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# "I'm More Than the Sum of My Parts": Multiracial Identities and the Creation of Racial Meaning

Hannah D. Johnson

Macalester College, [hjohnso7@macalester.edu](mailto:hjohnso7@macalester.edu)

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**“I’m more than the sum of my parts”:**

**Multiracial Identities and the Creation of Racial Meaning**

Hannah Dustan Johnson, Macalester College

Advisor: Erik Larson, Sociology

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the ways that multiracial individuals understand and give meaning to their identities. Specifically, how do we—as a culture and as individuals—conceptualize and construct multiracial identities? What is the relationship between the way people identify themselves and the way they are identified by others? What do people mean when they say they are mixed race? Through a series of in-depth interviews with 11 individuals who self-identify as multiracial or mixed race, I find that racial identities are fundamentally multifaceted; they can be asserted by an individual, ascribed by an outsider, deeply rooted in culture and heritage, employed as a way of creating community, and a source of discrimination or privilege. I go on to argue that conflict between the way that someone self-identifies and the way they are identified by others can influence the way that they construct the meaning of their own identity, and the way that they present this identity to others. I draw a distinction between the concepts of multiracial identities as a blending of cultures and mixed race as a stand-alone racial category with a unique set of experiences and characteristics, and examine the purposes that these theoretical frameworks serve.

Since the 1990s there has been an emerging cultural belief that mixed race people may be the solution to the problem of race in the United States. As more attention is being drawn to multiracial people in journalism, art, academia, and politics, the representation of these identities is often merged with a post-Civil Rights ideology that celebrates racial ambiguity as an escape from the rigidity of race and the discomfort associated with this country's racial history (Elam 2010). The assumption is that race will become less defined through interracial marriage and partnerships, eventually disappearing completely and allowing the U.S. to become post-racial without ever having to confront the persistence and pervasiveness of structural racism.

For a society that is so deeply invested in colorblind ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Lewis, Chesler, and Forman 2000; Browne 2009), there is significant appeal in a national narrative where race could cease to exist if it is simply ignored. As a result, multiracial children and interracial love have been idealized and arguably fetishized as a symbol of cultural progress (Joseph 2013). Where there has historically been stigma associated with interracial parentage, there is now celebration of multiracial people who are believed to have been able to escape the limitations of racial marginalization (Elam 2010; Joseph 2013).

In October of 2013, National Geographic published an article titled "The Changing Face of America" (Funderburg 2013). This article featured portraits of multiracial individuals from a wide variety of racial backgrounds, while lauding the catchy and clever terms, such as 'Blackanese' and 'Filatino,' which some multiracial people have chosen to describe their identities. These people were presented aesthetically "intriguing" and it is proposed that "[i]f we can't slot people into familiar categories,

perhaps we'll be forced to reconsider existing definitions of race and identity, presumptions about who is us and who is them" (Funderburg 2013:87). Further reinforcing the idea that multiracial people are a new phenomenon, the subheading of the article read, "We've become a country where race is no longer so black and white" (Funderburg 2013:80). This article celebrates multiracial people for living outside of the bounds of race without addressing the unique hardships these people may face, or the structural facets of racial inequality that do not disappear with phenotypical ambiguity.

It is important to recognize that race in the U.S. has never been a clear-cut Black/White binary and that people of different racial backgrounds have been having children for as long as groups of people have been differently racialized. Laws regulating racial classifications—and, therefore, rights—until the effects of the Civil Rights era, were often complicated and varied greatly between states. A person could walk across state borders and, legally, change races (Hochschild and Powell 2008).

On the 1990 census, the racial category "other" grew more than any other category (a 45% increase from the previous census) revealing that a rapidly growing portion of the population did not feel that the existing racial categories defined their identities. In the year 2000, people were, for the first time, invited to classify themselves as more than one race on the U.S. Census (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). That year, 6.8 million people, or 2.4% of the population, designated that they identified with more than one race. Ten years later, on the 2010 Census, the number of people reporting a multiracial background grew 32%, making multiracial people the fastest growing racial group in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau 2010).

While it is true that there has been an increase in the number of children born into interracial families due to the repeal of anti-miscegenation laws in the 1970s and the relative acceptance of interracial couples in recent years (Roth 2005), it must be acknowledged that recent increases in the number of multiracial people are not merely the result of increases in the number of children born to interracial parents. If we accept that racial categories are a social fiction with boundaries not based in biology but are socially and historically constructed, then we can understand that multiracial people are not new, the way their identities are constructed may account for part of the recent increases in the visibility of multiracial people.

