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A Qualitative Analysis of Multiracial Students’ Experiences With Prejudice and Discrimination in College

Samuel D. Museus  Susan A. Lambe Sariñana  April L. Yee  Thomas E. Robinson

Mixed-race persons constitute a substantial and growing population in the United States. We examined multiracial college students’ experiences with prejudice and discrimination in college with conducted focus group interviews with 12 mixed-race participants and individual interviews with 22 mixed-race undergraduates to understand how they experienced prejudice and discrimination during their college careers. Analysis revealed 8 types of multiracial prejudice and discrimination which were confirmed by individual interviews: (a) racial essentialization, (b) invalidation of racial identities, (c) external imposition of racial identities, (d) racial exclusion and marginalization, (e) challenges to racial authenticity, (f) suspicion of chameleons, (g) exoticization, and (h) pathologizing of multiracial individuals. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

In the year 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau allowed multiracial individuals to select multiple racial categories for the first time, and nearly 7 million people chose to do so. By 2010, that number climbed to over 9 million, which equals approximately 7% of the total national population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). These figures do not include individuals who might be of mixed-race heritage and chose not to identify as such on the census questionnaires. These data highlight the fact that multiracial people compose a significant and growing portion of the U.S. population.

Yet, with few exceptions (e.g., Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; King, 2008; Renn, 2000, 2004, 2008; Talbot, 2008), empirical studies on multiracials in higher education research are difficult to find. For example, our review of five of the most widely read peer-reviewed academic journals in the fields of higher education and student affairs—Journal of College Student Development, Journal of Higher Education, Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, Research in Higher Education, and The Review of Higher Education—revealed that fewer than 1% of articles published over the past decade included an explicit focus on mixed-race people. The lack of a developed knowledge base on student populations in the higher education is problematic, because a lack of empirical research on an entire racial group can contribute to the inability of postsecondary educators to effectively understand and serve these student populations (Museus, 2009).

In response to the reality that mixed-race people compose a significant and growing portion of the national population and the limited higher education research on this group, the current inquiry is aimed at understanding how mixed-race undergraduates experience covert or implicit forms of prejudice and discrimination during college. In the following sections, we provide the context for this examination. First, we offer an overview of research on prejudice and discrimination

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in the experiences of monoracial minority college students. Second, we review existing literature on multiracial individuals in general and mixed-race college students in particular. The remainder of the article focuses on our qualitative inquiry into mixed-race students’ experiences with prejudice and discrimination in college.

**PROCESSES OF RACIALIZATION AND RACIAL CATEGORIZATION**

Before discussing extant research on prejudice and discrimination in college and multiracial students in higher education, it is useful to say a few words about the historical and social processes that lead to racial prejudice and discrimination in contemporary society. Critical to understanding the experiences of multiracial students is the concept of *racialization*, which can be defined as the process of creating racial categories, associating those classifications with previously unclassified groups, and attaching racial meanings to those categorizations and populations (Omi & Winant, 1994). Historically in American society, processes of racialization have functioned to categorize populations of color, attach prejudicial meanings to these racial minority groups, and systemically discriminate against these communities based on the aforementioned racial meanings in order to secure and maintain power and privilege for certain groups. Over time, racialization and racial categories have become embedded and pervasive elements of the fabric of the nation and are often now taken for granted elements of America by those who have been acculturated into this society (Museus, Ledesma, & Parker, 2015).

The aforementioned racial categories, and the racial meanings that society attaches to these classifications, are problematic for several reasons. For example, they provide a basis for prejudice and discrimination toward racial and ethnic groups in college (e.g., Chou & Feagin, 2008; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Museus, 2013; Museus et al., 2015). Moreover, for mixed-race students who do not fit neatly into socially constructed racial categories, these classifications and the meanings attached to them are problematic in other unique ways. Specifically, people whose thoughts and behaviors are based on clearly defined racial categories often engage in interactions with mixed-race college students that function to force those multiracial undergraduates into racial classifications or lead to otherizing those mixed-race students. This forced categorization and otherizing, as well as their ramifications, are discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

**RESEARCH ON PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION IN COLLEGE**

A substantial body of existing literature has highlighted the reality that many college students of color report regularly experiencing prejudice and discrimination in college (e.g., Feagin et al., 1996; Hurtado, 1992; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000; Museus et al., 2015; Museus & Park, 2015; Museus & Truong, 2013). Ancis et al. (2000), for example, analyzed a single-institution sample of 578 undergraduates and found that African American students consistently reported experiencing racial antipathy, differential treatment, and pressure from racial stereotypes. Similarly, Lewis et al. (2000) interviewed 75 students of color at a single campus and found that they encountered contradictory pressures to represent their race and assimilate into the dominant mainstream culture of their campus, exclusion and marginality, ignorance and awkwardness in interpersonal communications with White students, resentment and hostility from White students, and marginalization by
the faculty and in the curriculum.

Although an increasing amount of empirical research examines students’ experiences with prejudice and discrimination in college, this literature largely focuses on monoracial undergraduates (e.g., Allen, 1992; Feagin et al., 1996; Hurtado, 1992; Lewis et al., 2000; Museus et al., 2015). Moreover, although researchers have examined identity processes among mixed-race college students (e.g., Chaudhari & Pizzolato, 2008; Renn, 2000, 2003), studies that focus specifically on how multiracial students experience prejudice and discrimination in college are difficult to find. The current investigation is aimed at filling this gap by illuminating mixed-race undergraduates’ experiences with prejudice and discrimination in higher education.

