

Nuestros Días de Desarrollo: Days Unfolding

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How do we, as student affairs professionals, approach our work with multiracial and multiethnic students from a holistic perspective if we ourselves do not feel whole? Historically, White people have had the power and privilege to define race; therefore, impacting why people of mixed races may or may not feel whole. The experiences of those who identify as multiracial and multiethnic are unique and therefore different from others who identify as a member of a single race or ethnicity. Individuals who perhaps have not needed to examine their race, such as their White counterparts, view their racial experience differently. Our experiences as two multiracial individuals and new student affairs professionals have been a constant battle between self-identification and societal categorization. The pressure to minimize our identities to “other” or “non” because we do not fit within a predetermined category has had a profound and lasting effect on our lives and how we choose to identify. Throughout this article we will examine our collective and individual quests of self-discovery, our struggles with the dissection of our identities, and the ownership of our White identity. To provide insight into how these experiences may impact students in a racially segmented country, we have chosen Maria P. P. Roots’ Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People (1996) as a framework to illustrate our experiences as multiracial individuals.

A growing demographic, biracial and multiracial individuals, is reaching the doorsteps of college campuses around the nation, offering a fresh and much needed look towards multicultural competencies. The growth in the multiracial

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population has heightened the exposure of multiracial issues in American media and college campuses. This increase in exposure may denote success for all multiracial individuals and the multiracial movement; it can, however, send mixed messages and an inaccurate perception of advancements in multiracial research (Wijeyesinghe, 2001). This may lead people to believe that there is an abundance of research, when in reality the heightened exposure is due to the pressing need for more research. Wijeyesinghe states that: "Although the public perception of Multiracial people is becoming more positive, the assumption that Multiracial people are confused, distraught, and unable to fit in" (2001, p. 131) is common, and a struggle that multiracial individuals face. We will begin by emphasizing pertinent terms and definitions in an effort to ensure an understanding of our topic. Throughout this article we will periodically shift in and out of our individual narratives while incorporating the Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People.

Definitions

Throughout this article, we will refer to people who have two or more racial heritages as multiracial. This term is the most inclusive to refer to people across all racial mixes. Thus, it also includes biracial people (Root, 1996). Race and racial groups refer to a socially constructed concept that divides people into subgroups based on real or perceived differences. Therefore, racial identity is the term used for those who self identify with one or more of the racial categories. On the other hand, ascribed racial group membership is socially applied to an individual or group that may or may not be aligned with how that individual or group self identifies (Wijeyesinghe, 2001). A person who self identifies or is ascribed a single racial group membership is defined as monoracial (Root, 1996).

Another socially constructed concept is ethnicity, which classifies the divide in racial groups based on a shared geographical, historical, and cultural experience. This decision is normally based on factors including racial ancestry, ethnicity, physical appearance, early socialization, recent or past personal experiences, and a sense of shared experiences with members of a particular racial group (Wijeyesinghe, 2001). Throughout this paper we will address our racial and ethnic identities but will not use them interchangeably. Therefore we use White as a racial label because we do not personally identify with our White ethnicities. We do however, strongly identify with our Mexican and/or Chinese ethnicities. We prefer to identify ourselves as Multiracial, not multiethnic, because we do not have a concrete White ethnicity. We hope that the key terms defined above have provided some clarity to terms that may be ambiguous in meaning or difficult to understand. This language will be used as a framework to guide our narratives.

The Multiracial Experience: Looking Through Our Lenses

As we focus on the issues that face multiracial students in today's college population, we will narrate our personal life experiences within the context of existing research. In order for the reader to gain insight into our multiracial identities, we will share a personal writing exercise called 'Where I Am From' that will lend a panoramic view of Sarah's Chinese, Mexican, and White identity and the Mexican and White identity of Iesha. "The 'Where I Am From' exercise was expanded to read and discuss the narratives in ways that saw the whole of these students' [Minority Undergraduate Fellows] lives" (Borrego & Manning, 2007, p.138). This exercise gave us the opportunity to truly express how we, from our perspectives, navigate our lives. We invite you to look at our lives through our lenses.

Where I Am From: Sarah M. Childs

"Look at my family...that is how you know where I am from. I am from hot apple pie, mole, and dim sum" (Borrego & Manning, 2007, p 61). I am from immigrants. I am White. I am Mexican. I am Chinese. I am multiracial. I am from an interracial couple in which my Mexican roots dominated and where I grew an appreciation for my Chinese blood by looking at the handsome face of my grandpa and all his brilliance. I am from the greatest love of my life—my mom, and a dynasty of strong, beautiful women: Grandma, mom, Cissy, Carrie, and Connie.

