Racing to Theory or Retheorizing Race?

Understanding the Struggle to Build a Multiracial Identity Theory

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Empirical research on the growing multiracial population in the United States has focused largely on the documentation of racial identification, analysis of psychological adjustment, and understanding the broader political consequences of mixed-race identification. Efforts toward theory construction on multiracial identity development, however, have been largely disconnected from empirical data, mired in disciplinary debates, and bound by historically specific assumptions about race and racial group membership. This study provides a critical overview of multiracial identity development theories, examines the links between theory and research, explores the challenges to multiracial identity theory construction, and proposes considerations for future directions in theorizing racial identity development among the mixed-race population.

In the United States, debate over how individuals with parents of different races (i.e., mixed-race people) would be racially categorized in the 2000 Census focused national attention on this growing population. Underlying the debate over whether or not to add a stand-alone “multiracial” category was the difference between the identity of mixed-race people and the identification of them by others and the state (Brunsma, 2006). On one side of the debate, a coalition of various activists, scholars, and pundits argued that increasing rates of interracial marriage since the Civil Rights Movement had created a “biracial baby boom.” They argued that such demographic shifts necessitated the addition of a “multiracial”

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category because individual members of the growing mixed-race population describe themselves and where they fit in the U.S. racial landscape as “multiracial.” In short, advocates wanted the widespread changes in individual racial identity to be reflected in the census (Williams, 2006). Civil Rights activists formed the other side of the debate, arguing that existing racial categories should remain unchanged because the data is used to monitor discrimination and track population inequalities, and the categories themselves are reflective of historically rooted racial groupings. Because Civil Rights monitoring and compliance is determined by how others categorize and respond to individuals’ racial group membership, opponents of the “multiracial” category argued that identification far outweighs self-proclaimed identity.

The 2000 Census debate illustrates the awkward historical moment we currently inhabit. It is a moment in which we acknowledge that race is a social construct (as opposed to a biological reality), but a construct that has real and measurable consequences. It is a moment where color blindness stands as the prevailing racial ideology despite evidence documenting persistent racial inequalities across social institutions (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). It is a moment in which we, as researchers, struggle to document and analyze racial identity without reifying race as a social construct (Spencer, 2006). The resultant political compromise allowed individuals to check all that apply in response to the race question, while also creating elaborate rules for how statisticians and researchers should reaggregate the data back into the standard five categories when it is actually used (Williams, 2006). While identity won the battle, identification won the war.

Racial mixing, in and of itself, is not a new phenomenon in the United States; however, it has increased since the passage of Civil Rights legislation and dismantling of state laws banning interracial marriage. The changing terrain of race relations has also been accompanied by an emergent cultural space where mixed-race people who identify as “multiracial” are visible in the media and “multiracial” identity is increasingly viewed as a legitimate racial identity. In addition to legal and cultural shifts, long-standing norms of racial categorization such as the “one-drop rule” (mandating that individuals with even “one drop” of Black blood must be categorized as Black) are being aggressively challenged from the political right, left and center. While racial mixing is not new, the census debate provided a new perspective on multiracialism because it highlighted the existence of a generation of mixed-race people whose entire life experience is in post—Civil Rights America (Korgen, 1999). Their experiences are characterized by changing messages in their parental racial socialization (Brunsma, 2005; Hughes, Rodriguez, Smith, Johnson, Stevenson, & Spicer, 2006; Rockquemore & Lazloffy, 2005), new racial identity options (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002), and shifting racial identification of mixed-race people as a population (Moniz & Spickard, 2006). These experiences reflect a changing racial structure and force us to reconsider the mutual exclusivity of racial categories.
The 2000 Census also forced an explicit discussion about race, race relations, and racial categories among social scientists. While there is broad consensus that the racialized social structure in the United States is changing, many important questions remain unanswered. Is the color line disappearing, slightly fading, or reconfiguring itself in new ways? Are we moving to a Latin-American racial structure (Bonilla-Silva, 2004), a Black/non-Black binary (Yancey, 2003), or an expansion of the category “White” to include new groups (Warren & Twine, 1997)? How are social scientists, politicians, activists, journalists, and service providers making sense of the mixed-race population in the midst of shifting demographics and changing racial hierarchies? We find that the study of mixed-race people is deeply fragmented and inconsistent, not because it is an emergent body of work, but because the work of theory building suffers from the limits of the prevailing racial ideology that social scientists are embedded within, a lack of connection between theory and empirical work in the area, and the seemingly insurmountable challenge of removing disciplinary blinders. How researchers have conceptualized racial identity development among mixed-race people has paralleled the unspoken assumptions about race that prevail in their respective historical context. The confusion in identity development theories today speaks volumes about the uncertainty around racial identity, racial categories, and racial identification in post–Civil Rights America.

