

The Vermont Connection

Volume 32 *Critical Truths, Empowered Voices,
Changing the Landscape of Higher Education*

Article 6

January 2011

Multiracial Student Acquiescence to Empowerment

Heather C. Lou

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc>



Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lou, H. C. (2011). Multiracial Student Acquiescence to Empowerment. *The Vermont Connection*, 32(1).
<https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol32/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Education and Social Services at UVM ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Vermont Connection by an authorized editor of UVM ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uvm.edu.

Multiracial Student Acquiescence to Empowerment

Heather C. Lou

The increased presence of multiracial students has led the academy to face the challenge of creating inclusive educational environments and support services for this identity group. Complex identity development and ambiguous features contribute to multiracial students' "struggle for inclusion in traditional racial/ethnic communities" (Renn, 2004, p. 9). Current campus settings permit multiracial students to acquiesce, or silently submit, to monoracial identity groups. This literature review and scholarly personal narrative will explore the visibility of multiracial students, identity development models, acquiescence to racial ascriptions to find support, and ways student affairs administrators can empower these marginalized students to find space for their growing population in postsecondary education.

“Where’s the Loving?”

I sat in social justice triggers management training this morning and the facilitator instructed attendees to break into racial and ethnic affinity groups. In these groups, we were to discuss ways to work through words, phrases, and situations that may incite upsetting physical reactions. As a newcomer to student affairs, I immediately began to panic as I contemplated my choices for racial identity: (1) White, (2) Chinese, or (3) multiracial, a way to honor all of these identities at once. I became hot, short of breath, and felt an overwhelming “pressure to choose between races” to find support from my peers, supervisors, and the facilitator (Jones, Renn, & Torres, 2009, p. 595). Needless to say, I was experiencing the exact reaction the group was about to discuss: a trigger.

Without a racial or ethnic group to work with, and unable to pass as monoracial, I stopped to examine the group. Everyone started settling into circles while I remained standing, an obvious outsider. In my frenzy and anger from being abandoned, I could not help but exclaim, “Is there *anyone* that is multiracial here?”

Conversations halted and eyes rose to meet mine. I stood out: flustered and without

Heather C. Lou is a first-year HESA student who received her B.S. in public relations with a minor in humanities from San José State University in 2009. Her fluid multiracial identity and passion for social justice, diversity, and equity are key influences in her practice as an educator. She hopes to integrate cross-cultural affairs and advocacy work in postsecondary education in the years to come.

a racial homeland. Then, two other professionals rose from their seats and created the space for conversation about the multiracial experience in our college setting. Although only one of the two identified as multiracial, I had found a monoracial ally to support my need to be heard by my peers. For the first time in training, I felt safe, included, and affirmed as a person with a fluid racial identity. When I asked the facilitator why there was purposely not an affinity space for multiracial people, they replied, “I just didn’t know it affected you to have to choose a racial group.” In fact, they admitted that with my ambiguous physical features, they assumed I was “just Asian”.

If the 18-year-old version of myself had sat in the training, I would have silently acquiesced to people’s racial labeling. As a 22-year-old graduate student and part-time administrator who completed a journey from acquiescence to empowerment, I have to ask student affairs administrators and faculty that influence racial climate and inclusion at postsecondary institutions: “Where’s the Loving” for multiracial students when the 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court case declared us legal products of an interracial union?

In a society where “blood quantum was the primary method for classifying multiracials” and antimiscegenation was legal until the 1967 Supreme Court case *Loving v. Virginia*, the lingering effects of monoracial social construction still affect the inclusion of multiracial students (Doyle & Kao, 2008, p. 2). According to the 2000 Census, 42% of the 6.8 million people who self-identified as two or more races were under 18 years of age. Jackson and Wijeyesinghe (2001) believed that “as the number of multiracial people increases over time and the nation achieves even greater racial diversity, society’s ability to assign racial group membership based on appearance may become increasingly difficult” (p. 146). Student affairs administrators and other members of college campuses may take note of the increasing demographics and complexity of incoming students. Programming, policies, services, and social justice work can become more inclusive to multiracial students and others with a fluid identity so that racial labeling such as what happened to me may become a habit of the past.

