‘I feel like I don't belong’: Examining the Social and Cultural Experiences of Bicultural and Biracial College Students

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In higher education across the U.S., there is a growing presence in mainstream U.S. culture (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). Bicultural individuals navigate between culture-of-origin and acculturation, experiencing additional challenges of discrimination and micro-aggressions (NCES, 2015; Santos, Ortiz, Morales, & Rosales, 2007). Developmental nature of college – academic, social, identity (Conley, Kirsch, Dickson, & Bryant, 2014).

Experiences of Bicultural & Biracial College Students
- Perceived racial discrimination associated with increased suicidal ideation, anxiety, and depression (Hwang & Goto, 2009; McKenzie, 2009).
- Lack of support and community engagement affect sense of belongingness, academic achievement, and psychological well-being (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2011).
- Negotiating identity between groups to avoid social oppression (Ellis & Chen, 2013).

Cultural Case Conceptualization Model
- We imposed a cultural lens on a CBT framework with a relational emphasis to guide our understanding of these population's experiences.

Hypotheses
1. Greater levels of ethnic and American identity (thoughts and behaviors), bicultural social connectedness, and positive feelings about both cultures would be positively and significantly related to increased self-esteem and decreased psychological distress.
2. Negative feelings about both cultures, and lower levels of culturally-oriented thoughts, behaviors, and relationships would be associated with greater psychological distress and lower self-esteem.

Method
- Participants: Students enrolled in higher education were eligible to participate.
- N = 147, 76.9% female, age range 18-38 (M = 21.13; SD = 3.29)
- Biracial (6.1%); Bicultural/majority (93.9%) including Asian American (47.8%), Latino/Hispanic (44.2%), Black/African American (3.6%), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (2.9%), Native American (.7%), and those who identified as other (3.6%)

Variables & Measures
- Cultural cognitions and behaviors (Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure – Revised [MEIM-R]; Phinney & Ong, 2007; American Identity Measure [AIM]; Phinney & Ong, 2007)
- Feelings about culture (Feelings About Culture Scales [FACS]; Maffini & Wong, 2014)
- Cultural relationships (Bicultural Self-Efficacy Scale [BSES] – Social Groundedness subscale; David, Okazaki, & Saw, 2009)
- Psychological well-being (Rosenberg Self-Esteem; Rosenberg, 1965; Brief Symptom Inventory; Derogatis, 2000)

Results
Increased Psychological Distress
- Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- Bi/multiracial students
- Greater levels of negative feelings toward ethnic culture

Self-Esteem
- Lower self-esteem
- Bi/multiracial students
- Younger students
- Negative feelings toward ethnic culture
- Higher self-esteem
- Greater ethnic identity (thoughts and behaviors)
- Bicultural social connectedness
- Positive feelings toward ethnic culture
- American identity (thoughts and behaviors) marginally related

Hierarchical Regression Model Examining the Influence of Cultural Factors on Self-Esteem

Discussion
- Biracial respondents reported lower self-esteem and higher psychological distress than their monoracial counterparts.
- Biracial individuals may feel more marginalized, and less accepted by members of either cultural group.
- Previous research indicates complexities and variations with regard to self-esteem among this population indicating the need for more research on this heterogeneous group (Bracey, Bâmaca, & Umaña-Taylor, 2004; Lusk, Taylor, Nanney, & Austin, 2010).
- Hierarchical regression conveys the different ways cultural thoughts, behaviors, feelings, and social relationships impact self-esteem.
- For bicultural and biracial individuals, having a strong connection to their heritage culture instead of mainsteam American culture is important to identity development and impacts psychological well-being.

Future Research
- Better understanding of psychosocial experiences (feeling marginalized/disconnected).
- Disaggregation of the social connectedness individuals experience in relation to each culture.
- Understand the varying influences each cultural dimension has on one's psychological well-being.

Counseling Implications
- When conceptualizing clients, factor in ways culture impacts cognitions, behaviors, emotions, and interpersonal interactions.
- Consider ways that cultural thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and relationships relate to psychological well-being.
- What does each culture expect of you?
- In what language do you think? dream?
- How do you feel about each culture? What does each culture say about how you should show emotions? What feelings do you experience most in each culture/language?
- What values or beliefs do you like about each culture? What values or beliefs are you questioning? What values or beliefs do you dislike or want to change?
- What do you think about your identity, what parts of each culture do you most like? What parts of each culture do you hate?
- Help client explore possible conflicts in cultural schema for each culture with which they identify.
- Facilitate exploration of how cultural schema may be similar.
- Encourage client to develop strategies to frame-switch effectively or reconcile ways to integrate both cultures into their identity.