Multiracial Competence in Social Work: Recommendations for Culturally Attuned Work with Multiracial People

Kelly F. Jackson and Gina M. Samuels

According to the 2010 U.S. census, approximately 9 million individuals report multiracial identities. By the year 2050, as many as one in five Americans could claim a multiracial background. Despite this population growth, a review of recent empirical and theoretical literature in social work suggests a disproportionate lack of attention to issues of multiraciality. Instead, social work practice models remain embedded in traditional societal discourses of race and culture that often exclude or marginalize the experiences of multiracial individuals and families. This article summarizes recommendations following the domains of awareness, knowledge, and skills in the NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice to support culturally attuned social work practice with multiracial people. The authors argue that a culturally attuned practice approach—one that is inclusive of multiraciality—is not only timely, but also consistent with the profession’s ethical obligation to provide culturally relevant services to all consumers and clients.

Key Words: cultural attunement; cultural competence; mixed race; multiracial; social work practice

This article summarizes recommendations following the domains of awareness, knowledge, and skills in the NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice (NASW, 2001) to support culturally attuned social work practice with multiracial people. We argue that a culturally attuned practice approach, one that is inclusive of multiraciality is not only timely, but also consistent with the profession’s ethical obligation to provide culturally relevant services to all consumers and clients.

This article draws from an interdisciplinary body of scholarship, including social work, to highlight both shared and distinct experiences among multiracial populations. We posit that by comprehending the experiences of multiracial people and how multiracial identities are influenced by multisystemic factors, including the intersection of other identities (for example, gender, socioeconomic status, sexuality), we can expand rather than constrict the lens social workers use to understand ethnic and cultural identity processes within and across diverse groups. This article guides social workers through the first phase of competence—initially expanding our knowledge, awareness, and skills to be more inclusive of multiracial individuals and families. By introducing an initial discussion of this topic, we hope to challenge traditional notions of homogeneous racial groups and expand our commitment to the growing group of people who identify as multiracial.

We use the terms “multiracial” and “mixed race” interchangeably as umbrella labels inclusive of, but not as substitutes for, derivative terms emerging in the literature to describe multiracial populations or people who identify two or more racial heritages, including biracial, hapa, mestizo, Mexipino, Amerasian, and Afroasian (Root & Kelley, 2003).

In 2010, 2.9 percent of the U.S. population, officially identified with more than one racial–ethnic category on the U.S. census. This represents a 32 percent increase in the multiracial population since 2000 (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011). This significant percentage increase corresponds directly to increases in immigration and interracial contact and the rise in interracial marriage. It is estimated that by the year 2050, one in every five Americans could claim a mixed-race background (Lee & Bean, 2004; Smith & Edmonston, 1997). As much of the U.S. population is either multiethnic or multiracial, this is certainly an underestimate of people whose origins are racially and ethnically “mixed” (Morning, 2003). Furthermore, youths are most likely to officially
claim their multiraciality (Dhooper, 2003; Jones & Smith, 2001), an identity increasingly visible in U.S. pop culture. Mixed-race actors, athletes, models, and musicians appear on popular magazines, television shows, Web sites, and radio stations, reflecting the growing ethnic ambiguity of our nation and the world (Dalmage, 2004; Ifekwunigwe, 2004). Equally noteworthy is the media frenzy surrounding the racial identity of President Barack Obama, a multiracial person of African and European American heritage. His public presence, and the ease with which he discusses his racial ancestry, has triggered nationwide discourse around issues of race, mixed race, and identity (Hendricks, 2008; Samuels, 2006).

Because of the significant population growth and increasing visibility of multiraciality in the United States, social workers are likely to see an increase in numbers of clients and family systems identifying as multiracial (Fong, Spickard, & Ewallt, 1995; Hall, 2001). In particular, there is growing research evidence that multiracial people may be at greater risk to experience discrimination, use drugs and alcohol, engage in violent behaviors, and struggle with mental health problems when compared with their nonmultiracial peers (Bolland et al., 2007; Choi, Harachi, Gillmore, & Catalano, 2006; Jackson & LeCroy, 2009; Sanchez & Garcia, 2009; Udry, Li, & Hendrickson-Smith, 2003). Certainly, multiracial heritage does not cause these risk factors. Instead, these findings highlight the need for social workers to understand how a multiracial people’s well-being can be further placed at risk by their growing up in a race-conscious society that constructs a normative and healthy racial identity in terms of a single, mutually exclusive racial group. As healthy racial–ethnic identities have been consistently identified in research as a protective factor for all children of color who must navigate racial bias and prejudice, it is important for social workers to understand risk and protective factors tied to identity processes that may be distinct for multiracial people. Furthermore, providing culturally competent practice, irrespective of the presenting problem and its cause, is a central tenant of ethical social work practice. This article argues that in order to achieve this ethical mandate, social workers must draw from an expanded set of knowledge and skills that are inclusive of contemporary research and literature on multiracial identity development.

