

# Defining the multiracial identity sociology essay



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## **Abstract**

The developmental progression involved in creating or constructing an individual's sense of personality is very complex and it is especially so for most multiracial youth and their families. There are features and characteristics that are from top to bottom exclusive to a multiracial person's heritage with the many dissimilar ethnicities involved and the varied influences that compel them. The process is comprised of: a multiracial person's ability to decide on a personal and a family identity that symbolizes their own position or mind-set concerning interracialism, how their family acknowledges the individual parts that make up their culture, and society's past of keeping groups of diverse racial backgrounds apart, and racial discrimination that is widespread and hierarchical. Additionally, the number of multiracial families and individuals will increase as generations proceed forward. Individuals may choose to accept and identify with the different ethnicities or they can align themselves with a new set whose only link is the multiple cultural backgrounds that their members represent. For teachers, therapists, and other child service professionals knowing about and being respectful of the attitudes, beliefs, and needs of interracial families is critical. This understanding will make it possible to aid multiracial students in growing a positive self-image for themselves and to be successful in school. And finally, to facilitate in the understanding of how un-important and immaterial racial differences really are.

## **Identity Development**

In the recent past many Americans have become more politically active and almost pressured to categorize themselves through self-identification with a

specific group that might share their ethnic background and further their social goals. For the growing number of persons of mixed race and cultural heritage living here in the U. S., formulating this identification is problematic and often challenging. Even more so for the children of these families. As of 1996 there have been in excess of 100, 000 infants born and considered to be multiracial in the U. S. each year. (U. S. Bureau of the Census, cited in Root, 1996) These infants represent a wide-ranging and diverse ethnic blending that will continue to increase annually. It is imperative for the public and our society to cultivate these multiracial minorities in positive ways that show a respect and an appreciation of their differences as they enter the larger society.

Education is important to all people and it is even more essential for those of mixed ethnicity. Schools and teachers need to be able to engage these students with their very particular educational needs. Often times even the parents must be somewhat educated to help the schools perform their very important job.

## **THE POPULATION**

Many individuals of mixed race will self-identify as being “ multiracial.”

Others who have parents each of different racial backgrounds are considered biracial. Still others have racial make-ups that include at least three cultures because of continued generational intermarriage which is more common now than in the past. (Hall, 1996). Because of this, the idea of being multiracial does not only designate a person’s origins and ethnicity but, it also includes their amassed cultural beliefs. The kinds of diversity that is being seen is surprising. Those with mixed backgrounds could be comprised of parents

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with the same language and race but, differing countries of origin. Or, parents could be of the same race, but come from different countries and speak completely different languages. Even adopted children with parents of a different race could consider themselves to be multiracial. Here, the adopted children take on the cultures and customs of both adoptive and biological parents. As adoption both regionally and internationally persists, multiracial families will become more common.

## IDENTITY FORMATION

The term “ multiracial” points toward an individuals reality of being of mixed racial, ethnic, and possibly their cultural descent. It is however surprising to know that great differences persist between persons in the American multicultural population. Individuals can be both perceived differently and treated differently even by those who share much of their background. This has a great deal to do with how individuals see themselves and how they perceive themselves within society and how they are treated.

Cultural and ethnic group variations have a major impact on children’s social maturity and development. Their ability to impact an individuals life is varied by age and their specific ethnicity. The function of a given child’s heritage in their personality growth is affected by their family history, and by their personal understanding of social context and their environment. Having a varied ethnic heritage has unusual and likely challenging consequences for a multiracial child’s development. These children and their families need help and training to aid them in acquiring a positive self-concept for their children. (Herring, 1992) These children need to be familiar with and

understand the lives of others who represent the different ethnicities so that they can comprehend the experiential differences. They need to recognize the reality of those who are multiracial, and to expand their “culturally-linked coping skills that include ways to deal with racism and discrimination (Wardle, 1987).” This job is likely to be done through the family and the school systems since there are few well integrated and mixed communities to use as supportive examples to affirm multiculturalism. (Miller & Rotheram-Borus, 1994),

## **CLASSIFICATION**

A major concern in the lives of multiracial children and their families is how they are seen or labeled by those close to them and by the greater society. Unfortunately, many multiracial people self-identify themselves as part of oppressed minorities. These self-imposed labels are needed reasons of empowerment (Root, 1996). In more recent times society has seen an increase in political activity amongst multiracial or interracial families and groups to ensure that they are acknowledged as a group with specific concerns that are insulated from the other racial and ethnic populations (Wardle, 1987).

Because of this push for political recognition, many different views concerning classification within multiracial societies have surfaced. Parents are trying to choose ways to better identify their own family and the children themselves will spend a great deal of time taking into account how they want to be identified by those around them. As children reach adolescence they will begin to assess and often reconsider their identities. This causes conflicts between their home life with their families racial identity and with <https://assignbuster.com/defining-the-multiracial-identity-sociology-essay/>

their personal racial identity. Often, pressure can come from friends or it can even come from the educational system itself. " They may experience pressure by peers and teachers, and from the forms that must be filled out, or even family, to choose a race. In numerous situations, young people will decide to be recognized by only one or their minority ancestral groups. To them this seems better accepted by society and it still lets them honor their multiracial background in a private and positive way (Okun, 1996).

