Promoting Wellness in the Face of Oppression: Competence in Multiracial Counseling

A review of the video

**Mixed-Race Identities**
with Maria P. P. Root

Reviewed by
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In *Mixed-Race Identities*, Maria P. P. Root, an expert in multiracial identity issues, demonstrates her approach to working with clients from mixed racial backgrounds. Keeping with the format traditionally used in the American Psychological Association (APA) videotape series, the video is essentially divided into three sections. The didactic portions of the video are conducted through dialogue between Root and her host, Jon Carlson. Root begins by explaining the necessity for a clinical framework for clients with mixed-race identities, and she explains the conceptual framework she developed to meet the unique needs of this client group. Root then carries out a practice session with a client, which is followed by commentary on various portions of the session that provide context for important considerations when working with clients from this population.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000), the multiracial population in the United States has increased significantly over the past 25 to 30 years, with more and more individuals identifying themselves as biracial, multiracial, or mixed. This shift, however, is occurring in a society that remains invested in maintaining its socially constructed racial classification system and corresponding unequal distribution of privilege. Consequently, identity development is often derailed or made difficult and confusing for those not fitting nicely into a single racial category.

What has become clear is that identity development for multiracial individuals in this unfriendly social context does not parallel the identity development for their single-race peers. Rather than a single and clear path of racial identity development, many multiracial persons create a racial identity that is a unique combination of diverse elements of their ethnic heritage (Hall, 1992; Root, 1996). For clinicians, the implication is that single-race models of identity development, such as those developed by Cross (1995) and Helms (1990), should be replaced with a more culturally appropriate model when working with multiracial clients. To address this clinical need, Root developed the ecological framework for understanding multiracial identity development, which she explains in the didactic first portion of the video.

Root's framework is comprehensive in that it takes into consideration the many points of influence on the process of identity formation. Contextual filters of experience are referred to as *macrolenses* in Root's model and include gender, class, and regional history of race. *Microlenses* refers to inherited influences on experience such as language spoken in the familial environment, given names, phenotype, cultural values, and sexual orientation. Finally, the model also takes into consideration individual personality traits and the
An important point highlighted by Root in the video is that distress related to mixed-race identity is primarily caused by the proclivity of many in the United States to adhere to the idea of fixed single-race categories and a desire to place others in such categories. Root also seems to coin the term *authenticity testing*, which she uses in the video to refer to the tendency of individuals who identify with a single racial identity group to act as the gatekeeper for that group. For example, this might look like criticisms of mixed-race persons for not being “Latino enough” or “Black enough” to actually be considered “truly” Latino or Black. According to Root, this can result in an overidentification with one group or another through internalization of exaggerated and sometime negative stereotypes about that group.

In the video, Root suggests that her framework for multiracial identity development can be used not only as a conceptualization tool but as a point of entry for meaningful dialogue with clients. Root also suggests that the Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People that she developed in 2003 can be used similarly as a door opener with clients. Root's clinical expertise is apparent in her culturally informed approach to the client in the vignette portion of the video as she demonstrates use of the model as a tool to guide inquiry. During this session, Root gently questions the client in a fashion that communicates her understanding of the complexity of the client’s experience while simultaneously honoring the client’s expert role in her own lived experience. In the didactic portion that follows the clinical session, Root reinforces the importance of honoring the client’s authority on her or his life, which of course is not a new idea. However, Root emphasizes the increased importance of doing so in an effort to avoid replication of the power dynamics that racially diverse individuals experience outside of the clinical setting.

This video is an excellent resource for those teaching diversity issues and multicultural counseling in graduate programs in mental health, such as psychology, counseling, social work, or psychiatry. Paired with professional literature in multiracial mental wellness by Root or her colleagues, this video provides useful information for clinicians to enhance understanding of the racial identifications of multiracial individuals.

References


