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THE IMPACT OF RACIAL MISCATEGORIZATION AND RACIAL AMBIGUITY  
ON MULTIRACIAL IDENTITY AND WELL-BEING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

by

Shirley A. Newcomb, M.A.

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,  
Marquette University,  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

August 2017

ABSTRACT  
THE IMPACT OF RACIAL MISCATEGORIZATION AND RACIAL AMBIGUITY  
ON MULTIRACIAL IDENTITY AND WELL-BEING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Shirley A. Newcomb, M.A.

Marquette University, 2017

Despite the rapid growth of the multiracial population there is a dearth of literature that informs the field of counseling psychology about the identity development and well-being of multiracial people. More specifically, there is little research which explores the challenge of having one's racial identity repeatedly questioned and/or miscategorized, and how these experiences of racial miscategorization and racial incongruence may influence their identity choices and well-being. The sample consisted of 11 total participants, (women  $N = 9$ , men  $N = 2$ ) who self-identified as racially ambiguous and of multiracial descent. Overall findings of the study suggest that experiences of racial miscategorization and being questioned about racial background (e.g. *What are you?*) had a negative impact on well-being, though many individuals considered these experiences as helpful building resilience later in life. Although racial miscategorization and being questioned about racial background was found to negatively impact well-being, it was found to have a positive impact on racial identity and development. Implications and future directions are discussed.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Statement of the Problem**

It has been over a decade since the 2000 U.S. Census decision to recognize multiracial individuals as a distinct and separate racial category. As a result of this Census recognition, multiracial people accounted for nearly seven million of the total U.S. population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Prior to this historical moment, multiracial individuals were subject to racially discriminatory legislation such as the rule of hypodescent, or the one-drop rule, which required anyone with a single drop of non-white blood to identify as a racial minority, thereby forcing them to identify with racial groups of the lowest social standing (Root, 1996). Another example of historical discrimination towards multiracial people includes miscegenation laws, which prohibited, or criminalized interracial marriages, and were not repealed until 1967 (Root, 1996). Legislation such as these clearly illustrates society's history of marginalization of those with mixed race ancestry.

Despite the history of discrimination and complex sociocultural history of the ever-growing mixed-race population, there remains a dearth of research related to the experiences of this diverse group of people. Research is scarce about multiracial identity development, factors that contribute to well-being among multiracial individuals, and racial miscategorization. Specifically, little is known about how identity development is impacted by multiracial people whose physical features are racially ambiguous and have frequent experiences of having to define or explain their racial identity to others. As the population of multiracial people continues to grow, there is an increasing need for

research that will inform mental health practitioners, educators, and policy makers of the unique experiences and needs of mixed race people. The purpose of the proposed study is to contribute to the body of literature on multiracial individuals by examining the experiences of *racial miscategorization*, the experience of being racially categorized differently than how one racially self identifies, and its impact on multiracial identity and well-being.

### **History of Multiracial People in the United States**

Accurately identifying members of the multiracial population is complicated both by the U.S. racial classification system in and of itself, and the fluidity that exists in multiracial identity (Gatson, 2003; Hitlin, Brown, & Elder, 2006; Renn, 2004; Rockquemore, 1999; Root, 1990, 1996; Wallace, 2001). A unique debate surrounding the 2000 U.S. Census occurred about whether or not to add a stand-alone “multiracial” category or to allow individuals to choose as many racial identity categories that applied to them (Brunsma, 2006; Rockquemore, Brunsma, & Delgado, 2009). The relevance of this decision marks the difference between those of mixed race being racially categorized by the state versus having the freedom to choose how they would racially identify themselves.

Advocates for the addition of a “multiracial” category argued that with the “biracial baby boom” that followed the overturning of miscegenation laws, the U.S. Census needed to create a category to represent this growing demographic. On the other side of the debate, civil rights activists against the idea of creating a “multiracial” category argued that data gathered from existing racial categories are used to monitor discrimination and inequality across racial populations, and the addition of a

“multiracial” category could detract from the Census’ ability to accurately capture these numbers. Moreover, because individuals experience discrimination based on how others respond to their perceived racial group membership, opponents to the “multiracial” category argue that self-identification is less important than racial categorization when collecting census data (Rockquemore et al., 2009). The heart of this debate speaks to the societal implications that are tied to the identity choices of multiracial individuals. The racial category one selects on applications for employment and higher education for example, have a direct impact on an individual’s social mobility and opportunities, as well as potentially have long lasting effects on distribution of resources on a broader social level.

The racial identity choices of multiracial individuals impact an individual’s social interactions, social mobility, and well-being, as well as society’s ability to monitor racial inequality and discrimination; examples of this would include college admissions applications, minority scholarship applications, and of course, employment opportunities (Sanchez & Bonham, 2009). Thus, gaining an understanding of the process of multiracial identity development, the impact of racial miscategorization on racial identity development and well-being is a worthwhile research endeavor. Therefore, understanding how these experiences may influence racial self-identification of the mixed-race population will be a particular area of focus within this proposed study. However, before discussing the impact of racial miscategorization on racial identity development and well-being, a discussion of the gaps in the literature must first take place.

### **Gaps in the Multiracial Literature**

One of the unexplored areas within the multiracial literature relates to a lack of definitional clarity within the body of literature. This is due in part to a lack of interdisciplinary connectedness across the fields of psychology and sociology (Rockquemore, Brunnsma & Delgado, 2009), resulting in differing terminology for similar constructs. For example, the terms *identity denial* (Cheryan & Monin, 2005), *reactive passing* (Renfrow, 2004), *unvalidated identity* (Rockquemore & Brunnsma, 2004), and *racial misclassification* (Campbell & Troyer, 2007) have all been used by researchers to describe the phenomenon of racial miscategorization. Similarly, there is a lack of distinction made between racial misclassification, which is a social interaction, and the resulting experience of racial incongruence, which is the internal experience of the individual who was racially miscategorized.

A second area is the construct of *racial misclassification* (Campbell & Troyer, 2007). *Racial miscategorization* is the phenomenon of being racially categorized in a way that is different from how one identifies racially; research on this construct is sparse and is often not the subject of inquiry, resulting in a wide gap in the multiracial literature. Little is known about how the experience of frequently having one's racial identity questioned may impact racial identity development and well-being. Exploring this construct will not only fill an important gap in the multiracial literature, but will also help to clarify how this unique experience may impact the well-being and identity choices of multiracial individuals.

Another area for further research is in the area of well-being and multiracial identity. Existing research in this area provides conflicting results regarding the adjustment and well-being of multiracial people, and thus does not always provide a clear

view of the multiracial experience. For example, some research on the well-being of multiracial individuals has shown that they are more likely to experience negative social (Gibbs, 1998; Lyles, Yancey, Grace & Carter, 1995; McRoy & Freeman, 1986) and psychological outcomes (Gibbs) when compared to monoracial individuals, while other research has shown that multiracial individuals experience similar (Bracey, Bamaca & Umana-Taylor, 2004) or more positive outcomes as compared to their monoracial peers (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). In a review of the research on the impact of having a mixed-race background on psychological well-being, Shih and Sanchez found that mixed-race individuals were similar to their monoracial peers in regards to psychological adjustment, further illustrating the complexity of this question of well-being in multiracial populations. Although it has not been addressed in the literature, one likely possibility that may have contributed to these conflicting findings may be a result of the field's shift from a primarily deficit focused perspective to a new focus on a strengths perspective. For example, much of the deficit perspective focused on negative outcomes such as depression, low self-esteem, and poor social relationships, whereas the strengths perspective highlights assets such as increased bicultural competence and tolerance of others. As a result of this shift in perspectives, it is impossible to determine whether a multiracial identity is linked to negative psychological outcomes or whether the negative outcomes associated with multiracial identity have decreased over time. While this shift demonstrates the move towards multiculturally sensitive research, further exploration of factors that impact the well-being multiracial individuals that offers insights to both strengths and deficits would provide a balanced perspective that may bring clarity to previous findings.

There is also a paucity of literature that explores how multiracial individuals cope with the challenges faced by being multiracial or factors that may mediate the negative effects of these challenges and foster resilience in multiracial individuals (Shih & Sanchez, 2005; 2009). Moreover, although there has been a recent shift in the field to begin to explore the strengths and benefits related to having multiple racial backgrounds (Shih & Sanchez); the majority of both theoretical and empirical research on the multiracial population assumes a deficit approach. Considering the conflicting research in the field regarding the well-being of multiracial people, exploring factors that may influence identity development and well-being of this population is crucial to understanding the complexity of managing multiple racial identities. One key aspect that has been shown in research as related to well-being is self-esteem.

Possessing a strong racial/ethnic identity is linked to self-esteem and has been found to buffer stress associated with experiences of racism (Smith, Phillips, Walker, Fields, Brookins, & Seay, 1999), however, multiracial individuals may have difficulty establishing a strong racial identity as a result of experiencing double rejection from both the white majority and minority groups (Comas-Diaz, 1996; Gibbs, 1987; Poston, 1990; Root, 1996; Winn & Priest, 1993), and/or racial authenticity testing (Deters, 1997; Root, 1998). Thus, the impact of being racially miscategorized may have a profound impact on the individual's sense of belonging and group membership (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008; Hall, 1992; Shih & Sanchez, 2005) and may play a key role in the racial identity development and well-being of racially ambiguous multiracial individuals.

### **Rationale for the Study**

The current study sought to expand upon the existing multiracial literature by conducting an in-depth exploration of multiracial individuals' experiences of being racially miscategorized, and how these experiences have, if at all, impacted their racial identity development. The study also explored how individuals respond to being racially miscategorized and its effect on well-being.

This study included interviews of multiracial adults (at least 25 years of age) who are self-described as having a racially ambiguous phenotype and having experienced racial miscategorization. Racially ambiguous adults were chosen as ideal participants for this study for two reasons: 1) adults will likely be better able to reflect upon their racial identity development than adolescents and thoughtfully consider how factors such as their physical appearance and experiences of racial miscategorization may have impacted their racial identity, 2) individuals who are racially ambiguous are more likely to have had numerous experiences of racial miscategorization and thereby have had more opportunity to reflect upon the impact of these experiences.

Data was analyzed using consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997; Hill et al., 2005), which emphasizes description of experiences in context and the inductive emergence of meaning from the data. CQR is an appropriate choice for the topic of study, given the paucity of literature regarding this topic. Given that the study is exploratory in nature, a quantitative approach that relies on testing hypotheses and theory verification would be inappropriate for the current study. CQR provides a method that allows for an in-depth understanding of this topic because it is a qualitative method that involves generating hypotheses from the rich personal

experiences shared by participants rather than imposing questions based on researchers' subjective opinions (Hill et. al, 2005).

### **Research Questions**

The current study sought to answer the question “What is the impact of experiences of racial miscategorization on multiracial identity and well-being?” This overarching question was explored through the use of specific queries. Participants were asked to describe experiences of being multiracial and having an ambiguous phenotype, and how they feel and react to experiences of racial miscategorization. These questions were intended to gain a rich understanding of the participants' experiences of being racially ambiguous and being racially miscategorized, as well as to understand how these experiences, as well as having a racially ambiguous phenotype have contributed to one's racial identity development and impact well-being.

### **Definitions of Terms**

The following section provides definitions of a number of relevant terms and key concepts related to the study of multiracial identity. The social constructs of race and ethnicity are complex and thus difficult to define; this is further complicated by inconsistency of how these terms are defined within the field of psychology as well across other disciplines. For example, the construct of racial identity has been framed as both a biological dimension (Spickard, 1992) and as a social dimension (Helms, 1995; Spickard). Since this review of the literature attempts to address a variety of constructs in the area of multiracial studies across several disciplines, it is necessary to provide clear definitions for the concepts being discussed, particularly those concepts that lack a

unifying term in the literature. In order to provide clarity to the topics being explored the following section offers an overview of the definitions of key constructs addressed in the current paper.

*Race* and *ethnicity* are both ascribed personal characteristics that cannot be changed because inclusion is based on an individual's physical appearance and family background (Phinney & Alipura, 2006). Race and ethnicity are distinct and separate constructs however, the terms are often used interchangeably and thus inaccurately (Phinney, 1996). For example, Latinos may share common set of cultural values, practices and beliefs but can vary greatly across racial backgrounds (e.g. Black, Mestizo, White). Similarly, Asians and Asian Americans may share a similar racial phenotype but vary greatly across nationality, or ethnicity (e.g. Chinese, Indian, Korean).

Not only do the concepts of race and ethnicity often overlap, but distinctions between them are often unclear, and as a result the concepts of race and ethnicity can be difficult to distinguish. According to the Office of Management and Budget (1997), the federal government defines five racial categories as: American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Black or African American; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; White. In addition, the government recognizes one ethnicity: Hispanic or Latino when gathering demographic data, which further blurs the distinction between racial and ethnic designations because it is impossible to know whether respondents who choose both Latino and another racial category consider themselves multiracial.

**Race.** Socially constructed categories based on physical characteristics (e.g. skin color, hair texture, facial features) (Phinney & Alipura, 2006).

**Ethnicity.** The sharing of a common ancestry through historical continuity, values, customs, beliefs, and other cultural practices (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998).

**Monoracial.** An individual whose biological parents are of the same race and thus identify with a single racial group.

**Biracial.** An individual whose biological parents are from two different races, and as a result may identify with one or both racial groups, identify as biracial, or reject racial designations altogether. (Rockquemore, 1999; Root, 1992).

**Multiracial, or mixed race.** An individual or individuals whose biological parents are from two or more different races (Root, 1996). For the purpose of this paper, the term *multiracial* will be used to define people whose parents are from different racial backgrounds as well as those individuals who would be considered *biracial* as previously defined. The terms multiracial and mixed-race will be used interchangeably; however, the term biracial will be used when referencing research that specifically targeted biracial (as opposed to multiracial) participants.

**Racial Identity.** An individual's perception of sharing a common heritage and sense of belonging to a particular racial group (Helms, 1994).

**Racial identity development.** The process by which a person comes to identify with a particular racial group (Brunsma 2006; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002; Helms; Roth, 2005).

**Ethnic identity.** An individual's perception of sharing a common culture and sense of belonging to a particular cultural group (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Yinger, 1986).

**Ethnic identity development.** The dynamic process of becoming strongly identified with one's own cultural values, beliefs and practices (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999) as well

as an exploration of and commitment to one's ethnic group (Phinney, 1989, 1990; Phinney & Kohatsu, 1997).

**Multiracial identity development.** The process of constructing an identity from the multiple racial identity choices that exist as a result of belonging to more than one racial group (Phinney & Alipura, 2006).

In order to understand how racial identity develops, and how the process for mixed-race people differs from monoracial people, it is necessary to understand the social constructs that influence the process of racial identity development. The following terms provide definitions for several social constructs relevant to the proposed study.

**Social Validation.** The social psychological process that asserts identities are interactionally validated self-understandings (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2004; Stone, 1962), in other words, how we are perceived by others, and how we believe we are perceived shapes our own understandings and perceptions of our personal identity.

**Racial categorization.** The way in which a person or society racially perceives and defines someone and should not be confused with racial identity (Rockquemore, Brunsma, & Delgado, 2009).

**Racial miscategorization.** The phenomenon of being racially categorized in a way that is different from how one identifies racially, thus having one's racial identity socially invalidated or denied.

**Racial ambiguity.** Individuals who have an uncategorizable phenotype, and although this term does not apply exclusively to the mixed-race population, it is such a common occurrence that the term *multiracial* is at times equated to racial ambiguity (Rockquemore, Brunsma, & Delgado, 2009).

## CHAPTER TWO: Review of the Literature

### Models of Multiracial Identity

It has been well documented that multiracial identity development is different from the racial identity development from that of monoracial individuals (Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Rockquemore, 1999; Root, 1990; Stephan, 1992). *Multiracial identity development* refers to the process of constructing an identity from the multiple racial identity choices that exist as a result of belonging to more than one racial group (Phinney & Alipura, 2006). The following section provides a chronological overview of over eighty years of multiracial identity research and the sociocultural factors that influenced multiracial identity research across generations. Next, the paper will identify common themes across different models of multiracial identity development and current models of how multiracial identity is believed to develop.

Theories of multiracial identity have progressed to reflect American society's movement towards racial equality. A framework for understanding the historical evolution of multiracial identity theories includes the following approaches to multiracial identity development: (a) the problem approach, (b) the comparative or equivalent approach, (c) the variant approach, and (d) the ecological approach (Rockquemore, Brunnsma, & Delgado, 2009; Thornton & Wason, 1995).

Early models of multiracial identity development referred to as the *problem approach*, reflect the widespread segregation and socially accepted racism that defines the Jim Crow era. During this period of widespread racial inequality, research on mixed race individuals viewed multiracial identity as a detriment to healthy development, focusing on the stigma, rejection, and isolation faced by individuals from both dominant

and minority racial groups. An example of the *problem approach*, called the marginal man theory (Parks, 1928; Stonequist, 1937) focuses on the negative social and psychological effects that mixed-race individuals faced as a part of living in a racially segregated society. Park's theory concentrates on how dual minority status makes multiracial individuals subject to rejection from both the dominant group and the minority group they belong too, particularly those individuals of Black and White ancestry whose racial identity was defined by the rule of hypodescent. As a result, multiracial individuals may experience isolation, rejection, and stigmatization.

Stonequist expanded Park's marginal man theory by hypothesizing that multiracial individuals may identify with both racial groups and internalize this group conflict, resulting in emotional and psychological distress. In Stonequist's expanded theory racial identity has three distinct stages (a) *introduction*, in which the marginal man experiences some level of assimilation into both of his parents' cultures; (b) *crisis*, in which the individual experiences confusion, estrangement, and disillusionment after having one or more salient experiences of the cultural conflict that exists between his two cultures; and finally (c) *adjustment*, in which the marginal man comes to understand and accept his social status and adjust towards the dominant group. However, because the one-drop rule prohibited those of Black/White ancestry of adjusting to the dominant group, these individuals were believed to either become leaders within Black society, due to the presumed benefit of White ancestry, or experience withdrawal and isolation from both groups. The problem approach did not explore the potential beneficial aspects of being multiracial, and began to evolve with the coming of the civil rights movement.

During the 1960s with the impact of the civil rights movement and the lifting of antimiscegenation, laws researchers began to take a more positive approach towards studying multiracial identity (Root, 1992; Thornton, 1996). The *comparative* or *equivalent approach* assumed multiracial people experienced the same process of identity development as monoracial people and that multiple racial backgrounds may influence the outcome of racial identity, but the process was the same. Identity development models that assume multiracial identity development is equivalent, or comparable to monoracial identity development are based primarily on Erikson's (1968) developmental theory of ego identity formation. Erikson's model asserts that forming a stable identity is a central task of adolescence, in which an individual progresses through a number of experimental stages before making a commitment to a social identity (e.g. religious affiliation, profession). This approach was highly criticized because it did not account for the possibility of identifying with multiple racial groups (Herring, 1995; Poston, 1990) or address issues faced by multiracial people when choosing to identify with a single component race (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002; Shih & Sanchez, 2005). From the mid-1980s and throughout the 1990s, emerging research in the field of multiracial identity offered a new conceptualization of the mixed-race population.

A new generation of researchers, many of who were of mixed race themselves, began to conceptualize multiracial people as a population distinct from other racial groups. In contrast to the comparative or equivalent approach, much of the research during this time focused on the psychological, emotional, and developmental factors associated with developing a healthy, integrated multiracial identity and marked the emergence of the *variant approach*. Models that emerged during this time period view

multiracial identity development as separate from monoracial identity development and are referred to as the *variant approach*. This approach challenged many of the assumptions about multiracial identity development that were present in both the problem and equivalent approaches through both empirical and theoretical research.