Despite the increasingly diverse contexts in which social workers operate, deficits have been identified specific to social work practice with multiracial people. The field has been critiqued for its continued reliance on misinformation or use of inappropriate practice modalities with multiracial people (see Folaron & Hess, 1993; Hall, 2005; Jackson, 2009; Keddell, 2009; Khan & Denman, 1997). For instance, the common and accepted practice of presenting informative “facts” affiliated with a specific panracial or ethnic group (for example, black, white, Native American, Asian, Hispanic) typically displaces mixed-race people by assuming they either do not exist in society or their experiences are equivalent to those of their parent’s racial–ethnic group (Hall, 2005; Keddell, 2009; Spencer, 2006). This is partly attributed to the general lack of research and theory on multiracial populations in not only social work (Fong et al., 1995; Jackson, 2010a; Samuels, 2006; Wardle, 1992), but also related fields like counseling, psychology, and education (see Caballero, Hynes, & Tikly, 2007; Coleman, Norton, Miranda, & McCubbin, 2003; Edwards & Pedrotti, 2008; Wardle, 1992, 2007). Clearly, social work scholarship and theory development regarding all ethnic minority groups have historically been insufficient (Balgopal, Patchner, & Balgopal, 1982). This dearth of culturally relevant theory, research, and literature has continued into the 21st century (Gray, Coates, & Yellow Bird, 2008; Hall, 2005). And there is some evidence that when comparing the quantity of literature and research on ethnic minority groups in social work databases, there is a notable deficit in research on multiraciality. For example, key word searches conducted in December 2009 recovered the following hits for the four panracial and panethnic minority groups within Social Work Abstracts (a prominent database produced by NASW’s review of over 500 journals worldwide): 1,185 articles related to “African Americans/blacks” (12.6 percent of total U.S. population in 2010), 496 related to “Asians” (4.8 percent), 193 related to “Native or American Indians” (0.9 percent), and 590 related to “Hispanics or Latinos” (12.5 percent). Although there is a notable dearth of literature on Latinos (a population with substantial mixed heritage), similar key word searches using the terms “multiracial,” “biracial,” and “mixed race” (2.9 percent of the population) produced only 85 articles. This number was further reduced when we accounted for the common use of biracial, multiracial, and mixed race to describe racially diverse groups, not racially mixed individuals (for example, a multiracial sample...
inclusive of more than one racial group). This left only 34 articles specific to multiracial individuals (n = 21) or multiracial families, including transracial adoptive families (n = 13).

Critiques of the study of multiraciality are also relevant to many of these remaining 34 articles. First, multiracials are often grouped together as a single panethnic group, or one group—often black–white biracials—is used to assumedly represent a homogenous multiracial experience. This is problematic because substantial racial and cultural diversity exists within the group “multiracial,” including multiracial people who do not have white heritage (Lee & Bean, 2004). Both shared and distinct experiences of multiraciality could likely affect the provision of culturally attuned services and supports. Second, researchers often use methods and measures of racial and ethnic identity that have been criticized as inappropriate for understanding identity development among people of mixed-race heritage (Coleman et al., 2003; Jackson, 2010a). Finally, social work scholarship has yet to fully connect with the explosion of literature theorizing and critiquing multiraciality within the fields of ethnic studies, sociology, and political science (DaCosta, 2007; Dalmage, 2004; Ifekwunigwe, 2004; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002; Spencer, 2006; Winters & DeBose, 2003). It is our hope that future theorizing and empirical work will remain flexible and responsive to aspects of race and identity that are both shared and unique to specific subgroups of multiracial people and family structures.

This article uses NASW’s specific competence domains of awareness, knowledge, and skills (NASW, 2001) to frame specific recommendations for multiracially attuned social work practice based on an interdisciplinary review of empirical and theoretical literature on multiraciality. In an effort to respond directly to debates regarding the problematic meaning of “competence” as a potentially presumptuous or oversimplistic professional goal (see Gray et al., 2008; Hoskins, 1999; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998), and awareness and acknowledgment of individual and group-based experiences of pain and oppression (Hoskins, 1999). An attuned practitioner must be perceptive and make microadjustments that account for a client’s intersecting identities (for example, gender, socioeconomic status), which shape potentially unique experiences of race and culture. Finally, being culturally attuned is not a fixed status to which one arrives. Rather, it requires ongoing learning, listening, and critical self-reflection.

