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A Foot on Either Side: Student Affairs and Transracial Adoptees

Sara Blair

Transracial adoptees (TRAs) are a growing population within higher education. As the population grows, it is important for student affairs practitioners to provide support and space for TRA identified students to connect in their campus communities. The purpose of this paper is to explore important areas of focus for student affairs and higher education pertaining to the TRA community. The points discussed at the end of this paper are important for student affairs and higher education practitioners in the quest to serve multiple student communities on college campuses. My personal story is the lens through which these focus areas will be explored.

I have a foot on either side of the privilege line. Being Multiracial, I have the privilege of racial flexibility on the outside and the privilege of understanding both the point of view of People of Color and the point of view of White people on the inside. My Multiracial story has the added layer of Transracial Adoption (TRA) into a White upper middle class family. While I may consider my multiraciality a privilege, the color of my skin signifies to others a lack of privilege compared with my White family members. My color may signal lower status on the one hand, but my actual economic class standing as a member of my adopted family is very privileged. The particular configuration of belonging to both privileged and non-privileged groups underpins what Viktor Frankl calls existential frustration: my concern over the worth of this life (Frankl, 2006). I confront this dilemma daily in interactions with People of Color, White people, and in educational settings. My efforts to reconcile these two sides of my existence, my economic-class identity and racial identity, are sometimes frustrating, infuriating, funny, or all three at once. Navigating this dilemma is a challenge, but more importantly a remarkable opportunity to find meaning living a life with a foot on either side. This is my story.

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The Beginning

I was born on July 22, 1987. The delivery room held my birth mother, the doctor, the nurses, and my adoptive parents. My birth mother was White and just 19 years old. About a month before my birth she reached out to a counselor to discuss her options. Young, pregnant, and estranged from her own adoptive parents, my birth mother was not ready to be a parent. Although I am told she had very mixed feelings, ultimately she knew she was not ready. Through a series of rather far-fetched connections beginning with the counselor, my birth mother and adoptive parents found each other. They met, got along, and decided to go forward with the adoption. Not being able to have children of their own, this was the best hope for my adoptive parents.

Knowing that my birth mother had a good head on her shoulders and the decision she was making was in my best interest was all that mattered for my adoptive parents. They thought they knew all they needed to know, so it was a surprise when I came out shades darker than everyone in the delivery room. My adoptive parents realized that love was not going to be able to shield me from racism in the future, but they were in it for the long haul. There was no turning back. They had made a commitment to a mother and child and they were going to keep it.

Reflecting back on what life could have been, I am eternally thankful for the sacrifice my birth mother made in placing me up for adoption. While I know that she could have raised me, it may not have been with the adequate resources. Furthermore, at the age of 22 she passed away from brain cancer, leaving me behind. Even though I do not have a conscious memory of her, I still feel a constant sense of loss because she is gone and I have just a few pictures and hearsay memories of her. Although I have never heard my birth mother say “I love you,” I know that she did. Viktor Frankl (2006) said:

Love goes far beyond the physical person of the beloved. It finds its deepest meaning in his spiritual being, his inner self. Whether or not he is actually present, whether or not he is still alive at all, ceases somehow to be of importance. (p. 38)

The love my birth mother had for me goes far beyond her physical existence; her act of finding a better life for me is a testament. Her love surrounds me and keeps me whole.

Wearing the Transracially Adopted Shoes

Sometimes the shoes fit and sometimes they do not. For years I was confused and angry with my adoptive parents for putting me in a situation that made me feel so different when all I wanted was to be the same. I have clear memories

of uncomfortable moments. I imagined what it would have been like to wear a different pair of shoes—a pair that was the same as everyone else in my family. For me, that would have never been the case. As my birth mother was White and my birth father was not in the picture, I would have been raised in a White environment whether adopted or not. Over time I have come to terms with the shoes that I wear despite the challenges they bring.

The challenges of being a TRA were, and still are, unique. My confusion manifested itself in subtly rebelling against my parents and building homogenous make-believe families during elementary school. I remember one day I lied to my mother about who was going to be at my friend's house. I told her that only my friend's mother would be home, but I knew this was not true. When we got to the house, my friend's mother was there with her male friends, all of whom were African American. I felt right at home. When my mother picked me up she was upset that I had been dishonest and that I had been in a house with so many men. For my mother it had nothing to do with the color of their skin, but for me that was everything. I remember being confused about why my mother was so upset. In my mind the men were not going to hurt me, we were the same.

