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Stories of Aboriginal Transracial Adoption

Simon Nuttgens

Athabasca University, simonn@athabascau.ca

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Abstract

Despite the significant number of transracial Aboriginal adoptions that have taken place in Canada, little research is available that addresses the psychological and psychosocial ramifications for the children involved. The scant literature that does exist raises concerns about the psychological impact of this type of adoption. The present research used narrative inquiry to bring greater understanding to the experiences of Aboriginal children raised in non Aboriginal families. The life stories of four Aboriginal adults who were adopted as children were gathered through audio - taped interviews. Seven “narrative threads” salient across the four participants’ life stories include: disconnection, passing, diversion, connection, surpassing, reconnection, and identity coherence

Keywords

Transracial Adoption, Narrative Inquiry, Aboriginal and nonAboriginal Families

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Stories of Aboriginal Transracial Adoption

Simon Nuttgens

Athabasca University, DeWinton, Alberta Canada

Despite the significant number of transracial Aboriginal adoptions that have taken place in Canada, little research is available that addresses the psychological and psychosocial ramifications for the children involved. The scant literature that does exist raises concerns about the psychological impact of this type of adoption. The present research used narrative inquiry to bring greater understanding to the experiences of Aboriginal children raised in nonAboriginal families. The life stories of four Aboriginal adults who were adopted as children were gathered through audio-taped interviews. Seven “narrative threads” salient across the four participants’ life stories include: disconnection, passing, diversion, connection, surpassing, reconnection, and identity coherence. Keywords: Transracial Adoption, Narrative Inquiry, Aboriginal and nonAboriginal Families

This research examines the life-stories of four Canadian Aboriginal¹ adults who as children were raised in non-Aboriginal families. The practice of transracial adoption gained prominence in the mid-to-latter part of the twentieth century and has subsequently garnered much interest within social science research (Hollingsworth, 1997; Kim 1990; Simon & Alstein, 2000; Triseliotis, 1993). This interest, however, has not extended to the study of Aboriginal transracial adoption, which remains under-research despite the immense number of adoptions that occurred through the second half of the twentieth century and continue to occur, though in fewer numbers, today.

Studies that examine the experiences of children raised in families outside of their racial and cultural heritage emphasize concerns regarding general psychological adjustment, racial identity development, and social competence in North America where race continues to be a divisive force within society (Feigelman, 2000; Friedlander, 1999; Hollingsworth 1997; Moe, 1998; Triseliotis, 1993). To date, this research has failed to provide clear evidence that transracial adoption is, in and of itself, detrimental to an adoptee’s psychological health (Bagley, 1992; Feigelman; Friedlander; Hollingsworth; Simon & Alstein, 1992; Triseliotis, 1993). This corpus of research remains controversial, however, due to important questions regarding the development of racial identity among transracial adoptees and their accompanying sense of emotional security when faced with prejudice and discrimination (Bagley, 1993b; Feigelman, 2000; Friedlander, 1999; Hollingsworth, 1997; Weinberg, Waldman, van Dulmen, & Scarr, 2005).). Findings that Black transracial adoptees adhere more to their parent’s Americentric, versus Afrocentric, values (Deberry, Scarr, & Weinberg, 1996) and that increased incidents of racial discrimination among transracial adoptees is associated with greater incidents of adjustment difficulties (Feigelman), raise concern that identity difficulties may be problematic in at least some transracial adoptive situations. Unfortunately the effect that racial identity has on adjustment remains unclear for all racial groupings because the relationship between these two variables is typically not examined in transracial adoption studies (Lee, 2003). Though not backed by research, it has likewise been suggested that Aboriginal children raised in nonAboriginal families have very significant identity struggles, and that this stands in direct relation to experiences of racial and cultural oppression (Bagley, 1993a).

¹ The term “Aboriginal” refers to the indigenous people who live in Canada.

Certainly in Canada it is widely accepted that the Aboriginal population has faced discrimination and prejudice for centuries, and that such treatment remains pervasive within contemporary society (Frideres, 1983; Kirmayer, Brass, & Tait, 2000; McMillan, 1995; Milloy, 1999; Ward, 1984; York, 1990). Explanations for current and historical racism towards Aboriginal peoples implicate Canada's colonial legacy and its manifestation in many of the government's constitutional and legislative enactments (Frideres, 1983; Kirmayer, Brass, & Tait, 2000; McMillan, 1995; Milloy, 1999; Waldram, 1997; Ward, 1984; York, 1990), the most exacting of which include the residential school system and the Indian Act. Briefly stated, the residential school system involved the forced removal of Aboriginal children to be reared and educated in residential schools typically far from their home, where they were punished, often severely, for speaking their language and following their customs. The incidence of abuse, including sexual, physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual, was common, and has led to the intergenerational transmission of abuse within Canadian Aboriginal communities (Shepard, O'Neill, & Guenette, 2006). The Indian Act involved racist and paternalistic policies designed to strip Aboriginal people of their culture, land, and traditional ways of subsistence. Many writers trace current social problems and economic austerity back to the Indian Act (e.g., Shepard et al., 2006; Ward, 1990)

Because of the unique sociocultural experience of Aboriginal transracial adoptees, research is needed that examines their experiences as a distinct racial and cultural group. The need for research in the area of transracial Aboriginal adoption is accentuated when one considers the prevalence and sociopolitical significance of its occurrence. In Canada, the height of Aboriginal adoption occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, an era that came to be known as the "sixties scoop" due to the inordinate number of Aboriginal children adopted into White families (Fournier & Crey, 1997; Johnston, 1983; Ward, 1984; York, 1990). Between 1971-1981, there were 3729 such adoptions of status Indians alone (Johnston, 1983). Many were sent to private American adoption agencies where the high demand for children among middle-class families often meant costly adoption fees (Ward, 1984). Lack of restrictions for Canadian children entering the U.S. (compared to potential adoptees from other countries) made the Canadian Aboriginal children all the more attractive to prospective American parents (Ward, 1984).