THE EXPERIENCES OF MULTIRACIAL COLLEGE STUDENTS

Although monoracial students of color report racial challenges such as exclusion and marginality, racial stereotypes, ignorance and awkwardness, and racial hostility, there is some indication that mixed-race students might face unique challenges due to their multiraciality. Most scholarship on multiracials, both outside and within the field of higher education, is focused on mixed-race identity formation (e.g., Kilson, 2001; Poston, 1990; Renn, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2008; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002; Root, 1990, 1998; Wallace, 2001, 2003; Wijeyesinghe, 2001). Indeed, researchers have developed several multiracial identity models that shed light on the experiences of mixed-race individuals. Renn (2000), for example, conducted a qualitative inquiry of multiracial college students and generated a typology that included five different identity patterns, including holding a monoracial identity, multiple monoracial identities, a multiracial identity (i.e., identifying with a distinct “multiracial” group rather than any one heritage), an extraracial identity (i.e., opting out of identifying with a racial group), or a situational identity (i.e., changing the way they identify in different contexts). Renn’s typology provides a lens to examine and understand the different ways that multiracial students identify, as well as how the college environment interacts with those identities. This research has contributed to literature on multiracial identity, complicated how researchers think about racial identity, and challenged common misconceptions that all individuals “fit” into singular racial categories.

Existing literature on mixed-race people also suggests that multiracial individuals regularly encounter explicit and implicit forms of prejudice. For example, a theme in existing literature illuminates how mixed-race individuals, including multiracial college students, experience the “what are you?” question (Gaskins, 1999; Israel, 2004; King, 2008; Talbot, 2008). This question, which is usually aimed at gathering information about a mixed-race person’s racial background, is the hallmark of the multiracial experience (Bradshaw, 1992; Johnston & Nadal, 2010; Miville, Constantine, Baysden, & So-Lloyd, 2005; Renn, 2000; Talbot, 2008). A person might ask the “what are you?” question in order to ease discomfort related to being unable to determine the multiracial person’s racial background (Williams, 1996). Figuring out the racial heritage of a mixed-race person can be important in determining how the inquirer understands and interacts with that individual. It can, for example, help him or her determine whether to grant a person entrance into or membership in a racial community. Yet, researchers have not empirically examined these encounters among mixed-race undergraduates or the consequences that they might have on these students. Giving attention to the ramifications of such interactions is important because, although
the inquirer's intent may be harmless and such interactions might appear benign to bystanders, it is possible that such encounters convey a message to the multiracial student that he or she does not belong in predominantly monoracial campus spaces or is different from his or her monoracial peers (Bradshaw, 1992).

Not only might multiracial individuals be consistently queried about and pressured to explain their racial heritages, but scholars studying multiracial people in general and mixed-race college students in particular have noted that other people ascribe monoracial identities to mixed-race people (Johnston & Nadal, 2010; Johnson, Ozaki, Pizzolato, Chaudhari, 2014; Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; Renn, 2000, 2003; Tashiro, 2002). For example, Talbot (2008) conducted individual interviews with 10 double-minority college students (i.e., mixed-race students with two minority parents) and found that some of them struggled considerably to resist the labels that others ascribed to these participants. Again, such literature sheds light on mixed-race students’ identity struggles in college. However, although scholarship on multiracial identity processes in the context of college environments is valuable, research that shifts the lens to the environment and provides a more holistic understanding of the milieus that shape multiracial identity and experiences is also important. Such research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of campus environments and multiracial identity, as well as how these two phenomena interact within institutions of higher education.

There is also evidence that multiracial individuals can experience exclusion or marginalization from monoracial groups with which they interact, although empirical support for this assertion is limited (AhnAllen, Suyemoto, & Carter, 2006; DeBose & Winters, 2002; Johnston & Nadal, 2010; Root, 1992; Suyemoto, 2004). For example, it has also noted that multiracial Asians and Asian Americans might experience exclusion and criticism from monoracial Asians and Asian Americans counterparts because some Asian communities value racial purity (Root, 1998). Such an emphasis on racial purity might pose challenges for multiracial undergraduates because it could lead to monoracial groups on campus excluding or marginalizing those mixed-race students. Again, however, the nature of such racial exclusion in higher education specifically has not been the focus of systematic empirical inquiry.

In addition, it has also been asserted that the authenticity of multiracial individuals’ membership in monoracial groups may be questioned, and these individuals may feel pressured to demonstrate loyalties and qualities of a particular race to justify the legitimacy of their membership in that racial group (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; Spickard, 1997). In addition, there is some evidence that mixed-race college students and their peers may question their own racial authenticity. A multiracial participant in Renn’s (2003) study, for example, identified as Filipina and explained that, due to her lacking easily identifiable Filipino characteristics (e.g., speaking Filipino languages or eating Filipino food), she and her Filipino peers were uncertain that they shared a common Filipino experience. Again, however, how multiracial college students’ authenticity is challenged and how they feel pressured to prove that authenticity have not been the focus of systematic empirical inquiry.

