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## Multiracial Identity: Membership and Cultural Representation

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# MULTIRACIAL IDENTITY: MEMBERSHIP AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, Communication

By

Bethanne Grover

May 2021

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# **MULTIRACIAL IDENTITY: MEMBERSHIP AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATION**

Communication

Missouri State University, May 2020

Master of Arts

Bethanne Grover

## **ABSTRACT**

What follows are two methods woven together to investigate multiracial identity and membership. The first section investigates the role of ethnographic research as the methodological tool of choice for a multiracial who positions herself along the liminal perspective through experimental autoethnographic tales of ambiguous embodiment. The tales weave in and out of the text and work to articulate multiracial identity through a critical race standpoint rooted in amorphousness. The second section applies a traditional qualitative approach, including narrative interviews of multiracial participants – focusing on intergroup-intercultural communication. Identity negotiation theory and communication accommodation theory guide my investigation into intergroup communication/coping strategies.

**KEYWORDS:** multiracial, autoethnography, identity negotiation, membership navigation, communication accommodation, cultural representation, coping strategies

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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I dedicate this thesis to my three daughters. Always remember that you can do hard things.

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## INTRODUCTION

“I am from there. I am from here. I am not there, and I am not here. I have two names, which meet and part, and I have two languages. I forget which of them I dream in.”

-Mahmoud Darwish

I am an anomaly in small town southwest Missouri: a half-breed Arab/Caucasian abductee with two names and an amorphous personality (see Figure 1). This unique situation leaves me to wonder, as an academic, how does a small-town anomaly conduct multiracial research?



Figure 1. An image of amorphousness. (Photo taken by author.)

This study is my journey in answering that question. What follows is divided into two major portions. The first section focuses on the investigative role of autoethnographic research as a methodological tool of choice and the second section applies a traditional qualitative approach, including narrative interviews from multiracial participants. In the first section, I posit that narratives and storytelling must be used as valid ethnographic research to contribute to existing knowledge around issues of multiracial identity, membership, and cultural representation. Producing autoethnographic research acknowledges and validates my multiracial presence as well as draws attention to my bordering position inside dominant societal structures. Autoethnography and critical race theory are the manners in which I think about the world and the ways I have chosen to engage in part of my multiracial research. My work is derived from personal experience as a multiracial with a complex membership identity and this distinct experience presents a unique opportunity to problematize and internalize forms of racial identity structures which permeate society. Grounded in my own multiracial memoir, personal narratives frame the first section of my research perspective to interrogate the amorphous role my multiracial identity plays in the creation of ideologies in society.

The second portion of my study focuses on a traditional qualitative exploration of multiracial identity and intergroup-intercultural communication. Identity negotiation theory and communication accommodation theory guide my investigation into intergroup communication strategies. Multiracial identity is a multi-layered, complex experience that has been underexplored within communication research; therefore, I chose to incorporate experiences of other multiracial individuals with complex identities via narrative interviews to culminate rich data and understanding of multiracial identity membership and cultural representation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Since the beginning of my graduate school journey, which has culminated in thesis writing, I discovered that I am unable to create the traditional academic stance between the thesis I was producing and the overpowering voices of my multiracial experiences. Admittedly, the production of what are traditionally deemed objective measures of investigation and formats of writing is undeniably valuable within specific goals and contexts. However, the actions and behaviors of our everyday lives—the instances that serve to inform theory—are set aside as scholars prioritize measures to maintain objectivity.

What is needed is a break from the restrictive pattern too often found in academic texts and discourses. To disrupt forms of knowledge that render the author's identity inconsequential, I deliberately choose to situate myself at the borders of this academic sphere. Here, on the borders, is a space where my tales—intertwined with the experiences of my multiracial community(ies)—are read alongside scholarly settings and serious texts. Producing autoethnographic research acknowledges and validates my multiracial presence as well as draws attention to my position inside dominant societal structures.

These borderline spaces can also be contextualized as the liminal position. I do not stand alone in this consciousness-raising space. Multiracial individuals often reside in this location to fully develop research that centers the connections between experience and consciousness so that we may affirm our existence and “provide a truth far greater than any telling of a tale frozen to the facts” (Moraga & Herrera, 2011, p. 4). Gloria Anzaldúa refers to this space as the “Borderland” or the ability to “inhabit multiple selves without feeling incoherence” (Chan & Currie, 1989, p. 414). While I am not confident that there are no “incoherent” feelings in this

space, I aim to study these emotional negotiations. In addition, the justification to theorize narratives serves to further emphasize the complex relationships between the personal and the political as they pertain to the formation of identity in the construction of multiracial membership and cultural representation. Further pushing the concept of positionality, this borderline space is primed for unlocking the divisions that facilitates the process of disrupting old belief systems, thus contributing to the production of a more inclusive and progressive shift in ideologies concerning multiracial identity/membership.

My stories are an attempt to recreate the instances where I collide with hegemonic ideological constructs. As an autoethnographer, my role serves to unpack the repercussions on my multiracial identity. Exploring the development of multiracial identity formation may help inform research in understanding how multiracial individuals—and others with complex racial identities—experience membership negotiation, emotional navigation/coping strategies, and communicative strategies.

### **Reviewing Literature, Reviewing My Story**

Humans often make sense of their worlds through stories. Stories are essential to human understanding and are not unique to autoethnography. Stories are the focus of Homeric literature, oral traditions, narrative analysis, and fairy tales. Given their importance, I argue that stories should both be a subject and a method of communication research (Ellis, 2004).

There are good reasons to use autoethnography. In calling my research autoethnographic, I mean to accentuate how this method uses one's own experience in a culture to look at our culture and ourselves. In doing so, I emphasize the direct ties between individual lives and larger notions of social formations and historical processes (Chavez, 2012). Additionally,

autoethnography can be defined as the union of “autobiography, story of one’s own life, with ethnography, the study of a particular social group” (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 6). Ellis (2004) explains autoethnography in this way:

Autoethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationships to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze: First they look through ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. As they zoom backward and forward, inward, and outward, distinctions between the personal and the cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition (p. 38).

Although social scientists often use the term autoethnography to refer to studies that include the researcher and their experiences in the field, as well as to express in a narrative form how people “do” culture, I use the term autoethnography as it was originally conceived, that is “cultural-level studies by anthropologists of their ‘own people,’ in which the researcher is a full insider by virtue of being ‘native,’ acquiring an intimate familiarity with the group, or achieving full membership in the group being studied.” (Ellis, 2004, p. 38)

To elaborate, instead of the traditional ethnographic study of immersing oneself in “the field” of another culture, autoethnography allows me to center on my own multiracial experiences.

## **Telling Multiracial Tales: An Autoethnographer**

What I am about to share are my own tales of ambiguous embodiment. The tales are rooted in experience. They weave in and out of the text and struggle to articulate identity in unsuspecting spaces. They are “generative” and aim to “trigger” moments where a reader might respond in kind (Alexander, 2000, p. 97). Like Alexander (2000) I am “interested in the generative nature of autobiographical reflection as an interpersonal (collaborative) phenomenon” (p. 99). The goal is that my multiracial tales will provoke within you a desire to generate your own tales that “engage critical memory through a critical performative response” (Alexander, 2000, p. 101).

This thesis began as an investigation into embodied and differently situated identities as they relate to race. Multiracial membership is complex and multiracial tales, limited as they are, can be confusing. They are confusing because they challenge the racial classifications thrust upon us. Root (1996) gives hope when she says the uncertainty that multiracial tales invoke “may be necessary to accomplish flexibility and complexity for deeper structural change” (p.xxiv). To consider multiracial identity and membership means engaging in the difficult conversations.

