

Identity formation of multiracial and multiethnic individuals



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Societal Influences on Our Identities: A brief look at the identity formation of multiracial/multiethnic individuals

To many, the growing number of interracial marriages foreshadows a society where race is no longer a defining characteristic. Since the Supreme Court's 1967 (*Loving vs. Virginia*) decision to nullify laws discounting interracial marriages, the rate of interracial marriages and unions in the United States has experienced a significant increase. However, it was not until the 2000 U. S. Census, over 30 years after *Loving vs. Virginia*, that a multiracial category first emerged, enabling the option of selecting multiple races. According to the 2000 U. S. Census, close to seven million Americans (1 in 40) identified themselves as multiracial/multiethnic. The 2010 Project Race findings "projected [multiracial individuals] as the fastest growing demographic group in the country," citing researchers that predict that by 2050, 1 in 5 Americans will be classifying themselves as multiracial (2010 Project Race). So what implications does this have for our society? Should this even be viewed as a significant change in the nation's demographics? In order for our society to embrace its diversity, we need to promote cultural competence in all aspect of society, from our living rooms down to the work place and classrooms. With an increase in immigration, cross-cultural adoptions, single-parent households, and interracial neighborhoods, it has become crucial for society to understand the implications of culture and race on our identities. And the nation's journey to a culturally aware and accepting society begins at the core of individual identity.

A great number of scholarly research has disproved theories that advocate the biological aspect of race, instead proposing that the concept of race is socially constructed and has no biological significance. It does, however, have a very apparent and crucial social significance. Race theory regards race as " an interactive process, where both the perceptions of others and one's own understanding of his racial identity shape his/her identity formation" (Bedley, 3). In order to better understand racial and ethnic influences on our identities, it must first be acknowledged and established that racial differences exist only in the social construct of our society. In other words, although not universally, in American society, the White experience differs from the Black experience, which differs from the Latino experience, and so forth. In the context of a multiracial/multiethnic individual, the process of integrating the individual's " own understanding of his racial identity," and the " perceptions of others" becomes more complex.

Research prior to Loving vs. Virginia (1967) was primarily geared towards a monoracial individual's identity formation, where the identity formation of a White individual was regarded as the social norm. In studying the results of such research, it became evident to those of the social sciences that there were significant differences in the identity development and formation of White individuals when compared to Blacks, Hispanics, and other races. And although much advancement has been made in an effort to capture, more accurately, the differences in the identity formation and development of a multiracial individual when compared to their monoracial counterpart, " research on the multiracial population has been largely theoretically driven

without substantial empirical investigation into how mixed-race people form a multiracial identity" (Bedley, 1). Once again, it is important to reaffirm that such differences in identity formation and development do not stem from a biological precursor, but rather from social hierarchies present in our society. Furthermore, theorists have long debated the "nature versus nurture theory," concluding that both, environment and biology influence our development. Our cultural and societal experiences have a profound effect on how we perceive the world we live in, and future experiences. However, because of the social significance of race, specifically in our society's history, ecological factors influence our identity formation equally.

Before continuing the discussion on the significance of understanding the identity formation of a multiracial individual, it is important to note that the U. S. Census views race and ethnicity as two separate and distinct categories. However, in this paper, the terms multiracial and multiethnic are used interchangeably based on scholarly research that implies that the basic identity developmental track of both, multicultural and multiracial adolescent is similar (Bracey, Bamaca, & Umana-Taylor, 2004). For example, although Hispanics can be categorized under the White racial category, the term Hispanics/Latinos is representative of an array of different ethnic groups and not racial. In American society, Hispanics/Latinos are not subject to the same opportunities and privileges that are available to Whites, and so are classified as their own group, separate from Whites (Bracey, Bamaca, & Umana-Taylor, 2004). For the purposes of this paper, Whites and Hispanics are classified as a separate racial group due to the variety of their distinctive cultural and societal experiences. Furthermore, although Hispanics are

comprised of several distinct ethnicities, their experiences in our society reflect great similarities, allowing for them to be grouped together under one umbrella. Implications of the research reviewed in this paper can be effectively applied to young first generation immigrants as well.

