

# Multiracial identity development



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In the current ecological approach to understanding multiracial identity, there have been studies investigating the relationship between the environment and the factors contributing to how multiracial individuals develop their identity (Miville et al.

, 2005; Renn, 2003). For people of color, racial identification can be an important part of their overall personal identity (Charmaraman & Grossman, 2010). In forced choice situations, a monoracial person of color might not have to consider how one will identify in the specific context. However, for a multiracial person, this opportunity to self-identify (e. g.

, in applications or the Census) might present an opportunity to consider how one represents oneself to the world. In other words, the process of racial identifying as a multiracial person consists of personal views and societal views of self (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). A seminal study investigated the identity development of multiracial college students. Renn (2003) applied an ecological framework, which described dynamic systems of the individual person, their interaction with the environment, the context, and sociopolitical factors. At the person level, Renn (2003) determined that family background, parents' heritage, cultural knowledge, prior experiences with members of their own and other groups, and physical appearance impacted the way the individuals identify.

Simultaneously while interacting with the environment, the person might experience high cognitive demand making sense of how they are perceived in that environment and their own sense of who they are. Further, Renn suggested looking at the larger context such as: where the individual fits in

on the college campus, the campus culture, whether the university forms allow for check all that apply, and the larger 26 discussion of multiracial identity on college campuses. Additionally, all of these systems are set within the sociopolitical climate that affects the overall societal norms of the generation. Renn's work recognized the complexity of racial identity development of multiracial individuals who do not exist in a vacuum, but rather interact with various systems to develop their sense of identity. Complexity is significant in the design of this dissertation study, which acknowledged that these factors contribute to the overall sense of malleability in the individual stating their identity in a context-specific moment. Identity Questioning Scholars highlighted the role of other people's perceptions in an individual's racial identity (Lou, Lalonde, & Wilson, 2011). Given the role of other people's perceptions and the larger societal discourse about multiracial identity, the historical views of multiracial identity as well as the current discourse must be acknowledged. Though the United States is a multiracial society, our society operates on monoracial constructions of identity (Daniel, 1992).

A potential byproduct of monoracial assumptions about race being dichotomous is the what are you question whereby a racially ambiguous multiracial person might be asked to identify because they are not easily categorized. This experience highlighted the complexity of a multiracial people's identities: having their identities questioned and their own sense of belongingness to the group or groups they declare. This is a common experience for multiracial individuals (Chen & Hamilton, 2012) and has been described in different ways: identity denial or invalidation. Shih and Sanchez

(2005) described the identity questioning experience as one of the earliest conflicts where a multiracial person must navigate their own-self definition, and the definition that has been imposed upon them by the outside world. 27 Increased awareness of the potential differences between multiracial individuals and monoracial people of color resulted in case study methodologies in order to address the potential nuances in this understudied population. In a case study by Gillem and colleagues (2001), Adolphus, a 19 year old, Black-White multiracial male, described his experience of growing up in a predominately Black neighborhood and having his identity questioned.

He described the experience of being called White by his peers, even by close friends who were there for him, he felt bothered by being called White because: “ not a lot of Black people like White people, so you’re around Black people all the time and they’re calling you White, which you know is something despised. You don’t want to be something despised, you know?” (Gillem, Cohn, & Throne, 2001, p. 190). Adolphus described an aspect of identity questioning where one’s identity is projected upon in a way that makes the individual feel negatively about who they are.

Similar to Cheng and Lee’s (2009) model of Multiracial Identity Integration, Adolphus portrayed feeling like there is racial distance and perceived racial conflict, which might contribute to feeling like his identity is less integrated. In moments of identity questioning, such as Adolphus experienced, it is essential to understand how authentic a person may feel about how their identity is being expressed. In the same case study, Jacqueline, a 17 year old, Black-White multiracial female described being told by peers that she

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was “acting White” and she stated that her response was “well I can’t help that, I am” (p. 188). However, at the time of the interview, Jacqueline identified as Black, but described her multiracial heritage if asked for more detail and then explained that she was biracial, but felt more comfortable and 28 connected around Black people (Gillem, Cohn, & Thorne, 2001). It is important to note that if Jacqueline had not been asked for more detail about her identity the researchers might not have known she identified as biracial. The fact that she provided more detail highlighted the desire to express her whole background as a biracial person, which she described as her biracial pride later in the interview.

According to the Multidimensional Model of Biracial Identity, Jacqueline would be termed as having a singular identity, however throughout the interview, it is apparent that Jacqueline’s identity changed as she aged and that in varying contexts she verbalized different identities based on the implications of her choice. However, what is not clear is her context-specific logic in deciding how to avow her identity and whether she felt authentic in her expression. Both quantitative research (Townsend, Markus, & Bergsieker, 2009) and qualitative studies (Jackson, 2012; Miville et al., 2005) attempted to capture the experience of multiracial individuals when having their identity questioned. In a quantitative study, Townsend and colleagues (2009) identified contexts where multiracial people may feel that their multiracial identity has been threatened also described as identity denial.

Specifically, they found that when people have their identity questioned by others, they are more likely to feel like they have been denied their identity and thereby perform more poorly on tasks and have lower self-esteem.

Similar findings were revealed in a qualitative study of 10 self-identified multiracial individuals (Miville et al., 2005).

They found that individuals tended to regard their multiracial identity positively, but due to negative interactions with other people regarding their multiracial identity such as in experiences of having their identity questioned, they tended to affirm a more monoracial identity. In another qualitative study with 10 multiracial individuals, Jackson 29 (2012) found similar themes and noted that participants described shifting expressions of racial identity based on perceived environmental pressure to be more monoracial. The findings of Jackson's (2012) qualitative study highlighted common themes of multiracial participants speaking about their life experiences. First, participants described shifting racial/ethnic expressions, which was portrayed as shifting avowed identity during certain developmental periods or environmental contexts. This was exemplified in dressing or talking in a stereotypical way in order to feel more aligned with the other person and was also associated with environmental pressure to be more monoracial. A second theme was racial/ethnic ambiguity, which is the experience of having one's identity questioned through the what are you experience and having people misattribute their race, which led to feelings of strangeness. A third theme, unique to Jackson's (2012) study, was racial resistance, which was the awareness of the pressure to conform and a desire to resist the system of race by educating themselves about race relations.

A fourth theme was that participants all described feeling like an outsider, marginalized from own groups. In particular, one participant said: " I knew I couldn't assimilate into the Black world. I knew I couldn't fit in. I was more

and more uncomfortable about it” (Jackson, 2012, p. 52). Finally, participants asserted their desire for community and their plan to seek out other multiracial individuals through the Internet or community organizations.

A desire for community highlighted a need for more information that multiracial individuals share common experiences by virtue of being multiracial. Continued research must investigate how these themes, such as shifting expressions of race/ethnicity, are expressed across multiracial people of different ethnic and racial 30 heritages and the role of identity questioning, identity challenges, identity resilience, and authenticity.