



6-16-2023

## Transracial adoption; Cultural pedagogy in the context of social work

Tianna Smith  
*Western Michigan University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors\\_theses](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors_theses)



Part of the Social Work Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Smith, Tianna, "Transracial adoption; Cultural pedagogy in the context of social work" (2023). *Honors Theses*. 3736.

[https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors\\_theses/3736](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors_theses/3736)

This Honors Thesis-Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Lee Honors College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



Transracial Adoption:  
Cultural Pedagogy in the Context of Social Work  
Tianna Smith  
Western Michigan University

### **Abstract**

Through a mixed-methods survey of a convenience sample of social workers' attitudes, this paper investigates foster care and adoption social workers' attitudes toward the process of transracial adoption. Survey responses were analyzed using groups made up entirely of foster care and adoption social workers. The findings of this study support previous research on social workers' attitudes toward transracial adoption and difficulties they face in finding a family with different cultural backgrounds.

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to acknowledge the outstanding efforts of Dr. Linda Reeser and Professor Leticia Pittman. I appreciate your time and faith in my ability to succeed. Thank you for all your support throughout this journey. This work was supported by the Lee Honors College.

### **Dedication**

This project is dedicated to my parents, who have supported me throughout these hard years of college. You have always encouraged me to keep my head up and keep working. You have always given me confidence in my work, and I couldn't be more blessed to have been placed in a home with the best and greatest love of all.

Tianna Smith

**Table of Contents**

Abstract.....2

Introduction.....6

Literature Review.....7

Methodology.....11

Results.....12

Discussion.....14

Limitations.....16

Conclusion.....17

References.....18

Appendices.....20

## **Introduction**

This topic is being studied to increase awareness among social workers doing foster care and adoptions about the issues, possibilities, and challenges of the process of transracial adoption. One would expect social workers to engage with the prospective adoptive family to determine their willingness and capacity to adopt transracial children. Transracial adoption is quite visible and controversial about which ways are correct for a child to be placed permanently. In this author's experience of being a transracial adoptee, I had the curiosity to know what the process was like and if racial and cultural identity were being acknowledged and respected in some way during that process. Keywords used for the search include: *Adoption* and/or *Foster Care* and/or *Cultural* and/or *Transracial* and/or *Social Work* and/or *Identity Development*

## Literature Review

This review will give insight into the decisions made by social workers during the process that takes place when placing a child with a family that is racially/ethnically different. There are many ways a child can become an adoptee; one way is a parent/legal caregiver of a child decides they are not able to care for a child at any point from conceived to 18 years old. Another way is because of abuse or neglect a child is removed from their parent or caregiver and is "placed" in the care and custody of the state they reside. When you are deciding to place a child with a family, it is hard for both parties, the family, and the social worker to know what all the factors are in placing a child of a different background with a prospective adoptive family. The social worker has a difficult decision to make about whether it is suitable to place a child with that family based on the family's life choices and educational experiences with diversity. Contrary to the large volume of research and information found regarding foster care, there is generally an absence of information and little knowledge development about transracial adoption. In a 2019 literature review on adoption matching in a child welfare context, it is found that "of the literature that has been written, a significant portion is on international transcultural adoptions or studies where domestic adoptions are not separated from international ones. The lack of information on the growing numbers of transracial adoptions is a most concerning point for practitioners seeking more evidence-informed approaches in adoption in a child welfare arena" (Dubov et al., 2019).

What was found in the literature were some articles that presented case examples and discussed implications for policy and practice. One article about transracial adoption is a story about an African American boy who was born in a Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, hospital and was exposed to crack cocaine and heroin from his birth mother. This boy was placed with a foster family and



prospered emotionally in the family's care. The foster family grew to love the child and expressed a desire to adopt him. Despite his bonding with his foster family and their desire to adopt him, the county department responsible for the child's placement decided to move him to a new foster home because the foster family was white. In adherence to its policy of matching minority children with same-race adoptive families, the department arranged a new placement for the child with a single African American woman (AULD, J. P. 1993). The family was so invested in the child they sought to overrule the adoption policy of the agency by taking them to court. Understanding the predominant factors that underly social workers' decision-making for transracial adoption is important for determining the outcomes of child placements. "Although racial or ethnic heritage is not to be used as a single criterion in making out-of-home placements, priority consideration must be given to the child's racial or ethnic heritage when selecting a placement. This consideration is necessary to ensure the best interest of the child" (AULD, J. P. 1993). In this case, it appears the social workers thought they were acting in the best interest of the child by placing them with a family that already knew them and loved them. A court action was necessary to decide what was in the best interest of the child because of the conflicting views of the adoptive family and the biological mother who wanted her child back. The child remains in foster care and is not available for adoption based on the judges' views and best interest for the child. Examples of key stakeholders include but are not limited to the identified child(ren) (adoptee), birth/kin family, prospective adoptive family, current/former foster family(ies), child welfare worker/supervisor, child welfare agency, court, and the child's cultural/spiritual/ethnic community (Dubov et al., 2019).

