

Episode 20 - Dr. Kelly Jackson: What Are You?: The Experience of Multiracial Individuals in a Monoracial World

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof the podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. Celebrating 75 years of excellence in social work education. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. The University at Buffalo School of Social Work is celebrating 75 years of transforming lives and communities. We would like to invite you to be part of the celebration. Please visit our website www.socialwork.buffalo.edu to see a full list of events marking our seventy fifth year leading up to the gala celebration. This is your host Adjoa Robinson. What do President Barack Obama, Tiger Woods, Soledad O'Brien and Derek Jeter all have in common. They're all persons of mixed heritage. According to the 2000 U.S. Census two point four percent of the total U.S. population self identify with two or more racial categories. It's America's fastest growing population. But what does it mean to be biracial or multiracial in an increasingly diverse society particularly when you embody that diversity. How does it affect one's way of being in the world. Remember the 2008 campaign season then candidate Barack Obama was at once too black and not black enough. The candidacy of Barack Obama intrigued and challenged the nation bringing the issue of multi racial experience to the forefront in a society that until 1967 outlawed interracial marriage in 16 states.

[00:01:55] Today's guest Dr Kelly Jackson has been intrigued and challenged in her own life and work by the other Neste experienced by those who are bi or multi racial. Dr. Jackson is an assistant professor at the Arizona State School of Social Work. She has authored or coauthored several articles and book chapters on multiracial and multicultural identity and culturally competent treatment and interventions for Multicultural Youth. Dr. Jackson is also a member of the board of directors of the Mavin Foundation an organization dedicated to building healthier communities by celebrating the mixed heritage experience and providing awareness and educational resources. I spoke with Dr. Jackson by telephone. Dr. Jackson your interest is and multi racial identity development. I'm curious what sparked your interest in this topic. Well I think a number of things both professional professional and personal. Personally I am identify as biracial. So my dad is African-American and my mom is European American and as well as professionally I realized through my research and social work that there was not a lot of information on multiracial identity. It was mostly focused on you know mono racial by different groups of kids. And you know such as African-American identity development model white American identity development model Native American identity models so we really kind of base identity on kids too. And people who identify with just one group. So I kind of felt like and that was the reason I explored this topic was that it wasn't being explored or examined. And why do you think it's an issue that social workers should be concerned about. Well I'm glad you asked that because I think with the rise of you know obviously our country is growing more and more diverse.

[00:04:06] And on top of that and as a result of that there are more people in this country who identify with more than one racial group. So right now well according to the census in 2000 there was approximately 7 million people who identified with more than one race. And we know that that number is probably a low estimate based on the fact that this was the first census. And I think over 50 years that actually allowed people to report more than one race. So we know that this population is growing. We just saw the election of President Barack Obama who identifies as African-American but also clearly describes himself as a mixed race. So that's something that is more prominent now that people are identifying with it. And it's something that is important to talk about. Yeah I think I read from your work that there are some estimates though be it could be as high as 1 in 5 by 2050. Yeah. So just like the rest of the population is to use your time as a minor racial part

of our population is a start for pacifying the mixed race. It's growing definitely and I just want to clarify too because often you know not even how I describe it it's like this new phenomenon multiracial people have been with us since the beginning of time. I really think this country is obviously very diverse and even within our model we think groups are a monolithic ethnic group. There is a lot of diversity. So just often our country hasn't really recognized that more in many ways downplayed the different racial mixtures that have always been here.

[00:05:50] So it's something that's been with us it's something that people you know it's not it's not a new phenomenon it's just what I wanted to mention. And speaking of you mentioned also that the 2000 census was the first one to allow people to check multiple boxes. There was a lot of controversy around that decision was there not. Oh yeah there's definitely a lot of controversy. The the OMB. So the federal Office of Management and Budget and budget they actually did a study a couple of studies. One was in the school to see how many kids actually identified with more than one race a day. And they also did a lot of interviews with multi racial groups and parents and Multiracial Kids to collect information as far as you know how to move forward with including a category about multiracial identity on the census and what they came up with was different than what the community was requesting. So multiracial community was requesting a multiracial category to check this. And what the census compromise on was this idea of check more than one race because it still follow the same format of you know keeping the groups you know as is instead of adding another group which would just be multiracial which in the past I think has been like other. It's it's now you know check more than one box. The multiracial community they want it just a multi racial box to check. What are the areas of difference or what do they see as a critical difference between being able to check one box versus multiracial and several boxes that you know sort of list your whole heritage. Right now I can't speak for the communities argument at the time.

