

Experiences and Processes Affecting Racial Identity Development: Preliminary Results From the Biracial Sibling Project

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Siblings of mixed racial heritage often identify differently from one another. In a study of 20 sibling pairs, 4 types of experiences surfaced that appear to influence the identity process: hazing, family dysfunction, other salient identities, and the impact of integration. These experiences were explored within the framework of the ecological model of racial identity development.

For centuries the United States has followed rules of hypodescent, or more colloquially, the "one-drop" rule for racial classification. This rule, implicitly embedded in racial identity theories, is challenged by changes in the contemporary population in which visible cohorts of persons of mixed heritage exist who do not strictly adhere to the one-drop rule.

Anecdotally, in the models of racial identity that have guided psychological understanding of racial awareness for two decades, persons assigned to the same racial grouping, whether they be siblings or strangers, use labels signifying their location within a single racial group. In contrast, anecdotal

information on siblings of racially mixed heritage suggest they often racially or ethnically identify themselves differently from one another. At conferences dedicated to the theme of multiraciality, this difference is often the topic of discussion, with some individuals saying that each of three or four siblings identifies differently. Is this due to stage of racial identity development? Can gender explain these differences? Does phenotype explain the difference? Does birth order explain differences?

These questions offer a range of explanations and hypotheses about these differences, suggesting that this phenomenon of different racial identities among siblings in

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the same family would likely be complex. Studies of persons of mixed-race heritage already suggest some counterintuitive findings, and misunderstood findings. For example, phenotype does not determine how people identify themselves (Hall, 1980), though it may certainly predict some experiences one is more likely to have. Hall also found that gender alignment between a child and parent (i.e., mothers and daughters or fathers and sons) did not predict the identity label used by young Black Japanese adults in her study. Other researchers have found that identity can change over the lifetime in a way that does not necessarily reflect a stage process (Root, 1990). Racial identity can be very situational, not necessarily reflecting an ambivalence (Stephan, 1992). And the contemporary cohort of racially mixed young adults, more than at any other point in history, is asserting a racially mixed identity. This assertion, however, is generally misunderstood to reflect a racial hatred of self, a desire to be White, or a personality that is opportunistic. Rather than these explanations being derived from conventional lore, many of these individuals are subverting monoracial paradigms (Daniel, 1992), refusing to adhere to the irrational racial rules of this country (Spickard, 1992), or contextualizing racial identity. An identity choice is possible amid a growing number of mixed-race people in the post-civil rights era. Without most people's ability to experience the insider perspective on being of mixed parentage, a monoracial framework is usually the guide for interpretation of behavior and process.

One of the purposes of this study was to understand what drives the process of identity development in general for persons of mixed ancestry. This report provides a preliminary discussion of the findings of the process affecting identity development that appear to account for some differential choices within the same family. A better understanding of this process may help to understand the different choices of identity among siblings.

The ecological model of racial identity

development (Root, in press-a, in press-b) was used to guide the process of inquiry. It relies on the contextual macrolenses of gender, class, and regional history of race to filter the meaning of situations and experiences to which people are exposed. Micro-lenses of *inherited influences* (e.g., given names, languages spoken in the home, phenotype, cultural values, sexual orientation), *traits* (e.g., temperament, talents, coping skills), and *social environments* (e.g., home, school, work) also filter the meaning of daily experiences (see Figure 1).

Inherited influences represent those situations into which one is born that are experienced in the home on a daily basis. They may be of biological or environmental origins.

Traits are those factors attributed to a layperson's definition of personality. Again, these factors can be genetically or environmentally determined. Traits include factors such as temperament, special abilities or talents, and learned coping skills. Personality and the skills often attributed to personality can direct differential outcomes of events. For example, name calling or authenticity testing, common experiences for many persons of mixed heritage, are not experienced uniformly. Although these experiences may be initially unsettling to almost all children, some children will experience them as challenges they are able to constructively meet; a brother or sister may experience some of these same events as so hurtful that these experiences preclude them from joining in with the other children. Their way of coping or avoiding further incidents may steer their life course in a different direction than their sibling's.

