The Latino Child in Transracial Adoptions

By Dee Dee Mascareñas, M.F.T.

According to the 1990 census, by the year 2000 the Latino population will comprise the largest ethnic group in the United States.

What should first be noted when discussing work with an individual originating from a Spanish-speaking country, or a descendant of such an individual, is that there is no one unifying name that comprehensively or adequately describes the variations of cultures encompassed by the term "Spanish-speaking." Some would like to be called Hispanic, others Latinos, others Chicanos, and still others simply define themselves based on their country of origin (i.e. Peru, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, etc.) It is, therefore, important to ask the individual or family what their preference is and the reasons for that preference, as the reason has significance as well.

For the purpose of this paper, I will refer to this population as "Latinos." It would be quite difficult to enumerate the multiple concerns that need to be taken into consideration and addressed when working with a Latino. If they are second, third or fourth generation, etc., they will have moved farther along in their bicultration process, farther than a newly immigrated Latino. While similar struggles exist for both these groups, the newly immigrated Latino finds his journey more intense as a result of the immediacy of his needs and concerns.

Therefore, I will limit this paper to focusing on the needs of the newly immigrated child. Specifically, the child (age 2-18) adopted from another country by a family of similar origin or as a part of a transracial adoption; or, the child who is a part of a family, newly immigrated to this country, who, for whatever reason, involuntarily lost or voluntarily relinquished their child for adoption.

Ego Development, Ethnic/Racial Identity Development and Racism

Ethnicity gives one a sense of connectedness, a sense of roots and integrity, a foundation from which to develop in many areas, but most specifically in the area of positive self-esteem. It also connects people who share a common ancestry in a number of significant ways.

There are many who fear that the current trend towards multiculturalism (the celebration of differences) disconnects the individual from the larger community or "mainstream society." The opposite is true, for as an individual is able to develop a positive and healthy sense of self, they are more fully able to connect with others from a position of acceptance rather than from a position of rejection or as a victim.

As we become aware of traits or characteristics within ourselves that are unacceptable to us, we begin to reject the self. If we see those unaccept-able traits in others, regardless of gender, race, religion, etc., we will also find them unacceptable. The unconscious is powerful and *will not* discern that it must *only* reject unacceptable traits in the self and not in others.

What can also happen along this continuum of self-acceptance and other acceptance is a process known as "splitting." This is a common process in the development of all children, but most significant in the development of adopted children. The adopted child unconsciously "splits" the adoptive parents and the biological parents and sees one as *all good* and the other as *all bad*. Therefore, any connection they have with the biological parents, be it physical or emotional, is sometimes seen as "all bad" or "all good." If the biological parents are perceived as "bad" as a result of the abandonment issues it stimulates in the child, the child is unable to integrate *all* aspects of the self (negative and positive) in a healthy manner in order to develop self-acceptance and healthy self-esteem, which subsequently hinders their acceptance of others as noted above.

It is said that ethnicity "fulfills a deep psychological need for identity and historical continuity" (Giordano, 1982). In his study of the development of identity in adolescents, Erik Erikson strongly believes that there is a direct positive correlation between the developed identity as it was linked to the past and the future. For Erikson, the establishment of a personal independent identity is the most important task for the adolescent. What the adolescent does in this stage is "refight many of the battles of earlier years" (Erikson, 1963 p. 261).

It is a process of integrating the past, the present and the future, and if that past or present has been filled with trauma it will be difficult to create a positive and meaningful future. The issues of greatest significance at this stage become that of "sameness" and/ or "differentness": sameness and differentness within the self, within one's family and in the world (with one's peers). It is, therefore, easy to see how, based on Erikson's model, identity development for a multi-racial child or a child in a transracial home would produce an even greater struggle than for the average adolescent.

"The adolescent adoptee is the child now struggling to form a mature identity, a task he or she finds difficult because there is no way of integrating the past with the present." (B. J. Lifton, 1988, p. 43). There are common struggles that all adolescents have, but the adoptee's issues compound this already difficult developmental stage. "...it is hard to know where you are going when you don't know where you came from — and hard to become an autonomous person when your parents and society control the basic facts of your heritage." (B. J. Lifton, 1988, p. 45).

