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Critical incidents in the development of (multi)ethnic-racial identity: Experiences of individuals with mixed ethnic-racial backgrounds in the U.S.

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Abstract

Secure ethnic-racial identity (ERI) is tied to well-being, especially for minority individuals; however, there is still little consensus on the key processes and optimal outcomes of various multiethnic-racial (ME-R; i.e., individuals with parents from different ethnic-racial groups) identity development models. In this study, we examine the critical incidents in personal and social relationships that are central to ME-R identity development. Twenty-nine ME-R individuals provided retrospective accounts of incidents and conversations they self-perceived to be critical to their ERI development. Four major themes emerged: incidents and conversations surrounding *intergroup contact*, *confrontation*, *heritage*, and *appearance*

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were all recalled as critical to ME-R identity development. These findings highlight the importance of studying the ways that ERI is constituted through interaction with others. Implications and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Critical conversations, critical incidents, ethnic-racial socialization, identity, multiethnic-racial

Ethnic-racial identity (ERI) is the degree to which an individual feels a sense of connection and belongingness to an ethnic or racial group(s) (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014) and is tied to psychosocial and behavioral outcomes (i.e., well-being, academic achievement; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014), especially for ethnic-racial minorities (Phinney, 2000). Traditionally, research on ERI has focused on *monoethnic-racial* identity development, positive identity, and sense of belonging or attachment with *one* ethnic-racial group (see Smith & Silva, 2011 for review), which limits our understanding of identity development of individuals with mixed ethnic-racial backgrounds in the U.S.—a population growing at an exponential rate (Saulny, 2011).

For individuals with mixed ethnic-racial backgrounds, development of ERI includes how individuals integrate their affect, sense of belongingness, and affiliation with *multiple* ethnic-racial groups. Moreover, ERI is not something that is “achieved” and static for multiethnic-racial¹ (ME-R) individuals, as the salience of particular ethnic and racial identities may shift across relational and social contexts (Rockquemore & Brusma, 2002; Root, 2003), placing interaction, communication, and expression at the center of ME-R identity. Given that ME-R individuals have unique experiences compared to monoethnic-racial peers (Soliz et al., 2017), it is important to deepen our understanding of ethnically racially driven interactions and their effects on ME-R identity and well-being (Atkin & Yoo, 2019). Although some aspects of ERI development are gradual and linear (i.e., gaining cultural knowledge), individuals do not typically move through stages of identity development based solely on internal cognitive shifts that are isolated from interaction with their environment. Rather, new understandings of identity emerge when relationships, experiences, and interactions change individuals’ perceptions. Thus, addressing calls to understand how our social interactions and relationships contribute to ERI (i.e., James & Tucker, 2003) and in an effort to move beyond the

unidirectional perspective on parent–child socialization (i.e., Hughes et al., 2006), we attend to specific incidents and conversations across relational contexts that are perceived by ME-R individuals to be critical to identity development.

ME-R identity development

In the past 30 years, scholars have made significant strides in the study of ME-R identity. Phinney's (1992) work on minority identity development and creation of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure, as well as Poston's (1990) development of a newer more positive identity development model for studying ME-R youth, has laid a solid foundation for this field of study. Beyond these initial developments, research and theorizing on ME-R identity can be traced to various perspectives on development (see Rockquemore et al., 2009; Shih & Sanchez, 2009 for review). The *problem approach* positions ME-R identity as a series of deficits, dilemmas, and negative experiences to be overcome. The *equivalent approach* suggests that individuals from multiple ethnic-racial backgrounds go through steps that ultimately lead them to adopt a monoethnic-racial identity implying that adopting a monoethnic-racial minority identity is the healthiest outcome for ME-R individuals. The *variant approach* focuses on how ME-R individuals actively and consciously construct an ME-R experience and how they can integrate their multiple cultural backgrounds to develop a healthy ME-R identity. As such, research guided by this approach acknowledges the complex, but feasible process of adopting an ME-R identity emphasizing the uniqueness of the ME-R experience (Rockquemore et al., 2009). A fourth perspective, identified by Rockquemore and colleagues, is the *ecological approach* (i.e., Root, 1996), which assumes that ME-R identity development is not a linear process and shifts throughout the life course based on relational and social considerations and experiences. While current research and conceptualizations of ERI development are guided by these latter two perspectives, there is still little empirical focus on the events (i.e., conversations, salient experiences) that are central to identity shifts. Given that our communication and interactions with others are how we shape our perceptions of ourselves and our relationships (Bergen & Braithwaite, 2009), the current inquiry is guided by a critical incident perspective which allowed us to

explore events, episodes, and interaction identified as salient and influential in the lives of ME-R individuals.

