An Abstract of the Dissertation of

Jessica White for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education, presented on
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Examination of Five Students’ Perspectives.

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Warren N. Suzuki

This research sought to "get at" students’ understandings of their own racial
identity development. The limited degree with which participants have been heard
and honored in research activities points to the need to inquire about their
experiences first-hand, respect their stories, and consider their voices among, or in
spite of, the current models that exist. My research efforts drew upon an interpretive
design and were enlightened by a variety of theoretical perspectives, mainly critical
theory and postmodern feminism. My goals throughout the process were twofold:
(a) challenge the dominant discourse and current research as it relates to our
knowledge of racial identity development, and (b) employ research methods that are
truly liberating in their incorporation of participants’ voices and perspectives. In this
way, I consider both the findings and research process equally important in this
dissertation.

The primary data collection method employed within this design was a
dialogic interview process with five student participants. I facilitated individual
dialogues and group dialogues with the student participants where we discussed a
variety of topics including campus climate for students of color, common shared experiences, personal identity issues, and emergent issues and themes. Dialogues were not "structured" or "standardized" in any way, but were primarily emergent. I employed a basic thematic analysis method, with participants individually and collectively involved throughout the dialogues in the development, confirmation, and rejection of themes as they relate to their own dialogues.

As a result of the analyses processes, five themes were identified. In drawing on a cross-case analysis of the participants’ stories, these five students’ stories appear to challenge the dominant discourse and traditional research in terms of the linearity, universality, and predictability of current racial identity development models. These students’ stories reflect a more holistic, fluid, cognitive, and complex process, one that has shared experiences, yet defies the "development" of all-purpose models. Given that we as educators tend to find comfort with and rely upon the predictability and familiarity of traditional developmental models, the implications for being effective and honest in our interaction with students are far-reaching and warrant considerable attention.
Racial Identity Development Among College Students:
An Examination of Five Students' Perspectives

by
Jessica White

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

[Signature]
Jessica White, Author
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Introduction

"But I still believe that the unexamined life is not worth living: and I know that self-delusion, in the service of no matter what small or lofty cause, is a price no writer can afford" (Baldwin, 1961, p. xxi).

With the words of James Baldwin (1961) ringing true, the research that I relate here is a journey toward "examining" life. I investigated the lives of five students and looked upon my own life--influences, experiences, and personal biases notwithstanding--in an attempt to make sense of and challenge the world as it exists. The "world as it exists" is a complicated and awesome idea; one that I believe is riddled with, among other things, power, discrimination, privilege, oppression, and racism. The continuous personal task of "making sense" of these societal elements in tandem with other overwhelming influences is among the most important and intriguing charges faced by individuals.

I name it to be one of the most important tasks because of how strongly power, discrimination, privilege, oppression, and racism have been--and continue to be--felt, contested, opposed, and supported in American culture. The existence and prevalence of race, racism, and racial matters represent a harsh history, but more importantly, the present-day struggles in American society. These racial struggles, whether apparent or not, envelop nearly every aspect of life and are manifested in a variety of ways including individual behaviors, institutional procedures, societal
norms, and civilizational assumptions and biases (Scheurich & Young, 1997). In many ways, the effects have been far-reaching and powerful, and continue to be perpetuated by even the most righteous and self-aware allies.

I believe this struggle to “make sense” of race and racism is also one of the most intriguing charges because of the uncertainty with which it is understood. How individuals personally make sense of such complex ideas and incorporate them within their own sense of self has primarily been theorized and deconstructed in the name of “understanding” and “clarification.” Precise linear and standard models have attempted to explain and predict this racial self-discovery and self-identification. From my experiences, the diversity of students’ voices and perspectives indicates that the “process” of “development” is different--more complex--than past and even current research efforts would have us believe. Within the context of his own attempt to explore the experiences of Blacks and African Americans, Warren (1965) explained the complex and unpredictable nature of racial identity development stating, “I seize the word identity. It is a key word. You hear it over and over again. On this word will focus, around this word will coagulate, a dozen issues, shifting, shading into each other” (p. 17).

Racial identity development generally refers to this process of “making sense.” According to Yeh and Hwang (2000), “Racial identity addresses how individuals relinquish the impact of disenfranchisement and build respectful attitudes toward their own racial group” (p. 422). I would argue that while racial identity does often involve issues of disenfranchisement and respect, it more directly involves a variety of continuous processes of recognizing racial group(s) as a salient reference
point(s) in development. The key here is that racial identity development does not necessarily involve a single process or a single racial group, but more likely numerous experiences, transitions, and journeys. In clarifying a common misconception, ethnic identity is not synonymous with racial identity. While ethnic identity may include cultural conflicts and prejudices associated with being of a specific ethnicity (i.e. Malaysian, Cherokee, Panamanian), it is not grounded in the historical and social construction that powerfully labels and then systematically empowers or limits people in varying degrees based on physical characteristics and genetic origins (i.e. Asian, Native American, Latino).

This research sought to "get at" students' understandings of their own racial identity development. The limited degree with which participants have been heard and honored in research activities points to the need to inquire about their experiences first-hand, respect their stories, and consider their voices among, or in spite of, the current models that exist. My research efforts drew upon an interpretive design and were enlightened by a variety of theoretical perspectives, mainly critical theory and postmodern feminism. My goals throughout the process were twofold: (a) to challenge the dominant discourse and current research as it relates to our current knowledge of racial identity development, and (b) to employ research methods that are truly liberating in their incorporation of participants' voices and perspectives. In this way, I consider both the findings and research process equally important in this dissertation.

This written account of my research deviates in many ways from the traditional doctoral dissertation not only in structure and organization, but also in
terms of substance. My version of these five students' stories—it being just that, my version—reflects an alternative, yet uniquely individual perspective. For that reason, this written account begins with an examination of my perspectives and role as the subjective researcher including those biases and assumptions that I am aware of and that I believe affect my understandings and perceptions of race, privilege, and power. This disclosure also includes an overview of those theoretical perspectives that have been most influential—and problematic at times—in my research journey as well as a list of working assumptions that guide and frame my approach to racial identity development research. This disclosure is followed by a critical discussion of my understanding of the literature relating to racial identity development and then the methodology and specific methods employed in my research practices. The traditional "analysis" and "discussion" sections have been replaced by the presentation of themes within each student’s "story" or vignette. The final portion of this dissertation focuses on considerations, implications for educators in higher education, and questions for future research.
"To begin to understand how we are caught up in power situations of which we are, ourselves, the bearers is to foreground the limits of our lives and what we can do within those boundaries" (Lather, 1994, p. 123).

Key to any research design or process is the role of the researcher. And essential in appreciating qualitative research is understanding the perspectives of the particular researcher. An epistemological disclosure, like the one that introduces this research, is an autobiographical attempt to get at how I have come to know and understand oppression. That is, it is an account of my apparent influences and biases regarding issues of oppression as I see them affecting my research and the theories with which I identify as a researcher and practitioner. In this case, I intentionally use the word “apparent” to convey the difficulties and intricacies involved in such introspection and disclosure, the most obvious and challenging of these difficulties being that I can never fully know the extent and depth of my own biases. Knowles (2000) refers to the problematic nature of the limits of our knowledge in defining autobiography as, “a selective [italics added] recounting of memories and experiences which position the self in the world” (p. 62). This disclosure, therefore, is not meant to be a comprehensive inventory since I can never be entirely conscious or free of my own biases or entirely aware of my position in the world.

According to Bogdan and Biklin (1998), the decision to include an autobiographical personal disclosure is often used “to gain authority with the reader” (p. 191). However, it is not in this spirit that I relate my experiences with oppression. In discussing the responsibilities of White researchers who attempt to
conduct cross-cultural research or research across racial groups, Helms (1993) urges that they “consider how their own resolved and unresolved issues of race/ethnicity potentially color their cross-cultural perceptions” (p. 240). I share my experiences and perspectives then in an attempt to be more self-conscious in my inquiries and analysis, to inform the reader of my own subjectivity, my own awareness of this subjectivity, as well as how it relates to my understanding of the writings and research of others. My purpose, therefore, is to honestly enter into an investigation with my assumptions--as I perceive them today--clearly articulated, so that others may realize, yet never entirely know or truly understand, the lenses through which I view the world (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994).

Relating this subjectivity is the first step in demonstrating competency in the area of racial identity development; how I view oppression must precede what it is that I specifically assume about oppression, because the “how” (epistemology) will directly influence and determine the “what” (ontology) (Scheurich, 1997). According to Ely (1991), “Revealing one’s research thoughts and actions is both an inherent imperative and strength of the [qualitative] methodology. The public sharing of insights, reasoning, emotions, changes, consistencies—whatever—is done in the service of helping readers to “be there” with the researcher, to understand, and to make their own assessments of the research in informal ways” (p. 176). It is in this vein that others may appreciate and learn from the disclosure and analysis that follow.

I do not posit that my subjectivity can be overlooked or weeded-out simply by reading my experiences. On the contrary, my biases, as reinforced and realized
through my experiences, are so deeply and intricately intertwined with my current practices that they cannot be systematically filtered out or removed. My research is my personal--yet scholarly--interpretation, diffused again through the lenses of your own experiences, biases, and assumptions. For this reason, as a researcher, I reject any attempts to dismiss my biases and epistemological beliefs in search of “the” truth or “a” truth. Truth is perceived reality, both personal and reflective; it is as much a social construction as are theories and values (Lather, 1986). This disclosure as well as my research findings and analyses, therefore, remain my version of reality, my perspective regarding oppression, as I know it to be.

Yet, this notion of perceived reality on an individual level becomes muddled within the context of culture. By its very nature, I believe that culture is fundamentally based on some degree of shared understanding and realities. Culturally speaking then, I do not reject the notion that others reading this may also share in my ontological and epistemological realities. In fact, given this idea of shared cultural understanding, it seems likely that others may also understand experiences, biases, assumptions and particular pieces of my reality.

Disclosure: Researcher as Instrument

In reflecting on the work of Paulo Freire, Audre Lorde (1984) states, “The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us” (p. 194). This epistemological and autobiographical disclosure is a critical
examination of the oppressor that I know lies deep within me. It is an attempt to
investigate the ways in which my oppression and, likewise, my oppressive behaviors
have shaped my worldview; that is, how I believe that oppression and my oppressive
behaviors have influenced—if not manipulated and controlled—the ways in which I
view family, education, economics, socialization, power, privilege, and my own
identity as a Euro-American, middle-class, heterosexual, temporarily not disabled,
woman.

This disclosure follows my struggle to recall those experiences that I believe
have led me to think and behave as I do today, as well as my “not-so-pretty” effort to
make meaning of these experiences as they relate to my privileges and the powerful
role I play in oppression. It is also an attempt to examine and communicate my
reality as well as my limitations and differences in perception. Such introspection is
essential in my research since I believe that my epistemological bias has emerged
from a civilizational level of racism; that is, the level that encompasses my deepest,
often unconscious, most primary assumptions about truth, reality, and the nature of
the good life (Scheurich & Young, 1997). In this way, I must return then to this
civilizational level to engage in an investigation of my own socially constructed
reality, challenging educational approaches and assumptions as they relate to
oppressive behaviors so that thought and action may move in new directions
(Pizarro, 1998).

As a White woman of European ancestry from a comfortable middle-class
family, the result of private schooling and suburban neighborhoods, it is important
for me to assert that my initial understanding of oppression is limited to a privileged
frame of reference. Every memory from early childhood through the completion of high school places me in the dominant group regarding race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and religion. Gender relations were the one exception to this feeling of majority. Of course, during these years I rarely—if ever—saw it this way. Even now in attempting to understand the implications of these privileges I realize that I have only scratched the surface.

As I flipped through old class photos from my grammar school in writing this autobiographical disclosure I can distinctly remember those students who did not quite “fit in” with the “normal” White, Catholic, middle-class, heterosexual (this is synonymous with Catholicism, of course) crowd. For example, Peter, whose pants were always a little too faded and a little too short, was considered the “poor” kid in school. Angela was also cast to the fringes because her family was “fatherless” and her mother drove an old beat up Chevelle. Robert was the only Black student (although I do not really remember how we referred to him then) at St. Rose of Lima, and I can remember being superficially fascinated by him in grammar school. In high school things changed little. Lisa was now the African American everyone knew of but never really knew, and Sally was the girl who could not afford Polo shirts and Gucci shoes to accessorize the plaid uniform meant to have a “leveling” effect on students. There were never any students that I knew of who had disabilities and certainly no Jews. In fact, few students did not identify ethnically as anything other than “Italian” or “Irish,” a convenient identification that I will discuss later.

My most adventurous cultural experience was an adolescent soccer team on which I was a player for ten years. Until I was eighteen, soccer practices and games
were my only regular interaction with Jews (Rachael and Leah) and Blacks (Melanie). Like my limited school exposure, I was keenly aware that these girls (later women) were very different from me. (It wasn’t until later in college that I understood “different” to really mean “less worthy,” “less intelligent,” and “less civilized.”) My family, as well as my friends and their families, reminded me of this difference constantly in a number of ways including subtle and not-so-subtle jokes and remarks. Associations and friendships with children of other races or religions were neither openly encouraged nor discouraged. I can only assume, or at best hope, that if I had pursued these relationships on my own they would have been tolerated, but no more than that. As a result, I chose to generally disassociate myself with the Peters, Roberts, Rachael, and Melanies of my life not out of disdain or dislike, but more out of indifference. What I did not have the tools and courage to realize then was that indifference was just another easy and oppressive way to exert and benefit from my power and privileges. Indifference was simply self-preservation, a means to protect my unearned, inequitable privileges as a heterosexual, catholic, middle-class, temporarily not disabled Euro-American white person.

I look back now and am certain that I was living, like many “Americans,” in the comfort of ignorance. Throughout schooling and other social interactions I was constantly assured that my lifestyle and beliefs were typical, normal, and, in many ways, the “correct” way to live. I internalized this to mean that it was right and I was deserving of my benefits and accomplishments. As many find themselves blinded by the myth of meritocracy, I too believed--knew, in fact--that my successes were the result--and only the result--of my own hard work and personal sacrifices.
Considering myself typical and normal was an easy way to avoid challenging this myth and the system of unfair advantages (Allison, 1993; Langston, 1988).

My surroundings at a large liberal institution like Rutgers were unsettling, eye opening, and challenging. The campus of over 35,000 was an immediate shock to my system, with plentiful doses of both discrimination and liberal open-minded thought. For the first time in my life I experienced (that is, I was cognitively aware of) being reduced to labels: “the Catholic-school girl down the hall,” “the J. Crew girl at the fraternity party,” or “that dyke/brute with all the bruises” (being on the rugby team, which I captained, immediately meant you were either a lesbian, manhater, or just a complete brute). I realized over time that these labels were superficial attempts to clearly define and categorize me, in terms of my gender, religion, sexuality, and social class. Offended by others’ assumptions and imposed labels, I initially found myself assuring others through my behavior and conversations that I was or was not those “things,” depending on how the label served me. Within a year or so, such assurances were tiring and draining. Proving to classmates that I was not the stuffy, sexually repressed Catholic girl left me struggling academically, well on my way to being an alcoholic, and broken-hearted in some cases. In short, I could not keep up the pace. Distracted by personal concerns in my second and third years of college, I no longer wanted or could manage to keep up the pace required to “prove” myself and fulfill or negate others’ labels.

Significant changes in my life during my final years at Rutgers led me to the startling realization that I was not necessarily the typical adolescent that I believed I was just years prior, despite my attempts. Strained familial relations culminating in
my parents' divorce after twenty-five years of marriage led me to the painful
discovery that my typical and normal childhood was not as I had hoped. As a
student struggling to mediate among multiple worlds and competing priorities, I no
longer fit the "normal" and ideal image I had created and maintained for myself.
The nuclear family as a key societal dimension no longer defined me (Helms, 1992).
This one "minor" aberration from my ideal plan snowballed with other, more
painful, realizations.

In my physical and emotional separation from my family I began to view my
life from the perspective of an outsider, digesting the racist, anti-Semitic,
homophobic, and sexist jokes as an uncomfortable spectator instead of welcoming
participant. Deconstructionists assert that this "othering"—exclusion, abandonment,
rejection, dislocation, and marginalization—conveys a sense of power, suggesting
that it may actually be advantageous to criticize as an outsider (Tong, 1998). I did
not see my condition as empowering, nor did I proclaim its advantages. Simply
speaking, I began to observe my family's own overt racist behaviors. With
embarrassment, but familial silence and respect, I sat around the table witnessing
ignorance and fear manifesting itself in laughs and attempts to "one-up" one another.
It was easier during these years to simply blame my family for this "inherited
disease" (Ortiz, 1999, p. 10) called racism, pointing fingers and casting judgments,
instead of accepting my own role and responsibility in perpetuating racism.

I first seriously questioned and considered my own racist and anti-Semitic
beliefs as I began my master's degree study nearly 3000 miles from my family and
childhood home. It was during this time that I began to focus less on condemning
others for their beliefs and actions, and more on confronting my own prejudices and
the role I have played and continue to play in oppressing others. I cannot say for
sure what led me to such a diametrical transformation in terms of my perspectives.
Perhaps it was the distance between my family and me. Perhaps it was the disgust,
anger, and guilt I felt when gay friends and friends of color shared their frequent
stories of discrimination and hatred and when I saw these instances for myself as
well, for aren’t we taught that seeing is believing? Perhaps it was the ways in which
my new partner, friends, colleagues, and professors challenged the security and
complacency to which I had been accustomed for so many years. Most likely, my
transformation was the result of all of these influences, not to mention those of which
I still remain ignorant, as they intricately intertwined with one another in shaping my
perspectives.

To date, the most powerful experience that has shaped my way of thinking
has been my work with students of color on campus. For an entire year, I worked as
one of only a handful of White students on a staff of fifty or so. Given that our goals
were to educate students, staff, and community members on issues of diversity,
oppression, and privilege, I learned much about others’ cultures and their
experiences. But more than this, I imagined--if only for hours at a time--what it was
like to be in the minority and be disregarded as a student of color. Many on the
“outside” assumed I was a student of color. After all, I had to be one of “them,”
right? Talking about issues of oppression and dominance are “their” issues, right?
On the inside of our staff group, I was challenged in ways that I cannot express. An
overwhelming sense of self-consciousness developed (some would call it
hypersensitivity or liberal white guilt), and I became critically aware at most
moments of my Whiteness, my own prejudices and power, and my privileges.

One of the most obvious and disturbing of these privileges was knowing that
by simply exiting a door I could once again be in the bliss and comfort of the
dominant culture; my presence as a person of color, while frustrating and powerful,
was temporary. Frequent introspection since this experience has also led me to truly
understand that my race/ethnicity as a Euro-American/White woman is in many
ways symbolic (Waters, 1996). Unlike the students of color with whom I worked, I
have options in exercising my identity in terms of which ancestries I choose to claim
and which I choose to reject and ignore. In both cases, the privilege of ethnic choice
occurs because societal conditions reinforce the notion of symbolic identity without
any cost to Euro-Americans, despite the fact that it often exists in direct opposition to
the struggles of people of color. It becomes easy and natural for symbolically-
identified whites, like myself, to assume that all ethnicities are a matter of choice,
interchangeable, and qualitatively similar.

I continue now, as a researcher, educator, and person, to struggle with the
notion that while I do not agree with racist and anti-Semitic behaviors and rationale,
I still help to perpetuate these on a daily basis. In some ways, it still seems an
overwhelming personal and professional struggle. Much of this sense of conflict
rests in my confusion and discomfort when dealing with those who still openly
express racist, anti-Semitic, homophobic, and sexist sentiments. My struggle is
muddled by familial values to respect my elders and love my family, and situated
against my personal ideas of justice and equity. How do I manage both without
feeling compromised in some way? In short, how can I have confidence in someone when I despise her or his actions? The logical solution seems to separate that person from those behaviors and actions that I condemn. I believe now though that this approach is my attempt to rationalize their behaviors and once again relieve myself of personal responsibility. Given this, I feel certain that I still have much work to do in resolving this dilemma.

Perpetuating oppression manifests itself in my professional life as well and I must not be remiss in realizing the power I have with students (Ellsworth, 1989). I know that my mere existence as White, middle-class, well-educated, heterosexual woman often affords me a number of privileges simply because of my race, economic status, or sexuality. Accustomed to the familiarity and ease of such daily privileges, I know that I still benefit while others are systematically oppressed, even in the academy. I also know that while I would like to say that perpetuating such inequity is entirely unconscious or the result of years of socialization, I still know that the decisions I make also represent independent and informed, or ultimately uninformed, choices.

**Theoretical Influences: Researcher as Instrument**

As a researcher, theories and philosophies that recognize the inherent existence of power relations and oppression most significantly affect my practice as an educator and research. However, in contrast with positivism and behavioral sciences, these theories do not stand before my practice in order to inform or drive it.
In "driving" practice, theory becomes authoritarian, controlling, and imprisoning to the researcher. According to Freire (1997), "This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed, extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits.... [On the other hand] knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (p. 53). For this reason, I assert that theory enlightens my practice; practice precedes theory and then theory follows as a result of reflection and introspection (Van Manen, 1990).

**Critical Theory**

Those theories that most profoundly enlighten my practice are critical theory and postmodern feminism. The first of these, critical theory, generally aims to emancipate, liberate, and empower those who have been unjustly oppressed, exploited, or marginalized in mainstream society. The fundamental assumption is that certain people or groups of people unquestionably experience privileges over others and that these power relations are prescribed as well as socially and historically constituted (Freire, 1997). In reversing this assumption, it seems apparent then that certain groups are unquestionably oppressed by the power and privileges of the dominant group. By delineating between the oppressed and the oppressor, critical theorists posit that there are two, and only two, oppositional categories: liberation and domination (Connolly, 1981; Freire, 1978, 1997). In the
former example, learners are invited to dialogically engage jointly with the “teacher” in their own creation of knowledge; in the latter, learners are coerced into passive and mute consumption of a superior knowledge and power. All educational efforts, therefore, are either liberating or dominating by their very existence alone. Collins (1998) refers to this dilemma as the choice between teaching for change and teaching the status quo. In the same way, research efforts cannot be neutral. By its simply existing, research is either liberating or oppressive; it seeks either to empower “participants” or dominate them as “subjects.”

According to critical theorists, oppression is most forcefully and systematically perpetuated through the continued conscious and unconscious subordination and acceptance of dominance as natural, necessary, inevitable, or right (e.g., internalized oppression, hegemony) (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). Freire takes this position one step further in asserting that, “It is essential for the oppressed to realize that when they accept the struggle for humanization they also accept, from that moment, their total responsibility for the struggle” (p. 50). The goal here in critical theory is a critical democracy, individual freedom, social justice, and social change through dialogue where citizens are personally adept in critically and rationally confronting issues through ongoing forms of social action (Ellsworth, 1989).

My epistemology is also enlightened by several of the fundamental concepts of liberating education and co-investigation as articulated by Freire (1997). As a researcher, I am aware of the powerful effect that the research process itself (as opposed to only the results) has on participants, and how research is often both an
ethical and political act, undertaken to facilitate the oppressed in empowering themselves and in addressing their own social inequalities and injustices. For this reason, my prejudice is that research must be a carefully considered act that is altruistic, responsible, reciprocal, caring, and does not totalize those involved (Casas & Thompson, 1991). Gore (1993) addresses this concern by differentiating between “emancipatory authority” and “authoritarianism” (p. 94), the former being liberating and the latter oppressive in nature. In other words, as a researcher I must consider a multitude of competing interests including my own self interests and those of the participants, as well as the methods practiced and the consequences resulting from these practices. And while all consequences can never be identified or predicted, the art of good research requires weighing possible consequences with goals and outcomes, and then opting to proceed in a manner that does not totalize or oppress others, but one that provides them with a fair chance to speak and have a voice. Of course, this understanding of fairness and voice is, as with other aspects of research design, problematic since its understanding and interpretation is subjective.

