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Biracial adolescents and young adults in college counseling

Abstract

Given the growing prevalence of individuals of mixed race in the US, it is important for college counsellors to attend to how these individuals are socially pressured to understand their own racial identities. Though some scholarships suggest that it is healthy for biracial individuals to identify with the minority part of their identity, I argue that this pressure is in fact special to the US and rooted in a history of slavery. Through a cross-cultural comparison of biracial identity in the US and Haiti, and through examples and techniques from my own experience as a college counselor, I argue that the ability to embrace one's dual racial identity as mixed individuals may be a healthier choice because it prevents internal dissonance and helps biracial young adults grapple with the effects of White supremacy on their identities.

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Introduction

With the rise of interracial romantic relationships, the number of individuals who are the product of these unions is also increasing in the United Stated and elsewhere. The 2000 US Census reported that 6.8 million people chose two racial categories under the race question. Those self-reporting more than one race increased over the next ten years, as seen in the 2010 US Census. For example, those who reported Asian with other race combination in 2000 was 1,655,830, compared to 2,646,604 in 2010. Those who reported a Black and White race combination more than doubled, increasing from 785,000 in 2000 to 1.8 million in 2010.[1] Knowing that the Census is used to determine the size of federal funding for distinct racial groups, minority politicians have often been against individuals selecting more than one race on the Census.[2] Since this is widely known among minority communities, it is therefore possible that the official Census numbers in fact underrepresent individuals of mixed races.[3]

Given the growing prevalence of individuals of mixed race in the US, it is important for college counsellors to attend to how these individuals are socially pressured to understand their own racial identities.

The situation for biracial individuals is particularly complex in the United States, a country with an unresolved legacy of slavery. US society insists that White/Black biracial individuals in particular should identify exclusively with the minority part of their ancestry. Despite the reality of growing numbers of individuals who identify as more than one race, the dominant attitude in the US toward biracial individuals, specifically Black/White mixed-race individuals, seems to be guided by a powerful collective unconscious with deep historical roots. Why should a biracial individual be pressured to identify exclusively with the minority side of their identity? Why was Barack Obama the son of a White woman from Kansas and an African man from Kenya, the US's first "Black" president? If race is biology who decides which part of one's DNA is relevant and which part is not? If race is just a construct who has the power to construct it?

Though some scholarship suggests that it is healthy for biracial individuals to identify with the minority part of their identity, I will argue that this pressure is in fact special to the United States and rooted in a history of slavery and White supremacy. I will argue that the ability to claim and embrace one's dual racial identity as mixed individuals may be a healthier choice because it prevents internal dissonance, and helps biracial young adults grapple with the effects on their identities of a history of US White supremacy. This question is especially important for college-aged students at the Erikson's stage of identity formation, in which they face negotiating the process of finding their place in society, figuring out who they are and how to see themselves, and discovering how other people see them. My experience as a college counsellor working with biracial individuals is informed by my personal history of having grown up in Haiti—a society which has a very different attitude toward biracial individuals—and having immigrated to the United States and lived with the difference between the two cultures.

Scholarship on biracial identity in the US

Some scholars claim that claiming only the minority part of their identity is the best approach to ensuring the healthiest identity development and self-esteem of biracial individuals. Social and psychological research had demonstrated that for racial minorities having a racial identity (sense of belonging to a group) is beneficial to the healthy development of the self. Cross[4,5] developed one of the most popular racial identity theories. In Cross's model, race is assumed to be a part of an African American's personal identity that may affect the individual's mental health functioning. He argued that when African American individuals accepted the values of the dominant White society, these individuals were more likely to experience self-hatred and low self-esteem than those who embraced Afrocentric values. Because of the US's proscribed views of race, for mixed-race Black/White individuals in particular, the process of developing a racial identity has been complex. Scholars such as Helms[6,7] have insisted that Black/White mixed individuals should consider themselves Black, in keeping with how they are viewed in society, and that they would be better off following the process of the Black identity model proposed. Bracey, Barnaca and Umana-Taylor[8] compared the sense of identity and self-esteem between monoracial and biracial adolescents and found that self-esteem among minorities was correlated with a strong sense of identity. Biracial individuals had a lower sense of identity than their monoracial counterparts and thus a lower sense of self-esteem. Robinson reported that mixed-race individuals who have developed a positive identification with the minority racial group

have, just like their monoracial counterparts, a higher level of self-esteem because this identification provided a buffer that protects them when facing racism.