Critical incidents and ME-R identity

Critical incidents (Flanagan, 1954) are conceptualized as “significant, important moments in the lives of individuals who were immersed in circumstances they perceived to be relevant or meaningful to some future outcome” (Morman & Whitely, 2012, p. 25). Scholars focusing on critical incidents assume that identity is constituted through interaction. As such, memorable conversations and significant events shape us (i.e., Kain, 2004; Morman & Whitely, 2012). In the context of ERI, Kellogg and Liddell (2012) found that college students recall critical incidents related to confronting race and racism, responding to external definitions of race, defending racial legitimacy, and affirming racial identity as crucial to their identity development. Further, Nuru and Soliz (2014) identified messages that ME-R individuals recall receiving from parents (i.e., messages of encouragement/egalitarianism, preference for one race over another) as critical to their ERI development. While critical incidents can include memorable messages, they can also be events or conversations that were not seen as significant when they occurred, but in hindsight were impactful. In short, a critical incident perspective on ME-R identity development draws our attention to both general experiences and critical conversations that individuals perceive as influential in shaping their identity. The role of everyday interactions in our relational networks has been largely neglected in work on ME-R individuals; thus, this study is guided by the following research question: *What do ME-R individuals recall as critical incidents in ERI development?*

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 29$, 9 males, 20 females) ranged from 18 to 31 years of age and represented various ethnic-racial compositions (see **Table 1** for demographics). To participate individuals had to be at least 18 years of age and have two parents from different ethnic-racial

Table 1. Participant demographics.

<i>Participant, gender, age</i>	<i>ERI</i>	<i>Ethnic-racial background of parents</i>
Adam, male, 27	Biracial	Asian, White, Venezuelan, and Dominican
Wanda, female, 21	Black or African American	Black and White
Tonya, female, 19	Native American and Vietnamese	Native American and Vietnamese
Brian, male, 18	Korean and White	Korean and White
Samantha, female, 24	Korean and White	Korean and White
Rhonda, female, 31	Mixed	Italian, Black, White, and Native American
Pamela, female, 19	Black	Black and White
Caleb, male, 21	Middle Eastern	East African, Middle Eastern, and Indian
Don, male, 19	Vietnamese	Vietnamese and White
Olivia, female, 20	Half Pakistani	Pakistani and White
Nala, female, 19	Mixed	White and Black
Danni, female, 20	Lebanese	Lebanese and White
Marley, female, 18	Hispanic	Honduran, Filipino, and White
Louise, female, 24	Mixed	Japanese, Venezuelan, Dominican, and Swedish
Eric, male, 20	Half Caucasian and half Filipino	White, Native American, and Filipino
Ian, male, 26	Hispanic	Mexican-American and German
Kiara, female, 19	Mixed	White, Native American, and Black
Jess, female, 30	Multiracial	Black, Native American, and White
Isabella, female, 21	Mixed	Spanish, Native American, and Black
Hannah, female, 20	Mexican and White	White and Mexican
Gwen, female, 20	Asian American	Chinese and White●
Farrah, female, 18	Black	Mexican and Black
Frank, male, 21	Half American and half Filipino	White, Filipino, and Spanish
Erica, female, 24	Mixed	White and Black
Christine, female, 19	Hispanic	White, Panamanian, and Cuban
Beth, female, 30	Latina	White and Mexican
Geoffrey, male, 23	Latino	Mexican and White
Alexis, female, 24	Mixed	Black and Scottish
Henry, male, 25	Multicultural	White and Black

Notes: All participant names are pseudonyms. Gender, age, ERI, and ethnic-racial background of parents are all self-identified. ERI = ethnic-racial identity

backgrounds. Participants were recruited via relevant online organizations and LISTSERVS, respondent driven sampling, and a research participation website at a large Midwestern university (18 students, 11 nonstudents).

Interview procedure and critical incident technique

Individuals were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview conducted in person, by phone, or via Skype (depending on participants' preference) with a member of the research team² (i.e., authors or trained research assistants). Interviews took 30–65 min to complete, resulting in 492 single-spaced pages of transcribed data. The interview protocol was developed by the research team using the critical incidents method (Flanagan, 1954). During the interview, participants were asked to reflect on and describe important moments related to shifts in their ERI. Follow-up questions asked participants to elaborate on these moments. Allowing participants to select moments and conversations that were important to them resulted in a broad spectrum of experiences ranging from seemingly everyday occurrences to major milestones.

Data analysis

To address the research question, we followed a thematic analysis approach put forth by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the primary investigator familiarized herself with the data, identifying initial themes of critical incidents by reading through the transcripts. Owen's (1984) principles of repetition (i.e., different incidents from interviews share the same meaning), recurrence (i.e., consistent use of the same terminology or phrasing to describe an incident throughout interviews), and forcefulness (i.e., the use of paralinguistic or other markers by the participant to stress the importance of an incident) were used to identify these themes which were revised and solidified after additional exploration of the data and deliberation with coauthors. Finally, salient excerpts from interviews were selected to provide context and exemplars for corresponding themes. Following this analysis, the research team engaged in a data conference by sharing the initial de-identified findings with scholars outside the research team who were chosen based on their expertise in ERI and/or qualitative methods. Following standard practices for this verification step (Braithwaite et al., 2017), we discussed the process used to collect the data, the techniques used to analyze the data, and initial themes, refining the latter based on discussion.