Despite the vast numbers of Aboriginal children placed in nonAboriginal families, research in this area remains scant. Studies conducted by Fanshel (1972) and Bagley (1993a), along with a limited number of biographical accounts (e.g., Tyman, 1989; York, 1990) represent the bulk of such investigations. The extant Aboriginal transracial adoption research raises concerns regarding the adjustment of children who experience this form of adoption, thus indicating the need for additional research. The findings of this research will also help extend knowledge in the more generalized area of transracial adoption, an area of inquiry that continues to garner considerable academic and nonacademic interest.

Narrative Inquiry

The decision to undertake this research was not happenstance; it was personal. From the time I was a toddler, and continuing today, Aboriginal children have lived as members of my family. Thus, the stories of my participants inescapably resonate with my own. Prior to beginning the interview process with participants, I told them my story as a way to situate my interest and aspiration to do this work within a personal frame of reference.. The theoretical and procedural foundations of this research followed the traditions set forth by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) in education, and Polkinghorne (1995) and Sarbin (1986) in psychology. Briefly stated, narrative inquiry is a collaborative endeavour between researcher and participant that involves the collection and written presentation of participant stories through

use of a variety of data sources, including autobiographical writing, field notes, letters, research interviews, and photographs (Clandinin & Connelly (2000). The appeal of narrative inquiry lies in its ability to preserve intact the richly described texts of human experience. Stories presented this way reveal the development of identities, situated as they are, within the temporal, relational, and positional contexts of living (Clandinin & Connelly 2000). As Bruner (1986) writes, “narrative deals with the vicissitudes of human intention” (p. 16), and by doing so explicates the meaning of personal experience in ways not possible using other methods.

Research Ethics

Prior to beginning this research I received ethical approval for the use of human subjects from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board. Ethical guidelines for conducting social science research using human participants, as required by the University of Alberta's Ethical Review Committee, include:

1. Ensuring that the nature and purpose of the research is clearly explained to participants and that this explanation is fully understood.
2. Obtaining written informed consent from all participants.
3. Provisions for participants to opt out of the research at any time without requiring a reason and without consequence.
4. Provisions for maintaining participant confidentiality and anonymity at all times throughout the course of the research. In this research, participants chose pseudonyms and were given the final say regarding what personal information would be included in their narratives.
5. Explaining any potential risks that might be incurred through participating in the research.

In addition to these provisions, I took steps to ensure that participants were not treated as secondary to the aspirations of the research itself. In some research participants are regarded solely as accessories to the final product, involved only to the extent that they provide the data. Examples of this type of treatment include (a) participants never hearing from the researcher once data is collected, (b) excluding the participants from the processes of transcription and analysis verification, (c) participants not receiving a copy of the final product, and (d) researchers privileging their own data interpretations over that of the participant's.

In this research, I attempted to level the often-hierarchical nature of social science research through ensuring that the participants did not experience the exclusionary practices noted above. This stance is especially important considering the history of Aboriginal-nonAboriginal relations and the innumerable examples of injustice and oppression have been served through colonialism.

Another practice that levels the hierarchy characteristic of some research practices is the inclusion of the researcher's story. As noted, prior to beginning interviews I situated myself in relation to the research through sharing my personal connection to Aboriginal adoption and how I attempted to culturally prepare myself prior to commencing.

Participants

The participants in this study were three adult females and one adult male. All were of university educated and all identified as being of Aboriginal descent. My first participant, Pam was forty-five years old at the time of her participation. Pam was fostered into a nonAboriginal family at age three and lived with this family within a small rural community until she left home at age sixteen. My second participant, Calvin, was twenty-eight years old at the time of his participation. Calvin was adopted into a nonAboriginal family when he was two weeks old and lived with this family within a large urban center until age twenty-one. My third participant, Karen, was thirty-five years old at the time of her participation. Karen was adopted into a nonAboriginal family when she was six months old. She lived with this family in a large urban center through to adulthood, though competitive sports meant that by age fifteen she was often away from home for extended periods of time. Autumn, my final participant, was forty years old at the time of her participation. Autumn was fostered into a nonAboriginal family at age three, and then adopted by a nonAboriginal family at age four, where she lived until within a mid-sized urban center age eighteen.

Participants were recruited through recruitment posters and word of mouth. Given their ages at the time of participation, it should be noted that for all participants their formative years of development occurred in Canada in 1960s and 1970s. Interpretation of their respective experiences should be made light of this socio-historical context. Participants were recruited through advertisements posted in community agencies and at the local university.

Story Collection

I collected the narratives for this research using audio-taped unstructured interviews lasting from forty-five minutes to an hour-and-a-half. As is common during the analysis stage of narrative inquiry, I used follow-up interviews to fill gaps within the storylines, while also allowing participants to verify the degree of correspondence between the written story and their recollected experiences. A general interview guide consisting of key topic areas identified in the literature was used to guide the interview process. Interviews proceeded in development sequence, beginning with the question, “What is your earliest recollection of being and adopted child?”