Not all scholars on biracial identity take this stance, however. Poston[9] proposed an integration of both sides of an individual's racial makeup. Kewin[10] proposed an integration of multiple racial identities and suggested that a healthy identity development includes valuing both races. As a result of a study of mixed individuals, Rockquemore & Brunsma[11] observed that while some mixed Black/White participants decided to identify with only one race, usually Black, others identified with both (border identity that corresponds to biracial identity) and still others with neither of their biological heritages. He found that the majority of participants with a border identity (biracial) were better adjusted in their choice than those who identified with just one or with neither of their racial heritages.

My approach to working with individuals of mixed-race heritage aligns with this second group of scholars who support that individual who are able to embrace all of who they are, have a better adjustment in life. In fact, their findings only confirm what I believe is a healthier path for anyone.

Biracial identity in the context of US White supremacy, in contrast with Haiti

Young adults attending higher education are at the Erikson's stage of identity formation where they face negotiating the process of finding their place in society, figuring out who they are and how to see themselves, and discovering how other people see them. I have noticed in my many years working in college counseling that this process is typically more laborious and sometimes costly and painful for students who happen to be the product of one Black and one White parent. This observation was puzzling to me, as it did not have a parallel in the society I emigrated from. Counselors in college and university working with these students may benefit for insights from other cultures' attitudes toward mixed race individual in contrast to the United States.

My experience in my native land of Haiti seems to contradict the notion that the process of identity formation should be more difficult for adolescents and young adults whose parents are from different races. I suggest that the environment and societal attitude in the US contributes to the difficulty of biracial individuals, rather than racial mixing itself. Where I came from, it would be seen as ridiculous that a mixed-race individual would view themselves solely according to the race of only one parent. Such individuals are viewed as the product of an equal combination of their parent's genes and characteristics and, consequently, as unique individuals different from both parents. These individuals may be called "mulattos," "mestizos" or just "mixes," terms none of which have a pejorative meaning. My own personal observations of many such individuals suggest to me that biracial individuals in Haiti are overall well-adjusted. And I started to reflect on what can help explain this difference between the experience of biracial individuals in Haiti and the experience of biracial individual in the US.

Just like the US, the West part of the island of Hispaniola (Saint Domingue) saw their wealth built on the forced labor of African slaves. However, this French colony had laws about how children born of sexual encounters between White colonists and enslaved natives was to be treated. Contrary to the US, in Saint Domingue not only were the mulatto children of colonists and enslaved natives born free, but these children were often able to free their mothers. In some cases, some slave owners would financially support their offspring or

would send them to France to put a distance between these children and their father's wife and legitimate children. Mixed race individuals in the French colony were seen neither as Whites nor as Blacks, but as a group set apart. Race relations were probably more nuanced on the island despite the dehumanization and atrocities of slavery—dehumanization and atrocities that lead to independence some sixty years before abolition in the US. Saint Domingue became Haiti, a country of free Blacks, through a bloody uprising that did spare a few "good Whites."[12] It is likely that this has had significant consequences for race relations in Haiti, a majority black society.

The United States has had and continues to have a society stratified by race. For an immigrant from a majority Black country, it is jarring to have to check a box that is supposed to identify you just by race. This obsession with race stratification comes straight from the slavery area, where it was important to differentiate who is in charge and who is subjugated, who has privilege and who is oppressed, who has all the rights and who has none. This was a calculated economic decision based on greed and an ability to rationalize about the humanity and worth of enslaved Africans. This attention to race stratification has been consistent throughout this country's history up to the present day, and it is not surprising that despite the abolition of slavery and the successes of civil rights and continues to be at play in the maintenance of the status quo. Codes and laws were made to protect the stability of this oppressive institution, such as laws to keep the races from mixing[13] and the "one drop" rule making someone Black and property during slavery and stripping them of many of their civil rights after emancipation. This economical maneuver, I believe, continues to dictate the rationale of insisting that biracial individuals identify with the race of their minority parent: it is White supremacy with its principle of hypodescent that wants individuals with one Black and one White parent to be considered Black.