Findings

All participants reported that their experience as an ME-R individual was somewhat positive, and, while most participants discussed both positive and negative interactions, many individuals reported having an overwhelmingly positive experience. This is noteworthy as a large portion of ME-R scholarship speaks primarily to the negative aspects of the ME-R experience (see Shih & Sanchez, 2009 for review). Across participants, four major themes emerged reflecting incidents and conversations recalled as critical in their ERI development: *intergroup contact*, *confrontation*, *appearance*, and *heritage* (see **Table 2**).

Intergroup contact

The theme of *intergroup contact* involves participants interacting with individuals of different backgrounds than their own. Two sub-themes emerged: *experiencing intercultural contact* and *engaging in interethnic-racial conversations*.

Table 2. Findings.

Critical incidents in ME-R identity development

Themes	Subthemes
Intergroup contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Experiencing intercultural contact ● Engaging in interethnic-racial conversations
Confrontation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Experiencing face threat <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Harmless face threat ● Harmful face threat ● Asserting agency ● Processing language barriers ● Talking about discrimination <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Self-disclosure of an experience of discrimination ● Received disclosure about discrimination
Heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Experiencing cultural traditions ● Talking about heritage
Appearance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Addressing physical appearance's relation to identity ● Talking about physical appearance

Note: ME-E = multiethnic-racial.

Experiencing intercultural contact. These incidents centered on being exposed to or interacting with people of a less familiar culture, often for the first time. The culture was sometimes that of one's parent and sometimes a completely foreign culture. Common incidents in this theme included visiting a different country, typically a country from the participant's parent's culture, or experiencing diversity through events like moving to a more ethnically racially diverse city or attending college for the first time and being exposed to intercultural contact. All but one of the participants described these kinds of incidents as positive for their development. For instance, Ian (age 26, Mexican American and German) described his experience traveling to Hawaii for the first time to visit colleges.

We went to Hawaii my senior year, or my junior, to look at colleges ... I never felt as instantly included into a group as I did there and part of that might be just sort of a culture that's developed there of insiders and outsiders and if you're assumed insider then the acceptance is more immediate and more warm, but having seen that I felt like perhaps I had missed that my entire life by not being white ... I started to see it as a possible reason for failure and exclusion where before I would not have included that path to those things.

Ian recalled that his thoughts and feelings toward his ERI may have been different had he not grown up in the mainland U.S. where the majority of people are White. Other participants who experienced similar incidents discussed feeling more connected to one parent's culture or feeling grateful for their ME-R heritage after visiting a new country because they had some choice in their ethnic-racial identification.

Other participants reflected on significant intergroup contact events with other ethnically racially diverse individuals who served as a catalyst in redefining ERI. For example, Tonya (age 19, Vietnamese and Native American) discussed a more recent moment when she decided to "claim" her Vietnamese heritage after feeling like she could only identify as Native American her whole life because of her tribal affiliation:

The moment that I decided I was going to say that I'm Native American and Vietnamese was actually this year when,

I kind of knew it all last year, that that's what I wanted to be but the, like, defining moment was when I went to Washington D.C. for NOCRE. It's a conference. It's a national conference on Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education. So that, when I went to that, it was like a week-long trip and it was kind of, like, life changing.

Many other participants described mere exposure to diversity as a notable experience in their identity development. Rhonda (age 31, Italian, Black, White, and Native American) stated: "Moving to a big city, seeing all the diversity, it's really made me feel more accepted," suggesting that her exposure to diversity also played role in her ERI development.

Engaging in interethnic-racial conversations. These conversations involve participants explaining their ERI or discussing matters of race/ethnicity with an individual from a different ethnic-racial group. These conversations typically take place in romantic relationships or friendships, as demonstrated by Pamela (age 19, White and Black) in discussing her reasons for not joining a sorority because she felt like she would not fit in culturally due to her Black heritage.

Yeah actually one of my best friends. I've been friends with her since high school, since sophomore year of high school, and we're roommates now actually, and her freshman year she was not in a sorority but that summer after her freshman year of college, she wanted to join a sorority and she wanted me to do it with her and we talked about it and I just said that it's something that I would want to do, but I didn't know if it was something that I would fit into. So, I didn't end up doing it, she did but I didn't, and so that conversation it's like because of my ethnic identity I didn't want to do it because I didn't know whether I would fit in with that.

Pamela and others recalled these conversations as important because they were typically explaining parts of their heritage to their interethnic-racial conversation partners who would be unnecessary to explain to same-race friends, partners, or family members. Caleb (age 21, Middle Eastern, East African, and Indian) had a conversation with a romantic partner, wherein his partner explains his struggles with race/ethnicity while dating.

I actually dated back home—I dated this Asian guy and in many of the online profiles they would say like no Asians and no Indians. So, here the common things that say no Black, no Asians. Back home it's no Asians, no Indians. And, that was like very common it's like every other profile. Maybe 70 percent of the profiles said that. And, then I started talking to this Asian guy and you know, and how he felt about it. And he's like you know he kind of felt degraded ... and then I recognized his humanity first so so I was like kind of proud of that. But, like that made me open more—feel more sympathetic towards like the whole experience.

