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Perceived Benefits and Challenges of a Multiethnic-Racial Identity: Insight From Adults With Mixed Heritage

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Abstract

The purpose of this inquiry was to explore the lived experiences of multiethnic-racial individuals (i.e., individuals with parents from different ethnic-racial groups). In-depth interviews were conducted with 29 adults from the United States with mixed ethnic-racial backgrounds ranging in age from 18 to 52 (female *n* = 20, male *n* = 9). We identified a number of themes related to perceived benefits (e.g., pluralistic world views, stronger sense of self) and challenges (e.g., identity tensions, communal concerns) of having a mixed heritage. Findings are discussed in terms of four considerations for ethnic-racial identity of individuals with mixed ethnic-racial backgrounds: emphasizing constellations of experiences, life-span and developmental considerations of identity, (mixed) ethnic-racial identity as constituted in interactions, and the potential promise of pluralistic world views.

Keywords: Biracial, ethnicity, multiethnic, race

Over the last few decades, the United States has experienced an increase in interethnic-racial marriages, with the recent Pew Research Center's "Next America" report indicating that approximately 15% of marriages are between individuals with different racial backgrounds (Pew Research Center, 2014). Coupled with this has been a dramatic increase in individuals born and raised with parents from different ethnic-racial groups. In fact, the 2010 U.S. Census reported that the "multiple race" population is growing faster than individuals with one racial background (United States Census Bureau, 2010). Likewise, children younger than 10 make up the fastest-growing segment of this population (Saulney, 2011). It is also reasonable to assume that these figures underestimate this population, given how the census (and related metrics) assesses ethnic and racial identity and the constraints on determining mixed heritage in the population. Simply put, the landscape of ethnic-racial demographics and identity in the United States is changing, and similar trends are occurring in other parts of the world. Although the multiethnic-racial[1] population is increasing and there is a growing recognition that mixed backgrounds are more common, research on the experiences of this population remains relatively scarce compared to the research on *mono*ethnic-racial individuals (i.e., individuals who have parents from the same ethnic-racial background). Enhancing our understanding of ethnic-racial identity in contemporary society necessitates a specific focus on multiethnic-racial experiences. As such, the purpose of the current inquiry is to gain insight into perceived benefits and challenges to multiethnic-racial identity from the perspective of individuals with mixed backgrounds. In the following, we provide a brief review of scholarly perspectives and extant research on multiethnic-racial identity positioning the current inquiry as an important and necessary step in ethnic-racial identity research.

In their comprehensive review of early work on potential positive and negative outcomes associated with a mixed heritage, Shih and Sanchez (2005) traced the movement in perspectives on multiethnic-racial identity. Early conceptual and theoretical work positioned multiethnic-racial identity as a *marginalized* experience based on the idea that mixed heritage would be contested by others, causing difficult identity development issues (Williams & Thornton, 1998). Further, this theorizing assumed that these individuals would experience what Vivero and Jenkins (1999) later labeled "cultural homelessness." In short, individuals from mixed backgrounds would not have a strong and secure sense of affiliation or belongingness with ethnic-racial groups in society. In turn, this lack of a distinct in-group would lead to experiences of marginalization in society, with negative implications for well-being.

While the marginalization perspective still remains in various public domains and discourses today, the scholarly community eventually dismissed the notion that a mixed heritage was inherently (or predestined for) negative identity issues and outcomes. Obviously, this was a positive step in affirming and recognizing the experiences of individuals with mixed ethnic-racial backgrounds. Unfortunately, at this point, much of the research on ethnic-racial identity operated under the assumption that multiethnic-racial experiences and identity development were *similar* to ethnic-racial minority experiences in general. As such, a majority of the research on ethnic-racial identity does not prioritize or take into account that multiethnic-racial perspectives or experiences are vastly different from other ethnic-racial minority experiences. As evidence of this, Smith and Silva's (2011) comprehensive meta-analysis of 184 studies of various minority ethnic-racial groups indicated a significant relationship between ethnic-racial identity and well-being (e.g., self-esteem, happiness, mental health). Yet, none of these studies appear to represent samples of individuals with mixed ethnic-racial heritage. Likewise, most of the research on ethnic-racial identity development (see Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014 for review) or ethnic-racial socialization (e.g., Hughes et al., 2006) does not explicitly account for the variation or uniqueness in multiethnic-racial identity development.

This exclusion of individuals with mixed heritage in current research on ethnic-racial identity is problematic given that experiences of multiethnic-racial individuals challenge the mono-ethnic-racial norms pervading societal and family structures (Root, 1998). Moreover, as evident in more recent inquiries, these individuals have different experiences from monoethnic-racial individuals. For instance, in education settings, multiethnic-racial students indicated issues with the way peers and instructors inquired or discussed their ethnic-racial ambiguity (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012). In families, perceived ethnic-racial differences with parents and grandparents were negatively associated with relational solidarity (Soliz, Thorson, & Rittenour, 2009), whereas strong parental relationships were linked to secure multiethnic-racial identity (Stepney, Sanchez, & Handy, 2015). Further, Sanchez (2010) reported that multiethnic-racial individuals' perceptions that they are expected to "choose" a singular ethnic-racial identity and views that multiethnic-racial identities are not valued in society were associated with depressive symptoms. In terms of ethnic-racial identity, Bracey, Bamaca, and Umaña-Taylor (2004) found that ethnic-racial identity was stronger for minority monoethnic-racial groups compared to peers with mixed backgrounds. As these studies demonstrate, we should not assume that research and findings on monoethnic-racial populations and the corresponding implications for practitioners can be generalized or applied to the experience and attitudes of multiethnic-racial individuals.