The pressure from academics, politicians, and the wider society for mixed-race—and particularly mixed Black/White—individuals to identify only with the minority part of their identity is, in my opinion, a symptom of how White supremacy thinking is ingrained in the collective psyche of the US. Without stating it, such thinking continues to promote the "one drop" rule from the slavery era. What was accomplished by this theory? First, it protected White men who sexually abused women they enslaved from ever having to take responsibility for their crimes and, most importantly, it allowed for a complete denial of the reality that they had fathered a child that they now put in slavery to work for them, a piece of property that they could sell if needed. One does not have to go too far to find the evidence of this aberration. Thomas Jefferson, a founding father, one of the authors of the Declaration of Independence, fathered children with one of his slaves and these children were all enslaved themselves. A collective cognitive dissonance appears to be at play here that supports White supremacy: if White slave owners consider a child born from their sexual encounter with a Black slave as being fully Black, the children could not possibly be theirs and therefore they can use them as property and increase their wealth. Society as a whole functioned according to this kind of rationalization, and was enshrined into law. For instance, in 1662, the colonies in the South passed a law in which children born of an enslaved mother had to take the status of their mother regardless of the race of the male genitor.[14]

Embracing both sides of one's identity in a racist culture

Why is this history important to bring up in order to understand the situation of biracial individuals in the US today? It explains, I believe, the current resistance of in the US towards granting individuals

of mixed race their unique category, because it is rooted in these historical beliefs and values. Against this dominant trend, I suggest that the ability to claim and embrace one's dual racial identity as mixed individuals may be a healthier choice, because it prevents internal dissonance. When one only claims the minority part of one's ancestry, it is also a denial of part of one's full self and the alienation of one of one's parents. As I said earlier, the problem for the adjustment of Black/White mixed individuals is situational and deeply rooted in the values of White supremacy and US racism. Because of that, a social justice approach is necessary particularly for mental health clinicians working with this population.

In the past twenty years, clinical research on biracial individuals overwhelmingly stressed negative psychological consequences for the product of inter-racial union.[15] Root's studies even stated that the tension between the different races in the individual (parallel to the tension in US society) was responsible for the difficulty in self-concept and racial identity of individuals of mixed race, and that rejecting either part of themselves will lead to internalized oppression.[16] Root's assertion seems accurate, in the sense that biracial individuals really do often feel strong tensions between the different sides of their identity. However, Root's diagnosis of the cause of this tension is misplaced: the cause of this experience of internalized oppression is less the consequence of the racial mixing in itself, and more the consequence of the particular history of oppression in US society. Being Black/White mixed race in the US is experienced as oppression because of this society's obsession with keeping the races in tight boxes and the ongoing legacies of slavery.

A lot has changed between the 1950s, when interracial unions—particularly Black/White unions—were legally prohibited, and the present time, when mixed race individuals are more present in public spaces and in politics. What has not changed, however, is the collective insistence that we continue to see and label these mixed-race individuals as monoracial, identified by the minority part of their inheritance. If a biracial individual resists being categorized as Black, the individual is pathologized, both culturally and also in clinical settings. One might then object: if mixed-race Black/White individuals will be socially regarded as Black no matter how they see themselves, then what is the purpose of addressing this issue in a clinical context? The answer is that challenging the status quo is the root of progress in many fields and in society at large. There is a significant problem in the way US society wants to view and treat mixed-race individuals, and this problem has concrete negative effects on the identity-formation and self-concept of these individuals, and it should be understood and challenged. It is of no wonder that during adolescence and young adulthood, when these mixed-race individuals are exploring and wanting to solidify their identities, some of them struggle and even present distressing thoughts and behaviors that may bring them to the attention of a mental health professional. One of the roles of a mental health professional with a social justice vision, is to be able to provide a place for the client to become aware of the contribution of systems of oppression to their wellbeing and assist them in exploring how they see themselves (not merely how society defines them), and in building a strong sense of self that embraces both parts of who they are in equal measure. It is also important to help clients find their voice and advocate for themselves.