David Fanshel tracked 97 families who had adopted children through the Indian Adoption Project. Researchers conducted parent interviews in fifteen different states, but they did not

interview the youth. There was no control group of adoptees of the same race or unadopted children utilized for comparison. Fanshel was one of the first to address the issue of discrimination in adoption services. “Fanshel found that factors often identified as strongly correlated with outcomes were not as noticeable in these adoptions” (Fanshel, n.d.) “The primary findings showed that 78% of all adoptees were adequately adjusted. Only one in ten children had problems that raised serious doubts about their future well-being. This indicated that transracial adoptions could be arranged on a solid foundation of objective knowledge that they would turn out well rather than a subjective hope that they might” (Fanshel, n.d.). The findings by Fanshel support the idea that the best interest of the child can be achieved without considering race as the only factor. A social worker might assume that a family of a different ethnic background would not be suitable for a child and that a family of a similar ethnic background would be the best choice for a child. It’s difficult for anyone to judge what is in the best interest of the child, since often the child is not old enough to have a voice and it may be difficult to assess whether the biological parent will be a suitable parent for the child. It is not a given that the foster parents are the best match for that child.

In the very recent case of baby O, it is at the center of a lawsuit because of the militant stance taken by people of a conservative perspective against the Indian Child Welfare Act. Baby O is of Native American heritage and thus a case that falls under the ICWA. In this act there is a provision that Native American children must be placed with a family that has Native American heritage, whether its biological or not. In this case a Caucasian family raised the child from birth as foster parents and then fought to adopt the child. A conflict ensued between the Native American tribe that the child was a member of over the suitability of a biological parent or a family member of that tribe and the Caucasian family that assumed they were the best match for

that child. They used their influence and money to try and coerce the child's grandmother into renouncing her membership in the tribe, thankfully the women did not succumb to that. They went to court and the judge allowed them to adopt the child. "National child welfare organizations say that ICWA has become a "gold standard" and represents the "best practices" of child welfare policy. Because of this, state child welfare policies have begun to look more and more like ICWA" (Nagle, 2022). However, there is a class action lawsuit that this family has joined, being presented to the court that has the intent of overturning the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) as a race-based act that discriminates against white foster parents. This supreme court decision has implications for state and agency policies that indicate preference for matching based on race or ethnicity.

## **Methodology**

I was able to create a survey study with an audience made up of social workers from foster care and adoption organizations. I used a survey as a method of gathering data to find out about the attitudes and beliefs of social workers who work with and place transracial children who are seeking adoption or foster care. The number of social workers that work in foster care and adoption in the area also restricted the range of possible responses, allowing for the collection of data that might not be conveyed in a traditional study. To conduct this survey research, I had to come up with a population of foster care and adoption social workers who would be the target of this study. Then, I got in contact with 3 local non-profit human service organizations, which included Samaritas, Bethany Christian Services, and Family and Children Services, where I got approval from the child welfare director to send out my survey to their foster care and adoption social workers to take the 5-minute survey. Attached to the email was an informed consent form that explained the process and eligibility criteria needed to participate in the survey. Questions were created that measured the participants' attitudes toward transracial adoption. The survey data was analyzed to assess similarities and differences among the participants and get a better understanding of their attitudes toward transracial adoption. The format of the survey was a 5-point Likert scale that gave the participants the option to choose from five answers. The recipients could choose from strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree.