For example, Jacobs (1992) model of biracial identity focuses on how multiracial children understand race in regards to phenotypical aspects such as skin color from a developmental perspective. This model begins with a stage in early childhood where race is not understood as constant, referred to as the *precolor constancy stage*. In the following *postcolor constancy stage* (approximately 4 to 8 years old) race and its social implications associated with skin color and other aspects of phenotype (e.g. hair texture) become salient to multiracial children, who then become ambivalent about their own racial background. The following stage is a period of categorization where adolescents feel they must chose a racial identity and may experience feelings of alienation. A possible final stage is one of integration where the adolescent or young adult values all his or her components of race. A period of conflict and tension to choose a racial identity is common to the majority of multiracial identity development models that exemplify the variant approach.

Another well-known example of the variant approach is Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model (BIDM), which is composed of five stages: (a) personal identity, which occurs at a young age and is based on interactions with family and peers, (b) choice of group categorization, in which individuals are forced to choose a single identity that causes psychological crisis, (c) enmeshment/denial, a stage where the individual experiences feelings of confusion and/or guilt as a result of denying an

aspect(s) of the identity, (d) appreciation, a stage where the individual begins to accept and appreciate the multiple aspects of his or her identity, and finally (e) integration, where the individual achieves an integrated multiracial identity.

The most widely accepted model for understanding multiracial identity development is the *ecological model*, which recognizes that people with mixed racial backgrounds may have many ways they choose to identify themselves; these identities may be situational or mutable throughout one's lifetime and may not follow a linear course of development (Rockquemore, 1999; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2003). The ecological approach is so named because its theories focus on the contextual factors that influence multiracial identity development rather than achieving a particular identity outcome. Root (1998) describes these contextual factors as *macrolenses* (i.e. gender, class, regional history of race), *inherited influences* (i.e. family name, language spoken in the home, phenotype, cultural values, sexual orientation), *traits* (e.g. temperament, coping skills), and *social environments* (i.e. school, home, work), all of which influence multiracial identity development. This approach challenges the assumptions that multiracial identity development is a linear process with a single identity outcome, and that choosing a single identity is the optimal endpoint of multiracial identity development. The ecological approach stems from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which Maria Root (1990,1996) applied as a framework for conceptualizing multiracial identity development. Root's model describes multiracial people as being socially located in "the borderlands" and as a result these individuals have a variety of ways they may choose to identify.

Individuals were described as (a) having the ability to have both feet in both racial groups, (b) shifting the foreground and the background to meet the requirements of the social context, (c) consciously choosing to sit on the border and identifying with a multiracial identity, or (d) establishing a “camp” in one group and visiting other groups when necessary. Root (1997, 1988, 2003, 2005) has continually refined this model by providing context to border crossings with consideration to gender, social class, sexual orientation, generational factors, history of oppression, racial socialization, family functioning, and individual traits.

Another example of the ecological approach is Rockquemore’s (1999) multidimensional model of racial/ethnic identity, which describes the different identity options that biracial/multiracial individuals may, chose throughout their life span. For example, individuals may choose the *singular identity* option and identify as exclusively one of their component race/ethnicities. Another option is that of the *border identity*, or identifying as biracial/multiracial, a unique category that integrates all of the individual’s component races. The *protean identity*, on the other hand, demonstrates the ability of multiracial individuals to identify differently in different social contexts (Root, 1990; Stephan, 1992; Rockquemore, 1999). Lastly, multiracial individuals may choose a *transcendent identity*, or the rejection of racial categorization and the refusal to choose a racial identity. Similarly, Roccas and Brewer (2002) provide a model consisting of four strategies for managing multiple social identities: (a) “intersection” which is the identification with multiple social groups, (b) “dominance” or identification with a primary social groups (c) “compartmentalization” or identifying with a social group depending on the social context, and (d) “merger” or simultaneously identifying with

each group. All of these models reflect the idea that multiracial individuals have a choice about how to identify racially and that their choices may change depending on the social context and may evolve over the course of one's lifetime (Poston, 1990; Root, 1990).

Each of these models reflects society's beliefs about race during a particular time in history. The problem approach was developed during a time when widespread racial inequality was both socially and institutionally normative, so it is not surprising that during this period it was hypothesized that being multiracial would result in negative psychological outcomes, rejection and social isolation (Park, 1928; Stonequist, 1937). Similarly, the equivalent approach reflects the period of the civil rights movement when racial and ethnic minority groups were displaying an increased sense of cultural pride and a strong identity with one's group was the expected outcome, such as in Cross's Nigrescence model (1971,1995). However, this approach did not give relevance to within-group differences of the experience of belonging to a particular racial group, or acknowledge the significance of belonging to more than one racial group (Rockquemore, Brunσμα, & Delgado, 2009; Shih & Sanchez, 2005). The variant approach emerged in the post-Civil Rights era and placed emphasis on the agency of multiracial people with the assumption that an integrated multiracial identity was optimal for psychological health. The ecological model is the most current framework for understanding multiracial identity development and researchers are still exploring the potential limitations this model presents in the current post-modern, color-blind era (Rockquemore, Brunσμα, & Delgado, 2009).

A new, interdisciplinary model of understanding multiracial identity development was proposed by Rockquemore et al (2009) that encourages researchers to rethink the use

of *race* as an all-encompassing construct in their analysis and instead begin to differentiate between *racial identity* (an individual's self-understanding), *racial identification* (how others understand and categorize the individual), and *racial category* (what racial identities are available and chosen in a specific context) allowing researchers to explore how and when these categories overlap and contradict for multiracial people.

**Summary of Multiracial Identity Models.** Four major themes emerge from a review of over a decade of empirical research across several fields of study in the area of multiracial identity development. First, research has repeatedly found that racial self-identification varies among the mixed-race population (Renn, 2004; Rockquemore, 1999; Rockquemore & Brunσμα, 2001; Wallace, 2001). Second, research has consistently found that racial identity is fluid and may change throughout the course of a multiracial person's life (Gatson, 2003; Hitlin, Brown, & Elder, 2006; Renn, 2004; Root; Wallace).

Next, racial identity development for mixed race people is not a predictable linear process with a single outcome, and finally, social, cultural, and environmental context can have a significant impact on the racial identity development of multiracial people. Some scholars suggest it may be more difficult for mixed race individuals to develop a positive racial identity as compared to monoracial individuals as a result of the unique challenges they experience as result of having to manage multiple identities (Kich, 1992; Rockquemore & Brunσμα, 2002; Shih & Sanchez, 2005). Conversely, there is a growing body of research that offers insight into the strengths related to having a mixed-race background, such as increased bicultural competence (LaFramboise, Coleman & Gerton, 1993) and greater acceptance and tolerance for other groups when compared to monoracial counterparts (Phinney & Alipuria, 1996).

## **Multiracial identity development and well-being**

Clinicians suggest that successful racial identity development is crucial for positive psychological adjustment, and youth who experience difficulty in reconciling their racial identity have a greater likelihood of having difficulties with maturation and societal adjustment (Lyles, Yancy, Grace & Carter, 1985), yet there is a paucity of research related to how a multiracial person's identity choice impacts his or her well-being or whether some identity choices are associated with better psychological outcomes than others (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002).

While it has been proposed by some that biracial and/or bicultural identity has a negative impact on development and ethnic socialization for biracial children (Herring, 1995), other research suggests more positive outcomes for those with an integrated identity. For example, individuals with an integrated bicultural identity, or identifying as bicultural may experience less affective stress (Benet-Martinez, & Karakitapoglu-Aygun, 2007) and have stronger connections to social support networks drawing from their diverse cultural backgrounds (Mok, Morris, Benet-Martinez, & Karakitapoglu-Aygun, 2007) than those who choose a malleable, or *protean identity* (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). Emerging research suggests that there may be a relationship between malleable racial identities and poor psychological outcomes, however, there is a lack of research on what factors influence some multiracial people to form malleable racial identities (Sanchez, Shih, & Garcia, 2009). While these findings suggest that some racial identity options may have better outcomes than others, and that a malleable identity may negatively impact well-being, the concept of racial malleability presents a challenge to

studying well-being in relation to racial identity options, and in the study of the multiracial population in general.

### **Experiences Unique to Multiracial Individuals**

The literature identifies many unique challenges that multiracial individuals contend with as a result of having to manage multiple identities (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). For example, multiracial individuals may not have access to role models in the media, within families, or among their peers like their monoracial counterparts resulting in a lack of social support (Shih & Sanchez; Root, 1992, 1998). Multiracial individuals may experience conflicts related to their identity choices, such as pressure to choose a single identity (Deters, 1997; Shih & Sanchez; Wehrly, 2003; Williams, 1997), inconsistency between how they are racially defined in society and how they define themselves racially due to physical markers of race (e.g. skin color) or racially ambiguous appearance (Shih & Sanchez), as well as feeling as though their identity choices must be justified to others (Gaskins, 1999). Moreover, multiracial individuals may encounter discrimination or rejection from their extended families as well as within their community as a result of being viewed as an outsider to both the dominant and minority group(s) (Kerwin & Ponterotto, 1995; Root, 1990; 1998), and as a result are more likely to experience feelings of social isolation (Brown, 1995; Gaskins). The following section provides a review of the literature that explores these challenges and their impact on multiracial identity development and well-being.

**Lack of Role Models and Social Support.** Like other children, seeing others like themselves in their environment (i.e. television, magazines, textbooks) help multiracial children understand how to interact with others as well as how they are viewed by

society. However, it can be difficult for multiracial children to find role models within mainstream culture, within their own families, and among their peers (Root, 1990; 1998; Shih & Sanchez, 2005; Wardle, 1987). For example, despite the numerous contributions of the mixed-race population from individuals such as the famous abolitionist Frederick Douglass, actors and musicians like Lenny Kravitz, Mariah Carey, Dean Cain and Halle Berry, and our current president, Barack Obama; they are often categorized in the media, or self-identify as monoracial. It has been suggested by some that the perpetual invisibility of multiracial role models both throughout history and in the current media is reflective of society's difficulty in dealing with the challenge to inflexible views of racial categorization that multiraciality poses (Wardle). Others have suggested that when individuals do not see themselves represented in the images of mainstream society, they may perceive this as a denial or disregard for their racial identity (Townsend, Markus, & Bergsieker, 2009).

Furthermore, multiracial children typically do not share the same racial identity as their parents. Consequently, multiracial children lack immediate parental role models of multiracial identity, unlike their monoracial peers (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). Similarly, because mixed-race individuals have multiple identity options, they often identify differently and have different experiences as their siblings who share their same racial background (Root, 1998). In a study that examined factors and experiences that influenced racial identity development in 20 pairs of biracial siblings who were raised in the same environment, factors such as phenotype, discrimination, and parental relationships were found to influence racial identity to such a degree that siblings from the same racial backgrounds often chose to identify differently from one another. As a

result, multiracial individuals may not have siblings who they can look to as a role model or source of support related to their racial identity development. A consequence of this lack of support is that multiracial individuals may not have role models to prepare them for dealing with racism, discrimination and prejudice (Winn & Priest, 1993).

Additionally, finding peers who are racially similar that can relate to their experiences may be difficult for mixed-race children (Renn, 2000; Williams, 1997). Without family and peers to relate to for social support, multiracial individuals may face the challenges of managing multiple identities without the benefit of a support network of family and peers. Multiracial people may also experience stress from receiving conflicting messages sent by the community and family (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). Children from interracial families may see people from different racial backgrounds coexisting in harmony or their parents may deemphasize the importance of race (Shih & Sanchez, 2005; Wehrly, 2003), leaving them ill prepared to understand and cope with racial prejudice, racism and discrimination they may contend with in society (Shih & Sanchez, 2005).

**Identity Conflicts.** When faced with the question “What are you?” multiracial individuals are given the implicit message that they must choose a way to define themselves (Deters, 1997; Wehrly, 2003; Williams, 1997) and often feel compelled to identify with one of their component racial categories (Hall, 1992; Nakashima, 1992) without realizing the options of choosing a multiracial identity or no racial identity at all (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). For example, in a study examining racial identity formation and self-image, biracial children aged 8 to 20 indicated they felt an obligation to choose a monoracial designation (Winn & Priest, 1993). Moreover, choosing a monoracial identity may not represent how the individual views him or herself. In a study conducted with 119

biracial young adults the majority of respondents indicated that when completing forms requesting racial group identification, 64.7% of respondents indicated they would identify as Black, however, when external pressures (e.g. single race option forms) were not present 66.4% indicated they would identify as interracial (Brown, 1995). Defining one's racial identity is not limited to face-to-face social interactions, but also through more subtle social interactions. There is an expectation in U.S. society that people choose a single racial designation, which can prove difficult for multiracial people who do not choose a monoracial identity and they may experience pressure to conform to this monoracial classification system (Hall, 1992). For example, educational, employment, and medical forms that only allow respondents to choose a single racial option both limits multiracial people's identity choices and deny the identity of those who do not identify as monoracial.

This situation has been termed the *forced-choice dilemma* (Standen, 1996) in which multiracial individuals feel pressure to choose a monoracial designation. Limited choice is associated with negative psychological outcomes such as decreased motivation and self-esteem, increased anxiety, and increased effort in reasserting the ability to choose (Iyenger & Lepper, 2002). When multiracial individuals feel forced to choose one racial identity over another, it can lead to feelings of emotional turmoil and guilt from feeling as though they are being disloyal to one of their parents (Deters, 1997; Sebring, 1985; Wehrly, 2003). Moreover, it has been theorized that being forced to choose one identity over another and thus denying a part of themselves can lead to a fragmented sense of self (Sebring). It has been proposed by many theorists that tension to choose a racial identity can cause difficulty for multiracial individuals to develop a positive racial

identity (Herring, 1995; Rockquemore & Brunnsma, 2002; Root, 1992, 1998), which has been found to be a protective factor in buffering the negative effects of racial discrimination (Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone & Zimmerman, 2003).

Related to the concept of forced choice, *identity denial*, (Cheryan & Monin, 2005) occurs when an important social identity is misperceived or denied (i.e. unvalidated) by others and leads to negative affect and attempts to reassert the desired identity. Identity denial can occur in overt ways, such as having one's identity questioned or unvalidated in social interactions in which they are racially miscategorized or being asked to explain one's racial background. Identity denial can occur in more subtle ways, such as completing single-option race demographic forms, which has been related to decreased self-efficacy, motivation (Townsend, Markus, & Bergsieker, 2009). The concepts of forced choice and identity denial can be seen as interrelated in that by being forced to choose a monoracial identity that does not match with one's chosen identity, the individual is essentially denying one's identity.

In addition to experiencing pressure to choose an identity, multiracial people may also experience stress from having to justify their identity choices to society (Gaskins, 1999; Shih & Sanchez, 2005). With the exception of those who are racially ambiguous, monoracial individuals less frequently experience having their racial identity questioned or denied by others in society, yet this is a common experience for many mixed-race people. For example, a monoracial person who identifies as White is rarely questioned about his or her racial identification; however, a Black/White multiracial person who identifies as biracial or identifies with one of their component races may have their group membership challenged or have their identity choice challenged (Gaskins; Rockquemore

& Brunnsma, 2004). Another source of confusion related to racial identity development for multiracial people that can impact well-being stems from identity conflict within the family (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). When parents of multiracial children are in agreement in how they perceive their children's racial identity they can help their children foster a unified sense of self. However, parents often do not share a unified perception of their children and may result in the development of a fragmented sense of self (Piskacek & Golub, 1973). It has been proposed that mixed-race individuals that lack a unified sense of self may have negative self-images and confused racial identities (McRoy & Freeman, 1986).

**Experiences with Discrimination.** Racism is one of the many factors that can influence the identity development of multiracial individuals (Harrell, 2000). Racism related stress has been linked to having a negative impact on well-being across numerous domains such as: psychological distress and depression (Comas-Diaz & Greene, 1994; Root, 1993) social functioning (Steele & Aronson, 1995), self-efficacy and self-esteem (Crocker & Major, 1989) and physical conditions (Anderson, 1989; Krieger, 1990; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996). As a result of having multiple racial backgrounds, multiracial individuals face the possibility of double rejection, or experiencing rejection and discrimination from dominant groups in society as well as minority groups (Comas-Diaz, 1996; Gibbs, 1987; Poston, 1990; Root, 1996; Winn & Priest, 1993). For example, multiracial people of White and Asian descent may experience rejection by the White community as well as the Asian community, which is known for valuing 'racial purity' much like White communities (Root, 1996).

The history of racial discrimination and oppression in the U.S. has fostered a suspicion of multiracial and light-skinned Blacks within the African American community (Daniel, 1992) as well as other racial and ethnic groups (e.g. Asian Americans, American Indians, Latinos). Additionally, past experiences of racism and the history of oppression can lead people of color to feel mistrust for those who identify as White, and these negative beliefs can be projected upon multiracial people (Deters, 1997). Consequently, multiracial individuals who are phenotypically White or ambiguous, or identify monoracially as White or identify as multiracial may find it difficult to gain acceptance from racial minority groups despite sharing a common racial background (Deters, 1997; Rockquemore, 1999; Rockquemore & Brunson, 2002; Root, 1998). One way this form of discrimination towards multiracial people may present itself is in the form of *hazing*, in which the mixed-race person is subjected to a demeaning process of *racial/ethnic authenticity testing*, or providing proof of group membership (Harrell, 2000; Root). By requiring multiracial people to provide “evidence” of racial group membership sends a clear message others do not perceive the individual belongs to the group at all. These tests of authenticity are psychologically similar to the exclusion of racial and ethnic minority groups have experienced from White society. More ironically, the mixed-race person is often expected to engage in stereotyped racialized behavior as a validation of group membership, and one’s ability to meet these expectations is more dependent upon the perception of the test giver rather than the multiracial person’s ability to conform to racialized behaviors (Root, 1998). These tests of authenticity may require mixed-race people to adopt a racialized manner of dress and/or speech, while others are

more extreme such as engaging in activities that conflict with their values (e.g. stealing) or rejection and denigration of all White people, including family and friends.

In a qualitative study of 10 interracial couples (Killian, 2001) semi-structured interviews were conducted with each couple and spouse individually (30 total interviews) to gather in-depth information regarding racial histories and identities. Participants reported limited support of the marriage from their families of origin, with many couples opting for brief civil ceremonies as result of family members refusing to attend the wedding. Of the 20 couples who participated in the study, 16 reported receiving negative public reactions such as avoidance, exclusion from conversations, and staring, that caused them emotional pain and frustration. One important finding that emerged from this study was the participants' minimization of their racial and ethnic heritage and avoidance of discussing experiences of prejudice and discrimination. As previously mentioned, multiracial children already lack parental role models to help them in developing a multiracial identity, and when their parents are unable or unwilling to discuss issues related to race, discrimination and prejudice, they are further disadvantaged because they are sent the message that discussions of racial issues are taboo. This leaves multiracial children with no immediate support system to help them understand and process the discrimination they face from society and in some cases from their own extended family (Harrell, 2000; Shih & Sanchez, 2005). Moreover, when multiracial children witness others' negative feedback to their parents' union, they are given a very implicit message about how they, the product of this union, are viewed by others. In addition to experiencing overt acts of racism, multiracial people may also be made privy to racist comments from others as a result of their ambiguity (Buchanan & Acevedo, 2004). For

example, mixed-race individuals may be included in conversations in which others use racist humor and/or make derogatory racial remarks about a group the multiracial person identifies with because others made incorrect assumptions about their race based on their physical appearance.

