Biracial Identity Theory and Research Juxtaposed with Narrative Accounts of a Biracial Individual

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Abstract With the increase in mixed-racial parentage in North America comes increased scholarly activity intended to bring greater understanding to the biracial experience. Such efforts, while undoubtedly informative and helpful, fall short when set aside the actual narrative accounts of a biracial individual's life experience. In this paper I first explore the typical, negative, portrayal of the biracial experience found within social scientific literature, and then compare this with the narrative accounts of a biracial individual. Through this exercise it is shown that factors such as the specific racial parentage and socio-cultural context can have a positive effect on what usually is viewed as a problematic psychosocial experience.

Keywords Biracial identity · Narrative identity · Narrative inquiry

In North America, evidence suggests that the population of biracial individuals is rapidly increasing (Hall 2001a, b). It is likely that this rise is the result of increasingly tolerant public attitudes towards mixed-race marriage (Root 2001). However, even with more tolerant attitudes, accompanied by a widespread shift away from racial realism which views race as divisible into succinct essential groupings, race continues to have immense social and political relevance within North American society. For those deemed white, the idea of race serves as a vast source of unearned privilege within all facets of life; for those deemed coloured, it means susceptibility to countless forms of prejudice and racism. What, then, does it mean for those whose race falls somewhere in between? If, because of interracial parentage, one's race does not fit neatly into a socially prescribed category how, then, is one to experience oneself within a racialized society? Racial identity

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development theory is meant to answer this question. The notion of racial identity is considered important in terms of shaping attitudes towards oneself, towards others in one's racial group, and towards other racial groups, including majority and minority groups (Poston 1990).

In this article I examine biracial identity in terms of the fit between the empirical and theoretical literature, and the actual life experience of a biracial individual. To begin, I present a view of the biracial experience informed by conventional biracial theory and empirical research. This is followed by a brief narrative account of Karen,[1,2] a biracial individual of mixed Aboriginal-European decent. Karen's story serves as a precursor to juxtaposing the narrative accounts of her experience with the conventional biracial literature. I conclude with a summary of key differences noted between biracial theory and research and Karen's lived experiences.

The Biracial Experience According to Biracial Theory and Research

In response to the racist North American society we live in, racial identity models have been created to help explain how people of colour develop a positive racial identity, and how people deemed white develop a nonracist identity (e.g., Cross 1995; Helms 1995). Numerous racial identity models have been created, most of which apply to non-dominant racial and ethnic groupings. However, it has been noted that racial identity development models are largely based on monoracial populations, and hence, lack relevance and utility for those of biracial heritage (Herring 1995; Poston 1990). Poston's response to this shortcoming was to develop an exclusively biracial model of identity development. According to Poston, young children are essentially unaware of race distinctions. Although research has shown that by the time children reach school age the permanency of racial features is understood (Hollingsworth 1997), at this age sense of self is somewhat independent of ethnic and racial background. Lacking awareness of the saliency of race, biracial children in early and middle childhood are largely unaffected by its social, historical, and political ramifications (Poston). Thus, identity for the biracial child rests primarily on self-esteem and self-worth developed through family experiences, and herein, is not to any significant degree racially based (Poston).

It is when the biracial child reaches adolescence that racial identity issues are thought to come to the fore. Herein, biracial theory and research offer a rather disheartening view for adolescence of dual racial heritage. Poston (1990) suggests that adolescence is a time of crisis and alienation for biracial individuals because they are forced to choose an identity that does not fully represent their racial background. It is thought that the pressure to commit to a single racial identity comes from many sources, all of which are related, in varying degrees, to the ubiquity of racist beliefs and values within society. Williams (1999) contends that the burden of North American racial ideology is represented in the artificial and

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[1] The personal narratives used in this paper are excerpted from the authors' Doctoral Dissertation (Nuttgens 2004).