Data analysis followed recommendations outlined by Polkinghorne (1995). First, audio-taped interviews were transcribed and returned to participants for verification. Once a participant’s interviews were complete, the transcribed text was read through thoroughly with text considered pertinent to the experience of being raised in a nonAboriginal family highlighted. The transcription was then read again; this time, notes were made beside each portion of highlighted text indicating the text’s relationship to central elements of the participant’s overall narrative, such as the participant’s relationship with his or her adoptive family, biological family, traditional culture, or community. Following this, key elements of the story’s plot line were identified and placed in chronological order in a word processor document. A second document titled “Story Outline” was then created as a means to configure the key elements into a sketched storyline from beginning to end. The storyline was then filled in using text quotations and supplementary commentary. Once completed, each of the participants’ stories was returned for verification. Further revisions were made according to the participant feedback. Finally, narrative threads were identified across participant stories in keeping with the following description provided by Clandinin and Connelly (2000): “An inquirer composing a research text looks for the patterns, narrative threads, tensions, and themes either within or across an individual’s experience and in the social setting” (p. 13).

Discussion

This research sought to bring greater understanding to the experience of Aboriginal adults who were raised in nonAboriginal families. Presented next are seven “narrative threads” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) that resonate through all of the four participants life stories.

Stories of Disconnection

The experience of disconnection is a prominent narrative thread that runs through the stories of Pam, Autumn, and Calvin. This disconnection comes in many forms (exclusion, rejection, alienation, removal), and occurs in differing social and relational contexts (family, friends, culture, community).

Stories of disconnection are especially prominent in Pam’s story, beginning with her early apprehension and placement in a White family headed by a physically and emotionally abusive mother. Her new family, which should have afforded emotional and physical safety, became a place of fear and constant vigilance. Pam’s attempts to secure love, care, and approval from her mother were unsuccessful. The rejection experienced in this relationship seemed similar to relationships with siblings, peers, teachers, and the larger community. Membership in Pam’s family was often presented as provisional and contingent upon her behaviour, with her status as a foster child only exacerbating this situation. The overriding theme throughout her childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, was one of exclusion and alienation – in a sense being looked upon and treated as a nonperson, the result of which, not surprisingly, was emotional devastation. Herein, racism served as the antagonist to Pam’s experiences of exclusion. Anne, Pam’s mother, tells her she is ugly, stupid, and bad. These same messages were then reinforced through racist discourse proffered by her peers and the community, while covertly being endorsed by siblings who, she believed, were embarrassed to have an “Indian” sister.

These feelings of alienation and displacement correspond closely to those described by Autumn, who likened her adolescent experiences of disconnection to that of being “invisible.” Autumn’s story of childhood is strikingly similar to Pam’s. Both experienced harsh physical and emotional maternal abuse, both experienced rejection by peers at school, and both felt wholly removed from their Aboriginal family, community, and cultural traditions. As with Pam, Autumn described the incredible emotional pain that accompanied the feeling of not belonging to the world. At the height of their emotional distress, both Pam and Autumn harboured suicidal thoughts, with Autumn actually attempting to end her life. In Calvin’s story, though he does not attest to experiences of disconnection from his adoptive family or the White community, he nonetheless described strong feelings of alienation from the Aboriginal community, to a point where, as with Pam and Autumn, he did not know how he fit among other Aboriginal people. “She [Calvin’s mother] would ask to see if I wanted to go to a Powwow and I remember just being closed. When I did go, you fear what you are not familiar with. So that’s what it was, it was just unfamiliar. Even going to my first Powwow I remember not knowing how I fit in with these people. They were strange.”

It is notable, however, that for all three there were, albeit limited, opportunities to establish some form of relationships with Aboriginal people, communities, or culture. Each in turn declined such opportunities, largely because they knew of the racist stereotypes associated with being Aboriginal, and hence did what they could to distance themselves from this aspect of their identity. They also distanced themselves from their Aboriginal heritage for fear of the unknown, and fear of what they “thought” Aboriginal people were like. Thus when Autumn was provided by her parents with coffee-table literature, ostensibly to familiarize her with her culture, she dismisses it as “quaint historic information about a dying race.” And when her parents took her to a powwow, she refuses to leave the car for fear of a people she

saw as utterly foreign to her own socialization, and of whom she associated terrible traits. Calvin shared a very similar story. Growing up he knew he was Aboriginal, but did not know how he fit with other Aboriginal people. During adolescence he became more cognizant of negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people, which further reinforced an aversion toward this aspect of his identity, to a point where he could say, "I hated being Aboriginal."

Despite experiencing profound disconnect from the Aboriginal community and his cultural heritage, Calvin always felt accepted by the White community. As already noted, this was not the case for Autumn and Pam, both of whom felt an extreme sense of disconnection from both White and Aboriginal cultures. For these two women fear of the unknown, along with a desire to distance themselves from negative stereotypes, deprived them of the will to pursue Aboriginal cultural and community connection. This meant that even if the means of connection were available (which could be argued they were, though negligibly), Aboriginal strivings were all but absent. The pursuit of belonging to White culture was equally off limits, though in this case, not for lack of will, but for lack of means. What Autumn and Pam alluded to in their stories was the need as children to have had someone with whom they could base their unique, bi-racial identity. Kirton (2000) speaks of this requirement among Black transracially adopted children:

What is needed is a "secure base" from which to explore identity issues linked to 'race' and culture. This is not one of primordialism, but one of connectedness with those occupying similar locations who may provide similar supports and resources for such exploration. (p. 98)

The absence of a "secure base" left little recourse for Autumn and Pam to resolve the identity conundrum that confronted them, that is, the experience of dislocation from both White and Aboriginal cultures and the immense feelings of loneliness and isolation this engendered.