As a growing number of multiracial people apply to college, their presence at postsecondary institutions will increase. Although multiracial students may be increasing, visible members of this group may be questionable or questioned because of their perceived external identity, or race, may be ambiguous and indecipherable to those with a monoracial lens. Multiracial student services and academic inclusion may empower and increase the visibility of this marginalized group of students. For administrators working with multiracial students, “the most difficult challenge seems to be helping individuals who identify themselves as monoracial to understand the importance and power of ‘border crossings’ for individuals” (Talbot, 2008, p. 30). In addition, monoracial administrators

may have difficulty understanding the multiracial border crossings, or fluidly straddling between races, of their students and colleagues. An examination of identity models and multiracial student acquiescence to groups outside their racial self-identification serves to inform student affairs administrators and reexamine support for multiracial students in postsecondary education.

Literature Review

Mapping the Borderlands

Cooper, Howard-Hamilton, and Torres (2003) define multiracial students as people who “can identify with two or more cultures with which they claim membership” (p. 63). Identity can also be defined as “one’s personally held beliefs about the self in relation to social groups and ways one expresses that relationship...[by how one] organizes experiences within the environment that revolves around oneself” (Jones, Renn, & Torres, 2009, p. 577). A multiracial person’s identity may result from the process of organizing experiences from childhood, adolescence, postsecondary institutions, and external factors such as media, literature, and education. Experiences and messages affect the level of awareness of internal, external, and expressed identities, where engagement in ‘border crossings’, straddling between two or more racial identities allows the multiracial person to hold situational identity. Hyman (2010) describes the hybrid of internal, external, and expressed identities as relative to environment and situation, determined by moving through the series of identity development stages of Maria Root’s Biracial Identity Model (1990). The relationship between a person and their environment may determine the actualization of an integrated multiracial identity (Renn, 2004). Student affairs administrators should explore monoracial attitudes embedded in campus climate so that the environment does not hinder multiracial student development, but empowers these students and their fluid identities. The approaches of Root (1990), Wijeyesinghe (2001), and Renn (2001) to multiracial identity development in relation to self, environment, and societal context will provide a basis for discussion.

Root’s Biracial Identity Model

Root’s Biracial Identity Model (1990) describes the process of racial group adoption. The multiracial individual’s dualistic and fluid identity may create the tension of not fitting in one racial peer group. Four resolutions to identity tension are: (1) acceptance of the identity society assigns, (2) identification with both or all racial identity groups, (3) identification with a single racial group, and (4) identification of a new racial group (Renn, 2008). An individual may work through these tensions in a fluid process, or never actualize multiracial identity because it was not presented in a campus environment. Tensions may occur if the multiracial individual chooses to accept the identity society perceives and assigns according to

physical appearance. Multiracial students “must also negotiate the campus racial landscape with an appearance that is not always recognizable to others, unwittingly provoking some discomfort until they can answer, “*What are you?*” (Renn, 2008, p. 18). This question, asked by peers, family, faculty, and student affairs administrators, may create tension for a multiracial student to prove his or her true racial identity. Situations of perceived racial identity may become enraging or tiring for multiracial students, allowing for acquiescence to be the most attractive solution to avoid racial labeling conversations or inquiries from others. The identification as a new racial group may come from self-labeling, which may empower the creation of new ways to address perceived racial identity (Talbot, 2008). Through scholarly personal narrative, this article will apply theory to practice for student affairs administrators through the discussion of Root’s Biracial Identity Model (1990).

Discussion of Root’s Biracial Identity Model: Critical Truth

Torrance, California is a special place to me - the ultimate White suburbia with sprinkles of diversity distributed throughout the socioeconomic bliss of my hometown. It was assumed everyone had a decent trust fund and finances were not discussed. *Everyone* was supposed to be well off. “Diversity” was nothing more than some people of color in the classroom and some new students sent to ESL (English as a Second Language) classes because they couldn’t speak English well enough, and were consequently punished for the pigment in their skin.