[2] Pseudonym.

rigid categorizations of people according to physical characteristics and the concomitant stranglehold it places on healthy identity development for someone who is of dual racial heritage. Historically there has been the infamous "one drop of blood rule" by which a person with any amount of "black" blood is—regardless of actual skin shade—Black. Social edicts such as this fulfil a political agenda that classifies individuals according to purported racial categories for the social and economic benefit of those deemed white. According to Cruz-Janzen (2000), for biracial individuals this has a distinctly dehumanizing effect due to social pressure to deny an identity that reflects their dual racial heritage.

The strength and perseverance of American racial ideology is apparent through consideration of the manner in which biracial youth are treated in schools. In her qualitative study, Cruz-Janzen found that peers and teachers of biracial school children were openly antagonistic toward them if they wanted to be recognized as members of more than one ethnic or racial group. Thus, within the school setting biracial children are pressured to adopt a singular racial identity; ironically, at the same time the biracial adolescent may increasingly be questioned about racial identity with an expectation that they must somehow justify their perhaps ambiguous physical appearance. According to Cruz-Janzen, the lack of a stable identity leaves biracial adolescents vulnerable to overwhelming feelings of uncertainty about who and what they are. Herein, the overriding assumption within the biracial identity literature is as follows: because the biracial individual does not fit neatly into any of the main racial categories available in society, he or she will struggle to be accepted by any racial group, and will therefore experience marginalization from all (Deters 1997). One might think that the biracial individual would at least find refuge within the psychological safety of their family. According to biracial theory and research, not so.

Bowles (1993) contends that the home front brings with it additional identity discord. Not only do biracial adolescents lack affirmation of their racial identity from the outside world, this also extends to their familial environment. It is thought that children of interracial parentage are bequeathed a third racial status that does not match that of either parent. This, according to Bowles, leaves biracial children with no role model within the family to base a sense of identification and belonging. Deters (1997) notes that in some cases one or both parents might actively discourage their child from embracing a biracial identity as a means to avoid discrimination and prejudice and instead secure the advantages of white privilege. It is thought that mounting pressure from many fronts ultimately leads biracial adolescents to resolve their identity quandary by aligning solely with one parent's race (Bowles). However, according to Poston (1990) adolescents who renounce one part of their racial heritage must also forsake identification with one parent, which then leads to feelings of guilt, shame, and disloyalty.

Evidence for a highly conflicted racial identity is supported by Brown's (1995) study of 119 Black/White biracial young adults (aged 18–35 years). This author found that consistent with social discourse, which negates a Black/White biracial identity, the majority of participants chose Black as their racial category. There was, however, a difference in choice depending on whether it was publicly or privately conveyed. Although publicly participants were most likely to identify as Black,

privately they were most likely to identify as interracial. Brown concludes that: "The compartmentalization into public and private identities seemed to help the participants preserve their interracial self-perceptions while conforming to societal pressures to disregard their white roots" (p. 127). Indeed, Brown asserts that there is potential for conflict in whatever identity the biracial individual decides upon. Choosing a biracial identity is contrary to societal prescriptions for racial personhood; choosing either black or white, however, only reflects half of their racial heritage.

How, then, should the biracial individual manage what seems to be an inherently conflicted racial identity? Various writers (e.g., Aldarondo 2001; Herring 1995; McRoy and Freeman 1986) have suggested ways that parents can support their biracial child to develop a healthy racial identity. Such advice includes validating the child's dual heritage; encouraging the child to acknowledge and discuss racial heritage; exposing the child to relevant role models; and giving the child opportunities to build relationships with peers from many different backgrounds. Doing this, in the words of Bowles (1993), helps the child "embrace both heritages so that intrapsychic autonomy can be achieved" (p. 426). If successful, these strategies are thought to culminate in a racially integrated identity in which the individual comes to recognize and value all racially-based aspects of their identity, which, according to Deters (1997), is considered most conducive to psychological health. Root (1990; as cited in Aldarondo 2001) contends that there are multiple developmental pathways for the biracial individual, all of which can potentially lead to a positive outcome. The biracial individual might: (a) choose the identity chosen by another; (b) identify with both racial groups; (c) choose one racial group over the other; or (d) identify with a new biracial or multiracial group. In keeping with the thoughts of Bowles and others (e.g., Poston 1990), the latter of these is considered most conducive to positive mental health. Research conducted by Shih et al. (2007) suggests that the ability of multiracial individuals to deconstruct the biological basis for racial differences decreases adherence to negative racial stereotypes, thus leading to a more positive biracial identity.

