

Reflections of African Canadian/American Identity
Development from Birth to Later Adolescence:
Towards a Framework for Guiding Interventions

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Reflection of African Canadian/American Identity Development from Birth to

Later Adolescence: Towards a Framework for Guiding Interventions

In the fall of 1998 I was contacted by a child welfare agency in rural Nova Scotia to comment on the issue of race and the viability of a biracial Black/White child being adopted by a White couple. As part of the report I wrote a brief segment on the role of race and culture in child development. The goal of this segment was to inform the court and the parties on racial identity issues across the life span and highlight the activities and skills needed to raise a healthy and aware Black or Biracial child. In Nova Scotia attention to a child's racial, cultural, religious, and linguistic heritage is considered important enough in -child welfare to be included within the preamble of the Children and Family Services Act: It is part of our philosophy as a Province. However, I would suggest that the enlightenment we assert by inclusion of race as a consideration has not yet been matched with sufficient knowledge and resources to ensure that we are able to widely operationalize the principle into practice. In seeking that knowledge there are two questions we should ask. First, how does racial identity develop, and second, how do we support positive racial identity development?

How Does Racial Identity Develop? Erik H. Erikson developed one of the most enduring theories of psychological development in about 1950 (Erikson, E. H., year). He, and many others, have built on this work to describe eight stages of the human life cycle, from infancy to senescence (Wright, R. S., year). Persons employed in the human services field almost universally understand this theory and I allude to it here to provide a skeleton for an understanding of racial identity development.

In each of Erikson's eight stages the theory suggests that there is a core issue, what Erikson calls

a psychosocial crisis, which must be resolved positively if a person is to grow unhindered in their psychosocial functioning. Erikson's theory goes on to describe the key relationships essential for the positive resolution of the core issue of growth.

Similarly, racial identity can be understood to develop in stages across the life span. In keeping with Erikson's model, it can be understood that each stage has a critical issue, a process for resolution of same, and a significant relationship and/or resource which supports positive resolution. For the purposes of illustrating I have given some thought to this issue and will give attention to four critical stages and issues described here first in table form and then in text.

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Stage	Age	Critical Issue	Process for Resolution	Significant Relationship(s) & Resources
Pre-school	0-5yrs	comfort with visible racial differences	Adequate and enlightened physical care	primary physical caregiver
Early school	5-9yrs	understanding of personal equality & competence	Facilitated success in social and academic pursuits	extended family members/school personnel
Early adolescence	11-14yrs	ability to appropriately negotiate racial dynamics	Knowledge of history and politics of race	same race role models, culturally specific and anti-racist education
Later adolescence	15-18yrs	personal choices in context of race	family values re: race, sex, reproduction and vocation	role models, community censors and informal agents

Pre-school stage.

Prior to going to school a child's world is almost completely controlled and filtered by their parents or primary care givers. It is likely that a Black or biracial child in the care of a White family will not suffer major hindrances in their racial identity development during this period. All adequate parents tend to shield their children from negative influences during this time. The close network of extended family and friends a child is exposed to at this stage will almost unanimously agree that the child is beautiful, intelligent, well loved, and destined for greatness. The child will however begin to understand the concept of racial difference as they see the phenotypic differences between people. It is then that the first critical issue develops and the child must develop some comfort with the visible difference of race. In order that these differences are not considered by the child to signal inferiority it is necessary that their differences be dealt with naturally and comfortably and noted as a mark of beauty. I suggest that this first issue is resolved when a child receives adequate care for their hair and skin and must sense the competence of their caregivers to accomplish the same.

The skin of Black and biracial persons tends to require more and specialized supplemental moisturising than that of White people. Likewise, the coarsely textured hair of Black persons necessitates specialized and relatively time-consuming attention. These facts have resulted in the creation of well established rituals around bathing and hair care that are perhaps the reason for the high degree of physical intimacy that endures between Black children and their parents well into adolescence.

