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Honors Thesis

UNDERSTANDING BIRACIAL WOMEN'S IDENTITY FORMATION

by
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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment
of graduation requirements for University Honors

Sociology Department
Brigham Young University
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ABSTRACT

UNDERSTANDING BIRACIAL WOMEN'S IDENTITY FORMATION

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This qualitative study seeks to identify themes & patterns concerning biracial women's experiences in the U.S. It is intended to help expand what researchers currently know about what it means to be biracial in the U.S. If society at large has not dictated a script for multiracial persons because they are not even fully recognized as a racial group throughout the US, what can the experiences of these biracial women tell us about the current sociological theories of identity construction? Utilizing six interviews with half-black women and three sociological theories, this paper seeks to answer that question. Ultimately, this study seeks to add to our understanding of half-black women. Their experiences are best told by them, and their stories illustrate the struggles of being multiracial and embracing all pieces of themselves in a society that expects them to just pick one.

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INTRODUCTION

The United States in the past forty years has experienced tremendous growth with regards to interracial marriages and mixed children. According to the Census, the “Two or More Races” category population increased about one-third in size since 2000 (2010 Census). Although this exponential growth demonstrates racial progress, it also raises serious questions about the identification of multiracial populations. If even the national census did not start to recognize “Two or More Races” as a legitimate racial category until fifteen years ago, surely it is not presumptuous to assume that many United States citizens would still continue to view race as a being solely monoracial, such as black, Asian, or White. For example, until 1990, multiracial people who did not feel they fit into a monoracial category on the Census were prompted to mark “Other.” “The instructions for those who marked ‘Other’ read: ‘If you fill in the ‘other’ race circle, be sure to print the name of the race’...If a person wrote two or more races, the Census Bureau considered the first one listed” (Lee and Bean, 2010: 46).

The case of multiracial persons in the context of identity formation raises the overarching research question: if society at large has not dictated a script for multiracial persons because they are not even fully recognized as a racial group throughout the US, what can the experiences of these biracial women tell us about the current sociological theories of identity construction?

First, this paper will discuss three specific theories on identity construction. This includes Bergsieker, Markus, and Townsend (2009) and Brunsma (2006), which focus on interpersonal relationships in understanding identity construction, and Cornell and Hartmann (2007) which offers primarily a macro level framework. Then, after a brief

explanation of the methodology involved, we will examine six different biracial women's experiences in forming their racial identity. These experiences are taken from interviews I conducted in New York City. I will then discuss how these experiences connect to the aforementioned sociological theories of identity construction. Examining these frameworks alongside these interviews is incredibly valuable, most especially because the discussion of race is a timely and heated issue in the United States. For that reason, I will also discuss these women's ideas about Black Lives Matter and police brutality.

MULTIRACIAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Bergsieker, Markus, and Townsend (2009) embraced the discussion of multiracial identification and hypothesized that mixed-race individuals would “experience a wide variety of situations as involving some form of identity denial” and that “the completion of demographic forms, with instructions to ‘check only one’ box, would be a frequently reported episode” (Bergsieker, Markus, and Townsend, 2009:190). These two measures seek to illustrate how a variety of contexts contribute to multiracial persons experiencing tension with their racial identity. While they bring up important points and ultimately conclude that multiracial individuals do experience many situations that cause them to face identity denial and that the demographic completion box debacle is less of a problem than they hypothesized, they use purely quantitative data to make their conclusions. There have been other studies about multiracial identities; one study addresses reconciliation of conflicting identities by describing and measuring multiracial identity integration (MII) using a scale comprised of 8 questions (e.g., Cheng & Lee, 2009) and another study explains how multiracial identities must be understood in the context of

historical construction of race as well as the current conceptualization of race (e.g. Sanchez & Shih, 2009). However, all these studies lack specific experiences of multiracial people within the United States, since they use solely quantitative or theoretical perspectives.

The history of blacks in the United States is painful; ultimately, blacks were brought to the US solely as a commodity (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007: 109), which ultimately created the racial divide between blacks and Whites. History dictated a lot of what being black in the United States meant. As the United States moved forward, racial identity construction became an important topic. Cornell and Hartmann (2007: 169) explain identity construction by raising two major points: first, race is a product of social change and circumstance, and secondly, race is therefore “variable, diverse and contingent.” They approach their argument by using a constructionist approach. In order to understand and approach the process of identity construction, two variables must be considered: “the comprehensiveness of an identity and the degree to which it is asserted or assigned” (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007: 76). Whether or not the process of identity construction is dominated by assignment or assertion, a boundary will be created, and the meanings attached to the groups on each side will be different (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007: 84). Ultimately, Cornell and Hartmann (2007) explain that a constructionist approach is not stagnant; ethnic and racial identities will change across space and time. The power of ethnicity and race and labels assigned or asserted “lies in the significance we attach to them, both to our own racial or ethnic identities and to the identities of others” (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007: 106).