I never went hungry and got to do everything that I wanted. I had toys, laughter, friends, and recreation as needed. I had Barbies. Their blonde hair shimmered in the California sunlight in all the clothes and accessories I could fathom. One day, my mother’s friend gave me a very special present. It was a “special” doll in the Barbie collection. She was Chinese. “Like me.” This doll never had a name and I accepted her with an uneasy smile. She was accepted and put up in the corner of a closet, never to be released from her prison sentence in a cardboard box, and her jet black hair would never shine in the sunlight like all of her lighter haired, wide eyed clones. Sitting in her box, laying in her red silk robe, and collecting dust, my “special” doll and my own Chinese identity remained compartmentalized and never brought into the light until my own emancipation from home.

Growing up, I was taught many things, including that being multiracial was pretty and coveted. All I understood was that Mom was White and Dad was Asian, but mostly Chinese. Sometimes I was White. Sometimes I was Chinese. This was, and still is, confusing for a multiracial child. I was taught that I talk like Mom, so I must be White. I must be White for so many reasons: Money. Suburbia. Education. The way I talk. And as for the bronze skin covering my body? It was exotic. Everyone in California wished they had it. Sunscreen? *No. You don’t need it. That is for White people.* But I thought I was White, too? *No way. You are*

Chinese so you can get into college. Diversity. Your almond shaped eyes. Like my identity, I compartmentalized portions of my own life. I spoke of my parents as if they were completely separate, rarely speaking as if we functioned as a unit.

I was taught many things growing up: to put away the Chinese girl who faced me in the mirror. Box her up, put her in the closet to collect dust and never speak of her again. I internalized the general perceived racial identities and passed silently from one group to another. “*What are you? Filipina? Latina?*” Sure. I can be any or all of those things if that means I will be left alone.

At seventeen, the college application process sparked the beginning of my empowerment. The computer screen in front of me was full of applications asking, “*What are you?*” again and again. In 2006, there was not an option to be two or more races, so I chose Asian as my race and Jewish as my religion. Hereafter began the initiation of honoring both sides of my identity as a whole person. My college career was full of unlearning internalized oppression lived throughout the compartmentalization of my racial and ethnic identities. 2005 marked the beginning of my life as a multiracial individual negotiating with society’s constructions, and embracing the *hapa’ self identification*. Hapa became my answer to “*What are you?*” No longer could I be confined to boxes; I found a way to escape the prescribed constructions.

In light of moving through phases of multiracial identity and finding empowerment, racial ascriptions by peers, professionals, and faculty have resulted in acquiescence. These ascriptions combined with submitting to racial labeling have been influenced by a variety of factors, best described by Wijeyesinghe’s Factor Model of Multiracial Identity (FMMI, 2001). Student affairs administrators can use my example as a narrative of empowerment and that of the stripping of power due to repeated assaults to my racial identity. The lack of knowledge about racial ancestry, ambiguous appearance, and social and historical context of multiracial identities leads to these assaults. San José State University (SJSU) is known for its diversity and social justice emphasis, but I was unsure if people with similar racial identities were represented at my institution. As “numerous institutions are designated minority recruiters to attract different racial groups on campus... educators need to consider if policies and other recruitment strategies to portray diversity only in terms of monoracial categories” (Kellogg & Niskode, 2008, p. 97). The FMMI (2001) serves to explain the need for multiple factors in multiracial identity development that may improve student affairs practice when applied to student services, recruitment and admissions, and most importantly for a more successful classroom experience in postsecondary curriculum.

¹*A person who racially identifies with a mixed racial heritage with partial roots in Asian and/ or Pacific Islander ancestry.*

Wijeyesinghe's Factor Model of Multiracial Identity (FMMI): Empowered Voices

Wijeyesinghe's FMMI identifies factors that affect multiracial identity development: racial ancestry, cultural attachment, early experience and socialization, political awareness and orientation, spirituality, other social identities, social and historical context, and physical appearance (Jackson & Wijeyesinghe, 2001). Understanding these factors allows people with a multiracial identity to make meaning of experiences from different periods of their lives. Racial ancestry, social and historical context, and physical appearance are four factors student affairs administrators should be particularly aware of in order to find ways to empower multiracial students beyond acquiescence.