## Results

When looking at the results of the survey study, we don't have a large enough sample to look at significance; however, we will look at the percentages and what we did find in this study. I found that 80% of social workers are in favor of children being placed with a family of a different race, and the other 20% either strongly disagree or disagree. When believing that children's identity development is enriched by a family of a different race, 50% of social workers were neutral to that belief, 30% either strongly disagreed or disagreed, and 20% either strongly agreed or agreed. 70% of the people in my sample chose neutral, saying that being placed in a family of a different race/ethnicity is in question to a child's identity development, and 30% either strongly disagree or disagree. When asked how the social workers feel about the Indian Child Welfare Act's mandate to place Native American children with Native American families, 30% feel neutral, 30% agree, and 40% strongly agree. 60% either strongly agree or agree, 30% are neutral, and 10% disagree that transracial adoption can adversely affect a child's sense of belonging in the family and community. 40% either strongly agree or agree, 40% are neutral, and 20% either disagree or strongly disagree with the idea that any family that meets the criteria of an adoption agency should be able to adopt a child, no matter the race or ethnicity of the child. Half of the participants either disagree or strongly disagree that the intent of a family of a different ethnic or racial background to expose a child to their identity is sufficient grounds for permitting transracial adoption, 30% are neutral, and 20% agree. 60% either disagree or strongly disagree when families have the desire and financial resources to support a child, which is sufficient grounds for approving the adoption; 30% feel neutral, and 10% agree. Lastly, I asked the participants to add any comments they would like to add about transracial adoption, and six

participants wrote a comment. Several comments made by the participants indicated that there needs to be further assessment when placing a child with a family of a different race.

## Discussion

Understanding the implications of social workers' beliefs and value systems as they affect attitudes is critical to understanding the process of transracial adoption. Learning and understanding what factors social workers use in doing child placement, and what they determine to be in the best interests of the child is helpful for social work practice and the training of social workers. In this study, the author looks at the attitudes social workers have toward transracial adoption and the previous literature on the outcomes of other studies about transracial adoption. When looking for patterns of similarities or differences amongst the participants to get more of an understanding of where they stand concerning transracial adoption, one interesting finding is that there is a similarity in the belief that a child of a different race can or should be placed with a family of a different race. Another interesting discovery is that when believing that children's identity development is enriched by a family of a different race, the participants were split between disagreeing or agreeing. Social workers don't necessarily agree on what the best way is of helping a child learn their identity.

Lastly, by offering the opportunity for the participants to answer using a qualitative question, this explored if there's anything further the participants wanted to comment on the topic. The responses given by the participants indicated that there are many other factors to consider, specifically for the families to consider before adopting a child of a different race. Participants believe families should go through specific anti-racism training as well as be aware of other racial barriers the child could face. A finding that was similar among the participants is that they believe there needs to be an in-depth assessment of the families who want to adopt a child of a different race or ethnicity to understand their motives and background for being suitable parents to a child of a different race or ethnicity. They stated that it is not enough to have the intent to

expose their child to their race/identity. There must be conditions placed on what they must do to even be considered suitable to adopt a child of a different race. One person mentioned that these conditions must be met before they place a child.



**Limitations**

The nature of survey research methods often doesn't allow full access to the population of concern. The results are from a subset of the users who voluntarily participated in the survey. Each question on the survey was chosen assuming there would be several social workers who had experience in that area. However, there may have been social workers in that organization who chose not to participate in the survey, hindering the potential of responses for this research. Additionally, there may have been social workers who haven't had the chance to work with transracial adoption, excluding them from having any attitudes or making decisions based on the nature of transracial adoption. Therefore, future studies should examine this topic of the process of transracial adoption with a larger sample size in comparison to a national survey of social workers across the United States. This may be accomplished by using a national organization such as NASW. This way, we would have more confidence in saying this is representative of social work doing transracial adoption and foster care.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study is to assist social workers who do adoptions in child welfare settings. The findings in this research add quantitative information about common practices of social workers who do adoptions in one community. There are some training programs in place in schools of social work that have child welfare specializations, but not all of them have child welfare certificate programs. All Child Welfare Adoption and Foster Care Specialist in the State of Michigan complete training through the Child Welfare Training Institute (CWTI) which is a 9-week program that prepares employees for the job. Private Foster Care and Adoption agencies also provide their own training which compliments what is learned in CWTI. Social workers who are open to reviewing the results of this research study can use the findings to learn from the experiences and advice of other social workers about transracial adoption. I think this topic is important for social workers going into child welfare and is also important for policy. The literature and the findings help social workers to think critically on their practice regarding cultural competency and client well-being (NASW Code of Ethics). Macro social workers can learn from policy issues that are currently under review by the supreme court. One should always think about the implications for what social workers do in practice and policy to understand their effects on marginalized groups.