Undoubtedly, the environments in which people interact significantly impact their identity because identity is derived from a transactional process that defines the elements significant for stratification within a society. Social environments provide the contexts for social interactions in which the self is reflected (Cooley, 1902). For example, how one is treated at home, at school, and at work may be similar or differ-

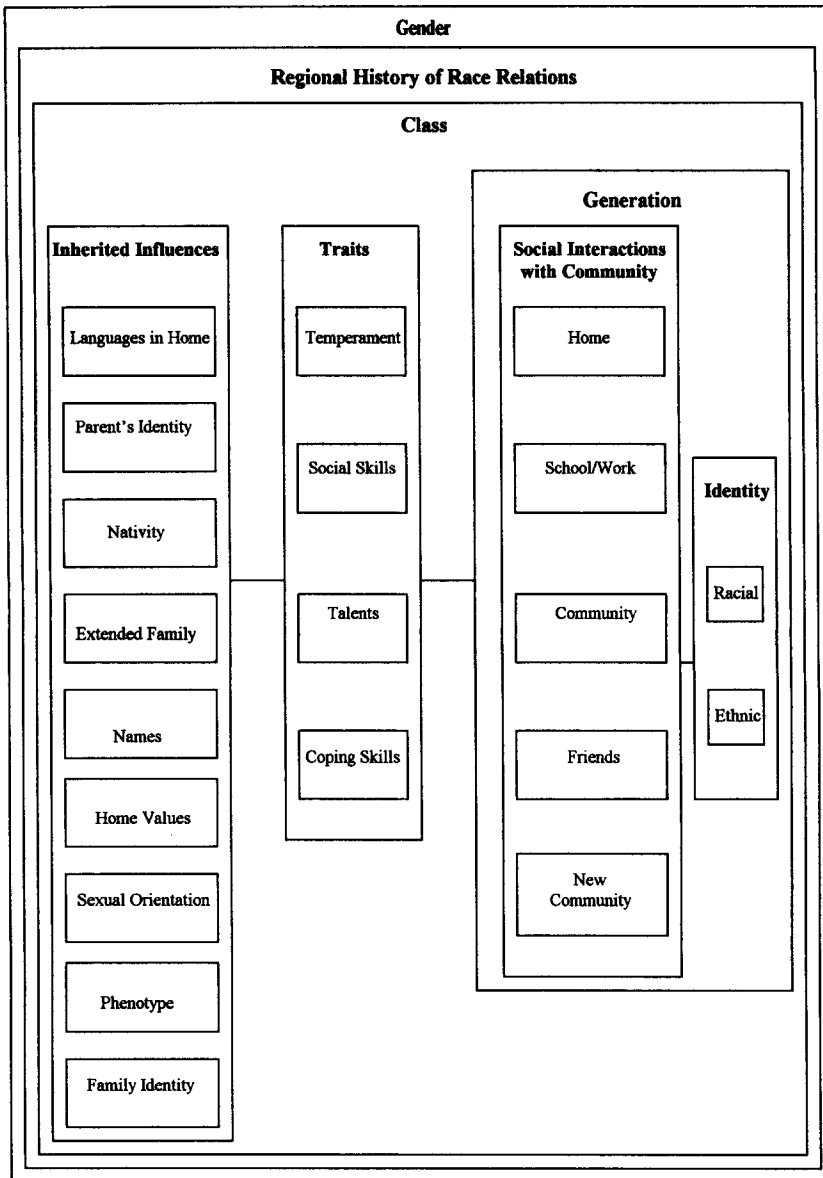


Figure 1. Ecological model of racial identity.

ent and one may have different ways of coping with interactions within these environments. One may have overlapping identities in each of these environments or disparate identities. For young persons, some of the racial identity process in their community is negotiated, although often indirectly, by the family. However, when young adults move to a new city for a job or for school, they may

have to negotiate their identity with strangers and possibly in a region with a different history of race relations. A common situation illustrating this point arises when people leave home for college or a job in a city and region of the country different from that in which they were raised. A mixed-race person from Oakland, California, who asserts a biracial Black-White identity may

meet major resistance of misinterpretation of this identity if he or she moved to Washington, DC, to attend Howard University, a traditionally Black college. Among other factors, the regional difference in the history of race relations may make this assertion more difficult. Subsequently, the feedback individuals receive about themselves may be very different from previous reflections in other social environments.

