

Multiracial Identity Theory

Kerry Ann Rockquemore, David L. Brunsma & Daniel J. Delgado, “Racing to Theory or Retheorizing Race? Understanding the Struggle to Build a Multiracial Identity Theory.” *Journal of Social Issues*. 65.1 (2009): 13-34



Why theorize multiracial identity?

Creating theories develops a “roadmap” for understanding social phenomenon and their consequences.

The ways we theorize multiracial identity reflect shifting cultural attitudes about race & racial identity.

Being born to parents of different racial backgrounds is more common than ever, yet the unique experiences and challenges of people born with multiple cultural identities is often overlooked in favor of those who fit into one group.

Challenges to theorizing multiracial identity

History has shown that since theories about multiracial identity are based in historical context, they merely reproduce dominant views on race.

Discussing ‘multiracial’ identity can inadvertently appear to validate the problematic construct of ‘race’.

A single multiracial theory cannot cover the complexity of all social and economic contexts among individuals, which result in dramatically varied experiences.

Our current culture opts for a ‘colour-blind’ approach to racial backgrounds while inequality along racial lines persists, making for an “awkward” dynamic.

The US census of 2000 faced the question of how to categorize the growing number of people born to parents of different racial backgrounds.

This required reconsidering the idea that racial categories were mutually exclusive, and led to increased attention to the experiences of being multiracial.

“We lack clarity as to whether multiracialism is demolishing or reinforcing racial hierarchies”

- *Racing to Theory or Retheorizing Race*



Study of multiracial individuals has historically relied on **deduction** rather than **empirical evidence**, and has therefore privileged the ideologies of researchers rather than the **experiences** of multiracial people

In the Jim Crow era, the “**problem approach**” viewed being multiracial amid segregated times as necessarily problematic, as the external racial **conflict** was said to be internalized. Classification as Black was automatic for someone with black/white parents due to the ‘one-drop’ rule.

In the Civil Rights era, the “**equivalent approach**” meant that being multiracial

was seen as equivalent to being Black, and life was a linear trajectory towards **acceptance** of Black identity.

Post-Civil Rights in the '80s, the **“variant approach”** began to involve voices of multiracial people and their experiences as **unique**. The goal was active construction of identity and overcoming conflict towards a healthy sense of self. However it was still prescriptive and limiting.

Historical Approaches

The “Ecological Approach” Today

From the '90s onward the **"ecological approach"** has developed, with the name referring to its focus on the **context** of identity construction rather than the outcome. It aims to **avoid** recreating hierarchies.

In this approach, there are no predictable or linear stages and no optimal or correct endpoint. It also accounts for people who **reject** racial categorization and identify as 'human'.

It is the first time
'multiracial' is viewed with
explicitly **positive** strengths.



Rethinking 'Race'

The authors suggest differentiating between:

1. Racial Identity
 - How individuals see themselves
2. Racial Identification
 - How others label or categorize them
3. Racial Category
 - Contextually available racial identities

Each can be different and varying based on context, comprising a whole identity

Empirical Data Since 2000 on Multiracial Identity:

- It **varies** among multiracial individuals
- It **changes** over the life course
- It is **not** a predictable or linear process
- Context is **critical**

“We are forced to ask: What are the limits of the ecological approach in the color-blind era and post-modern era?”