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What Are You? A Study Of Racial Ambiguity

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WHAT ARE YOU? A STUDY OF RACIAL AMBIGUITY

by

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THESIS

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Approved by:

_____

Advisor   Date

DEDICATION

For my mother and father

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INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be racially ambiguous? Before discussing racial ambiguity, race should be defined. Both the physical aspect as well as the social aspect of the term must be acknowledged. In their book, *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World* (1998), Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann define race as "a group of human beings socially defined on the basis of physical characteristics" (24). Someone that is racially ambiguous does not possess the stereotypical *physical* attributes of his or her supposed racial category. It is the physical features that one notices first about another individual when trying to determine that person's racial identity. Skin color, hair texture, facial features (e.g. eye shape, nose, and lips), are racial markers that people utilize when trying to identify race (Maclin and Malpass 2001). These racial markers are often stereotypical. For example, Black people are stereotyped as having wide noses, full lips, dark skin and curly hair. Asians are stereotyped as having slanted eyes, straight black hair and "yellow" skin. These stereotypes are socially constructed and serve the purpose of categorizing others who are different and recognizing those who are the same. Blacks, Asians, Latinos, Indians, Whites, etc., are aware of the stereotypes that exist about their respective races, as well as the stereotypes that exist about other races.

According to Cornell and Hartman (1998), "Ethnicity and race are not simply labels forced upon people; they are also identities that people accept, resist, choose, specify, invent, redefine, reject, actively defend, and so forth" (77). A problem with socially constructed stereotypes is that not every Black person has full lips and dark skin and not every Asian has slanted eyes and black hair; there are phenotypical differences within racial groups that go unacknowledged. Aside from the importance of the physical aspect of racial ambiguity, there is the involvement of ethnic identity, with factors such as typical behavior and cultural attributes

(e.g. language, involvement in ones in racial or ethnic community). The following is a sort of "compiled" definition of ethnicity based on certain works on ethnic identity. Ethnic identity is something that is shared by members of an ethnic group; a common ancestry that holds great meaning to that specific group and no other group (i.e. cultural traditions) (White and Burke 1987; Song 2003). One can also be ethnically ambiguous as in the case of Latinos who are grouped under the racial category of Hispanic as well as Black immigrants who come to the United States from other countries (Waters 2004). Existing stereotypes of what certain racial groups should look like, what they should act like, as well as generalizations about different ethnicities within racial groups greatly influence the identity of a racially ambiguous individual.

Most of the literature on racial ambiguity focuses on individuals of mixed-race, primarily individuals who are part African American and part Caucasian, and the difficulties that these individuals face in choosing how they want to identify or define themselves as either Black, White or as bi-racial (Davis 1991; Gilbert 2005; Lee and Bean 2004; Twine 1996). Mixed-race individuals face a great deal of pressure to identify a certain way from society and from their respective racial groups. While this type of literature is valuable in understanding racial identity and all of its many intricacies, the problem with an exclusive focus on Black/White bi-racial individuals is that the experiences of single-race individuals are marginalized.

Despite the contributions made by existing literature, we know little about racial ambiguity among single-race individuals. Children, teens and adults compare themselves to others within their racial and ethnic groups. If someone who is of a single race does not fit certain stereotypes of his or her respective group, then confusion is bound to result. In order to understand the feelings of single-race individuals we should listen to their stories of what it is like to be racially ambiguous in a society that favors compartmentalizing people into strict racial

categories. We must also try to understand the similarities and differences among single-race and multi-racial individuals as they experience racial ambiguity.

Through this qualitative research study, I aim to explore and understand individuals' feelings about and experiences of racial ambiguity. The study addresses the following questions: When given the opportunity, how do racially ambiguous individuals prefer to identify (racially, ethnically, both)? In what ways, if any, does being racially ambiguous influence an individual's sense of belonging to his or her racial and or ethnic group? How do both single-race and mixed race individuals experience racial ambiguity? And in what ways do they deal with their racial ambiguity? Information on these various questions can result in a more comprehensive definition and understanding of racial ambiguity and the role it plays in the lives of the people that experience it on a daily basis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

<u>Classical Theory on Identity</u>

In order to understand racial ambiguity, as well as racial and ethnic identity, one must understand concepts of the self and look at the classical and theoretical approaches to identity. There would be no racial ambiguity if there were no emphasis on identity. Theorists such as Charles Horton Cooley, George Herbert Mead, and Erving Goffman are mentioned throughout various works dealing with racial and ethnic identity. In *On Self and Social Organization* (1998), Cooley discusses the social self and the idea of the "looking glass self." The three elements of the "looking glass self" that he mentions are, "the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification" (164). Each element proves to be very useful in the understanding of racial ambiguity. They help in understanding how individuals process their

thoughts about themselves and how they interpret the perceived thoughts of others regarding their self.

In his essay *Self* (1934)*,* George Herbert Mead discusses the concept of the "I" and the "me." He explains that, "The 'I' is the response of the organism to the attitudes of others; the 'me' is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes" (380). An individual who was of Black and White ancestry during the age of the one-drop rule probably would have tried to pass or identify as White in order to accommodate societal pressures, this would be an example of the 'I.' The one-drop rule and the attitudes of Whites towards Blacks would have composed the individual's 'me,' the composition of attitudes of those who are not racial minorities and of what society believes makes a person Black. Mead also mentions the idea of the 'generalized other.' He says, "the organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called the 'generalized other'" (376). The perceptions of these "generalized others" are of great importance to those who are trying to figure out their feelings about their racial and ethnic identity. Stereotypes that exist in societies about what a certain race should look like, or how a certain cultural or ethnic group is supposed to act also fall under this notion of the "generalized other." The word "generalized" carries a lot of meaning in and of itself, it means something that is universal, something that is common, something expected. Expectations regarding racial and ethnic identity influence how one feels about his or her identity, when and where they choose to express their identity, if they desire to do so.

An important figure in the understanding of self identity management is Erving Goffman. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman discusses his idea of individuals being actors whose roles change in different settings or situations, and that follow "general dramaturgical rules and inclinations for conducting action" (362). In American society, there are

the notions that one can "act Black" or "act White." If a Black person grew up in a predominantly White neighborhood and went to predominantly White schools, often times they will be perceived by other Blacks as "acting White." The individual might feel the need to alter the way he acts, dresses (e.g., wear more urban style clothing) or may "perform" differently around others of the same race (e.g., hand gestures, slang) in order to fit in and feel a sense of belonging. Stereotypes and expectations exist, and they exist within the very racial groups that are being referred to. The concept of performing a racial or ethnic identity also applies to other racial groups, as well. For example, a Puerto Rican woman who does not speak Spanish or know how to cook traditional Puerto Rican cuisine may take cooking lessons or Spanish language lessons in order to feel more ethnic. People have a role in the construction of their own identities; however, they also greatly rely on interactions with others in order to define themselves.

Taking a modern approach on the works of these theorists is Richard Jenkins' book, *Social Identity (1996).* Richard Jenkins discusses a theoretical approach to understanding social identity. Jenkins draws support from Cooley and Mead. Their works on the self, particularly Mead's work, helped Jenkins to form his argument that the self is composed of the way we see ourselves and the way others see us. He calls this the "internal-external dialectic of identification" (20). The internal refers to how we define ourselves, and the external to how others define us. Jenkins distinguishes individual identity from collective identity and says that "individual identity…is not meaningful in isolation from the social world" (20). Thus it can be said that an individual has multiple selves, each employed according to the context of the situation that the person is in.

Theory on Racial and Ethnic Identity

In *Situational Ethnicity* (1981), Jonathan Okamura writes, "variability is the essence of ethnicity in its significance for the structuring of social relations in diverse situational contexts" (463). Ethnicity can play a prominent role in an individual's life or it can play a more subtle role. Relationships between individuals will vary in different contexts and ethnicity will set the boundaries of how to interact with each other, and what to expect from each other. There are several works (Jaret and Reitzes 1999; Lyman and Douglass 1973; Song 2003; White and Burke 1987) that focus on the saliency of identity, specifically on ethnic identity and the importance of it in different contexts. Within most of these studies, racial identity was rarely mentioned. However, in *Ethnic Role Identity among Black and White College Students: An Interactionist Approach* (1987), Clovis L. White and Peter J. Burke do mention race as a binding factor in ethnic identity instead of the frequently referred to commonalities such as religion and language. For example, they mention the notion of what it means to be Black, or White, or Chicano. In regard to the racial aspect of ethnic identity, they say that "stereotypes and other perceived trait differences…of ethnic groups are the symbols and shared perceptions used as the basis of ethnic self-identity" (311). Within ethnic groups, there exist stereotypes about cultural behavior and about physical traits. These stereotypes may be drawn from the stereotypes that exist outside one's racial group or may be stereotypes that have been around and have been used to identify members within one's specific ethnic or racial group.

Equally important, White and Burke mention three concepts of ethnic identity, "*identity salience*, or the centrality and importance of an identity; *commitment* to the identity; and *role-specific self-esteem* or the evaluation of one's self in the framework of the particular identity" (311). They derived this concept from Sheldon Stryker's *Symbolic Interactionism* (1980), which

focuses on the complexity of the self with an emphasis on the notion of roles or positions; the idea that attaching a label on a person "leads to expected behaviors from that person and to behavior toward that person premised on expectations" (57). Out of the three concepts mentioned, *self-esteem* and *commitment* are especially applicable in the discussion on racial ambiguity.

It is important to understand that one's racial identity as well as ethnic identity can have a great impact on one's self-esteem. Lack of self-esteem may result in the need to compensate by performing their ethnicity correctly in order to appear more committed to their ethnic or racial identity and in order to feel a sense of belonging. In regard to commitment, White and Burke say, "The more committed one is to a role/group identity, the more likely one is to maintain and activate that identity across situations, that is, the higher will be identity salience" (315). Along with ethnic group commitment, they mention ethnic "role" commitment, which they examine within the context of "extensiveness" and "intensiveness," or how many people one can relate to because of the particular role they partake in and the function that those people have in an individual's identity (319). White and Burke discussed attitudes and dispositions about ethnic identity, but they mainly discussed them in reference to political and cultural characteristics. A discussion on attitudes and dispositions of Blacks and Whites on physical characteristics, what stereotypes they have about what a Black person should *look* like, for example, would be helpful in understanding the expectations certain groups have and the pressure that individuals might feel as a result.

Like White and Burke, Charles Jaret and Donald C. Reitzes discuss ethnic identity in regard to Blacks and Whites in their paper, *The Importance of Racial-Ethnic Identity and Social Setting for Blacks, Whites, and Multiracials* (1999). Jaret and Reitzes, however, unite racial and

ethnic identity into one racial-ethnic identity, incorporate the multi-racial experience, and focus specifically on social setting as an influence on identity. Two important things that they address are racial-ethnic identity and how it changes in different contexts, and how race, class and gender influence a person's self concept. They present four interesting hypotheses, the first two being the ones that will be discussed. The first hypothesis is that "blacks and multiracials place greater importance on racial-ethnic identity than do whites" (715). The second one (which has two parts) suggests that racial-ethnic identity for Blacks and Whites will be more important when in public and at work than when at home or in their own neighborhood, and that for multi-racial people, racial-ethnic identity will be viewed as more important in public, work and home rather than in their own neighborhood setting.

As for the first part of Jaret and Reitzes second hypothesis, that Blacks and Whites will find their racial-ethnic identity as more salient in public and at work than in situations where they are around others who are like them (racially and ethnically), I believe that the opposite is true. Racial-ethnic identity is more important when around others who are the same race or ethnicity because of the constant exposure to the *rules* of how to be Black, White, Hispanic or Asian, for example. If one is around someone who is like them, then one will most likely begin to compare him or herself to the other person, or to the entire group. A racially ambiguous person, for example, may find that they are not like members of their group, that they are not *ethnic* enough or that they look different phenotypically. From their first hypothesis, the word "importance" in regard to racial-ethnic identity can refer to the degree to which it rules or influences daily life. For example, being a part of a sorority for Latinas, learning how to speak one's native language, interacting on a daily basis with others of the same race or ethnicity could be seen as ones racial-ethnic identity being a central part of his or her life.