The adoptee must, therefore, at this stage come to terms with the real loss he/she had — the loss of their connection with their birth family. H. J. Sants believes that the adoptee suffers from "genealogical bewilderment" or "adoption stress." Most people take for granted the existence of others in their life with whom they share physical characteristics. "As a matter of fact, persons outside ourselves are essential for the development of our complete body image. The most important persons in this respect are our real parents and other members of our family. Knowledge of and definite relationship to his genealogy is, therefore, necessary for a child to build up his complete body image and world picture. It is an inalienable and entitled right of every person. There is an urge, a call in everybody to follow and fulfill the tradition of his family, race, nation, and the religious community into which he was born. The loss of this tradition is a deprivation which may result in the stunting of emotional development." (B. J. Lifton, quoting British psychologist, E. Wellisch, 1988, p. 48).

As the child struggles during this stage of his development so does the parent. When they view every unacceptable act the child exhibits, parents are often hurt, bewildered, and unsure of their own parenting skills, as well as of the welfare of their child's future, as they stumble around trying to define themselves. It is also an option for the adoptive parent, that most parents do not possess, to disown any responsibility for the adolescent's struggles and subsequent behaviors, because after all this is not really their biological child.... One psychiatrist, himself an adoptive father, expressed it like this: "When your kid is acting up, when he's demonstrating all of his least appealing traits, you tend to be a lot more tolerant and forgiving if you can recognize those traits as your own, if you can grin and think — just like his old man. Hell! How can I blame him if he got it from me? But when you're not the old man, and the faults are alien and unrecognizable, you're going to be a lot tougher. You're going to wonder — where did the little bastard pick that up?" (B. J. Lifton, 1988, p. 51).

The mental health community has recognized the impact of the lack of identity development to the degree that this is a major contributing factor in the formation of the Borderline Personality Disorder and Identity Disorder (DSM IV).

It is, therefore, imperative that a parent take an active role in helping their child to make this transition with awareness, patience and nurturance. If this is not done, it will most certainly contribute to the development of a negative sense of self, individually, ethnically and racially. Many therapists believe that once prejudices have formed, if noth-ing is done to extinguish them, they become more rooted over time. This is true of both negative or positive beliefs. If a parent is unaware of this process of identity development and/or the existence of racism, this, too, can have a negative impact on the development and future of the child.

As described earlier, the process defined as "splitting" also becomes an issue as it relates to race and ethnicity. Whereby, if the child rejects the part of them which is different not only from "mainstream society," but more significantly the part of them which differs from their adoptive parents, they may begin to see their birth parents not only unacceptable as individuals, but also ethnically or racially. This "sets them up" to reject the ethnic/ racial part of themselves that is a part of their biological family. Consequently, the child, already fearful of abandonment, will most certainly move in the direction of pleasing the adoptive parent by assimilating the values, ideas, beliefs and even

culture and race of the adoptive parent. Regardless of the impossibility of the task, the child will do their utmost to be accepted. The more "outwardly" different the child is from the adoptive parent the more difficult the task. The further entrenched that child was in their ethnicity and culture, based on the age of their adoption, the more difficult the task as well. Patricia G. Ramsey, in her research on how children think about ethnic differences (Phinney & Rotherman, 1989, p. 71) noted the following: "Interestingly, children feel that their identity can change with the acquisition of cultural traditions and artifacts."

In Ponterotto & Pederson (1993, p.32 & 33), they note that parental influence is "without question, the greatest influence on young children's attitude development." They further go on to define a number of behaviors that contribute to the development of negative racial prejudice in children, specifically: "(1) not discussing racial issues in the home, (2) not having a culturally diverse group of friends visit the house with regularity, (3) not confronting prejudicial remarks when heard in the company of the children, (4) allowing children to remain in segregated environments…or making attempts to comp-ensate for such isolation and, (5) not pointing out the positive aspects and strengths of diverse cultures, including their own." Accordingly, if a parent were to knowingly or unconsciously engage in the above-described behaviors, the impact on the child would be detrimental. With regards to a child of color, this would most certainly contribute to the development of, or add to the process of internalized racism.

Often White America takes for granted that all other Americans hold, or should hold, the same values as they and subsequently judge them accordingly. This contributes to misunderstanding, preconceptions and prejudice. Therefore, in the case of the transracial adoption it would be important that the parents assess their own awareness of racism in America, as well as within themselves and in their family (nuclear and extended). Whether covert or overt they may be intentionally or unintentionally contributing to racism.

"Racism brutalizes and dehumanizes both its object and those who articulate it" (Pederson, 1992 p. 6). The dominant culture, as an inherent part of racism, possesses a number of tangible and intangible benefits, such as social privilege, political power, higher levels of economic development and status, and as a result, higher levels of self-esteem and positive identity development. (See McIntosh, 1988).

From an article entitled "What Did You Say You Were? Am I a Racist?" in *Confronting Diversity Issues on Campus* the author includes the chart, Myths and Realities of Racism which is reproduced on the following page.

