

# Ethical Considerations in Social Work Research with Multiracial Individuals

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## Abstract

Growing diversity in the U.S. has prioritized social work's ethical obligation to develop specialized knowledge and understanding of culture and its function in human behavior and society. One ethnic minority group that is receiving growing attention in the social sciences is multiracial persons, or persons who identify with more than one race or ethnic group. This population represents one of the fastest growing ethnic minority groups in the United States. The growing presence and visibility of multiracial persons in the US demands that social work researchers critically examine and understand the complexity of identity as it applies to people who identify with more than one race. This article will discuss both past and present conceptualizations of multiracial identity, and the methodological challenges specific to investigations with multiracial participants. This article will conclude with recommended strategies for ensuring ethically responsible and culturally sensitive research with multiracial persons.

**Key Words:** Multiracial, identity, culturally sensitive research, research methods, ethically responsible research

## 1.0 Introduction

Growing diversity in the U.S. has prioritized social work's ethical obligation to develop specialized knowledge and understanding of culture and its function in human behavior and society (National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics, 1999, Sec.1.05; NASW, 2001). This ethical requirement governs not only our practice, but recent initiatives to conduct and disseminate research with ethnic minority populations (U.S. Department of

Health and Human Services, 2001). This commitment evokes certain challenges for social work researchers since historically ethnic minority groups have been considerably more vulnerable to stigmatization, exploitation and harm in research (Fisher, Hoagwood, Boyce, Duster, Frank.). Ethical planning becomes a crucial component of research with ethnic minorities, and social work researchers must insure that investigations are not only ethically responsible, but flexible to the culture of its participants (Fisher et al., 2002).

One ethnic minority group is receiving growing attention in social science research: multiracial persons (Shih & Sanchez, 2009), or individuals who identify with more than one racial group (Root & Kelley, 2003). According to the U.S. census, approximately 7 million Americans or 2.4% of the total population identify with more than one race (U.S. Census, 2000). This population has steadily increased since the abolishment of anti-miscegenation laws in 1967 (*Loving v. Virginia*), and now represents one of the fastest growing minority groups in the United States (Shih & Sanchez, 2009). Though racial mixing is far from a new phenomenon in the U.S. (Morning, 2003; Rockquemore, Brunisma, & Delgado, 2009), the increased visibility of multiracial persons in the media (i.e., Tiger Woods, President Barack Obama) have inspired a growing number of people to claim membership in more than one racial group (Rockquemore, Brunisma, & Delgado, 2009). Recent legislation allowing multiracial persons to check more than one race on federal race reporting forms (see Office of Management and Budget, 1997) have made the multiracial population a noteworthy demographic group in the United States (Cheng & Lee, 2009; Shih & Sanchez, 2005). In fact some scholars propose that by the year 2050, one in five persons in the U.S.

could claim a multiracial background (Lee & Bean, 2004; Smith & Edmonston, 1997).

Due to the significant population growth and increased visibility of multiracial persons in the U.S., social workers are more than likely to see a rise in the number of clients and family systems who identify as multiracial (Fong, Spickard, & Ewalt, 1995; Hall, 2001). This heightens the need for social workers to understand how growing up in a complex society that continues to construct race based on historic ideals of distinct racial groups, may be challenging for multiracial persons. For instance, there is limited yet mounting evidence that multiracial youth, in particular are at greater risk than their monoracial peers to use substances, engage in violent behaviors, and struggle with self-esteem (see: Bolland, Bryant, Lian, McCallum, Vazsonyi, & Barth, 2007; Choi, Harachi, Gillmore, & Catalano, 2006; Jackson & LeCroy, 2009; Udry, Li, & Hendrickson-Smith, 2003). Researchers posit that this may be due to stressors associated with navigating a multifaceted identity in a mono-racial focused society (Choi et al., 2006; Samuels, 2009). Unfortunately existing research is unable to capture the more dynamic and fluid processes influencing multiracial identity development, those which may or may not be linked to an individual's risk for developing mental or behavioral health problems (Choi et al., 2006; Shih & Sanchez, 2005).

