

Article



Mixed Feelings: Identity Development of Biracial People

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ABSTRACT Multiracial people traditionally have been categorized as monoracial, thus creating limitations to their identity development (Gibbs 1987; Davis 1991). However, recent societal shifts concerning race have left mixed race individuals with an array of racial identity choices (Huffman 1994; Townsend et al. 2012). To explore such a phenomenon, this study consisted of in-depth interviews with 15 adult Biracial respondents on questions surrounding their experiences as a mixed-race person. The results indicate that Biracial persons come to develop a variety of distinctive racial identities ranging from monoracial to Multiracial. Additionally, the respondents identified three distinct stages in their development of a racial identity including: racial ignorance, racial ambivalence, and racial transcendence. The results of this inquiry affirm perspectives in the literature that Multiracial people continually engage in an iterative process of defining themselves in racial terms via the negotiation of social interaction.

In an era that has seen both the election of a Biracial president and the introduction of a Multiracial designation in the census, there is little argument concerning the paradigm shift regarding race in society. Within this landscape, Multiracial persons are in a unique position as they navigate the concept of race and identity politics (Root 1997). As such, this paper seeks to explore the array of choices Multiracial people make regarding race as well as the process by which they attain such an identity throughout their formative years. While this draws upon earlier efforts related to identity development (Jacob 1992; Huffman 1994; Kerwin et al. 1998), it is a subject that requires further examination as the fluidity related to such processes is often not addressed (Winn and Priest 1993).

The need for continuous inquiry of racial identity formation is evident in the seemingly paradoxical relationship society has with race. We live in a world that, in one dimension, sees race as a social construct and, in another, as something that is biologically significant. For example, the 2000 U.S. Census allows people of Multiracial descent to make a choice, giving 9 million Americans the ability to identify as Multiracial (U.S. Census 2010). However, in a recent case, Rachel Dolezal, a White woman who self-identified as Black, experienced a national backlash and accusations of appropriating an African American identity (Samuels 2015). Regardless of her personal motivations towards such an identity, it is seemingly paradoxical that in a time that some regard race as socially constructed, biological requirements do exist within the broader society. Researchers such as Howard Taylor (2006) suggest that identity politics can exist for people in a world that espouses agency yet still operates under biological frameworks.

The overarching premise of this work is that Multiracial people do not form racial identity in a vacuum (Huffman 1994; Townsend et al. 2012). Biracial people are shaped not only by their personal interests and proclivities, but also by the social interactions they have with the greater society. As Gans (1997) notes, identity development does not occur apart from a group as the symbols and their sources are a "part of culture" (1). It is evident that social interactions continue to shape the identities of Biracial and Multiracial people, who often develop their identity within the margins.

An environment where Multiracial persons have social agency *and* social pressure to make racial identity choices opens many questions regarding identity process. Questions regarding the conditions in which Multiracial people make identity choices, how certain agents of socialization affect the choices that Multiracial persons ultimately make, and many more, are raised when individual aspirations and social imperatives intersect.

Among these questions, one topic emerges as the focus of this inquiry: The identification of stages that Multiracial persons may go through in their development of a racial identity. Such inquiry is both timely and beneficial in that it attempts to uncover both the nature in which Multiracial persons develop a racial "self," as well as the unique coping strategies Multiracial people employ as they navigate the racial system. As stated earlier, racial choice and identification are enveloped in social processes (Gibbs and Hines 1994). As such, it is essential to identify the process by which Multiracial persons decide on a racial identity. This work is offered towards that end.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Starting in the early 20th century, scholars have given much attention to the idea that race is a social construction (Davis 1991; Hall 2001; Taylor 2006). As an extension of this trend, Multiracial identity has been a topic that many have taken notice of more recently (Rockquemore and Brunσμα, 2004; Renn 2008; Townsend et al. 2012). Particularly interesting are the eclectic approaches and positions held by those performing such research. According to Huffman (1995), there are three distinct categories under which Biracial literature falls. These three research approaches are problem-based, family-based, and acquisition-based. The current review indicates that these thematic trends in the literature continue.