I am from a childhood of growing up with my grandma and grandpa as my childcare providers. A place where I wasn't "Sarah," I was "Sara" (sawda) or "Linda" (leanda). I am from my grandma's kitchen, where I would sit on a stool and watch her cook; hearing her beautiful voice as she sang and spoke to me in Spanish so I would learn. Where there is nothing more comforting than the aroma of chiles, tomatoes, and tortillas cooking on the comal or her finger lickin' good rice that she would make me and Aaron nearly everyday.

I am from a childhood where my best friends growing up were my cousins. Where weekends were spent at each other's houses having sleepovers, watching scary movies, playing, and riding bikes. I am from a broken family. I am from a mother that kept her children safe and fought like hell to keep us together and strong during our most trying times. "We are from a childhood of playing She-Ra and He-Man in Aaron's two-toned underwear and in the front yard. We are from a country that tries to promote democracy and freedom of choice, yet when the time comes Aaron will not be able to marry the man that he loves. I am from a place that bitches and moans about how all the illegals are taking American jobs but would you clean filthy toilets and floors and break your back for minimum wage? I am from a place that values education yet makes accessibility an increasing challenge. I am from a place that values material possessions and money—where the wealthiest of the wealthy could support 60 of the

poorest countries in the world and yet we still have starving nations. I am from the school of thought that “si se puede!” (Borrego & Manning, 2007, p. 61). I am from a place with a very complex history and I’m just trying to find my way.

Where I Am From: Iesha G. Valencia

I am from a place abundant with fields and crops of colorful fruit and nut trees, endless rows of vegetables, and tractors driving 20 miles per hour on Highway 99 during harvest season. I grew up in a place known as the Olive City and where in my early years of elementary school I was a proud “Mamma’s little helper,” sorting leaves and branches from the olives. I am from a place where my people work long labor-intensive hours harvesting the crops that soon filter into the produce aisles of American grocery stores.

I am torn; straddling the Mexico and United States border, stuck at customs, itching to go south and never return. I live the life of a biracial woman. I speak Spanish with such love and beauty but default to English in order to navigate this country.

I am from a place where my skin color is a privilege and yet achieving the perfect golden brown glow is a lucrative industry. I am from a home where we are all brown at heart, even though our skin color reflects otherwise. I am disgusted with the color of my skin.

I live in a racist and discriminatory country where hearing these words, “Speak English! We’re in America!” is not uncommon. I am from a place filled with pride and shame.

I am also from a place of love, where my mother taught me mostly by example the importance of being strong, independent, bilingual, authentic, educated, and ambitious; all the while thinking both two steps ahead and behind my game in order to survive in this place I call home.

I am from a place of no regrets, strength, and culture.

Claiming Our Rights

A common experience we both share is the confusion we have surrounding our belonging in this world versus where people think we should be. It is the pride of our membership within the Mexican community and culture that has eased our discomfort with our multiracial identity. The frustration with the existence of oppression in the racially segmented country in which we live has shaped our animosity towards the oppressors. However, in our case, the oppressors are within our line of ancestry. We both have worked towards transforming our disdain and dislike for White people into greater self-awareness and ownership of our strong feelings as a way of shifting our negative energy into a positive form so that we can create change for others and ourselves. Root (1996) stated “The affirmation of rights below reflects resistance, revolution,

and ultimately change for the system that has weakened the social, moral, and spiritual fiber in this country” (p. 6). The set of affirmations developed by Root has been instrumental in articulating our thoughts and experiences as racially mixed people.

Our sense of self-advocacy is clearly articulated through the thoughts of Maria P. P. Root’s (1996) “Bill of Rights” for people of mixed racial heritage.

Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People
(Root, 1996, p. 7)

I have the right
not to justify my existence in this world
not to keep the races separate within me
not to be responsible for people’s discomfort with my physical
ambiguity
not to justify my ethnic legitimacy

I have the right
to identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify
to identify myself differently than how my parents identify me
to identify myself differently than my brothers and sisters
to identify myself differently in different situations

I have the right
to create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial
to change my identity over my lifetime—and more than once
to have loyalties and identify with more than one group of people
to freely choose whom I befriend and love

Our sense of self-advocacy is clearly articulated through the thoughts of Maria P. P. Root’s (1996) “Bill of Rights” for people of mixed racial heritage. If the student affairs professionals with whom we engaged during our tenure as undergraduates had a more comprehensive understanding of the multiracial student experience, then they would have provided a more holistic perspective, rather than place us in a developmental stage. Multiracial students lend a unique blend of experiences that can offer new perspectives to the field of higher education. We intentionally chose to focus on the “Bill of Rights” rather than on developmental theories because our experiences and frustration with the current models do not address all of our needs and milestones in our individual development. Root’s “Bill of Rights” touches more on our general experience. For us, not all developmental models were as inclusive as we have needed them to be, because we do not fit into an easily identifiable stage.