Tension exists between trying to write multiple tales while reminding society (and yourself) that they cannot be understood as separate. Bureaucratically, we are asked to “check one” race as if there is a linearity and hierarchy to being multiracial. In the performance of everyday, one sees only one race or the exoticism of the multiracial body. I find that context plays a key role in the ways that others racialize my body. I am multiracial in relation to my Arab family and monoracial when with my White family, because of my passing White skin. Alexander (2006) describes passing as a “performative accomplishment” that “is a dialogically

negotiated act between the one passing and those who would accept or deny, support or sanction, that passage” (pp. 70-71). As such, passing is relative (Serano, 2007). That my two families do not interact make these understandings even more prevalent as I navigate the politics of relative passing in and out of the home. Rather than perceiving my identity as viewed and informed by either my Arab or my White side, I consider both sides at once – as this is how they manifest in my daily navigation of life.

Multiracial tales elicit confusion. Root (1996) suggests that confusion must remain present in narrating our lives to allow for the perpetual rethinking of our social lives. As such, allow me to complicate my story a little further...

My personal story informs a particular understanding of race as a relative and constructed, yet deeply embedded, experience. I am an “indigenous ethnographer,” already entered into the culture where I recognize the resemblance between myself and various others in this culture and recognize our simultaneous participation in the creation of one another’s identities and realities. Because identity is an inherently social construct, the audience for one’s identity performances is always already a part of one’s authoring, interpreting, and inscribing of those performances. Thus, the data for my autoethnographic project are systematically collected and analyzed via field notes, letters, and the embedded interactions from within a larger culture of literature, scholarship, and popular understandings. This is what Spry (2000) called “the communal narrative of academe” (p. 84).

The body of my work consists of examples from my own developing autoethnography. I characterize these as confronting my Arabness, confronting my multiracialness, and confronting my Whiteness. None of these three locations of identity are static containers with rigid, impermeable boundaries.

## **An Autoethnography: Planes, Trains, and Automobiles**

Apparently, a great deal of social observation takes place when academics are on airplanes, trains, taxis, or otherwise traveling. As Ronald Takaki (1993), bell hooks (2006), and Derrick Bell (2018) have all written, these experiences in particular have given them a cue regarding their place in U.S. society. On an airplane in Toledo, I had a row of seats completely to myself when a man approached me and requested to sit next to me as his assigned seat was crowded. I nodded my agreement to sharing my row as he offered his hand and asked, “What is your name?” I took in his dark features, aquiline nose, and thick accent and without further thought replied, “Fatima.” His face broke into a huge smile as he confidently sighed, “Ahh. Hello, Fatima. I am Ahmed.” As he made himself comfortable next to me, our conversation flowed easily throughout the duration of our flight. We discovered that he actually knew my sisters personally -- this lead way to his confusion which I had to clear up in regards to my abduction as a child, name change, etc. He displayed his incredulity as I assured him of my backstory. In his amazement, he replied “If you had introduced yourself as your other name – Beth? – I would have just said thank you for the seat, introduced myself as AJ and that would have been the end of our conversation.” This type of situation was not new to me.

Having, at this time in my life, mainly stayed within small town Missouri, I had gotten used to being pegged as “overall” White, while occasionally having people make the offhand comments on my visible Arab heritage. The more places I have been since leaving my hometown, the more varied categories there are into which people have fit me. Although I was familiar with various forms of “What are you?” by the time I was 7 or so, there had been a typical pattern established. Most people at home (Norwood, Missouri) knew of my family ties, so the explanation offered there was typically accepted. As I research racial and ethnic

definitions comparatively and historically as well as move myself about the world, I find a less definite, yet more connected, identity.

Questions of personal identity serve to highlight larger insights about crucial social structural realities. I have been variously labeled as (among other things) a light-skinned Arab, mixed, and multiracial by others and even myself. Over time, I have gleaned more information about the components of both individual lives – my own and others’— and social conditions that have culminated in my current sense of identity. As well, I have spent the greater part of my life employing the “sociological imagination” in observing taken-for-granted conditions and have learned the value of turning that lens on myself. Thus, herein I am engaged in an autoethnographic account of the social realities that figure an individual life. It is an amorphous life.

## BEING AMORPHOUS: THE MULTIRACIAL IDENTITY

In contrast to a denotative definition of amorphous – “having no definite form; shapeless, being without definite character or nature; unclassified, lacking organization or unity; having no apparent crystalline form; uncrystallized” (Mifflin, 1991, p. 103) – I see being amorphous as a conscious activity, an engaged process of confronting cultural options that uses cultural resources. Being amorphous for me means finding a core of the self while at the same time realizing that this “solid” core is filled with a variety of cultural images, choices, and experiences, and not only those I chose. Amorphousness, in my usage, should be understood as a shimmering thing, a picture with blurred edges; a way to take in information about oneself and one’s connections, the outside world and the inside; an understanding of social construction as an ongoing project with a basis of more or less stability over time and across space. It is recognition of the historical and ongoing realities of active racial projects (Omi & Winant, 1994), an awareness of the roads not taken and hidden from view, of the possibility of play (Derrida, 1991).

Amorphousness in its noncomplementary denotation is indeed the critique of the confused and untrustworthy, if not tragic, multiracial. However, by being amorphous, I argue that I am “working long and hard” at questioning all our settled decisions of identity (Willie, 1996, p. 276). To be—being—is not merely a state of existence but an action or set of actions. I reiterate, to be amorphous is a conscious action, if not to play the devil’s advocate, to play with the comfort zones of the majority of whoever is in the room (L.K.C. Hall, 1996; Willie, 1996).

## **An Autoethnography: Friend or Foe**

It was a big day. I was dressed in denim overall shorts with a pink cotton tee – the one with the yellow-striped sleeves. I remember looking out the living room window and seeing my elderly neighbor walking by, holding the hand of her skipping granddaughter – Penny. I had heard her name float in like the wind through the open window when she arrived three days ago. I really wanted to play with her. I had watched her play hopscotch on the gravel drive outside for the past three days and was eager to be her friend. The neighbors were never overly friendly to me when I went outside to play, so I tended to avoid the area. But I had been cooped up in the house for too long. Today was the day that I was going to make a friend.

I slipped out the front door while my grandmother was talking on the phone and skipped across my overgrown lawn— stopping to pick a large yellow dandelion along my way. When I straightened up, I was face-to-face with the neighbor’s granddaughter. I smiled at her and she smiled back at me so broadly that her eyes disappeared into her round, rosy face. “I’m Penny” she said kindly. I felt like I would burst from excitement and delight.

“Penny!” her grandmother called, as she was making her way over to us. We looked up in time to see her quickly come, pat Penny hastily on the back, and start to lead her away. “But, bu—I want to play!” Penny said as her grandmother kept leading away. “No, Penny. Not here. Maybe Stacy is home.”

And so there I was, my heart sinking as I watched my chance at friendship being led away – I was being singled out again. No one was ever overly kind in this town. Not to Fatima. “But I don’t want to play with Stacy. I want to play with her!” she said as she pointed to me and wiggled out of her grandmother’s grasp. “What’s your name?” she asked as she skipped back to me.

I stared at her for a moment before glancing up briefly to take in her grandmother's stern, thin mouth – my insides were screaming. I knew what the problem was. I knew it. *Say your name*, I encouraged myself. *Say your real name*. But no amount of self-prompting worked. Why could I not simply introduce myself like I wanted to? Why could I not simply play with Penny? I should be able to. I know I can. But I recognized I was wrong. I recognized –even at the tender age of six— that something was wrong. Flustered but determined, I said something I had never said before, “Bethanne. My name is Bethanne.”

In locating myself in an identity, I start from a position mainstream society sees as the product of immigration. My biological father is Arab (Jordanian) and my mother is White. That is the simple version I use, stating the “facts” and letting my audience take them where they would. The fuller story is that I was abducted as a child, immersed into White culture, stripped of my name, heritage, and all that I knew, and distanced from my family history. I have witnessed blatant racism directed at my Arab and dark-skinned relatives but have rarely experienced it myself due to my passing light skin and the new White name on my birth certificate. The newly bestowed name and privilege created a sense of guilt within that makes me feel unworthy of participating in the greater conversation about race.

