Negotiating a Secure Black/White Biracial Identity

Using Adler’s Concept of Social Interest

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Abstract
Black/White Biracial individuals in America are in a unique situation in terms of developing a secure sense of racial identity due to the effects of the history of slavery. With the booming multiracial population coming into adulthood it is imperative to find explanations and solutions for feelings of depression and isolation that can be common among this population. This literature review seeks to investigate whether the Adlerian concept of Social Interest can be an effective conceptualization and adaptive, functional solution for the Black/White Biracial population to negotiate a secure racial identity.
Negotiating a Secure Black/White Biracial Identity Using Adler’s Concept of Social Interest

There is a long and sometimes painful history dealing with the effects of race on identity, relationships, and community in America. Though laws and norms have changed, racial distinctions still saturate social life, socioeconomic status, class, and culture in today’s America. Black/White Biracial (BWB) adults (persons who have one Black and one White biological parent) have lived through many changes in American society and find themselves in a more multiracial world than ever before. Immigration, refugees, and more multiracial children of every combination are browning the American landscape at a rapid pace. Though America is becoming more multicultural, the history of race relations permeates identity formation for BWBs in distinct and important ways.

Identity formation is widely recognized as an important stage of human development. According to Umana-Taylor, Yazedjian, & Gomez (2004):

Identity formation is a critical developmental task faced during adolescence, the resolution of which serves as a guiding framework in adulthood. Although individuals’ social selves are composed of a number of component social identities, in ethnicity-conscious societies like the U.S., it is imperative to more sufficiently address issues of ethnic identity formation and its relation to the broader social self. (p. 10)

For people of color in America, race is an important aspect of personal and social identity.

In the best case scenario, racial identity is a unifying factor, providing a cultural reference group, ethnic socialization, and a sense of belonging within which to embed a personal identity (Vivero & Jenkins, 1999). Ideally, BWBs grow up with the best of both worlds: the ability to easily embrace, fit in, and travel between their Black and White families and communities. However, the reality is that many BWBs may face any number of challenges on the road to a
secure racial identity: pressure to choose either a White or Black identity; growing up without one side of the family and their cultural influence; blatant or subtle racism from family members and communities; marginalization as a result of being rejected by both communities for not being Black or White enough, etc. (Umana-Taylor, Yazedjian, & Bamaca-Gomez, 2004). If identity development is not successfully negotiated in adolescence, BWBs may come to a racial identity crisis in adulthood and find themselves with a chronic feeling of being an outsider, having insecure attachments, isolation, depression, and social hypervigilance (Vivero & Jenkins, 1999).

When BWBs show up for mental health treatment, they may not directly describe identity issues. It is the writer’s hypothesis that Adler’s concept of Social Interest can be useful in the treatment of BWBs who present with symptoms of depression and social isolation (which may be traced back to an insecure sense of racial identity) in therapy. Through the examination of Social Interest, therapists can begin to explore the influence of an ambiguous racial identity on social belonging, enculturation, and life satisfaction. Through supporting research in healthy multiracial identity development, the writer will show that BWBs can be encouraged to look at their racial identity in a new way - as their personal choice to belong and something that can be changed and developed throughout the lifespan.

**Black/White Biracial Adults**

BWBs are in a unique place based on the racial history of America. In this section, the writer explores the historical influences, the experience of living as a BWB; and possible symptoms they would present in therapy.

**The Relationship Between Race, History, and Theory**

The writer has chosen to focus on BWBs due to their specific racial experience in the American landscape. According to Rockquemore & Laszloffy (2003), BWBs fall into a unique
set of circumstances due to three main historical factors: slavery, the one drop rule, and skin color stratification.

Though America has long since moved past slavery and made progress in laws, civil rights, social norms, and popular culture, racism has a lasting residue that permeates American society. Though people have begun to coexist, there is still both blatant and subtle racism and resulting tension between the races. Rockquemore & Laszloffy (2003) observed, “Blacks and Whites continue to have the greatest degree of distance between them, with enduring stigma attached to interracial unions” (p. 120). Interracial relationships, though more acceptable in the current day and age, may still cause tension for both Black and White communities, and both groups may let these stigma and underlying resentments affect their interactions with and acceptance of BWBs.

The one drop rule made a legal and social norm dictating that any Black blood in a person’s lineage required that person to identify and be identified as only Black. The research of Rockquemore & Laszloffy (2003) describes a BWBs only choice in racial identity as the one ascribed by society – a monoracial Black identity. They describe the way this continued well into the 20th century:

By the mid 1980s and throughout the 1990s ... Therapists began to conceptualize individuals with one Black and one White parent as having unique sets of needs that were distinct from the general Black population and thus requiring a unique theoretical model of identity construction. (p. 120)

Considering the timing of their observations, the idea of a unique theoretical conceptualization that allowed for the nuances of the BWBs experiences is still a relatively new concept in historical terms.
One of the nuances that influenced a BWBs sense of identity is skin color stratification – a hierarchal system within the Black community based on skin tone. Rockquemore & Laszloffy describe the historical impact of American slavery on skin color and shade as follows: Light-skinned Blacks were accorded privileges in the form of household duties, less violent treatment by overseers, better living conditions, educational opportunities… two categories eventually emerged: “good” (White) features - straight, long hair, a small nose, thin lips, and light eyes – and “bad” (Black) features - short or kinky hair, full lips, and a wide nose. Over time, nose width, lip thickness, and hair texture joined skin color as important status markers within the Black community. (p. 121)

These effects of skin color stratification have continued into the present. Vivero & Jenkins (1999) expand on the relationship between race and status, stating, “There is a hierarchical social status system based on skin color, and biracial people have been historically classified by status rather than by their choice… identified by the blood of the lowest status parent” (p. 8). Though most Black Americans have racial mixing in their lineage, BWBs with first generation mixing are somewhat more likely to exhibit the lighter phenotype, which affects status in the Black community. The effects can be positive (for example, elevation of status based on “beauty”) or negative (i.e. devaluation based on the lighter coloring that assume the BWB will think they are better than the monoracial Black community, therefore being identified as more White, or as an outsider, not to be trusted).

According to Rockquemore & Laszloffy (2003), “the historical backdrop of slavery, the legacy of the one-drop rule, and the politics of skin color stratification… may contribute to social invalidation with respect to how (BWBs) identify racially” (p. 119). There is a complex set of
circumstances one must take into account to conceptualize the effects of U.S. history on BWB identity development.

The writer believes that one must understand the history of a people to understand them contextually. The history of America, cultural and social norms, and theory are intertwined to present what is now known about the BWB experience. We now move to some common experiences of BWB adults in the present day.

**The Black/White Biracial Experience**

As with many other people of color, many BWBs deal with racism from society at large. In their work with ethnic minority girls in a theatre-based workshop to explore the effects of racism on them growing up in predominantly White community, Lee & De Finney (2004) describe the pain of racism as “palpable and visceral… visible and audible in their tone of voice, body postures, hand and facial gestures, and the frequent self-care and checking in with each other as they acted out the scenes” (p. 109). Like many ethnic minorities, BWBs run the risk of internalizing experiences of racism with the feelings being carried in the body and expressed in their interactions with others. Depending on the groups from which the racism has been directed, BWBs may be especially sensitive to criticism from certain identified groups. In turn, this can affect the way a BWB self-identifies in various cultural contexts. For instance, if a BWB has been the target of racist comments and experiences from White community or family members, they may downplay their Black identity and be especially sensitive to the approval of White community and family members.

The expression of racism and racist worldview has evolved from more direct violations to more subtle and subconscious manifestations. Within the last decade, the term *microaggressions* has gained momentum in describing this more subtle expression of racism. The formal
definition most commonly used was created by Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, and Esquilin (2007): “Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (p. 273). Therefore, more often than not, when discussing racism in current American culture, people will more likely point out more subtle incidents which may lead to feelings of invalidation or hostility. In addition, because the incidents are more subtle, there is more room for questions about misperceiving or misreading social or environmental cues, and a higher risk for invalidation of experience.

