

## Multiracial Identity Development: Understanding Choice of Racial Identity in Asian-White College Students

Ashley Viager

*Asian-White individuals will have greater representation in higher education student populations in coming years, and student affairs professionals must learn how these students make meaning of their racial identities in order to best serve the needs of this group. Analyzing Poston's (1990) and Root's (2003) theories of multiracial identity development, this paper examines the experiences unique to this population to demonstrate that Asian-White individuals have the ability to choose from multiple racial identity outcomes.*

In 2000, the United States government conducted a census in which multiracial individuals could self-identify with more than one racial category. Multiracial individuals are those whose parents are of two or more different and distinct federally recognized racial groups (Chapman-Huls, 2009). Previously, multiracial individuals had not been formally recognized in the United States. Instead, multiracial individuals who had one White parent were primarily classified according to their parent of color (Zack, 2001). This system of racial classification, also known as “hypodescent,” originated in the eighteenth century as a way to “maintain White racial purity and to deny mixed race people access to privilege,” (Renn, 2004, p. 4) and reinforced rigid categories of race. The 2000 census formally challenged these previous notions of essentialist racial categories by recognizing those who blurred the boundaries.

One of the main purposes in the revision of the census was to reflect the growing prevalence of interracial marriage in American society (Perlmann & Waters, 2002). The multiracial population is one of the fastest growing minority groups in the United States (Shih & Sanchez, 2009), and by the year 2050, one in five Americans could self-identify as multiracial (Farley, 2001). Of any racial minority group in the United States, Asians, both native and U.S. born,

register one of the highest rates of marriages outside their race, and marriages to Whites are the most prevalent (Lee & Bean, 2004; Qian, 1997). This growing trend means the population of young mixed race Asian Americans, specifically those who claim Asian and White descent, will increase (Min, 2006). As a result, Asian-White individuals will have significantly greater representation in higher education in the coming years. Because the Asian-White student population is growing, student affairs professionals must learn how these students make meaning of their racial identities. While few studies have explored the racial identity formation specific to Asian-White individuals (Khanna, 2004), current research on multiracial identity development can help student affairs professionals understand the Asian-White experience.

Acceptance or rejection from a racial group can significantly impact how a multiracial student chooses to identify. Multiracial identity theories rely on the notion that individuals “must make choices about their racial identification, navigate validation or invalidation around their choice, and resolve their in-between status while traveling pathways shaped by acceptance and/or denial” (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005). Multiracial students often feel caught between their racial components, unable to fully identify with White students or with monoracial students of color (Renn,

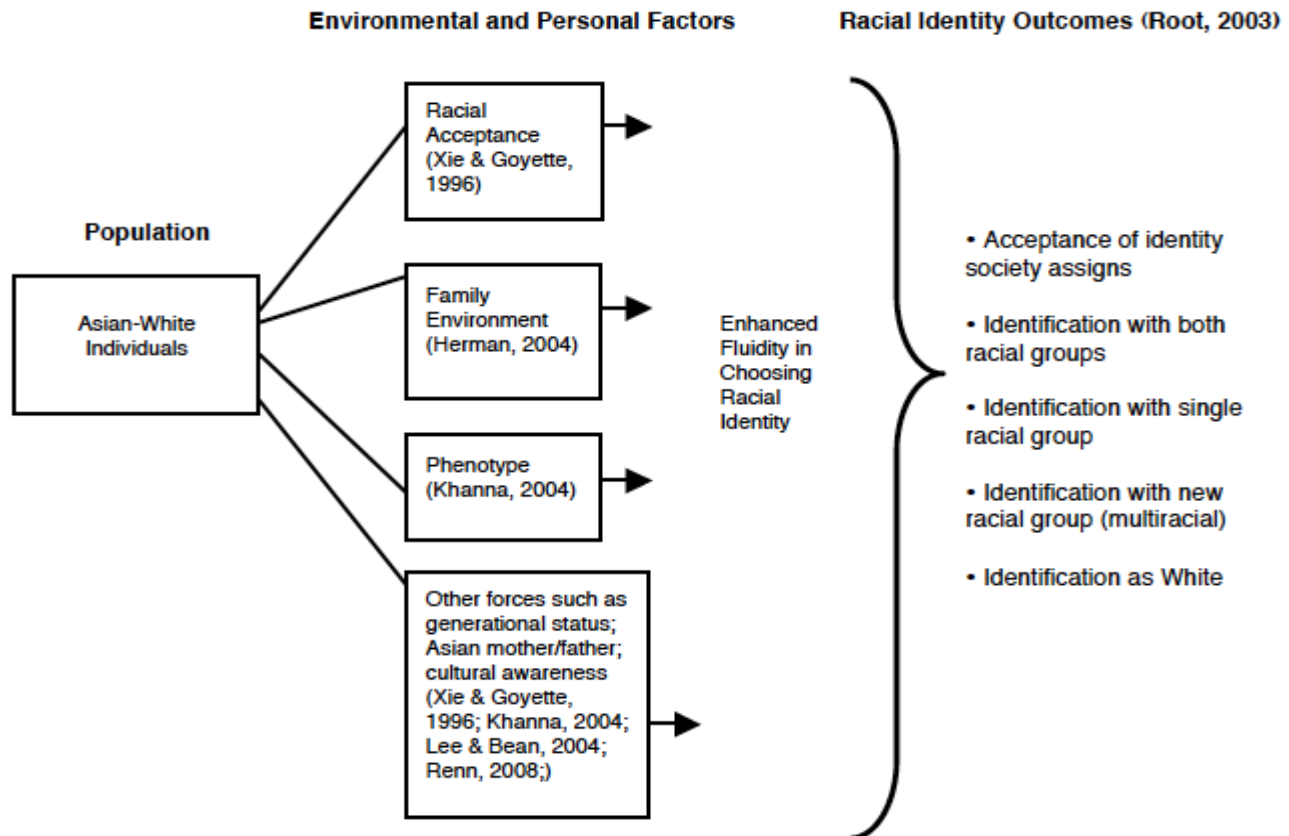
1998). It is important to note, however, that multiracial students experience varying levels of dissonance based on factors that impact the way they identify, and current multiracial identity development models are too general to be applied to any one specific multiracial subpopulation. Asian-White individuals share similar experiences that make their process of racial identity development different from any other multiracial group, thus necessitating a theory that outlines the Asian-White racial identity developmental process. This paper will examine Poston's (1990) and Root's (2003) multiracial identity development theories to provide an overview of how various factors influence the racial identity outcomes of multiracial individuals. These theories will then be integrated with current literature regarding the experiences of Asian and Asian-White groups in American society to provide an understanding of the fluidity in racial identity choice for Asian-White individuals.

