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Fall September 1, 2015

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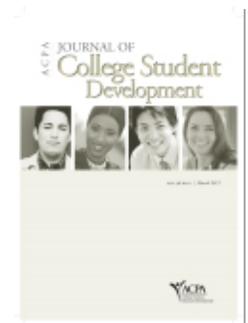
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Journal of College Student Development, Volume 56, Number 4, May 2015, pp. 331-348 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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A Qualitative Examination of Multiracial Students' Coping Responses to Experiences with Prejudice and Discrimination in College

Samuel D. Museus Susan A. Lambe Sariñana Tasha Kawamata Ryan

National data indicate that multiracial individuals comprise a substantial and growing proportion of the US population, but this community is often invisible in higher education research and discourse. This study aims to increase knowledge of mixed-race students in higher education by examining the ways in which they cope with experienced prejudice and discrimination in college. Findings indicate that multiracial college students cope with prejudice and discrimination by educating others about multiracial issues, utilizing support networks, embracing fluidity of multiracial identity, and avoiding confrontation with sources of prejudice and discrimination. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

National data indicate that multiracial individuals comprise a substantial and growing proportion of the US population. The 2000 Census allowed multiracial individuals to identify with multiple racial categories for the first time, and almost 7 million people opted to do so (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). In 2010, over 9 million people identified with two or more racial categories. In addition, in 2010, these individuals represented approximately 7% of the total population in the United States. Moreover, these figures do not include persons who have mixed-race heritage and decided not to identify with multiple racial groups on Census forms.

Although mixed-race individuals represent

a substantial and increasing portion of the national population, with few exceptions (e.g., King, 2008; Renn, 2000, 2004, 2008; Talbot, 2008), they are virtually invisible in higher education research and discourse (Museus, Lambe Sariñana, Yee, & Robinson, in press). In fact, our review of five of the most widely read peer-reviewed United States-based 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 less than 1% of articles published over the last decade included an explicit focus on mixed-race people. This virtual invisibility in the higher education literature is problematic, because the near absence of an entire racial group from the knowledge base can preclude the abilities of college educators to effectively understand and serve members of that population (Museus, 2009). Consequently, in the current study, we aimed to help address this invisibility of mixed-race students in higher education research and discourse by examining and shedding light on multiracial college students' coping responses to prejudice and discrimination.

Racial Prejudice and Discrimination in College

A substantial amount of research has illuminated the reality that students of color regularly

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encounter racial prejudice and discrimination in higher education (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). For example, Ancis et al. (2000) quantitatively examined a sample of 578 undergraduates at a single institution and concluded that African American students consistently reported experiencing racial antipathy, differential treatment, and pressure to disprove racial stereotypes. Similarly, in a single-institution qualitative study of 75 Asian American, Black, Latino, and Native American students, Lewis et al. (2000) found that participants encountered contradictory pressures to represent their race and assimilate into the majority culture of their campus, racial exclusion and marginality, resentment, and hostility from White peers, and marginalization by the faculty and in the curriculum on their campuses.

Although all monoracial minority groups report experiencing racial prejudice and discrimination, there are some differences in the ways that they experienced these racial realities (Chou & Feagin, 2008; Feagin et al., 1996; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Lewis et al., 2000; Museus, 2008). For example, Black students often reported experiencing significant pressure to disprove stereotypes that they are academically inferior, whereas Asian American students faced immense pressure to conform to stereotypes of academic superiority (Chou & Feagin, 2008; Feagin et al., 1996; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Museus, 2008).

In addition to illuminating the reality that monoracial students of color face racial prejudice and discrimination in college, scholars have empirically linked campus racial climates and experiences with racial prejudice and discrimination to these students' college outcomes, such as adjustment, involvement, persistence, and degree attainment (Cabrera,

Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). These studies consistently showed that more hostile racial climates or increased experiences with prejudice and discrimination are associated with difficulties adjusting to college, lower levels of involvement, decreased sense of belonging, and lower levels of persistence and completion. Hurtado and Carter (1997), for instance, examined data from the National Survey of Hispanic Students using structural equation modeling techniques and found that hostile racial climates significantly decreased Hispanic students' sense of belonging in college. Similarly, Museus et al. (2008) examined nationally representative data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students (96/01) Survey using structural equation modeling and concluded that more negative racial climates can diminish involvement and degree completion among students of color as well as among their White peers. In sum, research suggests that monoracial students of color regularly encounter racial prejudice and discrimination in college and that these experiences are negatively associated with important educational outcomes, but the knowledge base regarding mixed-race students' experiences with prejudice and discrimination is much less developed.