Finally, scholars have asserted that multiracial people are often exoticized because of their racially ambiguous physical features (Bradshaw, 1992; Johnston & Nadal, 2010; Nakashima, 1992; Root, 2004), and multiracial women might experience exoticization more often than their male peers (Root, 2004). Moreover, Nakashima (1992) argued that media representations of mixed-race women
have contributed to their exoticization because they are often depicted as sexually promiscuous and lacking control. Understanding exoticization is important because it might contribute to psychological distress among mixed-race women or a tendency to seek external validation to inform their sense of self (Bradshaw, 1992; Root, 2004). The vast majority of literature on the exoticization of multiracial persons, however, is outside of the field of higher education. Moreover, the bulk of this literature is conceptual or in the form of personal stories, rather than systematic analyses of empirical data. Indeed, systematic empirical examinations of whether and how mixed-race individuals in general, or undergraduate students in particular, experience exoticization in daily interpersonal interactions is virtually nonexistent.

Thus, although scholars have offered some indication that multiracial individuals do experience prejudice and discrimination in college, the bulk of this literature is not grounded in systematically collected and analyzed empirical data or studied in the context of higher education (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1999; Bradshaw, 1992; DeBose & Winters, 2002; Root, 1992, 2004; Spickard, 1997). In fact, the aforementioned review of the past decade of articles published in five of the most widely read peer-reviewed higher education journals revealed no studies that are focused on understanding mixed-race students’ experiences with prejudice and discrimination. The current inquiry was aimed at filling this gap by generating an empirical analysis of the way in which mixed-race undergraduates experience prejudice and discrimination in college.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the current study is to understand the ways in which multiracial college students experience prejudice and discrimination in college. Specifically, one overarching research question guided the investigation: How do mixed-race undergraduates experience prejudice and discrimination in college as a result of their multiraciality? Three additional questions guided the examination: (a) In what ways do mixed-race undergraduates experience prejudice in college due to their multiraciality? (b) In what ways do mixed-race college students experience discrimination because of their multiraciality? (c) How do multiracial college students make sense of these experiences with prejudice and discrimination?

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The conceptual framework employed in the current analysis was composed of two elements: Omi and Winant’s (2004, 2015) concept of racialization and Renn’s (2000) mixed-race college student typology. The process of racialization and the resulting racial categorization that has become a normal, embedded, pervasive aspect of American society underscore the ways that people associate mixed-race people with racial categories into which they do not fit and associate those multiracial persons with prejudicial racial meanings that are attached to the assumed affiliated racial group. Renn’s typology highlights the variety of ways that, and fluidity with which, mixed-race people define their own identities. Together, the concept of racialization and the multiracial identity typology can be used to examine how incongruence between society’s classification of multiracial individuals and those mixed-race persons’ self-identification can shape the experiences of multiracial college students.

**METHOD**

In the current investigation, we employed qualitative research methods to understand
the ways in which mixed-race college students experience prejudice and discrimination (Creswell, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). We chose qualitative methods because they are appropriate tools for answering what, how, and why questions (Creswell, 2012) and were therefore most suitable for our inquiry. The study consisted of two phases. In Phase I, we conducted two pilot focus groups with 12 mixed-race college students and college graduates to develop an initial taxonomy of types of prejudice and discrimination experienced by multiracial students. Generating this initial typology in Phase I allowed us to construct a more focused interview protocol and maximize the likelihood that we would gather the richest data on the types of prejudice and discrimination experienced by mixed-race students in Phase II of the investigation. In Phase II, we conducted individual, face-to-face interviews with 22 multiracial college students to gain a more in-depth understanding of how prejudice and discrimination are experienced by mixed-race undergraduates during college. We describe these phases in greater detail in the remainder of this section. Then, we discuss the findings from the 22 individual interviews with current multiracial undergraduates in Phase II of the inquiry.

Phase I: Pilot Focus Groups

We recruited participants for the focus group interviews with the help of multiracial college student and community organizations. Those leaders were asked to recommend members or recent members of their multiracial organizations. We employed purposeful sampling techniques to achieve intensity and variation in the participant sample. Intensity refers to the selection of information-rich cases, whereas variation focuses on identifying and describing themes that cut across variation in samples (Patton, 2002). With regard to intensity, we sought participants who were or had been recently involved in multiracial student and community organizations, under the assumption that those individuals would be more likely to have thought about and discussed multiracial issues than people who had never been involved in such organizations and would be able to offer rich insights into their experiences with prejudice and discrimination. With regard to variation, we solicited the participation of individuals who spanned a wide range of racial and ethnic mixes, so that we could identify commonalities across the experiences of mixed-race people from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Pilot Focus Group Participants. Because 4 to 12 participants is considered an optimal sample size for focus groups (Seal, Bogart, & Ehrhardt, 1998), we aimed for this number of participants for each group interview. The final focus group sample included 12 mixed-race participants who identified as Asian American / Black (6) Asian American / White (1), Asian American / White / Other (1), Black/White (2), Native American / White (1), and White/Other (1). The sample included 4 men and 8 women. The first focus group consisted of 4 current mixed-race students attending three private urban research universities on the East Coast, whereas the second interview consisted of 7 recent graduates of four urban private research universities and 1 recent graduate of an urban public research university on the East Coast.

