

Chris's Literature Analysis

Learning to Do Ethnic Identity: The Transracial/Transethnic Adoptive Family as Site and Context - *Chris*

In this article, Barbara Ballis Lal puts forth an argument against identity essentialism. Identity essentialism is the argument that a person's identity is dependent on one "essential" element of his or her self, usually race or ethnicity (gender, sexual orientation, are others). Inherent in this argument is the idea that a person inherits a certain culture that is shared by other members of the same group of descent; in other words, that racial/ethnic identity is biological. Instead, Lal argues that a person's identity is a "learned culture" (p. 159), a set of symbols, rituals, values, beliefs, and ideas that are a product of a range of factors that help us grasp the world in which we live. In other words, a person's identity is not biological, but rather it's learned; a nurture over nature argument.

Lal uses the transracial/transethnic adoptive family as a context in which to place her argument. She argues that in a mixed-race/mixed-ethnic family, whether adopted or biological, the experiences within the family are most determinant of a person's identity. She notes that adoptees can develop healthy identities, as Americans, Britons, middle-class, males, females, teenagers, etc. Her point is that identity formation is a process of a multitude of factors, and that there is no one "essential" element that trumps all others. Rather, a person can have a multitude of identities, and these identities are products of his/her early experiences, especially within the family, and of conscious choices.

Lal does not overlook the confusion that adoptees may have to face. She acknowledges the role of dissonance in an adoptee's identity formation. However, she concludes that "most children are able to confront dissonance on the basis of color, and to resolve dissonance in self-enhancing ways" (p. 164). She concludes the article by pointing out her three main points: 1) People's ethnic identities are labile and opportunist 2) Ethnic identities always exist alongside a range of other identities based on membership in a variety of groups 3) While a sense of ethnic identity has to do with how others see us, the ascriptions and treatment of others do not determine a sense of self (p. 167).

I agree with Lal's argument, for the most part. I agree with the fact that a person can have multiple identities, that a person is an active agent in the world and can have conscious choices as to membership in certain social groups. I also agree that identity formation is most determined within the family. However, I do not agree with Lal's third conclusive point. I do believe that others' ascriptions and treatment towards us is a major factor in identity. If I am told

from a very early age that I am white, I will form a white identity. I believe that Lal also overlooks the power of other group members in deciding whether or not we can be a member of a certain group. Her point is that we can choose certain group membership, but what if members of this group do not accept us? How does that affect identity?

While Lal often compared transracial/transethnic adoptees and biological mixed race/mixed ethnic children, she doesn't specifically discuss mixed-race/mixed-ethnic adoptees. The arguments that Lal discussed have major implications within multiracial people who are adopted. Lal throughout the article drew similarities between transracial/transethnic adoptees and biological mixed-race/mixed-ethnic children. But what if the multiracial child is adopted by a set of parents who are of a completely different race? (i.e. a multiracial black/Asian being adopted by white parents). This adoptee then has to navigate both the multiracial and adoptee worlds. Unlike monoracial adoptees, who can separate the racial/ethnic worlds of themselves and their parents, and of biological multiracials, who can go home and celebrate both parents' cultures, a multiracial adoptee can do neither. In the example above, do the white parents have to celebrate both the child's black and Asian cultures? Neither? Mix in their culture to form a tri-racial identity in the child? If/when the child goes through the immersion/emersion stage of identity formation, into what culture does he/she immerse, and from what culture is he/she emerging from?

As is quite evident, the case of the multiracial adoptee is quite complex. They have to navigate both the multiracial and adoptee worlds, and try to form a healthy identity at the same time. Neither a biological multiracial or monoracial adoptee model is adequate enough. I believe that in the American culture, identity essentialism is valid. In the culture we live in, race/ethnicity does trump all other factors in forming identity. Whether we like to believe this or not, the larger society believes it, and we are members of this society. We are not completely immune and have complete free choice, as Lal would argue. For transracial adoptees, race/ethnicity will become the primary factor at some point in life. For multiracial adoptees, this will become even more complex, as they can not readily accept/reject one culture, while simultaneously navigating the world of their parents.