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Builders of a Racial Bridge: Biracial College Students

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Despite a history of oppression and marginalization, biracial individuals are surviving, thriving, and positively impacting our society. Black/White biracial individuals can be seen as a bridge between Black and White America. The purpose of this study is to explore aspects of biracial identity, increase awareness and understanding of biracial individuals and address various implications associated with college curriculum and activities.

Black/White biracial college students and their involvement in the Multiracial Organization of Students at Tufts University (MOST) has been the focus of this study. It addresses issues of identity-construction and development in a college setting. I selected this liberal arts college in Medford, MA because of its diverse population and because MOST, a specific organization for multiracial individuals, exists at the college. This organization designed and operated entirely by students, focuses on creating a community, offering support to its members, increasing awareness of multiraciality and seeking to bridge racial, ethnic and cultural divides (MOST, 2003). The students I have interviewed for the following study all participate in MOST and were willing to share their experiences as biracial human beings in America.

History of Race and Biracial Identity in the United States of America

In order to understand the culture, issues, and identity formations of Black/White biracial individuals it is important to review the creation of racial categories, the history of slavery and miscegenation, the existence of the one-drop rule, and the significance of skin tone, White privilege, and the changes in the United States Census. In the eighteenth century, a Swedish botanist, Carolus Linnaeus, created a pyramid of artificial classifications of all living things (Spickard in Root, 1992, p.13). In the nineteenth century, following the establishment of this pyramid, several European scientists decided to extend the pyramid one more level to include human races (Spickard in Root, 1992, p.13). "The categorization divided humankind into at least red, yellow, black and white categories: Native Americans, Asians, Africans, and Europeans" (Spickard in Root, 1992, p.13). As these categories were created, the color White and the Europeans associated with it, were placed at the top of the color hierarchy and defined as the most intelligent. Blacks were placed at the bottom and considered the least intelligent.

Although race is a socially constructed phenomenon, this reality is often ignored. Contrary to what the people in power in American society would like us to believe there is no scientific or biological basis for the assertion or definition of different races. In fact, "Genetic variability within populations is greater than variability between them" (King, 1981, p.158). Despite the nonscientific origin of racial categorizations, the categorizations are profoundly significant.

Black and White 'mixed race' individuals in the United States began with slavery. Because of the hierarchy of races, the offspring of Black and White parents became very problematic to the idea of maintaining White racial purity. Although there are many racial mixes in the United States, the one that has been most threatening involves the mixing of Blacks and Whites. Because of this, several rules and laws were implemented: 'mixed race' individuals were not to be considered mixed or both Black and White but simply Black. Children who were the product of rapes between White male slave owners and their Black female slaves resulted in a range of complexions, some of which appeared White. The "one drop rule" was devised in response to this. "In both legal and social practice, anyone with any known African ancestry was considered Black, while only those without any trace of known African ancestry were called Whites" (Tatum, 1997, p.169).

Following the end of slavery in 1865, White politicians put anti-miscegenation laws in place to prohibit racial mixing. The law made it illegal to marry a person of a different race. This law stayed in effect until 1967 when the last 14 states holding anti-miscegenist laws were forced by the Supreme Court to repeal them (Root, 1992).

The US Bureau of the Census mirrored and altered its racial categories according to the politics of the time. In 1870, the races were White, Colored (Blacks), Colored (Mulattoes), Chinese and Indian. In 1950, that changed to White, Black, and Other. And by 1980, White, Black, Hispanic, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese, American Indian, Asian Indian, Hawaiian, Guamanian, Samoan, Eskimo, Aleut, and Other could be recorded (Spickard, 1992 in Root, p. 18). It was not until 2000, however, that the Census allowed for individuals to self-identify by selecting more than one race (Jones & Smith, 2001).

A salient factor influencing biracial identity is one's skin tone or how White one looks. "The systematic advantages of being White are often referred to as White privilege" (Tatum, 1997, p.8). Individuals who appear White own the privilege of not being discriminated against and of benefiting from the discrimination of others. Tatum (1997) explains, "... if a person of color is a victim of housing discrimination, the apartment that would otherwise have been rented to that person of color is still available for a White person. The White tenant is the beneficiary of racism, a system of

advantage based on race" (p.9). This factor of White privilege is a critical issue in the racial identity of mixed people.

