

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Christine LeAnn Mouzong for the degree of Master of Science in Human Development and Family Studies presented on June 11, 2008.

Title: "I'm the Best of Both Worlds" Factors Influencing the Racial Identities of Biracial Youth

Abstract approved

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Samuel Vuchinich

This study examined the social and contextual factors that lead to differences in the way biracial adolescents interpret their racial identity. Using 11 interviews with a sample of biracial youth between the ages of 14 and 17-years-old, this study also explores the strategies these individuals use to achieve social validation for their preferred racial self-understanding. Theoretically, the factors shaping identity construction and the strategies used to negotiate identity are studied through both a bioecological model and a symbolic interactionist framework.

The findings from this study provide new insights into adolescent biracial identity that involve issues ranging from cultural racism to the impact of video media on adolescent development. The main themes emerging from youth narratives suggest that four primary factors shape how biracial youth understand and reconcile their racial identities. First, *community messages* about race define the parameters of adolescents' racial identity options. Secondly, social meanings attached to *physical appearance* play a pivotal role in how racial identities are understood by self and others. Thirdly, *peer endorsements of color-based stereotypes*, especially those derived from popular media images of Black entertainers, are crucial to how these adolescents frame their racial

identity options. Lastly, *racial socialization in the familial context* provides an important, though often ambiguous, piece to biracial identity formation.

As well, four strategies surfaced in this study that biracial adolescents appear to use when negotiating identity claims in interactions with others. These strategies include *compromise, evoking mixed parentage, emotion regulation, and using humor*.

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“I’m the Best of Both Worlds” Factors Influencing the Racial Identities of Biracial Youth

by

Christine LeAnn Mouzong

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Christine LeAnn Mouzong, Author

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## DEDICATIONS

This work is dedicated to my mother and father who have always been there for me.

To my father, who passed away while I was in the process of writing this thesis; your energetic readings of Pat McManus novels when I was a kid helped inspire my love of language. You were a devoted dad who understood the importance of family and passed that knowledge along to your children. You are deeply missed.

To my mom, the force of nature who keeps my world spinning; mothers like you are the reason girls know that they can do anything.

# “I’m the Best of Both Worlds” Factors Influencing the Racial Identities of Biracial Youth

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

The color line in America is slowly changing. Though as recently as three decades ago individuals born into mixed-race families were likely to be assigned the racial identity of their lower status parent, (Dalmage, 2003), this practice is no longer taken for granted. Today, in part as a result of significant growth in the rate of interracial marriages and the consequent increase in the multiracial population in the United States, there has been renewed pressure on society to reconsider existing racial classifications (Hitlin, Elder & Brown, 2006; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005). These expanded racial classifications mean that biracial and multiracial individuals have more choice in how they define their racial identity, options that allow them the freedom to celebrate the diversity of their backgrounds. But for mixed-race adolescents facing the already daunting task of identity development, these expanded identity options may represent either a broadening of possibilities, or an additional hurdle in the path to a cohesive racial/ethnic identity (Qian, 2004).

### *Purpose of Study*

In this study I examine how biracial youth negotiate their in-between status to clear this hurdle, given the collective meanings about race and ethnicity that are available in their communities (Blumer, 1969). I define the terms “biracial,” “multiracial,” and “mixed-race” as having one White and one non-White biological parent, definitions that are all accepted and used interchangeably in the literature (e.g., Bratter, 2007; Dalmage, 2003; Hitlin, Brown, & Elder, 2006; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). Based on the

theoretical assumption that the shared understandings in the community of what it means to be a person who belongs to a particular racial or ethnic group may either ameliorate a biracial adolescent's emerging racial self-understandings or present a barrier to this process (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005), I analyzed the narratives of 11 biracial youth who participated in focused interviews to gain new insights into this process.

### *Background*

Pinpointing the strategies that adolescents employ to clear this hurdle is often a task that requires a qualitative approach to capture the complexity of the process. The accounts that we can most readily access in our society to illustrate this phenomenon, though not based on qualitative case-studies, can be found among the stars of our popular culture. Take for example the very conspicuous cases of celebrity golfer Tiger Woods and Senator Barak Obama. When Tiger Woods appeared on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* in 1997, he raised eyebrows when he explained that he “was bothered” by attempts to characterize his race as “African American.” Instead, he explained, he preferred to refer to himself as, “Cablinasian,” a term that he had created to encompass his affiliation with all the racial/ethnic groups represented within his family heritage (Caucasian, Black, Indian, and Asian). As the son of a Thai mother and an African American father, Tiger Woods serves as a prominent example of those who choose to eschew the previous federally recognized racial categories in favor of other descriptors that incorporate what they see as a new and more complex racial identity (Rothman, 2005).

Others, like Senator Barak Obama, choose a single race identifier—in his case as African American—to express their racial identity. As he describes in his memoir, *Dreams from My Father* (1994), Obama, born to a White mother and a Kenyan father,

went through a process of long deliberation and confusion concerning the two aspects of his heritage; on the one hand his feelings of loyalty to the White mother and grandparents who raised him in the absence of his father, and on the other his sympathy for the plight of African Americans and their undervalued status in the United States (Obama, 1994). His case is representative of those who decide to settle for a standard racial categorization, either because they believe that their physical appearance marks them as a member of that group, or, as in Obama's case, for more symbolic reasons.

An even more enlightening aspect of these cases, beyond the racial identities that each man chose, is the fact that for them, and for other biracial and multiracial individuals in America, the very act of choosing an identity—choosing either to camp out on one side or the other of the color line, choosing to straddle the line, or even pretending it doesn't exist—can have polarizing social consequences. Wood's public dismissal of the "African American" label, for example, was in equal portions considered a stride in the right direction by the multiracial movement, and criticized as being an attempt to distance himself from the African American population; he was seen as both a poster-boy for multiracialism by some, and as a "sellout" by many in the African American community (Rothman, 2005). Similarly, in Obama's case, though his interest in representing the African American population has been noted, others in the media attempt to make him more acceptable to mainstream America by invoking the "White" half of his heritage.

Even the push by a visible cohort of individuals who form the multiracial movement (Root, 1998), demanding separate group recognition for multiracial individuals in the U.S. Census, has been scrutinized as being largely influenced by the interests of White, middleclass mothers on behalf of their mixed-race children. These

mothers are thought to be "... arguing for a separate status for their children in the socio-racial hierarchy" ( Rockquemore, 1998). In this view, a separate status for multiracial individuals would afford them a higher status than their non-White parent, but not as high a status as their White parent. It seems that the newfound freedom for those from mixed-racial heritage to racially self-identify is not without a price. Though the cases of Woods and Obama are set on a national stage, the controversy created because of the ambiguous nature of their racial identities is likely also a reality shared by other multiracial individuals in this country.

### *Historical Context*

Though, as the previous examples illustrate, the multiracial movement has gained momentum in the popular, political, and scholarly fronts since the 1990's, (Root, 1998), it is not a new phenomenon. Even before they were publicly acknowledged as such, mixed-race people have been a continued feature of race relations throughout American history. Perhaps the most poignant example of this were the mixed race children who resulted from the rape of Black female slaves by plantation owners in the pre-bellum south (Rockquemore, 2002). Though by today's shifting racial categories these children might be considered multiracial, at that time it was impossible for them to claim an ethnic identity as anything other than Black. The legal and cultural expectations were that these individuals would develop an exclusively Black identity according to the societal norm known colloquially as the "one-drop rule" (Herman, 2007; Root, 1998). This rule, also known as the "rule of hypodescent," was thought to have first been articulated in legal terms during the Jim Crow era, and dictated that the presence of even a single drop of non-White blood, a hint of non-White features, or proof of non-White lineage, would

relegate the race of such individuals to that of their lower-status parent (Rockquemore & Brunson, 2002). This rule proved to be longstanding, echoing the devalued status of people of color and their tumultuous relationship with those in White, mainstream America for the better part of the Twentieth Century.

One of the most promising signs of the shifting color lines came in 2000, when, for the first time, the U.S. Census formally recognized the efforts of the multiracial movement by allowing individuals to choose more than a single race identifier. According to this census, 2.4% of total respondents reported two or more races. Of this group, the age group most likely to select more than one racial category, representing 42% of the multiracial population, were children and adolescents under the age of 18 (Qian, 2004). Not only do these data represent a significant shift in the color lines and categorization of multiracial individuals, but they also serve as evidence that today's youth are more aware than previous generations that the once rigid color line has become more porous and elastic.

Though research on multiracial individuals has gained momentum over recent years, (Root, 1996; Rockquemore, 1998; Herman, 2004), there is still much to be learned about the process of racial/ethnic identification among this population and the factors that shape their identity choices. Among the most salient of these questions is the issue of how multiracial youth negotiate their in-between status in society. Regardless of the particular racial/ethnic identity these youth claim, (be it Black, White, Asian, Hispanic, or a blended identity), they must negotiate with others to gain validation for a particular self-understanding within their social context (Rockquemore, 2002). Whether they encounter rejection or validation for their chosen identity in turn shapes how they

perceive, and later present, themselves. Understanding how this cyclical process emerges as a stable identity during this stage of development is thought to be of particular importance for this age group. Early work in identity development (Erikson, 1968), and more recent work focusing on minority and multiracial youth (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005; Yuh, 2005), has recognized that establishing a cohesive sense of self during adolescence can be tied to developmental outcomes such as self-esteem and psychological well-being, which will continue to affect individuals throughout the life course.

### *Research Questions*

In this study, I addressed the following questions: (1) How do the prevailing understandings of race and ethnicity in communities, what sociologists have termed “the local availability of identity options,” (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005), affect the racial identification processes of multiracial youth? (2) What factors, such as relationships with families and experiences with peers, shape the racial identity choices of multiracial youth? and, (3) How do multiracial youth gain social validation for their racial self-understandings? Though these questions have been addressed in other studies (e.g. Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002), the existing research on this topic is slim. I add to this emerging body of work by providing new insights into how biracial youth make meaning of their experiences in various social contexts to form a cohesive sense of self.

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature and Theory Review

The process of racial identity formation is seldom straight-forward for biracial youth. Given the complex history of racial classification within the United States, these individuals often face challenges in trying to reconcile their in-between social status and the salience of race to their self-understanding. In this chapter, I first discuss the theoretical perspectives used to conceptualize this developmental process and to frame the central questions in this study. Then, I review literature on identity development and factors such as community, family, peers, and individual characteristics thought to shape the process of racial identity formation among biracial youth.

#### *Symbolic Interaction*

A symbolic interactionist framework is particularly well suited to conceptualize the process of identity formation and how particular self-understandings are negotiated within the social context. At the heart of this perspective is the assertion that the meanings we have for objects and symbols are socially constructed. That is, rather than meanings being inherent in the objects or symbols themselves, the interpretations we construct for objects and symbols in our environment are learned. The way we understand social processes, the way we interpret human behavior, and the meanings we assign to symbols are all created in the process of interaction between people (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). The social interactions that characterize the human experience in society ensure that meanings are shared, transmitted to future generations, and occasionally reconstructed.

*Self-concept and identity.* This perspective also contends that people are socially created in that they develop a concept of self and identity through interaction with others (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). For the purposes of this study, the identity models used to understand racial identification process for biracial youth rest on three classic assumptions of symbolic interactionism: (1) we act toward things based on the meanings that we have for them, (2) meanings arise from shared interpretations that produce a common response in us and in others, and (3) meanings are modified through social interaction (Blumer, 1969). Conflict arises when the meanings we have assigned to something differ from the meanings others assign to the same symbol or object. For this reason, one might be required to negotiate with others in order to receive validation for a particular self-understanding. The term “local availability of identity options,” on which one of the central questions of this study is based, captures the idea that individuals’ agency in selecting their own identity may be limited to the collective meanings assigned to their skin color and physical features by others in their community (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005).

*Individuals as social actors.* Within the symbolic interactionist framework, individuals are often compared to actors on a stage. As social actors, we “perform” for an audience, often referred to as the “generalized other” (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). This theory, more than any other, underscores the importance of how events and symbols are interpreted by actors (Klein & White, 1996). To understand social behavior, or the “performance” delivered by the actor, we must first understand the meanings and importance that actors assign to the situation or symbol. The concept of “identities” falls under the category of symbols, as understandings we have of ourselves in a particular

role. As sociologist Kerry Rockquemore (1998) describes it, “An individual cannot have a realized identity without others who validate that identity.” The understanding that individuals have of themselves as members of different and varying communities can only be actualized when that understanding is validated and mirrored by others.

Though identities cannot be fully actualized without the validation of others, the social actor exercises some degree of agency in the importance given to a particular self-understanding. Identities are usually organized in a hierarchical fashion, depending on their relative salience to the individual. As described by White and Burke (1987), building on Stryker’s (1980) role theory, ethnic identity is a part of a process linking three related concepts: (1) *identity salience*, which is the probability of an identity being invoked in a given situation or in a variety of situations, (2) *commitment* to the identity, and (3) *role-specific self-esteem*, or the evaluation of one’s self in terms of a particular identity. Generally, the more importance one assigns to a particular identity, the more motivated one will be to excel in roles related to that identity.

Although the social actor may be said to exercise agency in developing this hierarchy, it is strongly influenced by social norms and expectations. For multiracial youth, race/ethnic identity remains particularly salient because race is still largely considered a “master status,” which along with age and gender, is an identity that trumps other presentations of self on the public stage (Herman, 2004). Social scientists also assert that ethnic identity is particularly important to the self-concept and psychological functioning of ethnic group members (Phinney, 1990). In terms of this study, I am interested in how multiracial youth perceive their racial identity options, not only the label they give to describe their race/ethnicity when asked to place themselves according

to federally defined categories. This idea of perceiving identity options include individuals' level of certainty about their membership within various groups, given how membership within these groups is largely defined and understood within their community. The symbolic interactionist framework provides the necessary tools to conceptualize such questions about identity.

### *Bioecological Perspective*

The social interactions that shape our understandings of self occur within a particular context. Contextual factors, both the physical setting and the interactions that occur between the individuals inhabiting that setting, are integral to the process of human development. To answer questions about how contextual factors shape multiracial individual's identity development, this study employs Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Bronfenbrenner's framework describes the relationship between developmental processes and different levels of context that interact to provide constancy and change in characteristics of individuals over the life course.

*Proximal processes.* The first of these, *Process*, is particularly salient for the purposes of this study because it encompasses the idea that significant others, such as parents and peers, by virtue of their proximity to the adolescents in question, continuously interact with them and influence certain areas of their development. In this case, they influence developing individuals' racial/ethnic identity development. The term *Proximal processes*, used interchangeably with *Process*, refers to interactions between the individual and the persons, objects, or symbols in his environment. These interactions operate over time and exert the most influence over the individual's development. The

more frequent and sustained the exchange the more vital to developmental outcomes of the individual (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

In the case of the multiracial adolescent developing a racial or ethnic self-understanding, this proximal process might consist of frequent communication with parents, during which time parents address the challenges that the adolescent is facing during the process of developing a cohesive racial identity, or discussions that take place with the developing individual and parents or peers after viewing a movie depicting racism.

These exchanges must also become “increasingly more complex” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), in order to continue to promote development in the individual. This concept may help explain why some adolescents are more influenced by interactions with peers regarding certain topics if, for example, the complexity of conversations with peers continue to evolve but conversations with parents around the same topic grow stagnant.

*Person factors.* Characteristics of individuals that affect their development account for the *Person* factors in this model. Though person factors include behavioral dispositions, bioecological resources, and demand characteristics, the factor of most relevance to this study is the demand characteristic of physical appearance. Demand characteristics are those that invite others in the environment to react positively to the individual, or which discourage positive reactions toward the developing person. The classic example of this characteristic is of the smiling, pleasant infant who invites adults to cuddle and play with him, and the fussy, stiff baby who discourages positive attention from adults (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The often ambiguous physical features of many biracial individuals can be conceived as operating in much

the same way, either to encourage or discourage particular exchanges in their environment. Ambiguous features may demand different interactions from peers, strangers, and even parents, than exchanges experienced by individuals whose physical characteristics are more easily placed within socially recognized categories of race. These differences in reactions individuals solicit may have varying effects on the salience of race and ethnicity to their self-understandings.

*Context.* The exchanges that characterize proximal processes occur within various social contexts. *Contexts* include the settings, both immediate and more distal, in which the proximal processes take place. In this model, the more immediate settings are referred to as *microsystems* and the more distal settings are either *exosystems*, or *macrosystems*, depending on the level of interaction between the child and persons or objects in those more distal settings. A child or adolescent growing up in a single-parent household, for example, will experience a different *microsystem* setting than a child growing up in a dual-parent household.

Developing individuals are also influenced by linkages between the persons, symbols, or objects in their immediate settings. These connections, or *mesosystems*, refer to relations between and among two or more systems which overlap and may either be complementary or conflicting in terms of the practices they espouse for the developing individual. For example, biracial youth may experience complementary or conflicting messages about the relevance of race to their identity from parents, peers, and teachers in the home or school settings.

The more distal *exosystem* and *macrosystem* also affect the developing individual, though individuals may not directly experience these settings. For youth, exosystems generally include settings that their parents experience, such as parent's places of work or

social networks, which may indirectly influence the developing individual. The *macrosystem*, then would be the cultural norms, prevalent societal attitudes about race and ethnicity, and governmental policies that may affect the individual, but also usually indirectly. Of all of settings in the bioecological model, the *microsystem* is thought to be the most important because the majority of the proximal processes that shape development occur at this level (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

*Time.* The element of *Time* is intimately intertwined with the other elements mentioned in the bioecological model, in how it operates to influence the development of the individual. *Time*, in this model, operates on three different dimensions: (1) *microtime*, which includes the concepts of steadiness or unsteadiness, and stability or change within the microsystem; (2) *mesotime*, which is conceptualized in terms of how often exchanges, or proximal processes, occur across days, weeks, months, and years; and (3) *macrotime*, which encompasses the notion that historical events or movements, such as the Great Depression, the Civil Rights movements, or in the case of this study, changes in racial categories on the U.S. Census, will affect the development of individuals differently when they occur at different developmental stages of the individual's lives. The concept of *macrotime* has particular relevance to this study considering that "multiracial movement," (Root, 1998), is a relatively recent phenomenon. The bioecological framework suggests that changes over time are producers of change, as well as products of change (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

In its entirety, the bioecological model is useful for explaining developmental processes which are complex and bi-directional, and whose main effects include multiple variables which are likely to be interactive. Although it can be argued that the variability

in adolescents' self-understandings about race and ethnicity can stem from influences on more than one level of the systems described by the bioecological model, this study focuses on a relatively small area within that larger framework. The concepts of proximal processes, person characteristics, and time, are most pertinent to this study because they are likely the contextual factors of which multiracial individuals are most aware, and those that they can best able to describe and articulate in their narratives.

*Summary.* Though each offers unique insights, the two theories used in this study are compatible frameworks for assessing the questions central to this study. Pairing symbolic interactionist perspective with the bioecological model allows a broader understanding of the meaning-making process that occurs within each context, where situational influences are translated into interpretation and social action (Swanson et al., 2003). The integration of these two perspectives acknowledges the argument that the most useful definition of context is one framed in terms of interaction: *contextualizing*, rather than just *context*, to describe a dynamic process rather than a static influence. Because the identity formation process requires the adolescent to make meaning of exchanges and interactions that occur within different contexts, it makes sense to bring these two theoretical frameworks together to provide a more nuanced account of this developmental process.

This study examines factors that shape the racial identity options of biracial youth. In addition, I investigate the process by which biracial youth make meaning of their experiences and interactions in a various social contexts to achieve validation for their self-understandings. In the remainder of this chapter I provide a detailed review of

what is known in the literature about racial identity formation among biracial youth and the social determinants of this process.

### *Adolescent Identity development*

While early developmental researchers like Erikson (1968) were concerned with the development of a personal identity during adolescence, that is, how adolescents achieve a clarification of who they will be in the future, social psychologists are more interested in individuals' feelings of belonging to a group (Tajfel, 1982; Pahl & Way, 2006; French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2006). Identity development in the social-psychological literature has been described as the process of defining oneself as a member of different and varying sized communities (Zack, 1993; Umana-Taylor, Yazedjian, & Bamaca-Gomez, 2004). As French et al. (2006) suggest, "Social psychologists have focused on the negotiation of one's social identity in the broader context of the value society has placed on one's group membership." For those who belong to highly valued groups, there may be no need to try to modify or enhance their identity; but for members of devalued groups, achieving validation for the meaning of a particular identity may require a process of negotiation. In the United States, people of color are generally considered to be members of devalued groups (French et al. 2006).

