Chameleon Changes: An Exploration of Racial Identity Themes of Multiracial People

Marie L. Miville and Madonna G. Constantine
Teachers College, Columbia University

Matthew F. Baysden and Gloria So-Lloyd
Oklahoma State University

The current study explored essential themes of racial identity development among 10 self-identified multiracial adults from a variety of racial backgrounds. Participants were interviewed using a semistructured protocol, and the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then coded for themes by research team members. Four primary themes were identified: encounters with racism, reference group orientation, the “chameleon” experience, and the importance of social context in identity development. A number of subthemes also were identified. Although several of the themes mirrored those associated with contemporary biracial and multiracial identity development models, new themes centering on the adoption of multiple self-labels reflecting both monoracial and multiracial backgrounds emerged as well. Implications of the findings for future research and practice are identified.

In 2000, for the first time in U.S. history, multiracial people were able to identify themselves as such in the national census (Jones & Smith, 2001). This event marked a substantial movement forward in the recognition of the civil rights and social realities of multiracial people. The United States has had a long and difficult history with regard to racism and racial discrimination, and multiracial people have been affected by this history in a variety of ways. Examples of this historical impact include the use of the “one-drop rule” as a legal definition of racial heritage as well as laws passed by legislatures that made so-called interracial marriages illegal for many generations (Root, 1992). The 2000 U.S. census marked a critical moment in which multiracial people finally began to gain governmental legitimacy with respect to their rich and complex racial heritages. Indeed, according to the 2000 census, nearly 7 million people checked more than one racial category, representing 2.4% of the total U.S. population (Jones & Smith, 2001).

Given the sociohistorical context described above, it is not surprising that there has been a lack of research in counseling psychology on multiracial people. It is only within the past 2 decades that most theory and research describing the unique experiences of multiracial people has been proposed and conducted. With the publication of several book-length works (e.g., Brown, 2001; Rockquemore, 2002; Root, 1992, 1996), pioneering researchers have recently been able to present a variety of themes, methodologies, findings, and theories regarding multiracial people in single forums. Moreover, a number of conceptual models have been proposed describing the racial identity development of biracial and multiracial people (e.g., Kerwin & Ponterotto, 1995; Poston, 1990; Root, 1996).

Although the models have shown promise regarding their delineation of important identity themes, there has been a paucity of empirical studies examining the applicability of these models to multiracial individuals (Kerwin, Ponterotto, Jackson, & Harris, 1993; Miville, 2005). Indeed, although many of these models, several of which are described below, offer intriguing and innovative ways by which to conceptualize the racial identity development of biracial and multiracial people, almost no follow-up research has been published presenting information confirming or disconfirming these models (see Miville, 2005, for a recent review of findings). To date, no measures have been published specifically assessing multiracial–biracial identity, although several clinically useful interview protocols have been developed (e.g., Gibbs, 2003).

In the current study, we explored the degree to which contemporary models of biracial and multiracial identity development parallel the racial identity development experiences and processes of 10 self-identified multiracial adults. We also wished to determine whether there were common themes or processes of racial identity development for persons from a variety of multiracial backgrounds that might not be reflected in existing racial identity conceptualizations. In this investigation, we use the terms biracial and multiracial to refer, respectively, to individuals who identify as being descended from two races (e.g., Black/White) and individuals who identify as being descended from more than two races (e.g., Black/White/American Indian). Much of the theory and research in this area has focused on biracial individuals from a specific racial background, the most common being Black/White. However, we use the term multiracial here because it connotes a more inclusive tone regarding the racial heritage of our study’s participants (Root, 1996; Wehrly, Kenney, & Kenney, 1999). Prior to presenting our research questions, we provide a brief overview of contemporary biracial and multiracial identity development.
models and summarize concerns delineated in nascent writings as they are related to these conceptualizations.

Biracial and Multiracial Identity Development Models

Poston (1990) identified a five-stage model of biracial identity development, suggesting that all biracial individuals will experience some conflict and subsequent periods of maladjustment during the identity development process. The first stage of Poston’s model, personal identity, usually occurs in childhood, when biracial individuals are not aware of their mixed-race heritage. During the second stage, choice of group categorization, there are numerous societal, communal, and parental influences that compel individuals to choose one racial or ethnic group identity. The third stage of the model, enmeshment/denial, is characterized by individuals’ feelings of guilt and disloyalty about choosing one racial group over the other. Unable to resolve feelings of guilt and disloyalty, these individuals may deny the racial differences and subsequently identify with both groups. In the fourth stage, appreciation, individuals may remain committed to one racial group, but they might explore the previously ignored racial group as they experience increased awareness and knowledge of the ignored group. In the fifth stage of Poston’s model, integration, individuals may still identify with one racial group but value the integration of their multiple racial identities.

Kich’s (1992) conceptualization of biracial identity development emphasizes movement from the dissonance of choosing a monoracial self-identity toward adoption of an integrated biracial self-identity as a function of age progression. In Kich’s three-stage model of biracial identity development, individuals move from incongruent feelings between self-perceptions and external perceptions (i.e., Stage 1: 3–10 years of age), through struggles for social acceptance and self-acceptance (i.e., Stage 2: 8 years of age through young adulthood), until they fully internalize a bicultural and biracial identity (i.e., Stage 3: late adolescence or young adulthood).