Multiracial Prejudice and Discrimination in College

Much of the existing scholarship on multiracial experiences, both outside and within higher education, focuses on multiracial identity struggles, formation, and development (e.g., Chaudhari & Pizzolato, 2008; Johnston & Nadal, 2010; Kilson, 2001; Nakashima, 1992; Poston, 1990; Renn, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2008; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002; Root, 1992, 1998; Talbot, 2008; Wallace, 2001, 2003; Wijeyesinghe, 2001). Renn's (2000) study of

multiracial identity in college is one inquiry that shed valuable light on the ways that many factors, such as precollege experiences and campus environments, shape the way mixed-race students identify. For example, she discussed a Black/Filipina student who was given opportunities to explore both sides of her heritage as a child. In college, this student connected with the Black Caucus, where she could express her Black identity, as well as with the Filipino Alliance, where she found space to express her identity as a Filipina. This is an example how a student's precollege experiences might prepare her to shift her identity across spaces and how various campus environments might constitute spaces where specific aspects of her identity increase in salience.

Renn (2000) also generated a useful typology for understanding the ways that mixed-race students identify. She found that students in her study exhibited 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). This body of scholarship has made a significant contribution to current levels of knowledge regarding multiracial identity, and these findings challenge common assumptions that all individuals should or do "fit" into singular racial and ethnic categories.

Although the aforementioned multiracial identity studies focused primarily on identity formation processes, they also provide some indication that mixed-race students encounter prejudice and discrimination as they navigate college life. For instance, Talbot (2008) conducted qualitative individual interviews with 10 mixed-race college students with multiple racial minority parents and concluded

that some of them struggled significantly because others frequently attempted to ascribe them racial identities. It is important to note that although issues, such as identity ascription, can certainly be analyzed as an identity negotiation process, such imposition can also be viewed as a form of prejudice and discrimination targeted at mixed-race people because it is an act of forcing identity upon someone and depriving that person of the right to choose his or her own method of racial and ethnic identification (Museus et al., in press).

In our review of literature, we found only one systematic empirical inquiry that was focused specifically and explicitly on multiracial students' experiences with prejudice and discrimination in college (Museus et al., in press). Building on the work of scholars writing about multiracial identity both outside and within higher education (Johnston & Nadal, 2010; Kilson, 2001; Nakashima, 1992; Poston, 1990; Renn, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2008; Rockquemore & Brunσμα, 2002; Root, 1998; Wallace, 2001, 2003; Wijeyesinghe, 2001), Museus et al. (in press) qualitatively explored how 22 multiracial undergraduates experience prejudice and discrimination. They found that these participants frequently encountered several types of prejudice and discrimination in college, such as instances of racial essentialization (i.e., others trying to force them into a racial category), the invalidation of their racial identities, the external imposition of racial identities, the exclusion and marginalization from racial groups to which they belonged, challenges to their authenticity as members of their racial group, exoticization, and the pathologizing of their multiracial identities. In sum, most research on the experiences of mixed-race college students focuses on their identity processes, and there is some indication that these students' experience with prejudice and discrimination in college.

Coping with Racial Prejudice and Discrimination in College

Coping responses can mediate the relationship between a stressor (e.g., racial prejudice and discrimination) and stress that results from it (Lazarus, 1990). Specifically, coping can be defined as “a process whereby an individual attempts to manage, through cognitive or behavioral efforts, external and internal demands that are assessed as exceeding one’s resources” (Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, & Cancelli, 2000, p. 79). Therefore, coping responses can be viewed as mechanisms by which people understand, reframe, or react to a particular experience, such as their encounters with racial prejudice and discrimination in higher education.

When individuals encounter a stressful situation, such as experienced prejudice and discrimination, they go through multiple stages of response (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Outlaw, 1993). First, they go through a *primary appraisal* stage, in which they assess the situation and determine if the conditions present a challenge or threat. Second, these individuals proceed through a *secondary appraisal* stage, whereby they assess whether they have the necessary resources to cope with the situation and diminish the challenge or threat. The individual can then pursue coping responses that are aimed at reducing the challenge or threat.

There are many types of coping strategies that people of color use when they encounter racial prejudice and discrimination (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Mellor, 2004; Truong & Museus, 2012). These coping responses can be easily separated into three categories: problem focused, emotion focused, and avoidant coping (Billings & Moos, 1984; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Liang, Alvarez, Juang, & Liang, 2007). Persons employing problem-focused responses aim to eliminate

the source of their stress. For example, a person of color may confront a person with prejudicial and discriminatory views or invest energy in spreading awareness that will reverse such viewpoints. Individuals utilizing emotion-focused coping mechanisms seek to diminish the emotional impact of a stressful situation. For instance, a person of color who encounters prejudice and discrimination might seek support to make sense of the situation and figure out how to address it. Finally, avoidant coping is aimed at engaging in behaviors to withdraw from normal activities and escape from a stressful situation. Those engaging in avoidant coping might, for example, adapt their behavior to avoid spaces where they are likely to (re)encounter prejudice and discrimination or drink alcohol as a vehicle for escape.

