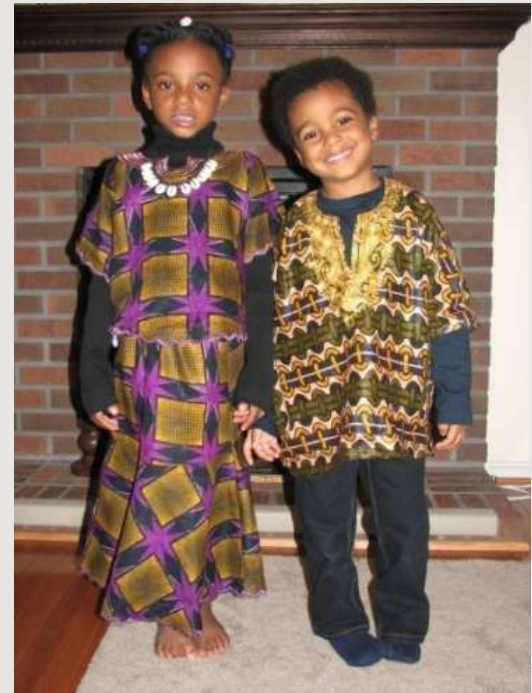


# Institute for Family & Child Well-Being

## Understanding Healing and Development Through a Lens of Race and Culture

North American Council on Adoptable Children  
36<sup>th</sup> Annual NACAC Conference  
Hartford, Connecticut



Marriott Hartford Downtown  
Friday, August 6, 2010

# A Road Map...

- Reflections and Perspectives from the Field
- Adolescent Development & Adoption Dynamics
- Understanding Culture
- Cultural Conceptions of Growth and Development
- An African Cultural Healing Framework
- Understanding Race
- Manufacturing Exile
- Toward a Process of *Re-Membering*
- I See You!
- Our Responsibility
- Thank you for modeling this journey!

# Reflections from the Field...

It still appears that the adoption field has been designed – and is organized in such a way – to meet the wants and interests of adults who are interested in parenting children as well as the systems responsible for coordinating the work, and not as much to meet the needs of the specific children who are in need of families. And, thus, the notion of an adoption industry.

# Youth and Family Perspectives...

*“People treat us like something is wrong with us, but we’re just crying out for help. If you were in my position, you would be acting the same way!”*

*“It was hard for him. When I saw our family, I saw an interracial family. When he looked at our family, he saw a white family.”*

# Some Starting Points...

- All children are *and have* unique gifts.
- Children are not broken; and they do not break.
- Children are *not* all the same.
- The developmental journey is not the same for all children and adolescents.
- The developmental “outcome” or “product” is not the same for all individuals.
- We must expand our understanding of what success means... toward a developmental/progress perspective.
- We must ensure equitable access to resources necessary to promote healthy growth and development.

# The Nature of the Adolescent Challenge

- Emotional and behavioral difficulties
- Interruptions in the attachment process
- Acting out, acting up (reaching out)
- Defiant behaviors
- Resisting authority
- Harmful and risky sexual behaviors
- Substance use and abuse
- Danger / Harmful to self and others
- A slow death from racial and cultural isolation

# Lifelong Issues in Adoption

- Loss
- Rejection
- Guilt and Shame
- Grief
- Identity
- Intimacy
- Mastery / Control

- Silverstein and Kaplan, 1982

# The Brain Science

- Development of the frontal lobe of the brain, which is involved in higher thought, is not complete until we are in our mid-20's, and governs the following critically important abilities...
  - Reason
  - Control impulses
  - Regulate moods
  - Empathize with others
  - Limit inappropriate behavior
  - Set priorities
  - Make sound judgments

# Major Developmental Questions... *approaching and during adolescence*

These fundamental questions are characteristic during adolescence, and are magnified for adoptees:

- Who am I?
- Who and where do I come from?
- How and why did I end up here?
- Where and to/with whom do I belong?
- What is my purpose?
- For Adoptees: Where are my other relatives now?

