

## Multiracial Identity Negotiation in a “Monoracial” World

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### Recommended Citation

Chan, Stephanie G. and Blomdal, Aileen R. () "Multiracial Identity Negotiation in a “Monoracial” World," *Pepperdine Journal of Communication Research*: Vol. 10, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/pjcr/vol10/iss1/8>

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### Cover Page Footnote

We would like to thank Dr. Charles Choi for his guidance in teaching the Intercultural Communication: Case Studies course at Pepperdine University, and his enthusiasm for teaching a class on such an important topic in today’s day and age. We would also like to thank our peers in the spring 2021 semester class who provided great open conversation and insight in every class discussion.

## Multiracial Identity Negotiation in a “Monoracial” World

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### Abstract

The constant shift of societal values and ideals has historically left multiple individuals in utter confusion over their acceptance in certain social settings. A specific minority group that has been at the brunt of this dilemma for many years, however, are those who identify as multiracial. Mixed-race individuals have struggled to be equally accepted and appreciated for their rich cultural heritages, and with the multiple unique intercultural relationships that currently exist, these individuals are constantly dealing with niched categories, labels, and microaggressions that separate them from other minority groups. Through greater research into the brief history, the modern-day problems, and the racial identity development multiracial individuals face, this paper hopes to further unearth the everyday issues that living in a “monoracial” world brings.

### Keywords

multiracial, intercultural, monoracial, biracial, microaggressions, categories, labels, minority groups, acculturation, identity negotiation, prototypicality, fluidity of race

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The United States was founded on the basis of equality among all people. Ironically enough, the United States of America was already breaking their promise to the people at the time of this claim. As we have continued to progress as a society, it has become more apparent that this country was instead founded on the principle of one dominant group, and all “others.” One of these “other” groups has long been overlooked because of their unique life experiences. Individuals of multiracial

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backgrounds have not only had to battle for the multiple cultures they represent, but have also had the struggle of discovering their own identities and to which other group they truly “belong.” Due to the novelty of multiracialism, there is still much to discover. Within this research, we seek to understand multiracial identity and how prototypicality applies, the unique obstacles multiracial people face, their identity development, and how these individuals choose to present themselves to society. For a multiracial person, the journey to understanding one’s race is not optional but necessary, as these individuals face the difficulties of racial identity negotiation.

### **The Facets of Multiracial Identity Negotiation**

To fully understand the phenomena of multiracial identity negotiation, one must become knowledgeable of the history, theories, and concepts that have structured the modern-day experiences of multiracial individuals.

#### **History**

According to a study conducted by Lambertz-Berndt, “often times, students with a majority identity (white, heterosexual, high social class, able-bodied) find it difficult to relate to a social identity” (2020). From a young age, American children have already developed preconceived notions of a “superior” group of individuals in contrast to those they deem “powerless.” The prejudices that those who grew up in the American school system innately hold should not be surprising, given the fact that African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans were all heavily discriminated against during the establishment of the U.S. From Naturalization Laws and slavery to Exclusionary Acts, each minority group that came to America in hopes of a better life struggled through incredible amounts of hate and alienation in this country (Takaki, 1993). But a minority group that has been consistently left out of social and academic discussions is the multiracial community. Up until the legalization of interracial marriage in America, which was made lawful only

53 years ago on Loving's Day in 1967 (Yancey-Bragg, 2020), multiracial people and their experiences have been overlooked or completely invalidated. Biracial sociologist and activist W.E.B. Dubois, wrote,

... Within the Negro group especially there were people of all colors. Then too, there were plenty of my colored friends who resented my ultra 'race' loyalty and ridiculed it. They pointed out that I was not a 'Negro,' but a mulatto; that I was not a Southerner but a Northerner, and my object was to be an American and not a Negro. (p. 51)

Although Dubois became one of the most well-known and recognized Black social activists and academics in American history, he struggled to identify himself with the Black community, as he happened to be the son of a White man.

Since Loving's Day, the number of interracial and multiracial couples in America has increased fivefold. As a result, "the U.S. Census Bureau (2011) estimates that minorities will be the majority by 2042," thus asserting the increasing presence of minorities, including multiracial people (Harwood & Kim 2020). Despite the increase in number of Americans identifying as multiracial, the United States continues to assign little importance to mixed-identity. A study conducted by Clayton finds that when filling out surveys such as the U.S. Census Bureau, many multiracial individuals who need to check off boxes labeled "two or more races" or "other" feel as though the maker of the survey "[Doesn't] care what race you actually are" (2020). If an "other" option is unavailable, multiracial individuals are then forced to choose between two "sides" of their beings, disallowing an extensive or accurate representation of their identities. Though just one example of how this country fails to appreciate an individual's complete cultural background and history, multiracial people have been proven to exist as a minority group through political, social, and academic discussion.

