

ABSTRACT

Understanding the Salience of Multiracial Students' Racial Identity

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As the number of multiracial individuals in the United States increases, it is important for educators to understand how the experiences students have in college can influence the way these students understand and make sense of their racial identity. This qualitative research study explored the following question: In what contexts on a college campus does racial identity become salient for multiracial students. Interviews with multiracial students revealed that racial identity becomes salient in monoracial settings, that multiracial students' interactions with monoracial peers influence how they understand their racial identity, and that multiracial students feel supported when interacting with other multiracial students. Implications for research include further research into the multiracial student population at different institution types. Implications for practice include integrating information about multiracial students into diversity training and establishing multiracial student organizations.

Understanding the Saliency of Multiracial Students' Racial Identity

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

“I never wanted to be somebody who looked like I was avoiding who I saw in the mirror. I never thought that would be a healthy thing,” former President Barack Obama said in an interview with a reporter from *The Atlantic* (Coates, 2016). President Obama was born in 1961 to a Black Kenyan father and a White American mother and was raised by his mother and maternal grandparents in Hawaii and Indonesia. Throughout his adolescence, President Obama wrestled with notions of race and finding where he belonged. In a 2015 interview, he said, “I am raised without a dad, an African American, but not grounded in a place with a lot of African American culture. So, I’m trying to figure out, I’m seen and viewed and understood as a Black man in American culture. What does that mean?” (Maron, 2015). In his autobiography, *Dreams from My Father*, he wrote about learning to “slip back and forth between my black and white worlds, understanding that each possessed its own language and customs and structures of meaning, convinced that with a bit of translation on my part the two worlds would eventually cohere” (Obama, 2004, p. 82). Through his statements in interviews where he discussed his racial identity and passages in his own book explaining the internal struggle to define where he stood racially, we see the challenges that President Obama faced as a multiracial individual growing up in the United States.

I too, like President Obama, am multiracial—the daughter of an Asian father and a White mother. During college, I was challenged to think about how I racially identified and where I fit in. I found that my racial identity became salient during moments when I

felt like I did not fit completely into any of the existing racial categories, and I felt like I occupied an in-between space of not being fully Asian and not being fully White. The experiences I had as a multiracial undergraduate student figuring out where I fit in and how to make sense of my racial identity sparked my interest in the experiences of other multiracial college students. As the multiracial population in the United States grows, higher education administrators and student affairs professionals must learn how to support students who do not fit neatly into the American racial categories. We must learn how multiracial students make sense of their racial identity and perceive its salience when, like President Obama, they might not feel completely at home in any of the races that constitute their racial heritage.

The Multiracial Population in the United States

Racial groups are typically conceived of as discrete, non-overlapping categories used to differentiate individuals. In the United States, people are categorized as White, Black, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, or a combination of two or more of the previously listed categories (Corcos, 1997). Individuals whose parents come from the same racial group are considered monoracial (Renn, 2000). Individuals whose parents come from two or more federally defined racial groups are described using terms such as multiracial, biracial, or mixed-race (Corcos, 1997; Renn, 2000; Shang, 2008; Garbarini-Philippe, 2010). According to Rockquemore, Brunsma and Delgado (2009), “some have conceptualized [multiracial] as describing a common set of social experiences among people who have parents of different races; however, it is not currently clear that mixed-race people have a monolithic set of similar life experiences and circumstances” (p. 25). In other words,

multiracial individuals are similar in that they have parents from different racial categories, but differ from one another in the ways that their racial identities and related life experiences influence the way they move about in the world.

The Growing Multiracial Population

Historically, multiracial individuals have not been acknowledged in the United States. According to Mukhopadhyay, Henze, and Moses (2007), hypodescent, whereby a child's racial identification is the same as that of the parent from the lowest racial status, dictated how individuals with one White parent and one non-White parent were categorized for a long time. In 1960, people who were White and another race were categorized as the minority race, and multiracial individuals with non-White backgrounds were classified according to their father's race (Pew Research Center, 2015). In 1970, people were allowed to choose their own race and were instructed to select the racial category they most closely identified with (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Prior to the 2000 U.S. Census, individuals were only allowed to select only one racial category to describe their racial identity (Corcos, 1997). If they chose not to select a category, someone else selected one for them based on their physical appearance (Corcos, 1997). According to Cornell and Hartmann (1998), as the multiracial population in the United States grew, multiracial individuals began desiring a way to express the multiple parts of their racial identity rather than claiming the racial identity of one parent and neglecting the racial identity of the other parent. During 2000 and 2010, individuals were allowed to select two or more racial categories to describe their racial identity. Not only did this allow individuals who identified with more than one race to accurately express the totality of their racial identity, but it also provided enough data to

examine how the self-identified multiracial population in the United States changed over time.

Between 2000 and 2010, the number of individuals selecting two or more racial categories on the U.S. Census increased by 32% from 6.8 million people to 9.0 million people, although the actual increase might be larger because of a data processing error in 2000 that overstated the multiracial population by about one million people (Jones & Bullock, 2012). Based on the number of people who self-identified with two or more racial categories, multiracial individuals made up 2.4% of the total U.S. population in 2000 and 2.9% of the total U.S. population in 2010 (Jones & Bullock, 2012). While the U.S. Census relies on individuals to self-identify as part of the multiracial population by selecting two or more racial categories, the Pew Research Center uses different criteria to determine if an individual is multiracial. The Pew Research Center (2015) classifies individuals as multiracial if they choose two or more races for themselves, indicated that at least one of their parents was a different race or multiracial, or indicated that at least one of their grandparents was of a different race from them or their parents. Using these criteria, the Pew Research Center (2015) estimates multiracial individuals comprise 6.9% of the total U.S. population. Despite differences in the estimated size of the multiracial population in the United States, there is consensus that the multiracial population is growing. The multiracial population in the United States is distributed throughout the country. In 2010, 18% of the population reporting two or more races on the U.S. Census lived in the Northeast, 15% lived in the Midwest, 27% lived in the South, and 40% lived in the West (Pew Research Center, 2015). Additionally, at least 1.0% of the population

in each state reported multiple races, and there were multiple-race respondents in every county throughout the country (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Just under half of all multiracial Americans are under the age of 19, and 13% of all babies born in 2013 were multiracial (Pew Research Center, 2015). As multiracial individuals continue to make up larger proportions of the U.S. population and begin to matriculate through colleges and universities, it is important that we understand how they experience their racial identity in the context of higher education.

Differentiating Between Race and Ethnicity

Before continuing, it is important to articulate the differences between the terms “race” and “ethnicity.”

The Biological Definition of Race

There are two separate definitions of race: one that views race as a biological construct reflecting variations on a genetic level, and one that views race as a social construct with no biological basis. Over the years, research has shown that there is little evidence that supports race as a biological construct, but that race as a social construct has real power in structuring the world. Race, when used as a biological term, is defined as a “genetically distinct subpopulation of a given species” with characteristics that are unique to that subpopulation alone (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998, p. 21; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Applying the concept of biological race to human populations hinges on several assumptions: (1) that people can be classified using genetically transmitted physical characteristics; (2) that physical characteristics related to race are transmitted together; (3) that these physical characteristics are linked to particular behaviors; and (4)

that all members of a race will have the same set of physical characteristics as other members of that race (Corcos, 1997). To accurately serve as racial criteria, the physical characteristics used to differentiate people must be present in all members of a given race, and must not be present among members of a different race (Corcos, 1997). Since there is a great deal of diversity among humans, and physical characteristics used to classify people into racial groups tend to appear across groups, there is little scientific evidence for the existence of biologically distinct subpopulations, or biological races, among humans (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998; Corcos, 1997). Racial distinctions among humans fail in that “they are not genetically discrete, are not reliably measured, and are not scientifically meaningful” (Smedley & Smedley, 2005, p. 16).

Race as a Social Construct

Although race is not a biological reality when applied to human populations, race as a social construct has powerful implications for how individuals interact with one another and with their environments. According to Cornell and Hartmann (1998), race can be conceived of as “a human group defined by itself or others as distinct by virtue of perceived common physical characteristics that are held to be inherent” (p. 24). Even though there is no biological basis for categorizing individuals based on their physical characteristics, people continue to rely on characteristics that they perceive as important to find people who they see as similar to themselves and to set themselves apart from people who are dissimilar. Although this type of racial identification relies on certain phenotypical markers, the selection of those specific markers reflects a the arbitrary and socially constructed nature of race as descriptive categories (Omi & Winant, 2002; Cornell & Hartmann, 1998).

To further support the notion that race is a social construct, Omi and Winant (2002) define racial formation as the “sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (p. 124). According to Spickard (2015), “race is primarily a sociopolitical construct” through which people have been sorted into racial groups by those in power to maintain the status quo (p. 16). Over time, “the government has revised the race and Hispanic origin categories it uses to reflect current science, government needs, social attitudes and changes in the nation’s racial composition” (Pew Research Center, 2015, p. 22). We can see race treated as a social construct by examining the way that race classifications on the U.S. Census have changed over time in response to the sociohistorical context and events such as the influx of minorities into major cities or the increase of individuals who have parents belonging to different racial groups (Corcos, 1997; Spickard, 2015).

Since race is a fluid social construct, dependent on time and place, and not a fixed biological reality, Rockquemore et al. (2009) differentiate between racial identity, racial identification, and racial categories. Racial identity is defined as “an individual’s self-understanding” of his or her race (Rockquemore, Brunsma, & Delgado, 2009, p. 27). While racial identity relies on an internally generated understanding of identity, racial identification, which describes “how others understand and categorize an individual,” relies on an external assessment of identity (Rockquemore et al., 2009, p. 27). Racial categories are defined as “the racial identities [that] are available and chosen in a specific context” (Rockquemore et al., 2009, p. 27). For example, the racial categories on the U.S. Census may differ from the racial categories that appear on forms used by colleges and universities. Rockquemore et al. (2009) argue that racial identification, how an

individual's race is understood and evaluated by others, determines how people will be treated in the environment. Similarly, Smedley and Smedley (2005) note that "social race remains a significant predictor of which groups have greater access to societal goods and resources and which groups face barriers—both historically and in the contemporary context—to full inclusion" (p. 22). Thus, although race is not a biological reality, it is a social construct with concrete consequences.

Distinguishing Between Ethnicity and Race

Ethnicity is closely related to, but distinct from, race. Despite being discrete concepts, race and ethnicity are often used interchangeably in everyday language. While race refers to systematic physical differences, ethnicity refers to the notion that a group of people share a common descent, culture, language, religion, or other pattern of behavior and belief (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998). Unlike race, which has both biological and social definitions, ethnicity is an explicitly social term that describes group membership based on common cultural traits unique to a particular group (Corcos, 1997). Because ethnicity reflects membership in a cultural group and culture cannot be equated with a specific physical appearance, physical characteristics cannot and should not be used to define an individual's ethnicity (Smedley & Smedley, 2005).

Both ethnicity and race deal with processes by which "human beings come to see themselves and others in particular ways, how they come to act on those perceptions, and how their understandings and actions are shaped by social and historical forces" (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998, p. 12). Although both race, which is based on the idea of systematic physical differences used to sort people into groups, and ethnicity which is based on notions of common descent, seem to be natural categories that people are born into,

individuals exercise agency when making claims about their own racial and ethnic identities (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998).

Selected Vocabulary

Prior to interviewing participants, I intended for this study to focus on race and not on ethnicity. However, two things became evident once I began gathering data: (1) students used the terms “race” and “ethnicity” interchangeably, and (2) ethnicity, which encompasses culture and other markers of shared heritage, was more significant than race alone. I treated race as a social construct, as opposed to a biological reality, that has real implications for how people view themselves and interact with their environments. I originally wanted focus on race and not on ethnicity for two primary reasons. First, much of the data collected by institutions focuses on racial categories. For example, when students take standardized tests, they are asked to indicate a broad racial category. Similarly, the Office of Management and Budget presents five broad racial categories that individuals can choose among on the U.S. Census. Second, physical characteristics are an important element of race, whereas it is not appropriate to consider physical characteristics in discussions of ethnicity. Many of the multiracial identity development theories that I discuss in subsequent sections refer to an individual’s physical appearance as an important factor that individuals consider when constructing racial identity. While these theories include physical appearance, they also include factors which are more closely aligned with ethnicity. As a result of the way students functionally used the terms race and ethnicity during their interviews, I realized that I could not investigate race without also including ethnicity.

Although there is a multiplicity of terms, such as biracial, multiracial, and mixed-race, that can be used to describe individuals whose parents belong to different racial groups, I use the term “multiracial” for consistency’s sake. For the purposes of this study, individuals were considered multiracial if they had parents from two different federally defined racial groups and/or if the individual identified as multiracial or using a similar term.

Multiracial Students in College

Multiracial students in college encounter challenges when constructing and developing their racial identity. Despite the apparent stability of racial categories, Omi (2001) argues that all racial categories are fundamentally unstable, and that there is an “inherent fluidity and slipperiness of our conceptions of race” (p. 248). Furthermore, the instability of racial categories is exacerbated by notions of ethnic identity which “involves self-identification as a group member, attitudes and evaluations in relation one’s group, extent of ethnic knowledge and commitment, and ethnic behaviors and practices” (Negy, Shreve, Jensen, & Uddin, 2003, p. 334). Since identity is performed in a social context it is inherently unstable and in constant flux (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). In addition to the inherent instability of identity performed in a social context, racial identity is also unstable because of the ways it gets lumped together with ethnic identity (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998). Therefore, the meaning of race and peoples’ understanding of racial identity “has been and probably always will be fluid and subject to multiple determinations” (Omi, 2001, p. 244).

As a result of this inherent instability, individuals may not always experience congruence among racial identity, racial identification and racial category (Rockquemore

et al., 2009). Individuals might have experiences in which the racial identification assigned to them by others or the racial categories available to them in a given situation do not align with their racial identity (Rockquemore et al., 2009). This incongruence may cause multiracial individuals to perceive that their racial identity is being challenged and may prompt them to feel like they must defend their chosen racial identity. Additionally, many of the early theories regarding multiracial identity development conceived of multiracial identity development as a linear progression whereby individuals increasingly integrate all aspects of their racial identity. Later theorists, like Renn (2000, 2003, 2008) understood multiracial identity development as more fluid, proposed multiple ways in which students might identify based on their environments and did not prescribe an ideal stage or end-point of development.

One way of understanding the various ways in which multiracial college students internalize and make meaning of the various contextual influences including their peers, professors, and perceived social expectations on their racial identity is by looking at their experiences through the lens of Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity. This model recognizes that identity is fluid and that the way individuals perceive the salience of various dimensions of identity, including racial identity, is mediated by the way they interpret and make meaning of contextual influences.

As the multiracial population in the United States increases, and more multiracial Americans become old enough to enter college, higher education administrators and student affairs professionals need to better understand the unique circumstances and challenges that multiracial students face while they are in college. Although existing

theories describe the different ways that multiracial individuals might choose to identify, they do not elaborate on how interacting with the college environment and various individuals on campus can prompt students to think about and reflect on their racial identity.

Space and Place

College students live in constructed environments filled with various structures and objects which give people cues about how they should behave within a given environment (Tuan, 1977). The physical environment of the college campus can be symbolic for those who interact with it because the environment conveys messages about how participants ought to behave, feel, and interact (Strange & Banning, 2015). According to Strange and Banning (2015), elements of the environment take on symbolic meaning as people interact with and within the environment (Strange & Banning, 2015). Because of this, it is important to consider how multiracial college students interact with and interpret the various symbols on the college campus as a way of understanding how different contexts can affect the perceived salience of a multiracial student's racial identity.

