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Racial Identity in Biracial Adolescents from One African-American and One Caucasian-American Parent

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Racial identity development in biracial children within American society is essential for the discovery of self-concept. Identity development in adolescents with one African-American and one Caucasian-American parent is a complex process deriving from social influences and individual self-conceptualization. Three approaches of identity preference are found to be the most common in biracial youth. The first is the denial of one race, the second is over-identification of the favored culture, and lastly the incorporation of both racial backgrounds as a separate identity.

Racial Identity in Biracial Adolescents

As we have advanced toward the twenty-first century, the complex mosaic of American society has continually integrated through interracial unions and their offspring. The focus of biraciality has increasingly become an integral facet in the study of identity development (Harris, Jackson, Kerwin, Ponterotto, 1993; Poston, 1990; Wardle, 1987). The accomplishments of the civil rights movement and the 1967 Supreme Court's abolishment of miscegenation laws have only been a few of the factors responsible for the increases (Kerwin, 1992). Biracial children have faced difficult tasks in the search for self-discovery due to the physical and genetic differences that are commonly categorized in a color complex society (Herring, 1991).

Erickson (1968) considered racial identification integration a salient variable for a healthy psychological identity. Historically, society in the United States often forces individuals into a specific caste due to physiological traits differing from Caucasian features. Biracial adolescents are often grouped into one category based on the amount of African-American features the individual may physically present (Bowles, 1993). This is not to say, however, that the societal discernment of racial identity is the basic influence for all adolescents. Many of these biracial youth successfully accomplish a healthy integration in the preference of an interracial identification.

However, there is yet another group of adolescents unable to cope and come to terms with

their racial identity leading to maladjustment (Gibbs, 1987; Herring, 1991). This group commonly encounters personal questions about who they believe they are as people and as a group (Bowles, 1993). The process of choosing a racial identity involves original self-identity in early childhood, internalization of societal mores, and the effects of parental and peer relationships.

The Biracial Identity Development Model proposed by W.S. Carlos Poston (1990), followed the stages through which biracial youth construct personal identity. These principle stages in the specialized model were: A) personal identity stage, B) choice of group categorization, C) enmeshment of one race and denial of the other, D) appreciation of a dual racial heritage, and E) integration of both races into identity. Only recently, have there been variations of information specifically about biracial identity development for counselors, educators, and psychologists (Bowles, 1993; Brown, 1995; Herring, 1991; Kerwin, 1992; Poston, 1990; Wardle, 1987). Therefore, the model mentioned above, contributed to the underlying problems and steps biracial adolescents generally encounter.

Racial Identity Choices

An important aspect in the process of discovering self-identity began with detailed self-description. Earlier studies conducted on this population revealed that the youth depicted themselves through physical description. Many of the adolescents identified with the parent that shared the same physical traits in their self-descriptions

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(Harris, Jackson, Kerwin, & Ponterotto, 1993). Awareness of physical differentiation occurs at a younger age than many psychologists and counselors previously thought (Gibbs, 1987; Harris, Jackson, Kerwin, & Ponterotto 1993; Poston, 1990).

In order to obtain qualitative research in the study just mentioned, the methodology utilized in order to obtain data was that of the long interview (Harris, Jackson, Kerwin, & Ponterotto, 1993). First-generation biracial children between the ages of 5 and 16 years of age were chosen for the unstructured long interview (Harris, Jackson, Kerwin, & Ponterotto, 1993). A great contrast existed in the biracial child's development from physical awareness of self-image to the denial of specific racial categories and cultural implications. This seemed to be a time of great inner conflict within the late adolescent (Brown, 1995; Gibbs, 1987).

The published cases of Jewelle Taylor Gibbs (1987) illustrated central conflicts biracial children have faced. According to Gibbs's (1987) clinical observations, there was a frequency to over identify with the parent of similar physical features, especially in teenage boys. He also referred to cases where teenagers identified with the white parent as a symbol of dominant majority (Gibbs, 1987). A pattern of shame about the black racial background has been illustrated primarily in adolescents raised in predominantly white homes (Bowles, 1990; Gibbs, 1987; Kerwin, 1992). On the other end of the spectrum, adolescents with predominantly black characteristics tended to over identify with the lower income black culture as a symbolic adjustment into what they assumed society inevitably has seen them to be (Gibbs, 1987; Kerwin, 1992). Conscious guilt accompanied the denial adolescents felt when denying one race for that of another (Bowles, 1993). Social cognition of negative and positive stereotypes of both races would be necessary before adolescents were able to reach racial awareness (Stevenson, 1995). However, due to the fact that the majority of research conducted on this subject has been with families in the middle-class socioeconomic status, it cannot be assumed that this identification qualifies for all biracial children of other classes.

Social Identity

Internalizing social mores and the concepts of the macrosystem that surround the individual, is

another area that influences identity in the biracial adolescent. Once the forces of socialization in middle school and high school become evident, group categorization becomes essential (Poston, 1990). Strong emphasis is placed on the need to belong to a particular group in order for the adolescent to see their value as an individual. The consensus of researchers studying this problem point out two identity choices (Bowles, 1993; Brown, 1995; Gibbs, 1987; Harris, Jackson, Kerwin, & Ponterotto, 1993; Kerwin, 1992, Poston, 1990). The adolescent may choose an interracial self-imposed identity or an African-American labeling (Brown, 1995; Poston, 1990). Ursula Brown (1995) suggests through her studies that most biracial individuals internally feel themselves to be interracial; however, they choose to be publicly known as African-American.

