This chapter presents an overview of theories that have been used to describe identity development of biracial and multiracial college students.

Research on Biracial and Multiracial Identity Development: Overview and Synthesis

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Racial identity development among college students with parents from different heritage groups was largely unexplored until the 1990s, when two forces—one demographic, the other theoretical—converged to stimulate interest in understanding the experiences and identities of biracial and multiracial youth. The increasing number of students from two or more races (Renn, 2004) drew the attention of student affairs professionals just as student development researchers moved into a period of close study of individual identity groups (for example, Black, Asian American, gay/lesbian/bisexual). Although it might have occurred without this convergence, a body of research from the mid-1990s to the present has produced a solid foundation of theory to support student affairs practice regarding multiracial college students. In this chapter, I provide an overview and synthesis of this research; other chapters in this volume describe how student affairs professionals can use these theories.

A decade ago, student development scholars who tried to describe the experiences of biracial and multiracial youth turned to two models (Poston, 1990; Root, 1990). In 2008, the literature has broadened substantially to include psychological, sociological, and ecological models for understanding the identities of mixed-heritage college students (for example, Kilson, 2001; Renn, 2004; Rockquemore and Brunsma, 2002; Wallace, 2001, 2003; Wijeyesinghe, 2001). A move away from linear models mirroring predominant minority identity development models (Atkinson, Morten, and Sue,
1979; Cross, 1995; Helms, 1995) to ecological models (Renn, 2003, 2004; Root, 1998; Wijeyesinghe, 2001) that explain factors contributing to identity development characterizes the research. It is important to note that most studies of biracial college students rely on qualitative methods and limited samples; an exception is the survey research of Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002), which is limited instead by the decision to study only students of Black and White heritage. Most recently, psychologists (Bracey, Bamaca, and Umana-Taylor, 2004; Shih, Bonam, Sanchez, and Peck, 2007; Shih and Sanchez, 2005) have contributed substantively to understanding developmental and educational impacts related to holding a multiracial identity in adolescence and early adulthood.

**Foundational Theories of Biracial Identity Development: Poston and Root**

Poston (1990) and Root (1990) were the first scholars to publish models for the development of healthy biracial identity. Countering a history of skepticism about the possibility for healthy resolution of racial identity in biracial individuals, psychologists Poston and Root offered alternatives to past models that hypothesized a “marginal” (Stonequist, 1937) existence for biracial people. They based their proposals in part on clinical experience as counselors and, for Root, in part on personal experience.

Poston (1990) claimed that existing models of minority identity development (Cross, 1987; Morten and Atkinson, 1983) did not accurately reflect the experiences of biracial individuals and proposed a “new and positive model” (p. 153) with five levels:

1. **Personal identity.** Young children hold a personal identity that is not necessarily linked to a racial reference group.
2. **Choice of group categorization.** Based on personal factors (such as appearance and cultural knowledge) and factors defining perceived group status and social support, an individual chooses a multicultural existence that includes both parents’ heritage groups or a dominant culture from one background.
3. **Enmeshment/denial.** Guilt at not being able to identify with all aspects of his or her heritage may lead to anger, shame, or self-hatred; resolving the guilt and anger is necessary to move beyond this level.
4. **Appreciation.** Individuals broaden their racial reference group through learning about all aspects of their backgrounds, though individuals may choose to identify with one group more than with others.
5. **Integration.** This level represents a multicultural existence in which the individual values all of her or his ethnic identities.

Poston acknowledged that this model resembled the earlier ones (Cross, 1987; Morten and Atkinson, 1983) that he rejected, but he accommodated
the specificity of biracial experience by acknowledging the difference between monoracial and multiracial identities in the middle three levels of his model. Missing from Poston’s model is Cross’s and Morten and Atkinson’s emphasis on societal racism as a factor in the lives of people of color, an element that later theorists would reintroduce. Also missing is the possibility of multiple healthy identity outcomes for the diversity of multiracial people, an exclusion that formed the basis of future inquiries by other researchers who observed an array of apparently healthy identities in biracial adults. Inclusion of personal and environmental factors in the second level (choice of group categorization) also foreshadowed the ecological perspective of later models of multiracial identity. Poston’s model is particularly useful in understanding biracial identity development as compared to minority identity development models often used in student affairs work (Cross, 1995; Helms, 1995).