To guide our exploration, we ask how have researchers conceptualized racial identity development among mixed-race people and what are the assumptions underlying their theories? What are the challenges to our current efforts toward understanding the difference between racial identity, racial categories, and racial identification? What are the implications of new racial identities among the mixed-race population on racially based public policies such as Affirmative Action? To address these important questions, we first provide an historical overview of theories of racial identity development for the mixed-race population. We then evaluate the challenges that face theory building in this area and underlie the state of confusion in multiracial studies. Finally, we suggest an intervention for future work that will allow for better connections between theory and method as well as research and policy.

**Racing to Theory**

To review the historical trajectory of racial identity theories for mixed-race people in the United States, we rely on Thornton and Wason’s (1995) framework which describes the research on mixed-race identity as following one of three approaches: (a) the problem approach, (b) the equivalent approach, and (c) the variant approach. We have expanded their framework to include a fourth distinct approach to racial identity theory that has emerged in the last decade: the ecological approach. Given that individuals with one Black and one White parent have been
the central case for theorists struggling to construct racial identity models (because Blacks and Whites have the greatest social distance in the United States), we use this group as an illustrative example in describing each approach.

The Problem Approach

The “problem approach” to theorizing multiracial identity encompasses all work on racial identity development that takes as its basic tenet the idea that being a mixed-race person in a racially divided world is, in and of itself, a problematic social position that is inevitably marked by tragedy. The origin of this approach lies in the late Jim Crow era, in which social scientists observed and sought to explain the racial identity development and personality of mixed-race people in an explicitly racially segregated social world. In this historical context, the one-drop rule was both a social norm and the law (in many states). As a reflection of the historical moment in which the problem approach emerged, theories of racial identity development that take a problem approach focus on deficits, dilemmas, and negative experiences associated with the position of being mixed-race in a racially segregated society. In other words, they specify the rejection, isolation, and stigma that mixed-race people experienced from both dominant and minority groups.

Robert Park’s (1928) marginal man theory followed by Stonequist’s (1937) expansion of his framework are classic illustrations of the problem approach. Park’s marginal man theory was not focused exclusively on American multiracials but recognized that due to the rigid color line in the United States, in which the boundaries for group membership were defined by the one-drop rule, Black/White mixed-race people must accept the status of Black. Despite the fact that mixed-race individuals possessed both Black and White ancestry, they were doomed to a permanent state of crisis in which their mental state was marked by turmoil that reflected a deeply racist and eugenic epistemology.

Stonequist (1937) went on to more fully explain and expand upon Park’s general theory by arguing that mixed-race people’s awareness of the conflict between the two races created some level of identification with both groups resulting in an internalization of the group conflict as a personal problem. For Stonequist, the marginal man undergoes three predictable stages of the life cycle: (a) introduction, (b) crisis, and (c) adjustment. In the initial introduction stage, the marginal man experiences some assimilation into the two cultures of his parents. This is followed by a crisis stage, where the individual has one or more defining experiences that indicate the irreconcilable nature of the cultural conflict that marks his existence. The crisis induces feelings of confusion, shock, disillusionment, and estrangement. Finally, he adjusts to his status and the full understanding of his social location. In most cases, the adjustment is toward the dominant group. However, in the case of Black/White mixed-race people in the United States, where adjustment
toward the dominant group (Whites) was impossible because of White supremacy and segregation, the marginal man was predicted to become a leader among the subordinate group (Blacks), or alternatively experience withdrawal or isolation.

The Equivalent Approach

Racial identity development theories for mixed-race people evolved beyond the marginal man and its correlate problem approach. Beginning in the 1960s, theorists working in the context of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements reoriented their thinking about Blackness and the one-drop rule. Researchers assumed that (Black/White) mixed-race people were part of the Black population and, as such, there was no need to draw such distinctions (as in the one-drop rule). Importantly, in this era, mixed-race people were expected to develop a positive sense of Black identity just like any other Black person. Because researchers asserted that the vast majority of the Black population in the United States were racially mixed, they found no reason to differentiate between those who were mixed by immediate parentage (children of interracial families) and those who were racially mixed over generations (most Black Americans). As such, the development of a Black identity was considered the healthy ideal for mixed-race individuals and negative mental health outcomes were primarily associated with internalizing racist views about Blackness (see Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). Therapeutic models driven by the equivalent approach were oriented to assist Black/White mixed-race people to develop an understanding of their racial identity as Black.

Identity development models that treat mixed-race people as equivalent to Blacks derive largely from Erikson’s (1968) developmental framework of ego-identity formation. According to Erikson, the central task of adolescence is to form a stable identity, or “a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity” (p. 328). This is done by progressing through a variety of exploratory and experimental stages that culminate in a decision, or commitment, in certain areas of social life such as religion, occupation, and political orientation. The formation of racial identity may be a similar process to the formation of ego identity because individuals explore and make various levels of commitment, across various social spaces, over time.