Stories of Passing

According to Ginsberg (1996), passing refers to "escaping the subordination and oppression accompanying one identity and accessing the privilege and status of the other" (p. 2). For ethnic and racial minorities, the impetus to pass for something different from one's presumed "natural" or essential identity is often born of discrimination and prejudice experienced through the workings of racism (Cutter, 1996). "Passing" is a narrative thread that resonated across the accounts of Pam, Calvin, and Autumn. In their stories, Pam and Calvin were explicit in their attempts to alter physical appearance to pass as something other than Aboriginal; they do so because they are at once drawn away from their Aboriginal identification, and drawn towards a White identification.

In Pam and Autumn's stories, the lure of Whiteness had to do with an intense yearning to belong and be accepted. Raised in White communities and socialized according to White-Western cultural ways, Pam and Autumn "felt White" and thus wanted desperately to be accepted by members of the White community. For the most part they were not. Instead, because they looked Aboriginal, their experiences were those of rejection, exclusion, and persecution. Thus, they attempted to become more White to subvert the constraints levied by racial and cultural oppression.

Escaping oppression and accessing privilege was an incentive for Pam and Autumn to aspire towards Whiteness. There were, however, additional forces which led them, as well as Calvin, to want to pass as nonAboriginal. Ginsberg (1996) writes that "One of the assumed effects of a racist society is the internalization, by members of the oppressed race, of the

dominant culture's definitions and characterizations" (p. 9). Through a narrative interpretive lens, "internalization" might otherwise be construed as the retention of certain stories within one's larger storied identity. To the extent that an identity of being Aboriginal seemed to unavoidably involve negative descriptors, Pam, Autumn, and Calvin all strove to "edit out" this aspect of their identities by disowning their Aboriginal racial and cultural heritage. To do otherwise, would be to accept these descriptors as accurate depictions of self. Thus, through childhood and adolescence the desire to preserve a positive self-identity motivated Calvin, Pam, and Autumn to forsake their Aboriginal heritage and aspire, instead, to the safer ground of Whiteness.

In Calvin's story, he describes how in high school he nurtured an image through dress and hairstyle that led people to believe he was Asian. If he did acknowledge his cultural heritage, it was through a culturally based gag meant to humour his schoolmates. Alcohol was also paradoxically used by Calvin to prove to himself that he was not Aboriginal, as "Indians", as the stereotype held, could not handle their liquor. Sadly, it was a night spent "partying" that led to the tragic taking of another man's life.

For Pam, realizing that "Indianness" was the reason for her mistreatment and exclusion, she tried to become more White on the outside through physical alteration, though all the while feeling very "White" on the inside because of her socialization. In this sense, passing was not only an act of subversion, it was also her remedy for the dissonance between cognitively experiencing herself as White, and the outward physical appearance that betrayed she was not. This disconnection of mind and body found dramatic representation in Pam's account of looking in the mirror and being shocked by the "Indian" that looked back. A similar experience was recounted by Autumn, who shares her surprise at seeing all of the "brown faces" gazing at her when she meets her biological family for the first time at the airport.

Stories of Diversion

"Diversion", as a narrative thread, represents attempts made by participants to divert their attention away from psychological distress. Autumn, Pam, and Calvin all recounted periods of emotional struggle through their adolescence. This was described with greatest intensity in Pam and Autumn's stories, both of whom attributed their debilitating emotional distress to profound feelings of relational alienation, abuse from their mothers, and a disaffirming Aboriginal identity. Calvin also spoke of adolescent identity struggles, which he describes in his story as feelings of insecurity and derision towards his Aboriginal ancestry. For all three "diversion" is a third narrative thread seemingly employed to sustain themselves through their most difficult times.

In Calvin's story he described a growing uneasiness with his Aboriginal identity beginning in early adolescence. By age sixteen he was using marijuana and alcohol on a regular basis, to a point where his stumbling and slurred journeys home brought forth images of the very thing he scorned: the "street-corner native." Though many youth of all racial and ethnic backgrounds go through periods of experimentation with drugs and alcohol, Calvin suggests in his story that his indulgence was carried out at least in part to divert from the identity troubles of his adolescence.

In Pam and Autumn's stories many activities could be viewed as acts of diversion. Both of them sought solace, comfort, and escape through social withdrawal and solitary activities (particularly reading science fiction) as a way to evade the pain of their daily existence. Both also turned to heavy drugs and alcohol use, amphetamines being their drug of choice. Perhaps more so than Autumn, Pam became rebellious through her adolescent years, dressing "wild", "hot-wiring cars", and garnering a reputation for associating with older boys.

The transracial adoption literature does not report the emotional coping strategies noted among participants in this research, perhaps because this literature in general advances a fairly optimistic view of psychological adjustment among transracial adoptees, or perhaps because their quantitative methodologies do not allow for the discovery of unexpected findings the same way that narrative inquiry does. Less optimistic are studies that examine emotional and behavioural problems among biracial children and adolescents. This literature finds that biracial individuals experience increased incidents of gender confusion, self-hatred, alcohol and drug abuse, suicide, delinquency, alienation, and denial of self (Herring, 1995). It is assumed by Herring (1995) that these difficulties arise because the socialization and developmental processes of biracial children are inherently more complex than mono-racial counterparts. Although using a very clinical nomenclature and writing more generally of child abuse, Hermans (1997) discusses the “forms of adaptation” which transpire among children who experience severe forms of oppression. Eating disorders, psychoactive drugs, and risk taking behaviours are all considered a means for abused children to regulate their internal emotional states. Herman writes that it is through these methods that “abused children attempt to obliterate their chronic dysphoria and to simulate, however briefly, an internal state of well-being and comfort that cannot otherwise be achieved” (pp. 109-110). Said another way, it is through such methods of diversion that youth such as Pam, Autumn, and Calvin were able to manage emotional lives that at the time felt utterly unmanageable.