They explain that identity formation is contingent on both individual and group dynamics, including intergroup dynamics. Much of this research will be looking into the inter-group dynamics of these half-black women.

Labor, residential spaces, status, and culture also play into what identity construction is contingent on (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007: 204). Racial identity saliency is increased when there is formal distribution of political power based on race, when policy treats races differently, when certain racial populations are residentially concentrated and, therefore, have diminished access to social resources, when the dominant racial group creates classifications and uses those classifications to assert status differentials (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007: 205). The more equally dispersed racial groups are residentially, in government, and throughout social institutions, saliency of racial identities decreases (Cornell and Hartmann, 2007: 205).

David L. Brunsma (2006) explains in his “intersectional model of identity” that four main components must be considered in understanding racial identity formation. First, the individuals themselves play a part in their racial identity formation—their political preferences and social leanings dictate a lot about how they identify racially and to what degree racial identity matters to them (Brunsma, 2006: 257). Social context and socialization additionally play out in creating how racial identity is formed: how was the individual taught to understand their race? What did the world around them teach them about what it meant to be their race? Third, reference group identities also contribute to racial identification. But “in the case of multiracial individuals who espouse protean identities their reference group is informed by the surrounding social and situational contexts. Though an individual may express allegiance and ties to differing racial groups

dependent upon context, it is important to note that racial reference group orientation does not exclude the possession of other non-racial reference group orientation” (Brunsma, 2006: 259). Fourth, the situation of encounter--a context in which identity salience shifted because of an event—also plays a role in understanding racial identity formation (Brunsma, 2006: 260). For example, Brunsma’s and Cornell and Hartmann’s theories about identity formation indicate that group and intergroup dynamics play a large role in multiracial identity formation. Cornell and Hartmann take a constructionist approach that includes a range of social, political and cultural processes while Brunsma’s book takes a different, more holistic, social psychological approach--the “intersectional model of identity.”

In Lee and Bean’s book (2010), *The Diversity Paradox*, they explain that mixes that “look black” have the hardest time identifying as biracial. Indeed, some of this can be attributed to the “one-drop rule”—the idea that having even just one drop of black blood classifies someone as black. In 1930, the Census Bureau solidified the “one-drop rule” when they decided to classify mixed black-white people as “Negro”: “A person of mixed white and Negro blood should be returned as Negro, no matter how small the percentage of Negro blood. Both black and mulatto persons are to be returned as Negroes, without distinction” (Lee and Bean 2010: 39). Indeed, while the slowly growing discussion on multiracial identity is incredibly important, there are certain specific groups within multiracial populations that need to be more closely examined. Consequently, this paper will solely examine the experiences and perspectives of half-black biracial women whose experiences are not well documented or understood, including within sociological

studies. Too few studies mention their experiences, much less detail their experiences and stories.

METHODOLOGY

In March and April of 2017, I conducted 6 focused, in-depth individual interviews with 6 half-black women of different backgrounds from the ages of 18 to 40; this was in order to obtain detailed information about their experiences and perspectives concerning biracial women's experiences and the barriers biracial women face, especially with how they fit into a large and important movement about race. This study centered around the experiences of well-educated half-black women. Such information can inform current theories on identity construction.

Because this study was exploratory, I do not aim to generalize to all half-black multiracial women. Rather, this study is intended to help expand what researchers currently know about what it means to be biracial women in the United States and it seeks to add important talking points to the conversation about shifting racial lines, identity formation and acceptance.

I chose to do a qualitative study because qualitative methods—in my case, interviews—attempt to help understand a specific process that is difficult to address using quantitative research, such as experiences with addiction, divorce, and illness. Additionally, qualitative research “lends itself to getting out into the field and finding out what people are doing and thinking. Qualitative methods can be used to explore substantive areas about which little is known or about which much is known to gain novel understandings” (Corbin and Strauss, 1998: 11). Additionally, as a biracial woman

myself, this study was of special importance to me. I wanted to give other biracial women a chance to tell their story, and qualitative research was the best way to give them an outlet to freely tell me their stories.

I created an interview guide under the advisement of my sociology thesis advisor, Dr. Carol Ward. The questions cover many different topics, including questions about how each participant racially identifies, why they chose that identification and how their upbringing and social circles play into their asserted and/or assigned racial identification. However, during each interview, not all questions were asked--the interview guide served as a guide for the conversation. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board, and before the interview, each interviewee was given an IRB-approved consent form to sign and was fully informed about the research study and their rights as participants. They were also given a copy of their IRB consent form for their own records. All of the names of the interviewees have been replaced with pseudonyms and any significant identifying information will not be included in this paper.