In *Ethnicity: Strategies of Collective and Individual Impression Management* (1973), Stanford M. Lyman and William A. Douglass discuss impression management with respect to ethnicity. They provide an example of something that can only be experienced by one racial group and that is the idea of 'soul' among African Americans. They say:

> At best, a fellow traveler of the Black community can, after long and intimate association, develop an emphatic understanding, while never sharing fully in the communion which 'soul' provides for those who 'have' it. 'Soul' constitutes invisible social cement binding blacks together and separating them and their unique experience from other groups. (346)

According to Lyman and Douglass, someone who is not Black can never know what it feels like to have 'soul.' He or she can get very close experiencing 'soul', but not being a member of the group means that experiencing 'soul' is off limits. If there are certain things that only certain groups can "own" or experience, what would happen when a member of the group has difficulty expressing this ownership or has trouble identifying/connecting with it? For example, would a mixed-race individual have less 'soul' than someone who was not mixed and who grew up in an all Black community where race is a strong defining marker? Or does the fact that one is Black or part Black mean that one automatically has 'soul'? Are there different degrees of 'soul'? All of these questions deal with racial ambiguity. Not connecting with something that is so unique and common to ones group can lead to feelings of insecurity and to feelings of not belonging, which can greatly affect one's sense of racial as well as ethnic identity.

The Social Construction of Race

The theory discussed provides a foundation for understanding racial ambiguity. A review of literature on the social construction of race is also a crucial component of this study, as it offers important social and historical information needed for a deeper understanding of racial ambiguity.

According to the prevailing view in sociology, race is socially constructed (Davis 1991; Lee and Bean 2004; Twine 1996). Racial minority groups are constantly being reminded about their race in society through portrayals in the media and by the simple fact that they are not White; they do not belong to the dominant group of society. The social definition of race expects Blacks, Latinos and mixed individuals for example, to have their racial identity be their most important identity because that is what helps distinguish them from other groups. There seems to be a want, a constant need by dominant groups in society to emphasize differences between individuals and between groups. This is reminiscent of the fear of "black blood" which led to the implementation of the one-drop rule in the late 1800's (Davis 1991).

James F. Davis, in *Who is Black?* (1991)*,* discusses the history of the one-drop rule and its impact on Blacks in the United States. Only in America are individuals subjected to the one-drop rule. Davis compares the notion of the one-drop rule in the U.S. with the racial classification systems of a variety of other countries (i.e. Latin America, Africa, United Kingdom, etc). The idea behind the one-drop rule is that if a person has one-drop of "black blood" then he or she is considered to be Black, regardless of phenotype (12). Davis also mentions that ethnic Whites in the U.S. are not subjected to claiming their ethnic identity. He says, "Americans do not insist that an American with small fraction of Polish ancestry be classified as a Pole…or that someone with any trace of Jewish lineage is a Jew and nothing else" (12). Not only are there cultural expectations that limit the development of Black identity (dress, speak, etc), but there are phenotypical expectations that confine individuals to a divide between Black and non-Black. If you *look* Black, then you are Black regardless of other ancestry.

Davis does not directly address racial ambiguity in its true form (one who does not physically look like the race he or she is). In existing literature, racial ambiguity commonly is

used to refer to the difficulty that a person of *mixed race* has when wanting to choose his or her racial/ethnic identity. It is used to refer to the constraints of social definitions of race; that you are either one or the other and to be more than one creates an ambiguous identity. Davis employs this definition and addresses the common perception of racial ambiguity, referring to individuals of mixed-race. He says, "The inability to tell that some persons who look white have some black ancestry can result in personal traumas and deep dilemmas concerning personal identity…The lightest mulattoes feel pressure to prove their blackness" (169). Within racial and ethnic groups, there are pressures to accommodate cultural and phenotypical expectations and when individuals have trouble making these accommodations or adjustments to their identity, inner conflict as well as conflict between the individual and the larger group can arise. How about the social definition of race in other countries?

In Latin America, there is an importance placed on skin gradation as a determinant of racial status. The lighter one is the "Whiter" one is. Davis mentions the experience of Puerto Rican migrants to the United States. He says, "It is a shock to the majority of the migrants—and not just to those mulattoes who were previously known as whites—to be called black in the United States, which recognizes no racial categories between black and white" (Davis, 104). To go from being considered "White" to being considered "Black" can have a great impact on one's racial, as well as ethnic identity. There is a difference in the way American culture and Puerto Rican culture views race; it must be a culture shock to go from being seen as Puerto Rican to being seen as exclusively Black. In her essay, *Ethnic and Racial Identities of Second-Generation Black Immigrants in New York City* (2004), Mary C. Waters writes, "Often both whites and blacks saw them as just black Americans and did not notice that they were ethnically different" (498). In this quote, Waters is referring to second generation Black immigrants who identify as

ethnic Blacks. However, despite their desire to be identified as Haitian, or Jamaican for example, they are automatically identified as being Black not just by Whites, but by other American Blacks as well.

Currently in the United States, the social definition of race is being influenced by rising trends in immigration as well trends in racial intermarriage. In *America's Changing Color Lines: Immigration, Race/Ethnicity, and Multiracial Identification* (2004), Jennifer Lee and Frank D. Bean look at the Black/White color line that exists in America and examine it in regards to immigration and intermarriage. They specifically mention the immigration of Latinos and Asians and write, "Social scientists are beginning to wrestle with the question of whether today's immigrants are helping to blur racial boundaries generally or whether America's newcomers are simply crossing over the color line rather than helping to eradicate it" (222-223). One may think that the Black and White divide would begin to fade away, considering the fact that Black and White are not the only races that exist in the U.S. due to the influx of immigrants, and also due to the intermarriage between these immigrants and other races. However, color lines are becoming flexible for these new immigrant groups (Latinos and Asians) and Blacks are being left behind. It appears that as long as someone is not Black, they can cross into white mainstream society. Could it be that society is shifting from a Black/White divide, to a Black/non-Black divide (Lee and Bean, 237)?

Although the discussion on Black and White mixed individuals and how they choose their identity is significant in understanding the social construction of race, David Gilbert (2005), whose work will be discussed in a later section of this literature review, mentions what appears to be a largely ignored aspect of mixed-race studies, which is the "experiences of mixed-race people from other heritages…" In her book, *Voices of Diversity: Multiculturalism in America*

(2009), Mary Cay Sengstock covers a broad range of issues that multicultural individuals and families encounter on a daily basis and found that for some individuals, being diverse allowed for more options when choosing an identity. More information on varied groups of mixed-race individuals, like in Sengstock's book, would be helpful in further understanding racial ambiguity and saliency and the choice of identity in the lives of these people.

France Winddance Twine (1996) discusses the impact that living in a suburban white community has on the saliency of the racial identity of females who are part African-American descent and part White or Asian descent. Racial identity, however, is discussed within the context of culture (participating in racially based political and social clubs and dating black men, for example, marks one as being Black). She discusses how the perception of these females' racial identity changes once they attend the University of California at Berkeley, an environment more diverse than the ones they grew up in (207). A commonality among the females interviewed by Twine is that they were raised by families who preferred to be racially unmarked. Twine says:

> Not being distinguished from European-American peers in everyday interactions is critical to the maintenance of a white cultural identity. I am not referring to physical distinctions in color, hair texture, or body type. Rather, these individuals experienced themselves as culturally neutral…the multiracial women, who acquired a white cultural identity, did not position themselves, and were not positioned by those around them, as culturally distinct from their peers of exclusively European descent in behavior, dress codes, speech, practices or interests. (208)

A key point that Twine makes is that being distinguished by one's peers is an important part in the maintenance of cultural identity. In the case of the females interviewed, the fact that they were not seen as different by their families aided them in identifying as White because they knew of no other way to define themselves. Also, Twine is specifically referring to a cultural dimension of racial identity. "White identity" for these females does not encompass having

Caucasian physical characteristics; it encompasses cultural characteristics such as behavior, dress and speech. Being racially neutral or racially *invisible* caused these women to make other identities more prominent than the African American side of their racial identity. They experienced "their class (and gender) identity as more primary than their African heritage in defining their identity" (211). This identification with identities other than racial identity is discussed by Okamura (1981), who wrote on the subject of situational ethnicity. He says, "It may be that in some situations ethnicity is a relevant factor which influences the interaction of parties, while in other situations the relationship proceeds according to other attributes of the parties such as class, religion, occupation, sex, personality, etc." (454). Growing up with access to material wealth and other forms of social capital were enough to secure the women in Twine's paper with a White cultural identity. Their physical appearances were bypassed within their communities as well as within their own respective families; their physical appearance did not hinder their involvement in the white community. In Twine's paper, racial neutrality seems to be synonymous with normalcy, in other words to be White is to be normal (211).

Thus far, stereotyping has been mentioned a number of times in this literature review. Stereotypes are socially constructed and should be acknowledged as playing a large part in the social construction of race. The notion of "soul" as referred to earlier in the discussion of racial and ethnic identity theory can be viewed as being a stereotype. In defining stereotypes, Lyman and Douglass state:

> The content of stereotypes constitutes the definition of peoples and situations, while the attitudes contained in them make up orientations which actors feel they are ordinarily obliged to take…stereotypes based upon the perception or misperceptions, understanding, misunderstandings, of certain behavioral realities. An ethnic's own generalizations about the group to which he belongs are also stereotypes in that they too emphasize certain features and relegate others to unimportance. (347)

Stereotypes about racial and ethnic groups are reinforced both by other groups and by the very racial/ethnic groups to which stereotypes are attached. Stereotypes of different racial minorities such as Hispanics and African Americans, for example, have a great influence on one's racial identity, creating expectations such as performing a race correctly. Goffman says, "The cultural values of an establishment will determine how the participants are to feel about many matters and at the same time establish a framework of appearances that must be maintained, whether or not there is feeling behind appearances" (361). For someone who is Black, but has very fair skin and does not have a close bond with the Black community, the expectations placed on maintaining a proper Black identity can cause the individual to change himself or herself or act differently in front of other Blacks and different in front of non-Blacks. Consider the individual in an all White crowd. She may feel that acting Black in front of others who are not Black is more comfortable because she knows that the authenticity of her racial identity is not going to be judged. When around other Blacks, she may feel uncomfortable and may feel forced to express her racial identity in order to keep up appearances. In regard to this, Lyman and Douglass (1973) say,

> Indeed, one of the great personal frustrations for the individual ethnic actor arises out of his difficulty in conveying the richness of his own ethnic self, as well as the humanity that encompasses his total identity, to those that insist on imputing stereotypic characteristics to him and all members of his group. (353)

If certain racial or ethnic groups emphasize how to act a certain way, how to dress a certain way or how to speak a certain way, then this creates greater chances for individuals who do not "fit" these stereotypes to experience racial ambiguity.

It will be interesting to see if social constructs will change as a result of an increasingly racially and culturally diverse society and changing immigration trends. Individuals of mixed-race may have to define themselves even more than before. Racial ambiguity will continue to

grow in a more complex fashion. Individuals adapt to different situations and are greatly influenced by the perceptions that others have of them. There is no doubt that both racial and ethnic identities (and identities in general for that matter) will experience some change.

Racial Ambiguity

Angela D. James and M. Belinda Tucker's paper, *Racial Ambiguity and Relationship Formation in the United States: Theoretical and Practical Considerations* (2003), acknowledges the difference between race and ethnicity in their discussion on racial ambiguity. They note, "It is the physical markers associated with racial categorization that present the dilemma of racial ambiguity" (155). They emphasize the need to discuss race rather than ethnicity with respect to racial groups because of its increasing social importance due to the changing racial makeup of the United States. Supporting their emphasis on race, they mention that U.S. society is structured more so around racial terms rather than ethnic terms (i.e. US census focuses on race, sex and gender) (154-155). Another important aspect of racial ambiguity that they look at is the fact that different ethnic groups are grouped under specific races. For example, the Black racial category encompasses several different ethnic groups such as Nigerian, Jamaican, African, and Haitian. Such grouping further complicates racial ambiguity, perpetuating stereotypes that isolate those who do not fit in and leaving more room for inaccurate generalizations to be made about individuals. They mention, "The explosive growth in the numbers of persons of Hispanic origin and the substantial immigration of individuals from the Middle East, North Africa, and other parts of the world where skin color and hair texture vary, has also contributed to far greater ambiguity in racial identification" (156). Variations within racial groups complicate racial ambiguity as well. James' and Tucker's acknowledgement of these various aspects of racial ambiguity is certainly appreciated.

