

Transcultural and Transracial Adoptees: The Development of Racial and Cultural Identity

By Arleta James, PCC



Danielle's birthparents were Latino and African American, but her adoptive family consisted of white parents and a white sibling who had also been adopted. The family lived in a small, mostly white town in Northern California. Danielle and her sister DeeAnne were well accepted at school, at synagogue and were active in scouting and sports during their elementary and middle school years.

When their father was transferred to a large city, the family moved to an integrated middle class suburb and put the girls into public middle school and high school. Suddenly the earth shifted under Danielle's feet. Perfectly comfortable with white kids like those she had grown up with, she suddenly found herself the target of black and Hispanic kids—especially the girls, who accused her of "talking white," "dressing white," and "acting white" as she drew the attention of boys of all races. After a year or so she made a conscious decision to claim her Black heritage and worked hard to model her dress, her behavior and her talk on those of the group she wanted so much to be a part of. At the same time DeeAnne began to complain loudly to their parents that Danielle's new behavior was an embarrassment to her.

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Welcoming a Brother or Sister by Adoption: From Navigating New Relationships to Building a Loving Family (Jessica-Kinsley Publishers - <http://www.jkp.com/>, 2013)

Where did Danielle belong?

Sometimes the adoptive family does not view the child's race or culture as an issue within the family. Yet, the reality is that we reside in a race—and culture—conscious society. Ignoring this issue leaves the child ill-prepared to manage when confronted with name-calling, jokes, stereotyping, etc. Additionally, in order to foster a positive sense of self within the child, it is necessary for the child to feel good about the racial or cultural group of which he is a member.

Identity formation is a difficult process for all of us. Race, ethnicity, and culture can make identity formation even more complicated for adoptees. The transnationally or transracially adopted child must learn what it means to be bi-racial, or to be a Black-, Asian-, Latino-, Korean-, Chinese-, Peruvian-, Mexican-American or be a member of a multi-racial family—an even more complex process yet! In addition to adjusting to the cultural climate and values of yet another family, adoptees may need to adjust to a new socio-economic climate, and perhaps an entirely different language and/or religion.

The identity development of transcultural adoptees is influenced by the environment in which the child lives. Those of us in the dominant culture—the group that has power over the distribution of goods, services, rights, privileges, entitlements and status, and those with access to education—develop confidence, self-esteem and goals because we see others like us achieving in virtually any chosen endeavor (Crumbley, 1999).

Children who are members of groups our society deems as minorities—groups subject to the power, control, discretion and distribution of goods and privileges by another group—frequently observe others who are not like them. They observe or experience prejudice, discrimination and stereotypical remarks, and thus may learn that they have more limited options and that their groups are somehow not as good as the prevailing cultural group. Thus a child's confidence, self-view, worth, self-respect and goals may be negatively affected (Crumbley, 1999).

All persons develop an identity, a sense of self, an answer to the question "Who Am I?". As pointed out above, for transracial and transcultural adoptees, the process of identity development is compounded as a result of environmental factors: prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, etc. Confrontation with these factors often triggers an exploration on the part of the adoptee into their race or culture of origin. This process may include a process of stages.

- *Pre-encounter*: In this stage there is a lack of interest in race or culture. The world is interpreted from the perspective of the dominant culture. It is not viewed as necessary to challenge the views and behavior of the dominant culture. There may even be a de-valuation of one's race or culture of origin.
- *Encounter*: The adoptee has experienced one or more racial or cultural confrontations inconsistent with current beliefs. As a result, the adoptee begins to question and reexamine their beliefs regarding the dominant culture. There is now confusion about their racial or cultural group as well as the dominant culture. The adoptee begins to develop new ideas and positive stereotypes about their own racial group as well as negative stereotypes about the dominant culture and/or other groups.
- *Awakening/Immersion*: This stage is the polar opposite of pre-encounter. In this stage, the adoptee is likely to reject the norms and practices of other groups and completely embrace the norms, values, and codes of conduct of their racial or cultural group. Confrontation toward or avoidance of the dominant group may

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occur. There may also be confrontation toward others in their own racial or cultural group who are not as immersed with differences as is the adoptee himself.

- *Internalization/Commitment*: Adoptees in this stage are secure and self-confident about their differences. They have developed a more balanced, integrated perspective of racial or cultural identity. They appreciate and assimilate traits from other racial and cultural groups as well.

Identity formation typically leads to inner struggle and conflict which is often expressed through negative behaviors. The adoptee may withdraw from the family or extra-curricular activities, grades may drop suddenly or unexpectedly, physical symptoms such as stomach aches or headaches may become common, there may be regression to an earlier stage of development or explosive or acting out behaviors may become prominent.

The task for parents is to support their children's developing a sense of where they come from and who they are. Providing the child accurate information about their race and culture is critical. And, providing this information at an early age is imperative. This front-end loading is an opportunity to offset the struggles and self-destructive behaviors which may result as the adoptee struggles with racial and cultural identity development.