Effects of Adoption on the Psyche and Mental Health of Transracial Adoptees

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Introduction

- **WHAT**: The act of placing a child of one racial or ethnic group with adoptive parents of another racial or ethnic group
- **WHO**: The sociocultural group of transracial adoptees who navigate birth and home culture
- **WHY IT'S IMPORTANT**:
  - Severely understudied
  - Often misunderstood
  - Understanding identity confusion
  - Considering mental health implications
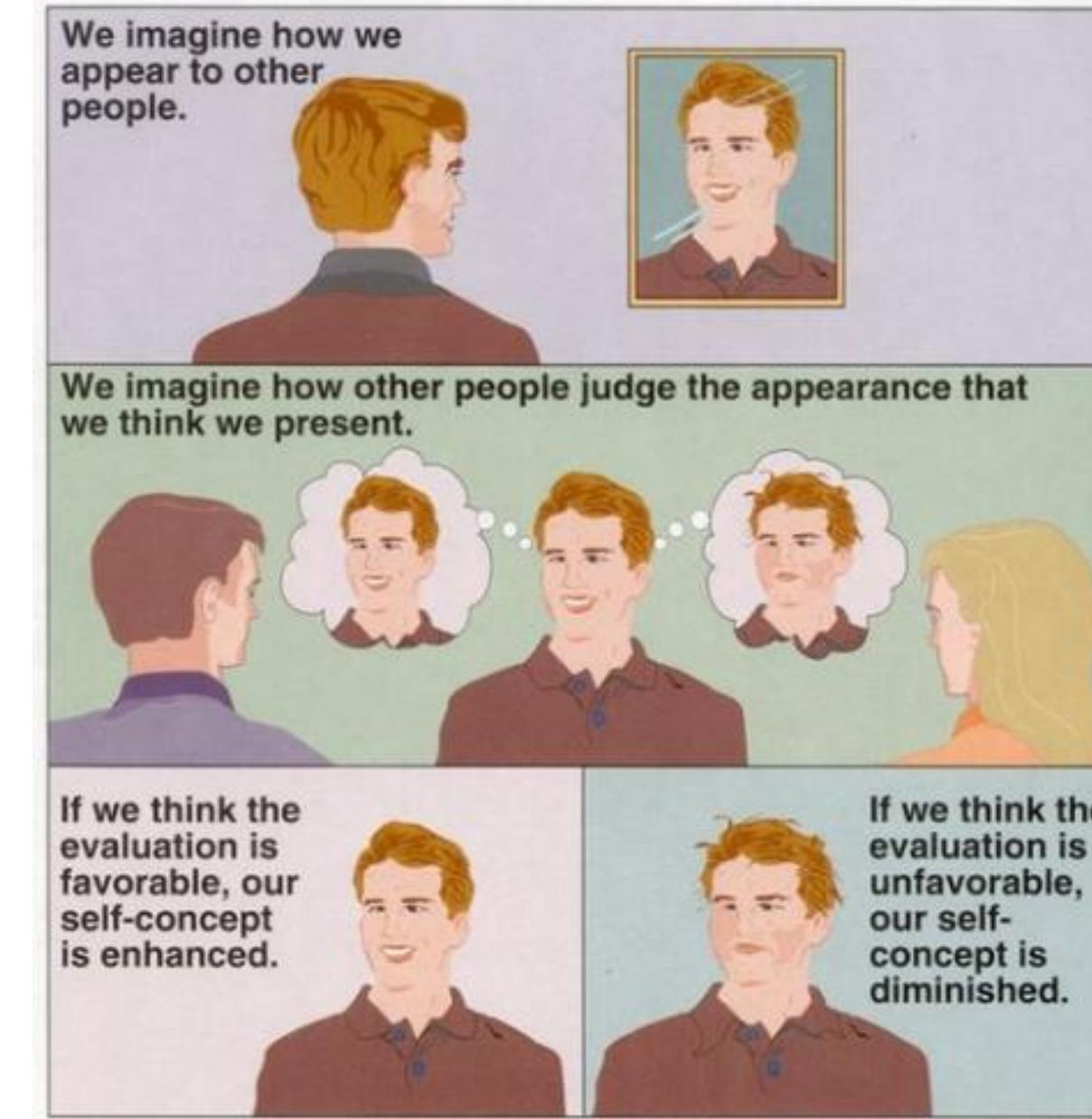
Fig. 1

- 1902 – Cooley's "**Looking Glass Self**" (Fig. 1)
  - Dynamic and influenced by our social world
  - **3 Step Process**
    1) How do I appear to others?
    2) What do others think of me?
    3) How will I change myself accordingly?