Much of the early Biracial research was focused on the problems and issues related to being Biracial. Such researchers generally came from counseling studies-based backgrounds that view Biracialism as a phenomenon needing to be "treated." For instance, in a clinical study of 12 Biracial children, Gibbs (1987) proposed that Biracial individuals face unique difficulties and challenges. Specifically, she noted that there is a tendency for Biracial individuals to have trouble identifying with their race because they are forced to identify with a status that is "disadvantaged." Ultimately, Gibbs (1987) concluded that Biracial individuals likely need a multi-faceted strategy of treatment when dealing with such difficult and potentially tragic circumstances (266).

A more recent study of 62 college students by Townsend et al. (2012) proposed that socioeconomic status of the respondent played a significant part in their identity development. The findings of Townsend et al. indicated that having lower social class designation potentially creates scenarios where identity formation for Multiracial persons would result in challenge or duress. In response to these studies, Wilson (1993) strongly cautioned researchers to guard against the urge to focus on Biracial research as problem studies. Wilson maintained that "there is the need for scholars and others interested in mixed race people to approach the subject in a non-pejorative and comprehensive fashion" (Wilson 1993:285).

While acknowledging the many challenges for the parents of Biracial children, other researchers have focused on positive influence that family and friends can provide. According to Rosenblatt et al (1995) Biracial children in his study were living normal, happy lives, although they were frequently confronted by racist experiences and attitudes. Rosenblatt et al. attribute positive relationships with family and peers to be notable influences in the development of racial identity. Ferguson (2004), in his study of 10 interracial couples,

concluded that the families of Multiracial children have a significant role in how mixed-race children develop racial identities. Specifically, Ferguson argues that they negotiate their identities with their parents via conversations, experiences, and social preparations (Ferguson 2004). Kerry Rockquemore and David Brunsma (2002), in their survey of 177 Multiracial persons, found that peer groups and social networks also have a strong influence on the choice Biracial people make vis-à-vis racial identity. More specifically, they found that feelings about Multiracial identity were stronger when one affiliated with certain cross-cultural peer groups than with monoracial ones.

Instead of focusing on specific external factors, other studies have opted to concentrate on identifying the stages in which racial consciousness develops. For example, Jacobs (1992) examined some of the variables associated with racial identity formation in Biracial children. Utilizing a "doll play instrument" with 36 hand-painted dolls each having varied racial characteristics, children were allowed to play with the dolls and then asked a series of questions pertaining to attitudes and preference for their doll choices. Based on the findings, Jacobs concluded that there are three different stages of racial consciousness: experimental stage, internalization stage, and family alignment. These stages suggest that Biracial children move from an identity based mostly on race to an identity that people identify based on social relationships (i.e., family). G. K. Kich (1992) also identified a three-stage identity formation model. After interviewing 15 Biracial people aged 16-60, Kich found that Biracial children struggle through dissonance, a quest for acceptance, and finally general acceptance. The findings in this study were very reminiscent of the findings that were construed through the Jacobs study (1992). It is with this focus that the present study is grounded. More specifically, the focus is on the notion that a process of racial identity development exists and matures as the Biracial persons interact with a social world around them.

METHOD

ANALYTIC STRATEGY

This research study employed an exploratory, inductive approach to identify the process that Biracial people go through in forming their racial identity. Scholars such as Christine Kerwin (1992) assert that the use of an ethnographic methodology is beneficial in the exploration into topics such as

racial identity formation. As such, the qualitative method of a semi-structured, in-depth interview was employed in the study. Several tape-recorded interviews were used to gather data from each respondent. Questions were open ended in nature and took place in a relaxed, neutral atmosphere (i.e., coffee shops). Initial and follow-up interviews ranged anywhere from two hours to six hours. After the interviews, some follow-up "reliability" checks were used as several participants were contacted for clarification and further explanation regarding their responses.