Recognizing and advocating for the premise that the multiethnic-racial experience is in no way inherently negative, we adhere to the idea that it is likely *unique* from monoethnic-racial experiences (Shih & Sanchez, 2005), warranting more scholarly focus. The goal of this inquiry is to supplement the current scholarly and emerging counseling literature (e.g., Edwards & Pedrotti, 2004) by identifying perceived benefits (e.g., assets, positive qualities, advantages) as well as challenges to multiethnic-racial identity based on individuals' actual experiences. In focusing on perceptions of benefits and challenges to identity, the current inquiry complements the nascent but growing research on experiences on individuals with mixed heritage in four ways.

First, there are significant considerations for mental health, especially given the connection between secure ethnic-racial identity and well-being of marginalized and underrepresented ethnic-racial groups (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Smith & Silva, 2011). Unfortunately, the current research is still limited in understanding experiences of multiethnic-racial individuals that will provide insight into *development* of secure ethnic-racial identity. Poston's (1990) *biracial identity development model* provided one of the first conceptual forays into multiethnic-racial identity development, recognizing that individuals likely experience a turbulent time in development as they integrate mixed backgrounds into their identity. However, this model has not received a great deal of empirical attention or validation. Further, while highlighting the importance of attending to the mixed heritage, the model did not account for the various components of ethnic-racial identity emerging in more recent scholarship. In their extensive review of ethnic-racial identity development, Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2014) synthesized the extant research and theorizing that speak to components of identity development from early childhood to young adulthood (e.g., cognitive development, social contexts, attitudes and beliefs about ethnic groups, recognition of difference and bias). Although their summary provides a comprehensive integration of existing work on ethnic-racial identity development, the previous research is primarily focused on the experiences of monoethnic-racial individuals. As such, we cannot assume the developmental frameworks account for factors unique to the multiethnic-racial population that may differentiate various developmental trajectories leading to secure ethnic-racial identity. It is therefore important to delve deeper into identifying the unique, salient, and potentially malleable processes and factors across a variety of domains (e.g., family, community: Leonard, 2004) that may differentiate positive and negative identity development and secure self-concept for individuals with mixed heritages. Exploring the perceptions of benefits and challenges will provide insight into various factors that should be taken into account in further enhancing our understanding of secure identity development in multiethnic-racial individuals.

Second, much of the academic discussion on experiences of multiethnic-racial individuals is still theoretical or conceptual in nature, especially in comparison with research on monoethnic-racial populations (albeit with a growing body of empirically based work). Of the extant empirical work, much of this is either domain-specific (e.g., focus on identity in education environment: Renn, 2003) or focuses on specific indicators of positive or negative self-concept (e.g., Bracey et al., 2004). Our study is meant to capture experiences beyond a specific domain and without a priori measures or indicators, as is the case in some of this extant research. This is not to discount the significance of this previous research. Rather, our hope is to capture potential gaps in our current thinking about the multiethnic-racial experience by providing "voice" to these individuals.

Third, much of the current writings and some of the research on the multiethnic-racial experience either focuses solely on advantages of mixed backgrounds or attends only to negative consequences. We believe this bifurcation is one of the reasons for the popularity of discourses assuming individuals with mixed backgrounds have inherently difficult experiences in terms of identity development and formulating a sense of belongingness and affiliation with ethnic-racial in-groups. In contrast, our inquiry is guided by the recognition that individuals possess both positive (i.e., benefits) and negative (i.e., challenges) perceptions of their experiences. Development of a more comprehensive understanding of multiethnic-racial identity requires integration of both the constructive and turbulent aspects of individual experience. Finally, as Renn (2003) pointed out, much of our research on multiethnic-racial identity is limited in its reliance on college or college-aged samples and focus on one specific ethnic-racial composition (e.g., White/African American). We are interested in varied spectrum of ethnic-racial compositions across the lifespan for a more holistic understanding of the multiethnic-racial experience. As such, the guiding research question for this inquiry centers on the following:

RQ: What are the perceived benefits and challenges to multiethnic-racial identity in individuals' current lives and retrospective accounts of past experiences?