While critical theory is powerful in its affirmation and assertion of the constancy and existence of oppression and the need for liberating pedagogical and research practices, it does not alone enlighten my practice. Furthermore, it cannot alone enlighten my practice given its superficial treatment of feminist issues and concerns. With Neo-Marxist roots, critical theorists assert that relationships are often mediated by the social influences of capitalist production and consumption (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). Such as assumption is convincing, but only without the realization that exploited workers do not suffer in similar or even comparable
ways, as do oppressed women or people of color. Such an assumption that capitalism is the primary root of oppression advances hierarchical notions of oppression, that is, the preeminence of one type of oppression over another. This way of thinking is rooted in competitive “either-or” thinking where women and people of color are expected to rank the severity of their oppressions and select the appropriate movement toward eradicating their struggles (hooks, 1984). In addition, the critical theory understanding negates patriarchy and other sources of oppression that, when intertwined with capitalism, create an overwhelming fate and an incredibly tenacious system of oppression (Tong, 1998).

Ellsworth (1989) asserts that this limited perspective problematizes critical theorists’ view of voice and the conditions under which participant voice can be obtained. According to Freire (1997), “Revolutionary leaders do not go to the people in order to bring them a message of “salvation,” but in order to come to know through dialogue with them their objective situation and their awareness of that situation--the various level of perception of themselves and of the world in which and with which they exist” (p. 76). Freire’s perspective, like other critical theorists, assumes first the existence of clearly defined voices that participants are capable of identifying and differentiating. This perspective does not address the complex and contradictory intersection of multiple voices and oppressions represented by gender, race, class, ability, ethnicity, age, religion, or sexual orientation, nor does it examine the impossibility of speaking from all voices at once, or from any one without influences of others being present and significant (Tong, 1998).
Freire's (1997) statement also assumes a certain elitist knowledge and comprehension that the teacher, researcher, or leader has regarding the intent of the participants. In other words, this position assumes the superiority of a leader's understanding and capabilities, that the teacher can be and is aware of the subject of oppression as well or better than the participant (Ellsworth, 1989). This perspective is clearly articulated by Lather (1986) as she described her own research efforts: "The purpose was to empower the oppressed to come to understand and change their own oppressive realities" (pp. 260-261). Not only is it impossible to step beyond my own socially constructed reality, but it is unlikely that I can ever truly know the oppressive situations of others. Theories, like critical theory, that assert that either of these feats is possible return in many ways to dehumanizing banking pedagogical practices (Freire, 1997).

In my interpretation, critical theory also falls short in placing undue emphasis on the responsibility of the oppressed in perpetuating their own oppression. An initial glance as this type of definition finds that it is consistent with traditional American views of consent as rights-based, as legalistic, and as committed to the view that individuals are radically free, self-sovereign beings. However, such an interpretation resembles existential philosophy and shares that theory's shortcomings in perpetuating patriarchy and other forms of oppression through victim blaming (Tong, 1998). Asserting that the oppressed are ultimately and wholly responsible for their liberation shifts the focus away from the role the dominant culture plays in oppression. Instead, the focus becomes the naïve, accepting, complacent, passive, imprudent oppressed who must not find their condition that appalling and in need of
change. In this way, the dominant culture places both the responsibility and failure in the hands of the oppressed, treating it primarily—but not exclusively—as a problem of the "other." In her discussion of empowerment and liberation, Lather (1994) succinctly summarizes the conflict: "How do our very efforts to liberate perpetuate the relations of dominance?" (p. 105).

**Postmodern Feminism**

Postmodernism, feminism, and mainly postmodern feminism address some of the concerns raised in my understanding of critical theory. Generally, postmodernism is a school of thought that attempts to transcend the constraints of modernity with new conceptualizations of culture, society, language, and power (Slattery, 1995). According to Lather (1994), "Postmodernism is borne out of the uprising of the marginalized, the revolution in communication technology, the fissures of a global multinational hyper-capitalism, and our sense of the limits of Enlightenment rationality" (p. 102). Postmodernism questions the presupposed existence and nature of rigid categories such as race, gender, heterosexuality, and ability, asserting that being human is matter of social, historical, and cultural constructions (Collins, 1998). Many who support postmodernism pay specific attention to the need to reconstruct these confining borders of meaning, these dominant discourses (Gore, 1993).

Additionally, postmodernism finds authority in deconstructing the master narratives that impose knowledge and thereby unequal power relations (i.e.,
oppressive and totalizing education). Cixous (1981) asserts that these master narratives--"the tyrants of the concept"--and their undisputed knowledge are accomplices to inequities in power, "That whoever stands in the place of knowledge is always getting a dividend of power" (p. 173). The key to deconstructing these master narratives rests in engaging in multiplicity of readings and interpretations, envisioning a prism of viewpoints rather than only one single perspective.

Postmodern feminism is a "feminist" perspective enlightened by postmodern ways of thinking. I question the term "feminist" here because postmodern feminism is a school of thought that defies categorization and labeling. (Thus, the term "postmodern feminism" is use here only for my purposes of convenience, despite the idea that those identifying with the central tenets discussed in this section may likely disagree with such a classification.) Theoretically speaking, postmodern feminism addresses the existence of a complex set of oppressive structures that intertwine to uniquely construct an individual's oppression. In simplest terms, it is a call to change the constructions of knowledge, politics, and power by disrupting its patriarchal foundation (Lather, 1994).

Yet, unlike critical theory, which clearly positions capitalism as the most profound source of oppression, postmodern feminists refuse to develop one overarching explanation and solution to women's oppression, a position that poses considerable problems for feminist theory. And unlike critical theory, which encourages binary oppositions, postmodern feminism, despite its emphasis on gender, rejects such strict hierarchical thinking as yet another manifestation of patriarchal domination. Given this, postmodern feminism is marked by suspicion
and doubt toward any mode of thought--feminist or otherwise--that aims to provide
the explanation for why women or others are oppressed as a group. Furthermore,
postmodern philosophies challenge the oppressive pathologies that suggest that there
is one--and only one--world order, framed around the dominant culture's philosophy.
Such formulaic approaches negate central tenets of plurality, diversity, and
difference and work toward--instead of against--class and categorization. In
addition, postmodern feminism is marked by an overarching sense individuality and
personal decision-making; each woman is invited to become the kind of feminist she
wants to be. As Tong (1998) states, "There is no single formula for being a 'good
feminist'" (p. 193). Identity, rather, is constituted through multiple meanings and
discourses that overlap, intersect, and contradict one another in various ways.

In deciding and constructing their own individual feminist images and
identities, women are encouraged to write themselves out of the world that men have
created for women. According to Cixous (1981):

For as soon as we [women] exist, we are born into language, and
language speaks (to) us, dictates its law, a law of death: it lays down
its familial model, lays down its conjugal model, and even at the
moment of uttering a sentence, admitting a notion of "being," a
question of being, an ontology, we are already seized by a certain kind
of masculine desire, the desire that mobilizes philosophical discourse.
(p. 166)

However, the complexity of writing ourselves out of the patriarchal world and
rejecting the dominant masculine discourse, practically speaking, poses a mammoth
task. For Cixous, writing in the feminine entails a focus on the process, rather than
the language itself. "Passing on what is cut out by the Symbolic, the voice of the
mother, passing on what is most archaic. The most archaic force that touches a body is one that enters by the ear and reaches the most intimate point. This innermost touch always echoes in a woman-text” (p. 175-6). In this definition, which strikes me as highly un-postmodern, Cixous refers to the “Symbolic Order,” a deconstructionist idea posed by Jacques Lacan, which is comprised of rules of language and behavior that are unconsciously internalized by humans to maintain social acceptance and the perception of normalcy (Duchen, 1986).

For all of its intellectualization regarding issues of oppression and empowerment, postmodern feminism, like critical theory, does not enlighten my practice without doubt. Particularly troubling is the apparent contradictions posed in finding a unique feminine language. Postmodern feminists initially model this in their refusal to construct and accept the idea of an overarching theory of feminism. Yet, if all current forms of language (i.e., written, oral, visual) are tainted by their phallocentric origins, then from where do we proceed? It seems, given the immensity of patriarchal thought, and therefore feminine limitations, postmodern feminist suggestions offer little hope. In simplest terms, if all language is oppressive by its very nature, what is there left to say?

A second problematic aspect of postmodern feminist thinking is in the apparent rejection of essentialist philosophy, that is, the conviction that a core being exists within humans. And while essentialist philosophy has been used in the past (and present) to justify oppressive inequities and atrocities, such as slavery and colonization, not all essentialist philosophies are political constructs of conservatism. According to Tong (1998), the postmodern feminist denial of essentialism is so
complete that postmodernism and postmodern feminism fail to accept that there is any essential unity of self through time and space believed to be self-identity. Interpreted within the realm of my research interests, postmodern feminists assert that there is no essential commonality among women, or humans for that matter.

As stated earlier, this limited notion of perceived reality on an individual level becomes muddled within the context of culture, which by its very nature, relies on shared understandings. While not a postmodern feminist, Erikson (1968) elaborates on this dilemma stating, “That a man [sic] could ever be psychologically alone; that a man, “alone,” is essentially different from the same man in a group; that a man in a temporary solitary condition...has disengaged himself from social action (or inaction) on whatever level—these and similar stereotypes demand careful revision” (p. 46). This view of unique and isolated individual realities is particularly problematic within the feminist culture, for example, where survivors of rape and sexual assault find meaning in a shared understanding and healing. Given this limitation, postmodern feminism can only partially enlighten my practice, my research, and this review of related literature.

**Researcher/Writer/Educator’s Working Assumptions**

Given my personal journey, I have developed the following list of working assumptions for my work as a researcher, writer, and educator. According to Tatum (1992) who also includes a comprehensive list of assumptions in her research with students, these type of assumptions and guidelines are so central to the process of
talking and learning about racism that it is crucial for the researcher/educator to share these with her audience. It is within this frame of reference that I share these following six working assumptions so that my philosophy, biases, and worldview regarding issues of oppression, power, privilege, and race may again be evident.

1. Race is an “absurd concept,” (Powell, 1999, p. 15) developed to allow investigations, definitions, and rigid classifications of human populations into sub-groups based primarily on physical characteristics and genetic origins (Helms, 1990). Yet, despite its “scientific” roots, race exists as a social construction that powerfully labels and then systematically empowers or limits people in varying degrees; it exists because we have created it as a meaningful category to conveniently delineate differences (Helms, 1995; Rosenblum & Travis, 1996). Race, however, encompasses more than simply a label. For those whose racial label is a constant reminder of systemic inequities, race becomes an inseparable part of identity, one that is not absurd. As Powell states, “‘Race’ has now become that reified entity, me. All my life I have been defined not by my accomplishments, but by my ‘race.’ Even when I struggle to separate myself from the aspersions attached to my ‘race,’ I, like my ancestors before me, have in some way been chained and shackled to what the word connotes” (p. 15).

2. Racism, as defined as a system of advantages and disadvantages based on racial heritage, often leading to the methodical mistreatment of one group of people by another (Tatum, 1997; Yamamoto, 1988), is pervasive in the United States. Racism manifests itself on a number of levels, including
internalized racism, individual racism, institutional racism, societal racism, and civilizational racism (Scheurich & Young, 1997). Each of these can exist either overtly or covertly. It is impossible to live in the United States, or attend college in the United States for that matter, and not experience the effects of racism first-hand, whether that is via privilege or prejudice and discrimination.

3. As a White/Caucasian/Euro-Americans in the United States it is virtually impossible not to be a racist. We have been historically and continually misinformed by racist educational and research practices have developed preconceived judgments and opinions, many of which may not ever be realized. These prejudices, combined with the power to enforce laws, institutions, and norms, result in the continued oppression, dehumanization, and deracialization of people (Banks & McGee Banks, 1997; McEwen, Roper, Bryant, & Langa, 1990).

4. The degree of comfort and opportunity provided to people in this country is often influenced by race (Kiselica, 1999). White/Caucasian/Euro-Americans are clearly the beneficiaries of racism, while people of color are repeatedly and systematically denied the same opportunities and advantages. Whites as a group perpetuate racism and the oppressive behaviors associated with it in order to maintain their own unearned privileges (Helms, 1992; McIntosh, 1989).

5. Racism has significant negative ramifications for Whites as well (Tatum, 1992, 1997).
6. Oppression is a complex web, comprised of the intricate interplay between and among various oppressive situations. Racism, sexism, classism, anti-Semitism, heterosexism, and ableism are often acting simultaneously and unconsciously within individuals. Likewise, people are often oppressed in a variety of ways, based on a variety of prejudices. These systems of oppression cannot be systematically or individually extricated. In addition, quantifying, prioritizing, or ranking these different racist experiences, however, is unproductive within the already oppressive hierarchal structure. Such practices serve only to pit individuals and groups against one another and ignore the powerful effect of multiple and simultaneous oppressive situations.

7. Individuals within particular racial, ethnic, gender, religious, or other cultural classifications engage in some degree of shared experiences. These shared experiences, while not identical, reflect a common understanding of the spoken and unspoken aspects of that culture.
Researcher and the Literature: My Understanding of Racial Identity Development

Literature

Literature surrounding and related to the area of racial identity development spans a variety of academic disciplines and research perspectives. The result is an assortment of theories, models, and often competing paradigms and recommendations for educational practice. The following pages offer a brief summary of the literature that reflects the leading perspectives (i.e. the most commonly cited, supported, and re-investigated) as they relate to identity development and racial identity development. I feel certain that it is not a coincidence that this “leading” literature generally parallels dominant ideas about identity development and appropriate research methodologies.

More important though than the brief summary offered here is the personal critique that follows each summary as I attempt to wrestle with current theoretical approaches and research paradigms and make sense of the literature. In this way, a more useful model meant to assist my own research efforts has replaced the traditional “review of related literature.” Specifically, this section will address that information currently known and articulated about racial identity development, gaps and unanswered questions within the same topical area, and my understanding of the literature as it currently exists. The goal therefore is to highlight that research which has been influential in the area of identity development, but also my own understanding of the literature and the point of reference from where my research efforts were conducted.
Overview of Erik Erikson and Psychosocial Development

Erik Erikson is often considered a pioneer, and as Josselson (1987) states, "our most important theorist of identity" (p. 10) in terms of the careful attention he paid to identity development and its importance within the larger developmental progression. Erikson believed, unlike his psychoanalytic predecessors, that an understanding of individual development required consideration of both the external environment and the internal dynamics (Erikson, 1968).

In viewing identity as a psychosocial process and the cornerstone of ego development, Erikson generally described identity as the sense of self that expresses who and what we really are. More specifically, he defined identity as a primarily unconscious process that unites personality and links the individual with the social world (Josselson, 1987). This sense of inner continuity and purpose is predicated on the degree of success with which individuals resolve each of his eight developmental stages. According to Erikson (1968) each stage can be paralleled with a particular time in the life sequence when physical growth, cognitive maturation, and certain social demands converge to create dissonance or a critical developmental turning point. A shifting polar orientation such as trust versus mistrust or industry versus inferiority is the focus within each stage where the individual wavers between contradictory perceptions of the self and then finds resolution.

Identity, while an overarching theme within all of development, is most comprehensively addressed in Erikson's fifth stage (adolescence) where conflicting notions of identity and identity confusion are addressed. According to Erikson, this
particular life stage provides young people with the optimal situation for defining a sense of identity (Patterson, Sochting, & Marcia, 1992). At this transitional life phase, the adolescent is beset with a changing body and mind as well as a number of societal pressures that lead to increased reflection and self-awareness. Among the most prominent of these pressures includes making vocational and ideological commitments. Erikson's final resolution of a healthy and positive identity development occurs when an active synthesis of the core self-image is achieved and is able to provide continuity.

Critique of Erik Erikson

Perhaps the most controversial piece of Erikson's identity stage theory is his belief that identity development follows an epigenetic principle. With this key concept Erikson (1968) asserted that all growing organisms follow a "ground plan" (p. 92) and that the self-concept emerges part by part in a sequence that is dictated by a universal master plan. Building on his Freudian roots, Erikson further explains this:

It is important to realize that in the sequence of his [sic] most personal experiences the healthy child, given a reasonable amount of proper guidance, can be trusted to obey inner laws of development, laws which create a succession of potentialities for significant interaction with those persons who tend and respond to him and those institutions which are ready for him. While such interaction varies from culture to culture, it must remain within "the proper rate and the proper sequence" which governs all epigenesis. (p. 93)
Given this, Erikson concluded that an inherent pattern of human growth and social climate combine to create a universal sequence of psychosocial phases. Such a conclusion elicits several troubling ideas that seem to have plagued subsequent research and even current studies. First, Erikson’s belief that social climates and the effects that these settings have on identity development can ever be stable or predictable seems highly unlikely. Just as my own research efforts cannot be replicated, the host of social dynamics that affect an individual cannot be reproduced, despite Erikson’s attempt to manage factors such as the “rate” and “sequence.”

Erikson’s epigenetic principle must also be examined within a cultural context. It is evident from Erikson’s words that while culture is acknowledged as a factor in identity development, it is done so only superficially. As stated in my earlier working assumptions, I believe that there often exists some degree of shared understanding across cultures including identity development. Yet while I hold this true, I am critical and doubtful that shared cultural understandings dictate universal identity development processes. It should also be mentioned that Erikson’s own implied standards of “reasonable amount of time” and “proper guidance” are evidence of his own subjectivity, one that is likely riddled with biases regarding the nature cultural influences.

A second problematic aspect of Erikson’s theory is his own indecisiveness in terms of adequately addressing female and non-Caucasian identity development. In particular, a number of researchers have questioned Erikson’s Western, masculine ideal of individualism and vocational commitment. These two ideas among others
are often in conflict with identity development processes for women and people of
color who tend to emphasize relatedness as a fundamental concept. For example, a
number of researchers including Douvan and Adelson (1966), Marcia and Friedman
(1970), Thorbecke and Grotevant (1982) and more recently Archer (1985), Schiendel
and Marcia (1985), and Josselson (1987) have suggested that identity development is
substantially different among women due to the number of competing domains in
which women find themselves and the relative lack of societal support for their
positions.

Erikson attempted to address these and other feminist concerns in two
separate chapters (1968, 1975) about women’s “inner space.” While some of
Erikson’s arguments seemed to address the inherent power of patriarchy, he
ultimately held fast again to his Freudian roots, defining women’s identity in
anatomical terms. In his earlier work he stated, “Am I saying, then, that ‘anatomy is
destiny’? Yes, it is destiny, insofar as it determines not only the range of
configuration of physiological functioning and its limitation, but also, to an extent,
personality configurations” (p. 285). By this, Erikson seemed to imply that women
were anatomically destined (doomed?) to be exclusively nurturing, accommodating
caretakers. More troubling though was Erikson’s insistence that a woman’s
resolution of identity development, while initially based on her own sense of
attractiveness, was only completed through marriage, motherhood, and a service-
type lifestyle. Such a perspective is not only damaging in terms of its sexist
viewpoint, but also in furthering the historical dichotomizing of femininity and
masculinity.
Eriksonian Theorists

Despite the number of feminist criticisms, several theorists built upon Erikson's work and introduced developmental approaches during the 1960s and 1970s that attempted to address identity development in slightly different ways. Kenneth Keniston (1971) expanded upon Erikson's work by suggesting that attending college is such a distinct social experience that it elicits a new psychosocial task and the potential for additional growth through a prolonged identity stage. According to Keniston, the college years provide a testing ground for how students will reconcile individual needs and societal norms (Widick, Parker, & Knefelkamp, 1978). Keniston's major contribution rests in his acknowledgement of the radical changes in society--an area all but ignored by Erikson--and the probable impact those changes have on the identity formation processes among traditional-aged students.

Echoing the work of Keniston, Chickering (1969) and Chickering and Reisser (1993) also acknowledged that the traditional-aged college student constitutes a distinct developmental phase. For this reason, the authors focused primarily on adolescent and young adult identity development to provide a framework for educational practice. Chickering's vector model outlines seven distinct dimensions of psychosocial development, with maturational growth occurring as a result of balancing environmental challenge and response.

Yet while Chickering (1969) and later Chickering and Reisser (1993) emphasize that students are developmentally diverse, a key shortcoming in these
models is, like Erikson, the description of change and growth in a global manner. Chickering’s models assume that a “traditional” student does exist and thereby neglect to focus on the diverse cultural aspects of identity development. This is especially evident in his use of Sanford’s (1966) challenge and response concept. In this theory, the environment provides challenges or stimulation that encourages new adaptive responses and ultimately leads to developmental changes. Here Chickering is remiss in failing to recognize that challenge and response vary situationally among students. Chickering does not address different motivational levels, the inequity regarding resource availability, or other oppressive environmental factors that have obvious effects on adolescent identity development. Instead, Chickering suggests only that students will develop if they encounter situations—regardless of what those situations may be—that demand new responses. This is particularly interesting given that Sanford himself mentioned the effects of overwhelming challenges stating, “When strains are too intense they do not lead to new adaptive responses but rather a falling back upon primitive defensive stratagems….Defensive devices of this kind, involving as they do unconscious processes, tend to persist, and to be utilized repeatedly in critical situations” (p. 258). Yet, in criticism of Sanford’s model, while he does acknowledge varying levels of challenge, he asserts that adolescents’ responses lead only to the development of healthy or confused identities based on the universal “norms.” In this capacity, neither Chickering nor Sanford suggests alternative developmental processes for individuals facing “unusual” challenges.

In addition to Keniston (1971), Chickering (1969), Chickering and Reisser (1993), and Sanford (1966), a number of other researchers have taken experimental
approaches to the early psychosocial theories of development. Marcia (1966) created four categorical statuses in relation to Erikson's fifth stage of identity development to assess ego development in late adolescents. Similarly, Waterman and Waterman (1970) conducted studies to quantify the relationship between Erikson's concept of identity and student attitudes toward college. Other developmental research has been conducted to support Chickering's model (Kohlberg, 1971; Loevinger, 1976) and specific vectors of development. Perry's (1970) work also corresponds to Chickering's theory and adds dimensions involving intellectual competence.

Yet, despite the abundance of literature and research related to Erikson's "pioneering" model, the majority of these earlier efforts have fallen short in terms of their broad and prescriptive characteristics. Nearly all the models choose to delineate, categorize, or simplify the developmental process through Western-based categories such as "growth trends," "vectors," "developmental tasks," "stages of development," or "student typologies." Viewed within the framework of these models, adolescents whose identity development does not proceed "normally" within such defined parameters are considered to be in a time of "identity crisis" (Erikson, 1968, p. 16) or at war with their internal self-concept.

In addition, nearly all of the models mentioned thus far were developed through research either exclusively or predominantly by and "on" White/Euro-Americans. Such research designs and findings, therefore, describe only a selective and limited portion of the identity development story. And while the "entire" story of identity development can never be completely told or predicted given the
innumerable diversity among individuals, new theorists later introduced alternative methods and experimental approaches to address the multiple dimensions of identity including both race and ethnicity.

In the following sections I will review early and more recent research in the area of racial identity development. It should be noted though that this research was not developed nor does it exist within a vacuum; other compelling and related literature particularly in the area of gender identity has been conducted and adds to the body of literature. But, given the intended focus of my own research, the remainder of this literature review will be concerned with racial identity development research. Helms (1990) refers to racial identity development as: "A sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group" (p. 3). The majority of other researchers and theorists mentioned in the following sections use similar variations of this definition and so these models should be understood within this context.

