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# Biracial Sensitive Practice: Expanding Social Services to an Invisible Population

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*Although literature acknowledges the existence of a biracial population, there has been minimal discussion of the differences indicative of biracial clients and how these differences impact provision of services. Too frequently, race criterion has been utilized to categorize biracial clients resulting in an all but invisible population. A biracial individual may then assume a multiplicity of identities including African-, Asian-, Latino- and Native-American, when negotiating with macro institutions including social services. As an alternative to racial paradigms, identity across the lifespan is suggested as a more comprehensive model for biracial clients. In the aftermath said clients will be rendered visible by identity models that prevail less on the basis of race and more on the basis of experience extended across the lifespan.*

## Introduction

Social work practitioners are faced with the task of providing services to clients characterized as biracial. Biracial clients comprise a group which they may have had little or no practice experience with as a separate entity. Although the literature acknowledges the existence of a biracial population, there has been minimal discussion of the significant differences and similarities indicative of biracial clients and how these differences and similarities might impact the provision of services. Instead, discussions regarding services tend to incorporate biracial clients into groups on the basis of skin color and/or racial criteria rendering them invisible. In the aftermath practitioners ask: "What are the

comprehensive criteria for service delivery to biracial clients? In what ways are biracial clients diverse, and in what ways are they similar? **Finally**, what are the implications for **biracial clients** perceived as members of **something other than their native** group based upon racial attributes?"

In the backdrop of these queries, biracial clients pose increasing challenges to social work practitioners. The size of this historically invisible group is increasing rapidly, and indicators such as dating and marital patterns suggest the need for more comprehensive delivery of services. In answer to the aforementioned queries, this article profiles the biracial population in the United States. It very briefly discusses the dynamics faced by said group in the context of race and identity theory. As an alternative to racial paradigms, identity across the lifespan is put forth as a more comprehensive model for biracial clients who must negotiate for social services with social work practitioners.

### Biracial Census: A California Profile

The United States 2000 census has made available an identity category separate from traditional race to accommodate biracial Americans (Census, 2000). Hitherto, the federal Census Bureau **had not** collected data profiling the U.S. biracial clientele. Consequent to criticisms from an increasingly vocal and active biracial population federal agencies have begun to modify standards for collecting race and ethnic data. However, such information remains unavailable for public consumption. Fortunately states such as California have acted with deliberate speed to accommodate racial changes in the state population.

In California a biracial person is defined as one descended from more than one racial category (Tafoya, 2000 p. 4). Because maternal/paternal race data are organized by monoracial criteria, it is impossible to report the biracial status of parents. Thus, the number of biracial births reported in the same data may be biased downward. Conversely, since racial status of children in the California data are derived rather than self-identified, it may actually overestimate the number of biracial births.

California today has one of the nation's most diverse populations vis-à-vis immigration. While legal barriers to intermarriage

were abandoned relatively early compared to other states, this has otherwise enabled little more than a moderate increase in biracial births within a 15-year period. However, taken as a percentage of state data in toto, biracial births rose from just under 12% in 1982 to just over 14% in 1997. In real numbers this increase accounts for about 50,000 births in 1982 and about 70,000 in 1997 (Tafoya, 2000, p. 4).

Despite modest rates of increase, the number of biracial births in California is significant and substantial. In fact said births exceeded that of Asian- and African-Americans for the state of California in 1997 (Tafoya, 2000, p. 6). The increasing size of this biracial population provides a context for understanding the concerns raised by biracial Americans as pertains to identity. Furthermore, the task of accurately assessing this population complicates traditional tabulation procedures for monitoring civil rights. For example, it has yet been determined nationally how and if statistically smaller biracial populations will be aggregated into traditional race categories. Considering aggregate group data it will then be incumbent upon census agencies to construct more comprehensive procedures for categorization.

Due to levels of immigration California boasts the distinction of having one of the nation's most racially diverse populations. That diversity however has not necessarily accounted for its biracial birth rate. The California data compared the births of native-born citizens with that of immigrants. Biracial births to native-born Californians increased from 14% to 21% between 1982 and 1997. This increase represents a 50% population differential. In contrast, fewer than 8% of California's biracial births were attributed to immigrant mothers during the same time period (Tafoya, 2000, p. 5). Hence, the biracial birthrate is not necessarily attributable to immigration.