Method

Participants and data collection

Participants included 29 individuals (female $n = 20$, male $n = 9$) ranging in age from 18 to 52 ($Mdn = 23$, $M = 26.03$, $SD = 8.79$) in the United States. After receiving institutional review board approval, we solicited participants from online discussion boards about issues of race and ethnicity, requested participation from organizations serving multiethnic-racial populations, and performed snowball sampling via social networks. Most participants ($n = 25$) came from these solicitation methods. Compensation was not provided for these participants. In addition, announcements were made to courses at a large Midwestern university in which participants ($n = 4$) received course credit for completing the study. After reading a recruitment message, potential participants from all research solicitation methods contacted the research team to set up interviews. The semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted by the first author or research assistants in face-to-face settings, via video chats, or over the phone. The interview protocol included specific questions about benefits and challenges (e.g., "Could you please describe any positive aspect of having a mixed ethnic-racial background? Could you please describe any challenges?"). However, the interview protocol also included more general questions about ethnic-racial identity and experiences in various domains of life (e.g., friendships, families, professional). Participants also spoke to benefits and challenges in addressing these questions. As such, responses to all questions were used for analysis. Interviews were conducted until we reached theoretical saturation (Sandelowski, 1995). Information about each participant including *self-described* ethnic-racial background is presented in Table 1. Throughout, pseudonyms are used unless the participant requested otherwise. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Table 1. Description of participants.

Participant, gender, age	Ethnic-racial background of parents (based on self-descriptions of participants)
Anissa, F, 33	Native American, White (French)
Destiny, F, 25	African American, White
George, M, 28	White, Hispanic, Native American
Zaida, F, 21	Samoan, German, Cuban
Andrea, F, 29	Panamanian, White
Mariah, F, 21	White (German, French, Irish, English), Black, Native American
Emily, F, 20	White (German), Iranian
Eric, M, 26	Spanish, White, Native American, African American
Virginia, F, 18	White, Vietnamese
Maya, F, 23	Irish, Italian, Bulgarian, Armenian, Hispanic
Justine, F, 20	German, Russian, Mexican, Spanish, Mayan
Alice, F, 32	White (German, Dutch), South Korean
Marco, M, 31	White, Filipino
Vicky, F, 20	Chinese, White (German)
Britney, F, 20	White, African American
Charles, M, 33	White, Italian, Black
Anita, F, 27	Mexican American, White
Victor, M, 24	Black and White (German, Irish, Scottish, English)
Tonia, F, 19	White, Black
William, M, 19	Indian, White (Italian)
Jeff, M, 49	Hispanic, Native American, European
Luke, M, 18	Korean, White
Olivia, F, 23	Irish, Black, Italian
Valeria, F, 52	Hispanic, Anglo
Carla, F, 20	Mexican, Vietnamese
Joyce, F, 41	Mexican, White (German), Cherokee
Cynthia, F, 23	Chinese, European White
Marissa, F, 20	Hispanic, White (German)
Tom, M, 20	White, Vietnamese

Some of the participants who indicated "White" also took advantage of the opportunity to provide heritage of the family, e.g., "White (Italian)." But, these were primarily parents residing in and born in the United States. Pseudonyms are used unless the participant requested otherwise.

Data analysis

Initially, two coders read the transcripts to become familiar with the responses. To provide different perspectives based on involvement with the data collection process, one of the initial coders was an interviewer of participants and the other coder did not conduct interviews. Next, we employed a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in which we identified potential themes and continually revised the themes based on our reading of subsequent responses. Rather than simply focusing on the frequency of specific ideas, themes were identified based on Owen's (1984) criteria relying on recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness of participants' discussion of their experiences to identify salient themes. Doing so provides voice to participants without any constraints of an inclusion threshold based simply on frequency of a specific response. Next, we revisited the themes to identify any incongruity or ambiguity in themes in further discussion. We followed this step by selecting exemplars from the transcripts to represent the themes emerging in our analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Finally, we completed a variety of verification steps. First, a negative case analysis was completed. Second, we presented our findings through a data conference to discuss our results. Participants in the data conference included members of the research team as well as colleagues not involved with the study but with experience in the method of inquiry. Finally, we also conducted a member check by asking two multiethnic-racial individuals who were not part of the sample to verify that the themes were congruent with either of their experiences. The purpose of these verification steps was to identify and refine, if necessary, our final themes and exemplars (Braithwaite, Moore, & Stephenson Abetz, 2014).

Findings

Although we present our findings by first discussing potential benefits of having a mixed ethnic-racial background followed by perceived challenges, many individuals spoke to *both* positive and potentially negative aspects in reflecting on their identity and experiences. We discuss each in detail below. A list of general themes and subthemes is provided in Table 2.

Perceived benefits of a multiethnic-racial background

We identified four general themes for perceived benefits: (a) pluralistic worldviews, (b) internal self-concept, (c) external self-concept, and (d) pragmatic benefits.

Pluralistic worldviews

The most reoccurring and referenced benefit discussed by participants revolved around the idea that experiences of a mixed heritage lead to an awareness, appreciation, and enhanced

Table 2. Themes of perceived benefits and challenges.