# The Fundamental Challenge...

## *healing and making whole*

- Tolerance vs. *Genuine* Acceptance
- Awareness vs. *Genuine* Understanding
- Maintenance vs. *Personally Relevant* Growth

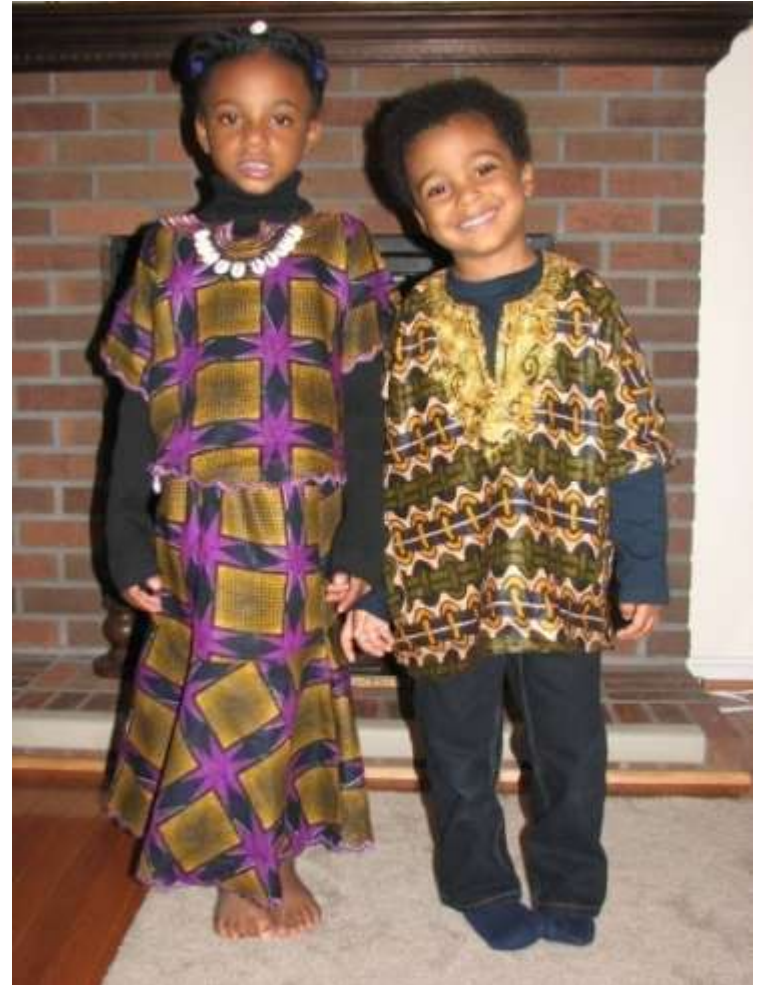
# Conceptualizing Human Development

## Beyond European Theories of Child and Human Development

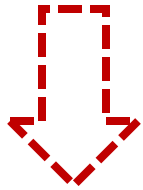
Every culture has reflected deeply on the meaning of life and the processes of child and human development...

Cultural Deep Thought

**Sankofa**...exploring and reclaiming the wisdom available to us from pre-colonial African cultures and spiritual systems