In 1997 births to couples in which one partner was white non-Hispanic and the other was Hispanic, Asian, or black accounted for an estimated 75% of all biracial births. The major portion of such births—53%—were to Hispanic/white couples. Births to Hispanic/black, Hispanic/Asian, and Asian/black couples accounted for 15% of biracial births. The remaining births were to couples composed of Native, Alaskan, Hawaiian, Pacific Islander Americans, etc. (Tafoya, 2000, p. 6–7). As a bellwether state, it

is plausible to suggest that what exists in California provides a glimpse of the biracial population that will eventually characterize the nation as a whole.

### Racial Identity vis-à-vis Racism

Racism, according to Banton (cf Kitano, 1985), refers to the efforts of a dominant race group to exclude a dominated race group from sharing in the material and symbolic rewards of status and power. It differs from the various other forms of exclusion in that qualification is contingent upon observable and assumed physiological traits (Wilson, 1992). Said traits imply the inherent superiority of dominant race groups that are then rationalized as a natural order of the biological universe (Minor & McGauley, 1988).

The most zealous proponents of racism proclaim their superiority on the basis of race as a matter of scientific fact (Welsing, 1970). They postulate that they alone have been endowed with capacities necessary to bring about civilization. So-called "advancing civilization" was a thinly veiled form of racism devoted to rationalizing the right of one race to embark upon a worldwide mission aimed at conquering others (Pinderhughes, 1982; Daly, Jennings, Beckett & Leashore, 1995). By way of conquest and colonization, dominant race groups left no terrain of the world untouched by their professed superiority. After centuries of domination, the mission to "civilize" has necessitated a universal, almost mystic belief in the power of race to define identity (Hyde, 1995).

Consequent to identity vis-à-vis race, racism has prevailed as one of the most subtle, but no less devastating, and tenacious social problems in the modern era (Hernton, 1965; Kovel, 1984). Volumes of literature have contributed little to its demise. Germane to the American version is a biracial population rendered invisible by virtue of race categorization. The biracial identity by definition is predicated upon the notion that there are no pure races and/or biologically sound racial concepts apart from racism (Stember, 1976). About the importance of this assumption there should be no doubt. Notwithstanding current levels of diversity, to characterize identity in a narrow racial context does disservice to the scientific method. It enables the absurd rhetoric of hierarchy

within a single species and in fact provides a conduit for the continued social, economic, and political oppression of biracial persons nationwide.

Among biracial Americans manifestations of a racial identity are a direct result of domination. Domination by racist concepts allowed for the exportation of racial values, which biracial Americans internalized. As pertains to skin color, the uppermost in status became those who most approximate dominant race groups and the darkest a lesser extreme. In an attempt to conform, biracial Americans adhered to the racial prescripts of identity. Their efforts facilitated a value system that is in many ways not only physiologically alien to them but psychologically brutal to same (Keefe, 1984; Soule, 1992). The result is a configuration of identity whereby cultural and familial experience are all but totally irrelevant to the assessment of biracial clients. That being so, it is imperative to acknowledge the intimate associations between identity and power.

In the absence of power, the perpetuation of self-definition becomes ineffectual. Associated with power, racism perpetuates the racial model of identity. As a logical consequence dominant race groups maintain superior numbers, cohesion, and resources to sustain the current identity system (Schermerhorn, 1978). Biracial Americans are frequently their descendants i.e.: mulatto, Eurasian, etc. (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992). They may lack numerical superiority but in fact are cohesive and share a common experience of identity ambiguity extended from the race paradigm—an ambiguity that has galvanized their numbers.

Subsequent to biracial ambiguity, identity vis-à-vis race in the United States is generally regarded as rooted in culture (Hall, 1997). By lack of any biologically significant criteria, social scientists have determined race to be a matter of subjective interpretation. Thus, any biological traits that extend from identity based upon race may vary from one culture to another. Skin color, hair texture and the like ultimately interact differentially to determine biracial identity; therefore, identity is in fact a pliable cultural phenomenon. A biracial Puerto Rican, for example, may be identified as *moreno* in Puerto Rico and African-American on the U.S. mainland (Felix v Marquez, 1981). In the aftermath, biracial Americans are racially diverse by any given system of identity.