In this paper, I interrogate the way racial categories are imagined and the purposes that they serve, both for multiracial individuals and the people around them. By focusing on the lived experiences of multiracial individuals, my work gains insight into the tensions that arise between the ways an individual self-identifies and how they are identified by the outside world, and well as the way they present and understand their identities in different contexts.

Specifically, my research questions were: What is the relationship between the way people identify themselves and the way they are identified by others? What do people mean when they say they are mixed race? How do they conceptualize these identities? Through these questions I hope to fill existing gaps in academic literature on the meaning and purpose of race for multiracial individuals in the U.S. today.

## **Literature Review**

Any theories on identity development must be understood within the specific cultural and historic context in which they were developed. When considering how

people develop and understand their racial identities, it is essential to examine what racial identities are available to individuals and what meaning they possess. Additionally, because of the constantly changing racial landscape of the U.S., it is important to regularly reevaluate the validity of these theories for individuals today.

In the 1960s and 1970s the Black Power Movement became a prominent political player, changing the language and significance of Black identity for many people in the U.S. During this time, many psychological theories of Black identity development were produced, the most well known of which was the Nigrescence model created by William E. Cross (1991). Cross' model outlines five stages of identity development in "the process of becoming Black" (Cross 1991:147). He distinguishes between a Negro identity and a politicized countercultural Black identity, outlining the way that people could develop a more self-affirming understanding of their racial identity. The stages in this theory move from Pre-encounter, when a person does not see their race as playing a significant role in their life or experiences, to the Internationalization and Internalization-Commitment stages where an alternative worldview privileging Blackness has been established. When this theory was initially detailed, Cross accepted self-hatred to be a fixed fact of the Negro condition, an assumption he has since retracted (Cross 1991). Cross' desire to revise his theory 20 years after its initial publication speaks to the shifts in the way race is understood in the U.S. during this time. He concedes that individuals in the Pre-encounter stage do not necessarily have a more negative self-concept and emphasizes the importance of considering that his stage theory was developed to account for the experiences of individuals involved in the Black Power Movement, and that this theoretical framework can not be attributed to all Americans of African descent.

This theory does not speak to or acknowledge that some people of African-American ancestry today adopt a multiracial identity, illustrating the newness of this as a widespread racial identity. This is not to say that an individual cannot embrace a multiracial identity and an Afrocentric perspective simultaneously, but instead reveals the historically specific assumption that anyone of African descent living in the U.S. must adopt a Black identity (Rockquemore, Brunnsma, Delgado 2009).

More recently, Maria Root (1996) developed a theory specifically aimed at outlining the experiences of people that have been a part of the multiracial baby boom resulting from the *Loving v. State of Virginia* court ruling who exist in a world that embraces a racial structure with mutual exclusivity that contradicts their experience (Rockquemore et. al 2009). Root uses the metaphor of border crossing to explain her five-race framework for multiracial identities. She provided a series of ways that multiracial people respond to their existence in the Racial Borderlands. For example, an individual can stand with “both feet in both groups” (Root 1996:xxi) and simultaneously embrace multiple racial perspectives or they can “decisively sit on the border” (Root 1996:xxi), taking on a multiracial identity that cannot be deconstructed. In this paper I will be drawing on this distinction in discussing the way multiracial identities are conceptualize and employed. For my purposes, it is more helpful to understand these as two, instead of five, ways of being multiracial. Rather than distinguishing between the four different ways that Root argues an individual can navigate and balance membership to multiple racial groups, I found the starkest contrast to be between viewing a multiracial identity as multi-group membership and having an autonomous mixed race category existing independently of other races.



In studies pertaining to race, social scientists often assume that participants will experience a certain level of racial stability and that the race that they designate on a survey will continue to be the race that they primarily identify with. However, many people experience racial variability in how they identify themselves in survey data (Martin and Yeung 2003). It has been established that there is not one trend in identity development among multiracial individuals (Doyle and Kao 2007) and that there is not one way that people with multiracial backgrounds will choose to identify (Root 1996; Rockquemore et. al 2009; Shih and Sanchez 2009). Scholarly work has been done to predict how people will racially identify with inconsistent and inconclusive findings (Bratter and Heard 2009; Hilton, Brown and Elder, Jr 2006; Doyle and Kao 2007). Today, racial identities are more autonomous and less reliant on parentage than ever before (Rockquemore, Laszloffy, and Noveske 2006; Xie and Goyette 1997).

