

IT'S NOT EASY BEING GREEN: STRESS AND INVALIDATION IN IDENTITY
FORMATION OF CULTURALLY-COMPLEX OR MIXED-RACE INDIVIDUALS

A Thesis

by

SAMARIA DALIA ROBERTS PEREZ

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2008

Major Subject: Communication

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,	Barbara F. Sharf
Committee Members,	Antonio La Pastina
	Antonio Cepeda-Benito
Head of Department,	Richard L. Street

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ABSTRACT

It's Not Easy Being Green: Stress and Invalidation in Identity Formation
of Culturally-Complex or Mixed-Race Individuals. (May 2008)

Samaria Dalia Roberts Perez, B.A., Rutgers University

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Barbara F. Sharf

This is an exploratory study to examine a population which has not been widely researched, mixed-race or "culturally-complex" individuals and identification. In the interest of this study, "culturally-complex" refers to individuals who report parents being from two or more different races/ethnicities; i.e. Black, White, Latino/Hispanic, Asian, Native-American, etc. Current literature reveals through quantitative methods that mixed-race adolescents often report more stress and are at greater health risks than most mono-racial adolescents. However, past studies have not thoroughly investigated why and how this stress exists and at times is inconsistent, which points to the need for qualitative inquiry. Although most of the previous literature focuses on mixed-race adolescents, this study focused on an adult population. Study participants were recruited through snowball sampling for in-depth, open-ended interviews. The data was analyzed by searching for common themes that illustrate the possible causes for stress in culturally-complex individuals.

Though this study cannot be representational of all culturally-complex individuals it did provide for noteworthy findings. Race and ethnicity, and particularly being culturally-complex are topics that are often not spoken about in the family or

between siblings. In general, culturally-complex individuals are not provided with space for dialogue and so thus, having a place to voice ideas, experiences, and opinions was appreciated by all participants. In all interviews, frustration and confusion was expressed towards box-checking. Though stress and invalidation was inconsistent in past literature surrounding mixed-race and culturally-complex individuals, only some participants in this study reported stress and invalidation, while other participants did not report having ever experienced stress or invalidation. While literature had posed that often culturally-complex individuals would identify with the ethnicity of the father, in this study most of those who identified as one culture over another had identified as the ethnicity of the mother. Participants additionally had “hierarchies of identities” where being culturally-complex was not always their most important role. Future research should examine populations from different socioeconomic groups and other demographics.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Recently through my online network, I was invited to a group entitled, “Coco Girlz and the Boyz that Wanna Sip.” Obviously, the group connoted a sort of romance/relationship or sexual oriented goal, which I was not seeking; still, the invitation struck me as odd since I am not usually referred to as “Coco.” My father is White, and my mother, Afro-Puerto Rican—I have never been described as being “fair-skinned,” but am not much darker than many Puerto Ricans who are not primarily of African descent.

I looked at the pictures of the “Coco Girlz” listed on the group’s page and noted that all of them were obviously Black/African-American. The few females that looked much lighter had categorized themselves as Black/African-American on their profiles. I wondered why the group host had invited me. Hadn’t she noticed that I listed my ethnicity as Latina/Hispanic and not Black/African-American? I realized, that this category in and of itself was problematic, as there are many Puerto Ricans who are also Black who consider both ethnicity and race within their identity (the combination was not an option to choose for the online group), but this is only a side issue. Despite my

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maternal grandmother's "mulatta" look, I do not identify myself as Black and I do not feel that I have had an African-American experience. I looked at my own picture posted—it was a very good representation of what I look like every day—my curly, voluminous, mass of dark hair with my big smile. Obviously my hairstyle had been the feature that was misleading, a recurrent theme in my life since I started wearing it "natural" (years of damaging chemicals, products, blistering-hot metallic instruments, and long hours spent straightening had finally precipitated enough annoyance to start wearing it curly). The invitation was the first time on the Internet that I was mistaken for Black but it had not been the first time in my life that I was faced with the situation. Still, it was somewhat curious on many levels; I wondered—if I had agreed to join the group, would others have taken offense since I do not identify being Black? Could I have passed for being Black? Am I denying my African roots owing to my White father's upbringing? If there were someone who was only 1/8th Black, who identified as African-American, would they be accepted by the African-American community?

Introduction

In the past, people like Frederick Douglass, Dorothy Dandridge, and Malcolm X were categorized by society in monolithic ways despite their multiracial/multiethnic backgrounds. In 1997, when Tiger Woods announced that he was "Cablinasian," Caucasian, Black, Indian and Asian, it was perhaps the first time in the media that an individual of such a mix of backgrounds publicly challenged the rigid ways in which society has traditionally viewed race and ethnicity. The controversy precipitated a

variety of reactions—news media people found it amusing and an eccentric quality of Woods while many African-Americans were not at all pleased stating that he was “denying his Blackness” (Gaskins, 1999). Tiger Woods’s action was a step toward restructuring the manner that people define and perceive notions of culture, race, ethnicity, and identity. Almost a decade later, multi-ethnic/multi-racial celebrities from Alicia Keys, to Derek Jeter, to Vin Diesel (see Appendix A) are supported by fans, yet these individuals are still categorized narrowly, disregarding the complexity of their cultures. Thus, approaches to understanding multicultural/multiracial identities remains largely under-examined.

Rationale

The 2000 Bureau of the Census marked a change where respondents were able for the first time to check all racial/cultural categories that applied (Liebler, 2004; Qian, 2004; Renn, 2000; Udry, Li, Hendrickson-Smith, 2003). Given this opportunity, approximately 2.4% of the enumerated population, more than 6.8 million U.S. residents reported being of two or more races (James & Tucker, 2003). This change 1) precipitated the acknowledgement that intermarrying and relations between cultures/ethnicities/races are increasingly becoming more common and 2) that the racial landscape of the United States is much more complex than earlier times—resulting in an understanding that individuals need not be limited to rigid cultural options and categories (James & Tucker, 2003). Thus, it is evident that a large portion of the population acknowledges being mixed or “culturally-complex,” which calls for the need to examine this group in depth. This is an exploratory study to examine, some

experiences of mixed-race or "culturally-complex" individuals, how they describe their processes of identification and the benefits and difficulties associated with those processes.

Terminology

Unfortunately, there is no absolute, perfect term to ascribe to the group of people which this study examines. "Race is not rocket science. It is harder than rocket science" (Edly, 2001). To build on conceptual definitions, race is "a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies" (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 55). Omi & Winant also discuss how definitions of ethnicity have been muddy, including notions of descent and culture. While many scholars over time have debated the definition of culture, Collier (2000) defines culture as "a historically transmitted system of symbols, meanings, and norms." Race and ethnicity are both socially constructed ideas; thus these categories are constantly changing and ideas and criteria within these social constructs are continuously re-constructed and reshaped through communicative processes.

Given the problematic background with terminology, for this study, "culturally-complex" is a term that will be used to identify individuals who have parents from two or more different races/cultures/ethnicities, i.e., Black, White, Latino/Hispanic, Asian, Native-American, Pacific-Islander, Caribbean, Middle Eastern, Indian etc. "Race" and "ethnicity," as mentioned, are slippery terms and as noted there are blurry boundaries between them. While an individual with a background of multiple cultures (e.g. one whose parents are Hungarian and Russian, one whose parents are Caribbean and

Nigerian, one whose parents are Peruvian and Bolivian) may have an interesting cultural experience, it is important to note that “race matters”; thus, at least for this study, individuals whose parents are from both racially and ethnically distinct cultures will be examined. For purposes of this study, I’ve decided that the interpretation of the “difference” within the criteria mentioned should ultimately be left up to the individual who claims cultural complexity. For example, if a woman has a Mexican father and a Peruvian mother, both parents are from Hispanic cultures and may not undergo the same kind of experiences as a man whose mother is Native-American and whose father is Middle Eastern. At the same time, as mentioned above, that ethnicity and race are slippery terms. Consider the following dilemma as an illustration of how race and color matter: if someone of this description (the Mexican-Peruvian), had a Mexican father of light-skinned, Spanish ancestry and a Peruvian mother with indigenous ancestry, the experience for their offspring might be very different than a Mexican-Peruvian whose father, instead of light-skinned and Spanish, also was from indigenous Mexican heritage, much like the Peruvian mother. Their experience as “culturally-complex” as defined in this context raises other historical issues of oppression and discrimination that might influence possible socioeconomic dissonance, as well as difference in social experiences, between both examples. For these reasons, I conclude that the deeming of “cultural complexity” needs to be left up to individuals themselves since “pigmentocracy” clearly plays a role historically in how peoples are treated. Perhaps a more basic litmus test for individuals would be to first imagine the heritages of both their parents and if they would need to check off multiple boxes in order to account for those ethno-cultural-racial

heritages on both sides or be confused or hesitant within this process, they probably are culturally-complex.

Though other terms have been used in research pertaining to the same characteristics, these descriptors have often been problematic. Literature that discusses “mixed-race” people tends to examine only Black-White individuals and often does not recognize Asian, Latino/Hispanic, Native-American, Middle-Eastern, Pacific-Islander etc. as being possibly “mixed” as well. Additionally, many consider Black and White as “races” which excludes other cultures such as Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Native-American etc. “Multi-cultural” is a term that is more inclusive, however this term is problematic because it seems too broad for purposes of this study. First, if an individual were to have parents from two different Eastern European countries, then clearly she could be deemed as multi-cultural, but the implications would not be equivalent to that of an individual from two or more phenotypically different cultures/races such as Asian and Latino/Hispanic. Multi-cultural would also include a wide array of concepts such as religion, but religious beliefs, while important, will not be used as one of the identifying factors that distinguishes one parent’s race from another’s. “Racially ambiguous” is a term for an individual who has a combination of features (i.e., skin color, hair texture, facial structure, etc.) which make it difficult for others to categorize racially. However, this term would not be appropriate for a man who is both Black and White yet is always read as Black and never categorized by others as White. “Hybrid” is a term that would seem more fitting, but at the same time, this expression may connote an individual’s acceptance of a mixed identity as opposed to a mixed individual who only identifies with

one culture/race. Gilbert writes (2005) “Because mixed-race is a social construction, it seems sufficient to argue that in all circumstances it should be left to individuals to self-identity for reasons of self-empowerment” (59). Therefore, while respecting the fact that individuals may have their own preferences in defining their identities, the terms “culturally-complex” or at times “mixed” or “mixed-race” will be employed in this study to describe individuals with parents from two or more different races/ethnicities/cultures. It is also important to note cultural complexity spans many different cultures and should not be viewed in monolithic ways. While many different combinations of ethno-cultural groups could have participated in this study, it is important to note that those in this study are not intended to cover all possible combinations nor represent the entire culturally-complex population, but instead provide some insight from the participants’ experiences to bring forth the issues associated with identification and the benefits and stresses of those processes which come into play.

Stress

Literature reveals that culturally-complex and mixed-race individuals often experience more stress than mono-racial individuals. While research on the culturally-complex is lacking a great deal, the few studies that have been conducted are mostly on mixed-race adolescents. Additionally, approaches towards this group have typically been situated within psychological research, (Bracey, Bamaca, & Umana-Taylor, 2004; Renn, 2000; Shih & Sanchez, 2005; Udry et. al, 2003) thus leaving many blanks to be filled, particularly in how the role of communication plays into identity processes for these individuals. Udry et. al. (2003) in their study found that mixed-race adolescents

are at greater risk for problems associated with emotional issues, health, and behavioral concerns when compared to mono-racial groups. Similarly, Bracey et al, concluded that mixed-race adolescents reported significantly lower self-esteem than mono-racial adolescents (2004). Shih & Sanchez (2005) concluded in their meta-analysis, that conflicting evidence existed in the scarce literature available, suggesting that cultural complexity can be both beneficial and disadvantageous. Negative implications of being mixed-race included problems with racial identity development, depression, problem behaviors, school performance, peer relations, and self-esteem. Negative experiences associated with cultural complexity consist of the discomfort of having to answer to inquiries concerning identity (Basu, 2003; Gaskins, 1999), failing to integrate multiple cultural identities (Gibbs, 1998; Gillem et al., 2001), and identity conflict and confusion (Fouad, 2001; Rockquemore, 2003; Root, 1994; Shih & Sanchez, 2005; Udry et. al. 2003) while benefits include feeling proud of being a unique blend of heritages (Hall, 1992). Root (1994) sums up the problems of cultural complexity in the following passage:

Our national tendency to treat race and ethnicity, core aspects of an individual's identity, as simplistic, dichotomous, and nonoverlapping classification systems has resulted in various forms of oppression of people of color and multiracial people (e.g., dispossession, alienation, marginalization, invisibility). These consequences ultimately impact the constitution of positive self-regard and psychological well-being (Root, 1994, 455).

Thus, the issues intertwined with cultural complexity are extremely complicated, varied, and depend on several different factors which greatly affect the sense of self. Research suggests that often stress in cultural complexity arises from invalidation, (Fouad, 2001;

Rockquemore, 2003) conflicting messages from others, (Root, 1994) and the rigid ways in which race/culture is viewed. Additionally, it is noteworthy that while many other cultures experience stress as well, the arguments presented in this study do not delineate a competition nor it is intended to diminish the stressful experiences that other minorities may endure.

In summary, the phenomenon of cultural complexity, including identity formation and related stress and benefits, requires further exploration to satisfy the void in existing literature. Specifically, research that has been carried out on the culturally-complex has been mostly within the psychology of adolescents (Bracey, et al., 2004; Renn, 2000; Udry et. al, 2003), and in clinical settings. These factors precipitate various problematic issues: 1) adolescents may not be able to report themselves as mixed-race unless specifically asked to report the cultures of their parents—often resulting in parents identifying their children as mono-racial (i.e., parents are more likely to identify their children in monolithic ways, or define their child as the ethnicity of one parent and not the other) or children reporting themselves as mono-racial having not factored both parents into their cultural identity, 2) clinical studies will inherently include adolescents with a priori emotional or psychological issues, and 3) research within culturally-complex adults has not been thoroughly examined. This thesis examines existing literature, and conducts qualitative and interpretive research within communicative processes which contribute to identity formation and related stress of those processes.

Appearance and Others' Perceptions

It is first essential to determine the role of communication in identity formation and stress within cultural complexity. Identity becomes an extremely confusing state of affairs for the culturally-complex owing to the fact that others' perceptions contribute to the self-concept. Communication is a major factor in establishing cultural identity because of the social construction of race. Race is socially constructed in that the categories themselves are symbolical creations, subject to redefinition (Harris, 2002); for example the racial category, "White" has changed a great deal over time—Italian immigrants when first emigrating to the U.S. were not considered White and now are; the same for Irish immigrants and others. Additionally, an individual's racial identity (how she thinks about her race) and racial/cultural identification (what she says about her race/culture) is continuously constructed and evolving based on input from the social world (Liebler, 2004). "The looking-glass self," or "symbolic interaction" posed by sociologists such as Mead and Cooley argue that others' perceptions largely determine how individuals see themselves (Brooks Gardner & Gronfein, 2005; Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983). In short, identity-formation and self characterization is significantly shaped by the perceptions of others and the social interaction of those evaluations. Holstein and Gubrium (2000) state:

Symbolic interactionism orients to the principle that individuals respond to the meanings they construct as they interact with one another. Individuals are active agents in the social world, influenced, to be sure, by culture and social organization, but also instrumental in producing the culture, society, and meaningful conduct that influences them (32).

Mead (1934) maintained that concepts such as “significant others” (influential people), “generalized others” (concept of how others perceive you), and “role taking” (behaving like others who serve as models) interplay with one another to construct a person’s sense of self in relation to the world around her. Because race is socially constructed, this attribute is especially paramount in identity formation.

When individuals first meet one another, so much of the interaction is based on assessing the person’s cultural identity. As James & Tucker (2003) write:

Along with gender, knowledge of another’s racial origins greatly influences the terms and manner of both the approach and content of our contacts. Moreover, as a social construction, race membership sets the parameters of our relationship to the larger social structure and relative position within it... Further, on the basis of the racial stereotyping that results from such a fixed schema, one’s classification shapes how others interpret behaviors and beliefs (154).

Thus, our ideas about a person’s race/ethnicity and culture will dictate our expectations of that person’s character, values, and beyond. For culturally-complex individuals, identity and racial options (how a person chooses to identify ethnically) are not as free or open as white ethnic options since racial distinctions are primarily based on physical appearance (Qian, 2004). Based on physical appearance, socialization, and others’ perceptions—culturally-complex individuals may formulate their own identities (O’Hearn, 1998).

When the perception of others play such a critical role in conceptualizing one’s identity, stress is even more increased when those perceptions are inconsistent with one another. “The ambiguity of ‘differentness’ of physical appearance can be very painful if it is a central part of the sense of self –worth, particularly when the individual is

perceived inconsistently by others” (Root, 1994, 459). Thus, how a person sees herself will always be challenged and re-evaluated by each interaction with varying perceptions that others hold. Shih & Sanchez (2005) best summarize the process:

One of the earliest conflicts that multiracial individuals may experience in their identity development process is a conflict between their own self-definition and the definition imposed on them from the outside world...Scholars propose that identity develops through a process of negotiation in which individuals reconcile their own self-concepts with the expectations of those around them (572).

Revisiting Mead’s concepts, consider a hypothetical woman with a Black mother and Asian/White father. Consider what it means to be White, what it means to be Black, what it means to be Asian, or what it means to be a combination of these. These cultures may simply refer to geography, phenotypes, skin tones, cultural traditions, etc.

However, if we examine what it means for the individual on the level of the cultural norms of the significant others (her mother, her father, her friends, etc.), then we can question how meanings of Whiteness, Blackness, and Asian-ness mean to them. Also, what do these identities mean to general others (her community, passers-by, etc.); how do these people culturally categorize her and why? Role taking also comes into play (e.g., she may decide to try to act like her Asian grandmother, her Black friend, her White father, all at the same time) in order to challenge identity that others impose onto her or she may decide to embrace one culture over others. Putting all these factors together precipitates a complicated state of affairs and then the process does not seem so simple anymore. The development of identity formation is further challenged when the majority of society has rigid ideas and expectations of race and ethnicity that often do not allow for culturally-complex categories. Confounding this matter even further is that

those rigid ideas and expectations of race, are both plural and are as inconsistent with one another as the perceptions of their ethnicity/race are. In other words—not only do people perceive the rules of race/ethnicity differently, but they also perceive the culturally-complex individuals themselves in inconsistent and varied manners.

According to Liebler, (2004) many mixed individuals who are part Black are accepted as Black if they appear Black while acceptance for American Indians by the American Indian community is more rigid and has more to do with tribal ties.

The literature supports that culturally-complex individuals experience a great amount of stress owing to the fact that views of identity and culture are often unyielding, compartmentalizing individuals into narrow categories, thus excluding the possibility for an individual to embrace more than one component of race/ethnicity/culture. This problem is the “either-or” fallacy in which we live concerning cultural identity. Standen (1996) dubbed this crisis as “forced-choice dilemma”; however, it has been argued in past literature that choosing one identity and rejecting another can result in inner turmoil, shame and a fragmented sense of self (Sebring, 1985). The either-or problem with culturally-complex individuals is further illustrated by Root (1994):

At some core level, the variability in the visual appearance of the mixed-race person challenges the meaning of race and the order of the world predicated on it. Instead of being offered the ability to define oneself, which is essential to empowerment (Helms, 1990), and simultaneously claim membership to and identity with more than one racial or ethnic group...the mixed-race individual is usually forced to “choose just one” identity for the sake of society’s comfort level... As such, society contributes at a very basic level to the unique developmental tasks that lie ahead of the mixed-race person at this point in the history in the United States (458).

Because of society's imposed ideals of race/culture/ethnicity, many culturally-complex people choose just one component of their multiple identities.

As Tiger Woods was supposedly “denying his blackness” (Gaskins, 1999), Halle Berry, while being a woman who is both Black and White, identifies herself as a Black actress but does not receive criticism from the public for this choice of not embracing her Whiteness. This is just one of many examples which illustrate how culturally-complex individuals may be influenced to choose just one component of their complex identity yet views of acceptability are inconsistent. Thus, culturally-complex members often have to choose one ethnic/racial identity and leave behind the other—this would often engender feelings of shame for denying identification with one group and not the other. For those who identify with multiple cultures, invalidation is often a result.

Invalidation

Positive self-esteem and self-concept result from support and validation by others; invalidation often is extremely emotionally detrimental to a culturally-complex individual. According to Rockquemore (2003), the process of identification depends on positive validation from others; experiences with social invalidation which affect self-identification can lead to psychological problems. Rockquemore writes:

Human beings are relational by nature. It is through relational processes that we are conceived and born into the world and develop a sense of identity... Our identities are shaped through our social interactions with others. This shaping process involves a multitude of experiences, but a crucial aspect of developing a strong, healthy sense of identity involves receiving validation from others. How others respond to us has a powerful impact on the types of people we become, how we feel about ourselves and the world around us, and our overall level of psychological well-being... Hence, biracial people whose chosen racial identity is consistently invalidated by others (especially from those who are

emotionally significant to the individual) are at risk of psychological distress (119).

A repeated theme in existing literature is the idea of “belonging” which greatly contributes to self-esteem. Root (1994) discusses invalidation in exclusion from groups that culturally-complex individuals may ascribe themselves:

The criteria [of group membership] become painful, however when differences are emphasized and similarities are dismissed, the former resulting in exclusion of the multiracial person. Subsequently, many mixed-race person suffer in the communities to which they are socially assigned because they do not “look right,” “think right,” or “act right.” Consequently, some multiracial people try extra hard to prove that they are African American, Native American, Asian American, or Latino because belonging and acceptance are so important (466).

Because “fitting in” is so essential to humans, stress may result when individuals do not “look” or “act” the cultural role that society assigns the individual. Culturally-complex people are often deemed to be stuck between a rock and the hard place since they may be rejected and experience discrimination from both the dominant group and minority group in society (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). A Black/White individual may be labeled as Black by White society but deemed as too light to truly be Black within the African-American community. Nadya Fouad, an Egyptian-Brazilian who identifies as Brazilian but looks Arabic, exemplifies this difficulty in being invalidated by others in her piece (2001). She writes:

I do not have the instant credibility that a person with darker skin color or differently shaped eyes has. However, living a life defined by visible racial/ethnic minority is not the only way to foster a commitment to cultural diversity. We need to acknowledge that there are a lot of people like me, who are products of multiple cultures and worlds. We also need to acknowledge that people like me may feel like nonvisible minorities and that our voices need to be heard to truly understand the complex issue of diversity (62).

Noteworthy within this passage is the fact that she does not have “credibility” owing to the fact that she is a non-visible minority; nonetheless wants to be accepted as such despite the fact that others do not perceive her as a minority. Also notable is her feeling “invisible,” without voice, pointing to a hegemony within minority groups that further marginalize those who identify themselves as minorities as an “other” within their own minority groups. While Fouad identifies with the multiple layers of her culture, the processes of racial/cultural identity are complex and need to be examined.

Racial/Cultural Identity Formation Theories

Theories of multi-racial/multicultural identities have shifted a great deal over time. In the 1920’s and 30’s, scholars proposed the model of the “marginal man,” a tragic figure who lived on the margins of society—neither quite accepted as either Black or White but neither, also referred to as “The Tragic Mulatto”, which looked at cultural complexity in very pessimistic ways (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). Clearly, society would view the culturally-complex in negative manners when racial mixing was illegal in states by anti-miscegenation laws in place (Root, 1994). The “one-drop rule” in which a drop of Black blood automatically labels a person as Black is now understood to be part of the United States history which helped to ensure White Supremacy (Gilbert, 2005). After the 70’s, approaches to cultural complexity perceived multiple identities as being no different than mono-racial identities. The most contemporary works on multi-cultural identities propose various models and processes in which culturally-complex individuals pass through in order to establish their identities. Many of these proposed models result in the final stage of “integration” in which an individual embraces all of the multiple

identities of which she is comprised as opposed to choosing one or some, as opposed to all. These models are often criticized as they often view the process of identification for the culturally-complex in rather simplistic and linear ways (Gilbert, 2005). There are several ways in which culturally-complex members may identify themselves. 1) They may choose a singular static ethnic or racial identity, 2) they may go through processes where they identify with different cultures at different stages in their lives, 3) they may recognize being of multiple ethno-cultures and embrace their cultural plurality, 4) as children, they may initially recognize as being of only one culture, then later in their young adult years accept other facets of their cultural-complexity, or 5) they may have a fluid identity that is situational (i.e., mono-racial in certain groups, a different sort mono-racial in other settings, bi-cultural in another setting, etc.) (Renn, 2000; Rockquemore, 2003; Kerwin & Ponterotto, 1995). Past models have emphasized the importance for culturally-complex individuals to accept all of their identities. Those past models have also argued that embracing plurality in cultural identity is often the most stressful process as individuals constantly need to negotiate how different parts of their identities are expressed and play into interactions with others. However, Rockquemore (2003) argues that it is not necessarily healthier for an individual to do this cultural integration; they may engage in a healthy self-esteem by choosing only one culture so long as they are receiving much support and validation from others. For example, to avoid conflict or the need to explain, some culturally-complex individuals may identify themselves as from an ethnicity that “matches” their appearance (Root, 1994) even if that ethnicity is not how the individual sees herself. Clearly, the identification processes of the

culturally-complex should not be viewed in such linear and monolithic ways; the processes are extremely complicated and vary depending on so many different factors.

Parents

In much of the literature, parents are seen as major factors who clearly contribute to a culturally-complex individual's process of identification. If we revisit George Herbert Mead's notion of symbolic interactionism, parents would certainly fit the profile of "significant others" since they are so influential in shaping our sense of self. If a culturally-complex individual has one parent who is absent from her life, this may determine her decision to choose the other parent's culture as her identity. Through the lenses of parents' decisions such as the community in which to live, the school for the child to attend, and instilling their ideas of culture through dialogue while raising the child (Kerwin & Ponterotto, 1995), individuals examine their cultural complexity (Qian, 2004). Shih and Sanchez (2005) suggest that parents who are unified in their perception of their children are more likely to instill a unified, positive sense of self, but when parents' views of their child's culture are conflicting, this conflict results in an unstable, fragmented sense of identity. Most past research points to the notion that culturally-complex individuals will define themselves as the culture to which their father ascribes (Qian, 2004). This is perhaps owing to the fact that most cultures are patriarchal. Parents need to be examined further in order to understand how their influence shapes the identity of culturally-complex individuals.