Pilot Focus Group Data Collection. The focus group protocol was constructed by utilizing protocols used in previous research on prejudice and discrimination and the literature on multiracial experiences (AhnAllen et al., 2006; Bradshaw, 1992; Harris, 2002; Nakashima, 1992; Root, 1992, 1997; Sue, Bucceri, Annie, Nadal, & Torino, 2007; Tashiro, 2002). While recognizing that the influence of researcher subjectivity
is inevitable, we aimed to minimize the influence of our own experiences as mixed-race individuals and biases on data collection by including general questions about experiences with prejudice and discrimination, rather than questions regarding specific types of predetermined prejudice and discrimination experiences. Questions, for example, included the following: Are there any stereotypes that exist about multiracial people? Are there ways in which you are treated differently because of your multiraciality? Focus groups lasted approximately 2 hours each and were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed.

**Pilot Focus Group Data Analysis.** Consistent with focus group analysis procedures and previous studies of racial prejudice and discrimination (e.g., Hill et al., 2005; Seal et al., 1998), we reviewed each transcript to identify thematic categories (i.e., prejudice and discrimination) and their corresponding properties. Specifically, we used open-coding techniques described by Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) to identify types of prejudice and discrimination in the transcripts and axial coding to identify the following properties of each one, including (a) the types of prejudice and discrimination experienced by our multiracial participants, (b) critical incidents that illustrate occurrence of the prejudice or discrimination, (c) any messages conveyed to participants by the prejudice and discrimination, and (d) participants’ responses to this prejudice and discrimination. Seven forms of prejudice and discrimination emerged from the focus group data and were further explored in Phase II.

**Phase II: Individual Interviews**

Similar to the procedures in Phase I, we recruited participants with the help of multiracial student and community organization leaders for the Phase II of the inquiry. Once again, leaders were asked to recommend participants for the investigation, and we recruited participants to achieve intensity and variation in the sample. In this phase, we also used snowball sampling techniques (i.e., acquired additional participants based on recommendations of interviewees) until we reached a point of data saturation (i.e., the point at which no new information emerged from the interview data; Patton, 2002). The final sample for Phase II consisted of 22 mixed-race college students in the New England area. All participants in Phase II were not included in Phase I. The sample included Asian American / Black (3), Asian American / Latino (1), Asian American / White (8), Black/Latino (2), Black/White (4), White/Other (1), * Asian American / Black / Native American (1), Asian American / Native Hawaiian / White (1), and Black / Native American / White (1) participants. Female students were overrepresented in the sample, as there were 17 female and 5 male participants. All 22 Phase II participants were enrolled in 4-year institutions on the East Coast. Of the 22 interviewees, 16 attended four urban private research universities, 5 attended a suburban private research university, and 1 attended a private urban liberal arts college in New England.

**Individual Interview Data Collection.** Each multiracial student in Phase II participated in one face-to-face individual interview that lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. We utilized the findings from Phase I to construct a semistructured protocol for the individual interviews. Thus, questions that were included in the individual interview protocol were more focused than those used in Phase I. Some sample questions included the following: Does

* The term *Other* was used to denote cases in which participants identified with an ethnicity that does not have a commonly agreed upon racial category, such as Trinidadian and Turkish.
how you identify differ from how other people identify you? Do people ever question how you identify racially? Do you ever feel excluded from groups on campus? The primary purpose of these individual interviews conducted in Phase II was to deepen our understandings of the ways in which this prejudice and discrimination manifests and shapes the experiences of mixed-race undergraduates.

**Individual Interview Data Analysis.** Data analysis in Phase II was conducted using several methods prescribed by Strauss and Corbin (1998). To handle the high volume of data generated in Phase II, we used the NVivo qualitative research software package to organize and code the individual interview transcripts. Similar to the process in Phase I, we used open-coding techniques to identify each type of prejudice and discrimination experienced by each of the 22 interview participants and axial coding to clarify (a) the experienced prejudice and discrimination, (b) critical occurrences of each type of prejudice and discrimination, (c) the messages conveyed to participants in the form of prejudice and discrimination, and (d) participants’ responses to the prejudice and discrimination that they experienced. The findings of Phase II provided strong support for six of the seven types of prejudice and discrimination in Phase I and partial support for the remaining two categories of prejudice and discrimination found in the first phase (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998).

**Researcher Reflexivity**

At the time of data collection and analysis, the research team for this investigation consisted of one faculty member, two doctoral students in higher education, and one doctoral student in clinical psychology. The faculty member and all three team members chose to be a part of this study because of their interest in racial and multiracial experiences and issues. The faculty member self-identifies as multiracial (Asian/White). Two of the four doctoral students are also mixed race (Asian/White) and one is White. The multiracial team members’ experiences as mixed-race individuals and all four members’ knowledge of existing multiracial literature informed their biases. At the onset of the study, all research team members believed that (a) subtle forms of racial prejudice and discrimination existed in American society, (b) multiracial people experience subtle forms of racial prejudice and discrimination in unique ways, and (c) experiences as victims of racial prejudice and discrimination can contribute to negative developmental, psychological, and social outcomes. We acknowledge that these perspectives likely influenced the methods that we employed and our interpretation of data.