The growing presence and visibility of multiracial persons in the US demands that social work researchers critically examine and understand the complexity of identity as it applies to people who identify with more than one race (Crawford & Alaggia, 2008). Such knowledge is critical to our field's development of culturally sensitive practice models with multiracial individuals and interracial families (Beneditto & Olisky, 2001; Gibbs, 1998; Morrison & Bordere, 2001; Nishimura, 2004; Wardle, 1991). Unfortunately social work research efforts to understand the identity of this diverse group have been minimal. This is discerning since the profession is known, not only for its ethical obligation to understand culture and its function in human behavior and society (NASW, 1999), but unlike other disciplines, social work has the potential to offer a unique, more inclusive understanding of multiracial identity by utilizing the professions ecological and strength-based perspectives (Jackson, 2009). The dearth of multiracial research may be related to the political and definitional challenges associated with multiracial identification, which include the practice of compartmentalizing persons into separate monolithic racial groups (Edwards & Pedrotti, 2008). Due to this, multiracial research, like

ethnic minority research in general, is confounded by certain methodological issues (Root, 1992).

This article will discuss both past and present conceptualizations of multiracial identity, and the methodological challenges specific to investigations with multiracial participants. This article will conclude with recommended strategies for ensuring ethically responsible and culturally sensitive research with multiracial persons. The author recognizes that constructs of race and ethnicity are not static and are often conceptually confusing in social science research (Cokly, 2007), therefore, for the purposes of this article, the author defines the term *multiracial* as individuals who identify with 2 or more different racial heritages (i.e., Black, White, Asian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaskan Native), which is inclusive of derivative terms such as: *biracial* (individuals who identify with 2 different racial groups), *mixed-race* and *mixed-heritage* (Root & Kelley, 2003).

## **2.0 U.S. Conceptualization of Multiracial Identity: Past and Present**

The social identity of multiracial people is strongly influenced by the sociopolitical context of the U.S., including the stagnant societal belief in the biological existence of separate races (Kahn & Denmon, 1997; Root, 1992b). Certain national events have played a significant role in shaping social conceptualizations of multiracial identity and social science research with multiracial persons. These include: slavery, the legalization of interracial marriage, Census 2000, and the recent election of mixed-race President Barack Obama.

*Slavery.* Slavery in the U.S. (1654 – 1865), particularly the raping of African female slaves by white males, led to the emergence of multiracial (black/white) individuals. In order to preserve the sanctity of the institution of slavery and protect White masters from having to provide patronage to their half-black offspring, legislation was developed in the 1600's to classify multiracial individuals with African American ancestry as black. This became known as the principal of hypo-descent or the "one-drop rule" (Brown, 2001; Graves, 2004). Around the same time, biological and sociological arguments began to arise portraying multiracial individuals as maladjusted and dangerous degenerates due to their dual polarized heritage (Brown, 2001; Wilson, 1987). This perspective was mostly shaped by false biological claims of the existence of a racial hierarchy, placing whites above groups of color, both on a genetic and societal level. For example, social scientists during the late 1800's and early 1900's considered mixed black/white persons less intelligent

and capable than white due to possessing black blood (*Hybrid Degeneracy Theory*) (Brown, 2001). This transformed society's view of multiracial people and led to the construction of the first multiracial identity theories which classified multiracial persons as "marginal" (e.g., Embree, 1931; Park, 1928; Sommers, 1964; Stonequist, 1937). Multiracial research at this time was often based on speculation and non-representative case histories that strongly emphasized the biased notion that interracial persons suffered from social and emotional problems (Johnson & Nagoshi, 1986). This prompted the rise of stereotypes popularizing the character notion of the genetically, mentally, and morally inferior "mulatto."