Perceived benefits	Perceived challenges
Pluralistic worldviews	**Identity tensions**
Self-concept (internal)	● Feeling disconnected
● Best of both worlds	● Explaining identity
● Strong sense of self	● Shifting identities
● Shifting identities	
	Salient differences in relationships
Self-concept (external)	
● Physical appearance	**Communal concerns**
● Compliments	● Legitimizing identity
	● Lack of positive role models
Pragmatic benefits	

understanding of others. For example, Joyce noted, "I socialize with everybody, partly because I've grown up in a multiethnic home … I think you are much more accepting and not so critical … it's really just the acceptance of people and cultures." Supporting Joyce's sentiment, Valeria's comments illustrated that mixed backgrounds caused individuals to be more accepting and open to diverse groups and individuals:

> I think that I'm very comfortable with people who are not just Hispanic or White but any race, because I have a deeper understanding of why people are the way they are because of how they were raised … I have that deeper understanding of people's behavior …

Cynthia opined, "… being of two racial backgrounds gives you more insight on a comparison of cultures instead of just being one …" Other participants directly compared their attitudes and experiences to their monoethnic-racial peers. For instance, Justine stated, "I feel that I'm more open to, you know, more things that maybe other people wouldn't even necessarily even think about," and this is echoed by William: "being open to new things. It's definitely helped me … it would be different if I was raised up like everyone else, so I appreciate that."

In addition to being more open, participants indicated that their experiences provide more insight into the nature of discrimination, in general. Valeria remarked:

> [I]t expands your vision and your perception about the human race as a whole. You have a deeper understanding of the behavior that is discriminatory and also that of the people who [are] discriminated against … I made it a point to try to raise my own kids with openness and sensitivity …

Finally, participants spoke to the idea that a mixed background led to a unique perspective on race and ethnicity. Emily discussed how her background forced her to recognize the variations among others: "I think it's important that everyone be open to racial identities … and everyone should watch what they say because they never know who's sitting next to them." Being purposeful in being open to others was echoed by Anissa: "the openness … the willingness to be accepting of someone that doesn't look like you." For all of these individuals, having a mixed background seemed to provide a greater capacity for perspective taking, empathy, and understanding of ethnic-racial experiences and diversity of experiences in general.

Self concept (internal)

Participants spoke to a general positive sense of self as a benefit of a mixed ethnic-racial heritage. For instance, participants conveyed that they felt they had the proverbial *best of both worlds*. As Carla pointed out, "I get to learn about two different cultures …" Echoing this, Charles stated, "you get to see the world through both sets of eyes." Thus, for Carla and Charles, experiences of mixed heritage enabled the development of more expansive world views or, as Zaida succinctly put it, "I have a lot of different, uh, viewpoints to draw from!"

Participants also spoke to a benefit to their internal self-concepts as having a *stronger sense of self*, as a mixed background was unique in society and, as such, provides a positive experience. In support of this, Valeria noted, in referencing her self-concept, "I believe the diversity or experiencing things on each end is positive for me." In addition, Alice stated, "with my American friends I would say I'm more proud of being Korean because I'm, I'm different than they are … I'm more proud, I guess, of being different." Olivia further supported this by articulating the following:

> It's also nice to have a wider world and nice to have that diversity of opinion. My fiancé's family all come from the same 50 square miles … that's fine and it's worked for him but I am definitely aiming for the everyone being different but being able to speak about and learn about those differences.

Thus, in these cases, having a mixed background was perceived as unique, and there was a sense of pride with this distinctiveness from others. This pride was clearly integrated into their self-concept. Mariah added a slightly different take. In her case, having the mixed background made her very comfortable with who she was and, as such, somewhat minimized the importance of race in her experiences:

… it was like there are so many things before your race, like, race wasn't really harped on in my house. I mean like, you don't walk around pretending that it doesn't matter to people…. But, um, uh, they always wanted me to be comfortable with who I was, racially [later adding] in my life, its always seemed that … it was more important for other people to categorize me than it was for myself.

Echoing one of the "options" put forth by Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002), being able to *shift identities* based on the context of situation emerged as another manifestation of internal self-concept benefits. Victor, for example, mentioned, "I like … just the overall experience of … being able to know where African Americans are coming from … but also having an experience in a White community … I can move between each kind of setting with ease and just being myself." Some alluded to this shifting of identities as a very organic process in their everyday interactions. As Cynthia described, "Not looking one way or the other kind of gives you the ability to choose … and it's nice that I can walk that line and choose … whenever it suits me in the context." Charles, however, provided a slightly different take:

There comes a point when one day you have to literally sit down and figure out like … you know how do you sit down and think, "am I more of this or am I more of that?" I mean you have to sit down and ask yourself "what do I feel like?" you know … "what am I more of?"

Charles did not seem to perceive this as a challenge. Rather, he simply explained that, while beneficial, shifting identities is often a mindful, reflective, and purposeful process.

Self-concept (external)

Participants also spoke to external dynamics associated with self-concept emanating from interactions and messages from others. As articulated by Victor, many regarding benefits that conveyed positive perceptions from others based on *physical appearance*:

People tend to project on you in terms of having the best features of each possible one in relation to, you know, hairstyles or bone structure or skin tone so, you know, um, I don't have to go outside and tan very much as far as to get a certain skin color … I look healthy all year long as opposed to getting very pasty in the winter and dark in the summertime … I got the better end of the deal.