Furthermore, one must consider the generational differences that interact with each of the lenses within the model. For example, to be a biracial Black-White college student in the 1990s has a much different meaning than it did in the 1960s or 1940s. Similarly, being an Asian-White college student has many different origins and subsequent meanings in the 1990s than in the 1960s or 1940s. For example, proportionally more of them now than in the previous generation will have two American-born parents. Either student in the 1990s will have a cohort of mixed-heritage people his or her age at college and around the country.

The ecological model of racial identity development acknowledges that there are many different ways people of mixed racial heritage may identify themselves. Furthermore, these identities may be situational (Stephan, 1992), simultaneous, or changeable throughout the life cycle (Root, 1990). These identities do not necessarily coincide with how other persons may identify them. Thus, the private identity may be different from the public identity assumed or validated by others. However, identity development, validation, and transformation is contextually informed by people in situations within which they interpret their interpersonal transactions through political, gendered, and class positions within the region's history of race relations.

Whereas the racial identity development process may resemble the process identified by many monoracial identity models (e.g., Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1979; Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990), for many persons of mixed heritage, the identity process outlined in these stages does not follow a linear course.

Some of the stages similarly represented across models do not offer the same meaning or certainty of refuge. For example, a stage in which an individual retreats from White society and immerses him- or herself in his or her racial group does not guarantee the same safety to the multiracial individual as it does the individual who is perceived monoracially. Furthermore, although multiracial individuals may identify singularly, appearing to follow a conventional model of racial identity, subtle interactions with other people at the same stage of racial consciousness may isolate them. For example, persons may hesitate to date them because they may be accused of actually wanting to date someone who is White. For some persons of mixed heritage, racial identities and ethnic identities may have an orthogonality (Oetting & Beauvais, 1990-1991). One may racially identify as Black and Korean, but be ethnically Korean. Multicultural models developed on racially mixed populations (Ramirez, 1998; Trimble, in press) have provided a framework for understanding an integration of identities as well as the orthogonality of race and ethnicity.

Method

Participants were recruited through small, free community newspapers throughout Washington, as well as a widely distributed free employment paper serving the greater Seattle area. Criterion for inclusion required participants to be at least 18 years of age and willing to participate with a sibling who shares the same biological parents who are of different races according to U.S. conventions of race. Participants were phone screened to make sure they met these criteria.

Subsequently, pairs of siblings were sent questionnaire packets separately and were asked to fill them out independently of their participating sibling. These packets

included an extensive background questionnaire, a body-image inventory, a racial resemblance inventory, a sibling racial resemblance inventory, a brief mental health inventory, a racial experiences inventory (specific to being of mixed heritage), and an identity questionnaire. Participants were reimbursed \$10 for returning the questionnaires.

At the point that both siblings had returned their questionnaire packets, they were scheduled separately for two 2-hr interviews at the University of Washington. The interviews were semistructured, audiotaped, and transcribed. Siblings were not interviewed together. Whereas I conducted some of the interviews, the majority of interviews were conducted by a graduate student research assistant who was an experienced interviewer with extensive knowledge of the racial identity literature. Each person received \$50 for participating in the interview stage of the research.

The first interview explored the broad issues of racial and gender awareness and identity development. For example, all participants were asked at what age they thought they were first aware of race. Similarly, they were asked at what age they became aware of the gendered status of boys and girls. Participants were asked for memories associated with these questions and the meanings they attributed to each of these social statuses. They were also asked specifically about how being a boy or girl affected being of mixed racial heritage or vice versa. Differences in treatment of siblings within the family was explored. Lastly, they were asked what they wished they could have changed in their life that would have made life easier, better, or happier.

