Sociohistorical Constructions of Race and Language: Impacting Biracial Identity

Matthew J. Taylor

> Very often history is a means of denying the past. Denying the past is to refuse to recognize its integrity. To fit it, *force it* [italics added], function it, to suck out the spirit until it looks the way you think it should [Welcome to the world of being biracial].[1]
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> (Winterson, as cited in Root, 1992, p. 7)

Historically, race has been constructed within the American psyche as a dichotomous variable—an either-or proposition. Moreover, our construction and use of language have developed to mirror this reality, which ultimately aids in its perpetuation. Has this divergent approach to race outlived its usefulness and applicability? Is it realistic, given the face of today's changing demographic landscape? At present, there remain cultural and linguistic disconnects between the phenomenological experience of the biracial individual and the expectations of the dualistic society within which they reside. On the individual level, there are implications for psychosocial development (Hall, 2001; Root, 1995). More broadly speaking, what will develop from the resolution of this dilemma is a new paradigm impacting how the citizens of this country view race and racial identity. This paper explores the impact that the sociohistorical constructions of race and language have on the lives of biracial individuals. To this end, the author, who is biracial, will blend sociohistorical conceptions of race and linguistic philosophy

with personal narrative components and conclude with implications for multiracial identity development.

WHO "WE" ARE

The most recent census data suggest rapidly increasing numbers of individuals identifying as multiracial. Census 2000 represented the first census in which respondents could mark two or more races. Almost 3 percent of the United States population, 6.8 million people, reported two or more races. New York City and Los Angeles, respectively, were identified as locales in which the largest numbers of multiracial individuals resided. Of particular note are the data that reveal that 40 percent of those with multiracial lineages are younger than eighteen years old (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). It is these latter numbers that particularly provide evidence that there is a growing amount of diversity within our communities and our nation.

The Awakening: Introducing Myself

I am biracial. I am the product of the union of a man of black descent and a woman of German-American heritage. My skin is a composite of light brown and tan; or if you prefer, other descriptive color schemes are bisque, peru, wheat, pale goldenrod, and moccasin. Yes, my skin does visibly burn with extreme exposure to the sun. My hair is a perfectly proportioned blend of curls and straight components. My eyes are brown. My speech pattern is relatively nondescript, with a hint of an East Coast upbringing. Some are surprised to learn that I am biracial; others seem to have known all along.

SOCIOHISTORICAL CONCEPTIONS OF RACE: YOU ARE WHAT YOU LOOK LIKE

While the race-based social hierarchy in the United States can be traced back as far as colonization and the arrival of the Europeans to the shores of the Americas, the roots of this movement appear early in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the works of Carolus Linnaeus and Charles Darwin. In his 1735 work *Systema Naturae*, Linnaeus presented his classification system for plants, animals, and minerals; while in 1859, Darwin offered *The Origin of Species*, which set forth his theory of natural selection ("survival of the fittest"). These biologically based scientific philosophies would soon find themselves

coupled with the geopolitical conflicts that accompanied European colonization and the subsequent conquering of native peoples around the globe; and would be utilized to justify and explain these social, cultural, and military occurrences. Predicated upon notions of the "culturally superior" European colonizers and "savage and inferior" natives who were colonized, a Linnaean-type social classification developed for humans. This newly created social hierarchy relied heavily upon physical appearance (phenotype), something that undoubtedly separated the Europeans from many of the indigenous/colonized populations. Not only did racial appearance become an "outward mark of innate and permanent inferiority" (Snyder, 2001, p. 92), but it also symbolized the "death" experienced by many indigenous cultures, which were dubbed as inferior, and in the spirit of social Darwinism, subsequently replaced by a superior entity.

So began a recurring pattern of control and oppression based upon phenotype that would later come to be the sociological and psychological foundations of intergroup relations in the United States. Whether it was found in the extermination practices impacting Native Americans, the race-based sight system underlying the enslavement of blacks, the seizing of Spanish/Mexican land in what would later become the southwestern United States, or the legislated Chinese exclusion and forced internment of Japanese Americans, there was a "system of appearance" implemented that led to discrimination that benefited whites and maintained the social hierarchy (Omi & Winant, 1986; Root, 1992). From the early pseudobiological scientific construction of race, rooted in Linnaean and Darwinian thought, sprang a culturally driven hierarchical conception of race more rooted in social, economic, and political forces. As the social hierarchy continued to develop, race and its perceived overt appearance were not only used to distinguish the Europeans, with all of their "positive" traits and qualities, from all others; they also came to be the "markers" from which we could infer a host of innate characteristics, such as sexual behaviors and intelligence to one's proclivity to commit crimes. This social order, based on (Euro) cultural definitions of race, further revealed itself via individual expression in the form of interpersonal interactions and associated stereotypes. The elusive nature of this concept is the very human quality of relying upon the appearance of "the other" as an evolutionary tool to determine friend from foe, as well as a host of other characteristics. As noted before, sociohistorical conceptions of race are more rooted in social, economic, and political forces, yet on the day-to-day basis a simplified "sight system" is used to provide clues about others. The