We will revisit the subject of what parents of a child of color can do to help address the area of racism and healthy self-esteem and identity development later in this paper.

The Latino Culture

In order to fully understand the needs of a Latino child, it is important to understand the Latino culture. What motivates and defines the Latino in terms of ancestry, language, codes of behavior, values, time orientation, family makeup, gender roles, sexuality, work ethic, education, spirituality, etc. As noted previously, it would be difficult to define the Latino adequately as the Latino originates from a number of different Spanish-speaking countries, each with their own cultural "flavor." However, for purposes of this discussion there are some similarities that hold true for Latinos as a whole and will be defined as follows.

Ancestry

Latinos are a mixture of Spanish ancestry combined with the indigenous population of the lands that they conquered ("Mestizos"). For instance, Mexicans are a mixture of Spanish and Mayan and Spanish and Aztec. In Central America it is predominantly Spanish and Mayan. Still in other countries the Spaniards massacred the indigenous peoples of the land and either intermarried or married with African slaves that they had brought with them. This is the case in Cuba, Puerto Rico and parts of the Caribbean. In South America the mixture is that of Spanish and Italian with the indigenous peoples. In some parts you may also find a Portuguese influence. There is a strong connection with Spain for many Latinos, and for others there is a rejection of that connection and a deep longing for that which they lost in the conquest of their indigenous ancestors.

No matter what the mixture may be, the rituals,

Myths and Realities of Racism

Myths	Realities
1. There are three distinct physical races.	1. Racial differences are social, economic, cultural & political.
2. Not everyone has a culture that matters.	2. Everyone has a complex culture that matters.
3. Racism is personal and happens.	3. Racism is personal, institutional & cultural.
4. Affirmative action is reverse racism.	4. Affirmative action seeks to reduce racism.
5. Racism is an on-off phenomenon.	5. Racism operates on a continuum from overt to covert.
6. Racism must be conscious and intentional.	6. Racism ranges from conscious to unconscious.
7. Racism must be mean-spirited.	7. Racism ranges from mean-spirited to well-intentioned.
8. What happens to people of color is unimportant.	8. Our racial communities are interdependent.
9. Racism exists when European Americans say so.	9. Racism can be identified by the victim, perpetrator or observer.
10. "I couldn't possibly be racist because I have friends in other races.	10. You can be a racist and have friends in other races.
11. Racism is inevitable.	11. Racism is not inevitable.

spirituality and beliefs of the "native" still influence much of the modern day characteristics of the Latino.

Language

The language of most Latinos is primarily Spanish; however, each country has developed a different dialect or form of Spanish. Often times these differences, small as they may be, are even a barrier to Spanish-speaking people themselves, depending on their country of origin. In someSouth American countries Spanish and Portuguese coexist.

Time Orientation

Latinos tend to be oriented first to the present, secondly, the past and thirdly, the future. The present is all there is, it is all that is within one's power to enjoy, to take part in or to develop. The past is that which gives one a sense of roots and connectedness to the generations before them. The future is "in God's hands" which is strongly connected to the spiritual belief that man is subject to the power of God and Nature. A common response to questions is "Sí Dios lo Quiere", "If God wills it so."

Gender Roles

The Latino family tends to be patriarchal in nature. That is, the father is the head of the household, and the mother is subject to his desires, needs or concerns. His desire is to care for, protect, and provide for his family to the best of his ability, with respect, love and caring, for this is "Macho." ("Machismo" is a term that has been much maligned over the years in this country, however, originally it had a positive connotation). The wife is to assist her husband in these tasks to the best of her ability, using the skills available to her or that she develops. Therefore, gender roles are well defined and to some degree rigid for the Latino. This definition, which may be considered "rigid" by white American cultural values, gives the Latino a strong foundation that helps create a sense of security and stability for family life.

The Family

The extended family is what defines the Latino as an individual, for in the Latino culture one is not alone, one is part of a whole, one is part of the "family." The family includes not only the nuclear component of what is thought of as "family" in the Euro-western sense, but also includes grandparents, aunts/uncles, cousins (first, second, third, etc.), godparents, and even past generations (their ancestors). Still even more expansive, the Latino family often includes lifelong friends (of any ethnicity). As noted above, the family is more important than the individual, and conversely, the parental role is more important than the marital dyad. It is within this framework that includes a loose definition of family, a definition of inclusion, that there is no room for competition, the focus is towards cooperation and cohesiveness. This is done in order to define life and to contribute to and promote the family as a part of society as a whole.