#### *Legalization of interracial marriage.*

Following the legalization of interracial marriage in 1967 (*Loving v. Virginia*), the U.S. saw a rise in interracial partnerships and a dramatic increase in multiracial children, also known as the "biracial baby boom" (Root, 1992). This prompted social scientists to again revisit the identity development of multiracial persons. An uprising of theories were proposed in the late 80's and early 90's, attempting to shed light on the racial identity options available to multiracial mainly Black/White children (e.g., Gibbs, 1987, *Model of Biracial Identity Conflicts*; Poston, 1990, *The Biracial Identity Development Model*; Jacobs, 1992, *The Identity Development Model of Biracial Children*). Many of these emerging theories also followed the Eurocentric stage model frameworks of early identity development theorists (i.e., Erikson, 1963, and Cross, 1987). These theories posited that multiracial identity development followed a similar linear path as other minority groups. Using this static approach many of these models pre-assigned and limited social identity options to a choice of either black or multiracial (Rockquemore & Brunnsma, 2002). In addition, most of these models were deficit-based, ignoring the contributing ecological factors impacting identity development, and consequently pathologizing the multiracial experience (Poston, 1990). Multiracial identity models developed during this time were either conceptual or based on research with small samples of biracial Black/White children. Despite relying on more pathological models of identity, research produced during this time introduced new conceptualizations of multiracial identity, namely that multiracial persons did not struggle psychologically (Gibbs & Hines, 1992).

*Census 2000.* The changing sociopolitical climate of the 1990's and the growing percentage of persons who self-identify as multiracial prompted the formation of activist groups advocating the legal right of multiracial persons to claim the racial heritages of

both parents. Their efforts elicited the ratification of the U.S. Federal Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) categorizes of race, allowing multiracial persons to check more than one race on federal race reporting forms (OMB, 1997). The 2000 Census marked the official end of the anonymity of multiracial persons in the U.S. (Brown, 2001), making them visible in a country who for the most part had not acknowledged their existence (Chiong, 1998). Prior to and following the 2000 Census, there was a notable increase in multiracial identity research, lead often by multiracial researchers themselves (i.e., Clinical Psychologist Maria P.P. Root). One major priority that emerged from this research was the development of a complex theory of multiracial identity – one that was non-linear and reflective of the numerous contextual variables that may influence identity development (e.g., Hall, 2005; Renn, 2003; Rockquemore & Brunnsma, 2002; Root, 1999b; Wijeyeshinge, 2001). Using a more ecological lens, multiracial identity research has introduced new evidence that identities can change across contexts, differ within a family system, and shift over the life course (e.g., Jackson, 2009; Renn, 2003; Rockquemore & Brunnsma, 2002; Root, 1998). This has contributed to a more in-depth understanding of multiracial identity, which can include: experiencing prejudice, adopting multiple labels to describe one's racial identity, refusing to disown any part of their heritage, and feeling comfortable in multiple ethnic communities (see Brackett et al., 2006; Buckley & Carter, 2004; Guevarra, 2007; Milville et al., 2005).

*Age of Obama.* Recently the U.S. has experienced yet another reputable and potentially influential shift in this country's conceptualization of multiracial identity. President Obama, who is multiracial (though he labels himself and is portrayed in U.S. media as African American) has described his mixed-race background as the most important and powerful factor that has prepared him for his role as President of the United States (Radutzky & Devine, 2008). His presence has re-ignited nationwide debates on issues of race and multiracial identity (Hendricks, 2008; Samuels, 2006), including previous notions that multiracial individuals have the right to choose how they identify, and the right to claim membership in both multiracial and mono-racial groups (*Bill of Rights for People of Mixed Heritage*, Root, 2001). This racial paradigm shift challenges social science researchers to contribute new advancements to conceptualizing multiracial identity (Shih & Sanchez, 2009). New research is beginning to emerge that utilizes more sophisticated methods (i.e., secondary analysis of national databases, mixed qualitative and quantitative designs,

multiracial identity instrumentation development, etc.) to generate new insight into the complexities of multiracial identity (see Shih & Sanchez, 2009).

Throughout history the social identity of multiracial persons has challenged legislation on patronage, marriage, and racial classification. There is a growing call for social scientists to examine, more constructively, how multiracial individuals experience and define their identity in a changing society, which up until recently was reluctant to acknowledge their existence. Therefore, ethical planning becomes a crucial factor in future research with multiracial persons, and social work researchers must become familiar with some of the noted challenges complicating multiracial investigations. These challenges will be described in the next section.