Related to this, participants spoke to the benefits of physical appearance coupled with the *compliments* and, at times, envy from others as a positive aspect of a mixed background. Marco explained, "I get a lot of compliments on my skin color. 'I wish I had mixed race like you because then I'd have great skin!'" Although recognizing this is somewhat superficial, it was nonetheless something attributed to their mixed background. Virginia's reflection also echoed the external self-concept somewhat constituted in reactions and discussions with others:

My friends, they're like, you know, I wish I was "half" like, everyone's always like half, you know, babies are always prettier, and I was like well, that's not it, but it, I guess like, I don't know. It just brings out, kind of like a brighter side … I guess, I mean, I like people kind of envious.

Pragmatic benefits

Many participants also spoke to the pragmatic benefits of having a mixed heritage primarily with social opportunities. For instance, Zaida noted that her extracurricular activities were influenced by her mixed background:

I actually used to be, um, the director of a nonprofit organization that worked with kids that were of different racial and ethnic backgrounds and I was really involved with that.

Further, in discussing her visits to the Indian Center in the community, Anissa emphasized the range of educational opportunities that stem from being multiethnic-racial and, specifically, access to spaces that benefit her identity and well-being, "… when I go to the Indian center, it does kind of reestablish, just sitting there, it's almost like me going to church."

Participants also spoke to the variety of opportunities afforded to them by qualifying for various programs and scholarships based on their background. Joyce explained that "when it comes to special scholarships or programs, those always worked in my favor because I was a minority, so that's an advantage." Some participants did indicate that their decision to identify with a certain aspect of their background over another was, at times, priority-based. As Victor stated directly, "it helps a lot with scholarships and stuff if I bring that into it." However, these comments often existed within a larger discussion of opportunity and the importance of diversity. For instance, in discussing her education opportunities and scholarships available to minority students, Marissa stated, "I guess, just, I'm very grateful for my scholarships that I have. And honestly I don't know, if I would have received one, you know." William noted that while he recognizes the benefit of the scholarship based on his ethnic-racial heritage, the scholarships he was eligible for are important for educational environments as they "offer diversity."

In these interviews, the discussion of positive qualities and benefits of having a mixed heritage was either explicitly framed or inferred from the tone (i.e., positive affect) in the interviews as playing a significant role in the development of secure identity and overall positive sense of self and well-being. However, as we alluded to previously, individuals were also able to identify and discuss perceived challenges that come with having a mixed heritage in tandem with these discussions of benefits.

Perceived challenges of a multiethnic-racial background

Three general themes emerged in participants' discussion concerning challenges to having a mixed background: (a) identity tensions, (b) salient differences in personal relationships, and (c) communal concerns.

Identity tensions

One challenge associated with self-concept is characterized by participants' experiences of *feeling disconnected* from parts of their identity or a concern about how they are perceived by others. For instance, Olivia disclosed, "there are always questions, am I Black enough, should I watch my speech patterns with these people, do I need to straighten out my hair?" Likewise, Vicky stated, "I really never think of myself as being really, really Asian even though I'll say I am for forms." As Marissa indicated, these identity tensions have implications for social affiliations: "I want to fit in and I'm afraid people will look and think she doesn't belong because I don't look like I'm from another race. I feel like there may be a little bit of judgment." Victor echoed these sentiments: "… it wasn't explicitly said 'you need to leave,' but it was expressed that you were viewed with suspicion and you were not going to be invited as far as the in-groups go." Anita discussed some experiences of explicit marginalization from "both sides" of her heritage, "you know, experiencing discrimination towards Mexican Americans from others or also whether it is Mexican Americans being like 'yeah, but you're White.'"

Participants also indicated that they were often mistaken as having different ethnic-racial backgrounds relying on explicit behaviors and identity discourses to *explain identity*. As Emily noted, "I get mistaken a lot thinking I'm like Latino or like that kind of I don't know why. I've had a lot of people come up to me and start speaking Spanish … and its just like I'm sorry I can't help." Joyce further articulated this challenge stating, "I don't think people think I'm part of the Mexican culture, unless it somehow comes up in conversation or something and then they are always surprised."

For some, this was coupled with confrontations of negative, stereotypical perceptions of one's background, as Justine explained in her discussion with a neighbor:

> [S]he goes, "Oh I don't look at you as being Mexican." I said, "Really? Why is that?" And she said, "Well, all of the Mexican people that I know, a lot of girls, they wear a lot of makeup and they're not very smart, and they, um, are pretty promiscuous." And I was pretty taken aback.

Olivia discussed her experiences, stressing that much of how she identifies is contingent on how others perceive her:

> [I]t isn't so much my choice as it is the people around me. You know, I'm a little lighter but I went to a predominantly White high school so I was still seen as Black. It wasn't like "hey, I'm White and I'm Black I want to be Black." It was chosen for me … when people see me on the street, they don't go "hey that's an Irish girl," they say "hey that's a Black girl" … I started seeing that it's not really how I define myself but how other people see me.