In the second interview, participants were asked to divide their life up into developmental stages. Subsequently, they were asked what determined how they divided their life up into stages. Similar questions to those posed in the first interview were asked and repeated within each stage to explore the developmental progressions of issues around race, gender, treatment in the fam-

ily compared to the sibling in the study, and what they wished would have been physically different about them at each stage.

The following results and discussion are based on interviews of 20 siblings pairs. The 40 participants had a mean age of 24.9 years, ranging from 18 to 40. The average age span between siblings was 2.85 years, ranging from barely a year to 12 years. Of these pairs, 10 were same-sex pairs (sister-sister [8] or brother-brother [2]) and 10 were brother-sister pairs. The same-sex pairs had an average age of 24.35 years and the different-sex pairs had 25.5 years, not a significant difference. Combined racial heritages based on parental identification included 11 pairs with African heritage. Of these pairs, 2 were of Black and Asian ancestry and the rest were of Black and White parentage. Among these pairs two parents, one Black and one White, also claimed some American Indian ancestry. There were 8 pairs with Asian ancestry. Two of these pairs overlapped with the previous count in that they were of Asian and Black ancestry. Six were Asian-White pairs. Additionally, 2 pairs claimed mixed American Indian and White ancestry. Most of the participants used different responses to identity questions for ethnicity or race in different situations according to the ecological framework for racial identity development. This result is consistent with Stephan's (1991) findings of persons of mixed ancestry in Honolulu, HI.

Twelve of the pairs grew up with both parents in the household until at least 16 years of age. The remaining 8 pairs came from various family constellations including parenting from a single parent and parenting from a parent and stepparent.

Whereas the majority of pairs perceived growing up in a similar class situation to their sibling, eight of the pairs perceived growing up in different socioeconomic situations from each other, although virtually all pairs grew up together. For example, 1 participant listed their class as poor, whereas the sibling listed it as working. In another pair, one sibling listed the family as middle class, whereas the other siblings listed them

as working or lower class. The age differences in these pairs could not explain this difference in perceptions. If one sibling listed multiple descriptions of which one overlapped with the sibling they were considered matching in perceptions of class backgrounds.

Results and Discussion

Without exception, all participants said that gender awareness predated racial awareness by years. Though most persons could not place an age at which they became aware that there were differences between boys and girls, most persons reported an awareness of racial difference by 5 or 6 years of age. Gender did seem to make some difference in the experience of being a mixed-race person. For example, the female participants experienced an exotification and sexualization not reported by the men. Such reports were consistent with the objectification of women in general, and the sexualization of race (Root, 1994; Zack, 1997).

Whereas participants were aware that the study explored similarities and differences in identities between siblings, different explanations were offered from phenotype to neighborhood environments to birth order to personality. A starting place for understanding similarity and difference is to explore the preliminary findings of processes that seemed to shape the course of identity.

Across subjects, several experiences emerged that seemed to affect the process of racial identity development. Four of these experiences are discussed in this section: hazing, family dysfunction, increased racial integration in the structure of society, and other salient identities. The first two experiences contribute a traumatogenic impact on the individual derailing the identity process.

Hazing

Psychological trauma has been defined in several ways. Essential to most definitions is

that traumatic experiences fragment a cohesive sense of order to the world by shattering more optimistic meanings and expectations of life (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Without help to reassemble one's life or integrate the fragments of meaning, one's life course may be derailed. At the least, it is more cumbersome and circuitous.

In order to build a new set of assumptions, the painful experiences must be reinterpreted. Often, in response to traumatic experiences inflicted by people, one seeks refuge in what is familiar and safe or promises refuge (Root, 1992). In fact, if one looks at the similarity among racial identity theories that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, one sees that they all describe a stage in which one seeks immersion in the socially assigned racial group as refuge from the oppression and racial assaults dealt by society (e.g., Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1979; Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990; Parham, 1989; Phinney, 1989). Unfortunately, this almost guaranteed refuge in one's racial group is not guaranteed for multiracial individuals. Daniel (1992) suggested that history has created a suspicion of biracial or light-skinned Black people within the African American community. This suspicion is not limited to the African American communities as some persons suggest (Davis, 1991), but extends to other groups (e.g., Asian Americans, American Indians, Latinos) where group membership may be determined by multiple and different factors. A mixed heritage, particularly if one's family members are unknown, requires a more active negotiation for acceptance. The experiences rendered by racial oppression constitute what Root (1992) defined as cumulative trauma because of their repeated nature, as is the case with emotional abuse discussed below. Additionally, because they begin at an early age they insidiously shape the worldview. Thus, with this form of trauma, one's worldview is not necessarily shattered if the experiences start early. Rather, one's worldview is shaped.

