

Racial Politics

The "Business" of Domestic Private Adoption

By Beth Hall, Joe Kroll and Ruth McRoy

Looking on the Internet, it is upsetting to see how few families of color are visible. I know we are out there. It is important to me as an African American woman that people see us as viable families and resources. Instead the ads are filled with offers of discounts if we are "willing to take" a fully African American child – don't they understand that as a black woman that child is my first choice? It angers me that they would devalue me and my children based on our race....I could never work with an agency that discounts in that way – even if it means paying more money to adopt.

– Annette, adoptive mom to Daniel & Eli

They told me that I needed to look at white families for my baby because it is hard to place Black children unless they are mixed. But I felt that my child needed parents who were the same race. They had flown me to Utah and told me they would help but when I found out they were charging the parents more depending on the race of the child I told them I couldn't work with them anymore. They told me I would have to pay them back for what they had spent on me and that didn't really want to place my child for adoption. But I left and found the family of my dreams and I know I made the right choice for me and my baby.

– Shayla, birth mother to Ezra

When it comes to adoption, "business as usual" cannot continue. The time has come to expose the unethical behavior and the inherent racism embedded in a private domestic adoption system that favors the interests of white adults over the children of color the system is supposed to serve.

Too often, adoption agencies are using racist practices under the guise of serving children, when in truth they are primarily serving the needs of their adult clients (McRoy, 1989) and their own bottom line. Even those adoption professionals who are striving to put children's needs first are not always equipped or inclined to explore the racism of their own practices—to examine, for instance, their lack of experience working with populations of color. Some agencies assume that white families are best for all children because of their own inability or unwillingness to recruit adoptive families of color or to recognize that their fees are a barrier to the placement of children in same-race families.

Race-based adoption fee structures assign children different monetary values according to their race (Boccarra et al., 2010).

When a couple seeking to adopt a white baby is charged \$35,000 and a couple seeking a black baby is charged \$4,000, the image that comes to mind is of a practice that was outlawed in America nearly 150 years ago—the buying and selling of human beings (Schabner, 2006). According to one study of parents (mostly white) who adopted through a private adoption facilitator and/or agency, "the increase in desirability of a non-African-American baby with respect to an African-American baby (both of unknown gender) is equivalent to a decrease of at least \$38,000 in adoption finalization cost (Campbell, 2010)."

Many respected and licensed agencies publish sliding scales based on the race of the child to be placed. It is difficult to know how many others may be doing the same, because agencies are not required to publish their fee scales publicly (Rhodes, 2005). Sliding fee scales based on a child's race perpetuate a racist value system and too often allows well-intended white practitioners to see themselves as serving "hard-to-place" children through offering discount pricing. In this way they avoid the question of how well their practice is really serving those children and if their standard fees are keeping available families from adopting. Basing sliding scale fees on the adoptive family's income instead of the child's race is an approach that doesn't devalue children. Adoption professionals who see same-race families as a resource and do everything in their power to make the system accessible to families of color know that this practice becomes a means to recruit ever more families ready and eager to adopt infants of color.

Money should not be part of the equation when children, particularly children of color, are involved. Our own brief survey of some licensed agencies revealed that several of them charge pre-adoptive parents a fee simply to speak to an expectant parent.

Today when children are voluntarily relinquished shortly after birth, their adoption is more like a business transaction than a child welfare service. Some assert that the growth and privatization of baby adoptions, especially involving African American and other biracial or mixed youngsters of African descent, sets the stage for an anachronistic recommodification of African Americans.

– Ruth Arelene Howe, Law Professor, Boston University

This system perpetuates the feeling in pre-adoptive parents that they are investing in the placement of the unborn child with them. Of course, private adoption practitioners must cover the cost of their services, but fee scales and client recruitment in which fees are unrelated to a particular placement can serve to avoid a practice that looks suspiciously like baby-selling.