## **Prototypicality**

When discussing individuals of multiple races, it is important to note that they have been and will continue to live their entire lives in a world “in-between.” The concept of prototypicality addresses this unique issue by claiming that multiracial individuals don’t necessarily fit the “prototype” expected of monoracial individuals. In fact, according to a study done by Hogg and Terry, most people are viewed as a “cognitive representation of features that describe and prescribe attributes of the group,” thus allowing “one to fully assimilate into an ingroup identification and ‘depersonalize’ one’s own self-conception” (Kanouse, 2008). Multiracial individuals, however, are not at all represented in this concept, and tend to experience exclusion as a result of not being considered prototypical. This leads to an “us” versus “them” mentality, where monoracial groups might unintentionally or intentionally exclude multiracial individuals, ultimately forcing them to negotiate their identities. This results in having to choose to identify with one racial group over the other, rather than allowing an acceptance of both.

## **Identity Negotiation**

Because humans are social beings, we long for belonging and inclusion within an ingroup, therefore automatically creating an outgroup. When interacting with outgroup members, individuals are more inclined to feel anxious or uncertain (Gudykunst, 2005a, 2005b, as cited in Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019, p.268). Individuals often establish in-group inclusion through identifying similar salient characteristics while establishing outgroup-based differentiation through identifying contrasting dimensions between the self and the dissimilar other, i.e., race (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019, p. 271). As a result, the social world is separated into “us” perceived as the “ingroup” members versus “them” as the “outgroup” members; therefore, in racial terms, ingroup favoritism and outgroup discrimination can be translated to prejudice and racism. This tension between monoracial groups

creates conflict within a multiracial person who identifies with both groups. To a multiracial individual, there is no “us” versus “them,” but a “we” instead. Despite multiracial people technically belonging to both ingroups, the majority of Americans belong to monoracial groups and will not consider multiracial people part of their ingroup due to a lack of prototypicality and affiliation demonstrated in the outgroup.

According to a communication study on cultural diversity, “identity is a social construction whose meanings are derived from cultural, historical, and geopolitical contexts” (Yep, 2016). As race being tied to culture, history, and geopolitics has become a recent phenomenon, a multiracial individual’s struggle to label their own racial identity is then justified. Race holds immense institutionalized power, especially in the United States, as “its naturalized existence and unique relationship to hegemonic structures and institutions” can create tensions amongst different people groups-- especially individuals who identify with multiple backgrounds (Harrison et al., 2015). Therefore, the negotiation of one’s multiracial identity can differ significantly as people’s classifications of race and ethnicity are “constructed by how people look, think and feel, and behave” (Harrison et al., 2015). Identity politics in the U.S. is one of the most prevalent examples of race causing tension between different racial groups and internal tension among multiracial individuals representing multiple ‘opposing’ races.

### **The Fluidity of Race**

The underlying issue that causes tension between monoracial and multiracial people derives from the lack of knowledge of race and its fluidity. Although there is a clear consensus in biological and social science academia that race is purely a social construct, race is still a very real social concept to the everyday person (Chou, 2017). Aware of this controversy, Robin Andreasen suggested that biological realism (races are biologically real) and social constructivism (races are social constructs)

are compatible conceptions (2000). This is because race is fluid and biracial/multiracial people are a living example of that. While society may deem a multiracial person as a certain race based on their phenotype, that same person may choose to identify however they feel best suits their racial identity. Unfortunately, there are still downsides to being a multiracial person.

### **Multiracial v. Monoracial**

Unlike minority monoracial groups, multiracial people experience a different type of marginalization in correlation with their racial identity. Johnston and Nadal propose a taxonomy of multiracial microaggressions (as cited in Harris, 2017), made up of five themes, including “exclusion and isolation, exoticization and objectification, assumption of a monoracial identity, denial of a multiracial reality, and the pathologizing of multiracial identity and experiences” (p. 431). For a country that emphasizes racial identity, exclusion is a common experience for those who may not fit into one race. John Blake, a biracial CNN Enterprise writer/producer, shared his testimony of growing up as a child of a white mother and a black father, describing it as “racial whiplash.” Blake’s mother was disowned for being with a Black man, and he and his brother were rejected by their mother’s family from birth. Blake also got into fights growing up because his mom was white; as a result, he grew ashamed of her and would lie to his teachers about having a black mother (2018). Multiracial people also experience exoticization and objectification in their dating and romantic relationships. Drawing from an analysis of 22 black/white biracial respondents in her interviews, Chandra Waring found that her participants “internalize[d] being described as ‘exotic’ and articulated their body and background as intriguing, attractive and unique” due to their romantic lives being heavily influenced by racist ideology (2013, p. 313-314).