Methodology

Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts and more specifically the Multiracial Organization of Students at Tufts (MOST) was the environment selected to conduct this research. The essence of the MOST mission follows: "MOST is a concerted effort to create a community, forum and an awareness of multiraciality and its associated issues... we examine issues of ethnicity, culture and society and encourage the participation, input and membership of all peoples from all walks of life. We seek to bridge racial, ethnic, and cultural divides..." (MOST, 2003).

The method of study was to explore this mission through observations and in depth interviews of MOST participants.

During a seven-month period from October 2004 through April 2005, I observed biracial students within MOST meetings as well as outside this context. The observational techniques I implemented to study biracial college students included open-ended, informal individual and group interviews, participant observations of group meetings, and field observation of students attending class and participating in social and cultural events. Observing and interacting both in individual and group settings allowed me to explore behavior and actions both one-on-one and within a group environment. All interviews were taped in order to focus on the individual, maintain eye contact and engage with the person.

Through Julie, my first contact and the first MOST meeting, I was able to identify a second female, Maya, and two males. The males were Evan, a 20 year old junior Jamaican and Sicilian male and Mike an 18 year old, freshman African, Native American and Caucasian male.

Julie and Maya were the two main consultants. Julie is a 21-year-old senior. Her father is African-American and her mother is Caucasian. She grew up in a poor, almost all White rural town in New Hampshire. She has one sister who is three years older. Julie is close to both her parents and visits them often on weekends. Her mother is a preschool teacher and yoga instructor and her father is a contractor. Julie grew up feeling isolated and confined by her homogenous community. Julie has a warm, welcoming, soft-spoken demeanor. Despite her calm persona, Julie enjoys taking risks. Because she connects with Latino culture, she chose to spend her junior year abroad in Cuba. She is majoring in Political Science and Latin American Studies. She is a very bright, motivated and compassionate individual.

Maya is an 18-year-old freshman from Western Massachusetts. Her father is African-American and her mother is of Irish descent. Both her parents used to run a consulting firm for diversity enrichment. They recently divorced and Maya's mother took over the consulting company and her father teaches at a local college. Maya grew up in a setting where diversity was celebrated. Her high school focused on teaching students about different cultures and ethnic groups. She is excited to be studying at a diverse college and appreciates the fact that there is an organization such as MOST on campus. She loves to talk about her racial background and in high school she wrote extensively about her identity. She shared with me a collection of poems and prose which was part of a senior project in expository writing. Despite her keen interest in multiraciality, Maya is choosing to major in Mechanical Engineering because of her strong abilities in math and science. Maya is a shy individual in group settings but has great insight and a lot to offer once she becomes comfortable.

Most of the individual interviews occurred at the student campus center because of its relaxed and familiar atmosphere. This is a central setting on campus where students come to meet, eat, relax, play ping-pong, watch TV, use the ATMs and buy tickets to events on campus. There are three floors, several cafes and a quiet study area, all of which provide for several different interactions. I had interviews in the café, on a couch outside an office on the third floor and at a small table with soft chairs adjacent to a reading room.

Most of the encounters with my consultants took place in the afternoons, evenings or nights during the week. College students are most often asleep or in class in the mornings. Therefore, I scheduled meeting times in the afternoons. Aside from the campus center, I interviewed Maya on a late Sunday afternoon in the lounge of her dorm. I chose this time and location with the hopes of helping Maya to feel comfortable, relaxed and at home.

The two joint interviews involved Julie and her friend Lisa whom she had met through MOST. The second joint interview was with Mike and Maya; they met at freshman orientation and immediately identified each other as 'mixed.' They both live in the same freshman dorm. These co-joint interviews allowed me to observe and listen to the flow of conversation created between the two participants without much guidance from me.

