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When Race Becomes Even More Complex: Toward Understanding the Landscape of Multiracial Identity and Experiences

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The explosion in the number of people coming from a multiracial heritage has generated an increased need for understanding the experiences and consequences associated with coming from a multiracial background. In addition, the emergence of a multiracial identity challenges current thinking about race, forcing scholars to generate new ideas about intergroup relations, racial stigmatization, social identity, social perception, discrimination, and the intersectionality of race with other social categories such as social class. The present issue brings together research and theory in psychology, sociology, education, culture studies, and public policy surrounding multiracial identity and introduces new advances in thinking about race, intergroup relations, and racial identity. In exploring multiracial identity, the issue will reexamine conceptualization of race and racial identification by examining the social experiences of multiracial individuals.

Introduction

Since the legalization of interracial marriages in 1967, marriages between people from different racial backgrounds have become more socially acceptable and occur more frequently in the United States. Accordingly, the number of multiracial children has grown exponentially. People of multiracial backgrounds represent one of the fastest growing minority groups in the United States. In

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the 2000 Census, over six million people identified with more than one racial group (Jones & Symens Smith, 2001), and many suggest that the size of the multiracial population is even higher (Harris, 2001). As a result of the growing rate of intermarriages and the rising racial and ethnic diversity emerging from new immigration in the United States, one in five Americans is estimated to identify as multiracial by the year 2050 (Farley, 2001). The growing visibility and the political movement surrounding the creation of a community of multiracial people (i.e., "multiracial movement," Brown & Douglass, 1996) has forced public recognition of multiracial identity and the needs of multiracial people in the United States. Although the U.S. Census is the most commonly cited example of this recognition when they allowed multiracial people in the United States to indicate more than one racial identity, a surge in academic research and theory around multiracial identity and surrounding political and social issues similarly reflects the movement toward recognizing a multiracial identity.

Today, this newfound scholarly attention has revealed much about the experiences and consequences associated with coming from a multiracial background; however, while the amount of research attention directed toward understanding issues associated with multiracial identity has increased, this body of work has been dispersed across multiple disciplines. The purpose of the issue is to bring together the research and theory in psychology, sociology, education, and public policy addressing multiracial experiences, and also to present the new ideas and perspectives generated by the study of multiracial issues. In this introductory article, we discuss the working definition of *multiracial* for this issue and suggest a framework in which to explore, organize, and integrate the various subjects being addressed by the articles in this issue, as well as how they may inform research on other racial minorities.

Multiracial studies is the scholarship and research addressing the personal, social, and political implications of an individual coming from more than one racial group. The field of multiracial studies has developed and changed tremendously over time. In this issue, Rockquemore, Brunsma, and Delgado (2009) provide an overview of the history and the development of the field and discuss the changes in approaches that scholars have taken as society's views about race and race relations have changed. In addition, Rockquemore et al. (2009) and Renn (2009) explore the issue of defining race and its implications for the social policies drawing upon work in various fields such as critical race studies, sociology, immigration, and social psychology and multicultural psychology.

Definitions in This Issue: Defining the Landscape of Multiracial Experiences

In the field of multiracial studies, the first issue we must address is to define the term *multiracial*. The term *multiracial* is complex and can be used in different

ways with different theoretical, political, and social implications associated with its different uses. This subsection of this article provides a discussion of the term *multiracial* and explicitly defines how the authors in this issue are using the term, and to understand the implications associated with this definition.

There are two issues to keep in mind when we think about race. The first relates to determining what race is, and how we construct racial categories. We refer to this issue as *racial category construction*. The second issue relates to how we determine in which categories others belong, once racial categories have been constructed. We refer to this issue as *racial identification*.

Racial Category Construction

In the late 19th century, individuals believed group differences were heritable and that race was characterized as cultural differences carried in the blood (Stocking, 1994). The idea that biological differences underlie race was reinforced as physicians observing differences in diseases among Whites and Blacks attributed it to underlying innate and physiological differences between the races (Shields et al., 2005). Individuals were categorized into racial "types" based upon physical appearance such as skull size and skin color (Gould, 1994).