Previous research has drawn a distinction between how individuals self-identify and how they are identified by others (Rockquemore et. al 2009; Brunnsma 2006). And while much of the research on multiracial identities has focused on self-identification, a smaller body of work has developed on racial identification by others and misclassification. Campbell and Troyer (2007) point out that qualitative research on race often relies on self-identified while failing to recognize that how someone self identifies can stand in stark contrast to how they are identified by others. Depending on the nature of the research, self-identification can have varying levels of relevance, depending on whether it is being understood as an identity or as a basis for discrimination. They find that people who are misidentified by outsiders are more likely to have parents of different races, suggesting that while personal identities are important, the way someone is

racialized by the people around them can also influence their experiences and opportunities. Therefore, an objective racial category for an individual may be irrelevant (Campbell and Troyer 2011). Additionally, Melissa Herman (2010) found that observers perceived about half of multiracial adolescents as monoracial, maintaining a mutually exclusive racial status quo. This work raises important questions about the role of identity in challenging the dominant ideology of race in the United States.

## **Methodology**

In my research, I focused on racial discourse and the relationship between dominant ideology and personal identity. This is a goal that I believe is best accomplished through qualitative methodology, particularly because it has been established that there is a critical difference between racial categorization as it is often presented on surveys and in census data, and the way people choose to self identify (Rockquemore et. al 2009). With this in mind, it is important to listen to how people speak about their own experiences with their racial identity to better understand the meaning these identities hold personally, politically, and culturally.

Accordingly, I conducted in-depth interviews that allow individuals to share their personal experiences as well as their own understandings of current racial categories and racialization. My questions focused on experiences in the home, with family, at school, in the work place, and within close personal relationships, both platonic and romantic/sexual. The first question participants were asked was: What is a time in your life where your race played an important role in a relationship or interaction? This

question was broad and intentionally vague so as to allow individuals space to share any story that they believed was particularly meaningful and relevant to their lives.

At no point during the interviews were any of the participants directly asked about their racial heritage or their parents' racial identities. Instead, individuals were asked about their experiences and the choices that they made in explaining and representing themselves. This was done so that individuals were given as much freedom as possible in establishing their identity. It enabled them to discuss their identity on their own terms, allowing them space to discuss race as something beyond what they inherited from their parents. Additionally, by drawing on experiences in a variety of settings and at various ages, I was able to collect information about how people have come to understand the relationship between race and their own identity and the way that their identities have shifted and changed across time and space.

I recruited for this project through word of mouth as well as by placing advertisements in a college's daily emailed bulletin that all students, staff, and faculty receive. 7 of the 11 participants reached out to me after seeing the advertisements and the other 4 participants were referred to me by others after the conclusion of their interview. Because participant recruitment relied heavily on this self-selecting participant sample, it is likely that the people who contacted me were more interested in talking about their racial identities and experiences than the general population. It is also likely that they were more connected to a multiracial identity than their peers who many also have parents of multiple racial heritages who did not volunteer to participate. Additionally, everyone that I interviewed had some amount of college education, increasing the homogeneity of my sample. 4 of the participants had at least an undergraduate degree,

and 7 were current undergraduate students. However, because the goal of this research is not to understand a universal multiracial experience, it is not detrimental to the results of my research that my sample is not representative of the larger population. The goal of this research is to critically examine how identities are assigned, asserted, and given meaning through language and interpersonal interactions and relationships. Because of my focus on the way people negotiate multiracial identities, it may be beneficial to this study that participants were self-selecting and therefore likely heavily invested in their racial identities. It is logical that people who would have put time and energy into understanding and developing their racial identity would be more aware of tensions between the identities they present and the identities that they are assigned by others.