Multiracial students may question their racial ancestry, identity, and interracial encounters as they enter college. One's racial ancestry may reveal information about physical appearance that may cause tension, as discussed in Root's Developmental Model for Biracial Identity (1990). If a multiracial student has not been exposed to information about racial identity, it is common for the person to take courses, study abroad, or find co-curricular activities to gain knowledge to find ways to assert their identity (Renn, 2008, p. 19). One setback of the self-discovery phase of identity development is the resistance from external sources such as peers, media, and administrators, which may deter the individual from claiming a fluid multiracial identity.

Social and historical context allows for multiracial people to explore the meaning of ancestry according to their environment. Understanding the history of racial construction may allow multiracial students to move beyond monoracial minority ancestry and begin to "increase public awareness of [multiracial] issues and [have] an emerging multiracial rights movement" (Jackson & Wijeyesinghe, 2001, p. 141). Student affairs administrators may create space for inclusion by changing the context and discussion in order to become better mentors for multiracial students. The pressure to choose between private and public definitions of identity, justifying identity choices, lack of role models, forced-choice dilemmas, rejection by peer groups, and conflict in messages are prevalent issues in multiracial student experience and contribute to the practice of acquiescence.

Physical appearance is a leading contributor to multiracial student acquiescence. According to Jackson and Wijeyesinghe (2001),

Physical appearance can often facilitate multiracial people's acceptance within particular racial communities, especially when their chosen racial identities are inconsistent with the racial groups ascribed to them by others based on physical appearance. While appearance can result in acceptance, it can also cause rejection or frustration when physical characteristics restrict choice of racial identity. (p. 141)

It is important for student affairs administrators to avoid ascribing racial group memberships to students because of the complexity of multiracial identity. The physical appearance of ambiguous models, actors, and others reflected in the media only reinforce acquiescence. Even with empowerment to claim multiracial identity internally or as ascribed by others, multiracial students may still be labeled by physical appearance (Talbot, 2008). To encourage multiracial students to overcome tensions of perceived identity and border crossings as discussed in previous models, student affairs administrators can help students understand their multiple racial identities and existing multiracial development models. Renn's *Patterns of Multiracial Identity* (2001) takes Wijeyesinghe's FMMI (2001) and identifies how students make meaning of racial climate and engage in border crossings according to environment.

Discussion of Wijeyesinghe's FMMI

Growing up, I did not see many multiracial people in the media. In fact, aside from several of my peers, multiracial identity was never addressed. Asserting my chosen identity in college was exhausting between the "*What are you?*" question and the "*I knew you were some kind of mix!*" response. Most of the time, the people I interacted with assumed I was the same race or ethnicity because of my ambiguous features. I joined the Filipino Cultural Organization and attended affinity events not because I identified, I just figured I should know about the people I was mistaken for on a regular basis. In some ways, these cultures have contributed to the appreciation of my multiracial identity. In others, they have hurt my development as a multiracial individual. I hid behind groups of people that looked like me so that I could find a racial homeland and avoid border crossings. I was filled with shame when trying to assert my fluid identity because there was nowhere to retreat. As Hyman (2010) states, "The more one resemble[s] a specific race, the more likely that individual will feel comfortable claiming the identity due to the perceived acceptance of the group" (p. 130). All I wanted was to feel accepted.

I chose my mentors because they understood my fluid identity. One woman identified as Burmese and Pakistani. Another identified within the LGBT community with American Indian and Jewish ancestry. The other was White and Asian like me. The composition of my supportive dream team of mentors was an interdisciplinary approach - I would pick and choose parts of their narratives to help me understand my own. Some of their struggles were, and are, mine. Some of them I will never understand, but they have taken root as questions in my own narrative. The three referred me to various multiracial professionals to speak with and to non-profit organizations to learn about the history of people similar to (and sometimes vastly different from) myself. There was no programming or support specifically for multiracial students on our campus, so after learning about my own racial ancestries, social and historical context of race relations with humanities

courses, and struggling with my physical appearance, I decided to question the racial landscape of SJSU.

