

## Self-Identity of Biracial Children: What Role Do Parents Play?

**Patreese D. Ingram**

**Anil Kumar Chaudhary**

*The Pennsylvania State University*

*One of the fastest growing student groups today is the biracial student population. This study is part of a larger exploratory descriptive study on biracial college students with a focus on the extent to which parents socialized their biracial children in the cultures of both parents while growing up and how these students chose to self-identify. Biracial students at a large, predominantly white, research university in the northeastern United States completed an online survey. Descriptive statistics and content analysis were used to analyze the data. The results indicated that most students had adopted a “border” identity. The majority of parents had encouraged their children to have an acceptance and pride in their biracial status. However, many students would have appreciated more exposure and knowledge of their heritages, as well as preparation for dealing with their environment as a biracial person. Students offered recommendations for parental practices to strengthen their racial identity.*

*Keywords:* biracial, multiracial, parenting practices, college students, racial identity

### **Introduction**

One of the fastest growing subgroups of students of color at today's colleges and universities is the biracial/multiracial population. This trend is predicted to continue. It is estimated that one in five new students will identify as bi/multiracial by 2050 (Brown, 2009). How one identifies racially impacts how one is perceived by others and how one perceives him/herself on the college campus. While race is often thought of as static (Gossett, 1997) and is used to delineate group membership, identity theory researchers suggest biracial individuals may identify along a continuum of racial identities (Renn, 2008; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002, 2008; Root, 1996).

Several racial identity theories have been developed and studied. Maria Root (1996) proposed a theory of identity formation that relies on the individual's abilities to be comfortable with their definition of themselves at any given moment while crossing identity borders. Renn (2008) identifies five patterns of identity ranging from a mono-racial identity, to multiple mono-racial identities, a distinctly multiracial identity, no racial identity, to a situational identity.

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Direct correspondence to Patreese Ingram at [pdil@psu.edu](mailto:pdil@psu.edu)

Rockquemore and Brunson (2002) propose a “mixed race” identity model with four categories: a border identity where individuals define themselves as belonging to a third and separate blended category typically called “biracial;” a singular mono-racial identity where individuals identify with the race of one of their parents; a transcendent identity in which one rejects the notion of “race” and its categories altogether; and a protean identity in which individuals change their racial identity as they move from group to group and through the various social contexts of everyday life.

How one chooses to self-identify and how comfortable one is with that identity is impacted by a number of factors including parenting/family practices and experiences (Katz & Kofkin, 1977; Lyda, 2008; Rollins, 2009), physical appearance (Renn, 2000), cultural knowledge, and peer culture (Renn, 2008). Thornton (1996) raises questions such as “Is proximity to the ethnic group important? Does contact with the in-group, political orientation, the racial balance of the community where the individual lives or grows up, or the level of commitment to and involvement in the in-group make a difference?” (p. 119). What messages are children taught about racial stratification in our society? While many Black parents, for example, raise their children to understand how race shapes institutional and interpersonal dynamics, many white parents raise their children to not think about matters of race (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005). How does the level of awareness of racial stratification impact the way in which biracial children identify?

Root (1996) suggests that multiracial individuals are constantly negotiating multiple perspectives in order to feel socially accepted in mainstream cultural domains. Whether or not one’s self-identity is validated by others may have an impact on the biracial persons’ sense of efficacy (Bracey, Bamaca, & Umana-Taylor, 2004).

Limited exploration has been given to the family’s influence on the self-identity of multiracial children (Thornton, 1996). It is recognized that parents are a child’s first teachers, and they have a major influence on the child’s racial identity (Hughes, 2003). Brooks (2007) proposes that the type of parental communication a biracial child receives is a strong predictor of whether a child chooses to adopt a singular/mono-racial, border, protean, or transcendent identity. Brooks proposes the Parent Racial Socialization Communication Model (PRSC) which considers a parent’s view of the child’s biracialness and their view of the world as two dimensions that construct a parent’s communication style.