- All about the imagination
  - "I am not what I think I am. I am not what you think I am. *I am what I think you think I am.*"

- Stressors to Self-Identity
  - Perceived threats specifically to an individual's cultural identity are shown to affect mental illness rates
  - **Culture** (Fig. 2)
    - Accounts for race, nativity, ethnicity, common interests, etc.
    - Multi-level, fluid and contagious
    - **Pros:**
      - Builds community
      - Promotes well-being
   - **Cons:**
      - "Us vs. Them" mindset
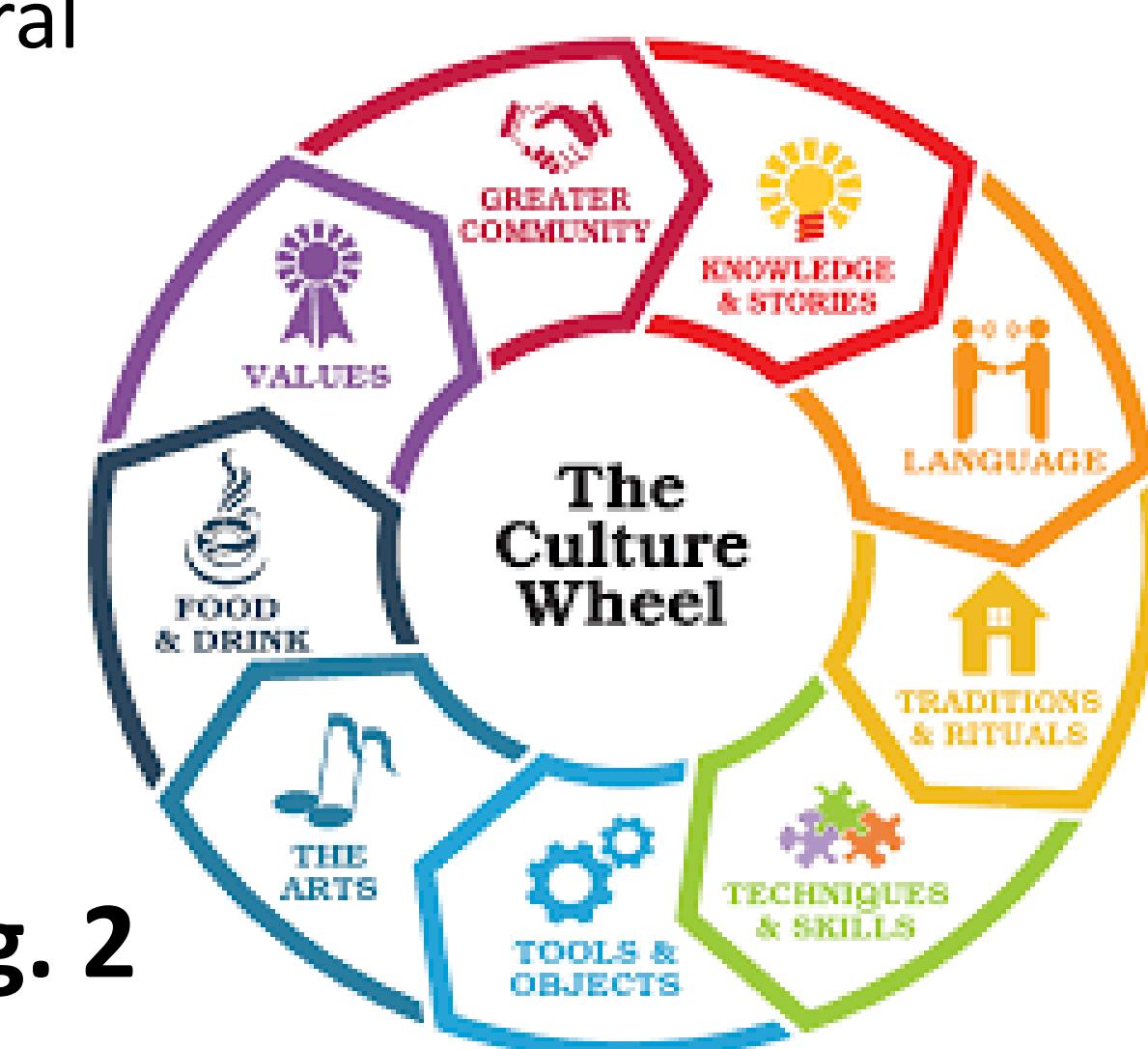
Fig. 2