Assumptions that a multiracial person is monoracial are often made when a person ‘passes’ as a prototypical monoracial person. Moreover, because race is influenced by society’s perception of



the individual in the United States, many multiracial people may face discrimination or privilege. Tatjana Freund, who is Nicaraguan and German, blogged about her experience as a white-passing biracial person compared to that of her brother, who is considered brown according to societal standards. When they were 16 years old, a police officer threatened to shoot her brother and his friend while Freund was let off with a warning after being pulled over (2020). This automatic assumption can often overlap with denying a multiracial person their identity and/or experience. As identity politics plays a prominent role in the United States, monoracial people may deny multiracial people the opportunity to claim their entire racial identity. A study by Harris at Midwestern University (MU) identified participants of multiracial backgrounds that had experienced microaggressions based on their physical features. Whether it was through a refusal to acknowledge an individual's true identity fully, ignorance about race, or a complete lack of respect, multiple MU students reflected on encounters with members of a racially dominant group who failed to see them for their individual and unique racial backgrounds (Harris, 2017). Even biracial Black and White public figures like Halsey and Megan Markle have faced this pattern. After the two spoke up for the Black Lives Matter movement, both received criticism for not being 'Black enough' to speak on behalf of the Black community. Despite the public's opinion, these women still choose to identify how they feel is best fit for their racial identity.

### **Racial Identity Development**

As mentioned, multiracial people may still choose their own racial identity. During their development, many bicultural and biracial children may claim four identity forms for themselves: majority-group identifiers, minority-group identifiers, synthesizers, and disaffiliates (Crohn, 1995). Those who choose to identify with the majority-group might identify with the parent from the dominant culture (in this case, White), be 'White-passing' (look prototypically White), experience

shame in their minority-group background, or want to benefit from the privileges of the majority-group experiences. Minority-group identifiers are those who choose to identify as the race that is considered a minority. They might identify more with the parent of the minority group, have experienced marginalization or discrimination themselves, feel resentful towards their dual heritage/majority-group affiliation, or even take pride in their minority status. Synthesizers choose to acknowledge both racial heritages and synchronize the two into a coherent identity (examples will be mentioned in the following topic of categories and labels). Lastly, some may want to completely disaffiliate, rebelling against any existing label that might be imposed on them. This mentality often manifests in disaffiliating with one's sociocultural identity and focusing on one's socio-relational role or personal identity. Disaffiliated multiracial people may consider themselves a 'global citizen' or part of the 'human race,' disacknowledging their racial heritage.

### **Acculturation**

In having to negotiate their racial identity, some individuals may fall into acculturation-- the assimilating to, or merging of multiple cultures. A study done on second-generation Indian Punjabis by Sekhon & Szmigin indicated a strong self-negotiation of identity because of "problems of balancing the expectations of living between two cultures" (2011). Many individuals stated they felt "stuck in the middle" of two drastically different cultures, and the influence of each participant's upbringing led to fluid identities "with participants moving between cultures but with no discernible distinct outcomes as a result of acculturation" (Sekhon & Szmigin, 2011).

### **Categories & Labels**

The fluid identity of many multiracial individuals has also led to embracing new categories of race (an example of multiracial individuals who fall under the category of synthesizers). New words have graced our vocabularies as the term *mestizo* now refers to Mexicans of Spanish and Indigenous

descent, half black individuals have historically been referred to as *mulatto*, half Japanese individuals have been referred to as *hafu*, and so on. A study on mixed-race Japanese people was done by Oshima, where results showed that although the term *hafu*—coming from the English word “half”—has been widely used among multiracial Japanese individuals, it continues to hold uncomfortable connotations for many. Despite the range of slang terms humans have created to fit themselves into desired societal boxes of race, not every term has been widely appreciated by all multiracial individuals (2014). The labels used to describe multiracial individuals have become so niched to certain races that one may begin to feel even more of an outsider as they become minority individuals of minority groups with continuously changing perceptions of their identities (Oshima, 2014).

Multiraciality may challenge monoracial standards, but creating new and separate labels also reinforces monoracial rubrics. According to Aurora Chang, people of mixed race are challenging current racial demographics only to create a new racial rubric. While interviewing 25 multiracial college students, “it appeared that students reveled in attaching a label and/or naming their experience. This, of course, was ultimately ironic in that the students expressed disdain toward monoracial rubrics while reinforcing those very rubrics by creating their own Multiracial rubric” (2014, p. 726). This trend of creating new labels for themselves further establishes their status as a minority, but also reinforces the racial structure that originally marginalized multiracial people rather than challenging the concept of race as a whole.