Several student affairs administrators and I began looking at racial and ethnic identifying questions on documents and whether multiracial students were included. As a group, we started informing students of the options to identify as two or more races on documents. A silent group of students started to develop a sense of community through peer education programs about the history of multiracial identity. In the sharing of histories, both group and personal, acquiescence was common. As empowered students, we created a gallery of our identities and broke the silence as out multiracial people. Conversations started. Taking into account the factors of multiracial identity, we empowered students to tell their truths as marginalized students in postsecondary education. Renn's *Patterns of Multiracial Identity* (2001) best describes the process each student negotiated as they moved across borders, according to the aspect of multiracial identity suited to each racial situation in their academic and co-curricular setting and will be expanded below.

Renn's Patterns of Multiracial Identity

Renn considers previous models above in her 2001 study of how 56 multiracial students made meaning of their identity by establishing five patterns of identity. A student may hold a (1) monoracial identity, (2) multiple monoracial identities, (3) multiracial identity, (4) extraracial identity, or (5) situational identity (Renn, 2004). Renn defines how multiracial identity development is a result of a person's interactions with time in his or her environment. Of all the factors, Renn's findings show how peer group culture and campus environment may contribute to consistent patterns of multiracial identity. A person may move throughout the pattern depending on time, place, and manner of an environment, "finding ways of constructing and reconstructing identity in shifting contexts of face to face and cyber encounters with others" (Renn, 2004, p. 49).

The peer context and student affairs practice contribute to the multiracial student's ability to make meaning of their identity in a campus setting. Renn builds from biracial and multiracial identity models and describes how multiracial students adopt an identity with encounters, immersions, and integrations. The encounters with peer culture and administrators "may play a number of roles in this realization and exploration of identity" (Renn, 2004, p. 51). Ultimately, student encounters with people of the same multiracial group may enhance the immersion into a racial group. A negative encounter with "subtle and not-so-subtle racism for the first time... could be a developmental force as the student accommodates a new understanding of race and racial identity" (Renn, 2004, p. 51).

The environment student affairs administrators create with programs and policies

may enhance or inhibit multiracial student development. More intentional educational opportunities about how multiracial students' development can be offered to provide support for this marginalized population. Focusing on diversity and social justice, which includes conversations about multiracial student identity, is "often good for all... in assisting students to understand racial and cultural diversity and to be comfortable in heterogeneous environments that are necessary for achieving success" (Renn, 2004, p. 10). Until services, policies, and programs adapt to changing populations, such as multiracial students, the postsecondary educational environment will exclude a dynamic and growing group of students.

Discussion of Renn's Patterns of Multiracial Identity: Changing the Landscape

I mean it when I say, "I am a product of my environment." Until the beginning of my second year of college, I had several ways of expressing my racial identity. On paper I was "Asian." If someone asked me to my face, most often, I was "White." Sometimes I declined to state my racial identity on paper, in person, or in passing. Other times I was "Other," "Native Alaskan/Eskimo," or even "Latina." And then there was Hapa. Until I was challenged to think critically about my racial identity by my mentor, I had no way of navigating the multiracial experience on a college campus.

One day my mentor asked how I identified. I replied, "White."

She asked me again, "How do you identify?"

I replied, "White."

This time, she stopped and looked at me. "No. You are a person of color. You are White, but also a person of color. Multiracial. Did you know that?"

I did not really know it mattered. I did not want to talk about race. Or class. Or gender. Or privilege. Then the wheels started turning. Yes. I am multiracial. But if the person you are talking to does not understand what it is like to hold flexible, complex, fluid identities, why bother elaborating? I dodged the rest of the conversation and went to class.

That day a visitor made an announcement in the classroom. She said, "The University is holding affinity focus groups to try to understand the student experience around race." She proceeded to announce the times of each group. I sat in my chair, half listening. The woman said many racial identities, but there was nothing for students who identified as more than one group. I looked at the White students writing down their times. I looked at the Asian students. For someone who identified as both, I did not know where to go. Then it clicked. Finally. It clicked.

