

Listening Between the Lines: Dialogic Listening in Transracial Adoptive Families

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

University of Washington

2025

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Communication

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Abstract

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This article asserts that dialogic listening is an effective skill for the co-creation of understanding and connection within transracial adoptive family units. I analyze and explore this listening style within the parameters of a case study. This case study dissects a conversation observed between a twenty-six-year-old black man and his eighty-one-year-old adoptive white father regarding topics surrounding identity and racial negotiation. The dialogue from this interaction creates the perfect opportunity to explore how the concept of Dialogic listening is essential in listening through difference. It also emphasizes deep engagement where all parties not only work to understand the context, but the emotions and experiences behind those contexts. Many adoptive families face unique communication challenges such as cultural, racial, and intergenerational differences can be amplified as the children begin to question what it means to discover their identities outside of their adoptive family unit. In many of these situations the adoptive parents and children, especially around social issues and identity, encounter exchanges that are complex and emotionally charged. Dialogic listening allows the family members to move from basic level understanding to engaging with the deeper narratives that shape their views.

Introduction to Dialogic Listening with a Transracial Family: A Case Study

Approximately 135,000 children are adopted each year in the United States with 40% being transracial, meaning that children are adopted by parents of a different race or ethnicity than them (Evan, 2007; AFCARS, 2021). In these transracial adoptive families, also referred to as interracial or multiracial families, communication dynamics are uniquely shaped by cultural, racial, and intergenerational differences between the parents and their adopted children. These family units face unique situations as they navigate identity and social dynamics that traditional, biologically related families often do not. Typically, as was the case for my sister and me, these families enter a unit together after the children have already been transferred from multiple homes, whether in the form of foster homes or just orphanages (Rublin et al., 2007; Unrau et al; 2008). In some cases, children are being adopted from overseas and brought back to the United States, where they then have to not only adapt into a space with new parents, but a completely new country. In many cases these new parents, despite planning or intentions, may not completely understand or comprehend their adoptees' fully (Nelson et al., 2021; McKnee; 2019). For example, I, as a transracial adoptee, met with my future parents approximately four times before moving in with them at age six, but I can only recall one of those meetings. Although my sister and I, before our adoption, moved frequently between state facilities and foster homes, when I was taken home by my parents I struggled to adjust to their foreign ways, values, and rules.

As the adoptee children grow and begin exploring their identities and culture, they begin encountering complex challenges of balancing their own identities with the ones of their adoptive families. These challenges, especially in the context of visible racial differences, make transracial adoptive families what scholars refer to as “discourse-dependent”, meaning that these

families rely heavily on their communication to construct and maintain their co-constructed familial identities (Gavin, 2006; Harrigan, 2009). Since communication in transracial adoptive families needs to address more sensitive topics such as race, there are more opportunities for sources of tension within communication. This paper explores how dialogic listening, a listening style that emphasizes co-creation and co-construction of meaning, can serve as a relational tool that allows for deeper understanding and connection in transracial adoptive families. Drawing from Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) and elements of theories of identity development, specifically addressing adoption, race, and generational difference, I argue that dialogic listening is essential in sustaining relationships across differences. RDT emphasizes the thought that within relationships opposing tendencies frequently occur (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Baxter, 2011). This theory gives a structured framework to explore co-constructed meaning and dialogic outcomes despite any tensions those aforementioned oppositions may bring. I will explore and illustrate these concepts and theories within the parameters of an observed interaction within my own family unit between my father and my brother. This interaction will be italicized throughout the work, appearing as a flash back scene that we will engage with, and then return and discuss.

Since our family unit began 26 years ago, Wayne, my father, has continually encouraged a sense of adventure and curiosity. With a smile often etched on his face, his large glasses would shield his eyes that were always animated as he mentally prepared his next grand story or silly joke for whomever happened to cross his path next. As a charismatic 55-year-old retired Vietnam veteran at the time of our adoption, he took up the traditional role of homemaker and spent decades ensuring our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. His engaging, down-to-earth approach to raising my siblings and me centered around encouraging independence, hard work, grit, compassion, kindness, and respect. As a self-proclaimed “country boy” from

Illinois, he was also adopted with his two siblings. Although he was not adopted into a transracial family unit, his understanding of being an adoptee certainly played a role in helping him understand navigating the explorations of differences within a family.