The subjective experience of being of mixed race in the United States, particularly White/Black mixing, is important to explore. And it becomes crucial for college counseling clinicians who provide mental health care to late adolescents and young adults to reflect on what could be beneficial for their students of mixed White /Black race who are seeking help.[17–19]

Methods and challenges for the college counselor

Regardless of their own race and ethnicity, clinicians should engage in self-reflection and become aware of implicit biases toward mixed-race individuals. Being part of US society, it is hard to escape unconscious attitudes and beliefs that have been perpetuated in society since the slavery and Jim Crow eras, attitudes that have been passed down from one generation to the next. Therefore, it is important to take stock of how much counselors themselves embrace, consciously or not, dominant societal views. Because of the focus of US society on race, it is also important for counselors to have a better understanding of the psychological implications for biracial individuals and the impact of being forced to deny parts of themselves.

Erickson provided a theory of human development that can explain the process of identity formation and help understand the particular struggle of mixed-race individuals. Identity formation for an adolescent and young adult is a very important process, with its success or its obstacles influencing perceptions, feelings, and behaviors, particularly with regard to how one relates to others. While it continues throughout adulthood, the process of identity formation becomes most salient during late adolescence. Questions such as "who am I?" and "What is my place in society?" arise, and the adolescents try to answer these questions using what they know or believe about themselves. What one thinks about the self is also strongly influenced by how one believes one is viewed by others. Mixed-race adolescents often face a distorted assessment or a societal refusal to acknowledge a part of who they are. What happens when one's presumed identity is pre-defined by others? Negative societal reactions to a person's race are problems that can deeply affect the wellbeing and process of identity formation of biracial individuals. Instead of being able to lay claim to an authentic personal identity, the process of identity formation becomes skewed, and an identity confusion is experienced. The individual may feel pressured to choose an identity that does not fully represent his or her reality. "When pushed to choose an identity of one ethnic group the individual may experience a time of alienation and even crisis."[9]

The mixed-race adolescent experiencing such identity confusion may experience feelings of guilt and disloyalty for rejecting one of their parents by Sebring. They also often experience anger and self-hatred. Because US society is heavily racially stratified, the mixed-race individual may internalize the negative stereotypes and society's racist views of his or her minority heritage. In societies where race has less impact on identity, the denial of part of the self, based on race is less of an issue. It is not to say that mixed-race individuals in other social contexts do not struggle to figure out who they are and their place in society. For example, such individuals might struggle with their sexuality, their ability, or their social class standing. However, such issues during the adolescent identity formation process are common, including among White adolescents in the United States. For minority adolescents and mixed-race adolescents, race seems to be an additional hurdle, and one that can set their futures on paths where they feel they have no control or even put their lives at risk.[20–25]

In counseling, the mixed-race individual might present clinical issues such as delinquency, hostility, aggression, interpersonal sensitivity, and substance abuse. These issues may actually be symptoms and exaggerated stress responses to discrimination and denial of parts of who they are by society. It is therefore important for counselors to be mindful of the underlying struggle of their mixed-race clients, even when this is not the presenting issue or even when the client denies that this is a problem at all.

When providing counseling to biracial individuals, in addition to helping them explore and find ways of alleviating whatever pain and distress that initially brought them in to seek help, I also provide a platform to explore who they are. I first explain that I will have a systemic approach in which we will explore their family of origin and other systems in which they belong, and I give them the rationale for this process: "we are everything that contributes to our make-up and therefore it can be important to understand our feelings and behaviors by looking at the different systems to which we belong." With clients, I often draw their family genogram, an exercise that automatically opens the conversation about both the race and ethnicity of their parents and grandparents, and the quality of their relationships with each member of their family, including their siblings.[26–30]

It is important to stress that gender can affect the process of racial identity development, with biracial women often having a harder time than biracial men. In a qualitative study with a group of biracial individuals from both genders, Rockquemore[11] reported that biracial women disclosed experiencing real hostility from Black women who perceived them as more attractive and consequently as threats. This negative experience centered on physical appearance may result in anti-Black sentiment that may need to be processed in counseling. Mental health providers should understand and encourage such individuals to verbalize their unique experience, in order to assess where they are on the continuum of accepting their entire identity and coming to terms with aspect of themselves they might have previously rejected.