**MULTIRACIALITY AND THE NASW STANDARDS FOR CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

The profession defines cultural competence as “the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures . . . in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities” (NASW, 2001, p. 11). Accompanying this definition are 10 standards for cultural competence. This article uses three of these standards to organize an initial discussion of what we call a multiracially attuned practice approach: self-awareness, knowledge, and skills (NASW, 2001).

**Multiracial Self-Awareness**

“Social workers shall . . . develop an understanding of their own personal, cultural values and beliefs” (NASW, 2001, p. 4).

Discourse on social work practice underscores the importance of addressing one’s own beliefs and biases prior to entering the field and throughout any working relationship (Kondrat, 1999). This first step is also recommended among advocates for culturally sensitive practice with multiracial people (see Dhooper, 2003; Gibbs, 1998; McRoy & Freeman, 1986; Wardle, 1992; Winn & Priest, 1993). This process includes an awareness of one’s beliefs regarding race and culture and their centrality in our lives and those of others. For instance, a first-generation Korean American school social worker may overlook the different experiences with acculturation, ethnic discrimination, and identity development of his 14-year-old, mixed-race Korean–white client. He may not be attuned to the dual discrimination his client may face at school with Korean and white peers and at home with Korean and white relatives. Or, conversely, he may assume that his mixed-race client is confused about his identity or that the disruptive classroom behavior teachers are noting is caused...
by problems with his identity. Lack of an awareness of his assumptions could not only jeopardize the helping alliance, but also constrain or negatively bias the assessment and, thus, the intervention process. Yet pursuing cultural attunement requires both an understanding of one’s beliefs related to race and a critical evaluation of how our personal systems of racial understanding are embedded within, and potentially reify, broader sociohistorical structures of racial meaning. How race is constructed in the United States has implications for shaping our societal, and thus our personal, beliefs about race and about specific racialized populations. The impact of these societal narratives and beliefs on one’s developmental processes are further discussed in the Multiracial Knowledge section.

Literatures in the fields of sociology, anthropology, and political science have long critiqued the social myth, yet enduring belief, that race is a biologically real and meaningful system for categorizing or understanding human beings (Samuels, 2009; Spencer, 2006). For example, critical race theory, which emerged following the civil rights movement, emphasizes that although race is a socially constructed phenomenon, race remains a contrived and deeply imbedded system of categorizing (that is, racializing) people according to observable physical attributes that have no correspondence to a genetic or biological reality (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Still, folk theories of race invoke it as a discernable characteristic—a legitimate method of creating groups of people by racializing characteristics like skin tone, phenotypes, and essentializing traits or skills as normative to specific groups (for example intelligence, athletic ability) (Samuels, 2006). Indeed, society ascribes a single racial category despite the ethnic diversity within one’s ancestry. For example, the one-drop rule derives from the genetic and social understanding of race as monocentric; it relegates the outcome of any racial mixing to a “nonwhite” racial status (Davis, 2001; Spencer, 2006; Spickard, 1989). Thus, black–white multiracials (and others with mixed-race white heritage) are expected to claim the racial identity of their racial minority parent. This has protected “whiteness” as a privileged racial status, conceived as the only racially “pure” category despite centuries of known racial mixing (DaCosta, 2007; Morning, 2003). Although changes in the 2000 U.S. census allowed reports of more than one racial heritage, the social potency of a monocentric paradigm, and mass internalization of this racial hierarchy, continues to inform our collective and individual racial beliefs and identities. Multiracial literature further explicates how these same folk theories of race combine to inform unique social narratives related to multiraciality (Dalmage, 2004; Ifekwunigwe, 2004; Keddell, 2009; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2003, 2005). These constructions of multiraciality include the following: narratives within society and science that pathologize multiracial individuals as inherently at risk for cultural loss, identity confusion, and psychological problems caused genetically by mixed racial heritage, as typified by the figures of the “tragic mulatto” and the “marginal man”; social conceptions of interracial partnerships as unnatural and, thus, inherently ill fated; constructions of the “multiracial identity” as an unresolved and unhealthy identity status; narratives within communities of color that pathologize claims to multiracial identities as attempts to “pass” as white and escape racial stigma; and today’s portrayal of multiracials as “rainbow children”—experiencing the “best of both worlds” or validating a “postrace” America (see Chiong, 1998; Coleman et al., 2003; Dalmage, 2004; Davis, 2001; Gaskins, 1999; Guevarra, 2007; Ifekwunigwe, 2004; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2003, 2005; Root & Kelley, 2003; Samuels, 2006; Shih & Sanchez, 2005; Spencer, 2006; Wijeyesinghe, 2001). Therefore, developing critical self-awareness requires an understanding of how these societal narratives of race inform our own beliefs about multiracial individuals and families.