I conducted these interviews in New York City, chosen because of its population of mixed race people. According to the United States Census, 3.3% of people in New York City identified as two or more races in 2016 (US Census Bureau). As compared to a city like Los Angeles, New York City has a higher percentage of black people. This means black is the reference group, as opposed to Hispanic or Latino (US Census Bureau 2016).

The women I interviewed were recruited from universities, clubs, and groups for multiracial persons and by word of mouth. All of the women were either in a university obtaining an undergraduate or graduate degree or they had already received a post post-

secondary degree. Certainly, this does influence the answers of the participants and is important to note since many participants mentioned their university experience as a particularly formative time for them in understanding their racial identity.

Another important factor to note is that I am biracial and I am visibly a person of color. During the interviews, most women asked me if I was biracial as well. This allowed me to establish a level of trust with the interviewees because some of them knew I could relate to pieces of their story. This also allowed me to provide the interviewees with an opportunity to freely tell their stories without feeling like they were being judged.

All my field notes and transcriptions were analyzed using Thorne et al.'s (1997) qualitative inductive techniques. They suggest becoming familiar with data before starting an analysis. From there, they suggest finding themes from the data, in this case the six interviews (Thorne et al., 1997: 175). My transcriptions and field notes were also utilized to identify variations, e.g., similarities and differences among responses related to the themes, and in order to most accurately represent the words and experiences of the 6 women interviewed.

FINDINGS

Identity Formation Among Multiracial Women

During this particularly racially divisive time in American history, the voices of black women become increasingly important to understand. This paper centers around the experiences of half-black women in the United States. There is significant consistency throughout the interviews detailing the confusion each individual, as well as people around them, have about their racial identity. At some point during their lives, if not now,

each of these women have dealt with racist comments or actions. Many consistent themes played into the formation of how these multiracial women chose to identify, including family, friends, school, and community and environment. For the most part, each woman identified herself as black and/or multiracial. For most of the participants, their racial identification was somewhat fluid; that is, while none of them denied their multiracial identity, many of them identified most frequently as black unless specifically questioned about race.

Family

Family may not always play a significant role in racial identity formation, but the interviews indicate that for many of these women, family does play a role in their understanding of their race.

Alli, an 18-year old university student who identifies as multiracial, specifically Japanese and black, grew up with her mother among the influences of her grandmother and great-grandmother on her mother's side. Her mother's family is Japanese with Mexican and Chinese by marriage, and she grew up mainly with Japanese culture in her environment. Alli is half-black, and she was aware of this from a young age. While she was younger, she claimed being Japanese and black, but when girls in her class began making negative comments about her black side, she came home to tell her mother that she did not want to be black because the girls in her class "make it seem so bad." She explains how her mother dealt with this situation:

And so, at that moment my mom like made me start reading all of these autobiographies and biographies of famous black people who have influenced American history and international history. I like literally, there was just not a time where my mom did not have a book in my hand about some African American or African historical figure to help me gain a better understanding of myself. So, then after that I think that I was more, more in-tune with my black

side...I'm lucky in a sense because my mom really didn't have like any black people around in her family when she was growing up. Like, I still had some influences, she had friends, but not family. So, she really had to gain a strong sense of herself and I think she kind of helped pass that on to me when I was younger. So, I think I'm fortunate in that sense, like when people question me, I'm pretty confident in my racial identity.

Her mother's proactive efforts to find her black role models in order to aid her in liking and accepting her blackness were crucial in Alli's understanding and acceptance of being both Japanese and black, an identity that she describes as being "Blasian" (black and Asian). Alli lists her mother as someone she still talks to about race and racial identity to this day.

Eva, a half-black and half-Italian master's student, who identified herself as being black, also understood the importance of race from a young age. Her community growing up was populated with mostly African-Americans, and her community was accepting of her interracial family. There were other multiracial families in the community. However, outside the community, Eva was very aware of the looks she and her three sisters got, all of whom all have different appearances and hair types. Questions like, "why does your hair look like that? Why does your sister look like that?" solidified Eva's early understanding of racism. Her mother, described as brown-skinned, told Eva and her sisters of being in the hospital giving birth, and the nurses didn't even want to give the child to Eva's mother because they did not believe it was her child. "She [Eva's mother] was like, 'Are you kidding me? Just because she's light-skinned? I can't have a light-skinned baby?'" Eva also noticed the looks her white Italian father received when walking with his children, who did not all match his complexion exactly.

Eva's family, that she described as "family-oriented," did not shy away from discussing race. While the discussions of race within her family were not constant, they were not avoided when it was brought up. Her father often affirmed to her, "You know you are a biracial woman, you are a black woman."

When I asked Eva how she racially identifies, she didn't miss a beat: "Oh, black, girl." She noted that her sisters do not always agree with her choice to racially identify as black, because they have viewed it as negating her whiteness. Eva does not view it as such; she believes her success in school and life is important because it negates stereotypes of black people. She explained to me that she is happy to check a box that says multiracial, but she mostly identifies as black.