So what exactly is identity? It has been a fundamental question examined since before the time of Socrates. Rene Descartes statement " I think, therefore I am" simplistically captures the essence of identity. Psychologists define identity as self-image; in essence, it is " an individual person's sense of self," or rather, perception of self (WordIQ 2010). According to Hartman and Hartman (2003), " identity develops over one's lifetime and is influenced by childhood and adolescent socialization as well as adult experiences" (Hartman & Hartman, 38). Our personal identity is multifaceted; our gender, our interests, our careers, our relationships and roles all influence our own definition of our self as a whole. We are what we think we are. But human beings are a social animal. Integrated into our sense of self is also our social identity. What we think is influenced by our peers. Sociologists assert that social identity is an " individuals' labeling of themselves as members of particular groups" (WordIQ, 2010). Our perception of our self and the group that we perceive our self to belong to goes hand in hand. It can be inferred that identity formation, therefore, is the process of forming such interrelated and mutually influential self-definitions and perceptions. Researchers in the social sciences have identified several factors that influence the identity formation of a multiracial/multiethnic adolescent. Among the identified factors are included: " family experiences, physical appearance, social networks...race relations, gender, class, speaking a language other than

English as well as region of the United States where the mixed-race person resides all play a role in multiracial identity construction and maintenance" (Bedley, 8). Although most adolescents encounter some confusion when forming their own definition of their self, as well as their relation to their environment, group, and larger society, adolescents who are a part of multiple groups may find the process to be more complex.

McGoldrick and Giordano (1996) have suggested that our ethnicity is a powerful determinant of our identity. Ethnicity is a self-perceived, socially constructed, phenomenon that is fluid over the course of time. MacDonald-Dennis (2006) defines ethnicity as the "identity that people who share a unique social and cultural history pass from one generation to another" (MacDonald-Dennis, 268). These groups of people share common cultural traits such as religion, language, practices, and solidarity (a sense of we-ness). MacDonald-Dennis (2006) further expresses that, in the United States, ethnicity inevitably subsides as the assimilation process into mainstream society intensifies. In other words, as we become functional members of society, our ethnicity begins to take a back seat. Although we may begin to minimize the affect of our ethnicity as we begin to assimilate into mainstream society, it continues to have a profound impact on our socialization, and consequently our sense of self.

According to Erikson (1968), an individual faces identity crisis during the years of adolescence, the period wherein peer acceptance is of utmost importance. Thus, identity formation can be viewed as the main mission of adolescence. Unfortunately, Erikson's stages of identity formation do not account for adolescents who are facing the dilemma of being a part of more

<https://assignbuster.com/identity-formation-of-multiracial-and-multiethnic-individuals/>

than one culture or race. The developmental identity of a multiracial adolescent, thus, may differ greatly from that of their monoethnic/monoracial counterparts. The multiracial/multiethnic teen may receive one type of message alluding to his identity from his family, and a variety of others from the outside world, including his friends, teachers, and the media.

Numerous factors determine the identity development of a multiracial/multiethnic individual. Many multiracial individuals adopt the looking glass self model. They internalize society's reflection of their identity, basing their identities primarily on those perceptions. The looking-glass self is the phenomenon where identity is shaped in accordance with society's perceptions. Outside of the home, society might group the multiracial individual with the race he/she phenotypically resembles, whether or not the individual themselves identifies with that specific group. The looking-glass self model is most apparent during the adolescent years of life. Erikson placed adolescence from the ages of 12 to 19. According to Erikson (1950), during this phase of life, the adolescent is concerned with how they appear to others. Bracey et al. (2004) asserted that identity development and self-esteem are vital processes that occur during the years of adolescence. These processes greatly impact an individuals' development throughout their lifespan. Our socialization constantly impacts of self-esteem and self-image. As important as family socialization is in terms of identity formation, peer socializing can play a major role in identification as well. The adolescent believes that the perceptions of others match, or should match, their own perception of themselves.

The extent of societal influence on our socialization, and consequently our identity formation is immense. Even though the multiracial individual might identify more with one part of his race, in-group discrimination may affect the acceptance and assimilation of that person into the group. Moreover, if the individual grows up in a community who is largely comprised of one of their two races/cultures, they will, more likely than not, identify with the majority population. Some research infers that mixed individuals with one White parent might identify as being White due to the socially assigned privileges associated with that group. As discussed, our social environment plays a large role in the perception of ethnicity and race because, not only does our community and societal perceptions impact our development, the society in which we reside defines these perceptions.

Multiracial/multiethnic adolescents may often experience peer pressure to choose one group of membership and abandon the other part of their heritage; others may grow up in households that don't place high importance to race or ethnicity and may consequently end up confused because they are being pushed to choose between groups with which they don't define themselves. According to Padilla (2006), a multiracial individuals' identity development is greatly impacted by both societal acceptance and parental socialization. According to Fish and Semans (2000), ethnic identity not only influences an individuals' perception of self, it also influences familial interaction and connection. Jourdan (2006) asserts that family environment plays a " significant role in [our] ability to develop secure ethnic identities". Having the support of family members positively correlates with the positive ethnic identity of the multiethnic individual. According to research conducted

by Harris and Sim (2002) multiracial " adolescents are identifying differently in different situations" (Bedley, 6). Accordingly, when parents support and promote their child's exploration of their ethnicity, the children may find themselves able and having to shift identities when the situation calls for it. For example, when in the presence of member from one race/ethnicity, the child might exhibit characteristics of that race; when in the presence of members from their other race/ethnicity, the child will probably adapt characteristics for that specific group. This demonstrates the racial fluidity, which, when adequately supported by parents, can benefit the child's development of a secure identity.