### *Race and Ethnicity*

As members of devalued groups, individuals of color are thought to have additional developmental challenges not shared by their White peers. In their proposal for a new conceptual model to frame studies of child development in minority populations, Garcia Coll et al. (1996) assert that "There is no theoretical or empirical reason to assume that individual primary developmental processes operate differently for

children of color than for Caucasian children in Western society” (p. 1893). The differences that researchers often find in the outcomes (i.e. academic achievement and self-esteem) between children of color and their White peers are often attributed to varying ecological circumstances, not collective differences in individual characteristics (Garcia Coll et al. 1996). Among the most pervasive of these ecological influences on children of color is the prevalence of racism in society.

Although there is evidence that race relations in the United States are improving, the emphasis often placed on race in this country continues to have consequences for individuals of color. There are two prevailing definitions of race. One, the mainstream definition of race, has historically been one based on biological differences. For example UNESCO’s (1996) definition of race as “...a group or population characterized by some concentration, relative as to frequency and distribution, or hereditary particles (genes) or physical characters, which appear to fluctuate, and often disappear in the course of time by reason of geographic and/or cultural isolation” (Garcia Coll et al. 1996). The definition of race most often embraced by scholars, one that debunks the biological definition of race, is that race is a socially constructed concept: it is a concept invented by participants in a particular society that continues to hold sway because people agree to behave as though it exists (Swanson et al., 2003). Although there is no “real,” biological basis for race, it continues to have very real consequences for individuals who, according to dominant systems of meaning, are members of devalued groups. Membership within the various racial groups that comprise our society is usually decided based on phenotypic traits—features such as skin color, hair texture, and facial features. For children of mixed-racial heritage, ambiguous physical features often make placement

within a particular racial category complicated, and make the normative process of establishing a stable racial identity more difficult. Understanding the social cues used for racial classification in our society is important to understanding the racial identification of biracial youth.

Though racial identity and ethnic identity are often used interchangeably in the literature, some scholars argue that they should be defined more carefully by researchers in the area (Garcia Coll et al. 1996; Swanson et al, 2003). As previously explained, *race* is generally understood to refer to perceptions of observable phenotype, while *ethnicity* refers to cultural heritage (Swanson et al, 2003). Studies interested in how the culturally specific experiences of Mexican Americans and Cuban Americans affect outcomes for each group, for example, might be more interested in ethnic identity, while studies interested in the experiences both groups share with racial stereotyping would be more interested in racial identity (Swanson et al, 2003). However, as these scholars point out, adolescents may perceive their own racial and ethnic identity as interchangeable, their consequences interwoven, which validates the argument for using them as linked concepts in the research. As the study at hand is interested in how their mixed race backgrounds affect the racial and ethnic identities of multiracial adolescents—how their phenotypes are “read” by others in their social context as well as how their cultural values are received—I will use the terms race/ethnic identity interchangeably.

*Racial/ethnic identity development.* We turn now to a discussion of the process of ethnic identity development. The standard definition of racial/ethnic identity often used in the literature is “the degree to which individuals have explored their ethnicity, have come to some conclusion about what their ethnic group membership means to them, and the

extent to which they identify with a particular ethnic group” (Phinney, 1990).

Developing one’s ethnic identity is of varying importance, depending on one’s physical appearance. As Waters (1990) suggests, ethnicity, like the concept of race, is based on a belief in a common ancestry and is primarily a social phenomenon, not a biological one. This would suggest that individuals might have some choice in developing a personal sense of their ethnicity and in constructing how they will present an ethnic identity to others.

Some individuals might have more agency in this process than others. Waters (1990) observed that Whites exercise a great deal of choice in whether or not to identify with a particular ethnic group, because whether or not they choose to claim a certain ethnicity is of little consequence to their overall life chances. For Whites then, ethnicity is considered to be a largely symbolic and optional component of identity. The ethnicity of Whites who choose to identify as Irish for the purposes of being part of a St. Patrick’s Day celebration, for example, but who do not otherwise acknowledge this aspect of their heritage, falls under this category. They are choosing when and how this “symbolic ethnicity” will influence their lives (Waters, 2007). By contrast, African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and multiracial individuals have little or no choice in whether or not to claim *some* type of racial or ethnic identity. As previously discussed, when a person’s physical appearance is ambiguous their ethnicity has historically been relegated to the lower rungs of the racial hierarchy. Regardless of how much persons of color may wish to claim an ethnic identity separate from that of their ancestors, their lives are strongly influenced by how others view their race and their ethnicity.

The process of racial/ethnic identity development for individuals from minority groups usually occurs during adolescence. Echoing Erikson's (1968) model of normative identity development during adolescence, models of ethnic identity usually involve stages through which the individual progresses. These generally follow a path of *exploration*, leading to a *commitment* to a particular identity, and resulting in identity *resolution* or *achievement* (Umaña-Taylor, Yazedjian, Bamaca-Gomez, 2004). As an example, Phinney's (1989) widely used model includes three stages: (1) *unexamined ethnic identity*, in which individuals retain unresolved beliefs, positive and/or negative, about their ethnic group; (2) *ethnic identity search*, during which individuals begin to explore what it means to be a member of their particular group, and; (3) *achieved ethnic identity*, in which individuals have explored their ethnic group membership and have arrived at a clear understanding of what it means to belong to this group. In terms of a developmental timeline, early adolescents (ages 12 - 14) are thought to mostly be included in the "unexamined" stage, with the remaining two stages generally thought to occur during middle to late adolescence (ages 15-18) (Phinney, 1990; French et al. 2006; Pahl & Way, 2006). Factors thought to set this developmental course in motion include such events as moving to a new town and the transition from middle to high school, which may serve as an "encounter" experience, (French et al., 2006; Pahl & Way, 2006), an event which motivates individuals to think about what it means to be a members of their racial/ethnic group.

With the noted exception of Root's 1998 study, which looked at multiracial siblings and their differing developmental trajectories, the literature is largely unclear about how racial/ethnic identity formation differs for multiracial adolescents as compared

to their monoracial counterparts. However, as Root discovered, the multiracial individuals who participated in her qualitative study were more likely to experience these “encounter” events earlier in the life span than their monoracial peers. These events were also likely to occur at different times for each in the sibling pairs, uniquely influencing when their racial/ethnic exploration process might begin (Root, 1998). In summary, the existing literature on ethnic identity development is an important launching pad for understanding the processes biracial youth undergo to interpret the salience of race and ethnicity to their sense of self. To understand how this process may vary for youth who must consider identity options within two or more racial/ethnic domains, I include literature that elaborates on that distinction.

### *Multiracial Identity*

As the color line has become more porous, widening the parameters of identity options for biracial and multiracial individuals, social scientists have developed models to explain how these different options may be constructed and understood by multiracial individuals. In the interest of brevity, the scope of this study is limited to the most recent model of multiracial identity development which is partially based on preceding models. It is worth noting that it follows symbolic interactionist assumptions.

*The Multidimensional Model of Biracial Identity.* Drawing primarily on Root’s (1998) model of “border crossings,” Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002) conceptualized a new model, the *Multidimensional Model of Biracial Identity*, which delineates four ways of responding to this developmental task. The first category is the “Singular Identity Option.” This category includes individuals who choose to racially self identify as exclusively Black or exclusively White. While the influence of the one-drop rule explains

the relative ease with which multiracial individuals might claim an exclusively Black identity, previous research has demonstrated that identifying as exclusively White, though rare, may be a possibility for individuals living in certain geographical regions (i.e. not in the South). As Rockquemore & Brunnsma acknowledge, however, the long-lasting influence of the one-drop rule continues to show up in an assumption found in some threads of research that the singular Black identity is the only healthy response for biracial individuals.

Rockquemore describes those who do not experience their identity as singularly Black or White, but as a blending of the two as the “Border Identity Option.” Historically, those who have insisted on this identity option rather than choosing a singular identity have been depicted in scholarly and fictional works as being the “marginal man” or of leading a life of ambiguity and misfortune (Herman, 2007). More recently, other theoretical models have emerged which consider the border identity to be the psychological ideal because the “border” individual is presumably able to identify with the culture of both parents, rather than being “overidentified” with their Black parent (Rockquemore, 2002). The newest shift in thought about “healthy” identity formation for multiracial youth is that the process of coming to some understanding about their ethnic identity matters much more than the identifier they eventually choose (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005).

The third category, the “Protean Identity Option,” incorporates Root’s (1998) example of individuals who shift one race to the foreground and the other to the background, according to the social context. They experience their race as interchangeable, moving fluidly between Black, White, and/or multiracial identities

according to whatever seems most appropriate for the setting. Rather than switching loyalties between the groups, individuals in this category may be able to reference themselves simultaneously in Black and White communities, while at the same time enjoying “insider” status within the differing social groups. Though these individuals may be able to identify and function in both groups, they may feel a stronger orientation towards, or be more comfortable with, either Blacks or Whites (Rockquemore, 2002).

In the final category, the “Transcendent Identity,” Rockquemore describes individuals who refuse to be classified according to federally defined categories of race. This group, perhaps because of their early experiences with an in-between status, seem to be most aware of the socially constructed nature of race, and therefore reject race as a master status altogether. They remain detached from this socially constructed phenomenon, and whenever possible, insist on being categorized first as a human being (Rockquemore, 2002).

As the most recent and comprehensive conceptualization of biracial identity, this model is pertinent to this study because it uses symbolic interactionist assumptions to frame the various ways biracial youth may respond to this development task. It is important to note, however, that although this model may apply to any multiracial adolescent, it is based on studies of identity development among biracial Black/White individuals. As such, it may not take into account important features of having various ethnic combinations. Since this study includes data from both part-Black and part-Hispanic youth, there are important distinctions to be made about racial identity development among both groups.

*Part-Black youth.* Though they remain a relatively small segment of the multiracial youth population, social norms based on vestiges of the one-drop rule mean that part-Black youth have one of the most challenging identity development experiences (Qian, 2004). Research has established that, regardless of their individual preferences, these youth are most often viewed as Black, encouraged to identify as Black, and treated as Black by others (Herman, 2007). This provides important context to understand the identity choices of youth in this study.

*Part-Hispanic youth.* Opinions vary in the literature as to whether *Hispanic* is an ethnic group or a racial group, (Amaro & Zambrana, 2000), but the same factors are thought to affect the identity of part-Hispanic youth (Herman, 2007). Unlike part-Black youth who may have only a distant connection to African culture, part-Hispanic youth may have a strong connection to homeland and be encouraged to speak Spanish. Depending on recency of immigration, the extent to which part-Hispanic youth are exposed to this culture and encouraged by their communities to participate, determines how likely they are to acknowledge their multiple racial identities. Having darker skin tones is also thought to influence the racial identity choices of youth in this group (Herman, 2007). Essentially, a variety of factors may be at play in shaping how part-Hispanic youth in this study identify and the ease with which their preferred racial identities are validated by others in their communities. These social determinants are explored more extensively in the remaining segments of this chapter.

#### *Factors that Influence Identity Options*

What leads a multiracial individual, whether part-Black, part-Hispanic, or of other racial/ethnic combinations, to identify in a particular way? Researchers have identified

three social factors thought to primarily influence racial identity construction among biracial adolescents. They are: (1) the racial composition of an individual's social network, (Herman, 2004; 2007 Renn, 2000 ); (2) family influences, (Phinney, 1997; Root, 1998); and (3) physical appearance (Madrid 1988; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005).

*Social Networks.* As the assumptions of the symbolic interactionist framework conclude, one does not develop a self-understanding in a vacuum. Rather, the process of identity development requires imagining an audience who will recognize and validate one's performance of self. Because identity construction is an interactional process, it follows that individuals are strongly influenced by the racial composition of their social networks, and experience "push and pull factors" that influence self-conceptualization (Rockquemore, 1998). An example of a "pull factor" may be growing up in a predominately Black community and experiencing a feeling of acceptance, while an example of a "push factor" might be experiencing negative treatment from other Blacks, or even outright rejection. Generally, researchers have found that biracial children who grow up in predominately Black neighborhoods are more likely to choose singular Black identities, while biracial children who grow up in predominately White, or diverse neighborhoods are more likely to claim multiracial or border identities (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002).

According to study by Herman (2004) "the wealthier and the Whiter the neighborhood, the more likely (multiracial) Hispanics were to self-identify as White." Neighborhood composition seems to impact the racial identity construction of Part-Hispanic and Part-Black youth in similar ways. This makes the racial composition of

neighborhood and community important considerations for youth of both backgrounds in this study.

*Schools.* As an extension of the community, researchers have long acknowledged that important messages about race and racial inequality are conveyed in day-to-day experiences at school. As the social institution where youth spend a significant amount of time, and have numerous opportunities to interact with same-age peers, schools are primary socializing agents, reproducing and transforming social norms (Knaus, 2006). Children are apt to experience confrontations over racial difference for the first time within the school setting, and these interactions tend to occur over an extended period of time, making the school context an important setting for studying this social process (Lewis, 2003). A key to understanding the importance of contextual factors like schools and neighborhoods on racial identification may be in determining whether youth view their interactions in these settings in a positive or negative light. As youth in this study are school-aged, their assessments of the racial messages they receive in these settings are critical to understanding their process of racial identification.

*Peers.* Experiences with peers, whether in the school or neighborhood context, also significantly contribute to the push and pull factors that influence identity construction for multiracial youth. For biracial youth in high school or college settings, finding acceptance among a group of peers may set the tone for social development. As participants in Renn's (2000) study of multiracial college students reported, the decision to affiliate with a particular group often depended on how permeable they perceived the group borders to be. Though at times the borders were more clearly defined, and more subtly delineated at others, being accepted into a group was often a matter of

demonstrating a shared set of cultural experiences—knowledge of language, food, religion, or values of the group’s culture. As well, these students identified that physical appearance, especially skin tone, often made the difference between who could enter a particular group (Renn, 2000).

Friendship choices have long been identified in the literature as being an indicative of social distance between racial or ethnic groups (Kao, 1999). For this reason, being accepted or rejected by a group for a reason that the individual perceives to be related to her racial identity can be seen as a validation or rejection of her nascent racial identity, thus adding to the push or pull factors that contribute to her selection of a racial identity. It is apparent that it is less the physical setting that impacts the identity choices of biracial youth, but the nature of interactions with peers and others that occur with some frequency within these settings.

*Family Influences.* While interactions multiracial individuals experience with peers and others in school and neighborhood settings are critical to their identity development, research also shows that the ethnic socialization that goes on within the family context is equally salient. One study, conducted by Umaña-Taylor, Bhanot & Shin, (2006), indicated that there may be a direct link between the racial composition of a participant’s school and the amount of ethnic socialization the individual reported receiving within the family. Participants who reported fewer members of their respective ethnic groups attending their schools also tended to report higher levels of ethnic socialization at home. In addition, the youth who reported receiving the most familial ethnic socialization also tended to report the strongest levels of commitment to their

ethnic identity. While the participants of this study were monoracial, the implications of this research extend into the realm of multiracial youth.

Another study, (Herman, 2004), found that multiracial youth were more likely to claim a singular Black identity if they only had contact with their Black parent (which usually meant that their mother was Black and no longer living with their White father). For multiracial youth living with one parent, that parent's subsequent relationship with the other parent played a pivotal role in the individual's choice to identify with one group over another.

For example, in Rockquemore's (2002) study, youth tended to internalize the attitudes of their cohabiting parent, particularly attitudes that attributed negative characteristics to the other parent's race. In her study, this phenomenon worked both ways: multiracial youth cohabiting with a White mother who conveyed negative attitudes about the father's race were more likely to identify as biracial, emphasizing their preference for White culture; similarly other participants reported being influenced by their Black mother's negative attitudes about the racial characteristics of their White father, choosing to claim a singular Black identity (Rockquemore, 1998). The parental messages about race that a multiracial youth internalizes often depend on the strength of their relationship with their parents. Parental messages about race, especially negative messages, inform their children's attitudes, and can have a lasting influence on the child's racial self-understanding. For this reason, the familial context is an important consideration in this study of biracial youth.

*Physical Appearance.* Lastly, a youth's physical appearance plays a large role in the identity options that are available. As has been discussed already, some scholars

consider this factor to be the greatest consideration in the identity development of biracial youth, especially part-Black youth (Herman, 2007; Tatum, 1997). Physical appearance provides a text that helps others define and situate others' membership as being within a particular group (Madrid, 1988). Phenotypic traits, skin tone, hair texture, facial features, as well as language and clothing choices, all provide clues to help others anticipate what to expect from these individual and of appropriate responses towards them. Physical cues often create the "first impression" that sets the stage for how individuals will be able to negotiate their racial identity with others. Particular physical features, such as the ones mentioned above (skin tone, hair texture, and facial features) are socially conditioned and understood markers of group membership (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005). These features, along with age and gender, trigger a whole set of meanings which have a certain status attached to them. When these cues are ambiguous, as is often the case with multiracial individuals, it can create a type of "cognitive dissonance," such that others are not sure in which group to place these individuals, what to expect from them, or how to react to them. Predictable patterns of behavior cannot always be established at first glance, which often prompts others to question multiracial individual about their ethnicity and heritage.

For biracial individuals, physical appearance may be the most crucial factor in determining which identity options will be available to them. This often plays out in unexpected ways. For example, female participants in Rockquemore's (1998) study reported that they felt singled out by African American woman, a feeling which they attributed to their lighter skin tone. Lighter skinned women reported that their relationships with African American women were often strained, and that they were

accused of thinking they were better than their darker skinned peers. In the study this was attributed to prevalent cultural standards of beauty, upheld even among African Americans, in which lighter skinned women are considered more attractive. This belief contributed to the hostility that these multiracial women felt from their African American sisters, and also resulted in their feelings of being rejected by the Black community. Though this was a phenomenon that occurred most often for females, these women felt like it limited the identity options that were available to them—their identities as Black women were not validated and it was easier to negotiate a multiracial identity (Rockquemore, 1998).

Though physical appearance may provide a strong incentive to identify as the race that others “read” one to be, physical characteristics do not directly and exclusively determine racial identity, such that someone who looks Black will identify as Black, and someone who looks White will identify as White, and those somewhere in the middle will identify as multiracial. (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005; Herman, 2007). For individuals who are ambivalent about how to identify, however, being assumed to be Black or multiracial just on the basis of one’s physical appearance may be the deciding factor in the individual’s racial self-understanding.

### *Summary*

As previous research has shown, the process of identity development seems to be more variable for multiracial individuals than for their monoracial peers (Herman, 2007). As well, because of their in-between status in society, they are often required to negotiate with others for a particular racial self-understanding. Though much of the literature on this topic focuses on identity formation processes among Black/White multiracial

individuals, (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002), and the factors that shape these processes, (Root, 1998), studies focusing on individuals from other mixed-racial backgrounds have found similar results (Amaro & Zambrana, 2000; Herman, 2004; Qian, 2004). The strategies that researchers have used in these studies to pinpoint how identity is negotiated, and under what circumstances this is necessary, have usually been qualitative in nature. Most researchers who take this approach prefer to use interviews to capture this complex concept (Rockquemore 1997; 2002; Root, 1998; Renn, 2000). The most notable exceptions to this are studies that employ quantitative methods to identify factors that influence ethnic identity development (Herman, 2004; Hitlin, Brown, & Elder, 2006; Umaña-Taylor, Bhanot, & Shin, 2006).

I consider existing literature on racial/ethnic identity formation and the social factors that shape those processes among biracial youth to determine the themes to be explored in this study. These include messages about race conveyed in community and school settings, peer and family influences, and physical appearance. Though the literature has informed this study, it is important to note that knowledge about how youth make meanings of these factors to construct their racial identities remains limited. Using interview data collected from focused conversations with 11 biracial youth, I explore how these youth experience their racial identities and convey those identity preferences to others.

## CHAPTER 3

### Method

This qualitative study used semi-structured and focused conversations with biracial adolescents to examine how they understand and reconcile their in-between racial status given the collective meanings about race available in their communities.

Additionally, this study explored the interrelations between individual characteristics and other contextual factors associated with adolescent ethnic identity development. Initial interview questions were framed in terms of symbolic interaction (Blumer, 1969), and bioecological perspectives (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), but were open-ended, leaving adolescents to elaborate on their own perceptions and experiences more extensively.

