

Identity Development in Biracial Children: Contextual Factors from Social Work

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ABSTRACT

The mixed-race population has increased immensely over the last decade with the majority being Black/White individuals. This paper seeks to highlight the conceptual factors that affect biracial identity development. In all areas of their lives, biracial individuals face pressures to conform to one racial identity over the other. Current research dismisses the idea of a forced, singular racial identity and supports a more fluid, multidimensional racial identification. Interventions for biracial individuals at the macro, mezzo, and micro levels of social work practice are vital to the creation of a healthy racial identity.

Keywords: Black/White individuals; family; interracial relationships; one drop rule; racial identity; racial socialization; theory

The growing number of biracial individuals in the United States has been given more attention in the recent years due to the complex nature of having a dual identity. In the past, biracial people were labeled mainly by the one drop rule, and had to pick either White or Black as a racial category on the U.S. Census (Davenport, 2016). In 2000, people could identify with more than one racial category on the U.S. Census, granting biracial individuals the option to fully express themselves in terms of their multi-racial background. According to the U.S. Census (2012), the population that reported multiple races grew by 32% from 2000 to 2010. One of the most significant changes was reflected in the multiple-race group of the White and Black population which increased by 134% (United States Census Bureau, 2012). The historically complex relationship between White and Black populations in the United States and the common occurrence of racist beliefs and values within society, initiated with the introduction of the first Black slaves to

the colonies in the 1600s underscores the legacy of additional challenges facing biracial individuals (Marsiglia & Kulis, 2016).

The formation of a healthy identity helps adolescents to navigate a smooth transition to adulthood and results in higher levels of well-being. Erikson's fifth stage of development (identity synthesis vs. identity confusion) explains the complex development of a child's identity. Identity synthesis is a constant state of self over a period of time. Identity confusion is changing and can contribute to a false sense of self. Contrary to a healthy identity, identity confusion can create problem behaviors. One major factor in creating a healthy identity is the relationship between parent and child. Personal identity is created mainly by family relationships (Sugimura et al., 2018). Therefore, the creation of a third racial category within the family can cause conflict between parent-child relationships; for some biracial individuals, their racial status may be the

first one of their kind within their kinship community. These family relationships create a foundation of identity that is later built upon by peers and relationships in the community. Hence, the importance of parental support for biracial child regarding the development of their racial identity (Bowles, 1993).

The intersection of adolescence and racial identity can be even more complicated for biracial adolescents. Not only do they have two different racial groups as part of their identity, but also they have external forces that influence their racial identity, such as peers, family, and society. Terry and Winston (2010), found that biracial adolescents' racial self-identification was fluid. These findings supported other research that racial identification can change over time and that it is a complex process. Identity development and self-esteem are important factors in adolescence that provide the foundation for further development in the life course. In past research, biracial individuals were assumed to have lower self-esteem because they were considered outsiders by both racial groups (Bowles, 1993). According to Bowles (1993), the complexity of contending with multiple racial groups was said to negatively influence adolescent identity for biracial people. Bracey et al. (2004) found a correlation between high ethnic identity and high self-esteem. Biracial individuals had lower self-esteem than Black individuals did, but they had higher self-esteem than Asian individuals. They also found that biracial individuals had higher ethnic identity than their White peers had, but scored lower than their Black, Latino, and Asian peers (Bracey et al., 2004). Overall, the study found a positive link between ethnic identity and higher self-esteem. This is important for biracial adolescents because the promotion of a healthy self-esteem and a positive ethnic

identity can facilitate better adolescent adjustment.

THEORIES OF RACIAL IDENTITY

The confusion of racial identity for biracial people can lead to feelings of shame. Bowles (1993) states that if a child cannot identify with one of their parents then they cannot develop a "real" sense of self. Feelings of shame often arise because the child disowns a part of themselves (Bowles, 1993). Toxic shame happens when one creates a false self to cover up their true self, which is "defective and flawed" (Bradshaw, 1988, p. 3). Toxic shame transpires because of disowning a part of oneself (Bradshaw, 1988). The complex nature of living in a space that is between both a White/Caucasian identity and an African American/Black identity could have a complex impact on child development. However, parents that embrace both identities, and build strengths from the multifaceted nature of their experience will foster in their child resilience and a capability for buffering these negative effects (Csizmadia & Ispa, 2014).