Despite any disagreements she and her sisters may have, she feels their comfortability in discussions is important because they are able to discuss topics that other people may not understand. Her parents and sisters are all people she continues to talk with about race.

Dina, a woman pursuing an advanced degree at a university, spoke of her familial influence as playing an important part in the way she viewed the world and why she views herself as biracial and does not choose one racial identity. Her father is a German immigrant who faced significant challenges regarding assimilation in the United States during the early 1960s amongst much anti-German sentiments that persisted throughout the country. Dina's mother is a "dark-skinned" woman from North Carolina who grew up with a more open sense of her race and who she was. Her mother could not blend into what Dina describes as "a white man's world" during the 70s and 80s, but she does not identify as "African American." Dina speculates that this is partly due to her mother's

unwillingness to be limited. However, Dina's mother still is very proud of her background. Her parent's stories "very much shaped my perspective on the world," Dina told me. Her parents are divorced but maintain a good relationship with each other, and Dina told me their stories with excitement and detail. Their struggles and life definitely informed Dina's choice to "never pick a side" in regards to race.

Fay, a half-black and half-white mother and elementary school teacher who identifies as black or multiracial, also had experiences discussing her racial identity with her family when she was growing up. Race and racism was not something she was aware of until she was about 6 or 7. While it was not a huge issue that was constantly discussed within her home as a child, her white mother and her mother's side of the family with whom she grew up, did make sure to discuss race and racism with her when it came up. Her family helped her embrace her multiculturalism.

Carmen, an 18-year old university student, identified as being Afro-Latina, but that was not the case when she was young. Unlike the aforementioned 4 women, Carmen was reminded of her multiracial identity in a different way within her family. Carmen is half-Cuban and half-black, and she grew up living with her black mother's family. In fact, she was the only Cuban on her mother's side--her family nicknamed her "the Cuban" or would refer to her as "Spanish prominent character names, like Speedy Gonzales," both nicknames that affirmed to Carmen that she was not fully black.

I never really knew that I was different until the age [pause] 5 or 6, and I went to school and I was placed in the ESL class because of my last name and they automatically assumed that I knew no English. And um, since then, like I would ask my mom like, "Oh, why am I in this class? Why did they make that mistake?" and she would say to me like, "Oh, it's because you're not like the other kids in

that school.” Like I went to a prominently black student school, I was like one of the rare mixed children in there.

Up until high school, Carmen did identify as fully black, and she did not claim her Hispanic side, even though other people did identify her as mixed based on her features and last name. Carmen’s mother did talk about the fact that she was mixed. The fact that Carmen attended a predominantly black school and lived with a black family made her multiracial identity more noticeable.

...My mom would like explain to me like, "Oh your dad is not--although he may seem black--he's not black. Like his father came directly from Cuba to the United States so that makes you half Cuban and half black.”

Both sides of her family play an important part of her daily life now, including her mother’s cooking and the mannerisms of the women on her father’s side.

Bea, a half-white and half-black law student, had a different experience talking to her family about race. Growing up, she did not think too much about race until she was in high school. The Christian school she attended in a midwestern state was fairly diverse. Bea’s parents divorced early in her life, and she grew up with her white mother. After she turned 10, she no longer saw her father. Her mother did encourage her having “moderate and progressive black figures and narratives” while she was growing up, and her mother took her to African dance. When she was younger, she identified as multiracial or biracial. When she entered high school, she was a minority at school, a shift from her previous experiences at her middle school, and Bea dealt with a lot of racial slurs. She noted that she did not bring this up to her mother at the time it was happening.

The presidential election in 2016 was a frustrating experience for her in regards to her mother and her mother’s family.

I think just people's unwillingness to, not stand up, but decently say out loud that Donald Trump was saying things that were racist or degrading to people or completely inappropriate. Um, I was just...I was just unwilling to excuse people for that.

She continued to express that the specific discussions she had with her mother about the 2016 election, which did affect Bea, did not go well. I asked her if conversations about race had been that way since before the election. "Yeah, yeah, definitely. Since college." She does continue to have conversations with her mother about race, but they are difficult. Her mother feels as if Bea withheld her struggles from her in high school. "My mom does not do well with those conversations," she explained. "She feels like she doesn't know who I am as a person, and it's, well, because I never told her these things."

Friends and relationships

A few of the women had important discussions with their friends about race while they were growing up and in the present. Alli, for example, always had a diverse group of friends, although it was unintentional.