Summary

Owing to the growing number of culturally-complex individuals, the associated stress and health issues within this group most likely attributed to invalidation, mixed messages from others, as well as gaps within the literature, research should be conducted to delve into these issues focusing on adults in non-clinical settings. Moreover, the stress is largely owing to the dichotomous world we live in where individuals are often categorized in narrow socially-constructed patterns. As stress is a major influence in our overall health, it is of utmost importance to try to examine these issues. Interpretive research is needed to examine the experience of these individuals which will lead to further understanding, and also give voice to a group that is commonly marginalized by society. While theories of mixed-individual identity formation have been posed in past research, these theories tend to simplify the processes; identity formation is complex, not linear—especially concerning ethnicity/culture. It is not so important to find which model (a stationary cultural identity, situational, evolved identity, etc.) that an individual fits in terms of processes in formation of culturally-complex identity. What is essential is to understand the elements of communication in their role towards culturally-complex identity. The role of communication needs to further be examined within the processes of culturally-complex identification to understand the stresses involved in identity formation.

Research Questions

- How do culturally-complex individuals identify themselves?
- How does invalidation through interaction with others contribute to stress in self-identification?
- For what reasons may interaction with others lead a culturally-complex individual to choose to identify with one race/culture over another? What are the benefits and disadvantages of this choice?
- How does communication with parents contribute to the formation of culturally-complex identity? Does this interaction impact identity formation in a particular way that other factors do not?
- What other factors come into play in identification for culturally-complex adults?

Method: Participants and Procedures

It is noteworthy that various methodologies were used in order to delve into this highly contextualized subject matter. In Chapter II, I employ an auto-interview, and textual analysis of my own journal in which I recorded ideas and feelings about being culturally-complex to examine my own experiences in comparison with my findings from in-depth interviews with my sisters. In Chapter III, in-depth interviews with 12 other culturally-complex individuals were conducted. IRB approval was obtained and participants signed consent forms. No real names of any participants (including my siblings) will be used as pseudonyms have been given. Since the methods in this study cover different areas and are carried out in different ways, the methodology will be further defined and explained within the next two chapters.

Thesis Chapters

This first chapter has served as the introduction, background, review of current literature, and overall purpose of the study. The additional chapters of this thesis will include 2) findings from my “auto-Interview,” and my “journal” in juxtaposition with interviews with my siblings, 3) a summary of interviews with other culturally-complex individuals (who are not myself or siblings), and 4) a final chapter of discussion and conclusions.

Chapter II: The interview in which I serve as my own respondent acted as a spring board to themes of cultural complexity which prepared me as a researcher. In other words by examining my own experience, I understand how this shapes my interactions with other interviewees regarding the same concepts. Additionally, this adds an auto-ethnographic element to the piece. I compare and contrast my interview with the interviews of my siblings. Based on our extremely different phenotypes, experiences, and personalities, these factors highlight the importance of how differing physical appearances as well as personal preferences, and other factors contribute to varied, diverse experiences and individualized cultural identities by cultural complex individuals. This section segues well into the subsequent chapter which summarizes more interviews—more culturally-complex individuals.

Chapter III: The summary of interviews includes a discussion of ways that an array of culturally-complex participants identify themselves, common patterns that emerge from the discussions on family, interactions with others, benefits, stress, etc. in

cultural complexity. The findings from these participants will further be delved into during the final chapter, the conclusion.

In Chapter IV, the discussion and conclusion, I will summarize and analyze findings from both chapters II and III, and the entire thesis process in order to establish what data I have uncovered that supports or contradicts existing literature. I will explain what substantial contributions to the stress of cultural complexity in young adults my thesis has made, as well as limitations to my research. Additionally, I will examine the newer methodological ground of auto-ethnographic-interviewing.

It is most natural to begin with my own experiences as well as to start from my family's sense of cultural complexity. The interviews with my sisters, as well as examining my own experiences with cultural complexity, were the first steps in my process of understanding mixed identity or with, thanks to my advisor, will be termed as "cultural complexity" within this study. This chapter emphasizes the themes from our experiences. While there are many similarities in how we describe our experiences, there are also many differences despite our identical heritages and upbringing.

CHAPTER II
IT'S A FAMILY AFFAIR

“Excuse Me-- Are You White?”

While walking behind the Northgate area of campus while on my way to visit a friend, a Black man walking across the street caught my attention, “Excuse me—Are you White?!” he yelled over from the opposite side of the road. On a day where I had let my hair down and wild, I understood that he was probably curious about my race/ethnicity by looking at my thick afro-esque puff-ball in contrast to my light, tan skin. I didn't want to answer since he was across the street and the relevance of the conversation was beyond me. “It's really none of your business,” I thought, but didn't say. Nevertheless, I settled on the idea that he was harmlessly curious and thought that if I just answered as quickly as possible that the scenario would quickly play itself out.

So how to answer... I thought about my Puerto Rican mother, my “abuela mulatta,” my White/Jewish father... so I wasn't sure how to answer—for me this is not a question that I can answer with a yes or no. I couldn't say, “Yes. I am White,” since I am ½ Puerto Rican—which includes Black and Taíno... but also includes French and Spanish. At the same time I couldn't say no since my Ashkenazi Father is technically White and my mother's side has White as well. I think he really wanted to ask “Are you Black?” I resolved to answer in whatever way that would make the conversation end as quickly as possible.

“No!” I called out, “I'm Puerto Rican!”

“Oh... Ok!” he shouted back, across the street.

This whole weird experience made me think. I wondered if his response would have varied if I had answered yes. I thought about how this situation would probably never happen in New Jersey or New York or Puerto Rico. I realized that Texans are not used to how Puerto Ricans look. The question probably seemed natural to him but was absolutely bizarre to me. Imagine if you were walking across the street and someone yelled the same question to you—how would you respond and what would you think about the question?

As mentioned in Chapter I, geography and politics explain only part of the broader set of labyrinthine matters of race/ethnicity which differ not only across locations but through individuals’ lenses shaped by their own personal experiences. The above story is only one example of how matters of race are of great importance in the South. Since starting this thesis project, I had shared this abovementioned tale of “Excuse Me! Are You White?” with both my sisters; my sisters’ responses were complete surprise and puzzlement that a stranger would be so curious and compelled to confirm or negate my whiteness in his mind that he would yell that personal, possibly rude, and downright bizarre question across the street. This event happening to me is but only one experiential difference between me and my sisters, in which I had a “moment of ‘what are you?’” in a context—the South-- where they’ve never resided. In order to further explore in depth the multiple factors at play in considering cultural complexity, I examined the experiences of three sisters, my two siblings and myself. The issue of cultural complexity in itself is complex (no pun intended). Cultural complexity will

naturally precipitate a wide spectrum of experiences with a variety of cognitive and emotional reactions. It is evident that significant people such as parents and friends will also influence a culturally-complex individual in various ways; for example, parents who are supportive of the multiple identities, parents who are not supportive of all identities but push the individual to choose one defining identity; and/or the influence of close friends. How one makes sense of cultural complexity may also be affected by several other factors, such as public versus private contexts, e.g., in the street versus inside a private dwelling, or by racial concordance or differences with others, e.g., attending a university with a highly diverse or purposely homogeneous student population.

Considerations of identity, in turn, raise issues about race and ethnicity. Since both parental influence and family environment (i.e. the presence of other siblings, how the siblings identify versus how they are treated, etc.) are so important in establishing a child's identity, examining three culturally-complex sisters with the same parents provides a rich case study for understanding how identities are developed and understood. The experiences of adult siblings may differ, but their shared parental influence and home environment during childhood and adolescence can serve as one level of commonality. Thus, adult siblings who are of the same mixed heritage, with the same parents, all raised in the same geographic location in the same time-frame will still vary in terms of their experiences and feelings toward these issues; it is both the differences and similarities which illustrate the intricate ways in which ideas of identity, ethnicity, and race are communicated.

Method

The methodology in this chapter includes interviews, an examination of my journal written during this project, and an autoethnographic-interview. Each of these approaches will be explained in the following:

Interviews

Based on a semi-structured interview protocol (See Appendix B), created by implementing the themes and literature explained in Chapter I and from my personal experience, I interviewed my sisters, Savannah and Sally (pseudonyms for the purpose of confidentiality in this study), as well as myself in an autoethnographic interview (see explanation below). Ages of participants at the time of interviews were as follows: Savannah (32), Sally (29), and myself (27). Additional questions were added spontaneously as needed during interviews with siblings to either probe further into issues or to compare the experiences more extensively between and among family members. Both sisters, who were made aware that the interviews would be recorded and utilized for this thesis, agreed to participate voluntarily. The telephone interviews with my sisters were conducted during times that they suggested as most convenient for them. Savannah, the oldest sister, spoke with me for almost an hour while she was at home during her infant's nap. In contrast, Sally's 37 minute interview occurred while she was at work in her office cubical, despite the fact that she had deemed this time as ideal for her. Perhaps the difference in time length was owing to the obvious: home versus work environments precipitated more or less amounts of "free" time for the interviewee.

Journal Analysis

When I first considered this topic as a possible thesis project, about a year prior to definitively writing my thesis proposal, I started to write down some of my experiences and feelings as a culturally-complex individual. In order to brainstorm, I wrote about how I thought being culturally-complex has affected me. Pieces from the journal are also included within this section to further inform and describe my identification processes. The journal was very helpful in that 1) it is a written account that was unaffected by my sisters' interviews since I started writing it a year prior to the interviews and 2) the difference in time between when it was written and when my autoethnographic-interview was conducted gave me perspective on how my cultural complex identity has and is continuing to evolve through my life.

Autoethnographic Interview

In order to further explore my own experiences, I employed "autoethnographic interviewing," (Creel, 2005) in which a researcher responds as her own participant in real time to a set of questions in order to invoke her natural, unrehearsed responses to examining introspectively her feelings and experiences with deeply personal subject-matter. For instance, Bonnie Creel interviewed herself in her dissertation research about her personal experiences as an overweight woman experiencing discrimination by health professionals. Thus, I not only recorded my telephone interviews with my sisters, but I also recorded myself responding to those same questions about cultural complexity. My own autoethnographic-interview lasted about 25 minutes. The difference in time length as compared with the interviews was perhaps owing to the fact that I had already

addressed some of the questions from the interview protocol within my journal entries. In addition, I would speak a great deal and end up answering multiple questions and had already thought much about how I felt, personally, about those topics. I conducted interviews with my sisters before conducting my own autoethnographic-interview for two reasons. First, I wanted to ask others the questions so that I could have adequate familiarity with the items and would be able to answer them as thoroughly as possible myself. Secondly, I could respond to some of the issues raised by my sisters in their interviews within my own interview.

I reviewed the journal entries as well as all of the audio-recordings (both my sisters' interviews in addition to my own autoethnographic interview) in order to compare experiences and to identify thematic patterns. The remainder of this chapter examines the differences in the siblings' perceptions based on our separate and shared experiences, and points to the various ways in which individuals can shape their culturally-complex identities. These findings also will be discussed in the final chapter and will be amalgamated with findings from other interviews that will be explored in Chapter III. It is noteworthy that these results are clearly not representative of all culturally-complex families, yet serve to illustrate the intricacies that are part of the identification processes regarding multiple ethnicities/races/cultures.

Before delving into the findings, it is important to note the family dynamic and background within this case study, as it serves as additional context to the matter at hand. My sisters and I were primarily raised by my White father, who was raised Jewish (but became non-practicing), from the Bronx by his parents of Russian (or Ashkenazi)

origin (though I did not know he was raised Jewish until I was maybe a teen as this was a taboo subject). My mother was born and raised in Puerto Rico and had heritage including: French, African, Spanish, and Taíno though she was not always around during my childhood. My parents had separated when we were fairly young and later divorced with my mother moving out when I was eleven-years-old. We had Hispanic/Latina house-keepers during the younger part of my youth (perhaps until I was six-years-old). At age 6, I started to be assigned household chores and shortly after, my father divided the entire chore list among my sisters and me, while my mother's parental role was limited to occasional weekend visits.

Introduction to Themes

After analyzing all materials: interviews with my siblings, my autoethnographic interview, and my journal entries I found clusters of themes. These themes are grouped and relate to one another in this study and within this particular family in the ways that are illustrated but do not represent all family dynamics. It is noteworthy that a figure has been created which explain the dynamics and relationships among the themes; this figure will be presented later in the chapter.

Tacit Knowledge of Secrets and Lies

My sisters and I had all discussed experiencing confusion and frustration while growing up, owing to our father's strong desire to keep our actual heritages a secret. It is important to start with this point since it is ever so much intertwined with how we came to understand our cultural heritage. During childhood and adolescence, we were instructed by our father to tell our friends that our mother was Brazilian and that he was

both Greek and Italian. It is critical to start with this theme owing to the fact that it has had such a strong impact on how my sisters and I have felt about our cultural identities.

In my autoethnographic-interview, I state:

I haven't always identified myself the same way and it's changed a lot. When I was younger, my dad did not allow us to speak Spanish in the house. He was worried that we would develop an accent and he didn't want us to be seen as foreign. We were not allowed to tell people that we were Puerto Rican because he said that "nobody likes Puerto Ricans" and that they wouldn't give me a chance [had anyone known about my background].

Similarly in my narrative, I wrote the following:

In most settings, my father forced us to tell others that my mother was Brazilian (even though it was clear that she did not speak Portuguese and did not look Brazilian [although I am not completely sure what Brazilians look like]). This was a confusing situation since I had to remember what I told to whom all the time—my mother was very open about being Puerto Rican and so some knew the truth and would catch me in the double bind. It was also problematic because sometimes it was ok to be Puerto Rican—my father would proudly say that I was Puerto Rican and spoke Spanish in front of any other Latinos when it might have been beneficial. I was forced by him to take Spanish in school while all of my friends were taking French. The inconsistencies hurt me even more than the lies did, regardless of that fact that I did not know how to express it at the time.

The fact that I talk about the inconsistencies raises issues of possible dialectics—feeling both supported and discouraged at the same time to identify with various aspects of my cultures. While this experience has always been a vivid memory to me, it was a painful topic initially avoided by both of my sisters. However, throughout the interviews with my sisters, probing them resulted in uncovering narratives that revealed meaningful experiences in which this issue of secrecy and lies evoked a great amount of stress and

shame. Savannah, initially, had been somewhat reserved in her response to how my father acted:

Interviewer: Have you always identified yourself the same way?

Savannah: No

Interviewer: How has it changed and why?

Savannah: Since we moved out of Dad's house, I am allowed to tell the truth.

Interviewer: Why don't you talk about that a little bit more?

Savannah: I think you're pretty good with what happened [in other words, she expresses that she believes I have a clear understanding of what happened with my father].

Interviewer: [I laugh.] Do you identify with one parent's culture more than the other?

Savannah: Yea, being that one is fictitious.

While she hinted that I already knew what the situation was, and had humorously stated that my father's self-identified culture was "fictitious," later in that interview she revealed more about her feelings on this topic.

Savannah: Only really with Dad it is an uncomfortable subject... Like I said... most of my... if I have any confusion or issues... it's because of Dad... and his lies.

Interviewer: Do you feel like you understand why he does that or not really?

Savannah: I do...but that's a whole other interview.

Interviewer: Why don't you talk about that, a little bit?

Savannah: Because he.... He... He's the.... He uh....I don't think that we have enough tape to talk about that. Because in his world he's like...um... in this particular instance of ethnicity he thinks people look down on Puerto Rican people so... and I guess Jewish people... which I *do not* consider myself because that I wasn't raised at all."

Thus, her interview really reveals the confusion and stress she has experienced when a parent is not supportive of the child's ethnic/cultural identity not only through her language, but also by her hesitance and difficulty in expressing the words. She further

reveals these feelings in describing the emotions that she associates with being culturally-complex in the familial situation.

The thing is...it's two different...it's two....There was how we felt when we were with Dad and how we feel now... in *reality*... <I laughed>. That's very serious—I'm not trying to be funny because Dad was very... He made it very confusing, and very embarrassing and... really that was *it*, ya know and um... And now... I guess uh... I feel fine about it when the truth can be told. It's comfortable and I guess proud that we speak two languages and ya know we have a beautiful place to go for vacation that our family lives in [our mother lived in Puerto Rico during the time of this interview].

It is noteworthy that she describes her life in an almost binary fashion, that is, the distress of having to hide her ethnicity versus when she is able to be comfortable, telling the truth. Much like my own experiences, what is interesting is that Savannah also experienced frustration with my father's inconsistent behavior regarding the matter—she told a story raising the issue that my father would deny being Jewish but at other times claim it.

Savannah: We were not raised that way [Jewish]. *Actually* that was looked down on by Dad and now all of a sudden he's like pretending he's a rabbi. He's all about Jewish people.

Interviewer: Really? In what way?

Savannah: Well now he wears that thing [she refers to a pendant that my father had custom-made which is a cross fused over the star of David] and then one time... ya know cuz Wally's [her husband's pseudonym] father has a thing with Jewish people and Dad was like all offended.

Interviewer: What was his reaction?

Savannah: Dad? He was like telling me he was all offended... Like I said to Dad something about Wally's father... it's not *prejudiced* against all Jewish people but he [Wally's father] has a problem with a lot of Jewish people...trust me; I'm not defending *him* [Wally's father]... but he's very stereotypical [meaning that he stereotypes Jews]; that's what it is.. with the Jewish people. And so I think I was telling Dad that because I didn't think Dad would care because he has hidden that *all* his life. And all of a sudden Dad is telling me how offended he is... Now why?... So even now he still has those mixed messages. Like why... if he's hidden that all his

life... and ya know he's looked down on it and he himself has made how many Jewish jokes, and now all of a sudden he's offended if someone else is stereotyping against Jewish people.

Savannah, like myself, was not only bothered by the past of being forced to lie about our background, but also was annoyed with his current "mixed messages" in the same way that I felt hurt about his "inconsistencies."

Sally was also a bit vague with her description of this phenomenon until further probing.

Well there was some confusion at the beginning... since basically, well I don't know and I guess this is something that you'll have to... powwow with me on... but I seem to remember Dad making up a whole bunch of ethnicities at one point... so that was obviously confusing at one point until finally that all came to fruition.

She further illustrated this tacit knowledge when talking about parents:

Sally: Mom was always very proud and Dad was always very...um....
What's the word I'm looking for...? Secretive.

Interviewer: Do you want to talk about that at all?

Sally: Do you really think I need to? Do you think I have unsettled issues about that?

Interviewer: Well, do you think his being secretive plays into your views of that culture now?

Sally: It certainly made me wonder if I had something to be ashamed of and it wasn't just about him, ya know, being Jewish or Russian Jewish background but also the combination of the Russian Jew and the Puerto Rican and why... why would... ya know.. Was there something I needed to be ashamed of that I shouldn't, ya know, make that known... and um... that was kind of weird. It was not something that I ever really, um... understood, or like you know... I didn't make much of that... I didn't think about, ya know what that meant at the time but um... I think that basically was *his own* issue.

Interviewer: And how did you establish that resolution?

Sally: Well I understand that he was just trying to protect us from living in a very White area.

What is interesting to me is that both my sisters in the interviews understood that I am already well aware of the situation concerning secrets and identity. During our adulthood at some point before these interviews, my sisters and I had some limited discussion about my father's choice to try to protect us and how he executed this plan, but we had never spoken a great deal about it. Perhaps we did not talk much about our father's behavior because it was a negative topic that was rather upsetting to all of us, and perhaps it was even taboo because there was nothing that could be done about what had already happened to us. We all spent a great amount of time discussing my father and his role in our cultural identities within the interview, but we spent very little time discussing my mother. Savannah describes my mother's response to my father:

Savannah: Mom has always been very proud of her culture. And um, Dad has been embarrassed about his culture and hidden it and made up his own... Well, obviously Dad was very, um, embarrassed and hiding Mom's and Mom just didn't care about Dad's. It didn't matter one way or the other, not that she didn't care about Dad—it just didn't make a difference.

Interviewer: What do you think about Mom's reaction to what Dad said or did?

Savannah: About being Puerto Rican? I think she handled it the way she did to not... she never made it... like I mean she was always hurt and offended and upset with... but she didn't make a big huge deal... I think *for us* and *still* she doesn't. So...How do I feel how she handled it? I guess it was good because if she made a bigger deal it would even be more confusing to us...

I do not agree with my mother's decision to ignore my father's behavior concerning our multiple cultural identities. Nevertheless, while I greatly disagree with Savannah's perception of my mother's reaction to my father denying our heritage, I can understand why she would prefer to lay the blame on my father as opposed to blaming my mother for not raising greater issue with my father about his problems with our heritage. I

remember wanting my mother to have stepped in and put a stop to the rule of keeping our heritage secret. While she did not lie about her heritage the way my father had wanted, she added to the inconsistencies. My second grade teacher had once heard me saying that my mother was from Brazil, but she had met my mother and said, “I thought your mother was from Puerto Rico.” I remember not knowing what to do and was annoyed with the whole situation—feeling stuck in inconsistencies but I didn’t know how to talk about it.

Shame

It seems that each one of us used an example featuring my father to discuss feeling some degree of shame about our identities. Savannah describes not wanting to tell others that she was Puerto Rican and not wanting to speak Spanish owing to the influence from my father.

I don’t know if you really remember... we had all these housekeepers that only spoke Spanish and um, I wish that they would’ve corrected my Spanish more but they really did not do that—I think cuz they were afraid of Dad... I guess because Dad would make me so uncomfortable um... I was even like... if we were ever at a friend’s house or whatever and I had to speak to one of the house-keepers, I was like embarrassed to do it in Spanish because he made it sound like it was such a bad thing. {She later continues with this thought}. He made it sound like everyone looks at Puerto Ricans like they’re crap and you can’t... and ya know we’re ... where was it from? ...Brazil or who the Hell... Brazil... in Brazil they speak Portuguese; they don’t even speak Spanish. That schmuck... and um... you know he made it very uncomfortable and embarrassing. Like I would remember *clearly* if I ever had to speak to one of the housekeepers and I was always embarrassed that they were there in the first place because of what he did and um... I would always try to like whisper on the phone to speak in Spanish real quiet so nobody would hear me, ya know... cuz of that.

Savannah first starts to feel ashamed that she is not as fluent in Spanish as she would like, but then focuses on the influence of my father in her lack of fluency, and finally she strongly expresses her childhood fear of others finding out about her background, owing to my father's beliefs. Her hesitance in expressing her feelings on the subject, further illustrates her difficulty with those past experiences. Savannah still holds much resentment, as evidenced when she remarked, "I would almost tell in secret like my good friends, like it was a big secret. They wouldn't care. *Nobody* cared. . . The only one who cared was *him*." Her previous use of colorful language in discussing his ignorance of Brazil versus Puerto Rico really bolsters the stress that she experienced and continues to go through from this experience. Savannah's description is similar to Sally's example of shame she faced because of my father's desire to hide our ethnicity from others.

I was like in second or third grade and had to do a family tree and was asking Dad for this information and he was making up names and making up countries and the *whole* thing was *completely* fabricated which made me... which... I didn't know that at the time, but once I learned that, that's when I started thinking, 'Well, ya know... is he saying that there's something innately wrong with being the mix of cultures that I am?' ... It just made me uncomfortable.... Once again those are his issues, not mine.

While she does not seem as angry as Savannah, she certainly shows the confusion that she experienced when she realized the issues implicated with his "fabrication" of cultural identities. In my written narrative I discuss how I believe my father was ashamed of my heritage and thus; the shame I felt towards my father:

By the age of about seventeen, I had started stating the truth about being Puerto Rican and part Jewish. One day my father had seen me removing photos of Puerto Rico (my mother's trip there and her parents' house which I had brought to school to show my Spanish class) out of my backpack and asked what they were for and I explained.

'You told them that you are Puerto Rican?!' he gasped. When I said yes, he told me, 'No one likes Puerto Ricans, not even Black people like Puerto Ricans.' What he had said bothered me on so many levels. First—the comment was racist against African-Americans and second I realized that no matter what I did, my father was not going to be able to accept my Puerto Rican heritage. My response to him was [stated] very calmly: 'Yes, I told them that we are lazy Puerto Ricans, with no jobs, with gold teeth, who never bathe and who sit around all day drinking tequila and hitting a piñata.' After this, he did not want to talk much about the subject, but the issue was obviously still a problem. It never had mattered to me that others thought I was the “Other,” but it mattered that my own father could never accept it. He had deceived me about who I was, but had also deceived himself.

Savannah later in her interview further elaborated on her sentiments in response to the question if she ever desired to be mono-racial. She answered that she would have preferred being mono-racial in our situation with our father because, “It was almost like a soap-opera drama, the way that he was carrying on about it. If anyone found out that we were Puerto Rican that they would throw us out of Wyckoff [our hometown] because Wyckoff doesn’t allow Puerto Ricans there.” Thus, shame is apparent on so many levels between my sisters and my own experiences owing to having to hide our culture and believing that something was innately wrong with what we were. Once I no longer felt the need to hide it, I felt shame towards my father for what he had done. In my autoethnographic-interview I stated,

I felt bad that I was lying and it made me feel worse afterward when I realized that it wasn’t true and that I felt like I wasn’t good enough for my father... It didn’t matter what he felt about me; he just thought that *other* people weren’t going to understand. The thing that hurt the most was that *he* didn’t understand and in a lot of ways I feel he still doesn’t... I don’t want to ever be pretending to be someone that I’m not. I don’t ever want to pretend being Italian, or Greek, or Brazilian when I’m not and I shouldn’t be worried about what people are going to think if I am Puerto Rican... Sometimes I won’t tell people [that I am Puerto Rican] because I don’t want problems but I shouldn’t be forced to [keep it secret]. That

should have been my decision and maybe he could have told me in a different way. I know that he was just trying to protect me but I feel like he could have warned me about the possibility without making it a rule in the house that I wasn't allowed to tell people that I was Puerto Rican.”