The qualitative approach employed in this study is useful for achieving an understanding of individual processes that evolve over time and within specific settings (Goodwin & Horowitz, 2002). As a qualitative method, the semi-structured interview accentuates the contextual nature of knowledge and provides an effective tool for gaining a rich understanding of social and psychological processes, allowing researchers to engage directly and personally with subjects (Kvale, 2006). This technique is especially valuable in studies of identity and self because it permits access to individuals' internal perceptions and social experiences in order to draw attention to the production of social meanings. I use focused conversations with youth to study the process by which mixed-race youth understand and express their racial identities, and to assess their awareness of various contextual factors that have aided or impeded that process.

### *Recruitment*

My analysis draws on audiotaped conversations with a sample of 11 mixed-race adolescents who, at the time of the study, were enrolled as middle school or high school students in one of two counties. To be selected for this study, respondents needed to be the offspring of a White-identifying parent and a non-White identifying parent, and be between the ages of 14-18. Ethnic identity literature suggests minority adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18 are more likely than early adolescents to have begun the exploratory phase of ethnic identity development, and are also more likely to have achieved a tentative sense of their ethnic identity (Phinney, 1990; Pahl & Way, 2006; French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2006).

Heeding Rockquemore and Brunnsma's (2002) methodological concerns, one initial difficulty I anticipated in designing this study was being able to attract enough respondents, particularly within the assigned age group, from which to draw meaningful conclusions. Although the percentage of individuals reporting two or more races in this area of the Pacific Northwest, at 2.8% is higher than the national average of 2.4%, (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), this group remains a relatively emergent segment of the population. For this reason, finding sufficient numbers of biracial adolescents by relying on contacts in a single school, or even from a single county, proved difficult. To broaden the possibility of identifying eligible participants, I used multiple recruitment strategies. I relied on contacts at local high schools, community contacts established over the course of an another study taking place in a coastal county in the Pacific Northwest, informal

contacts made when participating in a community event, chance in-person encounters, and snowball sampling to locate a sufficient number of participants for this study.

Several youth were identified through serendipitous circumstances when I attended an audition for a local production of the play *Ragtime* and noted that a handful of the adolescents attending the event appeared to be of mixed-race descent. Although I am not biracial, African American, or Mexican American, my five-year-old son is biracial and my husband is African American, and their presence with me at this event sparked informal conversations with some of the youth and their parents. My familial ties seemed to help pave the way for these individuals' subsequent interest in participating in the study. Whereas these youth were initially identified through this chance encounter, I did not recruit participants until I had gained IRB permission to recruit at this site, and had asked the play director for permission to distribute letters introducing myself and the nature of my study to parents of adolescents identified as possibly fitting the study criteria. Once I had received parental permission to invite qualified individuals to participate in my study, I approached these youth during rehearsal and invited them to participate. Four participants resulted from this recruitment strategy. Snowball sampling was also successful among this group as study participants identified eligible friends and family members, resulting in three additional participants. The remaining youth were identified through in-person encounters and school and community contacts.

### *Sample*

Recruitment strategies resulted in a total sample of 11 adolescents (6 males and 5 females). Eight of the respondents reported being born into families with one White-

identifying and one Black-Identifying parent, two reported being born into families with a White-identifying and a Mexican American-Identifying parent, and one relied on an anecdotal report from his adoptive mother to establish that his birth mother was African American and his birth father likely identified as White. The average age of participants was 16-years-old, with 3 adolescents aged 14 years, 7 aged 16 years, and one aged 17-years-old. Respondents were students in six different schools across two counties in the Pacific Northwest, 3 attending middle schools and 8 attending high schools. I did not solicit information about family income level, parental occupation, or parental education. With the exception of the one participant who lived with his adoptive mother, the remaining participants lived with one or both of their biological parents. Demographic information for each respondent is summarized in Table 1.

#### *Site Selection*

This study took place in three communities from two counties in the Pacific Northwest. Most participants came from the larger of the two counties which hosts a population of approximately 78,000 people. The adolescent age group in this county (between 10 – 20 years old) comprises approximately one-fifth (20%) of the population, and the presence of a large state university draws a relatively young demographic, with individuals between 20-40 years comprising 35% of the population (United States Bureau of the Census, 2000). The average educational level in this county is well above the national average, with 53.1% of individuals over the age of 25 holding a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 24.4% nationally in 2000. Overall this county can be characterized as White, relatively young, highly educated, and dominated by professional and service-related employment (Census, 2000). This county is also becoming more

racially diverse, with those who indicated two or more races on the census comprising a small but growing segment of the population. This county presented a suitable setting for this study because the percentage of people residing in the area who selected two or more races on the 2000 census is slightly higher than the national average (2.8% compared to 2.4% nationally).

Participants were also recruited in a second county located in a coastal region of the Pacific Northwest. This county hosts a population of approximately 24,500 people (United States Bureau of the Census, 2000). Youth under the age of 20 comprise about a quarter (25%) of the population. This county can be characterized as White, rural, and economically dependent on timber and agriculture. Like other rural U.S. communities also reliant on these industries, this county has recently fallen on hard times. The local poverty rate (15.4%) is significantly above the state average (11%) and many families in this county struggle as a result of this reality. Though not as racially and ethnically diverse as other communities in area of the Pacific Northwest, this community has recently experienced a rapid influx of Hispanic families, with a 410% increase in Hispanic students enrolled in local schools since 1990, double the increase experienced in the state as a whole (United States Bureau of the Census, 2000).

### *Interview Procedures*

After youth were identified for the study through various recruitment strategies, follow-up phone calls were made to potential participants and their parents to provide information about the study, further assess their willingness to participate, answer remaining questions, and to schedule a time and place to meet for interviews. Of the 15 youth approached for the study, three declined, resulting in a 20% refusal rate. Of those

who refused, two gave as a reason that they were too shy to participate in an interview. Because all of the youth who did choose to participate were minors at the time of the study, I obtained signed Informed Consent documents from parents and Assent documents from youth before conducting interviews. These documents are listed in Appendices A and B.

Interviews were held in a variety of locations including local restaurants, participants' homes, and the university and public libraries. Interviews were conducted in a one-to-one conversational fashion and lasted between 45 and 120 minutes, with the average interview lasting 70 minutes. Both Informed Consent and Assent documents were collected and checked for signatures before the interviews commenced. At that time, participants were given another opportunity to ask questions about the study and were reminded that their participation in the study was voluntary so they need only answer questions that they were comfortable answering. Participants' clothing choices, physical appearance, and general affect were noted in brief field notes for later consideration during analysis. Upon the completion of the interview, participants were compensated with \$10 gift certificates redeemable at a local department store.

#### *Interview Protocol*

Interviews were semi-structured, focused conversations designed to explore adolescents' ideas about their emerging racial/ethnic identification and factors that influenced that process, as well as to solicit detailed information on their thoughts and feelings about these processes. Adolescents were asked a variety of questions covering a range of topics. Questions used during interviews were loosely based on open-ended interview questions used in Rockquemore and Brunnsma's (2002) study of social

processes that govern the meanings of racial identity for Black/White biracial college students. As respondents in the present study were younger than the college-aged participants for whom these questions were intended, I modified questions accordingly. A catalog of questions used to guide these interviews is listed in Appendix C.

Youth responses to these topics ranged from short and curt to detailed and effusive. Most responses fell in the middle of this range. When their answers to questions were brief or vague I asked follow up questions as probes to encourage them to expand or better explain their answers. Whenever they seemed reluctant to answer the follow-up questions, or asked to skip a question, I moved on to a new line of questioning.

I began each interview by asking respondents to provide a general description of their family background, and was deliberately vague in wording this question as I wanted to gauge whether race/ethnicity was a characteristic they would include in this description. As I progressed from one interview to the next and began the transcription process of prior interviews, I noticed that a few of the respondents seemed confused by the way this question was worded. For this reason I modified this initial question in an attempt to better capture the salience of race/ethnicity to their overall sense of self. For instance, in the first 5 interviews I asked youth to tell me about their family background, and for the final 6 interviews I changed this question to “If you were going to introduce yourself to someone who can’t see you and doesn’t already know you, like someone over the Internet, what are five things you would tell them about yourself?” I encouraged respondents to come up with at least five of these self-descriptions.

Respondents also made statements about topics such as family background, experiences growing up in their communities and at school, relationships with parents,

siblings, and friends, descriptions of peer groups, romantic relationships, and common reactions/perceptions of strangers in their communities. To explore the broader issue of racial awareness and identity development (Root, 2001), I asked respondents to recall at what age they thought they first became aware of the idea of race. In addition, respondents were asked to elaborate on memories associated with that question.

Toward the end of the interview, youth were asked to summarize their experiences by providing advice about what they thought parents of biracial children should know in order to support their children. For follow-up probes to this question they were asked to recall parental advice that was especially helpful to them, and/or things they wished their parents had done to better prepare them for their experiences as biracial youth. As a final question respondents were asked to state whether they believed being mixed-race was generally an advantage, a disadvantage, or had no meaning to their lives.

#### *Data Coding and Analysis Procedures*

An interpretive, constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2004) was used for data analysis, allowing themes to emerge inductively. This approach acknowledges that researchers bring interpretive frames to the phenomenon they study and that theoretical analyses of data are interpretations of reality, not purely objective accounts of it. With this understanding, I followed five steps in analyzing data: (1) I listened to taped interviews and then read transcripts and examined the text for themes and patterns, (2) I asked others with knowledge about adolescent development to read passages to provide an independent assessment of themes, (3) I conducted a more detailed thematic review of each interview by re-reading the transcripts to confirm or disconfirm emerging patterns and to identify other possible themes, (4) I uploaded this information into *MAXqda*

software and established a coding system to label each passage according to established themes and patterns, and lastly (5) I reviewed these patterns and themes to determine how they fit together.

In the presentation of findings I have used respondents' direct quotes without correcting their grammar or changing their word choices. All respondents were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities, and names of friends and family members discussed during the interviews were also replaced with pseudonyms during the transcription process. All names of places were also replaced with fictional names.

**Table 1. Description of Respondents**

Community of Residence	Names	Age	Living Arrangements	Biological Parent Race/Ethnic Identification (Mother/Father)	Participant Self-Description of Racial Identity	Labels others have Applied to Race/Ethnic Identity
<b>Amberwood</b>	Valarie	16	Mother	White/Kenyan	"African American," "Biracial" "Half-African, half-American"	"African American"
	Allen	15	Mother/Father	African American/White	"Mixed," "Half-n-half"	"Mixed," "Mulatto," "Half-n-half"
	Marcus	14	Mother/Father	African American/White	"African American," "Mixed" "Black"	"Black," "Mixed"
	Trevor	15	Mother/Father	African American/White	"African American," "Mixed"	"Half-n-half"
	Max	14	Mother/Father	White/Cameroonian	"African American"	"Black"
	Miranda	16	Mother	White/African American	"One-half Black, one-half White, one-third Mexican," "Mixed"	"Half-Black," "Mexican" "Mixed," "Black"
	Andrea	16	Mother	White/African American	"African American," "A swirl" "Half-African American, half- Caucasian"	"African American," "Mixed"
	Antonia	17	Mother/Father	White/African American	"Multiracial"	"Mixed"
<b>Canterfield</b>	George	15	Adoptive Mother	African American/White	"African American"	"African American," "Black"
	Jason	16	Father	White/Mexican American	"Hispanic"	"Beaner," "Vanilla bean," "Gingo"
<b>Agate Peak</b>	Rachel	14	Mother	White/Mexican American	"Half -White, Half-Mexican" "Half"	"White," "Oreo"

*Note:* Pseudonyms have been used to protect the privacy of respondents and place names are fictional.

## CHAPTER 4

### Results

#### *Qualitative Data Analysis*

Adolescents in this study made statements about their experiences as biracial youth and the events involving peers, family, school, and community that have shaped their sense of self. Though many described race as a sensitive and difficult topic to discuss with friends and parents, they nonetheless were open to discussing this topic during interviews with me, and freely offered their insights about the relevance of race to their social experiences and emerging racial identities. I completed all of the recruitment of respondents, in-person interviews, and transcription of narratives that are used in this study, affording me greater insight when comparing and contrasting their responses.

A set of themes emerged repeatedly in the analysis of these interviews. I identified these themes based on how frequently they appeared in respondents' narratives, the duration of discussion of them within interviews, and the kinds of emotional responses they evoked among respondents. I determined the degree of emotional responses primarily by tone and inflection of voice and animation in communication. More intense emotional responses were interpreted as indicating greater salience of the topic for the adolescent.

Analysis of interviews revealed four overarching themes: the role of *community messages* in defining the parameters of racial identity options, *physical appearance* in self and public perceptions of racial identity, awareness of *peer endorsements* of color-based behavioral codes, and *parental messages about race* within the family context. The

salience of at least two of these themes was indicated in most or all of respondent interviews. A matrix of themes as they occur in respondents' narratives is represented below in Table 2.

**Table 2. Contextual Factors Salient to Racial Identity Development**

		Racial Identification	Community Influences		Physical Appearance	Peer Influences		Parental Influence
			Messages about Racial Difference	Overt Experience of Racism		Endorsement of Color-Based Stereotypes	Hip-hop or Cool-Pose Culture	
<b>Amberwood</b>								
	Valarie	AA, Mixed	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
	Allen	Mixed	✓					✓
	Marcus	AA, Mixed	✓		✓	✓	✓	
	Trevor	AA, Mixed	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Max	AA		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Andrea	AA, Mixed	✓		✓		✓	✓
	Miranda	Mixed	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
	Antonia	Multiracial	✓					✓
<b>Canterfield</b>								
	George	AA	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Agate Peak</b>								
	Jason	Hispanic	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
	Rachel	Mixed	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓

*Note:* AA = African American. Pseudonyms are used to protect participants' identities. Place names are fictional.

In keeping with their emergent stage of identity development, most of these adolescents did not display a clear and crystallized sense of their racial identity and were still considering identity options *within* these themes and spanning *across* the different themes. As an understanding of the importance of these factors can best be achieved by interpreting these adolescents' experiences, whenever possible, I leave it for them to explain aspects of their racial identities in their own words.

*“My Mississippi self” Community Messages and Racial Identity*

Without exception, youth in this study recognized community as playing a significant role in shaping their life experiences. Many were also aware that their own understanding of racial issues, and the extent to which race shaped their self-understandings and social experiences, were strongly tied to their perception of the degree of racial and ethnic stratification within their communities. But before considering the data on the impact of these perceptions on identity development, it is important to contemplate how these adolescents view their communities as a whole.

*General impressions of community.* Nine of the participants in this study reside in the college town of Amberwood, one in the smaller outlying community of Canterfield, and two in the coastal town of Agate Peak. As might be expected, participants' descriptions of these three communities varied to some extent, though most had generally positive things to say about their communities. Youth from the larger college town of Amberwood gave the most enthusiastic reviews of their community. Below are two typical portrayals of Amberwood:

I really like [Amberwood], it's a nice community and I know a lot of people. And, we have always done stuff...been involved with the community and stuff, and volunteered since I was little. —Valarie

Personally, I really like living in [Amberwood] because my mom lets us do a lot of stuff since we're getting older. Even though if we were still living in Washington, she wouldn't let us, just because of the environment. But [Amberwood] is more—I wouldn't say it's the safest place to live, I can't really say that—but it is a safer place. And, uhm, there is lots of variety of people. Lots. And I really like that. —Andrea

These accounts of Amberwood as small, safe, community-oriented, and ethnically diverse were echoed by most other participants from this area. In contrast to participants from the other communities, Amberwood youth also conveyed a belief that their community was different and special, especially in the sense of being more accepting and open to racial difference than other communities.

The remaining groups from the two smaller, more rural communities described their home towns in more ambivalent terms than youth from Amberwood. George, a 16-year-old who identifies as African American, offered this comment about growing up in Canterfield: “I mean, I don't *not* like it, but I feel like I'm more of a city person.” When questioned further about this topic, he confided, “I'm not sure if I really might stay in Canterfield when I go to college, or move, 'cause I want to go to Blanchford for my hair salon career...so.” Though he is reluctant to say he doesn't like his home town, George is typical of youth from other small towns in that he is ambivalent about remaining in his community after graduating from high school. Similarly, 17-year-old Jason, who identifies as Hispanic, also initially focuses on the size and lack of activities suitable for youth in his home town of Agate Peak. He voices his complaint in this description:

It's alright. Yeah, I mean, it gets boring from time to time, but every once in a while, I like meeting up with some friends and stuff like that...The only time there is something to do here is, uh, when it is hot. Like go to the beach and swim, or somthun' like that.

For the most part, other than sharing mild complaints about the lack of youth-centered activities in their respective communities, youth from all three communities gave positive portrayals of their towns. These descriptions began to further diverge, however, as participants responded to questions around the topic of race relations and racial stratification within each of their three communities.

Of the eight participants from Amberwood, six portrayed their community as an open and inviting place, virtually free of racism and prejudice. This view was often stated emphatically during interviews, as in Marcus' assertion that, "This town that I've been living in for all these years, there's *so* not racists, not *anything*." Like Marcus, other youth in this group were equally quick to portray Amberwood as a tolerant and accepting community where one's race and ethnic background were all but irrelevant. As a youth who spent the first eight years of his life in a major city in the Northwest before moving to Amberwood, Allen was especially enthusiastic in his portrayal of this community as a place untouched by issues of race. He elaborates on this theme by explaining why he believes his parents did not give him detailed advice as a child to prepare him to cope with racism or prejudice. He explains,

I think [Amberwood] doesn't really need that much teaching, because it is just kind of accepting, and goes with whatever. There is not really a need to talk about race—well, I guess you should talk about race, but it's not really as big a deal as it would be in a different city or town, or something like that.

Allen suggests that there is no reason for his parents to prepare him for racism or prejudice as he is unlikely to experience either while living in this accepting environment. However, his awareness that although race is not a “big deal” in Amberwood, it might be in other places, underscores a theme in this study that the racial climate of a community sets the stage for different paths of racial identity development among multiracial youth.

### *Identity Options and Community*

Allen’s account, as well as others presented below, confirms that multiracial youth are aware of the racial attitudes and beliefs transmitted in their communities. 16-year-old Valarie, who also moved to Amberwood at a young age, offers further evidence of this awareness and introduces the notion that attitudes about race conveyed in her community directly impact the relevance of race in her self-understanding. She explains:

I don’t really feel like my skin color...like, I don’t think about it. I just... I don’t know, I never think about it, and I feel like everybody else, and it is not really a problem, it just doesn’t seem to count. It might be in other parts of the world. Like, if I go other places and visit, I might experience it, but not in Amberwood.

By suggesting that she does not “feel” like her skin color, Valarie implies that her positive feelings about self do not mesh with what she perceives to be the wider expectation that her darker skin color might be associated with fewer social options. She seems aware that race is not openly acknowledged as a barrier in her current environment, which allows her the option to assert certain aspects of her identity over others. Where she lives directly affects the extent to which race has organized her social experiences. She offers this comment as clarification:

Sometimes when we are in the city and we are walking around, I don't know, it just feels different... And, I have always wanted to go somewhere, or like to the South, or, I don't know, just somewhere where there used to be racism, and to just experience being there. I feel like I have never been in a situation where I felt uncomfortable because of my race.

Valarie sees herself fitting in comfortably with her mostly White peers and community.

Perhaps because she realizes that she has been sheltered from the negative aspects of race growing up in Amberwood, Valarie expresses the desire to experience what it feels like to be in a setting where her skin color might prevent her from blending in so well.

Though she acknowledges that she might be treated differently in other settings because of her race, she seems to only expect a subtle difference, perhaps in the form of a feeling of discomfort, rather than overt racism. She also suggests that because she has never experienced discomfort due to her skin color or race in Amberwood, this has influenced her assumption that racism no longer occurs in other parts of the United States. If she is receiving more subtle messages about preferences given to one race over another within her own community, she hasn't yet been able to identify them.

In another example of how community shapes perceptions of racial difference, 17-year-old Antonia, who identifies as multiracial, takes her observations a step further by pinpointing just how she imagines her experiences might be different growing up in another community. She offers this hypothesis:

I think that growing up in a culture that is predominately Caucasian has...like had its influence, I think. I think if I had grown up in L.A. that I would be a completely different person. Uhm, just because of the...uh, as far as ethnicity goes, I would probably have more African American friends.

