Coming Home to Self
Reflections on Identity in Trans-racial and Inter-cultural Adoption and Fostering

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SELF ESTEEM

Self Esteem is, in essence, the value we attach to, and the opinion of our self. Self esteem is based on our attitude to our work; our current opinion and potential success, our purpose and place in the world; our fears, fantasies or perceptions about how others see us, our strengths and weaknesses, our ability to stand alone or stand with others – as well as whether we can say 'yes or no' appropriately, be it to self or to others.

We want and need to belong. People of all ages who have had multiple placement, lost one or more 'forever families', have been or felt discounted and denied on the basis of biology, behaviour, culture and colour, will still yearn to be a part of something that echoes and mirrors their sense of self. If our home life or childhood experience does not or did not reflect back to us words and images that say 'you matter' our self-esteem, if we have any at all, might not be well grounded.

This article, which draws on my training programme 'MAKING MULTI-CULTURAL PLACEMENTS WORK', explores some principles that can help professionals, parents and carers to increase the chances of successful trans-racial and multi-cultural placements. I am defining success not in terms of whether a child is compliant, malleable, obedient, god-fearing, studious or industrious, but a child who, as an adult in the making, is actively encouraged and empowered to be at one with him or herself now and in the future. I have in mind children who have racial and ethnic origins that are different from their carers and adoptive parents. I give particular emphasis to issues of pigmentation, but the underlying principles are not exclusive to race, adoption and colour.

Let me say how much I dislike the term 'placements', especially in relation to adoption. I sometimes wonder what adopted children think or feel when they hear that their 'placement has broken down'? Some of them I imagine must be dismayed that they were in 'A Placement' and not a family! 'Looked after' children no doubt have similar feelings and hurtful beliefs about *their* placements breaking down, especially if this is the latest in a series. Perhaps they, however, were never encouraged to believe that people looking after them would be a **forever** family. Many adopted and fostered children are convinced, even if it has never actually been said, that it's their fault that the placement is breaking down – yet again! *They* are the cause of their multiple moves; the virus in the body of the family, which was doing fine until they came along. If it were not for their attitude, their lying and stealing, their aggression, their challenging behaviour, their (inappropriate) expressions and explosions of emotion, their resentment and rejection of the people who do their best to care for them, *they* would not be resented or rejected by those same caring people. In short, what happens to them is their fault. And what sense can a looked-after or adopted child make of all this? Oh, people will attempt to reassure, comfort or convince them that they are not to blame, but I know, after thirty years of working with children, adolescents, adoptive families, residential workers, pre and post placement professionals, therapists and counsellors from a wide range

of disciplines, I *know* that the sense of self, the identity of many such children and teens is built on the shifting sands of low self-esteem. I know, too that many (most?) of the countless adults I've worked with still have powerful longing, a profound yearning, a kind of nostalgia for something different, someone else, some place *other*. A belonging place. In them beats a heart that feels forever empty, a dream forever, unfulfilled, anger unexpected, sadness unrecognized, fear unameable.

Race and cultural heritage are essential elements of personal development and evolution. They are aspects of our past and our potential and as such, need to be honoured and celebrated. It is a sad reality that, even now, in the 21st Century, although lip-service is paid to poorly skilled (even if they had the time and self-awareness) to prepare and equip prospective adopters or foster-carers to acknowledge the racial dimensions of a child's heritage and identity. Of course, these issues are touched on during preparation sessions but tentatively touched at best, as far as I can tell. This can result in preparation of prospective adopters being somewhat cursory and superficial in relation to race, culture and diversity. This observation is reinforced by what many social workers tell me. They are necessarily unwilling, once they fully realise the implications and impact of the lack; but they are under pressure to meet targets, they don't want to scare prospective carers away, they are reluctant to probe too deep and don't want to ask too much. Also, relatively few social workers are sufficiently trained in group facilitation skills to risk stirring too many emotions in groups that are 'working well' and even less so in groups. Since 'working well' often means not being difficult or challenging, it is understandable that the group facilitators don't want to upset the hornets' nest. So, on issues of race, culture and diversity, there may be a few platitudes and a couple of case studies to raise awareness of 'the issues'. Maybe some parents or carers tell their story, but little to trigger more than a mild and fleeting discomfort in the participants. Reassurances given; anxieties are readily and understandably allayed. Understandable? Yes, when over-loaded, time-poor professionals are overwhelmed by government ideology, managerial demands and financial constraints to find families for children. If meeting targets is a guiding principle, post-adoption considerations might well be treated as less important. It seems to me that more adoptions/placements break down sooner and more aggressively than hitherto.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Given all that, professionals are not very likely to be culturally competent. However, this, like most endemic attitudes, is usually neither malicious nor conscious – and ignorance is not a sin. I'd suggest that prospective adopters and carers have an opportunity for discussion with trans-racially adopted or looked after adolescents or young adults. A mix of those for placement worked and those who did not feel valued or validated by the experience. What had they needed or hoped to get from being adopted/fostered. And what was the difference between fantasy and failure?

