

Quien Yo Soy?

Identity Issues in Transethnically-adopted Children

by Beth Hall

Most of the studies and information on adoption by European American parents of children who do not look like them use transracial (Asian or African American) adopted people as subjects. Are the issues the same for transethnic adoption (Caucasian parents who adopt Latino children)? One significant study can help shed some light on this question. This study compared 30 transethnically-placed Mexican American children to 30 same-ethnically-placed Mexican American children. The children were tested for self-esteem, self-description, acculturation (lack of cultural identity). Parents were assessed for parenting strategies with regard to culture.

Comparisons of self-esteem and self-identity: As measured by the Tennessee Self Concept scale, the positive self-esteem scores for the transethnically- and same-ethnically-adopted people were essentially the same. A second test called the Twenty Statements Test asked children to respond 20 times to the question "Who Am I?." Transethnically-adopted children responded with ethnic terminology like "American" (73%), occasionally "Hispanic" (27%); none said Mexican American. The same-ethnically-adopted people responded with "Mexican American" (73%), occasionally "Hispanic" (17%), and rarely "American" (10%). Transethnically-adopted people were also far more likely to use color as a self-descriptor than their counterparts (83% vs. 33%). The final test was the Mexican American Value Attitude Scale, which measures connection to Mexican American culture vs. Anglo culture. Seventy seven percent (77%) of the transethnically-adopted people had very little connection to Mexican American culture while 63% of the same-ethnically-adopted people were highly connected.

A few interesting questions can be asked in response to these data. What are the differences in strategies to impart cultural knowledge between the transethnically- and same-ethnically-adoptive parents? How do these results compare with similar studies on transracially-adopted children? Are the issues for transethnically-adoptive families the same as they are for transracially-adoptive families? Given the results from this study, is transethnic adoption is OK?

Parenting Strategies: The study's author asked both sets of parents to describe their strategies regarding imparting cultural orientation to their children. She responded: "The transethnic adoptive parents had minimal or superficial contact with Mexican American people and had used an education

approach to teach cultural awareness to their children.... The same-ethnic adoptive parents emphasized socialization to the ethnic groups by exposure and living in the cultural context. Seventy-three percent of the same-ethnic adoptive parents maintained ongoing contact with the Mexican American community.... Many of the [transethnic] parents ignored racial incidents because they believed the incidents to be insignificant; others attempted to help their children deal with racism by stressing the notion of a 'human identity.' On the other hand, the same-ethnic adoptive parents attempted to prepare their children to respond to race-related incidents by emphasizing 'survival techniques' or coping mechanisms that had grown out of their experiences as minority individuals."

Conclusions: First of all, children from both same-ethnic and transethnic adoptions had positive self-esteem scores which generally differed little. The significant differences were all focused around ethnic identity. The author takes this to mean that transethnic adoptions are the definite second choice. No matter how offensive transethnically-adoptive families find this message, analysis of the parenting strategies that work is important for the healthy development of our children. Parents must be willing and able to acknowledge and deal with racism. In addition, they should be committed to developing a strong sense of ethnicity in their children. That is primarily accomplished by a willingness and ability to maintain contact with members of the child's ethnic group. This study clearly shows that formal, intellectual, or observational means to link families to an ethnic community do not result in strong ethnic identification. Well-intentioned celebrations of Cinco de Mayo or occasional trips to Latin American countries cannot be the major way we transmit positive ethnic identities to our children. We need to participate directly in the culture of their ethnic identity, which means our families must have continuing integral and intimate relationships with individuals who share our children's ethnicities.

Interestingly, when these results are compared to some of the studies done on transracially-adopted people, these adopted people appear to incorporate their racial identity far more clearly than transethnically-adopted people. What does this mean? One theory could be that transracially-adopted children are more obviously different from their parents and so have a greater need to know and understand their racial identity. A more likely explanation is probably that transethnic parents

of Latino children are less likely to impart ethnic terminology to their children than their transracial counterparts. The fact that many of the transethnic adopted people in Andujo's study used color as a self-descriptor rather than ethnic terminology would seem to confirm the second theory. These children had no language to attach to the difference they perceived between themselves and their parents and the dominant Anglo society. They appeared to use color descriptions to delineate their ethnicity because they had not been given the confidence to use ethnic descriptions the way the same-ethnic adopted people had. We parents of Latino children are the most guilty of not acknowledging difference between us and

our children. This is a severe indictment and something that we must immediately strive to change for the well-being of our children. We can learn from transracial families and literature. Our children too must learn and grow to be comfortable in their skin and in the cultural milieu the world will expect them to understand.

Oh yes, the final question: Can transethnic adoption work? DEFINITELY. The actions described above are not limited to Latino people, but can be accomplished by all of us who choose acknowledge our status as families of color.