It is difficult to find literature on the subject of single-race racial ambiguity, the research that does exist often comes from the field of psychology. One example is the research of Otto H. MacLin and Roy S. Malpass, a study called *Racial Categorization of Faces: The Ambiguous Race Face Effect* (2001). The study was carried out with the goal of helping minorities not become victims of facial recognition procedure inaccuracies in criminal investigations (98). Although psychology and law oriented, this research provides valuable information about physical racial markers, in other words, on the phenotypes of certain races (Black, Hispanic and White) and how they were perceived by individuals who were minorities themselves (Hispanic in this case). It also sheds light on how racial markers are stereotypical in nature.

The "other-race" effect mentioned by Maclin and Malpass refers to the notion that "people of other races appear more similar to each other than people of our own race….other-race faces seem to show less variation among individuals than own-race faces" (99). Hispanics, Asians, African Americans, and Indians have been referred to as all looking the same. There is a common perception in society that individuals within these racial groups all look alike. This is due in part to the fact that the phenotypes of these racial groups are much more visible or noticeable than the racial phenotype of Whites. MacLin and Malpass also mention that the amount of contact that people have with individuals of other races can lead to such generalizations. If a White person comes into contact with Asian individuals who fit the stereotypical characteristics that exist about Asians, then they will think that all Asians look the same and will be ignorant of the fact that there are great variations in phenotype within *all* racial groups.

The participants of MacLin and Malpass' study were twenty University of Texas at El Paso students, 5 men and 15 women, all of whom identified as "Hispanic." MacLin and Malpass showed these students faces that were considered to be racially ambiguous. They explain:

> Racially ambiguous faces were created such that certain facial features (e.g., eyes, nose, and mouth) overlapped across Hispanic and African American racial lines. Because the features overlap, the racial marker feature is absent, and the face is ambiguous as to which race it belongs. When the racial marker feature is added, the ambiguity is resolved, and the face is readily perceived as a member of a particular racial category. (104)

Interestingly, in the study, hair was the racial marker. Adding hair to the faces helped the participants to distinguish the faces as being Black, Hispanic, White, and even Asian and Indian. This goes to show that phenotype is a crucial component in how people categorize others. It also says a lot about how racial groups perceive themselves. Specific phenotype classifications emerged from this study, interesting ones such as the mouths of Blacks being wider than the mouths of Hispanics, the eyes of Hispanics as more protruding that the eyes of Blacks and Blacks having wider faces than Hispanics. Also, based on these faces, the participants determined that Black faces were more suspicious and "warmer" than Hispanic faces (106). Socially, Blacks are stigmatized as criminals, which would explain this perception of a Black face looking suspicious. Interestingly, Hispanic faces were also viewed as submissive, which again, from a social perspective can be attributed to the fact that a lot of illegal immigrant workers, for fear of deportation, keep out of the spotlight by working jobs that nobody else wants and submit to deplorable working conditions. If Hispanics have a certain racial prototype, for example, of how Hispanics should look, then individuals who do not fit into this prototype will not be seen as being Hispanic by members of their group. Lyman and Douglass (1973) discuss something similar in their work which they refer to as *ethnic cues*:

> Ethnic cues are those aspects of appearance and behavior (e.g., physiognomic features, color of skin, texture of hair, accent in speech, style of expression, etc.) which can be assumed to be vested with ethnic significance but over the projection of which each actor has little or no control. (361)

Accent in speech, and style of expression can be considered ethnic or cultural cues, however, characteristics dealing with outer appearance should also be acknowledged as racial cues because characteristics such as skin color and facial features reflect ones race; sometimes these characteristics are stereotypical and sometimes they are ambiguous, making it hard to identify an individual.

Despite no direct reference to single-race racial ambiguity, a lot of the information in Sengstock's (2009) book has been useful in understanding certain aspects of racial ambiguity, such as the issue of belonging and the imposed views of others onto an individual which single-race individuals experience along with mixed-race individuals. She provides an important perspective on individuals that have a multi-cultural background. She gives multi-cultural individuals the opportunity to identify themselves and to share their stories on how it was to grow up in a multi-cultural/multi-racial family in a society that places an importance on clear racial categories. She writes,

> Furthermore, people who *appear* to be of different race are constantly treated as though they were members of that group, even if they do not identify as such.
> Ken, whose background included Guatemalan, Black, Native American, and Chinese, provides a good illustration of the dilemma of the multi-racial, as opposed to multi-cultural, person...he was not welcome in certain neighborhoods because he was assumed to be Black...On the other hand, he felt that some Blacks felt that he was, '...not Black enough.' (66)

In the example above, being racially ambiguous affected "Ken's" ability to *belong* to his respective racial groups. Someone who is of a single race can experience this as well. If Ken identified as single race only, African-American for example, and had very light skin color he may still be treated differently by people of the same background because he is not "Black

enough." Having the experiences of single-race individuals presented in a similar fashion would provide a different viewpoint on the racially ambiguous experience. More of this kind of research is needed in order to have a better understanding of racial ambiguity, not just among mixed-race individuals, but among single-race individuals as well.

<u>Focus on Mixed-Race Experiences in Studies on Racial Ambiguity</u>

In much of the research on mixed race identity dealing with ambiguity that was selected for review in this proposal, the emotional aspect of the lives of these individuals is always taken into account (Song 2003; Conard-Salvo 2004; Gilbert 2005), which is important because racial ambiguity can be a frustrating thing to experience.

Miri Song briefly discusses racial ambiguity in her book, *Choosing Ethnic Identity* (2003). However, her discussion of racial ambiguity is specifically in regard to the experience of the mixed-race/multiracial individual. She mentions the one-drop rule, the debate on how mixed-race individuals should identify themselves (bi-racial, multi-racial, mixed, or choose one or the other), passing and misrecognition. She defines misrecognition as a "disjuncture between how someone perceives her own ethnic identity and her identity as seen by others" (69). This idea of misrecognition is very similar to, if not the same as Cooley's "the looking glass self" and Jenkins' "internal-external identities" (Cooley 1998; Jenkins 1996). Song discusses misrecognition in direct relation to the experience of a mixed-race individual. Song provides an example that supports the notion of racial ambiguity. She refers to a light skinned, mixed individual that may want to identify as Black or mixed, for example. However, due to misrecognition, he or she cannot do so because of the frequent occurrences of being perceived as White (70).

In a personal story, Tammy Conard-Salvo (2004) writes on her struggle as a bi-racial individual of American and Korean ancestry. This struggle is ignited after a decision to move from Lubbock, Texas to Boston, Massachusetts. She says:

> adjusting to an environment where I wasn't the only Asian-American face was initially strange and somewhat disconcerting…I continuously faced a set of questions that I didn't expect to ask: Will I fit in? Have I been away from Asian-Americans too long? Do I look Asian? Will the Asian/Asian American community discriminate against me because I'm only half Asian? What if people don't think I'm Asian because my name doesn't sound Asian…? (2)

Conard-Salvo is an example of a bi-racial individual who happens to feel racially ambiguous. She went from feeling unique in Lubbock (where there were very few Asian-Americans) and not thinking so deeply about how other Asian-Americans viewed her, to being preoccupied with questions about her Asian identity in Boston. She refers to herself as a "Hapa," which is a native Hawaiian word used to refer to individuals who are part White and part Hawaiian, but is also used in general to refer to individuals of partial Asian-Pacific Islander ancestry (Asian-Nation.org). In Lubbock, others treated her as something special and she felt proud of the fact that she was a part of the minimal diversity there; she did not have any doubts as to how Asian she was because she did not have others to compare herself to. For Conard, it appears that her racial-ethnic identity is more salient in racial/ethnic settings where her racial group dominates.

Having a sense of belonging to a racial or ethnic group can be very crucial in the maintenance of one's identity and self-esteem. In his essay, *Interrogating Mixed-Race: A Crisis of Ambiguity?* (2005), David Gilbert includes disclosures of personal experiences by mixed-race people which express "how and why some of their everyday experiences can reinforce their sense of dislocation and a lack of belonging" (66). Gilbert quotes the personal experience of an Asian/European woman:

> I always thought I looked white, I guess because my Korean (American) friends said I looked white. They joked about my blondish-brown hair and green eyes. Then one day this white person called me a flat-faced slant-eye. This was a blow to the image I had developed of myself…I'll never fit in because while people will accept me like my Korean friends do, they'll think I'm of a different race. (67)

Gilbert mentions the importance of the role of phenotype in this person's particular experience. This woman went from feeling comfortable about not looking Korean and about thinking of herself as Caucasian to feeling uncomfortable once someone pointed out her racial phenotype that distinguishes her from whites. This is very similar to the experiences of the women in Twine's research which was mentioned earlier, who went from being racially unmarked to racially marked once around others who acknowledge racial differences (1996). In Gilbert's paper there is a section titled *Question of Belonging*, in which he discusses "authentic racial characteristics" and how they are different for every group and can change over time (67). Characteristics such as phenotype, dress, and food can be measures of authenticity. Gilbert says, "To be an authentic member may require certain shades of skin tone, cultural knowledge, friendship groups, language abilities…and certain ancestral ties…borders are self-regulated and regulated by others" (68). The more distinct requirements racial and ethnic groups have, the more difficulties that one who is racially ambiguous will have fulfilling the requirements and fitting in. Gilbert ends his paper with a set of questions regarding the future of the study of racial ambiguity, with a focus on how it pertains to multi-racial people. One of the questions that he asks is, "What is understood by ambiguity in a range of social, physical, emotional and ideological contexts?" is more of a general question, allowing for more constructive thinking which cannot only be applied to the experiences of racial ambiguity by mixed-race persons, but by single-race individuals as well (71).

The literature reviewed for this study covers a broad range of important issues such as race, ethnicity, identity/sense of self, and stereotypes. The classical theories on identity and race and ethnicity provide a strong foundation to build upon and can be applied in the analysis portion of the study. There is a fair amount of information on mixed race identity based on what I was able to find. From Sengstock's (2009) work to Conard-Salvo's (2004) personal account, insight is provided into the uncertainty that mixed-race individuals encounter when trying to racially identify and the experiences they have when others try to identify them. Maclin and Malpass'(2001) study on facial recognition covers an aspect of racial ambiguity that help in understanding how physical similarities and differences between races contribute to cases of racial ambiguity among individuals. While this information is important and necessary for this study, focus on the experiences of single-race individuals is limited. What are their experiences? Do they experience racial ambiguity the same way that mixed-race individuals do? What difficulties does someone who has two parents of the same racial background come across when he or she does not look like his or her respective race? Overall, more information on racial ambiguity is needed and one way to obtain this information is by looking at racial ambiguity from a different perspective by interviewing individuals who personally experience racial ambiguity (including both mixed-race and single-race individuals).

METHODS

According to *Proposing Empirical Research* by Mildred L. Patten (2005), "The purpose of qualitative research is to gain an in-depth understanding of purposively selected participants from their perspective" (29). Qualitative research was used as the method of inquiry for this exploratory study. There is no better way to find out about racial ambiguity than from people who have experienced it and continue to experience it. In-depth, open ended interviews allow

racially ambiguous individuals to share their stories and explain how they choose to define their racial/ethnic identity and how it feels to be told that you are something that you are not. Interviewing is also a good method of obtaining information from racially ambiguous individuals on their sense of "belonging" to their racial and or ethnic group. In *Investigating the Social World: The Process and Practice of Research* (2004), Russell K. Schutt explains that in-depth interviewing can be chosen over other qualitative methods such as participant observation or focus groups because it offers the convenience of a onetime session and it also allows for exploring a representative person's feelings in a personal setting (276).