In addition to the interviews and class observation, I also attended four MOST meetings and movie showings. These gatherings allowed for me to conduct some field observations and see how my consultants and other mixed race students interact. My race, gender and status as a student affected my fieldwork. Because I myself am biracial, female and also a student, I was able to establish rapport with ease. I belonged to the group I was studying, I could relate as a fellow student and I believe

my gender alleviated certain awkward and uncomfortable situations. Men may have had a harder time sharing their personal emotions and insight with another male, while women may have felt threatened or uncomfortable with an unfamiliar male interviewer.

Data Analysis

During my time in the field many themes emerged from the interviews and participant and field observations that I conducted with biracial college students. I discovered that the balance between self and society (a concept coined as the identity "see-saw"), the impact of the skin tone on one's experience as a biracial individual, the significance associated with an organization such as MOST, and openness and acceptance towards others are all aspects that proved to be significant during my fieldwork. As I will illustrate below, there are both negative and challenging aspects to being biracial, as well as some incredibly positive components.

The Identity 'See-Saw' Self and Society

An ongoing issue facing biracial individuals is the struggle between how they choose to define themselves and how society sees them. Because the United States is such a racialized society, it seems necessary to place people in various categories. The difficulty arises when certain individuals do not fit into one category. In college, individuals are constantly evaluating their own identities, beliefs and behaviors while also being significantly influenced by those around them. Identity construction is influenced by many factors such as "… sociocultural (e.g., family, peers, and so forth), psychological (e.g., self-concept), personal (e.g., coping style), and physical (e.g., skin color) attributes as well as systematic influences and forces (e.g., racial discrimination)" (Carter, 1991, p.5).

The 'sociocultural' or societal influences create an ongoing debate for the individual. 'How does society see me and how do I see myself? Should I behave how society expects meto behave or how I myself feel most comfortable behaving?' As Thornton expressed:

There is no intrinsic personality related to race; what develops is a complex interaction between individual and social definitions. Individuals are expected to locate themselves "accurately" within established racial structures (such as current Census categories), finding where society places them and reconciling this placement with what they want to be (Thornton in Root, 1992, p.323).

This 'complex interaction' existed in the lives and experiences of all my consultants: Evan, Maya, Mike and Julie. Evan, the Jamaican and Sicilian junior, passionately

expressed the struggle with identity and the need to reconcile a sense of self with how others see him, in my interview with him:

"...identity is dynamic and morphing... it seems kind of weird but it's not totally up to you the person, it's kind of a mix between what you feel in yourself and the input from society. If someone sees black male or someone sees a black woman, even though you might not be, or you don't identify 100% as being a black girl ("oh I'm only half black you know," my sister might say,) but that's what society teaches me so sometimes you have no choice... it sounds kind of weird but it kind of is really out of your hands at times... people try to combat that and say –"well I'm going to do things the opposite well, I'm going to act this way and I'm going to dress this way" but then you ask yourself, well am I comfortable? It's interesting to find the middle ground and the balance and where you see yourself and where others see yourself. It's really hard to explain. It's intangible almost; it is like a see-saw you know you can do everything in your own power to in your mind change how society sees you but in the end they still can and at that point you might be not comfortable like oh I don't like short hair, or I don't like wearing tight clothes or whatever stereotypes that society has of certain people... It's a middle ground it's hard to rise above it, it's in the middle"(Interview, January 31, 2005).

As I listened to Evan's description of the identity 'see-saw' I reflected on his appearance. How had he decided to style his hair in shoulder length dreadlocks pulled back into a ponytail? Was this because traditionally or stereotypically Jamaican men (such as Bob Marley) have dreadlocks? Was he trying to show that despite his light skin tone and ambiguous physical features he is in fact Jamaican? What about the faded light blue jeans which were not baggy and almost too short? Was this to go against the stereotype of Black men in baggy hip-hop clothes? Why did he decide to wear a bright blue soccer jersey with white stripes down the sleeves and an Italian flag with the word Italia embroidered on the front? Was this to show that he is part Italian or is it simply that he plays soccer and likes the jersey? The sequence of questions that went through my mind illuminated this internal debate between dressing, speaking and thinking in a certain way based on your own interests and upbringing and the impact of society's image of you.

