

# Developing a positive racial identity – challenges for psychotherapists working with black and mixed race adopted adults

In this article, Esther Ina-Egbe argues that psychotherapists need to explore the repetitions and lack of mirroring that may be present in the therapeutic relationship



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**T**here is a huge body of knowledge on the development of racial identity. This article has been influenced by notable writers and critics, such as Schwartz, and Armstrong and Slaytor, who have carried out extensive work on this topic. I have also consulted other writers and formed my own opinion and judgments based on my experience in private practice.

## What is racial identity?

Before addressing how to develop a positive racial identity, we must first look at what racial identity is. Armstrong and Slaytor consider that children as young as two and a half years old are aware of racial differences, and that development of a positive racial identity does not just happen but must be cultivated. Bath and North-East Somerset Council has defined racial identity as 'one's self perception and sense of belonging to a particular group including not only how one describes and defines oneself, but also how one distinguishes oneself from other ethnic groups'. According to this definition, racial and ethnic group differences will certainly impact on children's social development, although that impact may differ according to age and specific ethnicity. Hence, social context, immediate surroundings and historical heritage are underpinning factors in the development of a child's race awareness and identity.

A child with a strong racial identity will place high priority on his or her race as a component of their self-image. A black child with a strong racial identity will therefore view their race as a more

important aspect of their identity than most other personal attributes or characteristics. This is an important point, as studies show that many transracially adopted black children place less significance on their race than racially adopted black children. In a society that emphasises race but often denigrates the black race, a strong racial identity enables a black child's self-esteem to cushion the messages of inferiority they receive from others. A strong racial identity, as with a black cultural identity, may be more likely to result from having black parents than white.

## Mixed race heritage

Having a mixed ethnic heritage has a different effect on a child's development (Herring, 1992), and it is therefore very important to actively help mixed race children acquire a positive self-concept. They need exposure to models of all the ethnicities they embrace. They need to understand what it means to be mixed race and to acquire coping skills linked to their cultures, including ways to deal with racism and discrimination (Wardle, 1987). Referring to the American experience, where there is dearth of fully integrated, stable and tension-free racially mixed communities, Miller and Rotheram-Borus (1994) advise that 'families and schools must work hard to provide a supportive community that affirms multi-racialism'.

A key factor in the lives of mixed race children and adults is how they are labelled by themselves, their families and society in general. Root (1996) views labels as a motivating factor, stating that 'labels are important vehicles for self-empowerment as there has been an increase in the self-determination of

interracial families'. Many have become active politically to ensure that they are accepted as a group with special concerns separate from other racial or ethnic populations. A recent example is the current president of the USA, Barack Obama.

Mixed race children and adults need to work through internal conflicts and guilt about having to develop an identity that might not incorporate all aspects of their heritage and to resist internalising society's negative attitudes, mixed racialism and minority status. Ultimately, successful identity formation, or a satisfying feeling of wholeness, requires that mixed race people appreciate and integrate all components of their heritage into their lives (Poston, 1990). Furthermore, while some families help their children develop a biracial identity based on the components of their particular background, it is important for children to take equal pride in all their heritages and to maintain equal connections with all members of their family. According to Pinderhughes (1995), some of these families recognise that their children's appearance reflects their dual heritage and they want the family's culture to embody that. However, other families foster their children's identification with only one race. Single parents, especially, may want to emphasise the culture of their own race because that is what they know best and because their children resemble them (Mills, 1994). Some parents of children with African ancestry may assume that society will consider the children black, so they raise them as black to better prepare them for their treatment in later life (Morrison and Rodgers, 1996). In addition, society may encourage children only to identify with their minority group in an effort to maintain the 'racial purity' of whites. Conversely, some mixed race children may be urged to assume a white identity on the assumption that if they can 'pass' as white they can avoid experiencing racism (Miller and Rotheram-Borus, 1994).

### What are the challenges?

Undoubtedly being mixed race has its challenges for the adult male. Identity development for the mixed race youth is more complicated than for the single race youth. This is due to there being so many possible choices, and also because the influence of families, peers and society

in general can be very strong on young people who are already struggling with internal conflicts. Another, perhaps even more formidable pressure on mixed race adopted black adults, which may continue throughout their lives, is societal racism in general and discomfort with interracial marriages in particular. Some people may also express reservations about intermarriage, believing that those who cross ethnic lines are rejecting pride in their own group or that the political power of their own group will be diminished through blending (Wardle, 1987).

Given the existence of prejudices in society in general, it is likely that some may be harboured by educators and counsellors, if unconsciously. Inevitably, mixed race students will perceive these attitudes and internalise a negative image that compromises their sense of self and ability to succeed. It is therefore vital for those working with mixed race children and adults to carefully consider their personal views, particularly in light of the significant worth that some people place on their approval.

