

## **Borgman, D. (1998). Race-blind or Racially-open Adoption Policy? S. Hamilton, MA: Center for Youth Studies.**

### **OVERVIEW**

Race continues to be an issue in U.S. adoption policy. There have always been many more black foster children than black adoptive parents. In late 1998, some 60% of the 110,000 U.S. children waiting to be adopted were black. This is one reason many black children grow up in white homes.

Black social workers have feared the loss of black identity or suspected other reasons such as the desire of white adoptive parents to appear liberal or inclusive. They have argued that such cross-racial adoptions were to the detriment of a child's personal identity or to a loss to the black community. In some areas of the country, policy prevented white parents from adopting black children.

Conservative reaction to such restrictive policies that left children in foster homes and adoptive parents without children led in 1994 to Congressional prohibition by states' use of race as the "primary factor in adoption placements." In 1996, Congress strengthened this law saying that states could not consider race as a factor in adoptions except under "rare circumstances."

But a monitoring of this rule by the GAO (General Accounting Office) found that neither the federal government nor the Health and Human Services departments of states have done much to implement racially blind policy. Health and Human Services spokesperson, Michael Kharfen, acknowledged that the policies of 29 states and the District of Columbia give preference to adoptions by race. (Associated Press release in mid-September, 1998, carried by national papers the week of September 14th, e.g., [1998, September 15]. The Boston Globe, A11.)

The issue of cross-racial adoption is complex, and conflicting opinions exist. Many adopted children express both the special struggle they endured but also appreciation for their adoptive parents. A mixed racial child (Afro- and Euro- American) was adopted into a very open and accepting racially mixed family (Euro- and Asian- American). The primary community of this family was black. At one point in her late teenager life, her older brother confided in her regarding his struggle to work out his mixed ethnic identity. Although she had never spoken about her own struggles before, she replied, "You think you have it bad; here I am caught between the mountains of two opposing worlds: black and white." Still, for all her struggle, she would not have it another way and has married into still another ethnic community.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

1. What is your personal experience with adoption? How does this influence your

- opinions about adoption?
2. Could you summarize the strongest arguments on both sides of this issue?
  3. Do you think government policy and social workers (or human service departments) can sometimes miss issues that affect the well-being of children without secure homes? Do you think blanket policy can sometimes miss exceptional factors needing to be considered?
  4. Would you agree that the struggle of teenagers to work out their personal ethnic identities is sometimes minimized in consideration and policy about adoptions. Do you think that adopted children in their twenties and thirties have important input in this public debate?

## **IMPLICATIONS**

1. All children need a safe and nurturing home and family (this certainly does not exclude single-parent families).
2. The boundary between family privacy and state intervention is a very delicate one.
3. Family is only one of several social systems that contribute to the socialization of children in urban societies. The town or neighborhood and social service departments are among the others.
4. Whether a child has been put up for adoption or has been taken from the family because of dangerous neglect or abuse, he or she deserves to be bonding in a safe and supportive family as soon as possible.
5. There are many criteria which decide what kind of a family will be best for a particular child. It is important that all significant criteria be professionally and appropriately applied and evaluated.

Dean Borgman cCYS