

## Biracial and Multiracial Individuals

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### Introduction

In 2008, the United States elected the first biracial president. From eugenic roots to federal rulings and US Census categorization, biracial identity has been intrinsically linked to the racial dynamics of our country. The field of psychology reflects these dynamics, moving from a place of pathology to one of racial integration. Yet, research on this topic is still in its infancy.

### Historical Context

In the early United States, there was both the reality of interracial mixing and the legal prohibition of it as soon as Europeans arrived. Innately racist social policies of segregation aimed to prevent the spread of perceived undesirable traits by criminalizing sex, cohabitation, and marriage between a White individual and an individual of color. The concept of miscegenation, or sexual relations between individuals of different races resulting in procreation, came from the eugenic movement in Europe in the early twentieth century, a set of beliefs and practices that aimed to encourage the reproduction of individuals with perceived desired traits.

The child of interracial mixing was marginalized and disenfranchised, seen as tainting racial purity and threatening social and political systems that dictate power and privilege. Using the construct of hypodescent, the automatic external assignment of the perceived inferior race to the child of miscegenation, individuals with any amount of African ancestry were classified as Black; this idea was known as the “one-drop” rule, and gradually codified into law throughout the twentieth century. Terms like quadroon, octoroon, and quintroon were used to designate the proportionality of hypodescent, with the assumption that once there was racial impurity, it would persist as legacy. While there were proportional variations across

states and differences regarding Native Americans and African Americans, the underlying principle of European superiority and eugenics persisted.

In 1967, state anti-miscegenation laws barring marriage between Whites and Blacks were repealed in the *Loving v. Virginia*, 388 U.S. 1 ruling (Loving, 1967). The court ruled this law held no legitimate purpose, and was instead hateful and distasteful towards US citizens, and violated the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Subsequently, the United States saw an increase in interracial marriages that spawned a large number of multiracial births. From 1970 to the early 1990s the number of interracial marriages increased from 310,000 to 1.4 million, and in 2008 there was an estimated 2.6 million (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2008). The resulting “biracial baby boom” has grown from an estimated 1% of the population in the 1970s to 5% in 2000 and is expected to rise exponentially (Masuoka, 2008).

The 2000 US Census was the first to allow respondents to self-identify as multiracial for official government counts, rather than “other,” a catch-all category conveying little to no meaning (DaCosta, 2007; Nagai, 2010). In 1993, multiracial representatives suggested to lawmakers that adding either a “multiracial” option, or allowing for the selection of all applicable racial categories would offer better recognition of this growing population (DaCosta, 2007). The 2010 Census reports approximately 9 million (2.9%) multiracial persons reside in the United States, a 32% increase from 2000 (United States, 2012). Of the 9 million residents, 92% of multiracial respondents checked just two races. The most common multiple race combinations identified were: Black and White (1.8 million), White and some other race (1.7 million), White and Asian (1.6 million), White and American Indian and Alaska Native (1.4 million).

## Biracial and Multiracial Identity Development Models

E. Stonequist (1937) was the first scholar to address biracial identity development, and numerous racial identity theories have existed thereafter in an attempt to conceptualize multiracial identity development. Singular racial identity development (RID) models do not account for the processes that mixed-race individuals experience (Rockquemore, Brusma, & Delgado, 2009). Further identity development models were developed by Poston (1990), Root (1990), Kerwin and Ponterotto (1995), and Rockquemore (1999).

The first prominent academic theory to address the identity formation of biracial individuals was popularized by Everett Stonequist’s 1937 book titled *The Marginal Man: A Study in Personality and Culture Conflict*. He asserts that the biracial nature of the individual creates a need to reconcile two distinct and antagonistic cultures. The marginal man will usually attempt to identify with the dominant culture, but may find ways to serve as a leader to the disempowered culture. The biracial identity is devoid of the co-constructed clarity of “we” versus “they,” which manifests in isolation, alienation, and stigmatization. Owing to the individual’s anomalous position in society, he or she will become the target for hostile sentiments from both parent races toward one another, and this will inevitably cause maladjustment in the individual.