[00:07:52] I can talk a little bit about what I believe their perceptions were as well as just from my research what I've kind of identified or am coming to understand. So the multiracial experience multiracial identity it isn't that you're just the different ethnic combinations. It's a living that experience of having multiple racial groups creates kind of a culture in itself. So what would you say to those people who say all right OK so you don't quite fit in. Big deal. So like you mean like yeah you're a person of multi racial experience. Oh you're not. You're not. You know you're you don't have a complete African-American experience you don't or you are the complete Caucasian American exchanges or whatever elements of your heritage so you don't fit neatly into one category. Why. Why is this an issue a pressing concern. I understand. I'll pick one and get over it. I think it's a pressing concern. If you think about social workers and this idea of us trying to be kind of culturally responsive I like that word a little bit better culturally responsive and attuned to our clients. If we kind of come up we approach our multiracial client or any client with the idea that you know your race or your ethnic background or who you see yourself as culturally you know isn't really important. You know just you know check a box on a form or pick one that we're really going to miss a lot of who that person is. And we will really miss out on how to kind of properly work with that person and develop an appropriate fitting intervention plan.

[00:09:48] If we do you know kind of just kind of blur over or with multi racial people in many ways. A lot of our forms in asking somebody not seen as a big deal or having them pick one really kind of reverts memory traumatizes them or it and I guess I'm using some harsh words there but it just reminds the person that again they don't fit in. Rights are not valued you know. And what was their you know their unique background is not something you know within this agency with this social worker or within a setting. We value it could put up a barrier I believe. It's sort of like you know our big thing is start with a client is but if you don't know where they are how can you start with that. Exactly. Exactly. Exactly. Being able to talk about this and ask people their perceptions of it and again that may not make assumptions. And again this is a new kind of a new finding that's coming out and some of the research that hasn't really been explored that often but

almost the collective culture of you know being multiracial. So it has shared experiences shared beliefs shared values a sense of multicultural background appreciation something that you're not going to be able to capture in just selecting the different groups that you affiliate with. Also I think people can have multiple groups that they're affiliated with biologically based on their parents ethnic background. But that doesn't necessarily mean the person themselves really ascribes to or identifies with that group though.

[00:11:34] And I guess so a lot of this that this conversation can be applied to everybody because often we're all kind of forced into a box or category just check. That really doesn't describe or define our experience. So I guess in talking about a lot of this stuff I do want to make it clear that you know it's kind of you know we're trying to fit within a system that really is flawed in how it describes people. Again based in part on some of these biological notions of different racial groups when we know that it's just kind of a social construction that you know we're we're kind of having to be having to live with. Exactly. And I guess this is a good time to talk about terms you've used mixed race you used multiracial and those are the the broadly accepted terms. I'm so I'm really I really appreciate you asking that question because in any field terms and concepts and constructs can be very different or over time they can change. So I use the term mixed race multiracial mixed heritage and sometimes multi ethnic all to mean a similar thing. So it's people whose racial background is composed of two or more races and that from what I've seen in the research is kind of a common shared definition that other researchers use to describe multiracial people where it gets confusing is the idea of multi ethnic and so multi-ethnic according to how government defines ethnic groups would be somebody who can and who identifies as Hispanic because that's the only ethnic group we recognize right now in this country and white because that or not Hispanics so Hispanic are not Hispanic. So somebody who identifies as Hispanic and not Hispanic could fit into kind of a multi ethnic group.

[00:13:36] But he gets kind of confusing because we all are made up of different ethnicities. So a lot of us most of us if not all are multi ethnic. Again not using the census categories of just looking at Hispanic. You mentioned before when you were talking about a shared experience of being multiracial. You sort of indicated that perhaps there are some folks who are of mixed race parentage who don't identify as multiracial. Well I think obviously the multiracial group is very diverse and I think that it's just a reality that there are people who have a mixed race background who don't identify as mixed race. They feel affiliation or comfort or just cultural attachment to one of their racial backgrounds and that's how they identify which is wonderful. And that's the other thing about kind of the multiracial movement or discussion around identity this idea that multiracial people can or every person should be able to identify however they want. As we're talking I'm just reminded of the anger in the African-American community and resistance in the African-American community to the notion of declaring or identifying yourself as a person who's multiracial. And as for example Tiger Woods when he appeared on the scene as a fiend he described himself I can't remember the exact term but it was a combination of black white Asian. I think there was Duchon there and he got a lot of flak for that. And I think for at least for many African-Americans they feel a rejection. Correct. Yeah. Tiger Woods really did kind of bring out the issue that was in 97 I believe when he was on Oprah and he described himself as Kablan Asian.