### **3.0 Methodological Challenges in Multiracial Research**

The demand to include multiracial participants in research investigations evokes certain methodological challenges since long standing notions of racial categorization (i.e., the One Drop Rule) are still prolific in our social institutions. For instance despite recent changes in federal race reporting standards that allow multiracial persons to choose more than one race (OMB, 1997), many schools and social service agencies continue to force multiracial participants to choose one racial category (Townsend, Marcus, & Bergsieker, 2009). This section will discuss the challenges that arise in research with multiracial participants. These challenges fall into two major methodological categories: sampling and data collection.

*Sampling.* Obtaining multiracial participants for research studies can be a difficult and complex venture due to the non-random distribution of multiracial people in the US (Root, 2003). According to the U.S. census, the majority of people who identify as multiracial (40%) reside in Western states such as Hawaii (21.4% of total state population), Alaska (5.4%), California (4.7%), and Washington (3.6%) (Jones & Smith, 2001). This makes recruitment efforts in other areas of the country more complicated (Root, 1999). For example, the majority of research involving multiracial subjects has taken place in Western states, such as California, and/or large cities, such as New York City, where there are greater percentages of multiracial persons, and others from diverse ethnic and racial groups (Root, 1992).

Researchers have also relied heavily on snowball sampling to recruit multiracial participants. This can substantially hinder the diversity of experiences and make samples more homogeneous

(i.e., racial mixture, SES, education, age) (Root, 1992). Similarly past multiracial identity research recruited convenience samples of college-age students, which represent a homogeneous age and developmental group (Root, 1999). Finally, advertisement can pose a substantial problem in multiracial research since some multiracial persons do not identify as multiracial and are unlikely to respond to ads that request persons who identify as mixed-race (Root, 1999). Leaving out such individuals may constrain efforts to draw a more holistic picture of multiracial identity. Research describing the multiracial experience based on these constrained samples may be limited in their applicability to diverse multiracial persons who are more intermittently dispersed in homogeneous communities throughout the U.S., who do not necessarily identify as multiracial, and who are not college-age.

*Data collection.* Qualitative methods of inquiry are employed more frequently in multiracial research (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). This may be related to the methods ability to extract the complexities and intimate details of multiracial identity, in a way that conventional quantitative methods cannot (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Despite this, means of collecting qualitative data with multiracial samples can introduce bias in research. Specifically, a researcher who relies on past conceptual frameworks of multiracial identity (i.e., psychoanalytic stage-models), or one that is unaware of their own beliefs and values about race, interracial relationships and/or multiracial identity, can pose biased questions in interviews with multiracial persons (Root, 1999). For example, asking a multiracial person questions that explicitly focus on any adjustment or psychological problems they have experienced due to being mixed-race.

A second, less explored area of bias in qualitative studies is the influence of the ethnicity of the researcher and the potential bias this may introduce in interviews with multiracial persons (Root, 1999). Specifically, the ethnicity of the interviewer could potentially influence a multiracial participant's response to interview questions about their ethnic identity (Root, 1999). For example, some participants may feel restraint in sharing their true feelings about a certain ethnic group of people, or about their experiences with a certain community of color, because of the interviewer's ethnicity (Brown, 2001; Root, 1992).

Traditional means of categorizing race (i.e., check one race) continues to pose a problem in quantitative multiracial research. In quantitative investigations this practice occurs both directly (i.e., a survey that asks a multiracial participant to select a

race that they *mostly* identify with) and indirectly (i.e., when race data is redistributed for analysis purposes). Both practices discriminate against a multiracial person's right to self-identify with more than one racial group. Recently there is evidence disputing this common practice in identity development research with multiracial persons. Specifically Townsend et al. (2009) found that forcing a multiracial participant to choose a race on measures introduces discrepancies between the outward identity multiracial persons report, and their desired or chosen identity. In addition, the same authors found that putting pressure on multiracial participants to choose a race subsequently caused decreases in self-esteem and motivation (Townsend et al., 2009). This directly contradicts previous identity assumptions that multiracial persons who identify with only one racial group (namely the minority) would have a stronger sense of self (see Davis, 1996).