In addition, engaging in various coping strategies can simultaneously enable individuals to deal with negative racialized encounters and lead to negative consequences. For example, those who engage in problem-focused coping and confront sources of prejudice and discrimination can be seen as combative and experience increased marginalization as a result (Carter, 2007; Sanders Thompson, 2006; Truong & Museus, 2012). However, it is important to note that the use of avoidant coping might be most problematic because it has been associated with increased stress and lower levels of satisfaction among people of color when compared to more active coping methods (Carter, 2007; Sanders Thompson, 2006; Truong & Museus, 2012).

Research has underscored the importance of understanding coping responses because they are an integral element of everyday experiences with racial prejudice and discrimination (Clark, 2004; Feagin & Sikes, 1995; LaLonde, & Cameron, 1994; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996; Swim, Cohen, & Hyers, 1998). In higher education, there is a small and growing body

of literature that examines coping responses to prejudice and discrimination among both undergraduate and graduate students of color (Bowen-Reid & Harrell, 2002; Clark, 2004; Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011; Gonzalez, 2006; Liang et al., 2007; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003; Truong & Museus, 2012; Utsey et al., 2000). This body of scholarship also indicates that both undergraduate and graduate students employ a variety of racial prejudice- and discrimination-related coping responses, such as confronting the source of prejudice and discrimination, seeking support, avoiding future stressful situations, and drinking as a vehicle for escaping or temporarily forgetting their stress.

In conclusion, extant research indicates that undergraduate and graduate students of color employ a variety of coping strategies to respond to prejudice and discrimination. Yet, systematic empirical inquiries that focus on how mixed-race college students cope with prejudice and discrimination that they experience in higher education because of their multiraciality are difficult to find. The current investigation aimed at filling this gap in knowledge.

PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE

As discussed above, systematic empirical research on mixed-race college students' experiences in higher education in general is sparse. In addition, systematic empirical inquiries that focused on understanding multiracial students' experiences with prejudice and discrimination in college and their responses to those encounters are even more difficult to find. Thus, we sought to contribute to current levels of understandings regarding mixed-race students in general and their responses to experiences with prejudice and discrimination specifically.

The purpose of the current inquiry was to understand multiracial students' coping responses to experiences with prejudice and discrimination in college. One overarching question guided the examination: How do mixed-race undergraduates cope with experienced prejudice and discrimination in college? Three additional questions guided the study: (a) What types of strategies do multiracial students' employ to respond to experiences with prejudice and discrimination in college? (b) How do these responses help mixed-race undergraduates cope with experienced prejudice and discrimination in college? and (c) How do multiracial college students make sense of these coping responses?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for the current examination was informed by the preceding synthesis and analysis of literature (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Liang et al., 2007; Mellor, 2004; Truong & Museus, 2012). Specifically, the three categories of problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant-coping responses to prejudice and discrimination that are highlighted in the discussion above served as the conceptual framework. These three categories provide a comprehensive framework that can be used as a conceptual lens to make sense of how mixed-race students directly confront situations in which they encounter prejudice and discrimination (problem-focused behavior), engage in efforts to diminish the negative impact of experienced prejudice and discrimination (emotion-focused behavior), and make efforts to escape or forget such experiences (avoidant behavior). Thus, this three-category framework was deemed an ideal lens for the current investigation.

METHODS

In the current investigation, we employed qualitative research methods to understand how mixed-race students cope with, and respond to, experiences with prejudice and discrimination in college. Qualitative techniques were deemed ideal tools for the current inquiry for multiple reasons. First, qualitative methods permit the collection of rich information and in-depth examination of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Second, qualitative inquiry is ideal for answering what, how, and why questions (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002). Thus, qualitative tools were deemed most suitable for the current inquiry. Specifically, we conducted individual, face-to-face interviews with 22 multiracial college students to gain a more in-depth understanding of how they utilized coping responses to experiences with prejudice and discrimination in college.

Recruitment and Participant Sample

We began by utilizing purposeful sampling to achieve intensity and variation in the participant sample. Sampling for intensity refers to the selection of information-rich cases, whereas sampling for variation emphasizes acquiring diverse samples in order to identify and describe themes that cut across variation within samples (Patton, 2002). With regard to intensity, we asked leaders of mixed-race campus and community organizations on the East Coast (i.e., our gatekeepers) to provide us with the names and contact information of potential participants, who (a) had been involved in their organizations (and therefore were likely to have access to space where they could discuss mixed race issues), (b) were knowledgeable about multiracial issues, and (c) could speak about prejudice and discrimination experienced by mixed-race

people. Once we received names and contact information of potential participants, we e-mailed them a flyer with a description of the purpose of our study and an invitation to participate. As students replied and expressed interest, they were asked to meet for an individual, face-to-face interview.

With regard to variation, throughout the recruitment process, we attempted to acquire a sample that represented diverse genders and ethnic combinations so that we could identify commonalities across the experiences of mixed-race men and women from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. We did this by asking each gatekeeper that we contacted to recommend individuals from groups when a group became underrepresented in the study. For example, when we began noticing men were becoming underrepresented, we asked if the gatekeepers could think about potential male participants. We also employed snowball sampling techniques to acquire additional participants until we reached a point of data saturation (i.e., the point at which no new information emerged from the interview data; Patton, 2002). Specifically, we snowball sampled by asking participants to recommend peers who might be potential interviewees until no new themes were emerging in the interview data.