Statement of the Problem

Research on multiracial identity development has provided descriptions of how students racially identify and offer some factors that influence their identity development (Renn, 2000, 2003, 2008; Good, Chavez, & Sanchez, 2010; Kellogg & Liddell, 2012). These studies and resulting theories were important because they rejected the notion of a linear progression of multiracial identity development toward a prescribed end in favor of

development theories that allowed multiracial individuals more latitude in defining their racial identity. Previous studies do not necessarily address the interaction between environmental or contextual influences and the way multiracial students make meaning of these influences (Renn, 2000, 2003, 2008; Kellogg & Liddell, 2012, Rockquemore et al., 2009). Students are not at the mercy of their environments, and as a result, it is important for us to learn more about how students interpret various influences across contexts to truly understand how contexts influence the way multiracial students conceive of their racial identity and its perceived salience. Furthermore, we must also understand how these interpretations of contextual influences, conceptions of racial identity, and perceived salience of racial identity inform how students behave and socially interact with others and the environment.

This qualitative study addresses a gap in the literature by asking the following question: *In what contexts on a college campus does racial identity become salient for multiracial students?* This study also asks the following sub-questions:

- (1) How do multiracial college students make meaning of the experiences they have in these contexts?*
- (2) How do multiracial students' social interactions inform their understanding of racial identity?*
- (3) How do these experiences influence the way that multiracial college students make meaning of racial identity?*

Significance

This study contributed to a growing body of literature about the experiences of multiracial students on the college campus (Garbarini-Philippe, 2010; Good et al., 2010; Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; Renn, 2000, 2003, 2008; Renn & Arnold, 2003; Rockquemore, et al., 2009). Although this study does not explicitly address intersectionality, which accounts for how the combination of a person's many social identities such as race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status plays out in different situations, I recognize that the intersections of these various identities can influence how individuals experience their identities (Patton, McEwen, Rendón, & Howard-Hamilton, 2007). I also recognized that a person's identities are "intertwined, interactive, and unique for each individual," which means that it can seem artificial to separate one dimension of identity from the others (Patton et al., 2016, p. 30). However, because this study sought to understand the contexts on the college campus in which racial identity becomes salient, I chose to focus specifically on students' racial identity.

As the number of college-age multiracial individuals in the United States increases, it is important for educators to understand how the college experience can affirm or challenge the way these individuals make sense of their racial identity. Understanding the contexts in which racial identity is salient, as well as learning more about how students make meaning of environmental cues, provides higher education administrators and student affairs professionals with knowledge that will assist them in supporting the multiracial student population. This study sought to go beyond simply describing how multiracial students racially identify and sought to understand the contexts that both affirm and challenge students' chosen racial identity. The findings

provide higher education administrators and student affairs professionals a deeper understanding of the ways that students think about and perform racial identity in social contexts. This is significant because it gives insight into how social interactions in college that affirm and challenge multiracial students' understanding of their racial identity. Many of the students who participated in this study arrived at college already having internalized messages about how they did not fit into monoracial groups. By making changes to the campus environment and being aware of how multiracial college students think about their racial identity, educators can support students as they explore and develop their racial identity.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

This chapter synthesizes the literature on multiracial identity development among college students and demonstrates the need to further explore how various situations and environmental factors influence the way multiracial students understand and perceive the salience of their racial identity. First, literature addressing multiracial identity development is descriptive in that it provides language which can be used to understand the variety of ways in which multiracial students might choose to present their racial identity (Cortés, 2000; Renn, 2000, 2003, 2008). Although this is important, the body of research on multiracial identity could be expanded by considering the degree to which multiracial students perceive that their racial identity is salient in various contexts within higher education. Second, the literature highlights the importance of factors such as physical appearance, peer groups, faculty, and degree of cultural knowledge in shaping how multiracial individuals understand their racial identity (Good et al., 2010; Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; Renn & Arnold, 2003; Renn, 2000; Renn, 2003; Rockquemore et al., 2009). The literature notes that these factors contribute to multiracial students' racial identity development, but does not explicitly address how multiracial students interpret and make meaning of these contextual influences. Third, the literature notes that socially constructed and understood spaces and places have a bearing on how individuals perceive and interact with the environment according to their various identity statuses (Attinasi, 1989; Neely & Samura, 2011; Strange & Banning, 2015; Tuan, 1977). The proposed study addresses the gaps in the literature by focusing on the interaction of contextual

influences and multiracial students' interpretation of these influences on students' understanding and perceived salience of their racial identity. It considers how environments and social contexts inform the ways in which multiracial students make sense of their racial identity and how students interact with others in light of how the students have made sense of their racial identity.

Multiracial Identity Development

Existing literature primarily focuses on the initial identity development process and on the broad patterns multiracial students may employ to describe their racial identity (Cortés, 2000; Patton et al., 2016; Renn, 2000). It addresses the various ways in which multiracial students come to understand and describe their racial identity. There is no one type of identity that is considered to be the pinnacle of identity development for multiracial students, nor is multiracial identity development a strictly linear process (Patton et al., 2016). Since multiracial students have such a broad range of experiences, theories on multiracial identity often take a typological approach and present a range of patterns multiracial students might employ to describe their racial identity (Cortés, 2000; Renn, 2000). These theories acknowledge that there is a degree of fluidity in the terms that multiracial students use to describe their racial identity in various situations. Renn (2000), for example, proposed five patterns of situational identity employed by biracial and multiracial students when occupying various spaces on college campuses. Students chose patterns of identity based on “where they felt they fit in, which was determined largely by the messages they got from campus peer culture” (Renn, 2000, p. 412). In the first pattern, students identify with an existing monoracial category, such as Black, White, or Asian (Renn, 2000). In the second pattern, multiracial individuals shift which

monoracial category they identify with based on the situation (Renn, 2000). In the third pattern, students used terms such as “multiracial,” “mixed,” “biracial,” “half,” and “mixed heritage” to describe their racial identities (Renn, 2000). In the fourth pattern, multiracial individuals reject racial categories and choose “not to identify along U.S. racial lines” (Renn, 2000, p. 410). In the fifth pattern, multiracial individuals did not consistently identify with one of the previous four patterns, but rather moved among them in different situations (Renn, 2000). For example, although an individual might self-identify as “multiracial” when discussing his or her identity, he or she might also select one or more racial categories when completing paperwork (Renn, 2000). As a result, this individual would be classified as ascribing to the third pattern when talking with people and ascribing to either the first or second pattern when completing paperwork.

Although these theories provide helpful language for discussing patterns of multiracial identity, they do not necessarily address what different racial identity labels or ways of identifying mean to multiracial students, nor do they address the salience of racial identity for multiracial students across different contexts within higher education. The existing body of research would benefit from an examination of the more dynamic processes by which racial identity becomes more or less salient in a given environment as students interpret and make meaning of their racial identity. The current study sought to address this gap in the literature by attempting to understand how multiracial students’ perceived salience of racial identity varies across contexts. It sought to examine what students consider when they describe their racial identity differently in various situations and contexts, and what their chosen racial identity means to them. In this study, I explored not only how students make meaning of their racial identity, but also how

students perceive the salience of their racial identity. I also allowed students to describe their racial identity using their own language, and did not restrict them to using strictly racial categories as a way of allowing them to own the way they described their racial identity. As a result, some students used ethnic terms when describing racial identity.

Influences on Racial Identity

Current research highlights the importance of contextual and environmental influences in the college environment on the way that multiracial students understand their racial identity (Good et al., 2010; Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; Miville, Constantine, Baysden, & So-Lloyd, 2005; Renn, 2003; Rockquemore et al., 2009). The literature notes that racial identity can be influenced by personal characteristics such as “family background and parents’ heritage, degree of cultural knowledge transmitted to the student before college, prior experiences with members of their own and other cultural groups, and physical appearance” and by interactions with peers, faculty, and various structures in place on the college campus (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; Renn, 2003, p. 392; Rockquemore et al., 2009). The literature suggests that multiracial individuals do not develop their racial identity independent of outside influences, and it suggests that they consider things such as how they believe they will be perceived by others when deciding how to racially identify (Good et al., 2010). Multiracial individuals may consider “how the salience of certain self-defining categories influences an individual’s self-categorization as a member of a particular group” (Rockquemore et al., 2009, p. 453). When individuals perceive similarities, such as physical characteristics, between themselves and members of a particular group, they are more likely to self-categorize as part of that group (Good et al., 2010). Although the literature notes that individuals

consider certain personal characteristics in deciding how to racially identify, it does not address how important these factors are to multiracial students' sense of racial identity or how students interpret the meaning of certain personal characteristics in relation to their racial identity. There is also a social element to the construction of racial identity as multiracial students consider how others perceive their characteristics in relation to their racial identity.

Social Interactions

Multiracial students' interactions with others can inform how they choose to racially identify and how they understand their racial identity. Multiracial students may consider how others perceive them when choosing how to racially identify, sometimes choosing a racial identity that they believe others will not question or challenge (Good et al., 2010; Renn, 2003). Campus peer culture can be a powerful force that "encompasses the forces and processes that shape individual and collective life on campus in terms of identity, group membership, and acceptable discourse, and desirable behaviors" (Renn & Arnold, 2003, p. 262). Peer culture is especially influential in the construction of multiracial students' racial identity because it can serve to reinforce the notion that individuals should only belong to one category (Renn & Arnold, 2003). Peer culture can also inform students' understanding of what characteristics or cultural knowledge an individual needs to possess in order to claim membership in a given group (Renn & Arnold, 2003).

Two themes that are present in much of the literature are challenges to the legitimacy of a multiracial student's chosen racial identity and instances in which multiracial individuals are racially miscategorized by others (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012;

Miville et al, 2005; Renn, 2003; Townsend, Markus, & Bergsicker, 2009). Multiracial students reported instances in which they experienced tension because they “did not fit peers’ implicit definitions of what it meant to be a ‘real minority,’ and recalled experiences in which they did not believe that they had the cultural knowledge to claim membership in a minority group, or they were told they did not look like minority students” (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012, p. 535). Questions of legitimacy were also raised in contexts where multiracial students perceived that their experiences were not similar enough to the experiences of their monoracial peers to claim membership in a particular racial group. In some cases, students responded by choosing a monoracial identity that could be “publicly acknowledged and socially supported” based primarily on phenotypical traits (Renn, 2003; Miville et al., 2005, p. 514). Multiracial individuals also reported instances of miscategorization, whereby they were assumed to be members of a racial group with which they did not identify (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; Rockquemore et al., 2009; Townsend et al., 2009). Multiracial students may be miscategorized by peers, faculty, and staff, and they may perceive that they are being miscategorized when institutional forms require them to select only one racial category to describe their racial identity (Cortés, 2000).

Some multiracial students who experienced challenges to the legitimacy of their chosen racial identity or who perceived that they had been miscategorized chose to stop engaging in the environment in which the challenge was issued (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012). Although the existing literature describes various instances in which multiracial students were challenged to defend the legitimacy of their racial identity or were miscategorized by others, it does not address how students interpreted these experiences,

nor does it address whether these experiences prompted students to think differently about their racial identity. The current study addresses this gap in the literature by examining how multiracial students interpret and make meaning of contextual influences in relation to their racial identity. It considers how students interpret others' assumptions about their racial identity. Students exercise agency in situations when they decide how to interpret and respond to others who challenge their racial identity or miscategorize them.

Space and Place

Literature concerning how people experience space and place also contributes to the proposed study by laying a foundation for the ways in which the environment influences students' perceptions and interactions (Attinasi, 1989; Neely & Samura, 2011; Strange & Banning, 2015; Tuan, 1977). According to Neely and Samura (2011), space is defined "as the general environment of social life" and place is defined "as the meaning and interaction applied to or made in space" (p. 1935). Place does not have intrinsic meaning, rather it derives meaning from the interpretive processes as people interact with the place as well as with other people in that place (Strange & Banning, 2015). In other words, meaning and interaction do not exist apart from one another. This relates to Snow's (2001) principle of interactive determinism, discussed in more detail in chapter three, which states that we cannot understand an object or phenomenon simply by looking at characteristics assumed to be intrinsic to that object. Rather, we can only understand the meaning of an object by considering it within the broader interactive context in which it is embedded (Snow, 2001). Individuals inhabit a socially constructed

environment that students understand through the lens of their interactions and perceptions (Strange & Banning, 2015).

Neely and Samura (2011) discuss the connections between race and space. They note that “racial interactions and processes (e.g., identities, inequalities, conflicts and so on) are also about how we collectively make and remake, over time and through ongoing contestation, the spaces we inhabit” (p. 1934). The reality of how a student experiences an environment is dependent on how he or she perceives those environments (Neely & Samura, 2011). Race and space are contested concepts that involve political struggles over their definition and meaning (Neely & Samura, 2011). Space is contested, meaning that the individuals interacting in and with that space are constantly negotiating the definition and uses of various spaces (Neely & Samura, 2011). Students might develop a racialized understanding of campus geography when they look around and take note of where various racial groups are present or absent (Neely & Samura, 2011). Considering the spatial elements of race can “reveal another dimension through which race is organized and enacted” (Neely & Samura, 2011, p. 1947).

In a sociological study focused on the persistence and attrition of Mexican American students on college campuses, Attinasi (1989) found that students develop cognitive maps to help them “come to locate themselves in the perceived geographies of campus” (p. 269). In this study, Attinasi (1989) found that students orient themselves to the campus by building “internal mental representations, or cognitive maps, of the physical, social and academic/cognitive geographies” that help students navigate the large campus environment (p. 271). These cognitive maps are formed on the basis of “the identification of significant objects in the environment, the establishment of the

connectedness of the objects to one another and to the observer, and the assignment of meanings, whether emotional or practical, to the objects and their relationships” (p. 268). Ultimately cognitive maps are the result of peoples’ perceptions of the environment, interpretations of their interactions with objects in the environment, and the way people choose to enact and make meaning of their perceptions and interpretations (Attinasi, 1989). A similar approach, with a focus on how students perceive, interact, and attribute meaning to the environment and various objects within it, can be employed when considering the contexts on a college campus where racial identity becomes salient for multiracial students.

Ultimately, the proposed study sought to expand our understanding of the contexts in the college environment which prompt students to think about their racial identity and to examine some of the interactions that inform how multiracial students construct and reconstruct their racial identity. It addressed the gaps in the literature by considering not only how students interpret contextual influences, but also how these influences affect the salience of multiracial students’ racial identity in various contexts within the college environment. This study acknowledged that race and ethnicity are, by definition, two discrete concepts, but also allowed students to use ethnic terms to describe their racial identity so that they did not perceive that they were being miscategorized by being forced to identify in purely racial terms. Finally, this study considered the importance of context and the meanings that multiracial students attribute to the interactions with people and objects in different environments, giving attention to how students came to understand racialized spaces.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Conceptual Framework

Abes et al.'s (2007) Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (RMMDI) served as the conceptual framework for this study (Figure 1). Abes et al. (2007) added a meaning-making filter to Jones and McEwen's (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI). Jones and McEwen's (2000) MMDI shows how an individual answers the question, "Who am I in the context of what am I?" Abes et al. (2007) understand identity as something that is "socially, historically, politically, and culturally constructed at both the institutional and individual levels" (p. 2). Jones and McEwen's (2000) model depicts different, intersecting dimensions of an individual's identity, such as race, religion, sexual orientation, gender, culture, and social class, as they relate to an individual's core sense of identity. The salience of each dimension of identity is represented as a dot on the model, with dots closer to the core representing aspects of an individual's identity that have a higher level of salience. Abes et al. (2007) added a meaning-making filter to this model. The meaning-making filter serves to represent the ways and degrees to which contextual influences, such as peers, family, stereotypes, and culture influence an individual's sense of identity. The way an individual interprets contextual influences impacts two things: (1) how salient a dimension of identity is and (2) how an individual understands that dimension of his or her identity (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). Although my study focuses exclusively on the dimension of racial identity, I recognize that there are other dimensions of identity

that are salient to individuals at various points in time. I also recognize that racial identity might not be the most important dimension of identity relative to a given student's sense of self.