Joseph, the youngest of our family unit, is undoubtedly the most reserved, measured, and soft-spoken. His quiet presence often opposes his towering frame, accented by his well-worn beanie hat always sitting atop his head. His calming presence and steady strength invite family, friends, and acquaintances to share their thoughts and burdens with him. As someone who has a deep love for family, he works diligently as my parents' caregiver, tirelessly managing the family while ensuring our aging parents receive the best care.

An important factor to examine before diving deeper into this interaction are the multiple layers of difference that are present between the key communicators. Although cultural and racial differences will have a significant role throughout this article, it is also necessary to acknowledge the intergenerational difference between both father and son as a critical piece in this case. Intergenerational gaps within transracial adoptive families can often influence how each family member perceives and approaches discussions of identity, race, and belonging. Scholars who engage with intergenerational communication work and psychological development have long highlighted the importance and necessity of continued connection and conversation between older and younger adults. Common characteristics that challenge an enduring connection across generations is the intensifying search for younger adults to find their personal and social identities (Erikson, 1968). Conversely, older adults may find it more difficult to be vulnerable and share details about their personal life, experiences, or their current views of a shifting modern world. A survey conducted by Strom and Strom (2014) with 987 individuals ranging from age 25 to what they have established as "retirement years" showed that younger adults

struggle to get to know their older relatives even when they are actively seeking a closer relationship. While this study introduces the use of technology for social connections, the foundational findings seem to be similar across the research. Intentionality is imperative for meaningful communication to occur within intergenerational interactions. Engaging with Dialogic Listening as a tool incorporates that need for intentionality and creates space for vulnerability and listening across difference to occur.

By embracing dialogic listening, family members can bridge the gap of difference and negotiate evolving identities, ultimately building a more supportive and cohesive family environment. In this case study presented we can see the shift from a listening style of “hearing to respond” to dialogic listening or “hearing to co-create”. In hearing to co-create, we listen between the lines of words spoken in the present moment to instead mutually create a space for deeper moments of conversation and relational longevity.

A look at traditional hearing styles

The concept of listening can be found within the research of numerous academic and layman disciplines. Our daily engagement with listening usually involves some extent of hearing information, deciphering that information through our own experiences and views, and then responding. I would argue that our habitual way of listening is innately selfish. Sure, in primary school we are told things that encourage us to listen to each other, but that desire to be heard often won out. Imagine an interaction between young primary school children. One runs up to their friend, visually vibrating with excitement and exclaims, “I saw a puppy on the way to school today!” What can we imagine the friend will reply with? “Oh really? How cool. What did it look like?” Certainly a few may respond this way. However, what could most likely be anticipated is a response similar to, “I saw a puppy yesterday!” These two classmates grow up,

move through society, and maybe this type of hearing to respond response becomes a usual nature for them. This illustration has representative qualities for many individuals, including myself, and demonstrates the need to acknowledge that when we listen, we hear through our own experiences, bias, desires, and values. Being aware of those individual values, bias, and lived experiences is imperative when engaging in any style of purposeful and intentional listening (Purdy & Borisoff, 1991).

In the following interaction we can see how Wayne and Joseph's lack of awareness of those individual experiences and values, plus their desire to respond immediately after hearing, leads to a tense dialogic interaction.

As a tight-knit family, my siblings and I often visit our parents on weekends and holidays. One such occasion is the setting for the analyzed interaction. In the recent years of more visualized police brutality, Black deaths, and movements such as Black Lives Matters (BLM) my family, like many others, struggled with the feeling of rage, sorrow, and exhaustion. We shared a few moments in front of the television watching the news and lamenting about the racial injustice of the country. With all of us in the family unit, except my father, being Black, conversations about elements of the social climate were frequent. It was during one of these satellite conversations that Joseph, deep in thought and leaning against the doorway of the family room, aimlessly flit between thoughts about activism, race, police brutality, and hip-hop. Not necessarily engaging anyone, eyes tracking an unseen spot on the wall, he spoke his thoughts; my parents and I, all lounging on separate furniture pieces, just nodded along.

"...Tupac's mom was a member of the Black Panther Party," he mused before changing direction to the Black Panther Party (BPP) and expressing his desire to do more, "as an activist." Joseph talked about researching the BPP and connecting with how they resisted

systematic oppression, represented strong Black masculinity, fought for their community and stood up against police brutality.