Today, understanding of the relationship between biology and race is much more complex, and the assumption that biological differences underlie racial categories is coming under great scrutiny. For instance, race is often a variable used in biomedical and genetics research. However, recently the Institute of Medicine issued a statement that race is no longer a biological reality (Institute of Medicine, 1999), and the use of race in biomedical, public health, and genetics research is usually considered to be a proxy for other social, environmental, and cultural experiences associated with racial categories (Shields et al., 2005)

The predominant view among social scientists today is that racial categories are socially constructed and are not fixed, immutable categories. They point to the fact that variance within racial groups is much greater than variance between racial groups and that race cannot account for biological variation (Goodman, 2000). Moreover, racial distinction between different groups has changed over time in accordance with the cultural and political climate of the day. In the United States, for example, people of Irish descent were considered minorities until they were co-opted into the White race shortly after the Irish displaced skilled Black laborers in the work force in the mid 1800s (Ignatiev, 1995). People of Jewish descent experienced a similar movement from minority to White in the early 1900s (Brodkin, 1999). Moreover, Wright (1994) suggests that various minority groups have also attempted to expand political representation by advocating for broader inclusion of ethnicities in their racial categories. For instance, Black Americans of multiracial descent often deny multiracial identification for fear that the population of Black African Americans would dwindle to a politically powerless number.

The presence of multiracial individuals highlights the mutability of racial categories because multiracial individuals can claim many racial identities simultaneously (please see Rockquemore et al., 2009). The contributors approach this issue recognizing that the category of multiracial people is a racial category that is just as mutable, challenging, and influenced by the historical climate as any other racial category. At the same time, for the purposes of this issue, the contributors are treating multiracial people as a racial category unto themselves.

Racial Identification

There are a number of ways in which race can be operationalized based on social criteria. One way is to rely on culturally created groupings such as government-created definitions (e.g., census categories). According to the Census, a multiracial individual may be a person who chooses to check off membership in more than one of the five census categories of race (i.e., [a] White, [b] Black or African American, [c] American Indian or Alaska Native, [d] Asian, and [e] Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander).

Although, this may seem to be a very straightforward definition, the process of arriving at this definition was in fact one that was filled with a great deal of controversy. Prior to the 2000 Census multiracial individuals were asked to identify with only one race on the U.S. Census. A Federal Task Force was set up to investigate the political and social implications of creating a new multiracial classification (Holmes, 1997). Multiracial groups argued that picking just one identity forced multiracial individuals to deny other parts of themselves (Gaskins, 1999; Townsend, Markus, & Bergsieker, 2009) and did not accurately reflect the true racial makeup of the country (Holmes, 1997). On the other hand, prominent civil rights activists, such as Jesse Jackson and Kweisi Mfume, argued against the creation of a separate multiracial category to preserve minority numbers and maintain political influence (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). This issue was finally resolved in 1997, when it was recommended that the category "multiracial" should not be included in census forms, but that instead, multiracial individuals could check off more than one racial category.

A second way to define multiracial would be to rely on individual self-definitions. In this case, individuals would simply identify their racial identity without having to select from a set of prefabricated categories. In this situation, individuals would generate their racial identity themselves. For instance, Tiger Woods has been quoted as identifying himself as Cablinasian, reflecting his Black, Caucasian, Asian, and Native American ancestry (Ahmann, 2005). In this situation, individuals from mixed-race ancestry could choose to identify themselves in many different ways. They could identify themselves with one of their component identities (e.g., Asian, Black), with the category of multiracial, or with their specific combination such as HAPA and Cablinasian (Rockquemore & Brunsma,

2002; Williams & Thornton, 1998). Simply put, a person who said he or she was multiracial would be considered multiracial without having to justify with blood quantum, membership in specific categories designated as racial groups, or any other method imposed by society.

From the biological perspective, race can be operationalized in a few ways. Individuals may define race based on features of a person's physical appearance (e.g., skin color), or if articulated in genetic terms, the phenotypic expression of the genes inherited through one's ancestors relating to physical appearance (Rowe, 2002). A second way in which society may assign racial category membership is through blood. For instance, the one-drop rule stated that any individual with a drop of Black blood would be considered Black (Spickard, 1992). Conversely, to be considered Native American one had to prove a blood quantum, or degree of racial inheritance (Wilson, 1992).

While these definitions may be articulated based on biological criteria, political motivations frequently underlie them. For instance, the one-drop rule was established with underlying political motivations to keep races separate and distinct. Because sexual exploitation during the time of slavery resulted in a growing population of Black and White mixed individuals, laws were written to ensure that any mixed-race child of Black descent was considered Black and thus maintain slavery (Spickard, 1992). Similarly, the blood quantum was a criterion developed to determine membership in different Native American tribes, and therefore, access to the land parceled out to the different tribes by the U.S. federal government in the late 1800s under the Dawes Act, or the General Allotment Act of 1887 (Sturm, 2002).