In one dimension, parents may be accepting of their child’s biracialness or the parent may have negative feelings about the child’s biracial status. In the other dimension, the parent may view the world as being accepting of biracial people, or the parent may view the world as being discriminatory regarding biracial people. These two dimensions result in four different parenting communication styles.

Brooks (2007) proposes that parents who communicate positive messages about the biracial child's racial status and feel that the world is *discriminatory* against this status are likely to take a direct and proactive approach toward discussing race and preparing their child to handle racism. This style is labeled the "Protector." Parents who communicate positive messages about the biracial child's racial status, but view the world as *accepting*, are more likely to take a less direct role in the child's racial identity formation, discussing race only when the child initiates the subject. This style is labeled the "Supporter."

On the other hand, parents who have *negative* feelings about the child's biracial status, yet see the world as accepting, are more likely to disregard race in discussions with their children unless the child initiates it. At that time, the parent will express their negative feelings about the child's biracial status. This style is labeled the "Dismissive." Finally, according to the model, parents who view their child's biracial status as negative and see the world as *discriminatory* are likely to send active *negative* messages about the child's race or the race of the other parent, perhaps in an abusive manner. This style is labeled the "Aggressor."

The Brooks (2007) Parental Racial Socialization Communication Model predicts that biracial children of "Protector" parents will self-identify as either a border or a protean identity that incorporates their dual heritage. Similar to children of "Protector" parents, children of "Supportive" parents are predicted to adopt either a border, protean, or a transcendent self-identity. Brooks (2007) suggests that the laid-back, hands-off approach of the Supportive parent provides the child a more direct role in choosing his or her own identity. Finally, children with "Dismissive" or "Aggressor" parents are more likely to adopt a mono-racial or transcendent self-identity. Negative parental messages about one race or both races may encourage children to identify with only one race or to disregard race altogether.

At this time, the Parental Racial Socialization Communication Model developed by Brooks (2007) has only been proposed and not yet tested. While this model deserves serious consideration, it is important to note that, as mentioned earlier in this paper, there are many factors that influence how a biracial child chooses to self-identify.

A number of studies have focused on the Black/White biracial population (Brown, 2001; Rockquemore & Brunnsma, 2002), while fewer studies have considered the variety of multiracial mixtures. Additionally, studies that have focused on the biracial college student population are more limited. Attending college and the exposure to a broader, more diverse group of peers may lead biracial students to explore, define, and redefine themselves and how they choose to self-identify (King, 2008).

## **Purpose of the Study**

This study is part of a larger descriptive exploratory study on biracial college students and focuses on factors related to students' parental/family upbringing. More specifically, this study explores 1) how biracial college students identify and 2) the extent to which parents specifically took steps to engage their children in learning about the race and culture of both parts of their heritage, encouraged them to accept and embrace their status as biracial persons, and prepared them for the experiences they might encounter as a biracial person.

## **Methods/ Procedures**

### **Sample and Data Collection**

The population for this study included college students at a large, predominately white, research university in the northeastern United States. Data were collected by an online survey. An invitation to participate was sent by email to all students at the university who had selected the racial category "two or more races" on their college admissions form. This database was maintained by the University Registrar. The invitational email, written by the researcher, was sent to the student list by personnel in the University Office of Educational Equity. Interested students were encouraged to email their willingness to participate directly to the researchers.

Those who sent their "acceptance to participate" and email addresses were emailed the link to the online survey. Reminder emails were sent to those who had not returned or completed the survey one week, two weeks and three weeks after they had been sent the link to the survey. The original invitational email was sent to approximately 1,500 students. Two hundred and forty eight (248) students (17%) indicated a willingness to participate in the study. Two hundred and one (201) of those who agreed to participate (81%) completed the survey.

### **Instrumentation**

A data collection instrument was developed based on a review of literature on ethnic and multicultural identity development, including items adapted from the Survey of Biracial Experiences (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002) and the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Phinney, 1992). The instrument included Likert-type scale items, forced choice, and open-ended questions. Items were reviewed for face and content validity by a panel of experts in research methodology, diversity education, and student affairs. Changes to the instrument were made based on this review. The instrument was then reviewed by a panel of biracial college students. Based on the student review, adjustments in wording were made, as well as additional items added. The resulting instrument was pilot tested with a different group of biracial students and final adjustments were made. This paper reports the responses to 35 questions in the survey.

## Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and cross tabulations. Cronbach's alpha measures for the scales within the survey ranged from .703 to .869. Content analysis was done to analyze the open-ended responses. Preliminary data analysis involved a reduction of responses as multiple researchers read and separately coded various themes. During the coding process, the researchers make sense out of the text data and later divide the text into various segments with codes and later relate these codes for redundancy or overlapping and at last collapse the codes into the broader themes (Creswell, 2005). The themes developed by both researchers for open-ended questions were compared to come out with a common understanding on themes. Interrater agreement was 96%. Finally, overall themes were analyzed to make sense for each open-ended question without adding any researcher's bias. The themes were reported in a later part of the paper.

## Findings

### Participants

The majority of respondents (71.1%) were female. Respondents selected the race to which they identify, including "all that apply." The following are the races respondents identified themselves to be: White/Caucasian (78.0%), American Indian/Alaska Native (11.8%), Black/African American (41.4%), Asian Indian (4.3%), Asian (28.0%), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (3.2%), and Some Other Race (33.9%). Of the specific races listed under "Some Other Race" the most frequently mentioned were Hispanic/Latino/Latina (31) and Puerto Rican (13). For both mothers and fathers, the most frequent racial/ethnic group with which parents identify is "White/Caucasian." The next most frequently identified racial ethnic group for mothers is "Hispanic/Latino" and for fathers is "Black/African American." See Table 1.

**Table 1. Race/Ethnicity of Parents**

Race/Ethnicity	Mother		Father	
	N	%	N	%
White/Caucasian	80	43.48	77	40.96
Asian	36	19.57	13	6.91
Black/African American	30	16.30	61	32.45
Native American/Alaska Native	12	6.52	8	4.26
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	6	3.26	3	1.60
Hispanic/Latino	55	29.89	48	25.53

*Note:* The total numbers for mothers and fathers are greater than the 201 participants in the study. Some participants identified their mother or father with more than one race/ethnicity category.

For more than half (56.9% - 60.7%) of the respondents, the composition of their elementary, junior high or middle school, and high school were “all White” or “mostly White.” Similarly, for more than half (51.3% - 57.9%) of the respondents, the composition of their closest friends in elementary, junior or middle school, and high schools were “all White” or “mostly White.”

Age of respondents ranged from 18 to 50 years, with 82% falling between 18 and 21. Two-thirds of the respondents (67.8%) were raised by both parents, and 29.0% were raised by their mother/and or her family. Almost all (97.4%) were U.S. citizens, and the majority (88.8%) were born in the U.S. Respondents were divided between freshmen (29.8%), sophomores (23.6%), juniors (27.2%), and seniors (19.4%).

### **Identity**

The overwhelming majority of respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they had pride in their mixed racial/ethnic heritage (90.6%). They had a clear sense of their racial/ethnic makeup (84.6%) and what that means to them (80.9%). Approximately two-thirds (66%) “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that people of their mixed race/ethnicity have a culturally rich heritage, while one-quarter of respondents (25.4%) “neither agreed nor disagreed” with that statement.

When asked to select which statement best expressed their identity, the most frequent selection was a border identity (44.1%). The border identity means that the person considers their race as existing between the two races of their parents, both incorporated into a hybrid racial category called biracial. The next most frequent response was a protean identity (38.8%). Those with a protean identity have a “fluid” identity. They adjust their identity to different circumstances, sometimes identifying as one of their racial backgrounds, sometimes identifying as their other racial background, and sometimes as biracial, depending on the context. Twelve percent (12%) did not associate any race with their identity, and 4.5% identified as a single race.

### **Parental Upbringing**

Talking with family members tends to be the greatest source for learning about their ethnic backgrounds. More than one-half of respondents (53%) talked with family members “often” or “always” about their ethnic heritage. To a lesser extent (40.5%), respondents spent time trying to find out more about the histories, traditions, and customs of their heritages “often” or “always.” See Table 2.