Wayne interjected, “But you gotta be careful though, people in organizations like that can be violent.”

This one matter-of-factly stated comment by Wayne immediately shifted Joseph to the defensive.

“The Black Panthers weren’t all violent,” Joseph retorted, shifting from leaning against the wall to standing solidly facing his dad. His brown eyes immediately aflame with anger, his lips tight, and jaw set.

Wayne immediately sat up, clearly sensing the tension in the room.

“I didn’t say that. But my recruiter office in Chicago got blown up by members of the Panther party in Chicago. When I was workin...” Wayne’s hands unconsciously joining him as he launched into a story, trying to explain his view. We all listened, but as I shifted my gaze to my brother, noticing his hooded and narrowed eyes, I knew that he was not truly hearing a single word Wayne was saying.

“They weren’t about violence at all though,” Joseph, negating anything from the story Wayne just mentioned, and instead emphasizing the things the organization did for underrepresented Black communities.

Wayne nodded quickly as Joseph spoke, mouth occasionally parting and closing, waiting for his chance to continue his thought. They both spoke in circles for a few moments more before Joseph frustratedly declared, “Forget it, you’re not getting what I’m saying.” With a curt

promise to be up to “check on you both in bit”, he silently slunk downstairs. Leaving the space with my mom, trying to figure out how to “fix” the interaction; dad, flabbergasted at the direction the conversation went so quickly; and me, silently concluding my observation and excusing myself to another room.

Listening shows up in a multitude of ways within the interpersonal and intercultural communication sectors of communication research. Orwell and Orbe (1999) states this best in the following quote: “throughout our research on building dialogic relationships, listening receives very little explicit attention, if any at all from scholars.... Conceptualizing communication as dialogue... requires a reconceptualization of listening.” In response, there have been numerous scholars who have taken on this task over the decades. The process of listening differs depending on the function of communication the listening is serving. Despite that, several scholars (Nichols & Stevens, 1957; Wolvin & Coakley, 1994; Bodie, 2003) agree upon, to varying degrees, the following four processes for meaningful and productive listening. These include the following: receiving information, constructing meaning, actively seeking understanding, and responding to the message. From engaging with these processes, it can be established that listening certainly involves more than just hearing, and to do it well, there are elements that must be performed to some capacity. Although focusing on this process is not our goal for this article, it is important, again, to recognize the element of effort that is required to “do” listening.

Notably, but seemingly common, skills established within the discipline are active engagement, maintaining focus, fostering understanding, and responding appropriately to the message received (Johannesen, 1971; Nichols, 1987; Wolvin, 1989; Bodie, 2003). Research has established that both processes and skills can make one a better listener, pending the context and

function of their communication. Ralph Nichols, often referred to as “the father of listening”, due to his foundational research on listening as a concept, identifies ten bad habits of listening, then further urges the reader to replace those bad habits. These include “listening only for the facts” and “getting overstimulated”. These habits lend themselves to listening styles that present issues in that one is not able to completely evaluate and interpret the message and is not able to do it with awareness of their own bias and values, before responding. “Getting overstimulated” highlights the importance to listen completely before rendering your thoughts. Surely most have all experienced a moment when while listening to someone, they say something that immediately causes you to not hear anything else that follows. Instead becoming so focused on the one element that caused the pause that nothing else after was heard, or in the individual’s mind, even “mattered”. Being mindful and breaking these habits are conducive to effective listening but are also necessary to properly utilize dialogic listening as a tool.

Since listening is a daily task, it is often overlooked as a skill or something that needs to be done critically. Therefore, conversations around the topic of listening can, at times, seem convoluted or unclear. However, basic understanding of listening as a concept allows for intentional use of it as a tool to develop and maintain deep and personal relationships.

Needless to say, the next few hours in the house were tense. As the family shifted into our own activities for the evening, I heard Joseph come check on mom and dad, then head back downstairs. As bedtime approached, I could hear the short, heavy footsteps of Wayne as he headed to the stairs, sat in his chair lift, slowly whirred down the staircase, and made his way to Joseph’s room. After a brief knock on the door, soft male voices floated up the stairs. By the time Wayne came back upstairs, the tension had left his shoulders. And a while later when Joseph came up for his final goodnight, I heard his promise to, “talk more about it tomorrow”.