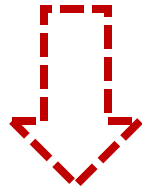


# Four Dimensions of Culture



## Fundamental

- Worldview
- Values
- Beliefs
- Conceptual systems
- Spirituality



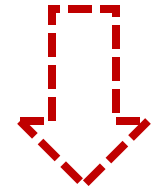
## Structural

- Rules
- Laws
- Institutions
- Media



## Expressive

- Foods
- Music
- Dance
- Literature
- Artistic & Creative Expressions



## Functional

- Skills
- Tools
- Materials
- Technologies

A. Wade Boykin, 1997

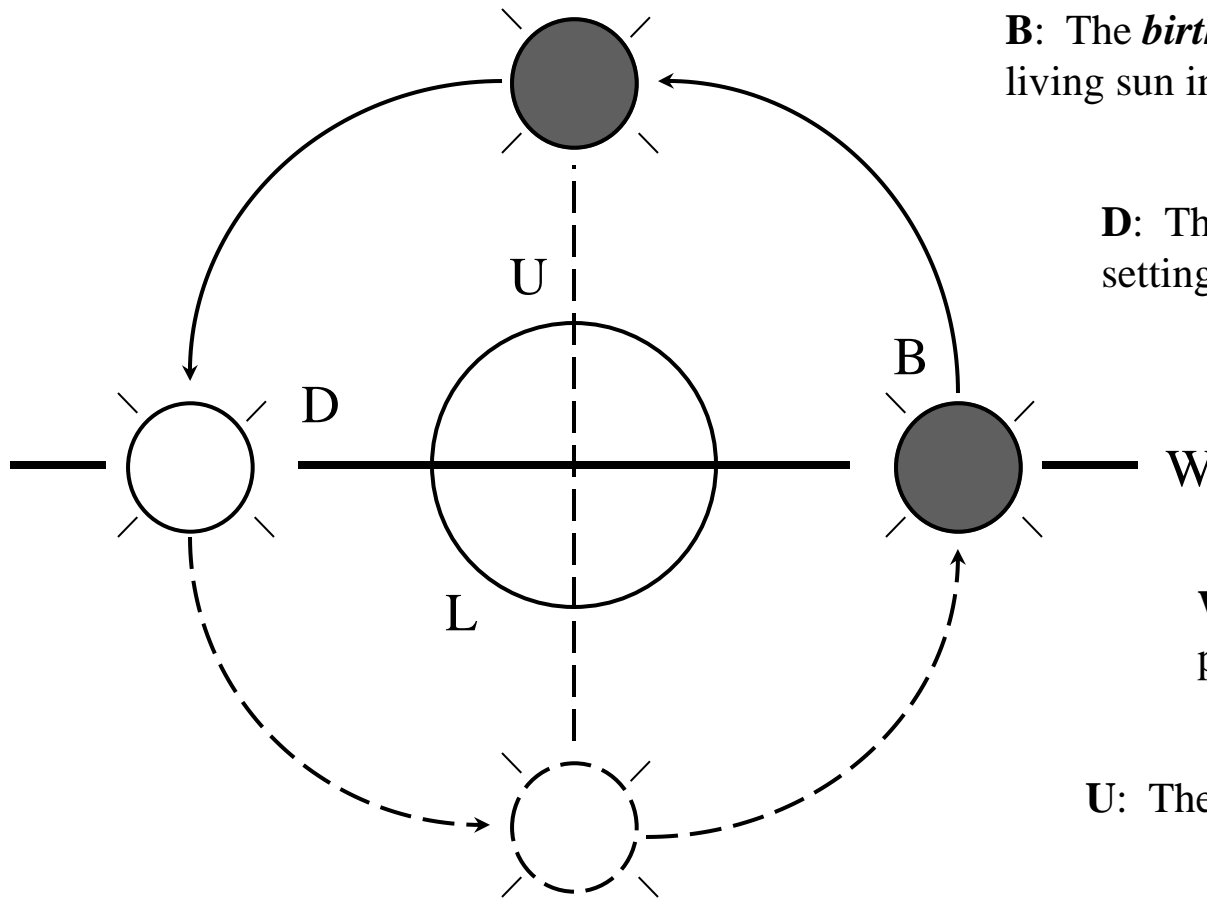
# Indigenous African Thought

- Community interest and consciousness is prioritized, and tends not to present a conflict with individual interests.
- Individual identity exists in relationship to the community.
- (Rugged) Individualism tends to be frowned upon.
- Individual expression is celebrated, yet is differentiated from individualism and self-centered competition.
- Individuals exist within a social-cultural and historical community context.
- Everyone has a place in and “belongs to” the community.
- “We owe our existence to those who have gone before us, and have a responsibility to those yet unborn.”

# Life as a *Process of Becoming*

- A “person” is one who has been incorporated into the community and who has placed in her/his heart the virtues and values that the society or community views as being essential to be called a “person.”
- *Personhood* involves moral development and character building, since morality and character play a crucial role in the way people relate to one another.
- Achieving “personhood” is a lifelong process, with clear stages of development. Birth, naming, initiation, marriage, having children, becoming a responsible adult, assuming the role of eldership, and death encompassing key milestones along the path.