**Trustworthiness and Quality Assurance**

We utilized several methods prescribed by Lincoln and Guba (1986) to maximize trustworthiness and ensure quality. First, we consciously examined discrepant data through-out the analysis stages of the study. Where data that were inconsistent with emerging themes were found, those themes were reviewed and modified accordingly. Second, we triangulated data from the two focus groups, the individual interviews, and researcher notes to cross-check, verify, and modify emergent themes. Third, we conducted member checks by sending all participants a summary interpretation of their experiences and requesting their feedback and any clarification that they deemed necessary to maximize the accuracy of our interpretation of their experiences and the findings of the investigation. Finally, two peer debriefers who are knowledgeable about racial and multiracial issues in higher education engaged with the researchers in discussions regarding the meanings and interpretation of the interview data.
Limitations of the Study

Despite the methods to ensure trustworthiness described above, there are several limitations of the current inquiry. First, the emergent findings are context-bound and cannot be generalized beyond our 34 multiracial participants. On a related note, all 34 participants resided on the East Coast, which provides a different racial and cultural context than other areas of the nation—such as in Hawai’i, where multiracials make up approximately 20% of the state’s population—so the findings of our inquiry do not address the experiences of multiracial individuals in other geographic regions. A second limitation is selection bias. We chose participants who were connected to multiracial organizations under the assumption that they have a space to discuss multiracial issues and might be more likely to recognize and talk about the salience of prejudice and discrimination in their daily lives. Participants who are not involved in mixed-race organizations or have never had the opportunity to process or discuss multiracial issues might not have identified and discussed similar experiences. Finally, insights gained from our examination are limited to common experiences and do not contribute to understanding how experiences with prejudice and discrimination might vary across subgroups or individuals within the mixed-race population. That is, the purpose of this inquiry was to uncover commonalities across mixed-race individual experiences with prejudice and discrimination, but we did not examine differences across racial composition, phenotype, or other characteristics.

FINDINGS

Seven themes emerged from the data. Before presenting the themes, a few caveats are warranted. First, the themes are not mutually exclusive—that is, they can happen simultaneously—but each theme represents a unique form of prejudice and discrimination that were sometimes experienced independently by participants. Second, it should be noted that although the following types of prejudice and discrimination are specific to participants’ experience as a mixed-race person, our participants’ experiences illuminated how multiracial individuals also can be subject to prejudice and discrimination targeted at them when they are perceived as a member of a monoracial minority group. For example, one Chinese/White participant was called a “chink,” and a Black/White participant described an experience being called a “nigger.” However, an analysis of participants’ experiences with prejudice and discrimination targeted at them because they are members of a monoracial group (e.g., Black) is beyond the scope of this analysis. We focus on the prejudice and discrimination that participants reported experiencing because of their multiraciality. Finally, it is also important to note that these seven themes are not intended to be an exhaustive list but rather delineate the ways that our 34 participants described their experiences with prejudice and discrimination in college.

Racial Essentialization

Racial essentialization refers to situations in which others attempt to reduce a mixed-race student’s identity to a singular racial category. This racial essentialization often occurred in interpersonal interactions when others tried, but were unable, to fit multiracial students into a racial group. The other person then often began an inquisition and, if he or she had difficulty making sense of the participant’s response, this interaction sometimes became prolonged as the other person probed until he or she was able to understand the mixed-race person’s identity through his or her existing cognitive racial frameworks. All
but one individual interview participant reported having frequently experienced the “What are you?” question. Alex, a Chinese/Black/Native American individual female interviewee, explained the following:

In addition to this external pressure to pick a race, it’s a very specific way they want you to pick one. Because that way there’s one category, and they can just remember this one box that you check. And, that makes things easy for them. But that might not be the way one identifies.

Racial essentialization also occurred when multiracial participants encountered forms or questionnaires that offer limited options with regard to racial self-identification. In these situations, as one Black/Latina participant named Bianca discussed, participants were often forced to pick one race and identify with one aspect of their identity:

One frustrating thing is the fill-in-the-box. Like college applications ask, “What are you?” I just hate those questions. . . . I don’t understand. There are so many mixed people. What do they expect us to do? Just pick one? Clearly, there are so many mixed people.

Several participants noted that although they did not always believe that people intended to engage in acts of prejudice and discrimination when essentializing them, these encounters were a source of discontent. A Filipino/White male interview named Cam, for example, illuminated these feelings when he shared the following remarks:

That question is so charged for me. I have so many emotions attached to it. . . . When someone asks me in that context, it’s implied that it’s like an interview. . . . And, I feel uncomfortable, like I’m on the spotlight for my racial identity. . . . It elicits this cringe in me because I can imagine the person that’s being asked is having to rack their brain and figure out which identity is most important.

Indeed, as the preceding quote illuminates, several of our participants associated these essentialization experiences with discomfort and frustration.

Invalidation of Racial Identities

The invalidation of racial identities refers to other people’s rejection of multiracial college students’ self-selected identities. Danielle, a Black/White female participant, discussed her frequent experiences with the invalidation or denial of her identity choices:

Yeah. It happens all the time. People are like “No. You’re not [White].” I’m like “Okay, well you can take it on with my parents, because I am.” I don’t know what to say when they’re like, “No way.” There’s nothing for me to say . . . so it ends there.

