

Kristen Renn's Multiracial Identity Theory

Kristen Renn's model uses Bronfenbrenner ecology theory to frame college student bi-racial and multi-racial identity and experiences. Her theory is also based off of Maria Root's work, which used ecological frameworks to study young people bi-racial and multi-racial identities.

Based on Renn's studies, she identified the following five patterns of identities among mixed-race students (Quaye & Harper, 2015)

1. **Monoracial identity:** student chooses only one of his/her heritage background with which to identify.
2. **Multiple monoracial identities:** student alternates between/among heritage group identities. Different factors affect which heritage group the student identifies with at a given time and place.
3. **Multiracial identity:** student elects an identity that represents more than one heritage, for example Black and Mexican.
4. **Extraracial identity:** student "opts out" of racial characterization. This pattern represents a resistance from the student to what he/she consider an artificial category "...socially constructed by the dominant, monoracial, White majority." (Renn, 2008, p.17).
5. **Situational Identity:** student moves between or among the above options. Students change identity based on circumstances and this shift is based on interaction between student and environment. For example if a student avoids any racial categorization but when forced, he/she will check off Hispanic, Asian, and native American on institutional forms (Renn, 2000)

Renn's studies show that 48% of the students who participated in the studies identified themselves with monoracial pattern, 48% of the students with the multi monoracial, 89% of the students with the multiracial pattern, 23% of the students with the extraracial pattern, and 61% of the students with the situational pattern. Percentage doesn't add up to 100% because all students in the extraracial identity pattern identified with more than one pattern as situational students did (Renn, 2008).

Renn not only developed the five pattern representation where she believes individuals move freely among these identity patterns, but also investigated how the environment influence multi-racial identity and what lead students to one pattern of identity over the others (Renn, 2003).

Strengths

Renn, through her first qualitative research, understood that peer culture regulated how students flow among social groups and student organizations, and the experiences of fitting in those places have an impact on how students develop their identities (Renn, 2000).

In a later study, Renn applied Bronfenbrenner's theory and that helped her understand the influences environment have on multi-racial identity. Renn's research (2003) found that students' characteristics, skills, and cultural knowledge, combined with the intensity they seek or avoid exploring their racial identity, led them to certain campus microsystems and away from

others. Their microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem' environments provided college students with a rich and important setting for identity development. The interaction with their microsystems strongly influenced where students fit in and how easily they could move from one identity-space to another. The mesosystem also influenced that movement and the interest of identifying with various groups on campus. The exosystem helped with the students' awareness of racial identity by paying attention to racial issues through experiences such as curriculum and institutional forms (Renn, 2003).

Weaknesses

It can be observed some limitations from Renn's research related to the sample used for it. Renn based his research in three studies. The sample for those studies consisted of a total of fifty-six students from six institutions. The first study collected data from twenty four students, where twenty of them had one white parent and one parent of color. The sample size is small and even we could say not well representative of mixed races. The data may also represent only a region of the country, since the studies were conducted in colleges and universities in the Northeast and Midwest of the United State (Renn, 2003). Lastly because of the small sample from her qualitative research it may be difficult to transfer the findings to the general population of mixed-race students (Renn, 2008).

Renn's model helps understand the experiences multiracial students experience while on campus, but doesn't capture the student multiracial identity development. Renn's pattern theory provides a framework for the student identity at a given point in time, but it does not allow the tracking of how the identities are developing through time (Renn, 2003).

Application

It is important to learn and understand the implications of this theory because the multiracial student population is growing. Data from the 2010 U.S. Census shows that 9 million people reported being from more than one race, which represents an increase of 32% over the reports from the 2010 U.S. Census. Based on this numbers it is normal to predict an increase in college students identifying as multiracial (Quaye & Harper, 2015).

We have already seen from previous lessons that engaging students through different experiences inside and outside the classroom is important for the development of their identity. Providing college students with courses, readings, workshops, and seminars that discuss mixed-race topics will allow students to explore their racial identity (Renn, 2003).

One of Renn's studies found out the importance for multiracial students to have a space, "a group of like-others with whom to affiliate" (2000, p. 415). Institutions should promote and help organizations of mixed heritage, and especially the creation of multiracial student groups if there are no such organizations already in place.

Administrative and faculty, by learning about their multiracial population and their concerns, may help them find places on campus where they can develop their identities.

References

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