As aforementioned, adolescence is the time where we define ourselves by what we believe others define us as, and so cliques are formed. In elementary school, or preadolescence, friendships are based on gender and interests, not ethnicity. However, as we grow up and start understanding the basis with which society defines us, we begin to reflect it within our own definition of our self. Moving through secondary school, we begin to notice a shift in our peer socialization. The White kids hang out with other White kids, the Asians with other Asians, and so on. During that phase of our lives, we define ourselves by what we have in common with others. The most obvious basis of commonality is based off of appearance (phenotype) and ethnicity. Clubs such as the Asian Cultural Club, Hispanic Club, and the Colored Students Society are common in high schools. These clubs endorse ethnic solidarity among adolescence. As discussed, multiracial identity is greatly impacted by the self-labeling of multiracial individuals, their own families, and the larger society.

Researchers, in the past, have operated under the assumption that because multiracial individuals were viewed as outsiders by both of their racial groups, they would encounter identity problems, and thus exhibit low self-esteem. Scholars have emphasized that the extent to which we identify with our identity greatly influences our social and psychological well-being.

Theorist in the past, such as Lewin (1948), have suggested that the marginal person, a minority who is in want of acceptance by the dominant group in society, has moved away from his/her own group in hopes of attaining that acceptance, will suffer from psychological distress if unaccepted by the dominant group. According to the contemporary bicultural view, however, an individual doesn't necessarily encounter psychological unrest when they are part of two or more cultures/races. Binning et al. (2009) "disputed the claims of psychological problems associated with having a multiracial identity," finding instead many benefits related to their racial fluidity (Garbarini-Phillippe, 4). These new research imply that multiracial individual person doesn't necessarily chose either or, but instead, is able to acknowledge and internalize both cultures/races in a positive and healthy manner. Instead, having internalized their racial fluidity, the multiracial/multiethnic person is well adjusted and eager to form relations with people of different backgrounds because he/she is socially flexible.

The implications of our ethnicity and race, as well as our relation to that aspect of our being, on our personal views and worldview is indubitably recognized by our society in such a way that it is depicted in several television shows, various facets of our arts, and even fictional novels.

Although factual research is unconfidently supported by fictional work,

<https://assignbuster.com/identity-formation-of-multiracial-and-multiethnic-individuals/>

readers can identify with the statement that we write what we know. Writers create and recreate a world and perspectives through their experiences, understanding of human behavior and relations, and previously attested or newly explored knowledge of the message they are giving a voice to. Furthermore, fictional and nonfictional illustrations can act as a conduit to express such scientific findings, as discussed in this paper, via laymen's terms. It is far more interesting to read about a young first generation immigrant struggling to combine his ethnic heritage with his American heritage than to read a study about the assimilation of immigrants. It is much more intriguing to accompany an African American woman on her journey to discover her African and White ancestry than to read studies about multiracial individuals and their sense of self or dry articles about slavery and its psychological impact. As such, there is some basis to use novels to illustrate the findings of scientific research.

In his novel *Famous All Over Town*, Dan James (a. k. a. Danny Santiago) illustrates the impact of our ethnic and racial ties to our identity and experiences. The guidance counselor of James's protagonist, Rudy, urges the young Mexican American to jump on the chance to visit Mexico and "find [his] roots! Discover [his] identity" (Santiago, 205). While experiencing his life through the narrator's point of view, readers are introduced to the identity conflict that many first generation immigrants experience. The author successfully portrays the differences between immigrants and their American born children. The guidance counselor must recognize the internal conflict of the young boy who conforms to his neighborhood gang because they are his brethren, all the while wondering whether he can break through

the predestined mould and become a doctor. Although assessed as exceptionally intelligent in Middle School, Rudy's grades and test scores dramatically decrease as he moves out of the 6th grade. Teens often go through identity crisis in adolescence, which can explain why Rudy becomes disheartened about his future and education, as he begins to need acceptance by his group, and feel a sense of belonging to his group. Readers are constantly reminded of the collectiveness of the group of Mexicans living on Rudy's street.

Another character that illustrates the marginal person (as discussed earlier) is Virgie, the American-born Mexican woman in the neighborhood. She is a part of two worlds, an internal struggle that is subconsciously expressed through her constant switch in speech, from spoken English to spoken Spanish. She is so much at odds with her own self that she has even dyed her hair in an apparent attempt to conceal her Mexican roots and appear more American. The reader can only imagine Virgie as a teenager, struggling to find a balance between her Mexican ethnicity and her American culture. However, as the discussed research demonstrates, the marginality of a multiethnic individual is not as harmful, if handled with cultural competence.