rigidity with which these socially defined notions of race were applied and stamped into the collective unconscious of society and firmly entrenched in its institutions is revealed by Allen (2001), who paraphrases Supreme Court comments from *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1857) that state, "[A]ny white man, no matter how degraded, is socially superior to any African American, no matter how cultured and independent in means" (p. 361). The stage was thus set. The racial ideology of America is rooted in what Omi and Winant (1986) term "racial etiquette," which is a set of interpretive codes: codes of behavior, attitudes, values, and beliefs. These culturally defined codes offer meaning to physical characteristics, such that "black" in Philadelphia means something very different from "black" in São Paulo, Brazil. Yet, it is this overreliance on selected anatomical features as the basis of race that makes racial categories prone to error (Webster, as cited in Ferber, 1995). The arbitrary and ambiguous nature of the dualistic race-based dichotomy that developed within the United States was flawed from its onset, and this is no more apparent than when applied to biracial individuals.

Beginning in the seventeenth century, miscegenation (race-mixing) had been a constant in the United States, yet the social standing of the children resulting from these unions had been anything but constant. As the American slave system was formed, built almost exclusively upon physical appearance, and later expanded in its breadth, there came the need to prohibit interactions between the races, which further served to maintain white supremacy and social standing (Daniel, 1996). The result yielded legislation and social norms that ostensibly prohibited miscegenation, especially in the South, and considered biracial children to be black by the law of hypodescent, or the "one-drop" rule. Not only did this increase the number of slaves, especially as it was considered the master's "right" to use his female slaves sexually as a form of concubinage, but it also reinforced white privilege and protected white racial and cultural purity (Daniel, 1996). However, it must be noted that the social position of mixed-race individuals varied geographically as well as chronologically. Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002a) offer an excellent historical outline that details the alliance between biracial individuals and white society in some states, which shifted to white hostility and a subsequent alliance of biracial individuals with black society as the Civil War loomed and following its conclusion. Currently, the landscape within which racial/ethnic reference group biracial children fall is unclear. While the laws prohibiting interracial unions have all been declared unconstitutional

(Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002a), in a *de facto* sense hypodescent still exists, as minority group societies continue to be more willing than the dominant culture to accept biracial individuals into their ranks.

The Awakening: What Are You?

For biracial individuals, the questions begin early. Earlier than we have the ability to truly understand their meaning. Earlier than we have the language required to supply adequate answers. I was four years old when an elderly woman called me a nigger as I played in front of my apartment building. From my teary-eyed mother, who realized that the blissful ignorance of my childhood was beginning to fade, I learned that this was a "not so nice word for black people." But my mother was white. Did that mean I was black? I did not understand. Pandora's Box of Racialization (American-style) had been opened for me.

THE SOCIOHISTORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF LANGUAGE AND HOW IT IMPACTS OUR VIEW OF THE WORLD AND THOSE IN IT: WHERE DOES BIRACIAL STATUS FIT?

As human societies create themselves and their world, language is culturally constructed and used to reflect the existence that is being played out (Vico, 1744). Language comprises structure and symbols that represent reality as it conveys cultural meaning, myths, and codes. As a system built upon inherited cultural values and bipolar positionals, language gives shape and meaning to experience and ultimately serves to remove any ambiguity from that experience. De Saussure believed that, similar to other socially learned constructs, "there were no pre-existing ideas and that nothing was distinct before the appearance of language" (1959, p. 112). This has direct implications for our current discussion, given the socially constructed and communicated notions of race that we are prone to absorb in childhood. Linguistic systems are created via arbitrary yet socially agreed-upon designations embedded within bidirectional relationships, as humans construct language; but they themselves are simultaneously constructed by it. In essence, language *thinks us*, as it guides our valued-laden cognitive processes; *orients us* with a cultural structure and framework; and *directs us* to develop culturally appropriate values, attitudes, belief, and behaviors (J. Parker, personal communication, September 22, 2003).

Language is related to the collection of race-based dichotomies that have developed from phenotypes (such as colonizer-savage; owner-slave; victim-criminal/potential criminal), and how we decipher their meanings. As a system of interdependent and related terms, the components of language find much of their value in the "simultaneous presence of the others [their antagonistic opposites]" (De Saussure, 1959, p. 114). Within this antithetical relationship, one entity cannot exist without the other, but particularly without the other being devalued; for instance, without evil, good ceases to have meaning; and without black, white takes on a different meaning. To the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1997), it is the social and value-based constructions of language that result in artificially/culturally produced and defined dichotomies. He goes so far as to consider a rather contradictory relationship with the "other," such that on the one hand a person can only address and relate to the "other" to the extent that differences are highlighted; yet at the same time, the "different" are frequently excluded and prevented from "crossing over to 'our' border" (p. 106). This approach to linguistic production of "other as different" unconsciously requires the perception that they are lesser and inferior. These notions of language and how they may relate to biracial identity find substance in the fact that the law of hypodescent fiercely prevented individuals with "one drop" of racial "minority" blood from entering into the elite hierarchy of white society. The result was, and is, a cultural and linguistic disconnect between the phenomenological experience of the biracial individual and the expectations of society. Thus, it is through the combination of societal proscription, behavioral manifestations, and linguistic constructions that biracial individuals find themselves marginalized.