<u>Instrumentation</u>

Analysis is based on a study I conducted in October and November 2010. Participants for the project were obtained from a university campus in a Midwestern state. All of the participants were students except for one person who was a staff member at the university. Before recruitment started, I utilized a screening questionnaire consisting of closed ended questions (see Appendix A). This screening questionnaire allowed me to make sure that I was recruiting individuals with experiences of racial ambiguity and also documenting the racial-ethnic backgrounds of participants. I conducted a pilot interview of 20 open ended questions with a friend of mine to see how the questions flowed and to gauge how long each interview would last. The pilot interview lasted about 45 minutes. I expected the maximum length to be about one hour, taking into consideration that some people may have more to elaborate on. Once I began my interviews, the length of time for the interviews ranged between 15 minutes to 45 minutes. The first couple of interviews conducted were shorter in time due to me still trying to get the feel for a good pace with the questions and additional probing. Some participants simply just had more to say that others and were very detailed in their responses and shared anecdotes.

The sample consists of individuals who are of single and mixed-race (bi-racial and multi-racial). My original intention before starting the interview process was to try to and recruit single-race individuals only. However, I decided against this due to the concern of not being able to recruit enough participants. I chose to start with a broad sample so that more information could be found which may later be used to provide a foundation for more specific questions or things to look at. Thus the sample consists of both single-race and mixed-race individuals. I felt that a sample consisting of both groups would be beneficial in comparing how each of the two groups experience racial ambiguity as well as assist in attracting more participants. I was also curious to see how meanings and experiences varied between the two groups, suspecting that single-race individuals would be more internally affected by being racially ambiguous.

The university from which all of the participants were recruited is known for its non-traditional student body, which helped yield a relatively diverse sample of men and women between the ages of 18 and 39. Individuals within this age group are old enough to not require parental consent, most are beginning to define themselves and distinguish themselves from others and are still within a range of experiences that are not from completely different time periods. Although gender did not play a role in sample selection, 13 out of the 19 participants were female. Based on the screening questionnaire, 15 out 19 participants identified as "single-race," 2 participants identified as "multi-racial" and 2 identified as "bi-racial" (see Chart 2). I also compiled the participants' actual racial and or ethnic identity, their preferred identity, and what they are mistaken for in a chart (see Chart 1).

Snowball and targeted/purposive sampling was used, the participants were essentially self-selected. I posted flyers in various locations around campus such as the student center, libraries, and various academic and administrative buildings asking for both single-race and or

mixed-race individuals to participate to achieve desired diversity.   Contact information was provided on the notice/flyer (see Appendix E). The flyers attracted several interested individuals, one participant brought a friend that eventually also took part in an interview. I received calls from interested individuals the following day after posting the flyers and soon after began to arrange meeting times. I continued to receive calls after I had already finished gathering my participants. I eventually took down the extra flyers that I posted around campus after finishing all of the interviews I had set up. The interview locations and times were convenient for the participants and myself because they were all on campus and during school hours. Participants received $5 in cash for participating in the interview. Although all of the participants expressed no particular interest in the monetary compensation, one participant refused the compensation stating that she just wanted to contribute to the research and did not want anything in return.

Aside from my own anxiety regarding interviewing people about a relatively personal subject, the recruitment process went smoothly and quickly. After the first two interviews, I revised my questions by eliminating a question covering racial ambiguity in pop culture after not really receiving any pertinent information for the study. I also began to probe more on the feelings of the participants, asking them to elaborate and provide specific examples of situations in which they were mistaken for being of another race or ethnicity. I also added a couple of questions which asked their opinions about the questions they responded to and also what they would want to ask other racially ambiguous individuals if they had the chance. There were a couple of questions that did cause some confusion for the participants, resulting in me having to provide examples and clarification. About six or seven of the interviewees needed clarification on the question, "What are some common physical characteristics of your racial group(s)?" The participants were confused as to whether I was asking for physical characteristics only or if I

wanted them to share ethnic/cultural characteristics. Regardless of clarifying that I was specifically asking for physical characteristics, the participants still ended up incorporating ethnic and cultural characteristics of their respective identities. There were similar responses to a question regarding stereotypes pertaining to their specific racial and ethnic group and their feelings about them. I had to clarify whether I was referring to physical or cultural stereotypes. Overall, the interview questions were created to cover how the participants identify racially; their ethnic/cultural background, stereotypes, and how others identify the respondents among other issues (see Appendix B).

The confidentiality and consent of the respondents was of high importance throughout the study and during the analysis. An information sheet was used to acquire informed consent from participants (see Appendix C). The recruiting process began upon approval from the Wayne State University Human Investigation Committee (HIC). All interviews were digitally tape recorded and later transcribed by myself. I read the typed transcripts several times, sorted out re-occurring themes, making notes aside. Coding was utilized to descriptively and interpretively analyze all transcripts, searching for words, comments, and themes pertaining to the research questions that I was seeking more information on. I also created charts with their pseudonyms, ages, racial and or ethnic identification and also what they are mistaken for. Themes that became evident were self-identification, identification imposed by others, perceptions of race and ethnicity, feelings, differences between the experiences of single-race and mixed-race participants, and ways of coping with being racially ambiguous. Quotes were pulled from the transcripts that pertained to each of these themes, and I referred to my charts for easy access to demographic information in order to write the findings section.

Since I am of a single-race and am also racially ambiguous, I was concerned that my personal experiences might add an element of bias. Not probing into the thoughts of the respondents the way someone who has no experience with racial ambiguity possibly would or assuming that I know all about the experience of my interviewees, and having expectations about what I am going to hear, were different bias risks that I considered. To reduce bias, I ensured that my probing questions were neutral as possible so as to not encourage specific responses. Needless to say, my own personal experiences have inspired me to look into the issue of racial ambiguity further. Despite the concern of bias, I feel that my experiences as someone who is racially ambiguous allowed me the opportunity to understand the interviewees better and help them feel more at ease with sharing personal stories and feelings about themselves. It is important to share my own experiences in my analysis portion because my experience with racial ambiguity is valuable data as well.

In her book, Sengstock (2009) states, "The USA is so preoccupied with skin color that even small variations are noticed. Furthermore, many people feel free to call attention to an individual's skin color, even in relatively casual situations, and to mention it to the individuals involved as well as to others"(64). The participants in this study experience this type of attention on a daily basis, in some instances, several times a day from strangers, friends and family members. How can this not have an effect on ones sense of self? Even a person with the strongest ties to his or her racial and or ethnic identity experiences the side effects of constant questioning. What are these side effects? Uncertainty (questioning oneself), feelings of self-consciousness and feelings of acceptance and embracement of racial ambiguity are all examples of the range of experiences of the participants. The findings portion of this study will cover the following three major sections: how the both single and mixed-race participants identify

themselves and what they are mistaken for, how it affects their sense of self, and lastly the coping mechanisms that they use to deal with being racially ambiguous.

FINDINGS

<u>"*I'm Actually. . .*" What They Are and What They Get Mistaken For</u>

The participants interviewed for this study are diverse in their racial and ethnic backgrounds. Some knew a great deal about their heritage, providing a breakdown of what they knew their racial and ethnic background(s) to be. Others were uncertain and appeared frustrated with their lack of knowledge of "what" they are. Considering their experiences with always being told what they look like by others, I felt that it was important to have the participants explain in their own words what their preferred identity was. How do participants describe themselves in their own words? What do they get mistaken for? Below are some examples of responses to different variations of the question, "Can you tell me about your racial background?"

> My parents are from South America, Guyana, which is part of South American but it's also considered part of the Caribbean as countries like Jamaica or Trinidad Tobago. The…language there is English, that's the official language but the culture there is a mix of African and Indian. A lot of people get confused with me because they hear "South America" and automatically they think "Spanish" or they think I'm Indian and I do have some Indian background but it's not the same Indian as it would be in India or Native American Indian.

In her response, Alexandra, age 18, discussed the national identity of Guyana, providing information on the diverse culture of the country. She is often mistaken for being Hispanic or East Indian. Addressing Guyana's cultural diversity in her response is a means of letting others know that there are many misconceptions about the country, which contribute to her racial ambiguity. She also refers to and clarifies confusion surrounding her Indian heritage which will be discussed later.

Raven, age 23, discusses in detail her ethnic background, breaking it down in terms of her mother and father's backgrounds, and stating with some uncertainty how she considers herself to be labeled. Raven is fair skinned, with light colored hair and is frequently mistaken for being White and sometimes part Asian. She says,

> My mother is Cherokee and Chippewa, um Saginaw Chippewa, and northern band Cherokee out of Pocahontas Arkansas. I don't know if that means anything to you, but to Indians that makes a difference. Um, and my father was an illegal undocumented worker from Mexico, so he's Mexican Indian… I guess I would be considered bi-racial/ Native American and Chicana.

She does not have just one ethnic identity; she states her identities in detail. She did not choose to say Native American or Indian, rather she referred to her tribal identifications. Also, instead of saying Hispanic, she specifically said "Mexican Indian" and "Chicana," she did, however, state that she considers herself bi-racial as well. From the beginning, Raven was confident in her identities and was very thorough in her responses. Also, her sense of pride was made apparent throughout her interview by the examples she provided of her childhood and involvement in her heritage.

Paula, age 25, who is often asked if she is Jewish, and who also gets mistaken for being a variety of different races/ethnicities such as Armenian, Lebanese, Arabic, Hispanic or mixed, started off with a racial identification and then went on to list her specific ethnic identities.

> I guess I identify as Caucasian and White, so I don't know how in-depth you want it. But, I'm German, Belgian, French, Irish, and Italian. And, I'm not sure if I'm a little bit Spanish

Compared to Raven and Alexandra, she is not as certain in her answer to the question. Although she has knowledge of what her respective backgrounds are, she states with uncertainty that she may have some Spanish ancestry.

In the following response, David, age 18, chose to answer by solely referring to his nationality and ethnicity. David is regularly mistaken for being Arabic. He states, "I'm a 100%

Albanian, um, I was born in Albania and I moved here in the year 2000." He started by confidently stating that he is "100%" Albanian. At that point, it became apparent that he identified strongly with his ethnic background, as opposed to identifying by race which according to his screening questionnaire is "European/White." Based on the quote above, one may get the impression that David is very confident in terms of his ethnic identity and that his ethnicity would not be ambiguous, but throughout his interview, he seemed to be affected emotionally by instances of mistaken identity more so than others. This was made apparent by comments that he made about dealing with being racially ambiguous, which convey a desire to not have to deal with uncomfortable situations of being mistaken for something else. Providing detailed information about his Albanian heritage suggests a message of *I was born in Albania, my family is Albanian, I speak Albanian, why am I mistaken for being something else?* Ways that David copes with being racially ambiguous will be discussed later.

Lisa, age 37, is often perceived by others as being bi-racial, part Asian or Latino. In the following quote begins with a general racial identification of African American but goes into more detail about what she believes her background to be in response to, "Tell me about your racial background?" She says,

> Um, African American as far as I know it…if there are Native Americans in our family, I believe they are Choctaw and Cherokee. I don't know my biological grandfather or um, my biological father, but I was told that my biological father, or grandfather was very light complected [sic] with green eyes and the people in my family are medium to dark complected [sic] aside from myself and uh a brother who is half Mexican.

She also later goes onto to say,

> I prefer to just identify myself as a person, but I feel really comfortable saying that I'm African American. It's not something that I try to keep a secret or that I'm ashamed of, you know? I feel good about that.

Lisa takes pride in being African American, and racially that is how she identifies. Throughout her interview she expresses a desire to learn more about herself and her ethnic heritage, also wanting her daughters to be able to know *who* they are. This desire may result from not being certain about her Native American ancestry and not knowing much of her paternal side. Despite embracing her African American identity and her desire to learn more about ethnic identity, in an ideal world she would prefer it if she could just identify as a person, avoiding categories altogether.

Nadia, age 18, has a diverse background, resulting in an appearance that is mistaken for being White, Mexican, Middle Eastern, Italian, or Mediterranean. She shared a thorough description of her ethnic and racial background, telling me what she knows of her mother's background and of her father's as well.