It has been suggested that negative stereotyping, discriminatory experiences, and lack of upward mobility in professional careers has supported the internal dislike for the black identity (Bowles, 1993; Brown, 1995; Gibbs, 1987; Herring, 1991; Poston, 1990). There were some inherent problems associated with this assumption. A new sense of appreciation over African heritage and culture has continually emerged since the "black power" attitudes presented in the seventies. The new dominant "pop-culture" of dance, clothing, and music, influenced primarily by the black culture, has not been considered in the study of why biracial adolescents may be proud to exhibit an African-American identity (Kerwin, 1992).

Parental relationships have an immense impact on racial identity development. In many studies, primary ties with the parent of a black racial background influenced the adolescents view of themselves in the family and community (Bowles, 1993; Kerwin, 1992). On the other hand, identification may have had more to do with gender similarity between parent and child rather than race (Harris, Jackson, Kerwin, & Ponterotto, 1993). Many of the parents interviewed in interracial identity studies were completely aware of the implications of future racial discrimination upon the children (Bowle, 1993; Brown, 1995; Gibbs, 1987; Herring, 1991; Kerwin, 1992; Poston, 1990; Wardle, 1987). The gender and race of the primary caretaker was not mentioned in the studies presented; therefore, it may be a necessary element

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needed to understand identification with one parent or the other. This factor may also have an effect on the biracial teen's sexual role. Gibbs (1987) concluded that the general identity confusion of the adolescent transcended into confusion in sexual preference and orientation. Biracial individuals who had the least hostility with the black parent of the opposite sex were least likely to experience this type of confusion.

Coping mechanisms to future discrimination have been viewed as an essential teaching for minority children by their parents (Stevenson, 1995). Parents may persuade the children to choose one racial identification over another due to societal implications or future hostility they might encounter (Brown, 1995; Wardle, 1987). The parents may feel the child should be sensitized to cope with the future discrimination by either race. These "minority survival skills" attribute to the adolescent's defense mechanisms (Wardle, 1987). Negation of the white aspect of their heritage becomes more evident when this form of identity is enforced. There has been an emergence of strategies designed by counselors, psychologists, and teachers to encourage parents to raise biracial children with an appreciation of both racial heritage's (Bowles, 1993; Gibbs, 1987; Kerwin, 1992; Wardle, 1987).

Peer relationships integral in development affect the biracial teenager immensely. Late adolescence is often a very confusing time of life for many individuals. Teenagers may have a preoccupation of what peers think about them, and this contributes to how the teen sees themselves. (Erickson, 1968). In trying to fit in, the adolescents are left confused and vulnerable to negative peer pressure (Gibbs, 1987). Fears of rejection within peer groups can also promote sexual identity conflict. Sexual preference to a certain race may be influenced by the degree of closeness the adolescent feels for the parent they identify with the most.

The importance of integrating dual heritage should eventually promote the adolescent to form a healthy racial identity. Conflict with the denial and the enmeshment process of identity formation can be overcome with successful understanding of both racial heritages as equally detrimental. Although internally the individual must come to terms with an interracial identity, publicly the biracial person may or may not be seen this way in society. It seems society needs to put less emphasis on racial

classifications and make an adjustment for biracial people.

Conclusion

The studies presenting identity development in biracial adolescents did not definitively resolve long-term aspects of choosing a racial identity. The measurement and understanding of identity was quite diverse. The primary literature about this subject offered explanations into the developmental patterns and problems of mainly middle-class children raised by both parents. The diversity of this understudied group has not been investigated for all economic and cultural classes coping with this dilemma. A consensual agreement on the essence of socialization as a result of racial identity biased toward black culture was made. However, with an increased section of the American population integrating racially, there must be a greater effort made in the understanding of interracial relationships. Studies presented had a tendency to exclude adolescents coping with either extreme of their economic situations. Attitudes in the studies did not significantly address the issues of black or white pride. They assume that a healthy integration of both races will enhance the adolescent's strive for racial identity.

This subject is in need of future exploration. Generalizations about such a diverse group have been made, but not much research has generally been done in the area of interracial marriages among Hispanic/African-American, Asian/African-American, Hispanic/Asian-American and Hispanic/Caucasian-American unions and their offspring. Control groups of black/black and white/white offspring's racial identity development would give the studies an expansive view of the levels of self-conceptualization in the racial spectrum. Cross-cultural studies of biracial children in other countries would also be an addition to the understanding of racial identity formation during socialization in other countries in contrast to the United States. A longitudinal study of random groups in each socioeconomic class from upper to lower would provide a knowledgeable basis. This would help to discover whether identity formation relies heavily upon early socialization or significant experiences within the lifetime.

The domination of white males in the field of psychology may have contributed to the lack of interest in this area. Society is not ready to abolish

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the categorizations of the races. Rising tensions in politics, crime, and economic issues affect racial attitudes tremendously. The physical color complex within our society promotes many biracial children to have to choose one racial identity over the other. This color labeling inhibits the ability to truly appreciate a diverse society.

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