SAMPLING PROCEDURES

For the identification and recruitment of Biracial persons for this study, conventional probability sampling efforts would be "wrought with threats to validity as Multiracial persons are not randomly distributed in the United States" (Root 1992B:183). This consideration, combined with the lack of a comprehensive sampling frame, compelled the researcher to recruit potential respondents through a "snowball" sampling method, whereby existing study participants volunteered informed friends, family, and acquaintances about the study (Seidman 1998). The initial respondent is a Biracial person who heard about the study from a third party and contacted the researcher directly to request admission into the sample. Subsequently, this respondent served as a gatekeeper to other potential recruits, even contacting some directly to inform them of the opportunity to take part in the study. The network of Biracial respondents willing to participate grew very quickly (i.e., within a few weeks). In fact, one of the respondents jokingly suggested that it would be easy to form an email database for all the Multiracial people that she knew. Respondents were added to the sample until adequate data saturation was realized.

Asking people to share about their racial identity can be a private and challenging experience (Gibbs 1992). Therefore, significant efforts were made to ensure an ethical selection and research process. For example, this study went through an extensive review by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of North Dakota, which assessed risks and benefits of the project. Also, respondents were provided a detailed consent form that outlined the goals of the study, along with identified risks and benefits. All respondents were told their participation was voluntary and that they could cancel at any time. Additionally, respondents were given the promise of anonymity throughout the process. As such, all respondents' names were replaced with pseudonyms in the transcripts.

SAMPLE

This study was comprised of 15 Biracial persons from the Midwest interviewed over the course of six months. While no specific number was set initially, examination of the data indicated that saturation had taken effect at 15 respondents, as themes were salient at this sample size. Additionally, several sample delimitations were put in place during the selection process. The respondents involved in the study were under 40 with an age range from 18-39. Age delimitations were put in place as Multiracial persons born before the 1970s may have had drastically different identity development experiences due to "one drop rule" norms surrounding identity development (Davis 1991). Respondents were to be over 18 due to the assumption that a certain amount of progress towards their racial identity had been made by that age.

For this study, "Biracial persons" were limited to people who had one White and one Black parent. It was imperative to delimit the sample to Biracial persons of two racial subgroups, as allowing for other racial and ethnic differences would potentially permit further variation in the sample group. It could be argued that the experience of someone who is Latino and Asian is markedly different than someone who is Black and Native American, for example.

Interestingly, the sample did not report identical identity labels, as eight of the respondents reported a Biracial identity, while seven of the respondents identified as Black. None of the respondents identified as White.

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE DEVELOPMENT

To appropriately explore the state of racial identity formation for Biracial persons, a set of interview questions was created. Specifically, each respondent was asked questions concerning their background history, views of race, and how they perceive themselves racially or otherwise. As is the tradition for qualitative research, the questions were informed via the review of literature featuring similar types of inquiry (Kerwin et al. 1993; Seidman 1998; Townsend et al. 2012). Additionally, care was taken to ensure that questions were global in nature to allow for the respondents to have freedom in their ability to respond. The culmination of these efforts resulted in several dozen questions surrounding the topics of racial identity, experience, and formation.

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis process included the transcribing and coding of the data received from the respondents into thematic categories. As all the interviews were audiotaped, they were fully transcribed into several hundred pages of text.

All completed transcripts were read several times by the researcher. Additionally, steps were taken via the use of a qualitative research analysis tool, *Ethnograph 8.0*, to collapse and refine the categories and coding schemes. While the software does not directly analyze data, it does offer excellent data management and coding tools for use during the analysis process. Ultimately, the interviews were sorted through for themes and patterns regarding the identity and experience. Concerns related to internal validity were mitigated via the use of respondent checks, follow up, and rephrasing. This effort resulted in the assertions regarding identity formation.