### What are the advantages?

However, being mixed race also has its advantages. There are several factors that determine the ability of people of mixed race to develop a cohesive and personally fulfilling identity, including personal qualities such as resilience and self-esteem. Individuals who are socialised as mixed race usually benefit from their heritage. Their families provide them with a cultural education that is broader than that of single race children, giving them a larger knowledge base and a well-rounded sense of the world. They have an enhanced sense of self and identity, and greater intergroup tolerance, language facility and appreciation of minority group cultures (Thornton, 1996). In addition, they are often able to identify multiple aspects of a situation where other people may see only one, and to see both sides of a conflict. Other factors include attitudes and behaviour, community and school environment, and the extent to which there is unity and coming together of mixed race families in the neighbourhood. Some of these factors affect the identity development of all children and some affect the development of single race minority children as well as mixed race children.

### Therapeutic input

Bath and North-East Somerset Council provided a model for understanding and assessing racial identity (following the work of Jocelyn Maxime) in terms of a five-stage process: pre-encounter stage, encounter stage, immersion-emersion stage, internalisation stage and internalisation-commitment stage. At pre-encounter stage, the mixed race worldview is influenced by a white perspective before racism is encountered. The encounter stage coincides with children's first real encounter with racism, which forces them to reconsider their previous worldview and reinterpret their experiences. The third stage is when they seek to reject all previous aspects of their identity and become immersed in their blackness. However, this is a superficial and reactive concept of black identity. Individuals at this stage are often wrongly perceived to have a positive black identity. The fourth stage, the internalisation stage, is a move towards a more positive and integrated model of identity, in which an internal working model of black identity begins to take shape. Finally, at the internalisation-commitment stage, the internal model links to aspects of a group identity, in that children commit themselves to active participation in and commitment to the black community.

### Recommendations

In order to develop a truly positive racial identity for black and mixed race adopted adults, families, schools and organisations catering for their interests are advised to reflect on the following recommendations:

- Recognition that black and mixed race adopted adults' knowledge and understanding of their cultural history are important
- Recognition that they need help to develop pride in their racial identity, and coping skills to deal with racism
- Development of racial awareness, coping skills and, for those adopting and their children, creation of opportunities to learn about and participate in the children's birth culture
- Recognition of racial identity, rather than denial of it or acting as if race does not matter

- Acknowledgement that the family is visibly different from others, and help for parents/their children to develop skills to deal successfully with the challenge of being a racial minority
- Recognition and awareness of own biases. Those who have not personally experienced racism may need to be especially attuned to teaching their children effective ways to respond to racism
- Understanding that interest and involvement in birth culture will help children be involved and comfortable in their culture of origin
- Help for adoptees in forming relationships with adults and children of the same race or ethnic origin
- Celebration of diversity and understanding that all ethnic groups have something worthwhile to celebrate. While it may be difficult for families living in smaller communities to find a multicultural experience, ideas could include planning a family trip to a larger centre to coincide with multicultural festivals, exploring existing opportunities through churches, schools and communities, and developing multicultural friendships
- Help for families and children to develop a strong self-image despite racism, and communicate

with families/children about these issues honestly and openly

- Recognition that other people in the family who are not of colour may experience verbal abuse about their adopted siblings, especially from peers. Parents can anticipate this and help all their children learn to deal with racism and not to side with their peers
- Development of coping strategies to deal with situations when mixed race children are not with their parents or in familiar territory
- Awareness of subtle stereotypes presented in the media. Like children, the adopted adult can be taught that all racial groups have historical figures who have made positive or negative contributions to the world
- Continuing contact with families facing similar issues. Practise responses to insensitive comments from others and demonstrate a lack of tolerance for racially or ethnically biased comments. Act as a positive role model for responding to racism.

The therapist's role is to empower all concerned and affected by a negative racial identity stemming from societal stigma and prejudices, enabling them to be better equipped with coping mechanisms to deal with the issues that confront them. **P**

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## The Moses Basket

Because love alone could not promise  
A land of milk and honey  
To the infant at her breast,

She plied a papyrus basket,  
Coated it in bitumen and pitch,  
Placed the swaddled baby there

And laid it in the whispering  
Reeds along the river's edge,  
Watched it drift downstream,

Prayed that it would find some  
Pharaoh's daughter. The severed  
Umbilical towrope insisted

No return and, no matter  
How often she struck the rock,  
No waters of forgiveness to soothe

A desert soul. But every day  
She climbed the mountain's barren peak,  
Looked out for the distant child

Skiping through meadows, through fields  
Of fatted cattle; listened  
For the industrious hum of bees.

**Tim Cunningham**

*Unequal Thirds* (2006). Calstock, Cornwall: Peterloo Poets