That I explore my emotional and political ties to these identities speaks to the sense of choice that exists in racial and ethnic identities (Waters, 2009). Moving through a web of both knowledge and constraint, one may connect one's own experienced and known biography to those experiences of particular familial and social situations not of our own choosing. We then move on from that involuntary point of entry. Moving from acknowledgment to more or less constrained choice, race is both a fluid and enduring link to these imagined and constructed identities. Race is simultaneously socially developed and physically located in individual bodies

and experiences and is thus both relational and experiential. This way of understanding race alerts us to its fundamentally political character.

### **Critical Race Theory: Weaving Stories with Theory**

Critical race theory in communication research is a set of basic insights; perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seek to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions. One specific element of the critical race theory framework is “the commitment to social justice” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). The call for social justice by critical race theorists requires the eradication of “racism, sexism, and poverty and the empowering of subordinated minority groups” (p. 26).

Critical race theorists call for recognition of diverse forms of knowledge, created by individuals of color, as a challenge to hegemonic forms of understanding the experience of the “despised others” (Apple, 2006, p. 683; Chavez, 2012). In particular, the methods by which multiracial individuals are choosing to describe their knowledge include forms of storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables, chronicles, and narratives (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Critical race theorists call for the validation of these ways of understanding the world as a form of resilience and resistance by individuals of color and express the need to include and legitimize these diverse texts when considering alternative forms of understanding our existing social order (Chavez, 2012).

I tenaciously use my experiences as valid ethnographic research to contribute to existing knowledge surrounding issues of multiracial membership and representation. I aim to build on critical theorists like Delgado, et al. (2009), Montoya (2002), and Solorzano and Yosso (2002), who make claims to the liberating and empowering effects of this epistemology. These theorists

justify the boundaries as a place for counter-storytelling and they justify the role of critical race theory as a framework which:

- a) foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process... while also challenging the separate discourses on race, gender, and class by showing how these three elements intersect to affect the experiences of multiracial individuals
- b) challenges the traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of multiracial individuals
- c) offers a liberating or transformative solution to racial subordination.
- d) focuses on the racialized experiences of multiracial individuals while viewing these experiences as sources of strength
- e) uses the interdisciplinary knowledge base of ethnic studies, sociology, history, humanities, and the law to better understand the experiences of multiracial individuals. (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 24)

By weaving theory and narrative together, I aim to provide a more critical understanding of the role of multiracial individuals and their membership navigation. By analyzing their communication strategies for engaging in the fight for racial justice, I hope to provide others with complex racial identities the tools and courage to join the conversation.

### **Critical Race Theory and Autoethnography**

By grounding my work within critical race theory, I call attention to the impact on the ideological roles that society plays in sorting practices that influence the formation of particular identities. By weaving theory and narrative together, my tales aim to problematize the ways in which society has influenced my ideological perspective regarding race and culture.

The stories included in this thesis are offered as illustrations of the impact of ideology that help emphasize particular forms of identity development as a multiracial individual. With the use of narratives, without the power of the first-person account and the role of bearing witness to racial injustice, my ability to challenge dominant perceptions around multiracial

identity would be limited. Accordingly, the use of my Friend or Foe story sets the tone for my trajectory in multiracial membership negotiation: a story that encompasses my position from the borders.

In retrospect, being abducted as a child and stripped of my name and heritage and then assimilating to the privilege which was thrust upon me brought about my own silencing. Developing resiliency sometimes means that it was simply wise to stay silent. Elenes (2000) argues for the need to voice such narratives as a way to situate knowledge uniquely gained from the perspective of the oppressed. Undeniably, these narratives reveal the contradictions inherent in my developing multiracial identity as they serve to identify the moments when I consciously succumbed to ideological dominance and those when I rebelled against it – such as was the result of this tale.

### **An Autoethnography: Say My Name**

I knew I was in trouble again. I was perched upon the kitchen counter, looking down at the ugly yellowed linoleum floors – each little yellow square displayed an ugly brown flower in the center. I fiddled with the hem of my green shorts as I swayed my long, gangly legs side to side.

My mother was angrily rummaging through the utensil drawer, sharply slamming the drawer when she found what she had been looking for – scissors. I was still looking at the floor when she stepped in front of me. “What’s your name?” she asked, her voice sharp. “Fatima.” I replied. She grabbed a handful of my hair and I flinched as I heard the *snip*. I watched as the long, dark waves fell to the floor. Shock froze my small body. My hair was my baba’s favorite thing. “Khalas!” I cried, trying to move away. My mother locked my legs against the counter

with her body, trapping me from moving. “ENGLISH.” She spoke through gritted teeth; her jaw was clenched angrily as I again felt the kitchen shears tug sharply through my thick hair. I held back tears at each pull. “What’s your name?” my mother’s tone was angry, cruel.

“Fatima.” *Snip.*

“What. Is. Your. Name.” Each word was angrily clipped, staccato.

“Fati.” The pull of the dull scissors through my thick hair got rougher with each rebellious answer. Finally, I watched the last long wave float softly to the floor. The pile of dark waves a sharp contrast against the yellow floor.

“Say your name.”

I reached my small hand up past my ears – feeling the lightweight tuft of hair left upon my head. Refusing to cry, I shakily whispered, “Bethanne.”

Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) describe this rebellion as a characteristic of “transformational resistance” that occurs when an oppressive situation creates an “I’ll prove others wrong” attitude (p. 319). Essentially, narratives trace the path that reveals a “map of consciousness” as I develop ways to actively navigate my multiracial identity. (Elenes, 2000). My tales, generated from a complex, oppressive situation, cement my desire to provide others with complex racial identities the tools and courage to join the conversation.

Incorporating critical race theory with autoethnography constructs the narratives of the anomaly in unique ways. Together, they represent new alternatives in thinking about the voices that have been previously excluded. I draw on storytelling to provide a more critical understanding of multiracial individuals’ experiences/navigations. Ladson-Billings and Tate (2016) argue for “voice” in the form of storytelling as an integral component of critical race theory: “...a first step on the road to justice that provides a way to communicate the experiences

and realities of the oppressed. Thus, without authentic voices... it is doubtful that we can say or know anything useful about multiracial membership.” (p. 58)

Without this voice, we would be limited in perspectives when constructing the fight for racial justice as the process of negotiating one’s multiracial identity is both intricate and inimitable. Undoubtedly, this theoretical lens and autoethnography represent the political forms of my development; more significantly, however, they are inextricably intertwined with my personal identity development and negotiation.

### **Multiracial Identity Negotiation**

Identity is one of the main realms of study in intercultural communication. Several theories such as Identity Negotiation Theory (Gudykunst, 2005 & Ting-Toomey, 1999), Identity Management Theory (Imahori, 2005), and Cultural Identification Theory (Collier, 2005) have been developed to explain intercultural and interracial boundary crossing issues. A plethora of general identity studies exist in this domain (Toomey, et. al. 2013).

The process of negotiating one’s multiracial identity, however, is a complex phenomenon which has been under explored within communication research. Multiracial individuals often encounter unique sets of perspectives and challenges when communicating with others due to conflicting feelings of identity. Delving deeper into their identity-meaning issues can help society understand their complex layers of identity struggles. Exploring the communication strategies of how multiracial individuals interact in perceived in-group and out-group situations can further contribute to a more multifaceted understanding of the dynamic intergroup encounter process.