These pressures exerted by society can change or affect the process that children go through while developing their cultural identity. It has been acknowledged that the multiracial person experiences a more unusual process. Poston called it, " a meshing of personal identity." This takes into account many non-racial constructs like self-esteem and interpersonal competencies. Poston also notes, reference group orientation or constructs like racial esteem and ideologies. This combining and assimilation performed by multiracial youth allows them to better work out internal and external conflicts and to manage guilt that comes about from needing to develop a personal identity that does not include all aspects of their ethnic and cultural heritage and its attitudes. In the end, successful identity formation creates a fulfilling sense of completeness, that allows multiracial youth to understand and incorporate all of their racial and cultural components into their lives (Poston, 1990).

Poston's representation of multiracial identity development seems to take into account all of the possible stages of identity development but, it is a fact that many interracial families will endorse identity choices that will not agree with the last stage of his model. There are many multiracial groups that are <https://assignbuster.com/defining-the-multiracial-identity-sociology-essay/>

in opposition to racial labeling. They would prefer to call everyone simply human. They also want to streamline the difficult methods currently used to enumerate all of their family's racial makeup and history. They believe that being labeled anything but European American actually downgrades them to a lesser societal standing because of the prevalence of racism.

(Pinderhughes, 1995). Children raised in this manner are often better adjusted than their peers and are more able to culturally mesh with those well outside of the groups found in their immediate communities (Weisman, 1996, p. 161).

Still, other families push their children into developing a bi-racial or multiracial identity that takes into account their ethnic and cultural background. It is understood that it is vital to have a sense of pride in the various nationalities and cultures represented in their particular heritage. It is essential that the children are proud of their lineage and that they preserve and maintain relationships with all parts of their family. " Many of these families recognize that their children's mixed ethnic appearance reflects their multiracial heritage, and they would like the family's way of living and culture to represent that (Pinderhughes, 1995)."

There are some who regard themselves as being multiracial but do not completely identify with every part of their heritage. There could be many reasons for this. They simply may not feel close every part of their particular background or, they just have not experienced all parts of their heritage. It is also noted that many just do not have the distinguishing features that would clearly identify them with any minority group so they just don't press the matter. This is likely because they feel some distance between their

existence and those that are unmistakably recognized as members (Thornton, 1996).

Some of these same people believe that the term “ multiracial” gives them an association with a completely distinct community that can be viewed as new and viable. This new movement also gives them a tangible sensation of belonging (Weisman, 1996). The group is unusual in that it’s distinctive feature is that it is just a combination of the characteristics found in all other racial and ethnic groups. Their connection lays in the reality that they all have numerous and diverse heritage. This take on multiracialism has raised concerns because it does not give its members a sustained sense of community because the group’s only unity is based on the “ ambiguous status” of its members. It is believed that this association is just not sufficient sustain what multiracial people need (Weisman, 1996). It is believed that at some time in the future groups of this kind could become more justifiable and included in the many forms and identification vehicles used in government agencies. This would aid in helping people to develop their identity at a later time. It is understood that ethnic intermarriage and cross racial marriages will continue into the future. Because of this, racial distinction will become much more difficult .

Some other families promote and identify their children as having a singular race. Mills noted that in single parent homes that the parent only promotes their own racial and cultural ancestry because they would like their offspring to more resemble them (Mills, 1994). It has been reported that many parents of children with an African heritage assume the greater society will consider their offspring as black so these children are brought up with that in mind to

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ready them for what they will experience as they get older (Morrison & Rodgers, 1996). In many Western countries, society will force the families and children to identify themselves by their minority ethnicity alone to maintain the “ racial purity” of whites. On the other hand, ethnically diverse children and families could be advised to assume the racial identity of a white person with the hope that they might be able to be viewed as a white individual. In this way they might be able to steer clear of experiencing racism (Miller & Rotheram-Borus, 1994).

## **DOCUMENTATION**

According to Chiong, most population studies or counts of individuals by government entities only allow for a single racial or cultural label. A pertinent example is the U. S. Census, which has been utilized as a foundation to establish an ethnic representation in our government agencies. Based on the Census numbers, we separate and divide resources to fund programs, social services, support for school systems, and many other entities that depend on funding levels which in turn, drives home the perceived significance that a particular group has in our social order. Multiracial individuals declare that this way of picking and choosing groups to fund or ignore proves that they are being excluded from advancing in this culture. Many believe that this way of doing things highlights how ethnic minorities can be excluded from succeeding in American society. It is viewed as a rejection of a part of their heritage, and a powerful negative influence on their self-concept. They believe that the lack of a “ multiracial” category is an indication of society’s rejection of them (Chiong, 1998).”

There are some ethnic groups that believe in only identifying as a singular or specific minority, as it demonstrates unity and influence (Chiong, 1998).