Kerwin and Ponterotto’s (1995) model of biracial identity development uses age-based developmental markers to illustrate progression in racial awareness. However, unlike the models discussed above, Kerwin and Ponterotto’s conceptualization acknowledges that there is variance in identity resolution styles (e.g., establishing a public racial identity that differs from a private one), and this variance is influenced by personal, societal, and environmental factors. Kerwin and Ponterotto’s model also differs from the other models in that it acknowledges that biracial individuals might experience exclusion from groups of color as well as from Whites. In the preschool stage, which occurs up to 5 years of age, biracial children recognize similarities and differences in physical appearance, and this awareness might be a function of the degree of parental sensitivity to and willingness to address race-related issues. In the entry to school stage, biracial children are in greater contact with social groups and may be asked to classify themselves according to a monoracial label. In the preadolescence stage, there is an increased awareness of social meanings ascribed to social groups as characterized by skin tone, physical appearance, ethnicity, and religion; environmental factors, such as entry into a more diverse or more monocultural context, and direct or vicarious exposure to racism also may heighten young adolescents’ sensitivity to race. As biracial children enter adolescence, pressures to identify with one social group may be intensified by expectations of identification with the racial group of a parent of color. In the college/young adulthood stage, there may be a continued immersion in a monoracial group, accompanied by an acute awareness of the contexts in which race-related comments are made. The adulthood stage is characterized by a continued exploration and interest in race and culture, including self-declarations of racial and cultural identities and increased flexibility in adapting to various cultural settings.

A limitation of some biracial and multiracial identity-development models is that a fully integrated biracial or multiracial identity is the desired end state (Root, 1998, 1999). Root (1999), however, has suggested alternative resolutions of the biracial and multiracial identity development process. She proposed an ecological metamodel for understanding the multiple, simultaneous, and dynamic potential impact of inherited influences (e.g., parents’ identities, nativity, phenotype, and extended family), traits (e.g., temperament, coping skills, and social skills) and socialization agents (e.g., family, peers, and community) on the resolutions of racial identity for multiracial people. Different sources of experiential conflict (e.g., family and peers) may lead to feelings of alienation, marginality, discrimination, and ambiguity that challenge the development of a healthy sense of self. Instead of describing one healthy resolution of identity conflicts applicable to all biracial individuals, Root (1996) suggested that identity-development concerns may be negotiated using at least four strategies (what she refers to as border crossings): ability to carry multiple cultural perspectives simultaneously; situational identity, or shifting racial identity with regard to context or environment; claiming an independent biracial reference point apart from family and peers; and maintaining a monoracial identity when entering different cultural environments. Identification with more than one racial group (Root, 1998) may be positive when personality and sense of self remain constant across racial contexts, although social validation of a biracial or multiracial identity may be specific to regions of high concentrations of biracial and multiracial people where there is a sufficient community with whom to interact and find support (Jones & Smith, 2001). The accumulation of empirical evidence demonstrating the variations of adaptive identity development resolutions for biracial and multiracial people, however, is in its infancy (Fatimilehin, 1999; Gillem, Cohn, & Throne, 2001; Kerwin et al., 1993; Root, 2002).

Purposes of the Current Study and Research Questions

Given the dearth of research in the area of interest, particularly for individuals descended from various racial backgrounds, we investigated the relevance of contemporary biracial and multiracial identity development models for biracial people. We also sought to determine whether there are common themes or issues relevant to these people’s racial identity development that may not be captured by existing racial identity conceptualizations. We incorporated a phenomenological research design based on interviews as being most appropriate for isolating and defining racial identity development themes (Creswell, 1998). We were drawn to the phenomenological approach in particular because we were interested in exploring the meaning of a phenomenon or concept—specifically, racial identity—among a unique group of individuals: multiracial people. Philosophical assumptions associated with the
phenomenological approach, searching for an “essential, invariant structure . . . [underlying] the intentionalty of consciousness where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image, and meaning” (Creswell, 1998, p. 52) seemed an excellent fit with our general research purposes. We incorporated the psychological approach of phenomenology, which focuses on individual, rather than group, experiences.

The research study addressed the following questions:

1. What are essential themes or processes of racial identity development for individuals from a variety of multiracial backgrounds?

2. How do these themes parallel or differ from existing conceptualizations of biracial and multiracial identity development?

Method

Participants

Qualitative inquiry—a category that includes phenomenological designs—generally incorporates relatively small samples selected purposefully to help ensure the inclusion information-rich cases (Patton, 2002). In our study, we used a mixture of intensity and purposive snowball sampling techniques that facilitated the involvement of a racially diverse participant pool. Participants were recruited at a midwestern university through personal contacts and fliers distributed on campus. Because of the unique nature of the study focus (i.e., multiracial heritage of participants living in a small midwestern town), we believed that individuals who responded to our fliers or otherwise learned of our project likely would have a fairly strong identification with their multiracial background; that is, we believed these individuals might have a “story” they wanted to tell about their unique racial background and, thus, serve as rich sources of information regarding their racial identity development.

