

English 280, Second Place; Professor, Penny Clause

## **Racial Categorization in America and its Effects on the Multiracial Populace**

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In a time where multiracial families and mixed-race children have become increasingly common in American society, the issue of racial categorization and how multiracial individuals fit into these preexisting molds have emerged. As a mother of a biracial daughter (Caucasian and African American descent), I have personally witnessed my nine year old daughter torn between two opposing cultures both at home and at school. Even at such a young age, she had already begun to struggle to belong to both cultures simultaneously. Subsequently, I have seen how she was misunderstood by both black and white children at school and how her self-image was negatively affected as a result. Often times, in today's society, people of multiple ethnicities have to choose between cultures and identify more with one than the other. In some instances, they even hide part of their ethnicity to fit in (Khanna and Johnson). Consequently, many biracial people have struggled psychologically due to these racial divides and stigmas, and research has even correlated a relationship between higher depressive symptoms and multiracial youths (Fisher et al. 1688). Although many researchers agree that racial categorization in American culture can have direct and sometimes detrimental effects on the biracial populaces' sense of identity, many disagree on how to address the issue. I believe the answer lies within the education system, and the creation of a universal curriculum geared toward teaching cultural diversity to primary students' nationwide. Once enacted, our country's youth would be equipped with the knowledge to combat the current racial stigmas imbedded in today's American society.

In 2010, the US Census reported that the multiracial population increased by 32% and “grew more than any other single race since 2000” (Fisher et al. 1688). With the numbers of people who identify as multi- or biracial considerably on the rise, it is imperative that we understand how this large part of our population adjusts to the sociocultural issues that accompany identifying as two races. Unfortunately, not much historical data had been recorded regarding ethnic identities in multiracial individuals due to discriminative times throughout history. During the Jim Crow era, the one drop rule classified people as black if they had one drop of black blood, and multiracial individuals weren’t recognized at all (Khanna and Johnson). More recently, multiracial people were more socially accepted, but it wasn’t until the 2000 Census that they could check more than one box for race (Fisher et al. 1689). Even so, multiracial individuals have had to figure out on their own what racial classifications to identify with since they don’t fit into the unyielding racial categories set within our society, and sadly, many struggle with their ethnic identities as a result.

Many researchers and scholars have also noted the sociocultural issues that can occur for biracial individuals due to the racial stigmas in our society. Researcher Marta I. Cruz-Jarzen, noticed the same cultural struggles that I also observed with my daughter, in her article “*You Are Not Enough: The “Faceless: Lives of Biethnic and Biracial Americans A Challenge for Truly Inclusive Multicultural Education”*”. She conducted interviews with ten biracial people and all of them “agreed that the United States is not only a culture demarcated by color, race, and ethnic polarities but also rigid categorical boxes” (4). She added that the study participants “also felt that to be American means to fit within the boxes. To be interracial or interethnic and thus impure and uncategorical put them even further away from the ideal” (4). In other words, all the participants in the study felt like they didn’t fit into American mainstream culture, the same way

my daughter felt. Society's harsh and inflexible racial categories have made millions of people feel like they were not enough; and consequently, many have suffered psychologically as a result.

In 2014, a study conducted by researcher Sycarah Fisher and her colleagues revealed that multiracial youths were more susceptible to anxiety and depressive symptoms when in the process of exploring their identities (1696). During adolescence, youths of all ethnicities strive to find their sense of self, but during this especially confusing time for youths of multiracial descent, they are at a heightened risk at developing mental health issues. Promisingly, even though Fisher found a correlation between ethnic identity and mental health, the same study also revealed that multiracial youths that "accept all parts of their identity" and refuse to identify with society's stringent racial categories "could equalize the effect of navigating various diverse contexts" (1696). The study showed that even though it has been undisputed that multiracial individuals have faced unique challenges due to racial stereotypes in America, it also confirmed that if multiracial individuals affirmed and accepted both cultures, their risks for anxiety and depression lowered significantly.

Interestingly, other researchers have also found similar findings. Researchers Margaret Shih, Diana Sanchez, Courtney Bonam, and Courtney Peck, like Fischer, also addressed the challenges multiracial people faced due to not fitting within society's preexisting racial categories in their case study "*The Social Construction of Race: Biracial Identity and Vulnerability to Stereotypes*". They additionally discovered that because of these struggles many multiracial individuals have realized that race was nothing but a "social construction" (125). This was an important and encouraging find for the multiracial populace. It proved that even though race may have played a large role in our society's social arena, it had been proven to have

absolutely no biological basis. Furthermore, Cruz-Janzen's research also exposed this fact back in 1999 and added that mainstream society's race classifications are based on "*physiognomy*" or the act of judging human character and mental qualities by observation of bodily and facial features (4). These findings showed that the concept of race and its subjective classifications were arbitrary. Though the notion of race was deeply imbedded in our social world, multiracial individuals who were aware of the concept's discrepancies could undermine its legitimacy. Going forward, and armed with the knowledge that racial categories are nothing more than social classifications with no biological basis, how do we change the current stigmas in mainstream culture? How do we change the world?