**Racial ambiguity and discrimination.** Different phenotypes (e.g. skin color, clothing, hairstyles, etc.) have a strong impact on human interactions because we rely on them to deduce the identity of others as well as present our identity to the world (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 2001). Because physical appearance is the most salient mark of group membership, it plays a significant role in the identity development of multiracial individuals whose physical appearance is racially ambiguous. Not only does physical appearance impact the way multiracial people are viewed by White society, it has also been found to be a stimulus for discrimination from racial minority groups (Gomez, 2000; Hill, 2000; Root, 1998). The type and intensity of racism-related experiences can be influenced by an individual's physical characteristics, such as skin color, hair texture, facial features, and body shape (Harrell, 2000). Skin color, in particular, can influence an individual's experiences both in the White majority and within one's racial/ethnic group. This phenomenon of favoring lighter skinned group members has been found in Asian, African American, and Latino subgroups (Harris, 1995; Hochschild & Weaver, 2007). As a result of the hierarchical system of social status, based on skin color, multiracial people of ambiguous appearance are excluded from White society and often face resentment and exclusion from minority groups because of their perceived elevated status (Root, 1990; Vivero & Jenkins, 1999). Issues and experiences related to race are easily color-coded, or associated to skin color, due to the negative or ambivalent messages society provides

about racialized otherness and mixed-race. Color-coding can be viewed as a type of heuristically based defense mechanism, which is elicited from people's racialized thinking (Root, 1998).

**Impact of discrimination on identity development.** When multiracial individuals experience discrimination from a minority group members with whom there share a common racial background, these experiences may be color-coded (i.e. the negative experience is generalized to people of color) and negatively impact how an individual identifies racially (Rockquemore & Brunisma, 2002; Root, 1996). For instance, when examining factors that influence the identity choices of Black/White biracial individuals, Rockquemore and Brunisma (2002; 2004) found that biracial individuals that chose validated (i.e. a biracial identity that is accepted by others) or unvalidated border identities (i.e. a biracial identity that is not accepted by others) reported the highest levels of negative interactions with members of the Black community, as well as from the White community; respondents also noted that these negative experiences often stemmed from their physical appearance. In other words, individuals who identified as biracial reported more negative experiences with both Whites and Blacks, than did those who chose a singular racial identity (i.e. identifying as solely Black or White) or a protean identity (i.e. malleable identity). Similarly, biracial participants were found to “color-code” experiences such as abuse or abandonment by parents and discrimination from peers (Root, 1998). These negative experiences resulted in distancing or rejection of the racial/ethnic group associated with the abusive parent or peers and in turn impacted the trajectory of racial identity development.

Some studies also suggest that types of experiences related to racial identity may be related to identity integration (Cheng & Lee, 2009; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997), a concept similar to choosing a multiracial identity. Individuals with high identity integration tended to have positive experiences related to their racial identity while those who had negative, stressful racial identity experiences tended to have lower identity integration (Phinney & Devich-Navarro), and identity integration may increase when individuals recall positive past identity experiences and decrease when recalling negative identity experiences (Cheng & Lee). These studies suggest negative experiences related to race can be harmful to the well-being of mixed-race people, as well as influence how they choose to identify racially.

**Current perceptions of the multiracial population.** Current research on others' perceptions of biracial people suggests that society's view of mixed-race people has been slow to change (Sanchez & Bonham, 2009). In a series of studies examining perceptions of warmth, competence, and minority scholarship eligibility of biracial college applicants, 181 undergraduate participants were asked to evaluate three undergraduate college applications for admission into a top-ranked university. Two of the applications were used as filler candidates; both filler candidates were male and one was described as White and the other as Latino. The target candidate was an 18-year-old male and described as White, Black, or Black/White Biracial; the race of the target candidate was rotated between these three options while all other information was held constant. Results found that participants viewed biracial applicants as lower in warmth and less worthy of receiving minority scholarship. Although results from this study did find evidence to suggest that biracial candidates were viewed as less competent, when the authors

replicated the study using an Asian/White Biracial target, results did find lower ratings of perceived competence, in addition to perceptions of lower warmth and minority scholarship worthiness. Furthermore, in regards to the study that used an Asian/White target, the biracial candidate received negative evaluations from both White and Asian participants, which may suggest that double rejection continues to impact mixed-race people. These findings suggest that mixed race people may be viewed as having less favorable character traits than their monoracial peers and that they are perceived as less deserving of minority scholarships. Ironically, while mixed-race people continue to experience the negative effects of racism, society perceives them as less deserving of the opportunities that are meant to provide compensation for institutionalized racism.

Since the legalization of interracial marriages in 1967 the number of interracial marriages in the U.S. has increased from 150,000 in the 1960s to 2,669,558 in the 2000 census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Despite the rapid growth of interracial unions, couples who engage in interracial unions may still experience rejection and discrimination from their families and society (Killian, 2001; Wehrly, 2003). As recently as October 15, 2009 a Louisiana couple was denied a marriage license because the justice of the peace, who openly admitted to denying other interracial couples marriage licenses, was concerned for the impact on the couple's future children (Huffington Post, 2009). Although this is a single example, it demonstrates the view that multiracial people do not fit into society (i.e. the *marginal man* stereotype) still exists within our culture, and potentially within the minds of those who are gatekeepers to resources such as educational opportunities, employment, and in this particular case, marriage.

### **Racial Ambiguity, Racial Miscategorization, Racial Incongruence and Identity**

**Social Validation.** In order to thoroughly understand multiracial identity formation and the various factors that influence its development, it is essential to be familiar with the underlying processes that influence identity development in general. Identity development, including racial identity development, does not occur in a vacuum, but requires *social validation*, a social psychological process that asserts identities are interactionally validated self-understandings (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2004; Stone, 1962). It has been proposed that identity develops through a process of negotiation in which individuals reconcile their own self-concepts with the expectations of those around them (Newsome, 2001). The personal identities people assume determine both how they behave during social encounters as well as how others behave towards them. When others do not confirm someone's chosen identity, the individual experiences stress and will either attempt to correct the misperception or the individual will submit to the misperception, resulting in negative implications for self-esteem and self-efficacy (Burke, 1991).

Research examining social classification provides evidence for the strong impact the perceptions of others has on determining social status, self-perceptions, and well-being (Troyer & Younts, 1997; Troyer, Younts, & Kalkhoff, 2001). Troyer and colleagues (Troyer & Younts; Troyer, et al.) examine the impact of conflict between first-order expectations (i.e. expectations one hold for herself) and second-order expectations (i.e. an individual's perception of the expectations that others hold of her) on social interactions. First-order expectations refer to an individual's self-expectations regarding attitudes and behavior based on self-assigned social categories, while second-order

expectations refer to an individual's understanding of the expectations *others* hold for one's self regarding the appropriate attitudes and behaviors one should display in social interactions. Results show that when individuals found it difficult or impossible to adjust to second-order expectations that conflicted with first-order expectations, individuals would succumb to the second-order expectations, even if they were placed at a disadvantage by doing so. Furthermore, regardless of whether submitting to the conflicting second-order expectations was advantageous or not, individuals reported experiencing negative affect such as guilt and/or anger as a result of submitting to the second-order expectations and individuals experienced these negative outcomes even though the other person was a stranger. The previous example is similar to the experience of racial miscategorization and incongruence that racially ambiguous multiracial individuals may frequently experience. Given the implications that social interactions have on both identity and well-being, it is important to consider the role of physical appearance on multiracial identity, particularly for those who cannot easily be categorized based on phenotype.

**Racial ambiguity.** The role of physical appearance, or phenotype, is an important factor in racial identity development because our physical appearance conveys information to society from which meaning is inferred based on cultural meanings associated with physical characteristics (Hall, 1992; Gillem, 2000; Omi & Winant, 1994; Rockquemore & Brunnsma, 2002). In other words, race has no genetic basis, but is a social construction contrived from the cultural and symbolic meanings attached to physical characteristics, and serves as a means for determining group membership. Physical characteristics such as hair texture, the shape of the eyes and nose, and skin color are simultaneously a

foundation for racial identity and a means of expressing that identity to society, and as a result, physical appearance plays a significant role in the extent to which individuals can achieve acceptance and belonging to certain racial and/or ethnic groups (Ahn Allen, Suyemoto, & Carter, 2006). Multiracial individuals whose physical features are difficult to racially classify often experience an exaggerated emphasis from others on their physical appearance because others may find them exotic looking, or simply difficult to racially categorize (Bradshaw, 1992; Root, 2004). Racially ambiguous mixed-race people often experience being treated as though they are unfamiliar and may be questioned frequently about their background, which in turn leads to a sense of exclusion, otherness and an increased desire to gain acceptance from others (Bradshaw). These experiences can lead to an awareness of how one's racially ambiguous appearance influences social interactions and how one is perceived by others in society.

In a study examining experiences that multiracial people perceive as threatening to multiracial identity (Townsend, Markus, & Bergsieker, 2009), 59 mixed-race undergraduate students (16 identified as Black/White, 23 identified as Asian/White, and 20 identified as Latino/White) completed an open-ended questionnaire which required them to describe situations in which their biracial identity was brought into focus and became a source of tension resulting in experiencing pressure to identify with only one racial/ethnic identity. Results found that the most commonly mentioned situations were those related to physical appearance, more specifically situations in which their physical appearance contributed to being racially miscategorized.

Skin color is one aspect of physical appearance that can play an important role in racial identity development. Skin color is often the basis used by individuals to racially

categorize others (O'Hearn, 1998), as a means for both individuals and groups to distance themselves from others who they perceive as different from themselves (Chavez, Guido-DiBrito, & Mallory, 1996), and contributes to an individual's racial identity. For example, researchers have found that skin color is most commonly attributed to developing a monoracial Black identity (Field, 1996; Hall, 1980), and that for biracial Black/White individuals darker skin tone increases the likelihood of choosing a monoracial Black identity (Brown, 1990).

Interestingly, research suggests that how we believe others view us racially may have more of an impact on our identity development than our physical appearance alone. In a study examining factors related to the identity choices Black/White biracial individuals, Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002) considered the aspects of both self-perceived skin color and socially perceived appearance. Using Rockquemore's (1999) framework of biracial identity (i.e. singular identity, validated border identity, unvalidated border identity, protean identity, and transcendent identity) 177 Black/White biracial respondents were asked to complete a survey that asked them to describe their physical appearance as well as assumptions others make about their racial background based on their physical appearance. Results found that socially mediated appearance, rather than self-perceived appearance was related to identity. Respondents who chose a singular Black identity, 45.5% responded, "I look Black and others assume that I am Black." Conversely, none of the respondents that reported a singular White identity reported that others assumed they were Black. This finding suggests that participants who reported an unambiguous racial phenotype based on skin tone had fewer experiences of racial miscategorization, particularly for participants who were phenotypically white.

Moreover, being perceived as Black was found to be more salient to biracials with an unvalidated border identity than biracials with a validated border identity, which may suggest that participants who felt their identity was denied experienced higher levels of racial incongruence. Overall, these findings suggest that physical appearance alone is not related to identity choice, but rather our understanding of how we are perceived socially that shapes multiracial identity choices.

**Racial Miscategorization and Racial Incongruence.** One unique challenge of identity development for multiracial individuals is the frequent inconsistency between how they are defined by society and how they define themselves (Brown, 1995; Root, 1990; 1998). The experience of *racial miscategorization*, or being categorized differently from the way they racially identify themselves (Campbell & Troyer, 2007; Rockquemore & Brunnsma, 2002; Root; Renfrow, 2004), occurs as a result of others finding it difficult to visually identify a multiracial person's racial category (Deters, 1997). The phenomenon of racial miscategorization has been explored across several fields of study (e.g. psychology, sociology, anthropology) and described in many ways; however, there is no unifying term for this phenomenon within the field of psychology or across the social sciences. Likewise, there is a lack of distinction made between racial misclassification, which is a social interaction, and the resulting experience of racial incongruence, which is the internal experience of the individual who was racially miscategorized.

Several constructs were identified within the literature that contributes to the understanding of the experience of racial miscategorization including *identity denial* (Cheryan & Monin, 2005), *reactive passing* (Renfrow, 2004), *unvalidated identity* (Rockquemore & Brunnsma, 2004), and *racial misclassification* (Campbell & Troyer,

2007). Though sparse, the aforementioned examples provide insight into experiences of racial miscategorization and the resulting experience of racial incongruence. The following section will attempt to elucidate the negative impact this unique social interaction has on the well-being and racial identity of racially ambiguous multiracial people.

*Identity denial* refers to the general experience of others challenging one's group membership (Cheryan & Monin, 2005); a specific type of identity denial is *categorization threat*, which refers to the experience of potentially being miscategorized as a member of an incorrect group. For individuals who possess a high level of commitment and sense of belonging to a particular group, perceived exclusion from the group leads to negative affect and efforts to assert group membership. A series of studies examining identity denial among Asian-Americans who were miscategorized as non-U.S. citizens by a White experimenter found that participants became angry and offended by being incorrectly categorized, expressed dislike of the experimenter, and presented greater displays of American cultural knowledge and engagement in American cultural practices than participants who were not incorrectly categorized (Cheryan & Monin). A similar study examined long-term effects of having one's social group membership (e.g. "jock") challenged by others, (Lemay & Ashmore, 2004) focused on college students transitioning into college as a time when individuals may show little resistance to miscategorization. The authors found that during this time of transition, students attempted to change both their self-categorizations and how they were perceived by others in order to achieve greater congruence between the two. While these findings are in contrast to results that suggest experiencing miscategorization lead to efforts to assert

one's desired identity, the study provides insight into factors that may influence an individual's decision to assert their desired or internal identity. For instance, Lemay and Ashmore (2004) found that timing (i.e. significant life transition) and duration of experiencing miscategorization (3-4 weeks) made participants more likely to accept the new identity. Moreover, the more important participants viewed the social identity they wished to express, the more likely participants were to attempt to persuade others' perceptions of them to validate their desired identity. The results from these studies may help elucidate how factors such as sense of belonging and racial identity choice mediate a multiracial person's reaction to experiences of racial miscategorization. Still, it is equally important to consider the potential impact experiences of miscategorization have on racial identity development and factors related to well-being such as perceived social support and sense of belonging.

*Reactive passing* (Renfrow, 2004) provides another example of racial miscategorization in which an individual is mistakenly assigned an incorrect identity and chooses not to challenge the misinterpretation. Renfrow suggests these acts of reactive passing may occur because a lack of social markers of identity often based on stereotypes, or because an individual's identity markers are socially ambiguous; for example, multiracial individuals who appear racially ambiguous and do not match society's image of certain racial groups also experience reactive passing. Multiracial participants in Renfrow's study describe how others assumed they were one of their component races or that they belonged to a different race altogether because of their racially ambiguous appearance. As a result, participants experienced discomfort from having assumptions made about their identity based solely on their appearance and

frustration that others did not acknowledge the demands of a social position that requires them to balance multiple racial identities.

While the previous two examples (i.e. identity denial and reactive passing) of racial miscategorization stem from others making incorrect assumptions about a multiracial person's identity, *unvalidated border identity* is a concept introduced by Rockquemore (1999) that refers to individuals who self-identify as biracial but their identity choice is rejected or denied in the context of social interactions. Rockquemore and Brunnsma (2001; 2002; 2004) conducted a series of studies that examined the identity options of Black/White biracial individuals and factors that influenced identity choices. They found that the majority of respondents that endorsed an unvalidated border identity were raised in predominately Black (90%) neighborhoods but experienced negativity from the Black community, often stemming from one's physical appearance. The authors note that being categorized as Black is not problematic in and of itself, but rather the *incongruence* between the individual's self-definition of racial identity and their perception of how others define them is where the problem lies.

The experience of *racial miscategorization* (Campbell & Troyer, 2007) prompts individuals to consider how they choose to identify themselves when these instances occur and adds a unique complexity to the process of racial identity development and resolution. When multiracial people are racially miscategorized, they experience *racial incongruence* (Pedrotti, Edwards & Lopez, 2008), or the experience of being racially categorized differently from how they self-identify racially. While multiracial people may view these experiences positively or negatively, they nonetheless impact their self-view (Bradshaw, 1992; Poston, 1990).

Although this paper addresses racial incongruence and miscategorization as two distinct constructs, it is difficult to consider them separately as one results from the other. While this phenomenon has been noted in the literature, there is a paucity of research that focuses on these experiences, how multiracial individuals perceive these experiences, and how these experiences of incongruence may influence their identity development and well-being. Moreover, with the increasing growth of the multiracial population, it can be expected that there will also be an increase in the experiences of mixed race individuals who are racially miscategorized and experience racial incongruence (Campbell & Troyer, 2007).

**Racial miscategorization and incongruence and the impact on well-being and identity.** The experience of racial incongruence, which results from being racially miscategorized, can be significant source of stress to multiracial people for a number of reasons. For example, sustaining a strong racial and/or ethnic identity has been found to be an important source of self-esteem that can serve as a buffer to minority group members who experience racism (Smith, Phillips, Walker, Fields, Brookins, & Seay, 1999), but this can be challenging when one's racial and/or ethnic identity is frequently questioned. Moreover, when others do not validate a key identity such as race or ethnicity there is a direct impact on social interactions (Goffman, 1959). For multiracial individuals who may already experience double rejection from both the white majority and minority groups (Comas-Diaz, 1996; Gibbs, 1987; Poston, 1990; Root, 1996; Winn & Priest, 1993), and/or racial authenticity testing (Deters, 1997; Root, 1998), the impact of being racially miscategorized can have profound impact on the individual's sense of

belonging and group membership (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008; Hall, 1992; Shih & Sanchez, 2005).

Interviews with multiracial individuals have found that repeatedly being asked to explain their racial backgrounds is both intrusive and distressing (Williams, 1997) and that individuals may change their identification in some situations possibly as an attempt to reduce the stress associated with being questioned about their racial background or to avoid being racially miscategorized. Early research has suggested that a possible consequence from the tension of these experiences may be feelings of marginality or the development of a “marginal personality” characterized by low self-esteem, insecurity, self-hate, low self-confidence, and defensiveness (Parks, 1928; Stonequist, 1937).

Although the concept of the “marginal personality” represents an era that pathologized multiracial people by virtue of the racist views that pervaded society, recent studies on the impact of racial miscategorization of racially ambiguous individuals continue to find higher rates of psychological distress in those that experience racial incongruence (Campbell & Troyer, 2007). In a study that utilized data gathered from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to examine the frequency of racial miscategorization across single race groups and multiracial groups, Campbell and Troyer found that miscategorized American Indians had higher rates of depression and suicidal ideation and that individuals who had parents from two different racial groups were far more likely to be racially misclassified.

Many of the challenges faced by multiracial individuals are related to various forms of racial incongruence that result from the mismatch between one’s internal racial identity and one’s observed identity (Shih & Sanchez, 2005; Townsend, Markus, &

Bergsieker, 2009). Moreover, there is a common perception that multiracial people experience confusion about their racial identity (Chelsey & Wagner, 2003), yet it is evident that racial identity confusion does not manifest internally, but externally as a result of confusion that others express about their racial identity (i.e. racial miscategorization) (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2004). One way multiracial people may respond to these experiences of incongruence is by assuming a fluid, or malleable racial identity.