# Life Cycle: A Kongolese Cultural Framework



**B:** The *birth* of a child is the rising of a living sun in the community.

**D:** The *death* of a human being is the setting of a living sun in the community.

**W:** The *invisible wall* between the physical and spiritual world.

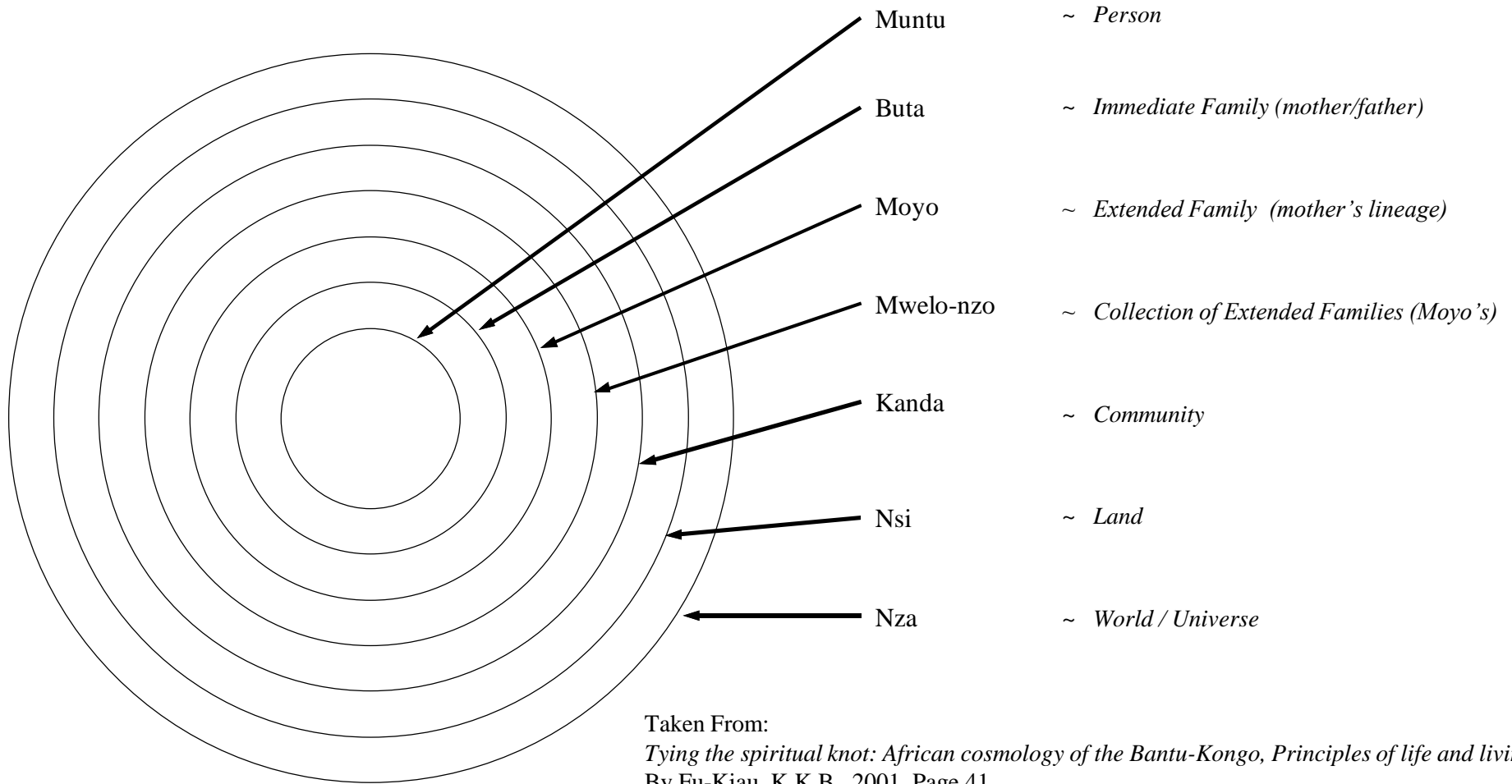
**U:** The *upper* world or the physical world.