The Awakening: On the Complexities of Gumbo—I'm a Little of This and a Little of That

Can I define myself using terms that do not result in a comparative treatise of black and white culture? I would very much prefer to define myself in a way that does not concede to the national rhetoric of hypodescent, yet simultaneously accounts for the exclusionary reality of a life between black and white societies. More importantly, how do I relate myself to others using language that is devoid of culturally rooted values and stereotypes? For as soon as I begin this task, do people then not presume to have me figured out? I know my choice of words carries meaning, but is it what I want others to focus on?

I am complex; do others see that? Do they see beyond the implicit cultural meaning (and stereotypes) of my descriptors? Dare I feed stereotypes and say that I enjoy playing basketball, dancing, eating fried chicken and watermelon, drinking malt liquor, and dating white women? Yet, this is the reality of what it means to be me and my experiences; is that not enough? I never truly know what to do. When I tell people I am biracial, I am regularly responded to with a befuddled look. The sum of my being is much more (complex) than its parts; more than the multiracial union that brought me forth. While I am simply "me," this is a rather complex collection of two worlds, two realities. To present this to others is quite a challenge. I usually end up feeling misunderstood.

Societal Influences on Biracial Identity Development: Where Race and Language Meet

The general concept of identity development finds its roots in the search for the answer to a very basic question: "Who am I?" The search for self and identity is a critical facet of the human experience. It goes without saying that this is a lifelong endeavor, replete with twists, turns, and cumulative and cyclical features; and relies upon our interactions with others and society. Not only are we trying to "figure ourselves out," but we are trying to do so within a larger collective. Who I aspire to be, or who I see myself becoming, is inexorably related to the internalized notions of who I "may be" as communicated by family, peers, community, and society. Ultimately, the search for self represents "the negotiation between self-identity and world perception" (Hershel, 1995, p. 173). Identification and connection with others and a reference group are not only an integral component of identity formation, but a component within the hierarchy of human needs (Maslow, 1970). We seek to belong (to a group), as this provides some meaning to life as well as a psychological and behavior anchor. From our interactions with others in our family and community, we learn what it means to be "us." Moreover, we are (in the best of scenarios) able to learn these lessons in an atmosphere that provides us with a safe space and social support. Yet when belonging is not communicated, and individuals are not readily accepted into "the group," there is potential for problems. Without one's reference point, who does one then look to as a guide toward identity formation?

So begins the dilemma of biracial identity development. Its inception is located in the drive to simply develop into oneself within the

harmonious family environment, where race and phenotype may be less of an issue. Many biracial individuals may readily embrace both racial heritages provided by their parents (Cooke, 1998). Intuitively, it seems that the result of this scenario would be a synthesis or the development of what Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002a) call a transcendent identity, and what Daniel (1996) calls a pluralistic identity. Both of these identity formations are characterized by the fact that they are relatively nonracial in their framework and represent a true multiracial existence. They are born from the blending and merging of multiple cultural traditions and are subsequently revealed in the embodiment of individual identity. However, as the broader influence of society comes to bear, with its implicit race-based categorization scheme, this specific developmental pathway is impacted, or interrupted (if you will), and it degrades into a framework that mirrors society's rigid rules. It is this socially rooted dichotomy of race that underlies the cultural umbrella under which biracial individuals find themselves: a system that requires them to be repressively categorized. There are discrete, mutually exclusive categories within which they are to place themselves: their identities and their being in the world.

The Awakening: Home as a Safe Place

My house was a safe place. I was just Matt. Not black, not white, not mixed—just me. I recall being identified more by roles and status (son, grandson, only child). Race was never a family issue, as my familial messages were clear: play with whomever you want, date whom you want, listen to whatever music you wish, to name a few. Ultimately the internalization of these messages was, "Be who you want to be; develop into you." Yet, existence eventually extends beyond the family boundaries and ultimately moves into the broader sociocultural context. The once-faded memories of my experience as a four-year-old would return as I expanded my horizons beyond the borders of my household. Within my family, I was never colored white or black with social crayons, but the world did not operate by the same rules that my house did. This would take some getting used to.