Most monoracial people never have to consider a challenge to their racial identity. In their research, Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2003) have found that though there are any number of ways a BWB can choose to identify, “the greatest challenge arises when individuals select a racial identity that is routinely invalidated by others, especially others who are emotionally significant to that individual… to grow and develop in healthy ways, we must receive some validation from others” (p. 120). Using the same scenario, if the BWB’s Black identity is routinely invalidated by the White community, they may not identify as Black and feel a disconnection with the Black community, yet still not fully accepted by the White community because of Black phenotype features.

The physical expression of genetic makeup can have a significant effect on the way BWBs identify socially. Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2003) illustrate with an example:

Consider a (BWB) with Black phenotypic features, yet who identifies as biracial. Given his physical attributes, both Blacks and Whites are likely to treat him as if he is exclusively Black… (however, when asserting biracial identity), he is likely to encounter
social invalidation from Blacks who may interpret his claim of a biracial identity as an inherently anti-Black statement and accuse him of thinking he’s better than other Blacks. He also is likely to encounter invalidation from Whites who, guided by the deeply entrenched assumptions of the ‘one-drop rule’ are likely to see and treat him as if he is exclusively Black. (p. 121)

This issue of claiming one’s own racial identity can be complex and require a solid assertiveness and commitment. This is no easy feat for a person with an ambiguous phenotype in a color-conscious society.

Issues of loyalties and acceptance can be problematic for BWBs. According to Vivero & Jenkins (1999), “The prejudice, misunderstanding, isolation and other difficulties experienced by minority group members are compounded and intensified for people of mixed ethnicity who may feel rejected by both minority and majority groups” (p. 11). Because they are not fully Black or White, there may be a sense of belonging nowhere, which contributes to feelings of being a perpetual outsider. If attempts to fit in with racial groups are rejected, feelings of confusion and isolation may follow. Vivero & Jenkins provide a haunting view of loneliness and perceptions about the complexity of belonging:

They often wonder what makes other people acceptable and welcome. There may be confusion about how to behave in order to belong... and despair that comes with contradictory demands and alienation. This rejection and confusion may result in self-imposed isolation to avoid further painful struggles to integrate and understand these experiences. (p. 14)
This passage displays a sad and unfortunate solution to the painful problem of not belonging. As many people who experience depression can testify, sometimes isolation is the solution to feeling that the world cannot understand your pain.

This example illustrates the importance of an accurate conceptualization of why a person is isolating. It is important to understand the racial influence, experience, and interpretation the BWB has had in their family and community throughout life, but especially during formative years. In an ideal situation, there are supportive and nourishing racial experiences that lead to a secure racial identity. However, negativity, challenge, and devaluation during formative years related to one’s chosen racial identity can lead to deep depression and social isolation. Next, we turn to the way BWBs with these negative experiences may show up in therapy.

**Mental Health Outcomes and Presentation in Therapy.**

It would be easy if BWBs came to therapy explicitly stating that they were having issues with their sense of racial identity and belonging. Rockquemore & Laszloffy (2003) assert that they would more likely present with feelings of depression, general isolation, and marginalization. They recommend that therapists bear the responsibility for initiating conversation about race when it seems appropriate, helping clients “in finding constructive ways to both confront and cope with invalidation” (p. 122). Whether through issues of phenotype and chosen identification, or growing up without enculturation in one of their identity groups, there can be strongly felt perceptions of exclusion and bewilderment about how other people seem to have it so easy being included.

It’s important to acknowledge what happens specifically when people feel excluded. De Wall, Maner, & Rouby (2009) conducted an interesting study about social exclusion and perceptual cues. Though theirs was not a study focused on race, the results apply. “The need for
social belonging operates like many other motivations, in the sense that when it is thwarted, people look for new ways to satisfy it” (p. 740). In their study, when participants experienced a specific incident of exclusion, rather than focusing on the exclusion event, they looked for new perceptual cues of inclusion – a friendly face, a smile, etc. Taken further in a racial context, it may follow that if a BWB has an experience of exclusion by one racial group and they find acceptance by the other, they will cling to the group that accepts them rather than repeatedly trying to win the acceptance of the group that excluded them. This can lead to a voluntary shift from identification with one group, or a fragmented identity, switching their racial identification based on who they are with. Identity-switching is another solution to the problem of feeling unaccepted.

Most modern theories find this process of identity-switching to be a healthy adaptation for some BWBs. However, Sanchez, Shih, & Garcia (2009) make a point about the possible negative outcomes of having this fluid racial identity, claiming, “unstable and malleable racial identification would create inconsistency and instability in private racial regard and thereby undermine well-being” (p.245). They indicate that compartmentalization of racial identity can be harmful to overall mental health. Perhaps this is related to the notion that the sense of self should be static. [The writer perceives each person’s sense of self as mysterious, a personal choice. A static sense of self is mainly a western concept, while some other world cultures see the sense of self as constantly changing. Fluidity is a unique and fun aspect of identity for some BWBs, as well as for other people in the world for various reasons.]

In addition to the feelings of exclusion and confused loyalties leading to choices of either/or compartmentalized racial identities, Vivero & Jenkins describe possible mental health presentation:
There will be identity confusion, social isolation, sadness, a vague sense of loss, shame, self-blame, and a treatment-resistant depression that may appear diffusely characterological… pervasive feelings of being different, “weird,” and complaint of being unable to belong or fit in, despite their efforts and need to do so. (p. 22.)

Socially, it is easy to see that some of the symptoms described here can look like depression or even paranoia, which is why it is so important for BWBs to be taken within context. Vivero and Jenkins continue, with further observations about self-expression and the therapeutic relationship:

Emotional experience may be preverbal and strikingly primitive compared to the client’s unusual cognitive and social sophistication… possibly misdiagnosed as a mood or personality disorder and may undermine the therapeutic alliance if the therapist is not culturally sensitive and aware…(the therapist) may need to (help the client )reconcile being different without being “wrong”… (the client) may need help to give up the ideal of striving to fit in and come to terms with who they are. (p. 22)

For a person who has struggled so long to fit in and become like everyone else, it is a striking solution to let this go and embrace uniqueness and being yourself. A strong, secure sense of self has not been the focus and may be quite elusive. It takes a well-developed alliance for the therapist to bring this radical solution to a client who is enmeshed in a lifelong struggle with racial identity development.

Being sensitive to and initiating conversation about race is an important and challenging aspect of the role of the therapist. The writer takes the position that the therapist has a responsibility to assess and if necessary to address issues race with clients of color. The writer
will discuss this position further in the section titled, *Therapeutic Implications*, in the conclusion of this review.

**Summary of Black/White Biracial Adults**

The present experience of BWBs is rooted in American historical context. Though slavery is long gone, there are still many unspoken social and cultural remnants of racism between Blacks and Whites which make it especially complex to be a product of their unions. Only in the last 20-30 years has society, therapy, and research recognized a distinct experience and identity for BWBs. Lee & De Finney insist that the current insights of BWBs are critical to informing theory and research going forward (2004). Due to the current aging multiracial boom in America, there will be many more voices to add to the research.

The coping mechanisms BWBs have used to deal with racism within both Black and White communities can lead to mental health outcomes commonly experienced as isolation and depression. Without understanding the links between phenotype, racial environment throughout development, experiences with racism, and other- or self-inflicted exclusion and isolation, there is a strong possibility of misdiagnosis or superficial treatments. Therapists must understand the historical context, current experiences, and the resulting possible mental health outcomes in order to effectively understand and treat BWB individuals in therapy. In the next section the writer studied Adler’s teachings about belonging as a possible method for treatment.

**Adlerian Social Interest**

To be clear, Alfred Adler did not look at social interest as an idea that was specific to individual communities. In his own words,

> It is the striving for a community which must be thought of as everlasting, as we could think of it if mankind had reached the goal of perfection. It is never only a present-day
community… it is rather the goal which is best suited for perfection, a goal which would have to signify the ideal community of all mankind, the ultimate fulfillment of societal evolution. (Qtd. in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 142.)