**L:** The *lower* world or the spiritual world.

# Well-Being: *A Kongolese Cultural Framework*

- **Realms of existence**
  - Physical world
  - Spiritual world
- **Understanding the human life cycle**
  - The rising of a living sun.
  - The setting of a living sun.
  - Invisible line between the physical and spiritual world; interaction between the two is fluid and normal
  - Biogenetic rope connects the physical and spiritual realms, bio-genetic history of a people; connects us to our ancestors; carries our healing power

# Relationship of *person* to *society*: A *Kongolese* cultural framework



# Well-Being: *A Kongolese Cultural Framework*

- **Self-healing Energy Source**

- Like the sun, humans are born into the world with a self-healing energy “package”... it is seen as an energy that radiates from within; it is the core of our “human-beingness.”
- This energy source is passed on during conception, and is influenced by gestation, birth and our environment.

- **Life Principles**

- Like the sun, humans are born with an energy that radiates from within; one is born into the world with a self-healing power.

*FuKiau: Self-Healing Power and Therapy*

# Well-Being: *A Kongolese Cultural Framework*

- **Initiation... Life's Developmental Journey**

- The process of learning and growing into a full understanding of *life's principles of living*.
- Process of having one's eyes opened... of becoming fully aware and conscious of one's existence in this world... mind, body and spirit. Knowledge of life's principles, as well as how to apply them.
- Our goal is to keep that “healing energy source” healthy and pass it on to our future generations.
- Failure to live according to life's principles weakens our core energy source, and weakens what we pass on to our future generations.

# Well-Being: *A Kongolese Cultural Framework*

- **Life Principles (life affirming principles)**
  1. We are what we eat and drink.
  2. Our understanding of life, at a fundamental level, determines the quality of the time we spend in this physical world.
  3. Our relationships create a space in which our self-healing power is strengthened or weakened... and can directly impact the core life/energy source of others around us.
  4. The basic values and quality of relationships between individuals determines the level of health and vitality of our society, it's institutions, etc. This collective space can influence the core life/energy source of us and others.

# Well-Being: *A Kongolese Cultural Framework*

- **Life Principles (cont.)**

5. Everything is connected in our lives.
6. Everyone possess this core life energy source at birth.
7. The substance of the core life/energy source is passed on at conception, but its functioning can be influenced by what we eat and drink, as well as how we live our lives.