To encourage this internal dialogue and build critical self-awareness, Harris and Durodoye (2006) suggested that practitioners routinely ask themselves questions such as “How do I feel when I see a member of my racial group romantically involved or married interracially?” and “Do I automatically conclude that problems are a result of being multiracial or are identity related?” However, we would add that developing culturally attuned self-awareness extends beyond noting one’s beliefs and values to include a more critical self-reflectivity (see Kondrat, 1999). For example, it requires questioning how sociohistorical constructions of race and specifically the protection of whiteness as a “pure” racial category inform our conceptions of multiraciality. To what degree has our social obsession with black–white race mixing not only resulted in pathologizing today’s black–white multiracials, but also caused us to ignore other multiracial populations? Furthermore, most people in the United
States are multiethnic (for example, Polish–German–Irish, a mixture of tribal or indigenous ancestries, even unknown racial ancestries) and are increasingly multicultural (Lee & Bean, 2004). This reality inspires questions that develop self-awareness around one’s own ethnic and racial identity: How do my racial identity and my beliefs reify monocentric racial norms and racial hierarchies? How does my own identity mask the existing racial, ethnic, or cultural diversity in my family background? How am I advantaged by the heritages I claim or those I do not claim? How is my way of racially identifying, or not identifying, accepted (or viewed as normal) within society or by those in my family or friendship group?

Although central to effective and ethical social work practice, multiracial self-awareness must be accompanied by “new” information, a knowledge base that derives from empirical research inclusive of indigenous perspectives. This can begin to aid social workers in pursuing empirically informed practices that are experienced by clients as attuned to their lived experiences. We argue that this commitment to developing critical self-awareness faces all social workers, even those who are so-called “insiders” to multiraciality. This ongoing developmental task is linked to expanding one’s knowledge base beyond personal experience and dominant frameworks of race and identity.

Multiracial Knowledge

“Social workers shall have and continue to develop specialized knowledge and understanding” (NASW, 2001, p. 4).

Scholars have long noted the need to expand the profession’s knowledge base regarding multiraciality (Bowles, 1993; Folaron & Hess, 1993; Fong et al., 1995; McRoy & Freeman, 1986; Samuels, 2006). Indeed, there is some evidence that professionals in the field are seeking such information to guide their work with multiracial individuals and families (Folaron & Hess, 1993; Harris, 2002). We use three domains of knowledge, drawing from NASW’s discussion of “competency” in this area to introduce readers to the existing knowledge base on which a culturally attuned social work practice can be built: (1) the sociopolitical history of multiraciality in the United States, (2) contemporary theories and models of multiracial identity development, and (3) the strengths and challenges of multiracial people across the life course.

History. Though people of mixed heritage have legitimate claims to two or more races or ethnic group identities, society has traditionally denied people the right to assert more than one ethnic or racial membership (Davis, 2001; Gibbs & Moskowitz-Sweet, 1991). There has also been great variance in how different ethnic groups have accommodated or rejected racially mixed children and interracial partnerships. These differences can substantially shape one’s multiracial experience, including the degree of their acceptance or rejection in a group, and thus shape processes and outcomes of identity development (Lee & Bean, 2004). Excellent reviews of the historical experiences of different multiracial populations can be found in the works of Davis (2001), DaCosta (2007), Dalmage (2004), Ifekwunigwe (2004), Lee and Bean (2004), and Guevarra (2007).

Social workers should be attuned to the continued use of racial epithets (for example, half-breed, mixed blood) and racially derogatory labels for mixed-race people, such as “mulatto,” deriving from the word “mule,” which signifies an infertile “mixed-breed” animal (Davis, 2001; Ifekwunigwe, 2004; Samuels, 2006). The use of such language by a social worker could seriously hinder the development of a helpful alliance with multiracial clients and interracial families. Using language that remains flexible to within-group diversity would advantage social work practice beyond multiracial populations, taking seriously the heterogeneity and complexity embedded within all cultural and panethnic groups.

