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The New Multiracial Student: Where Do We Start?

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In 2004, one in 40 persons in the United States self-identified as Mul-
tiracial. By the year 2050, it is projected that as many as one in five
Americans will claim a Multiracial background, and in turn, a Mul-
tiracial or Biracial identity (Lee & Bean, 2004). With racial lines
becoming more blurred, it is increasingly important for practitioners in
higher education to address the issues surrounding identity development
in Multiracial college students. By looking at a personal narrative of
a Biracial woman, recent studies of Multiracial identity development,
and the daily challenges that Multiracial and Biracial students face
concerning their identity, student affairs practitioners can begin to create
more inclusive spaces for this growing population of students.

Ambiguous facial features, complex ancestries, and an array of experiences and questions from the world currently shape the Multiracial community. Outside pressures to identify, specifically as one race, pose a constant threat to the identity of a young Multiracial student who has yet to experience a community that does not rely on strictly defined identity boxes. "What are you?" and "Where are you from?" are questions that are heard on an almost daily basis. These are questions that are not only intrusive, but can be very intimidating for a young adult who is not quite sure how to respond. Similar to their peers, young Multiracial adults need the time, space, and opportunity to develop their own racial identity. Unfortunately, however, not all college campuses have spaces for this growing population to do so. Understanding the journey of racial development for Multiracial youth can be difficult, but more important for student affairs professionals is comfort in students' uncertainty of how to racially identify. By examining different studies that have been conducted, different theories of identity that exist, and a personal account of racial fluidity, student affairs professionals can gain a clearer understanding of what this "not knowing" looks like.

Jackie Hyman earned her Bachelor of Arts from the University of Maryland, College Park
in 2008, and is anticipating her graduation from HESA in 2010. Having gone through
periods of doubt and confusion throughout her graduate career in identifying as Biracial, she
is now more confident than ever in her racial identity. Because of her experiences at University
of Maryland and University of Vermont, she has committed herself to creating a Multiracial
student group at UVM, as well as creating potential spaces for Multiracial students at her next
institution, wherever that may be. Without a doubt, a passion has been ignited that will guide
her research and involvement on college campuses for years to come.

Theory to Practice: How Do Multiracial Individuals Identify?

Multiracial individuals have an array of identity classifications that they can choose from and change however many times they feel necessary throughout each day, week, year, or lifetime. Depending on which point the individual is at in their racial identity development, these classifications can include identities such as Black, White, Biracial, Multiracial, no race at all, or however else the individual chooses to identify. The fluidity of race within the life of a Multiracial individual is a practiced and lived concept. In fact, social constructionists "argue that racial classifications can differ not only among nations and historical periods, but also in the day-to-day lives of individuals" (Harris & Sim, 2002, p. 615). To see race as a fluid concept, individuals must understand the three dimensions in which racial identity is distinguished: internal racial identity, external racial identity, and expressed racial identity. Internal racial identity is what individuals personally claim as their race independent of external factors. External racial identity is what observers perceive as the individual's race. Finally, expressed racial identity is how individuals articulate their racial identity to the general public (Harris & Sim). This expressed racial identity can take the form of the individual's internal racial identity, external racial identity, or a unique mixture of the two. Within the life of a Multiracial individual, depending on the environment or the context, one of these dimensions can shift, creating a different racial dynamic for that individual.

While examining data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Harris and Sim (2002) were able to identify patterns among the seventh through twelfth grade respondents pertaining to their self-selected racial identity. Harris and Sim found that 87.6% of the students expressed their identities consistently across all the contexts in which race was presented. Yet, most youth who reported being Multiracial in one context reported being Monoracial in others, leading Harris and Sim to conclude that "no more than two-thirds of youth with known Multiracial ancestry express a Multiracial identity" (p. 620). They also found that 75% of the mixed Black and White youth chose to identify as "Black" when asked, "Which one category best describes your racial background?" This figure demonstrated the enduring power of the one drop rule, established in the 1960s, declaring that an individual with any connection to Black ancestry is to be regarded and is to identify as Black. This figure not only demonstrated the commitment to a Multiracial identity among this particular racial group, but it also illustrated the fact that mixed Black and White individuals have a difficult time denying part of themselves and part of their racial ancestry. This is due to the perceived racial distance or separation between the Black and White identities and the perceived separation within this mixed identity (Cheng & Lee, 2009).