I definitely talked about race a lot in high school. With my friends, yeah. We would sometimes, yeah. It was kind of hard not to because so many things would happen throughout the day that like, they became the focal points of a lot of our conversation. Especially senior year, I was in a class called, "Race, Power and American Identity" and a lot of my friends--I had quite a few friends who were in it so we could talk about it or have that teacher, so we could talk about what he likes to incorporate into the classes. So, it wasn't a comfortable topic that people wanted to discuss in groups...it definitely was super like, um, you could feel an uncomfortable air. It's not uncomfortable for me, but I felt the air. But one-on-one, it, it wasn't uncomfortable so I think I talked about it way more.

Alli still talks to her friends from high school about race, and she also talks to her new college friends about race as well. It is a very open topic with people that can understand where she is coming from (they have similar experiences) or are in a group where they talk about race.

There was a clear importance for some of the women about finding someone who had similar experiences as they did and being able to talk about it. Fay mentioned that one of her good friends had similar experiences to her growing up. Race and racism is a topic discussed among the friends of many of the participants. Eva and Fay both talked about the difficulties of talking about race and racism with their friends who are people of color but who have different experiences than them, as well. Eva, who was dating a police officer, noted an experience that illustrated having a difference of opinions with her friend, who is Haitian.

...My Haitian friend...she's a lawyer. She did not grow up in the projects. She was...she, like, was one of those white black girls. Very proper and uppity sometimes. Grew up in a suburban area in Long Island of all places, and you know, she had lots to say about again, the cops. And they did that [in reference to a police brutality situation], and I'm just like, you know, taking it in. And this was like after speaking to [my boyfriend], because I now have a different perspective from [my boyfriend]'s side. And we went at it. Like, to the point where I was like, "I'm not even gonna talk to you right now because we can't even speak right now."

Because she, she's a black lawyer. She's into the whole Black Lives Matter, she's in the racism, she does community service, and she does all that good stuff. And then, I'm just like, "You have to understand like it's very offensive when you're saying it to someone who is with someone and you're going against that group of people."

Eva's experience with her boyfriend has given her a different perspective on police brutality. Certainly, she did not always agree with her boyfriend, but their discussions gave her the opportunity to consider some different perspectives. She explained to me that she could understand some of the situations that have happened between the police and black people that have been covered in the media. "They [police] are trained to shoot to kill...I do not agree with that. You should shoot to wound." In a conversation with her boyfriend, he pushed back on this idea and said to her, "If I'm out there and someone's pointing a gun at my head, you are going to shoot to wound?"

Disagreements about topics pertaining to race were not the only things mentioned when it came to friends. Carmen struggled with making friends growing up because her multiracial identity did not place her firmly among any one racial group.

I was more of a, um, social butterfly. Like, I would try to find my niche with certain people, but it would never really work out, because I was too different. Either I was too black for the Hispanic kids, or too, um, Hispanic for the black kids...I don't speak Spanish fluently...so that was something that I struggled with when it came to like befriending Hispanic kids--they would have their little side conversations speaking another language and I wouldn't understand so it never worked out. And with the black kids, like they would talk about their hair and stuff and my hair would be different so I couldn't relate to certain things they would go through at home.

She expressed that she now talks to her close friends about race, however. The divide she felt in high school does not exist quite as strongly between racial groups. One woman she recently met was also half-Cuban and half-black. She laughed after she told me she had never met another woman with the same mix as herself:

It was pretty interesting, we talked about how we relate and we don't speak the language and how we feel like we were isolated like in the school system, but being in college it's more a grounded community here for us.

College

While pre-college experiences differed among the women--some had good experiences and some had more consistently poor experiences dealing with race at their schools--college was mentioned as a place where they learned more about their race. For each of them, post-secondary education helped them to solidify their beliefs about their race, and it helped them gain a greater understanding of how they identify. Many of the participants gained a greater understanding of race because they had more access to clubs, groups and people who represented more diversity and opinions. They also talked

about a shift in understanding race academically from when they were in high school or younger. Dina explained that she did not previously have the “intellectual language” to talk about race. Other women talked about being exposed to more ideas and thoughts.

Bea explained:

I remember being anxious around black students all the time when I first got to college. Anxious about, I think what's shifted in law school, like I said, is being able to articulate who I am to people instead of like trying to cater.

Community and environment

The community and environment in which respondents live is important to understand as well. Many of these women deal with assumptions from those around them about their racial identification, racist comments, and the environment around them reaffirmed white European beauty standards. Most notably, while there was no question about hair on the original interview guide, almost all of the participants brought up hair as an important factor in their own self-identity, self-worth, and also how others viewed their race to be.

The respondents grew up in a variety of different backgrounds and environments. Some were from small towns, some from the suburbs, some from major cities across the United States. They do not all live in New York City--some of them live outside the city--but they all work or attend school in NYC. They all have dealt with dismissive and racist comments.

