

COWAP CONF. WHO AM I WHO IS MY MOTHER/FATHER (CROSS-RACIAL ADOPTION): ELEANOR SCHUKER, M.D., CHAIR  
SATURDAY MORNING PANEL 10/27/07

This morning we will explore some challenges and opportunities faced by parents and children who form interracial adoptive families. I would especially like to welcome you, the audience; I know that many of you already have a great deal of experience in this area, both clinical and personal. There are three interconnecting subjects on our agenda: the experience of adoption, the experience of being in an interracial family, and the experience of interracial as well as transnational adoption.

I would like to begin this introduction with a vignette to illustrate some of the issues; I quote a young woman who is an adoptee. She wrote a tribute remembering her “grandpa Joe”, a close family friend who had been her beloved grandfather- figure. Joe had unique warmth and love for her. He actively welcomed her as one of his three grandchildren (whose group photo he put on his fishing cap), a reflection of a loving and generous personality. The young woman and her parents had been centrally involved in many of Joe’s family activities, fishing, swimming, celebrating birthdays and holidays. This young woman wrote QUOTE “He was so good at welcoming everyone. I realize that I learned to follow his example, to welcome friends and relatives into my heart. I do not know anyone in this world who is related to me by Blood. Joe taught me that those around you become your family...as you accept them and love them, as people who will always be there to care about you.” ENDQUOTE

We can observe that partly via this relationship, this young woman had integrated an identity within her personal definition of family- as involving love, commitment, and caring, rather than blood relations. She had developed self-esteem and security about her origins and identifications. As a young adult, she welcomed others from many backgrounds into her life.

The topic of the interracial adoptive family is indeed rich. It involves feelings about adoption itself, and about race. Each person who is part of an interracial adoptive family has to deal with their own internal as well as external prejudices about adoption, race, and cultures, to reach some new resolution. Today we will be reconsidering our own assumptions about these topics, as well as facts about how identity develops in a child's mind. The psychoanalytic viewpoint may shed some light on these dynamics.

Over the past two decades psychotherapists working with adoptive families realized that children's feelings about adoption do not evolve from a single event of "telling", but rather are part of the history and fabric of the family. Discussion of this history reflects individual sensitivities, parents' ways of attuning to and talking with children, and parental capacities to understand themselves and their child's mind and his or her developmental level. All this influences the ways parents transmit feelings, attitudes, and cognitive information. A parent needs to provide a coherent narrative over time, hopefully age- appropriate, and conveying good feelings, so a child can develop a sense of their own story. Gaps or denial may indicate to a child, feelings of shame, secrecy, conflict, or prejudice, while a flooding with information can transmit parental anxieties.

Parental needs for gratitude or personal repair also may interfere with sensitivity to the child's reactions and fantasies, or to sharing the child's history in age-appropriate fashion. Parental conflicts can disrupt a child's expressing their own questions, confusion, or need for reassurance.

Interracial families may need similar kinds of activity as (intra-racial) adoptive families, such as mutual discussion, listening, active help, and psychic protectiveness in telling family stories. Intermittent talk about realities of race, culture, and adoption are part of discussions involving the more usual developmental issues, at age-appropriate levels. For example in the bath a child comments that she is a different skin shade from Mommy, can she change? does hers look beautiful?, will differences create a breach?, and closely attunes for reassurance to what Mommy's face, voice and words indicate.

Issues of adoption, race, and difference have various meanings as a child progresses through psychological development. To guide your listening, I now mention some developmental points that may provide special challenges for interracial adoptive families. Typically, internationally adopted children may not arrive as newborns and may need exceptional attunement and patience to form solid attachments, although it is remarkable how regularly this process is successful. Parents may need to have mourned their infertility to freely welcome a child. In their first few years of life, children develop a whole internal world and a core sense of identity, based on family interactions. Each child needs to feel cherished and secure that he or she is the mother's (and father's) child. IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT the answers to THOSE CONFERENCE QUESTIONS, Who

am I, who is my Mother or Father? ,should NOT affectively be in any doubt. Parents also need to feel secure that they are ENTITLED to be this child's parent.

By age three a child knows simple binary categories (girl/boy, big/ little, good/ bad etc) and usually feels good about who THEY are, unless something in their immediate environment has indicated that a quality is tainted. A child can confuse his own angry feelings or unresolved ambivalence with being bad or unacceptable, which can be reified if there is rejection from the immediate surround. By preschool age, most children are noticing differences within family members. Magical and primitive ideas abound, and the meanings of racial differences or of adoption can be entangled with disappointments, separation fears, and oedipal feelings. Parents can help with children's working over such fantasies. A child may need listening to, with explanations and reassurances for fears. Children also sometimes just want to be the same as everyone else, and to not discuss or emphasize any differences. Children and parents will each have their own individual reactions to diversity or to prejudice.

By school age, children have evolved complex ideas about the world, both fantastical and realistic. Ongoing family conversations and understanding of the child's views and feelings may help a child with difficult comments from peers, which themselves reflect common anxieties, prejudices, and mistaken information in school age children. The child may hear such things as "You don't know your real Mommy" or "You look dirty". Meanings of racial or other characteristics always reflect a particular surround. These encounters with peers

can be especially challenging, but are also an opportunity to assert one's identity with pride and even with a sense of expertise. Primitive ideas need not be internalized and reified. Family discussion or conversations with peers sometimes take place at surprising times, for example, from the back seat of a car.

By adolescence, young people from transracial adoptive families know a great deal about how their particular biological heritage is viewed by the wider culture. They are refining their own internal subjective feelings and conflicts, so that personal questions about "Who am I? Who is my mother and father?" gain complexity. Feelings can develop about lost possibilities, including exile from a culture that their physical appearance suggests. Adolescents can deeply resent discovered external stigmas and limitations. The realization that biology or ethnicity may be linked to discrimination or devaluation can add to turmoil. A scarcity of positive models for identification can also add to stress. New questions about birth parents and culture may arise. Families need to be supportive and accepting, yet may need support themselves too. The adolescent reawakening of separation-individuation themes can occur in the adoptive parents of adolescents as well, with parents feeling vulnerable to rejection. Thus, this process of (the second) separation-individuation may be more complex for the child in an interracial and adoptive family. The need to develop a multifaceted identity takes more time and can extend into young adulthood, yet it can eventually be enriching. Aspects of identity, with shifting of defenses and self-image, may continue to evolve in all of us. A third individuation has been

described for the experiences of parenthood, immigration, and professional consolidation. The complexities of interracial and transnational origins may provide a spur toward fruitful individual development.

INTROS:

FIRST SPEAKER: Dr. Ravinder Barn is a professor of Social Policy and Social Work at Royal Holloway, University of London. She has published extensively in the areas of race, ethnicity and child welfare. She has a special interest in interracial parenting and the needs of minority ethnic children.

Dr. Barn's topic is "INTERRACIAL PARENTING: NEGOTIATING DIVERSITY AND BELONGING"

DISCUSSANT: Dr. Elsa First is a Clinical Associate Professor of Psychology at the NYU Post-doctoral Program in Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy and a Training and Supervising Analyst at the NY Freudian Society adult and child training Programs.

SPEAKER: Jessica Radin has served as an activist and consultant on the topic of transnational adoption. She was born in Thailand and adopted by a white Jewish mother in New York. Jessica graduated with a B.A. from Yale University and an M.S. from Columbia University. She teaches history in a NYC public HS.

