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DEVELOPING POSITIVE RACIAL IDENTITY IN TRANSRACIAL ADOPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the role and development of positive racial identity in minority children adopted transracially. The purpose of this article is: 1) to identify how the minority child's racial identity is developed, and; 2) the parents role and tasks in the formation of positive racial identity in minority children adopted transracially.

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Framework for Developing Positive Racial Identity:

*Theories on social learning, object relations and identification are very useful in explaining how a child's identities (i.e., racial, religious, ethnic, class or gender) develops (Bandura 1977). These theories are also useful in understanding the similarities and differences in the development of identities in children from dominant groups and minority groups experiencing discrimination (see definitions) *.*

Object identification suggests that a child's identity is influenced by significant role models and relationships to which the child is consistently exposed in their environment (i.e., family, school, society and media).

The child from the dominant group begins its identity formation by:

1. observing what group is in power
2. observing that the members of the group in power are like them (i.e., racially, gender, religiously)
3. therefore assumes that they:
 - a. are like the members in that group.
 - b. have the same rights as members in the group
 - c. will achieve similar accomplishments and power as group members.

The ultimate result of the child's identity is a sense of positive self-esteem, confidence, worth, entitlements and goals.

The minority child's identity formation begins with:

1. observing what group is in power
2. observing that group members like them are not in positions of power and control
3. observing and/or experiencing prejudice, discrimination and exposure to stereotypes
4. therefore, assumes that they:
 - a. are like the members in the minority group
 - b. have the same limited rights
 - c. can only achieve the same accomplishments, position and status as similar group members
 - d. that they and members of their minority group are not as good as those in power.

* Definitions

Dominant: The group that has power and control over the distribution of goods, services, rights, privileges, entitlements and status.

The minority child's identity effects their self-esteem, confidence, goals, worth, self-respect, entitlements and expectations. The obvious result of negative group identities are



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inferiority complexes (i.e., low self-esteem, poor self-images, lack of confidence, entitlements, worth or rights). The inferiority is not the result of identifying or being a member of a minority group; but from exposure to discrimination, prejudices and negative stereotypes about one's minority group. A child from a minority group that is celebrated, held in esteem or shares power and control with the dominant group can have identities that are just as positive as a child from the dominant group.

Minority: The group that is subject to the power, control, discretion and distribution of goods and privileges by another group.

Group: i.e., racial, religious, political, ethnic, gender or physically/emotionally challenged.

In order to counteract the minority child's formation of negative identities, they must experience and be told:

1. members from their minority group can also make positive achievements if given equal opportunities
2. that the child and their minority group should also have the same rights and entitlements as members in the dominant group
3. that the child and their group are as equal and as good as any other group
4. that stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination are wrong
5. and that there is proof of the prejudices and stereotype being untrue so that the child can "see it in order to believe it."

The last task (#5) may be the most difficult and challenging to accomplish if the minority child's group is not in position of power, control and success in the child's environment. Alternatives may need to include:

1. exposing the child to historical figures and information about their group's accomplishments, capacities, values, culture
2. redefine and reframe the child's definition of success, strengths and accomplishments by not using standards and definitions based on those of the dominant group (i.e., highlight individual accomplishments, family commitment, group survival, spiritual and moral integrity, civil rights activities against discrimination)
3. exposing the child outside of their environment to their minority group in position of power and control (i.e., geographically, other countries, films, media).

In summary, children from a minority group (i.e., Asian, Latino, African or Native American) experiencing prejudice or discrimination are:

1. subject to developing a negative racial identity due to an identification with the stereotypes, prejudices and negative images associated with their minority group;
2. can develop a negative racial identity through personal experiences and/or observations (i.e., community, school or media);

3. requires monitoring and attention to their perception of racial identity in order to counteract any racial inferiority;
4. should not be expected to adequately develop a positive racial identity without the positive support and reinforcements from family, role models and the community.

Parental Tasks with Minority Children in Transracial Adoptions:

Task #1: Acknowledging the Existence of Prejudice, Racism and Discrimination

This task requires the adoptive parent to recognize 1) that racism, prejudice and discrimination exist; 2) and that they also have been victims and survivors of discrimination, prejudice and racism. By admitting the inequities existence, the parent can avoid denying and minimizing the child's experiences; or excusing the racist, prejudicial or discriminatory behavior. By admitting being a victim and survivor, the parent is able to: 1) recognize the inequities and their impact on others and; 2) elicit strategies for intervening on behalf of their child, based on personal experiences and knowledge.

The victimization of minority groups is fairly obvious. However, the victimization of members from the dominant culture and race may not be as obvious. Children in the dominant group are victims of racism by inadvertently developing superiority complexes.