As evidenced here, these conversations can also focus on others' ethnic-racial identities. These interactions often led participants to greater clarity regarding the topic of discussion or to a clearer understanding of their ERI further highlighting how conversations and relationships can serve as critical moments in understanding one's ERI.

Confrontation

Confrontation reflects participants' experiences of being confronted by and/or having to actively engage with cultural stereotypes or cultural choices. Four subthemes emerged: *experiencing face threat*, *asserting agency*, *processing language barriers*, and *talking about discrimination*.

Experiencing face threat. These incidents involved others applying stereotypes to the participant, usually in a joking or taunting manner. The outcome of the face-threatening incident was moderated by the quality of the relationship with the participant; if the participant had a positive relationship with the individual confronting them, the outcome of the face threat was positive or neutral, but if the relationship was distant or negative, the outcome of the face threat was negative. The first quotation listed below is an example of *harmless face threat*, wherein Eric (age 20, White, Native American, and Filipino) viewed the incident's outcome as positive because of the positive nature of the friendship.

They [friends] would—I guess just sense kind of – kind of racially profile me but here's the thing growing up I never made a big deal about it and most of the times it was just

like my friends ... It was more like a kind of joking manner; that was like a positive for me because I was just proud of who I was.

In another example of *harmless face threat*, Louise's (age 24, Japanese, Venezuelan, Dominican, and Swedish) face-threatening experience was categorized as neutral because of the nature of her relationship with the group involved.

There was a bible camp sort of thing when I was in college when I was 19, I think. We were at the beach and there was a guy giving a sermon and he says, "is anyone here racially ambiguous," and everybody who knew me just like pointed a finger at me and started laughing [laughs] ... It was not negative—it wasn't negative attention. I wasn't upset about it.

In contrast, the following quotation demonstrates *harmful face threat*, wherein Brian's (age 18, Korean and White) relationship to the other individual in the incident was negative, thus the outcome of the incident he experienced was negative.

I remember I was playing soccer and there was this kid that was like second or third grade and it was just like this little kid who was annoying and obnoxious just like the classic annoying kid on your soccer team. And I remember he called me a gook from like across the field and everyone heard. And as soon as he said that I knew what it meant and then I was shocked that no one did anything And I got so mad at him that I went over, and I got into a fight with him and I beat him up.

Similarly, the following quotation demonstrates *harmful face threat*, wherein Beth (age 30, White and Mexican) had a distant relationship with the individual who confronted her. This, in addition to the public and aggressive nature of the face threat, resulted in a negative outcome.

The first class that I ever taught as a graduate assistant, one of the assignments that I do is a perception check where it's

kind of like a pop quiz and I ask them to make assumptions about what they think I would do. So, as we're unpacking that, I'm teaching in South Texas at the time, I have a student stand up in the back of the room and—I don't have my students stand up when they're asking questions [laughs]—so that was out of the norm. And he asked me, he was like “so ...,” he was like “are you ... a ... half-breed or are you married to a wetback?” And I was like “aaahhh,” so I sat there for a moment and I was like “man.” I could see the students moving and not feeling comfortable so my answer was “well, you know, I consider myself more of a halfback, my dad's Mexican and my mom's white” and he was like “well ...,” he was like “I just—I don't think I can take any instruction from you” and walked out of my classroom. So—that's—that's the only other big moment where race has played a salient or significant part—or just something that sticks out.

It is important to note that the valence of these interactions on identity outcomes is purely based on participant perception, which is linked to their perception of their interaction partner. Although here we label these face-threatening experiences as harmful or harmless, it is also important to consider that biased face-threatening actions toward outgroup members may actively or passively inflict harm (Cuddy et al., 2007). Although a participant may process a face-threatening experience based on a stereotype or racial bias as harmless, it may in fact passively inflict harm on the participant's identity or on their perceptions of their ethnic-racial ingroups.

These incidents of face threat usually happen publicly, suggesting that having to justify one's identity in public is often regarded as an impactful moment. Most participants described how these moments caused them to learn self-regulation behaviors in terms of presenting their ERI, meaning that they became more aware that their ethnic racial make-up could become a topic of public discussion or torment, so they learned to either engage or not engage in retaliation in order to save face. For example, Brian, who got into a fight over being called a racial slur by a White teammate, states that “It just taught me to be more passive” and that he tailored his future behavior to not react so strongly about race and ethnicity, a situation mirrored by previous

literature on adolescent coping strategies when dealing with discrimination (McDermott et al., 2019).

Asserting agency. These incidents center on participants exercising their right to select an identity when being confronted by a choice. Sometimes these choices were forced upon participants; other times participants took it upon themselves to assert agency in presenting their ERI. The theme of choice came up in both incidents and overall experiences. Participants stated that they were grateful for choice, but they also expressed distress when faced with situations where they felt forced to choose (i.e., a religion, ethnic identity, etc.), which is reinforced by existing ME-R identity research (Sanchez, 2010). Ian (age 26, Mexican American and German) remembered how his mother's reaction to him identifying as Hispanic rather than "other" or "mixed-race" affected his ERI.