Dialogic Listening in Action

Dialogic listening as a concept developed from Mikhail Bakhtin's (1964) theories on dialogue being used as a tool for mutual meaning making, Johannesen's (1971;2002; Floyd, 1985) theory of dialogue as communication, and elements of Stewart's (1983; 1995) concepts on listening as a technique that offers mutual creation of verbal and nonverbal negotiation. Dialogic listening provides an interactive and reciprocal model of listening in which each participant actively works to understand the emotions and experiences behind the other's words (Baxter, 2011; Helin, 2013; Manusov, 2020). This listening style highlights the goal to reject "listening to respond" and requires that participants "listen to co-create". Like other listening styles there is an emphasis to understand the other, but the unique element here is the conscious establishment that the responsibility of a successful communication outcome is on both participants (Wolvin & Coakley,1994). Therefore, this type of listening requires intentionality and effort, making it a deeply relational practice for co-creating understanding, finding a sense of mutuality, and a transformative experience by being present in the moment. Buber (1970) introduces the philosophical foundation of mutuality in dialogic interactions with this classic idea of "I-Thou". Buber argues that for genuine and meaningful dialogic interactions one must view the other as a "Thou" instead of an "It, or the idea of viewing the other communicator as a whole being. He inserts that when we think of the other person as a being, we are inclined to not just receive information passively but allow the nature of our relationship to play a role in how we process the information. This approach in listening is especially relevant in transracial adoptive families where communication often involves navigating heavy topics with significant emotions, and a successful outcome of these conversations is mutually beneficial to all participants.

The four central characteristics of dialogic listening that emerge across scholarship are relationality, active participation, polyphony, and embodied listening. We can understand each point better as we continue to explore the observed interaction.

The next morning, following our usual routines led us back into the family room. And as promised Joseph came up to continue the conversation.

“I did a bit of research last about some of the violent outburst in Chicago by the Panthers. You were right, not all of the panther members followed their code,” Joseph declared, sitting across from Wayne. “Honestly, it [getting upset yesterday] wasn’t even about that. I’m angry because...” and I sat there, just as enraptured as my parents, as my brother vulnerably yet purposefully expressed that he was struggling as a Black man seeing people that looked like him die by police brutality. He spoke about how he felt as if he were not doing enough for Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) communities, he spoke about how he felt stressed by being a Black man with his body build in this country, and how he felt as if he always has to put on an “I’m safe” mask that lets white people know that he’s not a threat. He spoke about his festering internal rage that he didn’t know what to do with. As he spoke his peace, I watched the understanding and sadness spread on my dad’s face as the Black man he raised from eight days old poured out his heart about things he cannot connect with on the same level.

While Joseph spoke, Wayne sat and listened uninterrupted. His blue eyes glistening as his attention remained fixed on his son, mouth comfortably set, not indicating the need to speak. When Joseph finished speaking, we all sat in the pause for a moment.

“I’m glad you told me that, Jo. I didn’t know you had that bottled up.” Another silent beat before Wayne continued with a few probing questions like, “how long have you been feeling

all this”, “do you feel like you have to put on a mask in this town or always”, “is there anything I can do to help you with this stress”? These questions continued the conversation, enabling Joseph to dredge up other emotions he was navigating.

“I can’t understand everything you’re feeling, but I do want to help where I can.” Wayne started when the conversation shifted to him. “I haven’t had the worries you kids and your mom have when it comes to race and inequality, and I’m sorry.” Full stop. Stated understanding and acknowledgement all in that short moment. From this moment Wayne and Joseph went on to continue their conversation. Creating an intimate space where vulnerability and understanding thrives. And even to this day, both speak on that conversation in such a positive light. Neither recalling the focus to be about the Black Panther Party at all but about finding mutual understanding of identity and values.

Relationality refers to listening as a shared activity that requires that each person engages with the other’s story in a way that creates a sense of “us” (Stewart, 1983; Shotter, 2011; Buber, 1970). We can see in this interaction that even though Wayne and Joseph are having moments of communicative breakdowns, their relationship is important to both of them. We can see this when Joseph returns the next morning to continue the conversation, and in Wayne’s acceptance to return to a discussion that could potentially end up the same way as the previous day. This characteristic of dialogic listening emphasizes that constant relational processes involved in the co-construction of mutual meaning and identity. This forces both individuals out of the mindset of fitting the other’s story to fit their view and experiences and encourages them to be constantly checking in internally to ensure they are hearing things from the other’s perspectives.