Root (1990) also allied her model with the early stages of minority identity development models (Atkinson, Morten, and Sue, 1979), altering their later stages to reflect the observation that when many biracial individuals with White heritage reach adolescence, they cannot fully reject majority culture and immerse themselves in a minority community, as minority identity development models typically posited. Citing societal racism and internalized oppression, Root posited that biracial teens—assuming that they are at least partly White—entered a period of turmoil and possibly a “dual existence” (p. 200) when they might appear popular but feel as though they do not fit into any social group. According to Root, dating and tokenism (that is, being asked to be the “minority representative”) surface as issues with particular impact on biracial adolescents. Gender differences among mixed-race youth may exacerbate or alleviate the effects of racial discrimination.

Root (1990) proposed four potentially positive resolutions of the tensions of biracial identity:

1. **Acceptance of the identity society assigns.** Family and a strong alliance with and acceptance by a (usually minority) racial group provide support for identifying with the group into which others assume the biracial individual most belongs.

2. **Identification with both racial groups.** Depending on societal support and personal ability to maintain this identity in the face of potential resistance from others, the biracial individual may be able to identify with both (or all) heritage groups.

3. **Identification with a single racial group.** The individual chooses one group, independent of social pressure, to identify himself or herself in a particular way (as in resolution 1).

4. **Identification as a new racial group.** The individual may move fluidly among racial groups but identifies most strongly with other biracial people, regardless of specific heritage backgrounds.
Root (1990) accounted for the impact of racism on identity and introduced the possibility of a new identity group: biracial or multiracial. She also proposed that an individual might self-identify in more than one way at the same time or move fluidly among identities. Root’s model opened the door for the emergence of empirically derived, nonlinear models of identity development in mixed-race students.

Ecology Models of Identity Development in Mixed-Race College Students

In the mid-1990s, as mixed-race students were becoming a more visible and vocal population and student development researchers were beginning to analyze specific aspects of identity (for example, Black identity, lesbian identity, Catholic identity), the question of multiracial student experiences and identity captured a modest amount of attention. Two main concepts emerged from this period; the first presented patterns of identity observed among mixed-race students, and the second proposed ecological, social, and psychological contributors to the development of multiracial identities. It is important to note that these studies occurred against a backdrop of increasing access to Internet technologies that have become a key factor in multiracial research and social and political organizing, as by the non-profit political and social action group MAVIN Foundation, which has a substantial online organizing presence. Another key factor during this time was the 1997 decision by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget to change federal data collection, including the 2000 U.S. Census, to offer for the first time the option for respondents to identify themselves in more than one racial category (see Chapter Ten, this volume).

Patterns of Identity Among Multiracial College Students. In a grounded theory study of students from three postsecondary institutions, I (Renn, 2000) identified five patterns of identity among biracial and multiracial college students. I later expanded the study geographically and elaborated on the five patterns (Renn, 2004). Adopting the premise that college provides opportunities for identity exploration in academic, social, and peer involvement settings, this approach to multiracial identity takes a distinctly ecological perspective, as described in the next section. The five patterns I (Renn, 2000, 2004) identified were:

1. **Student holds a monoracial identity.** As in Root’s third resolution (1990), the individual chooses one of his or her heritage backgrounds with which to identify.

2. **Student holds multiple monoracial identities, shifting according to the situation.** Personal and contextual factors affect which of an individual’s heritage groups he or she identifies with at a given time and place; this pattern is like Root’s second resolution (1990).
3. **Student holds a multiracial identity.** The individual elects an identity that is neither one heritage nor another, but of a distinct “multiracial” group on par with other racial categories: Root’s fourth resolution (1990).

