Introduction

You know, one interesting thing, I thought that might be a little bit negative, but it is amazing to me that to adopt a child you must jump through so many hoops and be approved ... And to be biological [parents], just to have children, you don’t have to go to a parenting class, you don’t have to learn anything. (Maggie Abbott, adoptive mother)

Like creating families through transracial marriage, transnational adoption also involves a series of decisions made among adult parties. However, in the case of transnational adoption, intermediary parties – adoption agencies – have a strong presence in the decision-making process. In order for prospective adoptive parents to complete the transnational adoption process, they need to follow many bureaucratic steps, compile complicated documents, and take hours of required training classes as recommended by the US Citizenship Immigration Services [USCIS] (2005). Given the complex process transnational adoption requires, most transnational adoption placements are facilitated by adoption agencies. This chapter examines how adoption agencies promote transnational adoption. I will analyze how adoption agencies acquire necessary knowledge to help prospective adoptive parents not only in making their decisions, but also in preparing them for multicultural and multiracial families.

Adoption agencies play crucial roles in implementing transnational adoption procedures for prospective adoptive parents. For example, through private meetings and workshops, adoption agencies inform prospective parents about the pros and cons of both domestic and transnational adoption and legal issues. For many parents, the information they receive from the social workers at agencies and workshops is very important in making their decisions about which children to adopt and from where. The ways in
which the adoption agencies inform parents about transnational adoption may add different perceptions or even change parents’ ideas of building multiracial and multicultural families.

One of the major goals of adoption agencies is educating prospective parents in creating the best physical and cultural environment possible for the children’s upbringing. Adoption agencies not only assist parents in preparing the physical condition of their houses to meet the state’s requirements for foster and adoptive parents, but also teach prospective adoptive parents how important it is to understand and respect the culture of the country in which their child was born. This emphasis on respecting different cultures and equality is an important component of multiculturalism (Mahajan, 2002). Thus, the main question this chapter deals with is: How do racial differences and hierarchy play into the current discussion of multiculturalism through adoption agencies’ involvement in facilitating transnational adoption? This is an important question because recent studies on transnational adoption in the US show racial preferences among white parents when they choose to adopt Asian and Hispanic children from overseas (Ishizawa et al., 2006) over black children available for domestic adoption (Dorow, 2006b; Shiao et al., 2004).

Thus, in defining multiculturalism, the following section emphasizes the role of race. The third section presents the data used for this study. The fourth section concerns the role of race in multiculturalist discourse that agencies employ in their training sessions for prospective adoptive parents.

In analyzing race and racism, I contrast presentations given at a conference for adoption professionals with workshops given at two different adoption agencies. The fifth section analyzes how adoption agencies carefully inform prospective adoptive parents about the importance of considering race when deciding which country to adopt their child from, while simultaneously encouraging them to ‘transcend’ it by embracing different cultures. In the last section, I revisit major concepts in multiculturalism and discuss how ideas of multiculturalism are incorporated into the adoption agencies’ training workshops. I argue that normative perspectives of multiculturalism – embracing differences – provide a convenient and helpful ethos for adoption agencies in promoting transnational adoption to prospective adoptive parents, especially when they discuss race with prospective parents. That is, agencies educate prospective parents about race, but they can be neither too critical nor too dismissive about the existing reality of racism.

This chapter, thus, unpacks multiculturalism by examining the way in which race is incorporated yet obscured in the discourse of multiculturalism. My study of adoption agencies demonstrates how they genuinely try to ‘transcend race’ by relying on normative multicultural discourse, but nevertheless they must face the reality of racism, which creates a dilemma between multiculturalism and racism.