Although today, we have the freedom to self-associate as we please, having the option of associating with one, the other, or both of our ethnicities, it was not always the case. In our nation's history, multiracial children were regarded as belonging to the "lesser race," as defined by the society of the time. If a "Westerner" were to impregnate a native America, the offspring would be regarded as Native American. If a White slave owner were to rape his slave, their offspring would be born into slavery, and regarded as Black.

<https://assignbuster.com/identity-formation-of-multiracial-and-multiethnic-individuals/>

Slavery laws established that the illegitimate child of a slave and master would be born as his mother. Only if the mother was a freed slave, would the child be a free. In her novel *Kindred*, Octavia Butler portrays this type of labeling and societal prejudice. Rufus, the distant, White, ancestor of the narrator, Dana, struggles with his feelings for Alice, the daughter of a free slave. Throughout the novel, Dana often comments on the similarities and dissimilarities between Rufus and his father, fearing that he would inevitably grow up to be a slave owner like his dad. As we follow Rufus through his childhood into adolescence and adulthood, we witness the strong influence of societal expectations, social norms, and parental influence on the character.

As Rufus becomes more comfortable in his role as Master, and his White superiority, he begins to pursue his desires more aggressively. Although it is evident to the reader that he harbors real feelings for Alice, his struggle with the slave-master dynamics distorts those feelings. Rufus purchases the free Alice, and subsequently rapes her again and again. Alice bares many of Rufus' children, all of whom are enslaved just like their mother. It is Alice's wish that Rufus free their children that keeps her hanging around for so long. And although the children are half White, they are rejected the same privileges that are rejected to Black slave children, such as education. Their ethnicity is defined for them, by society; they have no say in it.

Butler explores interracial experiences through various other forms in the novel. Dana, a physically appearing Black woman with some distant White ancestry, is married to Kevin, a White man. The reader is introduced to the dynamics of the relationship, as well as some of the obstacles they have had

<https://assignbuster.com/identity-formation-of-multiracial-and-multiethnic-individuals/>

to overcome in order to get and remain married. When they were courting, colleagues mocked and commented on their relationship. When they introduced each other to their families, Kevin was shocked to discover his sister's narrow mindedness. Dana's family had a different reaction to Kevin's. Dana, although having some White ancestry, was raised as African American. Her aunt eventually accepted him because " any children [they] will have will be light"... and not " too 'highly visible'" (Butler, 111). Her uncle, on the other hand, was far more apprehensive, wanting her to " marry someone like him- someone who looks like him. A Black man" (Butler, 111). Group solidarity and belonging is taken personally. Herein we also find illustrated the impact of our physical appearance towards our identification of ourselves, as well as our identification with others. Furthermore, societal preference of lighter skin is made apparent by Dana's aunt's acceptance in hopes that the offspring of the couple will be lighter skinned. The societal preference of White and the social dominance of the White race is also a theme in Toni Morrison's short story, *The Bluest Eye*. The narrator finds herself despising the dolls she is gifted again and again. These dolls, with their blue eyes, are society's definition of beautiful.

These three authors convey the bitter reality of deep-rooted discrimination and stereotyping in our society. Their novels illustrate the internal conflicts and explorations of their characters. These protagonists all struggle to find a balance between the two halves of themselves, whether it is an American-born Mexican teen, or a Black woman with White ancestry. They encounter societal influences that factor into their own identities. Through these

characters, the differences between monoracial/monoethnic development and multiracial/multiethnic development become apparent.

As our society evolves, the racial and ethnic boundaries that once separated different demographics begin to merge. The growing numbers of multiracial/multiethnic individuals in our nation is a testament to such an evolution. And although surface discrimination and racism has faded, such separatist practices are engraved deep within our roots. Shang (2008) asserts that " most schools and neighborhoods are still segregated, hate crimes are on the rise, and lack of equality and social justice still affects many institutions" (Garbarini-Philippe, 2). As such, it is rational to conclude that our ethnicity and race still has a huge impact on our socialization, and our understanding of our selves. This is not necessarily a bad thing. We are all the product of our parents, and although our futures are not defined by that biological tie, our identity, our experiences within society, and even the opportunities we are offered, are all, in some ways, influenced by our race, even in today's time.

Society has to be well equipped to effectively supplement multiracial/multiethnic identities. Doing so will encourage a more tolerant and diverse society, which will be free of not only surface racism, but also deeply rooted institutional racism. Understanding the basic identity formation of the multiracial adolescent (for adolescence is when our identity experiences the most profound evolution) will help us to understand the identity formation of the future generations, therein better preparing us to meet the needs of an ever-evolving society.