Individuals may be simultaneously perceived in the United States as Euro-, Native-, African-, or Asian-American dependent upon circumstances. However, a biracial identity that suggests African descent may be the most socially damning of all statuses. But even then, to look white forces the biracial individual to identify as white to engage a better quality of life.

As pertains to biracial Americans, traces including African blood necessitates their status as "minorities" (Kitano, 1997). It is their most potent and salient feature because an African phenotype contrasts with the dominant group ideal (Hall, 1990). African identity may have an effect upon every phase of life including, self-concept (Owusu, 1994). It is a "master status" which differentiates the race category of biracial clients from the dominant group as an inferior element of society (Gacia & Swenson, 1992; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). So potent is this "master status" that it has recently served as grounds for litigation between persons of light and dark skin color but belonging to the same African descended race group (*Morrow vs IRS*, 1990; Hiskey, 1990). A resort to legal tactics is an indication that for some, identity has been particularly painful given the psychologically conflicting implications of race. That is, biracial Americans have idealized much of the dominant culture but unlike members of the dominant race group are prohibited from structural assimilation into it (Kitano, 1997). Their willingness to assimilate regardless reflects a desire not to devalue themselves but to improve their quality of life and live the "American Dream." In so doing, they may develop a racist disdain for dark skin because the disdain is an aspect of Western culture (Anderson, 1991; Martinez, 1993). They are cognizant of the fact that African blood is regarded by the various institutions as an obstacle that might otherwise afford them the opportunities necessary to succeed. For those who labor, unaware of the inherent limitations, failure is the end result. Furthermore, since quality of life closely correlates with having a color identification with the racial mainstream, light skin has emerged as critical to the biracial's ability to prosper (Hughes & Hertel, 1990).

### Self/Other Identification

When asked to identify themselves by traditional race categories, biracial Americans are more often resentful or confused.

All too frequently the racial criterion has been used to categorize some as African-American who may subsequently experience serious identity conflict (Tizard & Phoenix, 1995). As a result, it is incumbent upon the social work practitioner to consult with biracial clients regarding his or her identity. They must be sensitive to the possibility that biracial clients—upon reaching adolescence—may have experienced a dramatic change in social status attributable to the U.S. system of racial identification. Such a change can directly impact social and psychological well-being, self-esteem, and interactions with others.

When asked to describe their identity as children, most biracial clients will first respond with a reference to their home and family life. If one were to ask them about any broader self-identification, the term biracial would until recently rarely be their response. The significance of these queries has implications for both identity and quality of life. Work is perhaps the most important decision confronting Americans regardless of race (Hall, 1990). It is in fact the major variable in determining quality of life. As practitioners assist biracial clients in their decisions, contradictions become even more apparent. Equality of opportunity for all Americans has only recently become a societal goal (Foster, 1993). Biracial clients in their youth observe prevailing racism in the high rates of unemployment and poverty in African-American communities. They know that hard work for them may not result in the realization of career objectives. Aspiring youth must then decide whether or not they will invest their time and energies developing competencies around an identity, because of which, society may not allow them to fully evolve. The decision to pursue a particular line of work is thus contingent upon risk. For biracial youth the risk incurred by embracing a stigmatized identity involve their emotional well-being. If they invest themselves totally in the effort and the effort doesn't pay off; if they see that equality in the job market has eluded them in the process; they will face a profound devastation and lose all respect for societal institutions (Shams & Jackson, 1994). American communities are rife with casualties of previous generations. They consist of talented folk like themselves who struggled only to become alcoholics, prostitutes, and other societal derelicts. The alternative to taking the risk—particularly if one is a light-skinned biracial—is to distance one's self from the stigmatized community. Embracing mainstream



society via passing for “white” or the creation of a new identity under the circumstances are seemingly viable alternatives.

Being biracial in America requires/enables living a life of multiple identities (Mills, Daly & Longmore, 1995). At the very least, biracial Americans are the result of a predominantly black/white society that demands adherence to certain race based social norms (Phinney & Alipuria, 1996). Alternatively, today’s less overt and more covert racism facilitates a separate biracial identity evolving its own set of applicable criteria. Being biracial then requires two processes. On the one hand, it may precipitate a conscious distancing from the stigmatized group—usually African descended. On the other hand it may involve the creation of a new identity based in part upon an inability to be accepted without reservation by either composite race groups.