From his perspective, social interest was a philosophical ideal, a goal of perfection that humanity should be striving toward, a directionality. It is helpful for BWBs to look at belonging as directionality as well, a universal principle that cuts across racial lines.

In this section the writer will explore the components of social interest: Feelings of belonging and active contribution; healthy versus maladaptive development of social interest; inferiority feelings; striving for superiority; task orientation; and methods of safeguarding. Underdeveloped social interest can be developed more fully in therapy in the hopes of helping the client to increase their social contribution and feelings of belonging. It is the writer’s hypothesis that the development of social interest in BWB clients will greatly affect the security of their racial identities.

**Feelings of Belonging and Active Contribution**

One of Adler’s unique contributions to the field of psychology is the idea of social interest, which contains two parts: the feeling of belonging to the community and the actions we take to contribute to the community. Mosak & Maniaci (1999) describe the essence of the concept.

This is the theory behind community feeling and social interest: If we feel a bonding, a sense of obligation and belonging to the general welfare of others and the future, we will probably use social interest in our interactions with others... Fostering this feeling of interconnectedness, of belonging, is one of the key components of psychotherapy. (p. 114.)
In order to maintain balanced mental health, it’s important to feel social belonging. We sometimes express this feeling of belonging through the action of social interest. It is worth exploring each of these concepts in detail.

**Feeling belonging.** Ferguson (2010) describes the relationship between social interest and equality stating, “An important aspect of ‘feeling belonging’ concerns social integration… To be human is to recognize that one’s humanity rests on one’s identity as a social being, an equal among equals…To feel belonging, one needs to feel equality with others” (p. 2). When one feels equality with all members of the community, one’s self-assuredness of place is solidified. To feel equal is to know that you belong and have as much value as any other individual within the community. When real or perceived hierarchal structure is removed from the equation, everyone belongs to the group equally.

Many people who don’t feel connected to their communities begin to withdraw into themselves. Through defensiveness, they make a self-fulfilling prophecy of their lack of feeling belonging. King and Shelley (2008) saw community feeling as the antidote to isolation. They describe this as a “feeling of belonging without the need for defensive compensation… feeling a sense of ecology or wholeness and feeling a sense of security and belongingness independent of context and place” (p. 103-104). This can also be described as a universal feeling of unconditional acceptance.

When you don’t need to justify your right to belong, you belong. There are no membership criteria that you must argue in your favor to secure your place in the group. The research of Stasio & Capron (1998) supports this sentiment, concluding that “social interest overlaps with constructs such as altruism, prosocial behavior, and need for interpersonal
contact.” (p. 12). When one is not constantly advocating for his right to belong, one can contribute to the group in a socially interested way and reap the benefits of belonging.

**Acting on social interest.** Another crucial aspect of belonging is to be an active contributor to one’s community. According to Shifron (2010), the individual is a system within oneself, but also operates within family and community systems. One needs to contribute in their uniqueness to the larger systems in order to feel a solid sense of value and significance within those systems. Just as important as one’s feeling of belonging to the community is the individual’s contribution to the community.

Both Ferguson (2010) and Shifron (2010) stress the importance of equality and contribution to the mental health of the community. A hierarchical system is not good for the mental health of the community. In order to feel belonging, one must feel equal, not greater or less than, the other members of the community to which they belong. When you have an equal right to community membership, it follows that you have an equal responsibility to contribute to the stability and development of the community. The writer believes that social interest is the antidote to feelings of inferiority.

**Healthy Development of Social Interest**

Adler believed that social interest was innate, but must be developed. In an ideal world, social interest develops from the earliest relationship in life: the relationship with the mother. “The possibilities for social interest first take on life and become tangible in the relationship between mother and child” (qtd. in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 137). The child and mother are dependent on each other; the role of the mother requires the cooperation of the child (through breastfeeding, emotional attachments, etc.).
Perhaps one of the most important of these emotional attachments to develop is empathy. Adler offers that teaching empathy is a key piece of the development of social interest in early life.

The ability to identify [with others] must be trained, and it can be trained only if one grows up in relation to others and feels a part of the whole. One must sense that not only the comforts of life belong to one, but also the discomforts. One must feel at home on this earth with all its advantages and disadvantages. (p. 136.)

The idea is that to empathize is to become part of the shared experience of one-to-one as well as community relationships. Especially significant is the idea that we must learn to deal with the joys of life as well as the challenges. In practicing empathy, one learns to stand alongside others outside of himself. Through identification, we become “capable of friendship, love of mankind, sympathy, occupation, and love” (p. 136). Adler believed identification and empathy were the heart of social interest. These qualities can only be practiced within relationship.

Challenges are inevitable in the socialization process and may create inferiority feelings in individuals. Adler believed that inferiority feelings were natural, but that training a child to focus on being useful would allow for positive adjustment.

As long as the feeling of inferiority is not too great, a child will always strive to be worthwhile and on the useful side of life. Such a child, in pursuing his end, is interested in others. Social feeling and social adjustment are the right and normal compensations. (p. 155.)

In the healthy development of children, challenges are to be accepted and they should be guided toward positive compensation. Some parents try to shield their children from pain and
discomfort. It’s refreshing to release that pressure and to instead influence children by modeling and moving with them through disappointments.

In beginning to understand the child and his orientation, Adler believed the first step was to observe where the child’s interest was directed. He described:

Only a child who desires to contribute to the whole, whose interest is not centered in himself, can train successfully to compensate for defects. If children desire only to rid themselves of difficulties, they will continue backward. They can keep up their courage only if they have a purpose in view… If they are striving towards an object external to themselves, they will quite naturally train and equip themselves to achieve it. (p. 113.) Here, Adler encourages the idea of focusing on what you want, rather than putting all of your focus on what is bothering you. When a child just wants to be relieved of the discomfort of experiencing human problems, all of his or her energy is focused on the discomfort, which leads to self-pity and self-centeredness. When we teach a child to acknowledge the problem but look toward an external solution, the child’s energy is redirected in a more positive and competent direction. Adler continues:

Difficulties will represent no more than positions which are to be conquered on their way to success. If on the other hand their interest lies in stressing their own drawbacks or in fighting these drawbacks with no purpose except to be free from them, they will make no real progress… If a child is to draw together his powers and overcome his difficulties, there must be a goal for his movements outside of himself, a goal based on interest in reality, interest in others, and interest in cooperation. (p. 113.)

A child must be taught that obstacles are part of life. What parents must understand is that without proper guidance, problems can arise in terms of negative compensation (the focus on
drawbacks described above). Left unchecked, a child finds him- or herself developing in a maladaptive way, where problems, self-pity, and self-centeredness are the norm.

**Maladaptive Development of Social Interest**

As mentioned before, inferiority feelings are a normal part of coming into the world as someone small, helpless and without the ability to meet our own needs. According to Adler, maladaptive social interest is presented at a crossroads early in life.

If we consider that every child is actually inferior in the face of life and could not exist at all without a considerable measure of social interest on the part of those close to him, if we focus on the smallness and helplessness of the child which continues so long and which brings about the impression that we are hardly equal to life, then we must assume that at the beginning of every psychological life, there is more or less a deep inferiority feeling. (p. 115.)

These early inferiority feelings are natural and unavoidable. Therefore the issue becomes about how the child is guided to deal with them.

Adler considered the mother to be the first guide into social life. Therefore the mother has a great responsibility, but can make a common mistake:

The mother is often satisfied with a restricted social development for the child, and does not concern herself with the fact that he must go from her care into a much wider circle of human contacts. In such a case the mother concentrates the child’s social potentialities upon herself. She does not help the child to extend his interest to others besides herself. Even the father may be excluded if he does not make a special effort to enter this closed circle. Other children and strangers are, of course, excluded also. (p. 135.)
It is the special opportunity of the mother to choose whether to develop sociability or to focus the relationship inwardly between the two of them. (Of course, there is certain datedness in the pinpoint focus on the mother’s responsibility. It’s important to note that all family members and caregivers have an important role in the socialization of the child. However, in keeping true to both Adler’s words and ideas, the mother is used here as the primary relationship to the child.)