Cultural attunement also requires knowledge of how racial legacies shape contemporary experiences of race and identity. Scholars consistently highlight how monocentric racial legacies inform unique racialized microaggressions for multiracials (Dalmage, 2004; Oriti, Bibb, & Mahboubi, 1996), requiring people to navigate racism and “monoracism” (Root & Kelley, 2003). This includes navigating racial litmus tests and questions like “What are you?” that require people to claim their allegiance to a racial group and culturally perform only that identity (Dalmage, 2004; Ifekwunigwe, 2004). Panethnic advocacy organizations have also voiced opposition to the multiracial movement and multiracial identities as antithetical to the survival and well-being of panracial group solidarity against institutional racism (see Chiong, 1998; Dalmage, 2004; Fong et al., 1995; Spencer, 2006; Winters & DeBose, 2003). Consequently, a multiracially attuned approach requires social workers to appreciate the politically
and emotionally charged dynamics surrounding multiraciality. Arguably, simply *being* multiracial is a highly political and public existence.

**Theories and Models of Identity.** Cultural attunement challenges social workers to systematically determine the relevance of any theoretical framework of development with respect to a client’s values and individual needs (NASW, 2001). In this case, social workers must discern whether a given model of development is relevant to, and thus useful in, understanding a client’s racial and cultural experience. Increasingly, scholars critique single-race models of racial-ethnic identity as problematic for use with multiracial populations (see Coleman et al., 2003; Hall, 2005; Jackson, 2009; Root, 1998; Wijeyesinghe, 2001). Instead, multiracial identity research advances new models with fluid conceptions of identity development, suggesting that identities vary and change on the basis of context and family system and over the life course (see Hall, 2005; Jackson, 2009; Renn, 2003; Rockquemore, Brunsma, Delgado, 2009; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005; Root, 1998; Wijeyesinghe, 2001). These dynamic conceptions of race and identity replace earlier stage models that pathologized multiracial identity outcomes as psychologically unhealthy (Stonequist, 1937) or ignored such identities altogether (Coleman et al., 2003). This group of models further stresses the centrality of historic and contemporary social contexts and, in this way, compliments earlier discussions of creating a knowledge base that values the sociohistorical context of one’s development. Finally, the ecologically grounded processes of development that these models advance are especially complimentary to social work’s long-standing endorsement of the person-in-environment perspective—that human development is a contextually embedded and highly complex process influenced by the interaction of multiple social identities and social statuses (for example, socioeconomic status, sexuality, gender, immigration status).

Several findings from empirical research using these models of identity have begun to explicate a range of “healthy” identity expressions among multiracialities (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005), including the finding that even biological siblings may not share an appearance or experience of their multiracial heritages and, thus, can claim different identities (Root, 1998). Multiracial do not all identify as multiracial, and they all do not grow up in similar racial, cultural, or familial contexts (Samuels, 2009). Assessments of different healthy identity outcomes must be interpreted in these distinct contexts. This requires practitioners to incorporate theories of intersectionality (Samuels & Ross-Sheriff, 2007) that would draw their attention to factors like a child’s age, racialized appearance, gender, family structure, parental racial socialization approaches, ability/access to acquiring multilingual and multicultural skills, and the racial–ethnic diversity of one’s local context. Incorporation of these identities, not as additive but as dynamic and mutually informing factors, helps protect practitioners from using oversimplified understandings of race and culture as homogenous or as the sole lens to assess a client’s strengths and vulnerabilities.

**Strengths and Challenges.** Comprehensive ecological models also provide opportunities to reveal both challenges and gains embedded within one’s experience of multiraciality. For instance, experiencing discrimination, being marginalized, claiming different identities, and feeling accepted and affirmed in multiple racial and cultural communities can be, simultaneously, a part of one’s multiracial experience over the life course (deAnda & Riddel, 1991; Guevarra, 2007; Jackson, 2009; Jackson, 2010b; Miville, Constantine, Baysden, & So-Lloyd, 2005). Research makes clear that multiracial individuals can and do face distinct challenges attributed to living as a multiracial person or in a multiracial family system in a monocentric society (Choi et al., 2006; Gibbs & Moskowitz-Sweet, 1991; Samuels, 2009). For instance, some multiracial people, because of social distance that persists between many racial–ethnic groups (for example, black and white, Native and white), have to contend with historical dynamics that manifest in their own family systems. Further, systems for establishing racial membership (for example, the one-drop rule or blood quantum criteria to establish tribal memberships) continue to form the legal and informal guidelines for inclusion as an “authentic” member (Davis, 2001; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2003). However, research has also made clear that not all multiracial people struggle, and experiencing challenges related to this heritage does not eliminate the potential for gains or the development of strengths. For example, after reviewing social science research on multiracial populations, Shih and Sanchez (2005) found little evidence that multiracial individuals were dissatisfied, unhappy, or uncomfortable with their mixed-race identity. Other studies have also reported that their multiracial
participants had a stronger sense of ethnic identity (Bracey, Bamaca, & Umana-Taylor, 2004), felt more positive about themselves racially (Binning, Unzueta, Huo, & Molina, 2009; Gibbs & Hines, 1992), and were more socially well adjusted (Binning et al., 2009; Johnson & Nagoshi, 1986) than their peers who did not identify as multiracial. Again, the presence of these strengths does not eliminate challenges. Rather, it adds complexity to our understanding and knowledge base of how multiracial populations can successfully navigate the monocentricity and racism they experience.