Standard instrumentation poses an additional challenge in multiracial research. Researchers continue to utilize measures of racial and ethnic identity that have been criticized as inappropriate for understanding identity development among persons with mixed-heritage (Coleman, Norton, Miranda, & McCubbin, 2003). Such measures are often based on monoracial samples and assume the necessity of a single choice (Root, 1992). For instance, the Multi-Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) (Phinney 1992), though a highly reliable and useful instrument to measure ethnic identity, on the surface does not appear sensitive enough to gauge a multiracial persons multiple ethnic and cultural associations. For example, specific items on the MEIM require the multiracial participant to reference one ethnic group (i.e., item #1: "I have spent time trying to find out more about my own ethnic group"), which may pose a problem for those persons who simultaneously identify with more than one ethnic group. Employing such instruments in investigations can draw biased conclusions about multiracial identity.

The demand to include ethnic minority participants in research evokes certain challenges since they are considerably more vulnerable to stigmatization, exploitation and harm in research (Fisher et al., 2002; Kazdin, 2003). Multiracial persons are no exception, and in order to expand our understanding of multiracial identity, social work researchers should become familiar with strategies to minimize these challenges in future multiracial investigations. These strategies will be discussed in the next section.

#### **4.0 Recommended Strategies for Multiracial Research**

This section will present recommended strategies to design more ethically responsible and culturally sensitive research with multiracial participants. These strategies include: (1) using recent theory to conceptually guide research methodology; (2) sampling more inclusively; (3) incorporating more culturally sensitive measures and instrumentation; and (4) including multiracial persons on research teams.

*Strategy 1. Rely on more inclusive, ecological-based theories of multiracial identity to guide study methodology.* Future studies should continue the pursuit to understand the complex individual, interpersonal, and contextual factors that interact to shape a multiracial individuals' identity. A number of ecological-based models have yet to be fully explored in multiracial literature (Shih & Sanchez, 2009). These models include, but are not limited to: Hall's (2005) *Biracial Identity Development Across the Life Span Model*; Rockquemore & Brunson's (2002) *Multidimensional Model of Biracial Identity*; Root's (1999b) *Ecological Framework for Understanding Identity Development*; and Wijeyesinghe's (2001) *Factor Model of Multiracial Identity*. Such models could be used as a guide to understand the interconnected effect individual (i.e., phenotype, self-esteem), interpersonal (relationships with peers and family), and environmental factors (homogeneity of community and school) have on a multiracial person's identity experiences. For instance Renn (2003) applied Bronfenbrenner's (1979) *Ecology Model of Identity Development* to her examination of the identity of multiracial college students. By applying such a model, Renn was able to assess environmental factors influencing the racial identity of her multiracial participants, and offer suggestions of what areas institutions could do to enhance opportunities for supporting multiracial student development (Renn 2003).

Social work researchers are advantaged in the application of ecological-based theories due to our professions reliance on the ecological system's model to understand client problems and ascertain solutions (Hepworth et al., 2010). These models can guide the methodology used in multiracial investigations. For instance, the idea that multiracial identity is fluid and changes over time is justification for longitudinal designs, which could take the form of narratives collected over time, or analyses of a national longitudinal data base (i.e., Add Health). Also newer methodologies to emerge in social work, including the extended case method (see Samuels, 2009) and participatory action research (see Gazel, 2007), may serve useful for extricating some of the

more complex contextual factors including the racial composition and attitudes of the community, which may be impacting a multiracial persons development.