There are several variables that can affect one's racial identification. The most common and researched variables are bilingualism, one's proximity to a non-

White community, and one's phenotype based on generational status (being the direct or indirect product of an interracial relationship). "A consistent finding is that speaking a language other than English at home significantly increases the likelihood that Biracial children will adopt a non-White identity, supporting the thesis that language maintenance is critical in ethnic identity formation" (Lee & Bean, 2004, p. 230). In addition, exposure to the minority parent's culture within one's neighborhood context can also increase the likelihood that a Biracial child, more specifically a child who has one White parent, will identify more strongly with a non-White identity. Finally, one's phenotype is a significant determinant. "Skin color has been found to affect mate and friend selection" (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 2001, p. 30) among all individuals, but this presents a unique problem for Multiracial individuals. The more one resembles a specific race, the more likely that individual will feel comfortable claiming that identity due to the perceived acceptance from that group. Having little resistance and few questions when entering a specific atmosphere, Biracial and Multiracial individuals will more readily claim membership in that group. This becomes difficult for certain individuals because "Biracial individuals' appearances are often times ambiguous" (p. 30-31), therefore not readily fitting into any one specific community.

The Higher Education Setting

In college, students can explore their identity through media such as academic work, campus life, and residential community living. It is shocking to learn that the experience of the Multiracial student, a steadily growing student population, is scarcely documented or explored. How are these students navigating a traditionally modernist structure where race is considered "a master status, an identity that overrides all others in others' judgments of the self" (Stephan, 1992, p. 51)?

In 2000, Renn conducted qualitative research with 24 different self-identified Biracial college students from three preselected colleges. In her data analysis, Renn found two distinct themes that emerged for the Biracial students: the notion of a safe physical space and the impact of peer culture and acceptance in relation to those spaces. Several of the Biracial participants expressed concern when they noticed certain social borders or socially constructed barriers that were present around the various culture-based campus communities. Although some of these borders were more permeable than others, the three main elements of public space-making were a shared culture, physical appearance, and participation in legitimizing activities (Renn).

In her interviews with students, Renn found that several of them felt comfortable entering cultural spaces due to their shared cultural knowledge with the other students about such elements as language, food, religion, customs, and value of culture. For most, this shared cultural knowledge enabled the Biracial

students to participate and feel a sense of belonging on their respective campuses. However, the downfall to this is that a lack of cultural knowledge can be just as powerful in keeping a student out of a certain space. Feelings or attitudes of not being racially adequate, such as "Black enough" or "Asian enough," can serve as a divisive tool for individual Multiracial students and cultural groups on campus. In order to combat these labels, Multiracial students may feel pressure to be an expert in their cultural histories, potentially becoming an exaggeration of their ethnic selves.

Physical appearance is another major element in maintaining barriers. Several of the interviewed students recalled a time when they entered a meeting of a group of Monoracial students of color and felt out of place and questioned. An interesting dynamic that plays out here, however, is that "many students looked 'ethnic' enough to be perceived as 'not White'" allowing them the space to "belong to a general community of students of color" (Renn, 2000, p. 407). Although participating in this general community gives them an opportunity to get their foot in the door, true acceptance into a more specific ethnic group is still not guaranteed. Hopefully, in getting to know individual members and the cultures of the groups present, the Multiracial individual will begin to make one-on-one connections and be accepted by the group.

Participation in legitimizing activities gave Biracial participants a way of negotiating the perceived boundaries of various communities. By writing for the school newspaper as a representative of students of color, participating in the various cultural group's academic, political, or social programs, or even establishing themselves as a strong part of campus dialogue about race, Biracial students found they were better able to cross existing boundaries. Once they established credibility, their acceptance was still relatively fragile. It was also expressed within the study that if the student then engaged in activities with predominantly White organizations, or began their college careers with such involvement, participation alone can negate one's legitimacy in the eyes of their peers of color (Renn, 2000).

All of these students expressed the need, desire, and importance of feeling accepted and welcomed in their own space. Those participants that were unable to find their place contemplated the option of transferring to other institutions in order to feel a sense of belonging. "Given the importance in student development and racial identity development theory of having a group of like-others with whom to affiliate, the inability of most Multiracial students to find such a group is cause for concern" (Renn, 2000, p. 415). The level of involvement that one has on his, her, or hir campus and the sense of belonging created by the institution is paramount to the overall success and development of that student. Multiracial students need a space and a voice on campus in order to create an inclusive environment for not only themselves, but for other Biracial and Multi-

racial students on campus as well.

My Personal Story

In the last decade, scholar Maria Root (1996) developed an ecological Multiracial Identity Model that shifted the importance from a final outcome to a focus on the context of identity development of Multiracial individuals. Root proposed that there are four race contexts in which Multiracial individuals engage; this engagement is called, "border crossing." The term border crossing refers to "the idea that identity could be deployed situationally by well-adjusted, intellectually, and emotionally mature individuals" (Renn, 2004, p. 81). There are four different race contexts that Multiracial and Biracial individuals can navigate. One of these contexts is the ability to "hold, merge, and respect multiple perspectives simultaneously" (Root, p. 56). Another context is for individuals to assume a situational identity based on context or environment. The third framework is to create an independent and hybrid Multiracial reference point apart from family and peers. The final circumstance is for the individual to consistently maintain a Monoracial identity when entering different environments (Miville, 2005). Growing up and navigating my different surroundings, I found myself quickly identifying examples from my past where I engaged in all four border crossings.

