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# ATTITUDES TOWARDS TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION: MEASURES AND CORRELATES

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## ABSTRACT

*Scholars know little about attitudes toward transracial adoption, how to measure them, or why people hold the attitudes they do. We measure implicit and explicit attitudes towards transracial adoption. Explicit measures generally find support; implicit measures do not. We also look at correlations between transracial adoption attitudes and racial attitudes. These correlations vary for implicit and explicit measures. Racial bias is associated with explicit reluctance to adopt a black child. Color blindness, which we might expect to be correlated with positive attitudes toward transracial adoption, is associated with negative implicit evaluations of transracial families.*

## INTRODUCTION

Scholars have long been interested in interracial relationships for what they indicate about social distance between racial groups in the United States. Such research highlights the low numbers of intimate relationships between blacks and whites. Much work has focused on one intimate relationship - interracial marriage. Less research has been done on transracial adoption.

Technically, transracial adoption refers to adoption by parents of one race of children of another race. In practice, it is often used to refer to adoptions by white parents of black children. Only one to three percent of adoptions are of this type (Brooks, James, and Barth 2002; Census 2000). (Even fewer involve black parents and white children (Smith-McKeever 2006).) The reasons for this pattern are not well understood. While substantial amounts of research identify structural factors contributing to rates of interracial marriage, these factors are unlikely to apply in the same way to transracial adoption. Structural segregation, for example, does not present the same kind of barrier to adoption as it does to interracial marriage and friendship. This is because (non-relative) adoptions

typically occur through mediating agencies that provide prospective adoptive parents with access to both white and black children.

We might therefore expect attitudes and normative factors to play a role. But we know almost nothing about people's attitudes towards transracial adoption, the best way to measure those attitudes, or why people hold the attitudes they do. Whereas racial attitudes are assumed to underlie views of transracial adoption, we have no evidence of such correlations. In this paper, we begin to fill these gaps.

## MEASURING ATTITUDES TOWARD TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

Increasingly Americans perceive racial prejudice and discrimination as socially unacceptable. In the current normative climate, measures that explicitly ask about race-related issues may not be accurate indicators or good predictors of behavior (Greenwald et al. 2009; see also Quillian 2008). Scholars therefore have developed tools for measuring *implicit* evaluations. One widely used implicit measure of racial attitudes is the Implicit Association Test (IAT) (Greenwald, et al. 1998). This test uses response time computer software to measure the speed with which subjects associate positive and negative stimuli with individuals of different races. In general, research has shown that most people in the U.S. have a pro-white bias (Dasgupta 2009). Because the IAT measures biases that cannot be consciously controlled, its predictive validity is strongest for situations in which people do not have the motivation, time, or cognitive resources to consciously reason before they behave. Accordingly, the IAT is a better predictor of interracial interaction behavior than explicit self-report measures of racial attitudes (Greenwald et al. 2009). No existing research uses implicit indicators to measure attitudes towards transracial adoption. Thus in the context of transracial adoption, we do not know whether implicit and explicit measures are correlated.

To the extent that people recognize a general ideology that says that race should not matter, they might be reluctant to explicitly state preferences regarding family racial composition. If so, then there would be little correlation between implicit and explicit measures.

But, it may be that discussions of transracial adoption are different from other conversations about race because they involve children. Adoption professionals have long spoken openly about race, debating whether white parents can adequately raise black children in a racist world. Such arguments provide a non-racist justification (the welfare of children) for disapproval of transracial adoption. If people feel comfortable using the welfare of children to justify their attitudes, then we would expect people's explicitly stated attitudes about transracial adoption to be consistent with implicit measures of their reactions to families with different racial compositions. There is currently no evidence to adjudicate which of these possibilities is correct.

## RACIAL ATTITUDES AND TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

### Racial Bias

Many assume that low rates of transracial adoption reflect anti-black prejudice. Others argue that opposition to transracial adoption is driven by in-group preference (see, e.g., Banks 1998; Quiroz 2007). These perspectives suggest that pro-white biases and anti-black prejudices will be correlated with whites' disapproval of transracial adoption. However, such measures may capture more about what people are willing to admit than what they actually feel. If so, then we would expect measures of pro-white bias and anti-black prejudice to be correlated with explicit, but not implicit attitudes toward transracial adoption.

**Color blindness**

Research shows that many Americans support color-blind principles (Schuman et al. 1997). White Americans tend to think not only that discrimination should not occur, but also that discrimination plays a minimal role in the life chances of racial minorities (Bonilla-Silva 2003).