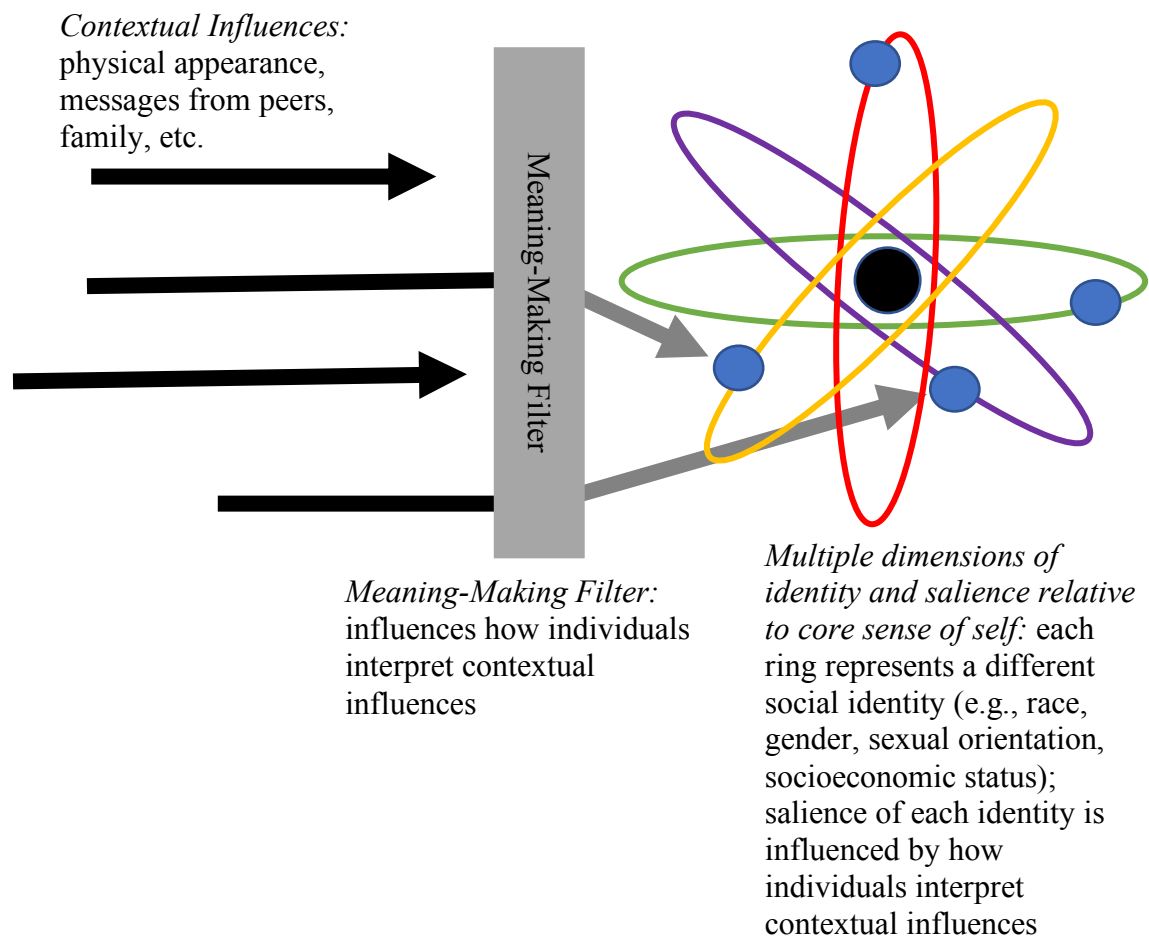


Figure 1. Adaptation of Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity

The individual elements of Abes et al.'s (2007) RMMDI informed how I understood multiracial students' understanding of their racial identity and its perceived salience in the context of this study. Jones and McEwen's (2000) original model conceived of an individual's core identity and multiple dimensions of identity as

surrounded by context including family background, sociocultural conditions such as sexism and racism, and current experiences that influence how individuals “constructed and experienced their identities” (p. 410). Abes et al. (2007) also included contextual influences in their model but asserted that effects of these influences on the salience or understanding of a dimension of identity is dependent on how the individual filters and interprets contextual influences. Using Abes et al.’s (2007) RMMDI as a conceptual framework for the present study allows us to consider a variety of contextual influences that multiracial students encounter and interpret in relation to their racial identity. Contextual influences also reflect the social nature of identity construction, as interactions with people can be understood as contextual influences that affect multiracial students’ understanding of their racial identity.

The meaning-making filter in Abes et al.’s (2007) RMMDI is an important element of the contextual model that makes it appropriate for the current study. People are not sponges who simply absorb and react to contextual influences and environmental cues without evaluating or interpreting them. As such, the meaning-making filter is especially important because it allows us to explore how contextual influences such as peers, norms, and stereotypes interact with multiracial students’ interpretation of these influences. The way multiracial students interpret these things affects the degree to which certain contextual influences affect students’ understanding and perceived salience of their racial identity. Students’ interpretations of these contextual influences also influence how students act in response to contextual influences that make racial identity more or less salient. The meaning-making filter allows us to acknowledge that although

identity is influenced by certain social cues, it is also influenced by the agency that individuals exert in interpreting social cues.

Lastly, I understand racial identity as just one of the many intersecting identities that a student may have. The concept of intersectionality asserts that “socially constructed identities are experienced simultaneously, not hierarchically,” which means that contextual influences have the potential to affect multiple dimensions of identity in addition to racial identity and that it is difficult to completely isolate any one dimension of identity (Abes et al., 2007, p. 2). Although I recognize that identities exist in relation to one another, and “each dimension cannot be fully understood in isolation,” I chose to focus specifically on the perceived salience of racial identity in hopes of gaining a better understanding of the contexts or environments in which this particular dimension of identity becomes salient for multiracial students (Abes et al., 2007, p. 3). In acknowledging intersectionality, it is also important to acknowledge that contextual influences have the potential to affect dimensions of identity other than, or in addition to, racial identity (Patton et al., 2007). The salience of multiracial students’ racial identity varies across contexts as different contextual influences, such as positive interactions with peers or challenges to a student’s racial identity, bring more or less awareness to racial identity. As Jones and McEwen (2000) noted in their original conceptualization of the MMIDI, contextual influences can potentially affect two things: an individual’s understanding of a certain dimension of identity, for example how a student chooses to racially identify in a given situation, and the salience of a given dimension of identity. The RMMDI is a helpful conceptual framework for the current study because it

acknowledges the fluidity of salience and understanding of racial identity in different contexts within higher education (Abes et al., 2007).

Methodology

This study employs symbolic interactionism which is an interpretive approach to qualitative research. An interpretive approach assumes that “meaning does not exist independent of the human interpretive process” and seeks “deep understanding by interpreting the meaning that interactions, actions, and objects have for people” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 17). Symbolic interactionism focuses on the meaning individuals attach to other people, interactions, and objects and asserts that peoples’ perceptions dictate how they act in various situations (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

Snow (2001) proposes four principles of symbolic interactionism: interactive determination, symbolization, emergence, and human agency.

- The principle of interactive determination states that objects of analysis, such as racial identity, must be considered in the larger interactional contexts in which they exist. Objects of analysis cannot be understood looking exclusively at qualities or characteristics that are assumed to be intrinsic and must be understood in terms of the relationship they have with the environment.
- The principle of symbolization focuses on the process by which things take on specific meanings and that elicit certain feelings and actions. Symbols are embedded in existing cultures, and people often rely on existing frames of reference to ascribe meaning to things. The principle of symbolization suggests we consider how symbolization of certain objects becomes taken-for-granted and under what circumstances symbolization must be reconsidered.
- The principle of emergence “encompasses processes out of which new, novel, or revitalized social entities or cognitive and emotional states, arise that constitute departures from, challenges to, and clarifications or transformations of everyday routines, practices, or perspectives” (p. 373). The principle of emergence becomes important when people must deviate from the taken-for-granted understanding of symbols.
- The principle of human agency asserts that human actors have active and willful character which operates within the constraints of biological, structural, and cultural factors. In other words, although there are certain boundaries within

which humans act, humans have a certain degree of latitude within those boundaries when choosing how to behave.

The four principles outlined above function together to help qualitative researchers using symbolic interactionism understand how social meanings “shape attitudes and influence behaviors and help people determine how to act” in various situations (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 18). Additionally, in the context of Abes et al.’s (2007) RMMDI as the conceptual framework for this study, the principles of symbolization, interactive determination, emergence, and human agency come into play in the meaning-making filter.

Additionally, this study takes a sociological approach, as opposed to a psychological or psychosocial approach. A psychological perspective is primarily concerned with the processes of human behavior as they occur and develop within an individual (Parsons, 1954). Although behavior might manifest in social interactions with others, a psychological perspective gives primacy to the internal processes giving rise to behavior (Parsons, 1954). In a similar vein, a psychosocial perspective is concerned with how individuals resolve developmental tasks at specific age-related points in their lives (Patton et al., 2016). Although psychosocial perspectives consider individuals’ interactions with the environment, they are primarily focused on how “internal biological and psychological changes interact with environmental demands, such as social norms and roles expected of individuals” (Patton et al. 2016, p. 287). The environment is secondary to the biological and psychological changes occurring within the individual. Psychosocial perspectives also assume that once an individual has resolved a task, such as establishing a dimension of his or her identity, he or she will remain stable in that identity and will not have to renegotiate it (Patton et al., 2016). For the purposes of this

study, a psychosocial approach is not helpful because the research question is not concerned with how multiracial students resolve developmental tasks to arrive at a specific point of development.

Since this study is interested in how students' interactions with and within various contexts on the college campus affect the perceived salience of their racial identity, a sociological approach is more appropriate than a psychological or psychosocial approach. A sociological perspective is concerned with the structure and processes of social systems which are systems "constituted by the interaction of a plurality of human beings, directly or indirectly, with each other" (Parsons, 1954, p. 68). Coupled with symbolic interactionism, which states that interactions and meaning do not exist apart from one another, a sociological approach allows us to give primacy to interactions and their meanings (Parsons, 1954). Additionally, because this study seeks to examine the perceived salience of multiracial students' racial identity across contexts, a sociological approach is helpful because it considers how meaning is constantly created and recreated as individuals interact with contextual influences such as people and objects in the environment.

Methods

Data Collection

I collected data for this study from multiracial students at a private research institution in the Southwest where self-identified multiracial students make up 4.7% of the undergraduate population. I collected data through semi-structured, open-ended interviews which were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim (see Appendix A).

Participant Selection

I collected a purposive criterion sample, whereby participants had to meet certain criteria to participate in the study. Students had to either self-identify using terms such as “multiracial”, “biracial”, or “mixed-race”, or have biological parents from two or more different federally defined racial groups. This study involved nine self-identified multiracial students from the sample institution (Table 1).

Participants were recruited in four ways. First, at the suggestion of the director of the multicultural affairs office at the sample institution, I contacted multicultural student organization leaders via email asking if they would be willing to send a recruitment email to the members of their organizations. I contacted a total of nine multicultural student organizations and received responses from two groups who were willing to distribute the recruitment email. This recruitment method did not yield any participants. Second, I asked university staff who work closely with students if they knew of any students who met the criteria and might be willing to participate. This recruitment method yielded one participant. Third, I posted a flyer on the “Free and For Sale” Facebook group within the sample university’s network that read, “Are you a multiracial student?” Students who were interested in participating were instructed to contact me via email to participate in the study. This Facebook advertisement is how five of the nine participants were recruited. Fourth, I asked other graduate students in the Higher Education and Student Affairs program to send the flyer to students they worked with. Three participants were recruited in this way.

Participant Protection

I took several steps to maintain my participants' confidentiality throughout the study. Each participant was given an informed consent form prior to participating in the study. The informed consent form explained the purpose of the study, participants' rights to decline to answer any questions during the interview, and participants' rights to withdraw from the study at any time. The informed consent form outlined how participants' data would be treated and how their confidentiality would be maintained. I assigned each participant a pseudonym that was used in all written materials and conversations related to the study. Audio recordings and transcriptions of participants' interviews were also saved using the pseudonym. As the researcher, I was the only person with access to the participants' real names. I also generalized any identifying information of people, places, and events that participants mentioned during their interviews. I also replaced the name of the sample university with a pseudonym: Wright University. Since the number of multiracial students at the Wright University was so small, I protected participants' confidentiality by omitting information about students' majors and on-campus employment, even though participants discussed these topics. Finally, on the day of each interview, I reviewed the informed consent form with participants and reminded participants of their right to decline to answer questions and to withdraw from the study at any time. I also provided time before and after the interview for participants to ask clarifying questions.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Name	Classification	Racial Identity ^a	Racial Category (Forms) ^b	Mother's Race ^c	Father's Race ^d
Allison	Sophomore	Half Black and Half Mexican	African American and Hispanic/Latino	Mexican	Black
Caroline	Senior	Hispanic	Hispanic and White	Nicaraguan	White
James	Senior	Mixed	Multiracial	White	Chinese
Kate	Freshman	Half Hispanic	White and Hispanic/Latino	Hispanic/Latina	White
Leah	Sophomore	Black	African American and Hispanic	White and Hispanic	African American and Native American
Lindsey	Senior	White	Other	Native American and Hispanic	Turkish, Lebanese, and Italian
Mark	Sophomore	Half White and Half Black	African American	White	African American
Sarah	Senior	Biracial or Half Vietnamese/Half Black	Two or More Races	Asian (Vietnamese)	African American
Taylor	Senior	Half-Filipino	Hawaiian/Pacific Islander or Other	White	Filipino, Spanish, Irish, and Native American

^a Participants were asked how they describe their racial identity. This was an open-ended question, and the researcher did not present options.

^b Participants were asked which boxes they selected when filling out paperwork. This was an open-ended question, and the researcher did not present options.

^c Participants were asked to describe their mother's racial identification.

^d Participants were asked to describe their father's racial identification.

Data Analysis

Each interview was audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. I used a two-cycle coding process to code the transcriptions. In the first cycle, I employed In Vivo Coding, which uses the participants' own words to code the data instead of using words generated by the researcher (Saldaña, 2016). Using In Vivo coding for the first cycle of coding is appropriate in the context of a symbolic interactionism approach because it

highlights the ways that participants themselves construct meaning. During the first cycle of coding, I used NVivo Pro software, and generated around 600 In Vivo codes. These codes employed the participants' own words to generate an understanding of how they viewed their racial identities and the salience of those identities. In the second cycle, I used pattern coding to pull the codes generated during the first cycle of coding into "more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis" (Saldaña, 2016). Pattern coding enabled me to identify similarities in the data from all nine interviews.