Stonequist suggested a three-phase life-cycle for biracial individuals. As a child, the biracial individual is introduced to parent cultures but is not aware of the differences in power or privilege, and usually identifies with the dominant race. In the crisis phase, the

individual experiences a crisis of identity and belonging characterized by rejection, dissonance, and ambiguity. This results in a maladjusted divided identity, applying the negative attitudes of parent cultures to him or herself. In response, the individual may continue to identify with the dominant culture by attempting to pass, identify with the subordinate group, or attempt to extricate from any racial identity. Stonequist emphasized the potential for biracial individuals, due to their distinctive understanding of both parent cultures, to be a cultural liaison between the two and a spokesperson for the subordinate group. Stonequist's theory is considered the precursor to future identity development models, but has been critiqued for blaming the individual or miscegenation itself for identity problems, instead of placing between-group prejudice as the core of the problem.

W. C. Poston (1990) asserted that previous monoracial models of RID were difficult to apply to biracial individuals due to inherent limitations: the insistence that biracial individuals need to choose one primary identification; would initially reject their minority identity at an earlier stage and reject the dominant culture at a latter stage without allowing for integration of multiple identities; and may not experience acceptance into either parent culture, whether minority or dominant. Poston's model starts with *personal identity* in which the young person is generally unaware of racial and ethnic differences. At the *choice of group orientation* stage the person is pressured by family, peers, or social groups to choose a singular identity and could result in crisis and isolation. The person's previous experience of prejudice and rejection can influence this choice. The *enmeshment/denial* stage involves a loyalty-pull in which the individual chooses one parent culture over another and experiences confusion and guilt in the process. The fourth stage of *appreciation* for both parent cultures is needed to progress. The final stage of *integration* is where the individual establishes a secure, valued, and coherent racial identity.

Root (1990) identified four processes for biracial individuals. In the *acceptance of the identity society assigns* stage the biracial person will adopt the racial group that they have been socialized to identify as by others. In the *identification of both racial groups*, the individual will positively self-identify as biracial. In the *identification of a single racial group* stage, the individual consciously decides to identify as a single race regardless of their biracial makeup, how their siblings self-identify, or what society imposes on them. This status is not considered problematic for the individual; however, it is important to note that identifying with a single racial group may not be acceptable to others when the biracial individual's physical characteristics are not congruent with their self-identified single race (i.e. White for a Black/White person), or in regions where the crossing of racial lines is unacceptable. Finally, there is the *identification of a new racial group*. In this stage the mixed-race person feels exceptionally committed to their multiracial heritage and wishes to identify as such in all areas of their lives. However, individuals who cannot identify as two or more races or develop a complete sense of belonging to one racial group will likely choose to identify as a new racial group, such as "human."

Kerwin and Ponterotto (1995) proposed a biracial identity model that used age-based stages and asserted that individuals may have both a public and private identity. In addition, this model was the first to acknowledge that biracial individuals may experience rejection from both parent cultures. This model starts at the *preschool* stage, where biracial children

up to the age of five become aware of physical appearance. With the *entry to school* stage, exposure to other children introduces the pressure to identify as monoracial. In the *preadolescence* stage, social meanings become more sophisticated, taking into account physical characteristics, culture, ethnicity, and religion. When young individuals experience overt or covert racism, sensitivity is heightened and may trigger identity questions. *Adolescence* can bring increased external pressure to clearly express a monoracial allegiance. *College/young adulthood* stage continues to bring pressure to monoracially identify, and the individual may experience a heightened yet isolating awareness of race relations. The *adulthood* stage brings continued exploration in race and culture, which may result in more nuanced self-definitions and a special type of racial flexibility in racial adaptation and understanding.