The final sample consisted of 22 mixed-race college students across seven campuses on the East Coast. The sample included Asian American/Black ($n = 3$), Asian American/Latino ($n = 1$), Asian American/White ($n = 8$), Black/Latino ($n = 2$), Black/White ($n = 4$), Asian American/Black/Native American ($n = 1$), Asian American/Native Hawaiian/White ($n = 1$), Black/Native American/White ($n = 1$), and White/Other ($n = 1$) participants (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). Female students were overrepresented in the sample, as there were 17 female and 5 male participants. Regarding institutional types, 1 participant was enrolled at a small (1,864 students) rural private liberal arts college on the East Coast, 4 at a midsize (10,777 students), 2 suburban private research university, four across 2 midsize (5,828–8,768 students) urban private research universities, 12 across two large (26,959–27,392 students) urban private research universities, and 1 at a midsize (15,741 students) urban public research university (numbers in parentheses are the total number of students enrolled including undergraduates and graduates).

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection for the current study consisted of two components. First, participants were asked to fill out a short demographic questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire consisted of questions that asked for students' contact information, as well as data on their gender, race and ethnicity, year in school, and multiracial organization involvement. Second, students were asked to participate in a face-to-face individual interview that lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The interviews were semistructured and guided by a list of questions that asked participants about specific experiences with prejudice and discrimination as a multiracial student and then followed up with probes that focused on how they felt and responded to these instances. For instance, two sample questions are: "Do you ever feel excluded from racial groups on campus?" and "Can you tell me about an experience when this happened?" These questions were then followed by the following sample probing questions: "How does that make you feel?" and "How did you respond in this situation?" This semistructured approach allowed us to ensure that we would gain insight into the phenomenon under

investigation while permitting flexibility to explore unexpected emergent themes (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

Data Analysis Procedures

To analyze the data for the current investigation, we used several methods prescribed by Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998). First, we read through each individual transcript to gain a better understanding of how each individual participant responded to personal experiences with prejudice and discrimination. This process also allowed us to generate initial themes to provide the foundation for the remainder of the analysis. Second, we utilized the NVivo® Qualitative Research Software package to organize and code the interview transcript data. Whereas open-coding techniques involve fracturing data into categories, axial-coding is used to identify relationships among categories and subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Thus, we used open-coding to identify different types of coping responses reported by participants. Then, axial-coding was utilized to deductively identify subcategories that helped describe the elements of each type of coping response. For example, utilizing support networks, joining multiracial student organizations, and creating mixed-race campus organizations were themes identified in the open-coding stage. Then, through axial-coding analyses of relationships among categories, we concluded that the joining and forming organization themes were subcategories of the final overarching utilization of support networks theme presented below.

Trustworthiness and Quality Assurance

We utilized three methods to maximize trustworthiness and quality assurance. First, we continuously sought and analyzed discrepant data throughout the investigation (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Maxwell, 2012; Patton,

2002). In cases in which emerging themes were inconsistent with interview data, these thematic categories were reviewed and modified accordingly until they were congruent with each coping response found within the interview data. For example, one of the categories that emerged very early in the analysis was the (cognitive) *minimization of significance of racism*. Later in the analysis, data emerged that illuminated that participants physically (as well as cognitively) avoided addressing their experiences with prejudice and discrimination, and the *minimization of significance of racism* theme was expanded into the final *avoiding confrontation* category, presented below, so that it encompassed both subdomains of physical and cognitive avoidance. Second, we triangulated data from interview transcripts, code reports, and researcher notes to cross-check, verify, and modify emergent themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Maxwell, 2012; Patton, 2002). Finally, we conducted member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Maxwell, 2012; Patton, 2002). Specifically, to ensure that our interpretation and summary of each participant's experience was accurate, we sent all 22 participants a summary interpretation of their individual experiences and requested their feedback regarding observed inaccuracies or clarifications.

Limitations of the Study

Despite the aforementioned measures taken to ensure trustworthiness and quality, this study still had multiple limitations that warrant attention. One limitation was selection bias. We sought participants who were connected to multiracial organizations and more knowledgeable about multiracial issues. Participants who were not involved in mixed-race organizations or had never had the opportunity to process or discuss multiracial issues might not have been identified and discussed similar coping strategies. Another

limitation of this study was potential gender bias. Despite the fact that we requested that gatekeepers recommend more male participants so that we could achieve gender diversity, only 23% of participants (5 of 22) were men. Thus, the findings could more accurately reflect multiracial female coping responses than those of their male peers. On a related note, we did not uncover gender differences within the current sample. However, it is possible that there were too few men in the sample for differences across gender to become apparent. As discussed below, these are important areas for future analyses of mixed-race college students' coping responses to prejudice and discrimination.

