

Biracial Black/White Experience

The Biracial Black/White Experience by Dr. Kelly Jackson

It is important to understand how growing up in a complex world that continues to socially construct race based on historical premises may be challenging for biracial Black/White Americans. This population of individuals is considered unique in that they represent the coming together of two historically polarized communities, a White superior group and a Black degenerate group. The presence of biracial individuals in America has historically shaped legislation on patronage, marriage, and racial classification. Their social identity has been and continues to be correlated with the state of interracial relations in this country.

Throughout history, society has not been eager to understand and accommodate individuals who are mixed-race because of what and who they represent. The question and concern about the identity of mixed-race people was initially forged in the US during slavery when White, European slave owners began intermingling with their African slaves. The presence of Black/White biracial individuals who were difficult to discern from Whites threatened the proslavery arguments that Blacks were biologically inferior to Whites. In order to preserve the sanctity of the institution of slavery as well as protect White masters from having to provide patronage to their half-Black offspring, legislation was developed during the 1600s to classify any Black/White biracial individual as Black. This became known as the principle of Hypo-descent or the premise that Black blood is considered a contaminate to pure white blood (“one drop rule”) (Brown, 2001; Graves, Jr., 2004). As Degler (1986) mentions the US is the only country with the exception of Canada that defined people racially by a measurable amount of black blood (Degler, 1986, as cited in Brown, 2001).

During this same period, biological and sociological arguments began to arise which consistently portrayed Black/White biracial individuals as maladjusted and dangerous degenerates due to their dual polarized heritage. This prompted the rise of stereotypes popularizing the character notion of the genetically, mentally, and morally inferior “mulatto”. The presence of biracial individuals and the principle of hypo-descent prompted further exploration by scientists to ponder the existence of a racial continuum. This perspective was mostly shaped by false biological claims of the existence of a racial hierarch, placing Whites above Blacks and other groups of color, both on a genetic and a societal level. Classification theories emerged during the 1800’s, placing biracial individuals (referred to as “mulattos”) above Blacks on the racial hierarchy. Because of their white blood “mulattos” were viewed as more intelligent and capable than Blacks, granting them certain privileges in slave times. This caused a rift between interracial people and the black community, threatening the historic acceptance of biracial children within the black community.

A change ensued during the Civil Rights movement and the biracial -Black/White- population began to embrace their “Blackness” and unite with the Black community to fight for equal rights in the United States. This movement encouraged biracial individuals to take pride in their African American heritage and to identify as Black. During the movement, new notions of interracial people developed and old elitist stereotypes were temporarily abandoned. A less beneficial message also emerged from the movement and biracial people were seen as “too white” or “not black enough” for having a white parent (Brown 2001). Unfortunately this movement also prompted the official classification of 5 different racial groups by the Federal Bureau of Management and Budget in 1977. This classification system based on traditional notions of the biological existence of race would introduce a number of issues in relation to the establishment of a dual race identity for biracial individuals.

The abolishment of anti-miscegenation laws, increases in interracial contact, and the rise in interracial marriage following the Loving vs. the State of Virginia U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1967 dramatically increased the population of biracial children (Spickard, 1989; Root, 1996). Root (1996), in her examinations of the 1992 U.S. Census, discovered that the number of biracial Black/White babies has increased more than 500% since 1970. The changing social and political environment prompted the formation of activist groups advocating for the right of biracial and multiracial children to claim the racial heritages of both of their parents. This along with the appearance and acceptance of multiracial people in the media (for example: actress - Halle Berry, singer - Mariah Carey, athlete - Tiger Woods) inspired the Federal Office of Management and Budget in 1997 to adopt and implement the option to report more than one race on federal forms. Despite headway to acknowledge the existence of biracial and multiracial individuals, efforts still continue in America to mono-racially classify them. In lieu of this, biracial individuals may be hesitant to make public an identity which has not been recognized by White and especially Black communities (Brown, 2001). The issue of whether or not biracial children should assume the racial identity of African American (one-drop rule) or be encouraged by their parents to identify as biracial is still debated in society. At the federal level re-tabulation procedures have been implemented to mono-racially quantify biracial and multiracial persons. Specifically, a mixed-race person under these procedures will always be counted in the minority group with the largest population. For example if an individual checks Black and White they are re-tabulated as Black. In addition a person will supposedly never be counted in the majority White group.

There is a rise in the percentage of individuals who self-identify as mixed-race. Approximately 785,000 individuals in the US, or 11.5% of the ‘two or more race’ population (~6,800,000), identify as Biracial: Black and White (US Census Bureau, 2001) and this number is growing. With increasing levels of racial integration and the growing number of interracial children in the US (4.94% of children less than 5 years of age), the diversity in skin tones among US residents is growing (Lopez, 2003; Root 1992) and the practice of compartmentalizing individuals based on skin color is becoming more and more difficult. At the macro level, society as a whole is beginning to acknowledge that individuals of mixed heritage are more than one, not half and half. In the case of Black-White biracial individuals, they are viewed as having the ability to enter and succeed in traditionally White institutions of education and business, as well as maneuver through and exist simultaneously in the Black community. The quote below by Trueba (2002) further details this growing perspective:

Biracial persons, for example, do associate with opposite groups (mainstream Whites and African Americans); they see multiple memberships and the use of multiple linguistic codes as an asset. In fact they often view their generation as gifted. Code switching and the assumption of different identities comes natural to them and permits them to function in multiethnic and multicultural environments. (p. 10-11)

Many believe that in the future the growing presence of self-identified biracial and multiracial people will spark the need to develop a new paradigm one that focuses less on the existence of monolithic races and more on the strengths of the cultures that make us whole.

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