I would always answer Hispanic on surveys that involved like a race answer or on applications to college, and she often felt like in doing that I was dismissing her background and her family ... it strengthened my impression that that's a sensitive question for me and for my parents and really like a reminder that how I see myself is not culturally like there with the Mexican/American part of my family.

This quotation is just one of many that alluded to race identification on standardized forms. Other participants recalled feeling forced to choose between religions or values. For example, Olivia (age 20, White and Pakistani) recalled discomfort within her household during her teenage years leading up to her choice of Christianity over Islam.

My dad is Muslim, and my mom's Christian and my mom always wanted me to choose what I believe myself. My dad wanted me to be a Muslim because that's culturally what, what was supposed to happen you know? ... it was really hard because my mom would always ask like oh, do you want to go to church and then dad would be like okay, you're going to the mosque.

However, an overall theme in most interviews was that participants felt a “best of both worlds” feeling when they get to choose which ERI to align with in different situations. For example, Olivia later stated “It really makes you realize how lucky we are to be here and be free to choose whatever we want you know?” when asked how she felt about her mom letting her choose her own faith, and Don (age 19, White and Vietnamese) stated “I feel kinda like I have the best of both worlds, my race is kind of breaking some of the racial stereotypes” when discussing his ability to highlight certain aspects of his ERI. These incidents are recalled as both a benefit and a challenge to ME-R identity and many participants were faced with making these important choices in young adulthood.

Processing language barriers. Many of these incidents involve a stranger approaching the participant and speaking a language they assume the participant speaks, causing the participant to reflect on the attributions others are making about their ethnicity or race. These incidents also involve the extended family in terms of who does and does not speak certain languages, which can often leave the ME-R participant or other family members having to overcome a language barrier.

In the following quotation, Ian (age 26, Mexican American and German) recalled feeling frustrated that he did not understand a conversation between his family members:

When I was at my grandparent’s house and they babysat me fairly often, when they were there with an aunt or some of their friends they’d often be speaking in Spanish and it would just be about like you know what they did that day or what they’re planning on doing later in the day, and I would just get very upset that I felt like they were talking in code in order to avoid me hearing them but really they were speaking in a language that they didn’t get to speak that often and that to them was comfortable.

Ian went on to explain that these kinds of incidents made him question his membership in that side of his family. The following experience from Christine (age 19, White, Panamanian, and Cuban) outlines a time that a language barrier also made her think differently about her membership in her family:

At Thanksgiving when I was probably around 10, we had my mom's side and my dad's side come over ... And, so, my mom's side of the family they like, they were saying a prayer or whatever in Spanish and my dad's side of the family felt kind of like excluded. And, I remember—'cause like they didn't know the Spanish prayer and so, my—I just remember like my grandma talking to her daughter, so on my dad's side, and just being like—"that was kind of rude, like we don't know what they're saying—It's a prayer but still like, I mean if we're all here like ... we should speak English and pray in English," things like that. So, I felt kind of uncomfortable hearing my grandma say that.

Christine went on to explain how her perceptions of the White side of her family based on this event affected how she thinks of herself in terms of identifying more with her Hispanic heritage. Language is both a frequent way that ME-R individuals are misidentified and can be a point of contention in the family. Many participants mentioned language as something they wish their family had taught them growing up in addition to learning more about their ethnic heritage.

Talking about discrimination. These conversations revolve around experiences of discrimination in the workplace, at school, or in private life. In these conversations, the participant either described disclosing a personal experience of discrimination, or described someone else, typically a family member, disclosing their experience of discrimination to the participant. The following quotation is an example of Danni (age 20, Lebanese and White) *self-disclosing an experience of discrimination*.

... Yeah, I told my mom about it and I think she was more offended than I was just because I don't know it kind of like in this day and age like that shouldn't be the first thing that they would ask ... seeing her be like actually hurt by someone doing something like that really put it in perspective just how big a part it was in her life, so I think it might have made me have like a little more respect for my ethnicity.

After disclosing to her mother that she was discriminated against while applying for a job, Danni had a new understanding of the impact of discrimination on her family.

In contrast, Pamela (age 19, White and Black) described a time when she *received disclosure about discrimination*.

On my Dad's side my grandma that is white, her family dis-owned her when she got pregnant by my grandpa who was Black. So that was, that's kind of something that's always been important to me just because it's always kind of made me a little insecure ... It made me realize that my ethnic group is a minority.

Pamela recalled her father telling her the story of his mother being discriminated against by her family for marrying someone of another race. These conversations impact ERI by bringing to the surface the racism that was a normalized practice in the U.S. just decades ago and uncovering its persistent impact. Talk about discrimination can bring clarity and catharsis, but it may also reify minority status to the participant.

Heritage

Heritage involves ME-R individuals participating in or talking about norms that are associated with one of their parent cultures. Two sub-themes emerged: *experiencing cultural traditions* and *talking about heritage*.

Experiencing cultural traditions. These incidents revolve around the participant engaging in, or avoiding, cultural traditions like making foods, listening to music, and participating in ceremonies. Although these incidents are not always milestone occasions and are sometimes repeated incidents over time, participants recalled them as critical in their ERI development. Eric (age 20, White, Native American, and Filipino) recalled an annual festival he attended when he visited the Philippines.