## References

AULD, J. P. (1993). Racial Matching vs. Transracial Adoption: Proposing a Compromise in the Best Interests of Minority Children. *Family Law Quarterly*, 27(3), 447–460.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25739950>

Carranza, K. E., & Stolar, N. A. (2003). *CSUSB ScholarWorks: Open Access Institutional Repository*. Social workers attitudes and perceptions toward transracial adoption.

<https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3378&context=etd-project>

Dubov, V., Petrovic, M., & Goodman, D. (2019, August 6). *Cultural matching in child welfare adoption practices: A ... - MCASS*. Cultural Matching in Child Welfare Adoption Practices: A Literature Review. <https://muslimchildrensaid.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/10-RCY-Adoption-Cultural-Matching-CWI-LitReview-7.8.19-FINAL.pdf>

Fanshel, D. (n.d.). *David Fanshel, Far From the Reservation, 1972*. Adoption history: David Fanshel, far from the reservation, 1972.

<https://pages.uoregon.edu/adoption/studies/FanshelFFTR.htm>

Nagle, R. (2022, November 28). *The story of Baby O-and the case that could gut native sovereignty*. The Nation. <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/icwa-supreme-court-libretti-custody-case/>

Rachor, Charles, "Identity Development in Korean-American Adoptees: A Content Analysis of Personal Reflections" (2017). *Honors Theses*. 2793.

[https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors\\_theses/2793](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/honors_theses/2793)

## Appendix A

*The following questions were included in the survey:*

- I am in favor of children being placed with a family of a different race.
- I believe that children's identity development is enriched by being with a family of a different race.
- Being placed in a family of a different race/ethnicity is not an asset to a child's identity development.
- I feel positively about the Indian Child Welfare Act's mandate to place Native American children with Native American families.
- Transracial adoption can adversely affect a child's sense of belonging in the family and community.
- Any family that meets the criteria of an adoption agency should be able to adopt a child, no matter the race or ethnicity of the child.
- The intent of a family of a different ethnic/racial background to expose a child to their identity is sufficient grounds for permitting transracial adoption.
- When families have the desire and financial resources to support a child, that is sufficient grounds for approving the adoption.
- Are there any comments you would like to add about transracial adoption?

## Appendix B

5/15/23, 10:15 AM

Attitudes Toward Transracial Adoption Survey

EXIT

### Attitudes Toward Transracial Adoption

This questionnaire will explore the different techniques used by social workers when working with adoption and children of a different races/ethnicity than the families seeking to adopt

1. I am in favor of children being placed with a family of a different race.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
★	★	★	★	★

