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ABSTRACT
          This paper advances a model to explain the
development of a healthy biracial identity among biracial children
and adolescents. This model integrates five ecological components:
family, community, minority context, majority context, and group
antagonism. At Stage 1, from age 3 through age 7, young children
explore individual and racial differences, learn labels and emotional
responses associated with various ethnic groups, and begin to pick up
social norms and values. At Stage 2, during adolescence, biracial
individuals begin to define who they are, how they feel about
themselves, and how society views them. Successful completion of both
stages depends on the impact and interaction of the five ecological
factors. (Contains 42 references.) (MDM)

<u>Biracial Identity: An Ecological and Developmental</u>
<u>Model</u>

by

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Biracial Identity: An Ecological and Developmental Model

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It is estimated that the number of biracial individuals
in this country is between one and ten million (Gibbs, 1987;
Postor, 1990). Because the census has no category for biracial
individuals and some biracial people identity with a single
racial or ethnic group, this is just an estimate. The actual
number of biracial children (0-18) is even more unclear.
Regardless of the precise numbers, the increase of biracial
children in our society along with the opinion by many
professionals that a disproportionate percentage of biracial
children require professional mental health services (Gibbs,
1987; Poston, 1990) has lead to a scholarly interest in this
population. Much of the attention centers around the question
of identity development (Brandell, 1987; Gibbs, 1987; McRoy
and Freeman, 1986; Poston, 1990; Wardle, 1989).

Studies indicate biracial children's self concept (including
racial attitudes) develop differently from black children and
white children (Gibbs, 1987; Gunthorpe, 1978; Jacobs, 1978).
Further, some scholars suggest that biracial children have more
problems with identity formation than their white and black
counterparts (Gibbs, 1987; Ladner, 1984; Sebring, 1985).

Most explorations into the identity development of biracial
children reflect the biases of our society toward these children.
These studies suppose biracial children cannot establish solid

identities, or that they must select a single racial identity;
they are marginal people with identity deficits (Gibbs, 1987;
McRoy and Freeman, 1986; Stonequist, 1937).

However, there is growing evidence biracial individuals
can develop a healthy, full, biracial identity (Cross, 1987;
Hall, 1980; Herman, 1970). Poston suggests most biracial
individuals progress through the developmental stages in a
healthy fashion - like other people (1990). The model presented
here postulates biracial individuals develop a healthy biracial
identity by progressing through specific stages, and by the
integration of ecological factors.

The two developmental stages are stage I (3 to 7 years old)
and stage II (adolescence). The ecological components are:
family, minority context, majority context, group antagonism
and community.

The Stage Model

Developmentally, biracial children must progress through
two important stages. These are the early stage (3-7) and the
adolescent stage. The early stage corresponds to the time
researchers and theorists have identified for ethnic/racial
identity formation for single race children; the latter stage
to the period of identity development discussed by Erikson
(1963), Gibbs (1987), McRoy & Freeman (1986) and others.

The 5 components of the ecological model determine whether
the biracial child will successfully progress through these
two stages. The impacts of the ecological components differ
at each stage.

While successful completion of stage I may not be critical,
a child who completes stage I with a healthy biracial identity
will be in a better position to successfully progress through
adolescence. The child will not experience the level of
confusion, crisis and identity denial so often documented of
biracial adolescents (Gibbs, 1987; McRoy & Freeman 1986; Poston,
1990).

Stage I (3-7). During this time children explore individual
differences, including skin color, hair texture and eye shape
(Derman-Sparks, 1989; Goodman, 1964; Katz, 1982). The preschool
and early elementary years (3-7 approximately) are recognized
as a crucial period in the growth and differentiation of the
child's feelings about self and about others who are different
from self. The child becomes increasingly aware of racial
differences, and learns labels and emotional responses associated
with various ethnic groups, including his or her own (Brandell,
1988; McRoy & Freeman, 1986; Wardle, 1988b). Children begin
to pick up society's norms and biases, and may exhibit
prejudicial behavior toward others (Derman-Sparks, 1989).

However, Alejandro-Wright warns that full understanding
of race does not occur until age 10-11 (1985). She suggests
the process evolves from a vague awareness of skin color to
a knowledge of clusters of physical-biological attributes
associated with a racial membership, to an eventual understanding
of racial categorization (p185).