Parents play a crucial part in the development of biracial children's identities. Their experiences with racial attitudes and ideologies shape the way that they communicate racial identity to their children. Interracial couples may feel pressured by family and/or society to align their biracial children with one racial group. Parents may encourage their biracial children to embrace a White racial identity in hopes that the child will avoid discrimination and gain advantages of White privilege. The complex nature of a third racial identity within the family structure can cause complications when biracial children relate with one racial identity over the other (Nuttgens, 2010). According to Poston (1990), biracial children who choose one racial identity

that is the same as one parent can feel alienated from the other parent who has a different racial identity. This can cause distance between the parent and child and cause the child to have feelings of guilt and shame. Another complexity of biracial identity is the creation of a third racial status within the family. The children of interracial couples do not have the same racial status of either parent. Bowles (1993) states that the different racial statuses of the parents and children results in a lack of role models within the family. Thus, the home environment brings about additional identity discord through lack of parental affirmation. Biracial children cannot base their identification off either parent causing them to feel a decreased sense of belonging due to the different racial backgrounds (Nuttgens, 2010).

The treatment by society of biracial children is noted as one of the main reasons for disapproval of interracial relationships. A study that was conducted by Bell and Hastings (2015) found that some people would not engage in interracial dating because they fear that their family members would disapprove. Researchers also found that those already involved in interracial relationships struggle to gain their parent's acceptance. Parental disapproval took away the interracial couple's solid foundation and support network in this study. Some parents that disapproved of the couples noted that they were concerned about society's reaction to the interracial relationship (Bell & Hastings, 2015). Other research has confirmed this idea of families being fearful of society's reaction to interracial relationships and the idea of biracial children (Korgen, 2009; Sullivan, 2005).

The "concern" about interracial couples having biracial children is a concept rooted in contemporary racial ideology. Sullivan (2005), states that this

ideology minimizes the racist views of the family because they talk about how society will view and treat the child, instead of confronting their own racial bias. Using this rationale about how negatively society will treat the future grandchildren, the family is able to engage in a sort-of vicarious disapproval that shields them from verbalizing their own feelings of racial prejudice/discrimination. The family insists that the couple think about the consequences of having a biracial child; the perception being that the child will experience racial discrimination (Sullivan, 2005).

Researchers have found that inter-ethnic relationships (i.e. one partner is Caucasian and the other in non-White, non-Black, e.g. Asian, Hispanic, Iranian, etc.) are more likely to occur than Black-White marriages (Lewis Jr. & Ford-Robertson, 2010). Lewis Jr. & Ford-Robertson (2010) suggest that this disparity is a result of color grading (lighter-skinned ethnic groups have less barriers than darker-skinned ethnic groups) and social/cultural barriers. White families were concerned that biracial children that chose a Black racial identity would be dismissing their White identity and possibly rejecting their White parent. Another concern was the one-drop rule, which automatically assigned the biracial child with a Black identity, denying the child freedom to choose a biracial identity. Black families were more concerned with how the biracial child would be viewed and treated. They believed that the child would be considered Black by society and that they may face consequences because of that label. Another concern of Black families was the emergence of a biracial identity. They believed that biracial children would assimilate to a "nonBlack" identity and move away from an African American/Black identity. Therefore, the movement for biracial individuals was not fully supported by African Americans

because, according to Sullivan, they feared it would create more power for Whites and less power for the African American community (Sullivan, 2005).

Research conducted by Sullivan (2005) showed that White families are more opposed to interracial relationships while Black families tend to be more open to the idea of dating outside of their race. This contrast may be explained by structural assimilation theory, which posits that intermarriage serves to assimilate the minority groups into the majority group leading to further adoption to the cultural patterns of the majority. While the power and influence of minority groups is constantly shifting and changing in US society, this theory provides a lens from which to understand underlying socio-cultural issues as inter-race relationships as bring minority partners closer to majority culture (Marsiglia & Kulis, 2016).

Note: The major theories discussed throughout this text are described in the table found in Appendix A.