When a child’s focus is solely within the relationship with the mother, there is not an opportunity to feel a part of larger communities, leading to underdeveloped social interest. In this case, the opportunity for social problem solving has been lost and the child becomes focused mostly on the self. According to Adler, “Where social interest is deficient, the individual’s interest is too self-centered, and he feels that he is impotent or a nobody. All his other feelings are then more or less directly connected with this social feeling” (p. 155). Taken to an extreme, without correction and guidance, social interest can be completely maladaptive. Adler cautions:

> It is always a lack of social interest… which causes an insufficient preparation for all the problems of life. In the presence of a problem, this imperfect preparation gives rise to the thousand-fold forms that express physical and mental inferiority and insecurity. (p. 156.)

No one can do everything on their own, people are innately social. Social life is not just important for maintaining friendships, warmth, and affection, but because we need help solving the problems of life. Our relationships feed our hearts, but they are also essential to survival and feeling competent in the face of life’s challenges.

**Inferiority Feelings**

It was as Adler looked at the well-developed or maladaptive socialization of the child that he began to highlight social interest. According to King & Shelley (2008):
Adler was convinced that most of the people lack adequate social feeling due to childhood feelings of inferiority (sometimes producing an inferiority complex or a compensatory and paradoxical superiority complex). As an antidote, Adler began to espouse the importance of social or community feeling. (p. 103.)

In order to understand the adult expressions of inferiority, one had to look back at what discouraged the child.

Discouragement can lead to a number of forms of inferiority. According to Carlson, Watts, & Maniacci (2005), there are three expressions of inferiorities.

*Inferiority* is objective, can be measured, and is contextual. *Inferiority feelings* are global, subjective, and evaluative. *Inferiority complexes* are behavioral manifestations of inferiority feelings... When one acts on inferiority feelings in such a way as to avoid exposing those feelings, Adlerians say that person has an inferiority complex. (p. 58-9)

In terms of inferiority feelings, there are a number of ways people can acquire them. However, according to Adler, inferiority feelings were not innately useless.

Inferiority feelings are not in themselves abnormal. They are the cause of all improvements in the position of mankind. Science itself, for example, can arise only when people feel their ignorance and their need to foresee the future; it is the result of the strivings of human beings to improve their whole situation, to know more of the universe, and to be able to control it better. Indeed, it seems that all our human culture is based upon feelings of inferiority. (qtd. in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 117.)

Adler knew that there was healthy inferiority that moves mankind toward industry and progress, as well as the type of inferiority that paralyzes people in feelings of uselessness. We now turn to how people typically compensate for their feelings of inferiority.
Striving for Superiority

Striving for superiority is a natural and innate phenomenon. We strive for safety, significance, and belonging. Adler described the underlying purpose.

We all wish to overcome difficulties. We all strive to reach a goal by the attainment of which we shall feel strong, superior, and complete…we shall always find in human beings this great line of activity – this struggle to rise from an inferior to a superior position, from defeat to victory, from below to above. It begins in earliest childhood and continues to the end of our lives. (qtd in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 104.)

Striving is a wholly natural way to stop feelings of inferiority from overcoming us.

Striving can have a positive or negative directionality. Ferguson (2010) describes the positive ways that a sense of belonging in the family leads to a firm sense of belonging in the community. “The person actualizes the need to belong with striving to contribute to the human community” (p. 1). To feel valued and an integral part of one’s family unit has very positive life and community outcomes. However, when does not feel this inherent, positive connection within the family, there are negative outcomes.

Once the child feels that she or he does not belong, behaviors are then directed toward self-protection rather than contribution to the community, and the vicious cycle continues. By the time the person is an adult, protective patterns will have become firmly set and these will lead to more failures of support. The more the person does not feel belonging, the more disturbing her or his behavior is likely to be, and in turn this leads to even less reliable support from others. (p. 4.)

While not all cases of self-protection taking priority over contribution will present in pathological ways, Ferguson makes a good point about this cycle. The less one feels they
belong, the harder they will strive to self-protect, the less social support they will experience, and the cycle repeats.

Ferguson offers another possible outcome of this striving saying that “Children who do not feel belonging strive to be special rather than strive to contribute” (p. 1). Feeling special is a positive part of being human. Especially in American culture, what makes one individual and unique is valued. However, over-emphasis on not belonging leads one to strive toward superiority in the form of being a unique figure. If a person cannot fit in within the structures available, the idea is to consciously be different, better, unique in order to find significance in the place where they do not belong.

Striving in itself is normal. According to Stasio & Capron (1998), “Human motivation exists in the form of striving for superiority or perfection; this striving is compensatory, originating in infancy from feelings of helplessness and inferiority in relation to the environment” (p. 12). They add that people who grow up with a secure sense of belonging strive in a positive way and typically develop pro-social behavior.

Feelings of inferiority are developed as a result of not fitting in or not feeling as good or competent as others. If one experiences a lack of belonging within the family structure and within communities at a young age, they are likely to strive for safety, significance, and belonging in other ways. This could result in self-imposed isolation to keep oneself safe from further feelings of rejection, over-emphasis of one’s uniqueness in order to feel superior in their isolation, or over-identify with their role as an outsider.

**Task Orientation**

We can glean a lot of information about a person’s striving according to the way they approach tasks in life. According to Mosak & Maniacci (1999):
People who move (psychologically) along horizontal planes tend to use social interest. They see people as equals and they are focused upon tasks. Others tend to move along vertical planes. This antithetical mode of apperception divides the world into “Black and White,” and therefore you are either inferior or superior, weak or strong, winner or loser… Life, for them, is of either being above people or below them, at their mercy. People who move along horizontal planes feel more at ease, more comfortable with themselves and others. (p. 116.)

In other words, when presented with a socially-oriented problem, some people focus on working together with the people involved to move past the issue, operating on the horizontal plane. Conversely, some people are focused on their own status in completing the task, operating on the vertical plane.

In order to understand one’s task orientation, one must ask the question, How do I approach problem solving? According to Mosak & Maniacci (1999), the answers explain orientation and can point to mental health or pathology:

- **Yes, I can.** Able to solve problems outside of feelings of inferiority, these people focus on accomplishing the task at hand, doing the best they can.
- **Yes, but I’m sick.** Moving along the vertical axis, they look at themselves rather than the task, focusing on risks and inferiorities, safeguarding themselves, seeking distance, making excuses.
- **Yes, but I’ll do it my way.** An idiosyncratic approach – I must be appreciated or else I won’t be able to function.
- **No.** Psychotics, who lack social interest, connection, and belonging.
In vertical movement, the focus is on how they’re doing rather than what they’re doing. “The more they focus on the themselves, the less they attend to the task; the less focused upon the task, the poorer they do and the worse they feel, thereby increasing their self-focus and perpetuating the cycle” (p. 117). Making people aware of where their focus is as they examine a problem can illuminate the major problem of being too focused on performance and success rather than using all our faculties to solve the problem at hand properly.

Socially interested people tend to operate on the horizontal plane, focusing on the task at hand rather than allowing inferiority feelings drive them.

**Safeguarding**

The definition of safeguarding can be summed up in the following statement made by Carlson, Watts, & Maniaci, 2005: “I am more interested in protecting my convictions and not changing them than in learning from them and growing. I become static in my development” (p. 59-60). The purpose of safeguarding is to deflect attention from one’s areas of perceived weakness. Instead of being transparent about one’s inexperience, inabilities, and insecurities, a type of sideshow is created to give feasible reasons for not participating in a problem-solving task.

Carlson et al. (2005) present a number of different categories of safeguarding: *Symptoms* are unconscious fears, real or imagined physiological complaints, and obsessive thoughts or behaviors; *Excuses* are ways one consciously rationalizes or denies thoughts and behaviors in order to avoid unwanted tasks; *Aggression* is expressed through the subcategories of *depreciation* (putting others down to feel better about oneself, or creating an ideal standard which no one can live up to), *accusation* (deflecting blame outside of oneself for their own problems or failures), and *self-accusation* (a person harming themselves for the purpose of
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creating pain for others); *Distance-Seeking* is a way to avoid major tasks by *backward movement* (a well-timed failure), *standing still* (consistently stopping before task completion), *hesitation* (back-and-forth movement without full task completion), and *creating obstacles* (making an unreachable goal as a roadblock to full task-completion); *Anxiety* is used when a person wants to avoid failure by being too afraid to face a task, and; *Exclusion Tendency* is a mechanism where people participate only in task which success is guaranteed, and all other tasks are avoided.