There is inadequate language and cultural reality to truly capture the biracial experience, as society constructs and relates a series of conflicting messages. As previously noted, both language and the American social structure take an "either-or" and rather rigid approach to racial categories, with a great deal of emphasis placed on excluding

biracial individuals from the ranks of white society. Weisman (1996) notes that hypodescent assigns group membership to biracial individuals via appearance regardless of individual notions of identity and relationships to group(s); as society declares, "You look like them, so there you go." Thus the development of the pluralistic and transcendent identities is jeopardized and ultimately shattered, for they have no place in the current American cultural context. What results is a push/shove toward a singular identity (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002a), though more with the group of the minority parent. That places pressure upon individuals to accept a distinct identity that may contradict their notions of self, which initially comprised identification with both racial heritages. This forced monocultural identity is socially reinforced in time, as the demands and influences of society replace those found within the safe spaces of family. Regardless of the specific identity outcomes, given the phenotypic sight system, many biracial individuals may find themselves more likely to identify with the (day-to-day) *experiences* of the minority parent (Cooke, 1998).

Biracial individuals are more often than not defined as nonwhite using sociocultural definitions. Self-generated characterizations may also lead to this conclusion, especially given the fact that in many instances, minority communities are more likely to accept these individuals. However, this does not guarantee a successful identity or cultural "fit" for these individuals, for within these minority communities there may also exist the same "either-or" dichotomy leading to a less-than-steadfast acceptance of biracial individuals. Herein lies the contradiction; on the individual level, I may feel some connection to both reference groups and readily embrace my various racial heritages; yet at the societal level, both reference groups may be less than willing to view me as a full-fledged member. From an identity standpoint, individuals may develop a border identity (Anzaldua as cited in Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002a), that is, an identity that stands apart from and is suspended between both reference groups. However, there is a danger inherent in this "middle" existence, for it may be accompanied by the psychological experience of marginalization, which is characterized by an exclusionary relationship with both reference groups (the dominant group [white] and other [nonwhite]) (Segall, Dasen, Berry, & Poortinga, 1999). Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002b) describe the negative treatment that many biracial individuals have felt from both reference groups, which opens the door to an identity purgatory of sorts.

The Awakening: Loneliness

The "middle margin" can be a lonely place. How do I as a biracial individual construct this notion of "me" and so reconcile seemingly contradictory aspects of my self that are communicated by the cultural nuances of the day? The imposed template does not fit with my reality. While the society imposes black or white, I look at my reality and feel both. I feel the pull from both sides; yet I feel strangely rejected, too. At times, I feel like a diplomat, brokering an uneasy truce between warring parties. However, at others, I get the impression that no one understands me and that I am destined to walk alone.

How is it that biracial individuals come to reconcile the identity dilemmas posited above? In the end, where does the push-pull of society and reference groups place us in relation to self? An existence "in between" reference groups may be fraught with isolation, and the option of pluralism is one that is frequently not available; although intuitively and futuristically, it is the one that makes the most sense and offers the most hope. Until that latter option is culturally legitimized, many biracial individuals find themselves developing a "migrant" notion of self, meaning they shuttle and move back and forth between both reference groups. This concept of an integrative identity (Daniel, 1996) or protean identity (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002a) has at its foundation situational and contextual variables that trigger reference group-specific attitudes, values, and behaviors. Great attention is paid to the details of self and others and the ensuing interpersonal interactions. While this is certainly not a feature unique to the biracial experience, as such analyses are undertaken within any interpersonal context; to many biracial individuals, this is a survival skill whose development and ultimate mastery are absolutely essential given the contrasting worlds they must traverse.

The Awakening: Anatomy of the Lunchroom . . . Where Do I Sit Today?

Ah, where to sit today? This is actually a more complex question than it appears to be. The joys of high school lunchroom politics. That was always the question as I walked down the steps around the noon hour. The options were rather numerous, each with its own set of rules, nuances, topics, and personalities. In retrospect, I have come to realize that each "neighborhood" represented a collection of stereotypes, some more accurate than others. There was the southeast corner of the

cafeteria, or "Little Africa," as we proudly referred to it. Its refreshing atmosphere allowed for a linguistic break from the intellectual façade of standard English. There the language flowed colorfully and freely as we contemplated issues as diverse as the latest R&B and rap singles to which teachers and fellow students were the most racist. Another option was more centrally located, and while given no specific name, its relatively nondescript and white nature could be described courteously as mini-suburban. While in a distinctly different locale from Little Africa, it was many of these students with whom I shared classes. Replete with designer clothes and an air of *je ne sais quoi*, discussions of soon-to-be-purchased cars, SAT preparation, and college plans filled the air.

To see my cultural shifts was a thing of beauty. I was good. I could keep up with the best of them. Occasionally I would bring a friend from one group over to "the other side"; although this hardly ever ended well. The worlds were too different, too adversarial, too suspicious, and too foreign and strange to one another. At times I questioned whether these were even the same school. Inevitably I began such an endeavor with an introduction, as I was taught that a good host does such a thing. These were usually met with some token mumbles of acknowledgment, as everyone knew each other to some degree, yet interactions were rather rare. Then for the next hour I would initiate, translate, facilitate, and in the end, vacillate on the prudence of my decision to attempt merging my two worlds in the cafeteria, and ultimately hesitate to do it again.