Overview of William Cross and Nigrescence Theory

With the influence of general identity development theories, theorists began contemplating ways to codify more specific developmental processes such as the stages of nigrescence, that is, "the process of becoming Black" (Cross, 1994, p. 120). A number of independent observers began the work of tracing the developmental stages that Blacks Americans traverse in moving from self-hating confusion to a self-aware and culturally affirming identity. Cross' (1971, 1978, 1991, 1995) model of
Black racial identity development has been the most influential and is frequently cited in support of a number of other related research efforts (Ford, Harris, & Schuerger, 1993; McEwen, et al., 1990; Parks, Carter, & Gushue, 1996; Tatum, 1992; Taub & McEwen, 1992; Taylor & Howard-Hamilton, 1995). Drawing on Fanon's (1963, 1965, 1967) work that addressed racial and national identity within colonial oppression and echoing the goal of critical theorists mentioned earlier, Cross set out to develop a model that acknowledged the power of racism and worked toward liberation rather than continued oppression. In his own words, his model "explains how assimilated as well as deracinated, deculturalized, or miseducated adolescents of Black adults are transformed, by a series of circumstances or events, into persons who are more Black or Afrocentrically aligned" (1995, p. 98).

Cross' five-stage Black Racial Identity theory, or as he described it, "The Negro-to-Black Conversion Experience," (1971, p. 13) contends that race cannot be treated as merely a demographic or social variable. His model emphasizes that Blacks differ in their degree of racial identification and that these varying degrees of identification correspond with five distinct developmental stages (1971, 1991, 1995). In his most recent examination of the nigrescence process (1995), the five stages, identified as Pre-encounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization-Commitment, constitute a well-defined experience through which each individual must pass.

In Cross' (1995) initial stage of identity development, Pre-encounter, individuals view the world from a White frame of reference such that their values and beliefs generally negate their Blackness and reinforce the dominant culture. In
his revised description of this stage, Cross asserts that individuals in Pre-encounter encompass a broad range of attitudes from considering Blackness as a stigma to feelings of self-hatred and anti-Blackness with these attitudes being manifested in a number of ways such as confusion, apathy, self-deprecation, and detachment from the Black community. Movement to the *Encounter* stage requires two distinct phases: (a) an event or series of events that prompt the individual to question current beliefs or values, and (b) the personalization and internalization of this encounter. Once in the Encounter stage, individuals reevaluate their self-image experiencing feelings of guilt, rage, and anxiety about the loss of the previously held identity and the discovery of a new Black one. These conflicting emotions fuel the *Immersion-Emersion* stage, where the individual begins to destroy the former Pre-encounter identity and establish a new frame of reference. This new frame of reference is generally marked by an immersion into the world of Blackness and a complete retreat from all that is associated with Whiteness. The fourth stage, *Internalization*, is characterized by a resolution to the dissonance between the “old” and “new” Black identities. In general, a personal confidence and sense of security with Black racial identity are evident allowing for a broader perspective and meaningful relationships with both Black and White individuals. The final *Internalization-Commitment* stage has few differences from the previous stage, except that it is uniquely marked by an internalization and integration of the new identity and a sustained commitment to social activism and empowering others.
Critique of Cross

Cross’ earliest model of Nigrescence (1971) was criticized by Parham (1989), among other authors, for its simplistic and sequential linear stage process. Parham was particularly concerned with Nigrescence theories, like Cross’, that suggested that Black identity development occurs primarily during the college years (late adolescence/young adulthood) and is resolved through a series of single-cycle stages. Basing his critiques on earlier research with Helms, Parham (1981, 1985a, 1985b), proposed that the development of Black racial identity is a “lifelong process” (p. 195) that occurs within three life phases, late-adolescence/early-adulthood, middle adulthood, and late adulthood, with an individual’s attitudes influenced differently by the variety of developmental tasks associated with these life stages. In addition, Parham asserted that the developmental process was cyclical in nature where an individual may move from one stage to the next, only to revisit and recycle through the same stage at a later time. In his 1995 revision of his early model, Cross briefly responded to Parham’s critique and addressed the issue of developmental cycles by briefly adding, “Internalization is not likely to signal the end of a person’s concern with Nigrescence, for as one progresses across the life span, new challenges (i.e., new encounters) may bring about the need to recycle through some of the stages” (p. 113).

Despite Parham’s (1989) revisions and additions to Cross’ early model (1971), Black identity development is still assumed to occur within the confines of five distinct stages. Ironically, even Parham’s three life stages (intended to broaden
the scope of identity development) each have sub-categories that correspond with Cross’ developmental stages. The critique here is that while the re-cycling concept is useful in understanding racial identity development, is it still explained within the confines of standard, other-imposed stages. In other words, individuals in the midst of identity development may progress through stages and then revisit them, but only those stages proposed by Cross and verified by Parham. Such universal assertions and generalizations seem troubling given Cross’ self-disclosed initial research methods in developing his model. According to Cross, these methods entailed the following: “Using phenomenological data, scattered interview material, and juxtaposing information obtained by simply interacting with Brothers and Sisters who were going through changes as a consequence of their participation in the modern Black movement, I have attempted to construct a model depicting the various stages persons traverse in becoming Black oriented” (p. 14).

In a critique of Parham (1989), Smith (1989) offers an “alternative” to the regression/re- cycling process asserting that development does not follow a predictable smooth progression. Instead, “it is characterized by movement forward, backward, sideward. These movement changes may be conceptualized as progression, retrogression, repetition, and skipping” (p. 281). But again, Smith’s explanation works within the dominant paradigm. That is, she assumes that there are fixed and “normal” stages through which an individual may move forward, backward, or sideward. So, while Smith’s critiques pose that stages may be traversed in a multiplicity of ways, she again works under the standard assumption that identity development occurs within the confines of discernible stages.
Additionally, the theorists mentioned so far also assume that processes such as “repetition” or “skipping” are simply minor—yet predictable—variations within those stages already described. A less positivistic view questions the nature of these diversions. What do they say about the “logical” progression of identity development? Moreover, is there a “logical” progression of identity development? Or do these diversions indicate alternative explanations? In general, what do they say about the existence of a “universal” developmental model?

An additional critique of the current Nigrescence models, as with Erikson’s work earlier, relates to the limited, Eurocentric worldview and research methods (e.g., survey research, statistical analyses, “use of subjects” versus participant involvement) in which they were developed. This point is particularly interesting given Cross’ (1995) own concern about the negative effects of monoracial and monocultural (i.e. White and Western-dominated) educational practices. Despite these concerns, his own models as well as Parham’s (1989) are inherently riddled with Western ideals about “truth,” “rationality,” and “normality.” Parham’s positivistic methods that are consumed primarily with quantifying and validating are evidence of this paradigm. And while I acknowledge that these researchers cannot escape their own worldviews, my critique rests with their own assumptions that these biases either do not exist or can be systematically and logically overlooked in the development of racial identity development models.
Overview of Helms and White Racial Identity

In an early work attempting to predict the interactions within racially diverse counseling settings, Helms (1984) proposed a model by which Whites racially identify. Based on informal interviews with a few White friends and colleagues, Helms offered a five-stage model to explain the process of White racial identity development. According to Helms, this original model was “based on the premise that all people, regardless of race, go through a stagewise process of developing racial consciousness” (p. 154). In the following years, Helms (1995) revised this model to include a sixth identity step and attempted to clarify misunderstandings about the permeability of her former stage concept by changing the name to “statuses,” a modification that will be discussed later in my critique of her work.

According to Helms (1990), most Whites enjoy the privilege of not having to examine their own racial consciousness, of being able to ignore their own Whiteness. As a result, many White Americans do not have a consistent or critical sense of their own race, racial prejudices, and racial power. Positive White racial identity development, therefore, involves two phases. In the first phase, the abandonment of racism, the individual is generally satisfied with the status quo and lacks an awareness of racism, the power of racism, or the individual’s own power, privilege, or Whiteness. These characteristics as well as a naïve curiosity about or fear of people of color characterize the first developmental stage, Contact status. The second status, Disintegration, is often achieved through increased interaction with people of color and exposure to new information about racism. During this period,
the individual becomes aware of his or her own Whiteness and the consequences of racism both personally and for others. As a result, the former ignorance is replaced by feelings of guilt, disorientation, and anxiety in choosing between internal standards of human decency and external standards of own-group loyalty. Resolving this moral dilemma propels the individual into the third status, Reintegration.

Driven by the desire to be accepted by other Whites, the individual retreats into the dominant culture, idealizing White culture and showing strong intolerance, fear, and anger toward people of color who are now perceived to be inferior.

The second phase of Helms' (1995) model is the construction of a positive, non-racist White identity. This process is initiated during the fourth status, Pseudo-Independence, where the individual abandons former feelings of superiority and expresses more genuine intellectual curiosity about other racial groups and how to “help” them. During the next status, Immersion/Emersion, the White individual attempts to rediscover the positive aspects of White culture and replace former racist misinformation with more accurate information about what it means to be a member of the dominant culture. During this status, changing White people becomes a salient issue rather than “helping” people of color deal with the effects of racism. In Helms’ final Autonomy status the individual is accepting of racial differences, actively seeks involvement in cross-cultural interactions, and avoid life options that require participation in racial oppression.
Critique of Helms

Despite the amount of attention and empirical investigation that Helms' White Racial Identity model (1984) has attracted, her work is not without its critics. Among the most common criticisms of Helms' model is the use of "strong" stages, which are considered to lead to mutually exclusive and static categorizations (Rowe, Bennett, & Atkinson, 1994; Tokar & Swanson, 1991). In her revised model (1995), Helms addressed this concern asserting that what were intended to be interactive, dynamic, and permeable stages had been misunderstood as epigenetic labeling. Citing the limitations of current language as the source of the misunderstanding, Helms changed her model from "stages" to "statuses" to emphasize that racial identity is an interactive and dynamic process. Yet, regardless of the modification in language, Helms' (1995) model still relies heavily on status-specific characteristics and information-processing strategies with little mention of movement between or among statuses. For my purposes, as discussed in critiquing Cross, the statuses themselves are a shortcoming and limitation in terms of understanding racial identity development and therefore hinder understanding of alternative processes. The critique here goes beyond the notion of stages and statuses, and also concerns the nature of "a" single, all-encompassing race specific identity development theory. In response to this, a number of "alternative" theories attempting to explain racial identity development have evolved. Among these is an alternative model for White racial identity (Rowe, Bennett, & Atkinson, 1994), models for identity development of Asians and Asian Americans (Sodowsky, Kwan, & Pannu, 1995) as well as
Chicanos, Latinos, and Hispanics (Casas & Pytluk, 1995; Ruiz, 1990), and general models for ethnic/minority identity development (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1998; Phinney, 1993).

Helms' (1984, 1995) models have also been criticized because they are cast in exclusively White-Black terms. Helms' models explain White racial identity in relation to Whites' sensitivity and appreciation of other racial groups, primarily Blacks. Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson (1994) assert that assuming that White racial identity development is defined only through attitudes toward Blacks "seriously limits the generalizability of the model" (p. 132). I would assert that such an assumption also brings into question the biases of the author and the ethics of purposefully negating the influence and power of other racial groups in the United States.

A final critique of Helms, but one that is applicable to all of the stage-type models discussed thus far is the inclusion of and importance of the final "highest" developmental stage. For Erikson (1968) this involves the development of integrity, for Cross (1995) it is Internalization-Commitment, and for Helms (1995) it is the realization of autonomy. Nearly all other theorists mentioned in this review also include an ultimate level of achievement. My critique is not whether the "right" values are represented in these stages (although I question Helms' notion that "acceptance" alone constitutes a positive racial identity), but whether a final stage or developmental conclusions exists. Having developed a positive non-racist identity--with no additional stages pending--assumes an end-point in the developmental process, an abrupt and static conclusion to previous growth. The question here
remains, is there ever an end to the racial identity development processes? Do individuals ever actually “become” fixed beings, leveling off developmentally at appropriately defined stages? In again questioning Helms, can a non-racist identity ever be achieved?

I would argue that a non-racist identity for a person of the dominant culture can never be fully achieved, despite attempts at reeducation, self-introspection, and sustained commitment as an ally. Racist values are in many cases the framework of our culture, insidiously hidden beneath our most fundamental and liberal beliefs. I feel certain that the strength of racism and the power of individuals as racists can never be fully known or overcome, as Helms would have us believe. Yet, this is not to imply utter hopelessness. The important work that remains regarding racial identity development involves just this point, that is, individuals’ attempts to understand their race and its implications as well as their limitations within a racist society.

Making Sense of the Literature

Despite the abundance of identity and racial identity development theories, I generally believe that current notions of identity development have been too narrowly explored and interpreted. I feel certain that there is a need for more—and more thorough--interpretive research to explore the multiple perspectives and lived experiences of people and what they understand about their own racial identity development. Conventional and long-established theories, models, and research
methods have thus far restricted researchers’ efforts to adequately investigate such issues. Given this, racial identity researchers and theorists must move beyond the traditional type of validation, quantification, and assessment that has been done so far (Atkinson, et al., 1998; Carter, 1990; Claney and Parker, 1989; Helms & Carter, 1990; Parham & Helms, 1981, 1985a, 1985b; Parker, Moore, & Neimeyer, 1998; Parks et al., 1996; Pope-Davis & Ottavi, 1994; Taub & McEwen, 1992; Tokar & Swanson, 1991).

In contrast to those theories and studies mentioned earlier, my own understanding of racial identity development is less positivistic and less authoritative. As I understand it, racial identity development generally refers to the variety of continuous *processes* (as opposed to a single predictable model and static stage) of recognizing one’s racial *groups* (as opposed to only one racial group) as a salient reference point/points in development. In referring back to my earlier assumptions, this type of understanding of racial identity development acknowledges the differing historical and cultural conditions of domination and oppression rather than any biological or genetic differences. Of course, this type of understanding reflects a worldview that differs from Erikson, Cross, and Helms. It, therefore, requires a type of investigation that attempts to explore individuals’ multiple and shared realities as they relate to their racial identity.
Researcher and Process: Liberating Methodology, Liberating Methods

"Human behavior, unlike that of physical objects, cannot be understood without reference to the meanings and purposes attached by human actors to their activities" (Cuba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 106)

The research that I conducted reflects an alternative—but in no way marginal—approach to exploring the complex processes that are commonly referred to racial identity development. The specific methods that I employed are outlined in the following pages. Here I have intentionally differentiated between the methodology and methods sections so that my general beliefs about the nature of research may be considered separately from the specific techniques I employed. “Methodology,” therefore, refers to a way of thinking about and studying social phenomena. “Methods,” on the other hand, denotes the set of research procedures for gathering and analyzing data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Focus/Purpose of the Study

A focus of this study was to explore college students’ understandings and descriptions of their own identities including their personal experiences, perceptions, and stories related to racial identity development. Their descriptions were considered alone, rather than incorporating these into a study that would confirm the results of previous models and theories. In other words, students’ own perspectives as they relate to racial identity and development (and then filtered through my interpretations and words as a researcher) were the primary focus of my future
research. Their unique perspectives and developmental experiences seemed both compelling and convenient given my goals to include new research paradigms and voices (Pizarro, 1998). In exploring students’ racial identity development I generally focused on the following unexplored and complicated questions: (a) Absent other-imposed categories and models, how do these students identify racially? (b) What do these identities mean to them? How do these students make meaning of their own racial identities and racial identity development? (c) How have these students come to identify this way? What are their personal processes for making meaning of their own racial identities? (d) Do these students’ ideas of racial identity challenge our current dominant discourses and educational practices?

Methodology

As evidenced by my own proposed research efforts, we are in the midst of a paradigmatic revolution, one that intellectually questions the utility of traditional research frameworks in investigating meaning. Alternative perspectives have challenged the era of empiricism and positivism that has been characterized by definite and absolute truths. It must be articulated that my purposes through this research were not to search for an overriding “truth” as it pertains to students’ racial identity development. As illustrated in my review of literature, that type of empirical research has been conducted again and again. Instead, I explored students’ multiple realities and “truths” as they related to race, racism, and development. In this way I have asserted that no “truth” is more or less “true” than any other, but simply
differently experienced, perceived, and known (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This research explored these various truths and compared and contrasted them as individual cases, each as a unique biographical experience.

A variety of terms have been employed to describe the methods that I employed, namely qualitative research, naturalistic inquiry, ethnographic methodologies, interpretive research (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998; Ely, 1991; Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 1999; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). While research terminology has become an increasingly confusing, unclear, and perhaps repetitious, throughout this dissertation I will use the term “interpretive” to describe the research experience I facilitated. I use this term, first and foremost, as a matter of convenience. Despite the necessity of labeling the work I do, “interpretive” is also a useful term in describing the work of the researcher and the inherent role of subjectivity within any design. My understanding and use of “interpretive” research assumes that research is an interactive process, one that relies and rests upon how the researcher and participants interpret questions, dialogue, and actions. Guba and Lincoln (1994) address this point by stating, “What can be known is inextricably intertwined with the interaction between a particular investigator and a particular object or group” (p. 110).

I use this term also because of the misconceptions around the terms “qualitative research” (commonly reduced to methods that gather “soft” data without regard to epistemology and analysis) (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) and “naturalistic inquiry” (can any research practices with people ever be natural and unobtrusive?).
Finally, "ethnographic methodologies" is not appropriate given intimate association with anthropological studies of uncovering and generalizing the practices of unfamiliar cultures. It should be mentioned that while I refer to my research as "interpretive," I realize that by its very nature this term automatically defines and confines the work I intend to do. I see this limitation as inevitable given the constraints of our current language.

Interpretive practices, as I will from now refer to my own research activities, are particularly appropriate in addressing my focus because they allowed me as the researcher to understand the meaning or nature of participants' complex experiences in an emergent fashion. Furthermore, this interpretive perspective encouraged the inclusion and use of intricate details and multiple perspectives by way of feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through other research methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, given the nature of the focus in this study, interpretive methods are uniquely suited in encouraging participants to speak for themselves and to provide their own perspectives as part of an interactive dialogic process (Ely, 1991). According to Bogdan and Biklin (1998), this goal of understanding participants from their own perspectives is a common theme among all types of interpretive research.

Within the interpretive framework, an inductive grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to study the racial identity development of five college students. Grounded theory is characterized by simultaneous data collection, analysis, revision, development of themes, and researcher reflection. In using a grounded theory approach, I derived localized
theory in the form of themes specifically from the data that I systematically gathered and analyzed throughout the research process. And while I have my own theoretical perspectives as well as significant prior knowledge of the theoretical foundations of research in the area of racial identity development, I had no particular preconceived theory in mind that I wish to validate or further develop. Instead, the processes were emergent based on my co-investigations with student participants and the on-going analysis of the data that I gathered. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), this strong fundamental link between data and theory leads to more meaningful insight and enhanced understanding of the research focus.

Methods: Participants

Participants in this interpretive study were five students (three women and two men), currently enrolled full-time at Oregon State University. Student participants ranged in age from nineteen to twenty-two and in class year from sophomore to fifth-year senior. The five students participating in this study identified racially in a number of ways, including “Asian American,” “Caucasian,” “Latina,” “Native American,” and “Mixed,” often using a variety of labels or multiple terms. Many of these verbal identifications for the participants changed throughout our interaction, a phenomenon that will be discussed in the analysis portion of this dissertation.

Prior to participation, all student participants had attended a three-day diversity leadership retreat and/or a ten-week academic class on campus that
addressed issues of race, power, and privilege and/or had been employed as a staff member at one of the campus cultural centers. The purpose in establishing this criterion was twofold. The first reason is that as a facilitator for both the retreat, class, and cultural center staff I had established relationships with a number of students, including those who participated in these research efforts, and was witness to their lengthy and powerful discussions about issues of identity and oppression—primarily sexism, racism, and classism—on campus. In this way, an initial relationship was already established. Secondly, because I had dialogued with them previously about issues of race, racism, and racial identity I felt confident that these were issues with which participants were already somewhat knowledgeable and conversant.

Purposeful sampling, choosing participants intentionally because they represent data-rich perspectives, was used to invite appropriate students to participate in the study (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998). Sampling in this manner does not seek representativeness as a goal. So while I understand that this sample was not representative of all racial groups at Oregon State University—let alone the larger community—I feel confident that such information-rich cases provided profound information regarding the area of racial identity development. As a researcher I realize the implications and limitations of such a small and purposeful sample in terms of generalizability and accept this as a tradeoff for richer and more meaningful and useful data. Participation in my research efforts was purely voluntary and students were afforded the option to decline my invitation. Participants were also asked to complete and retain a copy of the “Informed Consent” document prior to the
commencement of the research process. This document explicitly detailed expectations and projected time commitments as well as potential risks and benefits for the participants. During this preliminary meeting students were also informed about their rights as well as the University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) process, which had already approved my research efforts. Additionally, to ensure confidentiality, student participants were asked at this time to consider and offer a pseudonym by which they will be referred in the transcription process and the final presentation and publication of the research findings.

**Methods: Data Collection**

The primary data collection method employed within this interpretive perspective was an interview process, or more appropriately, a *dialogic interview process* (for the remainder of this proposal referred to as a “dialogue”). I use the term “dialogue” to refer to my process of actively engaging with participants because it more aptly describes the reciprocal nature of our conversations (Friere, 1978, 1997; Van Manen, 1990). Generally speaking, our interactions were less prescribed and researcher-driven and more emergent. The purpose of the dialogues was to engage in conversation with students face-to-face about their understandings of their own racial identity and racial identity development.

I facilitated three individual dialogues with each participant, each tape-recorded with the participant’s permission and lasting generally between thirty and sixty minutes in length. The first individual dialogue took place during the first
week of fall term of the 2000-2001 academic year to gain some initial background information about each student participant and begin to shape their biography. The second individual dialogue took place during the fifth week as a “check-in.” The third individual dialogue took place in all cases but one, during the final week of Fall Term 2000. With one participant, a scheduling conflict required that we meet for our final dialogue during the first week of Winter Term 2001. In all cases, this final dialogue served as a “wrap-up” for our discussions and an opportunity for students to offer additional feedback about the research process. Individual dialogues took place at a variety of locations, all of which were on campus. Participants were asked to identify spaces for these individual dialogues based on their own desire for privacy and confidentiality. In those instances where participants indicated that they had no preference for a location, the library was offered as a suggested initial meeting place.

In addition to the individual dialogues described above, I facilitated five group dialogues (three after the first individual dialogues and two after the second set of individual dialogues) with the student participants where we dialogued about a variety of topics including campus climate for students of color, common shared experiences, personal identity issues, and emerging themes. The combination of individual and group dialogues was intentionally used to allow for personal one-on-one conversations as well as group time for participants to share experiences with one another and question others’ views and beliefs. Unfortunately, one of the participants, “Bjorn,” was unable to attend three of the five group dialogues (the first, third, and fourth dialogues) due to unanticipated circumstances. As a result, and as discussed with him, his voice, as told in the third story of the analysis section,
may appear less rich perhaps in contrast with others' stories. Nonetheless, given
the powerful dialogues that we did have I feel that it is important to include his voice. I
do this not only from the perspective of utility in strengthening my arguments, but
also in honoring my own ethical beliefs as they relate to liberating research practices.

All group dialogues were completed during the fall term of the 2000-2001 academic
year and all, except one, took place at a central and private location on campus. The
exception (the fourth meeting) was a private dinner together that took place in my
home. In all dialogues, both individual and group, participants were informed that
they have the option to refrain from being taped, to pass on any questions, and to
review and clarify the written transcripts.