### **Literature Review**

In the literature, theorists have debated about the endpoint of successful multiracial identity formation. Poston (1990) based his theory on the argument that existing racial identity development models inadequately reflect the experiences of multiracial individuals. While racial identity models suggest that the endpoint of development is the successful formation of a monoracial identity, Poston (1990) argues that the developmental goal for multiracial individuals is to form an integrated identity in which all racial components are valued.

Poston's linear model of multiracial identity development is comprised of five stages. In the first stage, *personal identity*, young individuals tend to have a sense of self that is fairly independent of race or ethnicity; however, once individuals reach the second stage, *choice of group orientation*, they feel pressure to choose a racial or ethnic identity, usually of either the majority or minority group (Poston, 1990). Renn (2008) argues that this stage is highly influenced by personal and environmental factors. Poston's (1990) second stage may be a time of crisis and isolation, and multiracial individuals often choose an identity based on their experiences with prejudice, rejection, feelings of alienation, or pressure from family, peers, and social groups. The third stage, *enmeshment/denial*, is characterized by feelings of confusion or disloyalty for choosing to identify with the ethnicity of one parent but not the other, and in order to progress to the fourth stage, *appreciation*, individuals must learn to appreciate both parental cultures (Poston, 1990). By the final stage, *integration*, individuals develop a secure and integrated multiracial identity in which all racial identities are valued (Poston, 1990).

While the developmental goal of Poston's (1990) linear model is to form an integrated multiracial identity, Root's (2003) model proposes multiple racial identity outcomes. Unlike Poston, Root (2003) believes identity development does not reflect a linear stage process and that a successful racial identity can be situational and changing. Root's (2003) model is based on a notion that "allows for understanding the environments and experiences that shape



*Figure 1.* Proposed model of Asian-White identity development. This figure represents the proposed identity formation process for Asian-White mixed race individuals.

conventional monoracial identities, racially simultaneous identities, or multiracial identities” (Root, 2003). Therefore, multiracial individuals cannot be limited to one racial identity outcome, such as Poston’s integrated identity, but can identify in many different ways.

