

Latino and Asian Children in White Homes by Beth Hall and Gail Steinberg

"We want to adopt an Asian or Latino child," said the white couple. "She or he will fit into our community with no problem."

White prospective parents sometimes approach adoption with the idea that they can successfully raise a child of a race different from their own as long as the child is from a racial background they believe will be accepted by their community. Because it results in greater adoption opportunities for them, these parents benefit most from the myth that race is not an issue for Latino or Asian children.

What supports the conclusion that minority race doesn't matter from people without personal experience to justify it? In the public debate, it is rare to hear Latinos or Asians argue that they do not experience race as an issue. An Asian or Latino child being raised in a white family will experience the same stereotypes all Asians and Latinos face today in our country.

Caucasian people cannot fully speak for Latino or Asian people any more than they can be fully aware of what it feels like to be Latino or Asian in a race-conscious society. Though some prospective white adoptive parents also seem to take comfort in the assumption that there are no negative feelings about transracial adoptions in the Latino and Asian communities and that they will be welcomed, this belief may be false comfort. Generalizations are dangerous. Assumptions need to be tested on an individual basis. We'd guess someone trying to investigate attitudes in these communities would find a range of responses to transracial adoption, with as much resentment as support.

"Our adoption worker encouraged us to adopt a Salvadoran baby he had heard about," said the white couple. "He said there was a wonderful birth mother in Florida and the child would match us because, as Italians, we have dark hair, brown eyes, and olive skin tones. He said he was sure race would not be an issue."

When a birth mother approaches a professional service in need of a family to adopt her child, the professional normally turns to families in his or her own client base to assist in making a connection. For a variety of reasons that do not seem to include varying desires to adopt, there are more white families waiting to adopt than families of color. Adoption services are most often paid for by prospective adoptive parents. Thus, some service providers (agency personnel,

attorneys, facilitators, etc.) feel that the adoptive parent is their client and that their primary responsibility is to meet the needs of these clients to find a child, rather than to be sure a home will be appropriate for the child, based in part on the child's racial background. Professionals who are involved in the commerce of adoption and who have mostly white adoptive clients therefore benefit from the myth that race is not an issue for Latino or Asian children because it results in increased business for them.

"I hear what you're saying, but I want to adopt an Asian child anyway," said the white prospective parent. "After all, people think highly of Asians. Everyone knows they are very smart and hard-working, so why would there be any problems? And children from Asia need homes— so, frankly, I might have a better chance."

Children do not benefit from the myth that race is not an issue for Latino or Asian children placed in white families. Stereotypes, however "positive, remain stereotypes and all stereotypes are limiting. Again and again, members of those groups labeled "automatically good at math" or "great with details" express the burden of confronting social expectations — positive stereotypes — that may not apply. They also express sadness... that the efforts of one's hard-won accomplishments are diminished by others who account them as "natural" or genetically determined.

There is a notion among many would-be adopters that a racial hierarchy exists which makes it easier to be of one race than another. Certainly, various racial groups can point to differences in their history in the United States and in their current status as measured in socioeconomic terms. But there is not a single population "of color" that does not raise its voices against the racism experienced by all people of color in a white-dominant culture. It is inappropriate for those outside a minority culture to claim to know more than its members about their acceptance within mainstream society.

Adopted children are not genetically linked to their adoptive families. Comfortable acceptance of their dual identity comes from being valued and valuing in the context of celebrating differences. They have a right to feel part of and to participate in the culture that is their heritage as well as to feel part of the culture of the family of which they have become members. It may be harder for Asian and Latino children to make significant connections to their birth cultures because these cultures are closely associated with concrete traditions and the country

of origin. Role models, adults whose daily lives reflect that culture, may be scarce.

“We feel it is very important for our Peruvian child to understand the culture of Peru and someday we will travel there with her. She is often mistaken for a Mexican American but we tell her she is Peruvian because we want her to be proud of her heritage.”

Clearly these parents want to value their child’s background. No one can argue that a Peruvian child will not benefit from that someday trip to Peru. These parents seem to understand that race is an important issue for their child, but they may be creating more limits than they need to in helping her connect to her roots.

What is the value in making such a strong distinction between this Peruvian child and the Mexican Americans that people mistake her for? In the US, our largest population of Latino people is Mexican American. This means that, for many adopted Latino children, the Mexican American community is where they will find the closest connection to their life experiences as Latinos. By denying this child a feeling of

connection to the Mexican Americans she meets, we deny access to a group of people who could interpret and help her gain strength in the face of the stereotypes and differences they experience in common as Latinos. Transracially-adoptive parents need to do as much as they can to minimize their child’s loss of culture and ethnic or racial identity by allowing connections and fostering identification with those with whom their children share a cultural heritage.

“Who is hurt by the myth that race is not an issue for Latino or Asian children placed in white families?”

Children who lose the history, traditions, and comforts of connection to others who share their racial background are the victims of this myth. Parents who take away their child’s opportunity to feel a true member of their own racial or ethnic groups are depriving their child of a birthright and diminishing the rich contributions of the child’s intrinsic culture. For a member of a minority group in America, it’s an easy leap to conclude that the insignificance of one’s cultural heritage suggests one’s own insignificance as an individual member of that culture. As it is said, race matters. Help to make it matter in a positive way in bringing up adopted children.