I also encourage biracial individuals in counseling to search for and get involved in cultural activities relevant to both of their parents' ethnic groups, if possible. Through this, they can learn to appreciate both parents' heritage, culture and customs. I point out how special their position is to be able to understand different cultures in the capacity of both an insider and an outsider: this multiple identity can be considered as an addition instead of a deficit. The goal is to help them value all of who they are and to celebrate their uniqueness, regardless of societal attitudes.

When clients are able to look at their experience with positive curiosity, I encourage them to broaden their reference group in suggesting that they search for other individuals of mixed race. Having peers who share some of one's specific experiences can be validating and supportive. When clients are able and willing to connect with other biracial individuals, their sense of isolation can decrease, as they are able to compare and contrast their experience with the experience of similar others. This can give a sense of normalcy and comfort to their dual heritage. Some biracial groups are present online, and that could be safe places to begin the search.

Without fail, at some point in the work Black/White mixed individuals will complain about how they are treated by others, particularly—but not exclusively—the dominant group. White people only see them as Black, and often refuse to acknowledge or even see the White part of their identity. In addition, many report being rebuked for claiming their mixed heritage by Black people: the extended Black family and even the Black parent will often insist that they should consider themselves Black. However, they are also often rejected by Black peers, who relay to them that they are not Black enough. It becomes crucial, therefore, to help biracial clients move from an external (other people) to an internal perspective of who they really are.

The most powerful intervention in my work with mixed-race Black/White clients is that I can position myself as an outsider with a different cultural lens through which I can see them and understand their dilemma. My position gives me credibility to challenge both sides of their struggle: on the one hand, the denial of their White parents' contribution to their identities, and on the other hand, the internalized racism that has often arisen from the ways in which Black people are depicted and treated on campus or in the larger US society. Black or White counselors that have been socialized in this discriminatory geographical milieu may inadvertently or purposefully try to deny these individuals the full extent of their racial identity exploration. They may even be uncomfortable addressing that race is part of the individual's makeup because of the influence of the society in which they live; this problem is magnified with mixed-race clients. Therefore, I suggest that practitioners should allow themselves to question this discomfort, often rooted in personal biases, and to reflect on their own beliefs and values about mixed unions and biracial individuals. This will help them to both put themselves in the shoes of mixed-race clients, in order to treat them with equity, and also to move towards establishing an anti-racist practice for themselves.

Studies have shown that biracial individuals who grow up with a true biracial identity are happier than those who grew up with a single-race identity.[9] However, there is often a disjunct between how individuals feel deep inside about their mixed heritage, and how they choose to present themselves in public, and these two things should not be confused. It is very important to understand how biracial individuals want to present themselves in public, as they may be in the process of negotiating how they want to show up in different social settings. This can be a social or political calculation on their part; for example, former President Barack Obama, while being well aware of both the White and Black parts of his identity, chose to present himself as a Black man in the presidential race. How mixed-race individuals introduce themselves to others is their choice and they should not be pressured in any way. This should not be confused with how they feel deep inside about their mixed heritage, and how comfortable they are claiming all parts of themselves with self-appreciation instead of self-hatred, anger, or guilt. Our job as counselors is to make sure that these individuals have the space to come to feel positive about their full identities, regardless of how they ultimately choose to present themselves to others in the larger world.