A second source of data was derived from a research log that I maintained
throughout the data collection and analysis. This log contained participant
observations as well as personal reflections regarding the research process and
themetic development. Log entries were made shortly after each dialogue, both
individual and group, to ensure that as many details as possible are recorded. I
approached the log and its utility from Ely's (1991) perspective, "The log is the place
where each qualitative [sic] researcher faces the self as instrument through a personal
dialogue about moments of victory and disheartenment, hunches, feelings, insights,
assumptions, biases, and ongoing ideas about method" (p. 69). Data from this log
was valuable not only during the data collection process, but also during analysis and
writing stages as an essential reference point.
Methods: Dialoguing

Some of the guiding questions that I used in the initial individual dialogues and first group dialogue were piloted with volunteer student participants during Spring Term 2000, and were shared with a faculty member as well as colleagues within a qualitative methods course in an attempt to eliminate jargon and other language of the academician. The questions represented open-ended inquiries that reflected a guided interview style (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998). The questions were intended to encourage dialogue within a particular area of interest (mainly race, racism, and racial identity development) and then lead to other topics and issues as initiated by the participants. In this way, the dialogues were not “structured” or “standardized” in any way, but were primarily emergent.

As the research processes were primarily emergent and the conversations so varied, it would be burdensome and perhaps confusing to list all of the specific questions or topics that were discussed during the individual or group dialogues. I have provided instead the following general questions, which represent the types of topics we discussed and the boundaries within which we dialogued:

- How do you culturally identify? If you don’t, why?
- What does your cultural identification/lack of cultural identification mean to you?
- How did you start identifying this way?
- How do you describe your possible changes identity?
- How do you describe yourself as a person of color/person of the majority?
How do you describe yourself as a student of color/student of the majority?

How do you describe oppression?

How do you describe privilege?

How do you describe the experience of living with oppression/living with privilege?

How do you describe your actions as they relate to fighting oppression/living with oppression?

Methods: Analysis

As mentioned, to assist with the analysis of the numerous interviews I facilitated, I reflected and journaled about the research process relatively soon after each dialogue. Next I produced, or solicited the help from others to produce, verbatim transcripts and initially reviewed them for accuracy (e.g. language, tone, mannerisms) and content. All transcripts and audiotapes were kept confidential and in my personal possession except for those times when they were being transcribed by others.

In interpreting the data gathered through the dialogues, I employed a basic thematic analysis method that I have used with prior projects. This form of coding resembles that posed by Ely (1991) as well as the methods of Strauss and Corbin (1998). The method employed involved multiple readings of the text followed by a process of collapsing data into smaller pieces of data, then categorizing them according to their salient properties, or similarities and differences. This was
accomplished by highlighting various sections of the transcripts that relate to the process of racial identity development and then ordering and reordering the "data snapshots" into thematic categories.

While I initiated the process of data analysis, participants were individually and collectively involved throughout the dialogues in the development, confirmation, and rejection of themes as they relate to their own interviews. Having reviewed the previous dialogues, each group dialogue allowed me the opportunity to present my initial interpretations of our discussions to that point (i.e. themes that I see emerging based on my perceptions) and then "check" or "test out" my understanding with students' meanings. On a number of occasions participants used this time to refine, clarify, and even change my initial analyses. In this way, participants were directly and continuously involved in--and actually driving it themselves at times--the data analysis process (Lather, 1986, 1994; Pizarro, 1998; Slattery, 1995).

This type of analysis and interaction contradicts the advice given by Bogdan and Biklin (1998) who assert, "It is important not to defer to them [participants] completely....it may be unwise to reveal how much you are learning to certain subjects because they may withdraw (p. 163). My processes reflected a more working "with" rather than working "on" concept that attempts not to relegate participants to the passive and helpless "subject" status. This approach again parallels my bias and worldview as an educator. In drawing from my interpretation of critical theory, all educational efforts--including research--are either liberating or dominating by their very existence (Collins, 1998; Connolly, 1981; Freire, 1978, 1997). In the same way, the research that I conducted could not be neutral. For this
reason, I proposed that it empower “participants” and not dominate them as “subjects” through dialogic engagement where the students and I jointly created and learned from the process.

Thus the intent in involving participants in the development of themes and data analysis was to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study through continuous participant involvement. In defining trustworthiness I refer to Ely (1991):

Being trustworthy as a qualitative [sic] researcher means at the least that the processes of the research are carried out fairly, that the products represent as closely as possible the experiences of the people who are studied. The entire endeavor must be grounded in ethical principles about how data are collected and analyzed, how one’s own assumptions and conclusions are checked, how participants are involved, and how results are communicated. Trustworthiness is, thus, more than a set of procedures. To my mind, it is a personal belief system that shapes the procedures in process. (p. 93)

In this way, such reciprocity reflects a potentially powerful opportunity for additional dialogue and participant empowerment. In other words, by consciously using my research to encourage students to understand and challenge their current knowledge of race, racism, and racial identity I believe that I supported these participants in growing and changing their current situation (Lather, 1986). Thus, in order to be true to participants’ voices it was essential that I “defer” to them, as they are the experts on their own stories, experiences, and development. Yet, while I realize that participant involvement--co-investigation as Freire (1997) refers to it as--is a key element in creating a study that is both trustworthy and authentic, I also realize that participants’ involvement does not ensure complete understanding (as it never truly can) and also must be limited at some point. Ultimately, their words
became my own--as they have here-- and became subject to my interpretations, and my words then become subject to further interpretations by those who read and critique my research. The goal, however, was to maintain the integrity of participants’ voices throughout the process, encourage their self-exploration, and to come to terms with the data and results as honestly--personally speaking-- so as not to dominate individuals.

Methods: Continuing

I describe the methods employed in my research as “continuous” since the nature of my interaction with the students who participated in my study reflects ongoing relationships. At the conclusion of the data collection portion of this study each participant expressed a desire to continue dialoguing and acting as a “support group” for one another. They indicated at the same time their desire that I begin the writing and analysis processes for this dissertation so we mutually agreed that future conversations would not be tape-recorded and the content would not be shared in the findings of this study. Given this I feel the need to share the fact that I have continued conversations--some related directly to my dissertation topic and others about general and day-to-day experiences--with the five students who volunteered for my study. Despite the fact that we have chosen not to incorporate these new dialogues directly into this dissertation, I feel certain that the impact of these interactions still influences my perspective and writing. These continuing dialogues,
therefore, provide yet another lens through which I filter the participants' stories and experiences.
Analysis and Findings: Case By Case

As stated earlier, initial thematic analysis was conducted throughout the data collection process and in conjunction with participant dialogues. As a result of these initial group discussions and additional individual analysis the following five themes as they relate to the five student participants were identified: (a) Racial identity is a difficult concept to articulate, one that often becomes more complicated and convoluted with continued introspection; (b) Predefined labels, often used in describing racial identity, are used for a variety of reasons and often appear problematic in racial identity development; (c) Racial identity is viewed as a combination of both external and internal influences and processes; (d) Racial identity manifests itself in a variety of ways depending on situational and environmental circumstances; and (e) Racial identity is a dynamic process of growth.

Each of these themes, while only briefly presented here, played out in a variety of ways for each participant. In this way, the themes mentioned above were not homogenous among the student participants. Instead, within each proposed theme I found variation of content and intensity based on the participant’s background and experiences as well as current beliefs related to race and self. For this reason, and in keeping with my desire to honor each participant’s voice as a unique and compelling story, this dissertation is first organized around “cases.” That is, each participant is considered her or his own story or case through which the above themes are examined and demonstrated separately and in a variety of ways.
With each theme, examples of supporting evidence, that is, students' own words, are offered to illustrate my interpretation.

It is important to realize that the themes developed and now discussed here represent ideas, ideas that were expressed not within a vacuum, but during the course of intense and complicated dialogues. For this reason, the themes do not exist as distinct or separate concepts. Instead each is intricately intertwined with one another and in many ways overlaps with one another. The arbitrary division among themes is just that, arbitrary, but is necessary for purposes in sharing what I learned about these students' perspectives. Similarly, the themes described on the following pages do not represent static ideas. The stories of these five participants are not static yet, due to the limitations of this paper and language, need to be told in this "snapshot" approach. Given this, their stories should be considered fluid and dynamic with this version representing only a moment in development. For this reason, it must be told as "existing," but I encourage you to listen to their voices as only a piece of their continuous growth. It is in that vein that I further discuss each of the themes briefly mentioned earlier.

Finally, it an attempt to clarify the time and setting in which participants' statements were made, I have coded each quotation in the following analysis section with specific information. First, to situate the quotation within the entire dialogue process, I have indicated where each individual or group dialogue fell in combination within the eight total dialogues (three individual, five groups). The letter code following this number indicates whether the statement was made during an individual dialogue ("i") or group dialogue ("g"). Each quotation may then look
something like “3g” meaning the statement was made during the third dialogue which was a group session.

“Ana”

Ana is a 22 year-old (21 at the time that we began dialoguing), fifth-year senior majoring in liberal studies. Throughout her studies at Oregon State University Ana has been involved with a variety of groups and projects including those focusing on domestic violence awareness and prevention, women’s rights, and racial/cultural education. Ana is passionately “pro choice” and has been politically active both on campus and on a national scale in lobbying for change. Her future plans are uncertain as of yet, but she has interests in several areas including ethnic studies, women’s studies, public health, and Spanish.

In relating her background, Ana shared that she is the oldest child of two, and one of few in her extended family who is reclaiming—or claiming—her Mexican heritage, a now salient part of her identity. Her father is of Mexican descent, and her mother is of German and Scottish descent. She referred to the German and Scottish piece of her heritage as “White” or “Caucasian” in most cases and commented little on traditions or background other than her mother’s role in her life and the privileges and guilt often associated with having lighter skin in American society. The vast majority of cultural traditions and spoken language from her Mexican heritage have been lost over time (it was her great grandparents or great great grandparents who were originally from northern Mexico) and as the result of assimilation.
Spanish died with him [her father's father] because he went into kindergarten in California and they, you know, smack you with a ruler if you ever speak Spanish; so he totally forgot it by the age of ten or something, and because my great grandparents wanted him so bad to fit in and not be teased they wouldn't--they would only speak English to him, and they didn’t want him to keep learning Spanish. (1i, pp. 17-18)

And even in reflecting on her father and his siblings’ generation she stated, “I think probably for everyone was the choice just to fit in because, I mean, especially in Oregon and California there’s such a, just, I don’t know how to describe, just the prevailing anti-immigrant attitude that I don’t think anyone ever wants to be seen as that because it’s so negative, so I think probably choices are made” (5i, pp. 23-24).

As a result, Ana grew up as a part of a family devoted to the well-being of one another, but also amidst values that would pose contradictions later in life. Among these was her father and grandfather’s insistence on the “American dream” as a reality for everyone.

That’s something I grew up hearing from my Dad and Grandpa who are complete assimilation to the book stories, and I grew up believing that....That whole thing is a farce. The whole “American dream” is not true...and I grew up thinking that if you work hard you can make it and if you’re a bum you’re lazy and you won’t go out and get a job. That’s what was reinforced when I was growing up, and now I’m looking at it through totally different eyes and saying, “That’s not true.” The white picket fence and the big house and the dog and two kids and three cars, that’s not reality....the whole American dream isn’t...I mean I grew up believing it, but after this last year I’m just like, it’s bullshit. (6g, p. 22)

In reclaiming her Mexican heritage, Ana spent time studying in Mexico, has learned to speak Spanish fluently, and has immersed herself in the Latino/Chicano
community on campus. "I think learning Spanish has empowered me to feel like it's okay for me to claim my identity, because I think language has been a huge part of it, especially on college campuses, and now if I get a look like, 'What's she doing here?' if it's obvious that I'm understanding the conversation and can join in in Spanish, then I'm accepted" (1i, p. 18).

Now as the family "expert" on Mexican culture Ana finds herself in unusual situations where she, as one of the youngest in her family, has become the teacher and the bearer of cultural knowledge. As an example of this she shared the following, "This year, for Cinco de Mayo, like he [her father] works for the State and people asked him to come in and talk about it, and he was asking me, like who should I talk about? Or tell me the history. And it's, I don't know. It's interesting" (5i, p. 24). Despite occasions like this and the immense effort involved in her individual reeducation, Ana is still feels positive about her Mexican heritage and optimistic about "reinstating the stuff that was lost two generations ago" (4g, p. 12).

Regardless of her new found empowerment in learning and speaking Spanish, Ana still recalled on several occasions that her upbringing was less than diverse in terms of racial diversity. Ana spent most of her life living suburban Oregon in a predominantly White neighborhood and attending elementary, junior, and high schools with primarily White students. A few students of color did attend these institutions, and Ana was able to recollect these individuals with ease. Given Ana's limited experience with people of color during her childhood and her family's own assimilation she was unaware of her own Mexican identity.
There was a Mexican family who looked Mexican and fit the stereotype and no one identified me as that way because I was light skinned, so everyone always assumed I was White growing up. The first time, actually when I was little that someone did call me a "wetback" and I had no idea what that meant. I took it literally. I'm like, "What? [looking over shoulder at back laughing] There's nothing on my back." I didn't even understand it 'cause I'd never heard that before because I don't fit the stereotype of looking a certain way. (4g, pp. 7-8)

In many ways, Ana feels cheated about her earlier education and the important information and history that were omitted and not considered a priority in school. She remains angry that her first exposure to ethnic studies and women's studies were only realized at her own expense (literally) and time at the university level. In discussing the Oregon State University campus environment Ana believes that campus is a much more diverse place, yet still relatively unfriendly to students of color like herself.

Racial Identity as a Difficult Concept to Articulate

From the onset of our dialogues, I realized that the notion of racial identity was a concept that was difficult for Ana to articulate. During the course of discussing her own personal identity in our first conversation, Ana wrestled with the task of verbalizing who she was as she considered and reconsidered common labels for people of Mexican decent. "When I was little it [my identification] was 'Hispanic' because that was the only term I knew, that's what's on the thing you check off every time you have a job application, school, or whatever, and so that was the only word I knew" (ii, p. 10). Complicating this identification (and ultimately
identity) process for Ana was her own knowledge of her father’s Mexican decent though. She dismissed this notion though, stating, “Well, I wasn’t born in Mexico so I guess I have to say ‘Hispanic’ and that was all I knew until, well actually until college” (p. 10).

Once in college and among those who encouraged her to reconsider how she named herself, Ana learned more about her history, culture, and her identity.

I learned about the term “Chicano,” but kind of more associated it with my parents’ generation, like the people in the movement of the 60s, so I kind of thought, well, I really can’t call myself “Chicano” because I wasn’t a part of that political movement....and I didn’t like the word “Hispanic” because it’s just such a generic term that someone else gave to a group. Like the government said, “This is what we’re going to call all these people that don’t necessarily have anything in common.” And so I knew I didn’t like that word, but I didn’t think I could call myself “Chicano” and I was still struggling with, well, I can’t call myself “Mexicana” because I’m a US citizen, I’m not a Mexican citizen. (1i, pp. 10-11)

Articulating her identity was not only difficult for Ana in terms of the specific language she used, but in coming to terms with her bi-racial heritage and the struggle to do honor to both pieces of her identity.

I feel really guilty that most of my life I had been able to just pass as White and didn’t start standing up to racial jokes and just all that B.S. until my last few years in high school....I realized that because of the [light] color of my skin I had never endured the rest of my life as other people had....I just get tired of having to justify it and...I don’t know why, but I get mad if I just get lumped into the, “that’s just another White girl” group. (1i, pp.11-12)

In describing the tension between her physical appearance and her Mexican heritage, Ana has found that articulating her identity has become more complicated.
Reflecting on her past has not only reminded her that her light skin has afforded her numerous opportunities, but also that she has been neglectful in publicly recognizing and celebrating her Mexican heritage as well. The result has been a precarious balancing act between her heritage as White person and a person of color. Complicating these identities are also feelings of guilt and the struggle to compensate (overcompensate?) for years of passing as White by immersing herself in her father's heritage. As Ana shared, "I guess I felt like if I wanted to claim this [Mexican] identity that I had to struggle, and I'm not sure where I got that idea" (1i, p. 12). However, struggling at the expense of recognizing her White heritage has also been problematic for Ana as I learned later. "It took someone I was friends with...actually just flat out saying to me that I should deny that I have even any White heritage. And I'm like, wait a minute, no, because that's my mom...I would never deny her in my life, or who she is" (8i, p. 9).

By the end of our discussions I sensed that the language Ana was using to identify herself had become clearer or more well-defined, but perhaps that her ability to truly articulate the concept of self had not. If anything, I suspect that Ana's ability to articulate her identity was more muddled than ever. As she shared:

It's really good to sit and talk about everything in our group sessions, but I feel like I don't know that there are answers, and it feels like we always just go around it or kind of like, "No. Wait a minute, what were we asking? How do we solve that?" I think it's, I don't know, I think it's hard in Western culture to put a question out there you can't resolve because that's how we're used to working. (8i, p. 13)
In continuing her reflection on our conversations and her ability to convey her own identity Ana expressed continued confusion and perhaps frustration. “You know, we should be able to, okay, we talked about it, so now what’s the solution to the question. And I don’t feel like we always have one. Like I babble a lot, just putting all the thoughts on the table, but then it’s like, what do you do with them? How do you make sense of them?” (8i, p. 14). Finally, in concluding our last individual conversation, Ana admitted, “Having these discussion groups, my mind has been stretched a lot this term and I like it, but I think I’m still dealing with it….I need to…just sit and think about everything that I’ve been learning and things that I’d like to take more time to think about” (8i, p. 17).

Predefined Labels as Problematic in Racial Identity Development

As evident in discussing the first theme, prescribed labels were problematic for Ana in identity development, both in terms of articulation and self-discovery. During our first individual conversation Ana wrestled with various categorical names, finding that she felt uncomfortable with most. In finally being pushed to resolve this she stated, “So the term that I’ve come to use pretty, well, I guess I’ve stayed with it all through college is ‘Latina’ because it’s kind of… it’s all encompassing of all different groups of Latin Americans” (1i, p. 11). Given Ana’s struggle in reclaiming her Mexican heritage, I did not find this unusual, but I was interested in how this label related to her balancing act as a bi-racial person. How could she do honor at the same time to her White heritage and not deny her mother?
I guess the way I rationalize that is in that because, and it might be different if I was of Chilean descent or Brazilian, but because Mexican descent just, the Mexican population is so mixed anyway of European blood, African blood, and indigenous blood so in a way...because of colonization it's kind of like almost all of Latin America does have White blood anyway, you know what I mean? So I'm comfortable and proud to say I'm both. (1i, p. 12)

Based on a technicality then, Ana did not see her primary (versus "only") racial identification as a Latina as a denial of her White heritage. I suspect though that the intentional use of this term is more closely tied with reclaiming her identity, gaining credibility among other Latinos, and taking part in the "struggle" as she mentioned earlier rather than the mixing of bloodlines in Mexico. However, when we did discuss labels such as "biracial" or "multiracial" during our last conversation, she also seemed accepting of these as an alternative to choosing. Despite this though, I sensed that Ana was more inclined to identify as "Latina" as a political and personal statement of her commitment to her heritage and willingness to endure hardship based on it.

Despite her use of "Latina" as her primary racial identification, Ana made it clear from the onset of our conversations that choosing any label, while it may have the effects of empowering and legitimizing her own ancestral claims, was a challenge. She was troubled by the limitations of labels and the connotations that they unremittingly impose her. "I'm so sick of labels, sick of being put into boxes if you're a twenty to thirty year-old female of this race or that race, and this, this, whatever education. I'm just so tired of being put into boxes, but I don't know. I've thought a lot about the whole label thing...I think we should create new language for
it, but I have no idea what that would be” (1i, p. 15). This statement struck me particularly and how it resonated with my own critique of postmodern feminism. How do we write ourselves out of oppression? And are labels yet another layer to this social dynamic?

In relating this to race and her own racial identification, Ana asserted that she was tired of having to choose a label, having to openly articulate this choice, and then often having to defend it. Ana gave an example of her struggle with labels as she related the story of a recent experience she had filling out a survey with demographic information. After checking both “Hispanic” and “White” as her race, she was told to select only one.

So I just looked at him and said, “Well, if you won’t let me have both, I guess erase White” [laughs]....It’s just frustrating to me because I want to be able to claim both, but if I can’t, I go with Hispanic because I just feel, especially after living in Mexico...like I understand that background more than I understand Scotland and Germany. I don’t really understand where I’ve come from on that side as much. (1i, p. 20)

In this situation, Ana’s label of “Hispanic” alone was unfulfilling as it did not completely describe how she viewed herself. Ironically though, the label was also one of convenience to some degree. As Ana stated in a group discussion later, “It [the use of labels] is convenient so when someone asks you, you give a one-word answer rather than this where it takes a half hour to try and explain. So you just give what’s easy, and then you can be on your way” (4g, p. 5). In this example then, Ana’s reclaimed “Hispanic” identity was not only something of which to be proud, but less troublesome and more convenient.
Ana’s dissatisfaction with labels and categorical boxes also seemed complicated by her own everyday use of them for others. In discussing campus climate at OSU and her own perceived prejudices in a later group dialogue, Ana mentioned “sorority girls” and the “Greek system” a number of times, aware of her own use of labels and the judgments she continues to make based on them. In addition to these more negative labels, we debated the utility and necessity of classifications such as “Latina” or “African American.” After several weeks of dialoguing I sensed that Ana was wrestling with two conflicting ideas: the need for such terminology versus the imposed limitations and justifications that often accompany racial labels. As she explained, “I think it’s our way of trying to understand people this way. I mean what else do you have in the initial stages of getting to know somebody except the outside labels or adjectives or whatever describe that person?” (6g, p. 16). In our final individual dialogue she shared similar thoughts stating, “I guess we need it [labels] to describe each other for our own peace of mind to whatever, but I just don’t like them and that’s how I’ve been feeling” (8i, p. 13).

Racial Identity as a Combination of External and Internal Influences

After attempting to articulate identity and often exhausting the extent to which labels could accurately do so, Ana and I often discussed the nature of racial identity. Often when Ana would respond that she was “of Mexican descent” or “Latina” I would probe her by asking in a variety of ways as to how she know she
was "of Mexican descent" or "Latina." In other words, what experiences or self-reflective processes led her to take such a position?

During our first individual conversation Ana indicated, without directly stating it, that some of her identity and her confidence in reclaiming her Mexican heritage was linked to the external responses she received from others.

The struggle I've had...[is with] the perceived notion of what you have to be or look like to claim that you’re “Latino” or “Black” or, you know, whatever identity that you choose to call yourself and...when I was in Mexico I felt totally at home because it was like people, I guess, because people acknowledged me as being Mexicana, like I was just there, that’s who I was, but here I’m always having to defend and say that that’s who I am. (1i, p. 9)

Of course, given Ana’s light-skinned appearance, basing her identity—even partially—on external reinforcement seemed to prove troublesome and inconsistent.

Among the majority of Americans, Ana asserted that only certain physical features merit acceptance as a Mexicana or Latina. In further explaining this, she stated, “My perception is there’s the definition of you have to have Spanish as your first language. You have to have dark skin, dark hair, this, this, and this. There’s the whole list of the definition you should fit to claim Mexican identity here” (5i, p. 14).

Given that Ana’s appearance does not “fit” this standard definition, she is often assumed to be only White. As she shared in our second individual dialogue, this is an assumption that elicits a number of emotions from guilt to anger to defensiveness.

I just get mad with the assumptions because I feel like it’s leaving something out, I guess. I think that’s the conclusion I’m coming to....It’s all I can figure is that I don’t want to deny. I guess that’s [the White part] probably the obvious part of my appearance that that’s
who I am, so I don’t ever need to defend [it]. If I’m seen as Latina I
don’t need to say well, I’m White too because they think it….So it’s
the unobvious part that I feel like I have to defend, not defend
necessarily, but acknowledge. (5i, p 6)

In resolving this, or attempting to resolve this dilemma, Ana has temporarily altered
her some aspects of her physical appearance so that the struggle to establish
credibility between both the Latino and White communities is minimized. In relating
her recent educational experience she shared, “It was funny in Mexico because a lot
of women dyed their hair lighter and I dyed mine darker because I wanted to fit in as
much as I could. And my host mom, the lady at the beauty shop, what did she call
me? She had a nickname for me. Oh, it was ‘la guera morena,’ the light girl who
wants to be dark” (5i, p. 14).

