BI-RACIAL IDENTITY: CHILDREN BORN TO AFRICAN-AMERICAN AND WHITE COUPLES

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ABSTRACT: The quest for self-identity has been more complex for African-Americans than for all the groups in American society. This quest has been especially troubling for children where one parent is African-American and the other parent is white. The scholarly literature is replete with themes on black identity and self-esteem, but this literature does not speak to the issue of bi-raciality since societal attitudes decree that any person with a “drop of black blood” is black. There is a move afoot by bi-racial (black and white) young adult children to claim both parts of their ethnic heritage. This paper suggests that the issue of bi-racial identity must be revisited and re-examined.

The quest for self-identity has been more complex for African-Americans than for all other groups in American society. This quest has been especially troubling for children with one parent African-American and the other, white. Many children from these unions have identified as black; others have taken on a white identity; and still others have considered themselves bi-racial. Children from black/white unions have typically faced resistance from blacks, from whites and from society where tradition has been that “one drop of black blood” has meant that one is identified as black. This polarity has existed without careful thinking and studies being conducted on the impact of the assigned identity on the child’s sense of self.

It is important to note that a large number of African-Americans are of mixed ancestry and that many of them have been identified as African-Americans. Embracing both heritages has often been met with hostility by African-Americans, whites and society at large. Social workers, like other professionals, have also tended to downplay and deny the effects on the developing child of disowning a part of the self.

'The term, “African-American” will be used interchangeably with the term, “black.”
This paper will focus on the intrapsychic components of identity for those persons whose parents are African-American and white. It will seek to offer greater understanding of the emotional aspects of identity for the bi-racial child that will be useful to professionals, parents, society and will inform current discussions about racial identity.

Erik Erikson (1968), the pioneer of the concept of identity, defines it as "the creation of a sense of sameness, a unity of personality now felt by the individual and recognized by others as having consistency in time—of being, as it were, an irreversible historical fact" (p. 11). Erikson further emphasizes the importance of individual (personal) and communal (group) identities if one is to form a mature, healthy personality.

Personal identity ("Who am I?") developmentally precedes group identity ("Who are we?"; "Who are they?"). Personal identity is influenced primarily by family relationships. The reflected appraisals of intimates within the family circle provide the foundation that is later built on by peer and other relationships within the community to form group identity. To the extent that these relationships are with other blacks, self-esteem can be derived by using other blacks as the primary reference point. By definition, group identity requires a wider reference point to include observation of relationships of blacks with whites. It should be noted, however, that even with inter-racial interactions, the family and immediate community remain important as interpreters of these interactions (Jackson, McCullough and Gurin, 1981; Taylor, Ronald L., 1976).

The importance of the black community for the development of positive self and group identity is carefully emphasized by Barnes (1980). Viewing the black child as embedded in the social system of the family, the black family embedded in the social system of the black community, and the black community embedded in the larger white society, Barnes offers that the black community forms a protective buffer zone for the family and consequently the child. Bowles (1984) argues that the black family and community serve as back-up "recharge or refueling units," protecting and promoting blacks from the harmful micro-aggressions of the larger society. Rosenberg and Simmons (1971) carried out a study on 1,988 subjects of black and white students in the third through twelfth grades in Baltimore, Maryland. Their data, which refute long accepted research, showed that blacks do not have lower self-esteem than whites; rather their self-esteem appears higher. Their conclusions were supported by other studies (Bachman, 1970; Coleman, J. et. al., 1966; Hunt and Hordt, 1959; Powell and Fuller, 1970; Wendland, 1967). Rosenberg and Simmons found that:

Broader social forces have operated to place the great bulk of black children in a racially insulated environment and this environment establishes certain barriers to assaults upon their feelings of per-