Participants included 10 self-identified multiracial individuals from a variety of mixed racial backgrounds, including Black American/Asian; Black American/American Indian; Asian/American Indian; Latina/White; Latino/Middle Eastern; Native Hawaiian/White/Asian; Asian/White (2); and American Indian/White (2). Five participants were female and 5 were male (see Table 1 for summary list of gender and race of each participant). The average age of participants was 28 years, with a range of 20–54 years of age. All participants but one were currently enrolled as full-time students, and their academic majors ranged from psychology to biology. Most participants spoke or understood more than one language.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M1</td>
<td>Native Hawaiian/White/Asian</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2</td>
<td>American Indian/White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M3</td>
<td>Latino/Middle Eastern</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M4</td>
<td>Asian/American Indian</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M5</td>
<td>Asian/White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M6</td>
<td>American Indian/White</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M7</td>
<td>Black American/American Indian</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M8</td>
<td>Latina/White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M9</td>
<td>Asian/White</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M10</td>
<td>Black American/Asian</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. M2 and M6 were siblings.

Procedure

Participants were read an informed consent script, and then they completed a brief demographic form. Participants were individually interviewed for approximately 2 hr (range of 60 min to 2 1/2 hr) by Marie L. Miville, a multiracial (Latina/White) woman. A semistructured interview protocol was designed for participants (see the Appendix) with questions focusing on the following issues: (a) experiences and memories of growing up; (b) a time or an incident in which the individual was first aware of his or her racial group memberships; (c) their identity development process, along with important people or events that assisted in this process; (d) responses given to others when asked about racial or ethnic group memberships and the stability of these responses over time; (e) general observations about monoracial and multiracial people; and (f) joys and hardships experienced with regard to being multiracial. All participants were asked the same primary questions to access their lived experience as multiracial beings; depending on participant responses, differing probes were used to further facilitate the interview of each participant. The interviewer also maintained field notes recording her perceptions of the interview, covering such things as rapport, length of interview, and personal observations of the interview (e.g., “quietness” of interviewee). The field notes were later incorporated in interpretation of the data to enhance the trustworthiness of the results (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). Interviews continued until redundancies were observed, as based on the field notes and observations of the interviewer.

All interviews were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed, producing over 300 single-spaced pages of data. Interview data were then analyzed by a three-member research team consisting of Marie L. Miville, Matthew F. Baysden (White/American Indian man), and Gloria So-Lloyd (Asian woman involved in an inter racial marriage). Miville is a counseling psychologist and university faculty member, and Baysden and So-Lloyd were doctoral students in counseling psychology. The team was well versed in literature in the area of multiracial identity development, having reviewed the existing literature available prior to developing the research protocol used in the study. Also, the team had received training in the area of qualitative research via extensive readings in the area and participation in previous research using a similar methodology (Montgomery, Miville, Winterowd, Jeffries, & Baysden, 2000). Finally, each team member had a personal connection with the research topic, being either multiracial themselves (Miville and Baysden) or involved in an inter racial relationship (So-Lloyd). We believed our team had a fairly deep knowledge base and personal awareness regarding some of the potential identity themes arising from the cases. However, a concern we faced, individually and as a team, was potential bias in terms of allowing our professional knowledge and personal experiences to skew our analyses of the information provided by participants. We dealt with this concern in several ways, the first being the development of an interview protocol that was fairly open-ended rather than being structured to “find” certain responses. Second, we identified what our preconceived notions regarding multiracial identity (what is referred by phenomenological researchers as epocher; Patton, 2002) might be, and we discussed and revisited these throughout the research project, particularly during the analysis phase. Finally, we invited a fourth individual, Madonna G. Constantine, an African American woman, to serve as an auditor of our findings. Constantine is a counseling psychologist and university faculty member with experience in qualitative inquiry, but she was not personally connected to the topic of interest.

Data Analysis

According to Coffey and Atkinson (1996), there are several purposes to analyzing qualitative data, depending how researchers want to “interact with the data” (p. 36). With respect to our phenomenological approach, we used data analysis procedures that we believed would best capture the essential elements of multiracial identity development. In conducting our analyses, we also felt that it was important to maintain a balance of both
subjectivity (research team of individuals with great familiarity with multiracial issues) and objectivity (involvement of an auditor familiar with qualitative methods and multicultural competence, but less so with multiracial issues; Swagler & Ellis, 2003). We adapted the data analysis steps identified for phenomenological research by Creswell (1998) and Moustakas (cited in Patton, 2002) for our research.

First, the transcripts were reviewed by each team member individually and then by the team as a whole. This step involved bracketing the data by identifying key phrases or statements that reflected meaningful components of our phenomenon of interest, racial identity development (i.e., horizontalization). The team discussed connections, patterns, meanings, and underlying conflicts observed in the interview data, clustering specific verbatim statements together into meaning units (Creswell, 1998). The meaning units were discussed and rediscussed at weekly team meetings over 3 months from which emerged, via consensus, several common or essential themes or patterns that we believed reflected critical components of the racial identity development of our participants. Through our consistent dialogues as a team, we immersed ourselves considerably in the data such that we believed the themes that were generated reflected a genuine “synthesis of the meanings and essences” (Moustakas, quoted in Patton, 2002, p. 486) of racial identity development. As noted previously, to further enhance the credibility of our findings, an auditor (an African American woman) independently reviewed all of the transcripts and themes and made suggestions about linkages of data with the essential themes (Patton, 2002). These suggestions were reviewed by the primary research team and, where warranted, incorporated into the data analysis. Use of field notes and review of existing literature also guided the selection of the final themes (Patton, 2002).

Results

Four essential themes related to racial identity development emerged from the data: encounters with racism; racial identity label and/or reference group orientation; the “chameleon” experience; and identity development in context: critical people, places, and periods. Within each theme, several subthemes were identified.

