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The Biracial Identity Crisis

Laila Norwood

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BY definition an identity crisis is a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to an expected aims or a role in society. So a biracial identity crisis is when a person who identifies as more than one race feels as if they are not enough of one race or that they believe they have to pick a side, or they do not feel like they can identify as either because in society's eyes, they are not enough. For example, for the longest time I felt as if I had to identify as Black or Middle Eastern, but never both. Which isn't true because both sides of who I am are beautiful and I am proud to be both.

Being a biracial woman comes with many struggles, and I have had to deal with that and learn to navigate through life, learn how to have my own views on myself, and not care how society views me. Growing up, I was teased by the African American students because they did not believe that I was "Black" enough. I had a slight accent because English wasn't my first language, and my hair looked different from theirs and they didn't like that. So, I tried to erase that part of me as a whole. I tried identifying myself as Middle Eastern only, which was difficult because you wouldn't know that I am Middle Eastern unless I brought it up myself. A lot of people assumed I was Mexican, which was fine with me at the time because it was better than feeling like I wasn't Black or Middle Eastern enough.

My parents didn't help my identity crisis issue either. They would always argue and my Dad would say, "You are just Black, the world will only view you as black," and my Mom would always tell me, "You are Arab, so act like it." They wouldn't acknowledge that I was both Middle Eastern and Black. It took many years of self-searching to realize that everyone was wrong. I am both African American and Middle Eastern. Both cultures are so beautiful, and I am so proud to be apart of both cultures because it makes me the individual I am today. However, what really got to me was that I couldn't be the only one with a biracial background who felt this way or had to deal with these issues. What causes a biracial identity crisis, and what can we do to fix it?

In a research paper by Kristen A. Renn, she takes a look at biracial and multicultural identity development. She believes that there are five "levels" that a biracial child goes through in their time of development that shape how they view themselves as a biracial person. Level one is "Personal Identity," when the

child doesn't have a personal racial reference group. Level two is, "Choice of Group Categorization," which is basically when the child decided to prefer one side of their biracial identity because of appearance, cultural knowledge, group status, and/or social support. Level three is "Enmeshment/Denial," which is where the child has guilt because they do not identify with all aspects of his or her heritage which can lead to anger, shame, or self-hatred. Renn says that the anger and shame needs to be resolved to move past this level. Level four is "Appreciation," where the biracial individual learns more about their diverse racial backgrounds and appreciates them, though they still might choose to identify as one racial background. Finally we have level five, which is "Integration." Integration is the level in which the individual values all of their ethnic backgrounds into their identity.

In a study that was done by Stanford University, it found that there are many benefits to biracial individuals who self-identified themselves as multicultural. Binning and his associates have some theories about why there might be some psychological benefits associated with having a multiracial identity: "For one, perhaps being able to 'stand one's ground' and reject social pressure to identify with a single racial group indicates resiliency," said Binning.

Additionally, instead of falling between the cracks of two separate cultures, individuals who identify with multiple groups might be better equipped to assimilate into both racially homogeneous and racially mixed environments. This way, multiracial individuals in diverse environments might have a broader sense of "fitting in," which can boost both their psychological and social well-being. Basically, it is beneficial for people of multicultural and racial backgrounds to embrace every aspect of their identity because it is better for their mental health.

The study proceeds to explain how rejecting a part of your identity can make a person angry or emotional, which relates back to Renn saying that rejecting a part of your multicultural identity leads to shame and self-hatred. Alternatively, being forced to identify with one race over another can be disconcerting. "If I'm a member of multiple groups and forced to identify with only one group, I'm — by necessity — rejecting part of my identity," Binning said. "Typically, this means taking on the race or ethnicity of one parent over another. This can put people on the defensive, emotionally."