All of my consultants continue to experience the influence society places on their identity, and to struggle to come to their own conclusions about their identities and the way they choose to think, dress and act. Whether it is conscious or not, the impact of society on the self is significant. Not only did my consultants express their observations with the self and society, I also, reflected on the behaviors, hairstyles and dress of the various members at the MOST meetings. Here I could see this internal struggle displayed visually. One young light skinned male wore his hair in an afro, a much darker skinned male had his hair shaved almost to the scalp. A dark skinned woman had her hair in braids and a light skin woman wore her hair naturally in a

curly, kinky style. Did these styles intentionally express a belonging to a certain group? Were they chosen based on an individual preference or a need to fit in or be classifiable? There are no right or wrong answers, no correct behavior or incorrect behavior for a multiracial individual; there are only choices and interpretations. As Tatum (1997) explained, "Choosing a standpoint or an identity (or identities) is a lifelong process (p.175)."

The Importance of Skin Tone

The constant questioning and categorizing society forces a multiracial individual to contend with is one of the many influences on an individual's identity construction. The physical appearance and most importantly the skin tone of biracial people, strongly influence their life experiences. Skin tone was a prominent theme among my consultants. Regardless of whether their skin was porcelain white, yellow olive, caramel brown or dark chocolate, they mentioned that their skin color significantly impacted their life experiences.

As was discussed previously, race is a social construction. With the history of the one-drop rule and the desired separation between Black and White, a serious fixation on skin tone has resulted among multiracial individuals. White privilege or the systematic advantage of being or 'passing' for White, strongly influences not only one's experience but also how others see and react to each other (Tatum, 1997).

The consultants expressed the impact of skin tone. Maya shared a description of two of her close high school friends and how their experiences in life are so different due to society's perceptions of them based on the color of their skin. Despite the fact that they themselves all view each other as the same, their differing skin tones cause the world to view them all differently.

 "...two of my good friends growing up are both mixed, Black/White... we always talk about our skin tones because Sharice is a lot darker than I am and my friend Teresa, who is also mixed, has the palest skin I have ever seen and she has bright red hair and blue eyes. We always talk about our different experiences because she experiences things a lot different than me and Sharice... Sharice always gets mistaken for being 100% black, Teresa gets mistaken for being 100% White and I always get called Italian or Hispanic... we all... come from the same background but our experiences are so different in terms of how people view us." (Interview, February 20, 2005).

This example illustrates that despite the fact that each of the girls is a racial mix of Black and White, because of their skin tone alone, society views them each differently. As Maya described, "It's hard for all of us to convince people that we are mixed!"(Interview, April 24, 2005).

Not only are Maya and her friends perceived differently, but their experiences, in fact, are different. Maya described an experience she had in high school specifically related to her skin tone.

"I just remember this one time when my friend Raysheen who's Black made this comment to me in the middle of class she's like "You wouldn't understand what that's like because you look White and you are treated as a White person in society."… that was the first time someone had said that to me and I hadn't really thought of it before… But I think about it more now in how people see me because a lot of people when they first look at me don't think I am mixed" (Interview, February 20, 2005).

Because of the racialized history of this country and the continued fixation on racial categorization, skin tone remains a crucial issue. As Maya explained, though people look at her and don't see that she is biracial, she is left with the task of convincing people that she is who she is.

Mike offered another example of the connection between skin tone and White privilege. He commented, "I am not dark enough for most of White America to judge me as 'oh, he's going to go rob a liquor store or something like that.' My pigment isn't dark enough to be gangsta Black but it's dark enough for me to be accepted as Black" (Interview, April 22, 2005).

Skin tone and its connection to White privilege impacts the life experiences of biracial individuals. Unlike many White people who are completely unaware of the concept of White privilege, light skinned mixed race individuals are not only conscious of it but are also both positively and negatively impacted by it.

A separate example of the importance of skin tone is illustrated in a conversation with Julie, who explained her interest and affiliation with the Latino culture. She herself is 100% American, grew up in New Hampshire and has no direct personal or cultural connection to Latinos. However, she chose to spend her junior year abroad in Cuba, is majoring in Latin American Studies, enjoys Latin dancing and feels a sense of belonging to that community. She explained that her extensive involvement with Latino culture is not by chance. Because she is often mistaken for Latina (due to her olive skin tone) or identified by others as having the appearance of a Latina woman, she feels a sense of belonging in this group (Interview, February 11, 2005).

