

Many Layers of Racial Identity

by Susan Ito

Beth Hall, Pact's director, and I traveled to New York in 2006 to participate in a conference named, Families without Borders?: Adoption Across Culture and Race. It was an incredibly stimulating two days, filled with overwhelming choices. Everything looked simultaneously fascinating and baffling. I decided first off to go to a workshop with a really intriguing but confusing title: "An Ecological Approach to Racial Identity Development in Transracial Adoptees," by Susan Harris O'Connor, MSW. I had no clue as to what "ecological approach" meant, but I was interested, and so I went. This 90 minute presentation turned out to be totally worth the price of admission.

Racial identity can be a nebulous thing for many multiracial and transracial adoptees. It certainly has been for me. I've thought a lot about the term "transracial adoption" since I began working with Pact. Generally, when one thinks of transracial adoption, the image comes to mind of a child of color with one or more white adoptive parents. Yet I am biracial (Japanese/white) and was adopted by two Japanese American parents. Am I a transracial adoptee? Certainly my "white" half was "trans" or "on the opposite side" of their Asian selves. But often another hallmark of many transracial adoptees of color is that they have limited access to their birth culture. My white half did not have that experience because I grew up immersed in majority white culture in a primarily white town in northern New Jersey.

Because I was half white and adopted by parents of color, I felt like a "reverse" transracial adoptee, or a "backwards" one, or an upside down one, or maybe not one at all, since here I was steeped in the dominant culture since the day I was born, and so somehow that made me less transracially adopted than, say, a biracial black child with white adoptive parents. But it was confusing. It was really confusing. I felt like I was different from adoptees of color who had been raised by white parents. The whole thing was hard to make sense of, but I desperately wanted to make sense of it.

Susan Harris O'Connor is an incredibly engaging, articulate woman. She spoke with a lot of humor and compassion and passion about growing up as a woman of

color (half white/Jewish, half black/Native American, but more on that later) in a white family in an all-white community in New England. Her presentation moved seamlessly back and forth between her intensely personal story (which she presented as a powerful, moving spoken word/performance piece) and the very academic and theoretical. In a long, meandering but always completely engaging way, she outlined how she came to develop her Harris Racial Identity Model (1999).

She detailed how racial identity development is an extremely complex and fluid thing, not a category that can be neatly defined by a single box to be checked off. I was nodding like a dashboard puppy the entire time she spoke. And as she went through the five levels of racial identity development, I found myself scribbling furious notes, nodding, wiping away tears, and feeling the top of my head just ready to explode. Here was my answer. Someone had finally, finally, finally described in perfect and utter detail exactly what racial identity development has been for me, in a way that makes sense.

The Harris Racial Identity Model is composed of five intertwined, connected levels that all impact on each other, and this connection is one way to understand how race impacts self-identity.

1. Genetic Racial Identity

This is the factual identity that comes from birth family. A person is half X, and half Y. They may or may not know the details of these facts, but this is what is. (for example: I know that I am half Japanese and half... something else)

2. Imposed Racial Identity

This is what others assume/say/think about another's racial identity. This is about people thinking that I just can't be Asian, that I must be Jewish, or Italian, or Puerto Rican or whatever. Or this is about people thinking I'm not at all white. Or about people thinking I look just like their freaky

aunt Betty. Many people experience this as racism or confusion or judgment, but it's all about other peoples' experience of you. Biracial/multiracial and transracially adopted people get other peoples' imposed racial identity their whole lives. Susan Harris O'Connor read an incredibly poignant piece from notes that a nurse took about her as an infant in foster care: on days that she appeared to be especially "Negroid" in her features, she also seemed coincidentally "delayed" in social development; on other days, she seemed less black to the nurse, and oddly, also more "advanced."

3. Cognitive Racial Identity

This is what a person thinks or knows themselves to be. It is a conceptual idea that evolves with development. Often very young children don't have a cognitive sense of their racial identity until they reach school age. I know that I am biracial/hapa. I know this with my brain.

4. Feeling Racial Identity

This Harris O'Connor explained, is what you feel like inside. Regardless of what other people tell you, and regardless of what you even know to be "factually" true. This is where I say, I feel Japanese. Whatever that means. I feel Asian. I don't feel half white because I feel like I have little proof or experience of that aspect of myself. I have not met or seen proof of my white birthparent. The three out of four parents I know (2 adoptive, one birth) are all Japanese. Despite the "facts," this is all that I feel I am inside. She says that this feeling racial identity is not always in synch with the other kinds of racial identity: genetic, cognitive, imposed, or visual. And that this "lack of synchronicity" is what can often cause emotional or psychological distress or confusion. At this point my brain was going BINGO BINGO BINGO, the cherries were all lining up, the slot machine lights were flashing and twirling and I just felt like one big Yes.

5. Visual Racial Identity

This is when you need to use a mirror to understand who and what you are. Often transracial adoptees feel disconnected from their visual image (I know I am, although after forty-something years I've gradually, and I do mean gradually, started to get used to what I look like) and have a distorted racial image in the same way that people with eating disorders have distorted body images. Often, people can see with their eyes that their skin is brown, but it doesn't "match up" with the internal picture that they have of themselves.

Dr. Harris O'Connor explained more about the "ecology" part of her workshop's title. It just means that everything in society - our "ecology" -- impacts our racial identity development and its many different components. It is an organic, living thing that is constantly being impacted and changed.

This is different from how racial identity development has been described in the past – as a set of stages that people move through over time in coming to see themselves in a particular way. Dr. Harris O'Connor's model instead describes a collection of racial identities that exist simultaneously, that a person moves in and out of depending on how she's feeling or who she's interacting with.

So adopted children (and adults!) of color have an evolving and ever shifting, sometimes by the hour or minute, sense of racial identity. Sometimes young children are only able to articulate the visual, what they concretely see in the mirror or if they hold their hand next to their adoptive parent's. "I am brown, you are pink." Often they don't feel or think ANYthing about their racial identity until they go to school. Then, the layers Susan Harris O'Connor described begin to build – how do others see me? How does that fit with who my parents tell me I am? How does it fit with what I feel? Those were the questions I struggled with – without ever really understanding it – my whole life.

It was life changing and mind changing to go to this workshop. Suddenly it all made sense to me; all the myriad levels and shifts of racial identity that I have experienced throughout my life. It's constantly evolving, shifting, moving backward and forward and inside and out. It's not anything that can be put inside a single check box. Not even close.