Despite the potential for identity struggles to be lessened among biracial youth through sensitive parental intervention, the overall picture for biracial individuals from a research standpoint is decidedly negative. Findings summarized by Herring (1995) indicate that biracial individuals are vulnerable to a host of difficulties, including gender confusion, self-hatred, alcohol and other drug abuse, suicide, delinquency, alienation, denial of self, and a negative racial self-identity. The assumption is made that these difficulties arise because the socialization and developmental processes of biracial children is inherently more complex and problematic compared to their mono-racial counterparts (Herring).

Positives are noted by some writers such as Herring (1995) and Cruz-Janzen (2000) who suggest that racial duality can facilitate valuable attributes such as resiliency, adaptability, and creativity. This aside, the overall profile of the biracial experience—as informed by the social scientific literature—is somber in tone. The picture one is left with is that of a troubled young person who is racially marginalized both within society and within the family.

Karen's Story

At the time of first meeting, Karen was a 35-year-old woman of dual racial heritage. Her biological mother was full Aboriginal descent, her biological father was Caucasian of European descent. Karen was adopted at 3 months by Caucasian, English, heterosexual parents who had recently emigrated to Canada. Her adoptive parents had one biological daughter 2 years older than Karen, and one adoptive brother, a year younger. Karen's parents always told her that they specifically chose a child of Aboriginal parentage because they wanted to give the child an opportunity that they might not otherwise have had. Karen believes that her parents did just that: gave her a loving family and every opportunity that one would expect of a middle class white family. This is perhaps most evident in her career as an elite athlete. From an early age athletics were very important to Karen. Winter sports were her forte. By age 15 Karen was on the national ski team, and by age 22 she competed in the winter Olympics. Competition at this level meant that Karen spent very little time at home. Aside from a few months in the summer, Karen was constantly travelling throughout North America and Europe attending ski events. Although she says that she entirely missed the typical North American teenage experience, she has no regrets. Presently Karen divides her time between playing professional soccer, teaching skiing, working in a fitness centre, and working with youth in a residential treatment setting.

The Biracial Experience (According to Personal Experience)

Having first examined the adolescent biracial experience through consideration of conventional research findings and biracial identity development theory, I now examine this experience through the lens of a biracial individual's narrative account, that is, through Karen's story.

In keeping with the view that children begin to achieve racial awareness by the time they reach school age, as a young child in elementary school Karen was aware that she was racially different from her peers. Even so, this fact did not seem to negatively effect her social life in any discernable way. Certainly other children at school made her aware that her Aboriginal heritage carried with it negative connotations. Karen recalls being called "squaw" by boys who learned that this would entice the feisty and spirited young Karen to take chase around the playground.

> I was more aware of it [race/ethnicity] when I started going to school; so five to six years old, because that's when the teasing started with the other kids. So they would start teasing because, obviously I told them all I was [native], I mean I didn't care. So that's when some of the other kids made you aware, "Hay you're Indian", "Hey Squaw", "Hey, you going to scalp me". The usual stuff, right. Um, so that's when I first became kind of more aware of it, because I never thought of it before – I just was.

However, Karen was not slighted by these remarks. As a child she was able to recognize them as a form of common playground antics, and thus interpreted them as such with little effect on her identity as one of dual racial heritage.

> It never made me cry. Like it never hurt my feelings that I would go cry. It would make me mad in a way, but on one level I knew they were just trying to tease me – get me going, right. So it wasn't in a super, mean, vindictive, ignorant way. But now that you look at it, it's like, well of course it was – who goes around calling people squaw? But at the time it was more like I knew they just wanted me to chase them.