Multiracial identity is generally defined as an individual whose identity is composed of dual cultural/racial influences with each parent from a distinct racial group (Renn, 2004; Root, 2001). I aim to explore a multiracial individual's identity meaning construction narratives and communication patterns with perceived in-group and out-group members by utilizing Ting-Toomey's (2005) Identity Negotiation Theory and Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles & Baker, 2008). Both theories' concepts of situated identity meaning construction of in-group/out-group will increase and further develop our knowledge on the complexity of the multiracial identity negotiation process. The determination of which specific communication strategies to use in perceived in-group/out-group interactional situations also produces further insights into the dynamic creativity and tugs-and-pulls of a multiracial identity mindset (Toomey, et al., 2013).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

In order to explore the identity challenges and communicative strategies of multiracial individuals, the following sections have been organized accordingly: First, Ting-Toomey's (1993, 1999, 2005) Identity Negotiation Theory and how it relates to the multiracial identity negotiation process. Second, Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory (Gallois, et al., 2005; Giles & Baker, 2008; Giles, et al., 2007) provides insightful awareness into the broad communicative strategies which multiracial individuals use.

### **Identity Negotiation Theory (INT)**

According to Ting-Toomey (1999), the Identity Negotiation Theory proposes that humans from all cultures desire identity respect and approval and, furthermore, individuals have multiple images of self which are affected by cultural, social, and personal identity. Identity Negotiation Theory's five core assumptions can be applied to understand the identity formation process of multiracial individuals on various levels. Assumption 1 states "in order to understand the person with whom you are communicating, you need to understand the identity domain they deem salient" (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 219). For multiracial individuals, positive affirmation of their dual identity can conceivably increase social self-esteem. Multiracial individuals must manage anxiety associated with navigating two cultures correlating with "emotional security or vulnerability because of a perceived threat or fear in a culturally estranged environment" (Assumptions 2 and 3, p. 219). For multiracial individuals, in-group communication consists of interacting with members of their own group (i.e., others with complex multiracial identities), and intergroup communication entails interacting with all others. Most multiracial individuals

must simultaneously manage internal emotional insecurity and vulnerability while communicating with peers who may not consider or regard them as in-group members. Thus, peer attitude and their communication tone towards these multiracial members will shape their actual communication process and intergroup-interpersonal appraisal process.

Assumption 4 correlates to multiracial identity formation—the dialectical push-and-pull process—and how multiracial individuals potentially react due to being simultaneously a part of an in-group and a part of an out-group. When multiracial individuals feel inclusion and approval from the perceived in-group members, the more likely they would experience trust and predictability in their interactions. These reactions are reliant upon the established “ebbs and flows” of the communication process itself. The competent identity negotiation process consists of the satisfactory outcomes of “the feeling of being understood, the feeling of being respected, and the feeling of being affirmatively valued” (Assumption 5, p. 228). The Identity Negotiation Theory assumptions have been supported by research and work on topics involving acculturation and identity negotiation process (Toomey, et al., 2013). For multiracial individuals, affirming one cultural group membership can mean exclusion of another group membership. Those who can flexibly transverse both sides of their cultures and find complementary—rather than adversarial—values can have an increased predictability in their interactions and reduced anxiety (Gudykunst, 2005). Overall, the five assumptions of the Identity Negotiation Theory reveal the need to understand the multiracial individuals’ declared identity domain and negotiation of identity dialectics in an intergroup setting.

From an interactional communication perspective, when multiracial individuals experience security, inclusion/approval, and interaction predictability, they are likely to converge to the perceived in-group members (Toomey, et al., 2013). Inevitably, when identity

vulnerability, identity distinctiveness, and interaction awkwardness are experienced, they are likely to deviate from the perceived out-group members. Interestingly, it has been found that perceived identity support and positive social evaluation had much stronger relationships with accommodative reactions than in-group membership identification (Dorjee, et al., 2011). Communication Accommodation Theory and associated perspectives can aptly advise what strategies multiracial individuals may use to relate to others.

### **Communication Accommodation Theory**

The Communication Accommodation Theory is focused on social psychological processes and communicative outcomes in interpersonal and intergroup interactions (Giles, 1971; Giles & Coupland, 1991). Social approval is the primary motivation which explains individuals' accommodative reaction to each other in face-to-face encounters. However, initial orientation can determine the nature of interaction. Communication Accommodation Theory recognizes two types of orientation: An individual's orientation based on personal identity or personalized uniqueness and social identity orientation based on respective social identity or group membership emphasis (Toomey, et al., 2013). Communication Accommodation Theory has been revised several times and applied to many intergroup contexts (Dorjee et al., 2011; Harwood & Giles, 2008). Communication Accommodation Theory clarifies convergence and divergence strategies (Gallois et al., 2005; Shepard et al., 2001).

Convergence means adapting to each other's communication needs and employing matching or similar communicative strategies (Giles & Baker, 2008). Divergence refers to using differentiation strategies (i.e., code switching) to intentionally move oneself away from an interactional partner (Giles & Dorjee, 2005; Giles & Baker, 2008). Additionally, Strauss and

Cross' (2005) specific interactional communicative strategies and Benet-Martinez and Lee's (2004) research on cultural frame-switching could provide further insights into multiracial identity negotiation patterns.

### **Additional Multiracial Communicative Strategies**

Strauss and Cross (2005) provide a vast array of specific interactional strategies multiracial individuals have used to negotiate their co-culture identity. These specific strategies could expand Communication Accommodation Theory's wide-ranging communicative strategies. For example, multiracial individuals could use code-switching, buffering, bridging, and passing strategies for identity and communication negotiation in intergroup context.

Code-switching refers to the ability to communicate in multiple and distinctive culturally appropriate ways depending on the situational context (Strauss & Cross, 2005). For example, multiracial individuals can code switch between English and Arabic when communicating with Caucasian and Arab group members. Interestingly, code-switching can be used as either convergence or divergence strategy to affirm one side of the multiracial identity. Buffering refers to an identity protection strategy that acts like a "psychological shield" when individuals face unfavorable circumstances (Strauss & Cross, 2005). Multiracial individuals can use dismissal or indifference communication messages to safeguard against the hurtful impact of racist or ethnic jokes.

Bridging refers to the intentional use of connection and integrative strategies to reach out to diverse groups. Multiracial individuals can use this strategy to find some identity balance or security within themselves. Finally, 'passing' is an identity-based communicative strategy in which an individual of one or two (or more) multiracial groups tries to "pass" as a member of the

dominant, mainstream group. Benet-Martinez et al. (2004) provides further discernments into the cognitive and identity complexity of multiracial individuals.

### **Cultural Frame Shifting**

Multicultural identity is defined as “having strong attachments with and loyalties toward these cultures” (Nguyen & Benet-Martinez, 2010, p. 89). Genuine multicultural individuals can utilize diverse cognitive and communication strategies to “swing” between two or more cultural communities (Toomey, et al., 2013). Cultural frame switching is the use of “two or more cultural interpretive frames or schemas...These cultural schemas guide behaviors only when they come to the foreground in one’s mind and only when they are applicable to social events that need to be judged” (Hong et al., 2000, p. 742). Cultural frame switching transpires when multiracial individuals utilize social cues to “shift” between two cultural interpretive frames. They can cognitively “put forth” one cultural interpretive frame over another to negotiate their identity and interaction or integrate both cultural frames (Chen et al., 2008; Cheng et al., 2006; Tadmor et al., 2010).

Bicultural identity integration (BII) examines bicultural individuals perceived cultural fit between the two cultural communities (Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005). A compatible bicultural identity encompasses the perception of the mainstream culture and the ethnic community as being well-suited and having a “goodness of fit” with one another (Toomey, et al., 2013). These individuals integrate both cultures in their everyday lives comfortably, show behavioral competency in both cultures, and, depending on the cultural demands of the situation, switch their verbal and nonverbal behaviors adaptively (Toomey, et al., 2013). Bicultural individuals with compatible identities can say “I am both Arab and an American.”