4. **Student holds an extraracial identity by deconstructing race or opting out of identification with U.S. racial categories.** Not seen among Root’s resolutions (1990), this pattern represents an individual’s resistance to what he or she may see as artificial categories that have been socially constructed by the dominant, monoracial, White majority.

5. **Student holds a situational identity, identifying differently in different contexts.** Inherent in Root’s resolutions (1990), situational identity describes a fluid identity pattern in which an individual’s racial identity is stable, but different elements are more salient in some contexts than in others.

In a sample of fifty-six students from six institutions, I (Renn, 2004) found that nearly half (48 percent) identified themselves in each of the first two patterns, 89 percent held a distinctly multiracial identity, nearly one-quarter (23 percent) held an extraracial identity, and 61 percent identified themselves situationally (which explains why the total is more than 100 percent). When identity patterns were considered by students’ gender, class year, institution, and heritage combinations, some differences were observed, but the tendency for students to identify themselves across patterns persisted throughout the data.

I (Renn, 2000, 2003, 2004) used a human ecological approach to understand multiracial identity, but important contributions to theory come also from sociology and educational psychology. Sociologist Marion Kilson (2001) studied young adults (college and noncollege) and reported identities similar to four of my five (Renn, 2004)—excluding the multiple monoracial identities category. Another pair of sociologists, Kerry Ann Rockquemore and David Brunsma (2002), surveyed 177 Black-White college students and reported four categories similar to Kilson’s. Education psychologist Kendra Wallace (2001) studied 15 high school and college students and found evidence to confirm four of my (Renn, 2004) patterns, excluding the extraracial category. Although the studies all have limitations related to sample, the convergence of data strongly suggests that there are at least five ways that multiracial young people in college may identify themselves.

**Factors Influencing Racial Identity Among Multiracial College Students.** Smaller than the body of research on how multiracial students identify themselves is the literature on how they may come to have those identities. Evidence supports a person-environment or psychosocial process that is implicit in earlier models of racial identity development (Atkinson, Morten, and Sue, 1979; Cross, 1995; Helms, 1995). I (Renn, 2003, 2004) used an ecological approach, and it is possible to consider Charmaine Wijeyesinghe’s factor model of multiracial identity (2001) and Wallace’s work (2001, 2003) through this lens to examine factors that influence...
multiracial college students’ identities. Of these ecological influences, three recurring themes in the literature are physical appearance, cultural knowledge, and peer culture.

Across several studies (Renn, 2004; Root, 2003; Wallace, 2003; Wijeyesinghe, 2001), how a multiracial individual looks—skin tone, hair texture and color, eye and nose shape, and so forth—strongly influences his or her identity. Whether a woman “looks Black enough” according to her peers to be part of a particular student organization, or whether a man is told that he looks “too Asian” to participate in a Latino cultural festival, students routinely confront messages that college campuses are places where authenticity is at stake in daily interactions, student organizations, and even the classroom. Professors and teaching assistants are not immune from societal stereotypes that link physical appearance to assumptions about cultural backgrounds, and mixed-race students report encountering ignorance, disbelief, and occasional outright hostility from instructors (Renn, 2004). Confirming Root’s proposition (1990) that one option is to accept the identity that society assigns, multiracial students’ identity choices may be constrained by how others interpret their appearance. They must also navigate the campus racial landscape with an appearance that is not always recognizable to others, unwittingly provoking some discomfort until they can answer the What [race] are you? questions that they report as commonplace (Kilson, 2001; Renn, 2004; Wallace, 2001, 2003).