TOWARD NEGOTIATING A "FIT"

Forcing the development of monoracial identity from multicultural ancestry serves as a constant reminder that someone does not "fit" with the current system that is in place (Daniel, 1992). A race-based cognitive dissonance results when personal identity (self-concept) does not coincide with group identity. This stems from the *denial of "fit"* with white society and the *reluctant "fit"* extended by the black community, both of which come laden with uncertainty and suspicion.

Kich (1992) presents a three-part process through which this negotiation of fit takes place: (1) awareness, (2) struggle for acceptance, and (3) acceptance. Awareness of difference begins early, as notions of self and "other" are readily apparent, both within the family and out, yet there may be varying degrees to which this notion of difference is emphasized. As the development of self-concept initiates, self-definition and those defined by "other" (parents, peers, society, etc.) begin to dominate

the psychological landscape. Initially, it is parents who provide the lan-
guage and foundations of this experience in a way that "conveys . . . a
message of acceptance and positive valuation about being biracial"
(Kich, 1992, p. 308). Yet as the spheres of influence widen beyond
the safety of the family borders, the standard question posed to biracials
("What are you?") begins from peers and community. "Differentness"
becomes more of a concern and issue as a place in the social hierarchy
of childhood is established. Parents may be somewhat impotent to
fully grasp the issues impacting their biracial children, as doing so repre-
sents an added layer of experience that they may not have gone through
in their own development.

The Awakening: The Chameleon

Through family tradition and customs, I know that I represent a new
type of person. At times I feel as if I have transcended race, but I do
not feel free. By appearance and history I am black; but what about the
"other" side of my being? Where does that come into the picture? No
one ever seems to focus on that. I can deftly display a variety of aspects of
self, from perspective-taking and ideological stances to speech patterns
and dance moves. Who am I? I feel as if I do not own my racial heritage.
It has been defined for me by the genes of my parents and by society's
interpretation of my phenotype. Who am I? I am an actor in a play that
just happens to be real life. As the performance begins, I am often
compelled to ask, "Whom do you wish to know?" Tell me and I will
produce him, like a magician pulls a rabbit out of a hat.

The resolution of this identity formation process is its final stage, self-
acceptance (Kich, 1992). This represents the end result of the process
whereby biracial individuals balance their self-perceptions (self-concepts)
with the societal messages. While the positive psychological outcome of
this process is a cohesive identity, how this may look will vary from
person to person. There are varying degrees to which individuals internal-
ize the potentially contradictory notions of race offered by socializing
agents and the broader society. Other factors in this process that deserve
consideration are physical appearance and individual and family responses
to marginalization (Caluza, 2000). Of marginalization, a concept we
have noted before, Tucker (as cited in Kich, 1996) states, "people . . .
[are] ignored, trivialized, rendered invisible and unheard, perceived as
inconsequential, de-authorized, [and as] 'other'" (pp. 270–271). Re-
peated exposure to marginalization may lead to the internalization of
the societal love–hate relationship played out between reference groups

(that is, black–white tensions) (Hershel, 1995; Kich, 1996). Being
cast into the role of "other" by white society and "other among others"
within the minority reference group presents a rather daunting place
from which to develop a positive, self-accepting identity. Yet, the self-
accepting biracial identity is "not dependent on the other person's
recognition or confirmation and relies more on an integration [of a
self] that includes a clearer and heightened awareness of [multiple]
heritages" (Kich, 1992, p. 315).

The degree to which individuals develop an identity that allows
them to "float" back and forth between reference groups can be re-
lated to components of the acculturation model offered by Segall
et al. (1999). Irrespective of the previously noted quandary of reference
group acceptance, the parallel process of adjusting to a culture provides
a framework to refine our view of the variability of the integrative or
protean identities and their related psychological and behavioral aspects.
To begin with, there are varying degrees of how far an individual is willing
or able to go in adhering to or shedding cultural characteristics. And
while each of these reactions is not inherently positive or negative, keeping
in mind that people frequently initiate a plan of action that they deem
appropriate for their situation, there are potential rewards and pitfalls
as individuals negotiate these waters. Each of these psychological re-
sponses within the framework of the integrative or protean identities
does not represent static or fixed approaches, but rather represents fluc-
tuating dimensions of self as biracial individuals actively attempt to
garner a place for themselves in society, both psychologically and
physically.