Race, College, and Self Discovery

As the concept of race evolves over time, the validity of our multiracial identity is continuously challenged with the interpretation of racial group membership due to the influence of peers, family and culture (Brown, Elder, & Hiltin, 2006). Multiracial people not only go to college, but they go out into the working world, they have children, and they live life and desire just as much as anyone else, yet their experience can be quite isolating.

As we explore our multiracial identities, we begin by acknowledging all parts of our identity, examining those that are more salient than others. Messages we have received from society have deeply impacted our perspectives and influenced these identities. Nishimura (1998) states:

The additional challenge for multiracial individuals is that very little of their world is “a given,” that is, able to be accepted without conscious thought and decision. In North American society, race strongly influences how an individual is perceived by others, what community an individual identifies with and, to some extent, an individual’s social relationships and how an individual perceives himself or herself. . . . An additional step in the developmental process for many multiracial individuals is related to experiencing pressures to make a single choice regarding racial self-labeling. (p. 46)

The pressures to which Nishimura refers can be magnified in a college environment. For Iesha, college was a time to work through the pressures she faced growing up, by developing a new positive sense of self and belonging to a community, she longed to be fully accepted in.

Knowing that my skin color does not reflect how I self identify is one of the most complex challenges that I have and continue to face. In my junior high years I quickly became hyperconscious that I was different. I wanted to be accepted for who I was, not how others perceived me. I started to judge myself and began to believe that I would never be a “good enough” Mexican. The main change that took place was that I stopped speaking Spanish as much. I stopped responding in Spanish unless I knew they did not understand English. At times, I would see other people struggling with the English language at department stores or at school and due to my new fear, would not help them. I did not like the funny looks I received when people heard Spanish words escape my mouth. Sometimes, my Spanish would get criticized. I know as a result, my Spanish lacked proper grammar. When I entered college however, my lack of confidence in Spanish was not as important anymore, and I began to embrace my Mexican heritage and involved myself in activities and student organizations that would affirm my identities. Joining Lambda Theta Nu Sorority, Incorporated, a Latina based sorority, gave me the opportunity to celebrate who I was without any explanation. (I. G. Valencia, personal communication, October 16, 2007)

Unfortunately for Iesha, there were not any student organizations specifically for students of multiple races and ethnicities. Belonging to a sorority that is Latina based, and having such an important part of her identity supported rather than rejected, at the time, was a long awaited victory. According to Root's Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People (1996), Iesha has the right to identify herself differently in different situations, including the language she wants to speak rather than the language people expect her to speak. For some multiracial individuals, assuming different racial identities in relation to the social context serves as a coping strategy since it is uncommon for Multiracial people to feel completely accepted for their multiple identities. "Multiracial persons often find themselves in a position of simultaneously trying to examine who they are while confronting the racial designation people want to impose on them" (Nishimura, 1998, p. 46).

Nishimura (1998) articulated the impact race has had on us personally, and the experiences we both had combating peoples' impulsiveness in defining our identity for us. Nishimura continues to identify how this has heavily influenced our perception of ourselves, resulting in a strong affinity for our Latino culture. We have established a strong sense of identity for ourselves and continue to have it dismissed by others, even family members. For Sarah, the racial lines and boundaries in her family always seemed too hazy and unclear.

It has been with my own father that I have been made to feel marginalized as a person of color. In past conversations with my father, he has adamantly stood by his belief that my brother and I are White because half of our racial make-up is White. My father telling me this also implies to me that he feels that I am not Mexican or Chinese enough since I am only a quarter of each. Whether or not this is what he believes, this has been my understanding and that is how I have been impacted by his words. I find myself continually frustrated knowing that my own father does not understand race; and furthermore, does not seem to understand or want to understand how I identify. It is unfortunate that he is not open to realizing the detriment of his words and the impact it has had on me as a multiracial individual. Along with many other racial experiences, it has been these with my father that have further driven me to feel as I do about my White identity. I do not love it. I do not embrace it. As Root (1996) states, "I have the right not to justify my ethnic legitimacy" (p. 7) but I feel like that is always what it comes down to. Unfortunately my experiences with racial categorizations have not ended here. It all started as a young child and continues today with my father referring to my family and other Chinese people as "chinks." (S. M. Childs, personal communication, October 16, 2007)