Cultural knowledge of their various heritage groups is a second major factor in mixed-race college students’ identities (Renn, 2004; Wallace, 2003). Depending on knowledge learned from parents, family, and community prior to college, multiracial students may arrive on campus with extensive cultural knowledge of their diverse backgrounds, much knowledge on one or two backgrounds but limited or no knowledge of others, or limited knowledge of any particular heritage background. As with appearance, questions of authenticity, legitimacy, and fitting in arise in relation to cultural knowledge (Renn, 2000, 2004; Wallace, 2003). Students reported that speaking Spanish or an Asian language might be a passport into a community of students of color, as might listening to certain kinds of music or partaking of any one of dozens of ethnically marked elements of youth culture. Biracial students who had not learned about various aspects of their heritage before coming to college sometimes took courses, studied abroad, or participated in cocurricular activities aimed at learning more about their background (Renn, 2004). Armed with this knowledge, they might feel more confident to identify themselves with previously unexplored aspects of their identity; Poston (1990) proposed this “appreciation” level (level four in his model) in a general way, but college students have a number of resources close at hand to undertake this process. Considered in an ecological approach, appearance and cultural knowledge represent aspects of the individual, but the individual does not operate alone to influence identity development.
The context of college peer culture is a critical aspect of multiracial students’ identity development. Wijeyesinghe (2001) identified social and historical context as factors in choice of racial identity. Participants in my studies and Wallace’s cited the availability of a community of other biracial and multiracial students, a growing phenomenon that is discussed in Chapters Five and Six in this volume, as important supports for the development of separate multiracial identity. Resistance from monoracial students of color and racism among White students were additional aspects of peer culture that influenced their identities. I (Renn, 2000) found that the extent to which a campus peer culture supported or worked against students moving among identity groups was another important influence; at some campuses in this study, students moved easily among identity-based social groups, while at others, there was a clear delineation among groups, and membership in one precluded membership in another.

A full description of the operation of peer culture is beyond the scope of this chapter, but the influence of peers on student development and identity is well established (see Astin, 1984; Kaufman and Feldman, 2004), and it is not surprising that peers influence multiracial identity development as well. But as Poston (1990) and Root (1990) posited when contrasting their models to existing models of minority identity development, there are aspects of mixed-race experiences that make inadequate a simple application of existing theory to the experience of multiracial people. Considering not only the presence of various identity-based groups on campus but also the peer-supported ability to move among them is an example of how prevailing thinking about racial identity development and peers can be made more applicable to understanding multiracial college students.

Additional factors that have been linked to multiracial identity development in college students include gender, social class, family and family status, age, spirituality, social awareness and orientation, and geographical region (Renn, 2004; Rockquemore and Brunsma, 2002; Root, 1998, 2003; Shih, Bonam, Sanchez, and Peck, 2007, Wallace, 2003; Wijeyesinghe, 2001). Findings are not consistent across studies, but evidence suggests that personal and environmental factors combine to influence multiracial identity in college students.

**Psychological Studies of Impact of Multiracial Identity**

Written at the height of the pseudoscientific eugenics movement that aimed to improve the quality of the human gene pool, early literature on biracial individuals postulated poor mental and physical outcomes for these “marginal” people (Stonequist, 1937). More recent attention from researchers provides ample evidence that positive multiracial identity is linked to good psychological health. For example, multiracial adolescents’ ability to identify themselves in categories that accurately represent their heritages and
lived identity has been shown to promote higher self-esteem, a higher sense of efficacy, and lower stereotype vulnerability (Bracey, Bamaca, and Umana-Taylor, 2004; Shih, Bonam, Sanchez, and Peck, 2007; Shih and Sanchez, 2004). Although these studies are not limited to college student samples, it seems reasonable to apply their findings to traditional-age biracial college students who are in late adolescence. Extension of this research into older college populations will be a welcome addition to the literature.

Conclusion

These three bodies of research provide a foundation for understanding the experiences and identities of mixed-race students. They complement one another, yet must be understood within the limitations and strengths of each. Reliance on small samples of traditional-age students in qualitative studies (Kilson, 2001; Renn, 2004; Wallace, 2001) necessarily limits the transferability of findings to the national population of mixed-race students. Including participants from only one heritage combination (Rockquemore and Brunsma, 2002; Wijeyesinghe, 2001) introduces another kind of limitation. Relying on studies of precollege youth leaves gaps in knowledge about the identities, experiences, and psychological outcomes of multiracial college students. Yet as a whole, the body of research, combined with emerging literature such as that presented in this volume, provides a reasonably sound foundation for understanding and working with multiracial students in higher education.

References

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