Many of the respondents identified comments that pertain to them being multiracial and not being completely black or another race. Dina described some particularly emotional experiences. In high school, Dina described herself as being punk

rock. She recognized that people around her did not feel she could be “black and punk in the 90s,” but that was what Dina enjoyed. One experience that stood out to Dina and that shaped some of our conversation was an experience on a school bus:

...So my sophomore year of high school I used to get made fun of by the blacks and, not all, this is a very specific group and um so they would get, they would like call me “[version of my name]” which, I don't like being called...and make fun of me...

And this one day I sat in the front next to my friend and, um, [sigh] one of them was like, “[version of my name], come here, blah blah blah” and I said something like, um, “Leave me the fuck alone” which was like big for me, because like I rarely use the F word. Um, and she, so she came up to the front of the bus and she had a cast and she punched me in the face and then she beat the shit out of me um, and I didn't do anything because I was kind of non-confrontational kind of, and plus I was no match for her um, and I didn't cry either.

...I didn't move, I didn't fight back, I didn't cry, I just, um, just you know sat on my seat and then the bus driver is this dumb guy and didn't do anything. He dropped them off, and then dropped me off and then I went home and went to my mom, went to the police, went to the hospital. I had to wear this neck brace, she got expelled from school and other two they stopped a little bit. Still made fun of me.

I only think that they made fun of me because, I, they were mad that I wasn't one of them, which is sad. I feel like there were not many of them [black students], they were definitely the minority in my school and I was like a traitor in their eyes because I was like not dressing like them, listening to the music they were listening to and -- but that's just not what I was into and I felt, you know, I don't know. It was just weird.

She told me that the girl who beat her up saw Dina many years later and apologized, and Dina feels good about the apology. However, this event was clearly an event that stuck out to Dina as painful. She describes another extreme experience of racism in her life: seeing the KKK for the first time on television as a child. They were saying that mixed race breed made people “stupid,” and Dina remembered feeling upset because she knew she was not stupid and her family was not stupid. These experiences defined for her what it felt like to be constantly trapped between two worlds, a clear and tangible example of Robert Park's theory of marginality: the experience of being trapped between two

different identities and finding a difficult time assimilating because you belong to neither group completely (Park, 1928).

Dina did not feel like she was in-between, but she acknowledges that people around her do feel that way about her. And while she enjoys not choosing one, certainly the above issues illustrate the difficulties of navigating a multiracial identity.

Carmen also identified struggles of being identified as either “the pushover mixed girl” or the “angry black woman,” another struggle of being caught between identities.

...When I work in groups [in class] or when we're assigned a topic to discuss I feel like if I disagree with something that one of my peers said, I have to bite my tongue sometimes because it can come off as way too aggressive and make them feel uncomfortable. And I feel like as a black woman that is something that is commonly misinterpreted.

And, um, with being a mixed girl I feel like, people perceived mixed girls as just trying to like fit in and not try to like step on anyone's toes so you're letting everyone just like take advantage of you in a sense. So, I feel like when it comes to group projects, I sort of take on the role of making everything happen. And whoever wants to sign their name on it in the end can sign their name on it.

The experiences of being “too black” or not black enough were not just Dina’s and Carmen’s stories. Eva was told throughout her lifetime by different people that her sister was “so white” and Eva was “so black.” I asked what she believes “so black” implies.

She explained:

I think, I feel like it just has to do with being loud and being, ‘cause that's just how I am. I’m not a quiet person. I like to have to fun and I like to dance...Like, it's very offensive. You’re saying black people can't be proper? ...But I can only be real with who I am and how I identify.

Alli had similar comments about her experiences:

I got a lot of comments on I wasn't their expectation of what they thought black was. So, I would get a lot of like, “Oh you don't speak black.”

Along with these racist comments, participants noted being called derogatory slurs by strangers or people they knew or subtle comments denigrating their achievements. However, the racism they experienced in their communities and at the hands of those around them is not the only struggle with identity that they expressed. Most participants had been identified as being a race that they are not at all. Bea said she is usually misidentified by people as being Latina, and Dina, Eva, and Fay also talked about being mistaken for someone who is Spanish as well. Three of these four women said someone has approached them and started speaking Spanish to them, assuming that they speak Spanish as well. Fay said black men also think she is Spanish, but other respondents noted that black people generally just thought that they were black most of the time or could tell that they were mixed. It is important to note that none of the half-white women were ever mistaken for being white. They were always identified as being a person of color.

When I asked them how they respond to assumptions that they are a different race--for some of them, daily--they all had somewhat different reactions. For Bea, for example, it depended on her mood and who was making the assumption. Other women felt frustrated, because they felt that they had to explicitly detail what they were to a stranger. Eva looked at explaining her race to people as a learning opportunity for them--sometimes. Alli and Carmen both said they were either assumed to be black or mixed race. However, Alli shared with me that on a trip to Ghana, she was excited to be around a lot of other black people. She did not even think much about her appearance until she arrived and people commented on her skin tone.