Stories of Connection

Stories of connection are a fourth narrative thread within the life stories of all four participants. Pam, though experiencing many intense forms of disconnection, did feel connected to her father, her Aboriginal grandfather, two childhood friends, and a kindly teacher. Similarly, though feeling very disconnected at times, Autumn felt relationally connected to certain teachers, her father, and in late adolescence, to members of the gay and lesbian community. Calvin felt very connected to both his adoptive family and his peers and friends at school. All such connections were spoken of positively in the participants’ stories, and in keeping with the literature on resiliency (Rutter, 1999), appeared to have an ameliorative effect on their experiences of emotional distress. It was only Karen, however, who described a story of childhood connection to Aboriginal culture and community.

As described in her story, through the years she lived at home, and continuing today, Aboriginal cultural experiences and relationships pervaded her family life. In her words, “It was just there.” However, it wasn’t “just there” as a special offering to Karen. It is her belief that her parents always enjoyed a relationship with the Aboriginal community and culture, and thus the family’s continued involvement was a natural transpiration. That it wasn’t presented as “you should do this, this is good for you” enabled Karen to accept her cultural involvement in a way that likely would not have occurred, had she detected a parent-driven mandate. As a child, Karen was not fearful of Aboriginal people, nor was she loathsome toward this aspect of her identity. Instead she felt an affinity toward her racial heritage and thus comfortable – and proud – to claim it as her own. When she did come across negative images of Aboriginal people, she did not experience this as an affront to her own identity, other than feeling disappointed that a poor example was being set.

It is noteworthy that Karen’s experiences with Aboriginal culture and communities closely match the advice given to transracial adoptive parents as promoted by proponents of this form of adoption (McRoy & Freeman, 1986). The centrality of the parent’s role in nurturing a positive identity (racial or otherwise) is emphasized by Fogg-Davis (2002) who writes, “For better or worse, one’s family, whatever its configuration, is the first ‘school,’ the first institution of socialization. As such, families stand as critical transfer points for the

intergenerational perpetuation of racial meanings” (p. 97). Research by Bagley (1993a) that examined experiences of Black transracial adoption suggest that most White parents are able to meet the socialization and identity needs of their transracially adopted child if they are carefully selected and actively support the child’s racial identity. Research by Bagley (1993a) that examined experiences of Black transracial adoption suggests that most White parents are able to meet the socialization and identity needs of their transracially adopted child if they are carefully selected and actively support the child’s racial identity. Although they were not selected, Karen’s parents did promote their daughter’s racial identity through a sustained and meaningful relationship with the Aboriginal community that pre-dated Karen’s arrival in the family. This, according to McRoy and Freeman (1986), aids identity development through the provision of contact with positive role models who can negate stereotypic perceptions of racial and ethnic minorities. For Bagley (1993a), the key to successful transracial adoption involves the promotion of ethnic pride “sufficient in degree to defend the young person’s ego in the face of ethnic devaluation by the larger community” (p. 84). Though the devaluation of Aboriginal peoples living in Canada is held to be widespread, Karen had always been exposed to more realistic and affirming representations of Aboriginal people, and thus when presented with negative images, whether stereotypical or actual, an affirming identity of being Aboriginal remained intact.

Stories of Reconnection

A fifth narrative thread involves the participants’ stories of reconnection. In many ways these are stories of coming home. Aboriginal author Neal Macleod (2001) writes that “the process of ‘coming home’ is an exercise in cartography, it is trying to locate the place of understanding and culture” (p. 33). It is, as he goes on to say, “the attempt to link two disparate narrative locations” (p. 33). In all four of the participants’ stories there are stories of reconnection; stories of returning or attempting to return home to their communities, their culture, or their birth families; stories of reconciling their “two disparate narrative locations”.

In Autumn’s story, the disparities of her “White” life and the Aboriginal world from which she was removed are dramatically illustrated by the cultural division experienced when she reunited with members of her birth family. Vividly, Autumn described her initial encounters with an urban Aboriginal culture that seemed entirely foreign to her White middle-class upbringing. Her distaste for this environment leads her to want to flee back to the culture of her comfort, but she did not, for in the end the importance of finding family prevailed. In her own words, reconnecting with her birth family was akin to “the completion of a cycle. A coming full circle and returning home, and the doorway to finding myself. Opening the door to finding myself and my roots.” Not only was reconnecting with her birth family a way back to her cultural roots, it also fulfilled a longtime emptiness. She longed to find someone with whom she could identify, someone with whom she could look in their eyes and see shades of herself looking back. Pam, too, was desperate to find someone who might begin to fill the relational void that engulfed her existence, leaving her with no one with whom she could base her identity.

I thought if I knew where I came from, maybe I could understand who I was, or put myself in a place where I could um, maybe even find somebody like one of my relatives that was more like myself, brought up White but was still an Indian. You know? I think that was my main goal to try and find someone more like myself in the family, somebody to say that um, okay that’s what I’m like, that’s the way I want to be and, you know, focusing on that. Instead of that feeling of ...absolute feeling of not belonging.

Although both Pam and Autumn did eventually locate members of their birth family, Pam was not afforded the same opportunity to develop relationships as was Autumn. Thus for Pam, her Aboriginal mentor, Dave, became the conduit for reconnection with the Aboriginal culture and community.