Because race should not matter in a color-blind world, we might expect color-blind ideology to lead to support for transracial adoption. However, research shows that whites who express the most support for color-blind principles tend to have highly segregated social networks and oppose policies that might facilitate integration (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000). Thus color-blindness measures may provide indicators of whites' perceptions of and commitment to existing relations between racial groups (see Blumer 1958; Bobo 1999 for discussions of relative group position theory). If so, then we would expect color-blind individuals to be uncomfortable with transracial adoption because it challenges their view of the relative group position of blacks and whites.

Which of these two possibilities is most likely to be correct? The results may depend on how support for transracial adoption is measured – that is, whether implicit or explicit measures are used. We expect those who explicitly state support for color blindness to also explicitly state support for transracial adoption. Both kinds of statements are arguably socially acceptable. But, ideas that may underlie support for color blindness (commitment to maintaining the relative positions of whites and blacks) are not. To the extent that explicit statements of color blindness capture an unstated understanding of the existing racial order, we would expect color blindness to be correlated with implicit discomfort with transracial adoption.

**Preference for Biological over Adoptive Family**

It is possible that reactions to transracial families have less to do with race, and more to do with preferences for the familiar biological family. If a preference for the biological family drives reactions to transracial families, then attitudes about transracial adoption will be correlated with attitudes about adoption generally.

**METHODS**

## Subjects and Procedures

Participants were 43 white students (31 female and 12 male) from a community college in the West and a large public university in the South. Students who participated received course credit in their introductory sociology or psychology classes.

Participants completed two tasks – a survey and an Implicit Association Test. We used a survey to obtain measures of explicit attitudes towards transracial adoption, racial attitudes, and attitudes toward adoption in general. We used the Implicit Association Test to measure implicit attitudes toward white, black, and transracial families. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: one in which they saw images of white and transracial families and one in which they saw images of black and transracial families.

## Measures of Transracial Adoption Attitudes

We used *two explicit measures* of attitudes toward transracial adoption. The first is drawn from the National Adoption Attitudes Survey (Evan B. Donaldson Institute 2002). It asked participants on a 4-point scale from very favorable to very unfavorable about their opinion of transracial adoption (described as adoptive parents adopting a baby of a different race/ethnicity). This item is coded such that higher numbers indicate unfavorable attitudes about transracial adoption.

The second measure asked participants to imagine that they were considering pursuing an adoption and to complete the initial intake form provided to prospective adoptive parents by a private adoption agency. It asked how open participants were to adopting a child based on information about the birth mother's substance use history, and the child's age, race/ethnicity, and special needs. From the responses, we created a dummy variable indicating whether participants were unwilling to consider adopting an African American child.

We obtained *implicit measures* using the Implicit Association Test. This test is used to measure implicit attitudes towards individuals of different races (for a review, see Greenwald et al. 2009). Here, we use it to measure implicit attitudes towards families with different racial compositions. The IAT effect is the difference in the speed with which subjects make positive and negative associations with these family types. We calculated the IAT effect using Greenwald et al.'s (2003) improved algorithm that accounts for participants' cognitive differences and response time outliers.

While a large body of previous research using the Implicit Association Test shows that most people in the United States have implicit biases that favor white over black individuals (Dasgupta 2009), this is the first study that we know of that measures implicit attitudes about groups with different racial compositions. A pilot study in which 18 subjects evaluated white and black families showed a bias towards white families relative to black families (D effect size=.50; $p<.01$) that was moderate to large in magnitude and similar to that found in studies using the standard black/white IAT (Nosek, Greenwald,

and Banaji 2005). These results show that the IAT can be useful for measuring evaluations of groups (not just individuals).

**Measures of Racial Attitudes**

We measured pro-white bias and anti-black prejudice with semantic differential scales (Bobo & Zubrinsky 1996). Subjects marked on a seven-point scale their beliefs about whites and blacks on three dimensions: intelligent versus unintelligent, prefer to be self-supporting versus prefer to live on welfare, and easy to get along with versus hard to get along with. For the white stereotypes, higher numbers indicate in-group (pro-white) bias; for the black stereotypes, higher numbers indicate anti-black prejudice.

We measured a key component of color-blind ideology – minimization of the effects of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003) - by asking: "In general, how much discrimination is there that hurts the chances of black people to get good paying jobs?" The response was a four-point scale with higher numbers indicating a belief that discrimination has little effect.

**Measure of Adoption Attitudes**

We measured attitudes about adoption by asking subjects two questions, one designed to elicit their general support for the practice and one designed to elicit their preferences in the context of their own family. The first asked (on a 4-point scale ranging from very favorable to very unfavorable) their opinion on adoption. The second asked subjects the extent to which they would prefer to give birth to a child rather than adopt one (again on a four-point scale). Higher numbers for both items indicate more negative attitudes about adoption.