> Well my mom is um, German, French Canadian and Welsh, so, she is Caucasian and we call her White. And, my dad is half Japanese half African American…I definitely just see myself as a multi-racial individual, I don't ever identify myself with one certain race.

Her diverse background results in an appearance that is mistaken for being White, Mexican, Middle Eastern, Italian, and Mediterranean. She does not force herself to identify with one ethnic identity, or as Black or White, which is an issue that many individuals of mixed-race backgrounds deal with on a daily basis. She identifies as multi-racial; as being a part of all of the mentioned identities. Also, similar to Raven's response, Nadia discusses her mother and father's backgrounds in her response. This was a common occurrence in most of the interviews. Although I did not specifically ask them about their family in questions regarding their racial/ethnic identity the participants brought up their maternal/paternal backgrounds. Familial ancestry, along with other social factors, plays an important role in how we make sense of who we are, how we decide to identify ourselves racially/ethnically. Mead's (1934) notion of the

"generalized other" can be applied to family, and other social relationships, referring to the expectations and influence these "others" set for an individual.

In his response to the question "How do you prefer to racially identify?" James, age 24, states, "If we speak in race, it's going to be White or Caucasian. I mean as far as ethnicity is concerned, I'm gonna identify as Italian, perhaps Italian American." He went on to discuss what he feels he is considered to be followed by what he identifies most with. He states,

> Uh, I suppose in the broadest of terms, I would be considered "White," or Caucasian or something to that effect. But going a little bit deeper into that I actually um, identify most closely with Italian and occasionally Greek, depending on company or references, or something…

Part of his background is Italian, and aside from identifying with his Italian background he stated that he identified with the Greek ethnicity, of which to his knowledge, he has no ancestry of. Greek is an ethnicity that he often is mistaken for and a group that he spends a lot of time with as a result of personal relationships that he has developed. He identifies with the Italian and Greek ethnicities, exerting his Italian heritage among other Italians and embracing the ability to pass as someone of Greek ancestry when around Greeks. This is reminiscent of Okamura's (1981) concept of "situational ethnicity" in which one's behaviors or interactions vary when around different groups of people or in different situations. In the case of James, he engages in this kind of behavior to fit in more with his actual ethnicity or to blend more with the group that he is frequently mistaken for, both possibly for comfort reasons.

In hearing about the backgrounds of the participants, it became apparent how arduous it can be to define oneself, in the cases of both single-race and bi/multi-racial individuals. It becomes even more difficult when parts of one's ancestry are unknown or uncertain. In response to the question, "Could you tell me about your racial background?" or any variation of the question, a majority of the individuals responded with information about their ethnic and/or

cultural background. As a result, throughout the interviews I found myself straying from the term "racial," and also transposing the terms "race" and "ethnicity." This occurrence speaks to the confusion surrounding what "race" and "ethnicity" really mean and the difference between the two terms. The mistaken identities that the participants are perceived as also range across various racial and ethnic categories (e.g. Middle Eastern, Jewish, Italian, White, bi-racial, etc.) which illustrates that even those who do the labeling (strangers, friends, family) perhaps conflate ethnicity with race. There was only one instance where I stated the question in terms of ethnicity rather than race. I asked Marcus, age 39, "Could you tell me about your racial background?" He replied by asking for some clarification as to what I meant in regards to racial background. In response, I asked him to just tell me about his ethnic background. My reason for transposing ethnicity for race was because I wanted to know more about his ancestry and did not think that he would share much information about his background if I had asked him to clarify his race, which according to him is "European/White." Perhaps Marcus and the other participants were unsure of what I meant by "racial background," because race and ethnicity are not straightforward and can be synonymous at times.

"*Really? You Don't Look . .*" Experiences of Racial Ambiguity and its Effects

The texture of our hair, our facial features, the color of our skin are all are factors that play an important role in the way others identify us, and the way we choose identify ourselves. In her book, Sengstock (2009) writes, "It is perhaps belaboring the obvious to note that the physical character of racial differences ensures that they are constantly observable, even to the casual onlooker. Only people with racial differences look different – all the time" (65). What happens to our thoughts when our physical attributes do not match our actual racial and or ethnic

identity? What happens when we are told that we are something that we are not? In what ways are people's sense of identity affected by the opinions others?

In this section, a range of experiences and feelings amongst the participants will be discussed, specifically pertaining to having their racial and ethnic identities assumed by others. Some were annoyed by the constant questioning or even amazed by the curious nature of others. Some preferred being asked what they were as opposed to being told or assumed that they are something that they are not. At the other spectrum were individuals that did not experience much frustration from being questioned and did not mind answering questions or correcting the assumptions of others, expressing positive or empowered attitudes about their experiences with mistaken and ambiguous identity. For example, Sadie, age 18, who identifies as Indian, expressed that she has a sense of enjoyment when she is mistaken for being any of the following races and or ethnicities, Filipino, Mexican, Chaldean, Arabic, Hawaiian, "Gypsy," Christian, or Asian. It makes her feel exotic—different, "I don't really mind it because I find it funny. And I do feel a little exotic because I look a little different. Ha-ha."

In the following example, Stacey age 23, who is French, German, Native American and African American but gets mistaken for being Hawaiian or Hispanic, informed me that people make assumptions about and question her racial identity about 5 to 10 times a day. She conveyed her frustration regarding the frequent questioning,

> When people continuously ask me, it gets annoying and I'm just like, "Oh my gosh." Like working at a hospital, if I'm gonna ask you questions, it's gonna be relative to why you're here, you know, so when you ask "What are you?" It's like, "Really? You're sick, you're dying and that's what you want to know right now?" So, I don't know sometimes.

Prior to this she had mentioned that at a previous job, her co-workers were placing bets, guessing what race she was, stating that they even had a "whole chart and everything." This shows that

individuals would rather invest effort in defining someone's racial/ethnic background rather than settle for an ambiguous identity.

In response to me sharing some of my own personal experiences with David, he shared an anecdote about a time when he not only questioned himself but also his mother as to whom he really was. He is and identifies as Albanian, but as mentioned earlier, is mistaken for being Arabic. David's quote highlights the importance of understanding racial ambiguity and learning more about it.

> Am I adopted? "No, you're not. No". And there would be times when she would joke around back with me and she would say "Yes, I did adopt you," you know? "Am I really? Because you know it would make a lot of sense if I was." But, I've actually had um, you know how they do yearly checkups? I mean, I've asked the doctor myself, "Am I blood related to my mom?" "Yes, you are." So I mean, I can't, I don't, I can't uh…I know where you're coming from, you know?

After having so many experiences where others question "what" you are, it may start to affect one's sense of self. David eventually asked his own doctor if he was adopted. Being physically racially ambiguous caused him to question his mother and, although it may not have been a serious inquiry, there was still some sense of anxiety and self-doubt behind his efforts to figure out who he was.

Jessica, age 18, who is 1st generation Albanian, never really felt offended by being questioned, stating, "When they ask they usually don't really mean anything by it." She did, however, share something interesting with me when asked whether or not she feels her self - esteem has been affected by not "looking" Albanian.

> Um, yeah, more so with like, identity, I don't want to say confusion, but like, it's made me, I don't know, like question where I fit in more, you know? Not just the way I look, but all of that put together.

She feels that Albanians view her as being White, and that other Americans view her as being "foreign" (Mexican, Arabic), which causes her to look at herself more and try to make sense of how to identify and what group she fits in with.

In the following example, Nadia talks about the way that she felt in elementary school in regards to her atypical appearance. Things were fine when she was perceived as just being of one race, but when her classmates found out that she was of different backgrounds, perceptions changed.

> Some kid was like, "I like you," and somehow, someone told him that I was part Japanese or whatever, and he was Black, so I'm sure he was fine with the fact that I was part Black and part White, but when he found out that I was Japanese he was like, "That's weird, I don't like you anymore."

She then went on to comment on how her feelings have changed from when she was younger to being an adult.

> …As a kid it was uh, it was a little uncomfortable for me to tell people my racial background, specifically younger kids in elementary school…as I got older, people were more mature about it, more interested rather than being kind of racist about it…so I do remember being embarrassed and having a little bit of shame about it, about telling people because I was used to kids reactions being negative.

Although a long time ago, that single experience left a lasting impression on Nadia. It caused her to feel self-conscious, ashamed of looking different. It is a big adjustment to go from expecting negative reactions when telling someone about yourself and who you are, to receiving curious and interested reactions. With time, with improved self-confidence, and with changes in the way society accepts persons of mixed-race backgrounds, she has become more comfortable with sharing information about her racial backgrounds with others.

When asked what aspects of her life have been affected by her racial ambiguity, Tiffany, age 22, who is part German, Italian, Russian, and French, shared a story of a time she felt that she was discriminated against at work due to her physical appearance. She prefers to identify

ethnically rather than state she is White or Caucasian. She stated that a past co-worker was born

in Russia and had dyed blond hair, outwardly appeared to look "White" and according to

Tiffany, did not receive as much, if any feedback regarding her physical appearance as she did.

This led her to question if the comments that were directed towards her were due to the fact that

she did not physically look White as compared to her co-worker.

> She was just as ethnic as I was…and it's just like they wanted me to act like "White" or whatever…They kept saying, like, "You need to look more professional," and I was wearing like really nice clothes and they were saying "You need to do your hair different" and I was like "This is how my hair is," and they kept telling me to do all these different things with my clothes and my appearance, like "You need to do your makeup different," and like, this is how my face is.

It can be difficult enough to hear someone tell you that you need to change your sense of style

but what about when you feel that you are being told to alter your physical appearance, such as

your hair color or make up? In the above example, Tiffany's racial ambiguity resulted in what

she felt to be discrimination and it is an experience that she still carries with her. If she appeared

to look White at first sight, according to existing stereotypes, would she have been given

feedback on ways to alter her appearance?

When asked how she feels about being asked if she's White or Lebanese on a daily basis,

Mary, age 23, who is Mexican American shared her frustration with common stereotypes of how

certain racial groups are supposed to look like.

> See, okay, when people call me that, I kind of get offensive because to me I feel like they're being narrow minded, uh because I feel that regardless of what culture you're from, not everybody is gonna look the same. There's always gonna be some people that can look like one color and some people that can look like another, but that doesn't mean that they're not from that culture, so that kind of bothers me.

Mary is pointing out that there are many variations amongst people of different racial groups.

She has fair skin and light colored eyes which she feels contributes to her racial ambiguity

because they are physical characteristics that are shared across many racial and ethnic groups. It upsets her that these characteristics are not acknowledged by others as belonging to someone who is Mexican, and that she is categorized based on the fact that she shows these characteristics; which according to her specific experiences with racial ambiguity, belong to the White racial group, or the Lebanese ethnic group.

Marcus identifies as European American/Caucasian and is often mistaken for being Mexican, Italian, Mediterranean and Middle Eastern. There was a sense of curiosity on his part as to what the study was about which stemmed from a desire to try and understand his racial background and why he is racially ambiguous. In response to being asked if his racial ambiguity makes him feel like he does not fit in under the category of Caucasian he stated, "Um, a little bit, sometimes. In the back of my mind, hey I don't know if I…Do I look like other Caucasians? Do I look exactly like them, can I fit in?" He also stated that it stirs feelings of, "confusion, hahaha and uh kind of doubt a little bit, like it makes me want to find out more about my family, like other ethnicities." Similar to Lisa, Paula, and Tiffany, Marcus' racial ambiguity has instilled in him a desire to learn more about his ethnic identity. Although his preferred racial identification is "Caucasian," he questions his racial identity and why he looks the way he looks as a result being mistaken for being Hispanic or Middle-Eastern. He shared with me what he believes to be his ethnic backgrounds which can be seen in Chart 1.

In her interview, Alexandra used her experiences as a means of informing others who incorrectly identify her. As mentioned earlier, she came to speak with me with a purpose and she certainly explained herself thoroughly and clearly,

> I wanted to make it clear, like the differentiation between West Indians and Indians from India. Because like a lot of people deny the fact that I'm Indian, and that's not okay with me because I am Indian, just a different type of Indian… Whether they think I'm Spanish and stuff, I mean that's understandable because

it's South America I mean, people associate, the fact to sit there and say that I'm not Indian when I am actually Indian, it's disturbing.