People refuse to acknowledge the struggles that people of mixed race endure everyday. Society typically rejects the idea of being biracial as a whole, but in more recent years society seems to fetishize the idea of biracial children and biracial people. It's as if the existence of biracial people have become a trend that is currently "in." As a child, when I would explain to people that I am mixed, the most common thing I would get from males (mainly Caucasian) is, "Wow, you are so exotic!" Not only is it disgusting, it is also degrading. I feel like I am not even a human to them. I am some rare bird that they got to get the opportunity to see. "Being mixed race means that every day I am seen as a fetish (Parks)." People also tend to fetishize the image of how my children will look when I grow up. They tell me, "If you end up with a white boy, your babies will be so cute!" Or they tell me that they want to marry someone out of their race for the sole purpose of having babies who will be of mixed race.

What I believe needs to be done to resolve the issues society has with multiracial people is to simply realize that we can not be forced to pick one part of what makes us whole. According to Sarah Townsend from UC Santa Barbara, when biracial or multicultural people are forced to categorize themselves into one particular race or when they feel there is a conflict between their categorization and societies categorization of them, there can be lifelong psychological consequences including lower performance, lower self esteem, and lower motivation. Townsend's study also showed that when mixed raced people are free to choose their own identities, they tend to have higher levels of self esteem than monoracial people.

I decided to take a closer look into the mind of someone who identifies as monoracial and see how their views on biracial and multicultural people stand, and if they believe that biracial identity crisis is a real issue and what we can do to fix it. Carson Cox is a 18 year old white male, and this is the interview that took place.

Interview with Carson

Q: When you think of the word "biracial," what comes to mind?

Carson: When I think of biracial, I think of someone whose parents are two different races.

Q: Do you ever look at someone and identify them as biracial, or do you identify them as the race that you believe represents them more?

Carson: Honestly, if I can clearly tell they are mixed, then I will identify them as being someone of mixed race for sure. But if I can not tell, then I will identify them as the race that they look like more to me. Like when I met you, I didn't know you were mixed. I thought you were a light skinned black girl.

Q: Do you know what a biracial identity crisis is?

Carson: I don't know. When someone who is mixed gets mad because people don't know they are mixed? Or they get offended when people don't assume they are biracial."

This response to the last question did not shock me at all. Typically people tend to not take an identity crisis seriously, so when you add the word biracial in front of it, they think it is a joke or that we are being sensitive that people don't recognize our multi-ethnicity. I went on to explain what a biracial identity crisis was to Carson, and then I asked him one last question. I asked him if he thought that a biracial identity crisis was a real issue. He said, "I think it could be real, but I do not think that it is an issue at all. I think that people who think this is a issue are dramatic."

It did not surprise me that someone of a monoracial background believed that people who experience or believe that biracial identity crisis is a real issue are being dramatic, because in their eyes, they see no problem. I also took time to interview a friend of mine who also identifies as being biracial to understand his experiences with being biracial. Ulises Daniel Romero is an 18 year old male

who identifies as Mexican and White. I started off by asking him the question that I experienced all my life.

Interview with Ulises

Q: Growing up biracial, did you ever feel like you had to pick a “side” of which race you can identify as?

Ulises: Yes I did, depending on who I was talking with, I’d picked the side of me that I felt that they would like the best.

Q: Are there any experiences growing up biracial that really have stuck with you? Negative, positive, or both?

Ulises: I remember being called too much of a Gringo/white boy when I wanted to play soccer with the Mexican kids. Even though I spoke Spanish and was part Mexican, I was called a beaner when I wanted to hang out with the white kids.

When he shared this information with me, I felt like someone finally understood me. The issue is that people of monoracial backgrounds tend to shun away people who are biracial, because they believe that they are not good enough to be apart of their heritage since they can not completely identify themselves as that racial background.

When choosing a topic, I chose to do mine on the biracial identity crisis. I was not even sure that anything would come because I still had my own doubts in my mind that I was personally crazy and just making things up in my head. Throughout all my research and interviews, I can finally relax and know that this is valid and a real issue with today’s society that not many people really care about. Many biracial people do go through Reeds’ five levels of biracial development, and as nice as it is to know that level five is where someone embraces both sides of what makes them whole, it is sad that one has to go through a period where they attempt to reject what makes them who they are.

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