The second characteristic is active participation (Baxter, 2010; Buber, 1970; Cissna & Anderson, 2002). Active participation here not only focuses on the importance of being present

during the dialogue, but the ability to be vulnerable and attentive throughout the interaction, and an element of risk involved with dialogical interactions. Stewart and Thomas (1995), in a book I have come to regard as a foundational piece for understanding dialogic listening, state that dialogic listening requires collaboration and effort from all involved communicators. Active participation demonstrates that listening is an ongoing process that requires continued engagement and internal and dialogical reflection. We can see this not only in Joseph's willingness to do research before coming back to the conversation the next day, but also in the vulnerability both had when talking about a topic that brought them both different levels of emotional distress.

Polyphony acknowledges that there are multiple voices and perspectives coexisting in a single conversation. This is particularly true in families where there are cultural and racial identity differences (Baxter, 2011; Trenka et al, 2006). This characteristic embraces the multiple narratives and voices as their own truth, resisting the need to find a solution or identify a single "truth". While Joseph shared his experience, how he had been feeling, and his experience with Blackness, Wayne understood that his son's truth and experience was not similar to his own, regardless of them residing in the same home. RDT works well as a tool for identifying polyphony within relational discourse.

Aside from identifying and examining tensions and contradictions that arise within relationships, RDT, a well-known theory, also rooted in Bakhtin's theories on dialogue, establishes that relationships are characterized by opposing desires, such as the desire for integration versus separation, stability versus change, and openness versus privacy (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Harrigan, 2009; Harrigan & Braithwaite, 2010). In these unique family units, these tensions often become more pronounced as adopted children struggle to navigate

their own identities, as we can see with Joseph, while also attempting to maintain the sense of belonging within their adoptive family's culture. This stage for these children, referred to as "identity vs role confusion", involves the exploration of values, social roles, and cultural identities as the individual tries to understand their place in the world.

Cross' (1971) Model of Black Racial Identity Development provides another foundation for better understanding this specific context. This model highlights the navigational process one may go through as they grapple with the reality of what "becoming Black" means to them in the face of racism and oppression. For children of transracial adoptive families these explorations to define their identity can often include struggling with racial and cultural heritage, which may differ from their adoptive parents' experiences. This is seen in Joseph case in that although raised within a space that affords some privilege, he cannot escape the reality that comes with being a Black man in America. Within my own experience when reflecting on my siblings or friends that have been adopted in transracial situations, these struggles to understand their racial or cultural background may end up encouraging them to look into their biological families. Motivating them to try to discover "where they came from" and what their communities looked like. Shying away from these conversations can lead to misunderstandings as adoptees may feel like their parents do not understand their need for exploration. Dialogic listening can provide parents with skills to understand their child's identity exploration without feeling that their own values are threatened. By practicing dialogic listening, parents can create an environment where their children feel safe to share their experiences and better understand and validate each other's feelings.

The final characteristic of dialogic listening is this concept of embodied listening; this suggests that listening involves more than just listening to words but incorporates the idea of being aware of nonverbal and emotional cues as well. While using dialogic listening skills family

members should be both physically and emotionally present and engaging in each other's experiences and values. This means that when the limit of that engagement runs out, each communicator should be able to take a break from the conversation. Stewart and Thomas (1995) remind us of the importance of regrouping in moments of tension to preserve the relation and to avoid more damage. Although the abrupt break from the conversation on the first night was awkward and tense, the break was needed. It allowed both Joseph and Wayne to reflect on the conversation, align with their bias and experiences, and plan a way to articulate their thoughts upon their next discussion. By embracing all four of these characteristics, adoptive families can transform their interactions, creating a space where all individuals feel seen, valued, and understood.