**Racial malleability.** The concept of racial malleability, or the shifts in racial identity that many multiracial people experience, has been well documented in the multiracial literature (Gatson, 2003; Hitlin, Brown, & Elder, 2006; Renn, 2004; Wallace, 2001) and models of multiracial identity development acknowledge this concept of situational identity as one of the many racial options available to mixed-race people (Rockquemore, 1999; Root, 1990), yet very little research exists that explores this unique identity option. One of the important aspects of racial malleability is the confound it presents to researchers who endeavor to explore outcomes related to the racial identity options available to multiracial individuals. Currently, only two quantitative studies examine the extent to which the identity choices of multiracial individuals change over time and context. In a longitudinal study of multiracial adolescents' racial self-categorization choices across a five-year time span Hitlin, Brown and Elder (2006) found that multiracial youth are four times more likely to change their racial categorization either by adding a racial category (i.e. identifying as multiracial) or by choosing a single racial category (i.e. identifying as monoracial) than to consistently report a multiracial identity. Similarly, Doyle and Kao (2007) found that while participants who initially reported a

multiracial identity had the highest levels of inconsistency across reports of racial self-categorization, a significant number of participants who initially reported a monoracial identity also showed variability in consistently reporting a monoracial identity. There is also evidence to support that multiracial individuals' self-reports of racial self-categorization change across social contexts. Harris and Sim (2002) found that multiracial adolescents self-reported race showed inconsistency when interviewed in different environments (i.e. home vs. school). These studies provide quantitative support to the qualitative finding of the concept of racial malleability across both time and contexts (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002; Root, 1990, 1996), yet there is a lack of research on what causes some multiracial people to form malleable identities. While there is some evidence to link racial malleability to negative psychological outcomes (Sanchez, Shih, & Garcia, 2009) more research is needed to establish support for these findings. Equally, there is a need for research that explores whether multiracial people experience any benefits related to adopting a fluid racial identity. Overall, the majority of research that exists on multiracial identity examines challenges related to identity development and psychological adjustment (Pedrotti & Edwards, 2008) however, there is a dearth of research related to how people of mixed race descent choose their racial identity, and why these choices change.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the current study is to contribute to the growing body of research related to the multiracial population by examining the personal experiences of racial miscategorization and racial incongruence on multiracial identity development. The study will also explore how possessing a racially ambiguous phenotype contributes to these

experiences, and how if at all, these experiences may be related to the phenomena of racial malleability.

### Chapter Three: Methodology

**Participants.** CQR requires the establishment of both inclusion and exclusion criteria for participants (Hill et al., 1997; Hill et al., 2005). Inclusionary criteria for the current study were: a minimum age of at least 25 years, participants' self-identification as *multiracial*, and self-identification as *racially ambiguous* (i.e. phenotypically difficult to racially categorize), as well as the ability to recall and reflect on experiences of *racial miscategorization*. The age limit of 25 years was chosen in order to provide a sample of individuals old enough to reflect upon their experiences with racial identity across childhood, adolescence and early adulthood, who were also mature enough to discuss abstract concepts such as racial identity development, racial miscategorization and well-being.

Recruitment yielded a sample of 15 participants with two (one male, one female) who served as pilot interviewees to refine the interview protocol prior to data collection. The remaining 13 participants, which consisted of 9 females and 4 males ( $M= 32.15$ ,  $SD=4.83$ ), comprised the sample from which the data were analyzed. Participants were recruited from all regions of the U.S. Unfortunately, two interviews (both male participants) were excluded due to poor audio quality and inability to contact either participant in attempt to recover the missing data. Two of the 11 participants identified with three different races (Black/White/Native American = 2), while the remaining 9 participants identified with two different races (Black/White = 4, Asian/White = 2, Latino/White = Latino/Asian = 1, Latino/Black = 2).

**Research Team.** The research team was comprised of one female, multiracial (primary researcher) and two European American doctoral students (one female and one

male) enrolled in a doctoral program in counseling psychology, all of whom have previously been members on at least one CQR team. Although the primary investigator conducted all of the participant interviews, research team members participated in all levels of the data analysis. The primary researcher's dissertation chair served as the auditor for this study. She is a biracial female of Latina/White decent, and is currently a tenured professor in the Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology department at Marquette University. She has participated in several CQR studies and has extensive knowledge in the area of multiracial studies, and thus provided expertise across both topics.

**Biases.** Prior to data collection, the primary team members met to discuss their biases with regard to the concept of multiracial identity, factors that may contribute to racial identity development, racial miscategorization, how participants may be impacted by these experiences and how these experiences shaped researchers' expectations and beliefs about multiracial identity development, racial miscategorization and its impact on well-being. Aside from the primary investigator, the other members of the primary research team are referred to here as male researcher and female researcher.

The primary investigator held the beliefs that multiracial individuals have the right to racially identify with any or all of their racial identities, multiracial identity is impacted by a number of factors, and the identity of multiracial individuals can change across both time and environments. Both the male and female researchers held the same beliefs that multiracial individuals have the right to racially identify as they choose, that multiracial identity can be fluid, and like other forms of identity, may be impacted by multiple factors.

The primary investigator reflected upon numerous personal experiences of racial miscategorization and held the expectation that similar to her own experiences, participants would report multiple incidents of racial miscategorization throughout their lifetimes, would attribute these experiences to their racial ambiguity, and that experiences of racial miscategorization could have both positive and negative influences on both racial identity and well-being. Both the male and female team members identify as white, heterosexual, and with no personal experiences of navigating multiple racial identities or other minority identities. Nonetheless, both were able to reflect upon personal experiences of having assumptions made about their beliefs and/or identities, which they found frustrating, and both agreed that having one's racial identity regularly questioned may have a negative impact on one's well-being. Additionally, the female team member added that she believed multiracial individuals were unlikely to benefit from the advantage of white privilege experienced by their white peers.

## **Materials**

**Recruitment Letter.** Prospective participants were emailed a personalized recruitment letter (Appendix A) explaining the purpose of the study, expectations of participation (i.e. interview format, estimated length of interviews, focus of interview questions and benefits and potential risks), as well as contact information for both the primary investigator and dissertation chair so that interested participants could contact the investigator with any questions prior to volunteering for the study. The letter was provided along with copies of the informed consent form (Appendix B), demographic form, (Appendix C) and interview protocol (Appendix D) for participants to complete and return should they choose to volunteer.

**Demographic Form.** Participants completed a brief demographic form to collect the following information: age, gender, racial identity, race(s) and race(s) of biological parents, stability of racial identity, and frequency of experiencing racial miscategorization. Participants were also asked to provide rating of well-being after experiencing racial miscategorization and a rating of overall well-being on a scale from Poor to Very Good. The demographic form also requested contact information, including name, email and/or mailing address, phone number, and availability for scheduling the interview (See Appendix C). Information collected from these forms is presented in Table 1 at the end of the section.

**Protocol.** A semi-structured protocol was used during the interviews to gain consistent categories of information as suggested by Hill et al. (2005). The protocol for this study was informed by the aforementioned review of relevant literature to ensure that the collected data addressed the identified gaps in the literature. After clarifying the research questions the study was meant to address, the primary researcher drafted questions that examined the areas of interest. The protocol consisted of five different areas: opening/contextual questions, questions regarding racial identity development, questions regarding the participant's experience of being racially ambiguous, questions regarding participant's experiences of racial miscategorization, and closing questions. Questions related to the areas of racial identity, racial ambiguity, and racial miscategorization also included follow-up probes related to factors that influenced racial identity development and well-being. Both the CQR research team, the investigator's dissertation committee, and the dissertation chair reviewed several drafts of questions and the protocol underwent several revisions to clarify phrasing of the questions until

consensus on the questions was thoroughly established. This protocol allowed the primary researcher to ask follow-up probing questions based on the participants' responses to the planned questions so that they were able to fully and richly discuss their experiences, including areas that the planned questions did not anticipate. The complete interview protocol appears in Appendix D.

### **Procedures for Collecting Data**

**Participant Recruitment.** All 11 participants were recruited via “snowball methods” through personal contacts and solicitation on social media groups devoted to the interests of multiracial individuals (e.g., Facebook and Twitter). Potential participants who expressed interest in the study were provided with a letter describing the study (Appendix A), informed consent documents (Appendix B), a demographic form (Appendix C), and a copy of the interview protocol (Appendix D).

The primary researcher initiated the “snowball” by posting a copy of the recruitment letter (Appendix A) on her personal Facebook account, and with permission from the owners posted the recruitment letter on several Facebook groups dedicated to discussing social and civil liberties of multiracial individuals, mixed-raced studies, and connection with others mixed-race people. Individuals who expressed interest in the study were asked to email the primary investigator directly and the primary investigator then responded via email and provided the materials necessary for participation. A total of 28 multiracial individuals (20 females and 8 males) contacted the primary investigator to express interest in volunteering for the study. Ten of the 28 potential participants did not return the necessary forms required for participation and two did not respond to attempts to schedule the initial interview. The sample for this study originally included 13

participants, however two cases were dropped due to poor sound quality, resulting in a total sample of 11 participants, which falls within the range of 8-15 participants recommended by Hill et al. (1997, 2005).

**Pilot Data Collection.** The interview protocol was piloted with two individuals, one male and one female, both of whom racially identified as biracial black/white. Both participants provided feedback about wording and clarity of the questions as well as the flow of the interview. The piloting procedure allowed the interviewer to become familiar with the protocol questions prior to data collection and prompted several edits to the protocol. Following the initial pilot interview, several follow-up questions were eliminated due to redundancy in responses, and the order in which the questions were asked was revised to allow for better flow of the interview. No changes were necessary following the second pilot interview and the interview was completed within the expected timeframe of 45-60 minutes.

### **Data Collection**

**Interview.** The primary investigator completed all initial and follow-up telephone interviews with pilots and participants. The primary investigator reviewed informed consent, confidentiality (i.e. use of code number rather than participant identifying information), and definitions of racial miscategorization, racial ambiguity, racial identity development, and well-being with each participant at the onset of the initial interview. As described above, the interview questions consisted of five different areas: opening/contextual questions, questions regarding racial identity development, questions regarding the participant's experience of being racially ambiguous, questions regarding participants' experiences of racial miscategorization, and closing questions.

The initial interview was designed to be approximately 45 to 60 minutes in length, though some ranged between 90-120 minutes. After the initial interview, the primary investigator reviewed notes and the transcript of the interview prior to conducting the follow up interview. The follow-up interviews were scheduled approximately one to two weeks following the initial interview and were approximately 10 to 20 minutes in length. The follow-up interviews were brief and less structured, and allowed the primary investigator to clarify any unclear content. They also allowed the participant to elaborate on his or her responses, as well as reflect on any thoughts or reactions he or she may have experienced after the interview. At the conclusion of the follow up interview participants were asked if they would like to review and comment on a draft of the final results.

**Transcribing.** All initial and follow-up interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the primary investigator. Minimal encouragers, non-language utterances and any identifying information related to the participant and referrals from personal contacts were excluded from the transcripts. Other identifying information, such as cities, states, or names of educational institutions were edited to reflect general information (e.g. Western state, Eastern city, etc.). Furthermore, each transcription was assigned a code number to ensure participant confidentiality.

**Draft of final results.** Participants in the study were sent the results section of the final manuscript to verify that their experiences were accurately captured and that their confidentiality was maintained in any examples included, thus providing a validity check of the data as suggested by Hill et. al (2005). Any suggested changes were discussed by the research team and incorporated as needed.

## Data Analysis and Interpretation

**Consensual Qualitative Research Methodology.** CQR (Hill et al., 1997, 2005) was used to analyze the interview data. Hill, Thompson, and Williams' (1997) original manuscript describing CQR outlined the following core principles of conducting CQR: (1) data are gathered using open-ended questions in order not to constrain participants' responses, (2) the method relies on words rather than numbers to describe phenomena, (3) a small number of cases is studied intensively, (4) the context of the whole case is used to understand the specific parts of the experience, (5) the process is inductive, with conclusions being built from the data rather than imposing and testing an *a priori* structure or theory, (6) all judgments are made by a primary team of three to five researchers so that a variety of opinions is available about each decision. Consensus is used so that the best possible understanding is developed for all data, (7) one or two auditors are used to check the consensus judgments to ensure that the primary team does not overlook important data, (8) the primary team continually goes back to the raw data to ensure that their results and conclusions are accurate and based on the data (Hill et al., 1997, pp. 522-523). This approach to data analysis is centered on team members reaching consensus about the organization and meaning of the data. Team members discuss their own interpretation of the data, and then collectively reach an understanding for the consensual conceptualization. This model allows for disagreement among team members and individual differences in conceptualization, with team members striving for consensus by working through these differences.

**Domaining the Transcripts.** In this first step of the data analysis process, the research team developed a list of topic areas or domains based on protocol questions and

review of initial transcripts. Once initial domains were identified, the primary investigator worked independently by reviewing each transcript and assigning data to a domain. Once the primary investigator independently coded all transcript data into domains, the team discussed the placement of data until arriving at a consensus version, which included the domain titles, followed by all of the raw participant data for each domain. The original transcription was never altered, which allowed researchers to review exactly what was said and in what context during the interview (Hill et al., 1997). Data were also allowed to be coded into multiple domains, and any data that did not appear to fit into a domain was coded as “other” to be reexamined later. Due to a large amount of data being coded in multiple domains and coded as “other,” the research team revised the domains to better clarify topic areas that emerged from the data.

**Developing Core Ideas.** The primary investigator then generated core ideas to capture the meaning of the data in each case in each domain. Team members read and reviewed the data in each domain individually and helped to refine or identify additional core ideas that captured the content of that domain until consensus was achieved. The auditor (dissertation chair) then reviewed the consensus version (i.e., the domained and coded data) and provided feedback regarding the accuracy of both the core ideas and the domain coding, after which the team made adjustments as necessary.

**Cross-Analysis.** In the final step of cross-analysis, the dissertator developed categories that captured themes across cases within domains, which were then reviewed and consensually agreed upon by the team. The team then revisited the data to ensure that no data were excluded from initial coding, and revisions were completed as needed. The

auditor then reviewed the cross analysis, and the team made revisions based on feedback from the auditor.

**Draft of Findings.** Participants were invited to provide feedback on the results and whether confidentiality was adequately maintained. Four participants replied, and two declined to review the results and two had no feedback.

Table 1: Participant Demographics, Changes in Racial Identity, Frequency of Miscategorization, and Well-being							
Code #	Sex	Age	Race	Identity Changes	Frequency of Miscategorization	Well-being after experiencing miscategorization	Overall well-being
001	F	30	Mexican/Filipino	Yes	Monthly	Fair	Good
002	F	42	Latina/White	Yes	Weekly	Fair	Good
004	F	33	Biracial/Asian-American or Chinese and Caucasian (predominately Swiss & German)	No	Monthly	Poor	Good
005	M	39	African American/European American	Yes	Monthly	Fair	Good
006	F	35	Mexican and Black	No	Daily	Good	Very Good
008	M	30	Filipino/White	Yes	Monthly	Good	Good
009	F	29	Black/White	Yes	Weekly	Very Good	Good
010	F	27	Panamanian, American, Russian Jewish, Austrian and English	Yes	Weekly	Good	Good
011	F	30	Multiracial – African American, Caucasian & Native American	Yes	Monthly	Good	Very Good
012	F	28	African American/White	Yes and No.	Monthly	Good	Very good
013	F	29	Black/White—mixed	No	Monthly	Fair	Good
<i>Note.</i> 11 cases total (2 male; 9 female) (M=32.78 SD=4.99)							
<i>Key:</i> Identity Changes = <i>Have you ever identified differently than you do now?</i> Well-being = <i>Poor, Fair, Good, Very Good</i>							

## Chapter Four: Results

The findings from the study are presented below. The following seven domains emerged from the findings: *1. Childhood experiences of growing up multiracial, 2. The process of racial identity development, 3. The impact of being racially ambiguous and racial miscategorization 4. Experiences of racial miscategorization 5. Factors participants believe contribute to racial miscategorization, 6. Participant comments on racial ambiguity, miscategorization, racial identity and well-being, and 7. Experience of the interview.* The first section includes the contextual results of domain one, which provide background information regarding participants' childhood experiences related to being multiracial. Then the results of the remaining six domains and subsequent subcategories will follow. Finally, the closing findings, which address other information relevant to the study, are presented. Categories are labeled with the following frequency descriptors based on a total of 11 cases: General = 10-11 cases, Typical = 6-9 cases, Variant = 2-5 cases. "Other" results are not included in this manuscript.

### **Childhood experiences of being multiracial**

As an opening question, participants were asked a general question about experiences they had growing up related to being multiracial. This domain provided contextual information about participants' racial identity development, experiences of racial miscategorization, and impact of both racial ambiguity and racial miscategorization from childhood through college. The findings based on this domain are found in Table 2, following the current section. Participants were asked to discuss their early experiences of growing up multiracial and the results from their experiences were captured in the

following six sub-categories: exposure to racial diversity; participants knew they were “different” at an early age; participants were frequently racially miscategorized, questioned about race or had to justify racial background; experiences of racism and/or discrimination growing up; family relationships; experiences that prompted and/or encouraged exploration of racial identity.

**Exposure to racial diversity.** In the first sub-category, participants generally discussed the presence of, or lack of exposure to racial diversity while growing up. Two subcategories emerged under this category. Typically, participants reported growing up in a predominantly white community, and reported lacking a sense of belonging, not having others to identify with, and in some cases reported racial discrimination. For example, one participant described going to school in a predominantly white community, “I think that it was kind of tough going to school because there was nobody really around who could identify like me.” In another example, a participant discusses early experiences of discrimination in her predominantly white elementary school:

“I grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood [...] I went to Catholic schools that were predominant Irish, Italian children. There was still a lot of racism back in the 90's and a lot of people [...] didn't know what to make of me. Most of my friends were Caucasian individuals, but other people just didn't sort of get it and a lot of parents also didn't get my dad, so there were some people who I probably could have hung out with but didn't hang out with because their parent's perception of my parents. As kids, you sort of say little things like, “Oh my daddy doesn't like your daddy, or my mommy doesn't like your daddy” or something of that nature. That's how it sort of became negative, especially when you need your parents to arrange the play dates and arrange the functions for you.

Contrastingly, participants who variably reported growing up in a racially diverse community noted feeling as though they “fit in” and having exposure to other multiracial children and families. Unlike those participants above who described difficulty

identifying with others in their predominantly white communities, here, one participant describes growing up in a diverse community, “I grew up in a pretty diverse neighborhood, white, Black, Mexican, Asian; I feel like my whole environment growing up was very diverse even in school, elementary school all the way through high school [...] I never really felt like I was out of place, there were other kids that were mixed as well.” Here, another participant discusses the sense of belonging of growing up with other multiracial children:

“Well my parents were always very big in making sure that we lived in a diverse neighborhood and that we went to schools where there was a diverse population so I felt like I kind of just fit in. I never felt like I was different from the other students or the kids in the neighborhood and part of that was because there were other there were other multi-racial students or kids that were my age that were around. I do remember as a kid, I would get excited to see other multiracial kids, because for me that was like, oh they are just like me.”

**Participants knew they were “different” at an early age.** When asked to discuss childhood experiences of growing up multiracial, participants typically reported a beginning awareness of race through experiences such as noticing differences in appearance between their parents, between themselves and their parents, and experiences in society. For instance, two participants described, “feeling different” from others in their environment as children, with limited understanding of why they were different. As one participant stated, “I remember feeling from an early age that I was different. I don’t really know what that meant exactly [...] I knew that with my mom being Filipino, when I was younger I just knew that was how our family was and other people’s families were different. As with all of us, my concept of race was probably a lot more limited back then.” As another participant described, “I just knew that something wasn’t quite right, but I never really understood what, but we didn’t feel like we necessarily fit in. We were

just kind of outside of what everybody else looked like. We felt kind of at odds with everything.”