The concept of object identification can also be applied in understanding the formation of superiority complex:

1. the child observes that those in power are racially the same as they are
2. those not in power are observed to be of a different race or color
3. the child observes or is exposed to prejudicial and discriminatory beliefs and practices against a minority race
4. therefore, the child assumes that they and their race are better than the minority group.

By identification with the dominant group, a child can develop a sense of superiority without being told they're better or having had any contact with a minority group.

Tasks to counteract the superiority complex requires the child to experience and be told:

1. other minority groups can also be successful and make positive achievements if given equal opportunities and resources
2. members from other minority groups deserve equal rights and that racism, prejudice and discrimination are incorrect
3. minority groups are equal to members from the dominant group
4. and be exposed to examples and proof of the prejudices and stereotypes about minorities being untrue.

Parents are now prepared to undertake the second task once understanding how racism victimizes members from both the dominant and minority communities.



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Task #2: Explain Why the Child's Minority Group is Mistreated

This task requires parents to explain and define racism, prejudice, discrimination and bigotry. It is also necessary to explain why this behavior exists. The child's coping skills will be enhanced by having an understanding of the behaviors as not only being either "good or bad." By understanding the functions and reasons for the behaviors the child can also increase their range of responses beyond anger or retaliation.

Task #3: Providing the Child a Repertoire of Responses to Racial Discrimination

This task minimizes the child's feelings of helplessness. The child's identity can be more positive if they perceive themselves and racial groups as empowered with choices, resources and the ability to acquire and protect their rights. This repertoire of responses many include:

1. selective confrontation or avoidance
2. styles of confrontations (passive, aggressive)
3. individual, legal, institutional or community resources and responses (i.e., grievances, suites, NAACP, protests)
4. priorities and timing (when and when not to avoid issues)
5. goal oriented responses rather than unplanned reactions
6. institutional/organizational strategies
 - positioning
 - coalitions
 - compromising

Task #4: Providing the Child Role Models and Positive Contact with Their Minority Community

The need for this task is based on several assumptions:

1. that children from minority groups experiencing prejudice and discrimination will need positive support and reinforcements from their family, role models and their community in order to counteract negative racial identity and feelings of inferiority
2. that same race role models and the child's exposure to their culture and community are essential in counteracting negative stereotypes about their racial group.

Parents of a different race from their child are quite capable of modeling and helping the child develop various identities (i.e., gender, class). However, counteracting the racial identity projected by a racially conscious or discriminating society requires positive exposure to same race models or experiences. These contacts and experiences require: 1) interacting with the child's minority community; 2) providing the child information about their history and culture and; 3) providing an environment that includes the child's culture on a regular basis (i.e., art, music, food, religion, school, integrated or same race community.) This task requires that the parent be comfortable with: 1) being a minority when



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interacting in the child's community, and; 2) sharing the role of modeling with members from the child's race. Same race contacts and experiences function to: 1) counteract negative stereotypes; 2) teach the child how to implement the repertoire of responses, and; 3) provides a respite from being a minority (i.e., the only child of color, the object of stares, or needing to prove one's equality).

Task #5: Preparing the Child for Discrimination.

Providing the child information on how their racial identity might be degraded helps the child develop better coping skills and methods of maintaining a positive identity. The feeling of self-confidence in their ability to cope with and appropriately respond, reinforces a positive self-image and identity. Utilizing same race role models may be a helpful resource for information and preparation if the adoptive parent has not experienced discrimination similar to the child's minority group (i.e., double standards, slander, interracial dating, gender issues).

Task #6: Teaching the Child the Difference Between Responsibility To and For Their Minority Group

This task relieves the child of: 1) feeling embarrassed or needing to apologize for their racial identity or group; 2) not having to overcompensate or prove their worth because of their racial identity or negative stereotypes. However, the child is able to develop a commitment to both their individual and minority group's accomplishments, resources and empowerment.

The Clark Doll Test suggests that children are aware of differences in races as early as four years old. The study also found that African American children became aware of stigma associated with race as early as seven years old (Clark and Clark, 1958). Although parents cannot stop the minority child's exposure to racial prejudice, discrimination and stereotypes, parents (adoptive, birth, same or different race) of any minority child must help develop the positive racial identity necessary to counteract the effects of racial inferiority.

Task #7: Advocate on Behalf of Your Child's Positive Identity

The purpose of this task is to provide the child an environment that is conducive to the formation of a positive identity. The parent should advocate for family, social and educational experiences that are respectful, reflective and sensitive to cultural diversity. Therefore, the parent may need to be prepared to correct or confront individual or institutional racism, prejudice or discrimination that the child might encounter.

As an advocate the parent models for the child how to advocate for themselves. The child also sees and feels their parent's protection, loyalty and commitment which are essential elements in attachment and bonding. Confronting prejudice and discrimination on the child's behalf is no longer optional once a parent adopts transracially.



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