

Thinking and living in, out, and
beyond the box: Exploring
Racial and Cultural Complexity
in Identity among Adoptive
Multiracial Families and Persons

Gina Miranda Samuels, Ph.D.

School of Social Service Administration

University of Chicago

gmsamuels@uchicago.edu

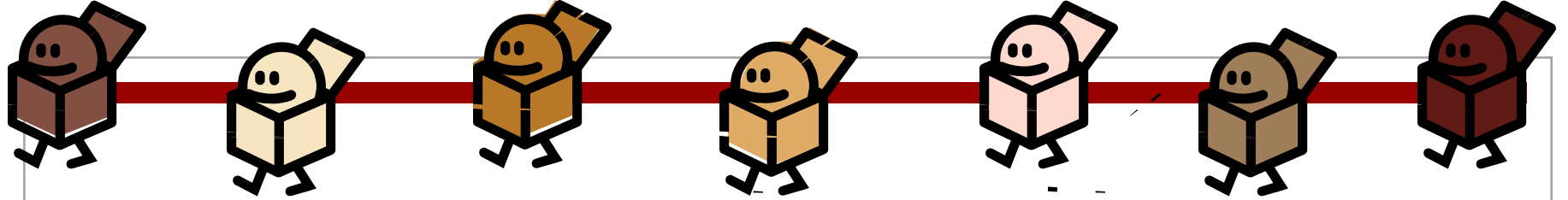


"Never, ever, think outside the box."

"Never, ever, think outside the box."

Overview of Talk

- A multisystemic & relational approach to identity theory in research & practice
- Reconsidering research, theory, training, practice
- Using a diversity of emic perspectives to define “needs” and “healthy” identity development



Rules of race inside the box: Folk theories of race, inheritance, and “healthy” identities

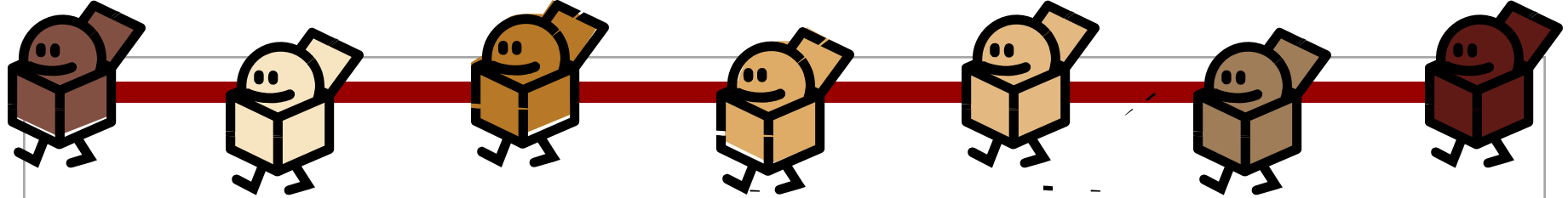
Rule #1: We do not choose our “race” box. Our racial heritage (our biological ancestors’ “race”) determines the box we “choose.”

Rule #2: Inside the box is a matching culture/ethnicity, and a matching racial and cultural/ethnic identity.

Rule #3: Therefore, to know one’s “race” is to know one’s racial, ethnic, and cultural heritage *and* identity.

Rule #4: A mutually exclusive membership. Everyone belongs to a racial box (group)—you can’t occupy more than one box—and certainly not at the same time. (and you **must** claim a box!)

Rule #5: Racial groups have shared appearances and physical characteristics. A person’s “race” is visible.



Folk theories of race inform how we theorize “healthy identity” in science and practice

- ❖ **Biologically driven/Essentialist (Rules 1-3)**,—A person’s racial identity should match their biological family’s identity. Identity processes linked to one’ racial heritage, not one’s familial or cultural context.
- ❖ **Monocentric, Linear, Predictable**— (Rule 1-5). There is a single (or a limited number of) and “healthy” identity outcomes based on ones racial-ethnic heritage. Said differently: Each racial group has a matching and predictable healthy identity outcome.

A person is born a certain "race", and the identity s/he develops should match that heritage. The “healthy” racial identity for a person of color is also one that is unchanging, does not include “white,” and is positively regarded.

Findings from contemporary research including on multiraciality & TRA, suggests:

- Identity process are fluid: not always predictable or easily interpreted independent of context
- Identity shaped by multiple factors: policy, historical legacies, parental socialization, skin tone, gender, class, sexuality, neighborhoods, region, age, identity politics. Requires use of intersectionality theories
- Dynamic: Changes over time, across contexts.
- Is multiple: People can have more than one way of identifying themselves racially and culturally. One's racial identity may not match cultural identity!
- Is biologically independent: Racial-ethnic heritage does not cause racial identifications. Bio-siblings have been found to express different racial identities.