Encounters With Racism

All participants described a variety of encounters with or incidents of racism that drove their awareness of group membership in one or another race (e.g., Black, Asian, American Indian). These encounters also focused on an awareness of being multiracial—that is, being phenotypically “unusual” or “unique.” Thus, participants were subjected to two types of encounter experiences: being a person of color and being a multiracial person.

Encounters with monорacial racism. Participants described a number of poignant incidents in which members of their social world either made overtly racist comments or acted in a racist manner regarding one or another racial group. For example, M41 (who was Asian/American Indian with an Asian surname) described an incident in which he applied for a job twice and never received a call back. He then went in person to check on the application, and the hiring administrator immediately asked him when he could start:

“I’ve never said my name. My last name is [. . .].” She looked at me very confused. I said, “I am the same person that turned in the application in twice before now. So, obviously to me if you’re looking for a person hired for this long, then you didn’t call me back for the simple acknowledgment of my name. You thought that, maybe you thought that I was a minority, maybe I was Japanese, or Asian that could not speak English well, maybe you are just discriminating against in hiring practices.” So I said, “Thank you for the job, but you know, here is the opportunity for you to learn that not everybody looks the same.” And I just walked out.

In another illustration of overt racism toward a person of color, M8 (Latina/White) described a friend in high school:

I couldn’t come over to her house when her grandfather was there ‘cause he didn’t like, he didn’t like Mexicans, . . . She had to tell him I was Spanish, so he accepted if I was Spanish, that was okay, but if I was Mexican, I couldn’t come over.

As M9 (Asian/White) stated,

Even though you’re not 100% Asian, you still get the stereotypes [about Asians]. You still get 100% of the prejudice. Doesn’t matter if you are “slightly” Asian, or if you are 100%. . . . You get 100% of the prejudice. That is the thing I hate.

These incidences illustrate the powerful effects that racism had on the participants, leading them to feel hurt, anger, and even shame, all of which are frequent psychological correlates of such experiences. For some of the participants, the incidents seemed fresh in their minds at the time of the interviews, leading to an awakening of a sociopolitical consciousness.

Encounters with multiracial racism: The ubiquitous “What are you?” question. Participants described encounters with racism from others based on ambiguous or unidentifiable physical characteristics related to racial group membership. Participants described these experiences as occurring in several settings, although usually in school settings, in which others directly asked, “What are you anyway?” Encounters with racism occurred at both personal and institutional levels.

M3 (Latino/Middle Eastern) described his efforts in putting together a university campus celebration of El Día de los Muertos [Day of the Dead]:

And they were like why are you doing that? I’m like, because it comes from my culture. And they just look at me, and they’re like, “What exactly are you?” It’s kinda like [pause], what am I supposed to be? You know, it’s like, what exactly are you? It’s what exactly are you! You know, that’s how you want to say it.

M10 (Black American/Asian American) related the following:

I went to New York City to visit my sister [who attends college there]. I could go out one day and I would be Dominican, and the next day I’d be Puerto Rican. Then if I [went] to Harlem, I’m a light-skinned Black girl. Um, it’s [like that] all the time. On this campus, especially on this campus, I get, “Well, what are you exactly?” I mean, “You’re just, you are so fair” and “Your features are hard to [classify].”

M10 also stated,

But then again, it kind of bothers me. I wish I could be normal, whatever normal is like—like everybody else. But it’s cool to be different too, because like I said, that’s what makes me—I mean.

1 Here and throughout, participants are referred to by their code numbers from the data analyses—M#, where M stands for multiracial participant, and # represents the individual case number.
As with monoracial racism, these encounters occurred with a mixture of hurt and anger, though some participants learned to develop an appreciation of their unique appearance. This finding in particular serves to highlight how psychologically impactful a multiracial heritage can be, yet how little social support is available to provide multiracial individuals with positive messages and strategies for resisting multiracial racism. In contrast with encounters with monoracial racism, it seemed as though the research interview was the first time many of these participants disclosed their experiences with multiracial racism.

At the institutional level, multiracial racism was experienced as there not being an appropriate racial or ethnic designation on applications for respondents. As M4 described,

[On] most of [the application forms for school], even when I was growing up, there was not an “other” . . . And so during those times, even when I was younger, I felt confused. You know, because, I thought, “Man, why do I have to check one.” And so a lot of times, I would check two [categories] or not check any.

M1 (native Hawaiian/White/Asian) also described entering college as an ethnic minority person:

Suddenly I’m “Minority Guy” . . . And for some reason that was important to them [university personnel]. They asked me to . . . just mark one. And I was like, you pick one. It’s more important to you that I’m one thing.

Not having a racial designation on institutional forms is one of the most invidious experiences of racism that occurs to multiracial people. As noted earlier, it has only been since 2000 that the U.S. government has recognized multiracial heritage as a legitimate designation on its census surveys. Participants all felt frustration at this common experience, yet they some found adaptive strategies for dealing with it (e.g., asking the institutional representative to select a designation rather than choosing one).

Reference Group Orientation

Another identity issue for participants was the question of which racial and ethnic groups or communities served as reference groups. It is interesting to note that participants tended to identify with one race or ethnicity (e.g., Puerto Rican, Black or African American, or Asian). At the same time, individuals recognized the experience of being multiracial as a personally meaningful label. However, the lack of a visible or accessible multiracial community seemed to make this identity more a privately recognized label rather than a clearly negotiated reference group orientation. Finally, identification with being a person of color was an important means of connecting with similar others and building a sense of community, social support network, and reference group orientation.