Trustworthiness

It is important for qualitative researchers to establish validity and reliability by promoting trustworthiness in a qualitative study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose four elements that promote trustworthiness in the context of a qualitative research study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

To address credibility, whereby the findings of the study reflect the social reality of the participants, my findings were subjected to scrutiny from my thesis chair to ensure that the conclusions I drew from the data were appropriate. To establish transferability, whereby the findings of a study can be applied in different contexts, I provided thick description of the processes and contexts used in gathering my data. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), transferability is contingent on similarities between the sending and receiving contexts. By providing information about my process and contexts, readers have the information they need to determine if the findings can be appropriately applied in their own contexts. To establish dependability, whereby my study can be replicated, I provided information about my institutional context, data gathering procedures, and data analysis procedures. Finally, to establish confirmability, I was open about my own

identity as a multiracial individual and my relationship to the subject matter. I included a researcher positionality statement to disclose personal characteristics that led to my interest in the research topic and to reveal potential biases (see Appendix B). I remained cognizant of how my personal experiences and assumptions could influence my interpretation of the data, and I used member checking to ensure that my conclusions accurately represent the way that my participants understood their racial identity. Member checks allow the data and interpretations to be checked by participants who provided the data to ensure participants have the “opportunity to correct errors of fact and challenge what are perceived to be wrong interpretations” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314).

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

This study employed Abes et al.'s (2007) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) in conjunction with symbolic interactionism to understand how multiracial college students think about and understand their racial identity. Specifically, this study sought to answer the research question: *In what contexts on a college campus does racial identity become salient for multiracial students?* The following sub-questions guided the data collection and analysis process:

- (1) How do multiracial college students make meaning of the experiences they have in these contexts?*
- (2) How do multiracial students' social interactions inform their understanding of racial identity?*
- (3) How do these experiences influence the way that multiracial college students make meaning of racial identity?*

In this chapter, I will discuss major findings that answered these questions and help us understand how racial identity becomes salient for multiracial students in different contexts. First, I will discuss how participants thought about racial identity with specific attention to the terms they used to describe their own racial identity. Next, I will discuss how participants noted that there is a certain degree of ambiguity when deciding how to racially identify. Then, I will discuss the specific contexts and interactions in which racial identity becomes salient for multiracial students. Finally, I will discuss the

ways in which participants believed that their racial identity was an asset which allowed them to see multiple perspectives.

Theme One: Racial and Ethnic Identity

Students used the terms “race” and “ethnicity” interchangeably and often gave more weight to ethnicity and notions of shared culture. The recruitment materials for this study asked for participants who (1) identified as multiracial, or using a similar term, and/or (2) had parents from two or more federally defined racial groups. At the beginning of each interview, I asked each participant how he or she described his or her racial identity. Several students used ethnic terms to describe their racial identity. Some participants whose parents belonged to different ethnic groups identified as multiracial because they felt they could not fully identify with a single racial or ethnic group. Nevertheless, even participants who did have parents from different federally defined racial groups used the terms race and ethnicity interchangeably and located the significance of their racial identity in the experience of not fully identifying with one group or another.

Participants identified in a variety of ways, some using racial terms and some using ethnic terms. Participants like Leah and Lindsey identified using monoracial terms: Black and White, respectively. Other participants including Allison, Kate, Mark, Sarah, and Taylor identified using the word “half” to denote multiple racial or ethnic heritages. Moreover, several participants noted that they selected “Other” as their racial category on paperwork, especially when an ethnicity-specific option is not available. Taylor, who identified as half Filipino, said, “Most of the time, if there’s not a Hawaiian or Pacific Islander option, I just put “Other,” because either or both don’t fully encapsulate it for

me.” Taylor’s comment highlighted the importance of the terms used to describe racial identity encapsulating or representing a specific type of experience regarding race or ethnicity. The terms students use to represent their racial identity must have some relation to the way that they experience the world and view themselves.

Participants were also asked to describe their parents’ racial identities. The terms participants used to describe their parents’ racial identities also reflect the notion that race and ethnicity are interchangeable, and that perhaps ethnicity is more important than race. All participants, except for Mark, used ethnic terms such as Mexican, Chinese, Hispanic, Lebanese, Vietnamese, and Filipino, when describing at least one of their parents’ racial identities.

Several participants stated that they knew there was a difference between race and ethnicity, because it had been discussed in an anthropology or sociology class at the university. Lindsey, a senior who identified racially as White and selects the option for “Other” when selecting her racial category on paperwork, said that her ethnicity often contrasts with her racial identity:

Well, my racial identity is white. Hispanic cultures are considered white racially, and I’m also Lebanese which is considered Caucasian. But I don’t technically really feel white just because my ethnicities don’t provide me that experience in the context of the United States.

Kate expressed similar sentiments about race and ethnicity and noted that it was helpful for her to learn the difference between race and ethnicity in her sociology class. As a light-skinned Hispanic woman, Kate felt that it was helpful for her to learn that “technically I can be White and Hispanic at the same time.” As terms, “race” and “ethnicity” functioned as linguistic symbols students used to make sense of their racial and

ethnic identities and to assert that racial identity, as it is understood at an institutional and data-collection level, was not representative of their lived experiences.

Theme Two: Ambiguity of Racial Identity

Participants expressed that at points in their lives they were unsure of how they ought to racially identify. Some participants expressed that, even as college students, they were unsure of what terms to use to describe their racial identity. Several students noted that their parents told them how to racially identify when they were growing up, especially when indicating racial identity on standardized tests and official forms. Participants who continued to question how to identify as college students noted that their uncertainty stemmed from a variety of factors including not understanding why they were told to identify in a specific way as children and being unsure of the criteria for claiming membership in certain racial or ethnic groups.

Unsure of How to Identify in Childhood

Participants recalled instances from their childhood during which they felt uncertain of how to racially identify. They recalled beginning to realize that their racial identity was more complex than that of their monoracial peers at different points in time.

Kate's realization came in middle school:

I guess when I was younger, I didn't really understand what racial identity was. Like, until, like, to that point, I just thought I was me. Like, you don't—kids don't really think about that. You just go through, like, through life thinking everyone's the same. So I guess when middle school hit, I started to realize, "Oh you know, maybe I am a little bit different."

Mark reported similar experiences in which his interactions with peers challenged him to think about how to racially identify:

I can remember being in elementary school, then [other kids] always asking, you know, like, “What are you?” Trying to just base whatever it is off of that and trying to fit in with that is just...I would ask, you know, like, “Well, you know, what am I? What do I...how do I fit in? Like I’m obviously...I’m too light to be black, or I’m too dark to be white.” When it comes to identifying with that, and like my dad said, he said, “Just check your own box. Make up your own. Do you...do your thing.” As far as fitting in, it was just---I was just standing out always to begin with.

Some students learned how to racially identify from their parents, and the terms they were told to use were often the same terms that participants used during the interview. Leah said, “I describe my race as black, because that’s my dad’s dominant race, and so that’s what people just told me to use, so I use it. I don’t really know why.” Lindsey also learned how to racially and ethnically identify from her mother. Lindsey’s conversation about racial identity was prompted by the demographic questions on standardized tests:

Whenever I started taking the SATs in high school, my mom said, “Make sure you check off the ‘Hispanic’ box, because you are Hispanic.” And I guess before that, I was unsure whether I was Hispanic or not, because people made comments and told me I wasn’t, and I guess it’s why I felt I couldn’t claim. But my mom always told me, “Make sure you claim it. That is who you are. Make sure you check that box.” And I guess that was kind of a way of gaining power of myself and who I was.

The message Lindsey received from her mother contrasted with the messages Lindsey received from her peers about her racial identity. Since her peers told her she was not Hispanic, she saw herself as not Hispanic until her mother told her otherwise. Lindsey interpreted and filtered the messages she received from the people around her in order to construct her racial identity and act accordingly. Since her interactions led her to believe she was not Hispanic even though she knew that her mother was, she was hesitant to claim that identity for herself until her mother told her it was alright to claim a Hispanic identity. Lindsey viewed the act of checking the ‘Hispanic’ box on the SATs as

a gesture symbolizing her claiming part of her heritage and identity that she had been reluctant to claim before.

Caroline, who identified as Latina, was also confused about racial identity as a child. When Caroline was growing up, her mom joked about her being a “mutt.” When Caroline began standardized testing in elementary school and had to select a racial identity, she checked the box that said “Other,” and wrote in the word “mutt.” Caroline’s mother had to meet with Caroline’s teacher:

They called this meeting with my mom, and it was funny because she was like, “That’s not an official thing. You don’t say that to people.” But I didn’t realize that, and I was like, “Well, I’m like a mix of things, and I don’t really know what I am.” But, like, so I was like, very confused.

Caroline grew up with many different influences because her mother was Nicaraguan, her father was White, her grandmother was half Chinese, and her grandfather was half Black. When she was younger, she explained her racial identity to people as a series of fractions:

They were all incorrect. But, like, I’m half White, and an eighth Black, and two-fourths Chinese, and five hundred percent Hispanic. And none of it made any sense, but I explained it as, like a series of things.

Unsure of How to Identify in College

Questions of how one ought to racially identify did not end in childhood, and some participants were still mulling over these questions as college students. Allison, who identified as half Black and half Mexican, noted that she grappled with notions of racial identity and how she ought to identify during her childhood. For Allison, discerning her racial identity was an ongoing process:

I wasn’t White enough for my White friends, but I wasn’t Black enough for my Black friends, but I wasn’t Hispanic enough for my, like, Mexican friends. So, I

was just kind of like, that's the whole like, racial identity part I really didn't know—I still don't know, like, where I belong or, like, where I stand with different, like, racial classes. So that's something I'm still, like coming to terms with.

Much of the uncertainty Allison faced came from her interactions with friends during which it was communicated that Allison was not similar enough to the members of any one group to truly fit in. Allison said that her behaviors, mannerisms, and physical appearance were all factors that contributed to her feeling excluded from different groups. These factors became symbols of what Allison understood as failing to meet criteria for membership or acceptance in various racial or ethnic groups. Allison understood that she did not belong because her own behaviors, mannerisms, and physical appearance contrasted with the behaviors, mannerisms, and physical appearances of her monoracial peers.

Leah also reported grappling with how she should racially identify in college. However, Leah firmly asserted that she racially identified as Black. Leah's uncertainty stemmed from a curiosity about why she was told to identify as Black in the first place, given that she could have also identified as Hispanic, White, Native American, or Black based on her parents' heritages:

I just really wish I knew, like, what I was supposed to identify as. Like, I know, like, in the, like I the—I think it was like Plessy versus Ferguson, they were like, if you are even one-eighth Black, you're Black. But I wonder if that still holds. Like, you know, I wonder if that's why I was told to do Black. Like, I learned about that recently, and I was like, "I wonder if that's why?"

Leah interpreted and filtered contextual influences such as messages from her family and historical events, like Plessy v. Ferguson, when constructing and seeking to understand her racial identity.

The uncertainty surrounding racial identity, in conjunction with the way students used the terms “race” and “ethnicity” interchangeably, reflects the notion that racial identity is fluid, and that there is no absolute way that multiracial students ought to identify. At the same time, interactions with others in which they were asked to describe their racial identity and standardized tests and forms that require individuals to disclose racial identity, served to reify race for participants and contributed to the ambiguity of how they should racially identify.

Theme Three: Students Felt In-Between or Not Enough

Participants felt as if they occupied an in-between space between various racial and ethnic groups and felt inadequate to claim membership in a group. Participants cited instances of perceiving that they did not possess the appropriate amount of cultural knowledge or the requisite physical characteristics for claiming membership in a monoracial group.

For many participants, racial identity became salient in moments when they needed to decide whether to engage in interactions with monoracial people or groups. Over time, physical appearance took on symbolic meaning, and participants interpreted their own physical appearance as something that prevented them from entering spaces as fully accepted members of a racial or ethnic group. The messages participants received from other people also played a significant role in how participants interpreted their physical appearance as it related to group membership. Because they had been told that they did not belong, they believed that they did not belong. Kate contrasted her light-skinned appearance with that of what she called “true Hispanics” saying, “I feel like for

true Hispanics, like, they have the dark complexion.” Lindsey expresses similar thoughts about her physical appearance:

I can kind of hide a lot more here because, you know, my skin is a lot lighter, so no one really questions it, no one really looks at me twice. And it’s I guess, it’s kind of made me feel wary of joining student associations and stuff like that because I grew up in an environment that told me I don’t look the part.

The interactions Lindsey had prior to college, and the accompanying messages, informed Lindsey’s current actions. Through these repeated interactions in which she was told she did not look Hispanic, Lindsey came to understand her skin color as a factor that people considered when evaluating her belonging in a Hispanic group. Because Lindsey had previously been told that she did not look like she belonged, she was reluctant to insert herself into student organizations where she might be told the same thing.

Several other participants contrasted their own physical appearance with that of people whom they considered to be full, or true, members of a racial group. Taylor, for example, said people did not perceive her as Filipino because her physical appearance was not similar to that of other Filipino people. As a result, Taylor questioned “if it’s okay for me to own that part of my identity sometimes.” Although Taylor was unsure of what criteria she needed to meet in order to look Filipino, the messages she received from her interactions with others contributed to her belief that she did not have the correct physical features.

Leah also considered how she believed she would be perceived by other students when deciding whether to joining a historically Black sorority on campus. Like, Lindsey, Leah considered the messages she received prior to college when determining how to behave:

I was always told I wasn't Black enough to do Black things like that. So, I just didn't even want to, I don't know, I didn't want to try.

For individuals of African American or Black heritage, hair was a particularly meaningful element of physical appearance. Mark, Leah, Sarah, and Caroline all mentioned their hair when discussing racial identity. Mark believed the way he styled his hair influenced how people interacted with him. Mark said, "Picking it out in an afro definitely lets people know that, ok well, he's for sure, I can see it in him and in his hair that he's for sure, some sort of African descent or heritage." He believed that if he "were to just get it buzzed" or to straighten it, people would perceive and treat him differently.

Leah's hair was a point of contention during childhood she interacted with Black girls. Leah described her hair as looking "completely different" than other Black girls' hair. As a result, the Black people with whom Leah interacted assumed she had "white girl hair," and did not acknowledge that Leah's hair might be similar to theirs. Leah often had to explain to people that she could not treat her hair like "white girl hair":

My hair does not resemble white hair at all, like, it's, like, I have to go through the same, almost same, struggles Black girls go through with their hair, just not, I guess to the extreme extent they do. Like, I never had to get perms or anything like that, or I don't know what a perm would do to my hair, but they'd be like, "Oh, you just wash your hair every day, and you know, it just is how it is." And I'm like, "No. I can't wash my hair every day. It'll fall out, just like yours." You know. And so, that was difficult because my hair, they were just like, you know. There's no way she can be Black with hair like that.

For Leah, hair was an ever-present reminder that she was not fully accepted as a Black person by the Black community.

Sarah said hair was important to her mother and grandmother because of the perception that people look down upon Black children who "have bad hair." When Sarah

was growing up, her mom emphasized the importance of Sarah and her sister “always looking really presentable when we went out.”

Caroline’s hair was one of her “insecurities,” because it was much different from her family members’ hair. When Caroline was growing up, she was often told, “Go brush your hair better, or go braid your hair, or whatever. Like if it’s down it looks crazy.” The way Caroline’s hair looked set her apart from other members of her family, and it was not until Caroline joined a student organization at Wright University that she understood her hair as something that could help her connect with other people. Caroline found a sense of belonging and acceptance when she joined a student organization at Wright University and found that the women in the organization had hair that was similar to hers.