A Multisystemic Approach to TRA: Understanding Race, Culture, and Processes of Identity

A multisystemic approach to multiraciality and adoption considers:

- Racial ethnic heritage of child
- Racial ethnic heritage of adoptive/foster family
- Politics of race, identity, TRA, and multiraciality in:
 - Broader Society
 - Nuclear family, Extended family, school/work/neighborhood/church context
 - Racial-ethnic and cultural communities
- Racial and cultural identity as a *developmental competency* (Garcia-Coll et al, 1996) required for resilience and social health in a race-conscious & racist society not
- Racial and cultural identities are *positive resources* that can facilitate supportive and affirming relationships across the life course

Why Multiracial TRA's to study Race, Culture, and Identity

- Growth in multiracial births-- growth in the multiracial population in foster care & adoption
- Multiracial children are four times more likely than white children to be placed in out of home care (AFSCARS, 2000, Casey Foundation, 2006)
- Disparities persist in child welfare services to multiracial families (Folaron & Hess, 1993)
- A hidden population but dominant population in TRA practice & research (Miranda, 2003, Samuels, 2009)
- Enduring politics and legal shifts related to multiraciality, transracial adoption, and interracial family systems—a case study in identity work as a politically, legally, and socially, negotiated enterprise

A war between racial world views and
historical realities: Politics of TRA

LOVE IS ALL YOU NEED!!!

**TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION IS CULTURAL
GENOCIDE!!!**

WHITE PEOPLE CANNOT TEACH BLACK
CHILDREN TO COPE WITH RACISM!!!

**RACE SHOULD NOT MATTER
IN FINDING CHILDREN
HOMES!!!**

Politics and Constructions of Multiraciality

Multiracial People
and/or Families are:

- are more attractive, exotic
- are the “face of the future”
“rainbow children” or
“rainbow families”
- have the best of all worlds
- are “really” white or want to be
- are confused, conflicted, mixed up

Adoptive
Family Racial
and Cultural
Socialization

Racism/Colorism
Essentialism/Biologism
Historical Adaptation
Segregation

Origin Story
Birth Family
Knowledge



Phenotype
Gender



Promoting/Inhibiting
Environments and
Experiences



Ecological Competencies:
Racial/Cultural Identity, Coping with Racism
Coping with racialized micro-aggressions



Taking
emic
perspectives
seriously

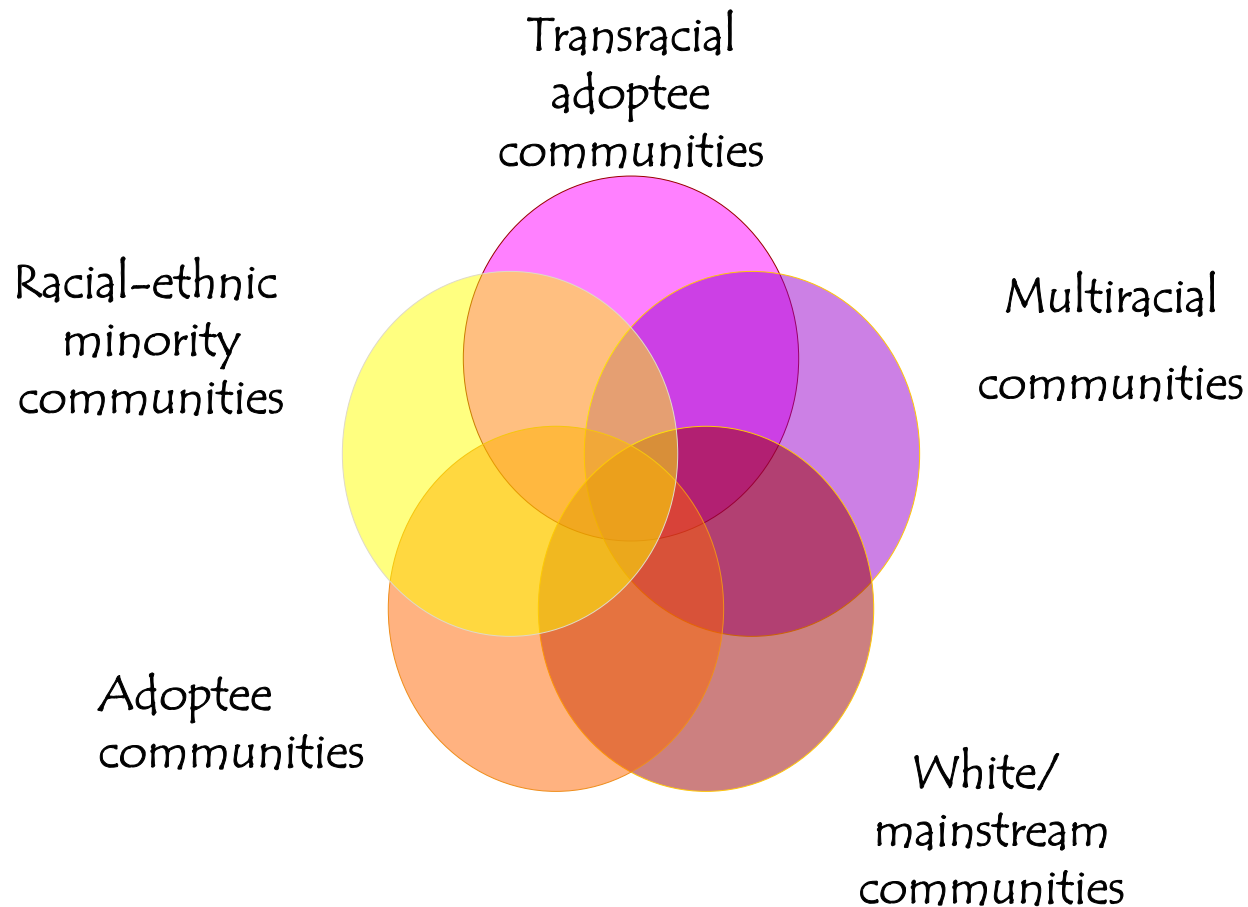
Letting go of colorblindness: Love is not enough!