FINDINGS

Our analysis resulted in four themes that characterized participants' coping responses to experiences with prejudice and discrimination in college. The first theme was "educating others," and it describes how mixed-race students directly respond to individuals by educating them about their racial backgrounds and engage in activity to spread awareness about multiracial issues toward the end of addressing prejudice and discrimination experienced by this population. We refer to the second theme as "utilizing support networks," and it refers to cases in which students sought and constructed support networks for multiracial college students. The third theme, "embracing fluidity," refers to instances in which students used their multiraciality to reject ascribed racial boundaries and attempted to find common ground with students of various racial and ethnic backgrounds. The last theme, "avoiding confrontation," signifies the ways in which mixed-race students minimized the salience of their experiences with prejudice and discrimination to lessen its effects. It is important to note that the above themes were

not mutually exclusive, but they overlapped, and multiracial students sometimes engaged in these coping strategies simultaneously.

Before presenting our findings, it is useful to contextualize them with a brief discussion of the participants' experiences with prejudice and discrimination as multiracial undergraduates. Specifically, participants in the current sample reported experiencing racial essentialization (i.e., being forced into a racial category), the invalidation of their self-selected racial identities, the external imposition of racial identities upon them, exclusion and marginalization from racial groups of which they were members, challenges to their authenticity as a member of their race by members of those racial groups, exoticization as a multiracial, and the pathologizing of their multiracial identities (Museus et al., in press). For example, one Korean/White male participant, named Jack, shared the following comments about the racial exclusion and marginalization that he experienced in the Korean community on his campus:

There are a bunch of Korean kids on campus who I don't think like me very much. You know, they won't really say hi to me. They'll only just sort of nod to acknowledge me. You know, nothing else. And, I sort of been like you know, "You don't really like me." . . . They never talk to me, so I would know if they would point that out. But this is my experience, especially with first-generation Koreans.

It is important to note that these participants also shared that they experienced feelings of disappointment, discomfort, frustration, and anger as a result of these encounters with prejudice and discrimination (Museus et al., in press). Now we turn to the results of the current analysis, which illuminate how these undergraduates responded to this prejudice and discrimination.

Educating Others

Participants discussed educating others as a way to respond and cope with their experiences with prejudice and discrimination, and this theme describes participants' actions to educate people about multiracial identities and experiences in order to diminish prejudice and discrimination toward mixed-race people. Educating others can be considered a problem-focused coping strategy because it entails engaging in efforts to affect the source of the prejudice and discrimination. This theme manifested in two forms. First, multiracial students directly responded to prejudicial comments by their peers and engaged in conversations about their mixed-race background with these peers to educate them about multiracial identity and experiences. Second, participants engaged in formal educational activities to spread awareness about mixed-race identity and experiences.

Several participants often engaged in educative conversations about their identity and experiences when they were confronted with experiences of racial essentialization, the invalidation of their identities, and the external imposition of identities upon them. For example, when a fourth-year Chinese/Black/Native American female participant, named Cindy, was asked how she felt responding to experiences in which other people attempted to essentialize her and asked the "What are you?" question, Cindy shared the following remarks about directly responding to these individuals and educating them about multiracial issues:

I sort of figured out . . . for a lot of people, it might be their first experience with a mixed person. That happened a lot at the beginning of school here, when I was a first-year. I was, to a lot of people, the first mixed student they had met or the first mixed student they had ever conversed with. So, in those instances . . . for me,

it is sort of empowering to be able to teach them . . . I think it varies with my mood. But, for the most part, I'm very calm about it . . . it's important for me to talk about it.

As this quotation suggests, Cindy discussed both how instances in which she was racially essentialized were frequent and the fact that she felt empowered when she responded to these situations by educating people about her race and racial identity.

In addition to educating others on an individual level, participants in this study engaged in more formal educational activities to spread awareness about mixed-race issues. Indeed, mixed-race students were actively involved in spreading awareness of multiracial issues via organizing forums on campus, giving class presentations or student lectures, or starting multiracial columns in magazines. For example, a second-year Filipino/White male participant, named Jazz, discussed giving a lecture on mixed-race issues in the following remarks:

I actually did a student lecture on *Hapa* identity a few months ago. . . . All my blockmates came . . . and all my roommates. . . . They were really taken aback. And, they were really interested in what I had been doing with *Hapa* over the past three months than they had led on before. And, so I guess, race is one of the few things we don't talk about.

Jazz's comments illuminate how educating others operated as a coping tool by empowering participants and allowed mixed-race students to impact the larger campus environment and foster greater awareness of multiracial experiences and issues across their respective institutions.