RESULTS

While variation in the respondents' respective identities was revealing, the central focus was to assess the process of identity formation for mixed-race persons. As such, the major theme identified is that Biracial persons engage in a process of identity development encompassing three stages: first a stage of *racial ignorance*, followed by a second stage of *racial ambivalence*, and finally a third stage of *racial transcendence*.

STAGE ONE: RACIAL IGNORANCE

The ignorance of race stage occurs early on in the life course. During this time, Biracial children are not fully aware of the context and consequence of a racial heritage. Typically, the Biracial children report the lack of identity to any race or any consequence of being labeled as part of race. As such, the label "ignorance" is used because it is indicative of the lack of awareness the person may have due to their nascent state of their identity development. Most of the Biracial people in this study identified this stage as including their earliest years until they were about 9 to 10 years old. Mackenzie discussed the nonexistence of color in her younger years:

When I was young I really didn't realize I was really different other than the fact that my skin was darker than my mom's. It didn't really affect me much. I knew my mother looked completely not like me, but it still didn't, even though I wasn't really around Black people that much. Up until then I didn't feel affected by it until I was 9.
(Mackenzie, 24 years old)

Donovan briefly summarized what the Biracial experience meant to him as a younger person in the first stage of racial identity formation:

During 1st grade and then 2nd, 3rd, and 4th [grades] I went to a private school in San Francisco. There were no Black kids in the whole school and that really didn't bother me because, I mean, I was still young and my mother was White so I really didn't notice, you know. I didn't feel out of place there. (Donovan, 23 years old)

Earlier studies suggest that color consciousness may exist among younger children, however it is without the awareness of the consequences regarding race. Similarly, respondents in this study uniformly considered their differences to be a mere matter of fact, without any real distinction. For example, another respondent, Dane, discussed how, as a child, he thought that he looked like everybody else in his life (who were, in fact, White): "I think when I was growing up, I considered myself just like every other White kid on the block and my dad was just a little darker than everyone else" (Dane, 22 years old). In some of the respondent cases, awareness required parental information for even the beginning of a racial identity to bloom. For example, Clark, who is adopted, did not realize that he was Biracial until his parents told him:

It was when my parents told me, like I asked my parents what color I was and they told me, "You're half Black and half White," was when they first told me and I figured that out. It was around age 10 years old. (Clark, 24 years old)

In all the interviews, social consequence regarding race was rarely, if ever, mentioned in reference to the early years of their lives. If anything, respondents would only concede that they knew their skin was different. In this initial stage, race had little real bearing for the respondent. Some respondents felt it unnecessary to even comment on the experiences under age 6 or 7. This is due, in part, perhaps, to memory recollection and the fact that there are no personal accounts of repercussions for a young child until they came to understand that racial distinctions exist.

STAGE TWO: RACIAL AMBIVALENCE

The second stage of ambivalence includes the years from 9 to later teens. This stage represented a very difficult period for the respondents in this study. The label ambivalence is connected to this stage as it symbolizes the

overwhelming amount of confusion that the respondents reported during this time. All the respondents shared stories of confusion as pressures, frustrations, and identity challenges rose to the surface as the Biracial children entered adolescence. Moreover, respondents reported that some sort of racist incident triggered this stage. During this stage, respondents report being the victims of verbal abuse, mistaken identity, and, at times, intense racism. Mackenzie discussed her first difficult racial experience:

It didn't affect me until I was 9 when there was this racial incident between me and this little White kid. I had this really nice dirt bike because I was a tomboy. He pushed me off of it and told me a nigger like me shouldn't have a bike like that. That was the first time that I ever experienced that I was way different from other people. (Mackenzie, 24 years old)

For some respondents, life events like a move or change in schools were the catalysts for trigger events. For example, respondent Marco discussed his first racial experience, which occurred after his family moved from an area that was, for the most part, accepting of all cultures to a more racist area:

Well, when I was in [home country] I was in a multi-cultural community. When I moved to [foreign country], my parents moved to a better town because they did not want me growing up in a bad place. And then I was in a little town that did not know anything about Black people. I think that I am the only mixed or Black person at my high school. So after I came there people started calling me nigger and stuff. I didn't even know what it was. So I found that out after a year or two. (Marco, 26 years old)

Ultimately, the racial experience seemed to have a confounding effect on the lives of Biracial respondents. Jathan remembered the intense racism that forced him to take notice that he was different from everybody else:

I remember when I was about 6 years old, and I remember when I was walking to the store to get some candy and I saw these two White dudes in a pickup truck and there was a four-way stop sign, and one pointed his head out of the window and said, "Hey little nigger boy, nigger boy, you hear me talking to you nigger boy?" So

that started at a young age. So that gave me a head start on something.

It was when I was 12 years old is when I really laid the foundation down but I always knew I was different. You know what I am saying? Ever since I was about 12. (Jathan, 26 years old)

For some, this experience occurred earlier and for others it was later. The one common theme for all respondents was that encounters with racism served as a turning point in their lives. Whereas race did not matter much in earlier years, it was important to adjust to a world that imposes such stringent norms on race. Being able to choose, this left the respondents in a state of bewilderment as they attempted to figure out how to live. It is at this time that the Biracial person is challenged to overcome the racial bigotry, commentary, and curiosity that confronts him/her. Although all the respondents reported difficulty during their teen years, those with Black identities tended to discuss the overt challenges, while the Biracial respondents emphasized the confusion. After Jathan, who identifies as Black, had his first brush with racism, the situation even got more difficult for him:

I used to hate how hard the struggle being mixed was. Back in the days when I was mixed, it was hard. Plus those little kids were so mean; man, they'll say whatever. That was the hard part, dealing with those little comments. (Jathan, 26 years old)

Marco, who also considers himself Black, discussed the intense loneliness that he experienced. Through it all, Marco still has awareness for the situations that confront him:

In the beginning, I had no friends. People didn't want to associate with me when I first came to [name of town]. People did not want to sit next to me. People didn't want to hang out with me and stuff like that. Like the first years I basically had no friends. I would just stay at home and listen to music and stuff like this. I would mind my own business and not play with other kids and stuff when I was in [foreign country]. In a few years I had some friends that I was really ok with . . . it took them a long time, they went through a learning process. Because it was not necessarily the kids' fault it was just the way they grew up, the way the parents taught them that they didn't want

anything (inaudible) till they found out themselves. (Marco, 26 years old)

For many, "fitting in" during the stage of ambivalence can be a real challenge. It is especially difficult in the teen years when peer groups are most important. Mackenzie, who considers herself Black, discussed this time where fitting in was extremely important:

I didn't feel I could fit in until I met some people that I could relate to me as far as people who were mixed or people who were Hispanic or minority anything because I could never wear the hair that was in at that point and time growing up. I had to put on a new (inaudible) because my hair is not the same, and, you know, I could never be certain of the makeup colors because it never looked right on me because of my skin. That was kind of hard. It was all about me not fitting in. And I wore a lot of brand names my first high school year, and that was my way of fitting in. But once I was comfortable with me, I started to wear what I liked. Whereas, before that I would just wear whatever was the style even if I didn't like it. You know? I always had this mouth to fight back with, I always knew what to say, but I think up until 10th or 11th grade I would just step over it and be quiet. I didn't really learn to speak up. (Mackenzie, 24 years old)

Whether Black or Biracial, respondents echoed each other in terms of the strong frustrations they had with identifying with race at this stage. Clark discussed the intense confusion that came from the "struggle" of being a Biracial person during his teen years:

Actually I have been criticized for the racial choices that I have made for being Biracial. Some people say, "How come you don't act White?" or "How come you act Black more than White?" or whatever. I am like, does that bother you? And they are like, you should be more White than Black. I am like, it is not your problem what I choose to be. If I want to be Black or White, I can. (Clark, 24 years old)