Racial Identity Questioned or Doubted

In addition to ethnically ambiguous physical appearances contributing to participants’ perceptions of existing in between racial groups, participants also reported interactions with others in which their racial identity was questioned or challenged as factors that contributed to their perceptions of not fitting in. Three participants, Leah, Sarah, and Taylor, reported instances in which they were challenged to defend the legitimacy of their chosen racial identity. These women each recounted instances in which people did not accept their racial identity and challenged them to prove it in some way. At the beginning of Leah’s freshman year, she and a friend went to a meet up for Black students. When Leah walked into the room, the conversation stopped and people looked at her suspiciously. It was not until the group began doing introductions, and

Leah had the chance to introduce herself, that her peers accepted her presence and believed that she belonged:

When it came around to me introducing myself, I was like, “Hi, you know, my name is [Leah].” They were like, “Where are you from?” “South Dallas.” And they were like, “What’s a fun fact?” So, my fun fact is typically that I’m mixed, because I have to put that out there somewhere. So, I said, “My fun fact is that I’m not Hispanic. I am actually Black.” And they’re like, “Oh! Okay!” One girl was like, “Yeah, I was wondering. I was so confused.” And then, I mean, they were telling, like, they straight-up said, like, “Wow. That makes sense. Like, okay, that’s why you’re here,” I guess. But my fun fact was like, “Yeah, I’m actually Black, White, Hispanic, and Native American.” And they were like, “Oh, okay. That makes sense. That’s...like, okay, now you’re cool, you know, like oh okay, now you can be here. We just have to make sure.”

Based on previous experiences, Leah knew what the lack of conversations and suspicious looks meant. Her strategy for coping with these messages of skepticism or doubt from her peers was to explicitly communicate to others that she was of mixed heritage and that she identified as Black.

Although no one verbally challenged Leah when she walked into the room, Sarah and Taylor both reported instances when they were directly challenged to prove their racial identity. Sarah told a story about a time when she was talking with some of her Black friends about different Thanksgiving foods when someone challenged Sarah’s Blackness:

And I actually remember, like, one kid being like, “I feel like you don’t have any, like, Black food in your house.” And I was like, “Okay, well, that’s weird, because, like, my Black grandma is the one that cooks us Thanksgiving.” And I’m like, “I do.” And they were like, “Okay, well, like, list them off for us.” And they made me, like, sit there and, you know, talk about the foods that I consider, like Black foods, or that they consider, and to, like, basically solidify my Blackness to them.

Through this interaction, Sarah understood that her peers did not perceive her in the same way as she perceived herself. To be fully accepted as a Black person by her

Black friends, Sarah had to move away from racially identifying with more than one group. During this conversation, Sarah felt she had to “discount” the Asian side of her heritage and prove herself to be accepted by her Black friends.

Taylor cited several instances of people not believing her when she told them she identified as Filipino. Taylor said she was talking about different Filipino foods with a friend and trying to explain what certain things were, and her friend rejected what Taylor told her because she did not think Taylor looked like she would have cultural knowledge:

I was telling her about lumpia, which is like, if a taquito and an eggroll had a baby—that’s lumpia. And I was telling her about it. She went, “Oh, it’s just an eggroll.” And I said, “No. It’s not.” And she looked it up on Google and was like, “This recipe says it’s an eggroll.” And I’m like, “That recipe wasn’t written by a Filipino person.” Like, so it was always kind of like, it felt like she was trying to disprove whatever other cultural, like ethnicity I was trying to identify with because I didn’t look like it and I don’t really live that way sometimes. So, it was, I almost felt like I was trying to prove my Filipino-ness to her while she was, at the same time, trying to prove that it didn’t matter or that it wasn’t true.

One way Taylor responds to people who do not believe that she is Filipino is by going on Facebook to show them pictures of her family so that they can see what her father looks like.

Although participants reported these instances of people not accepting their racial identity, Leah cited a positive interaction she had with the instructor for one of her classes. Leah was talking with the instructor about some of the challenges she faced trying to “justify my Blackness.” She was surprised to hear him respond by telling her, “I’d believe you were Black without you having to justify it.” Leah was so accustomed to people not accepting her racial identity that an interaction that did not follow the normal script was surprising.

Showcasing Cultural Knowledge

Participants frequently cited the ability to showcase or demonstrate that they had specific cultural knowledge tied to their racial identity as a factor that made them comfortable claiming a specific identity. Showcasing or demonstrating cultural knowledge gave participants an increased sense of ownership over their racial identity. Lindsey explained that being able to say that she eats both Mexican foods like tamales and posole as well as Lebanese and Arabic foods like hummus and kibbe was a way of expressing her culture. Kate said cooking things like tamales and fajitas for her friends is a way of expressing her cultural knowledge and claiming her Hispanic heritage. She also said that cooking with some of the other Hispanic students in her residence hall made her feel like she belonged:

But sometimes they [Hispanic students] get together for, down, like down in the lobby kitchen area and make food. And I'm like, that's where I get to shine. So, I go down there, you know, I'm like, helping them make food and they're talking in English, and I would say because I, there's a bunch of other kids there trying to take food. And I feel like I'm able to talk to them.

Taylor said she appreciates when people ask her about Filipino food because she feels “qualified to answer” questions about food. She also said she appreciates when people ask her about languages because she can share what she knows:

If someone like, if they're like, “Oh, do you know any Filipino languages?” Like, actually there are like a trillion dialects, and I know how to say “your mom” [laugh] in Illocano. And they're like, “Oh, that's cool.”

These stories demonstrate instances in which physical appearances or degree of cultural knowledge directly impacted how multiracial students interacted with others in social contexts. These interactions also demonstrate the extra steps multiracial students might have to take to persuade peers to acknowledge the legitimacy of their chosen racial

identity. They also highlight the factors, such as physical appearance, cultural foods, and family background, that multiracial students understood to be evidence of their racial identity.

Although the construction and interpretation of racial identity was largely an internal process for these participants as they took in messages from the environment, the way participants understood their racial identity had social consequences. If students believed they would not be accepted by a group of monoracial peers, they chose not to engage to avoid being told either overtly or covertly that they did not belong in a given social space. If students believed they would be accepted, they were more willing to engage and enter into interactions. Participants also knew, based on past experiences and interactions, which pieces of evidence to use to help people from different groups perceive multiracial people as legitimate members of a group, rather than as people who could only participate on the periphery or in the margins.

Theme Four: Racial Identity is Salient in Monoracial Contexts

Racial identity became salient for participants when they found themselves in monoracial contexts. Although some students cited physical spaces on campus, the activities that took place in those spaces and the interactions participants had were much more important than the physical space itself. Lindsey thought about her racial identity in the academic building where her Arabic classes were held, and Taylor thought about her racial identity in the academic building where she had her anthropology classes. Participants discussed two kinds of contexts in which racial identity became salient. The first category included campus-sanctioned student groups or activities including on-campus programming and student organizations. As previously stated, although these

activities and groups were tied to specific on-campus locations, the location was not nearly as important as what the activity was or who was in the group. The second category included informal peer groups which were not necessarily tied to a specific location on-campus. Again, the demographics of a peer group were more important than the location where the group met.

Campus-Sanctioned Student Groups and Activities

Two students, Allison and Sarah, spoke about participating in Greek life. Allison noted that Panhellenic sororities on campus were predominantly White. When Allison participated in the recruitment process and visited different sororities, she noticed she was often the darkest person in the room. She became aware of her racial identity when she found herself in what she perceived as a White monoracial setting. To mitigate some of the tensions she felt as a result of her racial identity, she joined a sorority that she perceived as “a bit more diverse” in its membership than other sororities on campus:

I chose this sorority because I noticed specifically that this sorority was more diverse, like ethnically. Like, there's black people, there's a lot of Hispanic girls. It's kind of known for being like, the one that's like, for the Hispanic girls. And, like, that was one thing, going through recruitment, that was when I really realized, like, there were some sororities that I, like, looked in the room, and I was, like the darkest person in there by, like a long shot.

Although Allison perceived her sorority as one of the more diverse Panhellenic sororities on campus, she still believed her association with a predominantly White sorority and her primarily White friend group led people to assume she did not identify with her Black or Mexican heritages. Allison did not consider joining a historically Black or Hispanic sorority because she grew up in a predominantly White community and felt like she would not belong in a historically Black or Hispanic sorority.

Sarah also joined a Panhellenic sorority, which she referred to as a “White sorority.” Sarah did not feel that she had a difficult time integrating herself into a White sorority, but that her decision to join was controversial among the Black student body. Although she felt welcomed in her Panhellenic sorority, she was also aware of her Black heritage because of some of the controversy she perceived within the Black community as a result of her decision to join a predominantly White sorority. Sarah perceived that her mixed racial heritage afforded her some of the same privileges that a White person would have had when rushing a White sorority. Like Allison, Sarah also mentioned that her upbringing in a White community likely influenced her decision to initially join a White sorority. Sarah has since left her sorority. When asked if she ever considered joining a historically Black sorority, Sarah said she wondered if not joining one is “going to be one of my regrets of undergrad” and that one of the things she has grappled with is the question of whether she should have joined a historically Black sorority. At the same time, she believed that because she spent time with a number of women in historically Black sororities, she had some of the experiences that she would have had in a historically Black sorority.

Lindsey became more aware of her racial identity when she participated in cultural dinner programs organized by one of the student services offices at Wright University. During these cultural dinners, the office partners with a cultural student association, such as Chinese Club or African Club. During each event, a cultural club makes food and educates people in attendance about their culture and heritage. Cultural dinners primarily focused on one culture at a time. Participating in these events caused

Lindsey's racial identity to become more salient because it reminded her that her own identity was composed of more than one culture or racial heritage:

And I guess, just getting more involved with [cultural dinners] has just made me think about multiculturalism and multiethnicity a lot more this semester. And it's made me want to actually take and action and do something about it, because I feel like it's a conversation that hasn't really happened. And I've done research on it as well, and you know, no one really ever talks about multiethnic multiculturalism as far as it being in one individual.

Racial identity also became salient in participants' interactions with monoracial student organizations. Some participants reported anticipating negative experiences or interactions with these kinds of groups, and others reported that interacting with these groups made them feel welcomed, accepted, and affirmed in their racial identity. Some participants did not attempt interact with monoracial groups because they feared being rejected, while others chose to interact and then later decided that they did not feel that they belonged. Leah, Mark, and James, said that they did not feel that they belonged in these groups, while Taylor and Caroline both felt accepted and welcomed.

James, who identified as "mixed", looked for clubs to join when he first arrived at Wright University. James went to a Chinese Club meeting several times at the beginning of his freshman year. He noticed that many of the members were Chinese international students, and James felt like he did not fit in the club because he did not know any Chinese and he was not raised in China. James says the Chinese Club members were "nice enough," but that he did not share any of their interests, and as a result, decided to stop attending. James had positive interactions with members of the organization but decided to stop attending meetings and events because he perceived that his interests and degree of cultural knowledge were not similar enough to those of the other members of the organization.

Leah also discussed her decision not to join multicultural organizations on campus. Her decision stemmed from her belief that she did not have enough in common with the other students in these groups:

There are a pretty good amount of, like, multicultural organizations that I could have joined. I didn't just because—this is gonna sound really bizarre—but, like, even the African American—I can't even say the African Americans, because most of them don't like to be identified as African American. The Black student body is very, like, pulled towards strictly African descent, instead of, like, the African American I'm used to, which, you know, couldn't tell you their African bloodline even if they tried to.

Leah compared her degree of knowledge about African cultures to the degree of knowledge she perceived that the members of these student organizations had. She said the difference in cultural knowledge made it difficult for her to relate to them on the basis of shared interests. Leah's reluctance to join these kinds of student groups stemmed from previous experiences of being told she "wasn't Black enough to do Black things," and she did not want to be told that she was not Black enough to join a particular group or organization.

Mark, who had previously read about multiracial individuals and their experiences on college campuses, also discussed his perceptions of monoracial groups. Mark had not attended an African Club meeting since arriving at Wright University, because he believed it might be uncomfortable to be in that space as a mixed person. He feared multiracial students, like him, were "too light to be in the Black group, or we might be too dark to be in a White group." He also acknowledged that if he were to attend an African Club meeting, "it could be completely different" than he assumed it would be. Mark stated that when he talked to other mixed-race students on campus,

several of them also said they would be uncomfortable in a monoracial space because of their mixed heritage.

Not all participants who interacted with monoracial student organizations felt uncomfortable. In fact, both Taylor and Caroline felt accepted in monoracial student organizations such as Filipino Club and Gospel Singers.

Taylor saw Filipino Club as an opportunity to gain more knowledge about Filipino culture. Being part of Filipino Club made Taylor feel affirmed and welcomed, because the people with more knowledge of Filipino culture were willing to share their knowledge with her and to accept her as she was:

I remember being in that and feeling, like, a really good sense of welcome, like, it's okay that I don't know how to speak in Tagalog or Ilocano. It's okay, because this is still part of who I am, and it was a lot of fun.

Similarly, Caroline felt welcomed and affirmed as part of Gospel Singers, which was primarily composed of Black students, and as part of a Latina women's discussion group. Being part of these groups made Caroline feel "connected in ways that I didn't before." She easily found similarities with members of both groups and felt affirmed in her identity and her experiences as a Hispanic woman, especially when engaging in the Latina women's discussion group. Being in the Gospel Choir with other women whose hair looked similar to Caroline's was an affirming experience:

So being in the Gospel Choir, like, everyone's hair looks like that. And I was like, "I fit! This is cool!" And it was like I kind of fit, and some of like, my musical tendencies and like, the way that I express myself, like fit really well there.

The similarities Caroline found with students in these settings allowed her to see herself as part of these groups and allowed her to connect with people, even though they were not exactly like her.

Informal Peer Groups

In addition to being salient in more formal, campus-sanctioned student organizations and programs, racial identity was also salient in informal peer spaces where students gathered together. Leah's story about the Black student meet up at the beginning of her freshman year is one example of these kinds of informal peer spaces. Leah said she was used to walking into predominantly Black or African American spaces and instantly becoming aware that others were skeptical of her presence. She said, "Typically when I walk into, like, Black interactions, everyone kind of just stops." Leah's physical appearance led people to assume she was Hispanic or White. People's responses to Leah in predominantly Black contexts, like the Black student meet up, made Leah aware of that others' perceptions of her racial identity were incongruent with how she racially identified.

Sarah named the library and the student union as places on campus where she became aware of her racial identity, specifically in the sense that she felt she could move between Black and White contexts with relative ease because of her mixed heritage. The library and student union were two places where Sarah saw a divide between the Black and White student bodies. Sarah noted that students at Wright University have the concepts of "Black Wright University" and "White Wright University" whereby undergraduate students divide themselves:

I mean, we're like, integrated to a point, but there's like, multicultural Greek life, and then there's White Greek life. And we have our own African Student Club and Black Student Organization, all that kind of stuff.