Through elementary school I found myself drawn to the students of Color. I played family with my Black friends and I was the mother with Black children that looked just like me. I felt complete with my make-believe family. We understood each other in ways only children of Color could. We spoke stereotypical Ebonics and sat together during recess and lunch. We laughed at the White kids who tried to double-dutch and wore brightly colored plastic balls in our hair. I even got into a fight with a White boy in honor of my Black make-believe son. No one asked how I could be a part of my make-believe family.

It was not until second grade that I started to become comfortable with my identity as a Multiracial TRA. My White sister attended the same school, which pushed me to begin accepting that I was the Multiracial child of Color in an all-White family. I had a real sister to look out for regardless of skin color. Now the fights were with anyone who made fun of her or asked, "Is that your real sister?" one too many times. In fourth grade, I asked my teacher if I could have a circle where I explained what it meant to be adopted. That was my first experience educating others on how it felt to be a TRA. Shortly thereafter, my mother pulled my sister and me out of public school and began home-schooling us. Those were the comfortable years when no one, not even I, questioned my identity.

High school presented another set of challenges that I was not prepared to face. I was not ready to negotiate my identity as a Multiracial Person of Color. As one of thirty-five students of Color at my predominantly White high school, I found myself in limbo between the students of Color and the White students. This

was the first moment that I found myself with a foot on either side. I identified with both. I had friends in both communities and I opted not to be a part of any student union that was ethnically or culturally based in order to stay neutral. I was more comfortable being in a group with my all-White friends than with the Black students who saw me as “not Black enough.” I was simultaneously exoticizing and denying my People of Color identity with my all White friends, and feeling invalidated by my fellow students of Color. In response to these feelings I acted out in high school and became severely depressed during my sophomore year as the search for my identity became too challenging.

While my friends of Color were comfortable in their own skin, I was tearing out of mine, wishing that it would change colors, get lighter, so that I did not have to feel this way. While I was torn between White and Black, I was also stuck in the middle between the wealthy and the not so wealthy. High school was the first place I had to face the reality that my skin color did not match the economic class status that I was socially expected to have.

Privilege and Non-Privilege in Being TRA

My class status has always been a tough subject for me to discuss without guilt. Graduating college debt-free is uncomfortable in the presence of People of Color carrying substantial educational debt. The guilt comes from knowing that I could have been part of the lower class; that my privilege came with being adopted. By birth, I would have been raised by a young, unemployed single mother who died when I was just three years old. Chances are I would have ended up in foster care or would have been raised by my grandparents when my mother passed away. Instead, I find myself on the other end of the spectrum with two loving adoptive parents who make enough to send my sister and me to college without loans.

The existential dilemma (Frankl, 2006) that I go through is trying to reconcile my skin color with my economic class status while also figuring out what it all means for me in this life. Society tells me People of Color are on welfare, are low-income, have low graduation rates, and have large amounts of educational debt. It does not help that many of my friends of Color have the same story and live the same experience. I know the majority of those under the poverty line are White (US Census Bureau, 2010), yet it is the People of Color under the poverty line that are most visible, reinforcing the stereotypes that fuel the existential dilemma. I try to fit into the stereotypes of being lower class by keeping my distance from class related conversations, working my way through school, paying for my own things, and not asking for any money. However, at the end of the day I am still the “Black” girl with a wealthy White family and no loans to pay.

This is the privilege of being a TRA and the non-privilege of being a TRA. On

the one hand there is no one to talk to in the family setting who will understand what it means to be a Person of Color. On the other hand, few of my Multiracial community come from or understand my privileged background. That being said, my friends understand the everyday challenge of being a Person of Color in a White-dominated society and my family members feel the pain of being powerless against racism. Having strong friendships and family support creates a safe environment that will cradle and sustain me in my journey through TRA life.

My Meaning in Being a TRA

Trying to move through the existential dilemma (Frankl, 2006) of figuring out what it means to be a TRA has convinced me that I will always be straddling the privilege line. This is where I find the most meaning in being a TRA. This identity means that I will always be different, and at some point I need to accept that I will always struggle with being economically advantaged while racially disadvantaged. However, that struggle “ceases to be a struggle at the moment that it finds meaning” (Frankl, 2006, p. 113). There is meaning in the fluid movement between one paradigm and another. My comfort comes from living a privileged and unprivileged existence freely. There is a joy in accepting a fate that placed me in my circumstances.

Being a TRA is frustrating, exciting, challenging, developmental, and above all the single most salient identity I have. It is what defines the way I view the world and the way I view myself. The challenge of reconciling my race and class status has pushed me to explore the intersections of both identities. As a TRA I am a mediator, negotiator and middle-woman when it comes to race and class conversations. My identity of being in-between helps bring people together. When there is conflict, I am able to see both sides of the story. There is a curiosity that comes with being a TRA, one that keeps driving me to find the answers to questions about who I am and who I am going to become.