The young child's sense of self esteem, self concept, and
self evaluation is not directly related to his sense of reference

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group orientation (Cross, 1985).

The evidence shows children 3-7 are developing an awareness of physical differences, are beginning to associate labels to those differences society has determined to be important, and are developing opinions about differences. A minority child is aware of his skin color, hair texture, and other physical features, but does not fully understand how these features make him a member of the minority group.

Piaget's cognitive stages (1963) and Erikson's psychological stages (1963) are important to our understanding of this age child. According to Piaget the child (3-7) is going through the preoperational stage. Preoperational thought is not well organized, is highly influenced by both salient and concrete factors, and prone to incorrect concepts and assumptions. While the child is trying to represent the world with symbols (words, pictures, etc.), his thoughts are dominated by egocentrism, and he cannot handle more than one piece of information at a time - thought is dominated by a single concept, object or sensation (Piaget, 1963).

It is not surprising, then, that this age child's concept of race and reference group is unclear and based on seemingly simplistic physical cues. White children's concepts of minority children are also based on salient cues, and often highly inaccurate and unsophisticated.

Educators and parents of biracial children have recognized these characteristics of preoperational children, seen a need to provide accurate information about diversity at this age

(Derman-Sparks, 1989; Wardle, 1988; 1991b), and a need for a
label for biracial children to use (Darden, 1991; Wardle, 1988a).

Initiative versus guilt is the psychosocial stage that
characterizes this age (Erikson, 1963). The initiative relates
to the child's natural experimentation in the larger social
word; guilt corresponds to whether this exploration is viewed
by the child as successful or not. Parent - and other significant
adult - response to the child's initiative will determine the
level of guilt. Adult reactions include open responses and
support of questions about physical characteristics, diversity
and racial identification (DermanSparks, 1989; Wardle, 1988a).
Children must be encouraged to ask questions, experiment with
social interactions, develop concepts and labels, and be exposed
to a variety of other children and families. Because of their
preoperational limitations, immature, primitive and inaccurate
ideas should not be punished, but rather explored through
discussion and example. Adult concepts of racial identification
and belonging should not be expected.

Adolescence. Erikson has proposed that the central task
of adolescence is to form a stable identity, which he described
as a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity (1963).
The most important tasks during this period are: to establish
a personal identity; to establish autonomy and independence;
to relate to members of the same and other sex, and to commit
to a career choice (Erikson, 1963).

Erikson points out that, "in their search for a new sense
of continuity and sameness, adolescents have to refight many

of the battles of earlier years" (261), and that adolescents
can be cruel in their exclusion of those they consider different,
"in skin color or cultural background, in tastes and gifts,
and often in such petty aspects of dress and gesture selected
as the signs of an in-grouper or out-grouper" (262). This is
done to avoid a feeling of identity confusion.

Clearly adolescence is a critical time for a healthy biracial
identity development (Gibbs, 1987; McRoy and Freeman, 1986;
Poston, 1990). Biracial individuals must continue to define
who they are, how they feel about themselves, and how society
views them. However, this does not mean a biracial child must
select a traditional racial group to avoid role confusion.
Adolescent groups are defined by many criteria - income,
politics, interests, career choices, etc. Their group selection
might be chosen according to interest, ability, etc.: gymnastics
teams, gifted programs, art group, etc. (Wardle, 1988a). Also
Cross has pointed out children don't have to have a strong
reference group orientation (belonging to a racial group, having
racial awareness) to have a high self esteem (1985). Finally,
Hall (1990) indicates children of this age have the cognitive
ability to identify with a combined, or biracial ethnic identity.

Ecological Components.

Successful completion of both stages depends on the impact
and interaction of factors that make up the ecological model:
family, minority context, majority context, community and group
antagonism. This model is a liberal adaptation of a model
proposed by A. Jones (1985) to work with black patients. A

community component has been added: the model is designed to
show the ecological components of healthy biracial identity
(Fig.I). These influences have a different impact at the
different stages. For example, the family clearly has a stronger
influence during stage I, the community during stage II (Poston,
1990).