**Table 2. Percentage of Respondents Selecting Various Methods for Learning About Their Ethnic Backgrounds.**

<b>Statement</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Never/ Rarely</b>	<b>Some- times</b>	<b>Often/ Always</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
In order to learn more about both (or all) of my ethnic backgrounds, I have talked to family members about my ethnic groups.	200	18.5% (37)	28.5% (57)	53% (106)	3.47	1.05
In order to learn more about both (or all) of my ethnic backgrounds, I have talked to other people about my ethnic groups.	198	37.4% (74)	33.8% (67)	28.8% (57)	2.95	1.09
I have spent time trying to find out more about each of my racial heritages, such as their histories, traditions, and customs.	200	24.5% (49)	35.0% (70)	40.5% (81)	3.30	1.14

The majority of respondents indicated that the parent/guardian with whom they lived encouraged them to have pride in their biracial heritage “some” or “a lot” (86.2%) and encouraged them to have acceptance of their biracial heritage “some” or “a lot” (86.8%). Additionally, the majority (71%) of these parents/guardians talked to the participants about their racial identity either “some” or “a lot.”

The percentage of parents/guardians who prepared respondents for the possibility of racism and discrimination and who discussed their own experiences with discrimination with participants “some” or “a lot” ranged from 55.6% to 60.0%. Therefore, 40% or higher were prepared for these possibilities “very little” or “not at all.” When disaggregated by race, respondents with some Black heritage were more likely than other racial groups to have parents who prepared them for the possibility of discrimination.

Nearly half (48.5%) of respondents were exposed to books, films, and TV programs related to the racial/ethnic heritage of both parents “very little” or “not at all.” More than half (54.4%) were exposed to adult role models related to the racial/ethnic heritage of both parents “very little” or “not at all.” See Table 3.

**Table 3. Percentage of Respondents Identifying Various Parental Practices During Their Upbringing (N = 196)**

<b>Parental Practice</b>	<b>Not at all</b>	<b>Very Little</b>	<b>Some</b>	<b>A Lot</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
Talked to you about your racial identity.	4.1% (8)	25.0% (49)	38.3% (75)	32.7% (64)	3.00	.861
Instructed you how to respond in certain situations related to your racial background.	19.9% (39)	27.0% (53)	28.6% (56)	24.5% (48)	2.57	1.06
Exposed you to books, films, and TV programs related to the racial/ethnic heritage of both parents.	19.9% (39)	28.6% (56)	30.1% (59)	21.4% (42)	2.53	1.04
Exposed you to adult role models related to the racial/ethnic heritage of both parents.	24.1% (47)	30.3% (59)	28.2% (55)	17.4% (34)	2.39	1.03
Discussed their personal experiences of discrimination based on their race/ethnicity. (NR=6)	19.5% (38)	20.5% (40)	35.4% (69)	24.6% (48)	2.65	1.05
Prepared you for the possibility of racism in your life.	22.4% (44)	21.9% (43)	32.1% (63)	23.5% (46)	2.56	1.08
Prepared you for the possibility of discrimination in your life.	23.1% (45)	20.0% (39)	31.3% (61)	25.6% (50)	2.59	1.10
Encouraged you to have pride in your biracial heritage.	8.7% (17)	5.1% (10)	29.1% (57)	57.1% (112)	3.34	.925
Encouraged you to have acceptance in your biracial heritage.	7.7% (15)	5.6% (11)	27.6% (54)	59.2% (116)	3.38	.902

Almost half (46.9%) of respondents had contact with their mother's family to a "great extent," and an additional one-third (32.7%) had contact to "some extent." A smaller percentage (30.8%) of respondents had contact with their father's family to a "great extent" and (26.7%) to "some extent." A small percentage (5.1%) of respondents was rejected by certain family members to a "great extent," and 8% were rejected to "some extent."