Some participants described more overt experiences, which drew attention to racial differences, such as experiencing racism, or exclusion from peers, while other participants discussed noticing differences in appearance between themselves and their parents and experiencing situations that seemed to heighten the salience of this differences. For example, one participant described being aware of the difference between the color of her skin and her mother’s skin but not “thinking anything of it” until an encounter at a supermarket:

“I think I faced reality when I was about seven and I remember going to the store with my mom and there was this older lady who was just looking, at my mom and me back and forth in what I thought was pretty overt, like blatant, even at seven when I didn’t really think of race [...] when you’re little you really don’t think of race as an issue, but I knew, even at that age, I felt what she was looking at and what she was getting at, and it just kind of seemed like she was spying. That is one of my very earliest memories of dealing with race and knowing I was different than my mom.”

**Participants were frequently racially miscategorized, questioned about race, or had to justify their racial background.** Participants typically reported various incidents of racial miscategorization, or being questioned about their appearance. For example, one participant reported “I went through a million different scenarios in my head; I thought I was ugly, thought I was – my nose was big and all these little characteristics and people would ask me if I was Chinese; I don’t even understand why I felt like they were picking on me. People would ask ‘Why is your hair so dark? Why is your hair black? Your eyes are black, your hair is black’ It was little things like that, so I never really understood until [...] after high school and I moved to California and people

would come up to me and start speaking in Spanish and I guess that was my first realization of what actually the situation was, I guess.”

Another participant who racially identified as biracial Asian and White reported memories of being questioned about her race when out with her mother as early as first grade, “I looked less ambiguous when I was younger, I looked more Asian, but not fully Asian, and so walking around with my mom people would always ask whether we were adopted. They didn’t recognize I was part white and the kids at my school saw me as Chinese or Japanese; they recognized me as not having a white side either.” In contrast, one participant described her exploration of multiracial identity in adolescence, only to have her identity dismissed, “Well high school is when I really started to explore that I didn’t just have to be Black, and that felt good too because for so long it felt like I had been kind of, not disowning my father but denying him and his culture and part of who I was. So, when I was in high school I started to feel really good about that, I got a little bit more comfortable in my skin, I also talked about it with some of my Black family, and they were like “No you are Black, what are you talking about?”

Participants reported experiences such as those described above were commonplace throughout childhood. As one participant put it, “Another part about being multiracial was always having to be open about my race. I feel like people, especially when I was a kid, a lot of other children would ask me, “What are you?” and so [...] I always felt like I had to be ready to answer, [...] because I guess people didn’t always know what I was. So, it’s one of those things I guess”

**Experiences of racism and/or discrimination.** Typically, participants reported experiencing some form of racism or racial discrimination growing up. Participants variably reported negative treatment from non-white peers, such as being teased for having a white parent, having the legitimacy of their racial identity dismissed, or accused of thinking themselves “too good” for their monoracial peers of color. Participants also variably reported being rejected by white peers, and for one participant a more aggressive display of racism: “when they found out that I was Black, because I didn’t look Black, they threw stones at us, they egged our house.”

**Family relationships.** Typically, participants discussed the impact of family relationships on their childhood experiences of being multiracial. Six variant subcategories emerged from this category. In the first subcategory, participants reported having relationships with only one side of their family. All but one of the participants in this subcategory reported growing up without their father and being raised by a white mother. One participant described the impact of her father’s absence: “I wish I would have had the exposure to my biological father growing up, so that I would have had a person to relate to; and by the time I did have exposure to him, my personality was already formed, so there’s not anything from him in me as far as cultural wise.”

In the second subcategory, participants reported their extended family did not approve of their parents’ interracial relationship. Participants reported being “estranged” and having little to no contact with extended family due to their disapproval of their parents’ union. In the third subcategory, participants reported being rejected by or treated negatively by their extended family. For example, one participant described being treated

negatively by extended family “because I think that they weren’t used to being around someone that looks like me and I talk differently” while another participant reported receiving less Christmas presents from her grandmother compared to her white cousins. Another participant spoke painfully of the impact of her stepfather’s remarks,

“So, it was very confusing I guess; he would make fun of the way I looked, ‘Oh your lips are so big, your nose is so big.’ It was just on and on and on but I didn’t understand why; I didn’t understand that it was because I didn’t have white features. I didn’t understand the whole thing, but I knew I wasn’t Black which is what I knew was the bad thing to be. It was very, very hard to stop self-bullying because I didn’t have the right features. I wanted to be blonde hair, blue-eyed, small features. But I didn’t, and I wanted to change my whole entire appearance; I hated it. I hated everything about it, I felt like I was trapped. In addition to all the isolation, I felt very trapped in myself. Obviously, there is nothing that you can do about it; I just hated it. I hated myself, I hated all of it.”

In the remaining subcategories, participants variably reported having relationships with both sides of their family, which they described as having a positive influence on their childhood and racial identity. One participant noted the positive impact of having close relationships with both sides of her family, “we were always praised for how we looked and how we acted so you know, I can tell that throughout my life that it has helped.” Participants also reported that family helped build their self-esteem, and that their parents talked openly about race and racial issues. Notably, one participant stressed the importance of her mother’s efforts in building self-esteem around her racial identity,

“I do think that she had a bigger role with me being so okay with who I was [...] and I think especially since my dad left when I was four, so by the time my hair got kinky and everything my mom had to deal with that by herself and she had to make sure we were comfortable with being mixed by herself as a white woman and this was in the early 90’s so things were not even as good as they are now and for her to have to strike out and do that, I think I would be much less okay with who I was if it hadn’t been for her and what she taught us.”

**Experiences prompting and/or encouraging the exploration of racial identity.**

In the final category to emerge under the domain of childhood experiences of being multiracial, participants typically reported having experiences that lead to the exploration of their racial identity. As previously reported, many participants reported an early awareness of race prompted by experiences of racial miscategorization, being questioned about, or having to justify their racial identity. Some participants reported their exploration or racial identity began shortly after beginning college. They reported college provided an opportunity to learn about their non-white culture by participating in cultural activities, building peer relationships, and simply being exposed to greater diversity. For example, one participant reported joining a sorority with a guiding principle of cultural awareness. Here, she describes the experience: “we were asked to share about our ancestry and interracial and ethnic background and what does that mean to you, and tell us about your family and I thought, oh my gosh, I don’t know much about the Mexican culture, I really need to experience that a little bit more.”

Still other participants reported their racial exploration began in early adolescence in order to better understand complex racial issues. As one participant described her early motivation to learn more about her racial identity:

“I found myself reading books like Uncle Tom's Cabin and Diary of Malcolm X and things like that to try and relate to certain things to try and relate because at a certain level want to understand, like you really need to understand where that discrimination is really coming from, aside from being learned in elementary school, where else is that discrimination coming from?”

Table 2. Contextual Findings—Childhood Experiences of Being Multiracial: Categories, Subcategories, and Frequencies

Domain 1. Childhood Experiences of Being Multiracial		
<u>Category</u>	<u>Subcategory</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
1. Exposure to racial diversity.		General
	P grew up in a racially diverse community	Typical
	P grew up in a predominantly white community	Variant
2. Participants knew they were different at an early age.		Typical
3. Participants were frequently racially miscategorized, questioned about race, or had to justify one's racial background.		Typical
4. Experiences of racism and/or discrimination.		Typical
	Treated negatively and/or not accepted by non-white peers	Variant
	Treated negatively and/or not accepted by white peers	Variant
5. Family relationships.		Typical
	P only had relationships with one side of family	Variant
	Extended family did not approve of interracial relationship	Variant
	P was treated negatively/rejected by family	Variant

	P had relationships with both sides of family	Variant
	P's family helped build P's self-esteem	Variant
	Parents talked openly about race and racial issues	Variant
6. Experiences prompting and/or encouraging the exploration of racial identity.		Typical

*Note.* 11 cases total. General = 10-11, Typical = 6-9, Variant = 2-5

### **Process of Racial Identity Development**

Generally, all participants discussed their personal experiences related to the process of racial identity development in response to being asked how they currently racially identify. Two typical categories emerged with this domain; the first category addresses changes in racial identity and the second category address situations that influence racial identity change. The remaining five subcategories that emerged within this domain are presented below, which shed further light on the process of racial identity development. These findings are presented in Table 3 immediately following this section.

Participants typically reported their racial identity was influenced by society's perception of their race. Here one participant reported, "I think that how I define myself is a lot based off of other peoples' miscategorization of me. I am trying to figure out part of my history, because I feel it's how other people have defined me, whether I agreed with how they defined me or not." Another participant described an early experience of being told how to racially identify by society, "The teacher had said, well no, you look Black so you choose Black. Or they [teachers] just ended up correcting it themselves.

Once I found the teachers would correct it, or they would tell me to correct it, [and say] well look at the color of your skin and change it that way.”

Participants variantly reported that contact with or relationships with family influenced their identity development. One participant reported that growing up with an absent father made it difficult to “identify with anything” racially, and described the process of racially identity development as “confusing” due to the lack of connection with her father’s culture. Another participant spoke of the dialectic of not identifying as white, yet not wanting to dismiss the of half of his culture: “I think one of the things that I have struggled with now is that I do identify myself as a multiracial person, someone who is not white but I don’t want to deny background and culture of my father so trying to make that cohesive without any kind of dissonance I think, can be difficult for me sometimes.”

In contrast, other participants spoke to the positive impact of being raised within both cultures. For example, one participant described how his family relationships seemed to strengthen his multiracial identity: “I started reading more and more about the history of the slave trade and the laws that were created to identify people as property [...] it started make me identify a little bit more as Black. I would always bring myself back because I have a very loving family.” Another participant reported that her family relationships not only impacted her racial identity, but also seemed to create a sense of belonging with others,

“Both of my parents I will have to say really taught us a lot as kids as to what they had to deal with growing up and sharing their stories and sharing their races’ customs and their way of doing things and so, I carry that with friends or co-workers or whoever and share

that with them and hear them share with me lot of the same things that my parents shared with me, it allows me to feel like I can identify with that – you know either side.”

Participants also variantly reported they did not understand or realize they were multiracial when they were younger due to a limited understanding of race. As one participant stated, “the only thing I really understood was Black and White I guess, and when I was younger, I didn’t really understand that there was anything else other than that.” Additionally, participants variantly reported they liked that being multiracial made them feel “different” or “unique”.

**Changes to racial identity.** In the first category under the domain of *Process of Racial Identity Development*, participants typically discussed changes to their racial identity. Participants variantly reported identifying as biracial/multiracial and that their racial identity has never changed, with all but one participant attributing their strong sense of racial identity to being raised within both cultures. Other participants reported identifying monoracially at a young age, but as adults now identifying as biracial/multiracial; notably, all but one participant in this subcategory noted identifying with their non-white racial identity as children, but as they matured came to acknowledge their white identity as well. The remaining participant in this category was of Asian/Latino descent and reported identifying more strongly with her Asian heritage as a child due to more involvement with the Asian community. However, she too reported identifying as biracial as she matured, because, “as I got older I realized that I really am both and it is not fair to discount one.”

Finally, a few participants reported their identity shifts between being multiracial and their non-white identity, and their inability to identify as solely white because of their

appearance. One participant explained that although she identifies as both biracial and Black, identifying as solely white is not an option, “It stinks, but yeah, I know that is pretty much how I am looked at; I may have the curly hair and the lighter skin, but regardless I still look Black, so they are going to label me as that.”

**Situations that influence change in racial identity.** Participants typically discussed situations that influenced changes to their racial identity in the final category under the domain of *Process of racial Identity Development*, and several variant subcategories emerged which describe these situations. In the first subcategory, participants reported they identify as monoracial when completing legal documents. Some participants discussed experiencing confusion throughout childhood about how to correctly report their race when completing official documents. As one participant described the experience of trying to accurately report her race in elementary school: “I would take so much time filling out the basic information that I wouldn’t have enough time to fill out the whole thing.” Participants reported identifying monoracially on work, school, and medical documents when not given the option to choose more than one race. As one participant explained, “The answer is well, if you have any Hispanic you are supposed to check this box, and so that is usually what I just did. It never made sense to me but that is usually how I would mark it when they [employers] asked those questions because it was how I was directed to do it; not necessarily because it was what I thought I should be doing.”

In the next subcategory, participants reported that exposure to racial diversity influenced their change in racial identity. For example, one participant who grew up in a predominantly white community described meeting other Asian-Americans during

college who were raised in racially diverse areas with large Asian communities and came to realize her experience as an Asian American was very different: “we had these conversations, and they had never even considered that it would be undesirable to be Asian. They both grew up in diverse or predominantly Asian communities and then I grew up in a predominantly white community, and had grown up with such low self-esteem... [which was] kind of an awakening for me.”

Others reported their racial identity was influenced by society’s perception of their race. For example, some participants discussed identifying as both Black and multiracial, due to how they are perceived by society. One participant described “I don’t think society sees me as a white person so I haven’t really had that experience; but as far as being a minority goes, I feel that I am Black and multiracial at the same time.” Other participants variably reported their racial identity as more fluid, and reported shifting their racial identity depending upon the situation or with whom they were interacting. More specifically, participants reported shifting their identity to establish legitimacy and navigate different racial groups while other participants reported identifying differently to avoid confrontations or certain situations. For example, one participant reported identifying as monoracial Asian when working with Asian student groups to create legitimacy, and similarly another participant reported identifying as monoracially Black to build trust and rapport with Black clients. Participants also variably reported identifying as monoracial to avoid unwanted attention. As one participant described a man questioning her about her race while taking a late-night taxi, “and at that point I started lying, like ‘Oh I’m just strictly African-American’ because I didn’t want to make myself stand out because it was just getting really awkward. There are certain occasions

where you don't want the attention and I think when you're at the deli, riding in a taxi cab late at night, someone that you don't know, those are certain incidences where I feel like my safety is a little more concerned then I don't want the attention.”

Table 3. Process of racial identity development: Categories, Subcategories, and Frequencies

Domain 2. Process of Racial Identity Development		
<u>Category</u>	<u>Subcategory</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
1. Process of racial identity development		General
	P's racial identity is impacted by how P's race is perceived by society	Typical
	P's relationship/contact with family influenced racial identity development	Variant
	P has always identified as biracial/multiracial	Variant
	P did not realize/understand P was mixed when P was younger	Variant
	P liked that being multiracial made them 'different' or unique	Variant
2a. Changes to racial identity		Typical
	P's racial identity never changed; P has always identified as biracial or multiracial	Variant
	P identified as monoracial at a young age but now identifies as biracial/multiracial	Variant
	P identifies as either multiracial or with non-white identity, but has never been able to identify as solely white because of appearance	Variant
2b. Situations that influence change in racial identity		Typical
	P identifies as monoracial on legal/official documents	Variant

Parents/family taught P how to racially identify	Variant
Exposure to diversity influenced P's racial identity	Variant
P's racial identity was influenced by others/society's perception of P's race	Variant
P's identity changes depending on the situation and/or who P is interacting with	Variant
P identifies differently to create legitimacy and or navigate different racial groups	Variant
P will identify differently to avoid conversations/situations	Variant

*Note.* 11cases total. General = 10-11, Typical = 6-9, Variant = 2-5

### **Impact of being Racially Ambiguous**

Participants generally reported that being racially ambiguous has impacted their lives in some way. This domain is divided into two general categories: *the impact of racial ambiguity on well-being* and *the impact of racial ambiguity on racial identity*. The first category describes the impact of racial ambiguity on participants' well-being. The second category describes the impact on racial ambiguity on racial identity, again beginning with negative effects on racial identity and ending with positive effects on racial identity. Notably, when discussing racial ambiguity, participants reflected upon both their physical appearance, as well as interactions prompted by their racial ambiguity, such as being racially miscategorized or being questioned about their racial background. These findings are presented in Table 4 following this section.

**Impact of racial ambiguity on well-being.** Generally, participants reported being racially ambiguous had a negative effect on self-esteem, sense of belonging, and/or identity while growing up and/or continues to cause negative experiences related to self-image, appearance, and/or how others view P as an adult. One participant reported that despite feeling connected to family and friends, they experience a sense of isolation due to not having others in their lives who share similar facial features. For example, one participant describes her experience of not having similar features to anyone in her family, “You know what, I don’t necessarily feel like there is anybody that I can identify with in my family; my children are very, what I would call watered down [...] they don’t have the features that I do. I guess again, I am kind of in that situation where I am more isolated.”

Interestingly, the remaining participants in this subcategory reported that having racially ambiguous features was not the direct cause of negative experiences in adulthood, but rather attributed the negative experiences of racial miscategorization and the narrative burden of explaining one’s racial background to their racial ambiguity. For example, participants describe that “after learning to be proud” of their appearance and racial identity, and knowing “who I am” experiences of racial miscategorization can still “throw things into question a little bit.” Others discuss how racial ambiguity contributes to the “struggle with what society feels I am” and the “pressure to pick a side.” Here, one participant describes how not having a group who can relate to his experiences of being racially ambiguous and multiracial negatively impacts his sense of belonging:

I really, I crave that I think on some level; I just don’t even know what it looks like or what it feels like. And I feel like I have missed out, I feel like I am lacking,

like my life is somehow incomplete or not whole because I don't have that – I see that other communities have that, and I don't have that, and I am jealous of it.

Participants typically reported that being racially ambiguous had a negative impact on well-being during childhood and adolescence, but as an adult they now viewed being racially ambiguous as a strength. As one participant stated, “unless you are a person of mixed race I don't think that you understand; I think we all have developed a very awesome skill. [...] I think that, you learn something that no one else can learn about, that you have developed characteristics in your personality that no one else can develop because of the way that you are treated, and I think that it gives you an advantage over other people that never have that exposure. I do utilize it I suppose, and learn from it. I think it is an advantage.”

Typically, participants reported being racially ambiguous was frustrating or difficult due to the “narrative burden” of explaining one's racial background to others. These participants reported that despite feeling proud of their mixed-race heritage or ambiguous appearance, it is irritating and tiresome to “always have to justify” themselves to others. One participant reported the experience of having to explain her racial background to people has made her “grow to appreciate people who never ask me [What are you?] because they just treat me like a person.” Here, another participant describes the narrative burden of being racially ambiguous,

“I think I get very tired of telling my story, it is just exhausting. [...] When people ask me questions I can be absolutely what I call “intentionally obtuse” about it. They ask me, what's your nationality? “American”. And I know exactly what they mean, but I am not going to tell them what they want to know until they ask me the right question. Because nationality just means what country were you born in, where are you a citizen? “Where are you from?” “I am from Midwestern State.” “Where are your parents from?” “They are from Midwestern State.” And

I will do that just because I am bothered by the question so I- I don't necessarily feel these really, I guess I don't want to say that I don't feel deep-seated, because I do, that kind of resentment is deep-seated."

Participants typically reported that being racially ambiguous positively influenced their worldview, career interests, and ways of relating to race and culture. These participants reported their experiences of being racially ambiguous prompted an exploration of their own cultures, which often led to further exploration of topics related to race, racism, and social justice. For example, one participant reported being "intrigued" by her experiences of being racially ambiguous, which led to interest in "researching more about what it means to be a minority in the U.S." Similarly, other participants reported their experiences raised their awareness of racism and racial disparity, leading to career interests in social justice.

Participants also reported being racially ambiguous made them more open and accepting to other races and cultures, and more tolerant of other people in general. As one participant noted: "I think I am more tolerant, just more understanding of other people, just because I never wanted anyone to be mean to me just because of who I was so I have been pretty nice to other people." Variantly, participants reported being racially ambiguous had a negative impact on well-being due to exposure to racism or discrimination from society, family, or sometimes both, as described earlier in the results.