Although the ability to *shift identities* was introduced as a benefit, individuals also discussed the shift in enacting an identity as a challenge to a mixed background. Zaida stated, "when I am with my Hispanic friends I have to emphasize my Hispanic culture so that I feel like I can fit in a little more." Olivia added:

> [I]t's all about shifting your communication styles to fit with the group with whom you are. So when I'm with my mom I may be the dark person in the room but I don't sound like it and my speech style changes when I'm with my dad and my aunt … my speech style changes and it depends on where you are I think … it's a different speech style.

In these cases, the shifting of identity was discussed as somewhat of a burden requiring more awareness and communicative competence. In these exemplars, individuals give voice to the experience of navigating a social context in which monoethnic-racial identity and background is the norm. Thus, while society as a whole is experiencing an increase in multiethnic-racial individuals, these experiences suggest that the social and communicative expectations are still fairly myopic in terms of recognizing the mixed heritage experience.

Salient differences in relationships

For some participants, the mixed backgrounds created perceptions of differences in personal relationships that could, at times, affect the quality of the relationship and feelings of inclusion. Tom reflected on disconnect with many in his social network: "I just, my entire high school life, I never really could share the Asian cultural side with my friends a lot." Many of the experiences of salient differences in relationships referenced family. Maya spoke to this in discussing having a parent of a different background, "There's a lot of times where [my dad] doesn't understand a lot of things. Um, he just doesn't comprehend, I guess 'cause he never experienced it …" Also, in reflecting on spoken language in the family, she noted, "Every single Sunday we would go to church. And, I know it sounds funny, but they didn't speak in English, so I never really understood what they were saying … so I just, I never really grasped much of an identity for myself." For some individuals, the challenge was addressing the negative perception of ethnic-racial groups within the family. As Mariah stated, "my grandpa, I guess when my parents first got together, he didn't like it. I guess he said some racial stuff… . Like, I guess he just said like he didn't want any mixed kids in the family." Participants also referenced cultural and linguistic barriers that would create relational divides with one side of the family. Speaking about her grandmother, Maya stated, "I never really had much of a relationship with her. She was very, well … she didn't speak much English, so you know, you couldn't really communicate well with her." Discussing her father, Emily noted, "I've run into confrontations of my dad's views compared to mine, 'cause obviously he didn't grow up here …" While these are similar to other experiences of acculturation in immigrant families, what is different is that individuals often spoke about solidarity with one side of the family and distance with another, stemming from the mixed backgrounds.

Participants also expressed concerns about the intergenerational transmission of identity and the potential of salient differences with their children and partner: "It's going to be hard. I am married and my husband is White. It's gonna be hard for my kids because they probably won't really have a very strong connection to the Hispanic side of my family" (Zaida). Vicky demonstrated the concern that there will be a cultural divide between her children and parts of her

family given her identity tensions, "I think when I have kids, they'll probably identify with being Asian even less than I do just because I don't have such as strong pull for it myself."

Communal concerns

Participants also alluded to challenges related to living in a society in which we still do not actively recognize the experiences of mixed heritage. Many spoke to the type of questions they received in various segments of society, especially from nonpersonal relationships or just standard social norms reflecting a need to *legitimize identity*. Anissa, for instance, expressed her frustration with having to explain herself, voicing, "if people ask me, I say I'm mixed race or biracial and then if they ask me if, um, which race or whatever, then I'll elaborate. I feel comfortable with, I actually think it's a rude question to ask, you know, 'which are you?'" Alice also made this point: "Everyone tells me, they're just like, they're always asking me, 'are you mixed, are you …?' It's like, 'yeah you know, you don't look full Asian.'" Further, Mariah echoed sentiments expressed by others concerning some of the formal ways in which mixed backgrounds are not recognized, "I had the situation, you know, bubble the circle with your racial identity—there was either White, Black, Hispanic, Native American. And I am just like, 'which one of those four bubbles am I?'" Britney put it bluntly: "'I'd say for the most part the biggest challenges have been paperwork ones … because it was frustrating not to be allowed to be me."

Finally, a few participants noted that *lack of positive role models* in their community or in the media who had similar ethnic-racial backgrounds was a challenge in growing up. In reflecting on growing up prior to moving to college, Destiny explained, "back home, beautiful was just something that I wasn't … until I, until I went to college and then I did see being mixed as positive." Eric spoke to the feelings of isolation in his community. He related it to "being the only Black kid in a White school or the only White kid in a Hispanic or Black school." In Eric's case, a "mixed" identity was something distinctly different from other ethnic-racial groups and one that was not explicitly recognized or affirmed. Tonia also spoke to the lack of interethnic-racial groups and families in her community or in the media to provide models for behavior: "It's kinda' something I'm almost insecure about so I think that's why it's a challenge for me." In fact, she spoke to moving to communities with more interethnic-racial social groups and individuals with mixed backgrounds as a positive change in her life.