[00:15:43] So a mixture of all those different groups that you mentioned. I'm glad you brought up the African-American community because that's a community that I feel a part of but also one that's in many ways. And I can just personally from my own experience feel disconnected from in some ways like my experiences not entirely the African-American experience based on how I was raised based on my community where I grew up. Also based on my complexion and how I look so I think that's an example of why multiracial people not that we're trying to separate ourselves or disconnect from our communities of color. We're we're not trying to separate ourselves. It's more of my experience doesn't line up exactly with the African-American experience as well as my experiences

not line up exactly with the white mainstream experience. So I think a lot of the conflict that comes about for African-Americans and it's justified it's looking back particularly at slavery and how people with mixed heritage because we knew we know at the time that there was a lot of intermingling between white slave owners and African-American slaves females that they were having children that were mixed race and those children were treated a lot better than the children of people who were not mixed. So it's longstanding that history of this idea of having a mixture of white white features. Right. The good hair the light complexion that that's been something in this country that has been you know kind of stigmatized as better. So it is right. You know if you're black get back. So I think a lot of African-Americans are concerned and have issue with multiracial people particularly those who might have some white ancestry.

[00:17:40] You know denying or saying that you know there are not just African-American that they're kind of all these things and they identify with all those. It's really hard and it's a personal decision. Like I said because I don't I'm familiar with a lot of multiracial people who identify as African-American and myself identified as African-American. Growing up throughout middle school and high school. So you know the idea of you know what communities we feel part of and how we identify the change over time. You know this just says you are bringing up the history. I think it's important for listeners to know that these how deeply rooted these things are and also sort of gets into that sort of intergenerational trauma that's been carried forward that's something that occurred in the past and that was has been perpetuated is still affecting how folks are viewing themselves how they see the world and how they go about in the world today. I agree. I think of ideas and talking about some of my relatives of my father. You know this idea of people being color struck. I don't know if you've heard of that sentiment but yes this idea of you know that people particularly of African-American descent are kind of obsessed with you know lighter skin more White features. So this idea even though it's like a love hate relationship or at least that's how I've always seen it. So because society has always told African-Americans and groups of color in this country that white is better.

[00:19:18] Yes there's this kind of obsession or you know desire to be or look like that but also in opposition to that is our own ideas and our own beliefs particularly that came out in the civil rights movement which was black is beautiful. Right. So it's this is this contradiction that that is deep rooted that comes out and many discussions and interactions not only with African-Americans or with other groups of color. Yeah and not only here it's just interesting how the Western influence has really impacted other countries in different places about appearance. Yeah it's funny you should say that because that's what I was thinking as you were speaking. It's not just restricted to blacks and whites in us. It's where wherever whoever is perceived and for good reason is having the power in terms of determining or being able to name those things that are important and and say this is the way you do things. They are esteemed naturally esteemed and naturally aspire to because of the power that's associated with those who hold those particular characteristics. Exactly. And it's everywhere it's all you see. I always tell my students in diversity class you know and able to kind of take a step back and realize the influence of mainstream media and what it tells you and shows you is beautiful and what that beauty looks like. And you know you just pick up a magazine or turn on a TV and you know it's it's white so you know for people to kind of understand that and relate to that. You know it's something that again it haunts me as a color. I believe in this country throughout the world. Yes. Yes. So tell me about your research. Why don't you start with what you did and why you did it and what you learned.

[00:21:19] Sure. And I think I can also tie that in to where I'm going with it. Yes. So for my dissertation I interviewed multiracial people about their cultural identity and what came from that was some of the factors that influence that identity development as well as this notion of kind of a shared experience a multiracial experience that all of the participants. So these 10 people that I interviewed had and again it was and it wasn't dependent on what their ethnic makeup was. So that

was really interesting. So that has led to some of the work that I'm doing now is developing a multi racial experiences questionnaire. I was just going to say now there are there were some models out there for understanding multiracial identity development. What are some of those and how do they differ from the one you use in your work. Great. Well I just want to clarify that I didn't develop a multiracial identity model and I'll explain why. I'll explain my thoughts on that. I truly believe that we don't know enough about the multiracial experience to all of a sudden attach some kind of identity model to it just yet. And I believe that a lot of the ways that people have attached identity model to multiracial people have been like the type policy model. So you measure one point in time how multiracial people feel about their different ethnic heritages heritages and then you category categorize them you know what. And you know they take the survey and outcome they have four different outcomes that they can fall into.