Sarah said that for the early part of her college career she spent most of her time with "White Wright University" because she did not think that people who are part of

“Black Wright University” would want to interact with her. At the beginning of her senior year, Sarah began “branching out” and spending time with people who are part of “Black Wright University.” Sarah was surprised by how welcomed and affirmed in her racial identity she felt during her interactions:

All of the kids in “Black [Wright University]” have been like, really accepting, and you know, they don’t like, care where you grew up, they don’t care what you look like, kind of background you have. We all just, like, come together and we just, like, enjoy the fact that we’re Black and like that we have a lot of stuff like that in common, and that’s just different than what I grew up with, because trying to identify with Black kids when I was growing up was, like, just very problematic. Like they were like, “We don’t want you.” Like that kind of stuff, and now, like, even kids from rough backgrounds are like, “I’m happy you’re around,” and you know, like, “You’re Black enough even though you’re mixed, and you still have, you know, like this is part of your culture.” And so, they’ve tried to just help me integrate and learn more about, like, my Black side.

Allison’s racial identity became salient in interactions with Black students during which she did not feel affirmed as a Black person. She often felt excluded when she spent time with Black students who were involved in things like historically Black fraternities and sororities and the African Club. She attributed these feelings of exclusion to her mixed heritage:

Like they don’t really invite me to anything. And like, they’ve said, like, they’ve joked around. They’re like, “Oh, like, you’re mixed. Like, da da da da da. Like, it’s ok.” But like, that’s...I still feel excluded and I still feel like I’m not a part of it.

Allison became aware of her racial identity when she is not invited to certain events because she interprets that the lack of an invitation means that she is not perceived as Black enough to participate. Although her peers verbally communicate that it is alright for her to be mixed, Allison perceives their actions communicate otherwise.

Theme Five: Need for a Multiracial Student Group

Participants expressed a desire for a multiracial student organization on campus. Participants noted that they had previously had interactions with other multiracial students in which they felt supported and understood. Although multiracial students have a variety of racial backgrounds, they found they had many shared experiences. Participants believed that a multiracial student organization would make it easier to find other multiracial students and that it would provide an environment where multiracial students could come together to discuss the experiences and challenges they had as multiracial students.

Comparing Notes with Other Multiracial Students

Participants discussed interactions they had with other multiracial students at Wright University, where students who selected two or more racial categories on institutional forms made up about 4.7% of the student population.

James was pleasantly surprised by the number of mixed-race students he encountered at Wright University. James disclosed his own racial identity as a mixed-race individual when he encountered other people who identified in a similar way. James had a positive view of these interactions and felt that he bonded with people over conversations about what it was like to be a mixed-race student at Wright University. In these instances, racial identity was a connection point that opened the door for conversations that James might not have been able to have with a monoracial peer.

Leah also felt she had an instant connection with multiracial individuals whom she encountered at Wright University. She acknowledged that although all multiracial people have different experiences, she still saw herself as “somewhat kind of similar” to

them. Leah believed that she could understand the experiences of other multiracial people and that they could understand hers based on the fact that they all came from mixed racial backgrounds.

Mark said that he recently developed a friendship with another mixed-race student at Wright University. During conversations with his friend, Mark noticed some commonalities:

And we just got together, and that was the first time I've really felt like a real good friendship with someone else who was mixed. And we just started talking and realized that some of the things we share in common. Before that, I had never really dove deep in a relationship with someone else or a friendship with someone else who was mixed, and we both exchanged notes.

Unlike James, Leah, and Mark, who had connected with other mixed-race students at Wright University, Allison had not connected or built relationships with other multiracial students. She knew two multiracial people, but was not friends with them and therefore, did not discuss the experience of being a multiracial student at Wright University with them.

Being able to connect and have a conversation with other multiracial students gave multiracial students the space to discuss their experiences with someone who might better understand what it is like to not identify with a single racial group. Participants believed multiracial peers could understand their stories and experiences in a way that their monoracial peers could not. For students like James, Leah, and Mark, another person's multiracial racial identity signaled to participants that it was alright to discuss the experience of being multiracial at Wright University. For other students, like Allison, there needed to be an established relationship in place with other multiracial students before discussing racial identity.

Creating a Club or Events for Multiracial Students

Several participants mentioned that they believed that the multiracial population at Wright University would benefit from having campus programming focused on the multiracial population or a multiracial student organization where multiracial individuals could come together to support one another and discuss the experience of being multiracial at Wright University.

Allison had difficulty finding people who were similar to her, and thought it would be helpful if there was a way for multiracial students to connect with one another. Allison did not feel her racial identity was affirmed or supported by the Black or Hispanic community. Allison perceived that her monoracial peers thought that Allison faced less oppression as a multiracial individual, and did not encounter the same kinds of struggles and challenges that they did. Allison desired a way to interact with other people who were like her so that she did not feel alone in her struggles:

I don't think that would take the struggle away, like it's still an issue, but I'll feel more supported and affirmed knowing that I'm not the only one. And like, I know that I'm not the only one, but I think like, hearing them, and like having a place to like, speak with other people and like, just share your story, I think that's like super important, and that would be helpful.

Mark also thought a multiracial student organization would be helpful since multiracial people “don't necessarily feel comfortable joining a monoracial group.” Like Allison, Mark thought a multiracial student organization could provide a space where people could meet together to learn and talk about the experiences of multiracial individuals:

We'll probably have some speakers coming in or just discussion-based, just talking about, kind of what we're talking about right here: how we've grown up, and the things we've seen and the things that, you now, we've experienced because everyone—everyone, no matter what, has their own experiences, but

especially mixed racial or mixed heritage people have multiple experiences from different groups and cultures, and just kind of blending that in all together, and creating a group that we can all get together and just talk about that.

James said it would be helpful to have a panel of multiracial students speaking about their experiences and their backgrounds. He thought this could be helpful for multiracial students learning about racial identity and for educating the larger student body about multiracial people. James noticed that Wright University often had programs focused on the experiences of monoracial individuals, but that he had not seen a program specifically highlighting multiracial experiences. Like Mark, James noted the intragroup diversity of the multiracial population and the range of experiences they could bring to the table. He said, “The experiencesid of a half-Black, half-White student might be far different from a half-Mexican, half-White student.” Although James believed that Wright University’s existing programs and student organizations did a good job of supporting minority students, he also said that “it couldn’t hurt” to have “an outreach program or a club or something,” specifically for multiracial students.

Participants who expressed a desire for a multiracial student organization all wanted a place where they could talk to other people about what it was like to be multiracial, specifically within the context of Wright University. Although several participants noted that they had interacted with other multiracial students, other participants thought it was more difficult to find other multiracial students on campus. Some students who participated in this study found monoracial student organizations where they felt welcomed, the participants who did not believed a multiracial student organization would provide a space where they felt comfortable expressing and exploring their multiracial identity.

Theme Six: The Ability to See Multiple Perspectives

Multiracial students believed that their multiracial racial identity allowed them to see issues from multiple perspectives in ways that their monoracial peers could not. Seven out of nine participants discussed this strength. Participants believed that their racial identity, which allowed them to experience the world from multiple racial vantage points instead of being entrenched in a single monoracial perspective, enabled them to evaluate arguments and to understand issues from more than one perspective.

Mark and Allison both attributed their ability to understand different cultures to their upbringing. Mark, for example, said that he saw “two drastically different experiences” when he looked at the Black side of his family and the White side of his family. Mark said, “I just felt like I was better [sic] to grasp the difference in cultures better than other students who have just grown up, you know, just with a White upbringing or just with a Black upbringing or whatever else.” Allison also said that seeing both her Black and Mexican relatives and their different cultures gave her a “cultural understanding of different, of like both sides.” Growing up in households that blended two or more cultures together enabled these students to see that there were multiple ways to do or think about things.

Sarah, Leah, Mark, and Lindsey discussed the unique perspectives that came from being in what Sarah called “the middle ground.” Sarah said, “I think there’s a lot to learn from being in places where you’re not like all the way one side or the other.” In this sense, if each student’s different racial heritages were represented on a linear spectrum, the multiracial individual would be located somewhere in the middle and not at either, or any, or the extremes. Like Sarah, Mark said his racial identity allowed him to “see things

from two different points of view.” Mark was proud of his ability to see the world in this way. Participants’ ability to see the world from multiple points of view allowed them to relate to and understand monoracial peers from different racial groups.

Sarah and Mark both gave concrete examples of times they used their unique perspectives to understand or speak to an issue. Mark said he could understand affirmative action from both a Black perspective as well as a White perspective. Mark said, “I was part of that system because I identified as African American or Black for records, for school, but I could understand at the same time how someone who can’t use affirmative action to their benefit, you know, would see that’s maybe unfair.” Although he saw affirmative action as beneficial, he also understood why some people argue that it is an unfair system. Mark saw validity in both sides of the argument, and he was able to empathize both with the people who supported it and the people who did not support it. Sarah cited Greek life at Wright University as an example of being able to see multiple perspectives. Because Sarah was in a predominantly White Panhellenic sorority and she spent a lot of time with women from historically Black sororities, believed she had “a really accurate perspective of what it’s like to be Greek on both sides.” According to Sarah, not many women who participate in Greek life have the opportunity to understand or see what it is like to be a member of a sorority in a different Greek council. Sarah’s racial identity as a half-Black half-Vietnamese woman gave her access to both Black and White Greek life, and having access to different Greek councils allowed Sarah to develop a unique perspective of Greek life.

Leah, Lindsey, and Caroline said their racial identity allowed them to be more empathetic and understanding of different people. Leah’s multiple racial heritages

allowed her to empathize with people from different racial backgrounds. Although she did not identify as Hispanic, it was part of her heritage. Leah said that although she did not experience all of the things that fully Hispanic people experienced, she experienced enough of the same things that she felt she could empathize with her Hispanic friends. Lindsey expressed similar sentiments and said that her multicultural or multiethnic heritage gave her a broad appreciation for different cultures and customs. Lindsey said, “It also makes me feel like I can be better as a person when it comes to understanding different cultures and heritages and why they do the things they do.” Lindsey attributed her ability to understand and look at cultural practices in context to her multiethnic identity. For Caroline, identifying as Latina, bicultural, or multicultural meant that she saw the world differently than how other people might see it:

I think it means having different points of views and being able to problem-solve differently. Being able to tell different stories, or to tell the same story differently. I just think it makes our collective experience, especially if we’re working in groups, or I mean, just talking and having conversation with someone. Like, it just like, livens it up, because it just, it adds more pop to it.

Having multiple racial heritages enabled participants to be mentally flexible in how they viewed the world. Because they did not have a singular racial heritage, they were not entrenched in the view of that group, and they understood that there was more than one way to view a single situation or issue that might be equally valid as a different point of view.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

This study focused on understanding the contexts on a college campus in which racial identity became salient for multiracial students. It addressed gaps in the existing literature by exploring how students interpreted contextual influences, such as degree of cultural knowledge and messages from their peers, and it explored the effects of these influences on the salience of multiracial students' racial identity. Furthermore, it examined how students acted in response to their racial identity becoming salient as a result of contextual influences and highlighted the importance of multiracial students' interactions with other people as they construct, reconstruct, and enact their racial identity. This study shed light on some of the uncertainty and concerns multiracial students have regarding their racial identity and how it influences their interactions with monoracial peers.

This chapter summarizes the research findings in light of the conceptual framework, revisits the conceptual framework and symbolic interactionism, discusses the limitations of the study, and outlines the implications of this study for practice and future research.

Summary of Conclusions

In this section, I will explain six conclusions from the findings that address the main research question and the three sub-questions I sought to answer through this study. First, the findings indicate that multiracial students use the terms "race" and "ethnicity"

interchangeably when discussing racial identity. For students, being multiracial is tied to the notion that they do not belong only to one racial or ethnic group. Second, the findings indicate that multiracial students consider how they believe others, including peers and faculty, see them when constructing their racial identity. Third, racial identity becomes salient in social settings where multiracial students do not feel congruent with the human aggregate environment. Fourth, the way multiracial students understand their racial identity influences how they interact with their monoracial and monoethnic peers. Fifth, multiracial students' interactions with other multiracial students can influence how they make meaning of their racial identity. Sixth, multiracial students believe that their racial identity allows them to empathize well with members of different monoracial groups.

Conclusion One: Race and Ethnicity are Interchangeable Terms

Multiracial students use the terms “race” and “ethnicity interchangeably when discussing racial identity. Understanding how students functionally use these terms enables us to better understand how multiracial students make meaning of and come to understand their racial identity. Although I differentiated between the terms “race” and “ethnicity” at the outset of my study, participants used the terms interchangeably throughout the interview. In order to honor students' chosen racial identities, I did not give them a specific definition of what I meant by “racial identity” and allowed them to describe their racial identities using terms that were not strictly racial. I simply asked them how they described their racial identity to other people. As discussed in the findings, several participants opted into the study based on the fact that they identified as “multiracial” or using a similar term. All participants had parents who were of different

racial or ethnic groups. Some participants did use racial language, such as White, African American, and Asian, to describe their own and their parents' racial identities. Other participants used ethnic language, such as Vietnamese, Filipino, Hispanic, and Latina, to describe their own and their parents' racial identities. Although participants did discuss physical appearance, which is reflective of race, more often than not, the concepts they discussed were more related to ethnicity, which is concerned with shared culture, language, religion, or other pattern of behavior and belief (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998). The most significant thing for participants was that their racial identity, composed of multiple racial and ethnic heritages, meant that they did not fully identify with one group or another. In this sense, a multiracial racial identity is an identity that gives individuals the experience of not identifying solely with a single racial or ethnic group.

These findings reflect the “fluidity and slipperiness of our conceptions of race” and the socially constructed nature of racial categories (Omi, 2001, p. 248). Participants’ understanding the definition of racial identity, as well as of what constitutes racial identity, is fluid and subjective. Participants exerted agency when racially identifying by claiming labels that they believed were representative of their lived experiences.

According to Snow (2001), humans have the ability to act as they wish, but are also constrained by certain “biological, structural, and cultural factors” which limit the ways in which individuals can exercise agency. While these students exercised agency, they did so within the context of a larger social structure that insists people can be separated and categorized using racial and ethnic terms. Therefore, while some participants used racial terms to racially identify, others employed ethnic terms, as well. Participants cited a mix of racial factors, such as physical appearance, and ethnic factors, such as cultural

knowledge, when explaining how they arrived at their particular racial identity. Students selected a mix of contextual influences to interpret through their meaning-making filters as they constructed racial identity. Although students noted which contextual influences they believed were important in relation to racial identity, it is also important to note that the selection of these specific influences were influenced by how other people, and society at large, understand racial identity. Once again, this highlights the interaction of individual human agency with larger social structures which influence how much flexibility individual actors have when exercising agency.

The distinction that researchers and academics make between race and ethnicity are not always significant to students in terms of their lived experiences. Only two participants explicitly differentiated between racial and ethnic identity. These participants came from families in which one parent was European-White and the other parent was Hispanic or non-European-White. These participants noted that although they were racially categorized as White in the United States, their ethnicities did not give them the experiences of what they considered to be a typical White person. Other participants did not explicitly differentiate between race and ethnicity.

The fact that most participants used the terms “race” and “ethnicity” interchangeably is significant because it reinforces the notion that racial categories are unstable, socially constructed, and fluid (Abes et al., 2007; Omi, 2001). There are no strict universal criteria or rubrics people use to determine racial identity. These findings also highlight that, for some multiracial students, the terms they use to describe their racial identity may not be available as racial categories on institutional forms used to collect data on race.