Participants variantly reported that being racially ambiguous had a positive impact on self-esteem, and reported being proud of their ambiguous features. Some participants spoke generally of how the experiences related to being racially ambiguous helped make them "aware of how race plays out in our society" and prompted identity

exploration at an early age, which participants identified as a positive experience. For example, one participant described how this exploration led to greater self-acceptance, “I feel like I have a space where I belong and I think that I have come to accept the fact that my identity is not as obvious as one race.” Other participants described being proud of their ambiguous features, and reported, “it has given me confidence and self-esteem” with some participants noting feeling proud from an early age, such as this participant who stated, “there was never a thing that I disliked about myself.”

**Impact of racial ambiguity on racial identity.** All participants discussed how being racially ambiguous did or did not impact racial identity. Participants variably reported being racially ambiguous and having racial identity frequently questioned by others prompted deeper questioning or consideration of their ambiguous features and/or racial identity. As one participant described, “And so, it was always kind of a thing; like I looked more like them [black peers] than my mom, but I wasn’t like them, so what was I? Who was I? People would ask me, and I didn’t really know. We were just brown kids, you know?” Another participant described his ongoing contemplation of his multiracial identity:

“I would say, that I have a very intellectual relationship with my racial identity. Emotionally, my racial identity I think still has a lot of places for it to grow and learn and there are things that I get intellectually but [...] I do have on some level like a supreme feeling of not belonging on kind of a deeper existential level. I don’t know that I have ever felt like I had found a community or a group or a truly felt like I belonged.”

A few participants reported that being racially ambiguous prevented them from being able to identify as monoracially white. Here, one participant explains she identifies as black because of the way she perceived by society, “I kind of go by how I look and

what I know what people would label me as, I just look black; it stinks, but I know that is pretty much how [...] I am looked at. I mean yeah, I may have the curly hair and the lighter skin, but regardless I still look Black, so they are going to label me as that. So yeah, I kind of, have to go with that.” In another example, one participant explains that her racial ambiguity does not allow her to pass as white or black, “There is no way I can identify as white and there is no way I can identify as Black because I can’t pass. So, I have to either identify as multiracial or I need to identify racially, or if you know if I wanted to I suppose I could just identify as black and just accept that most people won’t really accept that.”

Other participants reported that having a racially ambiguous appearance allows them the ability to “code-switch” or make subtle changes in their speech and interactions allowing them to relate more easily to other racial or cultural groups, or as one participant describes, “the identity thing is kind of complex because [...] I identified being biracial but I also identify as being Black [...] so it has always been easy for me to just slide into Black culture.” Here, another participant explains the meaning of code-switching and how being racially ambiguous helps with this ability,

That was a term I learned in college. In terms of acting one way around certain people, like the Black community, I would sort of pull out a little bit of Ebonics swag or talk different or talk about certain music; like I talk about different rappers or talk about different jazz artists, versus when I'm with all my White friends, I'll talk about the punk music I like, versus when I'm with the Indian friends and we'll talk about Bollywood movies or we'll talk about different music stars. I sort of blend in to who I'm talking with and I don't know if that's just related to the different group of people or I'm doing that purposely just to fit in more. [...] I now really appreciate the fact that I am such a mixed culture because in social work you need to relate to certain people and I sort of relate to more people though, I can relate to different kinds that I can see, I can relate to different social circles and I appreciate it so much now. I'm blessed with it because I can relate on so many different levels.

Participants variantly reported that being racially ambiguous influenced or strengthened multiracial identity. As previously mentioned, some participants reported being unable to identify as monoracial because of their appearance. Consequently, these participants report that not only did their racial ambiguity keep them from identifying as monoracial, it also strengthened their multiracial identity. Here, one participant describes how identifying as biracial “fits” because she has never been able to identify with one race, “So now what fits [...] is identifying as biracial [...] and honor that it is both but also neither.” Another participant describes how identifying as biracial seemed a logical conclusion based on her ambiguous appearance, “my mom is white, she looks white, blue eyes, very obvious and I didn’t have any relationship with my father. I mean I didn’t even know what he looked like at the time, and I knew that I didn’t look like her racially; there was no way that I was white. And so, as a result I had to be mixed. I just didn’t really know what that meant.”

The remaining participants reported that being racially ambiguous strengthened their multiracial identity as a result of society’s reactions to their racial ambiguity. For example, one participant reported being racially ambiguous “made me even more resolute and proud of who I am because I think it comes back to the bottom line that I am either going to be proud of who I am and identify myself based on how I feel and what I want as opposed to how I am being perceived.” Similarly, another participant described having a strong biracial identity despite pressure from society,

I feel like I know what I am. I think it is what society feels that I am, that I am always struggling with. I really feel like society wants to put labels on people; that’s what I feel like I am up against. Not personally or how I feel internally, but more of external pressure to identify with one. I have even dated men, and I will say who I am, and they are like “Oh, you are Black.” They don’t even care to

acknowledge my other half. [...] it is just more of society that creates the pressure to have to pick a side you know – or they can't fully accept that you are biracial or multiracial or whatever.

Here, one participant described how being proud of her racially ambiguous appearance strengthened her multiracial identity, "I think it made it kind of better, stronger. [...] I guess like by the time I got out in the world where they were going to be mean, I liked who I was and I liked that part of me. And I wanted to be stronger and they weren't going to crush me, at least not that way."

Finally, participants variantly reported that racial ambiguity had no impact on racial identity. One participant reported that she identified as multiracial despite being able to pass as monoracially black, "I know that there are so many people who look like me. So many girls who have the same hair texture, skin color, and they just identify as Black, probably because they are more comfortable with and that's what you know they were taught." The remaining participants in this subcategory reported that being racially ambiguous had not impacted their racial identity because they do not identify with a single race, and again reference the concept of code-switching. As one participant stated, "the identity thing is kind of complex because I feel like I identified being biracial but I also identify as being Black." Here, another participant explained the connection between racial ambiguity, code-switching and racial identity, "I don't think it [racial ambiguity] really has affected my racial identity. I'm so used to, depending on who the person is, sort of code switching and acting in different ways around different people that I don't think it really has affected me. [...] I see myself as I am; I don't see myself as just one person."

Table 4. Impact of being racially ambiguous: Categories, Subcategories, and Frequencies  
 Domain 3. Impact of being racially ambiguous

<u>Category</u>	<u>Subcategory</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
3a. Impact of being racially ambiguous on well-being	Being racially ambiguous has had a negative effect on P's self-esteem, sense of belonging, and/or identity while growing up and/or continues to cause negative experiences related to P's self-image, appearance, and/or how others view P as an adult	General
	Being racially ambiguous had a negative impact on P's well-being when P was young but as an adult P views racial ambiguity as a strength	Typical
	Being racially ambiguous is frustrating/difficult for P due to the "narrative burden" of explaining racial background	Typical
	Being racially ambiguous has positively influenced P's worldview, research/career interests, and ways of relating to race and culture	Typical
	Being racially ambiguous had a negative impact on P's well-being by exposing P to racism and/or discrimination	Variation
	Being racially ambiguous has had a positive impact on P's self-esteem	Variation
	3b. Impact of being racially ambiguous on racial identity	
P's racial identity never changed; P has always identified as biracial or multiracial		Variation
P identified as monoracial at a young age but now identifies as biracial/multiracial		Variation
P identifies as either multiracial or with non-white identity, but has never been able to identify as solely white because of appearance		Variation

### **Experiences of Racial Miscategorization**

All participants reported experiences of racial miscategorization with three typical categories emerging within this domain: *participants' negative experiences of RM*, *positive or neutral experiences of RM*, and finally, *navigating racial miscategorization*.

Participants typically reported having both negative and positive experiences of racial miscategorization, and also typically discussed their reactions and/or responses to being racially miscategorized. Additionally, several variant subcategories emerged within each of the aforementioned categories. These findings are presented in Table 5 below.

**Negative experiences of racial miscategorization.** Participants typically reported having negative experiences of being racially miscategorized. Variant responses included participants' reports of being exposed to racist remarks about one's own race, such as one participant who overheard coworkers making racist remarks without realizing she was a member of that race, "they were saying things as if I were just going to jump right on in; and even if I wasn't that race, I don't do that, it's rude, but I think that they were even more shocked when I said, *well, looky here.*" Another participant who referred to these incidents as "undercover racism" described these experiences as such: "sometimes the undercover racism is more upsetting than the outright racism [...] it feels so much more crushing; it's easier to be betrayed." The participant then provided an example of a high school boyfriend breaking up with her after learning she was black.

Other participants variably reported being racially profiled by the police. One participant reported "I have had a couple instances of racial profiling by police that have not been fun because I was being pulled over for no reason that made any sense to me." He then went on to describe a specific incident in which he believed he was a victim of racial profiling, "and in the wake of Trevon Martin, I did have a hoodie on that day actually. I wouldn't be able to nail down the specific race that I was classified as, but I do feel like I was generally profiled as some kind of person that clearly he wanted to check

out.” Another participant described her experiences of racial profiling following the terrorist attack of 9/11, “I mean I have gotten [racially miscategorized as] Asian, I have gotten Middle Eastern, I mean I remember after 9/11 happened I would always get pulled out of line because I fit the profile I was told. [...] I think that it was irritating more than anything else.”

Participants also variably reported the experience of being racially miscategorized as monoracially white as particularly negative because it is inconsistent with their experiences as a person of color. As one participant simply put it, “I don’t feel like I have the privilege of being a White person in America.” Other participants echoed this sentiment; for example, one participant stated, “there’s so much privilege that comes with being white; not that I don’t have privileges. I recognize that, being a college-educated woman that doesn’t have to work another job and gets to stay home and raise my child. I do have a lot of privilege, but there’s a lot of white privilege that I ...there’s no way that I will ever see the light of day with what they experience. I don’t even want to be categorized with that.”

Here, another participant described how being miscategorized as a person of color is perceived differently than being perceived as solely white:

“[...] being identified as white most of the times felt really invalidating. And I think that when I am miscategorized as another race that is different from white, that is not my racial makeup, I feel like it still validates what I have experienced, you know, people see me as a person of color still and respond to me in that way [...] but if a person sees me as a white person, then how do I explain these negative feelings that I feel towards myself, have felt towards myself, I don’t like them. [...] I have heard that people who are biracial who pass as white the majority of the time also struggle with how they reconcile their experience of the marginalization of their race with their experience of passing as white. And if I

end up still looking more and more white over the years, I probably will have to deal with that too. How do I navigate that? My past experience and my present experience and my experience of privilege and my experiences of potentially now looking more and more white or passing as white. I think that will be very challenging if that happens.”

**Positive/neutral experiences of racial miscategorization.** Typically, participants reported being racially miscategorized by people who believed them to be from the same race or culture was a positive or neutral experience of miscategorization. Many of these participants reported having multiple experiences of people approaching them assuming they speak the same language and believing participants belong to their race or culture. In contrast to being miscategorized as monoracially white, participants described experiences of being miscategorized as positive, or at the very least neutral. Some participants reported these experiences as positive because although they were being miscategorized, they were still being perceived as a person of color. For example, one participant compared the experience of being miscategorized as Native American to the above example of being miscategorized as white,

*I was like, well what did you think I was? And she was like, I just thought you were white and I just felt bad and confused. So, opposed to when my friend found out that I was Asian, and was like, Oh, I didn't know you were Asian, I heard that you were Native American. [...] In my mind, it wasn't a negative thing, it could even be a positive thing to be mistaken as a Native American in my mind, and whatever my subconscious motivates are because maybe I am exotifying like another group of people or whatever my internal motives are, it wasn't a negative thing as opposed to when I was miscategorized as white.*

Another participant described feeling validated when being miscategorized as a different racial minority: “when I am miscategorized I guess, as long as it is not white, I generally feel ok about it. [...] I will be perfectly honest with you, even when I was pulled over by that cop on some level that was validating. [...] it is a war story and it

makes me feel like my life has a legitimacy like I have, justification for fighting the man.”

Other participants reported feeling a sense of belonging from being miscategorized as another racial or ethnic minority or perceived the miscategorization as a compliment. Here, one participant described being miscategorized in this way, “they are not being malicious, [...] they just kind of lump me in with them, and it’s like, oh thanks for including me in your group.” Similarly, another participant reported perceiving these types of miscategorization as an attempt to relate to others,

When I talk to folks who aren’t originally from this country, and I am always going on that because I hear an accent, a lot of times they will ask me, *What country are you from?* and I will say, *Well I am from here* and they will say, *Well what country are your parents from?* I didn’t catch on the first couple of times it happened but later on, I realized they are probably thinking I am from some other country [...] or wherever they are from; I like that and I get people in those moments are trying to find a way to relate.

**Navigating racial miscategorization.** Typically, participants reported navigating experiences of racial miscategorization by considering multiple factors before deciding how to respond. Participants shared numerous examples of the many ways they experience racial miscategorization in society and the many ways they respond based on multiple factors such as current mood, perception of the person’s intentions, of wanting to avoid discussing racial identity with a stranger. As one participant stated, “the one thing that changes constantly is how I answer people’s questions [about racial background] because I still get that a lot; a lot of times it depends on my mood.”

Some participants reported identifying as monoracial or “mixed” to avoid unwanted attention or situations they perceive as awkward or unsafe. Other participants

reported responding “more delicately” to being questioned about their racial background in professional or community settings because they do not want their response to “come back and bite” them. Participants described relying on their ability to “sense” whether the person asking about their racial background will be “safe” to speak to about their racial identity. One participant reported, “I am not an expert at reading people; I am just going off of instinct and based off experiences I have had makes it seem like, my mind is already subconsciously weighing people based on the vibe I’m getting, by the way they look at me, or are coming at me.”

As reported above, participants typically reported racial miscategorization as a negative experience, and unsurprisingly, participants variantly reported experiencing negative emotions, such as anger, annoyance, shock, or confusion when racially miscategorized. One such participant reported his primary feeling when racially miscategorized as “probably annoyance,” while other participants reported feelings of shock and anger when speaking more specifically about experiences of being miscategorized as monoracially white or hearing racist remarks about their cultural group due to being categorized incorrectly, both of which are described in detail in previous sections.

Participants variantly reported using humor, making people guess their race, or “playing” with people when racially miscategorized or in response to being asked *What are you?* One participant reported “I’ve gotten to the point where I’m just like, *well what do you think I am?* At first, they may be offended, but now I’m just like let’s make a game of this, *what do you think I am?*” These participants reported engaging in this playful

banter because “I am curious to figure out how they are categorizing me, like what they suspected. I don’t know why that’s fun for me.” Other participants in this subcategory also discussed making people their race but reported doing so in opposition to being asked about their race. One participant describes his response to being questioned about his race,

I think I get very tired of telling my freaking story, like it is just exhausting. When people ask me questions I am what I call “intentionally obtuse” about it. They ask me, what’s your nationality? *American*. I know exactly what they mean, but I am not going to tell them what they want to know until they ask me the right question. Because nationality just means what country were you born in, where are you a citizen? Where are you from? *I am from Midwestern State*. Where are your parents from? *They are from Midwestern State*. And I, I will do that, just because I am bothered by the question. I don’t want to say that I don’t feel resentment, because I do, that kind of resentment is deep-seated.

Another participant reported responding in a similar fashion when questioned about her race,

I play with them a little bit, like “what do you mean?” And then they kind of struggle because they don’t know what word to use, like racial or ethnic, or ancestors or whatever [...] if they just ask, what is your racial background? I will say, *well that should be easy, you are supposed to be able to tell what race I am*. It works really good, to me it’s more enjoyable than anything else now, I am just like, *well what do you think I am?* and I think it kind of takes them aback because it puts them on the spot. They are the one asking the dumb question, so you tell me, you tell me.

In the final subcategory of participants’ navigation of racial miscategorization, participants variably reported correcting people who miscategorize them. While a few participants reported correcting the miscategorization is their customary response, others reported correcting the miscategorization if the person is asking “in a respectful way” or to avoid having further assumptions made about them as this participant describes here,

When I was in New York a lot of people would think I was Hispanic, [...] there were so many people from those places, I would say no, but before I would get a chance to explain myself they would assume I wasn’t proud of who I was and that

my Spanish should be better and why does it sound like I speak Mexican Spanish when I was from Puerto Rico or something. And when I would finally get a chance to explain to them, they would be generally sorry that they had miscategorized me, but others were like, *oh well whatever*; I just move on with life.

Table 5. Experiences of racial miscategorization: Categories, Subcategories, and Frequencies

Domain 4. Experiences of racial miscategorization

<u>Category</u>	<u>Subcategory</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
4a. Negative experiences of racial miscategorization	P has been exposed to hearing racist remarks about own racial background due to being racially miscategorized	Variant
	P has been racially profiled	Variant
	Being miscategorized as white is a negative experience for P	Variant
4b. Positive/neutral experiences of racial miscategorization	P is racially miscategorized by people who think P belongs to their race/culture	Typical
4c. Navigating racial miscategorization		Typical
	P must navigate how to respond to experiences of miscategorization and questions about racial background based on several factors (i.e. perception of other's intentions, P's mood, wanting to avoid conflict and/or discussing race with strangers, etc.)	Typical
	P experiences negative emotions (i.e. anger, annoyance, shock, confusion) in response to RM	Variant
	P responds with humor, making people guess racial background, or "playing" with people when racially miscategorized	Variant
	P corrects people when racially miscategorized	Variant

*Note.* 11 cases total. General = 10-11, Typical = 6-9, Variant = 2-5

## Factors Believed to Contribute to Racial Miscategorization

Participants generally reported several factors they believe contribute to racial miscategorization which were captured in the following categories: specific *aspects of physical appearance, racial diversity in the area, racial ambiguity, and other people's personal experiences and attitudes*. A summary of these findings are presented in Table 6 following this section. While many participants identified physical features as an important factor in racial miscategorization, external factors, such as local diversity and how others perceive one's physical features were reported to be equally important contributing factors. One participant explained how these different factors interact and contribute to racial miscategorization:

It is really a situational and a regional thing, [...] if I am alone or with my family, where I am in the United States or in the world, whether it is summer or winter time, the color of my skin, how I have my hair cut; there are so many different variables, it really took me a long time to understand that, and consider why people identify me in the ways they do.

**Specific aspects of physical appearance.** Typically, participants reported aspects of their physical appearance contributed to being racially miscategorized. More specifically, participants identified features such as skin color, hairstyle, clothing, and manner of speech as playing a role in miscategorization. For instance, one participant describes how these features taken together influenced how his race was perceived,

So much of how people perceive me is taken as a result of what my hair looks like, what I am wearing; when my head is shaved I have a tendency to be taken a lot more as Latino. I am pretty sure I have been mistaken for every possible racial group at some point or another.

Interestingly, all participant responses in this category mentioned that hair plays an important role in racial miscategorization. Male participants reported wearing their hair shaved impacted others' racial perceptions of them, and female participants discussed the impact of changing their hairstyles on how they were perceived by society. Here, one participant described how wearing her hair short has decreased experiences of racial miscategorization,

I think one of the biggest things I did was in the past few years was cut my hair, really, really short, and by cutting my hair I couldn't dye it a different color, I couldn't straighten it, I couldn't relax it, I couldn't do anything to it. I committed more to this African-American part of me, the natural part of me, than I did the White part of me and that was a big change for me, changing that one feature of myself. That made a big difference in how people see me.