In sum, in this issue, we draw the definition of the term *multiracial* from the perspective that race is socially constructed, and operationalize the term *multiracial* using social criteria (i.e., culturally constructed definitions or self-definitions). Thus, throughout this issue, when it is not otherwise specified, readers can assume the term *multiracial* people refers to people who identify with two or more racial heritages, based upon socially constructed racial criteria (Root, 1992, p xi). For example, the articles in this issue reporting on results of empirical studies using multiracial participants will either use participants who self-identify as multiracial or those who belong to more than one racial category as designated by socially constructed racial categories (e.g., the U.S. Census Bureau).

Four Themes in This Issue: Organizing the Landscape of Multiracial Experiences

The themes that we explore in this issue are (a) Multiracial Identity Construction, the multidimensional aspects of multiracial identity as well as the psychological consequences and precursors to multiracial identity, (b) Multiracial People's

Views of Race, how multiracial people view other races and the boundaries between the races, (c) Society's Perceptions and Representations of Multiracial People, how multiracial identity is represented in the media and how multiracial people are evaluated by their peers, and (d) Public Policies and Their Consequences for Multiracial People, the current attitudes and content of public policies for multiracial people and how these policies affect multiracial communities and people.

Multiracial Identity Construction

Multiple racial identity development has been the subject of much theorizing (Gibbs, 1987; Kich, 1992; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002; Wardle, 1992); however, this previous work has not provided a clear multidisciplinary theory for multiracial identity development that is grounded by empirical data. Building on a more ecological approach to multiracial identity, Rockquemore and colleagues (2009) suggest that the multiracial identity theory should take a three-pronged multidimensional approach to understanding the identities of mixed-race people. They suggest that researchers should distinguish between the *racial identity* (personal, chosen, racial self-understandings), *racial identification* (how others view them), and *racial categorization* (chosen racial identity in different contexts) of multiracial people. This approach is a useful, groundbreaking tool that could advance theorizing. Thus, we have used their multidimensional approach to integrate the articles in this section.

An important question raised by Rockquemore's theory of multiracial identity development is—what are the consequences of different racial identities for multiracial people? For example, are there differences in the psychological health of multiracial people who adopt multiracial or monoracial identities? Binning, Inzueta, Huo, and Molina (2009) compare the psychological health of multiracial adolescents who choose to identify with their monoracial or multiracial identities. They find that multiracial adolescents who adopt multiracial racial identities tend to report higher well-being than those who adopt their monoracial racial identities. These findings have interesting implications for identity development; however, Cheng and Lee (2009) suggest that people who identify as multiracial may also need to perceive their identities as overlapping and compatible to have positive health outcomes. In this issue, Cheng and Lee (2009) draw from the work on bicultural identity and introduce the Multiracial Identity Integration Scale, which measures the individual differences in the ways in which multiracial individuals may manage their multiple racial identities. They find that multiracial identity integration consists of two subscales: (a) racial conflict (i.e., feelings of tension among component racial identities), and (b) racial distance (i.e., perceptions of how separate the component racial identities are). They find that lower racial

distance and racial conflict was related to more multiracial pride and positive multiracial experiences.

The articles in this section lay the foundation for future research on multiracial identity construction. The authors have examined multiple dimensions of multiracial identity as well as identified important moderators of multiracial identity and well-being.

Multiracial People's Views of Race

Previous work suggests that multiracial people have more flexible understandings of race and race relations. For example, multiracial people have malleable racial identities that often change in the social context (Harris & Sim, 2002; Hitlin, Brown, & Elder, 2006; see also Rockquemore et al., 2009). Moreover, multiracial people, on average, tend to challenge the validity of race itself and tend to view race as a social construction more than those of monoracial descent (Shih, Bonam, Sanchez, & Peck, 2007). Viewing race as a social construction tends to put multiracial people at an advantage because racial stereotypes lose their meaning and fail to affect multiracial people's performance. In addition, viewing race as a social construction also appears to affect their interpersonal and social relationships. Because multiracial people tend not to give race the same meaning and weight as other groups, multiracial people tend to show greater comfort with interracial social interactions than other racial minorities (Bonam & Shih, 2009). Multiracial people, unlike other monoracial minorities, also show less evidence of implicit racial bias for their multiracial group (Pauker & Ambady, 2009). Most research on monoracial racial minorities suggests that people tend to show greater memory for ingroup members, yet multiracial people show greater memory overall and show little bias toward their multiracial group. These articles emphasize one of the important strengths within the multiracial community—a fluid or flexible view of race, which may help us understand race and race relations in monoracial communities as well.