Finally, cultural attunement requires a social worker to demonstrate respect in their practice by humbly assuming a position of “not knowing” (Hoskins, 1999). Social workers must remain attuned to what they know about an individual client’s experience and that it may not yet be represented within existing empirical research. Although both self-awareness and an empirically informed knowledge base are essential for moving the field toward a multiracially attuned practice approach, the knowledge domain of practice in this area continues to be constrained by the dearth of practice-based empirical research on multiraciality in general and in social work in particular.

**Multiracial Skills**

“Social workers shall use appropriate methodological approaches, skills, and techniques” (NASW, 2001, p. 19).

As with any client or family, it is important to select interventions that are culturally yet individually attuned, making use of a relevant knowledge base and the client’s natural support systems (NASW, 2001). However, many multiracial people do not experience a sense of their multiraciality in a collective community of other multiracial people. In fact, the naturalistic environment for many of them is that of a racialized minority in their parent’s racial and cultural communities, their local neighborhoods, and sometimes their own family systems (Jackson, 2009; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005; Samuels, 2009). Consequently, skilled work with multiracial people involves not only building connections to their racial–ethnic communities of origin, but also connecting them to other multiracial individuals and family systems. We acknowledge that most multiracial clients will not present with racial identity issues in practice. However, it is important for social workers to remain attuned to how the social ecology of their clients can exacerbate, protect, inhibit, or complicate any presenting problem. Further research continues to highlight healthy racial–ethnic identities as protective factors for all people of color. For multiracial clients who experience social disapproval or invalidation of their chosen racial identity, their psychological well-being and ability to be resilient is harmed (Gillem & Thompson, 2004; Rockquemore, 1999; Root, 1996). In these circumstances, it becomes crucial for social work practitioners to engage their multiracial clients in meaningful discussions about race and culture in a sensitive and responsible way.

This section proposes introductory skills and resources to consider in work with multiracial individuals, with a specific focus on identity processes. A deeper discussion of culturally relevant practice approaches, though beyond the scope of this article, is being initially explored in other disciplines, mainly psychology. These works, some of which include relevant case studies, are being hailed for their examination of culturally sensitive and effective practice strategies with multiracial people (see Gillem & Thompson, 2004; McDowell et al., 2005; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2003).

Any client–worker relationship can be complicated by discussing issues related to race and identity. Such dialogue can be uniquely challenging in work with multiracials, who often are routinely questioned in public and private about the details of their racial heritage and identities and often ridiculed for their identity responses (Buchanan & Acevedo, 2004; Dalmage, 2004; Jackson, 2010b; Samuels, 2009). Thus, some may resist openly engaging in potentially loaded questions regarding their identities and may doubt the relevance of sharing this information when asked early in the relationship (Hall, 2001).

Several skills can be developed by social workers to also avoid monocentric ways of discussing race and identity even as trust is being built in the working relationship. These include not requiring clients to indicate the group that they feel “most identified” with or the culture in which they feel “most comfortable.” Changing intake or assessment forms and one’s language to allow clients to racially and culturally identify (or not) in multiple ways is an important first step. When possible and appropriate, practitioners should include a client’s perspective on his or her identity rather than solely indicating his or her biological heritage or a parent’s report of a child’s identity. To demonstrate such respect,
an attuned social worker could use open-ended questions to solicit clients’ responses regarding their chosen identity. For example, asking the client questions like “How do you choose to identify?” or “Tell me about your experiences in relation to your chosen identity” would demonstrate respect for the client’s right to choose an identity and encourage the client to provide more descriptive accounts of his or her experience, which is crucial to assessment and mutual treatment planning.