Placement is emphasized over education and support. Across the nation, we are hearing more and more stories of independent agencies, adoption attorneys, and facilitators who use Yellow Pages and other forms of advertising to expand their practices by recruiting expectant/birth parents (Judd). They sometimes recruit African American expectant/birth parents without having identified any families who are prepared to adopt African American children. In a more recent and disturbing trend, some of these same professionals are creating "African American" placement programs and offering these services to expectant mothers, but placing no emphasis at all on recruiting African American families, or expending any effort on preparing the white families they serve to parent children of color. At the same time, the number of transracial adoptions of African

American children from the foster care system is growing. In 1997, 11.6 percent of adoptions with state agency involvement were transracial—by 2003, that number had risen to 16.9 percent (Hansen and Pollack, 2010). [The rest of this article focuses on private adoption—are you sure you want to pull in foster-adoption as well?] As these numbers increase, many authorities seem to be re-embracing the outdated approach to transracial adoption that claims “love is enough,” when we now know that children of color do best with parents who understand that love is only the beginning. The current foster-adopt system and the private adoption business put all of their emphasis on placement, leaving families on their own to face the challenges of adoption’s lifelong issues. Simply placing a child and leaving his or her family to figure it all out is not enough. In particular, to place a child with someone who is not prepared to address the child’s racial identity, or worse, believes that there is no reason to do so, is doing a lifelong disservice to that child and family. When one listens to transracially adopted adults, it becomes clear that children must either be placed with parents who share their race, OR be placed with parents who understand that their children must have access to a community that can foster and mentor their full racial/ethnic identity.

The politics of race often reduces the likelihood of social workers discussing race in real terms. Anecdotal evidence suggests that often those running placement programs themselves have little education about racial identity and have not critically examined their own experience of whiteness—in other words, have not encountered anything that might challenge their belief that placement trumps race. The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act, which makes it illegal to delay or deny adoptive placements based on race or culture has had the unfortunate result of keeping social workers from offering real training about race to transracial adopters, even when they have the knowledge and experience to do so. The Office of Civil Rights in the Department of Health and Human Services has mandated a colorblind approach to parent preparation, which has resulted in transracial adopters not receiving the specialized unique education and support they need and crave (McRoy, Mica, Freundlich & Kroll, 2007).

As a system, child welfare has long struggled with racial inequity in its effectiveness in serving children and parents—both birth and adoptive (Roberts, Solinger & May). Current adoption laws impose penalties on federally-financed agencies that “discriminate” by giving preference to the placement of children in same-race families, which effectively promotes transracial placement, yet there are no penalties for failure to identify adoptive families of color. Their recruitment while suggested is not mandated in the same way (Clemeston). While these laws only apply to public agencies, they underscore our societal discomfort with rules which work against white people as if giving preference to people of color is somehow an affront not to be tolerated rather than a legitimate service to the children currently waiting for adoption.

We need to revise our goals as a community. In a perfect world, no fees would be charged for the placement of children, removing the financial incentive to please the “consumer.” In the meantime, we suggest the immediate imposition of sliding scale fee structures that are based on income and assets rather than the race of the child. In order to apply the scale according to the needs of the children, families who are in short supply can be incentivized according to their qualifications and their ability to pay. This requires agencies to focus first on the needs of children rather than their own bottom line—child welfare as it should be.

Agencies and adoption providers who are serving children first should commit to full transparency about their fees structures and models. Currently there is no mandate requiring that fee scales for adoption be published but this must change if we want an ethical “marketplace” in the context of infant placement.

Ultimately, not only are race-based fee structures unethical, they do not serve the children of color they claim to help, and may in fact stop parents, both birth and adoptive, from accessing the very system that claims to want to serve them—not to mention the incredible dilemma of explaining such systems to birth parents and ultimately the adoptees themselves.

The uncomfortable truth was that the fee break [for adopting our African American child] made a difference to our budget.... But I can't lie to my daughter – even by omission – and the racist fee structure is now part of her adoption story.

- Dawn Friedman, adoptive parent

At the same time, it is crucial to recognize that placement is just the beginning, and make sure that adoptive parents are receiving the education they need—about race and other issues—to successfully meet their children’s needs and help them grow into healthy, happy adults.

Authors

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