Numerous conceptual models of Black identity have evolved from this perspective, although the most well known and vigorously tested is William Cross’s Nigrescence model (Cross, 1971) representing a Negro-to-Black transformative process. Cross’s stage model begins with a preencounter stage, before an individual acknowledges the existence of race and/or racism and prefers dominant modes of being. At some point the individual enters an encounter stage in which he or she must attend to a racialized event, which is followed by immersion in Blackness and emersion from emotionality and ideology. As development continues an internalization stage consists of a centering of the Black self and one’s
racial identity becomes an anchor, defense, and foundation for the self. Finally, commitment involves an ongoing active expression of Black identity. As racial identity models developed that considered mixed-race and Black people analytically equivalent, researchers assumed that the mixed-race experience was a linear progression toward a centered, meaningful Black identity. This assumption was reflective of the culture and identity politics of its historical moment.

The Variant Approach

By the mid-1980s and throughout the 1990s, a new generation of researchers emerged who focused on conceptualizing the mixed-race population as distinct from any single racial group. Theoretically, these new researchers (many of whom were mixed-race) sought to explain psychologically, clinically, and developmentally how mixed-race people actively and consciously construct a “biracial” or “multiracial” identity and how they could maintain a healthy, integrated sense of their multiple racial ancestries, culture, and social location. By creating new analytical tools and incorporating interdisciplinary approaches to differentiate their work from the problem and equivalent approaches, scholars working within the variant approach challenged existing assumptions about mixed-race people personally, experientially, and theoretically. This radical break from the equivalent tradition is best illustrated by Maria Root’s groundbreaking anthology *Racially Mixed People in America* (1992), wherein an emergent group of multiracial scholars advanced the notion that the mixed-race population was a distinct group worthy of study with unique, nonpathological experiences and identity development processes.

Both Gibbs (1989) and Herring (1992) suggest that the challenge for mixed-race adolescents is twofold. First, they must successfully integrate dual racial and/or cultural identifications while also learning how to develop a positive self-concept and sense of competence. Second, they must develop the ability to synthesize their earlier identifications into a coherent and stable sense of personal identity as well as positive racial identity. Developmental problems may arise when individuals experience conflicts in their efforts to resolve the following five major psychosocial tasks: (a) conflicts about their dual racial/ethnic identity, (b) conflicts about their social marginality, (c) conflicts about their sexuality and choice of sexual partners, (d) conflicts about separation from their parents, and (e) conflicts about their educational or career aspirations. For the most part, researchers using a developmental framework tend to assume that an integrated “biracial” or “multiracial” identity is the healthy goal as opposed to Black identity as the intended outcome. In this approach, “problems” do exist, but they are located in the process of developing a multiracial identity, not essential to the multiracial location itself. Furthermore, Black identity, in contrast to the equivalent approach, is viewed as “over-identification with the Black parent” and considered an unhealthy resolution of the dilemmas of racial identity formation (Gibbs, 1989).
The most often cited identity theory in the variant approach is Carlos Poston’s biracial identity development model (BIDM) (1990). Poston, like many working within the variant approach, addresses the flaws in previous racial identity development models that disallowed the integration of two racial identities and implied that mixed-race people must choose one racial identity (see also Jacobs, 1992). While the BIDM takes the same shape of previous stage models (i.e., Cross’s Nigrescence model), the development process culminates in an integrated multiracial identity. Poston’s stages are (a) personal identity (where personal identity is developed at a young age based on family and peer interactions), (b) choice of group categorization (individuals are forced to chose an identity that causes crisis), (c) enmeshment/denial (a stage of confusion and guilt resulting from denial of one aspect of identity), (d) appreciation (learning to appreciate multiple identities and broaden reference group orientation, and (e) integration (where wholeness is experienced through an integrated multiracial identity).

The Ecological Approach

The most recent approach to racial identity development among the mixed-race population is the ecological approach. Here, theorists have the following assumptions: (a) mixed-race people construct different racial identities based on various contextually specific logics, (b) there are no predictable stages of identity development because the process is not linear and there is no single optimal endpoint, and (c) privileging any one type of racial identity over another (i.e., multiracial over single-race identity) only replicates the essentialist flaws of previous models with a different outcome. Theoretical models constructed in this framework also allow for the possibility that mixed-race individuals may refuse to have any racial identity whatsoever and instead, identify as “human” (Daniel, 2001). We have labeled this new mode of theorizing an “ecological” approach because these theories focus more attention on the context surrounding identity development than on any one particular racial identity outcome (Rockquemore, 1999; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2003).

While we could trace the origins of the ecological approach back to Bronfenbrenner (1979), Maria Root’s (1990, 1996) theoretical modeling represents the original application of this framework to the multiracial population as well as a fundamental break from previous approaches to theorizing identity development for mixed-race people. For Root, the status of having parents of different races in a society that is organized by a mutually exclusive racial structure creates a social location in the borderlands. As a result, she describes a variety of ways in which mixed-race individuals function in the five-race context and the ways they engage in “border crossing.” She describes these as (a) having both feet in both groups so that one has the ability to “hold, merge, and respect multiple perspectives simultaneously,” (b) shifting the foreground and background as an
individual crosses between and among social contexts defined by race, (c) con-
sciously choosing to sit on the border and experiencing hybridity and a border
identity as a central reference point, and (e) creating a home in one “camp” while
visiting other camps when necessary. Root (1997, 1998, 2003) has continually
refined and expanded this model (now called the “ecological framework for un-
derstanding multiracial identity”) by contextualizing the border crossings with
consideration of regional and generational histories of race relations, sexual ori-
entation, gender, class, community attitudes, racial socialization, family functioning,
and individual’s personality traits and aptitudes.