Recently, specific practice modalities have received widespread support for work with multiracial people, particularly in supporting positive identity development and in countering pathologizing experiences related to multiracial heritage. In particular, narrative therapy has been proposed among several scholars (see Edwards & Pedrotti, 2004; Gibbs, 1987; Keddell, 2009; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2003). In narrative therapy, clients are viewed as possessing essential knowledge and are the experts of their own lives (Abels & Abels, 2001). This view of client-as-expert compliments the value a culturally attuned approach places on lived experience as central to developing practice wisdom. Furthermore, a narrative approach would help a multiracial person to “externalize” the pathologizing societal narratives of multiraciality and replace them with a narrative that affirms a positive sense of identity (Abels & Abels, 2001; Edwards & Pedrotti, 2004; Gibbs, 1987; Rittenhouse, 2000; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2003). For example, a social worker might work with a multiracial client on constructing his or her own labels or creating his or her own language to describe his or her identity in a positive and affirming way (for example, Mexipino—Mexican and Filipino) (Miville et al., 2005). In addition, an attuned worker could assist multiracial clients in developing strategies of resistance, specific to oppressive circumstances that clients may encounter in their daily lives (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2003), including how to affirm one’s multiracial identity when pressured to choose one race. Specific narrative techniques recommended for work with multiracial people include the following: critical conversation approach (see McDowell et al., 2005), relational narrative therapy (see Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2003), and hope therapy (see Edwards & Pedrotti, 2004). These approaches can help people to balance the real constraints placed on their identities in society and within their immediate social environments (for example, the one-drop rule) with their sense of agency to construct a positive sense of self in the context of these constraints.

Identifying social supports to promote healthy individual development is crucial to multiracially attuned practices. With multiracial clients who have experienced social identity invalidation, this would involve connecting them to a supportive community of mixed-race others who could validate and nurture their chosen identity. In the past, social workers were advised to connect mixed-race people to one or more of their ethnic minority cultures of origin (Gibbs, 1987; McRoy & Freeman, 1986). Findings generated from recent studies suggest that although these communities are still important resources, they are also incomplete (Miville et al., 2005; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005). Instead, there is evidence that multiracial people can benefit greatly from affirming experiences and relationships with other multicultural people and families (deAnda & Riddle, 1991; Jackson, 2009; Samuels, 2009). Yet most of the multiracial population in the United States is regionally dispersed; many multiracial people have limited or no access to a broader community of multiracial people (Jones & Smith, 2001; Miville et al., 2005). Social workers must identify resources and social supports that are available locally and nationally that could promote opportunities for multiracial clients to develop a sense of their racialized selves in the context of a multiracial community (McRoy & Freeman, 1986). Increasingly, access to an online multiracial community now offers a way to connect to a worldwide multiracial diaspora. Some of the more prominent organizations are I-Pride (http://www.ipride.org/), MAVIN (http://www.mavin.net/), the Mixed Heritage Center (http://www.mixedheritagecenter.org/), and SWIRL, Inc. (http://swirlinc.wordpress.com/). Social workers should become familiar with these resources for community building as well as other resources (for example, local organizations, books) that reflect and affirm a variety of multiracial and multicultural heritages (for lists of additional resources, see Gaskins, 1999; Root & Kelley, 2003; Steinberg & Hall, 2000). A multiracially attuned practitioner—again, drawing from the theoretical approach of intersectionality—must take into account that not all people require the same types or levels of racial-ethnic bonding and that need or desire for relationships with other multiracials can change across the life course.
CONCLUSION

In this article, we have argued for a multiracially attuned approach to enhance social work practice with a multiracial population. Indeed, many of the ideas advanced within cultural attunement are complimentary to existing language in NASW’s cultural competence standards, including its conceptualization as a life-long process for social workers (NASW, 2001). However, we believe that shifting the language to cultural attunement helps to reinforce some challenges embedded within effectively executing this domain of ethical social work practice. First, it requires vigilance, humility, and informed critical self-awareness over the course of one’s professional development and during one’s interactions with clients. Being culturally attuned also requires practice wisdom that draws from the client and family system’s unique racial and cultural experience while also using an empirically, historically, and professionally derived knowledge base. Finally, we have argued that this level of self-awareness must acknowledge that many of our personal, professional, and theoretical conceptions of racial identity are embedded in dominant and often flawed racial legacies, including monocentricity. In proposing the use of the extant interdisciplinary research on multiraciality, we highly encourage the development of both theory and applied social work research, particularly in the areas of school social work and family practice. As the school and family contexts are central to a child’s development, a robust body of research is needed to understand how social workers can support families, including adoptive families, to facilitate the healthy development of multiracial children at home and in their communities and schools. Likewise, there is a dearth of social work literature by researchers who are themselves multiracial. Including indigenous voices of multiracial people—not only as research participants, but also as scholars—is an important aspect of developing a multiracially attuned body of research and theory in social work.

The centrality of advocating for multiracial clients to access affirming experiences of themselves as multiracials is of the same protective importance as that for others who, marginalized in broader society, can find affirmation and a normalized sense of self with others who share an identity and experience. Future research should explore the degree to which contemporary cohorts of multiracial youths, in facing enduring monocentricity, come to form a collective sense of themselves and, thus, a distinct cultural group identity. This does not replace their community of origin but, rather, may offer an added sense of community and kinship to support identity work.