Conclusion Two: Multiracial Students Consider Others' Perspectives

Multiracial students consider how they believe others see them when constructing and asserting their racial identity. Participants discussed contextual influences such as the verbal and non-verbal messages they received from the people around them both prior to and during college that informed how they constructed and understood their racial identity. The way a student interpreted these contextual influences through his or her meaning-making filter influenced how these messages influenced his or her understanding of racial identity. Not only are these messages interpreted through students' meaning-making filters, but they also become part of students' meaning-making filters over time. This finding is congruent with findings from other studies that assert that multiracial individuals must negotiate with the social environment when asserting their racial identity (Townsend et al., 2009).

Seven participants noted that they were aware that the way others perceive their racial identity was not congruent with their own understanding of their racial identity. Allison, Caroline, Kate, Leah, Mark, Sarah, and Taylor all mentioned instances in which they were questioned about their racial identity, and most of them attributed this to the fact that their physical appearances were not necessarily congruent with their chosen racial identity and therefore, their racial identity was not evident to the people around them. Students described viewing themselves as they believed that others viewed them when determining how they were going to handle their racial identity in a given context. Leah, for example was aware that others did not perceive her as Black, and as a result knew she would have to make a statement asserting her racial identity in social interactions with other Black people. Similarly, Taylor was aware that she passed as

White, and knew that she might have to tell people that she was Filipino. Through this process of perspective taking and interpreting the self from the point of view of another person, multiracial students developed an understanding of what was expected of them in terms of physical appearance and behaviors in order to claim membership in a given group. Physical appearance became symbolized through social interactions and took on specific meaning that directed students actions (Snow, 2001). Students' responses reflect the idea of "racial rubrics", which Chang (2016) defines as "assessment tools and/or measures used to standardize and rate racial acceptability on the basis of individuals' daily interactions with others, as perceived through phenotype, power and privilege" (p. 718). Like the students in Chang's (2016) study, the participants in the current study noted that they often experienced "suspicion/rejection from fellow students who saw them as racially deficient because of their multiracial identity" (p. 721).

For many students, physical appearance was the most immediate and visible factor they referenced when discussing how they thought others viewed them. Over time, through messages received both prior to and during college, students ascribed meaning to their physical appearance as something that either supported or detracted from their ability to easily claim membership in a given group. This reflects Snow's (2001) principles of interactive determination, whereby an understanding of objects of analysis, like physical appearance, cannot be understood "by attending only to qualities presumed to be intrinsic to them (p. 369). Physical appearance is not intrinsically tied to membership in a racial group, but multiracial students began to understand it as such through interactions with others. Thus, the meaning of physical appearance as it relates to racial identity can only be understood by considering the interactional contexts in

which it exists. The messages students received about physical appearance informed how they understood their racial identity, and the messages became part of students' meaning-making filters as they interpreted other cues and influences from the environment. Leah made a statement that captured this idea when she said she believed people thought, "If you don't look like me, you can't be like me."

Other factors that students referenced when discussing how they thought others viewed them, and that they used to assert the legitimacy of their racial identity, include degree of cultural familiarity, language or patterns of speech, and family background. These criteria are congruent with the criteria cited in previous studies exploring multiracial racial identity (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; Renn, 2000, 2003, 2008). When multiracial students had interactions with their peers in which it was implied or stated that they did not belong to the group, multiracial students cited the aforementioned criteria to make a case for their membership. They believed that the things they were citing would be accepted by others as proof of their racial identity, especially when it was not supported by physical appearance. Students did not select these criteria on their own, rather, through social interactions they came to understand that others would accept their racial identity based on these kinds of criteria.

Conclusion Three: Incongruence with the Environment

Racial identity becomes salient in settings where an individual experiences incongruence with the environment. Strange and Banning (2015) note that "environments are transmitted through people, and the dominant features of any given environment are partially a function of the collective characteristics of those who inhabit it" (p. 51). This conclusion relates with Renn and Arnold's (2003) finding that

multiracial students become aware of their racial identity when they experience conflict between their norms and values and the norms and values of the groups with which they are interacting. This relates to how students perceive the dominant, collective characteristics of the people in a monoracial environment, such as a student organization or informal gathering of monoracial peers. Although students cited specific places on-campus where race became salient, the places they noted were significant because of the people who inhabited the spaces. Racial identity became salient for students when they realized that they were racially or ethnically different from the people around them. Strange and Banning (2015) note that individuals who have a high degree of similarity with the dominant characteristics of the people who inhabit an environment are more likely to feel congruent and comfortable in the environment than individuals who do not have a high degree of similarity. Racial identity became salient when students experience dissonance between their own characteristics and racial identity and those of their monoracial peers.

Space is contested, meaning that individuals within a space are constantly negotiating the definition and uses of various spaces (Neely & Samura, 2011). In spaces that were dominated by one racial or ethnic group, participants became more conscious of their racial identity. When there was more diversity, participants were still aware of their racial identity but they did not feel incongruent with the environment. For example, Taylor noted that Filipino Club had a good number of non-Filipino members who, like her, wanted to learn more about Filipino culture. Multiracial students constructed an understanding of monoracial student organizations and gatherings of monoracial students as places specifically for people who possess certain physical characteristics, language

fluency, or cultural knowledge. Those individuals without the requisite knowledge or characteristics who try to inhabit the space come to understand that this is not the place for them. This happened most often through non-verbal messages and by indirect verbal messages. These messages were communicated through things like suspicious looks given to multiracial students when they entered certain monoracial setting and questions such as, “What are you?”

Students became aware of their racial identity when they were in monoracial settings, including student organizations and peer groups. For some multiracial students, these settings were inhabited primarily by White students, and for other multiracial students, these settings were primarily inhabited by members of racial minority groups. Since students’ multiracial racial identity gave them the experience of identifying with more than one racial or ethnic group, they often became aware of their racial identity when they interacted with monoracial peers. Students were aware of the similarities and differences between themselves and their monoracial peers, including hair texture, skin color, language fluency, and familiarity with ethnic foods. Racial identity became salient when students, including Allison and Leah, noticed the ways they differed from their monoracial peers and began to question whether they could still claim membership in a particular racial group. As students interpreted the contextual influences, their racial identity became more salient. This relates to Renn and Arnold’s (2003) finding that “conflict between the norms and values of friendship groups was cited by many [multiracial students] as a source of awareness and growth of multiracial identity” (p. 275). Social interactions led students to realize that they were different from their peers.

Conclusion Four: Racial Identity Influences Interactions with Monoracial Peers

Multiracial students' understanding of their racial identity influences how they interact with their monracial and monoethnic peers. The way students understood their racial identity as well as the ways in which they interpreted contextual influences from the environment influenced whether or not they chose to engage with monoracial or monoethnic peers and how they behaved in those interactions. The interactions, in turn, influenced how students made meaning of and understood their racial identity. Furthermore, students used information that they had accumulated during previous social interactions to predict what would happen if they chose to engage with a group of monoracial peers. This information became part of students' meaning-filters and influenced the ways they interpreted new contextual influences and social interactions in college.

Although some students, like James, actually attended a few monoracial student organization meetings before coming to the conclusion that they did not have enough in common with other members to continue interacting, other students chose not to try engaging with monoracial student organizations. James reported friendly interactions with the Chinese students who were part of Chinese Club but realized his interests did not align with theirs. James left Chinese Club without feeling the need to reevaluate his racial identity. More commonly, students in this study reported that they avoided joining monoracial student organizations because they did not want the members of that organization to tell them that they did not belong. Multiracial students, like Mark and Leah, used information from past experiences to conclude that their interests and physical appearances were not similar enough to those of the individuals in a monoracial group to

feel comfortable engaging with the group. Over time, they had come to understand their physical appearance as something that prevented them from being seen as members of a given racial group. They did not want to enter an environment, only to be told that they did not belong based on their racial identity. For example, Mark said that his skin color prevented him from feeling like he could be part of an African American or Black student organization, and Leah said that she did not want to be told she was not Black enough. According to Renn and Arnold (2003), “monoracial student organizations often proved to be places where identity was contested and subtle (and sometimes unsubtle challenges to mixed-race students’ authenticity were commonplace” (p. 275). Although students in the current study did not report instances of this actually happening, they did note that the fear of it happening prevented them from trying to engage in a monoracial student organization.

Some students did perceive enough similarities between themselves and their monoracial peers to feel comfortable interacting with them. This relates to the concept of cognitive maps, and further illuminates the ways in which social interactions inform students understanding of their racial identity (Attinasi, 1989). Attinasi (1989) found that Mexican American students constructed cognitive maps of their environments based on the meanings they attribute to objects or relationships. Multiracial students in this study demonstrated a similar mapping of the college environment as they ascribed meaning to monoracial settings. Participants discussed certain places and groups of people they felt comfortable interacting with, as well as places and groups of people with whom they were not comfortable on the basis of racial identity. The cognitive maps people constructed of their environment allowed them to know how to act with different groups.

Students noted that although they never denied their multiracial racial identity, they did not always bring it up when interacting with monoracial individuals. They deemphasized their multiracial identity in some interactions with monoracial individuals so as not to draw attention to the fact that they were a slightly different than their monoracial peers. Multiracial students engaged in the reconstruction of their racial identity as they engaged in interactions in which they deemphasized their multiracial identity or behaved in a specific way. Some students who did choose to engage with groups of monoracial peers, like Sarah who spent time with students in “Black Wright University,” came to understand that there were certain ways they should act in order to be accepted as legitimate members of a racial group. Sarah, for example noted that she felt she had to “discount” her Asian heritage in order to be accepted as Black by her Black peers. Although Leah did not want to join a monoracial student organization, she did discuss her interactions with Black peers. Over time, Leah developed an understanding of the fact that she needed to state that she identified as Black whenever she interacted with other Black people. Other students learned that demonstrating their knowledge of ethnic foods was one way to demonstrate that they could be part of the group. The interactions students had in monoracial settings served as contextual influences that continued to shape students’ meaning making filters and either reinforced or challenged their understanding of their racial identity and how to enact it with certain racial or ethnic groups. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes the accumulation of meaning over time (Blumer, 1969). We see the accumulation of meaning at work when we consider the ways in which students’ social interactions serve to create and reinforce the meaning that multiracial students attribute to food, physical appearance, and cultural knowledge.

Conclusion Five: Multiracial Students Receive Support from Other Multiracial Students

Multiracial students felt supported and understood in their interactions with other multiracial students. Three participants described instances in which they encountered other multiracial students at Wright University and immediately felt like they had something in common, and one participant said she wanted to have these kinds of interactions with other multiracial students. The three participants who discussed positive interactions with other multiracial students noted that although the people they interacted with did not have the same racial or ethnic heritages, they still found similarities in their experiences as multiracial students at Wright University. Students contrasted their conversations with multiracial peers with their conversations with monoracial peers, noting that they felt more understood by their multiracial peers, especially when discussing their experiences as multiracial students at Wright University. For example, students said they discussed things like how to describe their racial identity, what they thought of participating in monoracial organizations, and how they believed they could see issues and situations from multiple perspectives.

Out of the nine students who participated in this study, Allison stood out as someone who felt deeply excluded by members of monoracial groups and who struggled to find people to relate to. Allison had not had interactions with multiracial peers, but she deeply desired them. Allison's experiences are reflective of what Sands and Schuh (2003) found in their study of multiracial students. Like the students in Sands and Schuh's (2003) study, Allison felt excluded by the Black monoracial community and struggled to find a peer group where she felt like she fit. Allison thought she would benefit from interacting with other multiracial students who would understand the

challenges she faced when trying to fit in, and who would acknowledge that her experiences were valid. Allison desired to experience what other multiracial students had realized through their interactions with multiracial peers: that she was not the only one.

Rockquemore et al. (2009) note that there is not necessarily one monolithic multiracial experience. Nevertheless, participants who had interacted with other multiracial students reported a sense of solidarity and feeling that they had been understood. These interactions with others served as contextual influences that participants then interpreted to make sense of their racial identity. Multiracial students viewed their interactions with multiracial peers as different from their interactions with monoracial peers. In these cases, students understood multiracial racial identity as something that symbolized shared experiences and understanding among multiracial students. These interactions also gave students the space to create and recreate their racial identity alongside their multiracial peers.

Conclusion Six: Empathy and Multiple Points of View

Multiracial students believe that their racial identity allows them to empathize with and understand the perspectives of people from different monoracial groups. This conclusion relates to how students' make meaning of their racial identity. Seven out of the nine students who participated in this study stated that their multiracial heritages allowed them to see issues from the perspectives of the different racial heritages that constituted their racial identity. For example, Mark, who identified as half-Black and half-White could evaluate issues and arguments from both a Black perspective and a White perspective, and Leah, who identified as Black with some Hispanic heritage, could see things from both a Black and Hispanic perspective. In addition to being able to

cognitively understand issues from multiple racial perspectives, multiracial students stated that their multiracial identity allowed them to empathize with monoracial people. Although multiracial students were not always treated like their monoracial peers, they believed that their experiences were similar enough to those of their monoracial peers to that they were able to empathize with them.

This particular conclusion and related findings was unexpected. None of the literature I reviewed throughout the course of this study mentioned similar findings. This could be an area for exploration in future research.

Abes et al.'s (2007) Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity, Symbolic Interactionism, and a Sociological Perspective

Considering multiracial students' racial identity through the lens of Abes et al.'s (2007) RMMDI, symbolic interactionism, and a sociological perspective provided a better understanding of how multiracial students construct and reconstruct racial identity in various contexts on the college campus.

In the context of this study, the meaning-making filter was the most applicable element of Abes et al.'s (2007) RMMDI. The meaning-making filter allows us to explore how students interpret contextual influences such as peers, norms and stereotypes. The meaning-making filter also allows us to acknowledge that students exert agency when interpreting contextual influences. At the same time, it is important to note that students' meaning-making filters are, in some ways, limited and bound by certain "structural and cultural constraints (e.g., roles, social expectations, norms, values) that impinge on situations in which they find themselves in the course of developing their respective lines of action" (Snow, 2001, p. 374). Thus, while students exert agency when interpreting

messages from peers that communicate that multiracial students are not “real” members of a group, their interpretations are limited by larger social understandings of race, specifically understandings of race as discrete categories. As a result, students interpret contextual influences in ways that grant or deny them access to specific racial groups based on their socially constructed understanding of what it means to be a member of a given racial group. In addition to including human agency and structural constraints, students’ meaning-making filters also included information gathered from previous social interactions. For example, Lindsey’s meaning-making filter included her experiences with people who told her that she was not Hispanic because she did not look Hispanic, meaning that whenever Lindsey thought about claiming her Hispanic identity she did so through the lens of knowing that she had previously been told she was not Hispanic.

Employing a sociological perspective in conjunction with symbolic interactionism allowed for a focus on the social interactions participants had with the people around them. As participants interacted with other people and began to understand the ways in which they were viewed by others, certain contextual influences such as degree of cultural knowledge and physical appearance began to take on meaning. This reflects Snow’s (2001) principle of emergence, whereby objects, people, and practices, take on new meaning. As students interacted with their peers, things like hair took on new meaning for students as they began to understand that their hair was interpreted by others as something that set them apart and marked them as different. During similar interactions, the meaning of students’ physical appearance, including hair, and degree of cultural knowledge took on specific meaning and became symbolized. Since a sociological perspective asserts that interactions and meaning do not exist independent of

one another, it is important to understand that the meaning participants attributed to their cultural knowledge and physical appearance emerged as a result of participants' interactions with others both before and during college. Once objects are symbolized and take on particular meanings, they become "objects of orientation that elicit specifiable feelings and actions" (Snow, 2001, p. 371). For example, Leah's physical appearance became symbolized and elicited specific actions. Specifically, Leah understood that she was not perceived as Black because of her physical appearance. As a result, Leah knew that she had to assert her racial identity whenever she interacted with other Black people. Together, Abes et al.'s (2007) RMMDI, symbolic interactionism, and a sociological perspective highlight the ways in which participants' understanding of racial identity is influenced by their own agency and decisions, their interactions with others, and by the meanings they attribute to contextual influences.