Discussion

The purpose of this inquiry was to identify potential benefits and challenges of having a mixed ethnic-racial background focusing on the perceptions of adults as they reflected on their past, present and, at times, anticipated future experiences. Complementing a growing body of scholarly work on multiethnic-racial identity, the present study contributes to our understanding by giving voice to individuals to reflect on both positively and negatively valenced experiences relevant to navigating social and personal expectations and relationships. In the following discussion, we shift from focusing on particular benefits and challenges and, instead, reflect on the synthesis of findings to identify important implications as we move forward in this area of inquiry. We frame this synthesis around four important considerations for interpreting these findings and future inquiries: emphasizing constellation of experiences, life-span and developmental considerations of identity, (mixed) ethnic-racial identity as constituted in interactions, and potential promise of pluralistic worldviews. We conclude with a discussion of the limitations of this particular inquiry.

Emphasizing constellations of experiences

Participants were not overly negative about their experiences nor was there a general theme of insecure self-concept or negative psychological well-being. This further supports the notion that

the multiethnic-racial experience should not be viewed as inherently turbulent or problematic. With that being said, the challenges experienced and discussed by the participants certainly represent social terrain in which individuals with mixed heritage live. In short, there is clearly a plurality of experiences expressed by the participants in terms of benefits and challenges to their mixed heritage. As we indicated in the rationale for the study, historical perceptions of the multiethnic-racial identity presumed an overall negative experience. Dismissing this approach, scholars have highlighted the positive aspects of a mixed background. Yet, in doing so, there seems to be an (unintentional) positioning of the these experiences as following *either* a negative (i.e., marginalized) or positive identity development trajectory.

Based on our findings, this is not the case, as most individuals speak with equal rigor to *both* challenges *and* benefits in reflecting on their lives and relationships. As with many aspects of life, therefore, our orientations to self and others is best understood not in terms of general positivity or negativity. Rather, our daily lives are actually a constant series of dialectics that we manage (Baxter, 2011). Put differently, what the participants in this study speak to is that the multiethnic-racial experience cannot—and should not—be distilled into general orientations of good or bad, favorable or detrimental, problematic or constructive. Instead, we should focus on the constellation of experiences (i.e., benefits and challenges) for a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of how individuals integrate experiences into their self-concept. One opportunity for future inquiry and discussion is to identify these potential constellations of experiences (i.e., are certain positive experiences also associated with specific challenges) to determine whether these constellations have implications for individual and relational well-being.

This emphasis on constellations of experiences does not preclude or minimize further exploration on specific benefits and challenges. In fact, there are many experiences that would warrant further investigation. For instance, future inquiries or discussions should focus on the interplay between the positive and negative comments from others to identify the intersecting effect of these discourses on self-concept and well-being. In addition, given the centrality of family in our lives, we should strive to understand how individuals manage the perceived differences in the family in a constructive manner (Soliz et al., 2009). Finally, attending to the comments about the lack of role models, we see another opportunity to examine the manner in which current social media campaigns (e.g., #beautifullymixed) centering on pride and positive reflection of mixed heritage are integrated into one's self-concept. These are but a few of the directions for further consideration related to specific benefits and challenges. Again, we emphasize that the constellation of positive and negative experiences is what truly captures the lived experiences of participants.

In considering some of the challenges voiced by the participants, we note that while some of these challenges may be similar to those experienced by individuals/members of other monoethnic-racial minority groups (e.g., experiencing discrimination), many of these are indeed unique to having a mixed heritage and should be considered in our research and practice in working with various ethnic-racial communities.

Life-span and developmental considerations of identity

Clearly, there are positive and negative moments and phases in life as we develop our identity and many of the interviews, as a whole, alluded to these variations. Thus, we should realize that multiethnic-racial identity is not static and the understanding and experience likely shift across the life-span. The life-span perspective has largely been ignored in our discussions of the multiethnic- racial experience. For instance, many of the foundational models about biracial identity development (e.g., Poston, 1990) focused on adolescent and young adult identity development. Further, much of the research on counseling focus on this early stage in the life-span (Hud-Aleem & Countryman, 2008). This phase of identity development is significant and warrants attention from scholars and practitioners. However, as participants spoke to experiences across the life-span (e.g., parenting their own children), we should also be cognizant that identity development and salient experiences linked to well-being continue across the life-span.

Related to this, many identity development models do not allow for the integration or negotiation of multiple layers of identities. Thus, as we continue to explore identity development among multiethnic-racial individuals, we should be cognizant of the dynamic nature of identity for this population, including (a) the affect associated with "shifting" of identities (Sanchez, Shih, & Garcia, 2009); (b) implications of a mixed heritage for identification with family (Fuligni & Flook, 2005; Soliz et al., 2009); and (c) the manner in which salience of ethnic-racial identity compared to others identities (Yip, Kiang, Fuligni, 2008) is amplified or minimized given a mixed heritage. In doing so, our approaches should embrace a life-span orientation, recognizing the various turning points and life events that can influence and/or change one's self-concept.