As for family life and her adoptive white parents' approach to their daughter dual-racial heritage, one does not find the type of identity conflict described in the conventional literature. Perhaps because she was adopted, Karen did not feel the need to choose one parent's racial identity over the other. Both her parents were white, and thus both were potential identity models for their child. One might expect, then, that Karen would simply take on a singular white identity; however, this was not the case either. From her earliest memories Karen's parents wove aspects of Aboriginal culture within fabric of their home life, not in a contrived and obvious way for the benefit of Karen, but through a genuine interest and affinity toward Aboriginal culture.

> We always had, um, instead of a tent in our back yard we always had a teepee. We had tons of native artifacts in our home. Um, mom and dad had Native friends that used to come by the house all the time, we had an Indian sled dog as a pet – a half wolf, half-Indian sled dog. We would go camping and stay with the Indian people. Northern Alberta or Saskatchewan, or wherever we went. Um, so I was always exposed to the culture. Knowing that mom and dad weren't Native, of course, but that I was. I remember I got to ride with a chief on his horse and he was all done up in his feathers. I was probably about four or five at the time. But it was always a feeling of this is where I am, this is where I came from, right, this is cool. But um, I mean mom and dad – I don't know if they made an effort to do this or if it's just a part of them in having all the Native artifacts. Like dad had a medicine man's hat in our house and we used to wear it around, a big buffalo thing, it was amazing. Um, that was given to him by elders somewhere. But mom and dad have always had a connection with the Native community. I don't know if it was because they got me. I don't thing so. I think they had that connection before. I mean there was more of a connection when I came along. Um, but it's just always been around – the Native culture with us.

It would seem that the continuous presence of Aboriginal culture within her family life led Karen to embrace an identity that included her Aboriginal racial and ethnic heritage. The Aboriginal identity was afforded legitimacy within her social world; she was able to accept and embrace it without fear that one or both parents would object or be emotionally hurt. Even still, Karen acknowledged that having been raised by white parents within a white-middle class community, her primary racial and ethnic affiliation followed suit.

I was brought with white parents, and like I said before, they've acknowledged the Native ancestry and that kind of stuff quite well. But of course it's a lot different when you are brought up in a Native home – an entirely native home. And so for me being brought up in a white home, I was less, hmm, how do you say this right… I was more inclined to go with the white ways than the native ways. Whereas I am sure that if I was brought up with the Native ways, I might have been, um, more involved in, like the spiritualism of the Native side. Which would have been very interesting, it would have been really neat to be involved with tat. But being brought up white, you go the white way.

Contrary to the typical findings of social scientific literature, Karen was able to manage her biracial heritage in an integrated "both-and" manner, and thus avoided the purported negative trappings of a confused and conflicted adolescent identity. But Karen's experience departs even further from what is most often presented in the biracial literature, in that the saliency of her racial identity was secondary to an athletics identity that began at an early age and culminated in adolescence.

I've always known every since I was like three years old that I wanted to be like Nancy Green who was the Olympic champion – I wanted to be just like her. And so I had goals already from when I was very young. At ten years old I had to choose between figure skating and skiing, because I was quite good at both. And I didn't like the makeup in figure skating, and I didn't like my figure skating teacher, so I chose skiing.

By age 12 Karen made the provincial ski team, which took her to competitions across North America. By age 15 she was on the national ski team traveling throughout the world for 10 months of the year. Skiing was tremendously important to Karen. Being an elite athlete was the centrepiece of her identity as an adolescent and young adult, and to a large degree it remains this way today. In contrast to the literature on biracial adolescents, Karen experienced none of the purported identity struggles, or the mental health concerns that have been found among people of dual racial background. Instead, Karen says that given a chance she would not change a thing about her adolescent years.

I'd do it again in a second. The experiences I got from the life that I had, growing up with a focus, with dreams, with goals that I want to achieve. Compared to little Johnny who goes to school, normal, hangs out with the teenagers after school, tries smoking, maybe tries drugs, maybe gets into partying. I wouldn't trade that for traveling around Europe, making friends all over the world, different cultures, different languages…I think you should experience the world and not fumble around.

Karen's account of growing up biracial demonstrates the possibility of embracing and managing multiple identities in a way that led to a very satisfying and enriching childhood. Although her experience as an elite athlete is not commonplace among adolescents, Karen's experience does show that the salience of racial identity can be mitigated through additional compelling and competing personal identifications.