I do not belong just with the White students. I do not just belong with the Asian students. Then, I surprised myself with a "Well. What about the multiracial students?" The woman was almost surprised by my question and perhaps boldness.

“You can just go to the group that you think suits you best.” I got up and walked out. No space for me. I could not breathe. I did not understand why I did not belong. At one time, I held a monoracial identity, several monoracial identities, a multiracial identity, an extraracial identity, and a situational identity. I fell into patterns of how I would identify. It was to find support. I affiliated with whichever group I could go to feeling like I could actually fit in, which mostly depended on ascriptions from my peers.

I found myself back in my mentor’s office, angry, proud, and unknowing of what to do next with my salient multiracial identity. She was sitting in her chair waiting for me, as if knowing, and then, we talked. Sometimes the conversations lasted for days. Realization after realization, question after question, she was there to debrief. When she could not answer the questions with me, she referred me to another person who could help me understand more. If my mentor had not been there to answer questions, be patient in my process, or embrace my patterns of multiracial identity development, I would not have moved past acquiescence to empowerment. I would not be who I am today without her support, or want to be a professional who could consistently support a student with fluid identity development and be willing to find others to help in the process. Time spent in the environment and the tone set for me at my undergraduate university helped me question my racial identity and the systems that created or affected it.

Conclusion

I have moved from the role of a student, to graduate, to professional in student affairs, and I have faced challenges I could not have foreseen. I advise a multiracial student group on campus and find myself moving into a new chapter where I not only observe multiracial student identity development, but also play a role in it. The students I work with are strong, intelligent, and willing to challenge others and me to try to understand their process of coming in to the world of postsecondary education as not only students of color, but also as multiracials. I celebrate the hardships and triumphs of each of these students as they navigate an experience that is somewhat unpaved and uncharted. The border crossings these students encounter are daunting for some, encouraging for others, and second nature for most.

Brilliant and innovative work has been done and continues to happen in order to create space and inclusion for multiracial students: explanations and application of the multiracial identity development models, allowing students to check more than one racial or ethnic box on identification paperwork, and multiracial groups growing on campus every year. As professionals working with an emerging population of multiracial students, we can continue to ask, “Where’s the Loving?” for our students with fluid identity development and patterns. How can we continue

to empower our students to move beyond acquiescence and passing? Are our services, programs, and activities including or excluding multiracial students? It is not until our emerging and influential field gains more knowledge about this group of students that we can encourage all to move beyond multiracial student acquiescence to full empowerment.

References

- Cooper, D., Howard-Hamilton, M., & Torres, V. (2003). *Identity development of diverse populations: Implications for teaching and administration in higher education*. 29(6). San Francisco, CA: Wiley Periodicals, Inc.
- Doyle, J. M. & Kao, G. (2007). Are racial identities of multiracials stable? Changing self-identification among single and multiple race individuals. *Social psychology quarterly*. 70(4). (pp. 405-423).
- Hyman, J. (2010). The new multiracial student: Where do we start? *The Vermont Connection: the student affairs journal of the University of Vermont*. 31. (pp. 128-135).
- Jackson, B. & Wijeyesinghe, C. (2001). *New perspectives on racial identity development: A theoretical and practical anthology*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Jones, S., Renn, K., & Torres, V. (2009). Identity development theories in student affairs: Origins, current status, and new approaches. *ACPA journal of college student development*. 50(6). (pp. 577-593).
- Kellogg, A. & Niskode, A. (2008). Student affairs and higher education policy issues related to multiracial students. Renn, K. & Shang, P. (Eds.). *New directions for student services: Biracial and multiracial students*. (pp. 93-102). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Renn, K. (2004). *Mixed race students in college: The ecology of race, identity, and community on campus*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Renn, K. (2008). Research on biracial and multicultural identity development. Renn, K. & Shang, P. (Eds.). *New directions for student services: Biracial and multiracial students*. (pp. 13-21). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Talbot, D. (2008). Exploring the experience and self-labeling of mixed-race individuals with two minority parents. Renn, K. & Shang, P. (Eds.). *New directions for student services: Biracial and multiracial students*. (pp. 23-32). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.