The individuals I interviewed were between the ages of 19 and 32. Eight of the participants in my study were women, and three were men. Unlike much of the existing research on multiracial identities, I did not limit participation to Black/White multiracial individuals. I did this because it was important to me to explore the full range of who can be considered multiracial and how their experiences may differ. Because there was no definition of multiracial in my advertising materials, participants were individuals who self-identified with the term multiracial. I found the agency that this gave my research participants to be incredibly important to my research because it minimized the influence of my own preconceived notions of what it means to be multiracial on the research. Each interview lasted between thirty minutes and one hour. Three of the interviews were conducted through Internet video calls, and the rest were conducted in person in a private conference room. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and four participants were sent copies of the interview transcript per their request.

## **Findings**

Throughout the interviews I conducted, participants discussed various instances in their lives where race and felt particularly relevant or important. When synthesizing my findings, it became clear that race played a complex role in the lives of these individuals, sometimes resulting in feelings of pride and belonging, and other times resulting in shame, anger, and feelings of otherness. For organizational purposes I have divided my findings into sections based on tensions that I saw between personal identities and the world around them.

### *Identity vs. Identification*

Because multiracial people experience such high rates of misclassification (Campbell and Troyer 2007; Herman 2010) how individuals identified often conflicted with how they were identified by others. This resulted in frustration, anger and—occasionally—amusement. Participants outlined various situations in which they had been misidentified, and the ways that they responded to these situations, both internally and externally.

For one woman I interviewed, Paris, experiences of misidentification were incredibly frustrating and left her feeling like she had little agency over her own identity. She felt as though she had a lot of experiences where she was read as White, which conflicted with her Asian identity. She recalled a time in high school where her campus hosted an event called “Racial Harmony” which gave students the opportunity to talk about race and racism in racially segregated groups. She explained,

When I signed up for it, I told the person who was the head of it...I wanted to be in the Japanese group, or the Asian group. And she said no, I was in the White group. I was really offended by that. Why can't I decide? And I ended up being in the Asian group because they had too many White people sign up and I was happy, but I was so upset and indignant that she would put me in that group. I'm not in that group.

In this instance, Paris was asserting an Asian identity, and had that identity rejected by one of her peers. She explained that this was upsetting for her because she had always believed that "race is something you should be able to define for yourself." Her own identity and assertion of that identity were invalidated when she was told that she would be in the White group, despite her request to be in the Asian group. This experience reinforced for Paris the reality that while she may identify with one race, that may have little impact on how she was racialized by others.

Another woman I interviewed, Rachel, explained that in high school she was frustrated with the way her classmates justified her academic performance. While she did not disagree with her classmate about what her racial identity was, she was angered by the way her peer deconstructed and divided parts of who she was according to racial stereotypes. As someone who identifies as Chinese and Latina, her participation in advanced placement classes was regularly attributed to her Asian heritage. "I remember one time I was...in a pre-AP class, this one guy, he was like, 'Oh, Rachel's only here because of her Asian side.' And it was really—I was really mad."

This situation highlights a common way that racial identities are assigned and given meaning in American culture today. Rachel's academic success was being

attributed to the portion of her racial identity that reinforced existing stereotypes. She was not succeeding because she was Latina, Venezuelan, or multiracial, she was succeeding because Chinese people are good students. Her identity was understood to be the sum of the parts of two separate races, and she had inherited a specific trait that her classmate attributed to being Asian. This reinforced the idea that Asian students are academically successful at the same time as reinforcing the idea that Latino students are not academically successful. Rachel's success was distanced from her Latina identity when it was attributed to a separate and seemingly unrelated part of who she was. What was implied was that she would not have been in a pre-AP class if she had been merely Latina, but because she was also Chinese, she was able to excel in school.

In both of these scenarios, frustration arose when these women were not able to define their identities for themselves. For Paris, it was clear that she was being assigned what she saw as an incorrect primary racial identity, while Rachel was upset by the way her multiracial identity was being used. She did not see herself as two halves of a whole person, and was "proud to be a Latina in advanced courses."

### *Adaptation of Identity*

One result of the tension that often existed between how participants self-identified and how others identified them was the integration of these experiences into their racial identity. When the question of racial identity was expanded beyond racial ancestry it became clear that how people thought about race was incredibly complex, often encompassing experiences they had with misclassification.

Rachel explained that coming to college had changed the way she viewed her own racial identity because of the diversity of ways she had been read by her peers. She explained,

I feel like I'm realizing more my Brownness and how I'm read here as really different. People from difference places, because everyone at [this college] is from a different place, people from New York would assume I was Puerto Rican and in Texas everyone thought I was Mexican because that's like the main place immigrants come from in Texas.