When I went there I was pretty young, so I really remember it was really different. They have this thing called festival

that they do. I think it's like once or twice a year, and it's just like a big celebration that pretty much everyone, like everyone in the little town does. But you know it's like a couple hundred people getting together ... The ethnic relations really made me appreciate how everyone can get together. Their sense of family I guess.

Eric went on to explain that festivals and ceremonies like this, although infrequent, made him feel more connected to the Filipino side of his heritage. Most of these incidents are positive ones; however, some of them create tension in the participants' lives. Louise (age 24, Japanese, Venezuelan, Dominican, and Swedish) who chose not to participate in a traditional Venezuelan 15th birthday party, stated, "At one point she [mother] wanted me to celebrate a Quinceañera, but not really identifying with Venezuelan culture I thought it was just a joke." Although Louise felt detached from her Venezuelan heritage previously, she went on to explain how this refusal created tension between her and her mother. However, most participants described these incidents as positive ones that further connected them to one or both sides of their heritage. Louise's experience is an example that themes overlap, as this woman also felt that her ME-R status gave her an opportunity to choose whether to participate in this rite of passage, an instance of *asserting agency*.

Talking about heritage. Conversations about heritage occur between family members and are either about cultural heritage or about a conversation during which a family member revealed an element of heritage that the participant was unaware of (i.e., revealing to the participant that they are ME-R). Danni (age 20, Lebanese and White) described discussions with family about their shared heritage.

When we were younger, my whole mom's side we would always talk about it at family gatherings and would eat certain foods and talk about like how my ancestors did things, and I think for the most part all of them had a really strong bond and family was always important to them and they were always very proud of where they came from and the different traditions that they took part in, so I think like having that growing up and then still currently has made me more like not only educated on it but like proud of it. Not like embarrassed or anything

These discussions typically took place when participants were young, and participants often appreciated these talks with family. An emergent theme throughout all interviews is that when participants were asked what they wish their families had done differently or what future research on ME-R individuals should focus on, many of them stated that they wish they could have been taught more about their heritage or their parents' past experiences, and many of the participants suggested that future research focuses on how ME-R individuals learn about their heritage.

Appearance

This theme involves participants engaging in incidents or conversations about their own physical appearance. Such incidents were incredibly impactful to the participants who discussed them. Two subthemes emerged: *addressing physical appearance's relation to identity* and *talking about physical appearance*.

Addressing physical appearance's relation to identity. These incidents involve others referring to the participant's unique physical features; the participant acknowledging their own unique physical features; or other experiences surrounding hair, skin, body shape, and facial features. Such experiences are both positive and negative and are often participants' first steps to recognizing their ethnic-racial uniqueness. Wanda (age 21, Black and White) recalled a time when a friend commented on her hair, which changed the way that Wanda perceived her own ERI because she realized her physical appearance affected the way her friends perceived her ERI.

This was in high school, this was one of my best friends that I still know now, she asked me when we were first becoming friends, she's like, "Are you mixed or something else? Your hair is just too long to be Black." And I was just like, "What?"

This quotation is another example showing that these themes are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as this incident could be considered *harmless face threat*. Wanda went on to explain her heritage to her friend, to reduce her friend's uncertainty about the participant's ERI as well as to overturn this racialized stereotype, which could be categorized as a conversation under the *engaging in interethnic-racial conversations* subtheme. Other participants discussed incidents like

the first time they had their hair styled or the first time they participated in cultural traditions regarding physical appearance like covering their hair with a scarf, giving them a newfound understanding of how physical appearance factors into ethnic-racial identification.

In the following quotation, Nala (age 19, White and Black) reflected on the impact that styling her hair had on her perceptions of herself.

When I was younger, we were visiting them and like my cousins they're a lot older than me and they're like "why don't, you should wear your hair down, like let's do, we'll do your hair," I was like oh, okay. So they, they took half of it and they straightened it for me ... they were the first ones who were actually able to do something with my hair and made me look at it differently.

Paying special attention to physical appearance is not only a theme in critical incidents, it is also a theme in participants' overall comments about ME-R identity. This could be related to historical practices of racial categorization such that humans like to categorize individuals, and when an individual appears racially ambiguous, humans are uncomfortable with that uncertainty, causing them to confront ME-R individuals' appearance and causing ME-R individuals to focus on their own features.

Talking about physical appearance. These conversations center on elements of physical appearance like hair, skin, body shape, and facial features. In the following quotation, Danni (age 20, Lebanese and White) recalled when her parents sat her and her siblings down to address their unique physical features.

I remember one time my whole family when I was probably like in second or third grade we just like sat, we have kind of olive skin tone so it's not really dark but like noticeably different from other people so we get asked a lot what our ethnicity is and when we were younger my parents sat us down. That's the first time they ever really told us like what, you know, what Lebanese was and about it, and they just told us like how to answer a question like that and to be like there's nothing to be ashamed of that our skin wasn't exactly like

others, and that was memorable to me just because that was the first time I ever learned about it really.