Safeguarding is a way to give an alternative reason to the truth about why a person refuses to participate in the completion of an important task. Keeping the truth hidden is paramount, saving face is key.

**Summary of Social Interest**

Inferiority feelings are a result of a real or perceived lack of belonging or helplessness that occur naturally as an infant and continue throughout human development. While many people have been trained to find ways to belong to family, community, and society, some are overcome by these inferiority feelings. Social interest is a natural combatant to these inferiority feelings, teaching a person to strive toward the good of the community, as an equal, as someone who belongs without question, by merit of being a human being alone.

Even when a person has become discouraged by inferiorities, it is possible to build social interest later in life. According to Shifron (2010): “Every individual is capable and creative and by making different kinds of choices, each person can learn how to feel belonging” (10).

Maladaptive social interest is disheartening, but it can still be developed well into adulthood. Adler sang the virtues of developing social interest at any age:

It is almost impossible to exaggerate the value of an increase in social feeling. The mind improves, for intelligence is a communal function. The feeling of worth and value is
heightened, giving courage and an optimistic view, and there is an acquiescence in the common advantages and drawbacks of our lot. The individual feels at home in life and feels his existence to be worthwhile just so far as he is useful to others and is overcoming common, instead of private, feelings of inferiority. (qtd. in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 155.)

Becoming socially interested doesn’t make inferiorities disappear completely; It shifts the focus from my inferiorities to our common human problems.

According to Adler, the cure for an underdeveloped social interest is for the therapist to re-parent the client, utilizing 2 main tasks: To join with the client (building trust and fostering the experience of a dependable and comforting relationship) and to encourage development of the social interest, which in turn strengthens their independence and courage (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Though a lifetime of discouragement is devastating, there is hope.

If a person can somehow change from a feeling of exclusion to a feeling of belonging, will negative self-esteem and antisocial behavior turn more positive and pro-social, leading to better mental health outcomes? Can a person struggling with identity issues develop their social interest in a racial context to build a more secure identity? In the next section, the writer looks at current findings and themes as related to the outcome of a healthy and secure racial identity.

**Building a Secure Racial Identity**

Earlier in this review, the writer established a relationship between history and theory. Rockquemore, Brunsma, & Delgado (2009) eloquently describe the current state of biracial identity development:

How researchers have conceptualized racial identity development among mixed-race people has paralleled the unspoken assumptions about race that prevail in their respective
historical context. The confusion in identity development theories today speaks volumes about the uncertainty around racial identity, racial categories, and racial identification in post-Civil Rights America. (p. 15)

Aside from the general concept of group membership, there are many situational contexts to consider when BWBs think about choosing a racial identity. Individuals could identify a number of different ways based on group loyalty, phenotype, and specialty demographic checklists. For instance, a BWB may check off two different sets of racial identification based on whether the purpose was for a job application, census data, or a scholarship.

Instead of becoming clearer, BWB identity development has become more complex. In this section the writer will review the historical and current trends in biracial identity theory, and present a loose framework to guide identity development for adults.

**History of Biracial Identity Development Theory**

Early 20th century Biracial identity development theories reflected a pessimistic societal view. According to K. F. Jackson (2009), “The identity literature produced during this period was often based on speculation and nonrepresentative case histories, and strongly emphasized the biased notion that interracial children were likely to suffer from adjustment problems” (p. 310). Theorists looked to the social climate of the times and projected problems onto the population rather than conducting direct research.

Historical, social, and cultural context plays a prominent role in the development of theory. Shih & Sanchez (2005) come to the same conclusions about the direction of early research, pointing to the popular concept of the marginal man during this time period.

The marginal man was thought to be an individual caught between two cultures but who, in reality, was not a member of either world. Scholars often call this the dual minority
status… The marginal man theories focus on the deficits and problems associated with having a multiracial background. (p. 570)

Given the racial climate in America during the early 1900s, it is understandable that early thought about biracial identity was quite pessimistic. When there was racism written into laws and a terrible tension permeated society, from the outside looking in there wasn’t much hope for the healthy racial and social adjustment of BWBs – in particular for those with a more ambiguous phenotype.

As the century progressed, researchers became more interested in racial identity in general. B.W. Jackson (2001) and Shih and Sanchez (2005) indicate that conceptualization of racial identities made a paradigm shift in the 1970s. There was particular interest in the effects of cultural pride after the civil rights movement. According to B. W. Jackson (2001), creator of the Black Identity Development (BID) theoretical model, this time period sparked a drive “to explain some of the dynamic transformations that were occurring in the Black community and with Black individuals in the 1960s” (p. 8). As the Black population in general gained more of a sense of pride and worth, researchers became interested in their racial identity development.

B.W. Jackson further explains the spirit behind his research:

My interest in the questions about the nature of the Black experience and the dynamic changes that we were witnessing… was more practical than existential or theoretical. I wanted to understand how this transformation or “conversion” experience (referencing theorist William Cross’s “Negro to Black conversion experience”) was affecting the way Black people saw themselves and responded to their world and with each other and how it affected the motives and behavior patterns of Black people. (p. 11.)
This time of conversion was a long time coming, signaling a public affirmation of power and self-respect in the Black community. Because of the continued general acceptance of the one-drop rule, BWBs were still grouped with Blacks in this new wave of identity development models.

Originally published in 1976 (though in development from the early 1970s), B. W. Jackson’s BID model included five stages of development:

*Naïve*, the absence of social consciousness or identity; *Acceptance*, suggesting the acceptance of the prevailing White/majority description and perceived worth of Black people, Black culture, or experience; *Resistance*, the rejection of the prevailing majority culture’s definition and valuing of Black people and culture; *Redefinition*, the renaming, reaffirming, and reclaiming of one’s sense of Blackness, Black culture, and racial identity; and *Internalization*, the integration of a redefined racial identity into all aspects of one’s self-concept or identity. (p. 17.)

Developing out of the effects of the Civil Rights Movement on Black culture, this model describes the changes B.W. Jackson observed as Blacks gained civil freedom, inspiration, and a sense of what they could accomplish together as a community. This greatly affected their view of themselves.

As more racial development models emerged, theorists began urging Whites to consider their own racial identity development. Hardiman (2001) began to develop the White Identity Development (WID) model in the late 1970s, publishing it in 1982. Describing her motivation, Hardiman offers, “I was certain that in a society with racism at its core, racism affected Whites as the dominant and privileged racial group as certainly as it affected people of color, albeit in
different and obvious ways” (p. 109). Inspired by reflection on previous racial identity development models, Hardiman describes the five stages of the WID.

No Social Consciousness of Race or Naivete (Whites have no understanding of the social meaning of race or the value attached to one race over another)… Acceptance (the White person accepts or internalizes racism and a sense of himself as racially superior to people of color, although this sense of dominance, privilege, or entitlenent is often unconscious)… Resistance (an individual questioning the dominant paradigm about race and resisting or rejecting racist programming)… Redefinition (the White person begins to clarify his own self-interest against racism, and begins to accept and take responsibility for his Whiteness)… Internalization (integrating or internalizing this increased consciousness regarding race and racism and one’s new White identity into all aspects of one’s life). (p. 111-12.)

Hardiman’s WID presents a response to the BID and other theories of Black identity development in a way that takes responsibility for White privilege.

During the development of these theories in the 1970s-80s, the prevailing socially accepted belief was that BWBs were racially equivalent to Blacks. However, there were undoubtedly some BWBs who identified as Biracial in their private logic, if not publicly. Taken as a combination, what can be gleaned from these theories to account for the BWB experience? Together the BID and WID theories could simultaneously present a unification of racial experiences to understand and combat racism, while acknowledging the polarization that makes a Biracial person at once the oppressed and the oppressor. Certainly even if a BWB has a Black phenotype, but is raised by White parents (or vice versa) there would be confusing internalized
messages about race, privilege, and racism. For individual BWBs who didn’t feel fully represented by either model of identity development, there had to be more options.