Why is this critical? Both White people and Black avoid having dry skin. It doesn't feel good and

doesn't look pleasant. Black skin requires special care in this regard and even a child who is socially isolated from other Blacks will stand out as unkempt if dry and ashen. With regards to a child's hair, it is essential not only that the hair be clean, but that it be cared for in such a way as to minimise the difficulty in the combing. Black hair approached with un-specified toiletries will result in a tangled mass that neither child nor caregiver will find pleasant to comb and style. Also, a caregiver must have sufficient skill to be able to style the hair to meet all occasions and circumstances. A 15 minute style that will look good and allow us to get to church on time, a three hour style that will look great and last a week or two while we're on vacation, a style durable enough to allow the child to go to a pool party and sleep over without having to do more than dry the hair, a simple but acceptable style that can easily be taught to father or a baby-sitter on the rare occasions that mother gets away for a weekend with the lady's auxiliary, and a variety of styles meant for no other purpose than to break monotony and allow for playful experimentation between child and caregiver.

Early school stage.

Once a child enters school they are subjected to the reality of their racial difference for the first time without the care and support of their caregivers. Like the cygnet (young swan) surrounded by ducklings, aided by the sometimes innocent but nonetheless painful queries of their peers, the racially different child begins to question the origin of their peculiar features and begins to feel less than the beautiful, intelligent and well loved child that they were told they were. It is interesting to note, though not surprising, that this early school age is the period during which racially visible children tend to experience a significant retardation in the development of their self-esteem (Kunjufu, J., Kuykendall, C., year).

Like the little cygnet this crisis remains unresolved until the child has their person-hood and competence supported and confirmed by virtue of relational and performance success. I would suggest that for Black children who successfully resolve this stage, the resolution is found in a strong and positive connection with their Black extended family and competent support from school personnel. Within this extended network of adults the child may-experience social success outside of their immediate family and develop mastery of the core values and skills necessary for achievement in the school system. It is likely that during this stage the child will begin to sense the subtle cultural differences between Blacks and Whites. This is the beginning of the child's cultural identity as a Black person; an identity, they begin to discover, that extends beyond the colour of their skin and culture of the nuclear family.

Early adolescent stage.

It is not significant that during this stage in a child's life that the public school system begins to teach media literacy. During this period all children begin to be exposed to the political and social constructs offered up daily in print, audio and video advertising, political dialogue, controversial literature and elsewhere in the media. For young women this means that they must begin to be empowered to counteract the damaging images that negatively and narrowly portray their gender in terms of intelligence and body image. They need an education that is able to filter these images for them through a feminist construct. For the Black and biracial child there must be a developing construct of race that is more intelligent and sophisticated than that offered by the media as well; a construct that is informed by millennia of African history, experience and global contribution; in short an Afrocentric construct. Essential in the development of this construct is a concrete knowledge of the history and politics of race in the child's local

community, province, state, and country. It means developing an understanding of how discrimination, poverty, migration, and other factors have impacted Blacks generally and their families specifically. In short, it means developing the knowledge to combat the racism that exists in their society.

Unfortunately for the Black and biracial child, the public school system in North America is in its infancy in terms of its understanding, development and implementation of an Afrocentric curriculum. This means that a Black or biracial child must develop this construct at home and within their ethnic community

Later adolescent stage.

Even when speaking of racial identity development, the overriding consideration in this stage of development is hormones. A family's and even a community's values regarding dating, sex, marriage and reproduction will come to bear on a child during this stage to attempt to shape their activities appropriately.

The controversy of race as a factor in intimate relations is a long established reality. Even the most racially enlightened persons and families, White or Black, are challenged when their child brings home a potential partner from outside their racial group. The continuum of responses ranges from a belief that partners should be racially similar to a belief that marrying outside the race is the ultimate statement of racial harmony and enlightenment. More important than what is the family's position is the necessity that the family have a position, or at least a discussion of the issue, and be able to articulate, debate and, if necessary, defend it against voices on the other side

of the continuum. If the parents of a Black or biracial child are ill prepared for this stage they will find themselves uncomfortably on the sidelines during it. Like unlearned parents of an NHL hopeful, the best they can hope to do is provide all the love, support and understanding they can while they facilitate their child finding a coach who is wise, kind, and respectful of their role as parents.

How Do We Support Positive Racial Identity Development Across the Life Span?,

Having a working theory of how racial identity develops is the key to answering this question.

Though the paper is overly simplistic; by thinking in terms of stages, issues, processes and relationships/resources; identity development is operationalized in a way that makes the opportunities for interventions more clear. If each stage of racial identity development can be clearly articulated, as I've attempted, and taught with patience and compassion, then a parent with sufficient willingness and capacity can learn to implement them. This is similar to the way parents of a special needs child might learn through instruction and modelling how to care for their child's particular physical, behavioural or emotional needs.

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