Instead of proposing a series of stages, Root (2003) presents five strategies for resolving the tensions of biracial identity that occur as a result of environmental and personal factors such as societal racism and internalized oppression. Root proposes five potential racial identity outcomes for multiracial individuals: acceptance of the identity society assigns, identification with a mixed identity (as proposed by Poston’s model), identification with a single racial group, identification as a new racial group,

and choosing a white identity (2003). In the first outcome, external factors, such as family and societal forces, determine how a multiracial individual identifies (Root, 2003; as cited in Renn, 2008). An individual may be able to achieve the second outcome and identify with both racial groups if he or she has the ability to maintain this identity despite resistance from others (Root, 2003). In third outcome, identification with a single racial group, an individual actively chooses to identify with one racial group, independent of external pressures (Root, 2003). Individuals may achieve the fourth outcome if they choose to claim a distinct multiracial identity, thus developing their own reference group instead of integrating or fractionating their racial identities (Root, 2003). Finally, Root (2003) argues that those who identify

as White often experience isolation and emotional detachment to both racial groups, and, as a result, identify as White as the default option.

Although Poston and Root disagree on the endpoint of multiracial identity development, they both recognize the impact of societal racism on identity formation. Asian-White individuals experience levels of discrimination and acceptance that are different from other multiracial groups, which significantly impacts the way they progress from Poston's choice of group orientation stage and navigate the enmeshment/denial stage toward self-identification. Together, Poston's and Root's models inform a new understanding of multiracial identity development. Using these models as a framework, the author has created a new model (see Figure 1) that specifically reflects the identity development of Asian-White individuals.

### **Asian-White Identity Development**

Multiracial individuals are often perceived as a conflicted group whose identity development is characterized by "dissonance associated with belonging to neither the majority nor minority racial group" (Grove, 1990, p. 618). This phenomenon is reflected previous to and within the enmeshment/denial stage of Poston's (1990) model, which asserts that individuals, typically adolescents, may feel anger, shame, and self-hatred because they have difficulty identifying and need to resolve feelings of isolation in order to developmentally progress (as cited in Renn, 2008). While some Asian-White individuals certainly do experience Poston's enmeshment/denial stage and have difficulty feeling accepted within their chosen racial identities, many Asian-White individuals do not necessarily experience the racial dissonance as outlined in Poston's model.

According to Tatum (2007), "Whiteness" is a source of privilege in society. Although Asian-Americans do not have access to white privilege, they occupy a unique societal position as minorities in which, although they are subject to racial discrimination and prejudice, they have "achieved social status on par with the White majority" (Barringer, Gardner, & Levin, 1993, as cited in Xie & Goyette, 1996, p.5). Compared to other minority groups, the social distance between Whites and Asian-Americans is relatively reduced, leaving many Asian-White individuals to transcend racial boundaries and experience little to no resistance in how they choose to identify (Xie & Goyette, 1996). As a result, Poston's linear stage theory cannot be universally representative of Asian-White identity formation. Instead, the diverse experiences of Asian-White individuals present the opportunity for many of them to fluidly explore the multiple racial identities that Root's (1990) model presents.

Asian-White individuals may feel less restriction in their racial identity formation due to the increasing racial acceptance toward Asian Americans. Literature regarding racial attitudes consistently demonstrates that "Whites' racial prejudice against Asian-Americans is lower than against blacks [*sic*] and Hispanics" (Xie & Goyette, 1996, p. 10). This highly accepted minority status may be reflected in the growing number of Asian-White intermarriages (Xie & Goyette, 1996). The increase of Asian-White intermarriages and the subsequent multiracial population suggest that racial boundaries between these groups are more fluid and that racial prejudice is less salient (Lee and Bean, 2004). Not only are Asian multiracial individuals more accepted than other multiracial groups, but "Asian-White individuals may ... be the most acceptable of the Asian mixtures to the Asian and White communities" (Hall &

Turner, 2001). It is evident that Asian-White individuals will experience high levels of social acceptance as they belong to arguably the most privileged racial categories, which, as Xie and Goyette (1996) posit, allows Asian-White individuals more freedom to choose a racial identity.

Family environment also plays a role in how Asian-White individuals come to identify themselves (Herman, 2004), as one of Root's (1998) racial identity outcomes can result from multiracial individuals accepting the identity their parents assign. Therefore, it is critical to examine how parents choose to identify their Asian-White children. In one study, 41% of Asian/White couples identified their children as Asian (Xie & Goyette, 1996), while approximately 50% of Asian/White couples in another study identified their children as White (Lee & Bean, 2004). Some parents admit that they stress the importance of a White rather than Asian identity while rearing their children (Grove, 1990), which would explain the high numbers of White identification for Asian-White children. Xie and Goyette (1996) discovered that the racial identification of these children by their parents can be somewhat arbitrary; for instance, when forced to choose a single-race category on a registration form, parents may flip a coin or rotate racial categories over time. The arbitrary and fluid nature of parental racial identification of Asian-White children demonstrates that these multiracial individuals are not limited to one racial identity.