Another respondent, Monique, further discussed the challenges that fitting in as a Biracial person can present during the ambivalent stage:

I was very confused because I wanted to fit in the school I was going to with the majority of White students but when I would go to games or, you know, activities with other schools they would be playing against African Americans and African Americans have this thing a lot of time when they're friendly and they'll say "What's up?" to another person of their race and when I would attend these different games or activities they would treat me like kind of like their own they would treat me differently so I think that was kind of one of them at that time. (Monique, 30 years old)

Being Biracial, one must expect that others will perceive their ambiguous features with a level of curiosity. With this level of curiosity opens opportunities for unsolicited inquiry and mistaken identity. This can be very bothersome to a Biracial person who is trying his/her best to "make sense" out of the difficult times that the teen years can present. Clark discussed his experience of being mistaken for some other race:

Some considered me White, and some considered me Black, and some people thought I was a Mexican or something like that you know. They liked asked me are you like Mexican? No! (Clark, 25 years old)

A good portion of the respondents shared that mistaken identities led them to feel anywhere from annoyed to deeply offended. Derek discussed how his ambiguous physical traits repeatedly led people to ask him, "What are you?" Derek felt the need to "set them straight":

Although some people have said that I look either Asian or some people have said I look Mexican or Hispanic or Indian. Or, hey I think you're, you look kind of like you're Asian, or you're kind of Hispanic or something like that. And I, just kind of tell them right there, I'm not any of those, I'm half Black and half White! (Derek, 21 years old)

The ambivalent years are often a period when the Biracial adolescent must wade through a quagmire of racism, pressure to fit in, and mistaken identity and unwanted curiosity. As indicated from the respondents, the Biracial people select a variety of identity choices to respond to the social pressures that they are facing at home, school, work, and elsewhere.

STAGE THREE: TRANSCENDENCE

The years of transcendence are comprised of the late teen years through the early twenties. During the stage of transcendence, Biracial people begin to solidify a concrete racial identity that is both personal and public. It is at this time that the person becomes emotionally reconciled with their racial choice. It is also at this time that most of the pressures that go along with the social realities of adolescence begin to diminish. The Biracial people in this stage are free to operate in society as whatever racial identity that they wish. In essence, they have "transcended" a racial structure that suggests that your identity is not your own, but one that needs to be earned and negotiated. Now such an identity is not earned or negotiated, but it is chosen and cherished.

All the respondents, those who chose Biracial identities as well as those who chose Black identities, reported coming to a time of transcendence. Their experiences suggest that there can be a "happy ending" for the Biracial person and that these are not individuals who are doomed to a life of marginality. Donovan exemplified the nature of transcendence:

Basically you're too young to care and then you're old enough to notice the difference and try to establish an identity and then you're mature enough to look past all that to be friends with whomever. You've got elementary: too young to care, junior high: kind of had to separate them to find out who I was, high school: I figured out who I was and so I could relate to anybody. (Donovan, 23 years old)

Looking back, many respondents are proud of the progress that they have made. Dane, for example, illustrates the coming-of-age experienced by those who adopted a Biracial self-identity:

I think that most people who are Biracial, by the time that they have matured, have already formed their own identity, they know who they are. Unless they are insecure in some form or another, most people by the time they figure out "I am Biracial", this is how it is, they don't worry too much about it, and they know who they are. They are a person like any other, they just happen to have one parent that is Black and another that is White. I think that most people are not confused. (Dane, 22 years old)

When sharing their thoughts regarding the latter stages of their identity development, many describe this transcendence in terms of being “comfortable in their own skin.” More specifically, they have come to accept that they are different, and that such uniqueness is fine. Mackenzie defined this transcendence as coming into herself, or who she was meant to be in society:

I just sort of came into my own comfortable me, instead of telling, instead of being both. I felt within this world it was more acceptable to be Black because I am light skinned Black person. I look like a minority; I’m treated like one unless I am with my parent. I was now me! (Mackenzie, 24 years old)

As someone who reported having moved out of a period of ambivalence and struggle with racial identity, Monique echoed this sense of comfort with her self-identity by giving her own example of what it meant to transcend from years of ambivalence:

I’m more comfortable with it [racial identity] now. I’m sure it has to do with that I am more comfortable with how I feel about myself today. I think it comes from just accepting myself; just accepting this is the way I am. My hair is naturally curly; my skin is darker than most people. Just accepting it and acknowledging then not thinking about it and trying to push it to the back of my mind! (Monique, 30 years old)

Due to this newfound comfort with their racial status, there was also a growing appreciation of the advantage to being Biracial. Many of the respondents reported that they have the “best of both worlds” in that they could communicate with either race effectively. In some cases, the respondents even reported the advantage of being a “social chameleon” complete with the ability to switch racial roles whenever it was prudent to do so. Nick identified the advantage of being able to talk to others by being able to gain access to Black culture where others cannot:

It [being Biracial] really helps to relate to other people when you can say yeah, you know. It is really natural. When I meet somebody who is Black it is really easy to blend in. If I am in a crowd with a lot of Black people it is really easy to blend in whereas some of my friends

would not have as easy of a time blending in. I can relate to both sides. (Nick, 24 years old)

Thus, because Biracial respondents experienced both worlds, they found they could interact more freely with either racial group than they would be able to if they were just one race. Another respondent, Brianna, discussed this advantage:

I think that being Biracial is more of a gift to me more so than a hindrance like people say 'cause I can fit in with so many more people and feel comfortable. I have no problem going to a frat party. I have no problems socializing with all races. (Brianna, 22 years old)

Others shared that the process of transcending has allowed Biracial persons to truly understand what it is like to overcome such challenging and social structures. Jathan, a respondent who discussed the periods of challenges in earlier stages, now reported the advantages of being Biracial as the ability to recognize the difficulty of what people have gone through in life:

No matter what there is beauty in every culture and being mixed it is even more. I don't know why, but we got insight into all types of things. It gives us an advantage because for the situations we have gone through we got an advantage over other groups that have not gone through this stuff. (Jathan, 23 years old)

Despite the earlier hardships, respondents such as Kurtis explain that the advantage comes down to the observation that such experiences allow the Biracial person unique opportunities to help others.

I am happy with the way I am. I mean, like I went through a lot of stuff. I would not want to go through again but on the same side it helps me help a lot of other people, it helps me give them advice and I think it actually gave me a bit of peace for what I went through because, I mean, I am still here after all that happened to me. I have had good sides from both sides, some bad from one but either way I don't want to change who I am having experienced both. (Kurtis, 39 years old)

Taken as a whole, the individuals in this study all reported that they have come to some type of "reckoning" with their racial identities. Regardless of what that racial identity happened to ultimately be, all the respondents in the study reported comfort and ease with their chosen racial status. An important caveat is that the exact racial choice that a person made was not necessarily what was important here. Rather, the focus of this study was to look at the process that was involved in the acquisition of participant racial identities.

DISCUSSION

In the 21st century, Multiracial people live in a paradoxical era; one that allows for agency in racial identity yet provides such freedoms with a multitude of stipulations. As such, this inquiry was offered to explore the process by which Multiracial people navigate the racial milieu of this era. This study successfully demonstrated that such a process exists for Biracial people, a journey that includes the three distinct stages of ignorance, ambivalence, and transcendence. The findings build upon earlier studies that indicate the presence of identity patterns (Huffman 1995; Jacobs 1994; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002). As such, these patterns provide important sociological insights to the manner by which Biracial individuals form and maintain a racial identity. For example, respondents were able to share about how specific social factors led them to develop awareness (i.e., curious questioning from friends, revelation from parents) to confusion (i.e., name-calling, exclusion) and to acceptance (i.e., positive relationships, community acceptance).