**RESULTS**

**Attitudes towards Transracial Adoption**

Below we report explicit and implicit measures of attitudes towards transracial adoption, and the correlation between the two.

***Implicit Measure***

Ninety-five percent of subjects viewed transracial families significantly more negatively than white families. In the white/transracial condition, response times were shorter and the error rates were lower in the same race-good rounds – showing that subjects had more positive associations with white than transracial families (Table 1). The effect is positive, large, and significantly different than zero ($D=.79$; $p<.001$) -- larger than in studies looking at reactions to black and white individuals (Greenwald et al. 2009).

Table 1. Implicit Measures of Transracial Adoption Attitudes

| | **Conditions** | |
|---|---|---|
| | White/Transracial | Black/Transracial |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **IAT Effect (D)[a]** | .79*** | .04 |
| **Response Time in milliseconds** | | |
| Same Race-Good/Mixed Race-Bad | 781.37(215.31) | 1024.33 (229.15) |
| Mixed Race-Good/Same Race-Bad | 1165.76(298.05) | 1055.48 (283.06) |
| | | |
| **Error Rate (%)** | | |
| Same Race-Good/Mixed Race-Bad | 4.07(3.30) | 5.98 (5.05) |
| Mixed Race-Good/Same Race-Bad | 11.90 (6.69) | 5.84 (5.23) |

[a] D is the millisecond difference score (mixed race – same race) divided by an overall latency standard deviation computed from critical rounds of the IAT. Positive numbers indicate a preference for same race families.
*** p<.001 The IAT effect is significantly greater than 0.

Only 26% of subjects viewed transracial families more negatively than black families. Analyzing data for all subjects in the black-transracial condition, we found no difference in evaluations of black relative to transracial families (D=.04; n.s.). Further, there is a statistically significant difference between the results for the white/transracial and black/transracial conditions (p<.01). These results suggest that race-neutral explanations for transracial adoption patterns are insufficient.

***Explicit Measures***

Eighty-three percent reported favorable or very favorable attitudes toward transracial adoption. (There was no statistically significant difference in responses across geographic region.). These numbers are comparable to nationally representative survey data showing that between 75 and 93% support transracial adoption (Evan B. Donaldson Institute 2002; Hollingsworth 2000). Despite these favorable attitudes, 54% of subjects (60% in the West and 21% in the South) were unwilling to adopt a black child (Table 2).

Table 2. Explicit Measures of Transracial Adoption, Race, and Adoption Attitudes

| | **Means (SDs)** |
|---|---|
| **Explicit Transracial Adoption Attitudes** | |
| Unfavorable | 1.80 (.78) |
| Don't Want Black Child | .54 (.50) |
| **Pro-white Bias** | |
| Intelligent | 5.08 (.94) |
| Easy to get along with | 4.80(1.11) |
| Prefer being self-sufficient | 5.85(1.11) |
| **Anti-black Prejudice** | |
| Unintelligent | 3.68(1.10) |
| Hard to get along with | 3.60(1.24) |
| Prefer welfare | 3.66(1.41) |
| **Color blindness** | 2.20 (.71) |
| **Adoption Attitudes** | |
| Unfavorable | 1.55 (.68) |

| | |
|---|---|
| Prefer Bio Child | 3.35 (.80) |

**Correlations between Explicit and Implicit Measures of Transracial Adoption Attitudes**

Initially, we included a control for location (South or West). The results with the control do not differ substantively from those without, so here we report the simple correlations (two-tailed tests). Our two explicit transracial adoption attitude measures (unfavorable attitudes about transracial adoption and unwillingness to adopt a black child) are positively and significantly correlated (r=.46; p<.01) (Table 3). However, the implicit and explicit measures are not correlated (r's<.23; n.s.).

Table 3. Correlations between Racial Attitudes and Implicit and Explicit Adoption Attitudes Measures

| | **Implicit Transracial Adoption Attitudes** | | **Explicit Transracial Adoption Attitudes** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Bias for White over Transracial | Bias for Black over Transracial | Unfavorable Opinion | Unwilling to Adopt a Black Child |
| **Explicit Transracial Adoption Attitudes** | | | | |
| Unfavorable | -.08 | -.28 | 1 | .46** |
| Don't Want Black Child | .08 | -.07 | .46** | 1 |
| **Pro-White Bias** | | | | |
| Intelligent | -.15 | -.22 | .17 | .44** |
| Easy to get along with | -.15 | .09 | .10 | .21 |
| Prefer self-sufficiency | -.25 | .05 | .19 | .51** |
| **Anti-Black Prejudice** | | | | |
| Unintelligent | -.01 | -.01 | .11 | .06 |
| Hard to get along with | -.17 | .23 | -.20 | .01 |
| Prefer welfare | -.01 | .37 | .08 | -.04 |
| **Color blindness** | .49* | .00 | .12 | .11 |
| **Adoption Attitudes** | | | | |
| Unfavorable | -.34 | -.06 | .54** | .17 |
| Prefer Bio Child | .16 | -.05 | .36* | .29 |
| **N** | 19 | 23 | 41 | 41 |