Danni went on to explain how the conversation made her more confident and noted that the conversation made her think of her ERI more positively. This and other direct conversations, especially between parent and child, seem to be very impactful especially when they take place at a young age. This theme, as well as the other themes of critical conversations, relate directly to the concept of discourse-dependent identities (Bergen & Braithwaite, 2009). As previously mentioned, racial ambiguity causes uncertainty in others as well as in ME-R individuals; thus, direct conversations like these can often help ME-R individuals gain clarity and accept their physical appearance. However, these conversations can also have negative impacts on ME-R individuals' perceptions of self.

In the following quotation, Beth (age 30, White and Mexican) recalled a somewhat negative experience wherein her mother engaged in a conversation about ideals of colorism.

And it also set up a very weird conversation that I remember my mom having with—my dad died when we were younger—but I remember my mom distinctly having a conversation with me when I started hitting puberty, and then my brother, so, around the age of 11–13, of what types of people we were supposed to date, and it was I think because of the backlash she got from being in an interracial relationship and then having kids that were multiracial that she didn't want us doing the same thing. So if we passed as white and ended up in a relationship with someone that was white then maybe her mistakes would be forgiven. It was very weird.

This is an example of a conversation that had a negative impact on a Beth's perception of her ME-R identity. She went on to explain how this made her realize that her mother may have a negative perception of individuals who are not White-passing. When ME-R individuals are faced with negative stereotypes surrounding mixed heritage or minority status, these conversations can reify difference and problematize ME-R existence.

Discussion

The purpose of this investigation was to examine the incidents participants indicated as critical in their ME-R identity development. The events and conversations shared by the participants provide insight into the experiences of ME-R individuals and highlight the importance of understanding how interaction in social and personal relationships, both inside and outside the family, shapes our perceptions of ERI and demonstrates how these interactions act as a catalyst that facilitates individuals' shifts in understanding and making sense of their identity. In the following, we discuss the implications of these findings for advancing existing ME-R identity research, the importance of examining how interaction functions in ME-R identity development, and the unique role that interaction plays in ME-R individuals' social identities. We conclude with suggestions for future research.

Complexity of identity development

ME-R individuals face unique benefits and challenges in developing a secure ERI. On the one hand, these individuals enjoy privileges (i.e., having more leeway to make choices concerning ERI affiliations); on the other hand, they have many mixed messages and mixed experiences to sift through when forming their ERI. ME-R identity development is complex and often fluid, and there is a plethora of racialized experiences that mark the paths of ME-R individuals. This study furthers scholarship suggesting that MER identity is contextual in nature, meaning that ME-R individuals react to different racialized incidents and conversations based on who is involved, where these experiences take place, and whether the individual has experienced the event before. For example, when Beth was called a wetback by a student, her evaluation of the incident was negative as compared to when Eric was teased by his friends about his race which he evaluated as positive. Although both participants experienced *face threat*, there are different contextual factors that led to each incident being actively or passively harmful or harmless as it relates to identity outcomes. Likewise, considerations of intent may come into play (i.e., whether the words signified rejection or acceptance) in addition to the social context. These findings suggest value

in considering how interactions in various relational contexts pull forward certain elements of our identities and what this means for identity development.

Evidence of the highly contextual nature of ME-R identity development, as well as many of the overall findings of this study (i.e., asserting agency and “best of both worlds” feelings), align with Root’s (1997–2003) ecological framework for understanding multiracial identity. This model suggests that ME-R individuals engage in “border crossing” between the following four states of being:

- (1) Having both feet in both groups so that one has the ability to “hold, merge, and respect multiple perspectives simultaneously,”
- (2) shifting the foreground and background as an individual crosses between social contexts defined by race,
- (3) consciously choosing to sit on the border and experiencing hybridity and a border identity as a central reference point, and
- (4) creating a home in one “camp” while visiting other camps when necessary. (Rockquemore et al., 2009)

While this model acknowledges the fluid nature of ME-R identity, it fails to address the reasons or precipitating circumstances that lead to “border-crossing.” Research on ME-R identity development may benefit from asking how interactions in myriad contexts shape ERI, how interactions and incidents affect movement between stages of development, and how interaction affects identity security. For example, Nala described thinking about her hair differently after her cousins styled it for her for the first time. This incident of *addressing physical appearance as it relates to identity* stuck with Nala as a moment when she began to think about her racial attributes differently and is an example of how incidents and conversations can move us through states of feeling more or less secure in our identities. This shift in research focus could allow us to recognize ERI development as an interactional and fluid cycle wherein different kinds of interactions push and pull individuals further from or closer to a secure identity, which builds off of Root’s ecological framework (1997–2003).