Building on earlier calls for the inclusion of multiraciality in social work (that is, Fong et al., 1995), we believe the next step is to fully move beyond traditional societal discourses of race and culture in social work theory, research, practice, and education (Keddell, 2009). A multiracially attuned practice model inherently rests on the existence of a broader body of empirical scholarship that engages multisystemic and dynamic understandings of race, culture, and human development. Thus, highlighting how multiracial identities are influenced by multisystemic factors, including other intersecting identities (for example, gender, class, sexuality), can expand rather than constrict the lens we use to understand ethnic and cultural identity processes, including those that operate within assumed homogenous panracial groups. This shift would support social work educators, researchers, and practitioners for effective practice in an increasingly diverse society. It is our hope to renew a dialogue on race, culture, and identity in the field that is maximally inclusive of the many ways in which race and culture are lived and experienced in today’s society and into the future.

REFERENCES


Buchanan, N. T., & Acevedo, C. A. (2004). When face and soul collide: Therapeutic concerns with racially


\textit{Kelly F. Jackson, PhD, MSW}, is assistant professor, School of Social Work, College of Public Programs, Arizona State University, 411 North Central Avenue, Suite 800, Phoenix, AZ 85004; e-mail: kellyf.jackson@asu.edu. \textit{Gina M. Samuels, PhD, MSSW}, is associate professor, School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago.

Original manuscript received April 6, 2009
Final revision received January 25, 2010
Accepted March 4, 2010
Racial and Ethnic Competency Are Key Social Work Components

Social Workers Are Called to Include Cultural Competencies in Their Practices

Success in social work practice requires cultural competencies, such as racial and ethnic acumen. In order to provide effective services for clients, social workers must have an understanding not only of the cultural values, beliefs and practices of their constituents, but also their own biases about those of other ethnic backgrounds. While race and ethnicity do not define the entirety of an individual, they are a component in understanding a person’s world view. Social workers better aid their clients when they are competent in understanding that world view.

The topic of ethnic and racial competency receives robust treatment in the latest issue of Social Work, published by NASW Press. Three articles specifically focus on racial-ethnic issues:

- Spirituality often plays a role in a client’s recovery, but a social worker’s knowledge of spiritual values may not include knowledge of Native American spirituality. In “Spiritual Assessment and Native Americans: Establishing the Social Validity of a Complementary Set of Assessment Tools,” David R. Hodge and Gordon E. Limb make a case for adapting client assessment techniques to reflect the spiritual world view of Native Americans. Furthermore, they point out that “spiritual competence” is an active process involving the social worker’s awareness of his own world view, an awareness of the client’s world view and the design of strategies that are appropriate to the client’s outlook. They also point out that spiritual competencies should be developed for each Native culture.
- Elderly immigrant populations, however, must deal with a very different life situation. Kyoung Hag Lee and Dong Pil Yoon discuss a particular set of struggles in “Factors Influencing the General Well-Being of Low-Income Korean Immigrant Elders.” Language barriers and a sense of dislocation can bear on the sense of well being among these elders, and lead to anxiety, depression, and health problems. The authors argue for several strategies to aid elderly Korean immigrant clients, such as language competency not only for social workers, but also for the US-raised relatives of these elders. Furthermore, the authors mention the close connection Korean elders often have with their churches, and how this connection can be fostered for further client benefit.
- We are becoming more accustomed to tailoring client care to the client’s ethnical-racial background—but what about multiracial clients? “Multiracial Competence in Social Work: Recommendations for Culturally Attuned Work with Multiracial People,” by Kelly F. Jackson and Gina M. Samuels argues for more culturally attuned practices with multiracial people. The authors point out that a multiracial client’s self-awareness and identity require a social worker’s acknowledgement of this cultural duality, and of the social worker’s own presumptions about race and ethnicity. The social worker needs to understand the unique situation of the client, and factor the client’s self-identity into designing strategies for care.

Additionally, this issue of Social Work includes a variety of helpful articles on mentoring, human services and management.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW), in Washington, DC, is the largest membership organization of professional social workers with 145,000 members. It promotes, develops, and protects the practice of social work and social workers. NASW also seeks to enhance the well-being of individuals, families, and communities through its advocacy.

NASW Press is a leading scholarly press in the social sciences. It serves faculty, practitioners, agencies, libraries, clinicians, and researchers throughout the United States and abroad. Known for attracting expert authors, the NASW Press delivers professional information to hundreds of thousands of readers through its scholarly journals, books, and reference works.


9/7/2011