# Well-Being: *A Kongolese Cultural Framework*

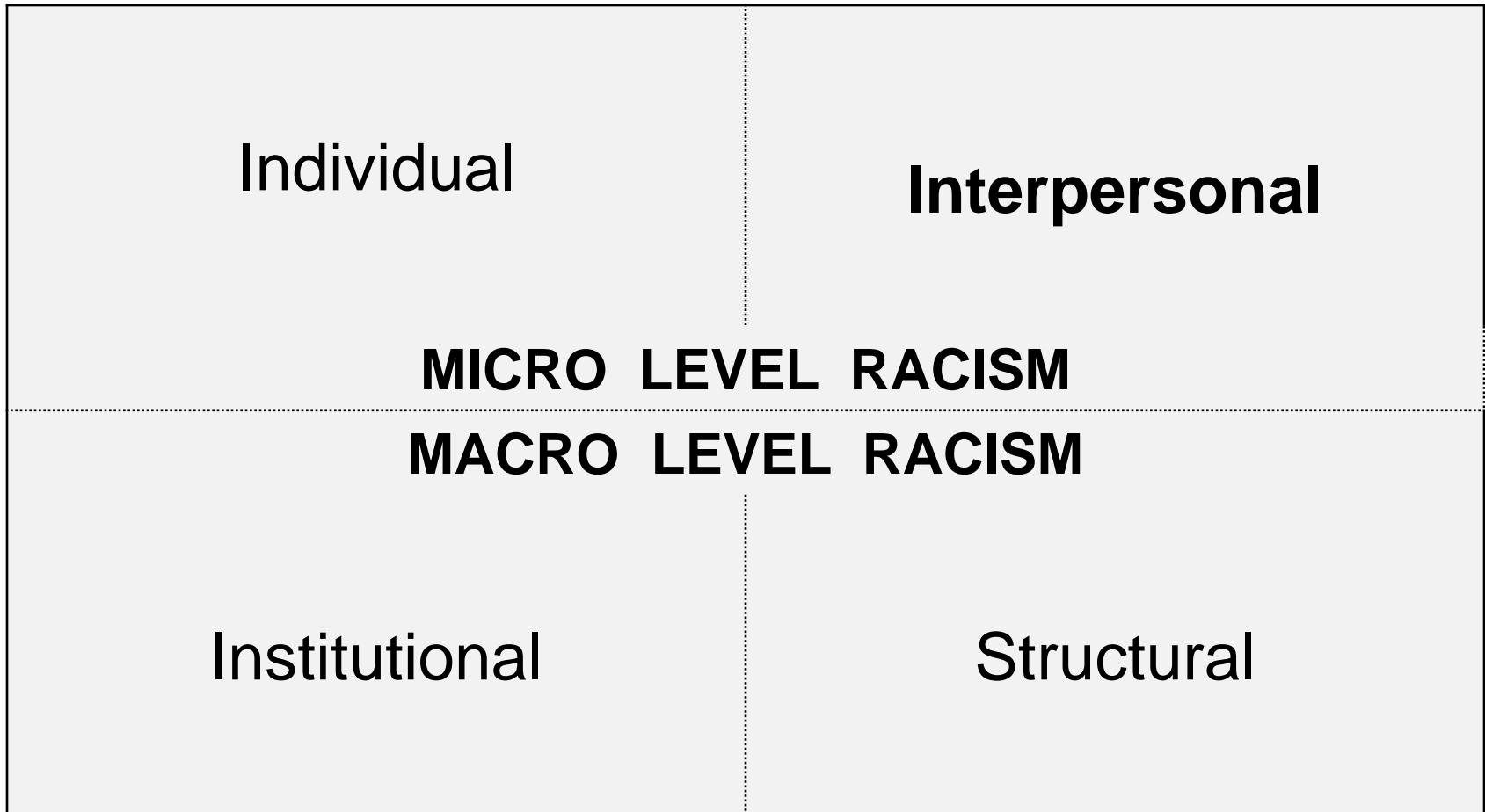
- **Self-Healing Power and Therapy**

1. Illness is a state of *dis-ease* and living out of balance with respect to the functioning of our core life/energy source, and its relationship to the environment in which we live.
2. Illness reflects the inability of one's core self-healing power to control and balance the many stresses that impact us daily.
3. Therapy is the process through which we restore and strengthen the functioning capacity of our core life/energy source.
4. Therapy, as a process, must respond to the need for holistic balance and wellness. It is a (self-) healing process at its core.

# Cultural Conceptions of Development

- Human beings are spiritual beings having a physical experience.
- Life is fundamentally a *process of becoming* – *within community*.
- Healing from our experiences... making sense of and discovering the meaning of life's experiences is integrated within the natural developmental process and life cycle.
- Communities are organized around the developmental journey that life is, including the preparation of children for adulthood and the active role of elders within the community.
- The collective community is responsible for ensuring the healthy development and well-being of children. We must do better!
- Societies are judged – at least in part – by the health and well-being of its children, and the humanity of the citizens it produces.

# Understanding Racism



*Note: These ideas adapted from the work and ideas developed by Terry Keleher and the Applied Research Center.*

# Strategies for Addressing Racism

Internalized Racism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• internalized racial superiority vs. inferiority</li><li>• support groups, racial healing</li><li>• mentoring, counseling</li></ul>
Interpersonal Racism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• anti-racism trainings and workshops</li><li>• diversity trainings and workshops</li><li>• cross-cultural dialogues, dinners</li></ul>
Institutional Racism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• assessment of intended / unintended consequences</li><li>• changing / developing clear policy and practices</li><li>• creating new and more responsive institutions</li></ul>
Structural Racism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• highlighting history, root causes</li><li>• challenging racist myths, ideologies</li><li>• understanding cross-systems dynamics and effects</li></ul>

*Note: Ideas adapted from the work and ideas developed by Terry Keleher and the Applied Research Center.*

# *Who, Whose and Where Am I?*

- What happens when our children and youth find themselves not seen and not heard... invisible and misunderstood at best, unwanted and inferior at worst?