Some minority political groups like the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and others have attempted to block any multiracial categorizations out of a concern that their voting rights enforcement acts and allocations for social and educational programs that are based on minority membership could be in jeopardy (Sullivan, 1998).

There have been some recent changes in the way that the government directs citizens to identify themselves by now checking all appropriate boxes. A step forward but, no multiracial category has been added as of yet. In 2003 schools also were told to change their own racial identification documents that are expected to have an effect on how more than two million students will report their race (Chiong, 1998). These recent changes show as noted earlier that the number of multiracial Americans has continued to increase and many groups will try to gain influence and acceptance through further activism.

#### ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

Children with more diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds have been found to experience both positive and negative aspects within their ethnic and cultural makeup. The factors that establish their capacity to develop a unified and personally rewarding identity include individual qualities like resilience and positive self-esteem. Similarly, the cohesiveness and stability of the family relies on their outlook on life, their attitudes and the school and community environment where they dwell. Either these places express a

supportive, nurturing setting or, one that is isolated and prejudiced. Also noted was the importance of commonality between neighborhood family makeup. These factors influence the development children's identities in all cases including monoracial children. Previously, it was understood that multiracial families and children had more problems and developmental difficulties than other children because they needed to "choose" a race (Wilson, 1987, p. 7). In some circles it was believed that monoracialism was customary and normal. Likewise, it was further argued that since monoracialism is normal, then multiracialism must be unusual or abnormal and even that the multiracial person does not really "fit anywhere" (Thornton, 1996, p. 108). These ideas were the results of a line of investigation that had to do with people who were seeking help for their difficulties. Where the findings became skewed were in the numbers that did not take into account the experiences of any well-adjusted minorities. So, the "missing" subjects were not able to showcase their ability to successfully navigate life as multiracial individuals. These important findings have gone unrecorded (Thornton, 1996).

Individuals that are "multiracially socialized" can benefit from their unique background. They are for all intents and purposes culturally educated with distinct benefits over the understanding levels of monoracial children. Their general understanding is characteristically greater and they have a more well thought out view of the world. Their personal judgment and greater inter-group tolerance, language capacity, positive reception of minority culture, and ties than monoracial are better (Thornton, 1996)." Additionally, they are likely able to recognize the many different aspects of a situation

where others can see only one view of a given conflict (Kerwin, Ponterotto, Jackson, & Harris, 1993).”

It has been stated that the identity development process in multiracial children is more complex than it is for monoracial youth. This is because our society has so many alternatives and possibilities to decide between and because there are so many possible choices and because family members, friends, and the prevailing culture influences all young people as they struggle with their own inner battles. An additional, and possibly even more difficult pressure for multiracial youth is general societal racism and the uneasiness people have with interracial marriages specifically. “ The racism visited upon people of color generally in the U. S. may be exacerbated by the strong prejudice of some people against mixing races through marriage and procreation (Pinderhughes, 1995). According to Okun, black and white interracial marriages occur at a much lower rate than many other mixed groups. Unfortunately, they also experience the greatest negative societal response (Okun, 1996). Wardle has stated that many ethnic individuals have communicated some reservations to interracial relationships. Some even consider it to be an assault of sorts to their personal concept of ethnic pride and a possible weakening of the groups political influence of their own group will be decreased through blending (Wardle, 1992).

With the understanding that these prejudiced beliefs exist in society, it just makes sense that some teachers and therapists could hold these attitudes as well. Without a doubt, multiracial students will recognize these people and take to heart their negativity towards them. The danger here is if the student allows the official to damage their sense of who they are and their true

ability to be successful. Consequently, it is vitally essential for those functioning around multiracial children to cautiously think about their private views. Students put a great deal of value on the opinions of their teachers and counselors.

Unfortunately, the caregivers of multiracial children often reject them and a number of multiracial offspring are abandoned or given away by their parents that are experiencing personal problems. Some are completely overwhelmed by the challenge of raising youngsters with more atypical needs.

## **CONCLUSION**

The process of creating or building a cultural sense of self is of particular complexity for most multiracial youth and their families. There are aspects that are completely unique to a persons heritage with the many different ethnicities and influences that drive them. The process is comprised of a multiracial persons ability to decide on a personal and a family identity that symbolizes their own position or mind-set concerning interracialism, how their family acknowledges the individual parts that make up their culture, and society's past of keeping groups of diverse racial backgrounds apart, and racial discrimination that is widespread and hierarchical. Additionally, the number of multiracial families and individuals will increase as generations proceed forward. Individuals may choose to accept and identify with the different ethnicities or they can align themselves with a new set whose only link is the multiple cultural backgrounds that their members represent. For teachers, therapists, and other child service professionals knowing about and being respectful of the attitudes, beliefs, and needs of

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interracial families is critical. This understanding will make it possible to aid multiracial students in growing a positive self-image for themselves and to be successful in school. And finally, to facilitate in the understanding of how un-important and immaterial racial differences really are.