One of the forms of trauma was hazing, an injunction to prove that one is an insider through a demeaning process of racial and

ethnic authenticity testing. However, the standards for passing such a test are fluid and determined by the one giving the test; thus, whether one passes or fails the authenticity test is largely determined not by one's insider knowledge, but often by the tester's assumptions about the individual or about mixed-race people in general. This testing in stressful rather than traumatic forms may be comprised of teasing or peer pressure to conform to such things as tastes in music or types of clothing worn typical of adolescents. In its traumatic forms it requires a submission or negation of self and the ego, risking emotionally cruel rejection.

The hazing process psychologically resembles a reenactment of the exclusion that minority group persons have sustained at the hands of White persons. Ironically, it combines this enactment with stereotyped and exaggerated expectations of ethnic and racialized behavior or interests. Ironically, the tests often project outsiders' stereotypes and lack of validation of the heterogeneity existing among persons within any ethnic or racial group display. Hazing was reported most frequently among respondents with African heritage in the Black community, although it was not limited to persons of this heritage.

A combination of mixed parentage and phenotype and assertions of biracial heritage (e.g., Black and White, Japanese, and African American) and multiethnic identity (e.g., Jewish and African American) were associated with hazing. (Thus, if someone was a light-skinned person with two African American parents, he or she was not as likely to be subjected to the harshness a phenotypically similar person of mixed parentage might experience.) Participants reported these experiences more commonly in middle to late adolescence. Therefore, the trauma that could be experienced was not necessarily anticipated or cumulative throughout life, but surfaced in the period in which dating and peer pressure were more salient in people's lives.

Girls sustained more ridicule and rejection around phenotype than boys for hair,

hairstyles, body size, eye color, eye shape, hair color, and bust size. Subtly, boys and men appeared to play a significant role in how they were racially marked. For example, Twine (1996) noted that mixed-heritage college students were racially marked by the men they dated. Both boys and girls were subjected to rejection or exclusion for having White friends, lacking ethnic-specific accents, or lacking language fluency (e.g., Spanish). Authenticity required giving up White childhood friends or acting cruelly toward them in public. Some hazing required commission of antisocial acts or behaviors that compromised one's values, for example, stealing, having sex, or denigrating all White people—including one's parent(s).

Ironically, many persons assert that biracial people do not experience discrimination. Although this study did not specifically focus on this theme, it emerged on its own along a continuum. Some respondents, subjected to various forms of hazing, found the price of acceptance by the ethnic community too high. Root (1992) suggested that traumatic experiences perpetrated by people and perceived as malicious may extract the greatest confusion to meaning making. Sometimes the individual "color coded" these experiences, which subsequently derailed the racial identity process. For example, 1 respondent concluded that Black women were mean because some Black women had subjected her to cruel hazing experiences. She shied away from opportunities to undo this overgeneralization.

Some of the respondents talked about immersing themselves more in the communities that would accept them or about striving for the development of identities that were not race based. In this avoidance of dealing with potentially more race-based incidents, the overgeneralized meaning attached to these experiences never gets challenged. Sibling differences in personality, coping skills, and talents seemed to mediate how effective hazing was and whether it was interpreted as traumatic. Phenotype seemed to serve as a stimulus for some of the

hazing activity; however, at this point, it does not appear to predict the outcome of hazing or a person's ability to cope with these experiences.