It wasn't until it started being brought up by the people we were around that like I was lighter, I had a guy call me “yellow-skinned” and so it was weird for me because I was like, “I'm black!” I was like, “I'm like you!” but I guess I have trouble with choosing and I was like, “Well I guess I'm mixed. But I'm really like you.”

As previously noted, there was no question about hair on the original interview guide about hair or beauty standards. However, five of the six respondents brought up hair as a really important way that people identified them in their community, and as a way they stood out from their white counterparts and their mono-racial friends. Fay explains a visit she had to a salon:

When I'd go there, they'd look at me and be like, “You have so much hair.” Like “What do you want me to do? You're the expert.”

Eva explained how her hair could help others form assumptions about her racial identity.

When I have my curls, like, if this [my hair] was washed, oh yeah. They'd be like, “You're not black.” They'll say, “Black girls don't have that hair!” But then when my hair is straightened and washed and set it's like, “Yeahhh, look at your hair!”

She also illustrated how different mixed women can look, and why she finds the terms “white hair” and “black hair” distasteful:

...My sisters all have such different hair; it's crazy. Like my sister, my older sister, she had Tina Turner hair. Fro, everything. My other sister, she has nice healthy curls-ish. The bouncy curls. My younger sister literally has straight hair.

While answering another question, Dina said, “Hair is a big deal.” I asked her why and she expounded:

I just thought my hair could be like anybody's hair depending on how I did it. So, um, when I was younger I thought like I could just relax my hair and I will have straight hair, like the blonde, you know, kind of Hollywood look.

...then I didn't and then I realized, and it was like a big realization that hit me. My hair will never be like that...I did nothing with my hair through high school, it was um, it was a big thing that made me feel ugly--not because I didn't, not

because, so it's not because I had black hair. It's because I didn't know how to do it.

Carmen and Alli described struggling with their hair when they were younger.

The European standard of beautiful hair weighed heavily on how they--and other women in the study--chose to do their hair at some point in their life. Carmen said of her experiences:

Um, I know for most like Afro-Latina women, they go through the same struggle when it comes to hair...

So, we straighten our hair, we wear European hair to be perceived as more beautiful instead of wearing our natural hair. And I feel like that's a similar struggle on both ends.

Alli explained that she noticed a shift when she chose her hairstyle to be more "black:"

When I change my hairstyle to like, let's say braids, the change in how I'm treated, there's a shift in how I'm treated, and I notice it. Like, it's so demeaning to know that like um, needing to know that people will hold you to a higher standard because not, because, because of how less black you are.

Carmen laughed about her hair struggles, though, as she said,

I don't really have to deal with maintaining my hair because my hair does what it wants [laughs]. It never chooses a side--it's mixed hair [we both laughed], that's the beauty of it.

Beliefs about Black Lives Matter and Police Brutality

This paper deals not only with identity formation, but also the existence and importance of Black Lives Matter in the lives of multiracial women. Most women indicated that they agreed with Black Lives Matter. Some women had specific concerns about the individuals being part of the organization using it for their own benefit as well

as a lack of understanding of what they were fighting for. While most women did not directly associate with Black Lives Matter (that is, they have not participated in marches and protests), they agreed with the general sentiment that black lives do matter.

Additionally, most women felt that they were a part of Black Lives Matter and did not feel that being multiracial excluded them from the movement. None of the 6 women considered themselves an official part of the movement, but some of them did participate in rallies. Bea's sentiments about her involvement in Black Lives Matter reflected the ideas of a few of the other women:

I mean, I guess like the premise of Black Lives Matter is that anyone can be part of it really. So, from that perspective, like, yes. But yeah, I guess in between. I just mean like saying I'm a Black Lives Matter activist is not really a fair characterization because I know people who are actually. I wouldn't say I'm an activist, but I go to rallies and support people in whatever they might do.

When I asked Alli if the Black Lives Matter movement had different implications for her as a half-black woman, she told me "no" and then continued to explain: "I think like at the end of the day I'm still black and I don't think that like a cop would be like, "Oh, but you're mixed, so let's not like brutalize you." Her thoughts were that regardless of whether or not you are mixed or you identify as such, you are still going to be black in the eyes of the police. Because of that, she felt there was no reason that she should not be an equal part of the movement amongst any mono-racial black peers.

However, not everyone felt strongly about participating in the Black Lives Matter movement. Both Dina and Eva felt that Black Lives Matter was really complicated, and it has taken a negative life of its own in the media and among other people. Dina and Eva expressed that they felt there was a lack of sufficient education and understanding among

everyone who engaged with Black Lives Matter and said they felt their methods were not always effective. Eva, half-Italian and half-black, was dating a black cop, and Dina identified less as black and more as multiracial and found the movement to be polarizing.