Conversely, another participant reported the opposite experience after choosing to wear her hair natural,

I think more people are unsure now that I wear my hair curly. But I think that you know- I think that my skin complexion is part of it, and I think that for me it is the facial features and that kind of thing. I was 25 I got relaxers regularly to straighten my hair and I guess you would assume because white people typically have straight hair that would make me look more white but I think, when I was growing up that the majority of Black women did get relaxer and I think that was part of me fitting into Black culture. But I feel like when I started wearing my hair natural and my hair is naturally curly, that just made people a little less sure about what my race is.

**Racial diversity in the area.** Typically, participants reported the racial diversity in the area contributed to being racially miscategorized either due to the lack of diversity in the area or the type of diversity in the area. Here, one participant describes how being racially ambiguous in an area of low racial diversity contributed to racial miscategorization,

I had more pronounced Asian characteristics, and my eyes, they are like an in-between of my mom's and my dad's so I think that [ambiguous features] trips people up but I also think it is a lack of presence of diversity in the community that I live in. Being in a place where there weren't other Asians, makes interpreting my ambiguity more difficult.

Other participants reported they are often miscategorized as belonging to the racial or ethnic group that is common in the area. As one participant stated, "I just really started to understand that it really depends on the part of the world and the experience that some people had as why they identified me the way that they did; depending on where I was and the situation it was different." In the following example, one participant described being miscategorized differently depending on his environment,

I alluded to going to the US Virgin Islands and flew in through Puerto Rico, and I was generally taken as Puerto Rican in Puerto Rico. As I said earlier there is a Mexican population here in Midwestern City, so I am a little more apt to be identified as Mexican. I have been to the Southwest on some trips and I have been actually identified as Native American. I also feel it is not necessarily tied to how I am identified, but like when I am with my Filipino family I definitely feel whiter and when I am with my white family I definitely feel more Filipino.

A few participants also reported experiencing fewer instances of racial miscategorization in areas of greater diversity because racial ambiguity was less of a novelty, as explained by this participant,

You know, that is the way it is in our society, and you know what is interesting, being in New England City I get it a lot less. Because there are so many different people here, like there are a lot of people from West Africa, the islands, the Caribbean, and South American that people just don't ask anymore because it's not a big deal. [...] I don't always feel like I have to pass anymore.

**Racial ambiguity.** Variantly participants noted that being racially ambiguous contributed to being racially miscategorized. In the previous category, participants reported specific ambiguous physical features that they believe contribute to racial miscategorization, while the current category includes participant responses that

specifically identify racial ambiguity as a cause for miscategorization. For example, one participant reported, “I think honestly, it is because when people look at me they have no idea what to think. I don’t look like a lot like anybody and I feel like they are just questioning in their mind, like what is she?” In the following example, one participant described the ambiguity of her features and how this ambiguity may confuse those who try to interpret her racial identity based on stereotypical perceptions of physical features of race,

I have curly hair; my hair is also reddish in the sun, which is a little strange for some people I think. I have very high cheekbones and very narrow eyes, which a lot of people think should be Asian but I am not Asian. My skin tone is light but not very light; I have kind of yellow undertones, which I think is also a little bit different. I think that people just kind of try and figure me out, and I think I don’t fit the right boxes, like my hair and my eyes don’t match my coloring or my coloring doesn’t match what race they want to place me in. I think what it is, is that people are trying to fit multiracial people into one box and so I think a lot of times even if they are wrong, people can look at us and kind of guess and that is comfortable for them; but I think some people are more uncomfortable with ambiguity, so they feel the need to say something, to ask. And because when looking at me it [race] isn’t obvious, I think a lot of people get confused.

**Other people’s personal experiences and attitudes.** Participants variably reported other people’s personal experiences and attitudes contributed to how they are miscategorized. Participants reported that in addition to being racially ambiguous, it is what people are “brought up with, how they were trained, and educated” that impacts how they are miscategorized, and that people’s perceptions are “really based on stereotypes.” For example, one participant explained her perception of being racially miscategorized by people in a predominantly white community:

They have never had the exposure to anything else other than being white and they’re not exposed to anything else so when something different comes along I think it is threatening for them, and so I think they throw whatever names they

want at it because they don't know what else to do [...] they don't know how to react. [...] They have no idea because they have never been around anything else.

Here, another participant further describes how others' personal experiences contribute to how racial ambiguity is perceived:

I think it is the perception, the history and the experiences of people who are categorizing me, that's the bottom line; I don't think it has so much to do with how I carry myself or how I perceive myself, it is really about what their experiences are or non-experiences, and their feelings on the issue of race and racial classification and what their feelings are that's really the cause [of racial miscategorization]. A person's background, there is so much from that perspective; it is cultural, it is regional, it is historical, and so many different things, negative experiences, positive experiences all rolled together and it really differs based on the person who that feels it. There are similarities amongst different people, but it really varies by person I think. I have come to the point where I realize it really depends on that person's experiences and what their perceptions are.

Table 6. Factors participants believe contribute to racial miscategorization: Categories, Subcategories, and Frequencies

Domain 5. Factors participants believe contribute to racial miscategorization	
<u>Category</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
Specific aspects of P's physical appearance (i.e. skin color, hair style, clothing, manner of speech) contribute to being racially miscategorized	Typical
The racial diversity in the area contributes to being racially miscategorized	Typical
Being racially ambiguous contributes to being racially miscategorized	Variant
Other people's personal experiences and attitudes contribute to how P is miscategorized	Variant

*Note.* 11 cases total. General = 10-11, Typical = 6-9, Variant = 2-5

### **Closing Findings**

The closing questions allowed participants to reflect on their experience of participating in the study and add any additional information they felt was pertinent to the

study. Participants were also asked to share any comments they had about racial ambiguity, miscategorization, racial identity and well-being, as well as how participating in the study impacted them. The findings based on these questions are presented in Tables 6 and 7 following this section.

**Participant comments on racial ambiguity, miscategorization, racial identity and well-being.**

Participants generally offered comments and observations regarding the experience of being multiracial. The following categories emerged within this domain: *the multiracial experience is varied and diverse, P continues to experience and/or witness the impact of the one-drop rule, P believes multiracial people should embrace both sides of their culture, and P considers how their children will navigate their own multiracial identity.*

**The multiracial experience is varied and diverse.** Participants variably commented that the multiracial experience is varied and diverse and while multiracial people may be able to relate on many levels, each person's experience is unique. As one participant stated, "we all have a slightly different experience." Other participants commented on how having a multiracial identity "can encompass so many different things," further elaborated by:

I am not the biggest fan of the multiracial term [...] I feel like to some degree it's a glorified other category. You know, if you have a form where you're still only allowing people to check one and the options are white, Black, Latino, Asian, and multiracial and all these people check multiracial, I don't know if there is much people can do with that from a statistical standpoint? Because if you don't know people's specific ethnic make-ups are then the experiences are going to be so varied.

**P continues to experience and/or witness the impact of the one-drop rule.**

Participants variantly reported continuing to experience the rule of hypodescent, or the one-drop rule, either directly or indirectly. One participant reported being identified as Black her “whole life” despite self-identifying as biracial, “that whole one-drop rule thing is just crazy to me; I get it from Whites, Blacks, Mexicans, I mean everybody.” Another participant described how the rule of hypodescent continues to negatively impact her brother, “it's a horrible thing because he's more likely to get racially profiled. And he's going to get racially profiled as a Black male, they're going to see him as a Black male, and they're not going to see anything else.”

**Multiracial people should embrace both sides of their culture.** Participants variantly expressed the belief that multiracial people should “honor both sides of their heritage.” One participant expressed the belief that embracing her multiracial identity could have a positive influence on those around her, “I have always felt like I could help bridge a gap, and kind of make people understand that race really doesn't matter so much.” Another participant simply wanted the opportunity to state, “I think you should embrace your culture.”

**P considers how their children will navigate their own multiracial identity.**

Participants variantly discussed their concerns about the challenges their children will face as multiracial individuals. These participants expressed both concern their children may face experiences of racism or discrimination similar to their own and hopefulness that they will be able to provide support and guidance to their children so they can feel “proud of who they are and have the opportunity to see [multiracial identity] in a very positive way.”

Table 7. Closing findings—Participant comments on racial ambiguity, miscategorization, racial identity and well-being: Categories, Subcategories, and Frequencies

<u>Category</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
The multiracial experience is varied and diverse	Variant
P continues to experience and/or witness the impact of the one-drop rule	Variant
Multiracial people should embrace both sides of their culture	Variant
P considers the impact of being multiracial has on their children	Variant

*Note.* 11cases total. General = 10-11, Typical = 6-9, Variant = 2-5

### **Experience of the Interview**

All participants found the interview to be an overall positive experience.

Typically, participants reported the interview provided an opportunity to talk about their experiences of being multiracial which was enjoyable, validating, and helpful.

Participants variantly reported choosing to participate in the current study to help inform others about multiracial issues, noting that multiracial issues need to be addressed.

Participants also variantly reported being interested in multiracial research and the results of the current study. Variant responses also included participants' interest in the primary investigator's racial background, and reported feeling more comfortable being interviewed by another mixed-race person. While all participants reported the overall interview experience to be positive, some participants variantly reported being more aware and/or sensitive to experiences of racial miscategorization following the interview, while others variantly reported that participation initially brought up negative memories and feelings, but later brought up feelings of catharsis.

Table 8. Closing Findings—Experience of the interview: Categories, Subcategories, and Frequencies

<u>Category</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
P found the opportunity to talk about experiences of being multiracial enjoyable, validating, and helpful	Typical
P wanted to participate to help inform people about multiracial issues and feels the topic needs to be addressed	Variant
P was more aware and/or sensitive to experiences of racial miscategorization following the interview	Variant
Participating in the interview brought up negative memories and feelings, but the result was cathartic	Variant
P is interested in multiracial research and study results	Variant
P was interested in researcher's racial background and/or felt comfortable being interviewed by another mixed-race person	Variant
<i>Note.</i> 11 cases total. General = 10-11, Typical = 6-9, Variant = 2-5	

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The current study sought to contribute to the existing literature about multiracial individuals and multiracial identity development by examining the topic of racial miscategorization, a phenomenon with limited empirical research. This study also sought to explore how having a racially ambiguous phenotype contributes to these experiences. In addition, the purpose of the study was to better understand how these experiences have impacted well-being and racial identity development for participants.

Research exploring the phenomenon of racial miscategorization is sparse (Campbell & Troyer, 2007; Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Renfrow, 2004; Rockquemore & Brunson, 2004) and only one qualitative study (Renfrow, 2004) was identified in the body of literature which explored the concept of an unvalidated identity. However, this study did not focus solely on the experience of racial miscategorization, therefore the current study contributes to the literature by providing an in-depth look into multiracial people's lived experiences of being racially miscategorized and questioned about their racial background, as well as how these experiences of identity invalidation impact well-being and racial identity development. Overall findings indicated that experiences of racial miscategorization and being questioned about one's racial background (e.g. *What are you?*) were largely a negative experience for multiracial individuals and negatively impacted well-being. This is consistent with existing literature that has found that multiracial people may experience stress and negative affect when asked "What are you?" or when racially miscategorized due to having to justify their identity choices to society (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008; Gaskins, 1999; Goffman, 1959; Hall, 1992; Shih & Sanchez, 2005; Williams, 1997). The current study found that all participants were

eventually able to reframe these experiences later in life as helpful in building their personal resilience, which has not been previously found in the literature. These findings suggest that while repeated negative experiences of identity denial and/or invalidation provides an opportunity for multiracial individuals to develop unique coping mechanisms, such as racial malleability, in response to navigating these situations. Although racial miscategorization and being questioned about racial background was found to negatively impact well-being early in life and cause negative affect in adulthood, it was found to have a positive impact on racial identity and multiracial identity development over time. These findings are important because existing literature has been largely inconclusive in determining the psychological outcomes associated with multiracial identity (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). The current findings suggest that as participants age, many find a way to reframe initial negative experiences into an opportunity to increase their awareness and understanding of race on both a personal and societal level, as well as strengthen their racial identity.

Additionally, the results suggest that although some racially ambiguous individuals expressed disliking their appearance in childhood or adolescence, or “wanting to look like everybody else,” they came to accept and feel pride in their racially ambiguous features, but continued to find experiences of racial miscategorization and racial questioning as irritating, invasive, and in some cases highly distressing. Furthermore, the findings indicated that most participants perceived the experience of being racially ambiguous and experiencing racial miscategorization as inherently connected. For example, when discussing experiences of being miscategorized, participants often described aspects of their physical appearance (i.e. skin color, hair

texture, shape or eyes or nose, etc.) to provide context for the miscategorization. It is likely that if they possessed less racially ambiguous physical features, they would not have been miscategorized. This finding indicates racial miscategorization occurs as a result of society perceiving multiracial individuals as racially ambiguous (Herman, 2007). Moreover, results suggest that in addition to racially ambiguous features, contextual factors, such as diversity of the environment and the experiences and attitudes of the perceiver also play a significant role in how multiracial people are categorized. These findings support previous research by Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002), which found that both physical appearance and our understanding of how others perceives one's physical appearance influences multiracial identity choices. These findings are significant in that they make the connection between the role of one's racial appearance, society's perception of one's racial appearance, and the context of the environment that all influence how a person identifies racially.

### **Contextual Findings**

As one might expect, participants discussed how family relationships shaped their childhood experiences in regards to exposure to and acceptance from both sides of their cultures, however no typical results were found other than the salience of family relationships. Participants' interactions with their families were as diverse as participants themselves, with some participants indicating being fully embraced into the families and cultures of both parents, and others reporting having little to no contact with or being rejected by one side of their family. While these findings about family did not yield any typical results, it is important to note the varied experiences about acceptance and rejection, as they may be worthy of future study. Emerging research exploring multiracial

people's experiences of racial microaggressions within families (Nadal, Sriken, Davidoff, Wong, and McLean, 2013) has found that multiracial individuals experience feelings of isolation within the family, favoritism, questioning of racial authenticity, denial of multiracial identity and experiences by monoracial family members, and feelings of sadness and regret about not learning about their family heritage or culture. Perhaps future research should explore experiences of how families effectively and ineffectively to address race-related conflict within multiracial families, including experiences of multiracial identity denial, to add to current literature regarding coping with racial discrimination and microaggressions.

All participants noted that the diversity (or lack of diversity) in their schools and community influenced their sense of belonging and self-esteem growing up. Those who grew up in predominantly white environments described more negative outcomes, such as difficulty fitting in with peers and disliking their physical appearance. Additionally, participants reported experiences of racism and discrimination from both white and non-white peers in these environments. The importance of environment has been noted by several authors (Brunsma, 2006; Wright, Houston, Ellis, Holloway, & Hudson, 2003). Additional qualitative studies comparing the experiences of multiracial individuals raised in racially diverse environments versus those raised in predominantly white environments would be useful in shedding light upon the role of environmental diversity on multiracial identity development.

In the contextual findings, participants reported becoming aware of racial differences between themselves and others at an early age, often before fully grasping the concepts of race. Participants further reported that experiences of racial miscategorization

and being questioned about their race happened frequently and began during early childhood, often prompting in-depth exploration of their cultural background(s) in early adolescence or young adulthood. As part of this exploration of race and culture, many participants also reported educating themselves about race, discrimination, and social justice in order to better understand their experiences with racial miscategorization, discrimination, and being questioned about their race. Review of existing models of racial and ethnic identity development (Cross, 1971, 1995; Helms, 1995; Phinney, 1989) identify several unifying assumptions about identity (Quintana, 2007), including the following: (a) a psychologically intense exploration of racial-ethnic identity occurs during adolescence (b) exposure to discrimination is the impetus for racial-ethnic identity exploration (c) racial-ethnic identity is associated with the development of positive in-group affiliation which has developmental advantages (d) positive racial-ethnic identity involves the preparation for dealing with discrimination. Contextual findings from the current study are very similar to these models in that participants reported an intense exploration of racial-ethnic identity during adolescence, which was prompted by experiences of racial miscategorization rather than experiences of discrimination. The current findings also indicate participants developed a positive multiracial identity and strategies for dealing with experiences of racial miscategorization, which suggest that like their monoracial counterparts, the process of identity exploration and developing a strong multiracial identity prepares individuals for dealing with experiences of racial miscategorization and questioning about their race.

### **Process of Racial Identity Development**

When asked about racial identity and changes in racial identity, participants' responses were reflective of the multiple identity choices that have been well established in the literature, including identifying as monoracial, multiracial, or a malleable racial identity that changes across time and contexts (Poston, 1990; Renn, 2004; Rockquemore, 1999; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2001; Root, 1990; Wallace, 2001). A few participants reported having a stable multiracial identity that never changed throughout their lives, however most participants discussed various factors they felt strongly influenced their racial identity process and current racial identity. Most notably, participants identified that *how others perceived their race* had a significant impact on their racial identity development. This is consistent with research on social validation which asserts that how we are perceived by others, and how we believe we are perceived shapes our own understandings and perceptions of our personal identity (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2004; Stone, 1962). Some participants discussed various ways family influenced their racial identity, either by directly teaching them to identify a certain way, or indirectly through lack of exposure to one side of their culture, thereby prompting an exploration and stronger identification with that culture. A few participants reported enjoying feeling "unique" as a result of their racially ambiguous features, which in turn influenced their racial identity choices. Aside from those who identified lack of exposure to one side of their culture as influencing their racial identity development, it is important to note that both being instructed by family on how to identify and perceiving themselves as unique are also examples of social interactions which the perceiver shapes the perception of the perceived.

**Situations that influence change in racial identity.** The findings suggest that influences such as family relationships, exposure to diversity and others' perceptions of participants' race had a lasting impact on changing racial identity in that participants' self-perception of racial identity was shaped through these interactions. The data also found that participants reported identifying differently in response to specific situations, such as completing legal documents or during specific social situations in which they may have chosen to assert or downplay an identity to either engage or avoid certain interactions. However, it is important to note these later findings do not necessarily indicate a "change" in participants' *internal* racial identity, but rather their *expressed* identity. In other words, they still felt their identity was intact internally, but they chose to express a different identity due to the situation. This finding is important as it suggests that the concept of a malleable, or *protean identity* (Root, 1990; Rockquemore, 1999; Stephan, 1992) may be better conceptualized as a strategy for navigating multiple identities rather than an identity *choice*. This distinction is important because much of the existing research on malleable racial identity examines the concept itself, rather than the impact of malleable identity on psychological outcomes; however, there is some evidence to link racial malleability to negative psychological outcomes (Sanchez, Shih, & Garcia, 2009). The current findings contribute to this literature by providing further evidence that other's perceptions of race have a powerful influence on the racial identity choices of multiracial individuals by providing concrete examples of social interactions or situations in which multiracial people may choose to identify differently.

### **Impact of Racial Ambiguity and Racial Miscategorization**

The current study attempted to explore the impact of racial ambiguity and racial miscategorization as two separate constructs, so as not to assume a connection between the constructs and to gain a greater understanding of both. As previously mentioned, the results found that participants had difficulty discussing the impact of one without discussing the other. This finding suggests that the experiences of racial miscategorization and being questioned about one's race influences multiracial individuals' perception of themselves as ambiguous. In other words, it is likely these experiences inform multiracial individuals of their racial ambiguity.

As briefly mentioned above, experiences of racial miscategorization were reported to have a negative impact on self-esteem, self-image and sense of belonging throughout their lives and continued to be a negative experience throughout adulthood, which is consistent with existing literature (Brunsma, 2005; Harris & Sim, 2002; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). Similarly, being questioned about and explaining one's racial background was found to be intrusive and distressing (Tatum, 1997; Williams, 1996). Because of these experiences, many participants reported being racially ambiguous had a negative impact on their well-being while they were growing up, but as adults they viewed being racially ambiguous as a strength. Participants discussed how these early negative experiences of racial miscategorization expanded participants' worldview, influenced their career choices, and fostered tolerance and acceptance of others through their early exploration of racial identity and racial issues. These findings seem to suggest that although continued experiences of racial miscategorization are found to have a negative impact on well-being early in life, participants appear to build resiliency in managing race-related stress.