The degree of disconnection found in Autumn's and Pam's stories is far less pronounced in Calvin's. Though like Autumn and Pam, being raised in a nonAboriginal family Calvin did not have a relationship with Aboriginal people or Aboriginal culture. As with Autumn, Calvin now sees reconnecting with his birth family as key to learning more about his cultural ancestry. He also believes that this cultural reconnection will help him to overcome any remnant fears and inhibitions he has towards this facet of his identity. Karen has also taken steps to reconnect with members of her birth family. However, for her this process is not looked upon as fulfilling a cultural or familial void; rather, she spoke of her desire as curiosity to see how her personal qualities and characteristics are represented among those of her biological kin.

Stories of reconnection are not only about reconnecting with birth family; they are also about reconnecting, in a more general sense, with members of the Aboriginal community. For example, in early adulthood both Autumn and Pam found work in band offices, whereas Calvin suddenly found himself surrounded by Aboriginal people during his incarceration. Common among these experiences was the dismantling of Aboriginal stereotypes, and hence, the fear and disdain that was associated with this aspect of their identity.

In addition to supplanting negative stereotypes, reconnecting with Aboriginal culture and community, especially through traditional cultural and spiritual teachings, helped Pam and Autumn dispel negative beliefs that arose through having childhood experiences that by Western standards would be considered paranormal. Both implored that as children growing up in nonAboriginal families, it would have been invaluable to have had someone who could interpret their experiences from a traditional cultural perspective. Instead, they were looked upon as satanic by Pam's mother, and as possible mental illness by Autumn's father. For both participants it was a great relief to learn as adults that the mysterious happenings of their childhoods could be culturally explained as ancestral endowments, that is, as cultural gifts, more worthy of veneration than alarm or indignation.

Reconnecting with Aboriginal culture was also significant in terms of reawakening the participants' spiritual lives. This was especially so for Autumn, who today asserts that spirituality is central to how she lives her life. In keeping with a culture that de-emphasizes, and perhaps depreciates spirituality, none of the four participants were afforded a spiritual life as children. This, Karen concedes, was a drawback to being raised in a nonAboriginal family. She acknowledges that she had a very happy and rewarding childhood that included both an in-home and community-based cultural presence, yet despite this, her parents were unable to provide the quality of spiritual teachings likely afforded had she been raised in an Aboriginal family.

The experience of reconnecting with members of one's birth family is a neglected aspect within transracial adoption research. None of the studies reviewed during the preparation for this research included information on this topic. This absence is surprising, given the oft cited advice that transracial adoptive families should live in multiracial neighborhoods, and that the adoptive parents should foster interracial relationships amongst themselves and their children (McRoy & Freeman, 1986). Why, then, should the question of birth family reunification not be raised? Grotevant (2000) suggests that adopted adolescents will construct a narrative of their absent birth parents regardless of the amount of information available, and that even among same-race adoptions resolution of a "dual identity" is often achieved through familial reconnection. Of course, the increasing practice of open adoptions

is making the traditional reunification scenario less prevalent, and indeed Kirton (2000) suggests that open adoption may be conducive to healthy identity development among transracial adoptees.

Stories of Surpassing

The narrative thread “Surpassing” involves personal accomplishments that run counter to prevailing Aboriginal racial stereotypes. Karen is an elite athlete. Calvin, who already holds an undergraduate degree, aspires to a law degree, and is a recognized leader within the urban Aboriginal community. Pam became the first Aboriginal woman in North America to earn a diploma in aeronautical engineering. Autumn is in the midst of completing her doctorate in social work. The achievements of Autumn and Pam are particularly noteworthy considering the tremendous adversity that each overcame in order to succeed.

Herein, both Autumn and Pam asserted that they intentionally set out to disprove the predominant Aboriginal racial ideology by transcending White standards of achievement. Their drive, as Pam points out, was to show to the White community “what an Indian can be like” – meaning, of course, so much more than the stereotypic portrayal. Achievement, as Autumn alluded to, was both a way to gain acceptance from society and become more accepting of herself: “We have to be better to be considered okay – even if it’s only in our head.” Today Autumn states that she cannot help but negate stereotypical images of Aboriginal people. This negation has meant entering social territories often considered the exclusive domain of White Euro-Americans. Doing so, as Pam and Autumn attest, both challenges stereotypes and yields discomfort and disapproval from those who cling to the security of their preconceptions.

In contrast to Pam and Autumn, Calvin and Karen do not associate their achievements with their adoptive status. Nor does the transracial adoption literature present evidence of exceptional achievements among transracial adoptees. Such a finding, however, would be consistent with the theorizing of Alfred Adler (1928), who believed that all children inherently possess feelings of inferiority, and are consequently motivated to strive for superiority, that is, to improve themselves to their utmost capacity and potential.

Stories of Identity Coherence

Questions of identity are central in all forms of adoption, even more so in transracial adoptive situations where such questions extend beyond psychological significance and personal ontology to reveal political, ethical, and moral domains of interest (Fogg-Davis, 2002; Grotevant, 2000). For Aboriginal children raised in nonAboriginal families we might then ask: Is there a problem in identity development, and if so, how is it resolved? Identity concerns are evident among three of the four participants in this research, and identity coherence, the seventh narrative thread, is central to understanding these concerns.