Alexandra is often mistaken for being Hispanic or East Indian. She used the interview with me as an opportunity to raise awareness on how diverse the Guyanese people are and that there are various different racial and ethnic groups that populate the country of Guyana which is in South America.

A lot of people just want to say stuff, you know, talk crap, and they don't even want to listen to an explanation. You know, they just say "Oh you're Indian, you wear a dot," and I'm like "No, that's my culture…"

She does not like to be told that she is something by people that are reluctant to even hear an explanation. The fact that many individuals make assumptions solely based on appearance is what is most frustrating for a lot of the participants such as Alexandra, Raven, David, and Paula, to name a few and even more so is when those who do the questioning do not want to believe or accept that they are wrong. Sengstock (2009) writes, "Consequently, individuals are often questioned about their racial background and expected to identify themselves with whichever group the questioner presumes they represent. Often, the questioners are not willing to accept any identity other that the one they expect" (65).

Sengstock's quote reminds me of an instance in which I was in a classroom, and a classmate asked me, "Are you Asian?" to which I replied "no, I'm Hispanic. My family is from Peru." She said to me, "No way, you are not Hispanic, you're Asian!" I was left speechless. She specifically thought that I was Chinese and did not want to think anything else. I was placed in a racial and ethnic group that I did not belong to, but to which my physical characteristics apparently belong.

Paula would prefer to be asked what she is rather than have people assume. She obviously has the most knowledge of her background and would like the opportunity to tell people about herself, but this does not always happen,

> I've had times where people just assumed what I was, and I haven't negated that because I just get irritated sometimes, where it's not up to me to like prove myself to you, if you're going to make a mistake rather than ask, that's your problem.

As a result of frustration, she does not bother to correct others when they mistake her for being Greek, Jewish, or Lebanese for example, because they do not bother to simply ask. She feels that it is not always necessary to go out of her way to inform people of her racial backgrounds. On a more personal level, she shared how it made her feel as a person.

> It's almost made me feel that I'm, the negative side, kind of like I'm not as much…as somebody who um, I might be the same as far as strict percentages of an ethnicity as somebody else, but it makes me feel like I'm not allowed as much to identify with it, or that I'm not necessarily as much of that because I don't have the phenotypes.

Being racially ambiguous has made Paula feel displaced, not really sure where she fits in. This is a sentiment that many people of multi-racial and ethnic backgrounds experience, and one that single-race individuals, such as Paula, share as well. Paula and I discussed the idea of the one drop rule (Davis 1991), which is a historical term used to prove or justify that a person is Black if he or she has "one drop of black blood" and felt that in her situation it was somewhat of the opposite. She believes that she has some Spanish ancestry, but feels that people do not allow her to acknowledge that part of herself because she is not fully Spanish. She states,

> I just recently found out that I have a little Spanish ancestry, but in some contexts I don't include that at all because I have friends who are Hispanic that tell me that I can't identify as that, you know how people tell you can't identify as something? And I don't want to make it a big deal. And they're like, "Oh you're not brown you're white"

She is denied the ability to identify with her Spanish ancestry simply because she does not look like a typical Spanish or Hispanic woman with "brown" skin. She almost became a part of a Hispanic sorority but was not accepted, which she believes to be due to the fact that she is not a 100% Mexican or Puerto Rican for example.

Paula's experience serves as an example of someone who considers herself to be of single race but who experiences her racial identity in a way that someone who is of a mixed race background might. Individuals who are mixed-race may experience difficulty in choosing how to identify themselves racially and or ethnically, but we see that even someone of a single race can feel the same way, especially when they are told that they do not look like the race that they are, resulting in confusion. A single-race person can also experience discrimination as a result of mistaken identity and feel pressured to identify as something that they are not solely based on their physical appearance. Paula, although she considers herself to be White, thinks that she may have some Spanish ancestry but feels that she is not allowed to "claim" that ancestry because her physical appearance suggests otherwise. This is also often the case for someone who is bi-racial (for example, Black and White) but who may be not be accepted by either side because they are either too light skinned or too dark skinned.

Above we see a range of experiences among both single-race individuals and bi-racial/multi-racial individuals, from thinking that being racially ambiguous is not so bad; that it can be fun at times, to feelings of frustration, feelings of personal doubt, offense, curiosity, self consciousness and empowerment. Out of the 9 participants mentioned in this section, 7 consider themselves to be of single-race. Overall, the majority of the participants in this study were of single race, which was something that I thought most likely would not happen, expecting that most of the participants would be bi/multi-racial. A comparison of the way that single-race and

bi-racial/multi-racial individuals experience racial ambiguity was a point of interest in this study and based on the responses of the participants we can see that there are commonalities and not many differences, if any. Both single and mixed-race individuals experience frustration, isolation, feelings of self-consciousness and also feelings of acceptance (or coming to the understanding that they are who they are and that they cannot change who they are).

Dealing with Racial Ambiguity: Coping Strategies

For the most part, the participants in this study have been asked, "What are you?" and have been the recipients of many puzzled stares and whispers. When who you are is constantly questioned, it can cause you to question yourself and wonder where you fit in. What are their ways of dealing with the questions and the curiosity that they attract? The way that they cope with the comments made about their physical appearance and their racial/ethnic vary from positive to negative; it was interesting to see the different ways in which the participants dealt with their racial ambiguity.

I wanted to learn more about ways in which the participants proved their identity to others, if they took pride in their racial ambiguity, if they joked about it, or if they sought out people like themselves in order to have a sense of belonging. After reading through the interview transcripts, the participants fell into different "coping" groups. Some of them use the ability to speak their native language as a means of dealing with the many instances of racial ambiguity/mistaken identity that they experience on a daily or weekly basis. Some provided examples of altering their appearance in order to fit in more. Then there are some who choose to surround themselves with people they feel comfortable with or that they can identify with. Finally some participants use humor in certain situations that might otherwise be uncomfortable. These different coping mechanisms will be discussed in this section.

In the following examples, David, Jessica, Raven and Mary shared with me the role that language plays in their sense of self. In regards to being able to speak and understand the Albanian language, David said, "It makes me feel the sense that I really am Albanian because it um, it kind of proves that I'm Albanian when my physical appearance fails to do so." He relies on his ability to speak Albanian in order to feel like he is an Albanian.

In the next example, Jessica, who is also Albanian, states that she feels the need to "be more Albanian" around others who are Albanian as well,

> Like around Albanians, I feel like I have to be more Albanian, and I don't speak it as well as others, so they always kind of mention my accent and certain things that I can't say. But when I'm around them, yeah, I try to show the fact that I am Albanian.

The desire to be acknowledged as being Albanian by other Albanians resulted in Jessica focusing on her language as a means of letting others know that she can speak it and avoid being questioned or asked what she is, even though her accent is critiqued. Despite an earlier example of her indifference towards her racial ambiguity, she still acknowledges the effect that it has on her identity and how she feels people of her own background perceive her.

Although Raven is very confident with her ethnic identity, there were times when she felt that she needed to express to others that she is Native American. For her, possessing the ability to speak her native language fluently is all the proof that she needs if someone questions her, giving her a sense of pride and authenticity over others who claim to be Native American.

> Knowing my native language has given me, like, it helps me assert my "Indianess"…even when I get these, for lack of a better term, these "res rats," these Indians living up on the reservation who think they're more, holier than thou, more Indian than me, I just look at them, and I say something to them in Ojibwe, and when they can't answer me back… I guess who's more Indian now?

In her interview, Mary described other ways that she compensated or dealt with her racial ambiguity, by wearing certain clothes, speaking Spanish and altering her physical appearance

(getting a tan). "When I was like around 15, I wanted to actually look darker, so I would take tans once in a while, um, but other than that I just learned to accept it and I'm fine with it now." She also describes a specific experience from when she was in high school,

> Like I remember I was trying to make new friends, they looked at me like "Do you even speak our language?" and I'd be like "Yes I do," but that was a long time ago, but now no. I felt out of place because I figured, I figured since I was, 'cause at that time I was dressed in some traditional clothes and I thought they would maybe understand that I could speak another language. I wouldn't be wearing traditional clothes just for fun.

Mary assumed that others would recognize that she is Mexican based on her choice to wear traditional Mexican clothing. For her, wearing traditional clothes represents her identity, as being someone that not only looks the part but can speak the language as well. Despite making the efforts to validate her identity, she was still questioned. Although they each have different experiences pertaining to being racially ambiguous, David, Jessica and Raven and Mary all use their native languages or dress (and thus, cultural evidence of race and or ethnicity) as a means of coping with being racially ambiguous -- whether it be around people who question what they are or around people of the same racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Throughout the years, there have been several different things that I too have done to try and prove my racial and ethnic identity to others—even if these people did not inquire about my background. I carried a key chain for a while that had the flag of Peru on it and even got a perm to make my hair curly, in hopes of appearing more "Latina." There were times when people did question me, and would not believe me so they would ask me to say something in Spanish or explain my ethnic background to them. As a result I was curious to find out if the participants exercised similar behaviors.

In the following example, Lisa, who is African American with Choctaw and Cherokee Native American ancestry as well states, "I was teased when I was younger um by children

because they didn't know what my background was. I was called…names, so when I was younger I wished that I was darker, like my mother." Lisa did not enjoy that she looked different from her family and from other Black people that she associated with when she was an adolescent. She even told me about a time when her grandmother expressed her desire for her granddaughter to have darker skin. "My grandmother put me out in the yard when I was little so I would have a tan." To compensate, she said, "I had in the past used the tanning lotion and things like that hahah, especially when they came out with the one's where you put them on and you get a tan." She wanted to alter her appearance with tanning products so that she could appear darker. In her eyes at that young age, being a Black woman meant having darker skin, especially when your own family and friends tease you and want to change the way you look. However, with time, she came to realize that "you can't change who you are." She learned to appreciate the fact that she is racially ambiguous and considers herself to be kind of a chameleon because she can fit in well with various racial and ethnic groups. In Lisa's case, racial ambiguity can refer to her lack of knowledge about her ancestry and the general confusion or curiosity she may experience as a result. This shows that racial ambiguity is experienced by both single and bi-racial individuals who know a great deal about their racial/ethnic backgrounds and those who do not. Not knowing much about one's ancestry adds another element to the already complex experience of racial ambiguity.

Raven is so confident and passionate about being a Native American woman, that the following quote might seem surprising,

> I went through this period of rejection, you know, but when I got to about 8th grade I was just, I just wanted to pass, let me just be White, I dyed my hair blonde, just let me be White, nobody harasses me, they think I'm White, let me just be White, I can pass, I can blend in…

In order to bypass all of the questions and the constant explaining, Raven resorted to altering her physical appearance by dying her hair, in attempts to cover her Indian and Chicana roots. In her opinion, it was easier to just be White, using her racial ambiguity as a means of passing. She is often mistaken for being White and half Asian. She grew up immersed in her culture and heritage, never thinking of herself as being different in any way. As she grew older she became more exposed and began to experience her racial ambiguity.

> People think I'm White because I have extremely fair skin…um sometimes people would be like, "Oh, well you look…" the polite way people usually address me, is "You have such exotic looks." Sometimes they think I might be half Asian, I've gotten that before, especially when I don't have my glasses on …but generally they think I'm White.

To be fair skinned equals whiteness and to look different equals being exotic, both common perceptions in society which are displayed in the above quote. Many people are accustomed to categories, and when someone does not fit into a certain group, then one is created or they refer to a group that is similar.

Paula, who would prefer that someone ask what she is, rather than tell her or assume what she is stated,

> No one will guess, like, that the majority of my ancestry, the greatest percentage is German, you know? So, I always tend to like find myself dropping that in there, or telling stories that are tell tale of your culture just so people have an idea and maybe they'll ask then.