Identifying as a TRA has taught me to be comfortable with the thought that I may never know where I came from; I am comfortable because I am sure of where I am going. Though it may be hard, I am okay with never being able to connect with my family members on issues of race the way I wish I could. Challenges like this make me stronger and make me seek out people to connect with who will understand. I also find it challenging to find new words to express how I am feeling to those I love so they may start to understand what it means to be me.

Being a TRA is one of the main reasons why I chose to enter into student affairs. It is the ability to see both sides and to understand what it means to travel the middle road, like so many of my students do, that makes me grateful for being a TRA. It means being challenged by my own identity so that I am better able to

understand the challenges faced by those around me. It means searching for new words to better express myself and being comfortable in the shoes that I have been given. Now, I cannot imagine wearing a different pair of shoes. My story has given me power. It is in these shoes that I proudly stand with a foot on either side.

Implications for Student Affairs

Based on my personal experience, I recommend three main areas that student affairs practitioners can focus on to better assist TRAs as they navigate their identity within the collegiate setting. They are: conducting assessment, providing training for practitioners, and providing space for identity exploration. Each area is important in the quest to develop a better understanding of what it means to be a TRA.

Assessment

According to the most recent estimate of transracial adoptions by the National Health Interview Survey in 1987, only 8% of all domestic and international adoptions were transracial adoptions (Stolley, 1993). Although a national report on the percentage of transracial adoptions has not occurred since 1987, state reports make it clear that TRAs are a growing population inside and outside higher education that need specific attention (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2002). Due to the lack of institutional assessment about the TRA community, it is self-disclosure that identifies TRAs on higher education campuses. TRAs are a population not included in conversations about identity unless a self-identified TRA enters the dialogue. As the TRA population grows in higher educational settings, it will be necessary to look closely at the presence of TRA students and their graduation rates for practitioners to become more aware of TRA population needs. Assessment will help to create visibility, determine ways to motivate TRA identified students, increase retention, and train practitioners (Adams, Thomas, & King, 2000). While assessment techniques will vary across institutions, it will prove useful in gaining a better understanding of how TRAs navigate identity within their respective institutions and how practitioners can better serve the community as a whole.

Training and Theory

TRAs encounter challenges around being in-limbo between identities (Trenka, Oparah, & Shin, 2006). It is for this reason that practitioners should be provided with training that discusses the challenges TRAs may face when attending institutions of higher education. The two main challenges I faced were coming to terms with my lack of knowledge about cultural background or heritage and my inability to identify or fit in with monoracial student groups.

Multiracial students also face similar challenges throughout their college experiences as explored by Renn's (2000) theory on patterns of experience among Multiracial college students. However, it is important to provide an identity development theory solely framed around the TRA community. This would provide practitioners with the competencies to better serve TRAs through counseling, guided identity exploration, programming, and conversation. An identity development model, which does not yet exist, in combination with training will provide practitioners with TRA specific language to create more inclusive spaces during conversations with students who identify as TRAs.

Space

Space to connect and explore a common identity with others who identify the same way is an important part of identity development (Renn, 2000). In my personal experience, space for TRAs is difficult to find. There is no space where TRAs can navigate the identity of being in-between, and I found it difficult to connect with fellow TRAs in higher education because I did not know where to start. I found my connections outside of school through an agency specializing in transracial adoptions. To this day I have found fellow adoptees but only one fellow TRA in the school setting.

Though there are adoption agencies that can connect TRAs outside the field of higher education, it is important for institutions to provide a space, defined by TRAs, to connect. With the help of trainings and institutional assessment, practitioners should have the information and skill set to connect members of the TRA community in a safe space where identity can be explored. Not only will these spaces create more visibility for the TRA community, it will also provide much needed support for individuals who identify as TRAs. As a TRA I wish that there had been a way for me to connect with fellow TRAs in college. I know that there are others out there, yet they are hard to find. If I had a group to turn to I suspect that I would not have felt as isolated in the dilemma I still face negotiating my privileged self and unprivileged self.

I believe that institutional assessment, practitioner training, and creation of space will provide TRAs with the opportunity to find each other and explore their identities. Now more than ever, with celebrities like Madonna and Angelina Jolie making transracial adoption more visible, TRAs need space to educate themselves and others about the challenges we face. As practitioners we have an opportunity to find ways to educate ourselves on a growing community of students who will influence conversations on identity development, family, culture, and race. There has never been a better time to explore what it means to have a foot on either side.

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