While generally following trends within the literature, there were areas in which this study provided some unforeseen insights into the development of racial identity. For example, the number of respondents who shared about their experiences with racism is telling. It was noted by more than two-thirds of the respondents that particular events of racial intolerance (including, but not limited to, taunting, pejoratives, and isolation) informed their identity development. This factor was a common discussion point within the ambivalence stage.

However, contrary to warnings in the earlier literature, mixed race people are not "stuck" in states of ambivalence; instead, they report using these experiences to solidify an identity that they are comfortable with (Gibbs 1992; 1994). Biracial persons do not go throughout life in states of perpetual marginality and confusion; rather, respondents in this study report the ability to embody racial identities that they believe best fits who they are and who they are

becoming. They can indeed transcend race. The story of identity formation is that Multiracial people do not live in the margins; they may stop there, but it is not where they call home.

These findings point to the need to educate parents, teachers, and friends about the roles that they play in the Biracial person's life. With this understanding, such allies and friends should be able to provide two things that Biracial respondents in the study found extremely beneficial to them: support and encouragement. Understanding when a Biracial person is especially susceptible to difficulty and hardship can offer a great deal of hope for the future. Institutions such as families and schools need to be educated that these three stages of identity development exist and informed on how to appropriately support Biracial children and adolescents.

In sum, these findings not only inform society regarding these topics, but can be seen as a benefit to the respondents themselves. In fact, many of the people who volunteered to take part in this work indicated that this was an important "part of their journey." For Biracial people, there are great incentives for identifying positive steps towards racial identity acquisition. Ultimately, as Root (1990) asserts, the Multiracial person welcomes a conclusive racial identity.

LIMITATIONS

Scholars have cited that exploratory research into topics like racial identity formation can have several potential limitations (Kerwin et al. 1993). Two specific limitations observed in this inquiry are sample representativeness and scope. This study relied on a self-selected snowball sample method. With such a small nonprobability sample, it is essential to consider this snapshot as an indication of the tendency towards these patterns of racial identity development. Additionally, the approach this research took was narrow as the study was delimited to half Black and half White participants. Other studies have shown that mixed race persons of Asian or Native American descent, for example, may experience other factors that are very different than those of this population. Additionally, the experiences of mixed race persons of three or more racial backgrounds may not adequately be addressed in this inquiry. Lastly, the region may play a part limiting the generalizability of this group in that most of the respondents were from the Midwest. One could speculate the Biracial persons on the coasts or in larger urban centers may have unique experience due to greater diversity and larger populations.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Based on this study and previous research, there are a few other aspects of the Biracial experience that need to be investigated. For instance, it would be highly beneficial to question the parents and teachers of adult Biracial individuals. Adding parents and teachers as respondents in further research would aid in understanding the earliest years of racial identity development. Likewise, studies that explored the roles parents played with their adult Biracial child would provide researchers with a broader perspective. In addition, the parents may have better knowledge of "behind the scenes" influences. For example, parents may not always outwardly discuss their parental strategies with their children, but they are aware of their intentional efforts to guide their children towards positive racial identity formation.

An examination of possible gender differences in the Biracial experience could also be a potentially promising area of research. Since growing up male and female are very different experiences, especially during the adolescent years, the question of whether there is a difference in their respective formation of racial identity is an interesting possibility. Another very important prospect for further research is an investigation of individuals who consider themselves "White." There were no individuals in the current study that saw themselves as White. Although it may be rare, it would be beneficial to examine the racial identity process for a Biracial person who chose a White self-identity. Lastly, further research should be done on other variations of Biracial persons (e.g., half Asian, half White). This would be beneficial to research, as there may be differences in how other racial variations affect identity formation. Exploring cultural and ethnic nuances that come with different human intersectionality allows for greater understanding of the ever-growing diversity of experiences that exists within our society.

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