Living as a biracial person in a racist society demands identity diffusion in the traditional Eriksonian (1968) sense; at the same time, a biracial life may exemplify the functional identity of a “black” or “white” citizen (Sowards, 1993). Given their experiences, by the time they become of age biracial Americans may be conflicted by identity (Tizard & Phoenix, 1995). As per the stigma associated with dark skin the ambitious confront major decisions pertaining to where they are going and how to get there. In a racist milieu that affects them personally they must prioritize American values, standards, and ideals. The bright and talented cannot possibly ignore the inherent contradictions between those values, standards, ideals and their personal lives. The middleclass who may have been sheltered from such a reality, encounter stinging consequences by the time they reach adolescence.

### Identity Across the Lifespan

In contrast to the traditional race models is the idea that identity is a fluid social construction that extends across the lifespan of human development (Brown & Montague, 1992). In this view, identity is no more static than any other social entity i.e. custom, class or experience. Advocated as a model the idea that identity is shaped by social circumstances is radical and politically charged. In fact—especially for the biracial—identity is multifaceted, subject to change and a malleable component of the

social universe. Such experience-based models expose the perception of race models as thinly veiled manifestations of racism. Furthermore, the self as multiple identities is well demonstrated in an analysis of biracial clients whose skin color is associated with more than one racial category (Brown & Montague, 1992). Enlightened conclusions offer skin color and the development of a biracial identity model to point out how racial models have become obsolete and/or function to reinforce various social and political objectives.

The need of biracial Americans for a separate identity contrasts with the degree to which race remains imperative (Hall, 1997). While numbers may be few, those who prefer to distance themselves from their African heritage must—for mental health reasons—have the option to do so. This contrast highlights the power of achieved identity as a cultural concept that is to be developed preceding adulthood. But for biracial Americans, racist imperatives are unyielding, rendering other than race based identities questionable. The race dynamic is possible because the biracial identity is removed from its historical and political context. As a result, biracial lives are assumed unrelated and unresponsive to social circumstances, history, or culture. This allows for the idealization of race in mythic proportion conveyed by Western culture and its belief systems (Hall, 1993). The construction of an essentially racial identity then inhibits fluidity and models that incorporate development across the lifespan. Models of identity that emerge are inculcated by pseudo-scholars who perpetuate hegemony resulting in the many layers of victimization that biracial Americans frequently endure.

The development of identity across the lifespan serves as a powerful alternative to the pathologizing influence of racial canons and to approaches emphasizing racial characteristics to the exclusion of others. It suggests a very different model from the traditional view. This set of concerns involves personal and social recognition that one's race/skin color is not wholly definitive. Generally, this includes understanding the nature of personal preferences and valuing them in spite of their existence within a stigmatizing social universe. Initially, the breadth of meaning for the new identity may be uncertain: it may also mean a new perception of the biracial self.

In the interest of mental and emotional health Americans who perceive themselves as biracial must counter define the social and political universe. In the face of two powerful barriers—racism and culture—this characterizes the viability of their existence. Scholars of cultural diversity stress the process of self-acknowledgment and the proclamation of existence as the first critical step in personal and, later, social acceptance of what is different (Long, 1991). For biracial Americans, this simple proclamation is a revolutionary act in its repudiation of a culturally imposed stigma. They are unique in that their defining difference on the basis of skin color may be racially non-definitive. Since they can literally choose their identity—via straddling racial categories—the affirmation of identity may be complicated for otherwise absurd racist reasons. Thus, to the degree that identity is actually a culturally constructed phenomenon, biracial Americans develop their identities under a unique set of circumstances (Biracial kids endure . . . , 1995). Consolidation of it is more impacted by ambiguity with few positive and many negative consequences. The characteristic ambiguity of “passing-for-white” is nearly always one of difficult consideration. But it is a necessity of slowly and painfully appreciating an identity wholeness that cannot be understood via race canon ideology.