When dealing with issues of police brutality, the women I interviewed who did talk about police brutality talked about it in terms of statistics or research. We did not necessarily delve into personal experiences with the police, except with Fay. As the mother of two children and married to an Indian man with whom she talks about race, she is aware that her children could face discrimination. Her daughter is not quite old enough to have discussions about race with, but her son is. The police were visiting her neighbor's home, and her son was peeking out the window and trying to go outside while the police were still at the neighbor's. Fay told him not to do that, and she explained to him that she did not want the police coming over to their house. "Oh, well why not?" Her son asked. She told me that when he gets a little older, she and her husband will talk to him about things he can and cannot do in a little greater deal. She wants him to be overly careful because her understanding of police brutality against black people in the US makes her worried for the safety of her son.

CONCLUSION

The study findings provide evidence that there are common factors that play a significant part in racial identity formation for biracial women. Family played a particularly important role for many of the women. The discussions they had at home--or the lack thereof--did play into how they understood their biracial identity. These women

generally still talked to their parents about race if their parents had been open about race when they were children. Friends also made an important contribution to the development of these women's racial identities. Just like with family, there were a variety of negative and positive experiences expressed by all the interviewees; however, the availability of more diversity meant more of the women's friends currently had a better understanding of race and racism. While that was true for some women while they were in high school, there was more variation in their experiences at that time in their lives. School seemed to play a less important role directly in identity formation for most women until they started attending a university. The diversity at their universities offered experiences to meet people more people that had similar racial backgrounds. Community and environment did not necessarily seem to alter the way they defined their race, but it highlighted many racist encounters and experiences. It also revealed to the women how other people viewed them, even without knowing them.

The previously discussed theories of racial identity and construction can inform what these 6 women explained in their interviews. Bergsieker, Markus, and Townsend (2009) suggested that multiracial individuals would "experience a wide variety of situations as involving some form of identity denial" and that "the completion of demographic forms, with instructions to 'check only one' box, would be a frequently reported episode" (Bergsieker, Markus, and Townsend, 2009:190). They concluded that there were a variety of ways that multiracial individuals face identity denial, and this conclusion is in keeping with the 6 interviews I conducted. Friends, family, and community play a large role in these women's identity denial. Bergsieker, Markus, and Townsend (2009) also concluded that the demographic information was not a significant

issue. This is also in keeping with the 6 interviews; this could be attributed to the rising amount of surveys that allow you to check multiracial, as well as the fact that some participants often self-identified monoracially.

Cornell and Hartmann's (2007) assertion that race is "variable, diverse and contingent" is noticeable in many of the interviews. Many interviewees talked about identifying as black most of the time, but recognized they were multiracial and would identify depending on the circumstance. There was a certain fluidity about identification to some extent. Cornell and Hartmann (2007) solidified this point by explaining that a constructionist approach emphasizes that identity formation is subject to change. Additionally, they explained how identity formation is contingent on individual and group--especially intergroup--dynamics. Many of these women expressed that they were part of groups that centered around race, for example, the Black Student Union. They also had friends that were mixed race or black, and these relationships and clubs generally seemed to help them form their identity. If they felt out of place at an event or amongst a group of people, it made them frustrated. For example, for the most part, groups for black people almost always welcomed these women and did not question their identity.

Brunsma's (2006) "intersectional model of identity" also relates to the interviewees' experiences. Their social and political leanings may have played a part in how they identified racially. However, I did not discuss political leanings with the women. A few of them did share their disdain for President Donald Trump. Despite the fact that we did not delve into politics, it was clear that each of the women as individuals played a part in how they identified, regardless of how other people may have viewed

them. Brunσμα also talked about how social context and socialization play a role in racial identity formation, which were covered in the different major themes discussed in the Findings section. Third, Brunσμα explained that reference group identities contribute to racial identity, but individuals may choose different racial groups depending on the context. Similarly, the interviewees provided evidence of an openness to fluidity--women who identified as black would claim multiracial occasionally and vice versa. However, being black was important to many of the women, and while they recognized they were multiracial and were not ashamed of that, being black held an extra important significance for them. The same is true of multiracial identities--those who identified as multiracial did it deliberately and it was important to them. Brunσμα also discussed identity salience shifting because of an event. There were events that helped build up identity formation, but I did not note in any of the women's interviews one specific event that solidified their racial identity. It seemed much more complicated than that.

Future studies could focus on different demographic characteristics of half-black women, such as different education levels and social class.

This study certainly does not provide data that could be generalized to all multiracial women in the United States. Nevertheless, despite their different backgrounds, these women all expressed the complexities related to being multiracial in the United States. Ultimately, this study seeks to add to our understanding of half-black women. Their experiences are best told by them, and their stories illustrate the struggles of being multiracial and embracing all pieces of themselves in a society that expects them to just pick one.

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