Utilizing Support Networks

Several multiracial participants discussed how they responded to exclusion, marginalization,

and the absence of a full sense of belonging on campus by utilizing support networks. Utilizing support networks can be categorized primarily as an emotion-focused response because these networks served the primary function of reducing the negative emotional impact of multiracial participants' experienced prejudice and discrimination. However, it could be argued that such support networks can lead to problem-focused (e.g., creating dialogues to educate others about multiracial issues) and avoidant (e.g., staying in these safe spaces to avoid encounters with prejudice and discrimination) responses as well. This theme consisted of two elements. First, some multiracial students discussed seeking out multiracial student organizations. Second, when such organizations did not exist on participants' campuses, some of them described how they worked to establish such organizations with their peers.

Several of our multiracial participants described how they sought out multiracial support networks and discussed the roles that these networks played in their college experiences. Jazz also shared the following remarks about being involved in *Hapa*, a multiracial student organization on his campus named after the Hawaiian word for "half," which is now embraced by many mixed-race people across the country:

Hapa exists, yes, to celebrate a shared partial Asian ancestry and the common experiences that the *hapa* students have on campus. But . . . I think primarily we exist to advance dialogue and provide a space where people can talk about issues related to race.

These comments illustrate how the *Hapa* organization served at least two purposes: to embrace and express multiracial Asian American identity and to provide a safe space for dialogue about racial issues among mixed-race undergraduates on his campus.

On some participants' campuses, multi-racial student organizations did not exist. And, in some cases, these students recognized the need for the aforementioned safe space to express mixed-race identity and discuss multiracial issues. Consequently, they collaborated with their multiracial peers to construct such networks. For example, when a Black/White female student, named Tricia, was asked why she helped form a multiracial student organization, she explained her rationale for creating a mixed-race organization in the following comments:

We wanted to create the organization because there isn't one on campus. . . . We never felt that that there was a place where we could go and talk about our issues and talk about what we deal with. . . . It creates a place for you to feel like you belong.

As this comment illustrates, these support networks provided multiracial students with a mechanism to cope with less welcoming environments on campus by constituting spaces in which they could embrace their identities and share common experiences. In addition, as the quotation suggests, these organizations also provided vehicles for fostering a sense of belonging among participants and their multiracial peers.

Embracing Fluidity

The third theme, embracing fluidity, refers to the process by which our multiracial participants responded to people trying to force them into racial categories or externally imposing racial identities upon them by rejecting this process and reinforcing their right to move between and among racial groups. Embracing fluidity can be categorized as an emotion-focused coping strategy because, similar to utilizing support networks, it functioned as a mechanism to empower participants and

reduce the negative emotional impact of experienced prejudice and discrimination. This theme consisted of two elements: (a) rejecting ascribed identities and asserting a right to identify with whichever racial groups they choose and (b) actively engaging in finding common ground with multiple groups to solidify their membership within them.

Several participants discussed refusing to be constrained by racial boundaries and asserting their right to move fluidly among various racial and ethnic groups. For instance, Jack illustrated this perspective as he made the following comments:

Being mixed, I want to just be me as a whole. . . . And, I want people to see that in its entirety. . . . I think, I'm still friends with a lot of people in the fraternity. And they're generally either White or Hispanic. Not a lot of Asian kids. And, a lot of times they'll point out that I've been hanging out a lot more with my Asian friends. For instance, "Oh, I noticed you've been eating lunch with your Korean friends a lot more recently." I don't want to say I get defensive, but I sort of get like, "Who are *you* to tell me who I can and can't hang out with?" In a way, I have a freedom to go wherever or say "hi" to whomever. I don't have to limit myself to a certain group.

Jack made the preceding comment while describing how he responded to other people's efforts to ascribe him to a particular racial group by asserting his ability to be connected to multiple racial communities to which he belonged.

Related to participants' rejection of racial boundaries and assertion of their right to move fluidly among various racial groups is the fact that many of them discussed how they actively sought common ground with members of various racial groups to reinforce their authenticity as a member of those groups and maintain the aforementioned fluidity.

For example, at events for ethnic student organizations, the multiracial participants would assert their knowledge of shared cultures to create common ground with their peers. Linda, a first-year Filipina/Black female participant discussed how, in interactions with her peers, she would construct conversations in a way that the other person could see that they shared common experiences and cultural knowledge with them. She illuminated this strategy in the following remarks:

If I am in a certain setting . . . I would respond with a culture identity most appropriate to that. If I'm in the Asian American Society setting, I would say "Oh, my mom's Filipino. I grew up in the Philippines. I was in Malaysia." And then, we could bond over that common sort of thing. And, if I'm in an African setting, I would say, "Hey, I'm from Ghana. I lived in the Caribbean." We can bond over that too. So . . . I think I'm just flexible with the way that I am.

This quotation demonstrates how multiracial students actively established common ground with members of various racial and ethnic groups to which they belong. Establishing such common ground ultimately contributed to their ability to effectively move between and among groups.