Respondents were asked to share what they wish their parents had done differently to strengthen their racial identity. Responses were in the form of open-ended comments. One hundred and eighty-two (182) comments were shared. These comments were grouped into several themes during content analysis. These themes are reported in Table 4.

**Table 4. What Students Wished Their Parents Had Done Differently**

Theme	N	%
Have known more about/taught me more about my cultural heritage	52	27%
Learn to speak Spanish/other language	34	18%
They have done a good job at raising me	32	17%
Nothing	28	15%
Told me how to deal with my race	10	5%
Provided more ties with my father	8	4%
Been more accepting of my mixed heritage	7	4%
Taught me more about racism/difficulty with acceptance by society	6	3%
Enrolled me in a more diverse school/neighborhood/helped me meet more biracials	6	3%
Talked to me more about race	2	1%
Been more accepting of other races	2	1%
Miscellaneous (emphasize both races equally, [stop] strong pressure to marry a certain race)	2	1%
Comments made did not answer the question asked	2	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>191</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Note:* Some comments included two distinctly different themes and were counted as separate comments. Therefore, the total number of comments is higher than the number of respondents who provided a comment.

The following are representative comments:

- *I would've liked if they had exposed me to more of my Irish and Hispanic culture. I know very little about them. I want to fully be able to embrace what I am but I can't do that if I don't have a clear understanding of the culture, tradition, etc.*
- *My parents could have taught me more about racism before entering the world and experiencing the negativity at such a young age.*
- *Basically, I wish she would have made sure that I learned Spanish, had Hispanic idols, and was just more connected with Puerto Rican culture.*
- *I wish my mother would have accepted the fact that I am both a Black man and a White man. She would say I was only Black because she raised me by herself and that was her racial identity. But I knew that just wasn't true.*
- *Acknowledged it. My parent never highlighted to me that I am biracial and didn't discuss any issues that I might face.*

- *I wish they would have enrolled me in a school that was more culturally diverse.*
- *I wish they had given me a greater understanding of my Asian side. The majority of my time was spent with my White family and I feel very disconnected from my Chinese heritage. I don't look like my White family and I don't understand my Chinese family.*
- *I wish my mother had taught me Korean, because the main reason I am shut out from the Korean community is the fact that I cannot speak Korean, not that I am biracial.*
- *Inform me that not all people may be accepting of my mixed race and teach me to feel ok about being multiracial and fight against people expecting me to choose, especially in junior high school.*

### **Discussion**

Families play a critical role in impacting the development of children's identities. Many of the respondents in this study had received very important messages from their parents that contributed to their overall feelings of pride in their biracial status. Very few respondents adopted a singular mono-racial identity. Most identified with a border or a protean identity, both of which acknowledge the racial heritage of both parents.

While the majority of parents talked to the respondents about their racial identity and encouraged them to have pride and acceptance in their biracial heritage, other important strategies were performed less frequently. Nearly half of respondents had limited instruction on how to respond in situations related to their racial background, nor were they prepared for the possibility of racism or discrimination in their life. Perhaps these parents hold a world view that the world is accepting of biracialness, and therefore, there is no need to take a proactive role in preparing their children for racial discrimination, as suggested by the Brooks Parental Racial Socialization Communication Model (Brooks, 2007). Yet, according to Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2005), "Healthy socialization involves talking honestly, openly, and directly with children about how race shapes everyday life" (p. 77).

The results of this study compliment the findings of Rollins (2009) who studied the type of racial socialization messages used by mothers of biracial youth. Messages were classified as being cultural socialization, minority socialization, mainstream socialization, egalitarian socialization, or no racial socialization. She found that Black mothers were more likely to use mainstream socialization messages and that White and other minority mothers (Asian, Latino, and American Indian) were not likely to provide any direct racial socialization for their children, thus minimizing the issue of race. Rollins (2009) found that Black parents were more active in preparing their children for the possibility of racial discrimination than were White parents. As

noted by Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2005), some White parents avoid talking about race because they do not recognize the influence of race in their lives. Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2005) specifically state, *“Because of the power of race, parents raising mixed race children have a responsibility to engage in a process of racial socialization that will prepare their children to understand and effectively negotiate the complexities of race relations”* (p. 59).