Antonia shows awareness that the racial composition of her community, particularly of her friendship group, has been instrumental in forming her worldview and sense of self.

As for how this factor has influenced the importance of race to her current self-understanding, Antonia provides this insight:

[My racial identification] is never a topic that I discuss a lot. 'Cause, uhm, none of my friends are biracial, or African American—they are all...White! Uhm, but it's just never a topic that comes up. I just don't really even notice it much. So, I just don't really think I would mention it, because of that, because I don't really think of it.

Later in the interview she discloses the following:

When I'm with my friends or at school, or anything else, I've always just been so, unaware of ...race, when I'm with other people that I, uh... I think that...and I do think it is important to identify yourself, you know, to feel like you can identify yourself one way or another, but uhm, it's never something that I've really noticed when making friends or with other people, I'm just not aware of it when it comes to those things.

Antonia suggests that her current lack of emphasis on the racial or ethnic aspects of her identity is serving her well among her all-White friendship groups. She suggests that issues related to race are not openly acknowledged among her friends and are not salient to her ability to make friends. Like Valarie, she also doesn't perceive her multiracial identity as an oddity that draws negative attention from members of the Amberwood community. Because race has not been a major source of adversity for either Antonia or Valarie, it has not been necessary to cultivate the strong sense of racial pride that often serves as a protective factor for adolescents of color who do encounter color-based prejudice within their communities ( Harris-Britt, Valrie, Kurtz-Costes, & Rowley, 2007). Instead, both youth find it easier to fit into their predominately White communities

if they de-emphasize race and focus on other characteristics they have in common with their peers.

*Mixed messages.* As a youth who has spent time outside of Amberwood, visiting relatives in the South, Miranda has a more nuanced understanding of the role of community in determining how she expresses different facets of her multiracial identity. She describes the contrasting reactions she receives to her appearance from the racially diverse citizens of Amberwood, compared with individuals from a largely Black community in Mississippi:

Like here, since it is [Amberwood], people know each other, even if they don't know who you are. And so here, if people see me they're like, 'Oh, okay she's tall. Oh, like what is she?... But, that's okay.' But down there, they're like, 'Wait, what?' And they like double-take and they're like, 'Wait, she doesn't talk right. Where is she from?' Like, 'What's Oregon?' Like, 'Whaaaaat?' They ask a lot more questions....It's like, I might as well have a siren on, like, "Whooo-hooo, look at me!" It's weird! Like here, I don't know, I'm just kinda like, 'I'm okay, you're okay,' because there are not so many full-[Black] people here, but there are more mixed. But down there it is all full. Maybe a couple of mixed girls, but then they're like Asian-Black, so they are darker than me anyway. And so, then it's just more like, okay for them. But with me they're like, 'Whaaaaat?' sort of.

In experiencing the reactions to her ambiguous appearance from strangers in a largely Black community, Miranda encounters a more rigid boundary between Black and White than she is accustomed to in Amberwood. She describes how strangers in this southern community react with unbridled curiosity to her appearance. In this environment, more emphasis is placed on her unusual physical appearance and her speech patterns, and these cues instantly make her stand out. Because her appearance challenges the usually clear

boundary between Black and White in this community, an explanation of her racial heritage becomes an almost unavoidable part of conversations with strangers. Though it is unclear that her appearance relegates her to a subordinate status within that community—in fact, her narrative suggests that it has the opposite effect—it garners such a strong reaction that it becomes more difficult for her to de-emphasize race as an aspect of her identity. She seems very aware of how the different attitudes about race conveyed within each of these two communities distinctively shape her own behavior and self-understanding when she is in these two settings. Below she shares her interpretation of this phenomenon:

It's just the surroundings, 'cause like down there, if you just go down there, you know, it's just like screaming 'LOOK!' So, it's kinda like, there is *no way* to be White down there. Like they don't know what quiches are, and it's just like, there is no way you can like—none of the same food, like, there is nothing...when you are down there and you are talking like them, you just pick up how they talk, you know. And then it's just kind of like, how it is. So, it's not so much pressure, but it's kind of like you're forced to do that because there is *no other way*. It's like, just *their way*. There is no other option of what you can do. So, I think that's just like, what it is... [But] if I was my Mississippi self up here, then people would be like, 'What is she *doing*?' Like, 'Whaaat?' It would be a big change for sure.

Miranda describes the power of her surroundings to influence her behavior and affect her identity by providing validation for certain aspects of her identity over others. She implies that, while the more “White” aspects of her identity (which, according to her definition, include her speech patterns and knowledge of particular kinds of foods) are not well received or understood by her friends and family in this southern community, her “Mississippi self” allows her to blend in. In this context she feels compelled to make

a choice between the White and Black aspects of her biracial identity, and receives more validation when she emphasizes the Black aspects. Back in Amberwood, however, she acknowledges that the reverse is true; her “Mississippi self” is out of context, and is thus not easily validated. Miranda’s recognition that certain aspects of her identity are likely to be validated within each of these communities provides a compelling example of the link between social context and racial identity options.

*Prejudice and identity options.* Though the remaining participants in this study also shared an awareness of the power of their community to define the relevance of race in their lives, they portrayed a different view of the role of racial politics in their community. This contrast was particularly clear in Jason’s narrative. As a youth who describes himself as Hispanic, Jason’s response to the question, “When did you first become aware of the idea of race?” paints a picture of a community more segregated by race and ethnicity. He describes first becoming aware of a social consequence of his skin color towards the end of sixth grade when, “I was walking down the street, or something like that, or hanging out with friends, and people were yelling out ‘beaner’ and stuff like that at me.” While inquisitive looks prompted Miranda’s realization that race would be an important aspect of her identity in Mississippi, Jason received more overt messages about the boundaries between the races growing up in Agate Peak. He became aware of the color-based prejudices in his community at an early age, and despite his mixed ethnic heritage, these reactions conveyed the message that his darker skin color marked him as a member of a subordinate group. The option to de-emphasize the racial and ethnic aspects of his identity was not as feasible for Jason in this setting as it was for Antonia and Valarie in Amberwood. Perhaps this helps explain why Jason reports a stronger

affiliation with his Mexican heritage, a necessity if he is to cultivate a sense of ethnic pride.

While the maltreatment Jason receives from members of his White community may provide impetus for his stronger affiliation with his Mexican heritage, this identity is also impeded by the discrimination he perceives from his Hispanic peers. He recalls:

[In middle school] at first, I, I mean, didn't really like hanging out with anyone Caucasian, or anything, I just hung out with the Hispanic kids. And then all of a sudden, Hispanic people like started changing their ways with me, because they found out, like, my mom was White, and stuff like that, and I was born here. Like, I guess if you were not born in Mexico then you are not all good, and everything, so. I didn't really like hanging out with them, so I started hanging out with other kids...like playing sports and people started recognizing me and stuff like that, I started getting more friends, and started hanging out with different people.

Jason recounts that his Hispanic friends began to treat him differently when they discovered his mixed parentage. Although his physical appearance provided cues for others of his Hispanic heritage, this factor alone did not guarantee his acceptance by members of this group. Having a White mother and being born in the U.S. made his loyalties suspect among his Hispanic peers.

Jason's younger sister Rachel recalls a similar experience, confirming that pressure to affiliate with one race over the other can come from both sides of the color divide. She describes the pressure she received from her Hispanic boyfriend to show her loyalties to her Mexican heritage by choosing to speak Spanish. She describes,

[My ex-boyfriend] used to make fun of me because I wouldn't talk Spanish around him, just because I don't that much really, unless I was talking to my parents. He used to say that, like...if like, they use to have

jokes about *la immigra*—the immigration—if they came down, that I was White and I would have to stand in between the border, because I’m half. He used to make fun of me like that. Sometimes it made me feel really bad, but I didn’t say anything. I just stood there.

As Rachel describes, the pressure to choose sides between the two aspects of her ethnic identity comes as much from her Hispanic friends as from the rigid color boundaries enforced in her predominately White community. Though she and her brother are not given the option by either group to choose a neutral identity in the middle, neither are they fully accepted by either group. In the passage above, Rachel’s ex-boyfriend chooses an apt metaphor to describe the situation that she and many biracial youth experience: one foot in each camp, straddling the divide between two cultures.

*Messages conveyed at school.* Whether they felt divided in their loyalties or believed that race played a minor role in their social experiences, youth in this study showed a strong awareness of the racial messages conveyed in their communities. As a prominent social institution within their communities, youth also included experiences at school in their overall assessment of how their communities react to racial difference. Generally, respondent descriptions of school culture supported the notion that schools tend to reflect the prevalent attitudes and beliefs of their communities (Knaus, 2006). Andrea’s description of her school, for example, echoes the common portrayal of Amberwood as a tolerant community. She said, “I really like [my school], because our school invites anybody there. You know, there’s gay people, lesbians, and everyone treats each other the same. So, I’m glad. I’m proud of our school.” Contrast this comment with that of Rachel, a 14-year-old from Agate Peak. She gives a more stark portrayal of the racial landscape of her school:

It's like half our gym—we have a gym at our school, and in the morning that is where everyone is at, and the Hispanics always hang out, like, on...on the west side of the gym, and the White people always have the east side. And it is always like that.

Her observation of the racially divided atmosphere at her school is congruent with other messages she receives about where she fits into her community. For Rachel and other participants in this study, the culture at school serves to reinforce the range of racial and ethnic identity options they perceive to be available to them.

*Conclusions from community influences.* Respondents in this study were conscious of how the racial boundaries in their communities defined their social experiences. While youth from Amberwood generally portrayed their community as tolerant of racial difference and open to diversity, they were also aware that this level of tolerance may be a unique feature of their community. Most of the Amberwood youth reported feeling comfortable in a predominately White culture and sought to de-emphasize the racial and ethnic aspects of their identities in favor of other characteristics that allowed them to blend in to their community.

Respondents such as Miranda, who have spent time in other regions of the United States, revealed an even greater awareness of how racial boundaries in various communities had the power to define the parameters of their racial identity options. Miranda discovered that it was easier to assert a biracial identity in the largely White community of Amberwood than in a largely Black southern community. While her physical appearance made it difficult to pass as fully Black or White in either context, she found that different aspects of her biracial identity received greater validation in each of these two settings.

Jason and Rachel also described difficulty in affiliating exclusively with either the White or Hispanic aspects of their biracial identities. They give accounts of the more rigid racial boundaries in their community of Agate Peak, and discuss feeling pressured by both the White and Hispanic members of their communities to affiliate more strongly with their Mexican heritage. They also recalled being reminded by their peers that their loyalties were suspect because of their mixed-race parentage, their choice to speak English over Spanish, and their ambiguous physical appearances. Their statements indicate that the racial and ethnic divisions in this community make it difficult to gain validation for a White, Hispanic, or biracial identity without active negotiation. For all of the participants in this study, regardless of the degree of difficulty they reported in claiming a particular identity, community emerged as a major factor in setting the stage for their racial identity development. When elements of community do not impose a racial identity on adolescents, other factors can have a greater impact on identity formation.

### *The Role of Physical Appearance in Racial Identity*

A second theme that emerged from participants' narratives indicates that regardless of the level of racial tolerance in one's community, it is difficult to claim a racial identity that does not match one's physical appearance. For mixed-race youth this current social standard bares vestiges of the historical one-drop rule which stipulates that racially stratified societies will relegate the race of children of mixed parentage to that of the lower status non-white parent. This rule has traditionally applied to individuals of Black/White descent and has meant that these individuals have been defined by any known African descent in their genealogy (Bratter, 2007). Though this factor alone may

have adequately explained the identity development process of individuals born prior to 1967, (see Tatum, 2003), the declining salience of the one-drop rule since that era makes it more likely that recent generations will apply other criteria in racial self-definitions. The narratives of mixed race youth in this study reflect both the vestiges of the one-drop rule and a generational shift in social standards.

Physical appearance may play an undeniably large role in the racial identification of youth in this study but it is not a simple one-to-one relationship, such that individuals who look White always identify as White, darker-skinned individuals always identify as Black or Hispanic, and those with skin tones somewhere in between always identify as biracial or multiracial. However, youth narratives reveal that they believe others, both Whites and people of color within their communities, use their skin tone as a primary cue for racial categorization. Even those in this study who report that they have never experienced color-based prejudice and believe that race is irrelevant to their lives expressed awareness that others make assumptions about their group identity based on their physical appearance—their skin color, hair texture, facial features, and even clothing choices.

While all participants acknowledged appearance as a highly salient factor, for most it did not solely account for their complex sense of racial identity. Perhaps no one highlights the complexity of this relationship as poignantly as 14-year-old Marcus. When asked how he usually identifies, Marcus offered this insight,

I consider myself African American—just ‘cause...I don’t know...I just do. I’m more darker, and that’s what I consider myself. But I know that I am, you know, I’m like mixed... At school usually, I’m like, well all of

my friends are just like, 'Yeah, Marcus is Black.' So I guess I just consider myself Black at school 'cause I know there is that dividing line. At my school, if you are darker, you're Black, and if you're White, you're White. I don't know, it's just kind of like that...it's just the way it breaks down at my school.

Marcus acknowledges a degree of inevitability in the relationship between his physical appearance and how others frame his racial identity. The fact that peers at school see him as Black because of his skin color means that he is more likely to have others validate a Black identity than a biracial or White identity in this context. Though his skin is not light enough to "pass" as White according to the criterion established by the one-drop rule, Marcus reveals that his racial self-understanding extends beyond that single criterion. His statement that, "I know that I am, you know, I'm like mixed" indicates that he includes other factors in his own assessment of his racial identity, even if he can't easily define them. He does not accept that his skin color alone determines his racial group membership. Marcus' struggle to define these other factors is echoed in the words of his darker-skinned older brother Trevor, who states:

Well, I mean, I consider myself African American, just 'cause the color, I mean because of the color of my skin. I mean, I am, but I tell people that I'm mixed. I tell people that I have a White dad, and they...sometimes they can't believe it, sometimes. They're like, 'Really, I thought you were full-Black.'

Trevor's narrative provides evidence that though his darker skin tone does not preclude the possibility that he can identify as biracial in his community, it does make it likely he will need to offer a compelling explanation if he wants to identify as anything other than Black. Claiming a biracial identity in this context requires active negotiation. Trevor presents a dilemma that is the mirror image of his brother's. While Marcus sees himself

as “mixed” he does not actively seek validation for this identity from his peers because he believes they have a fixed view of the boundaries between Black and White. Trevor, however, considers himself to be African American but still seeks to challenge these rigid boundaries. He wants to have the option of claiming either identity. Though skin tone is a feature of self that can’t be changed, these adolescents show that its impact on their racial identity is determined by negotiations involving self and peers.

*Reconciling ambiguous appearances.* The continued salience of physical appearance as a factor that limits racial identity options seems to work in other ways to constrain some respondents’ racial identity options. Rachel, who identifies as “half-White, half-Mexican,” shares her point of view:

I kinda wish that I was darker, because, it doesn’t really bother me now as much, but it does kinda. It’s starting to again. Because a lot of people are starting to make fun of me for being so White again. And, I don’t know, I think that’s the only thing right now, is that people are starting to make fun of me for being too White again...My Hispanic friends, they make fun of me because, when we compare ourselves to our friends, they’ll make fun of me and say, “You’re white! You’re not Hispanic at all, you’re so White.” I don’t know. It makes me feel bad.

Though the one-drop rule was created by Whites for categorizing Black and part-Black individuals living in the United States, Rachel’s account reveals that communities of color also adhere to social hierarchies based on skin color. Her light skin allows her to “pass,” to some extent, in her largely White community, but also prevents her from being fully affiliated with her father’s Mexican heritage. Rachel describes wishing she were darker so her membership in the Hispanic community would go unchallenged. She goes

on to emphasize how she sees her brother's darker skin tones working in his favor in his attempts to fit in with other individuals of color:

With my brother, it seems like he doesn't get any...doesn't get made fun of, or anything. Maybe it's because he's really dark, and he talks Spanish to his friends, and he's friends with everybody too, and they accept him. And they don't know about—that he is half. Or...I don't know. But it seems that he gets it easier than I do.

Rachel expresses a degree of envy at what she perceives to be her brother's advantage in having his group membership so easily validated because of his darker skin tones.

Though Rachel's skin color seems to communicate ambiguous social cues, she believes her brother's physical appearance does not challenge the color-based social hierarchy in his community.

Unlike the other participants in this study whose skin color, hair texture, and facial features, at least on first impression, communicate a particular group membership, Miranda's more ambiguous physical characteristics send mixed signals to those trying to place her within a distinct group. On the one hand, the fact that she is a person of color in a predominately White community remains a salient factor in how she believes others frame her racial identity. For example, when asked to explain how she might describe herself to a stranger, Miranda answered, "There's not that many 6-foot-tall, skinny, half-Black girls walking around Amberwood, so that's one way to describe me." But on the other hand, with further probing, Miranda's narrative provides evidence that behavioral cues interact with physical cues to form an explanation of how strangers might interpret her racial membership. While relaying memories of her visit to a community in Mississippi, she adopts a Black southern vernacular for dramatic effect:

I was just sitting on the side, watching everybody ‘dunk,’ and all these boys, of course, coming up to me, and they’re like ‘Hey what’s your name?’ And I’m like, ‘I’m Miranda.’ And they’re like ‘Girl, you ain’t talkin’ right!’ I’m like, ‘I’m from Amberwood, Oregon. Do you know where that is? I don’t think you do!’ ‘Cause most of them have no idea where Oregon is, or *what* it is! And they’re like, ‘Okay, well, what *are* you?’ And I’m like, ‘I’m half-Black, half-White,’ you know. And they’re like, ‘Naw-uhh, no you’re not! You talk too funny.’ You know. ‘You’ve got green eyes, what’s wrong with you?’ And I’m like, ‘Actually, I’m Mexican.’ And they’re like, ‘Ohhhh, okay, okay, okay.’ And I’m like ‘Yeah. That’s what I thought.’

Here Miranda is expressing an emotional reaction to the probing she receives from strangers as they attempt to reconcile the incongruity of green eyes paired with dark skin. Both her unusual appearance and her speech patterns are out of context and require an explanation. She seems resigned to the process of negotiation that ensues, whereby she attempts to claim a biracial identity, which is rejected, and then settles for an explanation that seems to satisfy her skeptical audience. Her reaction suggests that this is not the first time she has been put in the position of defending her group membership. Below, Miranda explains how she stumbled upon an unconventional solution for explaining her racial identity:

[It came] probably from my best friend being Mexican. Because I always go with her family, and so we’re pretty much like the same skin tone, especially during the summer when I get, like, really orangey. And so people always are like, ‘She looks Mexican, you know, but she’s got like curly hair.’ And they’re like, ‘Oh, okay.’ And I’m like, ‘No, I’m not actually.’ And so it’s kind of just a joke between like anyone pretty much who knows me or has seen me, that they always come up to me and they’re just like, ‘What are you?’ and I’m like, ‘Oh, you know, I’m Mexican.’ And they’re like, ‘Oh, okay.’ But then I’m like, ‘I’m Black.’ And they’re like ‘No you’re not. No, no you’re not.’ ‘Well, yeah, I *am*.’

Miranda’s example supports the assertion that it is difficult to claim a racial identity that does not match one’s physical appearance. Absent a compelling explanation for such

incompatibility, her audience is likely to rely on the socially ingrained meanings behind physical cues to establish her group membership. It is clear that Miranda must fight the current in order to achieve validation in this context for her racial self-understanding.

For the final group in this study, this current proves too strong to fight. With this group, physical appearance, particularly their darker skin tones, provides the strongest justification for a sense of racial identity. 14-year-old Max, whose skin color is among the darkest of all the participants in the study, is one such participant. When asked to explain why he identifies exclusively as Black, Max offered this simple explanation: “Cause I am.” He wasn’t able to elaborate beyond this statement except to say that despite his mixed parentage, he had never thought of himself, or heard others describe him, as anything other than “Black.” For Max, physical appearance, particularly what he believes is communicated by his darker skin tone, seems to make the thought of identifying as anything other than African American out of the question.

*“How do people tell you apart?”* Beyond the ability of physical appearance to communicate group membership, youth in this study also talked about the limitations of being reduced to the color of their skin. Their narratives suggest that the dominance of physical appearance in conveying membership also limits their ability to be seen as individuals defined by other attributes. Their reports uphold the notion that this experience is unique to people of color. Valarie explained it this way:

A lot of people—and I guess I’m kind of stereotyping too, I guess—think that a lot of Black people look alike. And, uhm, my brother and his best friend, I mean, they look alike, but there are differences. And people are like, ‘Oh my gosh, you guys must be twins, how do people tell you apart?’ Well, they are pretty different.