Limitations

The timeline of this study was a limitation. Data collection and analysis took place within the span of two and a half months and ran from December to mid-February. Because there was a limited amount of time to collect and analyze data, each participant was only interviewed once. As a result, participants shared stories and experiences they remembered from their time at Wright University. Had there been more time to collect and analyze data, it would have been helpful to do a second interview with each participant, specifically focused on instances in which racial identity became salient between the first and second interview. This may have captured more quotidian instances and contexts in which racial identity became salient. An extended timeline may have also allowed the recruitment of more participants.

A second limitation of this study was that this study used students who self-identified as multiracial and responded to the recruitment materials. This may have produced a sample of students who were already thinking about their racial identity, and as a result, racial identity might have been more salient for these students than it is for students who chose not to participate.

Finally, seven out of the nine students who participated in this study were female. The male voice and perspective was represented in this study. However, having a male-to-female ratio that was more reflective of the two-to-three, male-to-female ratio at Wright University may have provided additional insight into whether the contexts in which multiracial students' racial identity became salient differed for males and females. Despite this limitation, there was some overlap between the experiences male and female students discussed in their interviews.

Implications

Implications for Future Research

This study contributed to a gap in the research by exploring how different contexts and social interactions influence the way multiracial students understand and think about their racial identity. The findings and conclusions of this study demonstrated that racial identity became salient for multiracial students at Wright University in a number of contexts including monoracial student organizations and peer groups, interactions with other multiracial students, and instances in which multiracial individuals consider how others evaluate their racial identity. Although this provides a basic understanding of some of the contexts in which multiracial students become aware of

their racial identity, further research could help provide higher education administrators and student affairs professionals with a more nuanced understanding of how these contexts prompt multiracial students to become more aware of their racial identity. Since this study was conducted at a predominantly White private institution in the South, future research could examine the same research question in a different institution type and in a different geographic location. Researchers could also seek out Hispanic Serving Institutions, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Asian American and Pacific Islander Serving Institutions, and institutions with larger multiracial populations to understand how different campus demographics affect the contexts in which racial identity becomes salient. Since racial identity became salient in interactions with monoracial peers, it would be interesting to learn if the same thing occurs at institutions that have larger populations of non-White students. It would also be interesting to examine this research question at an institution where multiracial students composed a larger proportion of the student body since racial identity also became salient in interactions with other multiracial students.

A quantitative study could provide researchers with more insight into the multiracial population, especially among multiracial students who might not be comfortable doing a one-on-one interview about racial identity. A quantitative survey might elicit responses from students who are not as vocal about their racial identity. It could also capture responses from multiracial students who do not think about racial identity. A quantitative survey would also be helpful in comparing multiracial student populations across different institutions.

As previously noted, seven out of the nine students who participated in this study believed that their multiracial racial identity and heritage allowed them to consider issues from different racial perspectives and to empathize with monoracial peers from different racial groups. This finding was unexpected and warrants future research. Research stemming from this finding could take a number of different directions. First, it would be interesting to know if this is a perspective shared by multiracial students at different colleges and universities. Additionally, since students discussed both empathy, which had to do with understanding how people felt, and perspective-taking, which was concerned with understanding how people viewed issues, researchers could consider these two components separately. From a psychosocial perspective, research could investigate how empathy and perspective-taking develop among multiracial students compared to how they develop among monoracial students.

Implications for Practice

In light of the findings and conclusions of this study, I suggest four implications for practice. First, institutions can provide space on institutional forms for students to write in how they racially identify in addition to checking boxes for their racial category. Second, diversity training and education should include information about the multiracial population. Third, leaders of student organizations, specifically those who lead racially or ethnically based student organizations, should be challenged to consider the ways in which their organizations are inclusive or exclusive to students who might not identify as members of a specific racial or ethnic group. Finally, institutions can create multiracial student organizations or programming tailored to multiracial students to facilitate interactions among multiracial students.

The first suggestion stems from the conclusion that students use the terms race and ethnicity interchangeably and from the fact that participants' racial identity did not always align with the racial category they selected on institutional forms. As Lindsey noted, the racial categories that appear on institutional forms do not always capture the complexity of a student's racial identity. Giving students the option to write in their racial identity acknowledges their right to self-identify and may reduce some of the ambiguity and uncertainty that participants experienced when determining how to racially identify (Renn & Johnston-Guerrero, 2016). Not only would a write-in option supplementing the existing racial category check boxes enable students to assert their racial identity using their own language, but it would also give institutions insight into how its student body prefers to racially identify.

The findings and conclusions from this study demonstrate the need for further education in the campus community regarding the multiracial population. To create a campus environment that is more welcoming to multiracial students, student affairs professionals should integrate the following topics into diversity training and education focused specifically on race. First, in addition to educating people on the wide variety of monoracial racial identities present within the campus community, trainings should also acknowledge that individual people can have multiple racial heritages. Discussions about racial identity should recognize that multiracial individuals, who might not fully identify with a single racial group, exist and are part of the campus community. As Lindsey said, there are not many conversations about racial or ethnic diversity as it exists within a single person. Second, diversity training should address the fact that people exert agency when choosing how to racially identify, and that there is not one correct or incorrect way

for a person to identify. Diversity training should help people understand that their perception of a person's racial identity is not always congruent with how an individual chooses to racially identify. Third, training should educate people on appropriate ways to respond when someone discloses his or her racial identity. Several participants reported instances in which they disclosed their racial identities to peers, and their peers responded in disbelief or doubt. Additionally, one student noted that she was surprised when one of her professors told her that he would not have questioned her racial identity. Diversity training and education should communicate to people that it is not their place to question someone else's chosen racial identity. The multiracial students who participated in this study arrived at the university already having encountered and internalized messages about not truly belonging in a racial group. By including the aforementioned topics in diversity training and education, student affairs professionals can begin to create a new narrative that communicates that multiracial students' chosen racial identities are valid and that they need not be exactly like other members of a given racial group to claim membership in that group.

Participants' racial identity became salient in interactions with monoracial peers, and some participants specifically referenced the apprehension and hesitance they felt with regard to interacting with monoracial student organizations. Although none of the participants reported instances in which they were overtly rejected by members of a monoracial student organization, several participants were reluctant to interact with monoracial student organizations based on previous life experiences in which they were told that they did not belong. Despite these concerns, Taylor's experience with Filipino Club demonstrates that multiracial students can feel accepted in racially and ethnically

based student organizations. One way of addressing these concerns about what could happen if multiracial students chose to interact with a racially or ethnically based student organization is by providing additional training to the advisors and student leaders of racially and ethnically based student organizations that encourages the leadership to think about how their organizations respond to people who do not necessarily identify with their specific racial or ethnic group. If student leaders think through this prior to multiracial students trying to interact with their student organization, they may be able to mitigate some of the concerns multiracial student have about being rejected. Not only is this helpful for giving multiracial students access to these social groups, but it also helps give access to people who desire to learn more about a specific race or ethnicity.

Students who participated in this study expressed a desire to have relationships with other multiracial students. Participants noted that a multiracial student organization or programs specifically designed to educate people about multiracial students would be helpful in connecting them with other multiracial students. Participants expressed a desire for the creation of a multiracial student organization on their campus. Although it is important to acknowledge students' voices, student affairs professionals and higher education administrators should consider both the benefits and challenges of creating such an organization. A multiracial student organization could benefit multiracial students by bringing them together with other multiracial individuals who share similar experiences. According to Nishimura (1998), multiracial students who participated in a multiracial student support group that was recognized as a student organization sought to acknowledge the diversity in the student body. These students also noted that they had “no desire to isolate themselves from other students or promote multiracial exclusivity”

through their organization (Nishimura, 1998, p. 51). Multiracial student organizations also provide space for students to “express and explore their identity” alongside other multiracial students (Ozaki & Johnston, 2005, p. 54). In addition to considering the benefits of a multiracial student organization, student affairs professionals should evaluate the potential challenges of this particular kind of organization. Ozaki and Johnston (2005) note that students participate in identity-based student organization for three main reasons: (1) to socialize with others, (2) “to have more of a political voice,” and (3) “to express and explore their identity” (p. 54). Because not all multiracial students will want to participate in a multiracial student organization for the same reasons, student affairs professionals should think through what the purpose of this kind of organization should be. Multiracial student organizations are also prone to some other unique challenges. For example, there could be conflict that arises within the group if some students joined to explore their identities while other students joined with the intention of being more politically active (Ozaki & Johnston, 2005). Multiracial student organizations might also experience conflict and division if the identities of student leaders differ from the identities of the group members, as peoples’ identities cause them to “consider their needs and experiences through [their] particular racial mix” (Ozaki & Johnston, 2005, p. 56). Despite some of these challenges, multiracial student organizations do exist on some college campuses, and there are a number of resources, from groups like “the MAVIN Foundation, Association of Multi-Ethnic Americans, and Swirl, Inc.,” that administrators and students can use when considering the creation of a multiracial student organization on their own campus (Ozaki & Johnston, 2005, p. 59). If administrators do choose to work with multiracial students to create a multiracial student

organization, they should have intentional conversations about the purpose of the organization and how student leaders will handle identity-related conflicts that may arise. If students cannot come to an agreement about the purpose of the organization or how they will handle conflict, a multiracial student organization might not provide the kind of environment desired by the students who participated in this study.

Another way student affairs professionals can connect multiracial students to one another, aside from the creation of a student organization, is by hosting forums, programs, and discussion groups focused on multiracial students' experiences. By creating environments in which multiracial students can connect and build relationships with other multiracial students, student affairs professionals can help multiracial students understand that there are other students at the university who have similar experiences and who might understand what it is like not to fit neatly into one racial category.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

In what contexts on a college campus does racial identity become salient for multiracial students?

Sub-questions:

- What leads students to adopt a particular racial identity?
 - How do you describe your racial identity?
 - What racial category box, or boxes, do you select when filling out paperwork?
 - How do you describe your parents' racial identities?
 - What kinds of conversations did you have about race when you were growing up?
 - Can you give an example of a time that racial identity came up as a topic of discussion?
 - What kinds of memories do you have from your childhood about racial identity?
 - How did you describe your racial identity when you were a child?
 - Can you think of any experiences that led you to identify in that way?
 - Looking back, what factors do you think contributed to you describing your racial identity in that way?
 - How did you describe your racial identity when you were in high school?
 - What experiences led you to identify in that way?
 - Looking back, what factors do you think contributed to you describing your racial identity in that way?
 - What experiences have you had in college that contributed to how you understand your racial identity?
 - What factors do you consider when determining your racial identity?
 - What does being (*insert racial identity here*) mean to you?
 - Can you think of a time when it affected your behavior?
- How do multiracial college students make meaning of the experiences they have in various college contexts?
 - How often do you think about your racial identity?
 - When do you find yourself thinking about your racial identity the most?
 - Can you tell me about a specific experience you had while you were in college that made you think about your racial identity?
 - What happened?
 - What about that experience prompted you to think about your racial identity?

- Can you tell me about a specific place on campus that made you think about your racial identity?
 - What about that place prompted you to think about your racial identity?
 - If there were other people in that place, what role did they play?
- How do you think your friends perceive your racial identity?
 - What leads you to believe that they perceive you in this way?
- How do you think faculty perceive your racial identity?
 - What leads you to believe that they perceive you in this way?
- ⊖ Can you think of any situations when you became aware of the assumptions others have of your racial identity?
 - What happened?
 - How did it make you feel?
 - How did you respond?
 - What thoughts were going through your mind?
- Can you tell me some times in college when you became very aware of your racial identity?
 - What about that situation made you aware of your racial identity?
 - What thoughts were going through your mind during that experience?
- Can you tell me about a specific experience or place on campus where you felt affirmed or supported in your racial identity?
- What people on campus (friends, classmates, professors, etc.) are you comfortable discussing racial identity with?
 - What about those people makes you feel comfortable?
 - *[If there are none]*: What would need to change to make you more comfortable discussing your racial identity with someone on campus?
- In what spaces on campus are you comfortable discussing your racial identity?
 - *[If there are none]*: What would need to change to make you more comfortable discussing your racial identity on campus?
- In what spaces on campus are you uncomfortable discussing your racial identity?
- How, if at all, do these experiences influence the way that multiracial students make meaning of their racial identity?
 - Has the way you describe your racial identity changed over time?
 - Were there any experiences that were particularly influential in changing how you describe your racial identity? Tell me about those experiences.
 - Have you had an experience while in college that made you re-think how you racially identify? Tell me about that experience.
 - If you were to tell another multiracial student just entering college what it is like, what would you say?
 - If you were to tell a younger sibling who identified as *[insert racial identity]* about what it was like to be at Wright University, what would you tell them?

- How significant is multiracial college students' racial identity to their sense of self?
 - What are some words you would use to describe yourself to a person who you have not met before?
 - Do you believe it is important for people to know how you racial identify?
 - Why or why not?
 - What does being [*insert racial identity*] mean to you?

APPENDIX B

Researcher Positionality Statement

A researcher's personal characteristics and position in society impact the way he or she perceives others and interprets reality (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Since I believe that my personal experiences have the potential to influence how I approach this topic, interpret the findings of my research, and draw conclusions, it is important that I disclose my identity as a multiracial individual.

Personal History and Relationship to the Study

By definition, I am a multiracial individual: my father is Asian and my mother is Caucasian. My family never practiced any Chinese or Asian traditions, and as a result, being Asian is not a salient aspect of my racial identity.

I often find myself questioning how to racially identify. Although my racial identity was not salient throughout much of my childhood, it became more salient in high school and college as I began to think about my response to people who inquired about my race. People often assumed I was Hispanic based on my appearance, and I responded by telling them that I was half Chinese and half White. As I began learning more about White privilege and the oppression of racial minorities I started to question where I fit in these conversations. I also began think about how the way I chose to identify varied based on context. For example, I often indicated that I was Asian when applying for scholarships, but in casual conversation I still chose to identify as half Asian and half White. In the midst of this, I began to question whether it was appropriate to change how

I identified based on what I perceived would be most beneficial to me. I struggled to determine if I was “Asian enough” to legitimately claim that part of my racial identity.

My research interest in the experience of multiracial college students on college campuses and how they negotiate their identities stems from my own undergraduate experience. I wanted to know if other multiracial students had similar experiences and felt similar tensions as they navigated various contexts on colleges campuses that asked them to assert a racial identity.

Biases

My identity as a multiracial individual influence how I think about and understand racial identity and perceive the multiracial student population. Although, I recognize that my experiences as a multiracial individual represent only a small portion of the experiences that multiracial individuals might have while in college, I also know that my biases influence the way that I have approached this study. I need to be sure not to assume that my experiences are representative of the way multiracial students understand their racial identity in college. Other biases stem from my identity as a Higher Education and Student Affairs master’s candidate which prompts me to think critically about how college students develop and negotiate their identity in the college context. As a result, I might believe that negotiating racial identity is more important than other people believe it is.

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