Although most scholars and researchers agree that multiracial people have faced unique challenges and sociocultural issues due to racial stereotypes in American society, they don't all agree on how to solve the issue. Like Shih, Bonam, Sanchez and Peck, I also believe that we need to battle racial stereotypes at the societal level and, like Cruz-Janzen suggested as well, emphasize race as a social creation. Their research discovered that "stereotype threat effects" were minimized when the individual didn't identify with the stereotype (126). For example, based on their theory, men who identified less with the stereotypical idea of what a man should be may cook and sew well, and men who identified more with the stereotype identity wouldn't. Although I whole-heartedly agreed with their views, their article only briefly mentioned how education was key to implementing such a monumental change. Shih and her associates suggested "that education and encouraging people to be thoughtful about issues of race may be an important tool in the fight against the negative consequences of racism and prejudice" (Shin et al. 133).

Education is the key element in implementing change in all aspects of life. Neither a person nor, in this case, a stigma can change without the knowledge that they need to or the knowledge to know how. The same principles apply when combatting racism and racial stereotypes within mainstream American culture. Multicultural studies and diversity trainings need to be more prevalent in American schools' curriculums, and the education system needs completely reworked to accommodate it. Sociologist Amy Stuart Wells shared my same ideologies, and in her policy brief, she explained the consequences of current education policy makers disregarding race when constructing education policies. She referred to them as "color-blind" and accused them of ignoring race rather than embracing it, which consequently, caused more racial separation and inequality in schools (38). Basically, their concepts caused more harm than good and, therefore, led to a greater division among races. Wells referenced the failures of the two most recent central education reforms- the standard / accountability movement and the free-market school choice policies to prove her point and stated that both were set up "without directly addressing societal or educational issues related to race" (39). Similarly, Lauren Parosoff, an educator in Bronx, New York, also believed reform was needed in the education system, but she thought the improvement of diversity awareness trainings to teachers would assist in solving the problem (80). Parosoff gave her professional opinion in her article, "*PD Diversity: Too much and not enough*" and showcased, from a teacher's standpoint, how the diversity workshops offered currently to teachers are ineffective. She suggested that along with reformed training, teachers need to explore their personal views of diversity and identity before they can effectively bring those values to their classrooms (80).

Although I agree with both Well's and Parosoff's views that the American education system needs revamped in order to increase multicultural awareness, I think an entire new

curriculum needs to be devised to accomplish it. I would propose the creation of a universal education curriculum that incorporated diversity awareness instruction to children at the primary school level. Currently, children aren't taught these concepts until they reach high school or sometimes the workforce! In my daughter's elementary school, they are taught advanced concepts such as how to identify sexual assault, but unless it's Black History Month, they completely disregard the topic of cultural awareness. Cruz-Janzen found similar results in her research and pointed out that, "Until the curriculum changes, from the Kindergarten level, children of color are never going to have an identity...Schools don't give them identity as part of the history...You learn that you don't have a place in this America" (8). Arguably, people could contend that it's the parents' responsibility to teach these concepts at home. Although, I agree that these concepts should be taught by parents, sadly, many caregivers aren't culturally aware enough themselves and lack the knowledge base to educate their children on these topics.

Teaching multicultural education in elementary schools would be key to my program's success due to the unfortunate fact that many children aren't taught the concepts of racial awareness and tolerance at home. Interestingly, this unfortunate phenomenon not only applied to monoracial parents but it also occurred in multiracial households as well. Notably, researchers, Cesalie T. Stepney, Diana T. Sanchez, and Phillip E. Handy, found a connection between biracial individuals' closeness with their parents and their identity beliefs and how it directly influenced the biracial child's beliefs about themselves (73). This study demonstrated how important it is for children to receive this important instruction at all elementary schools nationwide in order to ensure that it's taught to all children across the country. Otherwise, our society's beliefs would remain stagnant and no amount of reform could change its current views.

Unfortunately, it seems that there is no quick fix for our culture's present beliefs. In order to change our society's current racial stigmas due to the social construction of racial categories, it is imperative that we induct an education curriculum that instructs tolerance and cultural diversity to American children everywhere. As the multiracial population has continued to grow, the need for change is imperative and urgent. Without change, I believe the racial divide will continue to grow, and the multiracial populace will experience even more complexities with their ethnic identities than they already do. A well- designed educational program constructed with the ideologies of ignorance, ideology, and inertia in mind could change the current preexisting racial stereotypes that are deeply imbedded in the social elements of our current society (Banerjee & Duflo, 2011, p. 271). Knowledge is power and, if properly implemented, can change the world.

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