Over the next 20 years, Theorists began to show a growing interest in Biracial identity development theories, which really began to boom in the 1990s. The theories of this time were developed out of the monoracial models (like the BID and WID) which described identity development in stages. According to Wijeyesinghe (2001):

Some of the content and themes from the Black and White theories appeared in these Multiracial identity development models, including (1) a stage characterized by an immersion-like experience into the culture, practices, and politics of particular racial groups; (2) the presence of strong emotions at various stages of identity development; and (3) an identity in the later stages of development that reflected a heightened understanding of race and racism, and a greater appreciation of the self. (p. 132)

Like other models of racial identity development, there was a focus on moving through an emotional examination of racism and moving along a continuum toward self-acceptance and pride.

In a previous paper, the writer summarized the direction of biracial identity theories developed in the 1990s.

Biracial identity development theories followed variations on a pattern of not noticing race, becoming aware of social and political consequences of race, choosing a monoracial identity, guilt over that choice, exploration, and eventually coming to terms with a balanced multiracial identity. However, some mixed-race individuals stick and stay with a monoracial identity, or may continue to have an unresolved sense of identity. (Osunkoya, *Identity*, 2011, p. 6.)
The main strength of these first real theories of Biracial identity were that they recognized the experience as distinct from a monoracial identity, and began the conversation on exploring multiracial identity.

Over the last decade approximately, there has been another change in conceptualization of Biracial identity theory. As Wijeyesinghe (2001) describes, there is an “important distinction between models that describe the development of a Multiracial identity… and models that address racial identity in Multiracial people” (p. 136). Next we will move into the exploration of this new type of theoretical model which attempts to describe the experience of BWBs through attention to social context and formative experiences.

**Current Trends: Social Context Models**

Due to the prevailing cultural relativism of our society, the time has come for a more inclusive approach. Rockquemore et al. (2009) outline the criteria informing the current needs surrounding their Ecological Model for biracial identity development: “(a) racial identity varies, (b) racial identity often changes over the life course, (c) racial identity development is not a predictable linear process with a single outcome, and (d) social, cultural, and spatial context are critical” (p. 20-21). Clearly, there are a number of ways BWBs identify themselves both in context and throughout the lifespan. Rockquemore et al. conclude that the Ecological Model is the best option for a cohesive and inclusive development theory.

It is only the ecological approach that (a) allows for the full range of racial identities that have been well documented in the literature, (b) focuses on the social factors that influence racial identity development as opposed to developmental stages, and (c) allows for contextual shifting of identities, multiple simultaneous identities, and no racial identity. (p. 23)
The ecological approach allows space for the many identification needs that BWBs possess in
different situations throughout their lives. Accommodation for choice and change is imperative
in creating modern identity development theories.

Other researchers agree. Wijeyesinghe (2001) has created another model that emphasizes
the individual’s identity choices within context, the Factor Model of Multiracial Identity
(FMMI). This model presents a person’s choice as central with eight surrounding influential
factors: Early Experience and Socialization, Political Awareness and Orientation, Spirituality,
Other Social Identities, Social and Historical Context, Physical Appearance, Racial Ancestry,
and Cultural Attachment. With this model, a person’s choice of identity is affected by all of
these factors, some more heavily influential than others.

Smith (1991) also spoke of the importance of a model that allows for identity
development over time. In her Smith Ethnic Identity Development Model she advocated for an
approach that was developmental over the life span and consisted of “a process of differentiation
and integration… a continual process of boundary-line drawing, of deciding what individuals
and what groups are included in one’s inner and outer boundary groups” (p. 183). According to
her model, Smith supported the context framework that the individual, through multiple ongoing
experiences, creates the edges of his or her identity.

Clearly, the most encompassing way to try to set groundwork for identity development
for BWBs today is to see the person in context with numerous options available to them, with no
one way being the best or only way. The models that draw on social context fit the bill for those
BWBs who grew up without a great deal of exposure or information about half of their ethnic,
racial, and cultural context. For some BWBs, safeguarding techniques may have pre-empted the
formation of a secure racial identity. In this case, they may find themselves facing an identity crisis in adulthood. How does a BWB develop their racial identity in adulthood?

**Identity Exploration, Affirmation, and Commitment**

It is the writer’s hypothesis that healing a disjointed racial identity involves learning more about the identities one feels disconnected from. In addressing this issue, it is important to understand how racial identity is typically formed. Smith (1991) describes the traditional ways that one becomes enculturated.

Birth and a long period of socialization into an ethnic identity heritage provided a person with minimum membership credentials into a given ethnic identity and into a given ethnic reference group. The ethnic identification process can be measured by observing the degree to which an individual’s ethnic membership group is a salient reference group and by observing the extent to which the individual uses the signs, symbols, and language of the culture associated with the ethnic membership group. (p. 182)

Even if one hasn’t met these “credentials,” exploration provides a new way of beginning to heal and build a secure sense of identity.

**Exploration.** In this context, exploration is a way of gathering knowledge to actively develop a richer sense of identity. According to Ghavami, Fingerhut, Peplau, Grant, & Wittig (2011), identity exploration is described as a phase “when individuals seek knowledge about a particular group, examine their beliefs and values about that group, and begin to understand the meaning of their group membership” (p. 80). They must saturate themselves in information in order to derive meaning.

When there have been insufficient attachments to build on from personal experiences, sometimes one must be industrious, which can initially feel false. Renn (2008) states, “As with
appearance, questions of authenticity, legitimacy, and fitting in arise in relation to cultural knowledge” (p. 18). Renn encourages that it is perfectly acceptable to begin exploring at any time. Her specific area of expertise was with college students who came to campus with varying levels of their own cultural knowledge and attachment. She found that many students find a cultural awakening in the college setting where there are formal classes to take, groups to join, and new individuals to mingle with.

Not everyone will come to a point of actively healing insecure attachments in a college experience, but advice can be taken from Renn’s research. People can certainly begin to explore independently through self-education at libraries, community organizations, local cultural events, restaurants, businesses, or through online race-specific connection forums. With current technology there are numerous ways to explore, educate oneself, and connect.

Through the exploration process, people are able to find pieces of themselves. Some things will fit and some will be discarded, but exploration is just the beginning of building a secure identity. Renn (2008) states, “Multiracial adolescents’ ability to identify themselves in categories that accurately represent their heritages and lived identity has been shown to promote higher self-esteem, a higher sense of efficacy, and lower stereotype vulnerability” (p. 19-20). Stereotypes are difficult for anyone to endure. Without complete and accurate exploration people are vulnerable to identifying with, idealizing, or rejecting a stereotype of part of their heritage. Finding truths and authenticity in their racial identity will help them to be people they are proud to affirm.

The writer hypothesizes that many racial identity conflicts stem from internalized stereotypes they developed in younger years, leaving them trapped by the idea of not belonging based on these stereotypes. Therefore, it’s important to look into a person’s salient memories
about past racially-charged experiences to assess their current beliefs and stereotypes. Syed & Azmitia (2010) discuss the relationship between memory content versus current exploration.

Thinking of (memory) content as specific behavioral episodes marks a major shift in how content is conceptualized, for these experiences may serve as the building blocks for other dimensions of content, such as developing particular attitudes about out-groups or participating in ethnically based activities. Examining lived experiences also provides a dynamic account of ethnic identity content, as memories of past experiences are frequently reconstructed over time on the basis of subsequent experiences. Further, this focus on lived experiences provides a key expansion of the meaning of content by including experiences that are not contingent on individuals’ own agency, active exploration, or declaration of views. (p. 209.)

The content of memory, or lived experiences, provides a background on past experiences which have been internalized as coming from an external locus of control. Memories show what happened to an individual to formulate their beliefs, typically outside of their own efforts. The good news is that beliefs can change based on subsequent experience.