The ability to tell and live by a coherent story of self is thought to be a central task in identity development (Kerby, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1991). Through childhood and adolescence the storylines of Pam, Autumn, and Calvin seem to lack this requisite quality of coherence. Evident in their life stories are discontinuities, disparities, conundrums, and paradoxes, all of which seemed to make achieving a coherent account of “being Aboriginal yet raised in a nonAboriginal family” difficult, if not seemingly impossible to reconcile. According to Polkinghorne the inability to reconcile the various plotlines of one’s life experiences into a single, coherent narrative, results in feelings of angst and despair. Such an assertion fits with Pam and Autumn’s recollections of identity disjunction. For both, an underlying paradox is their experience of “feeling” White, wanting to be White, yet being treated in prejudicial and

discriminatory ways because they looked Aboriginal. In Pam's story she describes being chastised by her parents for dating an "Indian". After being told that she is too good to be with an Indian, she asks herself, "who am I good enough for then?" In Autumn's story she talks of wanting to approach an Aboriginal peer in school, but decides not to because of the stereotypic qualities she attributed to the peer but not herself; in her mind the peer is Aboriginal, whereas she is not. Calvin relates that in his teen years he would paradoxically describe being intoxicated as "going a little Indian". All three struggle to bring intelligibility to a self story of knowing they are Aboriginal, yet not knowing how this heritage could fit within their identity of being raised in a White family. Not surprisingly, Autumn, Pam, and Calvin all spoke of the need as adolescents to connect with someone who could, as Autumn says, act as a mirror to "validate" who she was.

An impediment to identity coherence was the desire for participants to censor out a crucial storyline of their identity: being Aboriginal. Here it can be seen how larger cultural stories operate in the lives of individuals; how they are reflected in discriminatory and prejudicial words and actions; and how they thus have real effects on the lives of individuals. Growing up, Pam, Autumn, and Calvin all became aware of the racist discourse associated with being Aboriginal, and accordingly, all sought to negate this aspect of their identity, for the most part through attempts at "passing". As both Kerby (1990) and Kirton (2000) have noted, individuals who have not yet reached adulthood are more vulnerable to the imposition of negative stereotypic stories of self. This can be seen in Pam, Autumn, and Calvin's stories, wherein their stories of childhood and adolescence were subject to third-person narration which presented "being Aboriginal" in negative and disdainful ways. In the absence of competing narratives, these storylines became unchallenged "truths" of their personhood, wherein new events could only be interpreted as confirmation of the dominant and subjugating story of self.

For Karen, on the other hand, being of Aboriginal heritage seemed to fit seamlessly into her storied identity. As a child she was surrounded by favourable images and experiences of Aboriginal culture. From an early age she was exposed to Aboriginal role models that helped her to be proud of her Aboriginal ancestry. Not surprisingly, she viewed her identity as an Aboriginal person as decidedly positive, and thus even when confronted with negative images of being Aboriginal, she saw no cause to forgo this aspect of her personhood.

Through inspection of the participants' stories it can be seen that as adults steps were taken which allowed the loose ends of their identities to be reconciled and integrated into more unified and coherent life stories. For Pam, Autumn, and Calvin, the starting point for redressing their compromised identity coherence was to find family – people who could add further possibility to the stock of stories which inform what it means to be Aboriginal. Pam recounts as an adolescent her agonizing feelings of having no coherent account of who she was: "I had no identity. I had nothing...I didn't really have a family. I didn't have anybody in the community to identify with...there was nobody else like me." In her story Autumn talks of similar feelings of identity fragmentation, and thus when describing the importance of finding her biological family, does so in terms suggesting unification, integration, and the attainment of identity coherence: "The big picture significance would be the completion of a cycle. A coming full circle and returning home, and the doorway to finding my self." Calvin similarly notes that he has aspired for twenty-eight years (his whole life) to become a Sundancer, and that it is his biological mother who can bring fruition to this long disconnect from his cultural and racial heritage.

Striving for narrative identity is also reflected through all four participants' capacity to come to a larger, overall meaning of being raised in nonAboriginal families. For Pam, Autumn, and Calvin the fact of their adoption, along with the hardships this engendered, was made sensible as adults through their attainment of bicultural competence, that is, their ability

to operate effectively in both Aboriginal and White cultural contexts. For example, Calvin described himself as a chameleon who can strategically alter his self-presentation to fit the requirements of a particular social environment. Calvin used the term “apple” (red on the outside, white on the inside) to characterize his dual cultural identity. He says he has become proud of this identity, and uses it to the benefit of Aboriginal people. Autumn similarly spoke of her ability to “see the world through two perspectives.” She now uses this ability to help teach nonAboriginal people about Aboriginal culture.

In speaking of their adult identities, all participants do so in a manner that suggests a very fluid, contextual, and multi-faceted identity. Certainly for all, being of Aboriginal ancestry is central to their story of self, yet none profess to an identity that is fully informed by their cultural and racial endowment. Being Aboriginal is an aspect of who they are, but is not wholly defining of who they are. Herein, all participants indicated that given the particulars of their early socialization, they could not presently discharge themselves of their “White ways” even if they wanted to. In this sense, rather than being definitive of their identity, being of Aboriginal ancestry is but one of many identities, all of which coalesce to form an integrated whole. concepts of narrative and diasporic identity. Diaspora, which literally means the “dispersion of seeds beyond the area where they originated” is used by anthropologists to describe situations where large groupings of people retain their cultural identity despite geographical displacement (Kohl, 1992). In contemporary racial theorizing, the term diaspora is increasingly used to describe individual identities that are not easily accounted for by singularly defined categories of racial or ethnic group membership (Kirton, 2000). A diasporic identity is not bound by such essentialist representations of self and race, but rather strives to negate such representations by capturing the “complexity and local specificity” of race in ways that conventional understandings cannot (Luke & Luke, 1999, p. 234).