# Living in Exile... by Edward Said

## Excerpt from: *Representations of the Intellectual*

There is a popular but wholly mistaken assumption that being exiled is to be totally cut off, isolated, hopelessly separated from your place of origin. Would that surgically clean separation were true, because then at least you could have the consolation of knowing that what you have left behind is, in a sense, unthinkable and completely irrecoverable.

The fact is that for most exiles the difficulty consists not simply in being forced to live away from home, but rather - given today's world - living with the many reminders that you are in exile, that your home is not in fact so far away, and that the normal traffic of everyday contemporary life keeps you in constant but tantalising and unfulfilled touch with the old place.

The exile therefore exists in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting, nor fully disencumbered of the old; beset with half-involvements and half-detachments; nostalgic and sentimental on one level, an adept mimic or a secret outcast on another. Being skilled at survival becomes the main imperative, with the dangers of getting too comfortable and secure constituting a threat that is constantly to be guarded against.

# *Is it possible for a societal culture to routinely manufacture exiles?*

- “Normal” adolescent dynamics
- “Normal” lifelong adoptee dynamics
- “Normal” transracial adoption dynamics
- “Normal” international adoption dynamics
- An intensifying generational divide?

# Healing Through Critical Literacy...

*reading the word, reading the world*

1. Reading the word / text
2. Reading the world
3. Re-reading the word / text
4. Re-reading the world

*Paulo Freire (1921 – 1997)*

# Healing Through Critical Literacy...

*reading the word, reading the world*

- Making sense of our reality, inside and outside
- Recognizing our personal interests and strengths
- Imagining the possibilities
- Setting goals and plotting a path

# ***Something Torn and New***

**A Book by: Ngugi Wa Thiong'o**

- Dis-Membering Practices
- Re-Membering Visions
- Memory, Restoration and Becoming Whole
- Toward Collective Consciousness & Responsibility

# I See You... 150%

- Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it.
  - Frantz Fanon (1925 – 1961)

# Critical Tasks for Parents

1. Acknowledge the existence of prejudice, racism, and discrimination.
2. Explain why the child's race/ethnic group is mistreated, including the complexity.
3. Provide the child with a repertoire of responses to racial discrimination.
4. Provide the child with role models and positive contact with his or her community or origin.
5. Prepare the child for discrimination.
6. Teach the child the difference between responsibility to and for his or her racial / ethnic group.
7. Advocate on behalf of the child's positive identity.
8. Engage in and model anti-racist / social justice activities with and on behalf of the child.

Adapted from “Seven Tasks for Parents: Developing Positive Racial Identity” by Joseph Crumbley, D.S.W. (available via [www.nacac.org](http://www.nacac.org))

# Parent / Professional Responsibilities

1. Talk openly and honestly with your child – as best as possible and in ways most appropriate – about the circumstances surrounding their entry into foster care, or the circumstances surrounding their availability for adoption. These conversations should happen as frequently as is necessary to keep the lines of communication open.
2. Assist in gathering and sharing as much information as possible about your child's family of origin, including notes, files, pictures, etc. Use these various items to organize a *lifebook* or some other collection of family information.
3. Seek to understand why children of color are over-represented in this nation's foster care system. Explain these dynamics – including the complexity – to the child as appropriate, and discuss any of her/his related experiences.
4. Advocate for a more responsive child welfare system so that all families in crisis can receive the appropriate supports, services and resources necessary to keep their families together.
5. Be present; be mindful, and demonstrate an awareness and appreciation of your child's talents, interests, aspirations, etc. Show that you see your child!

# Some Closing Points...

- All children are *and have* unique gifts.
- Children are not broken; and they do not break.
- Children are *not* all the same.
- The developmental journey is not the same for all children and adolescents.
- The developmental “outcome” or “product” is not the same for all individuals.
- We must expand our understanding of what success means... toward a developmental/progress perspective.
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# FACING THE RISING SUN

Perspectives on African American  
Family and Child Well-Being



ORONDE A. MILLER



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# Thank You: *for being and becoming.*

- I see you.
- I am grateful for you.
- I celebrate and honor you, and your contribution.
- I thank you for being; and more importantly, I thank you for your commitment to this journey of becoming.
- And may each of us continue on this sacred journey of healing, growing, and developing... one family at a time.

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