Physical appearance, or phenotype, is another factor that significantly impacts Asian-White identity formation. Because racial identity is formed through social interaction, others' reactions toward a multiracial individual's physical appearance will impact how that individual chooses to identify (Khanna, 2004). Some Asian-White individuals are easily categorized based on their phenotype. Khanna (2004) discovered

that those who look solely Asian based on facial characteristics often identify most strongly as Asian; however, their racial identities are subject to change based on their acceptance into the minority group. Asian-White individuals often feel most racially marginalized in environments that are exclusively Asian because they do not feel that they are accepted as "real Asians" (Grove, 1990, p. 624). Spickard (1989) believes ethnic Asians coming from traditional backgrounds often do not accept Asian-White individuals into their communities. When presented with such struggles, Asian-White individuals, due to the privileged status of Asian-Americans, can explore other racial identities to discover where they "fit in."

Many multiracial individuals are racially ambiguous (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 2001). For some Asian-White individuals, this means that it may be difficult for others to categorize them into a single racial category. According to Grove's (1990) study, this freedom can be a positive experience for Asian-White subjects. One participant stated, "Most people can't categorize me and it's given me freedom to float between groups and get around people's expectations more easily," and another said, "You can't be quite identified ... it frees you to make your own identity" (Grove, 1990, p. 623).

While arguably important factors, family dynamics and phenotype are only two of the many forces that influence how Asian-White individuals self-identify. The Asian-White experience is diverse, and, therefore, these multiracial individuals will identify in different ways. Harris and Sim (2002) found that Asian-White individuals are equally likely to self-identify as Asian or White, and growing numbers of Asian-White individuals report that they identify as multiracial (Lee & Bean, 2004). Although it is important to remember that multiracial identity is

situational (Root, 2003) and can change based on environmental and personal factors, this information validates the notion that racial boundaries are less restrictive for Asian-White individuals, thus allowing them to choose among multiple racial identity outcomes.

### **Implications for Student Affairs Practice**

Going to college may be the first time Asian-White students question their racial identity. According to a study conducted by Grove (1990), it was discovered that 82% of the Asian-White participants first began questioning their racial identities while at college. In order for Asian-White students to explore their racial identities, it is crucial that they feel free to select among different identity-based spaces and peer groups on campus (Renn, 1998). To provide Asian-White college students with institutional support, student affairs professionals should consider establishing multiracial student organizations as a way to help multiracial students explore different identities and “find identity-based spaces that suit them” (Renn, 1998). Because the proposed theory suggests that Asian-White students have the ability to transcend strict racial boundaries, it is also crucial that student affairs professionals, when working with these students, do not assume how they racially identify. Making such an assumption could potentially do harm to the student by reaffirming an identity that society had previously assigned, which could restrict the student’s confidence to explore other racial identities. Student affairs professionals must be cognizant of the many factors that can influence an Asian-White student’s multiracial identity development and understand its dynamic nature. Furthermore, student affairs professionals must be intentional when working with these students by understanding that Asian-White students

have different needs from those of monoracial students. In order for Asian-White students to experience a supportive environment, they should feel that they are not limited in choosing a monoracial identity (White or Asian) but, instead, have other options as well.

Based on current research and this proposed theory, it is clear that the racial identity outcomes within the incoming Asian-White student population may vary; however, further research must be done to investigate how the college environment may reinforce or alter how these students identify. Scholars should consider a longitudinal study of Asian-White students from various sizes and types of higher education that tracks their racial identification over four years. In such a study it would be important to first determine how each student racially identifies to support the theory that Asian-White individuals can choose from Root’s (2003) multiple racial identity outcomes. Researchers studying Asian-White college students who experience racial dissonance should consider what environmental factors play a role, such as the existence or absence of a multiracial student group, institutional support, and diversity within the student population. This research would help identify the types of college environments, as well as various external factors, that influence the ability of Asian-White college students to feel that they have the freedom to choose a racial identity.

The college experience can significantly impact the way an individual becomes aware of his or her racial identity and the way it operates in society (Renn, 2000). Asian-White students may feel as if they must choose between associating with the dominant, White community or their minority group (Renn, 1998), or they may feel that their chosen identity is consistently rejected by others in their environment (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005). Therefore,

Asian-White individuals should be allowed to explore their racial identity from a “safe place” where their race is not a salient issue and they can feel free to choose their own identity (Grove, 1990). In a higher education

context, it is important for student affairs professionals to create this “safe place” to ensure that Asian-White students feel encouraged throughout the racial exploration process.

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*Ashley Viager plans to graduate from the HESA program in 2012. She received a B.A. from Loyola University Chicago in 2010 in English and Gender Studies. At Indiana University, Ashley serves as a Resident Leadership Specialist in Willkie Residence Center and works with New Student Orientation in the Office of First Year Experience Programs.*