Conclusion

Racial identity theories have been developed to bring greater understanding to the influence of race on one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours toward those of similar and different racial groupings. Such theories retain significance, even though the notion of racial realism has been discredited within the scientific community. In this article, bi-racial identity theory and supporting empirical research findings were juxtaposed with the first-hand accounts of a bi-racial individual's experience of racial identification. The benefit of this exercise is that it spawns reservations regarding the broad applicability of extant bi-racial theories and research. The resultant conclusions are limited, however, by use of a single case account that may not be representative of the experience of many other bi-racial individuals.

In summary, it was shown that the personal accounts of Karen fit poorly with what conventional theory and research would suggest. Notably, Karen's experiences as a bi-racial did not involve parental loyalty conflict with accompanying feelings of guilt and shame; feelings of alienation and marginalization during adolescence; or social pressure to adopt a singular racial identity. The lack of fit between Karen's life experiences as one of dual racial heritage and the body of research meant to account for such experiences raises questions regarding the indiscriminant application of such research. Closer scrutiny of the existing research suggests two primary explanations for the divergent accounts.

First, there is the matter of where the biracial research originates. Through the current literature review, it appears that such research comes exclusively from the United States, which in many respects is not surprising given the highly politicized nature of black–white relations within this country. However, the fact that most, if not all, of the research on bi-racial identity originates from the United states raises important questions regarding the applicability of this research within other geographical contexts, such as in Canada which historically and presently offers a significantly different cultural and racial ideological foundation. Of particular interest in Karen's case is the availability of a socially sanctioned biracial identity for people of mixed Aboriginal and European ancestry, namely, Métis. Although in speaking with Karen she did not identify herself as Métis, it is noteworthy that within Canadian society those of mixed Aboriginal-European ancestry are afforded a socially legitimized biracial identity not available to those of a black and white racial ancestry in the United States. As noted earlier, it is thought that within the United States bi-racial individuals receive various forms of pressure to identify with a single racial identity, thus leading them to renounce one of their two available racial identities and through this, experience marginalization (Deters 1997). In this respect, it is may be that Canadian biracial individuals of Aboriginal decent are at an advantage: less pressure to choose, and a readily available biracial identity upon which to identify, should lead to a decreased emotional burden compared to the American black/white biracial person living in the United States.

The other finding that arises through comparing the qualitative accounts of Karen's experience with mainstream social science research is one that serves to question a mainstay of racial identity theory: the assumption that by default race must be the preeminent feature of a biracial individual's personal identity. For

Karen, it was not. For Karen, to varying degrees race and ethnicity have been an important part of who she is, though it has never assumed preeminence. Which is not to say that it might not attain greater significance in her life in the future, or that depending on the circumstance it might not already, but rather at a personal level her identity is open to multiple and contingent interpretations. Race, being the social construction that it is, should not necessarily limit the selection of available identities.

This perspective lends well to a postmodern view of self and identity whereby the notion of a singular true self, affixed to a somewhat static and enduring identity, is replaced with what Gergen (1991) refers to as the "multiphrenic condition" in which versions of selfhood find expression within the "vertigo of unlimited multiplicity" (p. 49). According to Gergen, identity need not be constrained by a commitment to a true, individual essence. Rather, identity can be looked upon as "continuously emergent, re-formed, and directed as one moves through the sea of ever-changing relationships" (p. 139). Viewed this way, a bi-racial, or mixed racial identity, though highly significant in the lives of some individuals, may be much less salient for those of mixed parentage who indulge other identities, such as athletics as did Karen, or who were adopted by a same-race couple, or who are afforded a socially recognized bi racial identity, as in the case of Métis.

To conclude, inspection of a biracial individual's firsthand narrative account leads to a reconsideration of the negative portrayal typically found within the biracial literature. Here it was learned that factors such as the specific racial parentage and socio-cultural context can to a significant extent mitigate what could be, though is not always, a difficult time for individuals of biracial ancestry.

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