MULTIDIMENSIONAL MODEL OF BIRACIAL IDENTITY

The legacy of slavery, Jim Crow and racism in the United States is deeply connected to the “one drop” rule, which continues to permeate US culture in terms of how skin tone relates to racial identity. Currently, a binary model dominates the lives of many who have Black/African American ancestry. Current literature focuses on the development of an integrated racial identity for biracial people (Franco & McElroy-Heltzel, 2019). One model that is used to describe biracial identity is called the multidimensional model of biracial identity. This model was created by Rockquemore (1999) and argues that biracial individuals can choose between four different racial identities. These include singular identity (Black or White), border identity (biracial), protean

identity (sometimes Black, sometimes White, or sometimes biracial), and transcendent identity (no racial identity). As mentioned above, the singular identity was the most common, but now researchers favor the border identity as ideal (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). One study that supports the concept of a border identity concluded that adolescents who adopted a multiracial identity showed higher levels of well-being than those that chose a monoracial identity. They also discovered that individuals who identify with multiple racial groups tend to have lower stress levels, lower levels of alienation, and display more positive affect (Binning et al., 2009). Many people believe that creation of a healthy multiracial identity is a vital task for adolescents who have multiple heritages. According to one study, individuals who embrace their minority heritage or both heritages have better self-concepts and higher life satisfaction than those that embrace their majority heritage (Castro-Atwater & Huynh-Hohnbaum, 2018).

RACIAL SOCIALIZATION

Racial socialization refers to the practice of parent's communicating information, values, and perspectives about race and ethnicity to their children. Historically, racial socialization specifically referred to the study of how African American parents taught their children to maintain high self-esteem and help them to prepare for racial barriers due to the system of racial stratification in the United States. Currently, the concept includes how to cope with discrimination, how to succeed in society, instilling pride about their African American heritage, and teaching their children about the African American culture (Hughes et al., 2006). White and Black people have different attitudes towards race because of the socially constructed positions between

these two populations in the United States. Generally, White families do not talk about race or the complexities that surround racial tensions with their children. Black families are more inclined to promote racial pride and talk about heritage with their children (Csizmadia, 2011). Research about racial socialization by Hughes et al. (2006), broke down the concept into four different practices that parents used: cultural socialization, preparation for bias, promotion of mistrust, and egalitarianism/silence about race. Cultural socialization is the practice of teaching children about their racial/ethnic background and instilling pride about their heritage/history (Hughes et al., 2006). Preparation for bias is an effort made by parents to make children aware of discrimination that they may face and prepare them to cope with the discrimination. Promotion of mistrust relays a message to children that they should be skeptical about other races and should not trust them. This practice is different from preparation for bias because it does not give children coping skills to deal with discrimination. Egalitarianism/silence about race focuses on the teaching of qualities and skills, such as hard work, to children so they can assimilate into mainstream society rather than communicating about race. The study concluded that cultural socialization and egalitarianism were the most common practices used in minority families. However, they also found that most minority parents used preparation for bias, with African American families being the most likely to engage in this practice. White families were more likely to teach their children that race does not matter (color-blind ideology) than African American families (Hughes et al., 2006).

Racial socialization can be difficult for interracial couples because the parent's monoracial background is different from their biracial children. Therefore, they do

not share the same racial identity with their children. Parents may also have unresolved ideas about race or struggle with how to communicate race with their biracial children (Stone & Dolbin-MacNab, 2017). Racial socialization is central to biracial children because it plays a role in shaping their racial identity. In addition, it is important for White/Black children because it can prepare children for social challenges that they may face regarding their complex racial heritage. One racial socialization practice referred to as cultural humility was studied by Franco and McElroy-Heltzel (2019). The concept of cultural humility is defined as "creating space to let one's child explore their racial identity in a safe and supportive environment" (Franco & McElroy-Heltzel, 2019, p.271). Their study focused on parental cultural humility and the effect that it had on the development of biracial children's racial identity. They found that utilizing cultural humility as a racial socialization practice had better outcomes for children, such as, less challenges with racial identity and greater pride related to their multiracial background. These findings oppose the notion of colorblindness and other socialization practices in which the parents decide on the child's racial identity (Franco & McElroy-Heltzel, 2019). Stone and MacNab (2017) found that White mothers with biracial children tend to use the same racial socialization practices as monoracial couples of color, especially if the mothers considered their children Black or biracial. On the other hand, mothers that perceived their biracial children to have a White identity did not talk about race with them (Stone & MacNab, 2017). Csizmadia et al. (2014) reported that 80% of interracial couple use racial socialization several times a year as a parenting practice for raising their biracial children. This means that they openly communicated with their children about their background and their diverse

racial heritage (Csizmadia et al., 2014). Other factors that may affect socialization processes include socio-economic status and geographic location. The diversity of the community in which the family lives plays a role influencing these communication patterns (Csizmadia & Ispa, 2014).