After returning to this encounter from a few years ago and engaging with it under the lens of dialogic listening, I connected with both Wayne and Joseph for separate interviews to discuss their reflection of what Joseph has referred to on multiple occasions as a pivotal turning point to his and dad's relationship. While both can recall this conversation, they both now only emphasize this moment as an interaction that allowed them to "see each other better" and not a moment of strife that highlighted the difference of their initial perspectives. In fact, Joseph continues to passionately find ways to advocate for his community, even stating that more Black organizations are needed to offer programs like the BPP did. Therefore, we can see that this interaction, while creating a deeper bond with father and son between race, culture, and generational difference, may not have changed the foundation of their perspectives. Once again recalling the allowance of more than one truth amongst experiences. Wayne even notes that since this interaction, "Joseph and I are able to have long conversations and can share our views easier.

We don't have to end up having the same point of view or agreeing. I really just like that. It really just helps".

Joseph also talks about this moment as a significant instance in which he knew "dad saw me as a man with my own opinion". He continued to say, "It also left the imprint on me that even though we share different views and values, him and I are a lot more similar than I noticed before. Y'know, I always thought him and I were polar opposites, and even though we are different, we are more alike in ways we both failed to recognize. We are still all learning [together] now. Mom and dad weren't raised with the best foundations either...and we have to give them room to manage that too."

Challenges to dialogic listening as a skill

Without a doubt, dialogic listening certainly is beneficial for creating environments of connection and understanding. However, this skill can also present a few challenges that may be a hinderance to its effectiveness within transracial adoptive families. A challenge I grappled with myself was the discussion around empathy and inclusion. While some early literature about dialogic listening mentioned the need to be empathetic while listening, recent research challenges that notion. Over the decades scholars have challenged the element of "empathy" attached to understanding as it is not intuitive for humans to be able to completely immerse ourselves into another's lived experiences (Chun, 1999). Some scholars take time to highlight the near impossibility to set aside one's own values and view completely (Stewart, 1983), while others warn of the damage of solidifying systemic inequalities it can cause. Brekke (2021) reminds us of another scholar's warning, Sara Ahmed specifically states that "to hear the other's pain as my pain involves an erasure of the specific histories and structures that generated that particular wound, and thus such empathy involves violence" (P. 105). With those concerns, this

discussion will focus less on “empathy” and more on inclusion, with the understanding of the latter being one’s attempt to see the other’s perspective instead of putting themselves into the other’s perspective.

Another significant challenge would be if there is deep-seated biases or unresolved frustrations that align with certain differences. Regardless of the listening style, these types of tensions would impede open communication. An example of this could be if an adoptive parent holds subconscious beliefs or views about a certain race or culture. If unaddressed, these perspectives can surface as resistance when their children express any type of desire to explore their cultural heritage. This also results in children harboring resentment if they feel like their experiences are being invalidated or misunderstood, thus making it difficult for them to fully engage in the dialogic listening style as well.

A final challenge for dialogic listening is that it requires patience, time, and emotional openness. All three of those elements may not always be possible or practical in certain situations or family environments. Both parents and children may struggle to maintain a level of openness or emotional availability, especially if the conversation topic is emotionally charged. As can be seen throughout the case study, dialogic listening can be mentally exhausting as it demands vulnerability and that participants engage deeply with the others’ perspectives, even when those perspectives conflict or challenge their own. The best way to address the above challenges might be for a family to establish certain times to have these deeper conversations. Taking a break or pausing a conversation, although potentially awkward, can allow all individuals to take a moment to internally reflect on their own perspectives. This reflection time also offers moments where the individual can explore the core of what they are feeling and plan a way to articulate it.

Seeking external mediation, from a family member or therapist, can also be extremely helpful in these situations. There are also many resources in the form of blogs, books, and virtual communities that are available to adoptees and their parents as family members navigate these conversations and strive to listen with intention (Trenka et al., 2021; Aye, n.d). Recognizing these challenges grounds dialogic listening in reality, ensuring that families approach this listening style as a skill rather than an immediate solution to complex identity issues.

In conclusion, we have examined how utilizing dialogic listening as a skill can provide transracial adoptive families with a tool set to navigate inevitable conversations about identity and belonging. When embracing this listening style, these nontraditional and unique family units move beyond merely cohabitating and on to an environment of strong relationships grounded in respect and mutual understanding. Traditional listening styles allow for us to hear each other, but this approach allows us to truly listen through difference to more than just words. Dialogic listening can strengthen family relationships, but it can also empower each family member to negotiate their identities, and other values, with confidence and support.

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