When Theory Meets Data

Theory construction is a critically important part of the research process
because it provides a road map for understanding emergent social phenomenon. Yet
we must be willing to both test the explanatory power of a theoretical framework
against empirical data and incorporate new findings into the ongoing evolution
of existing theoretical models and the development of new models. We must also
acknowledge the intricate dance between epistemology, methodology, theory, and
interpretation in order to rigorously push the envelope in the questions we ask, the
methodological innovations we employ, and the critical interpretations we offer.
We turn now to an assessment of the explanatory power of the problem, equivalent,
variant, and ecological approaches in light of recent empirical findings.

The past 10 years of research on the multiracial population has been marked
by a move from reliance on case studies, observation of multiracial support groups,
and small-scale interview studies, to a broader and more robust stage of data col-
lection and analysis. This move has been pushed exponentially forward by the
availability of data from the 2000 Census, census-inspired surveys, an increase in
public-use data sets, and the emergent tendency of large nationally representative
data sets to include questions on parent’s race so that researchers can identify
mixed-race respondents for analysis. This new data has allowed an examination of
the identities and identifications of mixed-race children, adolescents, and adults
to a degree once empirically unimaginable. Researchers have not only been able
to document how mixed-race people self-identify, but also how parents identify
their multiracial children (Brunsma, 2005; Campbell & Eggerling-Boeck, 2006;
Herman, 2004), how geographic patterns impact racial identity and identification
(Brunsma, 2006; Wright, Houston, Ellis, Holloway, & Hudson, 2003), and the con-
textual nature of racial labeling (Harris & Sim, 2002; Renn, 2004; Rockquemore
& Brunsma, 2002; Townsend & Markus, 2009).

After a decade of new data and findings, what do we know about racial identity
development in the mixed-race population? Based on a review of the empirical
literature across several disciplines, the following four patterns emerge for identity
development within the mixed-race population: (a) racial identity varies, (b) racial
identity often changes over the life course, (c) racial identity development is not a predictable linear process with a single outcome, and (d) social, cultural, and spatial context are critical.

Using various methodologies and data sets, researchers have repeatedly found that racial identity varies among mixed-race people (Kilson, 2001; Renn, 2004; Rockquemore, 1999; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2001; Wallace, 2001). Some identify exclusively with one of their races, some blend the two to create a hybrid identity, others shift between several different identities depending on where they are and whom they are interacting with, and still others refuse any racial identification whatsoever. This variation has been best documented among mixed-race people with one Black and one White parent where some develop an exclusively “Black” identity (Storrs, 1999, Rockquemore, 1999), some an exclusively “White” identity (Rockquemore & Arend, 2003; Twine, 1997), some create an integrated “biracial,” “multiracial,” or “mixed” identity (Bowles, 1993; Gibbs & Hines, 1992; Kerwin, Ponterotto, Jackson, & Harris, 1993), others shift between “Black,” “White,” and “biracial” identities, depending on the racial composition of the group they are interacting within (Harris & Sim, 2002; Rockquemore, 1999; Stephan, 1992), and still others refuse any racial designation whatsoever (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2001). The documentation of variation in racial identity, however is not exclusive to mixed-race people with one Black and one White parent but extends to other mixed-race groups (Brunsma, 2005; Herman, 2004; Kana’iaupunni & Liebler, 2005; Kich, 1992; King, 2000; Lee & Bean, 2004; Wright et al., 2003; Xie & Goyette, 1997).

The second important and consistently documented fact about the mixed-race population is that, in addition to variation in racial identity, racial identity may change over the life course. This differs from conceptualizations of monoracial identity because identity development for mixed-race people is neither in a predictable linear fashion, nor does it have a single endpoint.\(^3\) Gatson (2003), Hitlin, Brown, and Elder (2006), Renn (2004), and Wallace (2001) have documented how racial identity is dynamic and changing as their mixed-race respondents move through their lives, shifting and changing as their lives are linked to social, material, cultural, economic, and institutional forces. Hitlin et al. (2006) provide significant empirical validation of the shifting of racial identity over time. Using a multiwave AddHealth data set (a nationally representative sample of 14- to 18-year-olds, followed up 5 years later), these scholars find various “pathways of racial self-identification” over time, especially for mixed-race people. Specifically, mixed-race youth are 4 times more likely to switch their racial identity than to consistently report the same identification over the time periods. While change occurs, it varies between diversifying, consolidating, or maintaining multiracial self-identification.

