

Perceptions, Representation, and Identity Development of Multiracial Students in American Higher Education

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According to the United States (U.S.) Census Bureau, by mid-century the number of people who identify themselves as being of two or more races is projected to more than triple, from 5.2 million to 16.2 million (U.S. Census Bureau, Public Information Office, 2008). The possibility to select two or more races on official forms is fairly recent. Until 1997, when the U.S. Office of Management and Budget allowed Americans to identify themselves as belonging to two or more races, biracial and multiracial individuals could only choose one of four racial categories: White, Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaskan Native. This change represented a major shift in national policy and a significant challenge to the “myth of racial purity on which social, economic, and political systems have operated in the United States” (Renn, 2003, p. 399).

In this article I first look at multiracial individuals in the context of higher education and argue that this student population has been largely ignored in educational institutions. Then I examine research on multiracial identity development and show how one assumption regarding people of mixed-race heritage, the inability to fit in any monoracial group, has been refuted by many studies that predict healthy and positive psychological outcomes for multiracial individuals. Finally, I suggest ways in which colleges and universities can create inclusive environments and utilize the potential of these border-defying students to introduce a new discourse on race. Throughout the article, I use the words “biracial,” “multiracial,” and “mixed-race” interchangeably, as do the authors of the studies cited.

The Multiracial Experience in U.S. Colleges and Universities

In the context of higher education, multiracial students emerged nationally as a distinct group only in 2003, when the Department of Education complied with the 1997 directive that allowed individuals to select more than one race on official forms. This change gave students “the opportunity to reflect their heritage, provide institutions with a better representation of the composition of student populations, and offer valuable information on multiracial students’ experiences in college” (Kellogg & Niskodé, 2008, p. 97).

The lack of data on the multiracial experience in colleges and universities prior to 2003 means that most services and programs offered by higher education institutions

were not established with this particular population in mind and may not meet their specific needs. It also means that it is hard to track access, retention, and equity issues related to multiracial students. For example, if multiracial students choose not to identify with any racial group, they may not be included in recruitment efforts targeting minorities, even if they often encounter the same educational inequalities in primary and secondary schools. Underrepresentation of the multiracial experience affects curricular and program offerings as well. Cultural studies courses traditionally focus on monoracial groups such as African Americans, Asian Americans, and American Indians, the same groups around which minority student organizations are built. Courses and programs that examine multicultural issues or the complexity of race are still a rarity, as are multiracial student groups (Kellogg & Niskodé, 2008).

Another factor to take into account is the social and historical context in which multiracial students attend college. Affirmative action has been banned in many states as a result of court rulings or ballot measures. In addition, preferential enrollments benefiting members of minority groups have become even more controversial during an economic crisis when people compete for fewer jobs and resources. As Shang (2008) accurately observes in his article on the social and historical factors affecting multiracial college students, most schools and neighborhoods are still segregated, hate crimes are on the rise, and lack of equality and social justice still affects many institutions, including higher education ones. For all these reasons, it is hard for multiracial students to find inclusive college environments, not only because they are primarily identified with minority racial groups, but also because of the challenges they face navigating identity-based social and cultural spaces on campus (King, 2008).

Identity Development Models for Multiracial Students

To better understand multiracial people, in particular after the 2000 census revealed that there were almost six million of them in the United States, identity development models have been developed with this population in mind. Relying on the assumption that “individuals with biracial heritage do not establish firm identities,” these models initially focused on their “marginal identities” (Poston, 1990, p.152). The first model for the development of a healthy biracial and multiracial identity that challenged this assumption of marginality was formulated by Poston (1990). Poston proposed a developmental process in five stages: personal identity (sense of self independent of one’s ethnic background, typical of children); choice of group characterization (choice of one parent’s racial heritage or, more seldom, of a multiethnic identity, based on personal and environmental factors); enmeshment/denial (confusion and guilt over an identity that does not fully express one’s background); appreciation (broadening of racial reference group and knowledge about multiethnic heritage, even though identification with one particular group may still be prevalent); integration (recognition and appreciation of one’s multiple identities).

Later models continued to challenge the assumption of marginal identity by observing multiple healthy identity outcomes in biracial and multiracial individuals. Root (1996) developed a theory of identity formation that does not follow a linear progression through stages but relies on the multiracial individual's ability to cross-prescribe racial borders. These border crossings are summarized by Renn (2003) as:

Being able to hold and merge multiple perspectives simultaneously; situational ethnicity and race, or consciously shifting racial foregrounds and backgrounds in different settings; a decision to sit on the border, claiming a multiracial central reference point; and creating a home base in one identity and making forays into others. (p. 384)

In Root's model, any outcome or combination of outcomes reflect a healthy and positive development of mixed-race identity.