(Mixed) ethnic-racial identity as constituted in interactions

Participants spoke to both positive and negative aspects of internal self-concept while also referencing the constructive as well as problematic encounters and experiences with others. Thus, understanding multiethnic-racial identity necessitates looking beyond what is happening *inside* an individual. Rather, identity is constituted in external discourses such as dialogue with others (e.g., explaining, defending, legitimizing identity) and culture or media messages. Positive experiences seem to emerge when there is a connection between one's self-concept and these discourses, whereas tensions between how one perceives him- or herself and how others or society, in general, perceive them likely lead to negative experiences (Jung & Hecht, 2008). Thus, these findings illuminate the tensions often experienced by multiethnic-racial individuals and it is likely the management of these tensions that results in positive or negative self-concept (Nuru, 2015).

Potential promise of pluralistic worldviews

As we alluded to earlier, one of the salient themes in terms of perceived assets was the emergence and recognition of pluralistic worldviews. If individuals with a mixed background develop more pluralistic worldviews, it would make sense that they could also (more easily) take the perspective of others and, perhaps, develop more constructive orientations and discourses toward controversial topics. Put differently, scholars often approach the experiences of multiethnic-racial individuals in terms of how they navigate expectations and norms of the social and communal worlds in which they exist. Yet, there may be a bi-directional influence and scholars and practitioners should focus on the manner in which the experiences, voice, and actions of multiethnic-racial individuals are influencing (i.e., changing) their proximal and, potentially, distal social contexts (i.e., improving attitudes among homogenous peer groups, challenging preconceived notions in families, promoting constructive dialogue about issues of race and ethnicity).

Limitations

As with any research inquiry, several considerations should be taken into account as scholars and practitioners interpret findings and translate research into practice. We identify three notable limitations in the current study and see each as an opportunity for future inquiry. First, as we discussed previously, we purposely set out to broaden our understanding of multiethnic-racial experiences by including a sample of individuals with a variety of ethnic-racial compositions, as previous research has tended to focus on specific mixed backgrounds. Doing so allowed us to examine a more global multiethnic-racial experience, yet there may be important differences based on the nature of one's background. For instance, given the historical and current experiences of African Americans in the United States and the disapproval of mixed marriages of White and African American individuals in recent decades, multiethnic-racial individuals with an African American background likely have different experiences than an individual with a background not met with as much disapproval or prejudice (e.g., Asian American/White). Future research would benefit from examining similarities and differences in ethnic-racial composition.

Second, participants in our sample were from the United States and the interpretation of experiences was viewed through this lens. There are likely sociohistorical factors across countries and cultures that warrant consideration in generalizing these findings beyond the United States. Third, there was a nearly 2:1 ratio of women to men in our sample. Whereas we did not specifically look for gendered experiences, nor did any emerge in our analysis, there are undoubtedly different experiences between men and women given the intersectionality of gender, race, and ethnicity. Fourth, many of our participants were solicited through organizations or Listservs that provide information and forums for discussion of multiethnic-racial experiences. As such, we may not be capturing the experiences of individuals who are not comfortable discussing experiences, have not reflected on their ethnic-racial identity, and/or do not identify as multiethnic-racial regardless of parents' ethnic-racial background. Future research should consider additional solicitation methods that can capture this potential variation in experiences and, in this case, perceptions of benefits and challenges.

Finally, while individuals in this study often implied that these positive aspects of mixed heritage and more negative or challenging experiences are associated with secure sense of self and overall psychological well-being, we did not directly assess this in the current study. As such, the findings lay the foundation for future inquiries examining the manner in which these assets and challenges are associated with secure ethnic-racial identity and corresponding psychosocial outcomes (Smith & Silva, 2011).

Conclusions

Ethnic-racial identity is central to the social development of individuals, with implications ranging from psychological well-being to coping with prejudice and discrimination to academic achievement. Although scholars have devoted significant attention to processes (e.g., socialization) and outcomes associated with ethnic-racial identity, individuals with mixed ethnic-racial backgrounds are still vastly understudied compared to monoethnic-racial peers. Given that the multiethnic-racial population has been growing exponentially the last decade, it is imperative that we focus on the unique experiences of these individuals in understanding the role of ethnic-racial identity in psychosocial development. We believe that the findings of the current study add to the growing body of work on individuals with mixed heritage by providing insight into the complex and nuanced aspects of (multi)ethnic-racial identity. We hope the findings provide opportunities for future research from scholars interested in the dynamics of (multi)ethnic-racial identity as well as practitioners (e.g., educators, counselors) working with diverse individuals and communities.

Note

1. Often, references to this population use the term biracial or, at times, biethnic. We employ the term multiethnic- racial for the following reasons. First, individuals may have more than two ethnic-racial backgrounds and, thus, the prefix "bi-" is not always appropriate. "Multi-" allows for more than two backgrounds. Second, *race* and *ethnicity* are often used interchangeably and/or there are various perspectives on *race* versus *ethnicity*. As such, using one term may privilege one perspective, deflecting from experiences of all individuals with mixed heritage. Finally, as Markus (2008) pointed out, using both terms minimizes views that distinctions among groups are based primarily on physical attributes and features.

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