 "I think I gravitate towards Latina culture at Tufts because that is how I'm outwardly identified. People always think that I'm Latina and it always comes up every single time I meet someone and so as much as I would like to say it hasn't affected me it clearly has, it clearly has" (Interview, February 11, 2005).

This example shows the connection between skin tone and how an individual identifies or associates with a community or group. Depending on how light or dark you are reflects whether you are accepted or excluded from various racial groups and communities.

Community/Belonging/Bridging

Connection and community created within the MOST organization, is significant to Evan, Julie, Maya and Mike. A sense of belonging is important to any individual and is especially meaningful to a group of individuals who are most often left out. As Tatum (1997) discussed,

 "…the need for safe space in which to construct a positive self-definition is important… space is created for resisting stereotypes and creating positive identities…even mature adults sometimes need to connect with someone who looks like them and shares the same experiences"(p.88).

Although the consultants recognize that they will most likely not find someone who looks like them, MOST does allow them to connect with people who share the same experiences. Both the impact and influence of society as well as one's physical appearance or skin tone can create what Root (1997) describes as the 'multiracial squeeze;'

 "…multiracial people experience a "squeeze" of oppression as people of color and by people of color. People of color who have internalized the vehicle of oppression in turn apply rigid rules of belonging or establishing "legitimate" membership" (p.5).

I discovered in my fieldwork that the individuals I interviewed and the observations I experienced illustrated that although multiracial people themselves may experience this squeeze, or have witnessed it in some form or another, they have developed a positive response to this emotion. By establishing, maintaining and participating in MOST meetings and gatherings, the individuals have found a place to vent their frustrations, offer support, and strategize for ways to unite all ethnic groups on campus. In a discussion about MOST, Maya expressed her enthusiasm;

"It's good 'cause we always had clubs in my high school: we had People of Color United (POCU), we had Latino Sonidos, students for diverse sexuality, and there was never anything for multiracial people and I always kind of felt like I wasn't technically allowed to be in POCU because I wasn't Black. I mean I could go and I knew mixed people that went but I just didn't feel comfortable with it so I feel more comfortable in MOST because…they are like me." (Interview, February 20, 2005).

MOST, however, is not only about finding a space to feel comfortable and supported in but also represents a place from which to begin to bridge differences across all races and ethnicities on the Tufts campus and in the larger community. Despite the fact that biracial and multiracial individuals are so often being excluded from all groups, they have not reciprocated this exclusive behavior and have introduced a different idea of welcoming all groups. There is a strong tendency in a racialized society to close-off and stay within your own culture or group but the MOST organization and its members are working to change this trend. During a conversation with Lisa, a former executive board member of MOST, she described her freshman experience as a Caucasian American member;

"[MOST] not only was a support group…MOST was a place where people cared about issues of race. It was not specifically multiracial issues but talking about race and race relations at Tufts. Space is really liberating…to have a space where you can talk about race with other people who really care about it but don't ask you to identify as anything that you don't want to identify as – which was liberating for all people – even White people" (Interview, December 12, 2004).

All of my consultants expressed an openness and understanding towards people of all races both in their daily interactions as well as through their overall outlook on life. Although I was not able to uncover much literature on this concept of openness, it was vivid among my consultants. Not only did they verbally express their feelings of openness but throughout my participant and field observations I was able to witness this powerful theme. That the individuals I spoke with were so open and willing to speak with me was affirming.

Mike describes how he feels that being multiracial has affected the way he sees the world:

"It definitely opens your mind a lot more…I was doing some research and I thought that this best represents it — 'a true multiracial person accepts all cultures and in broadening their aspects of those certain cultures, will broaden their aspects for all cultures and kind of see the world like that.' It definitely keeps an open mind. It doesn't make me favor one group or think one group is higher than the other. Like I won't go 'oh the White man is the Devil' no I'm not going to do that because I am half White and I know that's not true. There is racism on all sides. It's not just every ethnic group against White America. It's every ethnic group against every ethnic group. And even within its own ethnic group there are divides as well. There are so many divides that keep us all apart and being multiracial and multicultural you are able to see these divides and realize that there is no better race, there is no better way to go and then you see certain truths…" (Interview, April 22, 2005).