Extending the work of Rockquemore and Brunsma (2001), Renn (2004) focuses on the role of peer cultures in the various identity trajectories that multiracial
college students take as these are influenced by the ecology of the college campus. She develops a qualitative picture of five “identity patterns” (monoracial, multiple monoracial, multiracial, extraracial, and situational) and adds to our knowledge by showing how, when, and why these multiracial individuals construct or deconstruct their identities and alter their self-understandings in an ecological developmental model. Two of the most compelling studies are Gatson’s (2003) autoethnography and Wallace’s (2001) life history analysis, each of which illuminate the fact that racial identity can and does change over the life course for mixed-race people. Gatson’s autoethnography is carefully crafted through a painstaking methodology using field notes, interactions with others and institutions, and historical documents to illustrate how she has gone through a Black identity, explored a multiracial identity, and confronted her Whiteness. Wallace sees racial identity as a fully situated phenomenon and through her analysis we learn that racial identity and its concomitant discourses and narratives change over time and space.

Despite a consensus around the fact that racial identity may change over time for mixed-race people, the life course perspective (Elder, 1974, 1998) has not yet been fully incorporated into the empirical study of identity formation, development, and maintenance in the mixed-race population. Given the theoretical and methodological advances made over the past decade, this is an odd state of affairs because the life course perspective focuses explicitly on the patterning of lives as individuals make status transitions (e.g., from child to adolescent, adolescent to young adult, young adult to adult) while embedding such transitioning within the forces of history, social spaces, institutional arrangements, economic conditions, and racialized social structures (see Phinney, 2000, for an explicit discussion of this gap in the literature).

While we know that identities change over time for mixed-race people, it is important to note that empirical research does not support notions of a single healthy, correct, and desirable end point (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2003). Instead, researchers increasingly acknowledge the intricate dance between structure and agency, and explicitly pose deeper questions such as, What is “correct”? For whom and for what purpose is it “correct”? What is “healthy”? Is identity predictable? If so, what does this mean?

Finally, we know that the parameters of racial identity are socially, culturally, and politically constructed. In short, context matters in the identity development process of mixed-race people. Korgen (1999) demonstrated the extent to which historical patterns account for variation in the construction of racial identity between pre–Civil Rights and post–Civil Rights cohorts. Multiracial identity processes also vary across institutional spheres (Harris & Sim, 2002), and according to families’ varying contexts of socialization (Dalmage, 2000; Childs, 2005; Rockquemore, Laszloffy, & Noveske, 2005). Scholars have found that the racial composition of social networks is critically important in these trajectories (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002) and therefore that varying spaces—communities
and geographies—provide differential resources for identity development and identification parameterization (Brunsma, 2006). At the macro level, we know that the comparative elements of the nation-state, culture, and country can and do affect the development of racial identities within which mixed-race people must navigate (Davis, 1991).

Most of the extant empirical data supports the ecological approach and points to the limits of the problem, equivalent, and variant approaches. Mixed-race people today are not always following the social rules that implicitly underlie the problem and equivalent approaches—some do, some do not, some rearticulate existing rules, and some rewrite the rules entirely leading to varying forms of social change. For example, in the case of Black/White mixed-race people, we increasingly see evidence that individuals do not follow the long-standing norm of hypodescent (identifying with the lower status race), blindly accept the one-drop rule (that would mandate Black identity), nor do they uniformly identify as Black. The data also fails to support the theoretical framework of variant approaches that allow for an integrated identity and come closer than problem and equivalent approaches to explaining the emerging frequency of multiracial and biracial identification. Yet they are not useful in explaining the variation that has been repeatedly documented. It is only the ecological approach that (a) allows for the full range of racial identities that have been well documented in the literature, (b) focuses on the social factors that influence racial identity development as opposed to developmental stages, and (c) allows for contextual shifting of identities, multiple simultaneous identities, and no racial identity. It is precisely the focus on the pathways toward different racial identities, as opposed to a circumscribed end point, that make ecological theories useful in the post–Civil Rights racial landscape.

The Challenges in Constructing Multiracial Identity Theory

A critical review of the trajectory of racial identity theories allows us to step back and consider the three primary challenges to theory construction and research on the mixed-race population. First, epistemologically, we must recognize that the questions we ask in our research are embedded within a specific historical moment and remain critical of the potential reproduction of dominant ideologies. Second, scholars must understand that the characteristics, histories, and current structures of their own disciplines place significant parameters on what can be known about mixed-race people. Finally, scholarship on the mixed-race population has an important and critical place in the larger social scientific understanding of the structures of race, gender, class, and human societies. We now turn to a discussion of each of these points.
**Historical Limits of Knowledge Production**