*Strategy 2. Sample more inclusively.* Social work researchers should include more heterogeneous samples of multiracial persons, including persons from diverse ethnic backgrounds and persons from multiple generations (Root, 1999). Specifically the voices of multiracial persons who identify with two or more ethnic minority groups (with no White ancestry), and older adults are needed in multiracial literature. In order to offset challenges related to sampling multiracial populations, social work researchers can utilize recruitment strategies such as leverage sampling: when a multiracial participant recruits their sibling, who often identifies differently, in the study (see Root, 1998); or recruitment through multiracial friendly websites on the internet (i.e., multiracial groups on *Facebook*, multiracial websites such as the Mixed Heritage Center: [www.mixedheritagecenter.org](http://www.mixedheritagecenter.org)). Finally, in order to keep the sampling frame broad and avoid excluding those who do not identify as multiracial, social work researcher can leave identity verbiage out of recruitment material and instead ask for persons “from more than one racial group” (Jackson, 2007). Researchers should weigh the potential costs and benefits of utilizing the aforementioned sampling strategies prior to implementation. For instance, though recruiting siblings and persons from multiracial websites could broaden the sampling frame, it may also limit the generalizability of study findings since such persons may be more demographically similar than different (i.e., age, SES, racial composition, etc.).

*Strategy 3. Incorporate more culturally sensitive measures and instrumentation.* Social work investigations of multiracial identity should allow participants to self-identify as multiracial or, at the very least, check more than one race on quantitative measures. For instance a study sponsored by the National Center for Health Statistics found that multiracial respondents prefer a question format that allows them to self-identify as “multiracial” (Johnson et al., 1997). In addition, researchers interested in using standard measures of ethnic identity should make concerted effort to include measures that are sensitive to persons with multiple heritages, and inclusive of the numerous ways a multiracial person may express their identity (i.e., identify as multiracial, other, with more than one race, or monoracially). New measures have emerged that have been designed for, tested and proven reliable with multiracial samples (i.e., *Multiracial Identity Integration measure (MII)*, Cheng & Lee, 2009; *Multiracial-Heritage Awareness & Personal*

*Affiliation Scale*, Choi-Misailidis, 2003). Such measures may prove useful in future multiracial identity research.

*Strategy 4. Include multiracial persons on research teams.* In order to make sure our research efforts are culturally sensitive to the ethnic minority groups being studied it is important to involve members of that group in the research process (Fisher et al., 2002; Gil & Bob, 1999). In multiracial research, involvement of multiracial persons in both instrument development and data collection is crucial. First it is important to have several multiracial persons and/or experts on multiracial identity help develop and/or review constructed quantitative instruments or semi-structured qualitative interview guides, which have the potential to introduce bias in research designs. For example a recent study by Cheng & Lee (2009) assessing multiracial identity integration, used three experts in multiracial research to proofread and edit their newly constructed instrument. Other researchers have used diverse focus groups, inclusive of multiracial persons, to construct identity measures (see Buckley & Carter, 2004). By allowing such careful review, social work researchers are less likely to develop insensitive surveys or questionnaires based on their own biases or past social scientific assumptions about multiracial individuals (i.e., marginal, psychologically burdened, confused, etc.).

Another culturally sensitive strategy is to use multiracial persons as interviewers to increase the comfort level of multiracial participants and allow them to share more personal and relevant information during the interview process (Root, 1992). This strategy is frequently used in social work research to minimize miscommunication and power imbalances between interviewers and ethnic minority participants (Singh & Johnson, 1998). Social work researchers are beginning to incorporate this strategy in qualitative investigations of multiracial identity by pairing it with efforts to enhance rigor and minimize potential biases associated with multiracial investigators collecting, analyzing, and/or interpreting data on the multiracial experience. These rigor enhancing strategies can include: reviewer triangulation, member checking, and using multiple data coders (see Jackson, 2009; Samuels, 2009).

## 5.0 Conclusion

This article presented a backdrop and foreground for social work researchers to develop ethically responsible and culturally sensitive research with multiracial persons. Specifically this paper discussed both past and present conceptualizations of multiracial identity, including how national events

inspired changes both in societal perceptions of multiracial identity and social science pursuits to understand it. This paper also presented methodological challenges specific to multiracial research, and concluded with culturally sensitive strategies recommended for future multiracial investigations.

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