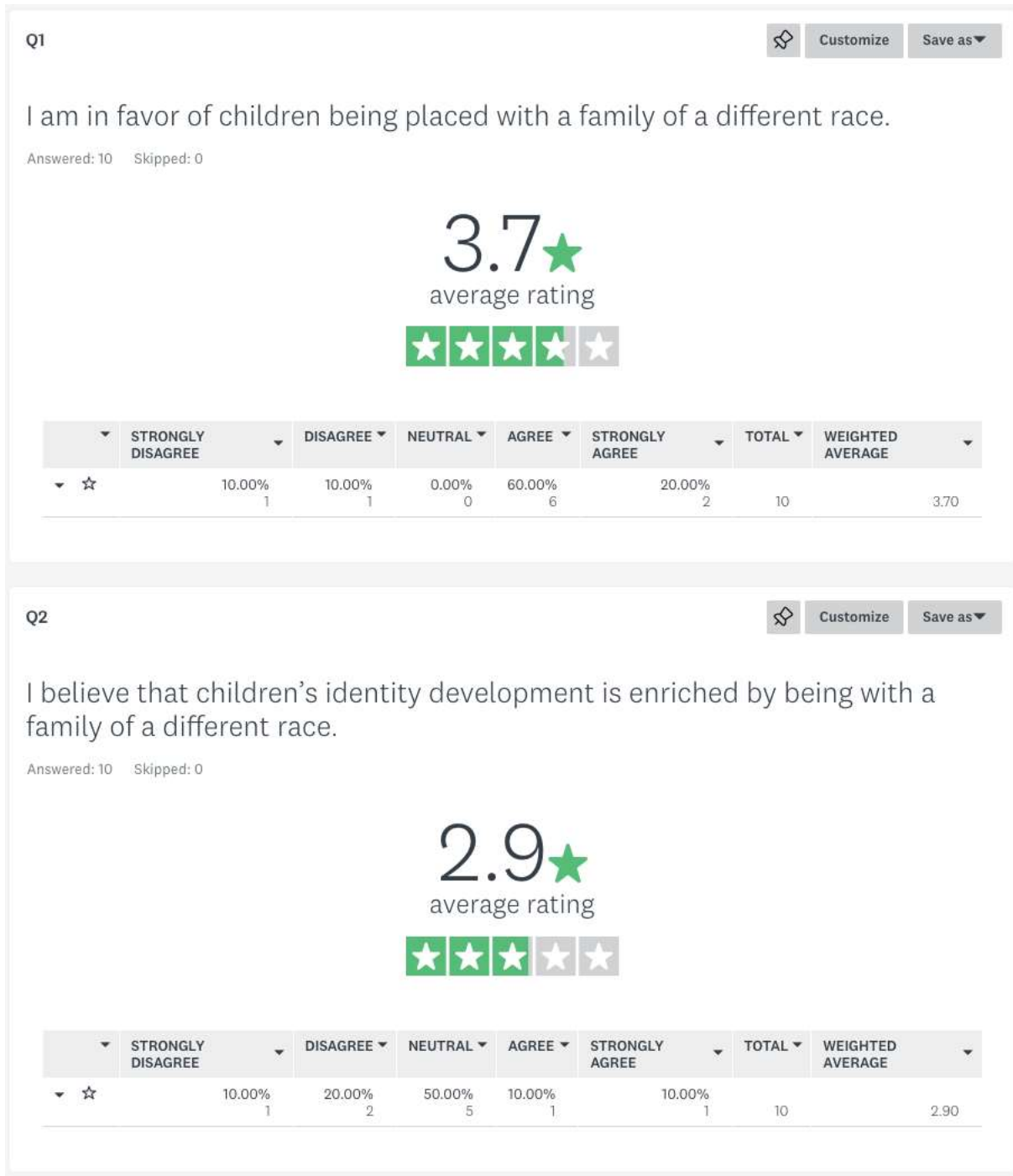
2. I believe that children’s identity development is enriched by being with a family of a different race.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
★	★	★	★	★

3. Being placed in a family of a different race/ethnicity is not an asset to a child’s identity development.



Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
★	★	★	★	★

### Appendix C



### Appendix D

Q3

 Customize  Save as

Being placed in a family of a different race/ethnicity is not an asset to a child's identity development.



Answered: 10 Skipped: 0

2.5★  
average rating



	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEUTRAL	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
★	20.00% 2	10.00% 1	70.00% 7	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	10	2.50

Q4

 Customize  Save as

I feel positively about the Indian Child Welfare Act's mandate to place Native American children with Native American families.