I had written a song in Spanglish about my inner turmoil while I lived in Puerto Rico prior to graduate school. The lyrics were as follows. Translations are provided in brackets yet obviously fail to capture the attempted poetic nature:

“Verse 1: I’m the half Puerto Rican, kept away from Borinquen [the natives’ name for the island before the Spanish conquistadores called it Puerto Rico].

Not allowed to speak the language. God forbid I seem foreign.

It is written in my eyes. It is wrapped into my curls. You had made me feel ashamed when you lied to the world.

Refrain: No olvidaré la raiz de Mamí—La bandera con estrella, adentro de mí. Tengo origen de la isla Borinquen. Mariposa orgullosa que acaba de empezar a volar [I will not forget the root of Mom—the flag with the star inside of me. I have pride from the island, Borinquen. Proud butterfly that has just started to fly].

Verse 2: So I liberate my hair. Lo suelto [I let it go], let it go wild. El sabor de mi sangre es mas picante que [the flavor of my blood is spicier than] mild.

It is my identity but you wanted to change me. You had thought that you were helping but it ends up hurting me.”

The song was a way for me to try to understand what had happened and to create some closure while I lived in Puerto Rico in order to embrace my Puerto Rican side when it had been kept from me in a way.

Physical Features and Others’ Perceptions

While I have already mentioned how hair affected my experiences as being culturally-complex (like in the story which introduces this chapter), both of my sisters mentioned this feature in their interviews. In my narrative, I wrote:

I was instructed to pull my hair into pony-tails, braids, or to straighten it because it was “too wild.” My father constantly teased me saying that it looked as if I had escaped from Borneo. While my sisters, for some reason, did not have the same thick, curly, wild hair—my father blamed me, saying that we had the same genes and that my hair was the way it was because I did not take care of it. Although we had the same genes—their hair has not been like mine (my theory is that my Mulatta grandmother’s hair type had been genetically recessive and that I somehow got the trait, while my mother and my sisters did not).

Though others have mentioned that the curly hair might come from the Jewish side of my family, we had never considered this a possibility within my family. This physical feature and the problems I had with it, came out as well in the autoethnographic-interview. In my autoethnographic-interview I stated,

I *did* take care of it. It was just different. I didn’t want to feel like an outcast in the family and I sort of did because of the hair. I felt like I couldn’t be pretty like my sisters because of that—because my dad ingrained it in me that it didn’t look good the way it was. I feel like that’s something he should have understood and he didn’t. Not to pin it all on my father or my friends, but if someone would have explained to me . . .

I continued with my frustration about hair in my autoethnographic interview:

I used to straighten my hair a lot, *a lot* [I repeat with emphasis] when I was a kid until the time when I was 16 and I decided it wasn’t a good idea anymore. It was just damaging my hair; making it fall out all of the time. It didn’t look good—it would puff out every time I would walk outside. It would just *puff* up. It’s just more practical keeping it natural.

Physical features have been an issue for me in ways that it has not for my sisters into adulthood owing to that issue of hair. As a person of cultural complexity, I ask myself if I look like what I *am* and if others feel that way. In my autoethnographic-interview I state:

I don’t know if I *look* Puerto Rican. I *feel* like I do and I feel that people who are Puerto Rican understand me more as Puerto Rican. But then other people sometimes say I look Egyptian or Middle Eastern, or mixed—meaning Black and White... I don’t think I look Italian or Greek.

I don't think I look necessarily Russian but the people who I know who are Jewish... they would say that I do look Jewish.

Savannah mentioned that she believed that she did not look as Puerto Rican because she straightened her hair, even though there are many Puerto Ricans who also have straight hair. Sally first noted that Savannah acted “more White” owing to her hair being straightened, but she then caught herself saying that many Hispanics do that as well, stating, “So I'm not sure what I meant by that.”

I have mentioned several times that I am often mistaken for being dominantly Black. While I believe that part of this is because of my hair, I also believe that part of it is owing to the fact that I am currently in a geographic location that is ethnically deprived, especially of Blacks and more-so Puerto Ricans. For my sisters, this was not so much of an issue at all, but during our recent conversations they both have agreed that living in the North East was probably a huge reason that they do not experience as much frustration that I have within this topic. When I asked them if they ever felt that they were treated differently because of being multicultural, they did not feel that it was problematic in their lives. The oldest sister, Savannah, stated that she is often perceived as Italian or Hispanic, owing to her olive skin.

I think people, when they look at me, they think I'm Italian right away and then when I tell them that I'm Puerto Rican... a lot of times, well... they'll think I'm that or Italian and it's just because my olive skin.

Interviewer: And where we live also? [I asked since the population of Italian-Americans in New Jersey is very high].

Savannah: Yeah, I think that's why.

Interviewer: Do you get asked a lot? How does that make you feel? How do you react?

Savannah: Well, only other... Hispanic people—they would ask me if I'm Spanish or whatever [Latina] but any other nationality would only ask me if I'm Italian. Only another Hispanic person would ask me if I

was Spanish. I don't know what difference that makes but only White people or other Italian people would ask me if I'm Italian. There's no reason I would get upset by that; there's nothing offensive about that at all.

Savannah would not be upset at all for being asked what she was--nor would Sally. Savannah mentioned how her skin-tone and her eyes were the clues that let others know she was "something."

My skin—I don't think my skin is all *that* dark. I mean there's a lot of Puerto Rican people that have a lot darker skin than me but it's darker than *yours*. You can tell that I have *something*, like you can tell that I'm not Irish or ya know Swedish. And because my eyes are dark and my hair is dark and my skin is olive that I would be either some kind of Spanish or Italian or... but it's not dark that you would think that I am something like Indian. Like I think it [her appearance] gives clues... Puerto Ricans have curly and straight hair but I think that mostly it's curly. Because you keep it curly it makes you look a little more. Like my skin I think is a little darker than the both of yours... It's like a couple shades darker. I think if I wore my hair more curly then it would make me look, I guess, a little more Hispanic because I straighten it. Not that that Hispanics don't have straight hair—but I think it's more common curly.

I also mention my skin-tone within my autoethnographic-interview as a feature that separated me from others, but mentioned that I did not feel particularly bad about it even though I was different from most of the children in my class.

I remember in class like in first grade, we had to draw ourselves and I remember that the kids in class would use the peach-colored craypas to color the skin, and me and the Japanese girl in class were given a brown crayon to do the skin. I thought it was interesting that she had me do that and I hadn't really thought about it. It was okay. At the time she made me feel special. She said, 'Well you two have more olive-colored skin so this crayon is for you.' So I did feel special in that way. I didn't feel bad about it. I think she did a good job as a teacher, saying that we were different but not in a bad way.

Sally mentioned that she was often mostly a mystery (in terms of cultural heritage) to others:

No one's really able to identify my ethnicity. I get everything from Middle Eastern to Israeli, to... some people think I look Hispanic... some people don't think that I don't look Hispanic at all. Some people think I look Lebanese-- It's a mixed bag... I think that I look like the cultures that I am, once you know, among other cultures as well.

My sisters were not particularly bothered by strangers asking about culture or heritage—they viewed it very much as curiosity and were not overly concerned with people's inquiries. While I often try to understand inquiries as simple curiosity, I am irritated when it is inappropriate both in context and in situation. For instance, in my introduction, I clearly did not think it was an appropriate situation for a stranger to be yelling across the street to me to fulfill his curiosity.

Additionally, in my above story I didn't mind the questioning of what I am, but found that the frequency of my having to think about being culturally-complex is what makes being in the South difficult. For example, in my autoethnographic-interview I state, "I feel like it's silly but I feel like *the hair* makes people wonder a lot more [about my culture] than with them [my sisters]. And I don't feel that that's bad. I just feel that I have to constantly define who I am ..."

Identification

Although my sisters and I all have the same mother and father, and thus have exactly the same ethnic/cultural/racial backgrounds, we do not all identify ourselves in the same way nor do we check off the same boxes on official forms. The various racial and ethnic elements are mentioned, but in very different ways. For instance, in my

autoethnographic-interview I state, “I identify my race/ethnicity and culture as Puerto Rican... half Puerto Rican, that is with some Black and the other side—Russian Jewish, but non-practicing Jewish.” I later talked more about my lack of knowledge of being Russian Jewish:

I guess I identify with my mom’s culture more, Puerto Rican, than my dad’s but that’s because I didn’t even know that my dad was Russian and Jewish until I was like 15 or so, and he didn’t really want to talk about it. He didn’t know any Russian. We didn’t practice any Jewish traditions, but Yiddish I did know from my grandmother and the cuisine from her as well.”

This identification differed a bit for my sisters. Savannah, stated, “I usually say... I guess Puerto Rican, I usually say.” At a different point she stated,

I don’t consider myself as Jewish ... Jewish is a religion and we were not raised that way...I don’t consider myself that because I consider that as a religion. You can convert out of being a Jewish person, but it’s not like you can convert out of being Spanish or African or whatever. So if you can convert out of it, then in my mind it’s a religion and I was never brought up that way and I don’t practice those beliefs so I don’t consider myself that.

She also later indicated that she identifies as White but not Russian. When I asked her if she considered herself as partially Black, she said that she really did not identify as such owing to the fact that 1/8th heritage is not important enough to mention. Her thoughts on identifying with Black were:

Who cares?... I think everybody has an eighth of something...and I think if it starts coming to... What are you? Well I’m 1/8th this... and it takes like 20 minutes to answer that question, I think it’s a little ridiculous. You just list the main things and that’s it.

I also believe that she would not consider herself as being part-Black, owing to the fact that she identifies as White 'because Dad is,' and additionally she is never, as an adult,

mistaken for Black. However, she recounted an experience as a child where she was called Black:

Savannah: When I was in grammar school, they said I was Black.

Interviewer: Who is *they*?

Savannah: Some stupid kid; one kid said I was Black. I didn't even get offended because I am just not. You are being so stupid. Black people are much darker.

This is very different from my own experiences since I am referred to as “La Negra,” in Puerto Rico which roughly translates as “The Black (female)” owing to my hair texture which is also often a term of endearment. In my journal, I recall a time as a child when my friends categorized me as Black:

I grew up in a predominately White neighborhood where very few minorities lived. My White friends would say that I looked like the Black girl who played the star's best friend on the popular show, *Punky Brewster*. I did not understand why and was offended that their reasoning was that the hair was 'the same.' White people are never said to resemble one another based on hair texture or hair-style. Furthermore—at the time I was not aware that my grandmother was Mulatta and so the idea of being partially Black or resembling someone Black in a White community was difficult. I wanted to be like and look like everyone else—who doesn't at that age?

When I discussed the same event in my autoethnographic-interview I stated:

I didn't like that. I didn't like being categorized as Black because I am *not*. At the time I didn't know about being part Black but I didn't have that [Black] *experience*. Again, I thought that hair was silly to base my race on and that's something that I've sort of come to terms with and I'm okay with that now. I'm okay that I am part Black and I am okay that my hair is thicker and curly and I do think that I *am* getting that genetic trait from grandmother who was mulatta and that's okay *now* but I feel that should have been dealt with more when I was younger. I feel like my mom should have told my dad, "Well, this is because Abuela [Grandmother] was mulatta" and I feel like she should have said, "Well, her hair is just different."

Clearly, the fact that I had such hair contributed to others' confusion about my race; additionally, that I was not aware of my Black heritage contributed to my own confusion about my identity. Sally, the "middle sister," did not mention Black heritage very much at all, but instead seemed to identify much more with the Ashkenazi side:

Half Puerto Rican, and half Russian American, non-practicing Jew. I really embrace both cultures and I mean... it's... it's there's a whole other element in this which is the Russian non-practicing Jew part. Of course Judaism is not just a religion; it's also very much a culture... and there's that whole debate without... even if I were just non-practicing Jew, there's a whole conversation about what does it mean to be non-practicing, what does it mean to have that culture? Am I still a Jew? Am I a Jew or am I not? I don't practice it, but it's a religion... but there's the whole culture that comes with it. So am I more Russian than Jew? There's that whole conversation.... So it's like the triple... the triple play? Obviously there's definitely culture there... I mean I know from Matzah Ball soup [spoken in my grandmother's Manhattan-Jewish accent], but I don't practice the religion, but I know some things about it.

While I had acknowledged my Ashkenazi side, and knowing some Yiddish, I didn't have quite the internal debate that she clearly experienced. I realized that being Jewish is part of my culture, but have never questioned whether I was or not to others, feeling comfortable with my usual explanation of having Jewish influence but not raised practicing Judaism. To me being Puerto Rican has become more salient to my identity.

I said in my autoethnographic interview:

I don't really identify that much with being Russian Jewish because we weren't raised Jewish, but I know about the food and I know a lot of Yiddish words from my grandmother and I feel that I do identify a lot with the Puerto Rican side. I speak Spanish and I've really spent a lot of time and energy and effort learning Spanish even though I wasn't allowed to as a child. And I lived in Puerto Rico for a couple of years with my mom after I graduated college and I feel that was really important to me in understanding that part of my cultural identity.

Box Checking

Savannah stated that box checking, an activity of self-identification, depends on what the reason—she usually picks out White and Hispanic, but would pick out whatever would “help” her more in a particular situation, such as a job application:

Savannah: I usually pick White and Hispanic; I usually do both. But if I’m only allowed to pick out one and to be honest, I pick whatever one I think will help me more... At the doctor you have to be honest because there are... especially I learned this being pregnant—like the Jewish heritage has like certain things you have to test for when you’re pregnant and Hispanics have a certain thing they have to be tested for when they’re pregnant and like African-Americans... you know like different races I guess have...

Interviewer: Do you check that off also then [African American]?

Savannah: *No* <she starts to laugh>.

Interviewer: Why do you say it like that?

Savannah: Because I don’t think I’m *Black*.

Interviewer: Well no, but at the same time it’s in there somewhere.

Savannah: *Everything* is in there in *everybody* I think. When it all comes down to it, everybody has everything.

Interviewer: Do you think doctors know that?

Savannah: ... Well it’s not like we have to check everybody for *everything*... you know it’s just like predominantly... you know what I’m saying? They’re not going to say let’s check her for some Chinese thing because we are all one.... I mean you could go crazy—you just do the main ones.

[At this point I reminded her that our grandmother was mulatta.]

It’s not a big deal to *me*... Like even you telling me now, I was like ‘Oh *yeah*’ you know because I don’t care... Like if you do this major family tree like everybody is going to be surprised. Like even skin-heads would find that they have some Jewish member... Like it doesn’t matter... we [her and her friends] never cared about that... we only cared about the kind of person that you are.

Sally replied that she prefers checking multiple boxes---White, Hispanic, and Other—if she’s permitted to check more than one, though she stated that if she ever desired to be mono-racial, it would be so that she could check an appropriate box:

"Whenever I am filling out applications, there is not an appropriate box for me to check

except for 'Other.' I always check off 'Other.' There is never a blank or a space to indicate. I check off White and Hispanic—I check them all." She did not indicate checking off Black and while she acknowledges our African heritage, she has not identified herself as Black either.

In my own experiences, box-checking has changed over time. When I was in elementary school I would check off "White" because I grew up in a White community, went to a predominately White school, and did not speak much Spanish at home. Particularly, I did not understand the purpose of this data collection-- how my educational experience was different than any White student in my area; there was no difference to me so why would my ethnicity matter since I was in the same classes as everyone else? I also think, now looking back, that my checking off "White" was perhaps what my father had wanted. I recall a conversation when he told me that he did not think my mother was Puerto Rican—that she was "American," although now I do not believe that those ethnic categories are mutually exclusive; rather, we are all multiple cultures. When I became more vocal about my Puerto Rican heritage, I began to check off White and Hispanic in high school or pick one at random if I was forced to choose. Sometimes I would check off more than one even if instructed to only pick one if I was feeling militant enough that day (and still do, but may also choose "Other"). Now when I have the option to check off "all that apply," I have difficulty deciding whether or not to check off "Black"—it's not how I identify, but it is certainly part of me, and a big part that other people seem to see in me even though I don't see myself as such. I really prefer to check off multicultural or "Other," but then when I am asked to specify, I am at

another dilemma—how do I describe myself? Do I write down every part of the Puerto Rican heritage—which would include Afro, Taíno (Native Puerto Rican), French, and Spanish or do I just write down Puerto Rican? I have settled for now as claiming myself Afro-Puerto-Rican-Ashkenazi.

Situational Identity

My sisters did not express much about feeling more or less of an ethnicity on particular days, however I did express in my autoethnographic interview the issue of self-identifying changing for me:

If I ever feel that I have to choose being one culture over another, I often feel more forced to choose being Puerto Rican because of the way that I'm often treated and I definitely feel more Puerto Rican living in Texas now than when I lived in New Jersey. Being Puerto Rican in New Jersey is not a big deal. Being mixed in New Jersey is not a big deal, but I think in Texas there are a lot of White mixes. People [in Texas often] don't know their backgrounds and don't embrace diversity a lot of the time, especially my students—I get that from them and I feel like a lot of times I am discounted from being White because I do have thicker hair and I wear it naturally instead of straightening it.”

Thus, again location leads me to a situation in which in my autoethnographic-interview, I stated that my location would precipitate “feeling” more to be a certain culture than another. While I felt this way at the time of my interview, as I write this, I don't feel that I necessarily agree with what I had said earlier:

When I moved there [Puerto Rico], I didn't feel very Puerto Rican—I felt very American. My culture really depends on where I am. When I am in Puerto Rico—I feel that while I am half Puerto Rican, I feel like I'm American and when I'm in the United States I feel that, yes, I am American but I am also part Puerto Rican and White/Jewish.”

Perhaps through the process of writing this chapter, I have come to accept my multiple selves as part of the whole without feeling necessarily the binary pull that I expressed in

my autoethnographic-interview. While my words were only written a couple years ago—the process of writing about my experience (as well as others' experiences) has helped me to feel more resolution and resolve about who I am despite the confusion that others may have with my cultural complexity. I once had a Black English professor who said that not everything she did was “Black;” that she didn’t do her laundry “Black” or cross the street “Black.” While this made me laugh—it was something that I felt spoke to how I feel about myself now; while I am a “mutt,” it’s not relevant to everything that I do. Race matters and it matters to me, but it doesn’t matter all the time.

Presentation of Self

While Savannah stated that she did not present herself any differently on various occasions, culturally speaking, Sally and I both admitted to changing how we look or present ourselves based on different situations. Sally stated:

Sally: “In different circumstances I can play out one over the other. For example, I don’t throw in a lot of Yiddish terms when I am hanging out with my Hispanic friends. If I am going Salsa dancing—I definitely dress a little more Cha-cha—like big silver hoops [earrings]. I wouldn’t say that I dress more *Jew*?

Interviewer: But more White?

Sally: Yes.

Interviewer: Is there a reason why you would wear big silver hoop earrings for Salsa dancing?

Sally: Relating to people of that culture.

Interviewer: If you didn’t, would you feel less part of that culture?

Sally: No, but it’s like an accessory. It’s the attitude you are taking towards it as relating back to that culture versus relating to it from another culture.

Thus, Sally looked at her presentation as a way to relate with the people of the culture in which she is situationally participating, as opposed to choosing to seem like an outsider. Similarly, I talk about how my lingo depends on who I am around, but at the same time,

I may feel more Puerto Rican one day and go with that look just because it feels right—other days I may not consciously think about it but may feel forced to present myself as “other” if I feel that others see me as such. Thus, presentation of the self is a cultural performance whose purpose perhaps serves to relate to a group, or to enact imposed identities based on social expectation.

Pride/Positive Experiences

In all three sibling interviews, benefits were revealed through being culturally-complex. We all expressed having friends from a myriad of diverse cultures and discussed the ability to appreciate those cultures. In my own experiences, I mentioned my interest in many different cultures owing to the fact that I’ve been such a combination. In addition, my background as well as my research interests has led to my improvement of Spanish, which, in turn, has helped a great deal in various jobs. Savannah mentioned that the little amount of Spanish she knows has been an asset in various jobs where she has acted as a cultural broker. She also mentioned that many of her friends were surprised that she was Puerto Rican, but thought that her being Puerto Rican was “cool.” While Sally has not used Spanish in her career, she mentioned that being a “Juan Epstein” [a reference to a half Puerto Rican and half Jewish character who is from a popular TV show in the 70’s, *Welcome Back Kotter*] has led people to think that her combination was “exciting.” She said that “people are really excited about it for some reason.” Additionally she stated that being mixed has lead to her enjoyment of learning various cultures and their practices, as well as being able to adapt culturally. Sally stated that she has Hispanic friends with whom she goes dancing and speaks

Spanish, but also has Jewish friends who teach her songs and the traditions. Also noteworthy is that Sally stated it was important to her to learn about and share cultural practices with others, whether she was of that culture or not, so again, an appreciation of others' cultures is expressed. Sally stated that she felt "empowered because I am able to adapt to a lot of different environments." She continued:

It [being non-practicing Jewish] has just given me a third perspective in terms of—I know about this religion, I know about that religion, I know about that culture. It's given me a lot more interest in worldliness in various other cultures because I am a mixture of two, so I am more open. I feel just to be involved in that kind of introspection.

It is also noteworthy that Sally mentioned feeling emblematic of world issues being resolved in her rare hereditary combination. When asked to tell a story about feeling proud of her cultures, she said:

Basically anytime anybody asks me, "What nationality are you?" Being able to be a mix of two such different cultures, it's exciting and it's nice to have the implications of how to establish world harmony. You know when you are a mix of different cultures, you're not particularly against those cultures... I think it's important to embrace all cultures equally or as many as possible.

Invalidation

Being invalidated means that others discount a person's claimed identity. While it was most painful to be invalidated by my father, I remember recently being invalidated as White where I stated in my interview:

There was a time in a graduate class where a student counted the White people in the class and didn't count me and I didn't like that because I *am* part White and yeah—I am part Puerto Rican but I don't think the 'one drop rule' applies.

Savannah had expressed that the only invalidation that she experienced was really from our father and not much from other: “The people that I surround myself with don’t care about it.” Sally had mentioned that at times she is referred to as “La Blanquita” (the little white woman) by Hispanic friends which has bothered her since she feels it’s not true and that it’s rude. She also expressed that this label bothers her in terms of equating her with White culture, and not skin color.

Sally: I don’t like it when people tell me that I don’t look Puerto Rican and that has happened before. Or I had a group of Hispanic friends that would refer to me as “La Blanquita.” That kind of irritated me. I didn’t like that. And I had a bunch of friends who were White that would refer to me as “Puerto Rican Sally” which I thought was kind of weird... It’s just weird. I shouldn’t be defined simply as...

Interviewer: Would you feel better if you were called Puerto-Rican, Russian-American, Non-practicing Jew, Sally?

Sally: Well, that would at least be accurate.

Interviewer: So what is your reaction?

Sally: I don’t say anything. I just get slightly irritated by it.

[I further probed her, unsatisfied and wanting to know why she felt so uncomfortable.]

Sally: It made me feel again like I was a cultural outsider.

Interviewer: Do you ever feel like are forced to speak Spanish or forced to do things to show that you are Puerto Rican?

Sally: Yes. If being called “La Blanquita,” speaking in English would confirm that I was more White than Hispanic.

Interviewer: Is that wrong? Being more White than Hispanic?

Sally: It’s just not what’s so.

In addition to being deemed as something she was not, she talks about over-all stress that she experienced in her teen years being culturally-complex:

Because I am two cultures, I never like... I never feel fully accepted by that... by one culture or the other. Ya know, I had felt at some point not Hispanic enough to be part of the Hispanic culture and not White enough to be fully accepted by White culture.

Similarly, in my autoethnographic-interview I stated:

If I ever have a desire to be monoracial, sometimes it would seem easier. I feel like at times I am not White enough to be taken seriously as my White thoughts. But yes—I am part White. And then I am not 100% Puerto Rican either and so yes—box-checking can be a problem and angers me because I don't want to be compartmentalized into one dumb box. I want to be able to embrace all my identities. I want to be able to explain that this can happen. It often saddens me that I feel like I am not allowed to.

Thus, not only does the either-or society bother me, but in addition, box-checking makes me feel invalidated. Unlike Sally, Savannah had less annoyance when others invalidated her cultural identity. She describes the following situation:

One time Maria [A friend from Cuba who used to work with her] came over and she looked in our pantry and then when we went back to work the next day, she said, “Oh, you should see Savannah's pantry has all the foods that Americans would have,” but what should I have in there?... I was raised here—because my mom is Spanish... what? Should I only have Goya things?

Her humor raises interesting points about the link between food and culture. Certainly her friend equated eating habits and cuisine as symbolic of cultural identity; while she did not agree. This phenomenon was similar in the conversation about language.

Language

Savannah expressed at several points that she was not fully accepted by Puerto Ricans as a Puerto Rican, owing to the fact that her Spanish is not perfect. At the same time, she expressed that language has nothing to do with one's cultural practice: “If you're American-Indian, just because you don't live in a teepee doesn't mean that you're not...” She also used the analogy that if she were to adopt a Chinese baby, the fact that the baby would not speak Chinese, not be raised by Chinese parents, and not live in China would not make the baby any less Chinese if she were in those other

circumstances. Sally's belief in the connection between language and identity was different; she mentioned language as a marker of being accepted into a culture.

Specifically, she stated:

It's [always been] sort of like... a Puerto Rican pride thing. Like even for a Nuyoricana that's 100% Puerto Rican but lives in New York, it's like 'Oh, do you speak Spanish?'— If you say no... it's kind of like 'Ohh [as if she is saying, it's a shame],' ya know, but if you say 'yes' it's like, "You're *in!* You're *in!*... Like that you're more accepted into the community as a Puerto Rican if you speak Spanish versus if you don't. Then there's definitely a cultural limitation there.