Though Valarie initially characterizes her community as tolerant and says she believes race to be irrelevant to her social experience, she reveals another dimension of her experiences that suggests that race is a consideration in her evaluation of self. Because she can clearly identify the differences between her younger brother and his biracial friend, she is surprised that members of her tolerant community don't seem to see beyond the attribute of skin color. She continues,

And I remember when we were talking to somebody, and they were like, 'I saw this girl at [my school] who looked just like you, and I said 'Hi Valarie.' And there's not a lot of Black people in Amberwood, so I think I knew who she was talking about, and she doesn't look *anything* like me! I was like, 'I don't look like her. Why would you think I look like her?' Obviously, I guess, because of my skin color. I guess I stand out because, again, there are not too many Black people in Amberwood.

Echoing Miranda's expression of resignation at the conclusions that strangers draw about her heritage because of her skin color, Valarie provides another example that the process of negotiating a chosen racial identity can elicit negative emotions among mixed-race youth. Here Valarie conveys irritation that her physical appearance, particularly her skin color, should provide the primary cue used to characterize her. Other aspects of her identity that may be more salient to her, like the fact that she is part of the 'preppy' group at school, or that she is a varsity member of the volleyball team, are not the aspects that seem to distinguish her in the minds of strangers. She concludes that this is because there are so few Blacks in Amberwood. Though her ethnicity is an aspect of her identity she has chosen to de-emphasize, she believes others in her community readily select her racial membership as her most prominent identifying feature.

George, a light-skinned youth, who identifies exclusively as African American, shared his insight into a similar experience:

There was two other African American boys who went to the high school before I got there, and I was friends with one of them for a long time...And they always somehow mixed us up with each other, 'cause we were the only three Black kids around. And we were, somewhat, the same height, but I thought that was kind of funny... how they all thought we looked the same, or were brothers, or something.

George doesn't convey the same level of frustration at being mistaken for another because of a similarity in skin color, but he does seem baffled that is the primary criterion chosen to define him. Though his sense of self is based on much more than his physical appearance, his skin color provides the first cue others use to form a first impression. Though George and other participants seem to generally fit in well in their predominately White communities, compared with their White peers who are not identified primarily by their skin color, they may start at a disadvantage in their ability to manage how they are viewed by others.

*Conclusions about appearance and identity.* The accounts of multiracial youth in this study are largely consistent with the notion that trying to claim a racial identity that does not match one's physical appearance requires negotiation. Many participants reported feeling constrained by the rigid boundaries between Black and White, and Brown and White in their communities. Part-Black individuals especially found themselves being automatically grouped with other African Americans in their community regardless of their own racial self-understanding. Some were resigned to the fact that they would be categorized according to the appearance in public but still used

other criteria to define themselves in private. For darker-skinned individuals like Max, physical appearance proved to be the strongest single factor in determining racial identity.

Multiracial youth with more ambiguous physical features, however, described having to justify the incongruity of their various physical attributes in order to claim a particular racial self-understanding. They described challenging others to overcome their deeply ingrained ideas about the relationship between physical attributes and racial categories. This process of negotiation was often described as requiring creativity and being emotionally taxing.

*“The Whitest Black Girl” Racial Identity through the Looking Glass of Peer Culture*

Although respondents’ physical appearance provides one important cue regarding their group membership, their behavior is not always congruent with deeply ingrained stereotypes of what it means to be Black. As their accounts revealed, part of the reality of growing up in predominately White communities surrounded by a largely White network of peers is that they often share the lens of the dominant White cultural framework. Their own knowledge of what passes for appropriate Black behavior is largely filtered through the eyes of their White peers. This sense of incongruence was strongly endorsed by the youth in this study when they revealed their feelings of confusion about their peers’ characterizations of color-based behavioral codes and what this meant for their own assessment of identity options.

One commonly shared theme was the experience of hearing their behavior described as “White” by their peers. Valarie put it this way:

So, when I was on my volleyball team, and I guess I’m preppy, or I act that way according to the people that I am around, and they say that I am like, ‘the whitest person they know.’ Which is so, I mean, I don’t know, it was really interesting. I was like, ‘Okay, what is that suppose to mean?... And apparently it’s because I am proper, that is what somebody told me, and I was like, ‘Okay.’ But I don’t know if that makes any sense at all.

Valarie seems confused by her peers’ comment about her “whiteness,” not sure what it reveals about where she falls on the color line. Her interpretation of this verdict of her “whiteness” seems to be that it has something to do with the fact that she acts “preppy” and “proper,” behavioral traits she assumes are incompatible with “blackness.” She later reveals that this assessment of her behavior comes in equal doses from her mixed-race friends. She recalls:

One time I was sitting at school, and we were at a table and all of us were mixed-race and I was sitting at the table, just kind of talking, and the guys were talking, and there was this other girl, and she was ‘gangster’ and they were just talking and using all of these slang terms. And I’m not around that at all, and I was like, ‘Okay, what are you guys talking about?’ And they were like, ‘Oh Valarie, you are so White!’ And I’m like, ‘Are you going to tell me what you are talking about?’ ...I’m just like, ‘Okay what is that suppose to mean?’ Like, it doesn’t make any sense, and I’m just like, you know...I guess they think I am suppose to be Black and know all these terms and slang, and I’m just, ‘Okay...’

Here Valarie provides another example of limitations imposed on the racial identity options of multiracial youth. Though Valarie’s behavior elicits similar responses among her White teammates and her mixed-race and Black friends, at least in the sense that they both refer to her as “so White,” these comments seem to convey different meanings coming from each group. In both cases this evaluation of her whiteness is based on her

behavior: acting “preppy” and “proper” fulfills the criteria for inclusion among her white peers, but being out-of-date on current Black terms and slang excludes her from full membership among her peers who claim a Black identity. Her choice of words is revealing when she says “they think I am suppose to be Black and know all these terms and slang” She is aware that there is more to being accepted as Black than fulfilling the criteria of having darker skin tones; there is also a behavioral code that she has not achieved.

This sense of needing to negotiate a dual criterion for blackness, both in physical appearance and appropriate behavior, was also conveyed by Miranda. Below she describes her experiences with a group of peers at school:

In our school, among the other Black people, I’ve been dubbed ‘the whitest Black girl’ pretty much. Just because of like, my skin tone, I guess. Just ‘cause like, I don’t know, I guess other people say like, I don’t act Black at all, I guess. Which is like, very true. I’m not like, in people’s faces about things, I guess, and I’m not like, “Naaah, naaaah, naaaah’ like my sisters are like. I’ve gotten more like it, just because I’ve been down to the South more, but, I’m not at all like it, I guess.

Miranda also seems conflicted by the messages she receives about race from her peers. Though she knows that her relatively light skin tone leaves a question mark about her racial group membership among her peers, this is only confounded by the fact that she doesn’t act in stereotypically Black ways. She cites the fact that she is not “in people’s faces about things” as a reason she is not seen as Black, seeming to accept this stereotype as an accurate representation of blackness. Interestingly, of all the participants in this study, Miranda’s exposure to predominately Black communities in the South means that some of her ideas about Black culture come from first-hand experience with African

Americans outside of Amberwood; she has spent time with her father, grandmother, and half-siblings in the South and has had the opportunity to assess the accuracy of these stereotypes. At the same time, however, her cultural frame of reference is still that of her predominately White upbringing, which may account for some of the confusion and ambivalence she conveys about this topic.

Her ambivalence comes across even more vividly when she describes her friends' reactions when she tries to reference both cultural frameworks at the same time. She recalls having phone conversations with friends in Amberwood while she is visiting family in Mississippi. She says, "But it's just like, when I'm down there, like my friends when I talk to them on the phone and stuff, they're like, 'Oh it's so funny how you act Black!' And I'm like, 'It's just what I do!'" Here we can see her attempting to reconcile the cultural expectations of two communities. Though she tries to gain validation for a new-found understanding of Blackness, her "Mississippi self," her White friends in Amberwood are quick to remind her that it is not so easy to achieve validation for a new self-understanding. She tries to assert this emergent identity by insisting, "It's just what I do!" That she is able to recall this level of detail in past phone conversations with peers emphasizes just how important these interactions are to her. She acknowledges this peer-imposed switching between Black and White behaviors as a newly negotiated aspect of self. She now sees herself as someone who operates from both of these cultural frameworks.

*Media and the "cool-pose" culture.* As Miranda introduces in the previous passage, along with this split experience of physically appearing to be Black but

behaviorally operating from a White cultural frame of reference, many participants brought up the common theme of “acting Black.” Several participants used this expression in the context of conversations they remembered having with their friends about the topic of race. Valarie describes how one such conversation played out with a friend:

We would joke about [the topic of race] sometimes, because you know, we listen to rap and we do hip hop a lot, and so there is a lot of rap involved in the music we dance to, and so we’ll joke around and be ‘gangster’ and you know, ‘Oh, I’m acting Black’ or you know, ‘You’re acting Black,’ or “You’re acting White,” or you know, it kind of ends up like that where we just joke about it, but uhm, we’ve never talked about it like, ‘Oh my gosh, you’re Black!’ Or, you know...we haven’t really *talked* about it.

Valarie’s description of joking with her friend about the topic of race and equating “acting Black” with “acting gangster” provides insight into how ideas about blackness originate among her peer groups. Of the eleven respondents in this study, six pointed to the media as playing a prominent role in shaping the stereotypes of blackness that abound in their communities. Their statements provide evidence of how these stereotypes are used as guidelines to frame the racial identities of mixed-race youth in the eyes of their monoracial peers.

For George, a 16-year-old who identifies as exclusively African American, the idea of “acting Black” seems to be taken literally. He explains:

I watch so many music videos from African people, and the way they act, I sometimes act how they act and I talk how they talk, and that’s... I just laugh because it is so much fun, and so funny. I say that because I don’t have the accent that they do, and yet I can do it really well, so... And it always is funny, and people play along with it... they just kind of go off of it, and we have a little fun with it.

George describes music videos as a primary source of information on “acting Black.” Though multiracial teens growing up in areas with higher concentrations of Blacks may need only to look to their peers, neighbors, or family members for cultural role models, in a George’s largely White community, Black role models are few in number. George also conveys, however, that he knows the Black musicians he sees in the media are not credible role models. His choice of words reveals that his aim in imitating their behavior is to meet certain peer expectations. In turn, he believes that his White peers share an understanding of their role in this performance because they “play along.” George gives further insight into how his re-enactments of stereotypical black behavior affect his social experiences at school. He explains, “I mean sometimes I do it, but uh, sometimes [peers at school] do it if they are near me too, but it’s rarely that I ever hear it from them without me bringing it up, or whatever, so...” George seems to suggest that his racial identity as an African American allows him to make fun of these stereotypes of Black rappers and hip hop artists, but he believes that his White friends do not take the same liberties unless he is around. His skin color makes George more convincing in this role, even when it is taken in jest.

Though acting out media stereotypes of Black rappers seems to provoke amusement and mocking among George and his peers, other participants credit these stereotypes as having more positive influences on how others view Black culture and Black adolescents. Antonia, who identifies as multiracial, offered this insight:

You know, this reminds me. I was reading this *National Geographic* article about, kind of like pop culture among teens, and you know, some psychologist was saying that kids of other ethnicities are drawn to African

American teenagers because they seem to...they tend to have this kind of like “air” about them, that you know, they just seem cooler.

Interestingly, this depiction of Black teenagers as having an “air about them” and projecting “coolness” seems to be particularly salient for Black and half-Black males. For example, though George seems to view stereotypes of Black musicians as a source of amusement, he also believes that this image affords him a certain social status as a Black teenager. When asked whether identifying as Black made it harder or easier to be part of any group at school, George replied,

I’d say that it would be easier. Because, I mean, they are becoming friends with the only Black person in the school, so it means a lot of cool...and they probably think they might learn something from me, or—whatever. I don’t know. I don’t really know what they think, but I think it’s cool.

A picture begins to emerge from these accounts suggesting that these prevalent stereotypes of Black culture convey conflicting messages—especially for Black and part-Black males. On the one hand depictions of Black gangsters seem to be received with amusement by teens in this community. On the other hand, there is still a perception, as Antonia describes above, that these stereotypes offer a certain status to the part-Black adolescents who can convincingly tap into this “cool-pose culture” (Patterson, 2006).

Valarie explains more about the relevance of these stereotypes at her school:

I think that there are a lot of stereotypes about the gangster thing, and, I don’t know. And then, like on T.V., its, I think, it is a like a big part of the gangster thing, I think, has to do with the media. Because of the rappers, everybody wants to be like the rappers. Like the guys that I know want to be like the rappers—they think that rap is cool, and that whole idea, and MTV, where everyone is all gangster and ghetto.

Concurring with other respondents, Valarie pinpoints the media as being responsible for the popularity of the “gangsta” and “ghetto” stereotypes. She also begins by saying that

“everybody wants to be like the rappers” and then revises this to only include “the guys that I know want to be like the rappers.” Below, she elaborates on the repercussions of these stereotypes, particularly for her part-Black male peers:

Most of the, I don’t know, the guys I know that are of mixed-race at our school are “gangster-ghetto” and I think that they have, not a pressure, but just kind of this way of being seen as that, and I don’t know. I’ve talked to one of my friends about it, and I was like—because he dresses all gangster—and I was like, you know, ‘I think it would be kinda cool if you would put on clothes that actually fit. I think it would be interesting,’ you know. ‘Why do you wear your shirts so big?’ He is like, you know, ‘I would be girly to wear my clothes like that,’ or something. And I was like, ‘okay.’ I don’t know, he has this, he thinks he has to be ‘tough’ and ‘gangster’ all the time.

Valarie struggles to explain why the “gangster” image is so popular among her Black and part-Black friends, but stops just short of acknowledging that there is “a pressure” for them to take on this persona. She also describes that her friends see the gangster-ghetto image as setting the standard of masculinity for Black and part-Black males. Much like images of very thin women in the media are credited with creating a standard of beauty that many girls find impossible to attain (Botta, 1999; Clay, Vignoles, & Dittmar, 2005), media depictions of hip hop artists and rappers seem to set the bar for masculinity among Black and part-Black males (Patterson, 2006).

Among the participants in this study, the females are quicker than the males to notice this parallel and understand its implications. Antonia describes this phenomenon from her vantage point. She states:

I think that they are almost expected to be, you know, like to...like to be interested in rap music, and to wear baggie clothes and not to be all that into school, and to speak a certain way, like the kind of things you see in

the movies—they almost, they are almost expected to fall into that kind of stereotype. Uhm, and maybe this is just at my school, but I’ve just noticed that most of them have.

Antonia, Valarie, and others in this study describe rap and hip hop stereotypes as having more salience for the Black and part-Black males at their school than for Black and part-Black females. But while Valarie avoids describing this salience in terms of “a pressure,” Antonia acknowledges that taking on the gangster and rapper image is “almost” an expectation for the part-Black males at her school. They are aware that the rapper image is a salient identity option for part-Black males at their school, but they still see it as a choice—not the only identity option available.

There is also the sense, in their descriptions of how these stereotypes affect their peers, that both Valarie and Antonia view the rapper and gangster images as limiting their peers’ social experiences. Valarie recalls encouraging her part-Black friend to “put on clothes that actually fit,” and Antonia expresses concern that most of her male peers seem to “fall into that kind of stereotype;” both accounts suggest that the girls are aware of the power of these stereotypes to shape, and to limit, their classmates’ social experiences. Neither seems convinced that this identity option for part-Black males projects the intended “air” of coolness.

This general impression is corroborated by Andrea, who talks about the power of these images to influence her brother’s part-Black middle school friends. She says,

I notice that now too, with my little brother. He goes to middle school and I can definitely see that. A lot of the kids are trying to be like gangster, or something like that. I see that with them. And the kids who are coming this next year for freshman, I can see that... From what I can see, I think [they are] mostly guys. ‘Cause guys want to, you know, be all rough and

tough kids. [My brother is] always coming home talking about them and saying, you know, how dumb they are and how they're always getting in trouble, and stuff. And so, I don't think he's really interested in being a part of that...I just think he thinks that it's just not worth it, trying to fit in somewhere when you don't really want to fit in, but it's just to 'fit in.'

Andrea relays her understanding that the emergence of the "gangster" image as a salient identity option for Black and part-Black males begins as early as middle school. Like the other female respondents in this study, she describes this stereotype as being popular among Black and part-Black middle school boys and suggests that this is because it allows them to fit in. She also implies that being thought of as a "troublemaker" may be one consequence of participation in this subculture.

Miranda, who has come away from her visits to the South with a different take on masculine scripts for her Black and part-Black peers, leaves little doubt about her views on the subject. In describing the difference between Black adolescents from Amberwood and those from a community in Mississippi, she again switches to southern Black vernacular as she relays her experiences. She says:

Like in Mississippi, they're more like, *real*. But here, they're like, 'Oh, we be Black.' You know?...So like [guys from Mississippi] they're more real, and they're more likely to stick up for themselves, like they wanna treat their girls better, but they are also like the same personality. Whereas here, it's just like, 'Oh, like you know it. We've been through stuff.' They're more like, all talk.

In this passage Miranda defines how the identity options available to Black and part-Black males in Amberwood differ from those of the southern Black teenagers she has encountered. She makes the distinction between being a "real" and "wannabe" gangster. In her view, Black teenagers in the South have more of a claim to this image and are

more convincing in this role because their community context readily validates this identity. She clarifies this distinction below:

I guess down there, it is more like, status-wise, especially with the guys from [the South]. It is more important for them to have gone through stuff, and if they haven't it's like 'Oh, well, that guy is weak' and stuff like that, you know? Like, the more they've gone through, like, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. So like, they really take that personally. So like, if they've been in a situation, and they didn't die, it only makes them that much stronger.

To Miranda, southern Black males are more convincing in their portrayal of the gangster image than Black teens from Amberwood because they have "gone through stuff."

Unlike the other female respondents in this study who also recognize pressure for their part-Black male peers to conform to a popular stereotype, Miranda is not sympathetic to their plight. She describes her take on the Black and part-Black males in Amberwood:

I don't talk to them anymore, because I don't...like...Black guys. They're weird and they're all the same. And they irritate me a lot...Like, they all have the same personality. They are all different, but they all have the same personality. They're always just like, 'Yeah giraw, I'm so hot, I know. You wanna come ovah here?' Like 'I'm the man. I know I'm rollin', I know I'm hot.' And, it just...it just bothers me a lot. 'Shut up. Stop talking.' But, the White guys are all different. Like, the guy I'm into now, he's a complete nerd. He's like, he plays Halo, and like, he just got a Wii, and it's like, the love of his life right now.

In Miranda's view, the Black and part-Black males in her community have so completely conformed to the gangster and hip-hop stereotype that they seem to have taken on "the same personality." In comparison, the White adolescent males in her community are "all different," perhaps because they have a variety of identity options from which to choose that will allow them to attain status and fit in among their peers.

What is clear from the accounts of these female participants is that there is a mismatch of perceptions between part-Black males and females about the “coolness” of conforming to the gangster image. The females in the study expressed the general consensus that adopting the mannerisms and clothing of rappers and hip hop artists was another form of “acting Black,” taking on a persona that is at odds with their White cultural framework. Among the part-Black male participants, however, this is viewed as a valid aspiration, and one that seems to grant them status among their peers.

The rapper/hip hop influence on Black culture was viewed with greater nuance among the part-Black male participants in this study. They conveyed a sense that this identity option was like a smorgasbord from which to pick and choose some attitudes and mannerisms and reject the rest. Trevor provides a good example of this distinction. Arriving at the interview wearing an oversized T-shirt with an image of the late rapper Tupac Shakur, Trevor provides this description of the hip-hop culture on his largely Black peer group at school:

Probably 90% of my friends are African American. Like, 90% of the friends I hang out with are African American...We talk about the same stuff, and we, you know, there's a few of us though, and I think we have to stick together somewhat, so...and we [listen to] rap. And hip hop. And the way we dress, and the way we act...I mean...Like, I don't know how to explain. I mean, if you take a group photo of my whole school, you could point out the people I hang out with, 'cause we're all...well, we dress like I'm dressing right now...And most of them are, actually all of my friends that are mixed consider themselves African American. So I mean, none of them really—I mean, they know that they have a White mom, or a White dad, but they consider themselves African American. To, I mean...to a point. Which means, like they don't consider themselves...yeah, they have their limits. I don't know, can't really explain, but they have them.