Avoiding Confrontation

The last coping response, avoiding confrontation, refers to the process by which multiracial students avoided confronting instances of prejudice and discrimination in their lives. This response most closely aligns with the avoidant coping category, and it manifested in both physical and cognitive avoidance. We use the term physical avoidance to refer to cases in which multiracial participants evaded spaces and situations in which they were likely to (re)encounter prejudice and discrimination. In contrast, we utilize the

term cognitive avoidance to characterize cases in which participants rationalized prejudiced and discriminatory interactions as benign in order to justify avoiding critically analyzing these experiences and creating conflict with their family, friends, and peers.

A handful of students engaged in physical avoidance or, in other words, intentionally removed themselves from environments where they felt racially excluded or were more likely to encounter situations in which people invalidated their identities or externally imposed identities upon them. For example, Diana, a first-year female Vietnamese/Black participant explained how she avoided spaces and situations in which large Asian and Black groups congregated: "When they're in a large group. And, I kind of sideline my own self out of wariness, I guess. So I stick with my friends, I don't know, my comfort zone."

However, in many cases, participants could not physically avoid spaces and situations where they experienced racial exclusion, identity invalidation, and identity imposition because their family, friends, and peers were the sources of this prejudice and discrimination. In these cases, participants engaged in cognitive avoidance by minimizing the salience of acts of prejudice and discrimination and interpreting them as benign, thereby avoiding being in a position in which they might have to confront the situation. A fourth-year Native Hawaiian/Chinese/Tahitian/White male participant, named Chad, discussed how he interpreted his friends' external imposition of a White identity upon him as a benign joke:

I feel, in some contexts, my friends will jokingly say that I am more White than anything else. And, I mean, I guess if you go by my blood, then yes, I'm a little more than 50% Caucasian. And, I can think of two roommates in particular that kind of joke and say that I'm White, but I would say that's more in a joking context . . .

at least, I *feel* like it's in a joking manner that they've done it. And, they do it pretty frequently . . . maybe on a bi-daily basis.

Toward the end of this comment, it appeared that Chad began questioning whether his interpretation of these instances as benign humor was accurate. This uncertainty is evident in his statement that it was his *feeling*, not fact, that these comments were just benign jokes. Chad continued to share the following remarks:

The term *haole* means [White] foreigner in Native Hawaiian. In high school, they would joke sometimes that I was a *haole* boy. And one time I shared that at a meeting for one of my groups on campus . . . now, one of my close friends, who was there, jokes around and calls me *haole* boy every once in a while. And it's a little annoying sometimes. But . . . he's a really close friend, so I know that he's not trying to be mean, but it does get old.

This quote demonstrates that Chad simultaneously minimized the salience of his friend's actions, interpreted them as benign humor, and admitted that it bothered him. Yet, to avoid confrontation, he rationalized his peer's actions as being okay because of the absence of malicious intent.

DISCUSSION

At least five conclusions can be drawn from the current study. The first conclusion that we highlight herein is a result of our literature review. As mentioned, we found that less than 1% of the articles published in some of the most widely read US-based peer-reviewed academic journals in higher education and student affairs over the last decade include any explicit focus on mixed-race people. As discussed, the omission of an entire racial group from higher education research and discourse is problematic because it constitutes

a form of racial exclusion and hinders the ability of college educators to understand and effectively serve this population. Therefore, we echo earlier assertions that it is imperative that higher education scholars increase empirical research on multiracial populations in higher education (Museus et al., in press).

Second, the current inquiry underscores the importance of moving beyond the study of multiracial identity to develop a more comprehensive understanding of mixed-race college students' experiences. It is difficult to deny that higher education scholars have made important contributions to current levels of understanding through their research on multiracial identity (e.g., Chaudhari & Pizzolato, 2008; Renn, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2008; Talbot, 2008). However, much remains to be learned about this population, including whether they face inequities in higher education, what factors influence their trajectories, how campus environments and agents shape their college experiences and outcomes, and how they experience and respond to various racialized experiences in college. This inquiry helps shed some light on these processes, but scholars must generate more research to fill these gaps in knowledge about mixed-race students and establish a knowledge base that can aid college faculty and staff in understanding and effectively serving this population.

Third, our findings suggest that the acts of directly responding to individuals who convey prejudicial or discriminatory views toward mixed-race people or engaging in scholarly activism (e.g., giving lectures about multiracial issues) might simultaneously serve as a productive way to educate campus communities about multiracial issues and an effective coping strategy for mixed-race students. Indeed, researchers in psychology have highlighted social activism as a potential coping mechanism for encounters with

prejudice (Mendoza-Denton, Page-Gould, & Pietrzak, 2002). Although systematic examinations of this phenomenon in higher education are difficult to find, our findings underscore the potential promising role of such activism in coping processes among mixed-race and other students in higher education.

Fourth, the findings reinforce earlier investigations that highlight the value of support networks in coping with racial prejudice and discrimination (Carter, 2007; Sanders Thompson, 2006; Truong & Museus, 2012). The extent to which mixed-race students have access to such support networks in college, however, is unclear. Given that multiracial students might be pressured to choose and identify with one racial group (Museus et al., in press), it is possible that they are likely to gravitate toward monoracial ethnic groups, making it difficult for multiracial support networks to emerge and solidify. This, however, is not well understood and is a topic that should be examined in future research.