I, like Sally, also mentioned that I identify “a lot” with my Puerto Rican heritage because I learned to speak Spanish, and I really spent time and effort learning despite the challenge of not being permitted to speak Spanish as a child. Additionally, I discussed my living on the island for two years to polish my Spanish and to further understand my cultural roots, but experienced issues being accepted as Puerto Rican when my Spanish was less refined. I express in my auto-ethnographic interview:

If I ever felt invalidated by someone for being Puerto Rican it might have been because my Spanish at the time was not so good, but most of the time now, because I did live there for two years and have gone to great lengths to learn about the culture, I am seen as Puerto Rican [in the mainland]. When I go to Puerto Rico, it's a little different because I grew up in the United States, I am viewed as a little different and as maybe foreign but that's okay and understandable.

When I asked Savannah more about what it takes to be identified as Puerto Rican by others, she explained that she felt others weighed language heavily as well:

Savannah: If my Spanish was really, really good then I think people in Puerto Rico would have no problem... Maria thinks I'm just Puerto Rican by blood... only, because if I spoke Spanish really well but I still had my exact same life and my exact same upbringing she would be like, 'Oh. ok'
 Interviewer: What about other things like listening to a kind of music or....?

Savannah: I honestly think that a big part to play is if you speak the language well or not and who you are talking to.

Interviewer: So the White people see you as more Puerto Rican than Puerto Ricans?

Savannah: Yes, because obviously I speak better Spanish than the White people, but a lot worse Spanish than the Puerto Rican people.

Stresses

In expressing stresses of being culturally-complex, my sisters had much less to say than I did. I first mention in my interview the difference in identification by others, and then later discuss in the same interview how I am often limited to being my ethnicity without being given the opportunity to just be myself:

I feel sometimes misunderstood and sometimes confused based on the fact that I don't think my parents identify me the way I identify myself... my mother really identifies me as Puerto Rican and Jewish. My father identifies me as being White and I feel that I really don't look White. I mean yes—my skin is really light but it's not pale like someone who is Irish. I feel I have dark eyes and my hair is very thick and very curly and a lot of people here [Texas] think I'm mixed [meaning half Black and half White]... it's strange that people will categorize you based on something silly like hair texture and nothing else.

Sometimes I feel prejudged. When someone asks me what I am and I say Puerto Rican and they go 'ohhhh' as if they understand who I am or they understand what is going on and that's silly. I don't think you can make so many decisions about a person's personality based on understanding their culture. Yes, that's part of me, but I'm part of so many different cultures—not just the racial/cultural aspects [meaning I am also from the North East, a teacher, a musician, etc.]

Sally had already mentioned the stress of being not fully accepted as one ethnicity or the other, and she additionally adds to the issue of stress by stating that it was difficult at times, growing up in a predominately white area which she calls, “being sequestered into a very ethnically deprived area.”

On the other hand, Savannah describes being culturally-complex, post living with our father as a beneficial experience.

None of my friends or people I know... nobody has any problem whatsoever with that [being culturally-complex]. And if anything like I said before, people think it's cool that we speak two languages and that... I guess a lot of people say you know we're Spanish [meaning Hispanic] that we have the olive skin, which we're so lucky and we can go in the sun. That's the only things that my friends and people that I know have commented on and I know that there are stereotypical things I guess about any race but I've never had any problem with them.

Relationship of Themes

In order to illustrate the relationship between themes within this chapter, a figure has been created which follows. Noteworthy in Figure 1 is that my sisters and I are represented by “self identification” and discussed how we were influenced by the family (significant others) and also non-significant others. Thus, if we examine Figure 1, we understand from the three spheres that interactions with both the family and non-significant others influence the individual's process of self identification. The arrows indicate this influence. The sphere of family (within this study) illustrates that tacit knowledge about secrets evoked shame. Though we were kept from speaking Spanish at home, my mother still expressed pride in her culture. We all reported that language was a concept utilized by others (particularly Hispanics) to include/exclude us as Puerto Rican and additionally we all discussed the varying ways which others perceive our cultures. We all expressed pride in our multiple heritages, uniqueness, and abilities to relate to other cultures. Though our self-identification differed, we established this through box-checking and presentation of the self, which Sally and I described as more

situational than Savannah. Invalidation and stress overlaps family and non-significant others within the figure as those concepts were reported in both areas.

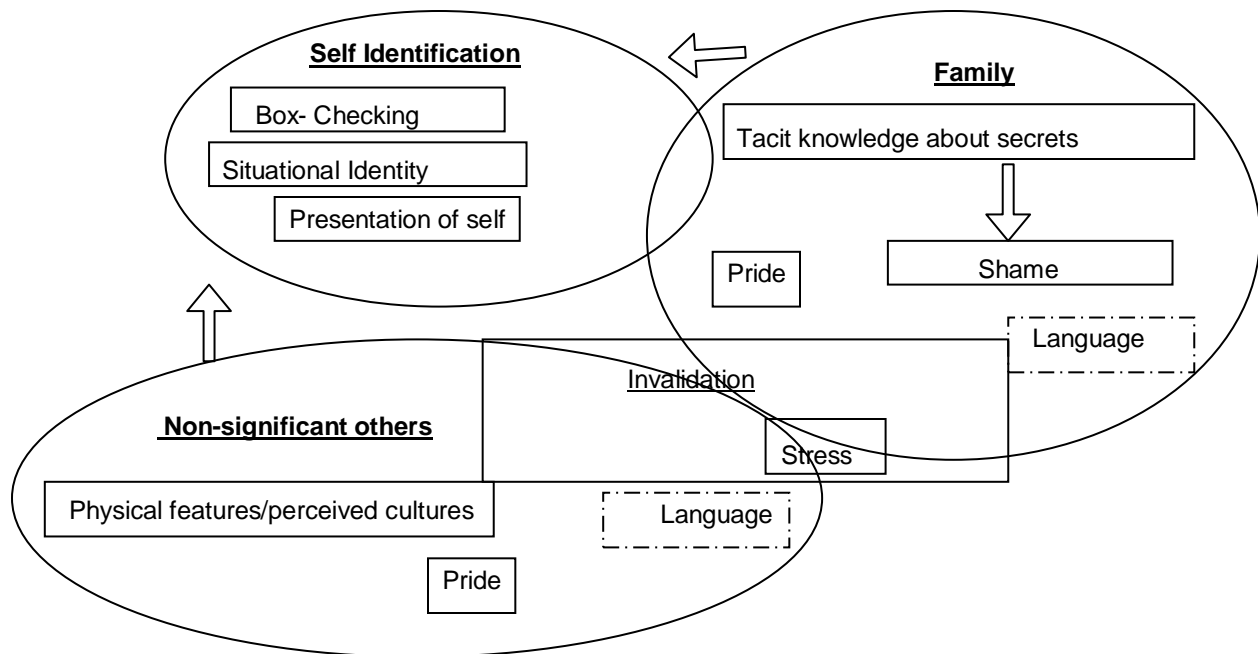


Figure 1: Relationship Between Clusters of Themes in “It’s A Family Affair”

Conclusion

It is obvious that my sisters and I each have very different experiences regarding our culturally-complex identities. For the most part, we have all come to terms with what and who we are, but express continued resentment towards the invalidation and strange happenings that transpired, owing to our father’s desire to keep us from telling others about our true heritages. It is interesting that all of us identify a great deal with my mother’s Puerto Rican culture even though we were forced to keep this a secret and

had felt past shame about who we were because of the experience. Muddy water remains when we discuss issues of culture—throughout the interviews, we find ourselves saying things like “acting Puerto Rican” and when we question ourselves we cannot seem to understand what we meant in the first place—a true indication that race/ethnicity/cultural heritage are extremely complicated issues and have been burned so deeply into how we think about things that the topic becomes difficult to deconstruct. In addition, there is confusion when it comes to identity, “rules of identification,” and what “counts” in order to be accepted as a claimed cultural commitment.

Despite whatever confusion that remains in our society concerning cultural complexity, through the interviews (including my own as well as my written stories), I find that the more I discuss the issues, the more at peace I am with who I am and with the way that others perceive me. The findings from this chapter will be revisited in the concluding chapter and will be analyzed while discussing the findings from the next chapter, interviews with other culturally-complex individuals.

CHAPTER III

EXPERIENCES OF OTHER CULTURALLY-COMPLEX INDIVIDUALS

From age 2 through 18, I lived in a predominately White neighborhood where very few minorities lived. My White friends would say that I looked like the Black girl who played the star's best friend on the popular show, "Punky Brewster." I did not understand why and was offended that their reasoning was that "the hair was the same." White people are never compared to one another based on hair texture or hair-style. I never say that Gwyneth Paltrow and Christina Applegate look alike owing simply to their both having straight, long, blond hair. Furthermore—at the time I was not aware that my grandmother was mulatta and so the idea of being partially Black or resembling someone Black in a White community was difficult. I wanted to be like and look like everyone else—who doesn't at that age?

The first time I ever decided to have my hair braided with extensions was when I was 18-years-old, and the kids in my high school said I resembled Stacey Dash, the Black actress from the movie, "Clueless." Others said that I looked like Janet Jackson. In college when my curly hair started growing out, several kids in the dining hall would refer to me as the Black Spice-Girl, Scary Spice. By that point, I was no longer bothered when people compared me to Black women; even though I didn't feel I looked particularly Black, I was okay if others saw me this way. In Puerto Rico, many people referred to me as "una negra," again, because of my hair and also because it can be a term of endearment, specifically when I was called, "negrita."

On the other hand, not everyone sees me in this same way. The third time that I had my hair braided is an example of me being deemed White. While trying to make conversation over the 12 hours that it took, I shared with the young Black woman, who was braiding my hair, the story which introduced Chapter II. Recall that Chapter II's introduction involves a Black man seeing my big hair and yelling across the street to inquire if I was White. After sharing this with the hair-stylist she said, "He was probably surprised to see a White girl with a big-ass afro!" I was a bit surprised at her response—if she had listened to the story then she would have heard that my response was that I was Puerto Rican. I am part White but I am also a person of color. To her, being Puerto Rican was NOT anything other than White since I looked White to her. While my hair styles may change—whether it is braided, curly, straight—within any one of those styles I am identified by others and perceived in variant ways-- some see me as White, Black, Puerto Rican, and a multitude of other ethnicities that I'm not—Egyptian, Brazilian, Italian, Middle Eastern, even Filipino! I couldn't say that all White people see me as ethnic nor could I say that all Black people see me as White—it's random and depends on the individual.

Chapter II illustrates the diverse ways in which culturally-complex sisters self-identify, as well as with one another (or not). Even while growing in the same household from the same mother and father, many differences exist ranging from how we see ourselves to how we see ethnicity itself. This is not to say that my family's experience can be applied to all culturally-complex families, but speaks more to the fact that matters involving race/ethnicity, and identity are extremely complicated issues.

This chapter examines the experiences of other culturally-complex individuals through in-depth interviews.

Method

Procedures

Since research about culturally-complex adults is lacking and most extant studies concern adolescents, I targeted participants ranging in age from 18 to 30. Subjects were recruited by personal networking within my social and academic circles. I contacted friends and acquaintances to see if they had friends who would fit the characteristics of the study. In order to qualify for the study, suitable participants identified their parents from two or more disparate cultures/races/ethnicities, i.e. Black, White, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern, American Indian, Pacific Islander, etc. It is, again, important to note how definitions and terms of culture and ethnicity are imperfect but those who participated, categorized themselves according to the criterion mentioned above. Snowball sampling (asking a person who suggests or asks a friend, who, in turn, suggests another friend) was employed, resulting in eleven participants (10-15 was the desired number).

In attempts to recruit even more participants, the Internet was utilized. “Facebook.com,” is an online system which networks individuals with one-another for social purposes, past-times, common interests, etc., associated with various universities (although now Facebook.com also has been made available to those not affiliated with universities). This online network served as a source for additional interviews. One group created by online members, entitled “Mutts R Us,” referring to “mutts” as multi-

ethnic people, was used in an attempt to target more participants. An e-mail was sent out to the “mutts,” briefly describing the study and requesting an e-mail response, if interested. This approach yielded only one interview.

Participants

Cumulatively, four participants were undergraduate college students, six were graduate students, and two were college graduates. All participants were in the Texas area at the time of the interview and most were Texan natives but three interviewees reported being from different states. Clearly, twelve individuals in no way represent the multicultural population of the U.S as a whole, but they do cover a broad range of ethnicities, and their interviews provide insight into the issues of identification, stress, and cultural complexity. Study participants (identified throughout this discussion by pseudonym) are listed and categorized based on their information as follows in Table 1.

Table 1: List of Participants and Their Parents' Cultures

			White	Black	Hispanic	Middle-Eastern	Asian	Native-American	Other
Shira	F	25	Mother			Father			
Richard	M	26	Mother (German)			Father			
Lisa	F	23	Mother	Father					
Victor	M	20		Mother & Father			Father (Japanese & Mongolian)		
Harry	M	29			Mother (Mexican)		Father (Japanese)		
Amanda	F	32	Father				Mother (Korean)		
Christine	F	31	Father				Mother (Korean)		
Alicia	F	23		Father (Nigerian)	Mother (Mexican)				
Gina	F	25	Father		Mother				
Madeline	F	22		Father & Mother	Father (1/2 Mexican)			Mother	Mother (Creole)

<u>Table 1: Continued</u>									
George	M	27	Father		Mother (Mexican)				
Steve	M	22	Father (Irish)		Mother (Puerto Rican)				

Also noteworthy is that the participants varied a great deal in how they self-identified which was “consistent” in identity for some and “inconsistent” for others (these terms will later be described in the first theme). Table 2 illustrates this phenomenon in how identity shifted (or not) for participants in the study.

Table 2: Consistent vs. Inconsistent Participants

Consistent Identity	Consistent Identity	Inconsistent Identity	Inconsistent Identity	Inconsistent Identity	Inconsistent Identity
Identification with all cultures throughout life	Identifying only one parent’s culture throughout life	Identification changed from both cultures to 1 in life	Identification changed from one culture to identification with all in life	Identification changed w/in interview	Confused Identity
Steve	Richard	Lisa	Madeline	George	Victor
Alicia			Amanda	Gina	
Christine				Shira	
Harry					

A semi-structured interview protocol was designed (see Appendix B). It is noteworthy to reiterate that the interview protocol, regarding cultural complexity was the same used in Chapter II, created by incorporating concepts from literature which were explored in Chapter I, such as family influence, identity formation, communication with others about identity, invalidation, stress, etc. In contrast to the preponderance of quantitative methods previously employed culturally-complex individuals, these interviews allow for a deeper examination of themes and issues within communication

that has largely been lacking in past research. Before the interviews were conducted, IRB approval was obtained and participants signed consent forms assuring confidentiality. In-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted at public locations in the Bryan/College Station area, suggested by participants in order to ensure convenience, comfort, and security for research participants. More often, the chosen locations were local coffee shops, but two interviews were at local eateries, two were at participants' apartments (when well-known to myself, the researcher), and another at one interviewee's workplace. Interviews were audio-taped and lasted between forty-five to 90 minutes. The lengths of the interviews varied depending on each interviewee's responses. Though all interviewees were probed through various questions—some had more to share than others. I reviewed the audio-recordings several times and transcribed selected portions. The selected portions were based on finding major quote/s for each participant in order to establish how they answered the various questions in the interview guide and associated probes using their own words.

Data Analysis

All of these interviews were analyzed using a grounded theory approach to identify emergent themes consistent with Strauss and Corbin (1998). "Axial coding" was used "in order to sort, synthesize, and organize large amounts of data" and to "reassemble them in new ways after open coding" (Charmaz, 2006) in order to show categories, subcategories and the relationships amongst them. Throughout the

interviews, themes and eventually clusters of themes which directly speak to cultural complexity emerged which will be examined and exemplified using the participants' words (note that language is slightly modified to simplify stutter, etc.). While there are patterns within some themes, other themes have much greater variance among participants. For example, the first category, self-identification, varies a great deal as participants indicate different processes of and influences on how they self-identify culturally. This first cluster of themes includes box-checking issues, a consistent sense of cultural identity versus an inconsistent identity, and varying hierarchies of identities. Similar to Chapter II, a figure has been created to show the relationships between themes (see Figure 2 following) which will further be explained after describing the themes. It is similar to the figure in Chapter II in that the self identification is influenced by both the family and by non-significant others. However, it is clear that there are many differences, more variance within answers and more themes given that there were so many more interviews.

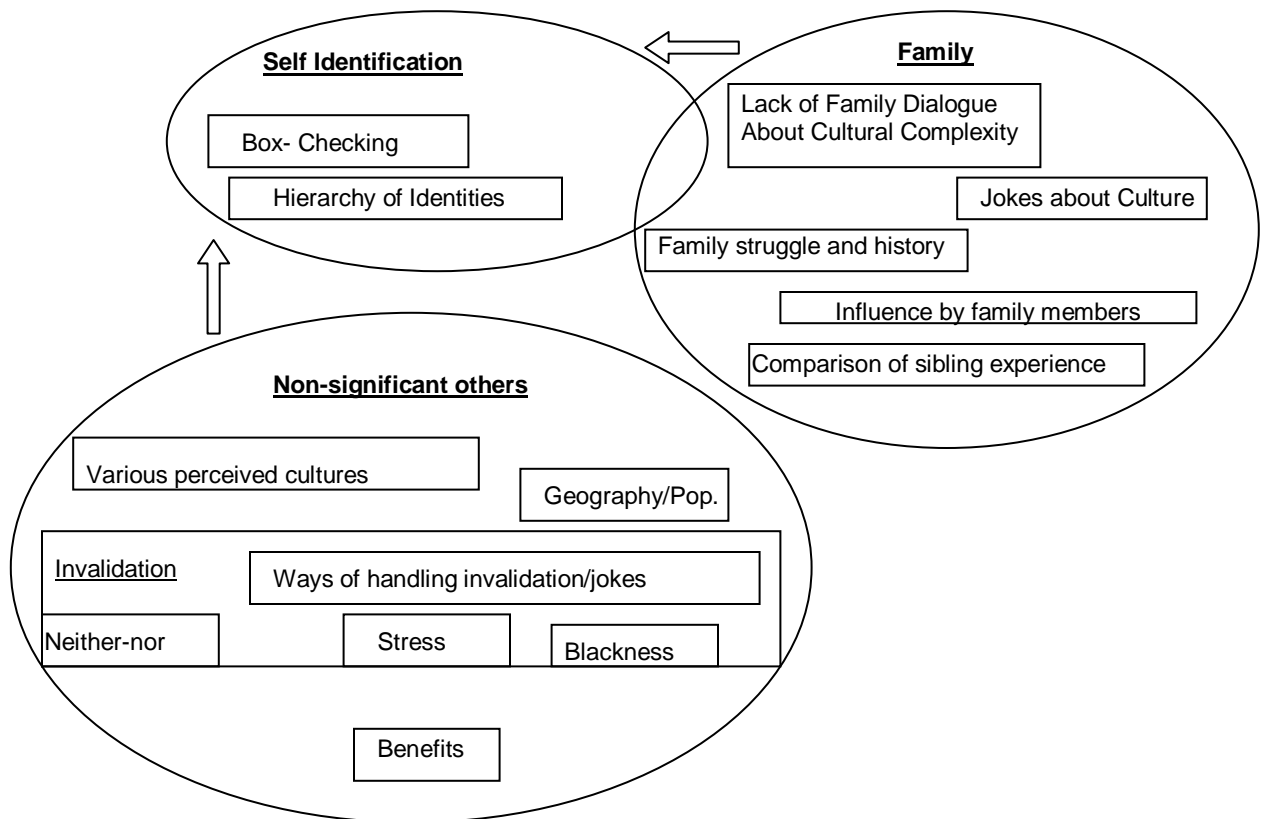


Figure 2: Relationship Between Themes in “Experiences of Other Culturally-Complex Individuals”

Self-Identification, Box Checking, and Hierarchy of Identities

As the first research question asks how culturally-complex individuals identify themselves, the first and most important cluster of themes surround self-identification (both consistent and inconsistent): box-checking, and expression of a “hierarchy of identities.” Before delving into the findings, it is first necessary to conceptualize the terms at hand. “Consistent identity” refers to when the interviewee claimed that his/her cultural self-identification had not changed ever in life as opposed to “inconsistent

identity,” referring to when an individual reported a cultural self-identification that had changed one or more times in life. Four participants reported a consistent cultural identification with all aspects of their cultural complexity and one participant reported a consistent identification throughout his life as one parent’s ethnicity and not the other’s. I interpreted seven of the interviewees as having varying degrees of “inconsistent identity.” “Box-checking issues,” situations in which questionnaires would ask individuals to mark off only one box for ethnicity/race proved to be an annoyance or difficulty to varying degrees to the majority of the participants when not able to check off more than one box. “Hierarchy of identities” refers to the idea that all participants were able to express how important their self-identified cultures were in comparison to other (non-ethnocultural) roles/identities. In other words, not all culturally-complex interviewees expressed that their cultural identity was most important to who they are, while others said they feel that it is extremely important. These three related themes will first be explored while I simultaneously introduce each participant. I will begin with those who claimed to always identify themselves in the same way and also who had always defined themselves as all of their known ethnicities/cultures/races. Each participant will be introduced with my descriptions of their physical appearance, how they identified themselves/how they discussed their cultural complexity (consistent vs. inconsistent identity), and finally (hierarchy of identities) how they placed importance on being culturally-complex. Though the participants could be introduced in a number of ways, such as first discussing their families (as in Chapter II) or interactions with others, before exploring other communication processes, it is more central to establish

how the participants themselves described their identification, and how they placed a range of importance on being culturally-complex.

Steve, half Puerto Rican and half Irish with a consistent identity, had light skin, dark brown eyes and brown hair. Steve reported checking off only Hispanic and when asked why he did not check both White as well as Hispanic, he answered, “I didn’t know you could.” Though he felt that he had more Puerto Rican familial influence owing to more contact with that side of the family (which will be delved into later in the cluster of themes surrounding family), at the same time he expresses clearly that while he recognizes his ethnic heritage, he sees himself as more American. He states, “...The majority of the family I know is Puerto Rican but as far as is it important to me... one or the other, or both, really I don’t really see it as.... Ethnicity is really where my family came from; not where I came from.” He stated that he thought “nationality, in a lot of places, kind of comes before ethnicity.” Thus, while Steve had expressed his Puerto Rican heritage as being more salient owing to more exposure, he felt more American than anything as later in the interview he stated, “Whether I’m Latin or Irish or whatever, I’m still American. I’m proud of *that*. But when it comes to the cultural aspect, it’s just something that makes me.” This idea of being American was further bolstered by his later discussing the importance of his U.S. Marine identity: “They [other students] see my occupation first—being in the military.” When asked, he said that being in the military was more important to him than his ethnic identity. He mentioned a couple times during the interview that the idea of being mixed was “not stuff I usually

think about.” Thus for Steve, while he identified with both cultures and had always done so, he identified more as being American than anything else.

Another interviewee, Harry, who has the coloring of a Mexican and Asian eyes, described himself as “Japxican” since his father was Japanese and his mother was Mexican. He had two tattoos symbolic of both sides of his family and both cultures, of which he explained the significance after the interview. He had the Spanish last name of his mother’s father on one arm, and his father’s last name in Japanese characters on his other arm; representing both cultures—one on each side, as “a tribute to both heritages.” Having always identified with both sides, and thus consistent in identity, he felt that he had an even balance of influence by both cultures,

There are certain aspects about the Japanese culture that I think I fit in with as far as certain situations, like I don’t get riled up too easily, I think I am pretty even-keeled and I think I get that from my dad; my dad’s that way. But then from my mom’s side—she tends to be very talkative, especially around family members...Once I warm up to somebody I tend to be pretty talkative like that too... so I think that depending on the situation, I kind of identify with one culture over another overall. But overall when you look at the balance I would say it’s fifty-fifty.

While checking off boxes, he reported checking off “other” when possible, but would leave it blank as opposed to choosing one, stating, “I don’t want to show bias towards one or another.” Though he expressed that he might place being “a Texan” as first, he explained that being “Japxican” was very important to his identity, “Growing up and seeing how my mom did things and watching my dad and seeing how he would handle a situation—I kind of piece together what works for me from both of them.” Thus Harry had described a constant conscious effort to consider both cultures at all times—from

representation in situations which would range from box-checking on papers to his expression in body art.

Alicia also emphasized being multicultural and described her identity as “half Nigerian and the other half: Mexican, Spanish, English, and German,” but reported usually simplifying to say “half Nigerian and half Hispanic.” I could clearly see the mixture of Hispanic and African-- skin a few shades darker than mine, brown hair in many stylish braids, and almond dark eyes. She attributed more Hispanic influence, having been more around her mother’s side in San Antonio and having only gone to Nigeria once. In checking boxes, she would check off all boxes that apply, and adamantly vowed to do so even when the directions indicated to check off only one box:

It upsets me because you know, I am half Nigerian but I am also half Hispanic, and you know there’s always the Black/Not Hispanic [box]; like they have to specify that. And then I guess technically, according to the boxes, I should pick Hispanic because apparently if you have any Hispanic blood that’s all they look at, but to me that’s like saying that half of me doesn’t exist, so you know I’ll just check everything.

Her checking all boxes which applied (even when instructed otherwise) illustrates her commitment to both cultures and her refusal to choose. Alicia’s statement is also noteworthy because it points to the idea that she is “upset” because the rules in the system do not allow for half of her to “exist” and her protesting against these rules illustrates her need to be recognized as a multicultural person. She consistently reported that being culturally-complex was very important as she stated:

It’s something [being culturally-complex] that is with me everyday. I don’t think that there is a day that I don’t think about my background or who I am...for me it’s constantly, it’s almost like a subconscious thing now that I’ve acquired to prove myself or cut any stereotypes they might try to make of me... whether it’s always trying to look well kept or

making sure that I always sound proper... I know what categories I am lumped into when I walk out and if in some way, shape, or form I can help change that stereotype of someone who sees me, even if I don't feel I fit that category at all, then I feel that I've helped in some way because I am never going to get a chance to sit down and talk to them so they are going to keep whatever idea or mentality they have of me so if I can make them realize... then it helps.