Society, skin tones, community, and an open-minded outlook all impact the lives and experiences of biracial individuals. You cannot escape the way society perceives you. You cannot change the color of your skin, but you can create a community to belong to and you can continue to address the world with an open mind and attempt to bridge differences. Life is dynamic and constantly changing and despite the racially fixated culture in which we live, individuals find ways to adjust, adapt, or reject what is occurring around them.

Summary and Conclusion

It is no secret that racism and the resulting poor race relations within the United States are still very prevalent. Despite this deeply embedded, unappealing reality in our society, as Mahatma Ghandi stated, "We must be the change we wish to see in the world." Biracial individuals are that change! According to the Census 2000, 6.8 million or 2.4 percent of the U.S. population reported more than one race (Jones & Smith, 2001). Today the U.S. population is continuing to grow and also continuing to diversify. As this article attempts to illuminate, positive change is possible.

This qualitative study begins to illuminate many of the more positive aspects of a biracial existence. I hope that more research can begin to look at these aspects of openness and adaptability. Although many of the themes I came across in my field work expose a common struggle of contending with the self and society and the impact of skin tone and racism in the lives of biracial individuals, the most encouraging and inspiring aspect shared among Julie, Evan, Mike and Maya is an open, accepting and non-judgmental outlook on life. Through the creation and continuation of the mission and culture of MOST and the constant action of openness towards others, multiracial individuals can produce change and have the potential to bridge racial differences in America.

Based on the observations and interviews I conducted there are several suggestions or implications apparent for the educational world. To begin with, more organizations such as MOST should be developed, supported, and encouraged in colleges and universities across the country. This type of organization not only allows biracial students an outlet to explore, share and reflect on their own unique identities but also offers an opportunity to educate others.

My final experience of fieldwork at Tufts involved attending a celebration and keynote presentation by MAVIN (2005) (a nonprofit organization founded in 1998 which celebrates and advocates for mixed race people and families to create a cohesive multicultural society) and the Generation Mix National Awareness Tour. Not only did I find my consultants here to be open, energized and willing to share their insights and

to spread awareness about multiraciality, but I also discovered national organizations of mixed race individuals doing the same thing. All of the information I gathered throughout my research and fieldwork came together as I listened to a group of five mixed race young adults who had been selected to go on tour across the country spreading awareness of America's mixed race baby boom! Aaron, a 21 year old African American, American Indian and European America male tour member, stated that what he found most exciting about the people in the fourteen cities he had visited across the country thus far was the common theme of inclusiveness and a desire to bridge communities. His comment highlighted for me the validity and the importance of this 'generation mix' to changing racism in America.

In addition to establishing and supporting organizations such as MOST, it is also important for educators to incorporate multiracial issues, concerns, and information into the academic curriculum. Educators must support cross-cultural communication and allow for events, open dialogue, guest speakers, and film and book series which promote and increase awareness of multiracial individuals. Biracial students need to feel that they are welcomed, that they are a part of the overall community and that their lived experiences are significant and deserving of attention.

As I completed my last interview in the field, I asked Julie what she wants people to understand about being biracial. She replied,

"They shouldn't assume that someone is tragic...everyone's experience is unique. It sounds almost too cliché of an answer but don't assume things about people because everyone's experience is different depending on who they are, the color of their skin, what their hair looks like —or just who they are as individuals, and I think people don't realize that. They're like 'oh you're biracial oh that must be really hard'...I didn't have cancer, you know. I mean it's different for everyone, so I think that people they should recognize that and can take that with them in conversations with people and they won't make presumptuous statements and they'll learn, they'll learn, which is the most important"(Interview, April 22, 2005).

Julie's insight is essential for individuals in this society to comprehend. This notion of not assuming can apply not just to multiracial individuals but to any human being. We need to stop making assumptions and judging people based on appearance, the neighborhoods they live in or the languages they speak. The openness and ability to be fluid and flexible, which can come with being biracial, will help to positively influence and educate others.

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