“As a parent you need to be willing to integrate the community, don’t make your CHILD do that. And that’s what my parents did. That’s why my experience is so different. THEY integrated, let THEM be the only ones in the neighborhood and they get called, “HONKEY.” Because you’re supposed to be able to handle that as an adult, don’t throw that on your *child*. That’s the biggest mistake I see adoptive parents make is that they think that’s all we need—LOVE—and a few cultural events each year, a black book, a few token friends of color. I think it comes from the parents’ sense of being comfortable or uncomfortable within that, then I think they give the tools to the biracial person that they need to survive. I grew up in a family where we didn’t look like each other, and it was respected---celebrated. WE didn’t have to hide it—the best and worst of both worlds!”
Kirsten, 29 (Miranda, 2004)

Parental Racial and Cultural Socialization: It's about more than hair!!!



A relational approach to cultural socialization: Navigating multiple community ties/memberships



Racial label use does not create a corresponding cultural identity

“I call myself biracial today. There’s times when I say black. I don’t ever call myself white. Culturally I cannot say I’m black. Culturally I was raised in a white community and culturally...I identify more with the white community. Which saddens me to some extent. [But] I’m a black woman on the street. They don’t see me as biracial. White people deal with me as black.” Female, age 28 (Samuels, in press)

Multiracial Identity Development Within and Beyond the Box

- Using TRA-relevant theories & research that include emic perspectives to broaden concepts like “healthy racial identity” and rearticulate “needs” of adoptees
- Abandoning colorblind ideals of race and monocentric conceptions of the “healthy” identity
- Countering stereotypes (including the positive ones) about multiraciality
- Building relational pathways to ground identity work beyond choosing a racial label (i.e., the box)



*Working Bill of Rights for Multiracial Adoptees

(Selected Items)



I have the right to:

- To know my racial and ethnic heritage; to not have to guess
- To have ongoing and developmentally relevant access to cultural immersion experiences in my communities of origin
- To identify (or not) with any of my biological or adoptive backgrounds
- To be accepted fully as a member of my extended family system
- To have parent/s who are willing and able to confront racism and micro-aggressions as they exist in different cultural communities, and within their own biological family systems
- To have parent/s who did not adopt me BECAUSE I was mixed race, or because of a need to save the world, prove their commitments to civil rights and equality, or to end racism
- To be taught about race, and how to cope with micro-aggressions, in ways that have relevance for my daily life in contexts beyond our family system
- To truly “choose” an identity or identities without social, political, or personal penalties

(*Adaptation of the “Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People “ (Root, 1996) and “A transracially adopted child’s bill of rights” by Liza Steinberg Triggs within Steinberg & Hall 2000, pg. 379.)

G. M. Samuels, 2009