The fifth conclusion that we highlight is that the fluidity of some multiracial students' conceptualizations of race might serve as a critical coping tool for these individuals. In her analysis of multiracial students' identity formation, Renn (2000) found that many mixed-race undergraduates identified in fluid and flexible ways, shifting between types of identification (e.g., from monoracial identity to multiracial identity) across varying contexts. Participants in the current study who can be characterized as having such a situational identity were able to reject racial boundaries and confidently assert their right to move between and among various racial communities to which they belonged. Therefore, the development of situational identities among mixed-race students might improve their abilities to cope with experiences with prejudice and discrimination and diminish the stress posed by such situations.

Finally, our participants utilized avoidant coping strategies, and it could be argued that such coping mechanisms may be the most problematic. As mentioned, evidence suggest that those who utilize avoidant coping might experience greater levels of stress and lower levels of satisfaction compared to those who engage in more active coping strategies (e.g., Danoff-Burg, Prelow, & Swenson, 2004; Utsey et al., 2000). Thus, it is possible that mixed-race students who respond to experiences with prejudice and discrimination by avoiding them might be inadvertently jeopardizing their own emotional and psychosocial health. Again, however, such assertions should be made with caution until this topic is examined among mixed-race students.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND STUDENT AFFAIRS RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

This investigation has important implications for future research and practice. Regarding implications for research, the current study has only begun to uncover the ways that multiracial students cope with prejudice and discrimination in college, and much remains to be learned in this area of inquiry. For example, one limitation of the current study is that it did not focus on analyzing differences in coping responses to prejudice and discrimination across multiracial subgroups. Given that evidence indicates that multiple identities mutually shape the experiences of college students (Jones, Abes, & Baxter Magolda, 2013; Museus & Griffin, 2011), future inquiries could include comparative analyses that examine the ways in which mixed-race students make sense of experiences with prejudice and discrimination and respond to such situations across gender, precollege experiences, and background variables. For

example, an investigation into how varying levels of family socialization about racial identity and issues might differentially shape the ways that mixed-race undergraduates choose to respond to experiences with prejudice and discrimination could advance knowledge in this area.

Second, it is important for future studies to examine the role of geographic context and how such environmental factors shape mixed-race students' experiences with prejudice and discrimination in college as well as the strategies that they employ to respond to such situations. Indeed, given that our entire sample was enrolled in urban universities on the East Coast and regional context is one factor that influences multiracial students' experiences (Renn, 2000), examinations of mixed-race students in other geographic regions are warranted and could generate additional insights into multiracial college student coping processes.

Regarding implications for practice, educators should intentionally incorporate multiracial issues into the curricula and cocurricula on their campuses. There is some evidence that color-blind campus environments that do not value racial dialogues might contribute to mixed-race students' racial dissolution or, in other words, diminish or eradicate their passions and motivations for engaging in racial and social justice advocacy toward positive social transformation (Museus, Yee, & Lambe, 2011). Thus, if college educators fail to construct environments that welcome dialogues and racial and multiracial issues, they might be both depriving their mixed-race students of the potential coping mechanism of spreading awareness about multiracial issues and perpetuating an environment that contributes to racial dissolution. Educators should not only incorporate literature about multiracial issues into course readings and invite guest speakers who are knowledgeable

about mixed-race issues but also should engage the voices of mixed-race students in curricular and cocurricular activities. Such efforts can serve to foster greater awareness of multiracial identities, challenges, and perspectives on campus while also providing mechanisms to empower mixed-race students to cope with their challenges by educating others about their experiences, identities, and issues as a multiracial student.

In addition, faculty and staff should make efforts to ensure that mixed-race college students have safe spaces available on campus to construct and maintain support networks. Unfortunately, this population is often not on the minds, or at least not among the priorities, of college educators. Indeed, most of the spaces that participants in this study highlighted as having a positive impact on their experience were student-initiated multiracial organizations, and there was only one campus at which participants discussed multicultural and student affairs staff who engaged the mixed-race student community in meaningful ways. Our findings suggest that mixed-race students can encounter challenging campus environments and respond to those challenges by seeking or creating safe space and networks that provide mechanisms for them to build community, feel a sense of belonging, and share common experiences. Thus, the findings highlight the importance of both faculty and multicultural and student affairs staff making concerted efforts to help students create and support such spaces and groups.

Finally, the findings of the current examination underscore the importance of college faculty and staff recognizing the benefits of developing multiracial undergraduates' situational identities and their abilities to reject racial boundaries and embrace racial fluidity. College educators can help facilitate mixed-race undergraduates' understandings of this racial fluidity, the empowering effects

of embracing it, and their ability and comfort simultaneously navigating multiple racial peer groups or communities. In this way, postsecondary faculty and staff can support mixed-race students' taking greater control of their own multiracial identities and lives.

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