Alicia was a noteworthy participant as she nor her father had an "African American experience." They instead were really upper-middle class "Africans" in America though she was often treated by other Whites, Blacks and Hispanics as "African American" since that was how she was perceived. Being perceived in such a limited way when she identified so strongly with being Hispanic, American, and Nigerian resulted in her having much to say. This above passage points to the idea of being treated as an African-American, and the associated stereotypes that Alicia constantly faces in life as she expresses the "categories" that she is "lumped into." Because Alicia had this set of circumstances her cultural identity was very important to her, it makes sense that she expressed her conscious effort to enact in ways to teach others about culture and cultural complexity.

Christine, half Korean and half Caucasian, (nearly 6' tall with jet Black hair, Asian eyes, and very fair skin) felt more White than Korean having grown up in the United States, with mostly White friends, and knowing very little about Korean language:

I consider myself half Korean, half Caucasian. Generally, I identify more with the American, you know, Caucasian-American side more than the Korean side since I was born and raised here and generally most of my family is here and everything.

Upon further probing, Christine also described her mother as an influence in her more American/ Caucasian identification. She explained,

My mom when she was here, I guess, kind of wanted to be more American. You know, she wanted to be kind of more a typical American mom and she didn't teach us Korean growing up so... my sister and I don't know Korean...She just wanted us to be like regular American kids and she wanted to be a typical American mom from TV [she snickers], and that kind of thing. So she... didn't really infuse much of the culture into us [while] growing up and so that really contributed to that as well.

Christine did not express any negative emotions about identifying more with American-Caucasian than with Korean; however, she discussed her annoyance when having to check only one box. She described that her method would be to choose one or the other randomly. "I'll be White today," she joked but was pleased that filling in "other" or checking more than one box is becoming more acceptable. Christine had less to say than many of the participants and while being multicultural was important to her, it was not an issue which she ever had problems with.

Richard always had identified himself as "White," though his father was Syrian and mother was White, and is the only one in this study who completely did not perceive himself nor have the desire to be as part of one of his parent's cultures. Though Richard's experience, in this study is unique (as a cultural complex individual who has a consistent cultural identity of only one ethnicity),; there are many individuals who are also a mix of cultural/ethnic backgrounds yet only recognize one (like Halle Berry) so it is important to examine his experience. Richard (light-skinned, freckled, hazel brown eyes, and light brown hair) expressed to me during the interview, that his full beard and "thick body hair" were usually the clues to others who recognized that he was part

Middle Eastern (though he expressed that few would recognize that he was something aside from White). He stated that he did not have the choice since “the choice was made for” him as he explained,

I see the benefits. I know why my dad did it. He didn't want me to be alienated or ostracized from the other kids. That's why one reason he wanted to take me to church... everyone else was religious; everyone else was White, so he wanted me to be just like everyone else so I wouldn't have any problems growing up... 'cuz I guess he thought there would be problems as a kid growing up from a non-white background going to an all-white school.

Richard expressed that he was not angry towards either of his parents for the choice they made for him, expressing that “race was never a talked-about issue in my house-hold,” but instead “social standing and class is more important than race or culture.” When asked why Richard would not check off more than one box, he stated, “I guess I could, but what would that do?” I answered, “Just representation; just acknowledgement of the fact that you have another ethnicity in you,” to which he answered, “Wow. I never thought about that. I never considered myself, I guess, Middle Eastern.” Upon further probing of why he didn't identify at all as Middle Eastern, he stated, “I was raised not knowing anything about my heritage or culture so I don't ever consider myself being that way. Yes, I know that my blood has that in me but I'm just going to say that I am a *Texan*; I am a *Houstonian*; that's how I commit myself.” Richard had greatly taken his heritage for granted as he had never even thought that he truly was part Middle Eastern. Thus, Richard did not feel badly nor any shame about only claiming himself as White. He felt that after all, race and ethnicity was not a big deal which goes against past theories discussed in Chapter I, arguing that culturally-complex individuals will

inevitably experience shame and a sense of denying part of who they are if they do not embrace all parts of their ethno-cultural make-up. While Richard had a consistent identity of being only White, Lisa also only self-identified as Black yet had an inconsistent identity.

Lisa, a large young woman, with light brown hair, light eyes, very light skin (lighter than mine), with a wide freckled nose said, “I identify as a Black woman” even though only her father was Black and her mother was White. While she was growing up, she explained that others identified her as “mulatto” or “mixed.” “People would tell me that I had to choose. College people would tell me that I would have to pick one race or the other, and they were quick to tell me who I was or wasn’t. So everybody’s always willing to tell you who you are.” She started to claim herself only as a Black Woman later on in life and did not state that she was both Black and White. Like many of the participants, Lisa mentioned box checking issues, but reported that she did not check off White in the boxes—even when able to, owing to the fact that she had such a strong identification with being Black, and that her appearance already represented her White background.

For some reason it didn’t feel right until I said, ‘I’m Black.’ I don’t feel negative about that at all. Part of it is that it was a culture that I had to almost chase after and not lose. I am White but if I had chosen to be *just* White, it would have been a much narrower path. Choosing to identify as a Black woman broadens that path. When I say I’m Black it’s obvious that there is something else going on [since her appearance is so light-skinned] so it forces the question. It makes them look at both.

Throughout the interview Lisa expressed that her identity as a Black woman evolved over time from several experiences, and she started to feel more “comfortable,” with her

identification as a “Black Woman.” Her first reasons to learn about being Black were from her living in a predominately White area where she experienced discrimination and prejudice.

Growing up, we experienced a lot of problems because of it, and that made me curious; why is it a big deal? So as I began to learn more, and read more, and write more, so that’s what came out—the woman that I wanted to be, the kind of person that I wanted to be; other than my family, I am more often found in Black literature and so it just made more sense to me...In the town that I grew up in, we were getting all the negative aspects of being Black, so I thought that ‘I am going to reap the benefits of it and find what those are.’

Upon my probing, she described identifying more with the female characters in Black literature than she did with the characters from other books. She continued to discuss how her search to understand Black culture helped her find herself such as developing an identification with Black music, “I loved jazz and blues so I began to learn about music... When you’re at peace, when you learn to breathe, that was *then*.” Her physical as well as character attributes also led her to adopt this identification. She attributed differences in culture and race to how members of her family behave. She described her father’s Black culture as “more raucus and theatrical,” while her mother’s White side of the family was “kind of shy.” In addition, “The Black culture is more appreciative of the big woman and see that as *beautiful*, so these were all things that I could plug into my life and make a life and be comfortable with it.” Thus, being a larger woman, who identified more with Black literature, who was more raucous and had an appreciation of Black music all led her to adopting her Black identification. Lisa’s evolution of identity was gradual but seemed to be a major reaction to having always been identified as Black by others, in addition to identifying with cultural aspects which she found to be more

“Black.” In terms of hierarchy of identities, she mentioned that most important to her was being Christian followed by being a woman, followed by being a “Black Woman.” Like Lisa, Amanda, could recall a specific set of reasons in time which led her to embrace her Korean identity as more a part of her, than she originally felt about her Caucasian, imposed (by her mother) identity.

Amanda, identified herself to me as “Asian-American,” since her mother was Korean which made up the Asian; and the American part represented her father and his White Anglo background. At first, I was confused, thinking that she was describing herself as would a person who grew up in the United States and whose parents both were from Korea. She clarified that this was not the case and that her description connoted two different cultures represented in her from her ethnically dissimilar parents. Amanda, a tall woman with very white features (reddish brown hair, light eyes, white skin), with the exception of Asian hints within the eyes and cheek-bones, expressed that she originally defined herself as White since her mother had always defined her (as well as her sisters who looked more Asian than her) as White. Amanda said that she identified more with being Asian in high school since she started to recognize the importance of her heritage and her mother’s struggle to leave Korea behind for a better life in the United States. When Amanda started thinking about the importance of her mother’s heritage, even though she never had gone to Korea and could not speak the language, being Korean became very important to Amanda which led her to change her self-identification:

To be really frank, a lot of it [changing identification] had to do with my mom. She came here from Korea when she was seventeen...I won’t give

you the whole story but basically she had a really hard childhood and it was an army couple that brought them here and she wanted to leave Korea behind. And so she married a White man. She was already fluent in English when she moved here because she had to learn it in school and so she pretty much did everything she could to leave Korea behind...plus she moved away from her family because my dad's family lives in Texas; my mom's family's all in Washington state. So coming here then, it was all my dad's family and she always identified us like on school forms and that kind of stuff as White. So anytime she was filling out stuff for us, she always said we were Caucasian and it never dawned on me that she wasn't... and it never dawned on me that my mom was different until I got old enough to realize the racism that she faced and I think at that point, probably in high school when I started to see that. That was when I kind of went back the other way and I'm like, 'Wait a minute. It's not just her. It's me too.' I'm seeing that that's part of my heritage even though she tried to leave that behind, that's still part of who I am and so then I tried to connect more with my aunt and my grandmother because my aunt has really stuck with a lot of the Korean cultural stuff.

Noteworthy in her response is the fact that even though she tried to "leave Korea behind," Amanda saw her mother's struggles as an important component of her own heritage which made her embrace that part of her. When I asked whether she had a defining moment when she made the decision to define herself both as White and Asian, she explained,

I don't think it was like one defining moment. I think it was kind of like a shift in maturity just of realizing that, because it wasn't different to *me* but realizing that other people saw my mom differently and that bothered me. And so it was kind of coming to the realization that my mom was different or that people saw her as different.

Similar to Amanda, Madeline (a few shades darker than me with long black hair, and Cherokee cheekbones) had claimed herself as only Black until middle school where she was brought to the realization that she had other ethnicities which she felt she had been "denying." She defined herself as being "mixed race" or also used the term "mutt." She described herself as a combination of "Native American, African American,

Mexican American, and Creole,” defining Creole as “French, Spanish, African American, and Caucasian culture blended into one.”

Up until middle school, I would always just say “I’m Black. There’s no ifs, ands or buts, about it.” But going through... an all Black middle school, I kind of realized that I wasn’t. Especially when people would put it in my face every day that I wasn’t just Black—that I was mixed... and at that point on I started identifying myself as mixed race because... maybe I was neglecting the rest of my culture by only saying that I’m one thing.

Madeline also discussed her frustrations with checking boxes, after answering “Do you ever feel like you have to choose being just one thing?” She stated that not having an “other”, or options for multiple ethnicities was problematic:

They just give you “Black (not Hispanic),” “Hispanic (not Black),” “Caucasian (not Hispanic),”... I mean at that point it’s like, what am I really supposed to check? If I check that I am Hispanic (not Black) or (not White), then I am denying my mother’s culture as well as part of my father’s culture; but if I check that I’m Black, then I am saying ‘You know what? Screw being Native American and Mexican and Creole and everything else.’

At the end of the interview she revisited the idea of how box-checking is a dilemma, “I think you are neglecting an entire population. And it does kind of get a little annoying, but I mean what can you do?” While Madeline reported now being proud and embracing her cultural complexity—others were much more fluid in discussing identity throughout the interview.

The following three participants had self-identified in the beginning of the interview in one way, however their commitments to those initial labels and cultural identities throughout the discussion shifted back and forth which led them to have much more fluid or confused cultural identities. Shira, who identified her mother as White and

her father as Persian, answered that she identified her own race/cultural/ethnicity as “White, I guess,” but when I asked her if she had always identified herself the same way, she then said, “It depends on who asks me, I guess... If someone asks me about my name, I tell them that my father is Persian, but in general when I have to check a box, I just say I’m White.” I asked her why she chose “White” as opposed to Middle Eastern, but she explained,

Well you can put ‘Arab,’ but Iranians don’t consider themselves Arab really, so I don’t put that. And I’ve tried to put ‘other’ in certain situations applying for scholarships and stuff but it feels just too dishonest so I just put ‘White.’

While Shira did not feel that she would be treated differently if she told people she was half Persian, for some reason she believed it was easier to tell strangers that she was White, yet would choose to tell people she considered to be friends that she was half Persian. The interview went as follows:

Shira: I’ve always been closer to my dad’s side of the family growing up so that’s made me, I think, identify more-so with my dad’s culture but I think it’s easier in our society just to say I’m White and leave it at that.

Interviewer: What do you mean by *easier*?

Shira: Easier as far as not having to explain...where you’re from, or you know, about your background. If you just want a simple-straightforward answer to... give to Joe Shmoe, then I would just say that I’m White. But if it’s someone you think you’ll be friends with, or you wouldn’t mind getting closer to, then you’ll go a little bit more in depth or be like, Oh, well, you can tell them the story.

I was perplexed why Shira found it “easier” to say “White,” rather than “half White” in addition to half “Persian” as she described her father. I probed, “Do you feel you might be judged if you reveal that information?” but she answered, “Generally, no.” It made little sense to me why she found it so much easier to identify herself as White when she

expressed feeling more influence from her father's Persian side. I asked her again about why she would identify as White when so much of the interview covered Iranian values,

Interviewer: When we started the interview, you said, 'I usually just say White and leave it at that,' but everything else you've said, you've really strongly said, 'No, I want to be both cultures; not just one.'

Shira: Yeah, well like I said, it depends on who I'm talking to you know? It depends how lazy I am that day. It's a convenience thing, I think, actually.

By the end of the interview, I still could not clearly establish why it was so much "easier" for Shira to identify as White—perhaps this was in part, a product of her growing up in Texas (a fact she may have referred to when she said that it is easier in our "society,"), possibly dealing with forms of oppression and deciding it would be "easier" if others saw her as White. For the next participant, George, identity also fluctuated throughout the interview.

George, half-Mexican/Hispanic and half white, identified himself as Hispanic at the beginning of the interview. I remember that when I first had met George, I mistook his ethnicity for Indian; he had a dark complexion but features that I would categorize as more white. He checked off "Hispanic" in boxes and reported identifying himself as Hispanic because of his darker complexion and in addition, he said his friends often referred to him this way. He went to school in a white population and had deemed himself as the "Whitest Mexican" that one would ever find as he talked about not speaking Spanish. I asked George why he did not define himself as White when he was indeed half White to which he answered that it really "changes from time to time." Similar to other participants, he was able to recall a story where he started to think about being multicultural; he was 19 or twenty when he was assigned to read and write about

race; he started thinking about being biracial, since before then he felt like “it was what it was.” He expressed his annoyance in once being singled out as a minority and said, “It was not the most important thing. . . being Christian and being a husband would be most important with Hispanic and White much further down the list.”

Gina, a 25-year-old woman said that she always told others that she was a “mutt,” yet later defined herself as half White and half Hispanic (which she also said included Native American and Mexican).

Gina: I just always tell people I’m a mutt. . . I just say, yeah I’ve got all kinds of different things. . . My mom is Hispanic but then there’s like Native American and other different things in there and my dad who I really don’t know that much about. . . he’s White and he’s got something else in there too but I’m not quite sure so I just kind of tell people that I’m just half—Half one thing and half something else.

Interviewer: So half Hispanic and half White?

Gina: Yea.

She checked off Hispanic in boxes, “I don’t think I’m other—I’m *something* but yeah.”

She explained how her sense of ethnic identity was not an issue until high school.

Up until about high school, I really did not have any concept of any racial identity or anything like that. . . I guess I started to realize that some kids were White and some were Hispanic because I went to a school that was pretty much split right down the middle—half White, half Hispanic and there were really no African Americans there and started to look around and I realize, I’m not one or the other. I’m kind of like in-between and there was only a small handful of us that were the “in-betweeners.”

Gina also described a situational “feeling” of identity--that she “felt” more White in San Antonio when she was with other Hispanics because she was often perceived that way, but felt more Hispanic in College Station since it is in a predominately White area. For Gina, even though her identification stayed as “mutt” or “in-between” she would “feel” a culture depending on the situation. I found Gina to be an interesting participant as she

had started the interview as a “mutt”, later claimed half Hispanic and half White and later referred to herself as “something,” which would illustrate certainly an ambiguous identity and even possibly uncertain at times though not as confused as the next participant, Victor.

Victor (a very large man, football player in stature, with dark skin and Asian eyes) had a difficult time with identification. When answering how he defined his race/ethnicity he responded, “It’s kind of hard to say [define ethnicity] because if you are Black mixed with Japanese and Mongolian, it’s hard to define what you are.” His grandfather was Black and Japanese and his grandmother was pure Mongolian on his father’s side. In checking boxes, he also described two problems—1) not being sure whether to pick “Black” or “other” since he had heard that “Black is the dominant gene [a fact, which he later told me he learned from the Discovery Channel].” “I always ask myself should I circle ‘other’ or ‘undefined’ because really technically I am not Black.” The second problem with box checking involved the idea of consistency; because his birth certificate said he was Black and since he was used to checking off “Black,” he expressed fear that changing to “other” would be “making false records.” He described how inconsistencies in paperwork made him nervous about seeming credible: “They’ll see me and my transcript and say, ‘Well on here he’s circled ‘Black.’ But on here he circled ‘Other.’ Something isn’t right.’ I don’t want any type of confrontation about that.” Even though he defined himself on forms as Black, he expressed identification with all of his family’s cultures but talked about how most people would define him as Black owing to his appearance.

Victor: According to everybody else and the way they look at me, I'm Black.

Interviewer: How does that make you feel?

Victor: A little uncomfortable because it's like my ethnicity is really getting ignored. I tell people what I really am and they don't believe me. They think I am lying. In fact I was at an event and people were asking me and I said, "Watch when my dad comes up here." My dad told them and they still didn't believe me, so it's kind of like—they do or they don't. They believe me or they don't believe me.

Interviewer: Why would they think you'd be lying about that?

Victor: I don't know—you look at my eyes and you can tell.

Thus, he identified more with being Black because he was treated that way by others and was "forced" to choose being Black since others "would not believe" that he was mixed with other ethnicities, "I feel like I *have* to choose Black. If I don't it's either a lie or... it definitely makes me feel like I'm being forced to pick something that I really think I'm not." Even though Victor had some issues with how others saw his ethnicity, his family was very supportive in his decision to embrace all of his ethnic cultures and he said that there was never a point where he felt ashamed nor did he ever have the desire to be mono-racial. The family was a topic of great importance for all participants and the next cluster of themes emanates from this subject.

Family

As questions surrounding family were included in the interview protocol, ("How does communication with parents contribute to the formation of culturally-complex identity?"; "Does this interaction impact identity formation in a particular way that other factors do not?"; "...other factors come into play in identification for culturally-complex adults?"), a large cluster of themes from participants' interviews spoke to the ideas, communication, influences and experiences of the family. The first noteworthy theme

within this cluster deals with the communication about cultural complexity within participants' families.

Lack of Family Dialogue about Cultural Complexity

A majority of the participants stated that they remember having almost zero dialogue about ideas of being culturally-complex with their parents, and very little discussion with their siblings about the issues related to identification, culture, belonging to one or both cultures, etc. For example, Alicia responded:

We've never talked about it [being culturally-complex]. It's just something that exists. It's normal to us. My parents never sat us down one day and said 'Okay, we're an interracial couple and you're mixed children. This is what society might say to you about this.' [she said sarcastically, while giggling] You know? They were just "We're your mom and dad." No big deal and I ever thought twice about it.

Like Alicia, most participants also expressed having almost no family discussion about being culturally-complex. Victor similarly said, "It's not like you should do *Black things* or *Japanese things*. They just treat you like, 'You're my son. It's regular; there are no certain things you should do.'" Madeline was perhaps the only interviewee who discussed being culturally-complex with her family however this was in response to Madeline being invalidated at school. After Madeline had told her mother that other children at school told her that she was not Black, Madeline recalled her mother telling her at the time, "Accept who you are. People aren't going to like you for many different reasons. If they don't like you just because of your race then, oh well... I mean it's just one other thing for them not to like you for." They also told her, "You are not a representative of your race, you are [she started listing her and her sister's names]." Thus, her parents acknowledged this as a difference in response to her being teased, but

did not deem cultural complexity as more important than any other difference. It is striking that even though Madeline was the only interviewee who recalled family discussion about cultural complexity, their discussion also bolsters the theme amongst the participants that in the family, cultural complexity is not very important and low value is placed on it while judging the person. Thus, at least for the participants in this study, cultural complexity is often not spoken about but the reasons why could vary (though they were not clearly stated in this study)-- perhaps families do not deem this matter worthy of discussion, maybe simply it is taken for granted, or even the contrary is possible--because it is a sensitive topic avoided altogether. The lack of communication within the family was an overall commonality, but at the same time participants also spoke a great deal about cultural influence by family members.

Influence of Family

Overall, participants could speak to some extent about how their families have contributed to their cultural identities and, accordingly, knowledge/customs/practices of their heritages varied depending on the participants and their degree of exposure with the culture. For example, Richard who did not identify with his father's Middle-Eastern heritage, also described knowing next to nothing about the culture. On the other end of the spectrum, Steve discussed that he felt more influenced by his mother's Puerto Rican culture, owing to the fact that he had more contact with that side of the family. He explained:

She's [mother] the only one growing up that I really had family with. I've got grandparents, aunts, uncles... on the Puerto Rican side. My dad really isn't close to his family... The Puerto Rican side is the only side

I've really been around for holidays and for everything... The Latin culture stresses family, I think, a lot more.

Amanda discussed always having gimshi at family gatherings because of her aunt who taught her how to prepare Korean food. Harry talked about his strong cultural influence from his mother, who was very proud of her Mexican heritage, "She always made a point to kind of fill [stories about Mexico] into our head just so we would appreciate it more, I think." Thus, it was easy for many participants to discuss which family members were larger contributors to their cultural identities. While participants also mentioned that parents would not say much about one another's cultures, they might have made jokes about their spouses' backgrounds.

Jokes

When asked what parents or extended family would say about the one-another's' cultures, some participants mentioned the jokes that would be made. Most interviewees reported feeling apathetic toward the jokes or giggled at them. For example, when Steve told me that his step-father would tease his mother by using the words, "Wet Back" and "Spic," more to "mess with her" or for a reaction from his mother and not so much to offend her. Steve reported not being bothered by the attempts at humor, and stated how he enjoyed watching his mother's temper increase so quickly due to his step-father's games. George talked about how his father might make the jokes about fitting a large family of Mexicans into the car, but he also was not really annoyed by the jokes. Gina talked about how her grandfather would tease her that she was part White by calling her "Huera," [which may mean blonde but can also be deemed as more derogatory and closer to the likes of "whitey"] and stated that her aunt called her an "oreo." Her

response was, “It was funny, but now it bothers me 'cuz now I feel like I’m not like completely 100 percent what they are... The more I think about it, the more it bothers me.” Gina seemed to be one of the only interviewees who talked about being possibly bothered by jokes. She, interestingly, reported not being bothered when others (such as friends) made Hispanic jokes, however she said she is “more and more uncomfortable” with the teasing that her family directs toward her. Gina has also been characterized in this study as an individual who was more inconsistent and ambiguous in identity, so perhaps her discomfort with the jokes might have something to do with the precarious-seeming nature of her cultural complexity. While jokes were discussed, more serious conversations about heritage were reported by participants, such as knowledge of the ethnic family member’s struggles.

Communication Regarding Family Struggle and Heritage

All interviewees had some amount of knowledge of their minority parent’s struggle to immigrate and roots in the United States. Madeline explained that her mother would teach her about her Native American roots and that her grandmother would bring her to reservations. Lisa shared that it was from her White side of the family, many who were educators during the Civil Rights era, which she learned a great deal about her Black cultural roots. Alicia talked about how her father left Nigeria and George mentioned his hard-working Mexican family. These stories served as mini-narratives that most participants understood as their families’ histories and many participants seemed proud when telling these tales. Thus, there is a large contrast within family

communication—the subject of culture is handled with flip humor or with reverent history.

Knowledge of Sibling Experience

Siblings' experiences were also a topic explored by many participants. All participants with siblings were able to compare their own experiences to those of their siblings; they were able to think about how their own ethnic appearance would impact their experience in comparison to their siblings', and were able to comment on how their siblings identified culturally. They were also able to say who looked more or who looked less, ethnic. Let us begin with how participants talked about siblings' appearances; Amanda stated that her sister had black hair and much more Asian eyes which made her appear more Korean than Amanda, who had a fuller face and red hair. Shira had talked about how a partially Iranian heredity had resulted in her sister having much darker skin and a much thicker/darker moustache in middle school than did Shira herself during that age. Similarly, Richard mentioned that his brother had dark skin; a schoolmate had called Richard's brother a terrorist which led Richard's brother into a fight with the schoolmate though nothing like that ever happened to Richard.

Respondents were also able to discuss how their siblings identified which would be described as either matching the participant's identification or differing. I was more interested in when a sibling's self-identification differed from that of the participant's. Lisa mentioned that her brother would not identify [his race, ethnicity, or culture] at all as he did not accept being identified as mulatto. "He'll say his name, but that's all he'll tell you" and she expressed to me that his teenage rebellious attitude and being Black on

top of it led to his being mistreated by local authorities growing up in the small White town. Harry reported how one of his brothers was “more toward the Japanese side” since he was “more analytical, was the kind of kid who would come home from school and finish his homework without having to be told to...” While Steve had always embraced being Irish as well as Puerto Rican, one of his brothers differed. Steve, the oldest of eight siblings, stated, “One brother would change everything just to say that he’s full blooded Puerto Rican. My other brothers... they don’t care. They are who they are.” He later conveyed that he saw his brother’s difficult relationship with his father as a possible reason why he might identify more with his mother’s heritage. In reflecting on his brother’s decision to commit to a Puerto Rican identity, as opposed to embracing both sides, Steve responded, “I don’t think it’s bad... I think it’s ignorant to deny the other half.” Alicia, oldest of six, also reported having a sister who identified more as Black and African American.