In addition to physical appearance, judgments related on the Spanish
language are made by other people and then internalized by Ana. As mentioned
earlier, Spanish was not Ana’s first language and was not encouraged at home. For
this reason, learning and speaking Spanish have played a big role in her involvement
and acceptance in the campus Latino community. As she stated in our second
individual dialogue, “I think language is such a big part of culture… I feel more
included now, like I understand more now…but I think if I didn’t know Spanish at
all I think it would be a totally different experience” (5i, p. 17).

Despite all external influences and being bombarded by stereotypical
standards, Ana asserted in later discussions that she is not comfortable believing that
identity is based solely on others’ perceptions and definitions. According to Ana, “It
is scary to think that, I don’t know, that just all the outside influences completely
make up who you are. You know, we like to think we’re unique and, you know, free
will and we choose” (8i, p. 16). Instead, Ana stated that she believes that identity is
the result of both internal and external influences. And although she could not
verbalize internal elements that have shaped her identity, she indicated through a
number of comments that something indeed did exist. For example, in our second
individual dialogue she stated, “I always know that [I was Mexican], that that’s a
part of me” (5i, p. 9). Similarly in a group meeting she shared, “It’s like we know
with intuition and feelings there’s something internal, but we can’t name it, we can’t
explain it, but we know it’s there” (6g, p. 12).

Racial Identity as Manifesting Itself Situationally

From the onset of our discussions Ana indicated that her racial identity
manifested itself differently as a result of situations. That is, specific aspects of her
personality and certain behaviors are shared in different moments for a variety of
reasons including comfort, utility, and her willingness to justify or defend a label.
According to Ana, “I guess it just, it depends on who I’m with, how in-depth I want
to go, or what form I’m filling out” (1i, p. 17). For example, for political reasons,
Ana may choose a certain label. “Every once in a while I’m lucky enough and it will
say multi-racial. But otherwise, like for the Census Bureau...if you want your
community to get the dollars, you know, multiracial, yeah, it’s there, but it’s really
just going to get tossed out. So I guess it kind of depends on what I feel like is going
to make a difference politically “(1i, p. 17).
Similarly, among various members in the Latino community, Ana may identify using different terms. "If you’re talking to another group you might call yourself ‘Latina,’ or if you’re with the older generations of people you will say ‘Mexicano,’ and so the younger generations will say ‘Chicano’...Identity is just kind of a fluid thing that can change depending on the situation or the person" (li, p. 11).

What became more evident during our later conversations was that Ana’s identity was not radically changing in each of these situations necessarily (although change, as discussed in the next section is a constant feature of identity development). As Ana and the four other participants explained to me on several occasions, their core identities were not changing in these situations, but how they manifested these identities was. As Ana stated, “I know who I am, but if I’m with another group of people who may or may not know or whatever than that’s going to change what I choose to tell them” (4g, p 21).

In relating this, Ana shared a recent experience where classmates unknowingly assumed that she was only of White descent based on her appearance. In this instance, Ana discretely and briefly corrected her classmates about her heritage. The choice to speak up here was a decision with which she was comfortable in this particular situation, but nonetheless seemed to be something of an obligation.

Ideally I’m more comfortable when the people I’m around know who I am...With that group of new people it’s like, or with that class I get tired of, I don’t know if it’s being on the defensive, but having the feeling like being the token person to educate everybody.... Sometimes I do get tired of it. Sometimes I’ll speak up and
sometimes I'll just sit there and get all frustrated inside, but not say anything. (4g, pp. 21-22)

Ana believes that her swings between quiet frustration and verbalized anger as well as her choices of different labels in different situations render her something of an enigma to some. “People think I’m schizophrenic or something because I do want to educate and help promote diversity and help promote understanding, but at the same time sometimes it just gets discouraging, like if I’m having a down day and I feel like it’s not doing any good and I’m tired of the fight or whatever, I don’t know” (4g, p. 22).

By our final conversation, Ana seemed less assertive about being “White” or “Latina” and more inclined to identify as both or neither. I suspect that much of this, as mentioned earlier, was a result of the complex and imperfect language that is commonly used in describing identity and race. Based on Ana’s comments though, it also seemed that her racial identity was muddled by situational influences. As she stated in our final conversation, “If someone just asked me, I would identify as ‘Latina’ and ‘White.’ But then I guess it would depend on the situation....It changes at times because, honestly, I mean even at work, honestly, sometimes I would identify as both and sometimes I would just say ‘Latina’” (8i, p. 1). Ana attributed these changes in her identity and her choices in ways to identify to her environment, mainly the OSU campus. As she shared, “I guess if I hadn’t made a choice to change my environment, then probably my attitudes or identities probably wouldn’t have changed or my feelings about identity anyway” (8i, p. 3).
The notion that racial identity is an ever-changing process was a theme that was articulated by Ana in two distinct ways. First, Ana shared on a number of occasions stories as they relate to her past and present understanding of her racial identity. In our first conversation she discussed her childhood ignorance related to race, her high school years as times of confusion and questioning, and her more recent struggles at OSU with identifying an appropriate label and claiming a biracial identity. These stories themselves and the multiple perspectives they offer indicate that Ana’s identity as a Latina has been a changing process, one that is still not static by any means. Her struggle and changes alone during our interview process to come to terms with her own Mexican ancestry and her right in claiming such as well her ability to do so while maintaining faithful connections to her White heritage are all evidence of her own ever-changing growth. In discussing a class assignment that points to this, Ana shared, “I always hate the first week of classes when professors are like, ‘Write me a story about who you are’....I mean I’ve just noticed over the years, like it’s never the same, the things I say about myself...I think it’s probably that way for everyone. So really to describe yourself is kind of, it’s always changing” (5i, p. 8).

In addition to modeling ideas about continuous growth, Ana verbalized again and again that she believed her identity and identity as a whole as ever-changing. She used words such as “fluid” (1i, p. 11), “negotiable” (5i, p. 7), and “dynamic” (5i, p. 7) in describing life processes such as identity development. “So to describe
something today who or how or what I am with some experience or anything that happens tomorrow could change that cause I think it’s kind of always evolving” (6g, p. 10). Finally, in a more abstract and postmodern description of racial identity development, Ana stated, “There’s the inner part that I think exists, but explain it and put words to it and articulate, then it dies and that part is done and over because then you’re still. Life is fluid and you’re still experiencing new things or taking in new things that are going to change what you just described. So I don’t think you could be the same person all the time” (6g, p. 28).

“Arthur”

Arthur is a twenty year-old sophomore at Oregon State University majoring in political science. Arthur was born and raised in a suburban area of Oregon and attended schools there. The schools he attended were predominantly White, in terms of the curriculum and prevailing attitude about education. In sharing some examples Arthur explained, “When I was younger and all the teachers are White and religious figures, police officers, you know, you look through your books and you see White male faces, you know, Jefferson and all that stuff, all them people, all the presidents and then you see how TV is all White….And I think that the standard is White then” (1i, p. 31). As a result of his studies and his own interest in examining cultures, though, Arthur possesses, and articulated throughout our conversations, a breadth of knowledge related to worldwide issues. Among the most interesting and contentious digressions during our dialogues were societal challenges related to consumerism
and corporate power, the muddled and neglected histories of people of color, and the
cultural mis-education of youths in formal schooling. On campus he is involved in a
variety of organizations, many of which are related to diversity education and
initiatives. He stated on several occasions that this type of involvement by students
of color on campus is one of OSU’s greatest assets in educating and reeducating the
campus community about issues of prejudice and oppression.

Among the first things that Arthur shared in our initial dialogue was his racial
and ethnic heritage. Arthur’s mother is of direct Chinese descent, but was born and
raised in Laos. Arthur’s father is from Cambodia, but fled to the United States in the
1970s. As a former captain in the Cambodian air force, Arthur’s father was forced to
leave his home due to widespread political upheaval and the vicious Khmer Rouge
regime that was in power from 1975 to 1979. While Arthur’s father escaped to the
United States, many of his family members, including his first wife were victims of
the brutal genocide; others, including his children were later “bought” or smuggled
out of camps. As Arthur explained, having lived through such an ordeal has given
his family a unique perspective.

Despite this unique perspective, Arthur stated that he grew up in what he
described as “a stereotypical Asian family” (4g, p. 13) in some ways with strict
parents who emphasized education and familial respect. In explaining this further
Arthur shared that his parents spoke (and now he speaks) several Southeast Asian
languages at home including Cantonese, Laotian, and Cambodian and that their use
of English was limited and rather poor initially. This aspect of his stereotypical
Asian family was sometimes a source of embarrassment in his earlier years. In
relating a story from his childhood, Arthur shared, “I was always ashamed. I remember sixth grade, I deny it to my mom still to this day, my mom and dad wanted to go see me at outdoor school...I saw my mom and dad and my mom looked right at me. I looked right at my mom then I turned my head like I never saw them ‘cause I was so embarrassed that they were there, and I was so embarrassed because I didn’t want them to speak” (1i, p. 22). Similarly, Arthur revealed that his parents were Buddhist, a religious background that was uncommon in the suburbs and therefore an obstacle in some relationships with others and in his own development. “I never claimed that my family was Buddhist because I so wanted to claim, I claimed I was a Christian all the time because I so wanted to claim, I didn’t want to be different, you know? If you were a Christian you were cool, but being Buddhist, [makes mocking bell sounds] I always got that” (1i, p. 22).

Although Arthur’s parents identified as Buddhists, they chose to enroll him in preschool at a Christian church. I was struck by the contradiction this implied but understood later when Arthur explained his parents’ desire for their children’s success. According to Arthur, “My dad knows that just all the Christian values and all that Christianity has values and beliefs that are good...It’s just he wants the best, he wants me to pretty much assimilate and it’s all about making it in this country. And to make it you got to assimilate....Why else would he name me ‘Arthur’ [pseudonym inserted]? So other people wouldn’t make fun of me” (1i, p. 10).

Assimilation, therefore, has been an important theme in Arthur’s life, demonstrated by his father’s own rags to riches story in the United States and now
encouraged as a means to success. In examining his own actions and beliefs Arthur shared the following:

Do I feel like I’ve assimilated? I think so because [pause] I feel like the music I listen to, the fashion, clothes, it’s all, it’s all, I don’t buy from no Chinese shops...no Asian stores. It’s all American clothing....I think I’ve assimilated to being Americanized. I’m American in the sense that my parents and the fact that I’ve lost a lot of my own culture, but as far as knowing who I am, I don’t think I’ve ever lost that. (Si, p. 3)

Arthur was quick to recognize early in our discussions though that despite taunting by his peers, the stereotypes of some teachers and limited exposure to his own culture in formal educational settings, he was/is also privileged in a number of ways. Among these privileges are financial stability and support from his family and his physical abilities as a temporarily non-disabled person.

Racial Identity as a Difficult Concept to Articulate

As with Ana’s story told earlier, Arthur expressed difficulty, both directly and indirectly, in articulating the concept of racial identity and development. His struggle though was less connected to the specific terminology used, and more related to the paradox of being an American of Asian descent. In explaining this further, he questioned, “Where do I fit in? People tell me go home and then it’s like my home is here because I don’t know Asia. And then people from Asia are saying you’re White-washed....I don’t fit in anywhere. Wait, APAs [Asian/Pacific Americans] in this country, where do they fit?....I say we all don’t because we’re a
perpetuated foreigner” (1i, pp. 15-16). This notion of the “perpetuated foreigner,”
that is, Asian Americans remaining eternal immigrants, as well as Arthur’s own
background of assimilation, prejudice, and privilege in many ways appear to
complicate his own articulation of his identity. In following up on this in a later
discussion, Arthur shared, “And so what is it to be APA [Asian/Pacific American]?
It’s to be mixed, to be messed up, well, it’s not messed up but it’s like you can’t, it’s
just a whole bunch of things. You don’t have a place and you don’t have a certain,
nothing is set for you and it’s all shaky ground” (5i, p. 31).

As he related in our first discussion and then again in later conversations, it
seems particularly problematic for Arthur to articulate identity when he feels
consumed in many respects with simply justifying being American and reeducating
others about stereotypes and the reality of racism.

I have to educate people about it...that we do belong here, you know?
This is my country, this is my land too. I don’t have the same rights
as you, but, you know, that’s what I got to do and that’s why I feel
like I have to do all the stuff I do, you know? It’s not like you, you
know, like you choose to do all the activities. No, I have to because if
I don’t educate, then who is going to do it? (1i, p. 17)

The additional difficulty is that much of this justification and education is public in
its nature. In this way, Arthur’s identity is often “on display,” unlike his White
peers, for others to examine and then question. However, while this unsolicited
attention seems to have complicated his ability to articulate his identity, it has
afforded him--if not forced him--the opportunity to face issues and consider his
identity in ways that his White peers likely have not.
Despite the task being difficult, Arthur did attempt to articulate various aspects of his racial identity. As with Ana, Arthur was also troubled in some respects by claiming his multiethnic heritage. Being of mixed descent, he too talked himself through a variety of identifiers.

See, I feel like I’m mixed too. No, for real, because like Cambodians and Laotians and Chinese, that’s like so many different things. So Chinese see me and they’re like, “He’s way too dark to be Chinese, but you got the Chinese eyes.” But then again Cambodians are like, “He’s got the Chinese eyes.” And then they’re also like, “He’s also Laotian.” And the Chinese are like, “He’s not Chinese cause he can’t speak Chinese.” But the Laotians talk about how dark he is….And it was like, “Where am I then?” (3g, p. 31)

These ethnicities are complicated by Arthur’s claim not only to his Asian ancestry, but as an American as well. As he stated in a later conversation, “My parents are straight from Asia, they’re straight Asians, and like I am, I’m American, but then again I have these Asian roots, but then again, I don’t know, [pause] I’m just like lost I guess….But I think any person of color could really say that. They don’t have the whole privilege of being ‘all-American’” (5i, pp. 3-4). In this sense, resolving an Asian ancestry with an American identity seems confusing for Arthur. It is confusing, as Arthur stated, because of his own allegiance to both, but also society’s reluctance to embrace, tolerate, or even be multiethnic.

By later discussions I sensed that Arthur was still struggling with articulating his racial identity. Whereas he was more willing to verbalize specific ethnicities within his Asian heritage, he became more adamant about the futility in doing so. In expanding on this in the group setting he stated, “I think you can’t say who you are.
You learn who people are, but you can’t put it into words. No matter how much you can describe ‘Jessica’ the person who’s reading it will never know Jessica” (6g, p. 10). The result, as Arthur shared in our final conversation, has been confusion, frustration, anxiety and despair at times as he continues to struggle in identifying.

Predefined Labels as Problematic in Racial Identity Development

As mentioned earlier, terminology did not appear to be the primary problem for Arthur in expressing his racial identity. Despite his relative ease in choosing a label (or perhaps it was his familiarity in having to do so), Arthur still contemplated the use of labels and the limitations it imposed on those being forced to choose. Among Arthur’s first comments during our initial dialogue he identified himself as “Asian American.” He continued to use this label, when needed, throughout the course of our discussions, but I sensed that he debated the meaning and usefulness of the term. Arthur was quick to point out that using such a term, while accurate in describing his identity, is only a general descriptor, a way to conveniently and often mistakenly lump all those of Asian descent together.

Everybody always asks APAs, “Where are you from?” or “Which ethnic background are you?” or “Are you Vietnamese?” “Are you Cambodian?” “Are you Chinese?” “Are you Japanese?” …but most people don’t know about Laos and Hmong and Mien. People don’t know about like India as Asia, people don’t think of Mongolia, people don’t think of, you know, Malaysia. I mean you could go on about the fifty-nine recognized [Asian] ethnic backgrounds in the United States, even though there’s more. (li, p. 16)
For this reason, Arthur specifically chose to identify both racially as Asian American and ethnically as Cambodian, Laotian, and Chinese in honoring his multietnic Asian ancestry.

In discussing his choice of identifying as “Asian American” or “Asian/Pacific American” Arthur discussed that this was a task that had been imposed by others and primarily for their convenience. In explaining this, Arthur asserted, “I think that you have these labels just so someone who doesn’t know you, someone who doesn’t see you, can somewhat see you by the assumptions of your labels” (3g, p. 6). However, this label, one that he became aware of mainly in high school, has now become an important piece in his identification and others’ views of him. “It [APA] was just label, but now it means something....I’m asked to sit in on this and that. I’m asked to join or head this group or do this and that, to put in ideas as a representative for Asian Americans. I’m asked, you know, what it’s like. I have to speak for Asians all the time and so it makes me realize I am APA” (1i, p. 30). Despite Arthur’s pride in identifying as APA, what was once a simple identifier for Arthur has now become a key element and limitation in generally defining him. Based on our conversations, Arthur also seemed somewhat overwhelmed by the popularity (with others, that is) of his label as an APA and constricted by its generalizations. He stated, “So it’s like I’m Asian, I’m not Arthur anymore. So it’s like, now I want to get back to being Arthur, but then again, how do I do that? I feel like in order to do that I need to get involved, start presenting to let you know that there’s more, there’s nothing to being Asian” (2g, p. 29).
For this reason, Arthur seemed to struggle throughout our discussions with identifying as Asian American, but also moving beyond this. On a number of occasions he indicated that while being Asian American suggested some sort of shared culture, values, and phenotypic appearance, being an individual within that label was just as important. In this way, Arthur constantly struggled with identifying with an ethnic or racial group and maintaining his own individuality as a person. In further discussing this struggle, he shared, “If people want to know what I am ethnically, ethnically I’m Chinese, Cambodian, and Laotian. And I say that because I believe that, or I want to believe that, races, there’s nothing to race other than just the human race and that people just come from different cultures and different places and have different characteristics” (8i, p. 1).

Additionally, the use of labels so commonly and conveniently was problematic for Arthur in terms of the generalizations that they have come to signify. For this reason, Arthur struggled with the label APA being meaningful and important and the term being more of an empty word with stereotypical connotations. In discussing the stereotypes, Arthur was quick to indicate the number of stereotypes often associated--and expected--with Asian, Asian American, and APA labels. Among those misconceptions he shared are ideas that Asian men are nerdy, unathletic, unromantic, nonaggressive, less masculine, and in many ways the perpetual foreigner.

It is not surprising then during our later discussions then that Arthur indicated that his use of the label “Asian American” was primarily for political reasons. As he explained, “They [people in general] don’t see Asians as Americans. People often
say Asians are, you know, how they're different from, and then they say Americans. And a lot of times people say Americans meaning White people" (5i, p. 4). For this reason, Arthur emphasizes Asian American as his identity.

I say "Asian American" for a political term, just to say that Asians in this country are Americans also and stuff like that. But do I really believe that I am an American? I don't think so because I feel like that people of color are not seen and don't have the same privileges as White people....I don't believe it because no one else believes it and I'm not going to, I can't believe it until everyone believes it. (8i, p. 1-2)

Racial Identity as a Combination of External and Internal Influences

Arthur's internalization of societal stereotypes and judgments is evidence that his identity has been shaped at least to some degree by external influences. Others' perceptions and definitions of Asians and Asian Americans seemed a particularly salient issue for Arthur. As a result of such a bombardment of labels and stereotypes, Arthur admitted several times that he has internalized certain aspects of these misconceptions within his own identity as an Asian American man and has attempted to break free from these by overcompensating through certain behaviors such as athletics, dating, and fighting in earlier years. Arthur even shared that his "Americanized name" and denial of his family's Buddhist religion are all likely linked to external negative images of Asians and Asian Americans. In our first discussion he shared, "[American] society makes you want to be White...and not let you be who you want to be, say who you really are. Society tells you to have a standard" (1i, p. 30).
In addition to reflecting on past incidents, Arthur shared that external influences and dominant culture stereotypes are still prevalent. For example, "I get questions all the time, like ‘Where are you from?’ or like, ‘You speak good English,’ and stuff like that....of course I do. I’m just as American as you are. I’ve been raised in this country. I believe probably in a lot of the same things that you do" (Ii, p. 14). Our conversations were riddled with comments related to how Arthur believed that others perceive him. However, in contrast to the stereotypes in the Latino community described by Ana, Arthur does not attempt to "fit" these descriptors. On the contrary, Arthur, given that he phenotypically "looks" to be of Asian descent, seems more concerned with negating these stereotypes through his own lifestyle. Despite these efforts, it seems evident that Arthur, who has been exposed to these generalizations his whole life, has perhaps "bought into" many of the myths and external influences, adopting the belief that America is indeed not his country. Accordingly, he shared, "Okay, when a total stranger sees me, I don’t know if they think I’m American or not, you know? I think too often they see I might come from a certain background, and I think they see that as who I am, do you know what I mean? They don’t see me as being a full American...so that’s why I don’t think that I’m American, because they don’t see that" (5i, p. 7).

Given Arthur’s honesty and introspection, I was not surprised then when he “formally” introduced the debate about external and internal influences related to identity development. In a group discussion, he posed a question to the other participants:
Do you think that, you know, racial categories that we’re in and stuff like that, is it judged phenotypically, like how mainstream sees us or is it more like how we really identify? Do you get what I’m saying? Because you [Ana] can look, you look White, I mean mainstream wise. And then like Deanne, she’s half White, but they see her as Black. You know what I’m saying? So she would totally identify with Black because that’s how they see her and that’s how they address her... But I don’t know, I mean how do you think it really goes? (4g, p. 4)

The complex question was, of course, not easily answered. Arthur offered his own ideas, developing and redeveloping thoughts throughout our next few conversations.

I think it’s [racial identity] more external, because it’s like yeah, a person is White, a person is Black, but they’re going to be different because, and they’re going to view the world differently because they’ve been treated differently. And it’s how they’ve been treated is how they’re going to be. I think people are products of society and not only just their family because it’s what’s on TV, it’s what’s on videos, it’s what’s on movies, and your friends and how they view certain things and what they think about certain things is going to turn out who you end up being. (6g, p. 11)

Despite this strong explanation of the external influences in shaping racial identity, Arthur was not confident in stating that identity was entirely other-driven (hence the word “more” used in the above thought). And while he did not offer extensive reasoning for his opinions, Arthur also indicated that at times these external influences are less influential. For example, when interacting with friends and family, Arthur asserted that cultural stereotypes and generalizations are less prevalent and less demanding. In these cases, he can be more real without having to negate or fulfill certain attributes. In this way, according to Arthur, racial identity is also an internal process, driven by an inherent sense of self.
Racial Identity as Manifesting Itself Situationally

In reflecting back on Arthur's childhood and the stories he shared, it seems that his identity may have manifested itself in a variety of ways. As he indicated, there were instances with his family when he denied his heritage or intentionally identified as English-speaking or Christian in order to "fit" within American norms. He also discussed an alternate identity he took on during high school. "I went through a 'bad boy stage,' and I believe a lot of, I'm willing to say a lot of APA males go through a bad boy stage because I think society sees them, you know, Asian males as nonaggressive as, you know, unathletic and not, not the real men like Black men are" (Ii, p. 2). In following up on this during a later conversation Arthur stated, "That [bad boy stage] was like more of a front, just so like people don't mess with me because I didn't like the whole racial thing. But like I knew there was racism and I knew outright, but I did that to protect myself basically from anybody....So that was just like more a protective thing just for my own self" (5i, p. 10).