Identity as monoracial or monoethnic. Most participants identified with one primary racial or ethnic group orientation. As M5 (Asian/White) stated,

My first response is always I’m Chinese. And I don’t think that’s ever really changed . . . Chinese is just what I’m made of, and Eurasian is a complement to that. I mean, it’s the same thing . . . it’s an expansion of that definition.

As M3, who grew up with his mother and never knew his birth father, explained,

I say [I’m] Puerto Rican because that is what my mom is and that is what I know about. I don’t feel right saying [I’m] Saudi Arabian simply because everything that I know about Saudi Arabia, I’ve learned from a book. That’s more anthropology than actual cultural immersion. I don’t get my identity from what blood flows through me now. I get my identity from . . . what culture filters through me.

M10 stated,

I feel like . . . a minority. I feel very close to minorities. I don’t care what kind of minority. I don’t feel I can relate as well to a White person. As minorities, we all have the same struggle. We’re looked at as different. We are! And I feel like—I hate it when people make fun of Asian American students because of their accents. Because I see my parents coming over here and having that accent and people making fun, and it makes me mad . . . And so I feel like I can relate to that.

The personal link with communities of color was quite apparent for many of the participants, and much of it centered on feelings of intimacy and pride. In particular, as M3 noted so eloquently, racial and cultural identity development based on race and ethnicity was not a passive intellectual activity but was, instead, a process of emotional and cognitive engagement that emerged from meaningful relationships with significant others.

Identity as multiracial. At the same time, a common theme among participants was the experience of identifying as multiracial. For example, M9 said that when he was a child, he preferred using the word Caucasian to describe himself “because I felt the word Caucasian meant, oh, ‘Cauc,’ you know, the first part meant White, [and] the last bit meant Asian, so I would just put Caucasian when I was younger.”

M8 described her realization, via her father’s prodding, that she was both Mexican and White after going through a period of militancy against Whites: “I realized that was half of myself.” As a result, she became interested in the recent multiracial political movement:

This is more where I fit in because . . . I wasn’t totally accepted by the Hispanic part of my family. . . . Not that they didn’t love me you know, it was just like [pause] it always separated me from them and then just everyone else would just look [at me and think] “minority.” So it was like I can’t fit either!

M3 also acknowledged multiracial as an identity in its own right:

I think the big issue for multiracial, like me, is the fact that we are an ethnicity . . . people forget about us in the whole minority spectrum . . . we all have melanin, but you know, it is [a lot] for some, [and a little not] for others, and you get kinda left out a bit.

M1 stated,

There’s like a pride . . . that can stand for like a whole lot of different things . . . [multiracial people] still culturally identify but there’s not like such a strong cultural identification at the exclusion of others.

M10 described feeling pulled between her Asian Indian family and her Black peers:
I felt like I had to decide because the Indian side is looking at me like, you don’t even look like you are a relative to an Indian. . . . And then the Black side’s looking at me like—we don’t like you because you are too light-skinned or cause you have “good hair” . . . . And that made me think I had to decide. I had to identify. When I finally gave it up was when I was just deciding that no one can make me [who I am], but me. So I’m gonna do whatever I want to do. I’m not going to identify with anybody or anything. I’m just gonna do whatever makes me happy.

A multitude of feelings were expressed by participants regarding their unique multiracial backgrounds, including alienation and pride. Such feelings seemed to result from both positive and negative experiences with others; several participants simply gave up striving to “fit in” with groups by which they were unlikely to be embraced. This finding poignantly highlights the strong need for a community of similar others who can positively mirror being multiracial.

The “Chameleon” Experience

Despite feeling alienated at times because of their unique racial mixture, many participants discussed how they attempted to develop strategies to help them fit in with more than one racial or cultural group (i.e., “both/and” thinking rather than “either/or” thinking). Participants expressed that their approach to social relations was one with flexible, rather than rigid, social group boundaries, and they emphasized their ability to adapt to the cultural norms or demands of the situation. One limit of this approach for some participants was the experience of fitting into both groups at some level but never feeling a complete part of either. Along with flexible group boundaries, there were flexible social attitudes, accepting oneself without needing to exclude others and valuing both similarities and differences among people, the latter of which has been defined as universal–diverse orientation (Miville et al., 1999).

Flexible social boundaries. Participants expressed a willingness or ability to adapt to the demands or expectations of their cultural surroundings. For example, M3 stated,

If I go to an Hispanic student association [meeting], I’m not going to say, uh [laugh] hi, my name is [. . .] and I am Saudi-Arabian and White. . . . I’m going to throw in the Latino thing. I’m going to be like, you know, Puerto Rican.

Later, he continued,

I assimilate very well and I think a lot of us are chameleons. We can sit in a group of White people and feel different, but still fit in. I mean, there’s still, we squeeze by sometimes, that is how it kinda feels. We squeeze by, but we made it, you know. It is kinda, “shh, don’t tell ‘em.” But we can turn around and sit in a group of Black people and feel comfortable, even though we are not Black in the same way. So, in a way, it’s an advantage.

Fitting into both worlds also has its institutional rewards, as M4 acknowledged: “I admit that usually I use it to my advantage as well. You know . . . if something [like] a Japanese scholarship or Asian American scholarship comes up . . . I am there.”