The Biracial young adult in psychotherapy: A composite-case example

Zach is a 19-year-old biracial (African American/Caucasian) cis-gender heterosexual male, a bright, well-mannered upper-middle-class college student in his second year of college. He originally sought help because he was becoming irritable and having arguments with his roommate of two years; he was also encouraged by his parents to come to counseling because they became concerned about his increased involvement in self-destructive behaviors, declining. Grades, and disciplinary consequences looming on the horizon. This situation was not typical and was also starting to worry Zach himself. At home, Zack lived with his biological mother and stepfather, who were Caucasian. Zach's parents divorced when he was nine. Though they officially shared custody, Zach only visited his father, an African American, during the summer, as the latter resided in another state a three-hour drive away. Zach has two siblings: a sister, who is two years older, and a half brother who is 11 years younger. He said that he had a great relationship with his siblings, particularly his brother, who looks up to him. Zach's family lives in an affluent, predominantly White neighborhood, and he attended both elementary and high schools that were more than 75% White. He is a serious athlete who played football back at home; unfortunately, he did not make the team at the university, which caused him significant grief. Zach stated that since

he has come to college something that did not seem to be important for him in the past is now occupying a huge place in his life: race: "I had always seen myself as Zack, my mom is Irish/White and my dad is African American. When I applied to college my mom insisted that I check the box Black." He could not remember ever talking to his mother about his race, prior to that incident or since. He felt that he was being pressured to call himself Black, because that is what others have called him and that is also what he has seen on television and in movies; however only now that he is becoming aware of this. "The thing is," he said, "I don't feel Black. I don't have a lot in common with the Black students on campus. Why can't I just be Zach?"

As I have described, it has long been unsettling to me when individuals of mixed-race feel forced to identify only with the minority part of their heritage, both for the sake of their own personal development and as a social justice issue. Consequently, when Zach talked about his experience during the college admission process, I joined him by saying: "I despise boxes that one needs to check because they rarely fit. Where I come from you are considered the product of 50% percent of both of your parents, who just happen to be of two different races." I made the point that children are the combination of their parents' genes, and that it does not make sense to me that they should be forced to represent themselves as the product of just one parent. Zach looked at me with relief, as if he were saying, "she gets me." I gained some credibility with Zach and was able to build on that to establish a therapeutic alliance.

When I introduced the idea of building a genogram, he became very excited and confessed that he knew almost nothing about his parents' family background. He decided to call each of his parents, connecting with them and asking them about his ancestors and also about his parents' experience of the worlds they grew up in. He shared that asking his mother questions about her side of the family gave him insight into her Irish heritage. We discussed what that meant to him. I made connections between certain dynamics that were culturally linked, such as his mother's no-nonsense demeanor and her peculiar way of showing affection to him, to stories about her own mother and her own upbringing. The meaningful conversations between Zach and his father made them closer. He became so excited about the genogram that he decided to take it on and continue it for himself beyond what was needed to set up therapeutic ground. He discovered that his paternal grandfather was himself biracial, and he was able to joke about that. He said that he wanted to have a DNA test in the future.

As Zach became more comfortable in counseling, we started to address some of his concerning behaviors. He had disclosed to me that since he started college the previous year, he has been engaged in experimenting with heavy drugs and felt that he needed to be the "N" with the White peers who accepted him into their group. He also explained that sometimes he was so angry that he would extinguish cigarettes on his skin or engage in very dangerous and daring exercises to impress his "friends," and also because, in his words, "I hate it all." I challenged him by asking if that was his definition of being "Black": being an "N." It occurred to him that besides his dad, he did not have any healthy models of Black men in his life.

During our sessions he verbalized internalized racism and self-hatred that was at the root of his self-destructive behaviors. Through these discussions, he got some awareness about the deeper meaning of his behavior. I then suggested to him that he start exploring his African American heritage and to find uplifting, smart and respectable figures that defy societal stereotypes, individuals from the past or the present that he can feel proud about. Zach shared with me poetry from

a prominent biracial author that gave words to his own struggle. He also identified other Black individuals who contributed to US history and wealth. He decided to attend an African American cultural event and visited the African American museum in Philadelphia. He came back from these explorations with some meaningful observations that there was a lack of Black history taught in schools. He also seemed to genuinely be gaining admiration for and pride about his African American heritage. At the same time, he also gave time and curiosity towards his White/Irish heritage. One of our sessions was on Saint Patrick's Day, and Zach had done his research: he educated me on the meaning of the feast and on the rituals attached to it, while wearing his green tee-shirt with neon green sneakers.