Theory building is inevitably a product of the sets of beliefs about race at a particular historical moment in which researchers construct their theories. We see in each of the four different approaches to identity development, researchers producing theories that mirror the prevailing racial ideology of their time. Scholarship generating from the problem approach, emerged out of Jim Crow segregation and focused its inquiry on the confusion and tragedy inherent in being located between two races. From that perspective, marginality was the inevitable destination for mixed-race people. As such, researchers asked questions that reinforced segregation and the structure of Jim Crow and constructed mixed-race people as both barometer and scapegoat by denying them agency. The privileging of Blackness in the equivalent approach emerged out of the struggles of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements as a “Negro-to-Black” transformation. With collective racial identity at the necessary forefront, it perhaps failed to legitimize the heterogeneity of Black people’s experiences, the realities of multiracial people’s lives, and their human agency. The variant approach, emerging in the post–Civil Rights era, had similar epistemological problems coupled with a class bias and a flair for identity politics. It overemphasized the agency of mixed-race people (particularly those that self-identify as multiracial), ignoring structure in favor of an individualistic stance that contained a palpable disdain for Blackness and an eye toward Whiteness. Turning the same critical lens on our current historical moment, we are forced to ask: What are the limits of the ecological approach in the color-blind era and post-modern era? How can we recognize the intricate interplay of agency, structure, space, and place, while also tackling real questions of hybridity?

**The Limits of Disciplinary Boundaries**

It is clear that explaining how multiracial people develop a racialized self-understanding requires an inherently interdisciplinary perspective; however, most scholars writing in this area are not engaged in conversation with each other, do not actively cite studies outside their discipline and methodological approach, and are seemingly unaware of their disciplinary limitations. Just as there are historical limits to disciplinary paradigms and epistemology, scholars are trained within tight disciplinary parameters where there is no incentive to stroll beyond the clearly defined walls. This results in repetition, lack of connection and innovation, and theories that extend disciplinary-specific dialogues but fail to explain the experiential reality of multiracial people’s lives and identity choices. Just as mixed-race people exist at a complicated intersectionality, so too does the knowledge, method, and interpretation of their contemporary experiences (Zack, 1993).
Validity of Race as a Construct

The publication of Root’s (1992) *Racially Mixed People in America* ignited political and scholarly debate regarding the validity of the concept *race*. While the Multiracial Movement was beginning to redefine and criticize racial classification systems in the United States (Daniel, 2001; Spencer, 1999; Williams, 2006), academics were increasingly recognizing that the multiracial population allowed for unique insights into the social construction of race. Ironically, while Multiracial Movement activists were criticizing classification schemes, they also desired to have their members classified as unambiguously “multiracial.” This burgeoning social movement was simultaneously arguing against the essentialism and inheritability of race and reinscribing essentialism and immutability onto mixed-race people. If not careful, academics can embark on a similar journey of reinscription and in fact critics such as Spencer (2006) argue that this has already taken place.

The mere idea of “multiracial” as a new racial category has been used in a variety of complex and contradictory ways in the scholarly literature. Some have conceptualized it as describing a common set of social experiences among people who have parents of different races; however, it is not currently clear that mixed-race people have a monolithic set of similar life experiences and circumstances. *Multiracial* is at times equated to racially ambiguous and uncategorizeable phenotype that binds individuals into “Generation E.A.” (ethnically ambiguous); however, the empirical reality of phenotype in the mixed-race population is one of striking variation and heterogeneity, not similitude and homogeneity. *Multiracial* has been used to describe a community striving for collective goals; however, the socio-economic location, opportunity structures, and politics of mixed-race people are decidedly diverse. *Multiracial* has been described as an expression of a unique hybrid cultural space with a particular collection of values, norms, strategies, and a proclivity for bending and blending; however, while many who write and think about the mixed-race population have rhetorically and theoretically articulated commonality, the concepts they use (e.g., “racial identity”) do not reflect the complexity of cultural spaces in which mixed-race people move. The construct *multiracial* has also been used as an identity, a marker, a social category, and a statement of self-understanding; however, the terrain of identity is increasingly multifaceted, fluid, and dynamic and cannot be encapsulated in one singular concept. Thus, instead of creating “multiracial” as a subset of the already problematic construct “race,” we need to test, expand, and refine theories that explain the current reality of race relations.

Retheorizing Race

As we have outlined the theoretical developments in understanding multiracial identity, what has become clear is that the greatest challenge of all is not
determining who is multiracial in the United States today, but instead finding ways that racial identity researchers can grapple with the awkward historical moment within which we are embedded. We see the construct race falling apart at the seams, while racism and group-level inequalities persist. We have newly emerging racial identities, but no clear terminology or methodological procedures to deal with them. We have an inherently interdisciplinary field in multiracial studies, yet an unwillingness to break through disciplinary walls and move beyond our methodological comfort zones in order to collaborate and move forward. We know the mixed-race population is at the core of changing race relations in the United States, but we lack clarity as to whether multiracialism is demolishing or reinforcing racial hierarchies. We close by proposing several suggestions for researchers studying the mixed-race population, proposing a modest theoretical intervention for future research, and posing the hard political and policy questions yet to be answered.