We attribute the racial slurs, discrimination and racism towards racial minorities by White people as an immediate red flag that we did not want to associate with those who

oppress our people and therefore us. The almost subconscious intentional rejection of our White identity was linked to the shame of carrying the blood of oppressors, yet living a life of oppression. Other Whites may have viewed our mixed races as an infiltration of racial purity. We as well struggle knowing that being a member of an oppressive group tainted the people we wanted to be. For Iesha, her whiteness was a source of shame and guilt, feeding power to the semantics of race and skin color.

As a biracial person, I have always identified proudly with my Mexican ethnicity. It was not until I was surrounded by White people at the University of Vermont, that I was unable to ignore the white privilege and power that was granted to me at birth. My new surroundings looked and felt unfamiliar. The communities of color that served as a personal safety net no longer surrounded me, forcing me to look at the underlying issues surrounding my privilege. I had to look back to junior high, the first time I began to understand race and realize why others had always seen me as a different type of Mexican. I had White skin and my family and friends did not. I spoke the same language, cooked and ate the same food, celebrated the same traditions, yet in the eyes of other people I was different than them. This has translated into a self-conscious perception of who I am racially and ethnically. (I. G. Valencia, personal communication, October 16, 2007)

Iesha's critical analysis of her privilege in relation to the way she navigates her life as a person of color and how she is perceived as a White person, creates dissonance in the dichotomy of her racial identities. As Root (1996) identified in her "Bill of Rights," Iesha has the right to identify differently than strangers expect her to. Only she can truly name her world and has the right to not justify her existence in this world. Root (1996) would also suggest that she has the right to not justify her ethnic legitimacy or be required to keep the races separate within her. Rather than converging all our races, we both separated ourselves as far as we could from White culture, values and beliefs. Daniel (2002) asserts:

Eurocentrism and white racism are not merely forms of ethnocentrism—that is, racial and cultural chauvinism in which one's group is considered the standard against which all others are measured—which exists in almost every culture that has ever existed. Eurocentrism is more extreme than the mere racial and cultural chauvinism that applies almost universally, because it is based on a more systematic, comprehensive, integrated, and reciprocal set of ideological beliefs. (p. 30)

Historically, the White racial category has only been reserved as a privilege for those perceived to have "pure" blood. The principle of hypodescent, was a law that ensured the social status of people of mixed races was the lowest ranking race of their mixed race heritage (Root, 1996). This is partially determined by phenotype expression and therefore makes it difficult to identify the racial category of multiracial people who may express ambiguous characteristics. Often

times, these people are referred to as people of color. However, the “white OR of color” dichotomy, is not realistic to the reality of multiracial people.

Other or Non

The desire to have recognition as a member of a monoracial community has been historically integral to the social recognition and status as a functional member of society (Root, 1996). This is unattainable for multiracial individuals because by choosing to identify with only one of their races, they are forced to ignore or dismiss other aspects of who they are. Seeking acceptance into the communities in which we live is a natural thought process for most individuals, regardless of race.

As two multiracial individuals who openly acknowledge the way we feel about the disconnect from our Whiteness, we continue to struggle integrating our White identity with our more salient racial identities. Resolving this disconnect is in line with our desires to feel whole. This is a feeling that we believe resonates with many people. Our experience of having continual implicit and explicit messages conveyed to us further marginalizes our identities. Though many strides have been made, our identities continue to be labeled by others without our input.

Common questions posed to multiracial people are “What are you?” and “Where are you from?” The questions themselves are based on a false monoracial assumption that everyone can be placed in a single racial category (Sattris, 1995). This can be especially true on college campuses that involve students joining together for the first time. It is natural for people to categorize others so that they can have a framework in which to operate. For people who have been exhausted with these questions however, it can be frustrating. “Mixed white-nonwhite persons face an irresolvable status ambiguity. They are rejected by the dominant race as impure and therefore inferior, but also disliked by the oppressed race for their privileges of closer association with domination” (Alcoff, 1995, p. 259). Certain moments with key individuals in our lives made us feel inferior and served as a reminder of our differences, and continue to do so today. Sarah conveyed:

I strongly believe that a large part of that problem is that my father is a White man that has not acknowledged his own White power and privilege. Furthermore, as a young child of 5 years old I knew that I was different from my father. Never was it more clear to me as a child than when my father’s brother lived with us for a brief time. The nickname my uncle Steve quickly gave me was “beaner.” As a child I did not think anything of this because I thought my uncle was just saying I was brown like a Pinto bean, which I was. My skin color, which was similar to my mother and brother, was the distinguishing factor between my father and me. (S. M. Childs, personal communication, October 16, 2007)

As Root (1996) would suggest, Sarah has the right to identify herself differently than how her parents identify her rather than being seen as monoracial. Additionally, she has the right to keep the races separate within herself and to create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial. Experiences such as these reflect in the way students experience college life, the way they are perceived and treated. At times it feels like a losing situation all the way around, because we simply want to be accepted for who we are and not feel as though we have to shift our identity to parallel geography, social atmospheres, education, job force, and family.

Recommendations for Best Practices

Susan Graham, the Executive Director of Project RACE (Reclassify All Children Equally) firmly believes that “mixed racial persons should have the same right as monoracial persons to define themselves accurately on racial classification forms” and further suggests that we need to advocate for students’ rights by creating a multiracial category and therefore recognizing their racial backgrounds (Korgen, 1998, p. 105-106). The absence of such a category at college campuses across the United States has the potential of sending mixed messages to the multiracial student population. In order to support and include individuals that identify as multiracial, an adjustment on the demographic section of forms that provides multiracial individuals the option to choose “all that apply” should be made. It is important that the forms reflect this inclusive measure by avoiding options such as: Check the following: race A (but not race B) and race B (but not race A). This is counterintuitive to an inclusive approach.

Educators must take the initiative to recognize the entire student body and affirm all students through their development. Having the option to positively classify as multiracial conveys to the student body that all students are valued in the academy. For multiracial youth, this act of self-categorization is significant in their development (Brown et al., 2006).

Student affairs professionals must go beyond the recent push for a multiracial category for a rising group of the college population and must integrate the lenses of multiracial students into their own awareness. Because each individual experience is different, we encourage dialogue between students, staff, faculty, and administration. Additional support is necessary for these students, considering that college may be the first time they are given the opportunity to discuss these issues. Parents are not always cognizant that they are raising multiracial children and therefore may not share or have shared experiences, especially if parents identify as monoracial. Additionally, this is why it is so critical that student clubs and organizations, including multiracial student groups, exist. Important issues to consider in ensuring that student clubs and organizations not only exist but thrive are through financial support and the support of knowledgeable student affairs professionals.

Awareness of one's own identities and how those identities impact the interactions with multiracial students is a beginning step that is important to a greater understanding of this student population. Additionally, sharing personal identities amongst colleagues will help connect students with multiracial colleagues, which can enhance their mentorship experience and sense of belonging at the institution.

By understanding Root's "Bill of Rights" and applying it to students, student affairs professionals can continue learning how to hear the voices of multiracial students, so that they may develop an accurate sense of their truth. We must not rely on student development theory as a primary source of guidance or framework for approaching multiracial students. Current racial identity development models may not fully address all the needs of multiracial students.

Conclusion

As multiracial people, it has been very clear to us that everything operates within a racial binary. This may be why understanding the multiracial perspective is a challenge for some people. It is not our intention to blame others for their lack of awareness or ignorance of multiracial individuals but rather to emphasize that, as educators, we must achieve a greater awareness around race. Embracing and affirming people rather than labeling them is a step in the right direction.

It is important for us as multiracial individuals in our racial development thus far to move beyond the negative racial experiences without dismissing their existence. We are now at a point in our lives where we can work through our feelings of internalized oppression of our White racial identity. Though it may not always be a fair request to forgive and reconcile with people who have caused us harm based upon their White racial membership, it is a necessary action on our part if we want to develop a more positive and healthy White racial identity. Our intention for sharing some of our personal life experiences is to give readers insight in the ways people reinforce the need for a "Bill of Rights" for racially mixed people. We hope that people will be able to analyze their interactions with current and future students and further reflect upon the way they have silenced others by not affirming all of their identities or by assuming they are monoracial.

We understand how easy it is for people to judge or make assumptions based from stereotypes and preconceived notions about group membership. We hope that our experiences will aid practitioners in their attempts to be inclusive and equitable. There is value in current research and literature, but there is still a great demand for more as the United States grows more diverse. These inclusive practices that we have shared with you can help guide our work as student affairs professionals and will hopefully leading to greater awareness.

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