A diasporic rendering of identity is aptly illustrated in Pam’s and Autumn’s stories. Pam described coming to the realization, after finishing college, that her adult identity is the composite of many identities, all of which are important, though not exclusive, to how she defines herself as a person. Autumn echoed this view when she discusses the unfolding of a fashioned identity that accommodates and transcends a singular view of self: “I was the only one of my culture, in my world. And my culture was of being an Aboriginal person in a sea of White. So it’s basically my own creation, and that will always set me apart.”

In keeping with this last statement, when Autumn and Pam spoke of their adult identities, there is a sense that reclamation of self-authorship has been achieved. As children their identities were fated by the imposition of racist and stereotypic narratives of Aboriginal personhood. These were the acted-upon stories of subjugation and oppression which, in the absence of alternative accounts, became taken-for-granted specifications for who they were. As Kerby (1990) notes “Such external narratives will understandably set up expectations and constraints on our personal self-descriptions, and they significantly contribute to the material from which our own narratives are derived” (p. 6). It is this form of third-person authorship, which seems to have been reversed for Pam and Autumn whose descriptions of their adult identities is reminiscent of the creative self-fashioning proposed by Fogg-Davis (2002) in his discussion of racial navigation. Without denying that we live in a race-conscious society, racial navigation promotes the idea that despite such real and often very strong hindrances, one may refuse to submit to circumscribed accounts of identity, and may instead actively cultivate a very personalized racial self-concept. Carr (1986) writing about narrative identity, suggests, “We are constantly striving, with more or less success, to occupy the story-teller’s position with respect to our lives” (p. 125). Assuming the position of self-narrator allows us to choose whose voices should be afforded more authority and recognition regarding our personal identity (White, 1997). It is in this respect that the subjugating stories of our life may

be reinterpreted and overwritten with a more satisfying and personally relevant account of who we are.

Such an undertaking is commensurate with the aspirational goals set forth by racial identity models (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1979; Cross, 1971; Helms, 1995; Kim, 1981). Fundamental to these models is the assertion that attaining a positive racial identity requires one to overcome internalized racism through traversing a series of stages or statuses (MacDougall & Arthur, 2001). Although it would seem that all four participants at the time they were interviewed had attained a degree of comfort with their racial identity, it is oversimplified and overstated to suggest that this proceeded in a linear, uniform, and categorically discreet fashion, or as already mentioned, that race was even the most salient aspect of their personal identity. Rather, as with notions of diasporic and narrative identities, for the participants in this research, conceptualizations of self manifested as fluid, manifold, and contingent upon social and historical context.

Conclusion

Since the time of first contact, vast numbers of Aboriginal children have been taken from their families and placed in nonAboriginal homes, often, as Fournier and Crey (1997) allege, due to no other reason than poverty and the hardship it engenders. Without question, the appropriation of Aboriginal children from their families and communities has had, and continues to have, a devastating effect on the well being of Aboriginal people across Canada (Fournier & Crey, 1997; Johnston, 1993; Milloy, 1999; York, 1990). In this research I sought to bring greater understanding to the experience of Aboriginal children removed from their birth families at an intimate, individual level, through looking at the stories of individuals who were raised in nonAboriginal families.

Through the life stories of four participants, seven narrative threads were identified which further explicate the experiences of Aboriginal children raised in nonAboriginal families along with the centrality that identity development assumes within such experiences. Resonating among the participants' life stories are stories of disconnection, passing, diversion, connection, reconnection, surpassing, and identity coherence. Given that all seven narrative threads in one way or another identify racism as a central constituent in identity development, it begs the questions: What protection might be afforded to the Aboriginal child raised in a nonAboriginal family who experiences prejudice and discrimination through an unalterable and fundamental aspect of who they are?

Bagley's (1993a) answer to this question is the promotion of ethnic pride "sufficient in degree to defend the young person's ego in the face of ethnic devaluation by the larger community" (p. 84). Such a stance recognizes as a fundamental assumption that we live in a racialized society in which physical appearance has real effects on the daily life experiences of those deemed nonWhite. For this reason, the results of this inquiry are in keeping with implorations of authors such as Bagley (1993a) and Kirton (2000) who assert that the parents of transracial adoptees should take steps to foster a positive Aboriginal identity in the face of a society which devalues and denigrates this aspect of their being. As was learned in Karen's story, such efforts ought to be fully integrated into the lives of the adoptive family such that positive experiences of Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal relationships can displace the negative racial stereotypes associated this aspect of their identity.

As noted earlier, there is little extant research that addresses the experiences of Aboriginal children raised in nonAboriginal families. The two studies of note that do exist (Bagley, 1993a; Fanshel, 1972), both raise concerns over potential identity problems among this population of adoptees. Bagley (1993a) speculates at the conclusion of his research that identity problems may be the root cause of the increased incidents of depression, low self-

esteem, suicidal behaviours, and behaviour problems found among his adopted Aboriginal participants. Fanshel (1972) similarly cautioned that although his young Aboriginal participants seemed to be adjusting quite well to their transracial living arrangements, identity problems could become prominent as the children reach adolescence. I contend that a better understanding of identity concerns among Aboriginal children raised in non-Aboriginal families has been achieved through using narrative inquiry to present the life-stories of four adult participants. It might be said, then, that the present research adds to previous research through providing the contextual information needed to understand how the storied outcome of a participant's life is influenced by their unique relational landscapes, that is, their relationship with family, community, culture and society, all situated within a specified time and place.

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Author Note

Simon Nuttgens is an assistant professor with Athabasca University's Graduate Centre for Applied Psychology. His research interests include professional ethics and Aboriginal mental health. He may be contacted at Box 17/Site 15, DeWinton, AB Canada; Phone: 403.995.2905; Toll-free: 866.916.9653; Fax: 403.995.2946; Email: simonn@athabascau.ca

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