For her, moving to a new part of the country and experiencing the diversity of ways that her appearance was racialized changed the way she saw her own identity. She was aware of the ambiguity of her appearance and the way this affected her viewpoint, and while she knew herself to be Chinese and Venezuelan, she also understood that misidentification played a role in her life as a racialized being.

For one man I interviewed, Michael, his ability to pass as White complicated his relationship with his racial identity. He explained that while he wanted to assert a Japanese identity, he acknowledged that he benefitted from his White appearance.

A lot of White people say all the time that it would be so cool to be Latino or whatever when they don't really appreciate what it means to be that and what kinds of differences you face. So I think that I'm sort of in a similar boat because I can say that I'm Japanese but I don't have to deal with the fall out of that kind of thing.

He went on to explain,



If I moved to a new city and didn't tell anyone what I was then I think I'd be pretty solid in terms of like, I think White people would think I was White and maybe some mixed people would ask me if I was mixed. But then we're both mixed so it's more of a connection than anything else, I guess.

While he knew himself to be White, Japanese, and Mexican, he also knew that he moved through the world in much the same way that a fully White person would, experiencing a significant amount of White privilege.

For Rachel and Michael the way they were read by others did not change what they knew to be true about their racial identities, maintaining authority about their own ancestry, but instead they integrated the identities they were assigned by others into their understanding of their racialized experience.

#### *Internal Identity vs. Expressed Identity*

Participants did not only adjust how they understood their identities internally, but also how they expressed them externally. The distinction between internal and expressed identities (Campbell and Troyer 2007) can be particularly pertinent to multiracial individuals when answering closed-ended questions about race. Even when given the racial category of choosing more than one option there are often questions about the way that information will be interpreted and used.

Michael believed that because of the ways he benefitted from his White appearance, socioeconomic status, and lack of connection with Mexican culture, he should not indicate Hispanic on his college applications, for fear that it might give him an advantage he did not believe he deserved.

Sometimes I don't check any and otherwise I just put White because I feel like that's the most and it's also like I felt disingenuous in the past about not checking white because when I was applying to college for example, sure if I put Hispanic I don't know, I didn't want to put that I was Hispanic in case that it helped me get into college because I didn't really feel, I felt that was disingenuous since I'm not really connected to that part of me.

Although Michael made it clear that he considers himself to be, in part, Hispanic or Mexican, he felt as though signifying this on his college admission paperwork would misrepresent his experience and positionality.

Similarly, Eric, a man that I interviewed who had a Chinese mother and a White father, was very careful about how he recorded his race depending on how he believed this information would be used. When applying to college he explained,

I thought that my identity as a minority should have any say in how I reached this school. I think I should have been evaluated for my merits. Now for some people it is important that they put that they are a minority, for whatever reason that they choose, but I didn't think that was something that applied to me. I don't think that my race should have any... because this school is really into the fact that it has a really high degree of people of color and I don't consider myself a person of color and I don't want institutions counting me for their own benefit. I think that's wrong.

For both Eric and Michael, their understanding of Affirmative Action policies had a large affect on how they chose to classify themselves while apply to college. In both cases, they did not feel like Affirmative Action unfairly preferences minority students, but felt

that they had not faced enough marginalization in their lives to warrant special consideration.

*Multiracial vs. Mixed*

In much the same way that Root (1996) distinguishes between multiracial people as members of more than one racial group and as sitting squarely on the border, I found there to be an interesting distinction between multiracial identities as a blending of cultures and perspectives and mixed race as a stand-alone identity grounded in racial liminality. I did not find that the individuals I interviewed chose to conceptualized their identities in either of these ways all the time, but rather that they shift between these two forms of multiracial identity depending on context.

Rachel explained that, for her, having a multiracial identity allowed her to embrace the complexities of her familial history and personal narrative.

I think about [my identity] as like one entity that has roots in two geographically different places. I think about it as sort of this blend, this blob that is my identity. I have Chinese in me and that whole history and the Asian diaspora and I think about that a lot, how my family came from China to Venezuela during that time. I think about the different traditions that my family follows, and that's a part of me. And it's equally a part of me as the Indigenous culture of Venezuela and the Spanish culture and the African culture of Venezuela.