The process of assimilation results when an individual gravitates
toward the dominant culture and attempts to shed aspects of his or
her culture of origin (nondominant). Most noticeably, this may occur in
language, style of dress, and other related observable elements, such
as dating preferences. Within our context here, the more assimilated
biracial individual will identify, even if unconsciously, with white
America. In essence, this individual may feel a certain degree of comfort
within white culture, especially if socialization experiences or scenarios,
such as interracial adoption, provided minimal exposure to minority
populations. Yet along with this assimilationist perspective has to come
some understanding that acceptance will, at times, arrive minimally
from the dominant culture, as the law of hypodescent ultimately assigns
placement within the minority group. Individuals may actively reject
this placement and characterization by responding to them with re-
newed efforts to be more like the dominant culture. These attempts

to gain inclusion in white America may further alienate the biracial individual from the once moderately accepting minority reference group, as the group may begin to question the individual's group commitment and connection. The use of terms like *sellout* and *Oreo* (black on the outside and white on the inside) points to these concerns and questions generated by the minority group and further compounds the push-pull relationship that exists between biracial individuals and reference groups.

The Awakening: You on Our Team or What?

Why do you talk like that? What are you wearing? Why do you sit with them? What is that music you are listening to? Are you not one of us? The questions fly frequently and without mercy. Having to justify every facet of your existence is never easy or fun. In fact, it is just plain tiring. The questions, the looks, and other disapproving non-verbals seem to come more from blacks than whites, suggesting some degree of indifference to my partial membership in that latter group. I respond in word ("Yes, I'm down, I am a member") and in deed (I turn my R& B up for all to hear; I turn my "gangsta" rap up for all to hear). But part of me wavers, hesitates, and understands that it is not all that simple. Well, if I am honest, I really don't feel as though I completely belong; can I claim about 60 percent of "the black feeling"? Is that possible? Phenotypically, I stand out a bit; I've been followed in stores, pulled over by police, and viewed as a threat by mothers walking past with their children. But that hardly constitutes criteria for group membership, does it? There is still a feeling of being inauthentic if I leave it at those features alone—it just doesn't feel right. Maybe I am a sellout.

Another response that may reveal itself is what Segall et al. (1999) refer to as separation, which is an individual's maintenance of minority culture to the exclusion of the dominant one. Historically, this is a more difficult physical endeavor, as dominant culture features are everywhere, with the exception of ethnic enclaves like Chinatowns, but the concept ultimately refers more to psychological and ideological separation. As such, the biracial individual fiercely takes hold of all things ethnic and immerses herself in that world. While it may appear that this is a self-isolating stance, for some it surely provides comfort; but at the same time does it deny a component of self? This response of separation may not be rooted in the reality of the circumstances, for biracial individuals are inescapably linked to the dominant culture in some shape or form. To actively negate an aspect of self is

destructive, regardless of its source. If others were to ascribe a singular identity to biracial individuals, we would label such an affront dehumanizing and look upon it unfavorably. However, when we self-select such an identity framework, it may certainly appear more palatable, but this may actually be more self-defeating to the broader development process, as it still removes us from potential social anchors and reference groups, namely dominant culture family members.

The Awakening: A View to a Crash—Bike Helmets, Roadside Ditches, and Poor Syntax

The words "Fuck you, mother nigger," stream from within the passing carload of white teenagers as it forces my bicycle (with me barely on it) off the road. I find some solace in the fact that my bicycle and I are not damaged, as I am still fifteen miles from home. I chalk it up as another incident for the teenage version of me to add to the list of things to tell my future children when they are old enough. As I resume my trek homeward, my shaken nerves are calmed by some of the amusement of what just took place. Oh, I certainly don't like getting run off the road, and the verbal and nonverbal messages were very clear; I think I will probably take a different route home the next time. But the hilarity of some fool's improper syntax strikes me as funny. I recall that public speaking can make some people a bit nervous and prone to such errors.

As I later relate the tale to some black friends, they offer that "white folks are such assholes!" I quickly agree, but later find myself a bit uncomfortable by having supported such a statement. Have my friends and I inadvertently included *my family* members in our philosophy? Do my friends know that I mean *those other white folks*, not my family? Come to think of it, whom do my friends really mean with that statement? Certainly not *my family*. Should I speak up to clarify for everyone? Despite the fact that I was the victimized one, I now feel guilty.

DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW VERNACULAR FOR BIRACIAL INDIVIDUALS

"What is a rebel? A man who says 'no' . . . whose no affirms the existence of a borderline. [A man who, in his act of rebellion], simultaneously experiences a feeling of revulsion at the infringement of his rights and a complete and spontaneous loyalty to certain aspects of

himself . . . for with rebellion, awareness is born" (Camus, 1957, pp. 13–15). So begins *The Rebel*, written by the French existentialist Albert Camus, and while more of a political treatise, nonetheless it offers an apt starting point for our discussion on developing a new cultural and linguistic philosophy for biracial individuals. The words of Camus represent a call to psychological arms, as we endeavor to help biracial individuals produce a new set of meaning systems within the vernacular that more accurately affirm their uniqueness and provide the foundation for them to create a "safe space" psychologically. We strive to "rebel" against the current limiting and dehumanizing sociohistorical constructions of race and language and seek to expand the range of legitimacy afforded by the biracial experience.