Cultural Context. Bateson (1979) talks about contexts being,
"patterns over time - which fix meanings" (15). Cultures operate
as contexts because they fix meaning over time, but each culture
has the capacity to fix meaning differently (Johnson, 1990).
Individuals operate within their own context; families define
contexts in which children are raised. Contexts are a set of
potentially dynamic relationships that are interactive. They
allow individuals to fix meaning (Johnson, 1990). While the
notion of racial groups representing pure biological categories
is incorrect, what matters is that society attaches significance
to differences of physiognomy (Wilson, 1984). The assumption
is that race provides a cultural context that has a profound
impact on an individual's identity (Wilson, 1984).

The biracial individual develops within the interaction
of several contexts, including the majority context (one of
his parents) and the minority context (his other parent). Since
contexts are interactive and dynamic, these contexts will impact
the child differently, depending on the other parts of this
model: family, community and antagonism.

Minority Context. Nobels (1976, 1980) has defined several
factors that positively impact minority self concept in this

country. He lists group identification, or 'we-ness' to define black identity in relationship to the community; strong extended family ties; a strong emphasis on spirituality, a flexible concept of time, and a general sensitivity to others.

Billingsley maintains that over 50% of blacks are middle class, and almost all American Blacks share the majority culture's aspirations and values of education and economic success (1968).

And all American blacks must develop ways to cope with experiences of racial discrimination (Jones, 1985). Further, a central task is to determine to what extent majority values, goals and psychological patterns will be adopted by the minority individual (Jones, 1985).

Jones notes that the way individual blacks respond to all these issues depends on a variety of individual and personal factors (1985). Biracial children will also respond individually to the minority side of their biracial heritage. It would seem, however, that interracial parents can effectively steer their children to a healthy integration of minority and majority values, attitudes and behaviors.

Majority Context. The white context is the dominant value in this society: TV images, print advertisements, teachers in schools, most pictures in books and magazines, etc. Models that society places as the ideal are mostly white (the president, doctors, lawyers, TV heroes, etc.). Many of the curricular and curricular materials at schools disproportionately reflect the white society. Thus, whites receive daily feedback that they

count, that the individual white person belongs to the dominant group, and that non-whites don't seem to count (McIntosh, 1988).

The white culture enculturates a pattern of assumptions to white people: a sense of control, of being able to succeed according to white standards, and the ability to make the system work for the individual (McIntosh, 1988). Whites also believe that success is based on individual merit, and that racism is perpetuated by individuals, not systems or institutions. Most white American do not see themselves as white, but rather German-Americans, Italian-Americans, etc. (Covin & Wiggins, 1989). Most whites do not acknowledge they belong within the white cultural context, which has a history of racism and domination (Covin & Wiggins, 1989). And whites can choose what to escape, and what risks not to take (McIntosh, 1988). Finally, the white context is often sought after by non whites, even if much of it is not beneficial to the society as a whole (McIntosh, 1988).

In many cases one can hypothesize the white member of the interracial family will be sensitive to this history of prejudice and domination experienced by American blacks. Because all minorities in this society need to come to terms with majority interests and values (Jones, 1985) the biracial child's white parent will be able to effectively assist in this task. This parent may also assist the family in understanding that, to a large extent, biracial families do not have a strong group in which to find orientation and meaning, and must take on a more majority concept of, 'I can do my thing' (Noble, 1980) to define their psychological meaning.

<u>Family</u>. The family includes biological parents (and adoptive
parents for adopted children) plus the extended family - on
both sides. The family's impact on the child's identity is based
on the attitude of the family toward a biracial identity, whether
it is openly discussed, and how the family tries to support
its development (Brandell, 1988; McRoy & Freeman, 1986; Poston,
1990; Wardle, 1991b).

Other family dynamics are also important. Parenting style
(Baumrind, 1971) and competent parenting (Meyerhoff & White,
1986) will have an impact, especially in the area of
communication and negotiation. Divorce poses tremendous negative
impacts on all children (Hetherington, <u>et</u> <u>al</u>, 1978). Divorce
in an interracial family can have an even more severe impact
if race becomes an issue, or if divorce results in removal of
the child from one of the child's heritages - usually the
minority heritage (McRoy and Freeman, 1986; Wardle, 1991a).

