UNRAVELING IDENTITY: AN INTERPRETATIVE
PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF MULTIRACIAL/ETHNIC
STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Multiracial/ethnic individuals have become the fastest growing demographic in North America. Subsequently, these student populations are entering higher education in increased numbers. The identity formation and social-cultural self-acceptance in multiracial/ethnic students is complicated; some struggle to make meaning of their identity within a monoracial society. Previous research has explored the experiences of pre-college youth, but an increased understanding regarding the psychosocial experiences and outcomes of traditional-aged college students is needed. Participants were interviewed face-to-face via a semi-structured interview protocol. Interviews were then transcribed and coded for domains and themes using a qualitative methodology, specifically interpretative phenomenological analysis. Four domains emerged: pre-college experience, university engagement, place and space, and perception of identity by others. Additionally, eight themes were identified across domains. Renn’s ecology model of multiracial identity development was used to explore the experiences shared by participants. Although a few domains and themes mirrored findings from previous multiracial/ethnic identity development literature, such as contextually-based identity representation, new themes emerged. In particular, a theme related to the impact of transformative experiences to one’s identity development such as international travel. Implications of the findings and recommendations for future research are discussed. A recommendation for practice would be is to urge institutions to include multiracial populations in their recruitment and outreach initiatives. These efforts would promote diversity and create multiracial/ethnic study programs.

Key words: multiethnic, multiracial, identity development in higher education, mixed-race, student development and support
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Dedication

This doctoral thesis is dedicated primarily to my family, particularly to my parents. As a first generation college student, the opportunity and privilege to pursue higher education is a dream come true for my parents. Moreover, my brother, Dr. Jean-Philippe Laurenceau, has served as a role model and an inspiration throughout my journey.

Additionally, I dedicate this doctoral thesis to multiracial/ethnic, Haitian and Latino students who are pursuing higher education. Percentage-wise, individuals with my particular racial/ethnic background are rare in higher education; I hope to serve as a source of inspiration and support for like-cultured individuals who are also considering higher education.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Overview and Statement of the Problem of Practice

“What are you?” “Where are you really from?” “But you do not look Latino or Black!?” These statements are common inquiries that some multiracial/ethnic students are asked by others within higher education arenas. Hence, multiracial students may perceive the university setting as unwelcoming and insensitive to the needs of such a diverse population. A sense of cognitive dissonance takes place with such students, particularly if they identify strongly as being of mixed heritage or of an ethnicity that is not immediately apparent based on external features or behaviors (Chaudhari & Pizzolato, 2008). Institutions of learning need to be more responsive to their diverse communities, to subsequently impact the needs of the larger society. As people of this nation strive to live and work in a rapidly changing cultural environment, they turn individually and collectively to institutions of education for knowledge, guidance and support.

For years, scholars and practitioners in higher education have highlighted the need to find ways to better support the academic, cultural and social experiences of racial/ethnic groups that have been historically underrepresented within a U.S. higher education context (Renn, 1998). Traditionally, the literature has focused its attention on preexisting broad-based race/ethnic categories such as Black/African-American, Latino/Hispanic/Chicano(a), Asian/Pacific Islander/Asian American and Native-American Indian. Scholars have suggested that those who self-identify as multiracial/ethnic are often challenged to select one racial/ethnic identity, while being forced to deny other parts of their identity (King, 2008; Jourdan, 2006). Students who do
not identify with such ethnic categories, given the multiple ethnic heritages they may hold, are now situated in another broad-based category of multiracial/ethnic.

With the increase in multiracial/ethnic students in higher education, the population brings with them new opportunities and challenges for institutions to consider (Paladino & Davis, 2006). Multiracial/ethnic student populations tend to be challenged the most when situated within predominantly white university settings. Research conducted in student development, specifically identity development, suggests that multiracial/ethnic students feel only partially accepted by monoracial/ethnic populations at universities (Renn, 2003). A sense of cognitive dissonance takes place with such students, particularly if they identify strongly as being of mixed heritage or of an ethnicity that is not immediately apparent based on external features or behaviors (Chaudhari & Pizzolato, 2008). As research suggests, faculty, staff and students within institutions of higher education sometimes make assumptions about students based on the color of their skin (Renn, 2000).

The fluidity and dynamic nature of identity challenges student development practitioners to think and act differently when engaging with culturally diverse populations (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). Multiracial/ethnic college students struggle to identify themselves in the face of rigid monoethnic structures and assumptions on campus. Developing a sense of belonging on campus is crucial to all students’ success; social connectedness is an especially salient theme.