Because it is rare that people identify Paula as being White or German, she feels the need to prove her identity by volunteering information about her racial identity to others in the hopes that it will prompt questions rather than assumptions, allowing her the opportunity to explain herself and not be told what she is. Although she identifies as "White," she expressed to me how sometimes it is difficult to identify as such for her because she does not consider herself to be a

typical white person based on common perception of what a White person looks like and supposedly acts like.

> I've never felt like "White," it's kind of like, you know I can say "Oh, white people do that," and it's okay, I can say that, cause I'm White, but at the same time I'm not necessarily identifying that characteristic of myself because I don't consider myself typically White. I guess that was one of the reasons why I joined a multi-cultural sorority so that I could identify with a bunch of people, nothing concrete, you know? Not any one thing.

As a result, Paula prefers to associate with individuals of different racial backgrounds. Although she identifies as Caucasian, she feels like she does not qualify as a "White" person because of her physical appearance (ambiguity). She seeks diverse groups of people as a means of coping with her racial ambiguity, providing her with a sense of comfort.

In the following quote, Blaire, age 18, who is of Black, Native American, German, Irish and British descent, shared her experiences of being at school and being told by others that she is not something that she is, simply based on her appearance,

> At my school, the Blacks would say I'm not Black just because I'm mixed with mostly White…A lot of my White friends they consider me as White because of the way that I talk and the way that I act, and a lot of my Black friends consider me as White because of the way that talk, so I never really get that I'm Black… I don't really associate with the Black side of my family as much…so I basically talk to White people, I'm connected to that.

Since she is of mixed-race, she is considered by certain peers to not be of a whole racial identity, which is reminiscent of the experiences of Paula (single race) and the notion of a reverse one-drop rule. In the eyes of some of her Black friends, Blaire cannot claim to be of the Black race because she is part White. As a result of these comments and her upbringing around the White side of her family, she feels more connected to the White side of her identity. She is accustomed to being around these individuals perhaps because they are less critical. Surrounding one's self with people who are similar in behavior and in physical appearance increases one's sense of

belonging, confidence and comfort level. This can be viewed as a way of coping with her racial ambiguity and instances of mistaken identity.

Alexandra also chooses to associate with those who have comparable cultures to Guyanese culture. She said,

> I mean I don't have my own cultural group here, and I mean, if I'm going to fit into somewhere, I have the Indian group, which I don't fit into and this African group, I fit into the African culture more here…Do I feel like I have to fit in or belong? No. Usually, I'm just like "Screw You." Hahah.

Although Alexandra does not believe that she has to fit in to a specific group or feel pressured to do so, she chooses to associate with a certain ethnic group because of the level of comfort it brings her. According to Alexandra, the Guyanese culture shares a lot of similar music and food tastes with the African culture. She receives a lot of questioning from the Indian population that she is exposed to, and does not have many Guyanese people available to associate with, so she chooses to connect with people of African descent because of the similarity to her own cultural identity.

Thus far I have shared examples of participants using language, altering their appearance, and surrounding themselves around similar groups of people in order to cope or better deal with their racial ambiguity. One last example that I would like to discuss is of a couple of participants finding humor in certain experiences and situations, for example by leading those who may be curious or confused astray.

In the following quote, David tells me of a time when he joked around with an acquaintance who thought that he was Arabic,

> Me and my Albanian friend were hanging out and his cousin wanted to meet up with us and you know, associate with us, and when he first saw me…he asked, "Where are you from?" and because I'm always mistaken for Arab I'm like, "Where do you think?" In a joking way, and then he would ask my friend "Is he Arab?" in my language, and them uh, previously like before his cousin came I

told my friend to um, act like I was Arabic for like a minute or so just so, I guess, to play around, and for like a good two, three minutes he was speaking Albanian you know saying stuff to him, about me, that wasn't offensive, it was just uh, you know, it wasn't really offensive I don't think it was offensive but then I would surprise him and say you know…I would speak my language and then he'd completely freak out, surprised. "You don't look Albanian," I get that all the time.

Instead of feeling self-conscious, or depressed, David realized that in order to feel good about himself he needs to have a sense of humor about his racial ambiguity. Throughout the interview, he was open about the way his experiences with racial ambiguity made him feel.

Back in um, middle school, of course it came to the point where I would go home crying, but over the years, you know, you got to deal with it. You don't look it, but you are Albanian. You know, you got to have a sense of humor about it…My grandpa told me about that actually, he said, "I know son, you look Arabic, but find a sense of humor about it, that you're mistaken for being Arab," So, that's what I do, you know? Now I joke around with it…

Being able to look back at his experiences and having a sense of humor helps him to cope with the impact that being racially ambiguous has on his sense of self.

When I first asked Sadie to tell me how she identifies, she said "sometimes I trick people and I tell them Hawaiian. But most of the times I tell people I'm Indian." Her interview was very light hearted and she expressed to me that she did not take offensive to having her racial identity questioned. She was born in India and enjoys being involved in Indian culture and stated that most of the comments that she receives come from her friends, who for the most part are Indian as well, on a daily basis "my friends they still make fun of me, honestly like every day they make fun of me. But from strangers I get that probably like three, four times a month." She stated that they often tease her about her eyes because they are "small." I then asked how she goes about dealing with these situations in which she is mistaken, whether she corrects people or just lets it pass to which she replied,

> If they're complete strangers, I'll tell them what I am. People I know, that I know
> I can joke around with, I'll mess around with them.

This example is similar to David's experience with his racial ambiguity. Sadie finds a sense of enjoyment with being racially ambiguous. She has the power to lead people astray with her physical appearance if she desires to do so and does not seem to mind it when people try to guess what she is. When I asked if she ever feels frustrated, she replied "no, I accept it. It's fun."

These different ways of coping change over time, from participants taking a more hands on approach to dealing with their racial ambiguity at younger ages, to taking a stance of acceptance or turning to humor as a means of coping at an older age. Both single-race and mixed-race individuals seek and surround themselves with people/groups that they identify with, use language as social cues, and alter their outward appearance to match their racial and or ethnic group.

CONCLUSION

The experience of racial ambiguity among single-race and bi/multi-racial individuals was researched in this study. Interviews were conducted with 19 voluntary participants and were later transcribed and coded in order to yield data for the study. In current research on racial ambiguity, there is a strong focus on the experiences of mixed-race individuals and the difficulty they face in identifying themselves. I wanted to learn more about the experiences of racial ambiguity among single-race individuals as well as mixed-race individuals and attempt to fill in some of the gaps regarding racial ambiguity in existing research.

Based on the information gathered from the participants' definitions of what they are, we can see that ethnicity and cultural background is very important in the way that a racially ambiguous person defines himself or herself. Questions regarding "race" led individuals to talk about their ethnicity/culture (nationality, ancestry) in great detail. Other identities were also

mentioned, such as their social identity (their respective communities, relationships) and personal/psychological identity (sense of belonging, search for self).

From the examples of experiences shared by the participants we are able to see that those who are racially ambiguous often times question themselves and their sense of belonging to their respective racial/ethnic groups, and that their experiences range from positive (enjoying an ambiguous appearance), to negative (feeling self-conscious, confused) to being indifferent (no effect on sense of self/identity). Physical characteristics are an important point of comparison for racially ambiguous individuals. As a result of their physical appearance differing from those of their family or peers, they start to become curious about their racial/ethnic backgrounds and start to question *what* they are, providing an insight into existing societal stereotypes, stereotypes that the participants themselves actively abide by.

In order to cope with being racially ambiguous, we see that different "coping" mechanisms can be employed. Speaking one's native language, sitting out in the sun to get a tan, or playing along with the assumptions of others are all examples of different coping mechanisms, all of which serve the purpose of alleviating feelings of displacement, and/or accommodating socially constructed racial/ethnic categorizations.

Racial ambiguity is experienced when someone does not poses the stereotypical *physical* attributes of his or her own racial/ethnic group(s). After taking into account the experiences shared in this study, we see that the notion of "racial ambiguity" is more complex than the original stated definition. The experience of racial ambiguity is composed of three important factors, the first being that it applies to someone who physically does not resemble his or her respective racial and or ethnic group(s). Second, racial ambiguity can refer to, in the case of both single and bi/multi-racial individuals, an uncertainty of one's own racial/ethnic ancestry. It is

difficult for someone to know exactly what they are, where they come from, or have a definitive knowledge of their identity/identities.   Third, the ambiguity surrounding definitions of race and ethnicity complicates the individual experience of racial ambiguity, again both among single and bi/multi-racial individuals. The ability to discern between "race" and "ethnicity" did not come easily to the participants.

Being that the experiences of both single-race and bi/multi-racial persons were of great importance in this study, it is important to highlight that just because someone is of a single-race does not mean that that person cannot experience difficulty in identifying themselves, something that mixed-race individuals have difficulty with. Being racially ambiguous causes this difficulty for both groups of people. David, Paula, and Lisa (all single race), went through periods of questioning their racial/ethnic backgrounds, feeling like they do not belong to their respective groups, and using different coping mechanisms to deal with those things all because they physically do not appear to Albanian, Caucasian, or African American, for example.

One important issue that may benefit from further research revolves around the difference between "race" and "ethnicity" as understood among the average US population. Throughout my interviews there were frequent deflections to ethnicity instead of addressing race. This could be because identifying ethnically allows for more clarification, especially for someone whose racial background is questioned frequently. For individuals who are frustrated with being mistaken for a different race(s), stating their specific ethnic/cultural backgrounds provides an explanation or proof of what they really are. There is also the element of pride when identifying ethnically. Being identified solely on a racial basis is where confusion often arises.

For as long as I can remember, I have been mistaken for being a race that I am not. I am a Latina/Hispanic woman and am often perceived as being Asian. Being told by family, friends,

and strangers that I am something that I am not was and still is frustrating, especially when it occurs on a regular basis. However, talking about my feelings and my own experiences has helped me tremendously in helping me sort out my thoughts and sense of identity. It is with hope that the participants of this study learned more about themselves and that they were able to express their feelings on what it means to be racially ambiguous, both the positive and negative aspects. I hope their experiences can serve as a point of learning for those who are quick to categorize others solely based on physical appearance and also as a reference point for individuals who are racially ambiguous and are wondering if there is anyone else out there that feels the same way.

Table 1. Identification Chart

	Actual Racial/Ethnic Background	Preferred Identification	Mistaken/Ambiguous Identity
1	Albanian	Albanian	Arabic
2	African American, Cherokee Indian (grandfather)	African American	Native American
3	Albanian	White, Albanian	Mexican, Arabic
4	Black, Native American, German, Irish, British, unknown	Mixed race, situational identification (Black around Black friends, mixed around others)	Mexican, single-race (Black)
5	German, French Canadian, Welsh, Caucasian/White, Japanese, African American	Multi-racial, White, Asian, African American.	White, Mexican, Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, Italian
6	Indian, South Indian	Indian, Hawaiian (jokingly)	Filipino, Mexican, Chaldean, Arabic, Hawaiian, "Gypsy," Christian, Asian
7	Guyanese, Indian, West Indian	South American, Caribbean	Hispanic, Latino, East Indian
8	French, German, *Indian	Multi-racial	Hawaiian, Hispanic/Latino (Cuban), English, "White Girl" "Black Girl"
9	European, English, German, Irish, French, Scottish, Jewish, Native American (uncertain)	Caucasian, European, "Different forms of Caucasian"	Hispanic, Middle Eastern
10	German, Belgian, French, Irish, Italian, Spanish (uncertain)	Caucasian/White	Greek, Jewish, Armenian, Lebanese, Arabic (variations), Hispanic, mixed-race
11	German, Italian, French, Russian (uncertain)	Italian, White	Arabic, Asian, Spanish, Mexican, Lebanese, Greek, Native American, Hawaiian

* Participant stated "Indian", but within context of interview meant Native American.