Extended family support, attitudes and involvement are
important. While much of this support is the same as with all
families (such as approval of a son's and daughter's marriage
choice) extended family members need to learn to respect both
parents' heritages, and the biracial identity of their
grandchildren

Each biological parent's attitude toward his own heritage
and that of his spouse is critical. It must be open, supportive,
and understanding. Race cannot become an issue between them,
and they need to come to a clear and united understanding of
the need to raise their child as biracial before the child has

completed stage I. Further, the parents need to find ways to support their child's healthy biracial identity.

Parents must be able to answer their children's questions about race, prejudice, genetics, people's fears, and diversity; they should give their children a label to use to define their heritage (Poston, 1990), and they need to provide their children with tools to defend themselves against insensitive people (Derman-Sparks, 1989).

It can also be hypothesized parent's general attitudes toward change, risk-taking, being different, and challenging the status-quo is important in how families respond to their unique societal status, and how comfortable biracial children will be in affirming their unique heritage.

In the language of Johnson (1990), the family is also a context. The biracial family context operates to provide protection and skills to handle group antagonism. It also functions as a mechanism for synthesizing the majority and minority contexts into a single unit, and by developing in the child a personal concept of what it's like to be biracial. This is done by not being racist (to either group), by reacting to prejudice, and by discussing openly the various myths and realities that define the two contexts (Wardle, 1988a). The child learns to become comfortable with his identity, and to make flexible choices with regard to the majority and minority context (Jones, 1985).

Group Antagonism. While minority children have a more difficult identity task, due to their status in relationship

to the majority society (Gibbs, 1987), many have argued it is even more difficult for biracial children to develop a healthy identity formation (Gibbs, 1987; McRoy and Freeman, 1986). The dilemma has lead to the argument biracial children are, by definition, marginal personalities (Gibbs, 1987). However, Poston argues that group antagonism (i.e., between group prejudice), not the disparity between cultures, is the key source of difficulties (Hall, 1980; Poston, 1990). The lack of support some biracial children receive from their parents' cultures may be responsible for their difficulties. It is possible for biracial persons to exhibit characteri ics of both cultures, without the conflicts assumed by many researchers (Hall, 1980; Poston, 1990). Given a choice between marginal (a conflict between two cultures) and multicultural (harmony between two cultures), the majority of biracial adults in one study selected multicultural (Hall). These same respondents, whether theyidentified with a single race or a biracial identity, had equally high self-esteem.

Thus this construct has to do with the lack of support from both of the parent's cultural contexts, which also include outright prejudice, exclusion, questioning of loyalty and name calling, and put-downs of the parents.

The resolution of these conflicts - by the family, community,and ultimately the child - will determine a healthy biracial identity.

This construct also includes general antagonism toward differences and the unrecognized status of biracial identity.

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This requires biracial children to often explain who they are, and why one parent is black, the other white (Wardle, 1991a). As the child gets older, usually during adolescence, she will also have to confront racial category forms that do not include a biracial classification. Often not even an 'other' category is allowed. To worsen matters, biracial children are may be told by the teacher of official 'to check the minority box, because that will give you preference' (Benjamin-Wardle, 1991). The biracial child is being told she must select one identity, and that identity must be that of her minority parent (Wardle, 1991a) Forcing a choice between parents will create guilt in the child - for denying one of his parents (Sebring, 1985).

Community. To a large extent the community represents what Bronfenbrenner considers the microsystem of socio-cultural influences (except the family, whose individual attention in this model seems self evident)(Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989). This microsystem includes school, church group, immediate peers and neighborhood groups - scouts, gymnastics team, soccer, baseball, etc.

For older children, especially middle school and high school students, formal groups within the school are important socio-cultural factors: athletic groups, gifted clusters, science organizations, choirs, etc. Informal groups are also important: cliques, political action groups, gangs, neighborhood friendships, etc.

The actual neighborhood will have a different influence, depending on is character, and how dependent the family is on

the neighborhood. Some neighborhoods are tight, self sufficient
communities of homogeneous populations; in other neighborhoods
people share nothing but the streets and trash collectors. In
between are rental or condo units with communal recreation
areas,shared golf courses, and community gas stations and
shopping centers.

Often children do not attend schools in their neighborhoods;
families may attend churches across town.