[00:23:14] So this idea of a marginal identity they have an idea of you know affirming more minority identity and I'm referring to the work of Kerry Rockmore and Bruhns Ma who really came up with an identity model for biracial black white individuals. And again it was the apology model in the sense that you had four or five outcomes at the end of that identity model that was based on kind of your affiliation with either the majority white culture or African-American culture. My problem with some of these models and even Maria did this with her model which is more of an eco systems model this idea of coming up with different types of multiracial people. Is that what we know of the multiracial experience is that it changes over time in high school or middle school identified as African-American. Yes and the name college identified is biracial and that was something that changed. So you interviewed me and high school my results on that survey might look a little different and my you know my typology would be very different than it would be now as an adult. So I get really you know I get a little nervous about how we are. You know we've traditionally some of the research that has gone into kind of some of these models that it you know puts multiracial people into categories on they're kind of ethnic membership. Again following some very more traditional means of coming up with identity models which I'm not you know saying that that's something that we shouldn't we. It's not something that we can move towards or something that would be appropriate.

[00:24:54] I just don't think it's appropriate yet because we're missing a lot of the information as far as you know what are some of the factors and things that are contributing to the identity development that we're we're not really paying much attention to. And so as you mentioned that part of your research one of the questions you asked was What are the factors that contribute to cultural identity development. What other questions did you ask and what did you find out. Right. I think so. Questions I asked. I used a narrative approach so I had purchased pens draw a timeline of events or experiences that shaped their cultural identity development. How did you broach questions to them. How I asked it was just. Could you describe to me the timeline experiences that have shaped who you are. OK. And that's all I ask them to do. I didn't give them any more guidance as far as what needed to be on there. So then I based on these timelines which turned out to be very elaborate and spent spent probably over 45 minutes most of them treating these based on that I ask them questions about what was on the timeline. So it was really kind of person centered approach to research in that you know their timelines guided views so I might look at a timeline and see that a particular incident were or category or there's something that stands out on the form that was you know in really dark print or they used a different marker color and color Marcus that they could use and that might be where I'd start the interview. I'm just asking Oh I noticed you wrote this word. Like for instance one participant wrote hate big bold capital letters.

[00:26:49] And that was the first kind of area that we talked about. But what I found based on the timelines and interviews were the factors that really influence their multi racial identity development or their cultural identity were really close to kind of the ecosystem's model. So first it was their relationships with their family and peers and tied to that were experiences of

discrimination that they had. And then also it appeared that the setting was also influencing on their identity. So a lot of the multiracial participants reported being in a more homogeneous like racial composition kind of setting. So a lot of them like neighborhood school or something like exactly neighborhoods and schools and how that kind of led to often more incidences of discrimination. Experiences of kind of loneliness just realizing that they're different from other people and that was something that was really really stood out to the participants shapes to their experience. So I want to just say that other researchers are doing work using kind of these multifactor model of kind of what are the influential factors that are impacting identity development. So not so much the the far end which is you know spit out what are the types of identity labels we can give to multiracial people. But more up front in what are some of the factors that are shaping the identity of Volman with Lingi is one person that does work in this area and she's always pointing to kind of more of eco systems model of these are the different factors that are impacting identity development and spiritual spirituality. With that she found as well and that's something that I also found in my study that she mentioned and I wonder if there's anything surprising.

[00:28:44] Anything that surprised you that came out of your previous research. Some of the things that I think were unique to my dissertation study that I hadn't seen or I might have seen little hints of in literature but weren't really wrote really expanded on. So it was something that was unique was the idea that a lot of my participants who had mothers who were white actually were reported that their mothers were very supportive or in some ways help them understand or supported their Balta racial identity and that was something that a lot of there's some social workers as well some psychologists back in the day I'd say early 90s late 80s reported a lot that white mothers in particular weren't able to really help multiracial kids or their children understand what it's like to be a minority or how to struggle with identity. So what I found is a lot of the mothers that my participants spoke about that there are white mothers gave examples of some of the discrimination they experienced being in an interracial relationship. So they talked a little bit about having the experience again not directly or sometimes not exactly what their children were experiencing but in some ways being able to relate or kind of give the idea or pass on the notion to their child that they could relate in some way. So that was something that was unique because I believe some of the work of Dr. Taylor good Jewel Taylor good to have talked about in the past that you know white mothers may struggle. Are white parents of multiracial kids may struggle more so and again. So that was something that was different and unique.