Alternatively, an oppositional bicultural identity refers to bicultural individuals who often recognize their identities as separate from the mainstream culture and regard their ethnic communities as highly distinct, separate, and even with oppositional value orientations. They can say “I am Arab *living in* America.” Cognitively, they compartmentalize the notion of “being Arab” as separated from concerning the intricate relationship between multiracial/multicultural identity construction and intercultural communication competence (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009).

The above theoretical frameworks and discussion provide broad insights into multiracial individuals’ identity work and communicative strategies. For deeper understanding of their complex identity formation, emotion navigation/negotiation, and intergroup communicative strategies the following questions are:

RQ1: What aspects of cultural representation influence the cultural membership negotiation enacted by multiracial individuals?

RQ2: How do multiracial individuals navigate emotions connected to complex racial identities?

RQ3: Based on their complex lived experiences, what salient strategies have emerged as advice multiracial individuals might give to other individuals experiencing similar identity concerns?

## **METHOD**

Narrative methods are considered both empowering and culturally sensitive in research because they elicit and empower the unique “voices” of multiracial individuals. In addition, narrative stories support a multiracial individual’s own creative expression of his or her chosen identity (Jackson, 2012; Jimenez, 2004; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2003). A phenomenological methodology via one-on-one interview sessions is crucial for gaining insight in that participants can share their experiences in an intimate, private setting in order to elicit honest responses to questions that they may feel uncomfortable answering otherwise. Phenomenology represents a philosophic and human-science research method that constitutes an avenue to provide discursive space where voices can be heard (Orbe, 1998).

### **Individual Interviews**

Qualitative methods are hailed for their ability to explicate our understanding of the diverse experiences of multiracial individuals, including their ability to simultaneously exist in two or more cultures (Root, 1992). This study employed a narrative, person-centered interview approach that allowed participants to share their experiences of identity negotiation. Narrative research involves obtaining a story from someone who is identified as having some knowledge or expertise with the topic at hand (Stuhlmiller, 2001). This method was selected for its capacity to explore social phenomena and recognize individual strengths while providing insight into how multiracial individuals construct identity meaning in everyday situations. A semi-structured interview guide enabled probing into the identity stories and communication patterns of the multiracial individuals. All interviews took place over Zoom due to Covid-19 restrictions, with

the exception of one interview which took place over the phone. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Given the focus of this study, multiracial individuals were recruited for this research project.

## **Participants**

Participants were self-identified multiracial individuals ( $n = 7$ ; 6 females and 1 male) who were recruited through networking/snowball methodology for interviews. To qualify for the study, individuals met the following criteria: 1) their parents are of differing racial/ethnic backgrounds, and 2) they are self-identified as having a “multiracial identity” during recruitment.

The participants’ demographic backgrounds are in a “codename, ethnicity, gender, age” format as follows: Rose, Saudi/Syrian/Female/20; Tulip, Somali/European-Russian/Female/23; Iris, Somali/Yemen/Female/19; Daisy, White/Guatemalan-Arab/Female/24; Sage, Korean/American/Male/24; Fern, Jordanian/Lebanese/Female/25; and Orchid, Filipino/American/Female/19. All names are pseudonyms to protect participants’ confidentiality.

## **Procedure**

Following the approval from the university’s Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A) on November 20, 2020, (IRB-FY2021-264) interviews were scheduled. Except for one phone interview, the rest were conducted via Zoom. Participants were informed that the objective of the interviews was for understanding more in-depth their multiracial identity experiences and communication practices in everyday settings. Having informed the participants about information confidentiality, they were asked simple demographic questions before being interviewed. The queries included dual ethnic heritage questions. The actual Interview Guide

consisted of interview questions concerning how the participants viewed their multiracial identity, conflicts they have faced in the past, and how comfortable they are with their identity, and strategies they have used to manage their multiracial identity (see Appendix B). On average, each interview last 40-60 minutes and all interview data was transcribed. On average, each transcribed interview data consisted of 15-20 single spaced pages, for a combined total of 113 pages of transcribed data.

## **Analysis**

To make sense of interview data, I utilized thematic analysis to identify key themes that emerged relating to each of the study's research questions. Thematic analysis was employed as links between expressions and themes are "conceptual labels placed on discrete happenings, events, and other instances of phenomena" (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 87). Thematic analysis allows for the classification of more discrete concepts and allows researchers to find patterns within data (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). These patterns/themes are determined through coding (Braun & Clark, 2006). There are six phases to analyzing data when employing this method. The first phase includes familiarizing oneself with the data. In order to familiarize myself with the data, I personally transcribed interviews, read transcripts multiple times, created memos, and noted initial thoughts. The second phase is the creation of initial codes. In this phase, I took my initial notes from phase one and created broad codes from the information. Phase three allowed for themes to emerge. In phase three, I focused on groups of codes that resembled one another and eventually themes emerged. In the fourth phase, I reviewed the themes which had emerged in phase three. Phase four involved combining themes that may have gone together and removing themes that did not have enough data to support. Phase five defined and named the

retained themes—allowing for a thematic map of data to be produced. Finally, the last and final phase was to produce a report that reveals the story of the data which has emerged (Braun & Clark, 2006). This story is reported in the following results section.

## RESULTS

The data for this study consisted of audio-recorded interviews, transcribed interviews, a semi-structured interview guide collected from 7 multiracial research participants, and parts of my autoethnography. The process of negotiating multiracial identity in perceived in-group/out-group setting is a multilayered, complex phenomenon. Three salient categories resulting from the research questions emerged and they are organized as follows: multiracial identity integration, negotiating multiracial identities, and multiracial communication/coping strategies. All of these categories weave and intertwine to create the emergence of membership coping strategy themes which include 1) construction of integrated identity (shifting/racial expressions); 2) racial delineation; 3) racial ambiguity/passing; and 4) ownership (claim/educate and seeking community).

### **Research Question 1: Membership Negotiation/Cultural Representation**

The first research question asks: What aspects of cultural representation influence the cultural membership negotiation enacted by multiracial individuals? How multiracial individuals viewed themselves and the labels they use to define themselves constitute the conceptual content of research question 1. A detailed analysis of interview data revealed a significant theme: the construction of integrated identity and/or shifting of racial expressions/multicultural values.

During interviews, a powerful and repeated theme developed when interviewees were questioned about choosing a side of their multiracial identities. All interviewees responded with explanations of why this would create disharmony within them and/or their families. Repeated words, phrases, and undercurrent meanings throughout the interviews included: *blended*

*together, never take a side, cannot split myself in half, constant explaining/excuses, and situational.* The following interviewee's responses reflect multiracial construction of integrated identity theme: "I never take a side. Yeah, I would prefer not to be in a situation like this. Because you would either hurt your father or mother" said Rose (Saudi/Syrian, 20). Likewise, Iris (Somali/Yemen, 19) explains, "I feel like I'm equally from both sides. I cannot split myself in half."

The responses from the interviewees followed the sentiment of being unable to split their identities into two separate labels. Multiracial interviewees seem to view their own identity as a fluid combination of their racial identities existing and morphing side-by-side. Depending on the situation and the nature of their intergroup-interpersonal relationships, they can manifest one identity more strongly than others.

According to Strauss and Cross (2005), some multiracial individuals use the strategy of code-switching (i.e., the ability to communicate in multiple and distinctive culturally appropriate ways depending on the situational context) to deal with two separate membership groups. All of the participants in this study described code-switching or shifting how they expressed their racial identity during different periods of their lives and/or in diverse social and environmental contexts. Expressions varied from checking a particular ethnic or racial box on a form, to dressing and/or talking in an ethnically or racially stereotypical way in certain social situations. All of the participants described changing their racial identity expressions around certain friends and/or family members affiliated with a particular culture. Interestingly, participants described shifting their expressions of identity often in an attempt to align more closely to the other person's racial identity. Iris, who identifies as Somali/Yemeni but raised in Saudi Arabia, describes having to alter and align her identity depending on which side of the family she is with:

“Yeah, I do feel sometimes that I need to change my identity at some point, not always, but yes, I do need to do that sometimes just to avoid all the judgments and everything.”