Flexible social attitudes/universal–diverse orientation. Being a chameleon also seemed to be related to more flexible and open attitudes toward others who were different from participants. M1 stated of his childhood,

It was kinda neat. . . . I’d go to my friends’ house, and their house would be done up completely different. I’d go over there to have dinner and . . . actually taking pride in having a lot of African American friends. . . . [It] doesn’t mean there’s a reason to treat them different.

M9 also stated,

When I’m with predominantly White people, or just, uh, basically the situation where everyone, I mean . . . even if you’re Asian and you are like talking like I am, I’ll accept you on an equal plane . . . it’s just like, okay, I’m one of you.

M8 reported,

I love everyone. I like the issues that pertain to Hispanics, minorities, and I used to want to work only with Mexicans and only with Hispanics. . . . I want to help people who are in need, regardless of color, now. I think that is more of a—me coming to a balance and realizing that people are human and people all have needs and wherever I best fit, where I can help the most people, is where I should go.

Together, these findings highlight the unique strengths that may be associated with a multiracial heritage—the ability to negotiate with a variety of social groups and settings and to cross rigid social boundaries, along with an awareness of the importance of doing so. At the same time, several participants were keenly aware—perhaps on the basis of their own experiences—of social realities (e.g., racism) that had led to strong social group boundaries. Although much research has been conducted on potential adjustment problems of multiracial people (see Miville, 2005), this finding seems to demonstrate how a multiracial identity may enhance psychological functioning by, for example, developing increased cognitive flexibility and openness.

Identity Development in Context: Critical People, Critical Places, Critical Periods

The development—even the evolution—of a racial identity seemed to occur for participants in response to a variety of people, places, and time periods. That is, the emotional connection participants felt toward one or another racial or ethnic identity was greatly influenced by family members, particularly parents, who were physically and emotionally available (or unavailable) to help create that connection to culture. The openness, acceptance, and racial–ethnic diversity of people within a setting also played a role in how positively participants felt about their mixed racial heritage. Some settings seemed to be places where important encounters occurred. Relatedly, certain developmental periods were important either in helping to create an awareness regarding mixed racial heritage or in helping to integrate a racial identity (be it monoracial or multiracial).

Critical people. Without a doubt, parents seemed to be the single most influential people in the development and expression of participants’ racial identity. Of greatest interest was the impact of the physical and emotional availability of parents on the identity label participants adopted. In general, it seemed that participants adopted the racial–ethnic label of the parent to whom they felt emotionally closest or whom they viewed as most dominant in the
household. For example, M9, whose monoracial label reflected his Asian background, perceived his mother (Filipino) as dominant: “She was like the God figure in the house. You know, don’t talk back to Mom. You could talk back to Dad and get away with it. . . . but never talk back to Mom.” M1, who also strongly identified with his Asian heritage, similarly stated,

I would say my mother has been a very strong influence, in identifying [as] primarily foreign Chinese. . . . Our house is decorated primarily like I said in Chinese type decorations. My mom had a strong influence in that.

Extended family and friends also seemed to play an important role in influencing the racial identity of participants. M1 described the importance of other relatives:

I’m very connected with my mother’s side of the family, and my uncles and my aunts and especially my cousins, and a couple of my uncles are very active with sovereign nation Hawaii. . . . One of my uncles who I stayed with [during the] summer, I look up to him a lot. I find him a good role model in a way, and he is one of the few people in the family that stills speaks fluent Hawaiian . . . and then [I identify with] my grandfather [because of] the fact that I’m his namesake.

M1 noted that his White father also took pride in his son’s native Hawaiian heritage, which he actively supported.

The opposite also seemed to hold true in terms of feeling distant from relatives, as M9 reflected in describing his extended White family:

It was really hard to relate [to] them. It was only my dad’s side of the family that we really noticed the problems. It was always like a lot of behind-the-back stuff. There was a lack of relationship with my dad’s side of the family, so I never really had the interaction, with [White culture]. I just had more interaction with Asian culture because [of] my mom. But when they did something, they did something, it was always like a party, social situation, and I was hardly ever in that kind of situation with my dad’s family.

In general, most participants who had a White racial heritage tended to identify more with their parent of color, perhaps in part because of the lack of emotional availability of their White parent as well as previously described encounters with monoracial racism, which may have increased the salience of being a person of color. It is possible that this finding, at least with respect to lack of emotional availability of White parents, was an artifact of our sampling strategy, particularly for our region (i.e., multiracial individuals who identified as White and felt close to their White parent simply may not have volunteered for our study because they did not perceive themselves as “multiracial”).

Critical places. Settings where participants grew up and attended school also had great impact on racial identity development. M5 grew up on a military base, where “being and looking different” seemed more typical than not:

Because you are in the military, you meet so many people from such broad backgrounds and you’re stuck in the middle of some international country where you’re all in it together. You’re all trying to go get fresh water together. . . . To me it was just no big deal; Black, Mexican, every different culture . . . I just thought that that was just the way the world was.

M9 grew up in a racially mixed urban neighborhood:

To me it was a typical American neighborhood, as far as I knew. I didn’t think there was anything wrong with it or that it wasn’t normal. . . . Until I moved [to a predominantly White neighborhood] . . . you just never noticed those differences.