To understand the phenomenological experience of biracial individuals, with the objective of creating sociocultural change, greater inclusion, and more self-defined identity development, it is essential to do so from a strong theoretical base. A variety of recent work has identified major spheres of influence upon biracial identity development, including family, accepting others, peers, school, and community, to name a few (Dovick, 2003; Gleason, 2000; Thompson, 1999; Tomishima, 2000; Wrathall, 2002). While focus on these features is indeed a useful endeavor, they must be explored and processed within the greater sociocultural context. To this end, the ecological systems model of Bronfenbrenner (1979) offers a starting point for deconstructing the broader environmental influences upon an individual's development. Furthermore, our premise throughout this work has been that the power of society exerts a narrow definition and unhealthy influence upon biracial identity development. A corrective goal would be to redistribute the descriptive power into the hands of biracial individuals themselves and allow them to reestablish their identity, through reframed definitions of self and a rejection of the narrow racial dictates of society. To this end, the empowerment model of feminist therapy (Worell & Remer, 1992) presents a means through which biracial individuals can validate their emerging views of self. This section will present both models, relate them to biracial identity development, and offer suggestions for present and future understandings of the biracial experience.

Ecological Systems Model

While the original model of Bronfenbrenner (1979) has gone through a variety of versions, it offers an excellent vehicle for viewing the interrelationship between society and individual development.

With the individual at its center, the model is organized into nested, or layered, systems of environmental influences, such as family, school, extended family, mass media, and culture—all of which impact the developmental process. Like concentric rings within a tree, each layer is impacted by another and eventually interacts with the individual. For our purposes the levels of note are first the innermost one, the microsystem, and the outermost one, the macrosystem. The microsystem comprises those entities and persons who represent immediate and daily (face-to-face) interactions for an individual (such as family, peers, and school). The macrosystem, which is the most complex system and is similar to a society's culture, comprises culturally based values, attitudes, and beliefs. Of note is the interaction that occurs between the micro- and macrosystems and the subsequent impact on development. At the microsystem level, families may recreate and "pass on" the societal messages that are rooted in the macrosystem. Another response could be that families alter or counter macrosystem influences, especially if there is the perception that they are potentially negative. However, there will eventually be some interaction between a developing person and macrosystem messages, and this will no doubt have some influence upon identity development. While family may create a specific type of environment for biracial individuals, as they venture out into society, they may be faced with a series of very different and potentially conflicting messages. All of this provides a framework to explore how the family of origin has created, communicated, and reacted to some of the broader culturally based messages about race.

Feminist Theory

As presented earlier, the historically dichotomous notions of race are embedded in the uppermost sphere of developmental influences: the macrosystem. Communicated through a variety of means within society, such as popular media, these impact the process of biracial identity development such that it is pressured to be framed as an either-or prospect. However, as we have seen, many biracial individuals utilize a more integrated approach, but the pressure of the dualistic distinction remains. The empowerment model of feminist therapy, with its inclusive themes of "both/and," offers applied tools to this dilemma (Worell & Remer, 1992). In a Bronfenbrennerian stance, the empowerment model recognizes the negative influence of society, via social and political factors that impact individual development. While the model was originally designed for use with women, its themes of

recognizing, rejecting, and reframing society's narrow view of an individual and empowering one to validate oneself, parallels our biracial discussion. In direct opposition to the dualistic oppression perpetuated by society, the empowerment model strives to increase appreciation of multiple perspectives of self and allows them all to thrive simultaneously (Worell & Remer, 1992). This inclusive stance seems to mirror the natural developmental process of many biracial individuals who incorporate multiple traditions into their existence.

Aside from analysis of the broader, culturally based messages, some understanding of the individual perception of and reaction to sociohistorical construction of race are critical components to biracial identity. Identification of how these themes are internalized may well reveal them through linguistic expression. Language molds us, shapes our view of reality, and calls forth the appropriate social behaviors. However, there is no need to wait until language shifts at the macrocultural level to begin utilizing it to better relate to one's experiences. This adaptability of language provides a more inclusive approach to self-definition and behavioral expression, which ultimately liberates individuals from stifling cultural definitions and sociological conditioning (Daniel, 1996). Recognizing the subtlety with which we agree to social convention is called into question and challenged as the voices of the biracial collective proclaim, "[T]his has gone on for long enough; I will stand for no more. I chose my own terms and conditions for this [social] contract [of self-definition]" (Camus, 1957, p. 14).