Perceptions of Multiracial People

One previously neglected area of multiracial studies has been the perceptions of multiracial people. Up until this issue, little empirical research has examined how communities responded to multiracial identity or how racial bias may influence multiracial people. In this issue, Thornton (2009) examines White and Black newspaper responses to the "new" multiracial identity and movement, and what these representations reflect and perpetuate in these communities. In his coding of newspaper articles, he finds that White newspapers view the multiracial movement as evidence that color has lost its meaning in society, thus, reinforcing a (problematic) color-blind ideology. Analysis of Black newspapers suggests

that the multiracial movement among Black mixed-race people reflects the desire to deny or distance from Blackness, which will politically unravel the power of Black communities. Given that White newspapers tended to view the development of multiracial identity as a positive step toward a color-blind society and Black newspapers viewed the development of multiracial identity as an attempt to escape from Blackness, or escape being publicly devalued and discriminated against, it is ironic that Sanchez and Bonam found that people tended to discriminate the most against those who identify as multiracial. In two experiments, Sanchez and Bonam (2009) found that people who identified with their multiracial identity were viewed as less warm and sometimes less competent than if they had identified as monoracial, which, in turn, affected whether or not they were seen as appropriate for race-based scholarships.

Now that scholars recognize that some multiracial people choose multiracial identities, understanding perceptions of multiracial people may enlighten our understanding of the consequences of these choices but also perhaps the reasons why certain identities are chosen in the first place. Given the results of these two papers, it is possible that some multiracial people may choose to identify with monoracial labels to avoid discrimination from their communities.

Public Policies and Their Consequences for Multiracial People

Because multiracial identity challenges many of the assumptions and thinking about race, it has pushed scholars to new understanding and perspectives with regard to race, racial identity, and intergroup relationships. These new understandings have implications for race-related policies. For instance, acknowledging multiracial people as an identity or a location of scholarship assumes that boundaries exist between races (Omi & Winant, 1986).

Given the slippery slope of multiracial identity and the controversy surrounding the multiracial movement, we expected that the main public policy issues facing the United States about multiracial people is the lack of systematic procedures to assess multiracial identity and the mixed support for multiracial policies. As evidenced by Thornton (2009), Black and White communities tend to show mixed support for recognizing a multiracial category; however, Pittinsky and Montoya (2009) suggest that support for recognition of multiracial people and social policies to assist them depend upon both having positive feelings toward multiracial people as well as valuing equality.

In addition, Renn (2009) provides an in-depth exploration of the current unsystematic assessment of racial identity across postsecondary schools in the United States. In addition, she notes the reoccurring situation in which multiracial students are forced to choose only one racial identity, which often does not reflect their chosen racial identity. Examining the consequence of these forced-choice identity situations, Townsend et al. (2009) find that these situations cause

multiracial people to feel worse about themselves and perform worse on subsequent intellectual tasks. These types of procedures may send the message to students that their multiracial identities are not valued or recognized, causing negative effects for mood and performance. This research provides compelling psychological evidence that public policies regarding identity assessments should include multiracial categories. In addition, Renn (2009) also calls for the need to have systematic procedures for compiling of data across school systems to fully understand the needs of multiracial communities as well as nonmultiracial communities.

The articles in this issue present empirical and theoretical work in multiracial studies. The articles present new advancements in our understanding of the experiences of multiracial individuals and also introduce new ideas about the basis of race, racial identity, and interracial relationships inspired by the study of multiracial identity.

Summary

In summary, research on multiracial studies has been scattered across several disciplines. This issue provides a foundation to bridge theories and findings across theoretical perspectives. In addition, this issue also provides a multidimensional perspective of the multiracial experience as we explore both the individual experiences of multiracial people to perceivers' view of multiracial people. At both individual and societal levels of analyses, this issue provides a long overdue understanding of the landscape of multiracial experiences.

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