Other participants like Rose and Sage described shifting their identity expressions in certain settings with family members from different cultural backgrounds. For instance, Rose (Saudi/Syrian, 20) described how she often had to change her appearance and perform more traditional female roles when in the homes of her father’s Arab family members:

Yeah, I do actually shift a lot and I’m conscious about it. Uh, for example, not only the way I speak, even the way I dress differs like maybe they’ll judge for the way I talk, and they didn’t like the way I dressed from my mother’s side. Yeah, that’s how I shift my personality, but it actually doesn’t bother me – like I find it a way to cope and blend in, actually.

Sage (Korean/American, 24) described withholding his English/White verbal expressiveness when around Korean extended family members or social groups. Changing one’s expression of racial identity was also associated with organizational environmental pressure to claim membership in certain monoracial groups. For example, Tulip (Somali/European-Russian, 23), describes changing her societal position/identity within differing work environments:

This is pretty controversial where you can use your minority status to kind of gain go-ahead....But I’m going to play a race card to my advantage if I have it. So even like, I work within the Canadian government and that’s a huge thing – trying to get more representation for multiracial individuals. So I will always use that to my advantage to kind of like rise in the social ladder, but there are certain circumstances when I was working more like in a private corporate world where being multiracial is not going to be an advantage at all. So I would like kind of hide my last name on applications because my last name is very Muslim... but I definitely do change which cultural card I’m playing depending on location and how I’m trying to rise in the social ladder.

As participants get older, they become more comfortable with their multiracial identity and describe that they share fewer instances of shifting identity. For example, Daisy (Caucasian/Guatemalan/Arab, 24) compares her feelings of being multiracial as a teenager to how she has learned to feel less guilty and more comfortable with how she expresses her multiracial identity as an adult:

I've always felt a lot of guilt and shame, and I really tried, like, especially in my teenage years when I was just trying to figure myself out, I really tried to like... what's the best word – I really tried to *caucasian-ize* myself. I dyed my hair a lighter color. I used to wear blue contacts. I used to wear several different sunscreens – like I used to wear a SPF 50 with SPF 25 and a spray – so I wouldn't get any darker. I used to just really try to pass as a lighter person because I was so self-conscious of my multiracial identity.

But now I want to fully embrace myself and my identity, even when I have always been insecure about it... you know, I still am a little insecure, but I embrace it as best as possible. Like my skin color I am still a little insecure about, but I have found makeup that looks really good on my skin from the rare beauty line. And so I made sure to put it on every day, even if it's just eye liner and little bit of eye shadow... it just makes me feel good. And just making myself feel as good as I can with what little I can every single day, because if I feel good I won't feel as insecure. And that way other people's hateful, mean words won't affect me as much.

These responses from the participants followed this sentiment of being unable to split their identities into two separate labels. Multiracial individuals view their own identity as a fluid combination of both identities existing and morphing side-by-side. Depending on the situation and the nature of their intergroup-interpersonal relationships, they can manifest one identity more strongly than others.

## **Research Question 2: Emotional Navigation/Coping Strategies**

The second research question asks: How do multiracial individuals navigate emotions connected to complex racial identities? The challenging factors that multiracial individuals face in negotiating their dual identity in intergroup settings are many. The recurring conflicts for many of these participants revolved around family/peer approval and acceptance. One substantial recurring theme emerged: racial delineation through feelings of inauthenticity, guilt, doubt, shame, lack of wholeness, lack of belonging and feeling dispensable.

**Racial delineation through feelings of inauthenticity/lack of wholeness and belonging: Intergroup-interpersonal relationships.** Many multiracial individuals describe some of their White friends or racially differing family members as “not understanding their cultural perspective,” “no effort to understand the other side of my family,” and “no effort to include.” Their frustrations and hurts often form the basis of their intergroup and interpersonal relationship conflicts. Repeated words and phrases and recurring underlying meanings throughout interviews under this theme included: *blend in, brush off, complicit-ness, assimilate, and avoid, caucasianize*, and even *anxiety medication and therapy*. The following direct quotes reflect some of these themes: Daisy (Caucasian/Guatemalan, 24) shared, “My therapist has really helped me understand that a lot of my negative emotions are from feeling like the black sheep of the family and trying to assimilate so hard.” Alternatively, Sage (Korean/American, 24) explained, “When it comes to dealing with it – not super great at dealing with it... which is why I’m on anxiety meds, some I’m just not – I don’t really have very good coping strategies for it.” And finally, Rose (Saudi/Syrian, 20) simply stated, “I blend in with them and everything is good.”

Many participants felt their multiracial identities have not been emphatically understood and acknowledged. The participants felt as though they constantly negotiated their identities, and their own sense-making and meaning-constructing process. Their multiracial identities are not mutually exclusive and differing categories. Nevertheless, others' perceptions, attitudes, and reactions can spark continuous identity struggles and either/or situational choices, even if the multiracial individuals resist or resent the either/or identity forced option. This lack of understanding and acknowledgment furthers intergroup-interpersonal conflicts.

**Intergroup distance attitude: Racism, lack of acceptance, doubt, jokes, or teasing?**

Participants depicted numerous intercultural and racial conflicts. While participants inevitably experienced the hurt and pain, they also used diverse attitudes and strategies to cope with the “teasing” or “joke” episodes. Repeated words and phrases used included: *racial, racist remarks, making fun, trying to be funny, ignorance, joking.*

Many of my ex-boyfriend's friends would make slight racial remarks against Asians but in a joking way. While I took it as them trying to be funny, it still bothered me. He would never stick up for me around his friends regarding the racism so we broke up. (Orchid, Filipino/American, 19)

There have been so many times in my life that I have heard racist remarks spewed about Arabs or Muslims. It's even more frustrating when some people are completely ignorant that I am actually Arab, though white-passing and I don't wear the hijab – but they were offending me. (Fern, Jordanian/Lebanese, 25)

Based on the repeated phrases from the interview excerpts, it seems that the most common occurrence of the felt intergroup distance gap is the interpersonal insensitive attitude or divergence strategies enacted by family, friends or society. Participants described periods of uncertainty often due to getting questioned all the time by their peers and/or differing family

members and not knowing an appropriate response, which in altered contexts could incite a fight, create a friendship, or even risk making an enemy.

**Racial ambiguity/passing.** One of the major similarities shared by all of the participants was the experience of having their racial identity questioned by others ('what are you?'). Racial ambiguity or having indistinguishable ethnic or racial features (i.e., eye color, hair texture, skin complexion, etc.) was usually the precursor to questions about their racial background. These questions often made participants feel strange or different, for instance:

I think I pass for Somali. So people – people really think sometimes that I just make this up. Whenever I say my mom is Yemen, they'd be like 'But you don't look like?' ... Yeah, but I don't have to *look* like this. So I know I don't really pass for a Yemeni girl, but I mean, that's the truth what shall I do? I get that a lot. A lot. (Iris, Somali/Yemen, 19)

All participants described feeling uncomfortable when approached by strangers about their racial background. For example, Tulip (Somali/European-Russian, 23) described a common scenario of getting stared at by others who are confused about her racial heritage:

I get a lot of subtle racism, or even just little looks –and just the uncomfortable way you begin to feel. And I think every person of color knows exactly what I'm talking about. It's not something you can really like...you just walk in and someone's looking at you like 'oh, that person is different' and you know that you don't belong there.

All participants described at least one incident where someone incorrectly guessed their racial background. Commonalities regarding the assumptions made by White and ethnic minority inquirers did exist across participant interviews. For instance, 3 participants reported that when

their identity was questioned by either a White individual or a person of color, both assumed the multiracial individuals was a “full” member of the questioner’s racial group.

