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Not Just “White Parents with Kids of Color”: The Importance of Racial Identity Work for Parents



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by

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Discussing multiraciality, transracial adoption, and identity have incited the most heartfelt and passionate debates I have ever witnessed in my professional or personal life. Multiracial families (both adoptive and non-adoptive) and mixed-race people are living symbols, and also walking targets, for some of our most cherished beliefs, our deepest pains, and our desire to ignore, dismantle, or indulge our obsessions with race. Engaging in these discussions can never be fully objective or value-free — they are deeply personal and emotional. I want to acknowledge that reality, while calling for a higher level of complexity and balance in our discussions and practices related to transracial adoption. We need to broaden the focus of our identity concerns to the racial and cultural identities of adoptive parents (rather than just their skills and awareness) as central to the well-being of their children. The ripple effects that emerge from a parent’s own racial and cultural identity work can either inhibit or promote a

family identity that is culturally and racially affirming for all family members throughout life.

I bring to this topic both professional and personal experience. As a person of black-white mixed-race heritage I was raised with my adoptive sister (who is also black but not mixed-race) by our white adoptive mother. At the time of my adoption at nine months old, my mother was a social worker in Chicago; we lived there until I was five. We then moved to a small, predominantly white, college town in central Wisconsin — a place I am now willing to claim publicly as one of my homes. Like the youth I later worked with as a social worker, and those adults I now interview as a researcher, I have stories that mark my development into adulthood as a person of color “raised by white people” (Samuels, 2009).

As I met other adopted and/or multiracial people, I found both striking similarities and important differences. So began my academic interest in exploring these differences and similarities to move beyond the question: *is transracial adoption good or bad?* Transracial adoption, like any other family structure, has potential vulnerabilities and strengths. Drawing on my own research and other contemporary literature, it is my intention to generate critical thinking and further discussion rather than provide definitive solutions for how all families must navigate the lifelong challenges of transracial adoption and identity.

The hazards of a colorblind identity, AKA: “*I just see people as people!*”

Sometimes well-intentioned white people (and even people of color) will claim colorblindness as a way of affirming that they are not racist. They believe that the best way to eliminate racism in one’s own behaviors and even in society is to be blind to the thing that seems to cause prejudicial treatment, in this case race. I would suggest, as others have, that this is a risky identity status to assert, particularly as a white transracial adoptive parent. It is based on several flawed assumptions. First, for people with visual abilities, it is physically impossible to not notice the wide diversity of physical characteristics expressed among human beings. Second, prejudice and racism are not caused by seeing these physical differences but by attaching a status of “normal” to one group and its members while relegating every other group and their members to the status of “other.” Being anti-racist requires a radical change in belief systems, not in vision. For white parents, this might require understanding their “whiteness” as engendering a unique experience of race, rather than being unraced, “just a person,” or just normal. This identity work may represent the first time a white person considers themselves as part of (rather than apart from) a distinct racial experience.

A third problematic element of colorblind identities for transracial adoptive families is the belief that equality and connectedness depend on sameness, and that seeing race differences fosters inequalities and disconnections. The working logic is,

“I don’t think of myself as a race I think of myself as normal/unraced/just a person. If I were to see your race, it might cause me to think about you as different and thus, as something other than like me....something other than normal/unraced/just a person.”

Some parents hope that deemphasizing or denying racial differences will promote parent-child bonding and family cohesion. This can especially be pronounced for multiracial children with white heritage, whose white parents may wish to connect over shared white racial heritage. My research with multiracial black-white adults, similar to research with other groups of transracial adoptees, finds parental attempts to deemphasize their black heritage actually created parent-child rifts and a sense of disconnection into adulthood (Samuels, 2010, 2009). This approach prevented parents from being available when their children experienced people and groups for whom race mattered a lot. It left children racially unsafe and alone to navigate racism and prejudice (in both black and white communities) without parental guidance or support. When a colorblind identity is internalized, it can risk shaming children by signaling that there is something very visible and unchangeable about them (their skin, hair, bodies) that others (including their own parents) must overlook and ignore in order for the child to be accepted, belong, or considered as equal. Underneath that hallmark expression of colorblindness,

“I don’t even think of you as Asian/Black/Latino/Native American!” is the silent internal reply, “What would happen if you did?”