My father identifies as African American and my mother identifies as Italian American. I identify strongly as Biracial. In middle school and high school, I never really thought about my race in relation to the students around me. I always had a diverse group of friends, so my personal differences never seemed very important or salient to me. It was very apparent in the different ways that we were raised, the different traditions and holidays we celebrated, and the different ways in which we interacted with our families that we all had unique stories and individual identities. However, these differences were never examined and we continued to bond over things such as basketball, music, and the inevitable middle and high school drama and gossip. This is where I feel I developed my ability to respect multiple viewpoints simultaneously without placing a particular value on any one perspective.

In high school, I would float almost seamlessly between different racial groups by automatically code-switching, changing my behavior, language, and style based on my surroundings. During each class transition I assumed a situational identity based on context and environment; I thought nothing of it. To be myself meant having two selves and that seemed normal. I didn't know anything else. My mannerisms, my style, and my speech would all change in the blink of an eye from walking down the hallways with one group to entering a classroom with another. I felt comfortable and welcomed in both settings. The amount of energy that it took to "switch" back and forth from one identity to another never crossed my

mind.

At one point in high school, I denounced my White identity and maintained a Monoracial identity, regardless of what environment I entered. I had submerged myself into the Black culture of the early twenty-first century and spent most of my free time with other Black students. One of my friends would cornrow my hair monthly, even though the braids would begin to unravel and fall out within 2 days. I would go out with my friends on the weekends to clubs that had all-Black clientele. I only listened to the three radio stations in my hometown that played R&B, rap, and hip-hop music. Although I maintained the friendships that I had with my White friends at the time, my connections lost some of their strength during this period. Each month and each year, it was a slightly different story, a slightly modified identity, and a slightly new approach to tackling the world of race relations.

It was not until college that I truly began to develop my Biracial identity and created a hybrid Multiracial reference point apart from family and friends. What allowed me the opportunity to engage in this exploration and land on my two Biracial feet was the fact that there was a structured and newly established Multiracial student group at my undergraduate institution. Being in a space with students who shared my racial identity, understood my stories, and sympathized with my struggles offered me the amount of support that I needed to gain footing. The discussions that we had, the programs that we planned and executed for other Multiracial students, and the times that we collaborated with the other cultural groups on campus allowed me the opportunity to claim and, more importantly, be proud of my Biracial identity. No longer was I switching from room to room and group to group. No longer was I denying a part of myself and my heritage. No longer was I inadvertently ignoring difference, because now I wanted people to see each and every one of my differences each and every day. I have established, solidified, and found solace in my creation of a Multiracial reference point. My Biracial identity could not then and cannot now be wavered or manipulated in any way, and that is due to my undergraduate institution. My institution offered me the support and the space that I needed to develop, experiment with, and find my identity the same way that my peers of color were able to, and I am eternally grateful.

A Call to Student Affairs Practitioners

Navigating the Multiracial and Biracial population can be a difficult and mind-bending task. The voices, experiences, struggles, and successes of Biracial and Multiracial students, however, cannot continue to go unnoticed, unheard, or understated regardless of the adaptations practitioners will have to make to the unconventional methods of racial identity development. As this population steadily

grows, it is important for practitioners to understand the many identities that a Multiracial individual can take on, the need and importance of their own self-identification, and for practitioners to be comfortable with the fluidity of race that many people exhibit. It is important that student affairs practitioners are able and willing to help these students navigate the systems in place at any given institution. The critical mass of Multiracial students is increasing. Creating a space where they feel welcome and their identities acknowledged and celebrated is an important step in the right direction.

There is ample opportunity for research focused on the Multiracial and Biracial population. Hearing the voices and narratives of individuals who grew up in an interracial household but identify as Monoracial would add an entirely new perspective to this subject matter. Conducting more research on individuals who have two parents of color and no White identity would not only illuminate a new student experience, but it would shed light on a new set of successes, struggles, and challenges in one's life. Engaging in more research on mixed Asian and White and mixed Native American and White identities would give voice to those Biracial students who are often overshadowed by mixed Black and White Biracial individuals in the literature and research concerning Biracial and Multiracial identities. Looking at the experiences of Multiracial and Biracial college students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Latina/o or Native American Serving Institutions, two-year institutions, and single-sex institutions can provide practitioners with a broader scope of identity fluidity, identity development, and the role of intersecting identities among Multiracial individuals.

Because the Multiracial and Biracial movement is relatively new, researchers and scholars have only examined the surface level of the issues facing this population. As more and more individuals identifying as Multiracial enter higher education and become a more visible presence on campuses around the nation, researchers, scholars, and practitioners will be forced to view racial identity in a different light. As of now, there are still many implications to be understood, and much work to be done, given the current volume of articles and publications dedicated to these individuals. Slowly, however, this group is being recognized, celebrated, and given voice, while unifying and demanding nothing less.

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