### **Research Question 3: Multiracial Communication Strategies /Advice**

The third question asks: Based on their complex lived experiences, what salient strategies have emerged as advice multiracial individuals might give to other individuals experiencing similar identity concerns? How multiracial individuals viewed themselves and the need to define themselves from their own unique lens and life experience was an important thematic motif that reoccurred during the interviews. The majority of the participants experienced some moderate levels of cultural-personal identity anxiety and uncertainty (Gudykunst, 2005). While the identity anxiety aspects can refer to the emotional turmoil or upheaval particular to the multiracial individual, the identity uncertainty aspects can be stemmed in part from self-identity uncertainty and other-perception identity unpredictability issue (Toomey, et al., 2013). In addition, the perceived conflicts in the development of intergroup-interpersonal relationship add to the identity struggle process. However, based on communication adaptation process, many participants learned to use these strategies and developed advice for others with complex racial identities: Assert ownership of multiracial identity and membership (which includes *claim/education* and *seeking community/acceptance*).

**Ownership – claim and educate.** Racial representation appeared to be synonymous with seeking political and academic awareness on race issues, as well as the evolving development and acceptance of their multiracial identity. For example, all of the participants described educating themselves, either formally in an academic setting or informally on their own about race relations in North America and around the globe. An outcome of this intellectual pursuit

was that participants often felt inclined to use this information to set the record straight involving stereotypical myths held by others about different racial groups. For instance, Sage (Korean/American, 24) proactively embraced his multiracial identity in college:

So for me, one of the things that helped me the most and really kind of helped me start embracing my Korean culture was when, I think in like my freshman or sophomore year of undergrad—there's a group called Korean American Students United on campus. And I joined as a member and eventually I stayed in it for like 4-5 years, became Vice President, all this stuff... and getting to go around town and public meetings – public like doing artwork and stuff downtown, interacting with the public, promoting the culture in the public, sometimes defending the culture with the public. This definitely helped me feel like I was actually doing something and helped me feel like I was discovering part of my side.

All of the participants in this study described feeling like an outsider in their communities, or disconnected from their mainstream peers or part of their family at some point. This disconnect was usually felt socially due to having a different appearance, accent, culture, and/or beliefs than their peers or part of their family. These experiences usually surfaced as children when participants began to recognize race and stereotypical differences across groups. As an example, Tulip (Somali, European-Russian, 23) discussed how one of her early childhood memories was how the local white kids where she lived had made the playground exclusive for whites only as early as third grade. Being an outsider was often prompted by environmental factors such as racial composition of the neighborhoods they lived in, schools they attended, and/or multiracial marriage.

For participants in this study, feeling like an outsider typically equated to getting stared at and/or criticized by others for looking/being different. Participants in general felt marginalized from the majority of their peers or family who were different from them, and who treated the differently based on their mixed racial background.

**Ownership — seeking community/acceptance.** The multiracial participants in this study expressed a collective desire to connect and belong to a community of peers who shared similar experiences and values as themselves. They sought friendships and connections with others who could relate to their experiences as a multiracial individual. For participants, the individual did not necessarily have to be multiracial, just able to relate to some of their experiences of being different. Consider Orchid (Filipino/American, 19) for example:

I think I'm just trying to find pieces of home and like every community that I join and people that are really welcoming. I think it's just about finding people that make you feel like home and finding communities that make you feel like you belong, even though you may not share the same heritage. And so I think it's just finding people with mindsets and people that support you.

The participants described efforts or ways that they were actively seeking such a community in their current lives and future plans. Some of the seeking mechanisms of the participants included traveling and joining different racial or cultural groups on the internet. All of the participants had spent time in other countries and both domestic and international travel was a priority for the multiracial participants who all expressed a strong desire to expose themselves to diverse others. Tulip (Somali/European-Russian, 23) explained, "You're you. You belong in a million different places, but none of them are a hundred percent your own." Similarly, Daisy (Guatemalan/Arab, 24) expressed the same thought:

It's kind of an odd situation to belong to a group, but not feel like it. Like when people say when you're alone, you can feel lonely when you're with people. And so you're still within the group, but you don't feel like you belong. Um, so that's a weird feeling, but knowing that you don't really have anywhere else to go...go everywhere.

The majority of participants took advantage of the internet as a tool to connect themselves to multiracial others and/or who had similar beliefs and values, and several described seeking friendships with others who, like themselves had experienced discrimination and oppression for being different in society. Finally, all the participants shared a collective ideal to be surrounded by others who valued and appreciated who they are as multiracial individuals.

I think accepting that you're our own special type of culture where it's – you take aspects of both cultures – or maybe more depending on what your identity is— and then you kind of form your own person and your own self and then just express that person. (Sage, Korean/American, 24)

As I explored these complex emotions, one finding was abundantly clear: Multiracial individuals are still members of their race. Still people of color, and our identity should be something that we own... we are our history and heritage, we are our father's and mother's daughters and sons, and we are a part of the conversation.

## DISCUSSION

The differing levels of choice and constraint with which multiracial individuals are all faced play out in particular ways. Four major themes emerged through my investigation into multiracial negotiation experiences. These themes, when viewed in detail, both separately and as a whole, provide us with more in-depth understanding of some of the challenges and strengths of claiming a multiracial identity in today's society. These categories were synonymous with recent scholarship on the multiracial identity and membership negotiation (shifting expressions of racial/ethnic identity, racial ambiguity, ownership—claiming/educating and seeking community). Two choices with which multiracial individuals can choose to identify and represent as have emerged: a) the one-race identifiers, or separatists (those who come from a multiracial background/family but choose to identify strongly with only one acknowledged racial ancestry group), and b) the amorphous multiracial individuals who view themselves as connected to many identities simultaneously.

If I must choose a particular categorical existence, I firmly place myself in the amorphous position—as I briefly touched on in the first section of this work. I define myself specifically as a multiracial Arab American. This straightforward statement often leads to further questioning, in which I can then attempt to articulate the richness of the identity and ongoing thought processes that I present herein. Audre Lorde (1984) wrote, “Because our society teaches us to think in an either/or mode – kill or be killed, dominate or be dominated—this meant that we must either surpass or be lacking” (p. 76). Rather than either/or, Lorde urged a both/and perspective—in which people can be “seen as whole people in our actual complexities” (p. 118). This is different

than a separatist multiracial identity because there is no allowance for the separation of people into parts.

The conception of multiracial identity calls for a strengthening of ties between others like ourselves—which will challenge the very foundations of race itself—because we are all, in truth, multiracial. This, however, feels like yet another demand for separation of self into an acceptable piece for someone else’s comfort and agenda. Lorde (1984) instead stated, “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (p. 138). This is the fundamental disagreement between the amorphous multiracial identity and the single-race identifiers—as well as a multiracial identity that attempts to mimic a single, unified, categorical racial identity. In many ways, both of these expressions fit well within the dominant stream of both racial definition and political tactics.

In being amorphously multiracial, I assert the concept that “any radical democratic politics must acknowledge and accept the uncertainty and fragility of social and cultural identities” (Winant, 1997, p. 109). I attempt being what is referred to as ‘comfortable with ambivalence’ (Haizlip, 1995). This understanding of our personal and political worlds allows us to reach out across constructed boundaries. At the same time, we must continue to acknowledge the ongoing sources of those boundaries, even as they shift. We must recognize the power and domination in which identities are embedded and understand that identity is fundamentally social, relational, and political. Finally, by acknowledging both our connections to the outcomes of past collective relations and identities as well as our rootedness in our own biographical and autoethnographic tales—and realizing that all other individual identities have been similarly constructed and lived—we make amorphousness about its own apparent contradiction: connection.