Rockquemore's (1999) exploration into multiracial identity found that biracial identity development tends to be more fluid than it is static and opined four racial self-identity options. With a *singular or traditional identity* the individual is aware of their parents' monoracial status and consciously decides to exclusively identify as one race. An individual holding a *border identity* understands their biracial status and chooses to highlight this fact by solely self-identifying as biracial. With a *protean identity* the mixed-race person chooses to freely move between racial groups, identifying as biracial in some social contexts and monoracial in others. The *transcendent identity* individual claims no racial identity and ignores racial categorization unless pressured to identify their race. These identification options consider the effects socialization has on racial identity that is often dependent on differing demographic regions and political conventions and ideations.

These biracial identity development models have significantly progressed over time and pointed to the interaction between the individual and the socio-political context. They are imperative in understanding the unique and complex processes for individuals in forming a biracial self-identity. Despite the improvements of RID models for biracial individuals in the 1990s, models that encompass those that are multiracial versus biracial have not been clearly developed and point to a new need in the field.

## Psychological Research into Biracial Identity Development

In the research literature prior to the mid-1980s, the term *biracial* was primarily used to mean "more than one race" within groups (e.g. a "biracial sample" indicated the studied population was composed of both White and Black individuals) rather than the experience or characteristics of individuals who came from a biracial background. Additionally, all the studies found looked only at African American and White as homogenous racial categories; other racial/ethnic groups were not represented.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the terms *biracial* and *multiracial* became associated with the idea of individual identity. The earliest studies appeared most frequently in feminist-oriented journals. However, while RID quickly became an important theme throughout the 1990s, there were still only a few studies looking at biracial experience. For instance, Kerwin, Ponterrotto, Jackson, and Harris (1993) explored how biracial identity is formed in children using qualitative interviews; Root (1998) offered a preliminary report on a mixed-methods study, *The Biracial Sibling Project*. Both these widely cited studies examine the

variability of the lived experience of being biracial as well as the impact of the larger cultural context, highlighting experiences of racism and the need for a term not imposed from the more dominant culture.

In the 2000s, the research has continued to delve into more specific areas of biracial identity, such as different ethnic identities (e.g. Asian and Hispanic) and gender differences. Rockquemore, Brunsma, and Delgado (2009) note that particularly after the change in the US Census in 2000, new quantitative data sets became available to researchers, leading to increasingly detailed understandings that biracial RID is highly idiosyncratic and contextually influenced. The authors analyze the assumptions that underlie race research, and the ways that biracial individuals illuminate or challenge them. The authors also critique the research generally as created out of the assumptions we make as a culture about race, including race as a social construct and an increased awareness of the impact of experiences of racism and discrimination. In addition, they emphasize that distinction must be made between an individual's racial identity (or self-understanding); racial identification (how others understand and categorize an individual); and racial category (what racial identities are available and chosen in a specific context).

Another major influence recognized in current theory is the cultural differences in conception of the self that some racial identities may bring, as in the interdependent orientation found in many Asian cultures (Lou, Lalaonde, & Wilson, 2011); the individual who is reconciling identities with very different cultural orientations may have a different experience of identity construction overall.

Trends in the research appear to be moving toward redefining the idea of race in line with changing social norms; studying biracial individuals from a variety of racial groups, as well as individuals who come from two minority groups; and developing further understanding of the ways in which cultural context and other identities impact racial identity formation.

## Conclusion

Our psychological understanding of biracial identity has been heavily influenced by the socio-political context that surrounds the field. Racial identity models have reflected historical changes, and have shifted focus from the pathology of the biracial individual to the impact of external factors and the intricacies of identity development. Established racial identity models have not been empirically tested, and there is yet to be clear theoretical conceptualization regarding the multiracial individual and the children of the biracial baby boom. Research in this area may be wrought with political ramifications given the racial tensions of our society, but it is important nonetheless for the growing demographic of biracial and multiracial individuals.

## See Also

Maria Root  
Monocultural vs. Multicultural

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