Intra-familial Microaggressions, Object Relations, and Racial Identity Formation in Multiracial Individuals

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Abstract

The concept of the self in relation to others is referred to in psychoanalytic theory as one’s ‘object-relations’ (Kernberg, 1984). One of the earliest object-relationships is between baby and caretaker(s), through which the baby develops a sense of their own identity (Mahler, 1967; Sandler & Sandler, 1978). Multiracial individuals, or those whose families fall in two or more different racial/ethnic groups, report racial microaggressions from within their own families (Nadal, Sriken, Davidoff, Wong, & McLean, 2013). Notably, Multiracial individuals who have one White parent and one non-White parent face a greater possibility of rejection from one or both sides of the family (Gaskins, 1999; Root, 1992) Such microaggressions may disrupt early object-relations, as well as sense of identity. As of yet, there is little exploration of the impact of racial microaggressions on object-relations and ethnic/racial self-identification, particularly among Multiracial individuals. However, difficulty with racial identity formation may impact mental health in Multiracial individuals (Fisher, Reynolds, Hsu, Barnes, & Tyler, 2014; Udry, Li, & Hendrickson-Smith, 2003). This study had five aims: (1) how racial microaggressions manifest within the family for Multiracial individuals (2) how ethnic identity is affected by such microaggressions in Multiracial individuals (3) how internalized object relations impact racial or ethnic identification in Multiracial individuals (4) how Multiracial individuals may identify themselves differently depending on the situation or environment and (5) how microaggressions received from within the family may have an impact on mental health outcomes in Multiracial individuals. This dissertation had participants that fell in two groups: those with one White-European parent and one parent of color, and those with two parents of color from different racial or ethnic groups. Using a mixed-method design, this study has demonstrated that familial experiences contributed to temporary micro-shifts in ethnic and racial identity, and that participants with one White parent and one parent of color similarly endorsed racial microaggressions within families and evidenced navigation between two ethnicities or races as did participants with two parents of color. This study also elucidated the types of racial microaggressions that occur within multiracial families including favoritism among family members and having experiences of race denied or invalidated by relatives.