DISPLACEMENT STRATEGIES

Lack of awareness can result in people avoiding the obvious by, for example, denying that racism exists. Trans-racially adoptive parents who have not been adequately challenged or prepared for the reality that their child will inevitably meet, might well discount the racial dimension in the home (We love you darling and colour doesn't matter! You're as good as anyone else!) Colour certainly DOES matter and to deny reality means to deny the child's

truth. What is the adult afraid of or denying that makes it necessary to deny that pigmentation, race, culture or ethnicity will impact on the child's whole sense of self? That denial, that avoidance strategy, will also impact on the child's emotional, psychological and physiological state. Other strategies include:

Patronising - differences of race and ethnicity are seen as quaint or exotic and therefore tolerated. When non-black people talk about assimilation, they seldom, if ever, mean that *they* will adapt to the customs of the minority group. But when carers or parents do no more than pay lip-service to those differences or, though ignorance or indifference, deny the very existence, they give a powerful message about the child's origins.

Omission – the whole issue of race is simply left out of the equation, never mentioned or referred to, let alone celebrated. My own position on race, culture and diversity are simply stated. They are always a cause and a source of celebration. Who, in a majority culture, has the luxury not to notice or, more accurately perhaps, to pretend they don't notice those aspects of another person? And if we are conditioned to deny them in ourselves; from whence and then what?

Denial – refusing to accept or acknowledge that problems – or possibilities – ensure from differences that really *do* exist and *really* matter.

Colour Blindness – a special kind of denial that, when indulged in by, say white parents or carers meeting the needs of an ethnically visible youngsters, begs the question, *"What is it that you don't want to see?"* and *"what needs are you discounting?"* And what does the child see, hear and feel when these important adults don't see, acknowledge or celebrate one of the most obvious things about them?

Dumping – if, as the child grows, she wants to know about her heritage, s/he might be angry that their sheltered, loving home did not prepare them for some of the harsh realities of racism and prejudice. Carers or parents who want – pro-actively – to build confidence and competence in their child will ensure that they develop cultural competence so that they don't blame the child for their anger and hurt. Professionals pro-actively need to go the extra mile in preparing a family to nurture a child's dignity and self-esteem based on openness and celebration about the child's heritage. A failure to do so might encourage the parents to hope it doesn't become a problem and then blame the child if it does.

Not to attend well to issue of racial identity can exacerbate other issues that, nowadays, we are more aware of. Attachment difficulties, the legacy of the Primal Wound and Adaptive Grieving are examples of other theories and models that are gaining credence in the world of adoption and fostering. Race, too, of course, but for most people who were or are adopted and fostered, such notions are of little use to them. Even if they seek professional help, it is extremely unlikely that the therapist or counsellor they meet will have any experience, expertise or exposure to adoption theories, and almost certainly little or less on racial or cultural aspects of the dynamic in the rarefied atmosphere of the therapy or counselling relationship.

COMPETENCE CONTINUUM

Culturally competent parents, carers and professionals are able to work or respond effectively across cultures in a way that acknowledges and respects the culture of the individual or organisation being served. They are aware and respectful of and, indeed, celebrate different values, beliefs, traditions and customs. Their desire, willingness and ability to see value in each and every culture is such that learning about cultural differences becomes something to achieve rather than avoid.

Cultural competence, for organisations and individuals, requires self-knowledge and self-awareness, experience and knowledge about a particular culture, and positive change or action for successful interaction with the identified culture. Lack of cultural self-awareness makes it difficult to be truly sensitive to the impact that our cultural customs, beliefs, values, and behaviours have on people from other cultures. It is difficult to tolerate the ambiguity that results from not knowing what the rules are or what is expected of you in unfamiliar situations.

Cultural competence enables people; parents, professionals and children, to empathise with the unique perspective of different members of various ethnic group(s), especially individuals who are most different from you. It enables people to listen to others even when intercultural differences pose challenges because, say, the other person has a strong accent, is highly emotional, or shares views that are counter to one's own.

Cultural competence enables to recognise when your personal limitations interfere with your ability to interact with someone who is different and give you confidence or courage needed to take risks that you can practice intercultural skills. You will *want* to learn how to address the challenges of intercultural interactions, rather than blame people for the consequences of inadequate interaction.

James Mason (1993)* developed a continuum of five progressive steps which individuals, families, groups and organisations can measure cultural competence:

1   Cultural destructiveness: Attitudes, policies, and practices that are demeaning and detrimental to individuals and their cultures.
2   Incapacity: Lacking the capacity to assist different cultures, the system or agency is unintentionally ruinous or destructive to individuals and or communities.
3   Blindness: Intending to be unbiased, the system and its agencies function as if the culture makes no difference and all the people are the same.
4   Pre-competence: Individuals and organisations start to acknowledge cultural differences and to make documented efforts to improve.
5   Competence: Acceptance and respect of cultural differences, continual expansion of cultural knowledge, contained cultural self-assessment, attention to the dynamics of cultural.

* **Mason J L** (1993) Cultural competence self-assessment questionnaire. Portland, OR Portland State University, Multicultural Initiative Project