While it is not clear the relationship of the child to the
community, many researchers have suggested it has a powerful
impact (Gibbs, 1987; McRoy and Freeman, 1986; Wardle, 1991b)
especially when there is an absence of the minority heritage
represented.

Three aspects seem to play heavily on the impact of
thecommunity on biracial identity: does the family feel they
belong; is the community accepting of a range of diversity;
and is there minority representation and biracial children in
at least some of the community groups the children attend:
school, day care, church, neighborhood soccer teams, etc.?
Furthermore, age of the biracial child is a factor. During stage
one, children need to be exposed to ethnic and racial diversity,
know others they can identify with, and be around similar
families (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Wardle, 1987). These community
organizations must also support diversity and help all children
respect differences.

During Stage II children develop groups and friendships,
and define their similarities in relationship to others (Erikson,

1963). Erikson points to many criteria for group selection -
race only being one; and Cross (1987) makes a clear distinction
between personal identity (the child's sense of who they are)
and reference group orientation (the group the child identifies
with). Thus because of the small number of biracial children
in most community groups, these children will use non-race
criteria for group selection. Or a biracial child might choose
to identify with a white group or black group, without either
denying the other side of their heritage, becoming anti-white
or antiblack, or being confused (Newsweek, 1991).

Conclusion.

Biracial children can follow a developmental path that will
result in a healthy, unified biracial identity. The child must
successfully complete two stages (age 3-7 and adolescence),
and must integrate 5 ecological components: family, community,
minority and majority context, and group antagonism. The quality
of each ecological component will instrumentally affect the
child's self identity concept; each developmental stage has
a unique role in this healthy development.

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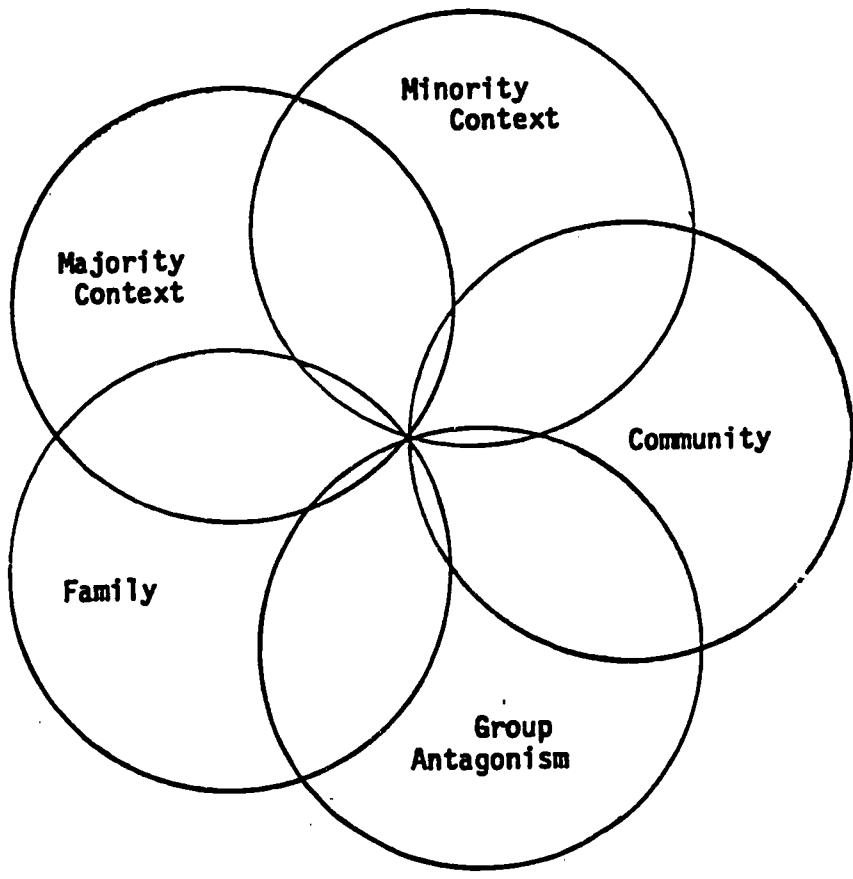
Figure I: The ecological components of the biracial identity model