She went on to explain,

I used to say I'm half Chinese and half Venezuelan, but I didn't like that that sounded like I was splitting myself so now I just say that I'm Chinese and Venezuelan...Sometimes I say I'm China Latina, which is my own term.

For Rachel, being multiracial was not about existing in a space outside of conventional racial boundaries, but it was about acknowledging all of the different racial and ethnic categories that make up her identity.

Katie, on the other hand, was an interesting case because both of her parents identify as Black, but after coming to college she decided to start identifying as mixed because she feels it well represents her culturally upbringing. She explained that she had always been referred to in her family as her parents' "White child," and that she had received this title because of her behavior.

It's really kind of sad. So I like Taylor Swift, but my parents? Hell no...It's really interesting because they have this double standard...I've grown up in [this very White town] my whole life and that's all you listen to with your friends and stuff.

This experience growing up was very influential in her decision to refer to herself as mixed instead of embracing a monoracial Black identity.

I think I picked to identify as mixed because I don't have a lot of tendencies that are Black ... I don't have any roots or traditions and culturally we are just a very normal American kind of family. So I think that identifying as Mixed encompasses that and encompasses where I grew up and how I am as a person and how I talk and how I think. It's not just like I think like a Black person, it's like no, I think like I'm mixed. I have such a diverse thought and experience that I just can't pick one [race].

For Katie, a mixed identity was a way to escape racial categories that she didn't feel accurately described her. While she based her decision to identify as mixed race on what she saw as her multiracial frame of reference, Katie was also quick to point out that her maternal grandmother was Irish. It was essential to validating this mixed race identity that she could point to a non-Black ancestor. Otherwise, she seemed to embrace the idea that her racial identity could exist as something distinctly hybrid. By asserting that she had neither the perspective of a Black person or a White person, she is separating herself from both of these categories and contending that her identities exists in an independent third space.

While it was clear that neither woman saw their identities as exists solely in one of these theoretical frameworks, the way that they spoke about how their identities affected them differed. Katie explained that she had been able to find community through her mixed race identity, because while she had very few Black friends, she was able to find commonality with other people who felt that they embodied more than one race or cultural perspective. She also spoke about how her light skin made her feel more mixed than many of her siblings, but in coming to college, being mixed was important to her because it helped her to find people that she felt she could connect with and relate to.

### *Multiracial as Attractive*

The individuals that I interviewed not only thought of their own identities as, at times, existing in a liminal third space, but many of them also expressed the believe that multiracial people are more attractive than monoracial people, establishing a unique racial stereotype for people in this category. Through this stereotype the individuals are

not asserting that they themselves have a distinct multiracial identity, but instead that all mixed people are a part of this racial category.

When speaking about his own sexual preferences, Michael stated, “I’m probably just more attracted to mixed people, as a rule,” going on to joke about whether or not this made him racist. This point was reinforced later in the interview when he was talking about the pride he felt in being multiracial, mentioning that the attractiveness of multiracial people was something to be pleased with. “I think mixed people are more attractive,” he said plainly. For this stereotype, racial heritage is not important, and instead being a mixture of two or more races was what made someone attractive. Paris echoed a similar sentiment, saying, “I don’t know, I believe that mixed people are more beautiful than non-mixed people, regardless of what specific group you’re in.” Neither Michael nor Paris felt the need to elaborate or justify why they believed multiracial people are more attractive than monoracial people, but both of them illustrated that they believe this to be an established fact about mixed race people.

This phenomenon is interesting because there is no universal way that multiracial people look; there are not specific phenotypic markers of a mixed race identity, yet they are imagined to be attractive, unique, and exotic. The assumption of attractiveness works to construct mixed as a group of people with specific traits and characteristics, legitimating this as a class of people. While at many points during the interviews, participants were critical of the validity of race and the dominant meanings given to racial categories, the attractiveness of multiracial people went unquestioned for nearly everyone.

Attractiveness, however, is not an assertion of a shared identity or experience, but instead was used as a general descriptor for a class of people. Participants did not refer to the attractiveness of mixed race people in relation to their own identity or experience, but instead used this stereotype to describe their sexual and romantic attractions to others. This was not an instance of identity assertion, but a way of ascribing identity to others.