In contrast, other participants grew up in neighborhoods and attended schools that were racially tense. M8 explained,

There was always a lot of fights, like at my high school, like racial fights, and it was always in the paper, and then the paper itself was very badly written, and still is, and it was always one-sided. . . . We always got bad publicity, and it wasn’t really warranted.

These findings signify how critical the social setting may be to the development of a positive racial identity. Whether the settings are marked by acceptance or tension regarding racial issues may lead to differing levels of awareness and acceptance of being multiracial.

Critical periods. Certain time periods, in terms of experiencing being somehow “different,” also played an important role in participants’ racial identity development. These critical periods seemed to occur at different times throughout the developmental history of the participants, and they affected the nature of how participants perceived feeling different from others.

The first critical period seemed to emerge in childhood and the elementary school years and was characterized by the participants’ perceptions of being somehow different from others. M4 talked about his early experience in elementary school with events such as Columbus Day and Oklahoma Land Run parties:

In our culture [American Indian], we do not celebrate those. And so, of course, you know . . . at a young age, you know a party was a party. We just wanted to be involved in that . . . but we still represented the fact that we would not take part.

M10 reflected on her memories from a slumber party when she was 10:

We were all sitting around, and I think we were playing [a game] and I looked and saw that my arms were darker than theirs. For some reason, that just caught my attention at that point in time. And that is when I realized that I was different.

A second critical period emerged in the high school years and was characterized by a peer-group affiliation. M10 summed up her experiences in a predominantly African American high school:

I guess the Black [part of me] came out. . . . I started dating Black guys. My preference in music was hip-hop. I started going to a Black hairdresser. And I picked all of it up, [so] I know it was social . . . it was all my peers teaching me this.

A third critical period occurred in college and was characterized by an integration of identity. For example, M8 talked about her early college experience with a student organization and how it helped her integrate her identity:

Just one night they had the [Hispanic heritage] kickoff celebration and I just went by myself. I didn’t know anybody. On a whim I just went and [met other people like me]. It was instant family. That night, they were like, “Hi, what’s your name?” “Where are you from?” Blah. Blah. Blah. And they took me out and we all went out dancing that night, and it was just like instant friends. So, I kept coming ’cause they were my friends. [Then] little discussions you start [when] you’re
sitting around eating or whatever and [how] your parents were and stuff. I was talking to my friend and she was like, her father was extremely strict, as well. I thought [only] my father was strict. And I know he’s more strict than . . . people in general. And in, even in the Hispanic culture, he’s even more strict than in Hispanic culture. It helped, I guess it just helped me to know, and it kind of instilled that pride and to be more aware of your surroundings how they affect you and other people.

Our findings regarding critical periods seem to fit well with those described by identity development models, both generic models (e.g., Erikson, 1968) and those focusing on multiracial identity in particular (e.g., Kerwin & Ponterotto, 1995). As children, participants noticed events or aspects of self without necessarily internalizing feelings or thoughts about them (e.g., simply noticing one’s skin color in contrast with that of others). As adolescents, our participants experienced peer relations as predominant, and feelings and thoughts about themselves as a part (or not a part) of social groups emerged. In later adolescence and young adulthood, although peer relations were still predominant, greater freedom and flexibility was experienced by participants regarding both choice of social group and cognitive and emotional reactions to these experiences (i.e., increased options about which social groups to join may have enabled participants to join those that supported important aspects of themselves).

Discussion

The current study focused on identifying essential themes of racial identity development among multiracial individuals. Although our findings seemed to parallel several themes described in contemporary biracial and multiracial identity development models, some unique themes emerged from the results as well. Most current biracial identity models describe developmental processes that multiracial people experience throughout the course of their lives. Although the current study was not longitudinal, we uncovered a number of themes conveying changes in identity themes that seemed to be results of age-related developments, family and peer interactions, and social contexts. For example, Kerwin and Ponterotto (1995) proposed that as biracial–multiracial people come of school age, particularly during the periods of preadolescence and adolescence, they may experience exposure to racism along with increased pressure to identify with a specific racial group, usually that of the parent of color. The present results indicate that this indeed occurs. Several participants poignantly described experiences with overt racism (i.e., “getting 100% of the prejudice”) or pressure from peers to define themselves within preexisting racial/social categories. Also, the immersion in monoracial groups proposed by Kerwin and Ponterotto was observed in participants, with several taking on leadership roles within campus and community organizations linked with such groups. Finally, increased cognitive and emotional flexibility in adaptation to various social settings along with continuing curiosity and exploration about issues of race and culture were noted (i.e., what we termed the “chameleon” experience).

Other models (e.g., Kich, 1992; Poston, 1990) have proposed identity development end stages characterized by the adoption of a racial identity fully integrating all aspects of one’s racial background. The present results provide some evidence that this may eventually occur for some multiracial people; participants indicated that after some initial struggle brought on by family and peer pressures about the need to “choose” one group over another, they found that they needed to choose a biracial or multiracial identity on their own terms (i.e., “no one can make me [who I am], but me”).

Root (1998) has emphasized an ecological metamodel to describe biracial identity development, including the importance of socialization agents. The model, although intriguing, has thus far had little empirical evidence published to support it (Miville, 2005). Our findings demonstrate several ways that socializing agents, both people and settings, may have influenced the way participants self-identified. Uniquely, the emotional availability or predominance of parents seemed to both inform and socialize participants as to how they could racially identify, particularly regarding their monoracial identity. Also, social tolerance for racial ambiguity or messages regarding the acceptability of multiracial heritage (e.g., being raised on a military base) seemed to provide important messages to participants that “being and looking different” was acceptable, thus providing the impetus to embrace a multiracial heritage.