This supports the incredible importance of identity exploration in changing mistaken beliefs about belonging and racial identity. In order to change beliefs, one must go out into the world to experiment, creating new experiences. This is a powerful stance to take for a population who may come from the perspective that everything has been decided for them.

As information is gathered through intentional new experiences, one must continually sift through the meaning of their experience. As new meaning is created, a person begins to affirm and commit to a more full and rich identity.
Affirmation and Commitment. As BWBs continue to create contact and experiences in order to flesh out their identities, beliefs begin to change about who they are. Understanding oneself and how they relate to people like them naturally leads to affirmation. Ghavami et al. (2011) describe affirmation as “the affective process of developing positive feelings and a strong sense of belonging to one’s social group” (p. 79). Exploration has supplied a more full sense of the reality of a person’s experience, which should lead toward positive feelings to affirm.

This is a continual process rather than a linear process with a clear start and finish line. Whitehead, Ainsworth, Witting, & Gadino (2009) say that exploration is cyclical with affirmation and commitment to one’s group; affirmation and commitment increase curiosity to explore one’s ethnicity further. Whenever possible, people can build on their past or current attachments. Once one becomes knowledgeable about their culture, in order to internalize it one must affirm and commit to the identity.

When one consciously pursues new contacts, interactions, and information, they can begin to heal their racial identity problems based on old stereotypes. Part of affirmation and commitment is a willingness to continually confront and process internal conflict due to past hurts surrounding group identification. Smith (1991) offers a loose framework about how one moves through the process of resolving ethnic identity conflict:

An individual experiencing salient conflicts in identification tends to go through four phases: (a) preoccupation with self or preservation of ethnic self identity (minority individual may be confronted with himself or herself as inferior), (b) preoccupation with some aspect of the conflict and with the salient ethnic conflict group (hate and anger dominate this phase), (c) resolution of conflict (attempts to bring closure and to put the salient conflict in ethnic identification into perspective), (d) integration (the person
integrates ethnic contact experience with his or her other contact experiences). These phases can be repeated as often as the individual has contact with majority or minority group members that lead to conflict. (p. 186.)

This process is both practical and inspires hope for people experiencing racial identity conflict. Beginning with a focus on the self and one’s feelings of inferiority and anger, resolution comes through exploration of the problem and integrating new experiences with old ideas.

There are other researchers who highlight the significance of this process. As Umana-Taylor et al. (2004) describe, “An achieved ethnic identity applies to individuals who have made a commitment to their ethnic identity that is characterized by a period of personal exploration and positive feelings toward their ethnic group” (p. 12). Affirmation and commitment are the resulting positive feelings that come from a willingness to integrate new information and experience into an identity which was lacking. Affirmation and commitment are the decisions one makes after they have taken their racial identity into their own hands.

**Summary of Building a Secure Racial Identity**

Based on the current field of research on biracial identity development, there is no best or only way to self-identify. BWBs need to make the choice for themselves, which can sometimes be a challenge. Negative racial experiences, or lack of exposure can stunt one’s racial identity development.

Throughout American history, racial identity development theory has largely focused on theorists’ assumptions based on the respective historical contexts. When the one drop rule was in fashion, BWBs were assumed to have the same experience as Blacks. An exciting shift came in the 1970s for Blacks as the effects of the Civil Rights Movement brought socially observable changes and inspired new theories of racial identity development – for Blacks, other people of
color, and Whites. By the 1990s the unique experience and needs of BWBs began to become salient in the development of theory, accommodating for the tension of a BWB’s experience versus what the outside world assumed.

Today’s theory moves further in this direction, almost past theory into the description of a multi-faceted experience based on the many contexts of a human life. Theorists have acknowledged that any number of the ways BWBs have developed their racial identity are valid, and acceptance leads to more open-ended research. BWBs can decide as they self-reflect whether they are happy with where they find themselves in terms of racial identity development, or if they would like to more fully understand themselves and their racial contexts for the purpose of further biracial identity development.

A person can begin to heal through exploration (new contact experiences, education, and information), affirmation (integrating these experiences with previously held stereotypes), and commitment (choosing for oneself and committing to a racial identity based on the more richly diverse experiences and information that have been gathered). What once may have been seen as an identity assignment can become an informed choice.

**Conclusion**

The current distance between Black and White cultures based on American history makes BWBs an especially susceptible target for struggles with the issue of belonging. Because their two ethnic backgrounds are historically polarized, BWBs may have a more difficult time affirming both to form an integrated racial identity. The writer has introduced social interest as a means to assess and facilitate a sense of belonging in adulthood. Through developing social interest in a racial context, the writer sees the possibility of developing a secure racial identity.
Theoretical Development and Social Interest

The early thought about identity development for BWBs didn’t leave much room or optimism for Social Interest. Being labeled “Marginal Man,” with the expectation of many identity problems, coupled with the social rules of segregation left no place for BWBs to practice the main tenants of social interest – feeling belonging and active contribution. Phenotype controlled options for the racial group with which one could identify, and there wasn’t much room for question or challenge. In this way, the possibility of practicing social interest was limited to one race only.

In a way you could say that the changes in history and the social developments in time made room for social interest. As the legal and social norms changed, it has slowly become acceptable to practice social interest in terms of both sides of BWBs ethnic makeup. Theorists acted in social interest in continuing to develop theory.

The spirit of identity development is belonging and contribution. Theorists like Hardiman and B.W. Jackson developed their theories of monoracial identity development out of social interest to explain the experience of Whites and Blacks, respectively. They wanted to develop models that explained exciting things that were happening due to the social and legal changes.

The reason the early theories didn’t work for BWBs is because they didn’t encompass the spirit of social interest that was specific to their experience. A linear way to develop a sense of identity didn’t affirm the experience of BWBs. When racial identity is prescribed to develop in a set of linear stages, social interest is lost; it doesn’t emphasize belonging and contribution because the person going through development is “supposed to” feel a certain way throughout the prescribed stages of development. Though stage theories offered a framework, they only
serve to reaffirm to the BWB another set of rules guidelines that can be perceived as outside of their instinct and experience.

Social Context Models are the result of socially interested theorists seeking to create an inclusive framework which affirms the experience of BWBs. Each possibility that serves as an option today is something that worked for a group of people in the past. Racial identity exploration is attained from the study of history and research, coupled with purposeful exploration and connection in the present. Affirmation is choosing to identify with the many experiences of the people who have come before us and finding a place that feels right today.

**Social Interest and Identity Development**

Adlerian belonging has a wonderful compatibility with the idea of many options to choose from in exploring, affirming, and committing to a secure racial identity. Though in its purest form Adlerian belonging is about a universal sense of belonging to humanity, the concept is transferrable to race as well. Feeling a part of a community and contributing to that community is a crucial part of both social interest and the exploration/affirmation link. In this way, social interest is a very effective treatment in negotiating a secure biracial identity.

In examining the components of social interest discussed earlier, there are many connections to be made. Adler focused on the ideal development of social interest, emphasizing the initial relationship with the mother. Consider the case of BWBs whose mother could be identified racially different than the child. Depending on the nature and quality of the relationship, this could be either the beginning of feelings of ethnic belonging and harmony or early seeds of racism and exclusion. Outside of the mother, the family atmosphere and constellation throughout early childhood can inform attitudes about race based on individual relationships and ascribed family identities. The experience of the child’s first relationships will
contribute to their earliest ideas about race and belonging, and may possibly show up in early recollections. Acknowledging race and its earliest derived meaning is vital.

*Inferiority feelings* and *striving for superiority* can be looked at through the lens of racial identification. Children who were exposed to racism, stereotypes, and expected or projected racial loyalties may incorporate racial identification into their inferiorities and striving. For example, a BWB who was exposed to racism from Black community members in childhood may develop an *inferiority complex* in which they all but isolate from the Black community throughout adolescence and into adulthood. Or, a BWB may so lack a feeling of belonging anywhere that they strive for superiority through overemphasizing their uniqueness, striving to be special. This is common as even within their own family and from a young age, a BWB is inherently unique, not the same as mother or father. Taken to the extreme, this sense of uniqueness can go toward self-imposed isolation because no one can truly understand their experience.