The current study also found that participants believed being racially ambiguous and experiencing racial miscategorization strengthened their racial identity by prompting them to reflect upon and further explore their racial identity. Research on *categorization threat* asserts that individuals who possess a high level of commitment and sense of belonging to a particular group experience negative affect and make efforts to assert group membership when they perceive exclusion from the group (Cheryan & Monin, 2005). Perhaps it is these experiences of identity denial, and having to continually explain one's racial background that foster a sense of commitment to having a multiracial identity for some multiracial individuals.

### **Experiences of Racial Miscategorization**

The current study provided the opportunity for participants to share and reflect upon their experiences of racial miscategorization over their lifetimes. Participants shared experiences of being racially profiled by the police and hearing racist remarks about their own racial background due to people not realizing they belonged to the racial group they were disparaging. Although it has already been mentioned in earlier sections of the discussion, participants reported experiencing feelings of shock, confusion, anger and annoyance in response to being racially miscategorized and/or questioned about their racial identity. Participants expressed this sentiment throughout the interview process in response to different questions, thus, this finding bears repeating. Although racial miscategorization was found to be a negative experience overall, being racially miscategorized was found to be neutral, and in some instances somewhat positive, if they were perceived by to belong another racial minority group, or if someone believed the

participant belonged to the same racial minority group as them. In other words, participants reported that when other people of color believed participants belonged to their racial group, participants found this to be less invalidating than other experiences of racial miscategorization.

Interestingly, the data found that being miscategorized as white was particularly upsetting for participants, even for those who had a white parent. This finding is interesting because it is inconsistent with previous research which has found that being misclassified with a lower-status group may be more stressful than being misclassified as belonging to a higher status group due to lower status groups, such as racial minorities, being more likely to face discrimination and disrespect (Berger, Fisek, & Zelditch, 1977; De Bose & Winters, 2003). The finding in the study was that participants found being miscategorized as White to be invalidating to their experiences as a person of color, which has not been found elsewhere in the literature.

The current study also shed light upon the many ways multiracial individuals navigate experiences of racial miscategorization and others' questioning about their racial background. Participants reported they racially identified (and responded to others' questioning) in different ways in situations based on their mood, their perception of the other person's intentions, and wanting to avoid potentially uncomfortable conversations. In addition to deciding whether they will change their expressed identity, participants also discussed correcting people who racially miscategorize them and responding to questions about their racial background with humor or sarcasm as a means of shifting their feelings of discomfort to the person questioning their racial background. In a study

examining the relationship between malleable racial identity and psychological well-being among 159 adult self-identified multiracial adults, Shih, Sanchaz, and Garcia (2009), found that racial malleability predicted greater depressive symptoms. However, the authors note a limitation of the study is that their measure may capture other constructs related to racial malleability. Given that participants in the current study reported their expressed racial identity may change based upon their assessment of mood and the intention of the other person, this further suggests that the concept of malleable racial identity may be better conceptualized as a coping strategy for managing the discomfort of having their racial identity invalidated. Similarly, choosing to make others guess their race or being “intentionally obtuse” in response to questions about their racial background appears to be a unique method of coping with these interactions which has not been identified elsewhere in the literature. This finding is fascinating in that demonstrates a unique way in which multiracial people navigate the unpleasant experience of being questioned about their race. Rather than simply avoiding the situation by providing a straightforward answer, making a person guess one’s race places the discomfort back on the shoulders of the asker, allowing the multiracial person to take back a sense of power. It would be interesting for future research to further explore other coping strategies multiracial people employ in these situations and they are effective in managing negative emotions associated with having one’s racial identity unvalidated.

### **Factors Believed to Contribute to Racial Miscategorization**

Participants indicated that having a racially ambiguous appearance and physical features, racial diversity in the area, and the personal experiences and attitudes of others

are all contributing factors to being racially miscategorized. While these findings are unsurprising, they provide further evidence that to fully understand the phenomenon of racial miscategorization and the complexities of multiracial identity. More research is needed to explore the influence of environment and society's perceptions about racially ambiguous phenotypes of multiracial individuals.

### **Summary**

The findings of this study suggest that racially ambiguous multiracial individuals frequently experience racial miscategorization and questions about their racial background beginning at an early age and these experiences have a negative impact on self-esteem, sense of belonging and general well-being. Moreover, these experiences appear to have prompted a period of racial exploration in which participants made efforts to educate themselves about their different cultures, race and racial discrimination. Although experiences of racial miscategorization were found to be negative, these experiences also appeared to strengthen participants' multiracial identity and foster resiliency in managing future experiences of racial miscategorization. Additionally, racial miscategorization and being questioned about racial background appeared to be best conceptualized as forms of identity invalidation. Moreover, the concept of racial malleability, or the ability to change one's racial identification across situations and environments appears to be better conceptualized as a strategy for navigating multiple identities rather than an identity choice, as proposed in some models of multiracial identity development. Finally, a unique finding of the current study was the coping strategies of making people guess or being "intentionally obtuse" in response to being questioned about their racial background.

## **Limitations**

As with all research, some limitations should be considered in the current study. A major limitation of the study is the wide diversity of the multiracial population, which lends itself to difficulty in generalizing the results to the broader multiracial population. Similarly, the sample size was small ( $N = 11$ ) and overrepresented by women ( $N = 9$ ), which also may also lead to difficulty in generalizing the results to the broader multiracial population and multiracial men. Another potential limitation that must be acknowledged is the sample was somewhat selective in that several participants were recruited on the Internet through multiracial interest groups. Thus, it is likely many participants strongly identified with their multiracial identity, thus possibly leading to a biased sample.

Additionally, it is possible the primary investigator unintentionally influenced both data collection and analysis, as compared with standard CQR methodology. The primary investigator completed all interviews, transcribed all data, and served as the leader in all phases of the data analysis, as part of the dissertation process. Not only does the process lend itself to potential bias, the topic was personal to the primary investigator who identifies as a multiracial individual. Team consensus was reached regarding the analysis at all stages, however the primary investigator could have further consulted with the team members and auditor more frequently about the presence of potential bias. Notably, all team members, including the primary investigator, openly discussed personal biases regarding the topic of study prior to data analysis in an effort to negate any potential influence the researchers' biases might have had on the data.

## **Implications**

The results of the current study yielded a number of implications for multiracial identity development, well-being of multiracial individuals, and future research which are discussed in the following sections.

**Models of multiracial identity development.** Much of the early research (Parks, 1928; Stonequist, 1937; Root, 1990, 1992, 1996, 1998, 2003, 2005; Thornton, 1996; Herring, 1995; Poston, 1990; Jacobs, 1992; Rockquemore, 1999; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2003) on multiracial identity focused on establishing theories of multiracial identity development that accurately captured the challenges and differences faced by multiracial people. Over the last few decades research has sought to determine whether having a multiracial identity is associated with positive or negative psychological outcomes, however findings have been inconsistent, with some research poor psychological outcomes compared to monoracial peers (Gibbs, 1998; Lyles, Yancy, Grace & Carter, 1985; McRoy & Freeman, 1986; Pinderhughes, 1995) while others found multiracial individuals had similar (Bracey, Bamaca, & Umana-Taylor, 2004; Herman, 2004) or better outcomes than monoracial peers (Sanchez & Shih, 2004). The current study provides support for Rockquemore and colleagues' (2009) call to the field to move towards a more integrative conceptualization of multiracial identity, which equally considers the role of society's perceptions of multiracial people on multiracial identity development.

The field has also seen an increase in research seeking to better understand the concept of a malleable racial identity (Doyle & Kao, 2007; Harris and Sim, 2002; Hitlin,

Brown & Elder, 2006; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002; Root, 1990, 1996) and associated psychological outcomes (Sanchez, Shih, & Garcia, 2009), however there is a paucity of literature exploring what factors influence the identity choices of multiracial people and why those choices change (Pedrotti & Edwards, 2008). The current study helps fill an important gap in the literature by identifying that participants' family relationships, exposure to racial diversity, and most importantly, society's perception of participants' race are factors that influenced racial identity choices over time and across certain situations. These findings help fill this gap in the literature, however more research is needed to further explore how these factors influence identity choices.

**Multiracial Identity and Well-being.** As mentioned above, existing literature on psychological outcomes associated with having a multiracial identity and has yielded inconsistent results (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). While this study does not provide conclusive evidence as to whether having a multiracial identity leads to positive or negative psychological outcomes, the findings provide further insight into experiences that negatively impact the well-being of multiracial individuals, including the experience of racial miscategorization. Moreover, the results found that all participants experienced a period of racial exploration prompted by ongoing experiences of having their racial identity invalidated, in which they sought to educate themselves about their racial heritage and the implications of race itself. Perhaps it is through this experience of self-motivated racial exploration that participants gained the positive effects they associated with racial ambiguity and racial miscategorization, such as greater tolerance and acceptance of other cultures and a stronger multiracial identity. Others have found similar outcomes such as greater openness to other cultures and the ability to move easily

between different racial groups (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). While it is unknown if this path of early negative experience to later reframing and resilience is something that all individuals undergo, the findings from the current study suggest it is a process that can be further explored in future research.

**Future research.** The results of this study have several implications for future research. Due to the small sample size and qualitative methodology, reexamining the current findings using quantitative methodology would be useful to determine whether the results can be generalized to the larger multiracial population. For example, using examples of racial miscategorization described in the current study, future researchers could create a survey to explore how multiracial people might identify in different scenarios, such as when they are miscategorized by someone believing the participant belongs to their racial group, or when they are miscategorized as monoracial to a racial group to which they do not belong. Alternatively, future researchers may choose a mixed method approach to the aforementioned suggestion to allow participants to provide an explanation of why they identify differently in different scenarios.

Additionally, the sample included only two males, thus future research should seek a more balanced gender pool of participants, as it is possible that men and women experience and cope with racial miscategorization differently. Further qualitative research exploring potential gender differences in experiences of racial miscategorization is warranted given that the male participants in this study reported being racially profiled by the police. Since this experience is more likely to happen to males, it would be valuable to know how this and other situations influence identity.

The current study found that although racial miscategorization and invalidated racial identity experiences are negative to well-being throughout childhood and adolescence, they lead to greater resiliency in adulthood despite remaining an unpleasant experience. Future qualitative studies are needed to explore how multiracial people process and reframe experiences of invalidated racial identity such as racial miscategorization and questioning about one's racial background, to help identify specific strategies (e.g., humor) to better foster healthy racial identity and resilience in multiracial youth. Additionally, future studies could examine society's perceptions of multiracial individuals to add to this emerging body of research (Chen & Hamilton, 2011; Feliciano, 2016; Young, Wilton, & Sanchez, 2017) and future studies should further explore how multiracial people process and reframe experiences of racial miscategorization to help identify specific strategies to better foster healthy racial identity and resilience in multiracial youth.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, the findings from the current study provide insight into experiences of racial miscategorization, and how these experiences negatively impact well-being and positively impact multiracial identity development. The study also helps fill an important gap in the literature by shedding light upon factors that influence the identity choices of multiracial individuals and changes in racial identity. The study also provides further evidence to suggest that racial malleability may be used as coping strategy for experiences of identity invalidation and that models of multiracial identity development must be expanded to include the impact of how multiracial individuals are perceived by

others. Moreover, the current study found that experiences of racial identity invalidation (i.e. racial miscategorization and questioning about racial background) prompted exploration of one's racial heritage and understanding of race.

In closing, this dissertation supports Rockquemore and colleagues' (2009) call to the field of the need expand our conceptualization of multiracial identity development to include the impact environmental and social factors to gain a clearer understanding of the process of developing a healthy racial identity. In addition, this project supports the need for further research into how multiracial individuals cope with experiences of racial identity invalidation, particularly the concept of racial malleability as a mechanism of navigating these experiences.

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## Appendix A

### Letter to Potential Participants

Dear <Name of Participant>:

My name is Shirley Newcomb, and I am a fourth-year doctoral student in counseling psychology at Marquette University. I am currently seeking volunteers to participate in my dissertation research examining racial miscategorization, racial incongruence and racial identity development of racially ambiguous multiracial individuals.

As a person of mixed raced heritage and racially ambiguous features, you have the opportunity to contribute to the growing body of research related to multiracial identity development and well-being. The study has been reviewed and approved by Marquette University's Institutional Review Board. Participation in this study involves 2 audiotaped, telephone interviews. The first interview will take about 45 to 60 minutes; the second interview is scheduled for approximately 2 weeks after the first and will take about 15 minutes.

The focus of the interviews will be on your personal experiences of being racially miscategorized (i.e. having others racially identify you differently than you identify yourself), your reactions and feelings towards these events, and your racial identity development as part of a research study that seeks to gain a deeper understanding of this unique experience. I have included/attached the interview protocol so that you can see the questions participants will be asked. Tapes, as well as the resulting transcripts and data, will be assigned a code number to protect your confidentiality; after transcription, tapes will be erased.

I recognize that there is a slight chance that talking about your experiences of racial miscategorization and multiracial identity development may be uncomfortable, and I am grateful for your willingness to do so. Participation in this project is strictly voluntary, and you may withdraw your consent at any time without penalty.

If you choose to participate, please complete the enclosed/attached Consent and Demographic forms as soon as possible, and return them either to the email address listed below or in the enclosed stamped envelope. I will then contact you to set up a time for an initial interview. As noted above, I have also included the interview protocol so that you may make fully informed consent. Please take a look at these questions prior to your first interview so that you have had a chance to reflect on your experiences. If you do not meet the criteria for participation, I would be grateful if you would pass this request along to a colleague who might be interested in participating.

Appreciatively,

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Appendix B  
Informed Consent

**Marquette University Agreement of Consent for Research Participants**

When I sign this statement, I am giving consent to the following considerations: I understand that the purpose of this study titled, “The Impact of Racial Miscategorization and Racial Incongruence on Multiracial Identity Development and Well Being: A Qualitative Study” is to gain an in-depth understanding of the personal experiences of racial incongruence, racial miscategorization, and racial identity development as experienced by racially ambiguous multiracials.

I understand that the study involves 2 audiotaped phone interviews, with the first interview lasting 45-60 minutes. The second interview, scheduled for approximately 2 weeks after the first, will take an additional 10-15 minutes. I also understand that there will be approximately 10-15 participants in this study. I understand that the interviews involve a discussion of my personal experiences of being racially miscategorized (i.e. having others racially identify you differently than you identify yourself), my reactions and feelings towards these events, and my racial identity development and that I will also be asked to complete a brief demographic form.

I understand that all information I share in this study will be kept confidential and data associated with me will be assigned a code number rather than using my name or any other identifying information. I understand I will not be identified by name when the study results are written. I recognize that data will be destroyed by shredding paper documents and deleting electronic files three years after the completion of the study. Furthermore, I understand that my interviews will be audiotaped and that the tapes will be transcribed and erased upon the completion of the study.

I understand that the risks associated with participation in this study may include minor discomfort when talking about my experiences of racial incongruence, racial miscategorization, and racial identity development, but are expected to be minimal. I understand that study participation is completely voluntary and that I may withdraw from participating in this study at any time. If I do choose to withdraw, I understand that I may do so without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. In the event that I withdraw, I understand that all data collected prior to my terminating participation in the study will be destroyed.

All of my questions about this study have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that if I later have additional questions concerning this project, I can contact Shirley A. Newcomb, M.A. at (414)477-6725 ([shirley.newcomb@marquette.edu](mailto:shirley.newcomb@marquette.edu)) or Lisa M. Edwards, PhD (Dissertation Advisor) at (414)288-1433 ([lisa.edwards@marquette.edu](mailto:lisa.edwards@marquette.edu)). Additional information about my rights as a research participant can be obtained from Marquette University's Office of Research Compliance at (414)288-1479.

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
(signature of subject giving consent)

\_\_\_\_\_ Location: \_\_\_\_\_  
(signature of researcher)

Appendix C  
Demographic Form

Please answer the questions below in preparation for our interview. Feel free to provide additional comments about any questions:

Code Number (to be completed by researcher): \_\_\_\_\_

Age:                      Sex:

Race(s)/Ethnicity(ies):

Have you ever racially identified yourself differently than you do now?

Comments:

Race/Ethnicity of parents:    Mother                                  Father

As you know, this study is about experiences you have had when others have mistaken you as belonging to a racial or ethnic group to which you do not identify. How often/frequently have you experienced this?

Daily \_\_\_\_    Weekly \_\_\_\_    Monthly \_\_\_\_

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

Please rate your well-being (life satisfaction, etc.) after experiences of being racially miscategorized.

Poor \_\_\_\_    Fair \_\_\_\_    Good \_\_\_\_    Very Good \_\_\_\_

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

Please rate your overall well-being (life satisfaction, etc.).

Poor \_\_\_\_    Fair \_\_\_\_    Good \_\_\_\_    Very Good \_\_\_\_

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

For the purposes contacting you regarding participation in this study, please provide the following information.

Name:                      Phone number:

Mailing Address:

Email Address:

Best possible days/times to schedule first 60-minute interview:

## Appendix D

### Interview Protocol

Thank you very much for your participation in this research on racial ambiguity, racial miscategorization and racial incongruence.

As a reminder, participants must be at least 25 years of age, have experiences of racial miscategorization and racial incongruence as described above, and be described as racially ambiguous.

Your responses will be kept confidential by assigning a code number and deleting any identifiers.

1. What are some experiences you had growing up related to being multiracial?
2. How do you identify racially?
  - a. Does your racial identity ever change or has it ever changed?
3. How has your physical appearance impacted the way people identify you?
  - a. How about the way you identify yourself?
  - b. How has being racially ambiguous (i.e. difficult to racially categorize) impacted your experiences of being incorrectly identified?
4. Tell me about your experiences of being racially identified differently than how you identify yourself?
  - a. How did this/these experience(s) make you feel?
  - b. Have these experiences of being identified incorrectly impacted you in any way?
  - c. How do you react when you are identified incorrectly?
  - d. What impacts your decision to correct people or not?
5. How, if at all, have these experiences of being identified incorrectly influenced the way you view yourself racially?
6. What has been your experience of this interview?
7. Is there anything else you would like to discuss about this topic?
8. How was this interview for you?

## Appendix E

## Letter for Participants Regarding Results

Dear <Participant>,

Some time ago, as part of my dissertation research, I interviewed you regarding your personal experiences of being racially miscategorized (i.e. having others racially identify you differently than you identify yourself), your reactions and feelings towards these events, and your racial identity development. Thank you again for your willingness to participate. As you may recall, as part of your participation in my study “The Impact of Racial Miscategorization and Racial Incongruence on Multiracial Identity Development and Well Being: A Qualitative Study,” you have the option to provide feedback on the results

Attached you will find a copy of the Results and Discussion sections of my dissertation. This has been sent so that you may comment on the degree to which the collective results match your individual experience(s). It is also sent to ensure that your confidentiality has been maintained. If you have comments or feel that your confidentiality has not been protected, please respond to this email and let me know which portions of the write-up need to be altered. I would be grateful for your response by [two weeks from date of email]. If I do not hear from you, I will assume that you have no additional feedback. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. Alternatively, you may contact my advisor, Dr. Lisa M. Edwards. Thank you again for your participation.

Appreciatively,

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