For Trevor and his friends, appreciation of the hip hop culture is a point of commonality that allows them to express their stronger affiliation with their Black culture, but alone does not define them. His account provides further evidence that though others might characterize part-Black males by their physical appearance, clothing choices, and affiliation with the cool-pose culture, biracial youth use a variety of other criteria to understand their own racial identity. A comment Trevor made at the beginning of his interview helps puts this in clearer focus:

When you're Black, you get the conflicts, you know? There's people out there who don't like Black people, but you also get the other side, you get the White, you know, *their* side. Some African Americans can do the stereotypes, but I'm not, because I'm like the best...I'm the best of both worlds, to me.

His account and others reveal that even biracial youth who claim a singular Black identity and participate in the hip-hop culture, use other factors in their assessment of identity.

*"It's so funny!"* Along with the subject of 'acting Black' which frequently arose in respondents' descriptions of interactions with peers, they also described having humorous conversations with friends about race. Though 14-year-old Marcus at first insisted that he didn't have conversations with his peers about race, he later described having the following conversation with his White friend Susan:

I think that we joke around and stuff. I'm like, 'Susan, you're so Black!' It's so funny! Susan and I are just so much best friends like that. I'm like, "Susan, you're Blacker than I am." And she's like, 'Yeah, I know.' So, we can just joke around like that. But we don't really have any serious conversations with my friends or my family about stuff like that.

Marcus describes himself as taking the initiative in bringing up the topic of race with his friend. In this exchange he makes the topic safe by applying a label to his friend's behavior that is obviously incongruent with her racial identity, and thus funny. He gives us further insight into how this topic is handled among his other friendship groups with this statement:

I just think our group, we can just laugh about, you know, some stuff. Like, we're so close that we can do like, you know, be kind of mean to each other. But you know that we are not meaning it, it's just kind of like that. We wouldn't say anything, like, racist. But you know, they say something, 'Oh, it's because you're Black' and I'm like, 'Yeah, it is!' So, we're just kind of...like that.

Marcus interprets his friends' ability to joke about his minority status as a sign that they have close friendships. One impression that emerges from participant accounts of conversations concerning the topic of race is that approaching this topic in a joking manner with friends seems to diffuse a potentially awkward and divisive topic. Participants revealed that using humor was one way they were able to effectively navigate the racial politics of their peer groups when broaching the topic of their mixed-race heritage.

Supporting Marcus' account, Andrea describes her preferred method of talking about her racial identity when among friends. She explains, "I prefer [to describe] it as a swirl. Just 'cause a lot of people don't really take it seriously, so, I don't know." Though Andrea injects humor into conversations about her racial identity with friends by choosing a creative metaphor to describe her heritage, she has also found a way to assert her claim to both aspects of her identity in a way that she believes will not be perceived

as pushy or defensive. She perceives that race is not a topic her peers want to approach openly and seriously and thus adjusts her own approach to conversations about race accordingly. Here humor is used as a tool to effectively negotiate a mixed-race identity.

Co-opting humor in order to gain validation for one's identity was not a strategy used exclusively by the part-Black participants in this study. Jason, who has a White mother and Mexican father, gives further insight into how humor is used in conversations about race with friends. He explains: "Like all of my friends know that I am half, so they just like to joke around with me and stuff like that, and I don't mind it, because they're just joking...Like, uhm, they sit there and they call me like 'vanilla bean' and stuff like that." Alex describes his friends as initiating talk about his mixed-race identity by softening what would normally be considered a derogatory term. He chooses not to take offense to this term because he believes his friends are being playful. Yet even in jest his friends communicate clear ideas about how they frame his racial identity. Though Alex chooses to describe himself as Hispanic, his friends use humor to gently remind him of where he stands in terms of his group membership.

*Conclusions from peer influences on racial identity.* Perceptions of the way peers characterized participants' racial group membership played a large role in their racial self-understandings. Physical appearance was described as being only one facet of how biracial youth believed their peers framed their racial identities. Part-Black youth revealed feeling that they must adhere to media-derived stereotypes of Blackness in order to achieve validation for a Black identity, and many acknowledged that their own understanding of Black culture was also largely defined by media images of hip hop

artist, rappers, and other popular Black entertainers. Participants reported feeling conflicted by hearing peers characterize their behavior either as “White” or as “acting Black.”

For part-Black male participants especially, affiliation with hip-hop culture seemed to be dually perceived as granting a certain social status and being at odds with their dominant White cultural framework. Respondents commonly reported hearing the phrase ‘acting Black’ used to describe behavior that appeared to mimic these media-derived stereotypes of blackness. Half-Black female respondents were much more likely to characterize peer affiliation with hip-hop artists and rappers as being problematic than the half-Black male respondents in this study. Male respondents were likely to view affiliation with hip-hop culture as being selective and only one facet of a more complex understanding of racial identity.

Respondent narratives suggest that humor is often used in conversations with peers about race to diffuse an otherwise awkward topic. Some participants revealed using humor to navigate racial politics and ease the way for a claim to a mixed-race identity. Others reported responding to friends’ jokes about their mixed-race identities. Whether their interactions with peers were infused with humor or a source of conflict, biracial youth in this study were strongly influenced by peer assessments of their racial identities.

*“You’re in the South now girl, you’d better buck up” Family and Racial Identity*

As the basis for a final theme, respondents frequently discussed the racial socialization they received within the family context. Though most youth largely focused

on the influence of peer culture in shaping their racial self-understanding during interviews, they also acknowledged the importance of the family context for providing messages about race and shaping how they viewed themselves racially. They reported receiving explicit and implicit kinds of racial socialization from parents, both in the form of conversations with parents about the topic of race, and through more subtle messages about the politics of race.

*“Stop talking!”* For a majority of the adolescents in this study, conversations with parents about the topic of race were described as being difficult, awkward, and in some cases, non-existent. Antonia’s response to the question about whether she had conversations with her parents around this topic helps explain the source of this awkwardness:

If they tried [talking to me about race] I probably shot them down. I probably didn’t want to talk about it. I think I feel like sometimes it’s something difficult to talk about, uhm, because I just think that ethnicity and race overall is just such a sensitive subject to so many people.

Much like a teenager might squirm at the idea of talking to her parents about sex, Antonia describes resisting her parents’ attempts to draw her into conversations around the topic of race. Her reaction is consistent with the finding in the previous section that race is an emotion-laden and confusing topic for many multiracial teens. Miranda mirrors these sentiments with her description of race-related conversations with her White mother:

She tries to have a conversation with me, but she was just like, ‘Do you mind that you’re Black—like, half-Black?’ And I was like, ‘Stop talking. You’re not sounding smart. Just stop. It’s not working for you.’ So...and that was about it. And so, we don’t really talk about it, I guess.

Like Antonia, Miranda describes discouraging her mother from broaching the topic of race, specifically questions regarding how she feels about her mixed-race heritage.

Miranda's reaction seems to confirm a concern cited in the literature (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005), about the abilities, particularly of White parents, to relate the experiences of their biracial children in order to socialize them accordingly. Though her mother seems concerned that being mixed race might present challenges for Miranda, as a White woman, her personal experiences with race may not have adequately prepared her to relate to her daughter's experiences. Perhaps her perception that her mother cannot relate to her experience motivates the sharpness and impatience we see in Miranda's response to this line of questioning.

Though participants often conveyed discomfort in talking about race with parents and family members, the shoe seems to be on the other foot in Andrea's case. Race is not an off-limits topic to Andrea because she is curious about her ancestry and eager for more information. During the interview she shared that her grandmother had experienced the Holocaust and described this piece of family history as a source of great interest to her and her brothers. She also relayed, however, that she knew very little about how her father's experiences as a Black man growing up in the United States. She explained, "I know a lot of stuff about my heritage on my mom's side, but not my dad's, and so it's kind of hard to relate with his heritage, I guess. Later she elaborates,

Like a lot of times, me and my brother, we always talk about, like, what exactly we are, because we don't know a lot about all of my dad's background, so we kind of like go online and look up all of the little details of other heritages, and stuff like, that so, I guess sometimes we'll

be like, ‘Oh, we have some Polish in us,’ or, you know, ‘some Native American.’

Though her peers talk about discouraging racial conversations with parents, Andrea attributes her lack of knowledge about her Black ancestry to her father’s reluctance to elaborate on this topic. She explains, “He [talks about race] a little bit, but when he does, he changes the subject, so I don’t think he likes talking about that kind of stuff.” Again we see the subject of race emerge as an emotional and difficult topic, both for mixed-race youth and their parents.

In a final group of participants, conversations with family members about race were perceived in a different light. Though some youth, like Andrea, described these conversations as opportunities to learn more about their heritage, others described such conversations as being simply unnecessary in the context of their tolerant communities. Allen’s descriptions provide examples of both of these scenarios. When asked if he had conversations with his parents about race, Allen replied emphatically:

No, no. Not at all. I don’t think it has ever been a problem, so they had no need to talk about it. They say just be nice to everybody. That’s what they always say to me. So, that’s worked out pretty well, I guess, that race shouldn’t be an issue. Just live your life.

Allen’s account of conversations about race with his parents illustrates a different understanding of the role race might play in his life. In contrast to other youth’s descriptions about awkward and emotion-laden conversations with parents about what this topic, Allen’s description of these conversations conveys an assessment of race as having minimal implications for his daily life. In his view, his parents find it unnecessary to educate him about race because they don’t anticipate that it will have any bearing on

his social experiences. The “take away” message for Allen seems to be that his own behavior, in being “nice to everybody,” will have more of an impact on his social experiences than his racial/ethnic heritage.

Later in the interview, however, Allen recalls having a different kind of discussion about race with his Black grandmother:

I usually just talk to my grandma about it, but she kinda just talks to *me* about it. I don't really ask that much. She just tells me. We just talk about...*she* just talks about her history and where her parents were from, and all the different races she has in her...She just tells me to just be who I am, and just be myself, I guess. Be myself. Not really try to fit in with a group.

Allen's description of discussions about race with his grandmother seems to be qualitatively different from his description of the more vague conversations about race with his parents. It is noteworthy that Allen calls attention to the fact that these conversations are instigated by his grandmother and not himself. He seems to suggest that she finds value in these conversations and has some stake in preserving her sense of family history that he doesn't necessarily share. In Allen's assessment, by describing “all the different races she has in her,” his grandmother is encouraging him to embrace the diversity of his cultural heritage and not favor one group over another. He seems to interpret his grandmother's messages about race along the same lines as those he receives from his parents—his conclusion seems to be that his social experiences should not be defined or limited by his racial/ethnic heritage.

It is difficult to assess how racial socialization within the realm of family has shaped Allen's view of race as insignificant to his life. For example, is Allen's apparent

lack of curiosity about race-related issues a result of parental influence, or, like Antonia and Miranda, does his attitude about this topic interfere with parental attempts to provide racial socialization? With only Allen's interpretation of events to draw from, it is difficult to reach a conclusion. It is interesting to note, however, that his description of his racial identity, as "half-and-half" strongly parallels this attitude. He elaborates on this understanding in this comment: "I'm half one way, half the other way. So, I can't really claim a race, I don't think, so I just go with mixed-race." He chooses not to emphasize one aspect of his ethnic identity over the other, but claims a blended identity that incorporates both. By choosing a blended identity, Allen is able to keep race in the margins of his social experience—or perhaps transcend race altogether—to ensure it has little salience to his understanding of self.

*Explicit messages.* Though they may squirm at parental attempts to offer advice and information about the significance of race in their lives, adolescents in this study also provided accounts of how these messages have influenced their understandings of racial politics. In this study, descriptions of explicit parental messages about race ranged from predictions that having a minority status would offer future advantages, to advice on how to handle situations involving racism and discrimination.

For Valarie, this parental counsel highlights the advantages of her ethnicity. She shares this perspective of her White mother's advice:

I don't personally feel that [race] affects my life, but my mom has told me that, like, I'm a minority, so....she has told me that when I am older, if I get good grades now and stuff, that people in other colleges will want me to go; if I'm, like, a minority and I have a really nice grade point average, or something, that I will have an opportunity and stuff.

Valarie seems to regard her mother's counsel as having no particular relevance to her current social experience, but information that may come in handy in the future. Valarie's choice of wording in this passage, that "my mom has told me that I'm a minority" and the use of the conditional "*if* I'm, like, a minority" also suggests that she views the idea of her minority status as an abstraction—a label that she has not internalized because it does not reflect her current social experience. In this case, her mother's interpretation allows her to try on the idea of herself as a minority, and though framed solely in an advantageous light, gives her some insight into what might be in store for her as a person with this status.

Similarly, George gleans information about his cultural heritage from his White adoptive mother through her endorsements of stereotypes about Black families. He explains:

My mom keeps saying how she would love for me to marry, like, a Black woman, because their kids are so cute. And I've always thought that was kind of funny, and I go, 'You know, I'd love that too, but whoever comes along and who's right, then we'll see.' And she also said that she loves African American families, because she loves the way that they always have fun—they do fun stuff together as a family, and she says that it would just be a really cool experience. And so, I think it would be.

George's narrative suggests that his White mother plays a significant role in shaping his notions of African American families and Black culture. Because George and his mother live in a predominately White community and have limited contact with African Americans in the community, this knowledge is achieved second-hand and seems to provide only a shallow understanding of the Black experience. That George seems to accept his mother's prediction that marrying into an African American family would be a

“really cool experience,” leaves in question whether his mother has been able to adequately prepare him for what he might experience as a Black-appearing man.

Not all of his mother’s messages about race, however, serve to encourage George to embrace only the positive aspects of his racial identity. As did others in this study, George describes advice his mother offers about dealing with situations involving racism:

Sometimes she says that if anything does happen, like little racial slurs or whatever, either to go tell somebody about it and talk about it, or just leave it...just leave it and go on with it, ‘cause they know that either way, they’re going to feel guilty about what they did, whether I heard it or not. Or, just go on and not care.

Citing an experience his mother had involving racism, George gives us further insight into how his mother has influenced his own strategies for dealing with racism. He elaborates that

There was actually one incident that my mom told me about when I was little, still a little baby, she said that somebody spit on the ground in front of her once...I don’t think she ever really told me how she handled it. I should ask and see what she did because she’s not really a person who would just yell at them. She’s kinda like me, she just walks it off, or whatever. So, that’s probably where I get it from.

George acknowledges that though he doesn’t actually know how his mother handled this situation, he can make an educated guess that she probably did not choose to confront the other person involved. His narrative provides evidence that both his mother’s words and her past behavior have influenced how he thinks about and handles these kinds of situations.

Jason also describes receiving advice from his father about how to live in a racially divided community like Agate Peak. He explains:

My dad, when he first came here, he was practically the same way I was through high school. He hung out with the Hispanic guys, and then he went to work at the Mill, and had a bunch of guys, and stuff like that, that didn't like him. And then they got to know him, and that is practically all he had, was Caucasian friends... And, he told me to just, just to hang out with people. Don't really call them friends unless they are like there for you and stuff like that. And later on you'll...you'll find out who your real friends are, and who you'll want to hang out with.

In this description, Jason sees a parallel between his father's experiences as a newly-arrived immigrant trying to get along with both Hispanics and Whites in the work place, and his own experience of trying to maintain friendships among people in both groups. His father's advice, to just hang out with people regardless of their ethnicity and to give them time to reveal themselves as true friends, seems to resonate with Jason. By suggesting he affiliate with both groups, his father's advice also gives Jason permission to claim both aspects of his mixed-race identity.

Rachel recalls receiving similar advice from her mother on how to navigate the politics of race and achieve validation for her biracial identity among her monoracial peers.

I talked to my mom about that, and she says that I shouldn't have to change who I am because of that, but just know that I am a better person than those people who are going to give me stuff, or be mean. Just be friends with both. ...Sometimes it's hard—I'll get made fun of for being half, and she just tells me that those people are just jealous that I can be both things, both White and Hispanic. Mostly, I get made fun of by Hispanics, that I'm half, and she tells me to just ignore people, just not even listen to them.

Though her mother is White and cannot directly relate to her daughter's experiences, she encourages Rachel to claim a biracial identity although it might be difficult to have it validated by both ethnic groups. She also fosters her daughter's positive view of her mixed-race identity by suggesting that peers might be jealous of her ability to be both things at once. Rachel offers information about how her mother supports her mixed identity:

[My mom] made us talk both languages. Like, I mostly talked, when we were younger, Spanish. And then we started talking English. She would talk to us in both languages, not just English or Spanish. And she learned Spanish too, so that she would be able to talk to us. So, she helped us learn both languages so that we would grow up knowing both.

By encouraging her biracial children to learn both languages and giving advice for fitting in to various social groups, Rachel's mother nurtures their ability to navigate dual cultures. Through her support she conveys the message that there is value in learning and understanding both aspects of their mixed race identities.

*Implicit messages.* Though some parental messages were not conveyed through direct conversations, participants revealed a clear understanding of their implications. Miranda, for example, concludes from her parents' subtle innuendoes that they both have a clear stake in her racial identity. She explains:

I guess that my mom kinda like, she wants me to be more White, I guess. Just 'cause, like, her family is just, *White*. And my dad's side of the family is just like, *Black*. And so like, when I am down there, he doesn't...it's not like he hasn't said anything, like he hasn't said anything, but like, when I'm talking about my friends and I show him a picture of one of them, and he's just like, 'Uhhh hmm.' Like, 'You're in the South now girl, you better buck up.' You know, 'Don't talk to that person.' But that's just how he is, you know. And like, here, it's kinda like the same thing. Like, my

mom is like, 'I'd rather you not do that.' Kinda like, she just gives me that look like, 'Well, if you really want to, but I'd rather you not.' Kind of thing, you know?

Like the image Rachel described of being stuck straddling the border between two countries, Miranda describes feeling caught between the unspoken expectations of her White mother and Black father. Miranda's example shows that powerful messages about the politics of race are communicated in the family context whether the topic of race is explicitly discussed or not. Unspoken messages that communicate what should be valued and what should be devalued in terms of race have a lasting effect on how biracial youth understand their racial identity options.

On a similar note, Trevor describes the lessons he learns about the politics of race from a major source of disagreement between himself and his father:

We don't really have like the same tastes in clothes, actually. Uhm, my dad, I want to dress the way I want—the way I've always dressed—and he doesn't like it that much. He always wants...I mean, I wear my hat backwards, he doesn't like it. That's probably one thing, the big thing.

The fact that Trevor has adopted the dress code of the hip-hop culture is a bone of contention between his father and him. As a common form of self-expression, (Rockquemore, 1998), Trevor may view a rejection of his clothing choices as a rejection of his racial identity. Though it is not clear from this passage what issue his White father takes with his appearance, Trevor may interpret his father's resistance to his chosen form of self-expression as disapproval of Trevor's stronger affiliation with Black culture.

Whether intended to express a preference for one cultural framework over another or not,

adolescents pick up on subtle messages that seem to favor one culture or race above another.

In contrast to the parents whose preferences seem to lean toward one side of the racial divide, Antonia describes her mother's more hands-off approach to helping her work through confusion about her racial identity. She recalls:

My mom just talked to me about it. You know, she, uh, she never encouraged me to try to identify myself in a particular way; she always wanted me to figure out where I belonged on my own. Uh, my mom never really asked me about it or mentioned anything about race to me until *I* said something to *her*.

Though her mother takes a more hands-off approach to racial socialization, she conveys her acceptance of the dual aspects of her Antonia's identity by not attempting to bias her decision. Antonia seems to view her mother as having a neutral stance on how she chooses to affiliate and on the conclusions she draws regarding her racial identity.

*Conclusions from family influences on racial identity.* As a primary source for adolescent racial socialization, respondents acknowledged the role of the family context in providing messages about race. They recalled experiencing both direct and indirect forms of racial socialization from their parents. When the topic of race and racism were addressed directly through conversations with parents, many youth described discomfort at hearing their parents broach a sensitive topic, and some reported actively discouraging conversations around this topic. Others described receiving helpful information from parents about the meaning of their minority status and how to handle color-based prejudice and discrimination within their communities. Though respondents were ambivalent about exactly how these parental messages factored into their racial identity

choices, they did show an awareness of their parents' and family members' explicit and implicit messages about race.

