

Kristen Renn's Ecological Theory on Mixed-Race Identity Development

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Renn's theory focuses on:

- *Ecological factors* that influence multiracial identity development
- *Identity patterns* that mixed-race students use to identify themselves

Ecology Influences

- Renn uses Bronfenbrenner's Person, Process, Context, Time (PPCT) model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).
 - *Person:*
 - Family background and heritage, extent of cultural knowledge, degree of experience with individuals of one's own heritage and other cultural backgrounds, and physical appearance all apply when considering the person in Renn's ecological influences model (Evans, N. J., 2010).
 - *Process:*
 - This definition contains several key ideas (Renn, 2004)
 - a) Processes are ongoing, enduring forms
 - b) They are progressively more complex
 - c) They are reciprocal
 - d) They involve interactions between an evolving person and other people, or symbols
 - e) They occur in the setting containing the developing individual
 - *Context*
 - Renn identified the following *settings* that influenced the identity development of mixed-race students (Renn, 2004), (Bronfenbrenner, 1993):
 - 1. Microsystems:** A pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with a particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit or inhibit engagement in a sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment. In higher education, microsystems include academic settings, residential and/or family settings, formal co-curricular and or/community settings, and informal social settings.
 - 2. Mesosystems:** The mesosystem is a web of involvements that comprises linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person. On campus, mesosystems might include the interactions between the various academic, social, co-curricular and familial microsystems.
 - 3. Exosystem:** the linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not contain the developing person, but in which events occur that indirectly influence processes within the immediate setting in which the developing person lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). This might include family, parent's workplaces, and settings on and off campus, such as faculty committees and federal agencies, where policies are made that influence the individual.
 - 4. Macrosystem:** the overarching pattern of micro-, meso-, and exosystems characteristic of a given culture, subculture, or other extended social structure.

- *Time*
 - Renn used the “chronosystem” concept that Bronfenbrenner used in his PPCT model. The chronosystem captures two perspectives of time: historical and personal (Renn, 2004).

Identity Patterns

- How multiracial students identify themselves.
- Renn (2004) described five **fluid** and **non-exclusive** “identity patterns” (p. 67), all of which she viewed as healthy.
 - 1. Monoracial Identity:**
 - a. The individual chooses one of his or her heritage backgrounds to identify with.
 - b. 48% of Renn’s (2004) participants claimed a monoracial identity;
 - 2. Multiple Monoracial Identity**
 - a. Student holds multiple monoracial identities, shifting according to the situation.
 - b. 48% of the students Renn (2004) interviewed identified using multiple monoracial identities, most representing their parental heritages (for example, white and Latino; African American and Asian).
 - 3. Multiracial Identity**
 - a. The individual elects an identity that is neither one heritage nor another, but of a distinct “multicultural” group on par with other racial categories.
 - b. **89%** in Renn’s (2004) study.
 - c. Term represented their unique mixed-race background (for example, multiracial, biracial, hapa, mixed).
 - 4. Extraracial Identity**
 - a. Student holds an extraracial identity by deconstructing race or opting out of identification with the U.S. racial categories.
 - b. $\frac{1}{4}$ of interviewees in Renn’s study fit this pattern.
 - c. Mostly all of them were juniors and seniors
 - 5. Situational Identity**
 - a. Situational identity describes a fluid identity pattern in which an individual’s racial identity is stable, but different elements are more salient in some contexts than in others.
 - b. 61% of Renn’s (2004) participants identified differently in different contexts, including all of the students who identified differently in different contexts, including all of the students who identified extraracially.

References:

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- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1993). The ecology of cognitive development: Research models and fugitive findings. In R.H. Wozniak, & G.H. Elder, Jr. (Eds.) *Examining lives in context: Perspectives on the ecology of human development* (pp 619-47). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
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