Participants also described how their peers would invalidate their identity choices in order to justify their racial jokes or discriminatory comments toward a racial group to which the participant belonged. Esther, a Chinese/White female participant, shared the following:

I do have some friends that will just make jokes and say, “Oh yeah, but we can say that because you’re not actually Asian.” . . . [They will] make remarks that are rude and borderline racist, but they don’t mean it in a malicious way. It’s just kind of like, “Oh, we can joke with you about it because you’re kind of Chinese, but you’re not actually Chinese, so we don’t feel like we’re actually offending you.” . . . One of my friends was like, “If I called you a Chink, you wouldn’t actually get offended because you’re not really Chinese.” Things like that.

This participant explained how her White friends not only determined that it was okay to say racist things in front of her, but also decided that she did not have the right to be offended because she was not really Chinese or Chinese American.
External Imposition of Racial Identities

The external imposition of racial identities is related to the previous theme of invalidation, but this imposition transcends the denial of a multiracial individual’s identity choices and refers to the ascription of racial identities onto a mixed-race person. Fiona, a Chinese/White female participant, illuminated this theme:

I’ll say I identify with minority group. And [my boyfriend] will say “No. You’re White and you’re American.” So, to him I’m a White American. To me, that’s true, but I’m also a minority. . . . Sometimes, I don’t feel legitimately a minority. The fact that he tells me I’m White makes me feel like “Yeah, maybe I am White.”

These participants’ experiences highlight how racial identities were forced upon them by strangers, peers, and family members who appeared to believe they had the ability to define that multiracial student in ways that conflict with the student’s own self-identification.

Although our multiracial participants did not always know the intentions of the other person when they experienced these instances of identity imposition, they all expressed frustration with encounters in which others externally imposed identities upon them. The external imposition of racial identities conveyed the message that the other person has the right and ability to determine the multiracial college students’ racial identities for them. Grace, a Black/White female interviewee, for example, described experiencing such exclusion and marginalization from his Korean and White peers in the following comments:

People would always sort of push me out as the opposite of what they were. So, when I was around White friends, I was the Asian kid. When I was with Asian friends, I was called the White kid. . . . Whoever I’m hanging out with, I’m always going to be sort of that odd person. Always. . . . I’m not the same as people who are fully one race or fully another race and that also comes with the fact that I probably won’t be able to fully ever really fit into any one group.

Moreover, the racial exclusion and marginalization was often reported as subtle, rather than overt. Isabella, a Taiwanese/White female participant, explained this reality:

I wouldn’t say that it is this outward, “Oh. Why are you here?” I mean, I’ve had that happen to me too. But, there’s usually this sense of. . . . You’ll walk in and everyone will be full Asian of full White. . . . And, there’s just this vibe in the room that’s uncomfortable and sends the message that I do not belong here.
Regardless of whether the exclusion and marginalization was explicit or implicit, however, the message that it conveyed to our mixed-race participants was that they were not members of a particular racial peer group. Interview participants felt discomfort and a lack of belonging and acceptance at times, as well as expressed confusion and surprise that they were the targets of such acts of multiracial exclusion and marginalization.

Challenges to Racial Authenticity
This challenges to racial authenticity theme describes experiences in which, after gaining membership into a particular group, the multiracial individual’s authenticity as a member of a given racial group is questioned. When our mixed-race participants experienced this challenging of their authenticity, their legitimacy was evaluated based on factors such as, but not limited to, cultural knowledge, language ability, preferences (e.g., food or music), and affiliations (e.g., dating, friendships). Isabella used President Barack Obama’s experiences as an example of how mixed-race college students’ racial authenticity is often challenged:

Is he Latino enough? Is he Hispanic enough? Is he Asian enough? Is he one of us? Just to put in context. . . . I know Barack Obama was hyperaware of this. You know. . . . He runs in Chicago, and the question is “Are you Black enough?” . . . Early on, it was “No. You’re not.” And, the guy who beat him, who challenged him in the primary, Bobby Rush, straight up put that argument to the people. . . . “This guy’s not Black enough.”

Although monoracial people of color might face similar pressures to demonstrate their racial authenticity, some participants’ comments suggested that they might have been seen as lacking authenticity because of their multiraciality, even when they met criteria that others use to assess their racial authenticity, such as speaking the language, eating the food, and understanding the culture of that racial group. Jenna, a Black/Latina participant, noted the following:

I went to the Latino Student Association just because I thought . . . “Okay, this is where I’m accepted.” But, then you go there and, not that they were malicious or anything, but it was like, “Okay, you have to prove yourself.” They were like, “What are you doing here?” . . . So, even though it’s crazy because Latinos come in all different shapes and sizes and colors and all of that stuff, it’s still one of those things, like “Oh. You’re not really this or you’re not really that.” And, I found it interesting because . . . they don’t even speak Spanish or they’ve never been to Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic or wherever they’re from, but supposedly they are more Latina than I am, when I speak the language, when I’ve been there, when I know about my culture and I know about my background. So that’s weird.