Conversations and sensemaking

Through this analysis, we also highlight the utility of considering salient interactions that specifically center around talk when discussing experiences during identity development. Although events and

observations are often important in shaping us, explicit conversations about racialized topics can also affect how we view ourselves. For example, Caleb noted that when his romantic partner explained his own experiences with race and ethnicity, it caused Caleb to reflect on race and ethnicity in general and made him more “sympathetic” to others’ racialized experiences. In this analysis, such conversations were identified as being impactful and memorable, reinforcing communication’s role in constituting identity (Bergen & Braithwaite, 2009). It is also noteworthy that some individuals chose to discuss a conversation surrounding an event that happened to them rather than discussing the event itself. For example, participants chose to describe conversations during which they disclosed an incident of discrimination rather than discussing that discriminatory act itself. This suggests that making sense of an experience of discrimination through explicit conversation can be just as memorable as the discriminatory event itself.

Nature of social identity

According to Social Identity Theory (see Hornsey, 2008 for review), part of our self-concept is comprised of our group memberships and how we perceive those groups. This body of research accepts that we are members of multiple groups and the salience of those shared identities changes across different contexts. However, in the case of ME-R individuals, when faced with racialized experiences, these multiple backgrounds may become antagonistic. This is not to say that developing a strong affiliation with multiple ethnic-racial in-groups is problematic or unattainable, but that it adds to the complex nature of developing a secure ERI and thus a more secure self-esteem. For example, Pamela discussed the experience of learning that her White grandmother was disowned by her family when she became pregnant by a Black man (Wanda’s grandfather). It may have been difficult for Pamela to simultaneously harbor pride and self-esteem for both her White identity and her Black identity. Future research should examine the means by which ME-R individuals choose to enact their ethnic-racial social identities, especially when their racial compositions are comprised of historically dominant and subordinate racial categories in the countries or regions they live in.

Additionally, much research on ERI and ME-R identity focuses on the ways that individuals self-identify over time; however, our

self-perceptions of ERI are not only based on how we identify, but on how others categorize us (Hornsey, 2008). Many of the negative incidents and conversations cited above stem from ME-R individuals not being acknowledged as belonging to a social group with which they self-identify. For example, Wanda discussed a time when her friend stated, “your hair is too long to be Black,” calling her membership in her racial group into question. Thus, interactions with others likely play a large role in ME-R identity due to frequent mis-categorization and misunderstanding during interactions with others. Because much of our ERI is based on how others categorize us, it is useful to study ME-R identity development as a series of interactions that force an individual to move through stages of identity security. For example, instead of describing identity turbulence as a stage in a model, we may describe how identity turbulence typically manifests itself in incidents of *experiencing face threat*, and these incidents may be experiences like being called out in front of others based on racialized stereotypes which may have negative identity outcomes. Or instead of describing a developmental stage of self-exploration, we may describe the types of events that manifest in this stage like *experiencing intercultural contact* or *engaging in conversations with interethnic-racial partners* which tend to bring understanding and clarity to ME-R individuals.

This way, we are focusing on incidents and conversations that ME-R individuals or parents of ME-R individuals can recognize and understand as being important moments in development. In addition to recognizing that these moments can be significant in the development process, ME-R individuals and their parents can be better equipped to prepare themselves or their children for these incidents or to discuss and dissect them when they happen. For example, Danni described and discussed impactful conversation where her parents sat her and her siblings down and discussed why their skin tone is different from others and explained what it means to be Lebanese. With this knowledge, parents and family members can recognize the importance of explicit conversation and prompt conversations about identity and difference.

Limitations and opportunities for future research

Although this study provides insight on new questions we might consider surrounding MER identity, there are limitations that should be considered which offer additional opportunities for future research. First, although these participants represent a diverse range of ethnic-racial compositions, we should also consider how other identities (i.e., religion, gender, age) influence this process. Second, the U.S. is a specific cultural context with its own sociohistorical definitions of what it means to be of mixed ethnic-racial heritage, so research in other countries is needed. Likewise, examining how these identity processes differ in different regions and countries would complement the findings from the current study and reveal additional cultural-contextual factors to consider in ERI development. Third, although the participants in this study reflect a variety of ethnic-racial compositions, future research may benefit from focusing on specific ethnic-racial compositions and unique sociohistorical factors that inform our understanding of ERI development for a specific group. For instance, given the historical and continued oppression of African Americans in the U.S., experiences of mixed individuals with an African American background may differ from those with other ethnic-racial compositions. Finally, as an initial inquiry, our focus and design allowed for rich descriptions of participants' experiences that shed light on identity development for ME-R individuals. Implicit in these descriptions is a connection between these critical incidents, self-concept (i.e., well-being, self-esteem), and relational outcomes, and future research should explicitly assess the connections among critical events, identity processes, and salient personal and social outcomes.

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Notes

1. Often, references to this population use the term biracial, biethnic, or multiracial. We employ the term multiethnic-racial for the following reasons. First, many individuals of mixed heritage come from more than two ethnic or racial groups and, thus, the prefix “multi-” is more appropriate than “bi-.” Second, there are various perspectives on race versus ethnicity. However, 1670 *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 37(5) these two social categories are inextricably linked. As such, using one term rather than “ethnicracial” may privilege one perspective. Finally, using both terms minimizes views that distinctions among groups are based primarily on racialization due to physical attributes and features.
2. The primary and secondary authors, as well as several members of the data conference team, identify as ME-R individuals.

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