Family Dysfunction

Extreme family dysfunction also appeared to derail the identity process. In this study, family dysfunction arose from addiction in one or both parents, abandonment, violence, emotional instability, and/or mental illness. The most significant forms were family violence in the form of emotional cruelty, sexual, and/or physical abuse. As in any form of repeated abuse, it reorients the individual's attention towards environmental cues that signal danger (Root, 1992). Although these forms of emotional, psychological, and physical cruelty are not rationally based, human beings have a propensity to attempt to make order and sense out of events in order to organize their experience. Repeated exposure to being told one is stupid, unwanted, bad, unworthy, or ugly may get color coded, particularly if the family is isolated from other interracial families or lives in a homogeneous community. Color coding is particularly easy around issues of race because society provides negative and ambivalent messages about racialized otherness and mixed race.

Essentially, bodies are coded and encoded with status. The body that is female, the body that is not White, is encoded to possess secondary status. Subsequently, with at least an unconscious awareness of this encoding, an individual may distance herself or himself from a culture or ethnic group or attempt to remove those remnants of cultural or racial markers as a way of attempting to exorcise what went wrong. It is a primitive defense elicited by the irrationality of the cruelty and the irrationality of racial thinking among many persons. For example, several persons who experienced emotional cruelty, often coupled with physical cruelty, created a false sense of safety by refusing to date persons who were of the same racial or ethnic make-up as the cruel parent.

One woman in her 40s talked about the cruelty of her Mexican American father toward her even in her adult years. She insightfully talked about looking for partners who were the opposite of her father—in part, she color coded this search by looking for someone different from her father, which included at some level of awareness not being of Mexican ancestry. Thus, she was not attracted to Mexican American men or men of color. She floated for years until cancer in her 30s redirected her attention toward healing herself and attending to her physical body. She noted that her sibling in the study was treated differently and in part had attributed that to phenotype and to possessing a personality that was more appreciated by her father because it was more stereotypically feminine and familiar to him.

Another set of siblings talked about having distanced themselves from Filipinos because their mother had been so distant and self-centered. Though not described as cruel or mean, a less dramatic example of some family dysfunction yielded a similar result to families in which cruelty is color coded. In their young adult years, having had the opportunity to reanalyze their experience and separate their mother's personality and behavior from the Filipino American culture, they have sought information about Filipino Americans and the respective culture.

Abandonment by a parent left participants feeling they had not been loved enough regardless of evidence of love by the parent who remained. The depth of hurt defines identity as an abandoned person and may overshadow dealing with racial identity issues. Conversely, some individuals color coded the abandonment and attached a negative feeling toward a person of that parent's racial background.

This understanding of the effects of cruelty and inconsistencies that stem from parental emotional instability combined with racial encoding also provides an alternative explanation for racially mixed persons who appear to hate themselves. The hatred may not actually stem from being of mixed race, but from lack of differentiation of self from

the abuser, because differentiation from this parent had been foreclosed by the energy expended to simply survive and protect oneself at a more fundamental level. Thus, one may not completely trust an aspect of self to which the propensity for betrayal and cruelty has been color coded.

It seems that traumas that arose before race was clearly understood or before a racial identity was formed derailed the racial identity process; they took precedent for sorting out life and confused aspects of the racial identity process that in part stems from demeaning messages and differential experiences based on race with these parts of the process. Racial identity took longer to sort out. Without the experience to sort and interpret one's experiences, family dysfunction may be color coded and result in different courses for siblings.

The Legacy of Civil Rights

The effects of the Civil Rights Movement showed itself within and across most pairs of siblings in the age range included in this study. Given that the repeal of antimiscegenation laws in 1967 has been followed by a biracial baby boom, mixed-race people are no longer a rare entity or as isolated as they used to be. A visible cohort of multiracial people has led to a multiracial consciousness that some suggest is a social and political movement revising the discourse on race (Nakashima, 1996). The meaning of asserting a multiracial or multiethnic identity at this point in history has a different meaning than ever before.