This challenging of authenticity conveyed messages to our mixed-race participants that their racial legitimacy is up for debate and was associated with pressure to prove their legitimacy.

Exoticization
Participants also discussed experiencing exoticization as multiracial persons. This exoticization refers to others’ fascination with and objectification of mixed-race people because of their unique or different backgrounds and phenotype. Participants discussed being exoticized by strangers, as well as peers and sometimes even family members. Kristine, a Black/White female interviewee, for example, described how she felt when strange men attempted to talk to her, inquired about her racial background, and objectified her:
If it’s some guy on the bus who is like “Oh, girl. What's good? What are you?” Then, like okay, you don’t really care. You know what I mean? Maybe you do, but you’re not about to ask me my Jewish history and how that affected my life to this point. . . . You just wonder why my body looks like this and why my face looks the way it does.

There are a few intricacies related to the current theme worth highlighting. Both male and female participants discussed how their appearance seemed to invite superficial attention and attraction, rather than genuine interest, although women were more likely to report exoticization as being a significant part of their experience. This difference could be an indication that exoticization has a different and more salient impact on the experiences of mixed-race women. One participant noted that she also experiences exoticization as an Asian American in addition to being exoticized as a mixed-race individual. And, one Chinese / Native Hawaiian / Tahitian / White male participant, named Lance, noted that the exoticization that he experienced was a result of being a part Pacific Islander and discussed his frustration with this objectification:

When I say that I’m Native Hawaiian or Tahitian, one of the first words usually is “That’s so exotic.” And . . . I remember being in a relationship, where they kind of wanted me to speak Native Hawaiian or something like that, when we were getting kind of romantic. That was a huge turn-off for me actually. It was . . . I don’t know . . . I felt like I was being exoticized. . . . It was kind of an uncomfortable experience. . . . I think being that Pacific Islander, it does happen pretty frequently. . . . There’s this kind of frustration. And, I think it’s even more so than any of the other examples that we’ve talked about because I’m more of a person that likes to be known for my personality and character, as opposed to how people racially perceive me.

Several participants felt that people who exoticized them did not have malicious intentions and were attempting to compliment them. They also noted that, sometimes, being exoticized made them feel good because it sent a message that they were unique. More often than not, however, the message conveyed to participants was that they were dehumanized and objectified.

Pathologizing of Multiracial Individuals

The pathologizing of multiracial individuals describes the assumption that mixed-race people are psychologically imbalanced, developmentally challenged, and confused about their own identities. Bianca underscored this theme when she said that other people assume that “you’re mixed up in the head. You don’t really know who you are, because you’re mixed.” This participant went on to explain that people made remarks that suggest that mixed-race student organizations, which sometimes explicitly explore identity issues, as providing spaces for confused people who need help because of their multiraciality: “I guess people sort of . . . I’ve heard people tease me and say ‘Oh. You multiracial people. . . . You’re so confused. You guys need a group to help you get through your identity issues.’”

This pathologizing conveyed the message that being multiracial is inherently problematic and leads to psychological and developmental problems. However, only a few participants spoke about this pathologizing during their interviews. Moreover, the ways in which this stereotype shapes the experiences of mixed-race people are largely unknown, so this might be an important area for future empirical inquiries into multiracial experiences with prejudice and discrimination.

DISCUSSION

The current investigation makes at least four significant contributions to extant
research. First, the inquiry contributes to existing literature on campus racial climates by illuminating the ways in which college climates can pose significant challenges for multiracial students. Several prior studies have shed significant light on how Asian American, Black, Latino, and Native American students encounter campus climates permeated with prejudice and discrimination (Allen, 1992; Ancis et al., 2000; Feagin et al., 1996; Hurtado, 1992; Lewis et al., 2000). This scholarship has examined the experiences of monoracial college students of color and offered a fairly sophisticated understanding of the ways that race, racial categorization, and racial prejudice and discrimination shape the experiences of these undergraduates. However, systematic analyses of empirical data on how mixed-race students experience prejudice and discrimination on campus are more difficult to find. By offering such an analysis, this study contributes to more holistic understandings of how college climates shape the experiences of all college students.

Second, the current inquiry contributes to existing literature by helping generate a more holistic understanding of the context surrounding mixed-race students’ identity and experiences. As mentioned, scholars have produced valuable insights into the nature of multiracial college students’ identity patterns and the various factors that influence these patterns (e.g., Chaudhari & Pizzolato, 2008; Renn, 2000, 2004, 2008). This research has provided some indication that campus environments influence mixed-race students’ identity choices, but has fallen short of providing a more holistic understanding of that relationship. The current study extends this literature by shedding additional light on how processes of racialization shape campus climates and interactions within them, as well as how these factors work to force multiracial students into, or push them out of, circumscribed racial categories.