Some participants shared stories of times that they had felt objectified because of their appearance and the fetishization of multiracial people. They complained about feeling like their multiracial status was what made them appealing to sexual and romantic partners. When asked about the role that race played in her love life, Katie pointed out that often times, she felt more like a “prize” than a person.

I think it’s the whole exotic thing. ‘Oh, you have this beautiful curly hair and it’s soft and it’s long and oh, but you have a really curvy body.’ It’s just like, well, ah, okay. I’m not really interested in you; I don’t really know you...I think people do like specific kinds of people and I’m okay with that but I’m like, do you like me or do you like this feature? What is that you really like? Not that whole culture and that whole race, because I think that encompasses a lot more than ‘You have really wide hips.’ I think sometimes it doesn’t go deeper than that.

From her perspective, men are often too focused on her physical features, fixating on racializing her appearance. She explained that this is a complicated issue for her because she recognizes that physical attraction is an important aspect of romantic relationships. She mediated her frustration with being exoticized by adding, “I want you to like me for me, not because I look a certain way. I mean, yeah, you can like how I look, but I’d hope you’d like how I look if we’re dating or something.”

When racial identities or features are integral to the attractiveness of a person, the attraction becomes fetishized (Marriot 2010), making the attraction no longer about the individual, but instead the group they represent. For Katie this was a frustrating experience because she wanted to be valued for who she was as an individual, not the racial stereotypes that her partner's believed she embodied. This can be a particularly pertinent problem for multiracial Black women who are celebrated for the way their features align with White standards of beauty (Rockquemore 2002), pitting their appearance against other Black women (Joseph 2013).

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper was initially to explore what it means to exist outside of the clear boundaries that are often imagined to exist in the dominant racial ideology in the U.S. While this tension is important and remained central to my findings, what was most compelling about the way participants talked about race was the wide variety of ways that it was constructed and employed. In memories recounted in the interviews I conducted, race was understood to be a signifier of culture, a means of exclusion and ostracization, a marker of experience with discrimination and a basis for social support and community building.

Based on these findings, the theoretical distinction between identity and identification drawn in previous research (Brunsma 2006; Rockquemore, Brunsma and Delgado 2009) proved to be incredibly helpful in understanding the process of racial identity formation and the creation of racial meaning. While misidentification can



function as a way to regulate identity and perpetuate the belief that racial categories are mutually exclusive in nature, it can also provide an opportunity for self-expression and resistance to the dominant narratives and power structures. Participants were often conscious of the way they presented their identities to others so as to allow them as much control over how they were racialized as possible. Additionally, multiracial people are able to create community outside of traditional racial boundaries by asserting a shared mixed race liminal experience, regardless of an individual's particular racial background or ancestry. However, the creation of an autonomous identity category for mixed race people also creates space for the addition of new racial stereotypes that can be dehumanizing and degrading.

This study is limited in its ability to represent the experiences of multiracial people of all socioeconomic classes, education levels, geographic regions and the immense amount of diversity there is with racial backgrounds and experiences multiracial people can have. The goal of the paper is to encourage the practice of examining not just how people claim or distance themselves from different racial identities but to also the discourse that produces these decisions. If we accept that racial categories are socially constructed, it is important to understand how and when different racial groups are imagined to be real.

It is also important to distinguish between multiracial identities that are a blending of cultures and perspectives and stand-alone mixed race identities that cannot be deconstructed. Root's work (1996) has drawn this distinction, in a historical moment where we are so fascinated by the idea of mixed race individuals and their potential to change the way race functions in the United States (Elam 2010), I believe the concept of

an autonomous mixed race identity is gaining increasing significance and meaning beyond the sum of the races that it is comprised of.

While National Geographic is hopeful that increases in the number of multiracial people will result in race as an obsolete measure of identity (Funderberg 2013), this does not produce a complete picture of what race means in the United States today. While race is used as a system of structural inequality and is often a gatekeeping mechanism for opportunities and resources, it is also a source of culture, perspective, community and support. As can be seen through the variety of ways that race operates in the lives in the individuals that I interviewed, the reality of race in the United States today is one where race acts as a force in many different directions on an individual's life.

In the future, quantitative sociological work pertaining to the topic of race should consider including and number of different measures of racial identity when collecting information about an individual's identity. Nuanced questions about racial identity and group membership may help researcher gain more insight into what aspects of a person's racial identity are more influential of different aspects of their lives.

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