Again, in wrestling with this notion of identity, Arthur here chose to identify in a way that would negate the stereotypes of vulnerable Asian and Asian American men, opting for an identity during high school that was more confrontational and defensive. In contrast with this was Arthur's home identity where as a member of "a stereotypical Asian family" (4g, p. 13) he took on a somewhat different role. At home, Arthur revealed, he was a studious teen, spending countless hours at the library and foregoing high school related social events. And despite the fact that
many of these decisions were strongly encouraged by his parents, Arthur's identity clearly manifested itself in unique ways given the situation and company.

In subsequent conversations, Arthur shared that he continues to find himself verbally identifying in different ways with different groups. For example, "I think it depends on who I'm identifying to....Like if I was identifying myself to someone non-Asian or an Asian person that was adopted who doesn't understand, then I would go in saying that I'm APA...And then if I was to talk to another Asian person...we don't say, 'I'm APA.' I've never said that to another Asian person" (4g, p. 34-35). But in addition to the differences in how he verbally identifies, Arthur also explained that his actions vary as well. "'Cause to fit in with certain groups of people you have to act a certain way, have a certain sense of style. To fit in with family you have to act all quiet and stuff. To fit in with White people you don't talk about race and if you do it has to be within a certain setting" (8i, p. 7). As Arthur indicated, "acting a certain way" among different groups is an attempt to fit in and therefore be less prone to explaining, defending, and reeducating others about his culture and their stereotypes. It is, as he stated in reference to his bad boy image in our second dialogue, an attempt at self-preservation. The balancing act as an Asian American, that is, claiming both an Asian heritage as an American, again complicates these situational identities for Arthur. He shared that while he attempts to negate the generalizations and stereotypes about Asians and Asian Americans within the dominant culture, he also is conscious of not renouncing people of color or appearing "White-washed" (8i, p. 9). As he continued, "I'm always conscious if
I’m the only person of color in a group of White, I’ll get really conscious about that. And I think it’s because I don’t want to be seen as a traitor” (8i, p. 9).

Racial Identity as a Dynamic Process of Growth

In discussing identity development as ever-changing, Arthur’s stories of childhood, adolescence, and his more recent experiences as a student at Oregon State University are evidence of how dynamic the process has been for him. Arthur discussed at length the changes in his attitudes about race, racism, and racial identity as a result of his first year in college. “Freshman year I started school, and I was a punk, and I used all sorts of racial terms and homophobic terms and very degrading terms towards women….I took a class…that taught me a lot about just like human beings in general….I met more people, heard more and more stories and realized that, you know, you have to stop the racism, stop the hate” (1i, p. 4-5). Similarly he addressed his changes in religious identity, which as discussed earlier, was closely tied with his Asian heritage and assimilation. “I don’t have a religion. I believe in a higher being; I believe in respecting all people; I believe in helping out other people when they need help. I believe in trying to do good; I believe in trying to become a better person” (1i, p. 12).

In revisiting our discussion about his denial of his mother in the sixth grade, Arthur shared that his attitudes have drastically changed, “If anything, it’s the opposite, like trying to prove who I am by hugging my mom in public and being around my Asian friends” (8i, p. 9). In his own use of labels and identifying
specifically as APA, Arthur indicated that this too was terminology that had changed recently too. According to Arthur in a group discussion, “I only started using APA last year as a statement” (3g, p. 12). As mentioned earlier, the statement here was the purposeful reinforcement that Asian Americans are not perpetuated or professional foreigners, but truly Americans.

Finally, in discussing a critical point in his racial identity development Arthur revealed that this year, his sophomore year, has been crucial in his own understanding of his identity. “I believe this last year [led to changes]...just really thinking about who I am, just working with different committees people ask me to come speak about, you know, what it’s like to be APA, realizing that other people go to these things without realizing that this country is so messed up. Because before I thought the country was perfect and everybody was equal” (1i, p. 27). Here Arthur’s growth is evident, yet not stagnant or static. On the contrary, Arthur often spoke about the numerous and changing influences in his life, discussing their impact on his attitudes and behaviors. In answering a question about the future of his identity, he offered the following uncertainties as indication of further change and growth: “I think I’ll really be changing. I think, I don’t know. I don’t know, that’s why I’m lost about what I want to do with my life. And I’m just trying to get through the years and just think more about why this country is the way it is, and why people are they way they are, and what I’m going to do with my life” (1i, pp. 27-28).
Bjorn is a twenty year-old sophomore originally from Salt Lake City, Utah. Bjorn’s educational interests are varied including physical anthropology, archaeology, geology, and biology, and our discussions in many ways reflected this diversity of thought. On campus and in the community, Bjorn is active in a number of causes including queer rights organizations, animal rights campaigns, and racial diversity initiatives. In building on these experiences, Bjorn has plans to travel to South Africa this summer to continue his interest, both politically and personally, in issues related to racial equity and humanitarianism.

In describing his background and heritage, Bjorn shared that he has Native American “blood,” but is mostly of Irish descent. Bjorn’s great-grandparents resided on an Ojibwa reservation in the Atlantic Northeast but moved to the West Coast at some point. His grandfather then grew up in Southern California and joined the Navy, married, and retained little of the Native culture. As a result, Bjorn’s mother recalls little of the culture herself with the exception of stories related by a great-aunt who returned to live on the reservation, immersing herself entirely in that culture and severing nearly all ties with non-Natives.

In describing his childhood and upbringing, Bjorn shared that he grew up receiving mixed messages about culture, privilege, and race.

I grew up being told by my parents constantly that everybody is equal, that race is something not worth discussing because, while it makes people what they are, you should look and see who they are inside and disregard that... So I grew up being told to love everybody, and don’t worry about who they are, where they came from, just look at
who they are right now. And then being told on the outside, we’re White, we’re going to buy Nike shoes, and Black people don’t live here. (1i, p. 15)

In recalling his experiences in school, Bjorn stated that there were a number of students of Mexican descent with whom he shared classes. He was quick to note, however, that there was rarely any true interaction between White and Mexican students at his high school, a circumstance that he refers to as “an awful coincidence” (1i, p. 16). Instead, as Bjorn described, his schooling was riddled with the segregation and intolerance by both teachers and students alike.

So I grew up in an incredibly racist community. My family, my parents talked quite a bit about equality, but my parents never showed me equality. They didn’t have the chance really…So I grew up with a lot of mixed messages, honestly, because I didn’t have any opportunity to know anybody who wasn’t White. So I got my understanding of what it meant to not be White on television and never wanted to believe people in my community. I just didn’t have that new experience at all. (1i, pp. 16-17)

As a result of these experiences and “mixed messages,” Bjorn admitted that he still holds a number of prejudices and considers himself racist, a term he associates more with the exposure to other races and the surprising emotions that such limited exposure often elicits. In explaining this further he shared:

Still to this day I get apprehensive if I’m in an area where not everybody is White, and I don’t mean small percentages. But if I’m in an area that’s like ninety percent Hispanic or ninety percent Asian, I feel uneasy, and I hate that. And I’m not going to deny that, but I don’t want to let it take hold of me either. And I feel that I can’t let go until I acknowledge it and, you know, there’s absolutely no reason for it, just because I grew up in a community that was so White. (1i, p. 17)
Racial Identity as a Difficult Concept to Articulate

From the onset of our discussions, Bjorn was clear about his difficulty and uncertainty in articulating his identity racially. This surprised me given that during our first meeting at the student retreat he appeared—if only on the surface—certain about identifying as Native American. Nonetheless, during our first dialogue he offered his current indecision related to verbalizing his identity. According to Bjorn, “I have a lot of problems identifying racially myself. I don’t identify with groups of people anymore. Occasionally I identify with a particular ancestral group that I’ve had. For a long time I identified with the Irish, for a long time I identified with my Native blood, and then I kind of went back and forth. And I’m at the point now where I just can’t identify myself racially at all” (5i, p. 2).

Bjorn shared that articulating identity is problematic for several reasons. For example, Bjorn revealed that other issues related to his identity, such as sexual orientation, have more recently been at the forefront of this thought and have diverted attention from introspection related to racial identity. Bjorn also mentioned the challenge of identifying as an individual within a society that is so “culturally interconnected.” Bjorn reflected on this collective nature of culture and the blending of various cultural aspects and the difficulty in articulating a single identity, racial or otherwise, as a result. “For me, my whole identity is in question. It’s very much that I can’t define in words what I see myself being, not just racially or sexually, or in terms of gender, or in terms of, you know, hobbies, the things I like to do. I don’t
know what to call myself, and the words might be out there. I can’t find the words” (1i, p. 5).

In a later conversation, Bjorn also revealed that some of his difficulty and unwillingness in articulating his racial identity was related to the tension between his Native American and White heritage.

The last time we talked I was in a space where I really didn’t want to identify with, with being White....So at the time I would have been not upset, but frustrated that I would be defined and perceived only as being White. Now, although I’m still not thrilled about always needing to be perceived as White, I’ve come to the conclusion that I can’t tell myself that I don’t want to identify with my White background because it’s a huge part of who I am. It’s always going to be a part of who I am, and I am White. (5i, p. 20-21)

As with Ana, Bjorn’s White heritage seems to be in many ways in conflict with his other “minority” identity. From our discussions it appeared that Bjorn was not necessarily ashamed of his White heritage, but troubled more so by the history, power, and privilege inherently associated with being of the dominant culture. Additionally, Bjorn shared that it is important that he is not perceived as representative of any demographic into which he may fall or identity that he may choose.

Despite his trouble in finding the words to communicate his racial identity, Bjorn asserted that race and racial identity are still important concepts, concepts that need analysis. For Bjorn, this analysis goes beyond individual and internal questioning, but also involves the examination of larger societal conditions. I was struck in particular by one statement that he shared in the group setting and its
similarity to my own researcher assumptions about the nature of race: “I feel like I know that racial identity means something. It has to mean something. I was at a lecture at an anthropology class that I’m taking, and the teacher was talking about human variation and said that biologically-speaking, race is nothing, it’s pure chance, pure geographic location. And so when race is pure chance…how can it mean so much?” (3g, p. 27).

During our final discussion, I was surprised that Bjorn seemed more willing to commit to an identity given the number of obstacles he expressed earlier. His identity reflects a shift toward acknowledging his dual heritage while also recognizing the internal dilemma that such an identity creates.

I still have trouble identifying who I am racially. But now, as opposed to before, I really do look at where I came from, speaking in terms of lineage more than I used to. So, I’m still a White person with Native American blood who doesn’t agree with a lot of what skin color can stand for and believes in celebrating skin color. And I’m still a person who believes that a lot of the ways that we look at and use race are inappropriate, but that there are many wonderful and appropriate ways that we do use race. But within myself I [am] focusing on, just thinking about how, how I am the product of all the people that I am. (8i, p. 1)

Predefined Labels as Problematic in Racial Identity Development

As mentioned, Bjorn was reluctant in our earlier conversations to assign predefined labels to his identity. During our initial conversations, therefore, we generally discussed the nature of language, its connection with identity, and its limitations. In reflecting on the limitations of language and words, Bjorn stated, “I
think the English language is very restrictive. There are a lot of languages with many descriptive terms that we don’t have words or even concepts for” (1i, p. 6).

In expanding on this later, Bjorn discussed how these limitations complicated his own process of identity and naming himself. “It’s so difficult for me to use labels on myself because I do change the way I identify myself with labels every couple of months. It just happens.... And it’s not really a conscious decision for me to stop using labels and start using other labels. Like I stopped identifying as ‘bisexual’ and started identifying as ‘queer.’ I never intended to do that, it just happened. And I think labels evolve over time” (3g, p. 13). Bjorn’s thoughts here indicate that while identity is changing and fluid, specific labels are confining in the sense that they are not dynamic.

Instead, labels for Bjorn are problematic because they do not reflect growth, but a static position. The question here remains, how closely linked are identity and the language used to describe and name identity? Does language influence identity or does identity guide the use of specific language? In addressing this very question, Bjorn shared, “I think that if you stumble upon a part of yourself that you’ve discovered that you don’t have a label for, you try to find a label to fit it. And for all the parts that you just know about, the label has kind of always coexisted with that part of you” (3g, p. 21). By our final conversation, while Bjorn was describing himself as White and Native American, he still claimed that labels play an important role in identity and that there is no single word to accurately and entirely label him. “The only word I can really think of to classify myself is ‘myself.’ And I can say that I know I’m a White person and I know that I’m a Native American person, I
know that I’m Italian and Irish and German and all of the other things, but I guess the question that makes it difficult for me to come up with a word that blankets all those terms in the first place is the question you’re trying to answer in the first place” (8i, pp. 1-2).

**Racial Identity as a Combination of External and Internal Influences**

During our first conversation Bjorn broached the topic of identity as influenced internally and externally. In an early comment, Bjorn asserted that identity is completely internal process. As he stated, “I think that identity is entirely based on your perception, and your perception, I think, includes what you have been, what you are now, and what you strive for” (1i, p. 9). However, just moments later in this same conversation Bjorn discussed how influential others, especially, parents are in developing an identity, racial or otherwise. For example, “Your children learn almost everything that they ever know from you by the time they’re three years old. I don’t think that their identity is a cosmic mystical force, but I really think that in terms of identity you, you’re forcing identity onto children if you have them. No matter what you do, you are shaping your children in your image, so to speak” (1i, p. 10).

In many ways, these two statements seem in conflict with one another. That is, the notion of complete individual perception and a “forced” external identity appear at odds with one another. This conflict seemed to be resolved in a later conversation where Bjorn shared that identity was a combination of both internal and
external influences. His insight indicated that internal changes could be caused by external influences just as external changes can be influenced by internal influences.

I think for the most part the things that cause the shift are probably externally based, and with me and with my identity, a lot of times it seems like my identity changes just because I set out to learn things. And with the more knowledge that I have, the more knowledge of what exists in the world, the harder it is to pin down my identity. But, of course, a lot of things are internal; a lot of changes are internally based. (5i, p. 10)

Our discussions revealed that external influences, including others’ perceptions and feedback, were and are important in Bjorn’s racial identity development. As mentioned earlier, Bjorn’s appearance as a White person is troublesome in some ways in that it both seems to negate his Native American ancestry and carries with it the stereotypes of the dominant culture. Having resolved that “for all intents and purposes functionally in the world I’m a White person,” (8i, p. 5) Bjorn wrestled with the idea of his appearance and its role in shaping his identity. In responding to my question about whether he would identify more strongly with his Native American heritage if he “looked” more Native, he stated:

Honestly, I think that I would [identify more with as a Native American] because of other people. I think that that would be based on other people’s interpretation of me....I really think the reason I would identify more than I do if I looked more Native is because I would have had different opportunities through socialization. I think I would have grown up knowing more about my culture because, rather than having to look for it, it would be presented to me occasionally. I also think that if I looked more Native there would be a lot more discrimination towards me based on that fact. (8i, p. 3)
As Ana, whose lighter skin has afforded (and forced) her to “pass” as White, Bjorn’s appearance as White has created a racial identity characterized to some degree by a struggle to remain true to dual heritages while experiencing the unearned privileges as White person in American society. And in this way, as with Ana and Arthur, Bjorn’s external appearance and others’ perceptions and judgments based on it, have been crucial in influencing societal opportunities and acceptance.

Racial Identity as Manifesting Itself Situationally

During two of our individual dialogues, Bjorn and I discussed at length the nature of racial identity manifesting itself differently in various situations. Bjorn was clear in asserting that behaviors, as a “limb” (li, p. 13) of identity, generally change given the environment.

You’re going to act much differently probably around your parents than you’re going to act at a party. Or, you’re going to act differently with students in a class that you’re in than you’re going to act with people who have known you for five years. I think that it’s impossible to act the same way around every person that we know because you have different boundaries with different people, you have different common points with different people, and I think that personality and identity in terms of other people becomes very fluid. (li, p. 12)

In describing this common practice of altering behaviors, Bjorn used a simply analogy to further describe how multiple traits can manifest themselves within a single identity: “So you take a flower, and there’s a stamen on it. And that, that’s kind of the core, like being who, you know, who you are. And each petal is, is a
different facet of your identity....And at different times with different people you are utilizing different petals all at once. They are all there all of the time, they’re always there, but you’re just not using all the ones” (1i, p. 13).

In examining this in yet another way, Bjorn shared that identity, generally speaking, is constantly changing shape, constantly redefining itself as a result of external conditions. As with Ana, who referred to her others’ perception of her identity as “schizophrenic,” Bjorn also shared that identity can appear to be fragmented. For example, “I don’t think that most people have multiple personalities or multiple identities. I think that it’s just, it’s just this coalescing cloud of identity that’s changing shapes all the time, and one day it looks like a duck, and the next day it looks like a bunny. It’s one, it’s one fluid dynamic. I don’t think it’s a stable situation” (5i, p. 7).

In building on Bjorn’s assertions that identity manifests itself situationally, I probed him about conflicting situations that demand disparate behaviors. In other words, how does he decide what facet of his identity to manifest when worlds collide (e.g., parents and friends)? As with Ana, who indicated that she identifies differently with older and younger generations of Latinos, and Arthur, who stated that he identified differently among Asians and Asian Americans, Bjorn stated that a priority in this selective identity exists. In explaining this further, he stated, “I think there’s definitely a priority, and I also think that that priority is governed by what you have at stake....So I really think it has to do with what you have at risk....Although sometimes I also think it’s just a matter of what you’re most familiar and comfortable with” (5i, p. 19). Bjorn’s explanation here provides insight into his
varying racial identity (at least verbalized) between Native American and White. Perhaps his identity as a White, given American culture and society, is not only more obvious given his appearance, but also more familiar and less risky.

**Racial Identity as a Dynamic Process of Growth**

Throughout our dialogues, Bjorn was clear and articulate about the concept that racial identity is a fluid, ever-changing concept. Indirectly, Bjorn indicated on several occasions that simply through the course of the ten weeks that his outlook had changed. Based on this, our conversations often focused on those issues most salient in terms of his identity, those issues at the forefront of his thought processes and everyday reflection. At times, these issues involved sexual identity/orientation, animal rights, or political activism. By our last conversation, with Bjorn’s recent leadership role at a diversity retreat, his own racial identity seemed to be an issue he was more willing and able to discuss. This general progression and fluctuation echo his clear statement during our first conversation: “I don’t think there is ever a stopping point” (1i, p. 9).

In addition to my observations, Bjorn often used words such as “fluid,” “dynamic,” and “coalescing” in describing the process of identity development.

I think that, like I said, it’s kind of always shifting, and I think that it’s entirely possible that your identity is constantly changing in its entirety, and that there are a few very strong, very important pieces of the identity that kind of hang around and remain a part of your identity in any given situation because those are the ways that you’ve defined yourself. ... When, I think if you say to yourself, “This is who I am,” it’s much easier for that to remain a part of your identity, but
you can change your feelings on something many, many times in a day just by talking to another human being or reading something. So, I think that our identity may very well be being recreated constantly. (5i, p. 7-8)

Here Bjorn clarifies that identity, racial or otherwise, is not entirely in flux. Instead, there is a core sense of self and being that remains relatively constant while other, perhaps more peripheral aspects, change and develop both consciously and unconsciously. According to Bjorn, memory, that sense of who we were, plays a large role in this core sense of self remaining relatively constant.

I think that there are always a few concrete identifications, images that you can cling to. No matter how much you change, no matter how much you’re going to change, there will always be ways to identify yourself. And those ways are your past, they’re all looking to the past. You know, people change, and that’s one of the reasons why we don’t completely change everyday is because we have memory. Memory is our biggest identifying factor. (1i, p. 10-11)

Bjorn also discussed the future as a crucial piece in the identity process, asserting that too often conversations related to identity focus on the past and present. In our dialogues, Bjorn shared his uncertainty and inability to articulate his identity at any point other than the current moment in time due to the fluid nature of identity. “I look into my future and I see myself doing anything. There are so many things that I’ve done now that I never though I would have I’d have done, that it’s impossible for me to say that I will never be able to identify with something, I will never have done that, that will never be part of me. I can’t say that. I don’t, it’s not part of my identification now, but, you know, things will be someday that I didn’t think that I would have” (5i, p. 11).
“Deanne”

Deanne is a twenty year-old sophomore majoring in health promotion education. Formerly a student in the College of Science, Deanne recently made the switch in educational focus feeling that she did not “fit,” in a number of ways, as a student of color within the University’s science programs. Committed to her studies, volunteerism, and public health initiatives, Deanne envisions a future characterized by using her talents in giving back to the community in a humanitarian capacity. As she shared early in our conversations, “I know that there are communities that are not being served, especially in health care, and then so if I can relate with them, then why not, you know? I have the ability to go to college and become educated and so if I can help them, so why not?” (Ii, p. 11).

Deanne was born on the West Coast but moved shortly thereafter to Alaska where she lived with her mother and two brothers and then relocated to Oregon ten years later. Deanne was raised primarily by her mother, an experience that has been influential in a number of ways. In reflecting on her family’s financial struggles and triumphs, Deanne believes that growing up in a single-parent family has taught her much about strength and given her a valuable sense of perspective. Growing up mainly in her mother’s care has also somewhat limited Deanne’s exposure to her bi-racial heritage. With her mother being White and her father being Black with Native American bloodlines (with which Deanne does not identify), Deanne indicated that she grew up mainly among her mother’s family and other White people. Additionally, in reflecting on her schooling in Oregon, Deanne indicated that her
exposure to students of other racial heritages was limited primarily to Whites and Asian Americans. According to Deanne, “It wasn’t exclusive, I did have White friends and Black friends, but honestly I can say that I never really hung out with Black people all that much” (li, p. 3).

In discussing the effects of this “one-sided” view of her racial heritage, Deanne shared, “So then he’s [her father] pretty much not been in my life for a while, and so that’s probably influential especially since he’s the Black one in the family or, you know, the black part of me” (li, p. 14). Despite growing up in a “White” family, Deanne insisted that her experience was one that did not negate her father’s heritage. “She [her mother] always told us that we were both, always, always, always. She never wanted us to be saying that we were one thing or another....So I think, in a way, she encourages us to learn whatever we need to learn and, you know, experience what we need to experience. She did take us to Black churches and so that’s, I think that’s important because spirituality is really important in the Black community” (li, p. 15).

But, in spite of her mother’s emphasis on her “mixed” heritage, Deanne admitted that few of her childhood, or current experiences for that matter, reflected or reinforced her Black cultural ties. On the contrary, as Deanne shared, she has never really lived the cultural experience of a Black person. For example, “I don’t celebrate Kwanzaa, and I don’t eat those traditional Southern foods that, I mean White people eat them too, but like greens and grits and that kind of stuff. I’ve been to Black churches before, and I think that spirituality and the Black churches is kind of a cultural thing. But for the most part, I don’t think that I do any certain things
that make me identify with who I am or what I am” (4g, p. 12). In this sense, Deanne’s perspective related to her own racial identity appears truly unique among the five participants in terms of the conflicting messages and experiences she has encountered.

Racial Identity as a Difficult Concept to Articulate

When first discussing the idea of racial identity development and her own identification, Deanne seemed unsure how to articulate this identity. Similar to Bjorn’s reluctance to commit to an identity or series of labels, Deanne initially claimed that her racial identity was an entirely individual concept. “Well, I feel that I’m just ‘Deanne’ [pseudonym inserted] to people, you know? When I meet people I’m ‘Deanne,’ [pseudonym inserted] I’m not a Black girl...I’m not someone that has all these stereotypes around them....So who is ‘Deanne?’ [pseudonym inserted] I don’t know, that’s something I wonder about sometimes” (1i, p. 5). In this sense, in articulating her identity Deanne seems to still be questioning her own identity and more comfortable identifying only with herself, claiming no specific race, group, or ethnicity.