Subsequent research supported this theory. In a study of multiracial college students, Renn (2003) found that students identified either in one of these patterns or across patterns and embraced the fluidity of race theorized by Root (1996). Among the factors that influence mixed-race students' choice of identity were family background; cultural knowledge; experience with their own and other cultural groups; physical appearance; cognitive development related to issues of race, culture and identity; peer culture; belief systems; and socio-historical context. Renn (2003) also identified a fifth outcome, described as the development of an "extraracial identity" that students reach "by deconstructing race or opting out of identification with U.S. racial categories" (p. 17). This deconstruction questions the validity of these categories and the necessity of rigid identification. People who hold this position refuse to select any box related to racial and ethnic identity on official forms and may view this practice a form of oppression.

The Benefits of a Multiracial Identity

The development of healthy identity models, and many subsequent studies on the relationship between multiracial identity and psychological well-being, question the assumption of marginality and maladjustment associated with multiple racial identities. In one of these studies, Shih & Sanchez (2005) argued that "multiracial individuals tend to be just as well adjusted as their monoracial peers on most psychological outcomes" (p. 569). They also suggested that different findings in earlier studies described clinical populations with psychological issues that may have been due to other factors, such as minority status or experience with discrimination and hostile racial climate. Other studies cited by Tatum (1997) reveal that the emotional distress observed

in biracial adults was more often attributable to experiences of family disruption than to mixed-heritage alone.

A recent study published in the *Journal of Social Issues* (Binning, Unzueta, Huo, & Molina, 2009) not only disputed the claims of psychological problems associated with having a multiracial identity but found specific benefits that multiracial individuals enjoy. The research examined the psychological well-being and social engagement of 182 multiracial high school students in the diverse city of Long Beach, California. It distinguished between those who identified primarily with a single racial group, either high-status or low-status, and those who identified with multiple groups. Students who fully embraced a multiracial identity reported lower stress levels relative to individuals who identified with either high- or low-status groups and lower levels of alienation than those who identified with a high-status racial group. Furthermore, they displayed more positive emotions and less problematic behavior relative to those who identified with a high-status racial group.

Among the potential explanations for the psychological benefits associated with having a multiracial identity, Binning et al. (2009) cited the resilience developed in confronting society's pressure to choose one racial group, the ability to navigate and feel a sense of belonging in both monoracial and multiracial groups, and a tendency to "switch between different cultures' ways of perceiving the world with relative ease" (p. 46). This study shows that multiracial individuals feel a high level of comfort in racially diverse contexts when they fully embrace their multiracial identity. Educational institutions should therefore welcome the exploration of a multiracial identity to increase students' well-being on campus and promote racial understanding.

Suggestions for Higher Education Practice

Policy makers and higher education administrators should implement data gathering systems that provide a better representation of the student population and give multiracial students the opportunity to accurately reflect their heritage on official forms. Data on race and ethnicity is used to track access, retention, and equity in higher education institutions, and so the inclusion of a multiracial category and transparency on how racial and ethnic data are aggregated are a fundamental first step to better understand the needs, strengths, and challenges of this student population. Institutional policies should also be reviewed to ensure, for example, that multiracial students are included in recruitment efforts targeting minorities and that diversity on campus is not only represented by monoracial categories (Kellogg & Niskodé, 2008).

Because identity development occurs in dynamic environments through interaction with others, colleges and universities should offer physical, social, and psychological spaces where multiracial students can feel comfortable, explore who they are, and educate others about an identity that may not always reflect social norms. These spaces include residence halls, classrooms, social events, student and professional organizations, as well as academic projects, journal writing and conversations with trusted others (King, 2008). At the University of California at Berkeley, for example, The Mixed Student Union is a student group that promotes awareness about multiethnic and multicultural issues and provides a welcoming space for people of mixed heritage.

Equally important is the development of curricula that reflect the country's multicultural experiences, avoid stereotypical information and discriminatory material, and include courses that help students understand issues of race and ethnicity from a multicultural perspective. The groundbreaking course "People of Mixed Racial Descent," started at U. C. Berkeley in 1980, explores the history and identity of people of various racial backgrounds by making use of an interdisciplinary approach that draws from history, sociology, psychology, cultural theory, and political economy. In addition to curricular diversity, a more significant presence of administrators and faculty members of mixed heritage would also provide multiracial students with much needed role models and mentors (King, 2008).

Finally, the ability of many multiracial students to cross borders could be applied in programs such as multicultural intergroup dialogues to facilitate discussion among members of different racial groups. The permeability of boundaries that this student population represents introduces a new discourse on race. By exploring how these boundaries have been constructed and maintained and how they can be deconstructed, multiracial students can help shape a more diverse and harmonious campus environment. For this to happen however, their multiracial identity must be socially and politically recognized, making further research in this field particularly important.

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