

My race, my dreams ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I'm black and I have many white friends. It doesn't bother me at all until I get around a lot of other black people or around certain family members. Sure some joke around with me saying I'm an "Oreo." But it really gets to me. I'm tired of people saying "acting white" or "acting black" or "the man keeps putting the black man down." It doesn't take long for race to come up in a conversation with some people. And that's when I really feel out of my element. I know no race is perfect. But I feel like where blacks are now is nowhere near what Dr. King was fighting for. Maybe I'm too emotional about it, but everyday I still wake up black.

For instance, I love all types of music, including rock, classical and country music. And these are some reactions: 1. Why am I listening to that "white people music"? and 2. I feel out of place if I don't know one of the latest rap songs. It's little things like this that just make me want to wish there weren't any races. But races and different cultures are beautiful and so much can be learned. I'm happy and comfortable with myself, but not my race as a whole. And on some days, it really gets me down to a point where I just cry. Am I just chasing an insatiable dream?

Answer

Dear Reader,

You clearly have a thoughtful perspective on the issue of race — many people do not recognize different races and cultures as learning opportunities or as having a kind of beauty. Most everyone in America confronts the issue of race at some point, and it is not at all unusual that you're questioning what race means for you. And, as you've discovered, some people are more comfortable discussing the complexity of racial identity than others.

Understandably, you may be having a hard time depersonalizing your peers' comments about race. Race in America is both intimately personal and culturally significant, making it one of the trickiest subjects under the sun. You mention not being comfortable with your race as a whole. One hard reality we all face is that while you may feel discontent with the way your race is portrayed or the way some people of your race behave, the actions of others are outside of your control. What *is* in your control is deciding for yourself how to personally cope with and understand the issue of race. Clarifying your perspective on race could help in managing the day-to-day frustrations you encounter when discussing race with family and friends.

Sorting out your own thoughts on racial identity from those around you is no easy task, but having a working, theoretical framework to think about race can facilitate new ways of thinking about this magnificently complex issue. The *Black Racial Identity Development Model*, originally developed by W.E. Cross during the 1970s and further revised in 1995 may be a helpful starting point. This framework suggests that African Americans may go through some or all of the following stages:

Pre-Encounter

An African American person believes in the inherent goodness and/or rightness of white culture, either consciously or unconsciously, and seeks acceptance by whites, sometimes while actively or passively distancing themselves from other blacks.

Encounter

An event happens in the life of a black American that forces her/him to recognize racism in her or his life. Such an event may include social rejection by members of white or other races. An African American may begin to conclude that groups that reject her or him do not view her/him as an equal. Because this black person is faced with the reality that s/he can never be a part of the rejecting culture, s/he begins to focus on her or his identity as a member of a group targeted by racism.

Immersion or Emersion

Desires emerge for the black American to surround oneself with outward symbols of her/his race, and actively avoid symbols of white culture or other races. An African American at this stage actively seeks out peers from her/his own racial background, and usually white-focused anger begins to fade away because her/his energy is now directed at self-exploration. A new sense of security begins to arise along with an emerging sense of self.

Internalization

While still maintaining connections with black peers, the person in this stage becomes willing to make meaningful connections with whites who are respectful of her/his definition of self. An individual in this stage is also ready to build coalitions with members of other oppressed groups.

Commitment

If an African American is in this fifth stage, s/he has forged new ways to translate her or his racial identity into a general sense of commitment to the concerns of black

people as a group, which is sustained over time. This person is anchored in a positive sense of racial identity, able to both perceive and transcend race proactively.

For a detailed chapter on the Cross model, you can check out *The Handbook of Multicultural Counseling* (1995) published by Thousand Oaks press.

As you can see, this framework only discusses black and white Americans, so you can imagine that your eventual analysis of race in our society will be even more complex. However, it presents one way to examine your own racial identity as a black person as well as the experiences you have with other black people. It may be that some of your peers are in a different place in their racial identity development, which takes place on a continuum and often over the course of a lifetime. Even for someone in the fifth stage of this model, race will still present itself in day-to-day life as an issue to be grappled with, through the media, policies, and social interactions. In considering this model, what stage do you think you are in? What are some ways you see yourself progressing forward in your identity development? How might you be able to discuss this model with others, and what do you think their reactions to it might be?

Black racial identity is a rich component of American literary and cultural tradition. Reading the works of black thinkers as they struggle with these very issues may illuminate new avenues for self-exploration. Writings by W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the first black American published authors, may be a good place to start — an essay in *The Souls of Black Folk* [2] describes the conundrum of "double consciousness" that black Americans deal with. In the book *The Future of Race* [3], Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. — two of the best known contemporary African American scholars — discuss the challenges inherent in finding true racial identity amid both their academic lives in the Ivy League and within their black communities. Gates has also penned a book and created a documentary entitled *Beyond the Color Line*, which examines privilege within black communities across the country.

Columbia students also have numerous resources at their disposal for finding peer support around race and racial identity. Getting involved in one or any of these campus offerings may lend support and new information as you journey through this issue:

- The Institute for Resources in African-American Studies (IRAAS) [4] hosts a series of conversations with members of Columbia and Harlem communities to discuss the black experience.
- The **Brotherhood Project** is a leadership group for men of African heritage who sponsor various campus programs for the black community and promote community building around black identity. **Sistercircle** provides campus activities for women of color, including monthly lunch discussions with faculty and mentoring activities. For more information on both the Brotherhood Project and Sistercircle, check out the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs [5] page.
- Counseling and Psychological Services [6] at Columbia also offers support groups every semester. Support groups exist for black men and women to meet in a safe environment to discuss common concerns and issues.

Finding your comfort zone with race among your peers and family may take some time. As you continue to sort through the complicated issue of racial identity, you can count among your tools your self-awareness and willingness to ask the tough questions.

Alice!

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Published date:

May 29, 2009

Last reviewed on:

Jun 12, 2009

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