### **Understanding the Multiracial Identity**

With a great emphasis on the struggles minority groups currently face, the concept of race should be an ongoing topic of conversation when dealing with issues of privilege and discrimination. The focus on multiracial individuals in this particular case study provides insight into the unique life experiences that only certain people have the opportunity of relaying.

In terms of prototypicality, both multiracial and monoracial individuals should be well-informed of the discrepancies of assuming a society built on the foundations of race purity has progressed to the point that depersonalization is no longer relevant (Kanouse, 2008). Rather, it should be a priority to invest in the individual identities of multiracial persons as though no prototype has ever existed for a “model” racial phenotype. As a society that heavily relies on one’s physicality to make generalized assumptions and stereotypes about their background, we must strive to work toward less biased mindsets.

The most evident microaggression we came across in our research was a denial of the ability to have multiple racial identities within one individual. In refusing to believe a person’s complete identity and background, individuals knowingly or unknowingly add to the daily struggle of identity negotiation in multiracial people. When the microaggressions in the MU study focused on a majority of physical aspects of multiracial individuals, the agitators inadvertently placed “multiracial students into monoracial categories that denied their multiracial realities” (Harris, 2017). When the non-normalized identities of individuals are overlooked, social values tend to point toward a premeditated want for dominant racial category amalgamation. Some individuals are pushed toward majority-group identifiers and strive to be white-passing in order to fit into societal expectations. As the rhetoric of identity management in the US has become “power-evasive,” strategically practicing an individual form of self-preservation in outer-group settings and interactions, undocumented Latin Americans have labored communicatively to create a notion of “working to be perceived as a member of a non-stigmatized identity.” They choose to create an identity for themselves that is heavily reliant on a “performative phenomenon that illustrates the constructive nature of all identities” in order to gain the benefits of being white in America (Scranton et al., 2016).

The fluidity of race is evident and accepted when individuals choose to identify with the majority group, not so much when claiming minority-group identifiers or synthesizing their racial identity. Lambertz-Berndt (2020) encourages teachers to open the discussion on race and identity in the classroom-- students of both dominant and minority groups are challenged to reconsider social identities in homogenous and multiracial groups to understand privilege better. As privilege is taught in learning environments, so is the concept of discrimination absorbed unintentionally. When it comes to conversations about individuals with multiple racial identities, more so than denying someone a part of their racial background, inverse monoracism must be avoided altogether. Multiracial individuals have learned to acculturate their identities repeatedly due to the fluidity of race. From being told that they are “not enough” of a minority group to hearing that they are not monoracial enough to “fit in” to a societally constructed dominant group, these racially diverse people claim a struggle unique to their individual physical attributes and surrounding social values.

### **Becoming Inclusive**

While the concept of race is a continuous struggle among multiple individuals negotiating niched identities, it will never cease to be a concept that should be challenged. It is important to note that one solution will not be comprehensive for all issues of multiracial identity negotiation. However, with every new case, new individual, and new mindset, racial identity should be seen and valued as a fluid notion.

Nevertheless, a measurable fix to the issue of multiracial identity is allowing individuals to fully indicate the races they best identify with in surveys such as the U.S. Census. While “two or more races” has been an option in the Census for the past 20 years, it fails to provide individuals the privilege of specifying their races (Clayton, 2020). Simply allowing a “two or more races” category

leads to feelings of insignificance amongst the minority group of multiracial individuals and should be updated to a “check all that apply” option instead.

Likewise, the struggles of multiracial individuals may also be reduced with an overall emphasis on one’s ethnicity rather than race since multiracial people are quite diverse. Focusing on ethnicity allows for more generalized social groups to be characterized by similar cultural characteristics, nationalities, affiliations, religions, languages, and traditions rather than physical traits alone. Identity will always be a social construct with issues to confront, but the question of racial negotiation may be better answered through realizations of individual cultural concepts.

### **Conclusion**

Multiracial identity in the United States is a continuously transforming phenomenon. Individuals with multiracial backgrounds have been placed on unique platforms where their identities have never been fully understood or accepted by societal values. Though multiracial individuals may consider themselves part of a dominant racial group, the recent shifts in cultural views have painted those of multiple backgrounds as part of a minority. The idiosyncrasies each of these individuals face demonstrate the great need to understand the experiences a merging of cultures can create. Most importantly, one should remember that, unlike monoracial beings, multiracial individuals are constantly re-evaluating their racial labels through the lens of anti-prototypicality and identity negotiation.

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### **Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank Dr. Charles Choi for his guidance in teaching the Intercultural Communication: Case Studies course at Pepperdine University and his enthusiasm for teaching a class on such an important topic today. We would also like to thank our peers in the spring 2021 semester class who provided great open conversation and insight in every class discussion.