However, as our conversations continued and I probed more, Deanne revealed more about her identity and wrestled with the notion of verbalizing and experiencing a “mixed” heritage. As she shared:

I’m not just White, I’m not just Black, you know? I am “mixed” because my mom is White and my dad’s Black and that makes me “mixed”...I think that a mixed person’s experience is different than
just a Black person's experience and it's different than just a White person's experience....like one thing is like saying I'm too Black for White people or I'm too White for Black people, you know? That's always something that comes up. (1i, p. 7)

Later in a group dialogue, Deanne shared that while she considers herself "mixed," her darker skin and therefore appearance as a Black woman, further complicate this identity and how she chooses to articulate it. "I kind of go back and forth, calling myself 'mixed' or 'Black,' you know? And it's totally unconscious, but I think that it shows that there is that confusion or whatever. Do you know what I mean? Not that I'm confused about what I am, but I'm just confused about how to let other people see me" (3g, p. 15). It is interesting to note here that Deanne equates how she articulates her own identity with how she "lets" other people see her. In this sense, verbalizing her identity, that is, finding the right words to do justice to her ideas and concepts, seems to be a crucial piece not only for her own understanding, but for others as well. In further exploring this idea of Deanne's "mixed" identity, but her appearance as a Black woman, Deanne shared that balancing the two was often difficult and the articulation of it even more complicated. Attempting to clarify her apparently unconscious oscillations, Deanne offered the following, "I think when I refer to myself as 'Black' it's a collective thing. All these other people that are Black or half-Black, or you know, mixed with Black, like we're all one, we all have this commonality...and then if I want to say I'm 'mixed,' it's just 'cause, I don't know. I just want to say the whole racial being of my racial identity, I guess" (5i, p. 6).
As we explored Deanne's "mixed" identity it became more and more apparent that articulating this was not an easy task. As Deanne indicated, in certain situations articulating this identity is even difficult to those closest to her. In relating a recent story with her mother, Deanne shared early in our conversations that she and her mother had been temporarily stranded roadside on I-5 due to a flat tire. At a nearby restaurant, Deanne experienced a situation that was well-known to her, but unfamiliar to her mother. "I was telling my mom how it was, and there was, you know, of course there was all White people there, and they're like staring at us...and my mom's like, 'Oh, wasn't that weird?' and I'm like, 'No, I'm used to it.' And then my mom heard that and she was, I don't know, I guess it made her sad or something that I'm used to being stared at and stuff" (Ii, p. 5).

As with Ana, Arthur, and Bjorn who each expressed some degree of discomfort with the right to "claim" and articulate their racial identities, Deanne shared similar feelings. According to Deanne, "There's the feeling that you're not good enough to or like, say, I'm not White enough for White people and I'm not Black enough for Black people" (5i, p. 5). Compounding this bi-racial identity is Deanne's knowledge of her father's Cherokee blood. However, like Bjorn who shared that he feels disconnected and too far removed with this heritage, Deanne was very hesitant to claim this piece of her identity. In explaining this further, Deanne stated, "For a while I was really interested, and I just wanted to know more things, and my dad got really into it too...but I don't live the traditional Native life in any way, and I don't know that I could, and so in that way I don't really want to claim to be something I'm not" (5i, p. 3). Deanne indicated here and at other times during
our dialogues that identity and the articulation of identity have more to do with just bloodlines, that racial identity reflected a deeper understanding and connection with race and culture.

By our last conversation, Deanne seemed more intentional about relating her bi-racial identity. In responding to questions about her racial identity and how she articulates this, Deanne offered, “I racially identify as being mixed with Black and White, but I also understand that I think I relate more to the Black race or culture” (8i, p. 1). In this way, while indicating a claim to both a Black and White heritage, Deanne also established a deeper connection with the Black culture as she worked to make sense of the various influences on her identity.

Predefined Labels as Problematic in Racial Identity Development

During our first conversation Deanne indicated that labels had been especially problematic for her in terms of her bi-racial identity and the area in which she lived and attended school as a child. In discussing her early memories of choosing an identity and the labels that accompanied such a choice, Deanne shared the implications that other-imposed labels had on her educational experiences.

When we lived in Alaska people thought a lot that me and my brother were Samoan or thought we were native Alaskans. And one time we got put in a certain program, it was beneficial to us, but it was meant for Native Alaskan people, and neither of us are native Alaskans....And then later on when we moved down here, I found out that on my dad’s side there’s Native blood, Cherokee, and then so we were put in stuff, you know, we put that on records and then all of a sudden I was just Native American according to the schools. (1i, p. 2)
Having had her identity apparently decided for her and dictated to her so often, it was not surprising that Deanne was initially somewhat indifferent about articulating her identity.

Later in our conversations, Deanne seemed to fluctuate among identifying as “mixed,” “Black,” or “African American.” In explaining the shift between “mixed” and “Black” or “African American,” Deanne offered that her darker skin in many ways dictated her identity as a Black woman and what label she used therefore. In discussing the shift between “Black” and “African American” Deanne shared that the two labels held relatively similar meanings for her. “I think for me, honestly, a lot of it is about how in the English language we shorten words as much as we can….Like sometimes when I hear people say, ‘African American,’ I think, ‘Man, that took a long time to say.’ I’m like, ‘You can say Black’ or like, ‘Can’t you just say APA instead of Asian Pacific American?’ So I think for the most part that’s what it is” (3g, p. 16). In this way, labels add an element of convenience for Deanne, who sees many of the racial labels currently used as interchangeable. In addition to convenience, Deanne also indicated that racial labels reflect a sense of strength and “re-acclimating.” In explaining this further she stated, “Well, okay, like the ‘n’-word and like saying ‘queer’ and stuff, when you first start using those words they’re meant in negative ways, and then we just make it so that they’re positive for us, you know? Like, we don’t really have much choice but to make them positive for us” (3g, p. 17).
Our lengthy conversations about labels led to further debate about how meaningful such self-naming is. In other words, what does a label mean in the context of identity? Deanne indicated that labels, while at times self-selected, might create a stereotypical image for others to judge. For example, “The way we use titles is for convenience, but at the same time it does mean something, you know? Because if somebody hears that I am bi-racial or that I’m Black or something, then they’re going to think that I’ve gone through certain things that just any other ordinary person hasn’t gone through, you know?” (3g, p. 14). In addition to creating an image, whether accurate or not, for others, labels are also problematic in that they often define or prescribe identity. In other words, as Deanne indicated, labels can in some circumstances dictate “appropriate” behaviors and identity. In sharing an example, Deanne offered, “When you’re younger, you have that title, you’re a ‘boy’ or a ‘girl,’ but you might just act like whatever, and you get older and you realize that there is this title and you should act a certain way” (6g, p. 21). Despite this strong influence, Deanne stated that she feels confident that her racial identity as a “mixed” and “Black” woman developed independent of predefined labels, that she was a person before a label. According to Deanne, all of these factors including the specific connotations of labels and the limitations of language in self-description are ultimately troublesome in blocking true expression and understanding of who she is racially.
Racial Identity as a Combination of External and Internal Influences and Racial Identity as Manifesting Itself Situationally

In deviating from the pattern of attempting to discuss each theme individually, I have chosen here to discuss these two themes together, “Racial Identity as a Combination of External and Internal Influences” and “Racial Identity as Manifesting Itself Situationally.” I do this because Deanne’s language in describing external and internal influences as well as the situational aspects of identity is so intertwined that I find it unnatural and inappropriate to consider them as separate thoughts or concepts. For that reason, the following section will address Deanne’s ideas as they relate to both of these themes.

From the onset of our conversations it seemed evident through Deanne’s comments that external or other-based perceptions were an important piece of her identity. As Deanne shared in our earlier conversations, she had not considered her “mixed” or “Black” identity in depth prior to attending Oregon State University. However, her exposure to those who were less familiar with her has made her more conscious of herself and those with whom she associates.

I didn’t really think about it until I came here [OSU], you know, and I realize that most of the people I hang out with now are Black or are people of color, and I would say that that’s not as much by choice...it’s just what I do, and I feel comfortable with these people, and they know where I’m coming from on this campus and stuff. I’d say that I went through kind of a lot last year...I just learned a lot about myself and my racial identity last year...More than ever I learned so much about myself and how the world sees me. (1i, p. 3)
Here Deanne reflects on what seems to be a situational aspect of her identity. In other words, Deanne’s immersion into the predominantly White OSU culture has thrust her into relationships with other students of color that she may not have pursued otherwise. Compared to her own admission of interacting mostly with White and Asian American students in high school, Deanne’s racial identity is manifested differently in the unique social experience of being one of relatively few students of color on campus. Deanne elaborated on this idea of a “situational identity” further during our second individual conversation. “Maybe I don’t know how I view myself, because one minute I might view myself as ‘mixed,’ and another I’ll see myself as ‘Black.’ It depends on like, like my situation and it probably does have to do a lot with who I’m with, you know?” (5i, p. 2).

Within this context, Deanne also indicated that external influences, how others viewed her, were salient in her own self-naming and identification. As she stated, “I think that’s what it comes down to when it comes to racial issues, it’s about what other people think” (3g, p. 15). These views and perceptions of others also seemed evident when Deanne shared comments about American standards of beauty and made statements such as, “I feel like people look at me and they see that I am a person of color” (1i, p. 5) and “According to like standards and statistics in my life, you know, maybe I’m not supposed to be in a four-year university doing well, you know what I mean?” (1i, p. 4). In being probed to articulate more definitively her racial identity, Deanne offered the following, emphasizing the role that external influences have played in her growth. “If I had to, I’d probably say I’m Black because that’s how the world sees me, and as a female, like I face the problems that a
Black woman faces. I don't face the problems a White woman faces, you know, and that's just the way it is" (1i, p. 7).

Being perceived as a Black person and internalizing this seems to have had a profound effect on Deanne's identity. On several occasions, Deanne shared that having the appearance of a person of color on campus is a powerful, and sometimes powerless, attribute. In many instances Deanne believes that she is often looked at as the "expert" or the "voice" on Black history or issues simply because of her appearance. I considered this especially interesting since Deanne, as mentioned earlier, does not view her lifestyle as reflective of the traditional Black culture. She too noted the irony of this in a later group dialogue. "I don't have all those internal cultural traditions or anything, but when you were talking I was just thinking, yeah, my friends see me as Black" (4g, p. 17). In being perceived as Black by both strangers and friends to some degree, Deanne feels the pressure that others' assumptions and perceptions place on her. In explaining this further she shared, "I think that's unfair, that we [Blacks] have to watch how we act, like no matter what we do. Well, I [feel] like I have to watch what I do because I know that people look at me as a representative of the entire Black community" (2g, p. 10).

In addition to the powerful external influences that have shaped her identity, Deanne also indicated throughout our conversations that others factors were also at work in terms of her racial identity development. On a number of occasions, Deanne referred to the shared and understood experiences among other people of color. In our first dialogue, she indicated a sense of commonality among other biracial or "mixed" students. In later conversations she stated that this internal feeling of a
“common ground” and “camaraderie” (6g, p. 4) was an important element in her identity. By our final conversation Deanne was, like Ana, Arthur, and Bjorn, fairly comfortable with asserting that her racial identity was a combination of external and internal influences, many of which she could not articulate.

I think, yeah, I think a lot of it does have to do with how people perceive me, just from like all the conversations we’ve had and stuff. Like, over and over again is the theme that labels and how society and other people see us has a big part. I also know that there’s that commonality between me and other black women probably because of the things that we face, or that we know we’re going to have to face, or that we have in the past. So I think it’s a little bit of both but there probably is, a lot of it is outside influence. (8i, p. 4)

Racial Identity as a Dynamic Process of Growth

As with Ana, Arthur, and Bjorn, Deanne’s story also suggested ever-changing growth in terms of racial identity, however this theme seemed less prevalent than with those previously discussed. Unlike Ana who directly discussed the nature of identity as an dynamic process, our conversations emphasized more of Deanne’s personal journey and growth and the changes in her perception. During our first conversation Deanne reflected on the profound changes that she has encountered as a student at OSU, being pushed beyond her “comfort zone” and the familiarity of her family and neighborhood and her new exposure to other students of color. “A lot of things changed last year, there were times when I was like, ‘I don’t want to stay here,’ like I thought about going to school in Portland, and then things
got better and even now, I mean maybe I’ll still keep discovering things and stuff’
(1i, p. 8).

Even within her educational experiences at Oregon State University, Deanne indicated that significant change was evident.

It’s a lot different this year, in this term, than it was last year just because I’m comfortable on campus now, and, I don’t know, I don’t long for my family like the way that I did last year. But there were like other things, like the retreat. I think I talked about that before, like that was a turning point as like seeing like where I fit in a class kind of. But then I went to the retreat again this year, and there is like an even wider spectrum. (8i, p. 5)

During our final conversation Deanne revealed that as a result of pivotal experiences like the retreat she mentioned, she is able to notice considerable changes in her own awareness relating to race, racism, and racial identity. In reflecting on the scale and breadth of racism and its effects, Deanne offered, “It wasn’t like an issues really that much until I came to college and not just like a personal issue, but I realize that it’s a societal issue now” (8i, p. 1).

Finally, as our last conversation came to an end, Deanne discussed changes that she plans to make in the future. And while these behaviors may appear independent from identity, I suspected that her realization of the societal impact of race and racism compelled her to reconsider her identity as a “mixed” or “Black” woman.

And, so, but I think I’m going to change that because I’m here for my education, and I know that I’m an outlet for other people to learn things, and so I need to bring my perspective into the classroom more. And I know that if you speak up in class, you’ll understand things
under different perspective, and I don’t know, I think that’s really important since what I’m here for is education and since my major is health promotion, there’s a lot that has to do with what I’m really interested in is communities of color and underserved communities. And so we do talk about that a little bit in class, and I think that people have misconceptions, and I need to like speak up more on like behalf of people of color, not that I’m the expert, but just like to heighten awareness. (8i, p. 11)

“Diana”

Diana is a twenty-one year-old senior, a member of a campus sorority, and involved in a number of campus activities including dancing and singing. In relating other important aspects about herself, Diana indicated that her studies in Spanish were a salient point in her identity. As she shared, her interest in Spanish was fostered at an early age with her elementary and secondary schooling through a Spanish immersion program offered in her middle-class, but fairly liberal, Oregon suburb. “Well, since I was six years-old, first grade, I had half my day in Spanish and half my day in English. So now I’ve taken fifteen years of Spanish, and am basically fluent, but it’s not just the extent of knowing the language, it’s the culture. We were taught culture as well, a lot about Latin American history and culture and dances and music, and so I feel like it’s kind of a part of me” (1i, p.1). As a result of this prolonged immersion experience, Diana admitted that she believes herself to be more accepting and more open-minded toward people of diverse backgrounds.

Surprisingly, despite the diversity of culture that was a part of her everyday education, Diana shared that her childhood classmates were predominantly White. Perhaps because of this unique, and ironically homogenous, educational experience,
Diana was keenly sensitive in discussing the campus climate at OSU, agreeing with the other participants that it was not a particularly inviting place for students of color. Diana was especially critical of the lack of faculty of color on campus, questioning others about their perceptions and feelings. In fact, Diana’s role within the group setting was often to question her peers, pushing the conversation to the next level of consideration. Several questions were particularly insightful as she probed her peers about their opinions and perceptions related to the White students and faculty on campus. In this regard, a sizeable amount of Diana’s dialogue was in the form of inquiries, posing additional challenges in telling her story here.

In addition to her various roles and relationships on campus, Diane indicated that her Scottish heritage was an important aspect of her upbringing. Diana’s grandparents are originally from Scotland, with her father then being of direct Scottish descent. Because of this close connection, Diana and those family members on her father’s side are still very active in the Scottish community, regularly practicing Scottish traditions. For example, “My dad plays the bagpipes; I grew up going to highland games since I was born; my dad wears a kilt....I feel like it’s a pretty big part of me just because it was a big part of our family and we still carry a lot of traditions that, I guess, you know, go on in Scotland, that are Scottish traditions, going to the games and just having different things around” (1i, pp. 7-8).

In briefly discussing her mother’s heritage, Diana shared that her mother is of Italian descent. In questioning as to why this was not a salient part of her identity or an aspect she initially discussed, Diana indicated that she felt somewhat removed from this part of her cultural background. In explaining this further she stated, “I can ask
questions about it [Scottish culture] to my dad or my nanna or granda or whatever, and you know, I’m around the culture more and so it’s just easier to find out about it, to learn about it, to be part of it. But then the Italian side, there’s no one really to talk to about it with or ask about or no one who’s influencing me to be a part of it” (5i, p 5).

Given her cultural interests and continued experiences interacting with diverse students on campus, Diane indicated an interest in a career that would focus on helping others. In conjunction with these aspirations, Diana still seems critical of intolerance that remains ingrained in society. In describing the stand she takes toward others who make insensitive remarks, Diana stated, “I’m pretty outspoken, I say what I feel, and if someone has said something I don’t feel is correct or if they, you know, are putting somebody down I’ll call them on that, so sometimes my friends get upset with me and say I should be more reserved and just let things go, but I can’t, because I have to point it out” (1i, p. 3). Despite this sense of integrity, Diana shared that she is also wary at times of her assumed role as a leader in effecting change. As with Deanne who shared her frustration with being considered the expert on Black or multicultural issues, Diana also stated similar feelings. “In my [sorority] house, whenever there’s any sort of cultural thing that comes up or some sort of thing, it’s like ‘Diana’ [pseudonym inserted] will do that or ‘Diana’ [pseudonym inserted] knows about that. I’m like, what? Like what is that? Like she’s that cultural person. What does that mean?” (4g, p. 22).
Racial Identity as a Difficult Concept to Articulate

Perhaps more than any other participant, Diana seemed more comfortable—at least initially—in articulating her racial identity. During our first individual discussion Diana shared that she racially identified as White and Scottish American. Having attended an immersion school with such a diverse faculty and being exposed to the Scottish heritage at a young age, Diana claimed that she noticed racial and ethnic differences relatively early as a child. In articulating these differences and her own identity now, Diana indicated that she feels fortunate to have such a rich and active heritage, stating that many of her White friends do not feel so connected with a cultural past. In explaining this further, Diana stated, “I just feel lucky… I mean, because a lot of [White] people don’t know what they are or they’re like German, Irish, Scottish, Italian, you know, everything. And, I don’t know, it’s kind of nice that I can actually say like, focus on one thing and be really certain that that’s how I identify” (1i, p. 8).

Despite this sense of heritage, I gathered from some of our later conversations that for Diana articulating her identity and discussing issues of race and racism were complicated in some ways by the group setting. During our second individual dialogue Diana initiated a conversation about her role as a White student in the group (which became even more apparent with Bjorn’s absence from several group sessions). In discussing this further, she shared:

Sometimes I feel like being, you know, a White person, some of the issues I don’t quite understand, I mean, because obviously I don’t. I try to, but some of the conversations, like I don’t really have anything
to say about, you know, it’s just other people talking, which is fine.... You know, in classes how people are saying they feel sometimes like they have to either speak for all of their race or ethnicity or that they feel singled out in class or uncomfortable, like I don’t, haven’t really had those kind of feelings or, you know, being watched around on campus or whatever. (5i, p 1)

In this sense, while Diana was able to clearly articulate her identity as a Scottish American and list a number of its cultural practices at the onset of our dialogue, she seemed to be becoming aware of her identity’s additional implications. And even though she did not directly name these implications or differences to be “privileges,” through our conversations it appeared that Diana was realizing that her identity was linked to more than the music and dance she had so often associated with being Scottish American.

By our final conversation, Diana still chose to identify as a “White woman with Scottish heritage” (8i, p 6). In articulating its significance though, Diana was less sure and less willing to define what it meant to her. “I don’t know if it even means anything specific. It’s just a state of being, it’s just a name. It’s, I don’t know how to, I can’t put it into words. It’s not really something describable, I guess” (8i, p 2). Later in that final conversation Diana and I attempted to “get at” just why articulating the meaning of her identity was problematic. I sensed that while Diana seemed certain about her identity as White and Scottish American, she seemed rather uncertain--perhaps even troubled--as to why she had chosen this identity.

I think for me part of it, this sounds kind of stupid, but it’s wanting to be different, not wanting to be like run of the mill, just, you know, [a] normal, regular person. It’s wanting something that makes me more of an individual, I guess. That’s probably why, partly why I do
identify so strongly with being Scottish....I mean, it's part of my family, but then I think I could totally choose to downplay that if I wanted to and only be involved or whatever when I'm with my family, but I don't. It's like when I'm outside my family too. I think it's like not wanting to be boring in some ways. (81, p. 8)

In this way, Diana's struggle with articulating her identity and her reasons for articulating such an identity reflect my own journey in discovering the nature of "symbolic identities" (Waters, 1996). That is, Diana's options in exercising her identity in terms of which ancestries she chooses to claim and which she choose to reject and ignore--the freedom that this allows--pose challenges in verbalizing her identity. Compounded and contrasted by the "forced" experiences of those self-identified students of color in the group, Diana's articulation and understanding of her identity seemed to have become increasingly complicated.

Predefined Labels as Problematic in Racial Identity Development

The existence and societal "need" for labels was also a problematic issue for Diana. As already stated, Diana was not necessarily confused about the labels she had chosen for herself and so our conversations were less concerned with finding the most appropriate terminology to use. Instead, Diana's comments regarding the use of labels seemed more general and more critical of their convenience. As she stated in our first discussion:

I guess people like to put labels on things so when you're asked, you know, "What are you?" it's good to have an answer. I don't know, people are all about labels and trying to put you in a group....I don't think you should have to be labeled and check a box to say, "This is
what I am”...[but] you have to. People ask you these questions all the time, but I don’t think we should have to be asked those questions....But since we are, it’s good to have an answer. (1i, p. 11)

In this sense, Diana seemed torn between the societal necessity of labels and her own personal aversion for such superficial categorization. In explaining this superficial nature of racial labels further, Diana shared, “Well, the label doesn’t explain your personality or how you are as a person. It’s just what people want to put you in a box of ethnic identity or cultural background or whatever. That doesn’t say anything about you as a person, who you are necessarily. So it’s kind of a stupid thing to have to do, I guess” (3g, p. 5). In expanding on this comment later during this group conversation, Diana shared that labels then were only afterthoughts in development, that they did not dictate in any way her own identity.

As with the other participants, Diana indicated that the labels associated with racial identity were most problematic because of the stereotypes that accompany such self-naming. Similar to Bjorn who expressed apprehension regarding the negative and racists images of being White, Diana also stated her concern and again her desire to have a more unique heritage.

Sometimes I don’t want to be just a White person; I don’t want to just be White. So it’s like you find something else to feel like I’m not a part of that, because it has, I feel a negative connotation. You know, when you’re talking to people of color or people, other people, to be White they think, I kind of sometimes feel that people think you’re going to be a certain way, they automatically think you’re going to be racist or automatically think that you have preconceived notions about them, when you don’t necessarily, so it’s like you don’t want to just be White because you don’t want to have people think you’re this horrible racist person or something. (5i, p. 2)
It is not surprising then that during our final conversation Diana, like Arthur, Bjorn, and Deanne, who each discussed the notion of losing their individuality within the context of labels, was reluctant to self-identify and chose to identify at one point only as “Diana” [pseudonym inserted].

By our final conversation it appeared that Diana was questioning the use of labels in expressing racial identity even more, at times revisiting some of her earlier comments related to the topic. For example, in discussing the role of labels as possible influencers in racial identity development, Diana reexamined whether such identifiers are self-selected and empowering or simply other-prescribed and a matter of convenience. Some of her final remarks indicate that while she may be relatively settled as to how she names herself (although this too seems to be in question to some degree), the issue of labeling suggests a deeper struggle with identity.