Unique findings not previously emphasized in existing biracial identity models were revealed here as well. Of particular importance was the simultaneous adoption of multiple labels or categories to describe one’s racial identity. That is, many participants seem to identify both as a monoracial person, generally the background of the parent of color, and as a multiracial person. Because of social pressures and the availability of a visible community, the multiracial label was the one whose adoption was publicly acknowledged and socially supported. This identity seemed especially important to participants as a way of connecting with similar others, providing important buffering from racism, and building a sense of community. However, a multiracial label or identity was one that seemed to be more private, even unspoken, rather than an identity stemming from a clearly negotiated reference group orientation. The finding of a privately held multiracial identity label points to a unique identity development challenge that multiracial people face, the adoption of a racial label or reference group orientation that is different from that of one’s own parents and most of one’s peers. In light of the incidences of overt racism that our participants described, based on being multiracial (the “What are you?” experience), finding a community that recognizes one’s multiracial background seems critical to providing a buffer from racism targeting multiracial people. The lack of a visible multiracial community or social network is likely one of the greatest challenges facing multiracial people in their negotiation of a positive multiracial identity.

Overall, the current findings provide some support for a number of the models that have been proposed to describe multiracial identity development. In particular, the data seem to support models emphasizing developmental markers, perhaps driven by age-related changes; the varying influence of social context on the salience of both monoracial and multiracial identity labels; and critical differences in adopting multiracial and monoracial identities. Each model provides a unique approach to conceptualizing multiracial identity development (e.g., age-based development, ecological approach), and the current data indicate that several of these models accurately capture some, though not all, components that make up racial identity for multiracial people.
Limitations

Root (2002) summarized a number of limitations relevant to research on multiracial people, several of which apply to our study. For example, it is possible that some of our findings were results of the region from which the participant sample was drawn, because there was not a visible multiracial community or a well-organized political network, and thus, there was little community from which the participant might have found support. Also, given our intensity and snowball strategies for data collection, it is possible that participants with more well-developed or sophisticated racial identities volunteered for the study, leading to some of our findings.

Furthermore, the use of traditional college-aged university students limited the range of a number of demographic variables, such as socioeconomic status and age. Stylistic differences on the part of participants led to another limitation regarding the narrative methodology incorporated here (Noonan et al., 2004). Participants differed in their levels of verbal expressiveness, leading to potentially inaccurate or incomplete information. We incorporated different probes for participants on the basis of their responses as well as the interviewer field notes to help address this limitation. Finally, although we used a number of strategies to adequately triangulate the data (Patton, 2002), given the lack of racial-identity instruments for multiracial identity, such quantitative data were not collected here.

Implications for Practice

The current findings help to point out several aspects of racial identity development of multiracial people that should be incorporated into clinical practice. Exposure to several kinds of racism, both monoracial and multiracial, may be critical for practitioners to assess with their multiracial clients. Following up on this topic may help clients to articulate their thoughts and feelings about being multiracial, the kinds of social supports they have in their environments for being multiracial, and strategies they either have developed or might develop to cope with racist incidents.

Also, clinicians may want to assess their clients’ social support networks (both current and those from childhood) to gain a better understanding of the types of reference groups to which their clients may be oriented. Supporting clients in adopting both monoracial and multiracial labels also seems critical to helping them establish a more complex sense of self. Finally, helping clients to see how their mixed racial heritage may enhance their understanding of the types of reference groups to which their clients may be oriented.

Implications for Future Research

The current study is in line with several other studies (e.g., Collins, 2000; Gillem et al., 2001) that have incorporated qualitative approaches, allowing for the unique voices and stories of multiracial people to be shared. Future researchers, however, might wish to incorporate blended approaches of both quantitative and qualitative designs to allow for generalizability of their findings (Miville, 2005). Of primary interest in this regard might be research focusing on the unique experiences of adopting both monoracial and multiracial labels for multiracial people and how multiracial people negotiate the various communities and reference groups of which they perceive themselves to be a part. Relatedly, research investigating the social context of racial identity development is greatly needed. The current findings on the significance of people, places, and time periods in this vein provide a further impetus to research in this area.

References

Appendix

Multiracial Adult Interview Guide

1. Tell me a little bit about growing up. What are some of the things you remember?

2. Do you remember a time or incident where you first were aware that you might be somehow different? [Probe differentness related to race and racial identity; e.g., “Did you go through a period of time where you felt you had to decide your race?”]

3. What do you say when someone asks you what your racial/ethnic background is? Has this changed over time? [Probe change; e.g., “Do/Did you notice change in behavior and attitudes which are affected by whom you are with or what you are doing?”]

4. Who have been important people in helping you identify as you do? [Probe family, friends, dating relationships, comfort in talking about race.]

5. Do you have attitudes and beliefs or practice customs of [please choose] Native Americans, African Americans, or Whites? How did you learn about these?

6. What are some things you’ve noticed about multiracial people? [Probe similarities/differences between self and others.]

7. What are some things that you have noticed about monoracial people (i.e., people of one race)?

8. What have you liked about being of mixed heritage? What has been hard about being of mixed heritage?

9. What advice do you have for parents of multiracial children?

Received November 22, 2004
Revision received March 11, 2005
Accepted March 25, 2005