Let’s Stop Reinventing the Wheel and Start Seeing If It Rolls

Until recently, multiracial identity theories were largely deductive because of the lack of data on the multiracial population. The explosion of data sources from large sample interview studies to nationally representative data sets provides the opportunity for the interaction of theory and data in an explicit way. This new infusion of data has allowed for both older theoretical models to be tested for validity as well as new models to be constructed. Several major data-collection projects include in their massive survey instruments a multiracial box: the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (AddHealth; 1994/1996 waves, and again in 2001–2002), the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K; 1998 and numerous waves since), and the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Birth Cohort (ECLS-B, 2001). These data sets are large nationally representative samples of adolescents, kindergartners, and 9-month-old children respectively. Their strength lies in allowing researchers to explore identity development in context as respondents are embedded within their families, schools, and neighborhoods. There is a rich body of social, psychological, network, resource, and other information within each data set that are only beginning to be explored. Scholars have recently used large data sets such as Add Health (Campbell & Eggerling-Boeck, 2006; Doyle & Kao, 2007; Harris & Sim, 2002; Udry, Li, & Hendrickson-Smith, 2003) and ECLS-K (Brunsma, 2005; Cheng & Powell, 2007) to study racial identity and identification among mixed-race children and adolescents. These data sets are valuable resources for studying the multiracial population because of their depth and representativeness.

Before the emergence of these data sets, scholars were forced to rely largely on qualitative interviews, ethnographies, and case studies. Data that emerge from narratives, interviews, life histories, and ethnographies reveal the complexity of the
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process of racial identity development among mixed-race people and the creation of theoretical frameworks. It has been through qualitative projects that some of the most serious questions about the measurement of “race,” and “racial identity,” have emerged. In addition to qualitative data and large quantitative data set research on multiracials, there is also a recent emergence of data collected from experimental research designs. This new methodological approach is exemplified by the work of Townsend and Markus (in press) and Sanchez and Bonam (2009). Townsend and Markus’ (in press) research provides the literal space “where the rubber hits the road” by highlighting how multiracial people experience difficulty in asserting their identities. Particularly we see this difficulty arising when multiracials are forced to pick one racial identity (rather than a multiracial category) on their SAT surveys, and, as a consequence of this constraint, have lower levels of self-esteem and motivation. Similarly, Sanchez and Bonam (2009) use a three-pronged approach to explore how multiracial applicants are perceived in the scholarship awards process. Both research teams used multiple experimentally based studies to answer complex research questions, illustrating yet another new source of data. Experimental designs enable a reduction in the potential redundancies that may occur with repeated usage of large data sets and provide data on processes similar to that gained through qualitative methodologies. While innovative, experimental designs must push to further develop reliable measures of the following: phenotype (that go beyond just skin tone), the salience of racial identity relative to other identities, direct process comparisons between mixed-race groups (of different racial mixtures), and socialization messages sent to multiracial children and youth from parents, extended family, the media, churches, and schools.

Differentiating Racial Categories, Racial Identity, and Racial Identification

Given the critically important political implications of understanding the mixed-race population, we want to suggest that researchers rethink the use of race as an all-encompassing construct in their analyses and instead begin to differentiate between racial identity (an individual’s self-understanding), racial identification (how others understand and categorize an individual), and racial category (what racial identities are available and chosen in a specific context). While these three constructs are highly correlated for single-race groups, the fact that they are not perfectly correlated among the mixed-race population is heuristically fruitful (see Figure 1). More important, it is analytically useful in researching the mixed-race population to consider the areas where racial identity, racial identification, and racial categorization overlap and where they do not. Such a conceptualization of racialized experience may also be useful in understanding ethnic identities. We illustrate this briefly below using a hypothetical example to tease out the similarities and differences between racial identity, racial identification, and racial category.
Let’s consider a simple hypothetical example of three mixed-race high school students who we will call Kristy, Ann, and John. While each student has a Black parent and a White parent, they vary in physical appearance and racial identity. Kristy physically appears White, lives in a predominately White suburban community, and has developed a multiracial identity. In contrast, Ann is so phenotypically ambiguous that others cannot pinpoint her race and regularly ask her “what are you?” for clarification. Despite her physical ambiguity, Ann has developed a Black identity as a reflection of the predominately Black community in which she lives. John is assumed to be Black by others, but he adamantly refuses any racial identity and considers his race as “human,” an identity that he has been taught and encouraged to maintain by his politically conservative parents.

At some point during their senior year, if Kristy, Ann, and John apply to college, they will interact with the formal racial project in the United States known as Affirmative Action. As part of their college application process they must check off a box designating their racial group membership. Despite Kristy’s racial identity (multiracial) and physical appearance (White), she checks off “Black” only on her admission form because she perceives it will give her an advantage in the admission process. Ann checks off both “Black” and “White” because doing so best represents her identity and her phenotype. John, like Kristy, claims “Black” as his racial category for perceived advantage. We summarize their racial identities, racial identifications and racial categories in Table 1.