Addressing task orientation can be especially powerful once it has been determined in which contexts a BWB feels they don’t belong. The horizontal and vertical planes offer a visual representation of how one finds their self-worth and meaning. In the American race-conscious society, coming out of a history of racial hierarchy, it’s can be a deeply meaningful experience to acknowledge personal bias, whether one perceives themselves as better or worse than others of a certain race. In addition, when challenged to become more socially interested, Mosak and Maniacci’s (1999) answers to approaching problem solving (previously presented in *Task Orientation*) can offer options to explore in why they might have trouble connecting with specific racial groups. *What kinds of excuses are being offered? Are you focusing on the task at hand or on whether you fit in?* Encouragement to focus on tasks/contributions can be very
effective at sidestepping insecurities. Further exploring insecurities, assessing safeguarding methods as they relate to a BWB’s racial identity is important.

**Implications for Therapeutic Approach**

Social interest is a helpful therapeutic tool because it can be used for both diagnosis and treatment. A therapist can diagnose by assessing social interest and identifying inferiority feelings and the direction of striving to get an initial snapshot of possible racial identity issues. As a form of treatment, BWBs can be encouraged in their social interest by working on their contributions to racial groups they are feeling excluded from. In addition, BWBs can be encouraged to change the direction of striving from being unique and special toward striving for the good of the group, while letting go of insecurities and preconceptions of rejection.

The present mental health outcomes for BWBs who have not reached a secure identity are informative. It is striking to see that identity unrealized exhibits itself in depressive symptoms. Addressing social interest is a wonderful way to treat depression (addressing the useless direction of striving and getting socially reconnected) and in turn will, the writer believes, be an innovative way to explore racial identity.

Individual therapy is always an option, especially at the beginning of exploration. As previously mentioned, a BWB may not enter therapy complaining of identity issues. A sensitive and gently persistent therapist can begin to explore identity issues based on the information provided in this review once rapport has been established. To be clear, it is the opinion of the writer that it is the responsibility of the therapist to broach the subject of racial identity with a client, if the client hasn’t brought it up over the course of therapy.
Once it has been established through individual therapy or outside assessment that a BWB is having security issues in their racial identity, the writer believes an optimal treatment is group psychotherapy.

A group that focuses on identity development for people of mixed-race offers many unique opportunities that benefit BWBs. The premise of any group therapy experience is that of a safe place to explore a common issue. With BWBs, who have been saturated with the experience of not belonging, group therapy is an opportunity to identify with others of similar experience.

In a previous paper, the writer created a group therapy curriculum for mixed-race identity exploration, called *Neither to Both*.

The purpose of *Neither to Both* is to facilitate self-exploration of members’ identity-forming thoughts and experiences throughout the lifespan in order to understand how they arrived at their current understanding of their own racial identity and to identify goals and aspirations in the creation of a new identity without discord. (Osunkoya, *Neither*, 2011, p. 2.)

This group provides ten weeks of curriculum which emphasizes group cohesion, self-exploration, and challenging mistaken beliefs.

The spirit behind this curriculum was inspired by Yalom and Lescz’a (2005) ideas about the individual and their unique wretchedness. People are often afraid to open up out of a sense of shame, and further shame themselves by hiding it. BWBs are especially susceptible to shame surrounding their private thoughts about racial issues. The beauty of group therapy is the opportunity to come together with others having these same private issues for the purpose of shedding light on the wretchedness, showing that it is not unique. In addition, this may be one of
their first experiences of participating in true community where they feel belonging, and are inspired to contribute.

**Implications for Therapists**

Due to the fact that both therapist and client come from American society into the therapy office, it is necessary for the therapist to participate in their own self-reflection. Some in the industry may take the personal stance of *colorblindness* in their personal worldviews. The writer argues that this could be detrimental to the therapeutic relationship. In many cases, with clients of color, race is a salient piece of identity and experience of the social and physical world. To be colorblind is to invalidate the important perceptions about life, relationships, and opportunity of their clients of color. As previously discussed, some BWBs are prone to hypervigilance when it comes to race and interpersonal perceptions, and may be more sensitive to microaggressions. Therefore the writer wishes to stress the importance of the therapist’s personal worldview. Therapists of all races do a disservice to their clients of color by not examining their own history of racism, and acknowledging the experience of other races regardless of their personal conclusions.

The task the writer charges therapists with is neither simple nor easy. Discussions of race are uncomfortable for everyone. Goodstein (2008) describes one of the dilemmas mental health professionals face:

> We psychologists need ways to enlighten White people who are embedded in racist thinking and ways of being without intent, and we are left with the dilemma of how can we show a White person when racism manifests, when he or she is the one creating and perpetuating the problem. (p. 276.)
In this day and age, the writer assumes that most Whites consider themselves well-meaning and non-racist. The previous research introduced detailing microaggressions should bring questions to people of every racial category what their subconscious behaviors may betray.

At the same time, therapists should not make assumptions about the experience of clients of color. Goodstein continues, given the complexity of racial, cultural, and ethnic combinations, “Misconstruing this multilayered, textured nature of identity may inadvertently impede the therapy process and translate into invalidating clients’ unique perceptions and experiences… when we presume to know the worldview of a person based on his or her race, we risk closing our minds to infinite possibilities for how people might construe and construct who they are culturally” (p. 276). The charge is to be mindful of possible outcomes based on racial makeup, but to keep an open mind because there are no absolute templates for racial and cultural experience.

To be clear, the writer presents these recommendations to therapists of all races and cultures in American practice. It is just as important for White therapists to confront racism as for therapists of color. In fact, BWB therapists deserve special mention here; though they may identify with many of the things the writer has described in this review, there is no guarantee that a BWB therapist has fully come to terms with their own racial identity.

Therapists from all backgrounds should begin or continue the work of acknowledging race and racisms in their lives. This begins with non-judgmental self-observation in their inter- and intra-racial interactions. Begin to ask yourself: What are my thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as I interact with people alike and different from myself? What assumptions cross my mind? What surprises me? What scares me? Which thoughts do I push aside – thoughts that I
would be ashamed to say out loud? As therapists we can take the opportunity to show the
courage we expect from our clients by beginning to examine ourselves.

**Considerations for Further Research**

There are no studies directly relating the appropriateness of Adlerian belonging
specifically in the treatment of BWBs. Based on the findings of this literature review, the
hypothesis is strong and the information provides insightful information for therapists to consider
in practice.

Regarding future directions, Rockquemore et al. (2009) emphasize the necessity of
interdisciplinary research. The lack of communication between professionals in their respective
fields “results in repetition, lack of connection and innovation, and theories that extend
disciplinary-specific dialogues but fail to explain the experiential reality of multiracial people’s
lives and identity choices” (p. 24). Specifically, it would be nice to see multidisciplinary
research teams representing psychology, social work, historians, sociologists, and
anthropologists.

Though outside of the scope of this research, specific attention should be given to the
families of BWBs for the purpose of socially interested racial identity development. As Adler
said, social interest begins in the earliest relationships, and parents of BWBs have a doubly
important job for which they may not be prepared. Currently there is a lot of information
available about trans-racial parenting. It’s a delicate issue for a parent of one race to try to teach
a child of another race how to identify. Parents should seek out as many resources as possible to
understand the implications.

The writer believes that the most helpful thing either parent of a BWB can do is to
develop and model their own social interest for their children. The simple fact that one Black
and one White adult found one another and had a child does not mean they have addressed their own racial issues. Often times people never need to address the issue of race until an unavoidable problem presents itself, and by then it may be long past the time a child is born.

Parents of BWBs do a valuable service to themselves, their children, and the community at large when they address the role of race and racism in their lives. There are a number of ways to get started: Getting involved in one another’s families and racial communities; confronting racism in their subconscious thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and; participating in anti-racist campaigns through local or national community agencies to model self-acceptance and empowerment for their children.

With the technological advances, meet-up groups, and more intentional ways people are creating opportunities for belonging today, it is much easier to form and join multiracial communities. It’s an exciting time to be Biracial!
References