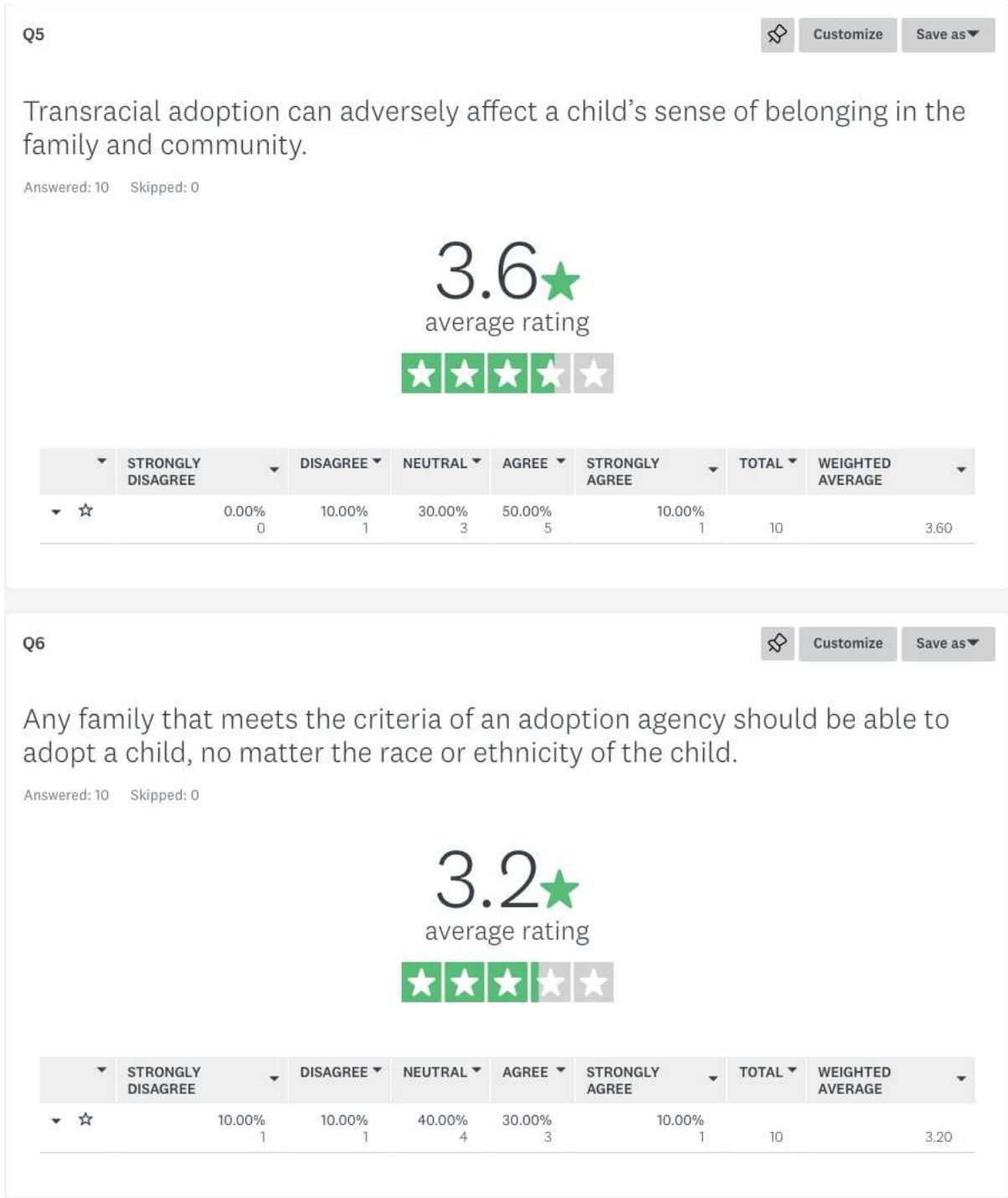
Answered: 10 Skipped: 0

4.1★  
average rating



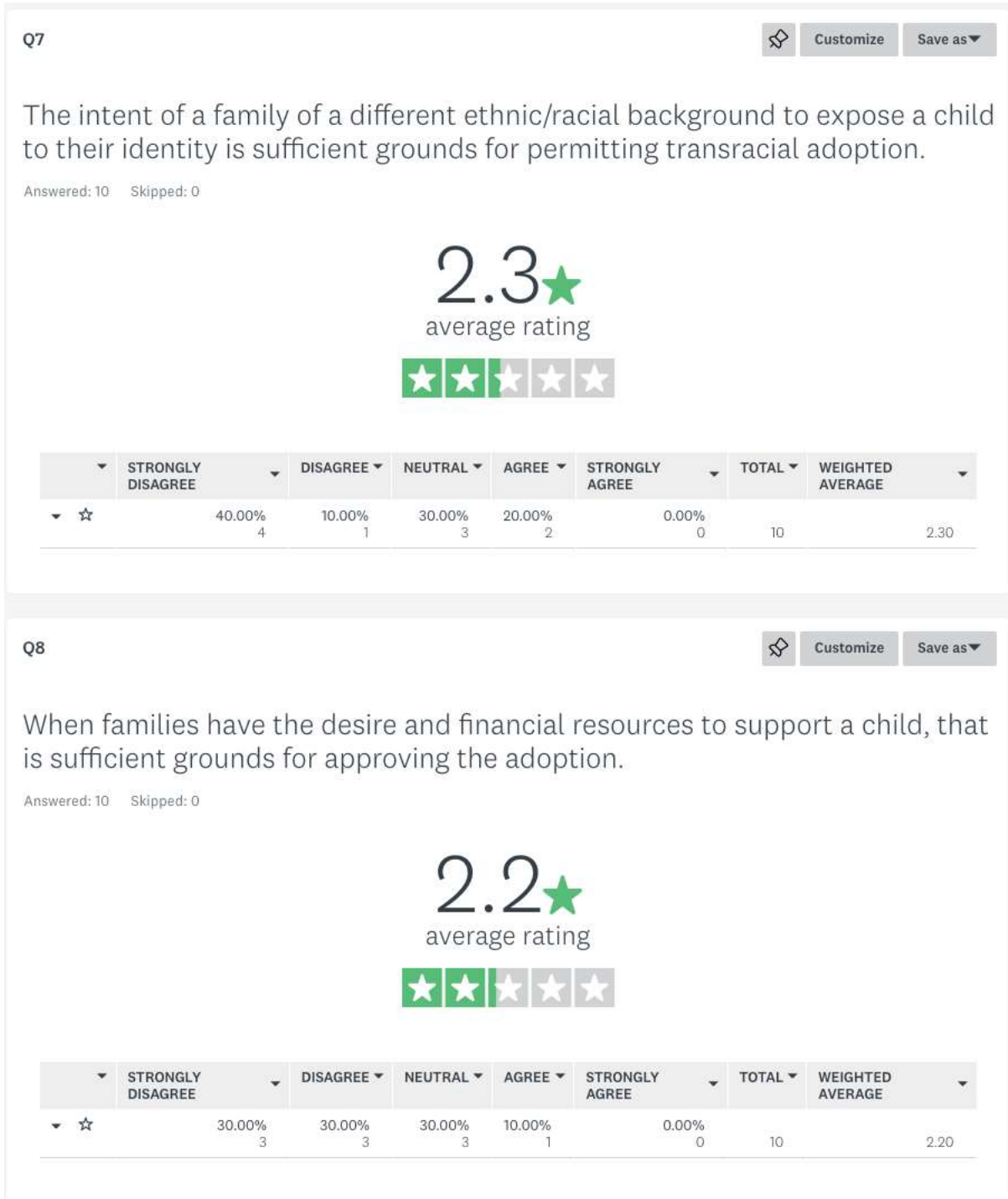
	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEUTRAL	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
★	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	30.00% 3	30.00% 3	40.00% 4	10	4.10

### Appendix E





### Appendix F



### Appendix G

Q9 Save as

Are there any comments you would like to add about transracial adoption?

Answered: 6 Skipped: 4

RESPONSES (6) WORD CLOUD TAGS (0) Sentiments: OFF

New!

Introducing Sentiment Analysis

Detect the feeling and sentiment behind written responses.

Watch a demo

Try it!

Upgrade

Search Responses Filter: by tag

Showing 6 responses

- Families who are wanting to adopt, and do not have extensive anti-racism trainings should not be permitted to adopt cross racial children. Families need to be actively anti-racist if adopting a child of color and be aware of the barriers POC individuals have in our society and be willing to be firm advocates against racism and discriminations.  
5/23/2023 09:31 AM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#)
- There are many factors that go into determining if an adoption will be in the child's best interest. When considering transracial adoption, by law race can only be considered if the child expresses concern or desire to be adopted or not adopted transracially.  
5/22/2023 09:37 AM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#)