From the perspective of the college admissions officer (reading their forms), Kristy, Ann, and John are three Black students. From the perspective of the campus guide that led them on their tour, they are a White student, an ambiguous
Table 1. An Example of Discontinuity in Racial Identity, Racial Identification, and Racial Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Kristy</th>
<th>Ann</th>
<th>John</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Racial identity</td>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Human</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial identification</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Ambiguous</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial category</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

student, and a Black student. From the perspective of their own self-understanding, they are multiracial, Black, and human. These micro-level decisions over racial category matter because the racial category that each student selects on his or her college admission form will result in a concrete decision that will affect his or her opportunities, resources, and mobility. Their racial identification will determine how they are understood and treated by others in their environment, while their racial identities are free to shift and change as they adapt to their new environment.

But let’s step back and consider the scenario at a broader level. Is it problematic that individuals may designate their racial category in ways that are different from their racial identity? Does it in some way undermine the validity of our data? Do Affirmative Action policies operate on the premise of racial identity, racial identification, or racial category? Does Civil Rights compliance and monitoring require racial identification with a particular group, or can someone like Kristy, whose racial identification is white, but whose racial identity is multiracial, claim she has been discriminated against as a Black person because of her racial category? What does someone like John who understands himself as part of the human race mean for our use of racial statistics? Do we count him as a nothing because he claims “human” as his race? Or is he Black because that is how others see him and will influence whether he can catch a cab, gets followed in stores, or receives a promotion.

While we cannot definitively answer the previous questions, we pose them as a way to encourage researchers to consider how racial identity, racial identification, and racial category interact, overlap, and contradict each other when working with the mixed-race population. For those interested in individual processing and micro-level interaction, racial identity will continue to be the primary construct of concern. We must be careful, however, not to confuse racial identity with racial category, as is frequently done in the use of census data where we hear estimates of the “multiracial population” that are in fact only a small subset of mixed-race people who checked off more than one race as their racial category. A more robust exploration of identity requires us to first designate mixed-race respondents according to who has parents of different races, and then analyze their racial identity. In addition, we must be mindful of the context of the data. When we are drawing respondents from data sets where there is the potential for
self-interest to mediate one’s racial category, we must be open to the possibility and likelihood that racial category and racial identity may not be perfectly correlated and may require confirmatory subsampling and/or expanding the cases selected beyond those who marked more than one race on a particular form.

For researchers who are primarily interested in macro-level racial patterns, the distinction between racial identity and racial identification is critical because holding the two together can help us explore the dynamic relationship between public categories and private identities. Racial identities and how they are manifested in formal mechanisms such as the census, admission forms, and occupational applications occur in enigmatic ways that function as political, social, cultural, and interactional resources. Such resources may (or may not) be available in particular social contexts within the United States that are characterized by decidedly different “identity markets” (Cote, 1997). In other words, public categories that appear to be the same in every part of the United States are actually not meaningfully available in some contexts at the interactional level. This is because validation processes stem from the existence of variation in public categories as well as social networks that lead to variation in private identities for mixed-race individuals. Such a reality points to the fact that race is not an entirely structurally imposed status for mixed-race people but instead is characterized by fluidity and constrained choice. As a result, racial negotiations can be predicated on social, cultural, institutional, legal, and other foundations that parameterize identity options through various racial regimes, racial projects, and racial formations.

The census, as the primary arm of our public racial categorization system, is not simply a counting of the U.S. population. It is a highly political apparatus, reflective of social and cultural discourse regarding race in the United States. It is also an indicator of our national racial structure as well as a partial macro-level structure giving grounding and antitheses to multiple racial projects within meso- and micro-level social systems. Racial identity, as a specific expression of private racialized selves, becomes a political device that simultaneously challenges and reinforces existing racialized social structures. It is also a cultural boundary marker rooted in negotiations, strategies, and tactics of “doing race,” and intimately tied to material, historical, and gendered systems. And at the same time, there is a great deal of reflexivity between identity and identification that we are just now beginning to understand. It appears that identification is predicated on available choices, whether formal, cultural, social, or all three interwoven together. In this way, identity development is shaped by the structure and discourse of identification.

The United States has an appalling history of racial oppression including African slavery, Native American extermination, Chinese exclusionism, and Jim Crow segregation. While the current racial formation might be best characterized as de facto White privilege in the midst of de jure equality, resources, and opportunities continue to be distributed along racial lines, by a racist state. In this period of
flux and change, race scholars must fundamentally rethink how we measure race, racial identity, and racial categories. While many acknowledge that race relations in the United States are changing, for social scientists, the central questions are how and to what ends? What are the implications of the changes we have described in this study for pursuing racial and social justice in the United States? And how can researchers who study the multiracial experience move beyond documenting the social phenomenon and attend to broader implications on social policy in order to begin to turn around our societal and disciplinary retreat from racial justice?

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