I hadn’t really thought about it [racial identity] before we started these sessions, so it just makes me think about, you know, why, why do I identify this way? Or what, you know, what is race? Like is [it] anything? Like how, when we were talking about like in our group sessions, all the time about labels and names, it’s just, it makes it more confusing. Do we choose to be called this because we want to, or is it because it’s the only way to describe it, you know? It’s just like there’s no answer, I don’t think, and it just makes me more confused. (8i, p. 7)

Racial Identity as a Combination of External and Internal Influences

Diana was the participant who introduced the topic about the nature of the influences related to her racial identity development. In fact, it was her statements that in many ways propelled later group conversation and debate about external and
internal influences. In describing her own Scottish American heritage and how she had come to know and understand this aspect of her cultural background, Diana shared that her family was highly influential in shaping her identity. In many ways then, her identity was truly “inherited.” As she stated, “That’s what I’ve been told by my family, by my parents, and just by association with my dad being so involved in the musical aspect of that, and I guess just being told. And my grandparents are from Scotland, have accents and everything” (1i, p. 10). However, Diana was clear in indicating that her family’s actions, while significant, were not the only factor in her racial identity. As Diana revealed, other internal influences must be at work as well.

I think it’s [identity] a combination of like being told by your family, being told by other people, and just kind of intrinsically knowing. I think it’s a combination of both things, and probably, you know, if my family wasn’t at all involved in Scottish heritage things and had no involvement with that, I would probably be a little more of a different person today, I probably wouldn’t have as strong of a connection with that side of me and I would kind of be floating around still trying to figure out like what my identity was, you know, like if you don’t have anything that’s kind of pushing you towards one thing. I don’t think it would be as strong of a connection, I guess, and there’s still like a part of me that, still kind of floats out there wondering who am I and how should I identify and that kind of stuff. (1i, p. 10)

Throughout our conversations, Diana vacillated between whether her identity was the result of external or internal influences. In a number of dialogues she discussed the perceptions of others including her family, friends, and even strangers, indicating that had others not told her that she was “White” or “Scottish American,” she likely would never have considered it with any consequence. She shared that
others' initial opinions can be particularly interesting, and even deceiving, given her appearance as a "White girl" (5i, p. 6) who is fluent in Spanish and has been exposed to a culturally diverse education through her immersion experience.

Despite this, and more than any other participant, Diana was committed throughout our dialogues to acknowledging the existence of both the external and internal influences. In revisiting the topic during our second individual conversation, Diana shared at length her thoughts on the balance or external and internal influences and her own role as an independent being with free will.

It's a combination of both of them...what my family has emphasized or, you know, told me, and it's the focus, but also, I mean, I could choose just to keep that within my family, you know what I mean, and not like talk about it with other people or not vocalize it. Does that make any sense? So, but I choose to...say that to other people and share it...So I think it's a combination of me wanting, of me searching for who you are and trying to identify with something and your family telling you or people telling you. I think it's both, it's not one just one or the other... I don't think it can be just one. I mean, maybe it's like it would be ninety percent external and ten percent internal for people, or ten percent external and ninety percent internal or whatever combination, but I think it is both, you can't have one without a little bit of the other, I think. (5i, p. 3)

While Diana was able to share a number of examples of the external influences in her life, articulating those factors that are internal was more problematic. As she shared with her peers, "I think there still has to be some other little internal thing. I think it's like what 'Deanne' [pseudonym inserted] said, that you can't verbalize it though. I don't know, it's scary to think I'd be completely, completely external, that you have nothing about you that controls who you are. That can't be possible, there has to be something" (6g, p. 13). Here Diana's comments reflect her own need to
have some sense of control over her own identity, and to resolve the overwhelming number of outside factors with an individual construct that makes sense of the external influences.

Racial Identity as Manifesting Itself Situationally

While Diana discussed this aspect of her identity less than her peers in the group, she did assert during our first conversation that she revealed her identity differently in various situations. However, Diana was quick to indicate that in doing so, her identity did not itself change, only the outward representation. As she clarified this she explained:

I think certain aspects come out at different times, different elements that you’re in at those times…I mean, it’s always in there it’s just other things come out, I don’t know how to say this, like above each other, you know. If I’m in a situation where I need to be independent, that’s going to be, you know, what I am at that moment and then those other things will kind of be underlying still. Does that make any sense? (1i, p. 3)

In a later group discussion she shared this thought with the group stating, “You keep certain things more subdued in certain company and let it all out in other company…I think those things are still inside you, you just choose when to let them out” (6g, p. 28).

In addition to the few direct comments Diana made in reference to the notion of situational identities, I was struck by how she demonstrated and hinted at her own experiences with this through her stories. For example, Diana’s heritage as a
Scottish person and her active involvement in its practices as well as her participation in cultural events on campus relegate her as something of an “expert” among those in her sorority house. Among her family and friends she is, therefore, culturally “rich.” On the other hand, among the students participants in these dialogues I sensed that Diana considered herself rather culturally “poor,” identifying so strong with her Scottish heritage in an attempt to “not be ordinary” (8i, p. 9). In this sense then, Diana does not necessarily manifest her identity differently, she identifies as Scottish American in all instances, but what exactly that means to her in the context of different situations seems to change. In some situations this identity is a source of pride and tradition; at other times it is a reminder of a heritage that is in some ways “less cultural” and less meaningful.

Racial Identity as a Dynamic Process of Growth

As with the other participants, Diana also indicated her belief that her racial identity was a dynamic, constantly changing process. Just moments into our first conversation, Diana indicated that self-identifying is challenging because of her own continuous growth. As she shared, “I feel like I’m like a work in progress still, you know, each time I take a class or go somewhere it’s like I learn a different part of myself” (1i, p. 2). Diana elaborated in this aspect of change and growth later after we continued our discussion about her identity as a White, Scottish American woman, allowing room for modifications her own responses. As she stated, “That’s how I am right now, but, you know, we all change” (1i, p. 10). As Diana indicated
throughout of discussions, much of this “work in progress” has been shaped most recently and most powerfully by the experiences of independence that life at OSU has afforded her.

Diana’s own growth and change in perception was perhaps the most evident indication of the fluid and dynamic nature of racial identity development. As mentioned earlier, Diana appeared initially in many ways the most certain about her racial identity, its practices and its meaning. Our final conversation though indicated that Diana was feeling less confident about why she chooses to identify as Scottish American. Her own self-doubts demonstrate that she too, simply over the course of our discussions, was beginning to view her racial identity in new and more critical ways. She concisely summed up these thoughts and feelings of confusion and growth in the last statement she made during our final conversation.

I think it’s [the dialogues] been really good. I do come out feeling really confused sometimes, but I think it’s good to be thinking about these things, and it just gets your mind kind of rolling. And maybe, I mean, I don’t think. Some of these questions are like, are almost unanswerable, like you can never come to a concrete answer. But you can get like closer to an answer for yourself or, you know, it evolves all the time obviously because you feel differently at different times. (8i, p. 10)
Considerations: A Cross Case Discussion

As with every chapter of this dissertation, writing demands an arbitrary and unnatural suspension in the process of examination and investigation. In terms of attempting to make meaning of the lived experiences of the five participants in this study, I have in no way completed this complex task. This “final” chapter, therefore, should not be considered a culmination or conclusion to the work involved in attempting to understand racial identity development of the five participants. On the contrary, these last pages are only a pause to allow for the reporting of my reflections as they currently stands.

I use this opportunity to revisit my research questions and my own opinions as they relate to race, racism, racial identity development, and research. The irony here is that in relating these thoughts, my perceptions are again altered since by simply speaking I have given voice to my thoughts and changed their essence. In this sense, in writing I am forever engaged in the futile attempt of relaying the present through words that cannot seem to “catch up.” Yet despite this futility, I am charged with the need to articulate my thoughts and perceptions as they relate to racial identity development after this research journey. I do so then as the legitimization of my research, but do so knowing the limitations that this implies as well.

In making sense of the stories (data) presented it is helpful to look beyond the five themes and consider the importance across the five participant cases. In other words, what is meaningful about these stories? What have these students shared that
allow for my deeper understanding of racial identity? In an earlier section of this dissertation, I presented four focus questions meant to guide my research practice and writing. These questions were: (a) Absent other-imposed categories and models, how do these students identify racially? (b) What do these identities mean to them? How do these students make meaning of their own racial identities and racial identity development? (c) How have these students come to identify this way? What are their personal processes for making meaning of their own racial identities? (d) Do these students’ ideas of racial identity challenge our current dominant discourses and educational practices?

In revisiting these questions it seems that the students’ vignettes themselves, their voices and stories, have led to insights regarding a number of these questions. These stories have highlighted how these five students chose to identify during our dialogues, what these identities meant to them, and, in many ways, how they have come to identify in the ways they expressed. What still needs to be addressed, it seems, is whether these students’ ideas of racial identity challenge current dominant discourses and educational practices. And, if the answer to this is yes, then the more compelling question seems to be how do their stories challenge the dominant discourse and what are the implications associated with this?

I have found that in supporting my considerations, traditional research articles generally fall short. Not surprisingly, the most meaningful texts--those works that resemble in some ways the shared experiences of the five students who participated in this study--are other stories of racial growth, autobiographical essays, vignettes, and books. In using the voices of the Ana, Arthur, Bjorn, Deanne, and
Diana as a guide and others’ stories (Baldwin, 1961; Croteau, 1999; Delgado-Romero, 1999; Fukuyama, 1999; Jackson, 1999; Johnson, 1927; Kiselica, 1999; Liu, 1998; Mura, 1991; Ortiz, 1999; Parrilla de Kokal, 1999; Pizarro, 1998; Rodriguez, 1981; Warren, 1965; Williams, 1999), I offer the following thoughts.

**Challenging the Dominant Discourse**

As discussed at length, the majority of traditional racial identity development models exist in a positivistic attempt to test, retest, and explain the experiences of both people of color and those in the majority (Atkinson et al., 1998; Carter, 1990; Claney and Parker, 1989; Helms & Carter, 1990; Parham & Helms, 1981, 1985a, 1985b; Parker, et al., 1998; Parks, et al., 1996; Pope-Davis & Ottavi, 1994; Taub & McEwen, 1992; Tokar & Swanson, 1991). Recently, some researchers (Jones, 1997; Kerwin, Ponterotto, Jackson, & Harris, 1993; Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis, & Thomas, 1999; Watt, 1999) have included “qualitative” techniques to make meaning of this phenomenon, but have done so still “using” participants voices minimally and within the framework of traditional racial identity development models in an attempt to find a universal and generalizable explanation.

The general and arbitrary division among racial identity development models (i.e. “White” versus “Black” versus “Bi-racial”) and the use of “stages,” (Cross, 1971; Helms, 1984; Ruiz, 1990) “statuses,” (Helms, 1995) or “types” (Rowe, Bennett, Atkinson, 1994) in describing and then predicting a universal pattern in development is a common trend and shortcoming among theories and racial identity
development research. In telling their own autobiographical identity stories, other researchers (Wilbur, 1999; Williams, 1999) have also critiqued this approach. In recalling her biracial heritage, Williams asserted, "In a world where socially constructed categories of race are misconstrued as biological, little encouragement is offered to people like me to claim an identity that falls outside prescribed frameworks....The racial identity development models could not help me with the questions I was asking" (p. 33-34). Likewise, in reflecting on his Native American background and now profession as a multicultural counselor, Wilbur stated:

I have also found such [subjective life] experiences to be more complicated and less determined than can be explained by theories that focus on processes that reproduce psychological capacities, stages, and proclivities across generations. Rarely will there be a fixed consequence of a single event. Unfortunately, traditional models of therapy often are based on linear assumptions of causality. (p. 49)

I have realized from the abundance of positivistic and post-positivistic racial identity development models, the frequency with which they are implemented, and the definitive conclusions made as a result, that we actively choose to misunderstand others' thoughts and behaviors. Our current models, research methods, ways of thinking echo the drive for neat definitive explanations. Even within the most complicated phenomena such as racial identity development, we choose to simplify and oversimplify answers for our own convenience and our own benefit. In other words, describing others from safe and predictable perspectives makes our roles as educators easier, less troubling, less thoughtful. Much of the current research examining racial identity development--its need for management and prediction--is
an example of this naïve desire to “know” and the naïve belief that we can “know.”
In her own story of a complicated racial identity Williams (1999) shared similar thoughts: “Racial identity is an individual’s own choice. It is this concept that flies in the face of social constructions of race. The idea that individuals have the right to define their own experience, to create their own personal meanings, to frame their own identity, to claim an ‘I’ that is uniquely their own, shakes up many people’s most dearly held beliefs about race” (p. 34).

The stories told by the participants in this examination indicate that racial identity as experienced and verbalized by them (as opposed to simply condensed and then paraphrased for them) is indeed complex. Their perspectives indicate that racial identity for them was not fragmentable, linear, causable, or even “developmental” in the most common sense of the word. In contrary, the experiences of these five students indicate that for them, racial identity appeared to be a holistic (not viewed in pieces or phases), variable (does not follow a standard or logical progression), and cognitive (thinking, perceiving, reasoning) process. Racial identity processes for these five students did not seem to follow an established or known scheme or time frame, and was not characterized by milestones or checkpoints. By their perceptions, identity growth did not seem to be an orderly process, a series of age-appropriate and age-dictated stages through which they would navigate regardless of their unique experiences.

For Ana, Arthur, Bjorn, Deanne, and Diana, changes in racial identity seemed to reflect a transformation on several levels. First, it seemed to be recurrent in nature, characterized by a series of emotions and intellectual self-reflection that are
revisited time and time again. As seen in their stories, the uncertainty with which they expressed their identity and the number of changes in perception is evidence of this recurrent nature. I associate this process to Tatum’s (1997) comparison of racial identity development to a spiral staircase whereby individuals are constantly in motion, but also revisiting similar areas and issues at times. Like the climber on the staircase though, each individual is never in exactly the same place intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually. In many ways, this image is analogous to the experiences of the student participants in this study, yet I am reluctant and resistant to conclude that “higher” and “lower” levels of the identity process exist in relation to one another.

The important point here is that, growth for these students did not seem to be an incremental process where additional experiences developmentally add on to existing ones. In revisiting my critical theory influences, this type of perspective reflects the “banking” concept of education (Freire, 1978), in which development proceeds only through filling the vacuous, passive individual. Instead, from a more cognitive approach, identity growth entailed complicated thought, perception, and reasoning process as well as changes, sometimes subtle sometimes more noticeable, that transformed the previous identifications into something entirely new and distinct. Other cognitive approaches (also stage-organized theories though) to student development have focused on intellectual and ethical development (Perry, 1970), moral development (Kohlberg, 1971), and structured learning (Kolb, 1984), highlighting the crucial integration of intellect and identity.
Absent the knowledge of these traditional models, the students that I dialogued with did not seem to make sense of their identity in ways which have been presented, tested, and retested by leading researchers (i.e. Western, White, male "logical" ideals of development). Traditionally held notions of racial identity development link it with maturational age (Erikson, 1980), environmental influences (Cross, 1971) or a combination of the two (Kerwin et al., 1993). In contrast to this, Ana, Arthur, Bjorn, Deanne, and Diana seemed to consider their identity less in terms of physical or maturational development; they were less concerned with "appropriate" feelings and behaviors given their age or class standing or with an specific phase or period. In fact, our conversations did not broach the topic of physical or age-related development at all; it seemed irrelevant. Likewise, their stories and the emphasis on indescribable internal processes indicate that environmental circumstances are not exclusive in influencing racial identity growth. These five students were more interested in exploring identity from an intellectual and emotional perspective, in realizing, understanding, and then articulating their stories within a larger connected life experience. And while the five student participants identified significant turning points at various times in their lives, many of which had taken place recently while attending Oregon State University, their approach to considering racial identity seems substantially different from that proposed by Cross (1971) who put a time frame around identity growth, suggesting that at least Black identity development occurs primarily during the college years. It also runs contrary to Helms' (1984) model that is "based on the premise that all
people, regardless of race, go through a stagewise process of developing racial consciousness” (p. 154).

The stories shared by these five student participants challenge the dominant discourse in additional ways. As discussed in the last theme, the students in this study indicated that their racial identity growth was an ever-changing and dynamic process. In his own work revisiting Cross' (1971) model of Nigrescence, Parham (1989) emphasized this same point, but within the context of a traditional stage-wise progression. These students did not indicate a final phase within the process, a highest or most complete sense of knowing and realizing their identity. Instead, they used words such as “dynamic,” “fluid,” “coalescing” in their descriptions. This idea of continuous growth challenges nearly all of the traditional identity development models proposed thus far in that it contradicts the notion of a “final” awareness or stopping point in self-discovery.

In addition, these five students indicated that racial identity growth seemed to be a complex balance between both individual and group processes, with this shifting a possible indication of differing degrees of clarity among participants. As seen through their desire to identify only as “myself,” these students indicated that their experiences in understanding and articulating their identities were unique and individual process that cannot be dictated or systematized for all. On several occasions though, student participants indicated that amidst this individuality, a sense of shared understanding exists among their peers. As mentioned earlier in my researcher assumptions, this notion of shared experiences, a common understanding of the spoken and unspoken aspects of a culture, is fundamental in the existence of
identity and central to my critique of postmodernism. Nonetheless, such a balance as articulated by these students runs in contrast to the broad nature of identity development models and theories, that is, that a single model can explain the diverse identity experiences of all Whites, Blacks, Latinos/as, or other racial group. In other words, traditional racial identity development models assume uniformity among individuals within the same racial identification. The variation in stories and even with individual themes for the five student participants indicates that for them little uniformity exists. According to Tatum though (1992), Cross’ model for Black identity development is sufficient in explaining and predicting the experiences of other people of color because “there is evidence to suggest that the process for these [Asian, Latino/a, Native American] is similar to that described for African Americans” (p. 9).

In addition to challenging the dominant discourse in a number of ways, the vignettes generated from the five students in this study have led to additional thoughts and considerations (many of which also may also be viewed as challenging the dominant discourse) regarding their racial identity growth. The first of these considerations involves the use of language. As Tatum (1997) stated, “The language we use to categorize one another racially is imperfect....The original creation of racial categories was in the service of oppression. Some may argue that continue to use them is to continue that oppression. I respect that argument. Yet it is difficult to talk about what is essentially a flawed and problematic social construct without using language that is itself problematic” (p. 17). As demonstrated earlier, students in this study struggled with the imperfection of labels--in much the same way they struggle
with their own racial identities—expressing difficulty in articulating and adhering to such self-naming. In this sense, it seems that labels for these five students are more than a matter of semantics, that they are in some way linked with identity. I would suspect that for Ana, Arthur, Bjorn, Deanne, and Diana labels were in some way an outward manifestation related to internal cognitive growth. Furthermore, “settling” on a label or several labels simultaneously, reflected a self-assessment in “talking through” the use, need, and appropriateness of racial categories. And as with an ever-changing and dynamic identity, labels for these students were also constantly in flux.

In analyzing these five students’ stories it also seemed that racial identity, in addition to being in a state of continuous change, is constantly negotiable. In his own autobiographical racial identity journey, Jackson (1999) referred to this negotiation as “code switching” (p. 6) whereby individuals alter behaviors out of personal necessity due to some external influence. The students in this study engaged in “code switching” based on situational stimuli such as peer perceptions or familial obligation. In acknowledging the prevalence and power of such influences, these students were generally troubled by a sense of helplessness in considering the power of societal and environmental influences. This struggle in resolving the source of the identities and the role they play in claiming an “I” remained a constant question throughout our dialogue.

In describing identity as a cognitive process, reconciling this dilemma is less problematic. In drawing on the examples and stories of the students in this study, it seems that identity is uniquely and at least partially cognitively internal. While
external influences are abundant, overwhelming to some degree, and those
influences may be similar for numerous individuals, racial identity growth remains
internally constructed. In other words, the sources of experiences may be externally-
based, but the way in which each individual chooses to incorporate, negate, or make
meaning of these influences is internal. It is this self-resolution that provides for a
unique identity, one with its origins in shared and common experiences.

In reflecting on the dialogues with the five student participants in this study
and considering our more recent “continuing” discussions, it seems evident that these
students valued the opportunity to share their stories. Our semi-regular
conversations served as a time to vent frustrations with the current campus and
societal climates, compare stories of oppression and discrimination, and appreciate
shared experiences. But more than this, the students in this study expressed on
numerous occasions their disbelief and even skepticism regarding the potential of
their own voices. At different moments during our conversations or after reading
their own vignettes, participants began to realize the power and importance of their
words. I sensed from our conversations, many of which took place before or after
the tape-recorded dialogues, that students were amazed (and perhaps somewhat
troubled) by my own interest in their histories and struggles (“Why are you so
interested in what I have to say?”). Their questions related to my own desire to hear
their stories and honor their voices saddened me to some degree. Why should it be
so unusual for educators to listen to students beyond “relevant” classroom topics?
And if it is uncommon for such exchange to occur, what does this mean for
education?
Implications and Questions for Future Examination

Given these considerations and challenges, the implications for educators, counselors, and higher education administrators are significant. Simply asked, how well do we know our students? Do we choose erroneously to know our students in safe and predictable ways only? Do we adhere to traditional models that categorically designate students developmentally and then use this misinformation to guide our practice? How are the misinformation and the limitations of the dominant discourse affecting our ability to educate students, our success in conducting research, and our credibility as scholars and leaders? How are they affecting our willingness to create opportunities that support students’ unique perspectives and individualistic growth? More importantly, how are they affecting our ability (or inability) to effectively and honestly dialogue with students? Finally, what are the effects of not engaging in true dialogue with students concerning the most fundamental questions about their experiences? Can we afford to continue contributing to the dominant discourse and its oppressive nature by ignoring, misrepresenting, or selectively using their voices?

In considering the scope of these questions and the far reaching implications of more liberating research in the area of racial identity development, the possibilities for future research are numerous and, to some degree, awesome. Further examination is needed in examining other students’ experiences and perceptions related to racial identity. Among the other dimensions to consider are possible differences or similarities related to age, religion, and institutional affiliation
and exposure. In other words, how different or similar are other university-level students’ experiences than those in this research project? How do students other than Ana, Arthur, Bjorn, Deanne, and Diana make meaning of their racial identities? In addition, since participant dialogues in this study did not involve discussion of traditional racial identity development models, how would participants’ knowledge of these models affect our dialogues? How do students’ make meaning of the dominant discourse? What are there perceptions regarding traditional descriptions of their development? How do they view the predefined “stages,” and would they use them in self-identifying?

Among those questions that pose ideas for further consideration and future research is the notion of further exploring our current ideas of racial identity development. Specifically, what are the implications of racial identity that is perceived to be transformed and cognitively resolved? How does this consideration further complicate and challenge our current notions of development? How does this consideration further complicate and challenge how we “do business” as educators, researchers, and administrators?

In moving beyond the concept of racial identity, the methodology and methods employed in this study can be can be reconsidered with the context of other types of identity growth including gender, sexual orientation, class. How do students identify within these other constructs and how do they make meaning of their own identities? Do students’ ideas of identity in these other areas also challenge our current dominant discourses and educational practices? Additionally, how do multiple aspects of identity (age, gender, religion, sexual orientation) intersect with
racial identity? How do students make meaning of and balance these multiple identities?

Finally, further investigation needs to be conducted regarding the fundamental nature of our research, educational, and pedagogical practices. What other ways can we intentionally honor students’ voices and examine such intimate experiences through research and education efforts? How does examining students’ experiences in such depth and honoring students’ voices affect their identity development? How would such thoughtful inquiry affect our own practice and self-awareness? Finally, what would happen if we did choose to listen to students’ perspectives, voices regarding issues of race? What would it mean if we truly honored students’ voices? For us as individuals? For us as educators? For our communities?
Bibliography


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