[00:30:48] And the other one that came out that was really unique in my dissertation study was how multiracial people were racially. I define them as described them as racially defined. So this idea that they really opposed the idea that race you know that we have to report and that and that they were really they didn't believe in the notion that there were separate racial groups. They really opposed how people tracked race. So now the government track race how they had to fill out race forms and also they really defied this idea of having to answer the question What are you accurately. So this idea that you know somebody could approach you. You don't even know off the street and they have a strange look on their face and they're just like what are you. And so their responses to some of these these are the responses to kind of their encounters with not only persons asking you know what are you but also forms that are asking you to pick one right or even you know the idea of having to check more than one box or in conversation with people about you know race and that you know when you're talking with somebody who really does believe that race is real. So they would come up with these kind of ways of a little like oppositional defiant like how they would kind of describe themselves or or you know having conversations with people they would lie a lot. What are some examples of your respondents being racially defiant.

[00:32:21] I had a couple participant who described people coming up to them so strangers on the street said one participant who was of darker complexion and has this really great kind of big big hair that was kind of tight curled in some places but straight in others so she had this really beautiful

very big hair. And so people would come up to her and ask her you know what are you and they'd start cussing you know there are you. You know black are you Cuban or are you all these things. And she would say I'm Swedish. Right. So. So that would be an example. Other people another person reported that she'd get the forms like that would ask you to you know just pick one and she'd check every box. So you know misreporting there was a lot of that and then I had some of the other participants who would because I have this idea that a lot of people bought into this idea of separate races did a lot of research and a lot of research and gathered kind of information they were really attuned to different race relations and historical information about how race different racial groups were treated in the country and now racial groups were formed and so they would engage with people you know in these discussions so even if a person who would just come up and just say you know what are you. And while that's strange or why don't you just pick one. They would kind of go into the diatribe of why you shouldn't have to and give people actually educate right or wrong that is. So I thought that was also very interesting. So now you've got a place to start. Right. What's next for you.

[00:34:11] For the past year I've been working with two other professors two other colleagues one in the School of Social and family dynamics and another in Asian Pacific Islander Studies Department. We're working on developing multiracial experiences questionnaire. We realize it's shaped again from my qualitative research. I was just going to ask you what dimensions you were looking at in that questionnaire that you're putting together. So what we did was we came up with five categories that define or describe them all see racial like experience. So some of the categories are on my dissertation and some others were added based on Dr. Glomar as work. So one category is shifting expressions of identity. The other category is getting asked what are you. So this idea of you know appearing or looking different or not categorize. All right. So who are you. You look you look on. I think in talking about this sometimes we're able to see and make sense of that question that you asked well so why don't you just identifies black or white or you know why don't you just pick one. Because my ex you know my experience in other multiracial person's experience sometimes does not align with the experience of a certain group or or whatever. Now so getting asked what are you in and where are you know where are you from. And those kind of questions is very very common for multiracial people. So that's another group. Another group is multicultural. So that's something that came out of my work as well as Dr. Gwer virus was that multiracial people often because of their obviously their different backgrounds have kind of multicultural experiences.

[00:36:07] We talked about that category and the last one is this idea of a third space. So multiracial people you know kind of seeking out a community of like others and it just has to be multiracial people it has to be people that kind of can relate or understand them or accept them for who they are. And so how do you hope that will inform you and your work. Lately I've noticed in the research that there's been a lot of studies that are pointing towards multiracial persons particularly youth as being more at risk. So large data sets people are coming up with findings that say multiracial youth are more likely to use substances maybe suffer or struggle with more mental health problems. These are some of the things that are coming out but we don't understand why. So what happens when we don't are understand why is we fall back on old notions of the ideas of multiracial people as being unstable. Have adjustment problems the tragic mulatto. You know all these things that kind of come about. So I think this I'm hoping and my goal of this kind of survey is our development of a questionnaire is that people can use this as a way to understand what's going on for that person. So it's not that that person is because of their multiracial background. They are more likely to use substances because that person who is multiracial happens to be discriminated against in their homogeneous setting and thus are more prone to use substances. Some of the more disturbing findings that have been coming out just giving more explanation as to why what's going on. Dr. JACKSON It's been a interesting and stimulating conversation.

[00:38:01] Thank you for agreeing to talk to us about your interests and your work. No. My pleasure. I'm I'm always excited to engage in conversations about my work. You've been listening to a conversation with Dr. Kelly Jackson on multi racial identity development to learn more check out the Web resources at the mixed heritage center and the Mavin Foundation. Thanks for listening. And join us again next time for more lectures and conversations on social work practice and research. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. Our school is celebrating 75 years of research teaching and service to the community. More information about who we are our history our programs and what we do. We invite you to visit our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. At UB we are living proof that social work makes the difference because lives.