Zach explored the US biases that prompted his mother to insist that he check the Black box on his college applications and shared that that must have been as hard for his mother as it was for him, and that this was not a gesture of rejection. He became less critical of her and less angry. He also started to build a better relationship with his African American father, sharing with him some of his important decisions while continuing to get along fine with his stepfather. One of the most challenging situations in Zach's life was his friend group, as well as a romantic relationship with a biracial (White/non-black minority) woman. These relationships seemed co-dependent, and he struggled to change his behavior because of his prior reputation. He was aware of the challenge and explored ways of setting different expectations.

Zach decided that it was a plus to be able to look at the world through different cultural lenses. I encouraged him to look at other contributors to his identity beyond race and ethnicity. His athletic ability, his talent as a writer and his brilliant curiosity were all things that contributed to defining him. While Zach continued to partake in the exploration typical of his age, he became less angry and less self-destructive. He saw himself as an individual of mixed race and of mixed heritage, at times calling himself biracial, and his self-esteem seemed to improve.

In addition to addressing the cause of Zach's mood and behavior, counselling offered him a platform upon which to start exploring the different components of his racial and ethnic identity. He showed appreciation of both heritages. He also became more flexible and more accepting of himself and others. According to Erikson identity development is influenced by the context in which the individual evolves, and "discrimination and marginalization have a psychological toll." As seen with Zack entering the new social setting that is college, he developed identity confusion and a feeling of estrangement from himself that resulted in self-hatred and anger. By provided Zack with a route to explore and challenge this destructive context for himself, he started to define himself according to what he knows to be true for himself, instead of according to the values of many others in society. This change of attitude also liberated him. He was able to look beyond race and at all that made him who he is.

The US's insistence on maintaining a racially-stratified society may alienate individuals of mixed race, particularly Black/White mixing. Because this insistence is directly connected to the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, these individuals may find themselves denied recognition of their full identity, with dire consequences for their mental health and sense of self, with self-hatred and internalized feelings of social racism and prejudice, as well as feelings of guilt and disloyalty toward one of their parents. Counselors should be aware of this when working with individuals of Black/White mixed identity, and should challenge their own biases to be able to provide a competent social justice approach in their work with these clients. The racial stratification common in the US is not universal, and an outsider look can be of significant benefit for treatment.

Conclusion

My work with mixed race individuals and their families is guided by my personal experience as an immigrant having to fit in a preset identity box in the US—a box that denies essential parts of who I am. It also comes from my observation of a different, less laborious kind of biracial development in my native land of Haiti. I intuitively understand the difficulties that often face this group. I have heard some of my clients' and their parents' rationale about identifying only with the minority aspect of their identity: American society seemed to be demanding that they do so. This attitude in my opinion is an aberration that is often at the root of identity confusion for young adults. Often the biracial individual experiences this as a violation of their right to exist. It is no wonder that they are conflicted, obliged to lie or deny part of who they are to satisfy other people's discomfort with respect to accepting their unique identity. It then makes sense that this conflict is often translated into behavioral and emotional problems.

In this paper, I compare and contrast Haiti and the United States, their history of slavery, their treatment of mixed Black/White individuals during and following the time of slavery, and contemporary race relations. It is clear that the US continues to hold tight to their ideas of White supremacy, which translates into a denial of a biracial identity. Both African American and White scholars have claimed that in face of a racist society mixed-race individuals would develop a higher sense of self-esteem if they identified with the minority side of their identities. However, others have recognized that this strategy can be problematic, and suggest that mixed-race individuals fare better when they can embrace the different parts of their identities. I joined these scholars in this assertion as guided by my observation of biracial in Haiti and experience working as a counselor with these young adults. Finally, I shared a composite case that demonstrate the process of repairing identity confusion in Black/White biracial clients. While US society may take time to come to term with attitudes and beliefs that are legacies of slavery and White supremacy, the mission of the mental health professional is to help every individual develop a healthy sense of self, even in the face of societal resistance. To prepare for this mission they need to explore and challenge their own biases, attitudes, and negative stereotypes toward minorities that they may unconsciously hold just because they are members of this society.

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Conflicts of interest

Author has no conflict of interest.

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