## CHAPTER 5

### Discussion and Conclusions

When I was in the early stages of planning this study, I had a conversation with a middle-aged Black man in a barber shop. I told him about my study and that I was interested in discovering how biracial and multiracial youth identify and the various factors that might influence their identity choices. He listened politely, shook his head, and then replied with certainty, “What’s there to study? They’re all Black!” This anecdote, a clear application of the one-drop rule, helps frame an important conclusion from this study: physical appearance is no longer the only cue mixed-race adolescents use to understand their racial identity. While the relationship between physical traits and racial identity might seem straightforward and definitive to some, the adolescents in this study demonstrate that the current generation of biracial youth grapple with an assortment of factors when forming their racial identity. Physical appearance is only part of that picture. The findings from this study help bring these myriad factors into sharper focus and provide new insights into how social context shapes the identity options of biracial youth.

#### *Conclusions*

In thinking about the link between social and contextual factors and identity, I’ve identified a second level of conclusions. These constructs, providing insights into how biracial adolescents consider their identity options *within* and *across* the various themes revealed in this study, emerged as intersections among elements of the four themes and are described in more detail below. They include community and youth *perceptions of*

*skin color, gender and color-based codes of behavior, the relevance of parental messages about race, and youth strategies for negotiating a blended identity.*

*Community interpretations of appearance.* When youth talked about their communities as a whole, most portrayed their hometowns in largely positive terms. Adolescents from Amberwood, in particular, tended to depict their community as uniquely culturally diverse and socially liberal, and thus more tolerant of racial difference than the other communities. These descriptions were at odds with what later surfaced in their narratives, however, that skin color figures more prominently into their social experiences than they initially accounted for in their descriptions. Nearly all respondents gave some indication that skin tone played a prominent role in how they believed others in their community frame their identities.

For some, including Max, Trevor, George, and Jason, who identify exclusively as African American and Hispanic, respectively, appearance emerges as a primary factor in establishing their racial self-understandings. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that three of these youth, Max, Trevor, and Jason have darker skin tones and the least ambiguous appearances of all the respondents in this study. In terms of identity options, then, it may be that no matter where a biracial youth grows up, having darker skin tones makes it more likely that he or she will identify exclusively as African American or Hispanic.

The relationship between appearance and identity options for the remaining respondents with more ambiguous physical features was not as straightforward. When discussing their racial identities, it was apparent that these youth were influenced by factors other than a simple characterization of their racial identity according to their

physical appearance. Their narratives, however, largely corroborated the first group's accounts in supporting the notion that, even in communities where individuals are welcomed regardless of color or creed, it is difficult to claim a racial identity at odds with one's physical appearance.

*Gender and color-based codes of behavior.* As well as navigating the color divide, this study shows that biracial youth also contend with peer evaluations of their behavior, which seem to be framed in terms of media-derived, color-based stereotypes. Like their White peers, part-Black respondents in this study demonstrated that they are largely operating from a White cultural frame of reference in their understandings of what it means to be Black. For these adolescents, this means that ideas about what it means to be a Black person in America come principally from media-derived stereotypes of prominent Black entertainers and athletes.

This color-based characterization of behavior was apparent in two strands of youth responses. First, youth talked about hearing their Black, White, and mixed-race peers describe their behavior as "White" when it was outside the realm of media-derived stereotypes of blackness, and as "acting Black" when it approximated these stereotypes. Valarie's belief that her teammates characterized her behavior as "White" because she acts "preppy" and "proper," and Miranda's assertion that "acting Black" is "what I do" suggests that biracial youth internalize this color-based scheme of behavior and use it to evaluate their racial identity options.

A gender difference was manifest in the second strand of responses on this topic. The potency of color-based behavioral codes was especially evident in descriptions of

how part-Black males are influenced by images of hip-hop artists and rappers. Though part-Black female respondents acknowledged their own appreciation of hip-hop and rap music, they saw their male counterparts' behavior as being strongly influenced by the "cool-pose" culture (Patterson, 2006). While they joked about their own imitation of gangster and rapper behavior, they believed that their part-Black male peers felt pressured to conform to this unrealistic standard of Black masculinity. As well, they saw this behavior as problematic and out-of-context in their largely White communities.

Part-Black males, however, viewed their imitation of hip-hop culture as being selective and superficial, a sign of appreciation, but not a true representation of their self-understandings. Trevor's assertion that he and his part-Black peers see themselves as being part of the hip-hop culture, "to a point" is an example of this distinction. This study shows that affiliation with hip-hop and gangster culture plays a paradoxical role for part-Black youth; it is at once an avenue to higher social status and peer respect for those who are convincing in this role, but also a source of peer amusement and derision for those who are not. In terms of identity options, the perceived rewards of engaging in this culture seems to make it more likely that part-Black youth, especially males, will identify more strongly with their African American heritage. Whether operating from a gender-based behavioral code or from deeply ingrained stereotypes of what it means to be Black, peer appraisals of appropriate color-based behavior inform the identity options of biracial youth.

*Construing parental messages.* Youth narratives call attention to a final consideration in their attempts to piece together cohesive racial identities. Though they

seem more strongly influenced by how their peers view their racial identities, they are also aware of the subtle and not-so-subtle messages they receive from parents about the relevance of race. Youth in this study seemed less influenced by their parents' appraisals of their racial identity than peer assessments. Some insisted that they rarely to never had race-related conversations with parents and were unaware of their parents' views about their racial identities. They also reported actively discouraging these kinds of conversations with parents, as in Miranda's emphatic directive to her mother, "Just stop. It's not working for you!" When they did occur, conversations about race with parents were regarded by some adolescents as being awkward, forced, and often irrelevant.

Nonetheless, 8 of the 11 respondents recalled receiving either explicit or implicit racial messages from their parents and family members. For some, these messages came in the form of conversations with parents and grandparents about the realities of race. Some reported that parents fostered positive beliefs about their mixed-race identity. In some cases, youth recalled hearing parents extol the benefits of a mixed-race identity, including the advantages of having a minority status for acceptance to colleges, and for Rachel and Jason, the ability to speak two languages and fit in with two cultural groups. Parents also gave advice about dealing with color-based prejudice and racism. Some respondents described their parents as encouraging them to take a passive approach to experiences of racism by ignoring the event and walking away. Others reported their parents encouraging them to choose tolerant friends who would not reject their claim to a biracial identity or resent their ability to fit in with two cultural groups. For the most part, youth were aware of the explicit and more subtle messages their parents relayed about

what should be valued and what should be devalued in terms of their racial identities, but still seemed more influenced by their peers' evaluations of their racial identities.

*Negotiating identity.* The conclusion that arises most prominently from youth accounts of various factors that inform their identity options is that they must often negotiate a claim to a particular racial affiliation. As previous research confirms, the identity process appears to be more variable for mixed-race youth than has previously been reported for their monoracial peers (Herman, 2007; Root, 1998). Youth in this study recognized race as an inevitable aspect of their identities, but varied in how they evaluated the implications of race to their daily lives (Quintana, 2003). Some described the salience of race to their identities as being very situational, choosing to emphasize race as a salient aspect of their identity in some contexts but not others (Root, 1998). As their narratives revealed, this is something youth come to realize as they seek to achieve validation for their complex self-understandings.

For some adolescents in this study, social validation for a chosen racial identity was only achieved through active negotiations within various social contexts. Most often negotiation is necessary to validate a blended identity. But even youth who claimed an exclusive identity as Black or Hispanic reported having to explain and reconcile aspects of their identities with other's criteria. The exchanges they describe having with strangers, peers, and even family members about their identities can accurately be described as negotiations, because a compromise is often reached at the end, even if neither party realizes they were negotiating. Analysis of interviews yielded four main strategies youth use to negotiate a blended, or a singular, identity; *compromising*, *evoking*

*mixed-race parentage, emotion regulation, and using humor* during interactions with peers. The use of negotiation strategies by each respondent is listed below in Table 3.

**Table 3. Negotiation Strategies for Validating Racial Identity**

	Compromising	Evoking Mixed-Parentage	Emotion Regulation	Using Humor
<b>Amberwood</b>				
Valarie	✓	✓	✓	✓
Allen		✓		✓
Marcus	✓	✓	✓	✓
Trevor		✓	✓	
Max			✓	
Andrea		✓	✓	✓
Miranda	✓	✓	✓	✓
Antonia			✓	
<b>Canterfield</b>				
George	✓		✓	✓
<b>Agate Peak</b>				
Jason	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rachel	✓	✓	✓	

*Compromising.* When attempting to claim a blended identity in exchanges and interactions with others, these narratives show that the biracial youth are usually the ones doing the compromising. We can see this vividly in Miranda’s account of an exchange with strangers in Mississippi, where they question her identity (“*What are you?*”), she offers an explanation (“*I’m half-Black, half-White*”), they challenge her claim (“*Naw-uh, no you’re not! You’ve got green eyes, what’s wrong with you?*”), and she compromises by providing a more plausible—though technically inaccurate—explanation (*Actually,*

*I'm Mexican*). Rather than insisting that they acknowledge her preferred racial identity and risking outright rejection, Miranda settles on an explanation that allows her some agency in deciding how she is viewed by others, but one that still conforms to their preconceived notions. These results show that achieving validation for a blended identity often involves compromise when youth appearances or behavior are out-of-line with others' color-based stereotypes.

*Evoking mixed parentage.* As another strategy to negotiate a blended identity, youth narratives illustrate that informing peers of their mixed parentage often lends instant credibility to their identity claims. In particular, disclosing that they had a White biological parent seemed to validate a blended identity for youth. For example, Rachel indicated that she announced her blended identity in exchanges with others by stating: "I just say, 'My mom's White. I'm half-White, half-Mexican.'" She believes others will accept this as a valid justification for claiming a blended identity, so she uses her mother's racial status as a tool to assert her self-understanding. Analysis of interviews revealed that the majority of youth who asserted a blended identity described a similar exchange wherein they evoked their mixed parentage to describe their racial identity. Paradoxically, some of the youth who claimed a single racial identifier as Black or Hispanic, described hearing others evoke this same fact as a basis to *challenge* their single-group affiliation. Jason, for example, recalled that his Hispanic peers "changed their ways" with him after learning that his mother was White. This shows that for some, having a White parent provides a tool for negotiating a blended identity, and for others, it acts as a barrier to achieving a single-group affiliation.

*Emotion regulation.* In describing exchanges with peers, friends, and strangers, it becomes evident in these adolescents' descriptions that one of the things they juggle during these exchanges is their own emotional reactions. Achieving validation for their understanding of the salience of race to their identities seems to involve a great deal of emotional regulation for biracial adolescents. This was evidenced repeatedly in their narratives: in Miranda's sigh of resignation that strangers would validate her "Mexican" identity but not her mixed Black/White identity, in Marcus' acquiescence to the inevitable color line he confronted at school, in Valarie's exasperation that she was mistaken for an African American peer, and in Rachel's acknowledgement that being depicted as straddling the border between Mexico and the US, "...made me feel really bad, but I didn't say anything. I just stood there." These responses reveal that adolescents know something is at stake for them within these interactions, but rather than engaging directly with their peers to challenge misperceptions about their identities, they undergo internal negotiations to regulate their own emotional responses. In many of the exchanges they describe, self-regulation seems to be a more manageable task than the thought of challenging peers' deep-seated assumptions about race.

*Using humor.* Finally, this study provides evidence that when biracial youth do choose to confront ingrained beliefs about race and biracial identity, they use humor in exchanges with peers as a strategy to negotiate a claim to a blended identity and to dissipate the effects of color-based stereotypes. This was revealed primarily in the creative expressions youth used to describe their blended identities to friends, as in Andrea's characterization of her Black and White heritage as "a swirl," Allen's description of himself as "half-and-half," and Jason's laughing reference to his friends'

use of the label “vanilla bean.” Youth also described poking fun at various color-based stereotypes with their peers by mocking the “gangsta” and “ghetto” subculture, and by describing their White friends’ behavior as being “so Black.” Using humor in conversations allowed biracial youth some agency in managing how their blended identities and understandings of race were received by their peers.

### *Discussion*

When taken as a whole, these results provide new insights into adolescent biracial identity that involve issues ranging from cultural racism to the impact of video media on adolescent development. The main themes emerging from youth narratives suggest that four primary factors shape how biracial youth understand and reconcile their racial identities. First, social meanings attached to physical attributes, such as skin tone and hair texture, continue to play a pivotal role in how others view the identities of biracial youth and how they understand their own racial identity options. Secondly, peer endorsements of color-based behavioral codes are crucial to how youth frame their racial identity options. Thirdly, racial socialization in the familial context provides an important, though often ambivalent, piece of biracial identity formation. Lastly, this study shows that adolescents of mixed-race descent use a variety of strategies within various social contexts to negotiate identity claims with others.

### *Color-stratification and Identity*

The conclusion that appearance, particularly what is communicated by skin tone, continues to provide the primary social cue to place the group membership of biracial adolescents is largely consistent with past research in this area (Rockquemore &

Brunsma, 2002; Dalmage, 2003). Though there was variability in the way adolescents identified, a few choosing a single racial identifier such as Hispanic or African American, and the rest choosing a blended racial identity, it is telling that none of the respondents indicated that they identified as White. With the exception of Rachel, none of the adolescents in this study were light enough in skin tone to pass as White, so it is not surprising that they also did not attempt to assert a claim to a racial identity that was incongruent with their physical appearance. This upholds previous findings in the literature which suggest that, regardless of how tolerant a community is perceived to be, skin color directly informs and limits racial identity options, making it difficult for mixed-race individuals to claim a racial identity at odds with their physical appearance (Dalmage, 2003 ; Zack, 1993).

Also consistent with the literature was the finding that youth in this study with more ambiguous physical features were more likely to claim blended identities than those with darker skin tones (Rockquemore, 1998). Individuals with ambiguous physical features, such as lighter skin tones and green eyes, were more likely to find validation for a greater range of identity claims and included factors other than just appearance in their racial self-understandings. This study supports the claim that physical appearance remains the greatest factor in how mixed-race individuals are classified by others and a large part of how they frame their own identities (Bratter, 2007).

While vestiges of the one-drop rule may provide part of the explanation for the continued reliance on skin tone as a primary cue for racial classification, the fact that mixed-race respondents also seem to make color distinctions in terms of who has lighter

and darker skin tones may be compatible with the remnants of colorism thought to occur within communities of color. Colorism is defined in the literature as “a system that privileges the lighter skinned over the darker skinned people within a community of color” (Hunter, 2002; Maddox & Gray, 2002). As Hunter notes, though it is important to acknowledge the connection between colorism and racism because colorism is based on the privileging of Whites, it is also useful to see the two processes as distinct; people may experience racism differently depending on their skin tone. Within American communities in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, colorism was reportedly used to exclude darker skinned individuals from participation in social clubs, churches, fraternities, and sororities (Maddox & Gray, 2002). Passing the “paper bag test” was one criterion for membership within these groups, whereby individuals were required to compare their skin color to a brown paper bag, and were denied entry if their skin tone was deemed to be darker than the bag (Maddox & Gray, 2002).

The current work suggests that along with the one-drop rule, colorism factors into the social experiences and identity options of biracial adolescents. Not only do mixed-race youth perceive that others link their racial identities inextricably with their appearance, they also make these color distinctions among themselves. In this data we see a clear distinction between darker and lighter skinned youth in terms of the salience of physical attributes to their identity formation. Some attention has been paid in the literature to how awareness of color degradations affects the ability of lighter-skinned part-Black women to relate to full-Black women, (Rockquemore, 2002), but more attention is needed to establish how colorism impacts the identity options of part-Black youth and mixed-race youth of other ethnic combinations.

The narratives of Rachel and Jason give some indication of how colorism may affect biracial youth attempting to gain entry into Mexican American social groups. A comment from Rachel shows that it may operate differently for this group than the literature suggests:

[When I was younger] I used to get made fun of, out of my family, 'cause I was the one who has freckles, the one that takes after my mom, and everybody takes after my dad but me. So, I'm the White one. That's what everybody says. I'm the White kid out of our family... It was mostly my brother that used to make fun of me for having freckles and for looking like my mom, and being the White one. And so I'd always wish that I could be darker, and I'd go tanning, and I'd go lay out. I used to be really dark last year, after I'd go tanning, but it's like I have to go tanning just to be darker and my whole family is already dark.

In Rachel's assessment, a form of colorism is clearly at work within her familial context, but contrary to what is depicted in the literature, (Hunter, 2002), the darker skin tones of her brother and sisters are favored over her lighter skin tones. She also reported having trouble being accepted by Hispanic friends because she is White-appearing. Taken together, these narratives suggest that the system of favoring lighter skin tones over darker skin tones may be changing, at least within the Mexican American community. Though this study supports other conclusions in the research regarding the importance of appearance to racial identity, more research is necessary to fully understand how the varying importance given to skin tone impacts the identity options of biracial youth.

### *The Paradox of "Cool-Pose" Culture*

The second conclusion of this study provides a unique contribution to our understanding of the biracial experience. This finding suggests that the behavior of mixed-race adolescents, particularly of part-Black males, is framed in terms of peer

endorsements of color-based stereotypes. A majority of the part-Black youth in this study identified the media as the source of many of their own and their peers' ideas about what it means to be Black. They also believed that their behaviors were characterized in terms of Black or White based on whether they approximated or deviated from these stereotypes (Quintana, 2003). In terms of identity options, then, this study provides evidence that the more closely individuals approximate these color-based behavioral stereotypes, the more likely they are to be seen as Black by their peers, and to self-identify exclusively as Black.

A gender difference was evident in how these stereotypes were applied to male and female behavior, both in the sense that part-Black males were expected to affiliate more closely with hip-hop culture, and female respondents were more likely than males to view this participation in the hip-hop and "gangsta" culture as problematic. Female respondents believed there was more pressure on part-Black males to participate in this sub-culture, but didn't feel the same pressure from peers to comply with these stereotypes. In short, this behavioral code seems to place restrictions on the males' identity options, making it more difficult for youth who want to reap the perceived benefits of participation in "cool-pose" culture to also claim a blended racial identity. The part-Black male respondents in this study, however, seemed unaware of this limitation, describing their participation in this sub-culture as being selective, and not a complete reflection of their more complex racial self-understandings. They may publically identify as Black but privately have a more nuanced view of their racial identities.

The finding that part-Black males may access the cool-pose culture in constructing their racial identities was unexpected given that a review of the extant literature (e.g. Dalmage, 2003; Rockquemore & Lasloffy, 2005; Root, 2001; Zack, 1991) yielded no associations between this subculture and biracial identity development. To the extent that part-Black youths accept these media images, the benefits and pitfalls of participation to this sub-culture may be explained by a recent assertion made by sociologist, Orlando Patterson. He contended that young urban Black males' participation in the cool-pose culture was self-destructive and at least partially to blame for their later socioeconomic disadvantage (Patterson, 2006). He describes the "cool-pose" culture as being "simply too gratifying to give up," explaining that, "For these young men, it was almost like a drug, hanging out on the street after school, shopping and dressing sharply, sexual conquests, party drugs, hip-hop music and culture, the fact that almost all the superstar athletes and a great many of the nation's best entertainers were black" (Patterson, 2006; 1998). While his assessment, and others (Majors & Billson, 1992), identify participation in the "cool-pose" culture as a risk factor for young Black males, this study provides new evidence that it may function in additional ways for part-Black males.

Patterson's interpretation of the relevance of cool-pose culture for young Black men provides important context for the appeal this subculture holds for part-Black males. It also helps explain why the rewards offered by accessing this identity option may outweigh other factors in these adolescents' assessment of racial identity. For mixed-race adolescents whose physical appearance and behavior lends them credibility in this role, engagement in this sub-culture seems to provide a status and respect from their White

peers that might not be so readily available in other roles. Put another way, because of the high salience of this identity, even adolescents who might otherwise be inclined to claim a blended identity because of their ambiguous physical features might decide to claim a singular Black identity to more fully participate in this culture.