The Work Ethic and Education

Self-esteem and integrity for the Latino is defined by "who" you are, not what you do. "How" you do something not what you look like or where you do it. There is a striving for doing your work to the very best of your ability, regardless of whether your work is one which includes manual labor or one that is more intellectual in nature. Whatever you do to enhance that ideal, to develop your sense of integrity in doing the task at hand is acceptable; be that enhancing your education, physical mobility, expanding work responsibilities to include several jobs, all this is seen as valuable. Here again, the very strong spiritual component that comes from the indigenous roots of the Latino can be seen, in that the "essence" of the person is what is valuable and must be nurtured, rather than what is "nonessential," what is material, what is outside the self.

Spirituality

Spirituality in the Latino culture includes not only established religion, but also the development of the spiritual core or essence of an individual. There is then a combination of organized religion with indigenous beliefs that include a connection to that which is "natural," seeing the world symbolically, and understanding the need to nurture and develop balance within all parts of the self, balance with nature, and balance with all men. For many years, the dominant religion in most Spanish-speaking countries has been Catholicism, yet in recent years there has also been a strong influence from the Protestants as well, and they bring with them the component of education and personal responsibility.

Language: A Bridge or a Barrier

The U.S. is currently the fifth largest Spanish-speaking country in the world, and yet there is a bias in this county to only speak English and to value it as a language more important than others. In Europe, where people speak a number of different languages as a matter of everyday life, this concept is not understood. Regrettably, in this country, individuals who possess the ability to speak in two languages often struggle with the tendency to see themselves as less valuable if their strongest language is not English. Yet

many believe that an individual who is fluent in two languages is worth two people, that they are in fact more astute, flexible and open to change and new ideas.

There was a time in America when the school system believed that children who could not speak English, especially in the case of Latinos, were less intelligent and slow to learn, and consequently they were placed in classes with "mentally challenged children." As a result of this injustice, the civil rights-based Chicano Movement of the 1960s helped to bring this issue to the attention of American citizens in general and the school districts in particular. What came out of this struggle was the birth of "bilingual education." This was created to ensure that the child was learning the concepts that they needed to learn at their grade level in their own language, while simultaneously learning to master English. There are many camps of thought as to the validity of such an educational process, but nonetheless, it still exists in many schools today as a way to address this area of concern.

Other Considerations

Returning to the concerns of the newly immigrated child, it would be important for a number of variables to be considered with regard to placement and treatment. For instance, what country is this child from? Did the child experience war, death of a significant family member or abandonment as a result of that war? Was the child left in their country while their parents immigrated with the hopes of creating a better life for their family, while at the same time creating feelings of rejection, abandonment and neglect in the child who is left behind, waiting for them to find "success"? Is the child bilingual? What type of environment was the child exposed to, i.e. rural, urban, lower, middle or upper class? Was this an only child? What are the numerous losses this child must contend with as they are expected to simultaneously adjust to a new country, a new family, a new culture, a new language, and in some cases new races of people, which may or may not include their adoptive families. What are the fears and expectations this child has of this new country, as well as of their new family? What preconceptions already exist in the mind of the child about Americans, or about different racial or ethnic groups?

Recommendations

In her work on transethnically adopted Mexican-Americans, Dr. Estela Andujo (Andujo, 1988) provides empirical data and valuable recommendations. She believes that "ethnic identity appears to have been more of a problem for the transethnic adoptees than for the same ethnic adoptees, and supports the belief that ethnic similarity of adoptive parents and children is a factor that is relevant in adoption practice and policy." Dr. Andujo proposes that the placement of Latino children, in both policy and practice, needs to take into consideration the following: "(1) Permanent care in an adoptive home is preferable to long-term foster care, (2) Emphasis on ethnic identity is an essential starting point for the development of an ethnic sensitive home study, (3) Parents who adopt trans-ethnically should demonstrate a willingness to accept ethnic and cultural differences between themselves and their child, (4) Families who adopt children of different ethnic backgrounds than their own must be helped to recognize that the ethnic and cultural heritage of the child is an essential part of their psychosocial sense of self, (5) Agencies need to help families use the ethnic and cultural resources of the minority community to explore the realities of racism, (6) Parents need to be willing and able to acknowledge and deal with racism and cultural prejudice, and (9) Parents need to be willing and committed to imparting a sense of ethnic identification to their children by sustaining contact with members of the child's ethnic milieu."