** p <.01; * p<.05 (two-tailed)

**Correlations between Racial Attitudes and Attitudes towards Transracial Adoption**

In looking at correlations between racial attitudes and attitudes toward transracial adoption, again we initially included a control for region. Because including the control did not affect the results, here we report the correlations (two-tailed tests) without the control for region.

### *Racial Bias*

There is a correlation between pro-white biases and being unwilling to adopt a black child (intelligence r=.44, p<.01; prefer self-sufficiency r=.51, p<.01) (Table 3).There is no correlation between either pro-white bias or anti-black prejudice, and explicit disapproval of transracial adoption (r's <.19, n.s.). Participants who admit positive attitudes towards whites also admit that they would prefer to adopt a white child, but do not state objections to transracial adoption in general. Further, there is no correlation between the two racial bias measures and *implicit* preferences for white over transracial families (r's <.37, n.s.). As we discussed above, to the extent that the racial bias measures capture what people are willing to admit (not necessarily their true biases), we would not expect these measures to be correlated with implicit preferences for white over transracial families (biases people may not explicitly admit).

### *Color blindness*

Color blindness is not correlated with explicit reluctance to adopt a black child (r=-.11; n.s.) or with support for transracial adoption (r=-.11; n.s.). It is, however, correlated with the implicit measure of preferences for white over transracial families (r=.49, p<.05). Color-blind individuals reacted more negatively to transracial than to white families. This finding is consistent with the argument that whites who adhere to a color-blind ideology are attached to the existing racial order.

### Correlations between Adoption and Transracial Adoption Attitudes

A preference for a biological rather than adopted child and negative attitudes about adoption are correlated with explicitly negative attitudes toward transracial adoption (unfavorable r = .54, p<.01; prefer bio child r = .36, p<.05), but not with unwillingness to adopt a black child. When thinking about one's own family composition, race rather than concerns with adoption may drive reluctance to adopt across racial lines. Attitudes toward adoption are not correlated with implicit preferences for white or black over transracial families.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our results have methodological and theoretical implications. Methodologically, our results show that implicit and explicit attitudes towards transracial adoption do not capture the same thing. Further, the correlations between racial and transracial adoption attitudes vary depending on the measure that is used. Racial (pro-white) bias is correlated with explicit unwillingness to adopt a black child. Color blindness is associated with negative implicit evaluations of transracial relative to white families. These findings suggest that future studies should incorporate both implicit and explicit measures.

Theoretically, a puzzle for race scholars has been how to explain why support for integration policies among whites and actual integration of intimate relationships remains low even as racial prejudice has declined. One possibility (suggested by relative group

position theory) is that white people who do not explicitly admit to racial prejudice may still perceive a gap between the relative position of blacks and whites and may retain some level of commitment to the status quo (see Appendix showing that racial bias is not correlated with color blindness). Transracial families threaten understandings of the existing racial order. Our findings provide evidence supporting theories that root resistance to racial change in the degree to which such change is perceived to challenge existing group positions.

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## APPENDIX

### Table A. Correlations between racial bias and color blindness measures

| | **Pro-White Stereotypes** | | | **Anti-Black Stereotypes** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Intelligent | Easy to get along with | Prefer self-sufficiency | Not intelligent | Hard to get along with | Prefer welfare | Color blindness |
| Whites Intelligent | 1 | .38* | .55* | -.40* | .07 | .22 | -.16 |
| Whites easy to get along with | .38* | 1 | .64* | -.12 | -.30 | -.29 | -.19 |
| Whites prefer self-sufficiency | .55* | .64 | 1 | .06 | .00 | -.24 | -.19 |
| Blacks unintelligent | -.40* | -.12 | .06 | 1 | .03 | .37* | .16 |
| Blacks hard to get along with | .07 | -.30 | .00 | .03 | 1 | .10 | .15 |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Blacks prefer welfare | .22 | -.29 | -.24 | .37* | .10 | 1 | .06 |
| Color blindness | -.16 | -.19 | -.19 | .16 | .15 | .06 | 1 |

* p<.05


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