- I believe that finances, desire, and exposing a child to a different ethnic/racial identity are not sufficient grounds for an adoption by themselves. Adoptive parents should be committed to maintaining and informing that child of the child's OWN racial/ethnic identity. Just as adoptive parents should ensure that Native American children maintain their heritage, all other children should be able to maintain their heritage as well.  
5/16/2023 01:40 PM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#)

## Appendix H

Filter: by tag ▾

Showing 6 responses

---

I put neutral for many of my answers as it takes a desire and an understanding that cultural identity is important and needs to be nurtured and encouraged in all adoptive situations. It is not enough to have an intent, there has to be follow through.

5/15/2023 03:50 PM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags ▾](#)

As an Adoption Specialist, I have worked with many families completing transracial adoptions. This is such a complex topic and I think that there really needs to be deeper assessment in this area. It's not enough to just have the intent to expose a child to their ethnic/racial identity. There should be a plan and connections already happening prior to the adoption.

5/15/2023 02:47 PM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags ▾](#)

I am in support of transracial adoptions when the adoptive parents are willing to educate themselves on the importance of cultural identity and will actively seek to assist the adoptee in maintaining and growing in their identity. They have to be aware of the impacts of systemic racism and social injustice. This also requires them to confront their own biases and do work to ensure it doesn't negatively impact how they parent a child of a different race/ethnicity. ⬆