My sister who is 21... she from about 8th grade, she just embraced the African American culture—big time. Where all of my friends were White, all of hers were Black. She took on the language, so to speak, changed her accent, changed her dialect... there are aspects of our culture that she really likes but then for the most part she would claim African American before Nigerian or Hispanic or anything like that...

When I asked Alicia to reflect on what she thought about her sister’s choice, she expressed understanding why it might have been more convenient for her sister to identify as African-American. Similar to Chapter II, participants discussed not only the family but the influence of non-significant others.

Influence of Non-significant Others

A large cluster of themes constitute constraints on the interaction with others outside of the family. This cluster of themes would include participants' leaning toward one culture owing to geographic location and perceived ethnicity by others (appearance). Some participants discussed that geographic location would often have a higher population of one culture than another which, in turn, would often engender the individual to emphasize whatever culture was more dominant.

Geography (Prevalence of One Culture over Another)

When asked if he ever felt more influenced on one side than the other, Harry explained that growing up in Texas where the Hispanic population was prevalent would “skew him” toward that Mexican side at times but that he never felt that he had to choose being one culture over another.

Just in everyday situations... I encounter Hispanic Americans a lot more than I would encounter Japanese Americans; so I think in that sense I kind of found myself trying to learn Spanish and trying to get in touch with that side of my culture just for the fact that I know that will become useful in many situations.

Madeline stated that she identified more with being African American and Native-American, but that being in Texas made her more “open” to her Mexican side because in Louisiana, where she grew up, there was a much smaller Mexican population. When asked if Alicia ever felt she had to choose being one culture over another, she stated,

A lot of times it comes down to a situation where I'll kind of lean toward one side, depending on the group that I'm with. Like if I find myself around other Hispanics, I'll make it very clear—Hey I'm Hispanic too; don't try to leave me out of this... So I'll really cling to that and 'talk the language' so to speak. So that they know I'm for real. I have

predominately White friends so around them I can act like myself—I don't have to be one thing or another around them.

What is striking about Alicia's response is that she wants to make it known that she is Hispanic when other Hispanics are around but does not feel that action is necessary around her White friends when she acts like *herself*. Her description, "don't leave me out of this," indicates the importance of being around Hispanics and needing to feel included and accepted by Hispanics even though she looks Black, and she is able to represent what she deems as an authentic marker of being Hispanic by speaking Spanish so that other Hispanics know that she is "for real." Thus, for culturally-complex individuals who don't necessarily "look the part," they may try to assert their identities whenever possible.

Appearance

All interviewees could speak to the topic of looking or not looking like the cultures to which they belonged and reported a variety of perceived ethnicities based on interactions with others. For instance, Madeline stated that she was most often mistaken as East Indian but also listed Dominican and Somalian. Harry talked about how most people see him as White which was funny to him since he is so much darker [than many White people]; though the list of things that others thought he might be included: Pakistani, Indian, Palestinian/Arab or Spanish which he found "curious as to how people position others geographically based on race and funny because I know I am not from India or I am not Arab." Steve reported that most people saw him as White, as he looked more like his Irish father than his Puerto Rican mother. He said that people were often surprised upon finding out that he is half-Latino:

Steve: A couple of weeks ago, I was at a Salsa competition...there was a bunch of people from my music class who were there who I didn't really know at all. Then right after I won, there were a couple of Mexican girls and they were like, 'Where did you learn how to dance like that?' And I'm like 'I grew up with it; I'm half Puerto Rican' and they're like, 'Really?' [in a very surprised tone]. They just don't expect it... I think it's kind of funny because people are very quick to judge people just because of how they look. I've known some people that are so mixed-race; you look and go, "I don't know" [trying to figure out what their ethnicity is] but to me it doesn't matter.

Though he felt his ethnicity was often mistaken, Steve said that he did not feel he was treated differently owing to whether he was deemed as White or Hispanic, and did not report a change in treatment from others once they realized he was culturally-complex.

Many participants said that other mixed/multicultural people or minority group members could recognize some of the culturally-complex components. For example, Amanda said that other Koreans could tell that she was half Korean, even though most Whites assumed that she was White, not a mixture. Victor also talked about how Asian people would call him a "hybrid" since he had features from all of his cultures which he really enjoyed as it made him feel validated in his culturally-complex true identity as opposed to an imposed identity based on his appearance. He said:

It puts a smile on my face because people recognize what I really am and they think outside of the box rather than always assuming." [He later came back to this idea]. They can actually see past my color and see what I really am. They're not just looking at my skin or just looking at how big I am—'cuz the first thing people think is, "Oh yeah he is big. He is dark. He is Black. Next!" It's just not like that. You have to look more into it.

Similarly, Lisa said that Black people and other mixed people "almost always" saw her as having Black in her but that White people often mistook her for being just White.

Thus, while many of the participants could discuss being perceived ethnically in different ways, fewer discussed invalidation.

Invalidation, Fitting in and Negative Comments by Others

As reviewed in Chapter I, invalidation is a major theme in more recent literature as a major factor contributing to stress for culturally-complex individuals. Invalidation would include any situation in which a culturally-complex individual was told that part[s] of his or her self-defined cultural identity were not legitimate. There is a great deal of variation within this cluster of themes which speak to the issues of invalidation, ways of handling, etc. It is important to note that not all participants experienced being invalidated: Richard, Amanda, Christine, and Harry never experienced invalidation, and others mentioned few times of being invalidated. When asked if Lisa would ever be overtly invalidated, she answered:

That will happen to me all the time. Someone will say something that they wouldn't say in front of Black people and then someone else will say, you know, "She's Black right?" and then they say, "No, she's *not*..." Like how more dismissive can you be?

She expressed annoyance in her tone while describing such situations, and also described more subtle forms of invalidation, where the question of being Black was more indirect. For instance, she recounted a story in which she was pulled over and gave her license to the officer, who returned it, saying, "Your license, ma'm says that you're a Black woman"... to which she answered, "Yes, that's correct..."

It was like he was saying, "But you're *White*"... it's like I got that feeling from grammar school. It's like, "Why do I have to explain? Why does that matter that way? It does—it's beautiful, but why does it suddenly make me different from you and different and bad. It's real simple but with me there's always an explanation behind that.... Or somebody else

needs an explanation for that because it confuses *them* when it makes perfect sense.

In essence, Lisa showed that her being invalidated and needing to explain her mixed heritage made her feel the familiar sense of alienation that she experienced during her youth. The idea of feeling negatively about having to “explain” being culturally-complex continuously was expressed by Alicia as well. Alicia described feeling first “proud,” but then “frustration” and “sadness” when asked to describe emotions of being culturally-complex:

Frustration in other people not seeing... or not understanding it the way that I do or not expecting it the way that I wish that they would... For some reason the word sadness comes to mind, just because I think of my past and how that has caused a lot of sadness at times... Just having to deal with it [on a constant basis] like why can't I just go about my business and be who I am? Why do I always have to talk about who I am? Why do I always have to explain who I am? I feel that there are people who go everyday and don't even know anything about their background because it's never been an issue and they don't ever have to do anything to verify themselves and prove themselves. Sometimes I wish I could just live and not constantly be explaining myself so I do feel the sadness sometimes that ignorance still exists in the world.

This passage is very striking because it first points to the idea that Alicia faces her cultural complexity on a regular basis, and then conveys how she frames her experience as almost not fair, comparing her experience to those who are not culturally-complex, people she deems as never having “to do anything to prove themselves.” Others described being invalidated at times by multiple groups at the same time and thus illustrated times of fitting in nowhere.

Neither-nor

Some participants discussed points in life where they were discounted in multiple groups on the basis of being culturally-complex. For example Steve said:

Steve: Irish people would look at you and go, ‘Well you’re half, so...’

And Puerto Ricans would look at you and say, “Well you’re half, so...

Interviewer: You are in with both crowds?

Steve: Not really. You are not in with either. When I lived there I was young so I didn’t really experience it very long. It’s kind of like ‘you are half Irish and Puerto Rican’ so to the Puerto Ricans, ‘Oh, you’re Irish;’ the Irish [say] ‘Oh, you’re Puerto Rican.’ You don’t really fit into that.

When I asked Steve how that made him feel and whether it ever made him desire to be one or the other, he stated, “Not really, because the way my parents brought me up was like, “you are who you are.” You can’t change it and be proud of it and if those people don’t accept you for it, then screw them.” Lisa similarly talked about how she would not feel that she belonged to either cultural group:

I used to struggle with that a lot...not White enough for the White kids, not Black enough for the Black kids... mainly that happened to me in college...I wanted to be a Black person and I can’t even articulate why. I wanted to know what that was and wanted to be a part of that. I wanted to join in the struggle and I knew that there was one and so it hurt sometimes when I couldn’t have the hair conversation, or the skincare conversation, or I couldn’t have the conversation at all because I wasn’t Black enough—whatever that means and so that was hard.

Alicia also discussed not truly fitting in with Blacks or Whites having lived for a brief period between junior high and high school where she was in honors classes and most of the people she was surrounded with were White since the Black students were usually placed in remedial classes. She did not have much contact with other Blacks unless in sports where she was not accepted for who she was; on the other hand, her White friends were also not very respectful of her being Black:

I played sports and that was the only time that I got to interact with other African Americans and they wouldn't accept me because of the way I talk, I was light-skinned or "yellow boned" so to them, I thought I was too good. "You must think you're all that"... like they would mock me [she starts to imitate the tone]... And that really upset me because, okay, I was raised like this. My parents talk like this. I am not trying to prove anything. I'm sorry that I speak... intelligent English [she laughs] but they wouldn't accept me because I wasn't Black enough and then all my White friends, I was that token, "You're my Black friend. Yay!" and they would make the jokes that, you know... even to them it might have been funny, but I recall numerous instances of going to the store and we're all jumping in the car and one of my guy friends would be like, "Oh Alicia's gotta sit in the back!"... and to them it was just "ha ha ha"—but I realized, even at such a young age, "Man, this town, people are so ignorant here that they don't realize that the things they say are so non P.C. and inappropriate.

Handling Invalidation

Participants who reported experiencing invalidation or hearing any kind of jokes seemed to handle the situation in variant ways, by either treating the situation as a "teaching" experience, brushing it off, or taking the invalidation and internalizing it in an empowering way. Most participants said that how they handled it would depend on the situation and that sometimes they were not in the "teaching mood." For example, Alicia talked about how handling invalidation was:

... kind of a give and take—you can't change someone over night so you just gotta have some bit of acceptance and then at the same time let them know, "Hey that isn't acceptable. If someone heard you talking like this down the street who didn't know you, you could be in big trouble," and just trying to open their eyes in a friendly manner, on a day-by-day basis.

Even though she felt it was her responsibility to teach others, she also talked about the frustration of having to be the "teacher":

At the same time it gets hard. I'm a kid too. Why do I have to teach my whole life, you know? When I don't feel like I ever had to be taught by anybody; I just knew—like these are things I felt that I just knew yet

everyone around me is so... empty—they don't understand what's going on and I am just like, "Why do I have to teach you all; we're all the same age. Where did you not learn this? So that's where it just gets stressful sometime and I'm just like "I give up. Forget it, ya know?" [she starts laughing]. I'm going to make it my goal to change the world [she laughs again] in one day, ya know.

Thus, what is noteworthy is that she feels that others should automatically be in-tune with cultural sensitivity and feels frustration that many are not. Most participants, instead of teaching, described brushing off invalidation, negativity, or rude comments. Harry said, if "they make a comment in the first place, I think they're pretty set in their ways and it's going to take a lot to change their minds. So I feel like it's just best to brush it off." When asked how he felt if people were making jokes about one of his ethnicities, Steve said, "Then they are below me... people are different... and if you are going to put people down because their race is different, screw you man." Victor said he would just smile and not do anything if he heard on of his friends invalidating part of his ethnicity; "You can bring a horse to the water but you can't make him drink it." While some participants used invalidation from others as teaching moments and others ignored it, two participants in the study handled invalidation as a self-empowering process.

Madeline and Lisa described being invalidated through teasing as a way for them to be self-empowered by embracing these experiences when their mixed identity was being treated as an oddity. For example, Madeline talked about how she first was invalidated as being Black and turned it into her nickname:

You have to realize that there is a lot of Black racism that exists like between darker skin Blacks and lighter skin Blacks, and while I was a lighter-skinned Black I also had other things that would make them "hmmmm." Like I have the Native American cheek bones, and my nose isn't as large, and stuff like that... they started picking me apart. It was

actually kind of funny because that's how I got the nick-name "Tan Barbie Doll"; 'cuz "You're not Black. You're not White. We'll just call you tan for the time being." It was kind of an insult at the time, but I thought, "You know? I am going to take it and run with it. I think it's a compliment."

Similarly, Lisa told me about the time that someone called her a zebra and how her father helped her to reshape that idea into something special:

I remember 4th grade-ish, I think, elementary school. The first time I heard people call me a zebra, it really hurt me so I went up and cried... and my dad told me to tell them "Better a zebra than a jack-ass" and so it jolted it out of that self-pity sort of thing and over the years it just stuck with me. Even over the years, being identified as a zebra has kind of become a positive thing... It has become a really positive, powerful thing. So it started out negatively and ended up beautifully.

Lisa and Madeline decided to use the language of others (which was intended to exclude them) as a way to embrace their cultural complexity. Thus, for culturally-complex individuals, being made fun of for being an unusual mix may transform experiences that could be seen as painful and invalidating, as moments where they may begin to appreciate their uniqueness.

Blackness

Though only four participants reported being Black as part of their cultural complexity, all of them expressed experiences related to specifically Black issues that often stemmed from societal expectations which include appearance and behavior. Lisa told me the story of when she first started attending college and chose to sit at the Black table in the lunchroom and sometimes people would look over and question others about her presence since she was so light; other students would "clue them in and it would be

like ‘oooooh’ and then I’m part of the secret society.” She also reported having been invalidated as being truly Black by “militant Black men” since her skin was so light:

They [militant Black men] would say, “You don’t know. You are not part of the struggle because you are not—your skin is not Black; you haven’t had the same experiences I have” and I can’t really argue with that, but I think if having Black skin is the only thing that makes us that, then all those species, biological reasons apply.

Thus, while Lisa agreed that she understood her experience was different owing to her light skin, being Black was still very important to her even though she was not always accepted as Black. Victor clearly had difficulty with identification since, as mentioned above, he was treated as Black and his friends did not believe that he was part Japanese and Mongolian since his skin was so dark and because his stature was large. Alicia and Madeline talked more about behavioral expectations. Alicia discussed how her Nigerian identity was often mistaken as being African American, an identity which she asserted is completely different:

It’s not that I’m African American. I’m Nigerian which is a huge, huge difference and something that I have to like set straight with my friends right off the bat which is, “do not lump me in...”my term for it—There are Black Americans which their ancestors are from America, don’t know where their original cultures are from; then there is my father who is *from* Nigeria. I know where I am from which is completely different. I was raised completely different. I have a different *mentality*. So when people meet me, it’s very important for me to let them understand, “No, I’m not just Black. I’m African,” and that is a *big* difference... 'cuz they expect me [to] know, “what’s that ebonics word for this”... you know they try to make me fit that mold and I don’t know anything about that. [she starts to laugh].

As noted earlier, Alicia was teased by Black classmates since she spoke very differently than many of the African Americans, was in honors classes and acted differently.

Similarly, Madeline shared having been scrutinized for her behavior which differed from the typical inner city African American.

I went to an all-white elementary school so at that point, I was the Black girl and I went from being called a nigger, and everything else; it really bothered me. At that point, I was like, "I'm Black—no big deal. Then there was the transition to middle school (with many Black students) and when I first walked in they were like, "She thinks she's all that. She's too proper—she's not Black. She doesn't act like she's Black. She thinks she's more than us." So at that point—I'm not down enough to be Black...I tried to transition and change into who they wanted me to be but I still wasn't accepted and I think it was in high school where I finally said, "You know what? I am going to accept all of me—not just a single part. I am not going to try to impress anyone in the process because I will always be like not accepted by someone." I mean if it's not because of my looks or my culture—it's going to be because of my frame, it's going to be who I am dating, what I drive, who my family is... so that's why I thought "I am going to stop worrying about fitting in... Whatever."

Thus, Madeline expressed having experienced racism from both Whites and Blacks, and was expected to "act" in a certain way that she did not, which led her to embrace every cultural component she had. Past literature and research concerning mulattos have often depicted them as tragic figures yet less attention has been paid on examining the complicated matters of Blackness when other ethno-cultural components (aside from White) are at work. These participants did not have more to say about cultural complexity as a whole, but had more to say about invalidation than the other participants in the study. This finding perhaps points to the idea that Blackness calls into play more rigid concepts and societal norms than do other races and ethnicities. However, it is difficult to make such a generalized assessment from only four participants.

Stress

Not all participants reported much stress from being culturally-complex, but those who did describe stress attributed it to events during adolescence in which they realized that they were “different.” In these instances, stress was explained as a result brought on by the participants’ lack of understanding prejudices and societal norms that accompanied those experiences. For example, Lisa stated that grammar school was difficult because:

They kill you there. You don’t have the terms and you don’t know how to talk about it. You don’t know why people are doing what they are doing with you and it’s very hard for a kid to understand why an adult has a problem with them. You don’t get that. I still don’t [she chuckled].

She then told me about parents [of school friends] who would find out she was Black and stop inviting her over or allowing their children to spend time with her. What is even more interesting than the prejudice she faced was that she expressed not being able to articulate or communicate about it at the time. Madeline also reported grammar school being a challenge in figuring out who she was, but when she was asked to talk about how being culturally-complex has led to stress, she answered,

When everybody is in that awkward stage and wants to be accepted, I wasn’t and that’s when you are in your adolescent stage and everything else. People struggle with identity in the first place even if you are mono-racial. You struggle with your identity in changing from the little girl to almost an adult type thing, ya know and it does... compound it when you are also struggling with "what is my actual racial identity?" It does make it difficult when you are looking at relationships and stuff like that because I am very, whatever [she expresses liberal and open to other cultures] and my family.... [was the same way] you go and you realize that other people don’t necessarily think that way.

Thus, Madeline described establishing identity as an inherently difficult process for anyone and for her, learning about others' issues with race just added to the complications.

Another source of some stress reported by participants was described as societal problems as opposed to individualized interaction. Some participants talked about feeling invalidation based on societal expectations placed on being a minority. For example, George said:

It means “diverse”... you're not normal... not the majority?...If there is a struggle that's it—what I do with affirmative action? What do I do with people trying to give me the help up? Do I say, "Don't help me out, White man—I can do it myself"? Or do I go, "Well, hey, if you want to just look at the color of my skin and think that I deserve a boost, I'll take it. [He then pauses.] I don't need it but I'll take it."

He told me that he thought affirmative action was commendable “as a way to make up for past wrongs” but at the same time felt that it highlighted more differences. He thought that “people of color will always struggle” based on his opinion that “unity” cannot be achieved when one is always “highlighting differences.” So while George was okay with being Hispanic and labeled himself as such, later on in the conversation, he said that if people wanted to give him money [meaning scholarships] because he was biracial, then that was “America's issues”—not his. While he was comfortable being half Hispanic, he was uncomfortable with the connotations that others may attach with that label. Madeline similarly recounted being annoyed by hearing about the expectations placed on Black women. When she was taking the PSAT's in high school, her counselor told her that she would be better off if she only check Black “because the expectations for being a Black female are probably lower than being anything else.” She

later told me, “In undergrad, I had my department head tell me that minority females did not have the capabilities to succeed in a biological field,” to which she reacted, “I think that is why I am in academics, because I want to change that perception.”

Benefits of Being Culturally-Complex

Culturally-complex interviewees reported having benefited from their backgrounds in scholarship opportunities, diversity initiatives, as well as an overall idea of becoming more well-rounded individuals from having been more exposed to other cultures. For example, Steve said that both his parents would identify him as half Puerto Rican and half White but that his birth certificate said Hispanic: “On the form my dad made sure that went on just because . . . They said for financial purposes.” George also said that his parents instructed him that identification as Hispanic would be more beneficial financially, and Lisa stated that her mother was fine with her identification as solely Black owing to academic benefits as well. Aside from scholarships and financial incentives, the benefits of being culturally-complex included being more open to other cultures.

A majority of participants discussed how their cultural complex identities led them to be people who are generally more “open”— a description which ranged from being more tolerant of intercultural relationships, proficient in understanding cultures, or able to relate to multiple cultures in different contexts. For example, Richard, though only identifying as White, stated that his awareness of being from two different cultures led him to be open to other cultures in a community not as open:

It doesn't matter, seeing my dad from a different culture from my mom.
When I was raised, I didn't think it was a big deal for interracial... people

to get married or have interracial families. When I came to A&M though... Black and White... can't be together... I was proud of the fact that I am not a racist and that's probably coming from an interracial couple.

Other participants described their understandings of their different cultural parts as different approaches to situations. George said that he felt that he drew from both cultures: "I see them as two approaches to the same task and they are not necessarily different—they just highlight different aspects." For example he talked about how Hispanics are more communal and family oriented while White America is more individual, "pull yourself up by your boot-straps." Lisa said that being mixed improved her writing and acting since she is able to understand different cultures, and in addition talked about being culturally-complex as a way to feel pride in her being symbolic of a future with more multicultural children:

I've never wanted to not be me so I can't imagine being me without all those things mixing in and I really think I got some of the best of both worlds...It's allowed me to move in and out of different cultures. And that's the direction that the world is moving anyway—so I am the flag ship, honey! Everyone is going to be looking more and more like me anyway.

Others also felt proud that their mix spoke to representation of bigger things like being a product of "the melting pot" (also referred to by participants as "the quilt" "stir fry" and "tossed salad."). Madeline stated that she felt proud of being able to look at herself every day and recognize her unique background:

I feel proud whenever I wake up and I look in the mirror and I'm like, "You know what- there's nobody else like me!" There may be others who *may* have my mix—I mean that's a very strange mix but I am proud of it. I am who God made me to be and why should I be ashamed of that?

Victor discussed that his mix was so unusual that people were often surprised about it, “It makes me feel like I taught them something new.” Similarly, Steve described being culturally-complex as beneficial, “because you get exposed to more.” In the same way, George thought that mixed culture was an issue that was becoming more important owing to the fact that “interracial relationships have become more prevalent” and “intercontinental business and globalization” would also lead to more culturally-complex people.

Relationship of Themes

Thus, if we revisit Figure 2 (p. 57) we understand the same three spheres that were present in Chapter II. Again, the self-identification process is influenced by both interactions with the family and non-significant others (which is indicated by the arrows). Each participant described their self-identification, indicated which boxes they checked and could place importance on their cultural identity in comparison with other roles on their own personalized hierarchy of identities. The sphere of family (within this study) illustrates that overall there was a lack of communication within the family about cultural complexity but instead families would either joke about one culture or another, or discuss family heritage. Participants also talked a great deal about how their families would influence them culturally (and would indicate if they felt more influence owing to more exposure to one side of the family over another). Participants with siblings were also able to discuss and compare their own experiences to their perceptions of their siblings’ processes of self-identification. Non significant others influenced participants in various ways. Some participants felt that their location or prevalence of one culture

would “skew” them to one identity at times over another. All participants were able to talk about how variant others perceived their cultures, though many were unfazed by this. Benefits were reported by all interviewees, while fewer participants discussed invalidation. Being invalidated sometimes led to “neither-nor” where individuals were excluded from multiple groups or stemmed from issues unique to Blackness. Handling invalidation varied amongst participants.

Self Reflection

All participants were asked one last question, “How has discussing these issues made you feel?” This last question was important in attaining the final attitudes of the interviewees’ experience with the interview and with the subject-matter as a whole. Steve, Harry, Richard, Christine, and Gina all reported not usually thinking about the issues we had discussed, but overall, participants felt positive about the interview experience, as it provided them an opportunity to think about ideas that some had taken for granted and gave others a place to voice their stories and opinions on matters in which there usually is no appropriate venue to share. Harry said that the interview was “eye-opening” since he had “never really talked about it,” but expressed interest in reading others’ stories since he was curious how others handled their identities.

Alicia stated:

It’s been enlightening. I always enjoy talking about it especially in this kind of setting—when it’s more of a “tell me about this” and “I wanna know more” instead of debating kind of thing where I am defending my point of view. I feel happy and I love sharing about my culture so especially doing an interview like this I feel... Cool. Maybe one other person understands me a little better so it was a good experience.

Madeline stated that while it made her think about societal problems that still exist, she felt similarly about the interview as other participants:

At some parts, it makes me a little angry still that... there are still problems within cultural identity within multiracial people and that there is still a lot of racism that exists... but another part of me... gives me another outlet to talk about who I am so that's a good thing.

Concluding Thoughts

After discussing the participants within this chapter, it is clear that the formation of cultural identity and self-identification is extremely complicated and highly contextualized based on the individual at hand. What was most noteworthy within the interviews was that little to no communication regarding cultural complexity occurred within the participants' families though families would discuss heritage, or make jokes about the culture/s to which they belonged. While few participants reported invalidation or stress—much took place during adolescence which seemed to inoculate them from invalidation as adults. Participants with Black heritage as part of their cultural identity seemed to have more experience with invalidation, at least in this study. Invalidation overall was treated largely with an apathetic attitude as most participants expressed being comfortable with their cultural complexity during the interview, yet at the same time, some felt that at times it was important to teach others to try to help them and society. Though some stress was reported, a great number of benefits were also described. The findings from this chapter will be further analyzed in conjunction with the findings from Chapter II within the next and, final chapter. The resulting themes which combine ideas from Chapters II and III will demonstrate further insight into cultural complexity and illustrate how discussions surrounding these matters speak to

larger ideas of culture itself: how we commit to cultural identity, how we engage in it, and how we identify one another through these unclear, ever-morphing socially constructed rules.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION: I WANT A BOX THAT SAYS "ME"

ME

What are you anyway?