The Policy Statement of the North American Council on Adoptable Children affirms a number of guiding principles that they believe hold priority with regard to children in need of a home. The principles that speak to the issue of transracial adoption are as follows: "... (5) If a relative is not available, or if placement with available relatives is not in the child's best interest, agencies should next endeavor to make a placement with an appropriate adoptable family of the same racial or ethnic background. Same race or ethnic placement fosters appreciation for cultural heritage and facilitates identification with adoptive parents… (9) When transracial or multi-ethnic placements are made, full appreciation and consideration should be given to the child's need for close identification and interaction with his/her culture of origin. Cross-racial and cross-cultural family assessment tools should be used when

considering transracial and adoptive placements, and… (10) Families who adopt transracially should receive ongoing support services to ensure that children of color have an opportunity to develop a complete understanding of their racial and cultural identity."

Given the many areas of concern addressed in this paper, it is clear that transracial adoptions create a particular set of distinct problems. One must ask if it is truly necessary, and in the best interest of the child to provide them with such a home—a home that inherently creates more issues for the adopted child to have to resolve, with or without support and guidance.

There are certain circumstances where transracial adoptions are necessary. However, it would be important, and this author believes, in the best interest of the child in *all* areas of their development, to provide them with a family that is most similar to themselves, racially, ethnically and culturally.

A transracially adopted child, much like the biracial child, needs to have healthy and intact coping skills to deal with a racist world. Some parents may think they are crippling the child by telling them the truth, that racism exists, and that one day they may be rejected or viewed as "less than" simply because of their racial or ethnic heritage. This is not the case. In fact, it is a loving parent who communicates with their child openly and honestly and provides them with information, support and healthy ways in which to combat the negativism that is inherent in racism.

In their paper on Transracial Adoptive Parenting: A Black/White Community Issue (1993), Leora Neal and Al Stumph share the following insight: "It is important that transracial adoptive parents *not* berate themselves for what are essentially society's ills. However, they should acknowledge that racism is a bitter fact of life and try to help their children to function in spite of it, while working to break down such barriers. It must also be recognized by both parents and children that every ethnic group has a cultural history that is worthy of knowing about and that to deny the worth of one's ethnic background and to not be proud of that background is to ultimately deny oneself."

I will close with the following painful but true reality, difficult as it may be to understand or accept, love is simply not enough.

References and Bibliography

Andujo, E. (1988). "Ethnic Identity of Trans-ethnically Adopted Hispanic Adolescents." *Social Work.*

Brown, N., R.N.M.N., and Gaddy, L., M.S.W. (1993). "Working with Multiracial Families Disrupted by Child Abuse." Multi-Ethnic Competency Institute (CCPCA).

Brand, E. S., Ruiz, R. A., and Padilla, A. M. (1981). "Ethnic Identification and Preference: A Review." *Psychological Bulletin.*

DeAnda, D. (1984). "Bicultural socialization: Factors affecting the minority experience." *Social Work.*

Erikson, E. (1963). *Childhood & Society.* W. W. Norton.

Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity, Youth & Crisis.* W. W. Norton.

Flores, J. L., M.F.C.C. (1993). "Ethnicity and Child Custody: The Latino Biculturation Process." Written for the 15th Annual Child Custody Colloquium.

Lifton, B. J. (1988). *Lost and Found: The Adoption Experience.* Harper & Row Publishers, Inc.

McGoldrick, M., Pierece, J. K., & Giordana, J. (Editors). (1982) *Ethnicity and Family Therapy.* Guiford Press.

McIntosh, P. (1988). *White Privilege, Male Privilege.* Wellesley College, Center for Research on Women.

Montalvo, F. (1991). Phenotyping, acculturation and biracial assimilation of Mexican-Americans. In M. Sotomayor (Ed.), *Empowering Hispanic families: A critical issue for the '90s* (pp. 97-119). Milwaukee: Family Service Association.

Neal, L., Stumph, A. (1993). "Transracial Adoptive Parenting: A Black/White Community Issue." Bronx, NY: Haskett-Heal Publications.

Phinney, J. S., Rotheram, M. J., (Editors). (1987). *Children's Ethnic Socialization: Pluralism & Development.* Sage Publi-cations, Ltd.

Phinney, J. (1989). "Stages of Ethnic Identity Ddevelopment in Minority Group Adoles-cents." *Journal of Early Adolescents.*

Ponterotto, J. *G.,* Pederson, P. B. (1993). *Preventing Prejudice: A Guide for Counselors & Educa-tors* (Series 2). Sage Publications, Ltd.

Saville-Troike, N. (1978). *A Guide to Culture in the Classroom*. Rosslyn VA: National Clear-inghouse for Bilingual Education.

Shorris, E. (1992). *Latinos: A Biography of the People.* Avon Books.

Sue, D. W., Sue, D., *Counseling the Culturally Different: Theory & Practice*