Additionally, nearly half of respondents had little or no exposure to books, films, and TV programs related to the racial/ethnic heritage of both parents. More than half of respondents had little or no exposure to adult role models related to the racial/ethnic heritage of both parents.

Since many parents of biracial children have not shared the racial experiences that their biracial children experience, these parents may not naturally have the knowledge and resources to provide racial socialization for their children. In some homes, the topic is not addressed at all (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005). Whites are less likely to consider the impact that race has in shaping one’s life. As Rollins (2009) pointed out, many biracial children do not grow up in a clearly defined biracial community which could provide guidance in racial socialization practices. Therefore, it may be necessary for parents of biracial youth to consider the racial environment their children will face and make specific efforts to discuss such learning with their children. It may be necessary for all parents of biracial children to provide opportunities for their children to interact with the racial/ethnic groups of both parents. It is important that such exposure includes positive representations of the minority and majority group. Parents must also actively challenge instances when their children may experience the devaluation of a part of their heritage.

The open-ended comments from respondents clearly suggest that many of these students would have appreciated more support from their parents in the areas recommended by the literature. They wanted to learn more about and feel more comfortable with both parts of their heritage. Many wanted to learn the language of their parent who speaks a language other than English. Some specifically expressed that inability to speak the language hampered their ability to be accepted by family and community members. Several wished their parents had prepared them for the fact that all people are not accepting of their mixed race and how to deal with negative attitudes.

Although most respondents had recommendations for changes their parents could make in raising biracial children, a notable number of respondents expressed satisfaction with the way they were raised. In most of these comments, respondents indicated they were exposed to and taught to embrace both cultures equally.

## Conclusions and Implications

There is a clear need for greater attention to and understanding of the biracial population. As one student stated, “I just want to reiterate that I think of myself as a combination of the races in my parents. Not one or the other.” Biracial students are one of the fastest growing student groups in this county. Their unique heritages must be recognized, acknowledged, and valued on our college campuses. Most are proud of their biracial status. Increased understanding of this population by student personnel professionals, counselors, educators, and other service providers can lead to more effective supportive services for these students. In particular, counselors who support families with biracial children may benefit from an increased understanding of this population. Encouraging parents to engage in racial socialization of their children and to expose them to the cultural heritage of both parents is a clear recommendation from this study. Additionally, based on the Brooks (2007) Parental Racial Socialization Communication Model, encouraging parents to have positive feelings about their children’s biracialness may lead to children who are more accepting and comfortable with the heritages of both of their parents.

The findings of this study also can inform parent education programs in a variety of settings, including Extension education programs and high school and college courses that focus on child development and family relations. An important step would be to introduce racial/ethnic heritage as a topic in textbooks and other educational materials. Efforts should be made to increase the visibility of biracial people in the curriculum, including in internet and social media resources. Consideration should be given to collaborative research with other disciplines dealing with biracial issues in higher education. As stated earlier, outside of college and university campuses, Cooperative Extension can serve as a viable dissemination source to extend information to the general public.

The intent of this study was to begin exploring the parenting practices of parents of biracial children. The findings of this study are limited to the biracial student population at one university. This study only scratched the surface of questions that can be examined in additional research with a larger population, greater diversity in the racial mixtures, and over a larger geographical area. Future research can examine statistics regarding differences in social/emotional functioning between individuals who were prepared by their parents and individuals who were not. Other areas for further research include determining if the socioeconomic status of the families or the geographic location in which biracial children are raised may have an impact on the extent to which parents expose their children to a variety of experiences which may impact their self-identity.

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*Patreese Ingram* is an Assistant Dean for Multicultural Affairs and Professor in the College of Agricultural Sciences at The Pennsylvania State University with a scholarship focus on diversity education.

*Anil Kumar Chaudhary* is a graduate student in the Department of Agricultural Economics, Sociology, and Education (AESE) in the College of Agricultural Sciences at The Pennsylvania State University with a dual major in Agricultural and Extension Education (AEE) and International Agricultural Development.