There are many ways parents can pursue identity work that celebrates both differences and similarities among family members and engages both overt and subtle strategies to counter-balance the myriad negative messages children will receive about their skin tone, facial features, hair, and bodies. I encourage parents to consider that discussing differences and attaching beauty to them can be important points of connection and authentic affirmation that facilitate familial belonging — just as important as celebrating the many shared characteristics and talents within the family.

More than books, dolls, and racial labels: the relationally and familially grounded identity

“I know about the white culture, because that’s what I was in. . . . Had I been raised in the black culture, I probably would have known a lot more. . . . But in order to know . . . I had to be immersed. . . . My parents didn’t take me outside African American culture. They didn’t stick me completely in it and leave me either. They were there with me, and we would talk through things . . . and we ALL learned things.” *Lauren, 28 (Samuels, 2010)*

Research makes clear that developing bicultural identities are positive assets for all children of color — including (and maybe especially) children adopted transracially. Here I want to emphasize that race and cultural identities are social identities that can facilitate one’s sense of belonging — but that they are acquired socially and familially. Having a certain heritage, being given books or dolls that reflect that heritage, or even using a particular racial label to self-identify are alone insufficient for developing a social identity. By themselves, they are highly fragile and precarious foundations for transracial adoptees to build a lifelong sense of confidence in their belonging within any community. Developing a sense of one’s *family* identity requires more than just having family pictures, a heritage, or even claiming a family name; it assumes that a person lives in that family and experiences relationships with others in that family over a period of time. Similarly, developing a *racial or cultural* identity requires, as the quote above suggest, being immersed in and experiencing relationships with others who share that identity. Ideally, as Lauren indicates, families do this together.

While we all experience moments of feeling like outsiders, transracially adopted people face particular obstacles as they strive to develop confidence in racial and cultural belonging. Many transracially adopted people cannot depend on automatic acceptance within any racial or cultural community. Instead, the second they speak, the moment they share first or last names, disclose their hometowns, or just enter a room with their parents, they are subject to stares and questions interrogating their identities and legitimate belonging — “where are you from?” For multiracial adoptees, a racially ambiguous appearance can elicit additional suspicions and questions in their ethnic communities of origin.

These are unavoidable realities that can erode a child’s core sense of belonging. To navigate this effectively, kids need more than tokens of where they come from — dolls who look like them, occasional visits to cultural events or camps, or waiting until high school or college for a first-time experience of immersion in a culture where white faces are the minority. They need to build confidence and multicultural agility through real relationships that provide meaningful opportunities to experience (and thus choose)

how they will express all dimensions of their diversity as transracial adoptees, as persons of color — as potential members of many communities. They also need parents who can model this level of confidence and cultural agility.

For parents, this requires several shifts in broadening their cultural and racial reference points. They may need to re-evaluate and re-define their values: what is “a good school,” “a good neighborhood” or “a good church?” They must learn to take seriously any setting’s capacity to provide their child with racial safety, as well as social identity promoting opportunities for the whole family. Parents must also challenge themselves to independently develop deep and meaningful connections to their child’s racial and cultural communities of origin. When parents already have established experiences and attachments within a community, more natural and meaningful pathways of connection for their children will follow. Taken together, these efforts support a coherent and collective confidence in identity shared and experienced as a family unit — *we are in this together!* This does not mean white parents become a different race, but rather, they replace a single racial/cultural reference point and lived experience with one that is multiracial and multicultural, and one that takes seriously their child’s experience as potentially different. In this way, the family identity shifts from “a white family with kids of color,” to a “multiracial family living multiculturally” — a relational unit where there are both shared and distinct experiences among members.

Of course transracial adoptive families must be flexible in how they pursue these developmental tasks and build their family identities. Not all transracial adoptees have the same needs, children’s needs change over time, and not all white parents enter into transracial adoption for the same reasons or with the same set of challenges or strengths. Fortunately, there is a generation of transracially adopted adults (as well as seasoned parents) who can serve as elders and as a supportive community for younger generations. One lesson learned from previous generations: it is important for parents to pursue identity work that is multiracially and multiculturally attuned. This hard but important work can be a powerful force promoting the health and well-being of all members of the family.

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