Third, and closely related to the second contribution discussed above, the findings of this investigation encourage a shift in research and discourse around mixed-race college students. The vast majority of existing literature on multiracial experiences has centered the discussion on mixed-race individuals’ identity struggles and patterns (Kilson, 2001; Poston, 1990; Renn, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2008; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002; Root, 1990, 1998; Wallace, 2001, 2003; Wijeyesinghe, 2001). In doing so, this research can function to perpetuate assumptions that these individuals should assume the bulk of responsibility to adapt to environmental pressures while giving inadequate attention to institutions’ responsibility to cultivate more inclusive institutional environments that alleviate these challenges. By shifting the focus to examine processes of racialization, campus racial climates, and institutional agents’ (e.g., faculty, staff, and peers) engagement in acts of prejudice and discrimination toward mixed-race students, the current study emphasizes the need for more research and discourse that advances current levels of understanding regarding how institutions perpetuate challenging environments for mixed-race students and how they can improve the campus milieu for these undergraduates.

Finally, it is important to note that the findings illuminate how multiracial students’ experiences are shaped by systems of racism in unique ways. Scholars have discussed the ways in which communities of color are lumped into categories and racialized, as well as how such processes lead to racial subordination and racial challenges for minority groups (e.g., Feagin et al., 1996). The current findings suggest that mixed-race college students can be racialized in multiple ways by many different racial groups (e.g., people who are monoracial, members of their own racial communities,
people who are overtly racist, those from racial minority groups, etc.), thereby shaping their experiences in complex and unique ways.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

The findings of the current inquiry have several implications for research and practice. Due to limited space, we offer a few of those implications herein. With regard to research, an examination of differences in multiracial individuals’ experiences with prejudice and discrimination across subgroups (e.g., difference between experiences of Asian/White and Black/White individuals, or differences across geographic regions) was beyond the scope of this study. It is, however, possible that the prejudice and discrimination that emerged in our interviews are experienced with varying levels of intensity or manifest in disparate ways across different racial and regional backgrounds. For example, it could be hypothesized that mixed-race individuals who are more frequently racialized as White, when compared with their peers who are typically racialized as persons of color, are more likely to share a stronger connection with White communities, are more able to pass as White, and are more likely to be marginalized and face challenges to authenticity among their espoused communities of color. And, it is possible that racialization processes and race relations among mixed-race persons vary across geographic regions with different racial compositions. Thus, future research can utilize the forms of prejudice and discrimination excavated herein as a framework to examine such differences and advance understandings of the diversity of experiences within the multiracial student population.

Second, quantitative explorations of the effects of multiracial experiences with prejudice and discrimination are warranted. Because prejudice and discrimination had not yet previously been empirically and systematically examined among mixed-race college students prior to this investigation, qualitative methods were necessary for generating rich insight into the nature of these experiences in the current study. Future research can and should build on this work by utilizing the typology of prejudice and discrimination outlined above to generate quantifiable measures of them and examine the connections between these types of prejudice and discrimination and various psychosocial (e.g., stress, anxiety, depression), social (e.g., sense of membership or belonging), academic (e.g., performance and persistence), and satisfaction outcomes. In doing so, researchers not only can shed light on whether these experiences predict important outcomes, but also can illuminate whether these instances are relevant to larger populations of mixed-race college students.

Third, the current study focused on mixed-race students’ experiences with prejudice and discrimination in college. Therefore, this inquiry sheds significant light on the challenging aspects of campus environments for multiracial students. Future research can add to knowledge of mixed-race students’ experiences by analyzing aspects of college campuses that might contribute to positive environments that allow multiracial students to thrive. For example, scholars should conduct research to advance knowledge regarding whether and how ethnic studies curricula and multiracial student organizations that explicitly provide more inclusive curricula and spaces for marginalized populations might help mixed-race students cope with the challenges uncovered in the current investigation.

With regard to practice, the taxonomy that emerged from this investigation provides a typology to guide professional development activities around understanding and serving multiracial students. Utilizing the framework in professional development efforts can ensure
that educators are aware of their potential to unconsciously commit acts of prejudice and discrimination when working with multiracial students, can avoid committing acts of prejudice and discrimination toward them, and can foster a more welcoming and positive campus environment for mixed-race people. Because mixed-race issues are often excluded from conversations about race and ethnicity, such professional development opportunities are critical to ensuring that educators understand the issues faced by this population.

Last, postsecondary educators should assess their campus environments to understand how they might pose challenges for mixed-race students. The environments of many college campuses are permeated with racial divisions. Although informal affinity groups and formal student organizations, ranging from student governments to fraternities and sororities, both serve as critical sources of support for students, one monoracial group is often predominant in their membership. Similarly, conversations around diversity on college campuses are often based on assumed racial groupings and differences between the White majority and people of color. Environments characterized by such entities and conversations might reinforce notions that undergraduates have to fit into monoracial groups to socially connect to campus and pose environmental challenges for mixed-race students who do not neatly fit into one racial category. College educators can utilize the typology offered in the current study to ask critical questions about their campus environments, such as the following: Are multicultural and student affairs units, programs, and services designed in a way that they essentialize students and assume that they fit neatly into one racial category? Are there sufficient explicitly identified mixed-race spaces and organizations to diminish the likelihood multiracial students will become isolated or marginalized? What aspects of the institution (e.g., demographic questions on institutional forms, available student organizations, etc.) might invalidate the ways that mixed-race students identify or force them into a circumscribed category? And, are mixed-race perspectives included in the list of speakers who are invited to campus? In sum, the taxonomy offered herein can help guide campus leadership to develop more critical understandings of multiracial populations and understand how to cultivate more inclusive environments for this population.

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