Black? White? Mixed? Latina? Native American?
 Mulatto? Caribbean? Puerto Rican? Gringa?
 Middle Eastern? Central American? Venezuelan?
 Italian? Greek? Biracial? Cape Verdean? Spanish?
 Cuban? Irish? Trigueña? Jewish? Hispanic? Morena?
 Multiracial? Colombian? Eastern European? African?
 Mestizo? Brazilian?...

I'm all of the above because you *think* I am
 (depending on the clothes I'm wearing, the company
 I'm keeping, the language I'm speaking, the food
 I'm eating, the style of my hair, the shade of my
 skin, the country I'm in), and I'm none of the above.

What am I?

I'm a question. I'm an answer.
 I'm a resister of racial classifications,
 A defier of ethnic designations,
 A list of possible labels,
 And a navigator of niches that don't quite fit.
 I'm a petitioner for no more pigeonholing,
 Who loves to keep you guessing.
 I'm a medley, a mixture,
 A collage of colors,
 A blended body shifted shades,
 A cultural chameleon
 Of ambiguous ancestry and hybrid heritage.
 I'm creator of my own category,
 I'm inventor of my own identity.

I'm mixed, but I'm *not* mixed up.
 I'm not about denying a part of me.
 I'm not about trying to pass.
 I'm no sellout, no traitor,
 No wanna-be, no mutt.

I'm no tragedy, and no exotic other.
 ... If anything, I'm just another hue of you.
 I'm not about confusion
 (unless you mean other people's confusion).
 I'm not about anomaly or impurity,
 About halfness or being in between.
 I'm no less of one thing than I am another.
 I'm no poster child for interracial harmony,
 No model for miscegenated humanity.
 I'm not about messy mingling,
 And I'm not what's meant by the melting pot.
 I'm no jungle-fever rainbow baby,
 No icon for interbreeding.
 I'm not about trying to be better than anyone else,
 Or trying to be different.
 What *I'm* about is being *all* of what I am...
 Nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.

I'm a black + white + I don't know what else =
 both/neither/other, "half" transracially adopted,
 descendant of people I've never met. A freckled,
 brown skinned, curly/straight/frizzy brown haired
 (with some black, blond, and orange thrown in),
 German-American raised, Spanish-speaking gringa
 and multicolorful part-time expatriate. I'm mixed.
 What I *am* is *ME* [✓]

(poem by Sara B. Busdieker, from Gaskins, 1999)

Introduction to the Chapter

The poem above (written by a 26-year-old biracial female, adopted by German-American parents) is an illustration of how cultural complexity evokes sets of ideas, experiences, shared meanings, and commonality; both the concepts and the very language of the poem are also repeated throughout the responses of the culturally-complex individuals in the study, including myself, both in Chapters II and III. This chapter will draw conclusions from the process and content of the thesis which include overall findings from Chapters II and III; a reflection of how these findings respond to

the research questions posed and extant research reviewed in Chapter I; discussion of this study's limitations and concurrently its newer methodological ground; implications for future research; and finally I will discuss my role as a researcher and my relationship with the subject.

Discussion and Analysis of Overall Themes

Stresses and Benefits

Understanding the process of how culturally-complex individuals identify themselves was a major goal of this thesis. While past research has been somewhat conflicting regarding stress, this study overall shows that culturally-complex individuals are not really more stressed per se but instead just experience a very different process of identification as culture is often taken for granted by everyone (both mono-cultural as well as culturally-complex individuals). The culturally-complex individual often is forced at some point to consider being more than one box in a one-boxed oriented society. This opposition is not necessarily an "othering" event although it can be for some. However, overall, the participants in this study were proud to be culturally-complex.

Establishing an identity for a culturally-complex individual—whether the path is choosing one culture and not others, claiming only some cultural identities, or embracing all is of no matter to a healthy identity, so long as that individual's claimed identity is supported by significant others. While stresses exist for culturally-complex individuals, all of the young adults in this study reported absolutely no desire to be any other culture or cultural mixes. The majority of the stress described by interviewees surrounded

figuring out identity while growing up. Some stress was illustrated as dealing with cruelty of others during adolescence, and finally stress came into play in the frustration with the constant need to explain to others who do not understand or who reject our self-identified cultural labels. When reporting invalidation, individuals overall expressed that it mattered little and would assess that invalidator's intellectual value as low. While many reported treating those moments as teaching possibilities, others felt it was not worth it or perhaps were not always in the mood to battle or teach. On the flip side, there was a great amount of positive experiences and benefits associated with being culturally-complex such as being able to be a cultural "chameleon," being open to other cultures, having various perspectives on situations, and getting "the best of both worlds" in being able to celebrate multiple activities and traditions, etc. For both chapters, there were some overarching themes about cultural complexity that need to be addressed, specifically cultural values and markers.

Cultural Values and Markers

While none of my questions directly asked what it meant to be a member of a particular culture, (i.e. What does it mean to be Puerto Rican?, What does it mean to be Irish,; what does it mean to be Black,; what does it mean to be White?), most of my interviewees answered this question while describing their families, traditions, and even in the ways of behaving which all point to a notion that the culturally-complex experience perhaps grants the individual as a socialized young adult, a unique experience. This distinctive unique experience allows the culturally-complex individual the ability to recognize cultural differences and has the opportunity to view the world

through multiple lenses. Throughout the interview discussions, the spectrum of ideas that encompass the often vague concept of how individuals view, participate, enact, and represent “culture” came into play. Although never asked directly, all interviewees referenced themes of personally-held theories of what I am now considering “cultural values” and “cultural markers.” These concepts unfolded in interviewees’ responses to questions concerning how they viewed and identified themselves culturally and if this process of self-identification varied through their interactions with others. Each participant, throughout their interviews, would discuss prescribed importance on specific meanings for specific cultures learned by interaction, mainly within the familial context, which led to “cultural values”. “Cultural values” answers the question: what actions are highlighted as important according to that group as a whole. Cultural values are present during the moments where we hear “because it supposed to be done this way,” or “that’s just how we do things.” For instance, Victor described “staying out of other people’s affairs” and avoiding confrontation as a Japanese way to handle situations which he learned from his father. In addition to recognition of how cultural values come into play, these notions coupled with personalized systems of cultural rules where criteria consisted of “markers.” “Cultural markers” were proof of ethnicity, used to place themselves in terms of belonging, which would authenticate a relationship with that culture or alienate the individual from it. For instance, while talking to Richard who only identified as “White” despite his father’s Syrian heritage, he stated, “How would I commit myself to being Middle Eastern? How would I aspire to do that besides what...? I don’t know the language; I don’t know any of the customs... I just know some food

items.” Thus, in Richard’s personalized system of rules of what it takes to be Middle Eastern, language use and knowledge of customs were real Middle Eastern cultural “markers,” while food was less of a marker and therefore he did not deem himself as Middle Eastern. In Amanda’s personalized system of rules, though she also knew little of Korean customs and only understood a few Korean phrases, her knowledge of food, and moreover her appreciation of her mother’s struggle, were sufficient criteria to identify herself as part Korean. “Cultural values” included: gender roles, ways to handle situations, family importance, and “cultural markers”: food, dance, language, knowledge of heritage and current events, activism towards people, and situational presentation (lingo, dress, action/behavior). See Figure 3 of how cultural values and markers are used to help form personalized systems of rules which precipitate notions of authenticity and belonging accordingly. This figure will be revisited after explaining these ideas.

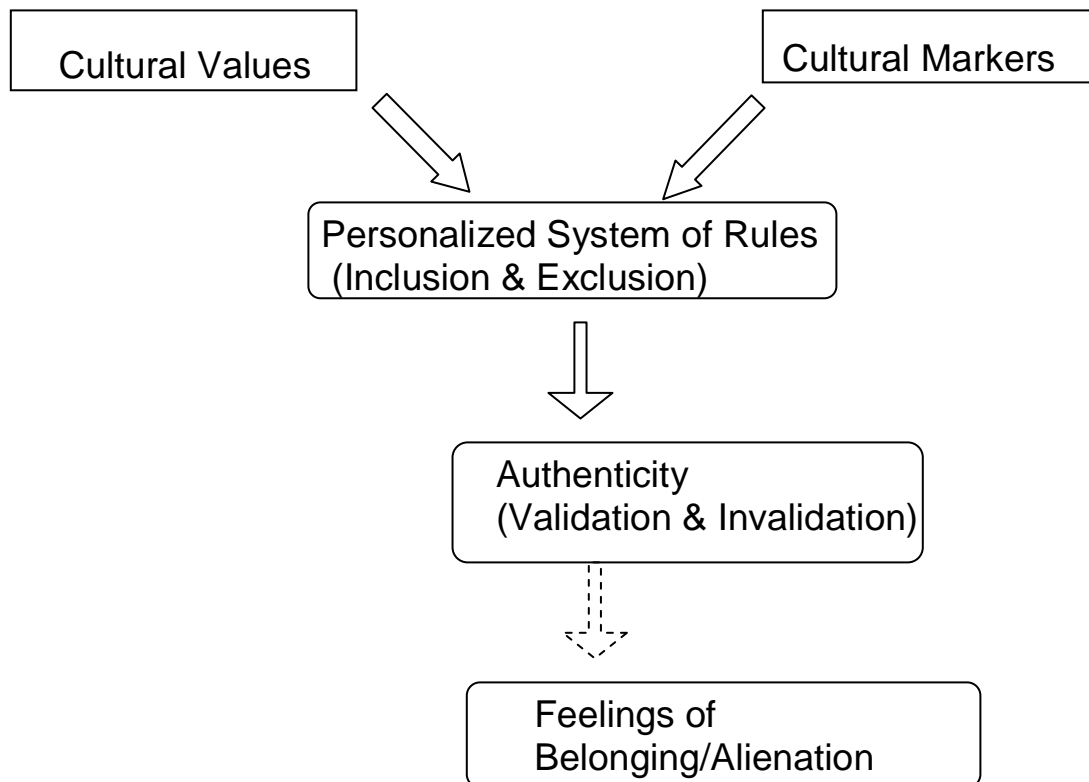


Figure 3: A Model of Overarching Themes of Cultural Complexity

Cultural “Values”

Gender Roles

Following or understanding set gender roles modeled by family seemed to be one subtle cultural value discussed in the interviews, particularly by the women in this study. Gina talked about how she would feel that she would need to take care of her boyfriend, cook for him, and serve him since she felt it was right and the Hispanic way to do things which she learned from her mother. Amanda discussed how she saw Asian women as submissive to men, and that she appreciated her mother’s leaving Korea so that Amanda

would be free from living in a society where women have such social expectations. Shira discussed how Iranian values expressed that the woman in a marriage is really in charge, even though outwardly the man would behave as if he dominated. Not only did interviewees discuss how gender roles were of importance to certain cultures, but also illustrated how cultures would differ by emphasizing how to handle situations. It seemed that only females (at least within this study) discussed gender roles as cultural values while male participants did not. This fact may illustrate the idea that rules for maintaining traditional gender roles are stricter for women than for men in various cultures yet.

Ways of Handling Situations/Problems

Participants with an Asian part of their cultural make-up would talk about the reserved manner to handle things. For example, Victor talked about how confrontation is handled by the Asian culture in a very different way than would the African-American culture. In telling a story about a confrontation his friends had, he said:

The Blackness in me would have said, "Screw it. Just go fight." But the Japanese have more morals. They don't jump into stuff like that. Whatever happens, happens. That's between those people. Moving right along. You look out for yourself and you stay safe. You don't interfere with other people's affairs because that's wrong.

Harry similarly said, "There are certain aspects about the Japanese culture that I think I fit in with as far as certain situations, like I don't get riled up too easily. I think I am pretty even-keeled and I get that from my dad." While this example might sound like a personality trait, Harry later in the interview talked about his Japanese grandmother who had cancer and had decided against telling the family as he expressed that it was a

Japanese value to “not make a big deal of things.” He also found his brother's and father’s attitude of “getting things done” and valuing education to be a “Japanese” value. Certain interviewees also described how their identified cultures emphasize family and togetherness.

Emphasis on Family

Most participants had felt that a portion of the cultural make-up emphasizes family much more so than the other. For example, Steve had mentioned that part of the reason why he felt closer to his Puerto Rican side was that “emphasis on family” was much more so than on the Irish side. George had also thought that his being around his Mexican side led him to believe that family was more important to them than to the White side of the family. In descriptions of family values, there was particularly a similar weight on getting together often, and having very large, extended-family get-togethers with lots of food. Cultural values were not discussed as much as cultural markers by participants.

Cultural “Markers”

Cultural markers were used by interviewees as indicators which would authenticate a relationship with specific cultures and, thus, a commitment and identification to those. Participants also described these markers through stories in which significant others would place emphasis on these aspects as a method of inclusion and exclusion.

Food

Several participants had mentioned food as their way of participating in their culture. For example, Amanda said that she would cook Korean food with her mother and aunt as a way to keep up with Korean customs. Victor, expressing pride in his cultural complexity, said “All three of them have good food.” Harry talked about how his mother always cooked Mexican food and Steve discussed being on a date with an Ecuadorian girl’s family for lunch where he stated that he knew “how to eat” and that he “knew the etiquette.” That is, he responded by speaking to the culture behind eating and food selection of Latinos:

You take the heap of rice, and you take the beans and you pour it all over the rice and you mix it up. Then you got the avocados... like there’s the way Latinos eat their food... I think that saved me with the Latin girl’s family because I knew what I was at least doing with the food [even though he couldn’t speak Spanish].

Thus, Steve had described being accepted as Latino simply since he had past experience with the food although he realized that his not being able to speak Spanish was a mark against seeming Latino.

Language

Just as language was heavily discussed as a powerful marker of culture in Chapter II, it was consistently discussed within several interviews as well as a sign of being identified as part of a culture, or possible being alienated by others because of not speaking the language. Recall in Chapter II that my sisters and I all agreed that the ability to speak Spanish (or not) has often been a factor in inclusion/exclusion of being identified as Puerto Rican. Sally and I, who both spoke Spanish and learned it to assert

being part Puerto Rican, obviously felt that learning Spanish was important while Savannah illustrated that the connection between culture and language was random when she gave the example of American White parents who adopt a Chinese baby that would never learn to speak Chinese would still be Chinese. Chapter III was no different-- in that language was often brought up by participants as a way of being validated or invalidated and associated variant rules. Steven said that he was often made fun of by the Puerto Rican side of the family because he couldn't speak Spanish. George also regretted that he felt bad that he could not speak much Spanish. Madeline stated that her grandfather always would speak Cajun French with her to encourage her to embrace her Creole side. Victor said that his grandfather wanted him to learn fluent Japanese and his grandmother wanted him to learn Mongolian to which he replied, "I told them I wasn't getting into that. That's between y'all" since he expressed it would be difficult and he just had no interest. Victor also later reported that others (non-Asian friends) would always ask him if he knew how to speak Japanese and Mongolian as a "test" to see if he was really a part of those other ethnicities as well as Black even though it did not matter to his Asian friends, as they accepted him as being a "hybrid." Thus, language can be seen as a marker which includes or excludes (depending on the personalized system being used to measure), and is often underscored by significant others in the family as a way to maintain culture. Although some, like Savannah, see language as simply a by-product of that culture, others deem it as very important to cultural identity itself or for the benefits associated with speaking another language.

Harry, though now learning more Spanish, said that his mother regretted not teaching him and his two brothers; when Harry asked his mother why they hadn't learned, he found that speaking Spanish was frowned upon in Texas when his mother was younger. George expressed the same idea about his own mother. Though Harry was not overly upset about not knowing more Spanish, his mother was since part of her culture was not being passed on. When George talked about perhaps feeling pressured to be more Hispanic, he told a story in which in the 7th grade he was at a restaurant where someone looked over, perceived him as Hispanic and spoke to George in Spanish; George was not able to answer and he did not understand which made him feel "guilty." When he told his mother afterward what had happened, expressing his embarrassment, his mother encouraged him to start to learn Spanish not for the importance of heritage, but rather for utility in speaking another language professionally. But he never learned Spanish and when he told his friend that he had felt like a "bad Hispanic" for not being able to speak it, his friend reassured him by saying "Oh, yeah cuz you know that's [speaking Spanish] the hallmark of being Hispanic" [implying sarcasm]. In a way, George invalidated himself through this cultural marker as he deemed it as an important aspect of being Hispanic though his friend [not Hispanic] did not. So perhaps because he viewed the ability to speak Spanish as a cultural marker while his non-Hispanic friend did not, dissonance perhaps remained for George is his friend was no more Hispanic than him. Gina felt similarly, expressing that she would be going to Spain and "feel[s] bad" that her Spanish was not perfect, "I don't even speak the language of the people I

come from.” Alicia felt similarly while telling me that she is learning more Spanish now:

It’s always been something that’s bothered me—that I don’t know this language and I *should*, given where I’ve lived, who my family is... so I am trying to learn it because I want *him* [her son] to learn it. I want him to be culturally diverse...

Noteworthy is Alicia’s emphasis on “should,” placing a sense of obligation on herself deeming language both as a tool (for both herself and her infant), as well as a way to maintain her cultural identity. Dress and presentation of the self also seemed to be a cultural marker discussed by some participants.

Dress and Style

Alicia said that she would present herself more Hispanic in certain situations based on her hair and clothing:

I have those frilly skirts that are great for Salsa dancing and I have like a little flower and I’ll pull my hair back into a bun with a flower in it. I mean I don’t know if that is so much how to look the part or just like trying to get into character because [she raises her pitch a great deal] “Hey Salsa dancing is fun! Let’s dress the part for it,” but I would say that if I know that I am going to be in a Nigerian setting or with other friends like that, I might change my clothes or do something a little different just to kind of go like “Hey, I fit in too.” Nothing really drastic... I don’t really feel like I make like a *conscious effort* to do those things but I guess if I really think about it in some ways I do.

It is interesting that Alicia acknowledges that her initial reasoning is to “dress the part” or “get into character,” but in the same statement understands that fitting in is an underlying factor. Steve also said that he presented himself differently in the Salsa scene:

Steve: I can see one way would be like if I am going to a Salsa club or something that you know I tend to wear stuff that is more Latin like clothes. You know—you fit the scene.

Interviewer: What are more Latin clothes?

Steve: I don't know; I've got this shirt—it's like blue and white with stripes going in and whatever cuff-links—more of that style. I wouldn't go there in wranglers and you know a cowboy hat or anything, you know—I just fit the scene.

Alicia had also stated that she would have her Latin, slicked back hair styles with large hoop earrings in order to fit the cultural Hispanic scene; which was interesting since Sally, my sister, had mentioned the same style (hoop earrings and slicked-back hair while talking about Salsa dancing) which she described as an attempt to “relating *to that* culture,” rather than relating to it from another culture. Finally, the last set of cultural markers described by interviewees is much more unclear, and was often difficult for participants to define and explain: how different cultures “act.”

Action/Behavior and Fitting In

Within several of the interviews, respondents alluded to cultures and how people “act;” these ideas related prescribed vague behavior which accompanied fitting in and out of cultural groups. When George said that his friends were always surprised that he was part Hispanic, it was because he didn't “act Hispanic,” yet upon my questioning him what it means to “act Hispanic,” he was not able to articulate it to me exactly...

I act normal...If White is normal and if Whites and Hispanics are supposedly acting in different ways, then I guess they [sic] more see me acting White than Hispanic. But really, the more I look at it, the fewer differences that I really see.

He went on to explain that the distinctions that others seem to make about how Hispanics “act” versus how Whites “act” were unclear to him as well. Other participants

were able to distinguish vague characteristics of cultural groups for inclusion purposes. Lisa and Madeline both talked about how their behavior may change by the lingo as it would keep them in and out of certain groups, Lisa stated...

When I am being more professional—I don't think it's more White. I know plenty of White people who act the fool. When I am playing and joking around—in my mind it's not more Black, but I do, of course, realize that there's a culture to all these different colors, and identifications and so when you are around people who understand the lingo and who understand that culture and you all enjoy it—you are going talk in those kind of terms. If you are around people who don't get it and you want to communicate with them, I think it's good to be a social chameleon so you can fit in with any of these colors and you can enjoy and exchange in all of it.

So Lisa really did see actions/behavior associated with culture even though she felt that those characteristics were not exclusive to those categories. Madeline additionally talked about how she may morph based on behavior of others based on race or ethnicity and associated language.

Madeline: You try to acclimate yourself to the environment that you are in... I mean not that you completely change your identity but... let's say you're in a group of African American females, you're not going to throw in your whole Latino identity because then it's like, do you really fit in? So at that point you play up your whole African American culture...

Interviewer: How do you play that up?

Madeline: I hate to say this but it's kind of like you relax your talk and you become a lot less formal. It's a little bit more chilled and a lot more slang.

Thus Madeline understood a behavior/style of speech difference between cultures and in order to be part of the group she would “play up” a cultural role. Alicia also talked about how her lingo would change, “If I am around some of my African American friends, I would be more inclined to talk the language because I do know what it is so... it's just a matter of when in Rome, just making it the most comfortable situation

possible.” Though language/lingo and behavior are cultural markers, they are abstract, unclear notions that make fitting in even more complicated for some, as boundaries of belonging can be so unclear and variant depending on the culture and situation. Both cultural values and markers are used in these situational contexts as a way for individuals to assert their belonging with a group which brings us to the idea of authenticity.

Authenticity

Cultural values and cultural markers are used by culturally-complex individuals as factors within their own personalized systems of inclusion and exclusion, that is “proof of ethnicity,” and point to the notion of “authenticity.” This is consistent with Carter’s (2003) argument that “groups create internal cultural boundaries to separate the “real” (“authentic”) from the “not real” (“inauthentic”) co-ethnic, and individuals construct self-conscious ways in which they use “natural” and specified characteristics to signify group affiliation” (p.138) by use of symbols and signifiers. Debates have occurred (Jackson, 2001) around questioning authenticity in regard to Blackness (i.e. when socioeconomics are at hand, the lower-class experience has often been deemed as more authentically Black than that of an upper-class) or concerning American Indian heritage as a criterion for economic benefits. However, little research has examined the concept of authenticity as it relates to ideas of belonging and cultural complexity. I found this concept of authenticity to be rather compelling as participants varied a great deal in how their personalized systems played into identification, as Savannah stated something to the effect of, “I don’t have to live in a tee pee to be a Native American,”

while in contrast, others such as those who felt obligated to speak Spanish, had many more criteria to be included in order to verify authenticity. Though this was not an initial interest of the study, future research should examine how these personalized systems of rules are formed.

Belonging or Alienation

Discussions that illustrated ideas associated with authenticity would result in various reactions from participants. These feelings would range from indifference, to feelings of belonging, or feelings of being alienated. Not all interviewees experienced moments where others or they themselves questioned their own “authenticity” (for example Christine reported never being invalidated as either Caucasian or Asian but was always accepted as both). Many interviewees who did report invalidation, like Steve or Savannah, did not seem to care when they did not fit with someone else’s personalized system of rules of belonging. The “screw them” mentality illustrated that for these individuals, their own system of rules and self actualization trumped all others. Others who experienced invalidation more frequently such as Lisa, and Alicia illustrated feelings of being alienated from the group to which they were identified; the reverse is also true. When culturally-complex individuals were “authenticated” by others, they felt a sense of belonging, like Victor when he shared when Asians would tell him “they could tell” that he was a “hybrid,” he said, “it puts a smile on my face.”

Overarching Themes Model

Thus, if we revisit Figure 3, a model explains the overarching themes of cultural complexity within this study. The boxes indicate concepts but moreover communicative processes as they are all social constructs. Illustrated is that culturally-complex individuals use both cultural values and cultural markers toward their personalized system of rules. The system of rules at hand, include cultural boundaries that are socially constructed which differ across individuals and groups. Culturally-complex individuals then are moved to the process of authenticating themselves, especially (though not necessarily) while in the presence of a dominant ethno-cultural group. The process of authenticity will either validate the individual or invalidate her, which may lead to apathy (indicated by the dotted arrow) if their own self actuality is strong enough. However, if their self-identification is questioned more-often, it may lead to either feelings of belonging, or feelings of alienation.

Additional Themes

Other important themes that emerged from the data included “rules of how people should identify,” and larger world issues. For example, box-checking adds to confusion in terms of identification. While Alicia said “you are supposed to check off Hispanic” even though you may be Black, Victor said that “Black is the dominant gene.” In my own experience I had mentioned that I would check off White (in the past) because I thought that my education was no different since I came from a primarily White school. There were also a great number of inconsistencies among participants; for instance, Shira and Savannah mentioned to only “state the main things [ethno-racial-

cultures]” in order to keep it “easier” versus others who would list everything as they were proud and would embrace all of their known ethno-cultural backgrounds. The various rules concerning box-checking illustrate a need for other researchers to examine their purpose. Another overarching theme was world issues.

World Issues

World issues were brought up by the majority of the interviewees which speaks to the context of how current events continuously turn the muddy landscape of culture. For example, Steve raised the issue of how cultural identity may be more based on coming together after September 11th and the collapse of the Towers, stating that “after 9/11, everybody was like... American.” Richard, who identified as White, also talked about how September 11th made it even less desirable to identify with his father’s Syrian background because of so many negative terrorist stereotypes. He discussed the stereotypes and it is perhaps one of the few times within his interview that he expressed annoyance:

It pisses me off when people automatically assume that everyone from the Middle East is a terrorist. Those are just stupid idiots... I say, ‘Hey, not everyone from the Middle East is a terrorist.’ And sometimes I’ll say, “My dad’s from the Middle East; he’s not a terrorist.” Or I’ll joke about it; “oh my family, you better be careful... my dad’s from the Middle East...” They laugh it off.

Participants with Latino backgrounds, George, Harry, Madeline and Gina: all asserted a position or at least awareness of the Mexican immigration debate within the United States. Additionally within the interviews, other issues such as affirmative action came up. George thought affirmative action was commendable but at the same time felt that it highlighted more differences.

If there is a struggle that's it—what I do with affirmative action? What do I do with people trying to give me the help up? Do I say, "Don't help me out, White man—I can do it myself?" Or do I go, "Well, hey, if you want to just look at the color of my skin and think that I deserve a boost, I'll take it. [He then pauses.] I don't need it but I'll take it..." When I see affirmative action I see an attempt to make up for past wrongs.