Antithetical to the racial traditions is coming to an appreciation of the cultural myths pertaining to race. Some of these myths are the obvious negative stereotypes about the associations of dark skin with inferiority and the superiority of European ancestry (Hall, 1992). Others are less well articulated, maintaining that some among biracial Americans—particularly the light-skinned—having European ancestry are arrogant and/or self-centered (Jones, 1994; Gatson, 1994). To the degree that these views have been consciously incorporated, they are easy to challenge, but they must be challenged by demythologizing personal contact. Such occurrences as recognizing other aspects of identity will slowly modify the more deeply entrenched assumptions.

The disadvantages of racial criteria as an identity paradigm in social work stem from a methodology rooted in cultural tradition—not science. Fortunately, such disadvantages have begun to manifest in the practitioner’s push for a scientific explanation of social phenomena. Conversely, by adhering to cultural tradi-

tion, the practitioner is forced to view identity from a culturally constructed perspective. This necessitates identity by racial criteria rather than reflecting reality. Under such circumstances a traditional pre-existing view of the identity universe is reinforced. The more scientific, logically constructed nature of identity across the lifespan is then overlooked accordingly. To reverse this trend and enable more biracial sensitive practice, the social worker attempting to service biracial clients will find it helpful to:

- determine what the class, social and familial circumstances of the client are
- be sensitive to the possibility that people who are in crisis or who are experiencing powerful emotions may resent erroneous assumptions about their identity
- seek biracial support systems if such action seems appropriate
- review the literature pertaining to biracial clients

### Conclusion

When determining a biracial client's identity, it is imperative to consider the social context in which that identity evolved. A biracial individual may in fact assume a multiplicity of identities including African-, Asian-, Latino- and Native-American, when negotiating with macro institutions such as social services. Biracial clients comprise a composite group with enough feelings of solidarity to aid coalition forming when confronting institutional structures, which in turn may find it convenient to regard them by race—making them all but invisible. In other situations this sense of solidarity need not be called into play—as in a racially diverse neighborhood where class or ancestral heritage serve as the predominant identity criteria.

Macro institutions and the society-at-large have heretofore invalidated the biracial identity. In many respects, biracial clients being racially labeled is the result of and a response to oppression and exploitation: One might speak of the labels “half-caste” or “half-breed” as indicative of such oppression. By a purification of terms, such labels are assumed derogatory in designation. But lifespan experience may transcend terminology in the search for a comprehensive biracial identity. Pertinent to situations where racial identification may be important, the social worker will find

it helpful to let clients identify themselves, to remember that interpretations of identity may vary by social context, and to remember that individuals may not see themselves as members of the group they have been institutionally identified with.

For the entirety of U.S. history, biracial Americans have been oppressed by virtue of their inability to be rendered visible (Kitano, 1997, p. 317). Particularly, those perceived as black have suffered from discrimination, violence, and disrespect. The cultural suppression of their biracial heritage, sanctioned by the state at various institutional levels, led to the acknowledgment of the population now referred to as biracial. That biracial population began to form a separate identity, as part of a diversity cultural theme in the social services profession. This process has led to an increasing group consciousness among biracial populations both organizationally and symbolically, as indicated by the addition of identity categories to the 2000 census.

Whatever cohesion existent among biracial populations extended from racial criteria is the product of traditional racism. When confronted with the special needs and challenges of such a large and growing populace, U.S. institutions began labeling without meaningful input from effected groups. Individuals then tended to identify themselves as biracial or not depending on their level of interactions with other systems facilitating conflict.

Evolution of a human development across the lifespan model minimizes identity conflict and complies with the genesis of a new awareness in theory and practice. It is increasingly evident pertinent to the study of identity, self-image, family dynamics, etc. It is a necessity in a nation fastly becoming not only racially but also ethnically and culturally diverse as well. The subsequent diversity in higher education has facilitated assertions on the part of "minorities" to define identity for themselves. Their findings have validated the importance of self-experience as having a direct correlation to psychological well-being. Furthermore, are implications for the mental health of biracial clients in that they require the option, at least, to identify themselves rather than be identified by superficial racial characteristics. In the aftermath biracial clients will be rendered visible resulting in validation of identity models that prevail less on the basis of what race they are—vis-à-vis skin color—and more on the

basis of who they are—vis-à-vis experience—extended across the lifespan.

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