The Civil Rights Movement of the third quarter of this century resulted in more integrated neighborhoods and schools; multiracial families do not necessarily live in ethnic enclaves. The result seems to be that some mixed-race persons of European White ancestry are identifying themselves as White in some contexts; this identification does not represent confusion, but in some ways represents a color coding of class status. Whereas they grow up in a multiracial family, they may grow up in a largely White com-

munity or attend a largely White school, or grow up with the privileges associated with middle to upper middle class, which previously was almost exclusively reserved for White persons. Two conditions also appear to combine, giving rise to a White identity in racially mixed persons of European White ancestry. If the parent of color is racially or ethnically isolated, and the White parent and his or her side of the family wholly claims the children as part of them and theirs, the children may identify as White. This is akin to the exposure many biracial children had who were cut off from White families and primarily exposed to the extended family of color and a community of color.

Other Salient Identities

Some participants described growing up in situations in which identity was circumscribed by a culture that supposedly transcended race. Within this culture, a set of values was clearly laid out and much socializing existed among persons of similar values. Two major identities stemmed from military affiliation and religious affiliation. As part of military identity, particularly when the family had traveled, exposure to other cultures and extended living abroad also greatly affected one's interpretation of being an American and the salience and enactment of race (Williams, 1992). Personality and age seemed to interact significantly with these experiences.

A group of participants demonstrated that possessing and then losing an identity that was less clearly associated with race throws them into the racial identity process out of developmental synchrony from their peers. One sibling pair with a 12-year age difference from a military family described very different impacts of the transition from military to civilian life largely because of the age at which it occurred. The older sister, in her early 30s, grew up almost exclusively on and around military bases. Her father retired as she was entering her senior year of high school. She stayed in Germany to complete her senior year with her classmates.

Meanwhile, as the family moved back to the United States, her sibling, the youngest of three girls, had just started school. She was exposed throughout her schooleyears to the U.S. construction of race and the attitudes that stem from racial apartheid in this country. Although both siblings identified themselves as mixed race, the younger sister identified herself as ethnically Black. Her older sister, also identifying herself as mixed, did not align herself with the Black community in the same way. Culturally, she did not grow up in the United States. She speaks in a way that is labeled by her sister as White. The older sibling talked about a process of exploring being an "other" and exploring many different types of alternative identities in her search for finding herself once she returned to the United States. This search lasted for approximately 10 years through her 20s.

Another sibling pair belonged to a very religious family that, after such an upbringing, experienced a crisis in the church that led to the church's dissolution. With both the crisis and the dissolution of the congregation, both siblings were left to reconstruct their identities. The church had required a lifestyle that isolated them from the rest of the community except for during the school day. Just starting their 20s, the brother's reaction to the dissolution was quite different from his sister's reaction. Choosing to disavow all aspects of himself associated with the church, which his sister did not, he had to start his search for identity. Given how integrated the church was into their lifestyle, he was left with fragments of a self and the need to make meaning out of what happened and what remained.

Summary

The identity process appears to be more variable for persons of mixed-race heritage than previously reported for persons who are monoracially identified. Some sibling differences in identity may be impacted by

processes invoked because of certain experiences. Four types of experiences were briefly described in these preliminary findings. Traumatic experiences, particularly when they are incurred at a young age, encourage an irrational color coding of the experience that may alienate the individual from some groups of people, including him- or herself. Some families live in contexts in which race is not the most salient identity. When the identity constitutes a culture such that values are dictated by a community associated with this identity, and socialization may be almost exclusively among other similar people, racial identity is less important. However, moving out of this context requires persons of mixed heritage to make sense out of race and determine how they fit into society. Age of transition and personality factors seem to impact how this transition goes. For other persons, growing up in post-civil rights integrated communities with a family class standing of at least middle class seemed to color code class so that these individuals may identify themselves as White.

The preliminary findings from this study suggest that many processes may affect identity. However, central to understanding the differences in identity that may exist between siblings is the age at which these experiences occur and the possible color coding that may ensue as a way of making meaning and understanding the world, particularly when one feels threatened.

Despite the discussion of traumatic experiences, few of these participants suggested that being of a different racial makeup would have guaranteed a happier life. Resilience seemed to prevail among participants regardless of their experiences.

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