The problem for these youth becomes that even if they wish to be selective in how they participate in this culture, choosing only aspects that afford them higher social status and respect amongst their peers, while at the same time allowing them to conform to the values of their White cultural framework, their peers seem to attribute the negative aspects of the “gangsta” and “ghetto” stereotypes to them as well. Female respondents were quick to point out the nature of this double-edged sword, acknowledging that their part-Black male counterparts were seen as “masculine” and “cool” by some of their peers, but also describing them as “fake,” “posers,” “players,” “not that into school,” and “troublemakers.” These labels are in keeping with Patterson’s (2006) warning that participation in this culture is a self-destructive path for young Black men. In his estimation, engagement in “cool-pose” culture is strongly linked to academic underachievement for this group, and fosters what he calls “the predatory sexuality and irresponsible fathering behavior of young Black men” (Patterson, 2006). Though examining the relationship between participation in this culture, academic achievement, and other measures of wellbeing for part-Black youth, was not within the scope of this study, respondent narratives, especially those of the part-Black female respondents, suggest that participation in this subculture is also perceived to be a self-destructive path for part-Black youth. This study raises the possibility that affiliation with “cool-pose”

culture may go beyond just the impact it has the racial identity options of part-Black youth; it may have far-reaching consequences in other areas of their development as well.

### *The Familial Context*

Conclusions from this study diverge from the extant research in another important way. While the familial context has been characterized as playing a primary role and being “critical” to adolescent ethnic identity formation in several studies, (Herman, 2004; Phinney & Chavira, 1995; Umaña-Taylor, Bhanot, Shin, 2006) this study found only a mild relationship between parental socialization and adolescent racial self-understandings (see Supple et al. 2006 for a similar finding). As discussed above, peer endorsements of color-based behaviors proved more influential to biracial identity development, as evidenced by the intensity of emotional responses during discussion of this topic in interviews. Respondents displayed a range of emotional reactions—confusion, resignation, irritation, anger, hurt, and disappointment— when discussing exchanges with peers about the topic of race, but the most common emotional reaction in reports of conversations with parents about race was one of irritation.

A caveat may be in order to put this finding into context. Past research (e.g. Larson, 1972) suggests that though adolescent decision-making is likely strongly influenced by parents, adolescents may be unreliable in their evaluation of the relative salience given to peer versus parental influences. As Larson suggests, adolescents are age-segregated in our society, often expected to identify with their peers and be age-mate oriented, and as such may be more likely to acknowledge their peers’ involvement and influence on their developmental processes during this stage of their lives. As individuals

move into young adulthood, however, they become more adult-oriented and likely to acknowledge the impact of parents on their decision-making processes and development. In light of this consideration, the conclusion that peers seem to be more influential in shaping the racial identities of biracial youth than parents, based on these adolescent reports, may prove to be an artifact of developmental stage. As these youth move into early adulthood, they may change their perspectives on the relevance of parental messages about race to their racial/ethnic identity development.

Though some youth dismissed the parental role, this study found parallels with the conclusions of Rockquemore & Brunσμα's (2002) study, contending that parents relay messages to their mixed-race youth, either explicitly or implicitly, about what should be valued or devalued in terms of race. Though it is not clear from their accounts how adolescents in this study apply these messages when constructing their racial identities, it is clear that many were aware of the cultural values their parents endorsed.

### *Negotiating Self*

One clear conclusion of this study and others, (Dalmage, 2003; Zack, 1993), is that the identity formation process can be fraught with challenges for biracial youth. Their narratives reveal that negotiating a racial self-understanding in interactions with others may be among the greatest of these challenges, a discovery also in line with previous research (Root, 2002; Rockquemore, 2002). This study, however, offers unique insights into the types of strategies biracial youth use to achieve validation for their racial identities. Along with compromising in these exchanges when their self-perceptions are at odds with social norms for racial categorization, youth also take an active role in trying

to manage how others will view their racial identities. They do this by evoking the fact of their mixed parentage to establish credibility for a blended identity and using humor to broach the subject of race and their racial identity in conversations with peers. As well, the current work establishes that biracial youth undergo internal negotiations to regulate their own emotional responses when their self-perceptions conflict with others' ingrained ideas of color-based stereotypes and behavioral codes.

### *Limitations*

The insights generated in this study of factors influencing identity options for biracial youth should be viewed in light of some notable limitations. Because biracial youth are a relatively emergent segment of the population, it was challenging to recruit a representative sample of mixed-race adolescents from this region of the Pacific Northwest. My sample consisted of a small number of biracial adolescents, the majority of whom lived in the same community. Therefore, results cannot be generalized to other populations. Other research is needed to establish the validity of the claims made in this work.

In addition, though a variety of recruitment strategies were employed to find sufficient numbers for this study, a majority of the 11 respondents were recruited through purposive, word-of-mouth sampling. This recruitment strategy leaves open the possibility that respondents shared characteristics in common other than their mixed-race heritage, potentially confounding the conclusions that can be drawn from their responses. As well, youth who claimed blended identities in this study may not be representative of low-income adolescents from rural communities as previous studies have indicated that youth

who typically self-identify as “biracial” tend to come from predominantly White, suburban communities and are raised by middle-class parents (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005).

The inclusion of two Hispanic/White biracial youth in this study presents another possible limitation. As the bulk of the research in this area, including the research on which the multiracial models of identity development are based, has been conducted on Black/White biracial individuals, an initial concern of this study was that their identity processes might differ from Black/White youth in important ways. Analysis of their responses, however, revealed that they shared many processes in common with the part-Black youth in this study. There are two notable exceptions to this. First, the part-Hispanic respondents in this study did not seem to access media stereotypes as a source of their cultural information to the same extent as part-Black youth, indicating that video media may play a lesser or neutral role in their racial identity development. Also, they reported experiencing more prejudice within their rural community than the part-Black youth, and were more likely to experience what might be aptly described as “colorism” within their Hispanic peer groups. Given that this study includes only two Hispanic/White youth, these claims need to be explored more extensively. Their reports of feeling marginalized and unaccepted, however, not only by the racial group with which they identified, but by either racial group, are largely consistent with past findings of the ways biracial Black/White youth have traditionally reported experiencing marginalization in their social contexts (Dalmage, 2003; Rockquemore & Brunσμα, 2002; Root, 2001; Zack, 1991).

### *Implications*

*Future research.* Despite the limitations, the findings from this study have important implications for future research in the area of biracial identity development. One implication is that regardless of how tolerant and open to racial difference many communities are believed to be, skin tone still matters in how others classify the race of mixed-race youth and how these youth view their own identities. More research is needed to fully understand why physical appearance continues to be more relevant to the racial identity options of part-Black and part-Hispanic youth than for individuals of other ethnic combinations, (Bratter, 2007; Herman, 2007), and how the importance given to skin color may operate as a push factor for biracial youth seeking acceptance into communities of color.

The possibility that hip-hop culture may be critical to how part-Black youth, especially part-Black males, construct their racial identities should also be the focus of future research, as it raises a number of significant questions. Do the negative stereotypes attached to engagement in cool-pose culture function in similar ways for part-Black and Black youth? Is there a relationship, for example, between affiliation with “cool-pose” culture and academic under-achievement for part-Black youth? Is participation in cool-pose culture also a risk factor for part-Black youth from White middle-class communities as Patterson (2006) believes it is for Black youth, or does higher socioeconomic status mediate the negative effects of affiliation with this culture? There is potentially much to be learned about how participation in “cool-pose” culture

impacts the racial identity options, and the developmental trajectories, of part-Black youth.

In a similar vein, an additional implication of this study is that mixed-race youth seem more influenced by peer socialization than parent socialization when it comes to racial identity development. This study relied solely on adolescent reports to reach this conclusion, making it possible that future research including both parental and adolescent reports, will find this conclusion to be an artifact of developmental stage. Future research should also look into the possibility, however, that the White parents of biracial youth underestimate the importance of instilling a sense of ethnic pride in their children, when respondents live in communities thought to be socially liberal and highly tolerant of racial difference.

Though much work has already been done to establish the importance of parental socialization on the process of ethnic identity formation for monoracial youth, (Herman, 2004; Phinney & Chavira, 1995; Umaña-Taylor, Bhanot, Shin, 2006), the ambiguity involved in biracial identity construction may have something to do with the mild relationship found in this study. Research has also identified that parental messages fostering racial pride among minority youth act as a protective factor against future exposure to discrimination stress, (Harris-Britt et al., 2007), making the resistance shown by some of the youth in this study toward their parents' attempts to broach the topic of race particularly concerning. Can White parents suitably prepare their biracial youth for possible discrimination stress and prejudice? A more comprehensive, longitudinal

approach to parental racial socialization and the ability of biracial youth to cope with racism and discrimination stress might sufficiently answer this question.

Future research should also address the level of emotional duress that biracial youth seem to experience when they encounter racial and value incongruity within various social contexts. Whether they were trying to assert a claim to a blended or a singular identity, their narratives suggest that their racial self-understandings are highly situational, or flexible (Yip, 2007), depending on how they experience the availability of identity options in each of these different settings. What are the developmental consequences of having a situated racial identity? And, what does it mean for the wellbeing of biracial youth when they continually forgo active negotiations with others in favor of internal negotiations to regulate their emotional responses when their self-understandings are not socially validated? More empirical work is needed to understand how levels of connectivity or incompatibility in the way their racial identities are understood within different social contexts affect the developmental trajectories of biracial youth.

These are also concerns that should be heeded by parents, teachers, school counselors, and others who work with biracial youth. Though the part-Black youth in this study seemed relatively unconcerned that their mixed-race status was in any way a disadvantage, it is important that adults who work with, and care about, these youth remain vigilant of the possible negative consequences of having an in-between social status. This may be especially true for part-Black males who are drawn to cool-pose culture. Parents, teachers, and counselors may be able to ameliorate the negative effects

of this sub-culture by engaging in frank conversations about race and ethnicity with biracial youth and their peers, and facilitating awareness of the risks associated with looking to the media for role models.

*Symbolic Interaction.* The results of this study support the continued use of a symbolic interaction framework to understand how social interactions in different settings lead to the construction of a cohesive identity. An especially important feature of this theory, as it applies to identity development, is that self-understandings of racial identities can only be actualized only if they are validated by others. As youth in this study demonstrated in their narratives, perceived compatibility between their physical appearance and racial identities was crucial to having their identity claims accepted by others. They also showed that they exercised agency when constructing identity by organizing aspects of self according to an identity hierarchy. This was especially evident in the high salience of the “cool-pose” persona for part-Black males in this study, and its impact on the way they understood their racial identity options. This persona provided a highly salient identity option for part-Black males, perhaps because of the perceived benefits of high social status and peer respect attached to this image. This perspective continues to provide the most promising tool to conceptualize future research questions about identity options for biracial youth.

*Bioecological Perspective.* The incongruity many biracial youth experience between their self-perceptions of the salience of race to their identity, and the perceptions of others, were shown to be largely context-dependent. For example, some youth reported experiencing different levels of validation for their preferred racial identities at school or

when visiting a new community than they experienced among friends and loved ones at home. Having a situated or context-dependent racial identity as this implies, may prove to have implications for the well being of biracial youth and their ability to develop a stable sense of self.

The bioecological framework provides a useful tool for conceptualizing this dilemma, especially when we apply the concept of the *mesosystem*, or the linkages between the persons, objects, and symbols within the individual's social settings. This concept seems highly relevant to the youth in this study, as they reported difficulty in trying to reconcile the largely incongruent racial values and practices espoused by various elements of immediate settings. For example, youth were conflicted when symbols in their environment, in the form of images of hip-hop artists and athletes, collided with peer interpretations of those symbols, and resulted in youth being held to a social prescription for appropriate Black behavior. Youth agency in managing their identities may be largely dependent on their ability to successfully juggle these various elements in the mesosystem.

This study also focused on the *proximal processes*, the dynamic interactions between biracial youth and their peers and parents that take place within various microsystems. The finding that youth may be more influenced by peer racial socialization than by parental racial socialization, may be in part explained by the assumption that interactions must become increasingly more complex to sustain continued development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Youth expressed that their interactions with peers about race were more *salient* than with parents, but more empirical work is needed to test

the assumption that the complexity of peer exchanges have a greater association with biracial identity development.

The aspect of time, particularly *macrotime*, (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), is a feature of this theory that will have continued relevance to the racial development of biracial youth. Historical context is important to framing the identity options available to recent generations of biracial youth, and to understanding why the media images of Black entertainers and athletes seem to factor so prominently into the racial identities of part-Black youth. Fortunately, the impact of media images may be more short-lived than longstanding social norms like the one-drop rule. The fact that media images can evolve more rapidly than these ingrained cultural traditions, and can influence them, may ameliorate the more negative aspects of media influence on biracial identity development. For example, some famous Black rappers (e.g. Snoop Dog), now have family-centered reality shows in which they display good parenting. Shows, such as the one mentioned above, that capture rappers and other Black entertainers in more complex and pro-social roles, may help dispel some of the negative stereotypes associated with the “cool-pose culture.” Making some well-informed and careful changes to the way Black entertainers and athletes are portrayed in the media is a timely intervention that may facilitate pro-social behaviors and could help reduce problems associated with identity development among biracial youth.

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## **APPENDICES**

## APPENDIX A

### INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

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Project Title: **How Multiracial Youth Negotiate Identity**

Principal Investigator: **Samuel Vuchinich, PhD, Human Development and Family Sciences**

Student Researcher: **Christine L. Mouzong, Human Development and Family Sciences**

We are inviting mixed-race youth to participate in a study of ethnic identity. We hope to better understand what it is like to grow up in the United States with one white and one non-white parent. We are interested in learning about experiences that have influenced mixed-race individual's understandings of their ethnic identity.

Your youth is being invited to participate in this study because he/she:

- Indicated an interest in participating in this study
- Has one white and one non-white biological parent
- Is between the ages of 14 and 19 years

#### WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY AND HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

If you agree to give permission for your son or daughter to participate in this study, we will set a mutually convenient time to hold an in-depth interview that will last between one and two hours. The interview will be conducted either in your home or in another mutually agreed-upon location, such as the public library. During the course of the interview we will ask participants questions that will invite them to recount the unique personal experiences that have led to their current self-understanding. The interview will be audio-taped and later transcribed.

#### WHAT ARE THE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?

There are few foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study. Participants will be asked questions about their experiences as individuals of mixed heritage, which they may find uncomfortable or upsetting to answer. We hope, however, that participants will find the opportunity to share their experiences with an engaged listener to be a positive one. Participants will also receive a \$10.00 gift certificate to be redeemed at a local store at the end of the interview.

#### WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION MY CHILD GIVES?

The information that participants provide during this research study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. One aspect of this study involves making an audio recording of the interview. The audio recording will enable us to make a verbatim record of the interview. The recording will be transcribed and coded according to standard research methods. After it has been transcribed, the recording will be destroyed. The transcribed information will be used to write a

Master's thesis. In the thesis report, and in any other articles that may be written using this information, all participants will be given a pseudonym to protect their identities.

### AUDIO RECORDING

By initialing in the space provided, you verify that you have been told that an audio recording will be generated during the course of this study. The recording will be destroyed after the interview has been transcribed, and all other data will be destroyed after a maximum of 5 years.

\_\_\_\_\_ Parent initials

### DO PARTICIPANTS HAVE A CHOICE TO BE IN THE STUDY?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Youth may choose to participate in this interview according to their own level of comfort. Participants have the right to withdraw their participation from the interview at any time, without fear of consequence. Participants will still receive the \$10.00 gift certificate even if they choose not to answer all of the questions in the interview, or if they ask to end the interview early.

### WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS

If you have any questions about this research project, we encourage you to ask. Please contact graduate student researcher, Christine Mouzong, by office phone at 737-1092, or by email at [mimaliam@msn.com](mailto:mimaliam@msn.com). If you have questions about your child's rights as a participant, please contact the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Human Protections Administrator, at (541) 737-4933 or by email at [IRB@oregonstate.edu](mailto:IRB@oregonstate.edu).

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**Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to allow your child to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.**

Child's Name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Parent's Name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Parent)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

**APPENDIX B**  
**ASSENT DOCUMENT**

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Project Title: **How Multiracial Youth Negotiate Identity**

Principal Investigator: **Samuel Vuchinich, PhD, Human Development and Family Sciences**

Student Researcher: **Christine L. Mouzong, Human Development and Family Sciences**

We are doing a research study. A research study is a special way to find out about something. We are trying to find out what it is like to grow up in the United States as the child of one white parent and one non-white parent.

This reason for this form is to give you information about the study so you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. You can ask any questions. After all of your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in this study or not.

You are being invited to be part of this study because:

- You were born to one white and one non-white parent
- You are between the ages of 14 and 19 years

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY AND HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?**

If you decide that you want to be in this study, we will ask you to sit down with a student researcher and tell her about your experiences as an individual who was born to one white and one non-white parent. If you and your parents agree that you can participate in this study, the student researcher will talk to you and your parents about a good time and place to interview you.

Depending on what you and your parents would like to do, the researcher will either come to your home for the interview, or will meet you at a public place, like the local library. She will ask you questions about your childhood, your friends, how you get along with other kids at your school, and your ideas about who you are. You will only be interviewed once and it will last for one or two hours. The interview will be recorded on an audiotape so that we can listen to it later and write down the answers you give.

**WHAT ARE THE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?**

We want to tell you about some things that might happen to you if you are in this study. If you agree to be interviewed we will ask you questions about what it was like growing up with a white and a non-white parent. You should know that you may find some of these questions uncomfortable or upsetting to answer. You should also know that it may take up to two hours to finish the interview.

If you decide to be in this study, some good things might happen to you. We hope that you will enjoy talking with a person who is very interested in hearing about your experiences. Being in this study may give you the chance to talk about things that you have not been able to share with anyone before. But we don't know for sure that these things will happen. We hope that learning about your experiences will someday allow us to help other teens like you.

To thank you for being in the study we will give you a \$10.00 gift certificate to use at a local store. You will receive the gift certificate when the interview is over, even if you choose not to answer all of our questions, or if you decide to end the interview early.

### WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION I GIVE?

When we are done with the study, we will write a report about what we found out. We won't use your name in the report. We will assign you a different name in any report we write to protect your identity.

### AUDIO RECORDING

By initialing in the space provided, you confirm that you have been told that an audio recording will be made during the course of this study. The recording will be destroyed after the interview has been transcribed, and all other data will be destroyed after a maximum of 5 years.

\_\_\_\_\_ Participant initials

### DO I HAVE A CHOICE TO BE IN THE STUDY?

You don't have to be in this study. It's up to you. If you say you want to be in the study now, but you decide that you want to stop later, that's okay too. All you have to do is tell us.

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### **If you want to be in this study, please sign your name**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, want to be in this research study.

(Print your name here)

\_\_\_\_\_

(Sign your name here)

\_\_\_\_\_

(Print today's date here)

## APPENDIX C

### In-depth Interview Guide

1. How do you describe your family background? OR— If you were going to introduce yourself to someone who can't see you and doesn't already know you, like someone over the Internet, what are five things you would tell them about yourself?  
  
*(follow-up probe)* How do you describe your racial or ethnic identity to others?
2. What is it like growing up in this community?
3. Have you lived anywhere else? What were your experiences like in those places?
4. Can you tell me about how people usually react to you and/or your family when you're in the community?
5. What types of name, either positive or negative, can you remember people calling you (people of any ethnicity)?
6. At what age do you think you were first aware of the idea of race?
7. Tell me about memories you have of when you first became aware of the idea of race.
8. Tell me about the ethnicities of your mom and dad.
9. Have you had conversations with your parents about race? About being from a mixed-race family?
10. What are those conversations like? What do you talk about?
11. How are you like your mom/dad? How are you different?
12. Do your parents try to shape your racial identity or tell you how to identify yourself?
13. Tell me what your current friendship groups are like.  
  
*(follow-up probe)* Who do you hang out with and what are they like?
14. How would you describe what you all have in common, the group of kids you hang out with? *(follow-up probe)* What are your friends' ethnic backgrounds?
15. What is the racial or ethnic composition of your school?
16. Tell me about your best friend. What is he/she like? What do you have in common?
17. How are you unique or different from your friends? What makes you different?

18. Do you have friends who are mixed-race? Do you talk about being mixed-race together?
19. What was elementary school like for you? Middle school? High school?
20. (For younger respondents) What do you anticipate high school will be like for you?  
  
(*follow-up probe*) What concerns do you have about going to high school? What are you looking forward to?
21. Do you think your experiences as a mixed-race person would be different if you were a (person of the opposite gender)? How so?
22. Are you allowed to date? Are you currently dating anyone?
23. What do you have in common with that person? What is the race of the person you are dating? What has that experience been like?
24. Have you ever tried to (physically) make yourself look (darker) more Black or White?
25. Generally, do you feel like being mixed-race is an advantage, a disadvantage, or has no meaning in your life?