DISCUSSION

According to the National Association of Social Workers (2020), two of the core values for social workers are: dignity and worth of the person and competence. Dignity and worth of the person seeks to embrace clients' unique cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This is a vital component for social workers working with biracial clients. Social workers can help biracial clients more efficiently by addressing their dual racial background. Competence seeks to increase professional knowledge and skills in the social work field. Updated and current literature can guide social workers to better understand biracial clients. These two values highlight the importance of continued research on biracial individuals as to better serve their emerging population (National Association of Social Workers, 2020).

Current research has focused on the concept of a border identity, and it has been linked to the development of a positive racial identity and better outcomes for biracial individuals. Programs like P.R.I.D.E enhance positive racial development in individuals by supporting them and their families and is a model for social work interventions that could redress this issue. The P.R.I.D.E. (Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education) program is an example of a macro level strategy to enhance positive racial development. The program educates families, communities, and professionals about the importance of supporting African American youth,

especially about the formation of their racial identity. P.R.I.D.E offers a variety of resources that embrace the African American heritage. These resources include: a six-week course designed to help parents feel comfortable discussing race with their children, a public forum where community members can talk about race, mini art festivals devised to support positive racial development for the youth, and a professional development component to aid teachers in becoming more culturally competent (University of Pittsburgh, 2018).

At the mezzo level, parents can promote pride in their child's racial identity development by using the racial socialization practice of cultural humility. Cultural humility signifies openness and respect about the identity choice of biracial children. It accepts the child's exploration of their dual heritage, which differs from socialization practices where parents choose their child's racial identity. Individual identity development involves receiving messages from others regarding race. Therefore, having a supportive parent who explores and validates their child's racial identity promotes more security and pride in their chosen identity (Franco & McElroy-Heltzel, 2019). In connection with cultural humility, parents should use socialization practices that teach their biracial children about their dual heritages. Racial socializations practices that incorporate cultural knowledge and traditions foster pride in one's racial identity. These practices can include learning about important historical figures, using culturally appropriate books and music, celebrating ethnic holidays, and eating ethnic foods (Hughes et al., 2006).

Practitioners at the micro level are an additional resource for biracial individuals. Relational-Narrative therapy is a clinical practice that is helpful in combating the racial invalidation faced by

this population. Relational theory assumes that most problems faced by clients are due to relationships. Narrative theory is based on the idea that people develop truths about their lives through stories. Relational-Narrative theory is a mixed approach that combines both aspects into practice. This approach builds on the research of racial identification for biracial individuals by challenging the notion of forced racial identity constructed by relationships and society. Practitioners should use this perspective to encourage biracial clients to create a "new" story that enhances exploration and acceptance into their own racial identification. This practice supports empirical findings that presume the freedom of personal racial identification is beneficial to healthy development in biracial individuals (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2003).

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Appendix A. Theories of Biracial Identity Development.

Theories of Biracial Identity Development		
Theory	Theorist (Year)	Brief Description
Erikson's fifth stage of development (identity synthesis vs. identity confusion)	Erik Erikson (1950)	The fifth stage usually happens between the ages of twelve to eighteen. Identity synthesis is a constant state of self and being true to one's self. Identity confusion is changing and can create a false sense of self.
Structural assimilation	Milton Gordon (1964)	This theory explains the behaviors adapted by the minority group to become more like the majority group. The minority group (ex. African Americans) move into the dominant group (ex. White Americans) by being accepted into their structures.
Multidimensional model of biracial identity	Kerry Ann Rockquemore & David Brunsma (2002)	This theory states that racial identity is complex and fluid. It outlines four identification options for biracial individuals: singular identity, boarder identity, protean identity, and transcendent identity.
Relational-narrative	Kerry Ann Rockquemore & Tracey A. Laszloffy (2003)	This theory highlights the impact that society and relationships have on biracial identity. It invites clients to tell their story and then create their own story through exploration of their chosen racial identity.

Egalitarianism	Diane Hughes et al. (2006)	A racial socialization practice that focuses on teaching children skills, such as hard work, so they can assimilate into society. This type of communication does not focus on discussions about race.
Racial socialization	Diane Hughes et al. (2006)	The practice of parent's communication to their children about race and ethnicity.
Cultural humility	Marisa Franco & Stacey McElroy-Heltzel (2019)	Another racial socialization practice used by parents to allow their children to explore varied racial experiences. This practice opposes the notion of colorblindness and forced racial identity.
Color blindness	Kathleen Korgen (2009)	The notion that racial differences do not exist. This ideology diminishes the fact that racism is happening and encourages people to ignore the injustices that minorities face because of their color.