The Problem

- **The "Color-Experience"**
  - Privilege for those who align with certain identities:
    - White, Cis-gender, Heterosexual, Able-Bodied, Affluent, Male, and more
  - Minority identities → Psychological stress → Greater mental illness susceptibility
- **Critical Race Theory**
  - **Dominant Narratives =** stories from the majority group that discredit and discourage the stories of minority groups
  - Throughout history, minoritized groups have suffered *mistreatment, deviant labeling, and silencing!!*

Empirical Evidence

- **Q: Does race influence mental health?**

Fig. 3

  - There *are* different rates of mental illness based on race (Fig. 3)

- **EXPLANATION?**
  - Greater levels of internalization in racially marginalized groups
    - Self-fulfilling prophecy? Silencing?
  - *Perceived discrimination ∝ negative psychological outcomes*
    - Across ethnic groups
    - Over the lifespan

- **Q: 1970s – "Can White parents adequately prepare transracially adopted children for growing up in a racially charged world?"**
  - Studies of Transracial Adoptees (TRAs) vs. Ethnic Non-Adoptees (NAs)
    - **NO** differences in psychological adjustment
    - **YES** differences in ethnic identity → weaker in TRAs
    - **YES** differences in sense of self → *identity confusion* in TRAs

- **Q: What do young adult transracial adoptees have to say?**

	ADOPTEE GROUP	NON-ADOPTEE GROUP
Total Participants	13	14
Number of Females	12	11
Number of Males	1	3
Average Current Age of Participant	19.8 years	19.9 years
Average Age of Adoption	10.3 months	NA
Average Mental Health Score (1 to 5)	3.7	3.6
Average Score for Significance of Identity on Mental Health (1 to 5)	2.7	2.0

	ADOPTEE GROUP	NON-ADOPTEE GROUP
Reports of Anxious Feelings	5	6
Reports of Depressed Feelings	7	8
Clinical Anxiety Diagnosis	5	1
Clinical Depression Diagnosis	2	1
Culture Match	1	11
Culture Non-Match	10	3
White Adoption	0	9
Racial/Cultural Minority	13	5
Reports of Experiencing Stereotypes or Racial Slurs	11	5

- **Interview Trends** (Fig. 4)
  - **Racial Slurs**
    - Chinq
    - Banana or Twinkie
  - **Other Derogatory Statements**
    - "But where are you *really* from?"
    - "What *are* you?"
    - "Your birth parents didn't love you, so they gave you up"

Fig. 4

Conclusions

- **How to improve psychological adjustment for transracial adoptees:**
  - Acknowledge differences in physical appearances and culture
    - This is critical to positive mental health

1. Normalizing = treating differences in appearance as standard within the family
  - **PROS:**
    - Destigmatize deviance in appearance
  - **CONS:**
    - Contributes to "color-blindness" – the misconception that skin color does not matter

2. Ethnic socialization = teaching family members how to cope with racial discrimination and fostering a multicultural identity
  - **PROS:**
    - Increases racial awareness and perspective-taking abilities
    - Strengthens self-esteem, well-being, and parent-child relationships
    - Decreases perceived discrimination
    - Decreases externalizing behavior and depressive symptoms

- **How to create a multicultural family:**
  - Creation of "**color-consciousness**"
    - Parents as primary social agents → open discussion of race

- **How to do it:**
  - Celebrate cultural differences
  - Adopted siblings – the more the merrier!
  - Preparation for bias → protection
  - Explore identity → "**identity-home**"
- **Effects:**
  - Greater psychological well-being
  - Better familial and peer support networks
  - Greater ability to critically reflect on race relations in the social world

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