FINAL THOUGHTS

We have charted how society has historically responded to the questions of race and racial identity with an either-or answer. For those of us who are multiracial, the result has often been a "forced fit" (physically, psychologically, and culturally) into one aspect of who we are as people. One way to alleviate this dilemma is presented in the framework that begins the biracial deconstruction of societally defined notions of self. From the ashes of this will arise a more self-generated concept of "who we are," and ultimately one that will give legitimacy to a new legacy of "unboxed identities" (Weisman, 1996). Derrida (1997) speaks to a similar process through which identity is internally differentiated, as he describes himself as a "European who does not feel European in every part" (p. 114). By this statement, he is deconstructing his identity and recognizing that it is a complex web impacted by features such as country of origin and immigration, which interact

Toolbox for Change

Maintenance of limiting images and perceptions of biracial people	For the biracial individual	For everyone else
Race and ethnicity are culturally seen as either-or concepts, whereby biracial individuals are frequently not "allowed" to simply be collective whole people.	In defining yourself, be aware of the society-level influences upon your identity development and how you may have internalized them; ask yourself whether you are developing into the person that *you* see or the person whom others have constructed.	Recognize the limiting characteristics of society's definitions of personhood and how these impact biracial people. Work to not recreate these limiting monikers of self.
The continued over-reliance on a flawed perceptual "sight" system that is used to determine initial conclusions about others.	Define yourself in a manner that fits your understanding of your reality and utilize an identity framework that fits *your* life.	Ask yourself, "*Why do I have to know*" what the racial/ethnic status of another person is to truly relate to them as an individual.
Sociocultural presentations (such as media) of biracial individuals rarely include the notion of a "both-and" philosophy, which limits our perception of their reality and ultimately our ability to relate to them.	Actively take hold of your identity and the language that displays it. Claim them as your own, regardless of where that "fit" places you in the eyes of others.	Strive to respond to others as individuals and not as representatives of a stereotype.
	Be true to yourself.	Delight in the diversity of the human constellation.

with family characteristics (like religion). As such, identity is both similar and different to itself. It represents a static and grounded entity, yet one that is constantly in a state of flux and rebirth.

It is through the deconstruction of a value-laden, culturally rooted identity that biracial identity will break free from its restrictive bonds. According to Camus, "Rebellion breaks the seal and allows the whole being to come into play" (1957, p. 17). As the population of multiracial individuals steadily increases in number, their collective voice in this new vernacular will be hard to ignore. As an ever-diversifying nation, we are compelled to initiate a cultural reevaluation and reconstruction of identities. What is necessary is accepting the autonomy to choose ambiguity. It is time for a new discourse to address the unshackling of multiracial identity from its oppressive and historically dichotomous bonds of marginalization. It is hoped that the day will come when multiracial people and their identities will no longer be forced to divide into unrelated, contradictory, and adversarial entities. That day is upon us now.

Awakened: Out of the Mouths of Babes

My response at four years of age to the elderly woman who called me a nigger was, "What? Speak up. I can't hear you!" As an adult processing this experience with my mother, we came to some conclusions of note. While my initial response was based upon the fact that I truly could not hear the woman clearly, another set of interpretations is offered: "Speak up" and let the world see your ignorance and lack of knowledge; and "I can't hear you" is more akin to I "do not" hear you, I choose not to, as your words do not penetrate my sense of who I am. There are no receptors here for that reality. It is not I.

I am my own person; my self is constructed by me, for me; it is mine alone to share with whom I choose, and how I choose to do it.

I am biracial, proud, and whole.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

NOTE

1. The terms *biracial*, *multiracial*, and *mixed race* will be used synonymously for ease of discussion. Additionally, unless noted, and given the author's background, the notion of "biracial" is rooted in white/nonwhite parentage, although it is acknowledged that a variety of equally beautiful familial scenarios could be considered biracial.

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CHAPTER 5

Bias in Counseling Hmong Clients with Limited English Proficiency

Michael Goh

Timothy Dunnigan

Kathryn McGraw Schuchman

A hospital in a large midwestern city was trying to create a warmer welcome by displaying a sign in the hospital reception area that welcomed patients in the languages of its multilingual constituents. The new sign hung prominently as one entered the facilities, with the first line in English reading, "Welcome to our hospital. We're here to help you!" Just below it, the same phrase in Hmong read: "Welcome to our hospital. We're here to *hurt* you!" This story would be more humorous if not for the fact that it was true. It is a stark reminder of how even with the best of intentions, language, if not carefully treated, can have the most opposite and detrimental of consequences.

In Minnesota, Asians are the second largest racial group among all children of color. More than one third (38 percent) of Minnesota students who are English-language learners speak Hmong—the most common language among those 29,000 students. Over 45,000 Hmong were counted as residents of the Minneapolis–St. Paul (Twin Cities) metropolitan area in the 2000 census. They began arriving in Minnesota in the late 1970s as a traumatized refugee population. Significant immigration, both primary and secondary, continued through the early 1990s. The Hmong population in Minnesota is said to be the largest urban Hmong population in the world (The Minneapolis Foundation, 1999). Despite over two decades of immigration to the Twin Cities metropolitan area, mental health services for Hmong children and families are inadequate. While many community