Alicia stated that race and affirmative action were problematic as her father always taught her to “work hard and be successful.” She expressed that her father would feel that talking about race is making excuses; she said that his feelings would be, “Don't make excuses. Don't let anyone make an excuse for you. Just prove to them why you deserve to be where you are and be there.” In sum, when world issues were discussed, they often were regarding negative or controversial depictions of parts of their cultures. This is important to note when considering how communication may influence identification and meanings associated with a culture, though it was not a focus of this study.

A Return to the Looking Glass Self, Extant Research and an Interruption of Communication

As mentioned in Chapter I, the looking-glass self,” or “symbolic interaction” posed by sociologists such as Mead and Cooley, were theories that drove many of the questions and ideas behind this study. Recall that these theories in short tell us that identity-formation and self characterization is significantly shaped by the perceptions of others and the social interaction of those evaluations. We then we may consider cultural complex experiences within this study. Interviewees were asked how both their families *and* friends contributed to their identification, yet they mainly had more to say about their families. Thus, significant others (influential people), at least in this study, are

mainly family members in shaping cultural identity as friends did not play a large role in contributing to their identities. Participants in this study mostly reported a taken-for-granted approach from their parents regarding cultural identification. In one case, Madeline, parents responded to cultural complexity in reaction to the child being invalidated, but mostly interviewees discussed that families ignored the topic all together (with the exception of Richard whose father decided to raise him as only White and with no communication within the family about the other ethnicity). In my own situation, my father's behavior (a significant other in Mead's terms) evoked shame within our family, but this problem has been resolved through the siblings' validation by others and through our own processes of self-actualization.

Interaction with non-significant others varied for participants particularly by perceptions. All participants were perceived as many different ethno-cultures. Additionally, some interviewees were invalidated because others' perceptions of the interviewee's cultural identity did not match the interviewee's self-identification. For example, Lisa was frustrated and felt invalidated by the police officer telling her that her license said she was Black as he did not see her that way. However, within these cases most interviewees were not terribly bothered and most seemed to show confidence in how they felt about their own identities despite when others invalidated them such as Steve's attitude of "screw them." Invalidation and being solicited frequently ("what are you?") became more problematic and served as a source of frustration for the individual. Mead's concept of "role taking" (behaving like others who serve as models) came into play but was more of an individualized decision and negotiation process which was

illustrated when individuals discussed cultural values. For example, George stated that he understood each parental culture as a “different approach” to each situation so he would consider both and settle on what would work better for him.

In essence, participants answered what it means to be culturally-complex, whether that complexity derived from being Japanese, Hispanic, Nigerian, Korean, Persian, etc., by discussing cultural values and cultural markers but what seemed to be more telling was how important these identities were to the individuals themselves. As mentioned in Chapter III, a “hierarchy of identities” emerged through conversations with participants since interviewees were able to place importance on the various roles in life which included allegiance to a culture. Thus, when Lisa had stated that being a “Black woman” was second to being Christian, it would make sense that she was so annoyed when the police officer saw her as White. With the reverse in mind, when George was asked about being a minority, his anger was owing to the fact that “it was not the most important thing.” Thus, the notion of the Looking Glass Self functions differently for culturally-complex individuals. Socialized adults already recognize society’s problems with cultural complexity and identification, therefore their own notions of self are often much clearer for themselves despite the fact that others’ perception of them is so inconsistent. A miscommunication occurs as others may group an individual with expectations that do not fit. While this miscommunication is not necessarily “stressful,” it certainly can be frustrating. In my own reflections toward this phenomena, I express sadness if people constantly try to “put me in boxes that don’t fit; they will really never see past that; I am more than just my cultural complexity.” Thus, when generalized

others place judgment on culturally-complex individuals, there is noise within the communication since meaning for both parties is different. While it is true that meaning is different for both parties in every attempt to communicate, this is a special case owing to the fact that is very difficult at times for individuals to get past in order to negotiate meaning. The culturally-complex individual then may be accepted if they choose to “teach” the other party, as described by participants like Alicia or they may remain un-categorizable. Gaskins (1999) states:

When people cannot make racial distinctions and sort people into racial categories they are thrown into a sort of “crisis,” concludes Teresa Kay Williams, a sociologist and professor in Asian-American Studies at California State University, Northridge. “The crisis is caused by the contradiction between how people have been trained to understand race and the fact the multiracial person doesn’t fit that scheme” (p. 21).

In this day and age, people are becoming more aware of the fact that culturally-complex individuals exist and are increasing in population, yet some still view culture, ethnicity, or race in rigid ways. This study suggests that many culturally-complex young adults understand this pattern of misunderstanding and ways of resisting it. Culturally-complex individuals learn to deal with society’s problems with cultural complexity (at least in this study) though some may find it more annoying and frustrating if their identification conversations are more frequent. When others look at cultural complexity with a rigid scheme of categorization in mind, then it is like they view the multicultural person as if through a kaleidoscope and it is almost impossible to make sense of what they see. Culturally-complex individuals (at least in this study) are good about either ignoring those who view them through kaleidoscopes, or at least are well versed in attempting to assist others to change the lens in which they are perceived by teaching them.

Past Research

After conducting the interviews, I think it is clear that past theoretical models and research about cultural complexity are biased and outdated. While past theories suggested that individuals would be unhealthy if they did not embrace all of their cultures (particularly minority cultures), this hypothesis did not hold true with the participants in this study. The participants who did not identify with all of their cultures did not express any sense of shame and, in fact, were quite comfortable with their identities. In addition, other extant research concluded that culturally-complex individuals will define themselves in terms of the culture to which their father ascribes (Qian, 2004). However, those in this study who identified with only one culture in the interview (Lisa, Richard, Shira, and George), all identified with their mother's side which clearly contradicts this past research.

Answering Research Questions

In reflecting back to Chapter I, it is necessary to address my initial research questions. I will discuss how this investigation answers (or fails to answer) each query, and then discuss the limitations of the study. Most of the research questions have been addressed throughout the analyses so each question will be briefly attended to as a review.

How does invalidation through interaction with others contribute to stress in self-identification?

As experiences differed and a range of ideas were expressed, the most extreme end of the spectrum was “frustration,” “sadness,” and “annoyance,” while the other end of the spectrum was apathy toward invalidation. Several interviewees (but not all) as mentioned, discussed stress during adolescence in the process of trying to identify themselves amongst rigid race/ethnicity categories. These interviewees all acknowledged this phase as a stressful time for all individuals at that age. From another perspective, in my own family’s experience, invalidation seemed to come from within the household (as our father did not want us to tell others we were Puerto Rican, to speak Spanish, or for us to visit Puerto Rico) which evoked feelings of shame. However; we all seemed to come to terms as adults with our cultural complexity just as the other interviewees in this study had.

For what reasons may interaction with others lead a culturally-complex individual to choose to identify with one race/culture over another? What are the benefits and disadvantages of this choice?

There were only four participants who reported themselves as being of only one culture at the beginning of the interviews, yet during the interview, two of them discussed how their identity shifts. So, in reality, only two participants in this study, Lisa and Richard, identified with one culture. Thus, given that there were only two participants who could address this research question, it is difficult to assess though it is noteworthy that for Lisa and Richard, the concept of belonging was present in both of

their explanations to how they came to only identify as one culture. Richard was forced to identify as only White because his parents wanted him to belong and Lisa chose to only identify herself as Black, because it made her feel a better sense of belonging. I pose two possible reasons for why only two interviewees were categorized as identifying with only one culture over another. First, this type of interviewee may take race, ethnicity, or culture more for granted than the other types of interviewees and thus, the individual may be next to oblivious that they could be considered culturally-complex. For example Richard had expressed that he had not thought at all about most of the questions and as mentioned said, “I just never considered myself Middle Eastern” even though his father was. Thus, it is possible that individuals I tried to recruit for the study excluded themselves, if they immediately saw that the topic surrounded cultural complexity and did not identify themselves as such. Second, it seems that past models may have focused on cultural identification with Black-White culturally-complex individuals. However, the concept of Blackness is unique and perhaps choosing one culture over another is more prevalent within Black mixed populations which may differ within cultural complexity when other ethno-cultures are involved.

How does communication with parents contribute to the formation of culturally-complex identity? Does this interaction impact identity formation in a particular way that other factors do not?

As mentioned in the findings, participants of this study reported little to no communication with parents about being culturally-complex. While some families joked about one culture or another to which one parent belonged, other families said nothing

about culture (my family seemed to be aberrant in the study as no others discussed a parent's hiding cultural identity). Instead, interviews reveal that family members influenced the individual through interaction, such as family gatherings, where aspects of that culture were practiced which would "skew" a person to one parent's side, perhaps over another. Simply being around one culture more than the other might make an individual understand one more than the other without affecting identification with the less-known culture. For example, Amanda knew very little about Korea, having always been identified by her (Korean) mother as White), yet she still came to embrace Korean culture as part of her heritage. Thus, even though family influence can be strong to the young individual, the more independent culturally-complex person is still bombarded with various messages forcing constant examination of cultural identification which may or may not lead identification to change.

Limitations and Advantages of Study

This study concentrates on the experience of fifteen culturally-complex individuals, mostly who are from or reside in the state of Texas and were college-educated. Perhaps cultural complexity amongst differing socioeconomic statuses would elicit a range of different experiences not represented in this investigation. Additionally, participants only met with me on one occasion to discuss their experiences—perhaps multiple contacts would have yielded more insight and information from the participants, as noted that many participants reported having not thought nor spoken about many of the topics or subject matter highlighted in this investigation. On the other

hand, the particular methodologies used in this study provided me with an advantageous perspective of the area under investigation.

My auto-ethnographic interview allowed me to understand my own feelings and difficulties with cultural complexity—doing this work before interviewing others (of no relation to me) helped me to examine how my own experiences may have biased me as a researcher though my sisters' interviews (which were completed before my own) set the precedent that others would obviously not view the world in the same way. In the same way that an ethnographer gets inside information while engaging in participant-observation, my own experiences as culturally-complex gave me an insider's experience and participants seemed to feel very comfortable talking with me. I was accepted as being culturally-complex and though I realized how different my experience was and is from that of others, it did not lead me to overtly privilege opinions which matched my own. Conducting semi-structured interviews was extremely important as I was able to tap into information that I originally had not thought about (that is, issues not originally represented in my interview guide), allowing the participants more freedom to voice experiences, feelings, and opinions. This flexibility in interviewing led to a discovery of topics which should be considered in future research.

Research Contributions and Future Research

As all culturally-complex individuals could discuss importance of their various cultural roles in comparison to one another, future research should consider how culturally-complex individuals come to prioritize certain identities over others. While a goal of this study was to understand the process of how culturally-complex individuals

self-identify, the hierarchy of roles deserves further consideration. Perhaps certain patterns may emerge for particular ethno-cultural groups which may illustrate even deeper meanings of how we view culture yet more data would need to be collected. In addition, personalized systems of rules regarding inclusion/exclusion led individuals in this study to point to abstract ideas: cultural values and cultural markers in order to establish authenticity. It is important for future researchers to consider additional sources of influence (such as the media and world events) in the construction of those personalized systems and rules and how these vary. In addition, the purpose of box-checking and “rules” of which box to choose when forced was a very confusing matter; future research should concentrate on structural functions of box-checking and perhaps how this has changed over time. In addition, while individuals reported little stress, some expressed that cultural complexity was most difficult during adolescence so researchers should focus on improving communication about cultural complexity to adolescents in order to help precipitate meaningful, empowering experiences for culturally-complex individuals during those stages in life. Also, in this study only females rather than males seemed to discuss gender roles. Future research should establish how gender roles come into play for culturally-complex individuals. Finally, most participants in this study reported little to no dialogue with others about cultural complexity, yet indicated being content to have a space in this interview to voice their experiences and feelings. Researchers interested in culture as a whole should consider allowing more culturally-complex individuals (as opposed to people with only one

cultural designation) as participants or perhaps initiate groups where the focus is to celebrate multiculturalism or cultural complexity.

My Roles as a Researcher and as a Participant

This project has been a journey for me on multiple levels; writing it has been the most difficult and yet the most validating experience at the same time. Throughout reading about culture, I have been forced to ask myself to apply social/cultural theories to my own life. My introspective approach has led me to examine my entire life's evolutionary process toward cultural identity and cultural complexity, a process that required investigation of my personal beliefs about culture, analysis of my family, where I've lived, how I've interacted with others, etc. This self-examination sometimes would lead me to confusion; ideas I had taken for granted or had never even thought about suddenly became more relevant. I realized that at times I still was not sure how I "felt" culturally and was angry that my past indicated an inconsistent cultural identity. There were other ideas about ethnicity which I, at first, could not make clear decisions about (and I still feel uncertain about some of those issues, like whether or not I should check off Black). In the process of writing, though, I realized that even though I am culturally-complex, and I know a lot about this combination of culture, ethnicity, and race—it's still a construct which I describe as somewhat "muddy." I propose the analogy: it's easy to catch a ball well if it's made out of rubber, but when it's made of mud; things are bound to get messy, no matter how good a catcher you are. Aside from wrestling with my cultural identity, there were other challenges with this subject matter owing to my relationship with it.

There were two distinct, very emotionally difficult issues throughout the process of this thesis. One obstacle was talking about my family history's relationship with cultural complexity and the other was facing cultural complexity issues as a social predicament. I will comment on each of these in succession. It was not awkward to ask my sisters to participate, nor to ask them questions from my semi-structured interview guide. Rather, the most emotionally laborious task lay in both facing my own shameful past while listening to the shame and residual pain that my sisters expressed. We had realized that it was a topic that was rather taboo in our family; we had not talked much about it, but knew and disliked the feelings the experience would evoke as both of my sisters had hinted about it without explicitly volunteering to delve into the topic. We all expressed those difficult emotions within the interviews, including in my auto-ethnographic interview. While I am not seeking sympathy nor do I feel that my experience was horrible, during the analysis phase, at times I was in tears while typing. Other times I relived my resentment toward both of my parents--my father for his mandatory, false, inconsistent identities which he imposed on us—and resentment toward my mother for her passive, yet conflicting role in the already confusing matter. At the same time, it's like a saying I once heard: "It has to hurt if it is to heal," and my journey into my culturally-complex past helped me to deal with it as not only an adult, but as a researcher.

While I am not supportive of my parents' choices, I have to accept it as part of what shaped me and I now have a space for telling this story. Having the ability to voice both who I am and how I came to learn who I am culturally, has given me a sense of

closure. After years of being haunted by past experiences of silence, secrecy, shame, and, perhaps, confusion of my culture, my thesis is part of my life narrative which has helped me to work through those past issues by talking to my sisters, other culturally-complex individuals, and thinking about how I feel in response to those ideas. This is my agency. This is my voice. I am no longer in a position to take instructions in order to decide my cultural claimed identity—and speaking of that, I have spoken with both of my parents since writing this work. While my mother, after my questioning her, had admitted that she should have intervened, my father does not regret his choice to raise us as he did, stating that he thought he was doing what was right at the time. However, he admits that we should have learned to speak Spanish and now realizes that it is possible to be bilingual in Spanish and English without having a Spanish accent during English speaking. As a person with feelings, I am not sure that I will ever be completely over my parents' (and particularly my father's) behavior and decisions regarding identifying our heritage, but the part of me that is a researcher has helped to gain a more understanding perspective of this social dilemma.

Talking about this experience and writing about it in an analytical fashion has also helped me to step away from issues which before I had taken so personally. Clearly, my experiences mentioned in Chapter II illustrate past unresolved identity issues that would surface on and off throughout my life, but facing my cultural identity being in the South, particularly in Texas, was what motivated me to explore this topic. My past infuriation with Southerners who view race and ethnicity in rigid ways, who were quick to try to categorize me, begged an attempt toward my understanding cultural

complexity and the experiences of others. While I assumed that other culturally-complex individuals would have bitterness similar to my own, despite some stress reported, they clearly had different perceptions, many positive experiences, and as a whole were happy with being culturally-complex. Before the thesis, I had little discussion with other culturally-complex individuals about these experiences, ideas, and feelings, and like them, I often would take my cultural background for granted (though *a lot* of people take their heritage for granted—whether culturally-complex or mono-racial). My interviews with others finally created a space for all of us to dialogue about this subject. Even though we all had different ideas about culture and identified in different ways, through the interviews I felt a sense of belonging and understanding with each interviewee. While societal norms may be imposing, I now feel that my understanding of those norms and my research concerning race, ethnicity, and culture reveal a greater basis in social problems, rather than personal problems. Moreover, these are certainly not problems that are unique to me. Being able to hear about others' experiences with cultural complexity helped me to be more open-minded about those who do not understand cultural complexity; I feel much more compelled to explain, to ask others why it's important, and hope that I can continue teaching. When I think about the first chapter, "Excuse me, are you Black?!" I think about how I answered and if I were in the same situation now, I would have yelled back, "Why is that important?!"

The title of this chapter, "I Want a Box That Says ME," came from my interviewee, Alicia, during a post-interview conversation in which I shared with her my own experiences of being culturally-complex. We laughed a great deal about it. My

consistently being asked about who I am is an issue which I had never been able to understand before, but it is now so clear—I am more than just my cultural complexity. Others sometimes do not understand how viewing me through muddy cultural lenses forces them to see me only as an aberration and nothing beyond that. It bothered me so much when people limited me to boxes, prescribed descriptions, and placed expectations on me based on rules that do not allow me to be the individual that I am. Like everyone else, I have a lot of other roles—artist, musician, sister, teacher, scholar, free spirit, hula hoop troupe leader, etc.; those who only ask about my ethno-cultural background deny me the opportunity to be more than just my cultural complexity or at least the question points to larger issues. Talking to other culturally-complex people helped me to see beyond their stories and beyond my bitterness, and broadened my perspective to understand larger themes within cultural complexity.

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APPENDIX A

FAMOUS CULTURALLY-COMPLEX PEOPLE **		
<u>CELEBRITY</u>	<u>OCCUPATION</u>	<u>BACKGROUND</u>
Alicia Keys	Singer	Black father, Italian Mother
Allen & Albert Hughes	Directors	Black and Armenian
Jenny Lumet	Actress	Biracial granddaughter of Lena Horne – Jewish father, mother Gail Buckley (Horne).
Amarie	Singer	Black father, Korean Mother
Anais Granofsky	Actress	Born in Canada in 1974 Russian Jewish Canadian father, African American Mother
Bob Marley	Singer	Black and Caucasian
Boris Kodjoe	Actor	West African father from Ghana, German mother
Brooklyn Sudano	Actress	Italian father (Bruce Sudano), Black mother (Donna Summer)
Carmen Ejogo	Actress	Nigerian father, White (Scottish) mother
Clark Johnson	Actor	Black father, White mother
Cree Summer	Actress	Mestizo father (White & Cree Indian (actor Don Francks), Black mother
Derek Jeter	Baseball player	Black father, White mother
Dorothy Dandridge	Actress	Mixed racial heritage
Eartha Kitt	Singer/actress	White father, Black Cherokee mother
Faith Evans	Singer/actress	White father, Black mother
Freddie Prinze Jr.	Actor	Puerto Rican father, White mother
Giancarlo Esposito	Actor	Italian father, Black mother
Gina Belafonte	Actress/Producer	Black father (Harry Belafonte), White mother
Gina Raveri	Actress	Half Puerto Rican, Half Black
Gloria Reuben	Actress	White father, Black mother
Grant Hill	Basketball player	Black father, Bi-racial (Black & White) mother
Halle Berry	Actress	Black father, White mother
Jasmine Guy	Singer/actress	Black father, Portuguese mother
Jaye Davidson	Actor	Black father (Ghana), White mother (English)
Jennifer Beals	Actress	Black father, White mother
Jimi Hendrix	Guitarist/singer	Black, Caucasian, & Cherokee
Karyn Parsons	Actress	White father, Black mother
Kelis	Singer	Black father, Chinese/Puerto Rican mother
Kidada Jones	Actress	Black father (Quincy Jones), White mother
Leila Arcieri	Actress	Italian father, Black mother
Lenny Kravitz	Singer	White/Jewish father, Black mother
Lisa Bonet	Actress	Black father, White/Jewish mother
Lonette McKee	Singer/actress	Black father, Scandanavian mother
Malcolm X	Activist	Half African-American, quarter Grenadian, & Quarter White American
Mariah Carey	Singer/actress	Venezuelan/African-American father, Irish mother
Mario Van Peebles	Actor	Black father (filmmaker, Melvin Van Peebles), White mother (German actress, Maria Marx)
Maya Days	Actress	Mixed Portuguese & African-American background
Maya Rudolph	Actress	White father, Black mother (singer, Minnie Ripperson)
Michael Michelle	Actress	White father, Black mother
Mya	Singer	Black and Italian
Naomi Campbell	Model	Multiracial, Chinese father, Black Jamaican mother
Nicole Ari Parker	Actress	Black Father, white mother

Nicole Lyn	Actress	Chinese father, Black mother
Persia White	Actress	Black Bahamian father, White American mother
Philip Michael Thomas	Actor	Biracial
Rae Dawn Chong	Actress	Father is Tommy Chong (white-chinese), Black mother
Rain Pryor	Actress	Father is Richard Pryor (black), White mother
Rashida Jones	Actress	Black Father (Quincy Jones), White mother (Peggy Lipton)
The Rock, (Dwayne Johnson)	Pro Wrestler/Actor	Black and Samoan
Rowland Gft	Singer (Fine Young Cannibals)	Black and White
Rosario Dawson	Actress	Puerto Rican, Black, Cuban, Irish, & Native American
Sade	Singer	Black Nigerian and White British
Salli Richardson	Actress	Italian-Irish Father, Black/Cherokee mother
Samantha Mumba	Singer and actress	Half Irish and Half African
Shemar Moore	Actor	Black father, White Mother
Sherri Saum	Actress	Black father, White (German) mother
Shirley Bassey	Singer	Nigerian and British
Smokey Robinson	Singer	Black and White
Soledad O'Brian	Reporter/News Anchor	Australian-Irish, White father, Black Cuban mother
Sophie Okonedo	Actress	Nigerian Black father, and Jewish, White mother
Stacy Dash	Actress	West Indian (Black) and Aztec Indian
Susan Fales-Hill	Writer/producer	Italian father, and Black mother
Sydney Tamiia Poitier	Actress	Black father (Sidney Poitier), White mother
Tahj Mowry	Actor	White father, Black mother
Taimak Guari (Guarriello)	Actor	White (Italian) father, Black mother
Tamara Taylor	Actress	Black father (Nova Scotian), White (Scottish) mother
Tamia	Singer	White father, Black mother
Tammy Townsend	Actress	White father (English and Yugoslavian), Black mother
Thandie Newton	Actress	British White father, Zimbabwean mother
Tia & Tamara Mowry	Actresses	White father, Black Mother
Tina Turner	Singer/Actress	Black and Native American
Eldrick "Tiger" Woods	Golfer	Describes himself as 1/4 Black, 1/4 Thai, 1/4 Chinese, 1/8 White, 1/8 American Indian
Tracee Ellis Ross	Actress	White father, Black mother (Diana Ross),
Traci Bingham	Actress	Native American father, Black & Italian mother
Trevor Penick	Singer	Black father, White mother
Troy Beyer	Actress	Jewish father, Black mother
Tyson Beckford	Model	Chinese grandmother, Chinese/Black mother
Vanity	Actress	Black and White
Victoria Rowell	Actress	Black father, White mother
Vin Diesel	Actor	Multiracial & Multinational but avoids specifics
Walter Mosley	Writer	Black and White
Wentworth Miller	Actor	Black father, White mother

**Note: This list was taken from (<http://www.blackflix.com/articles/multiracial.html>, 2006) and this list is of famous people whose cultural complexity includes being partially black or African as a common factor. Other lists could be compiled emphasizing cultural complexity that includes Latino ethnicity, for example.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1) How do you identify your race, ethnicity or culture?

Probe: Have you always defined yourself the same way? If not, how has it changed and why?

Probe: Do you identify with one parent's culture more than the other? If so, why and how?

Probe: Do you ever feel that you have to "choose" being one culture over another? If so, how have you felt about this idea?

Probe: Do you feel that choosing one culture over another would be more beneficial?

Probe—how about the influence of other family members? Siblings, grandparents, etc?

2a) What kind of feelings have your parents expressed about their own individual cultures?**2b) What kind of feelings have your parents expressed about each-other's cultures?**

Have your parents' ideas of your cultural identity conflicted with one another; i.e. would your parents identify you in the same way or would they describe you in two different ways?

3) What are the various ways that others perceive your race-ethnicity-culture? How do these perceptions make you feel?

Probe: How has the way that you look—hair, skin-tone, features influenced—how others treat you?

Probe: Do you feel that you "look" like the culture you identify with?

Probe: Describe how your friends have contributed to your cultural identity.

4) Describe a time where you felt ashamed about part/parts of your cultural identity.

Probe: Describe a time where your cultural identity was invalidated by someone.

Probe: In what situations, if any, have you desired to be mono-racial?

5) In what ways do you feel that your mixed identity has led to stress in your life?**6) How has discussing these issues made you feel?****7) Is there anything else that you would like to state about this matter that you feel is important?**

VITA

Samaria Dalia Roberts Perez

Department of Communication
Texas A&M University
4234 TAMU
College Station, TX 77843-4234
samariatamu@gmail.com

Education: B.A., Communication, Rutgers University, 2002

Employment: Instructor/Teaching Assistant
Texas A&M University College Station, TX
Communication Department Fall 2004 – Present

Health Educator & Research Assistant
Texas A&M University College Station, TX
Department of Health & Kinesiology Summer 2006 – Fall 2005
Center for the Study of Health Disparities

Journal Articles:

Stephenson, M.T., Morgan, S.E., Roberts Perez, S.D., Harrison, T., Afifi, W. & Long, S.D. (in press). The role of religiosity, religious norms, subjective norms, and bodily integrity on signing an organ donor card. *Health Communication*.

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