My autoethnographic evidence displays my attempts at trying to hold on to an articulated, and thus closed, inscribed, defined definition of myself, while at the same time trying to perform it as a conscious, ongoing, amorphous state of being. Lionnet (1991) explains that one can be “comfortable in the knowledge that the whole world is in a flux of becoming, and affirms a principle of eternal change based on observations of the radical fluidity of inorganic, organic, social, and cultural forces” (p. 180). My own amorphous multiracial identity, and that of my participants, offers a framework grounded in firsthand experience.

The difference between native and the researcher has been about blurring this distinction while still retaining the critical tension between the concepts. In being an indigenous researcher, I have experienced “a chain of destabilizing experiences that undermine forever a sense of belonging to a specific place” (Lionett, 1991, p. 183). These dislocations distance one forever from the misleading possibility of an unexamined and unmediated participation in the network of relations that constitute culture. At the center of this discussion is my perspective that has been marginalized. I used critical race theory because I had no choice. Critical race theory is at the center of my epistemological frame. By grounding my autoethnographic work within critical race theory, I intentionally underscore the interrelated roles of multiracial identity, membership, and cultural representation – thus calling attention to the impact on the ideological roles that society plays in the sorting practices that influence the formation of multiracial identities. By weaving the theory and narrative together, my stories and experiences aim to problematize the ways in which society has influenced my race, culture, and identity.

Participants interviewed in this study expressed a racial representative mindset expressed by efforts to cope, educate, and join the conversation. Though many scholars identify multiracial individuals as having a heightened awareness of race as a social construct (Gaskins, 1999; Harris

& Sim, 2002; Rockquemore & Brunσμα, 2002; Shih et al., 2007), this study expands this knowledge by providing important information as to how multiracial individuals navigate emotions, in both defiant and resilient ways, to situations in which their multiracial identity and ethnic membership is disrespectfully questioned and/or compartmentalized, and therefore allowing those with complex racial identities the tools, coping strategies, and courage to join the conversation.

### **Limitations**

This section recognizes three limitations to this study. First, while using multiple theoretical frameworks has richly informed this research, these frameworks do not necessarily form an integrative scheme to explain the complex, multifaceted, and situated identity experiences of the multiracial participants. Future studies should continue to understand the complex individual, interpersonal, and contextual factors that interact to shape a multiracial individual's identity by further examining the interconnected effect individual (i.e. self-esteem), interpersonal (relationships with peers and family), and environmental factors (uniformity of community and school) have on a multiracial individual's salient identity experiences.

Second, it is important to consider the limitations of autoethnographic writing as a research tool. This form of writing will occasionally suffer for its difficulty to claim generalizability from a single autoethnographic account. In addition, because the researcher and the participant are the same individual, the limitations imposed by the construction of self-knowledge are challenged by our humanness as we "interview ourselves" to discover that we must rely on our fragmented sense of memory or our limited capacity to understand and reflect upon our own experiences. In the act of retelling, humans are simultaneously reinterpreting the

events we choose to depict regarding our lived experiences. Thus, while stories are many times fragmented bits and pieces of our own collective memory, these instances serve to deepen our understanding of the ways in which social relations are embedded within existing hegemonic structures.

Third, the fact that author and the interview is of Arab-Caucasian multiracial identity background has both drawbacks and benefits. One limitation could be that the “insider-outsider” position of the interviewer as an indigenous researcher could potentially skew the interpretation of the interview data. However, an asset of being in this dualistic position could be that the interviewer was able to draw out a richer data set due to the multiracial identity resonance factor. Future studies need to address these limitations and strive to develop a situational-based multiracial identity and intergroup competence model.

## **Conclusion**

Three categories emerged from this study: multiracial identity integration, negotiating multiracial identities, and multiracial communication/coping strategies – the four thematic communication coping strategies that were uncovered in this interpretive study include: 1) construction of integrated identity (shifting/racial expressions); 2) racial delineation; 3) racial ambiguity/passing; and 4) ownership (claim/educate and seeking community). Regarding research question 1, this study found that multiracial individuals tend to view themselves as both rather than either/or split identity. Most importantly, the intertwining of multiracial identity represents the integrative identity and their ability to “morph” dependent on situational and communication contexts. The finding of balancing the emotions of identity challenge and

security is a result that carries meaningful research importance as it suggests a vigorous and complete conceptualization of multiracial identity.

Throughout the interviews, participants expressed their identity as a fluid, borderless combination in which parts of their identities manifest contingent upon interactional situations. When one identity is being threatened, the participants often sought solace in the other identity. Simultaneously, they also use flexible and adaptive communication strategies to protect themselves. Multiracial individuals weave themselves into an integrative form through developmental adaptive process (Kim, 2009).

Relating to research question 2, depending on the communicative situations, participants appeared fluid in their conceptualization of in-group/out-group membership. Favorable intergroup communicative situations afforded them “in-group” identity approval and support. Conversely, unfavorable intergroup communicative circumstances prompted participants to use code-switching and other applicable communicative strategies to protect themselves. Specifically, participants also see of multiracial individuals with similar backgrounds as their in-group peers who can resonate with their multiracial experiences.

Relating to research question 3, multiracial individuals often managed their complex lived experiences with salient strategies for coping/developed advice for others with complex racial identities, such as 1) construction of integrated identity (shifting/racial expressions); 2) racial delineation; 3) racial ambiguity/passing; and 4) ownership (claim/educate and seeking community).

This study contributes to the initial understanding of how multiracial individuals conceptualize and negotiate their identities and has found that multiracial individuals view themselves as having a fluid and complementary identity rather than an oppositional identity.

Multiracial individuals have unique identity facets with unique, distinctive value patterns and communication attributes – their identities are intertwined and naturally flow. These multiracial individuals are simultaneously secure and vulnerable, and they are also cognizant of the situational cues that prompt their identity struggles and are, therefore, mindful of their adaptable use of flexible communication styles and strategies under variously situated contexts.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval



**To:**  
Carrisa Hoelscher  
Communications

**Date:** Nov 20, 2020 10:56:36 AM CST

**RE:** Notice of IRB Exemption  
**Study #:** IRB-FY2021-264  
**Study Title:** Multiracial Identity: Membership and Cultural Representation

This submission has been reviewed by the Missouri State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and was determined to be exempt from further review. However, any changes to any aspect of this study must be submitted, as a modification to the study, for IRB review as the changes may change this Exempt determination. Should any adverse event or unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others occur it must be reported immediately to the IRB.

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This study was reviewed in accordance with federal regulations governing human subjects research, including those found at 45 CFR 46 (Common Rule), 45 CFR 164 (HIPAA), 21 CFR 50 & 56 (FDA), and 40 CFR 26 (EPA), where applicable.

Researchers Associated with this Project:

**PI:** Carrisa Hoelscher

**Co-PI:**

**Primary Contact:** Bethanne Grover

**Other Investigators:**

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. How old are you?
2. What racial identity(ies) do you claim?
3. What is your occupation?
4. Is your cultural identity contextual? Does it change based on who you're with?
5. How do you change your societal position/identity within differing cultural environments?
6. How does this affect the way you interact with others?
7. Tell me a time you have witnessed or experienced oppression regarding race or cultural membership.
8. What are some ways you find yourself being both the "target" and the "participant" of oppressive communication?
9. In what ways do you experience membership (or lack of) in your racial/ethnic communities?
10. Do you experience emotions through this membership or lack of?
11. How do you navigate feelings of guilt, inadequacy, inauthenticity, and lack of "wholeness" through the lack of membership?
12. What strategies do you use to overcome or navigate the feelings of inadequacy?
13. How do you engage in cultural conversations to enact social justice and serve as a cultural representative in spite of the feelings of inadequacy?
14. What advice do you have for others in this position?
15. What else would you like to add? Can you think of anything I haven't asked that is important or would be helpful regarding this topic?