	Actual Racial/Ethnic Background	**Preferred Identification**	**Mistaken/Ambiguous Identity**
12	African American, Choctaw Native American, Cherokee Native American	Human being, African American	Asian (background), Latino, Bi-racial
13	Mexican, Immigrant	Mexican, Mexican American, Hispanic	White, Caucasian, Lebanese
14	Mexican, Mexican American	Not provided	White, Chaldean
15	African American, American	African American	Mixed-race (White/Black)
16	Chinese	Asian, American	Arabic, Chaldean, Filipino, Laotian, Thai, Japanese, Korean, Mexican, Inuit, Mixed Race
17	Cherokee (Northern Band), Saginaw Chippewa, Mexican Indian	Native American, specific tribal identity, American Indian, Chicana	White, Part Asian
18	White, Italian, Canadian	White/Caucasian, Italian American	African, Ukrainian, Jewish, French Italian, Greek, Canadian (accent), Finnish, French Canadian, Arabic
19	Chaldean/Arab American, Indian, British, Assyrian	Arabic, Chaldean, White, Arab American	Indian, Mexican

Table 2. Race Category Chart

Participant	Single-Race or Bi/Multi-Racial	Racial Category
David	Single-race	European American/White
Louise	Single-race	African American/Black
Jessica	Single-race	European American/White
Blaire	Multi-racial	African A., Euro A., Native A.
Nadia	Multi-racial	African A., Euro A., Asian
Sadie	Single-race	Asian/Pacific Islander
Alexandra	Single-race	West Indian/Caribbean
Stacey	Bi-racial	African A., Euro A., Native
Marcus	Single-race	European American/White
Paula	Single-race	European American/White
Tiffany	Single-race	European American/White
Lisa	Single-race	African American/Black
Mary	Single-race	Hispanic/Latino
Robert	Single-race	Hispanic/Latino
Craig	Single-race	African American/Black
Ashley	Single-race	Asian/Pacific Islander
Raven	Bi-racial	Native American/Indigenous
James	Single-race	European American/White
Nate	Single-race	European American/White

Information derived from screening questionnaires.

APPENDIX A

Screening Questionnaire

INSTRUCTIONS: Please respond to the following questions about yourself by circling or writing down your answer. <u>Do not</u> provide your name or other identifying information.

1. Gender

   a.) Male   b.) Female

2. Date of Birth (month/year): _____

3. Racial Identification

   a.) single-race   b.) bi-racial   c.) multi-racial

4. Mother's Racial Identification:

   a.) single-race   b.) bi-racial   c.) multi-racial

5. Father's Racial Identification:

   a.) single-race   b.) bi-racial   c.) multi-racial

6. With which of the following racial categories do you identify with?

   a.) African American/Black

   b.) European American/White

   c.) Asian/Pacific Islander

   d.) Hispanic/Latino

   e.) Native American/Indigenous

   f.) Other (Please Specify): _____

 7. Have you ever been mistaken for another race or ethnicity?

   _____ Yes

   _____ No

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

1.) Tell me about your racial background.

    -Probe on family background (e.g. race of mother and father, and why they might identify

    with the background that they do.

2.) How about your cultural background (e.g. ethnicity)?

    -Probe on generation level (i.e. first, second, third).

    -Probe on celebration of holidays, family traditions, types of food eaten, ways of dress,

    language proficiency, decorations in their home, etc.

3.) How do you prefer to racially identify yourself? What do you call yourself and why?

    -Probe on whether they have always identified this way, or if there was a change in their

    identity at some point.

4.) Do others ever identify your race for you? (If so, what do people think you are?)

    -Probe on whether they think people are "right" or "wrong" about who they are.

    -Probe on how it makes the individual feel when they are told "what" they are by others.

5.) Do you do things to make others recognize your race or culture?

    -Probe on if they eat certain foods, or dress a certain way. Do they celebrate any special
    holidays? Do they *act* a certain way?

6.) Have you ever been mistaken for being a race or ethnicity other than the one you identify

with the most?

    -if respondent answers with "yes" probe on what they get mistaken for, why they think
    they get mistaken, and how it makes them feel when it happens. Can they provide an
    example of a situation? Does it happen more with a certain group of people such as co-
    workers, family, friends, etc.? What is his/her earliest memory of a situation like this and
    does it still happen? When was the last time it happened? Did he/she correct the person
    that identified him/her incorrectly? What was that conversation like?

7.) What do you consider to be some common PHYSICAL characteristics of your racial

group(s)? (i.e. eyes, nose, hair, skin color)

> –Probe: Ask whether they "fit" within these physical characteristics (if yes, how so, and if no, then why/why not?)   In other words, according to existing stereotypical perceptions of the racial group(s) you identify with, would you say that you physically *look* like your race?

8.) What do you consider to be some common CULTURAL characteristics of your racial

group(s)? (i.e. behavior, traditions)

> –Probe: Ask them whether they think they "fit" with these cultural characteristics (if, yes, how so, and if no, then why/why not?) How would you describe your involvement with your ethnic identity?

9.) How do you feel about the stereotypes that exist for your racial and ethnic group(s)?

> -Probe on whether they have ever felt as if these stereotypes are applied to them personally. If yes, ask them to provide an example. If no, ask them why not. Keep in mind physical attributes.

10.) Do you consider yourself to be of mixed-race or of a single-race?

> -Probe on why they feel the way they do. Do they think others see them as mixed race or single-race? Is it important for him/her to be seen as mixed-race or single-race?

11.) When do you think about your race the most?

> -Probe on where they are in these situations. Who is around them? What are they doing? What is the conversation?

12.) When do you think about your ethnicity/culture the most?

> - Probe on where they are in these situations. Who is around them? What are they doing? What is the conversation?

13.) Do you think you are racially ambiguous?

> -Probe on why/why not. What makes them feel this way? Ask if they can describe a situation in which they might feel racially ambiguous. Ask how racial ambiguity makes them feel.

14.) Do you feel like you belong to a certain race or ethnicity?

> -Probe on what makes them feel like they do or do not belong.

15.)   How often do you think about your race? About your ethnicity?

        -Tell me why you think about it a lot or not that much. Do you think about your race or
        ethnicity more or less than in the past? (If there has been a change in how much they
        think about it, why?)

16.) What did your parents tell you about who you are? Do you adhere to their definitions, or do
you think of yourself differently than they think of you?
        -Probe on if there anyone else in his/her life that has influenced how they think about
        their race or ethnicity? (If so, who/what, explain.)

17.) Would you say you are comfortable or uncomfortable with your racial or ethnic identity
most of the time? (Get them to explain their answer)

18.) Who do you hang out with most of the time: people who are the same race/ethnicity as you?
Or people who are a different race/ethnicity as you?

        -Probe on whether this is purposeful, whether it is important to them to be similar to
        others that they are around, etc.

19.) What is your view on popular mixed-race figures such as President Barack Obama, Tiger

Woods?

        -Probe on their opinions on the way these individuals choose to identify themselves and
        how society identifies them.
        -Ask them who they think are some celebrities that they find are difficult to racially
        classify. What is their reaction when they find out the racial background of these
        individuals?

APPENDIX C

Research Information Sheet

Title of Study: *"What Are You?" A Study of Racial Ambiguity"*

Principal Investigator (PI):   *Cindy Vargas*

Sociology

248-302-7324

Purpose:

You are being asked to be in a research study of racial identity because your response to the screening questionnaire meets the criteria for this study. This study is being conducted at Wayne State University and any other location that is a convenient meeting place for the interviewee and interviewer (e.g., campus, coffee shops, and homes).

Study Procedures:

If you take part in the study, you will be asked to respond to questions pertaining to racial identity, specifically concerning racial ambiguity. You will be asked a series of questions pertaining to your racial and ethnic/cultural background, family background, as well as to issues such as stereotypes, among others. Certain questions will touch on self-esteem and how it is impacted by the way you identify yourself racially and the way others identify you. With this being said, if at any moment you feel uncomfortable and do not want to answer any question, you have the option to not answer. You will remain in the study if you decide not to answer certain questions.

You are only asked to participate in one interview that should last from one to two hours. Interviews will be tape recorded.

Benefits

The possible benefit to you for taking part in this research study is having the opportunity to share your opinions and experiences openly and freely. By participating in this study, you are contributing to the sociological study of race. The results may help others feel better about their racial identity as well as provide others with the opportunity to compare experiences of racial ambiguity. Lastly, the results may be helpful in understanding the way health is affected by issues concerning racial identity (e.g., anxiety and depression), and how race influences social inequality.

Risks

There are no known risks at this time for participation in this study.

Costs

There will be no costs to you for participating in this research study.

Compensation

For taking part in this research study, you will be compensated for your time and inconvenience in the form of a $5 Starbucks gift card.

Confidentiality:

You will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. There will be no list that links your identity with this code.

Voluntary Participation /Withdrawal:

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time. Your decision will not change any present or future relationships with Wayne State University or its affiliates.

Questions:

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact Cindy Vargas or one of her research team members at the following phone number (248)-302-7324. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Human Investigation Committee can be contacted at (313) 577-1628. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call (313) 577-1628 to ask questions or voice concerns or complaints.

Participation:

By completing the interview you are agreeing to participate in this study.

APPENDIX D

Racial Identity Resources

Organizations

- **Office of Equal Opportunity**
  656 W. Kirby Ave. - Suite 4324 F/AB
  Detroit, Michigan 48202
  Telephone: **(313) 577-2280**
  Fax: **(313) 577-7738**
- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
  Detroit Branch NAACP
  8220 Second Avenue
  Detroit, MI 48202
  (313) 871-2087 phone
  (313) 871-7745 fax
  Branch President: Rev. Wendell Anthony
  info@detroitnaacp.org
- National Urban League
  Detroit Urban League
  http://www.deturbanleague.org
  208 Mack Avenue
  Detroit, MI 48201
  313-832-4600
  CEO: N. Charles Anderson
  CEO Email: ncanderson@deturbanleague.org
- Wayne State University Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)
  5521 Gullen Mall
  Room 552 Student Center Building
  Detroit, Michigan 48202
  Phone: 313-577-3398
  Fax: 313-577-9628
  Email: caps@wayne.edu

Books

- Voices of Diversity: Multi-Culturalism in America by Mary C. Sengstock
- Detroit Divided by Reynolds Farley, Sheldon Danziger, and Harry J. Holzer
- The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit (Princeton Studies in American Politics) by Thomas J. Sugrue

Websites

- http://www.Racialicious.com
- http://www.Colorlines.com

APPENDIX E

Flyer

Do People Know What You Are?

Are you ever mistaken for being another race?

Would you be willing to talk about your experiences?

Then participate in research at Wayne State!

A study at Wayne State University is looking for individuals of single or mixed-race backgrounds who have been mistaken for a race or ethnicity with which they do not identify.

Participants will be given $5 cash for their participation in this research. Interviews will last between 1 and 2 hours. Participants may choose when and where they are interviewed.

If interested, please contact **Cindy Vargas** by telephone at (248) 302-7324, by email at cr1518@wayne.edu, or by mail at the Department of Sociology, Wayne State University, 2263 Faculty Administration Building (FAB), Detroit, MI 48202

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331.

ABSTRACT

WHAT ARE YOU? A STUDY OF RACIAL AMIGUITY

by

CINDY V. VARGAS

December 2012

Advisor: Dr. Heather Dillaway

Major: Sociology

Degree: Master of Arts

Most literature on racial ambiguity focuses on individuals of mixed-race. While this type of literature is invaluable in understanding racial identity and all of its intricacies, the experiences of single-race individuals are marginalized. How do people who are single race experience racial ambiguity? Do their experiences differ from those of mixed-race individuals? For this study, nineteen individuals (single and mixed-race) who consider themselves to be racially ambiguous were interviewed and asked open-ended questions. The transcribed and coded interviews yielded important information on their self-perceptions, what they get mistaken for, how it makes them feel, and how they deal with their racial ambiguity. The findings provide a more complex definition of "racial ambiguity," and also open the door to possible future study on the differentiation between the terms "race" and "ethnicity."

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Cindy V. Vargas

Cindy V. Vargas received her bachelor's degree in Sociology from the University of Michigan in 2007. She will be receiving her Master's degree in Sociology from Wayne State University in December 2012. Ms. Vargas' research in sociology has centered on race, ethnicity and inequality. Her desire to study racial ambiguity stems from her personal experiences as a Hispanic woman who considers herself to be racially ambiguous. Future research endeavors will continue to focus on race in society and the experience of racial ambiguity among both single-race and mixed-race individuals.