

Handout 2, Four Stages of Identity Formation: A Model

This model can be a valuable tool to help people who identify as a Person of Color or as a member of a historically marginalized ethnic group, and those working with them, to better understand identity formation. The limitation of such a model is that human beings are all different, and each of us is constantly evolving and changing. Keep in mind that these stages are meant as guidelines; they are not stagnant, but fluid: A person can remain at one stage or move between stages during their lifetime. Take care neither to use this model to label or stereotype individuals nor to generalize about populations to which the model applies.

1. Assimilation Stage. This stage is characterized in terms of a person being educated or indoctrinated to believe that the standard of excellence and all that is good is synonymous with the dominant culture. Indoctrination of this message from an early age becomes internalized for many people who learn to believe the dominant culture is better than their own ethnic/racial group. Consequently, many may prefer teachers, doctors, lawyers, schools, etc. from the dominant culture, while denying the value of professionals of their own ethnic group. People at this stage may experience self-hatred, lack of awareness of the merit or value of their ethnic group, or lack of an integrated approach to assessing the merit or value of the dominant culture.

Children who are biracial and/or transracially adopted are, at this stage, just becoming aware of their particular racial or ethnic identity. Children of color who are raised in homogeneous white environments and assume they are part of the dominant culture may experience this stage differently than other people of color and members of historically marginalized ethnic groups, because “they just assumed they were like everyone else. Until they experienced some form of racial prejudice or discrimination from a schoolmate, strangers, or even relatives of their adopted family.”¹

2. Questioning or Awareness Stage. This stage is usually initiated by a crisis (personal, political, or social) or comment that causes the person to question their beliefs about self, by comparing what they have been taught with what they actually experience. Through questioning, awareness begins to take root and the person notices comments, behaviors, and even facial expressions directed toward them that are offensive or hurtful. For example, one Sunday before the morning service, a minister was engaged in conversation with two males, one of European descent and one Latino. A third male of European descent walked up and asked the Latino to help him move a heavy piece of furniture. A person in the questioning and awareness stage would ask why the male of European descent was not asked to help move the furniture. A person

¹ C.N. Le, “Adopted Asian Americans” *Asian-Nation: Asian American History, Demographics, and Issues*, 2001-2007; accessed 8 July 2007; available from <http://www.asian-nation.org/adopted.shtml>.

going through this stage begins to reflect on their life experiences and usually grows angry with self and society for a lifetime of indoctrination and unequal treatment.

People who are biracial or transracially adopted may experience this stage in particular ways. At this stage a biracial person may question/become aware that society and possibly family members are forcing them to choose one ethnic/racial group identity. People who are transracially adopted by people of European descent may, at this stage, become aware that their parents wish to live in a colorblind world and/or that the wider circle of people with whom they interact on a daily basis do not live in such a world. Experiences of racism in their communities, schools, faith communities and sometimes their adoptive families can trigger feelings of isolation and rejection.

3. Rejection-Disengagement Stage. This stage is characterized by withdrawal from the dominant culture and immersion in one's own ethnic group culture. For Hispanics, it may mean taking pride in speaking Spanish and not wanting to speak English. For people of Asian descent, it may manifest as wanting to learn more about the culture and history of their ancestral country. People in this stage develop and project a strong connection with their own cultural/ethnic identity. This stage is also marked by anger/rage as the person begins to address a lifetime of shame and guilt projected onto them by the dominant culture.

For many biracial persons, this stage can bring up feelings of guilt over the possibility of having to reject one parent's culture or ethnicity. Biracial individuals may experience self-hatred based on feeling a need to reject a part of oneself. Transracially adopted people can experience this stage in two ways. They may disengage from their ethnicity of birth and only identify with their adoptive parent's identity. Or, they may disengage from their adoptive parent's ethnic identity, and seek and take pride in their ethnicity of birth. For both biracial and transracially adopted individuals, this stage is difficult because it usually involves having to reject either a part of self or a part of their family.

4. Integration-Reengagement. People in this stage have learned from and moved back and forth among the previous stages. They have gone through tremendous personal growth. Their sense of self is more positive and their connection and attachment to the world are more secure. They have discovered that their identity can be flexible and fluid and they have learned to embrace the many paradoxes of everyday living. They are able to discern healthy from harmful aspects of the dominant culture. They are also willing to be critical of their own ethnic culture. They have integrated the cultures that affect their daily lives, and their attitude toward life is holistic and hopeful.