Empirical evidence, particularly qualitative in nature, regarding the topics of space and peer influence has incurred increased attention as areas of research that could provide more substantive meaning regarding student experiences (Renn, 2003). Racial identity and overall student affairs literature emphasizes the importance of claiming space, establishing a sense of
belonging, and fitting into the campus milieu. Consistent with this, scholar-practitioners are challenged to create environments to better support multiracial/ethnic student experiences in higher education.

Furthermore, the literature demonstrates that to better support multiracial/ethnic students in higher education, one must understand the cognitive complexities that students may struggle with regarding their identity exploration (Paladino & Davis, 2006). For instance, physical appearance, in and of itself, is challenged in relation to the identity development process of majority student populations within predominantly white campus communities. In addition to the physical features primarily based on one’s skin color and hair texture, multiracial/ethnic students can also be challenged based on how they speak. Unlike monoracial/ethnic students, multiracial/ethnic students are more likely to encounter situations on campus where they are interrogated on their cultural background and heritage, which can cause other psychologically based challenges. Continuous probing of where multiracial/ethnic students come from or how they identify can cause a sense of isolation and negative feelings with their peers, and ultimately resentment toward the institution as a whole. Additional research regarding the impact of such feelings is needed.

By examining a multitude of contexts in and outside of the classroom setting in higher education, and by employing qualitative approaches and involving multiracial/ethnic students as co-researchers, we can better understand how students are supported through their identity development. With this understanding, higher education faculty, staff and student leaders can better engage each other in campus conversations regarding the invisibility of multicultural identity and encourage each other to include multiracial/ethnic identity in their discussions about
culturally diverse populations in and outside of the classroom. Together, the campus community can facilitate a welcoming environment and a sense of universality amongst students, where they do not have to associate with a particular category nor do they have to feel forced to defend their identity; multiracial/ethnic students can simply be comfortable. Overall, the scholar-practitioner’s interest is to explore the ways in which multiracial/ethnic students navigate educational, cultural and social spaces and how their identities may be challenged across such campus contexts.

Significance

Students today, regardless of their cultural background, identify themselves more within a dynamic, fluid, and global context. Many multiracial/ethnic students do not want to be pigeonholed into prescribed, and perhaps problematic, ethnic-based categories that have been historically used in higher education (King, 2008). As the U.S. population becomes increasingly diverse, and with the continuing rise of interracial couples, more multiracial/ethnic students are entering higher education at a rapid pace. Multiracial/ethnic students enter this context with a myriad of social and cultural pre-collegiate experiences, in many cases differing greatly from traditional monoracial groups. It is important that student development professionals be prepared to support and enhance the collegiate experiences of such diverse populations.

Deweyan philosophy posits that education is the cornerstone of our democracy and of the global partnerships that bind us to the future (Ehrlich, 1997). Institutions of learning need to be more responsive to their diverse communities, to subsequently impact the needs of the larger society. As people of this nation strive to live and work in a rapidly changing cultural environment, increasingly they turn individually and collectively to institutions of education for
knowledge, guidance and support. The question is, then, what populations are not being supported adequately and equitably in education?

Societal pressure to identify in a particular way poses an issue to the identity of multiracial/ethnic students who have yet to experience a community or context. Students need the time, space and opportunity to develop their own ethnic identity (King, 2008). Some institutions of higher education struggle with finding such spaces for this growing population. Student development professionals, along with other higher education administrators and faculty, can gain a better understanding of the needs of multiracial/ethnic students if they are exposed to studies that have been conducted, different theories of identity that exist and hear personal experiences regarding ethnic/racial fluidity (Renn, 2008).

Identity development of multiracial/ethnic student populations can no longer go unnoticed in higher education and, in particular, student development spheres of influence. Not only do student development practitioners need to be comfortable with racial and ethnic identity fluidity, but safe spaces need to be created to allow for such support networks to be established.

**Positionality Statement**

As the population of multiracial/ethnic students in higher education continues to grow, the Office of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs can no longer focus solely on supporting the needs of distinct, broad-based, historically underrepresented groups within predominantly White institutions (Renn, 2008). Such mono-racial categories include, but are not limited to, African-Americans, Latinos/Hispanics, Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders, and Native-American Indians. Today, an increasing number of underrepresented students choose to identify differently, within categories such as other, multiracial/ethnic and biracial/ethnic. My positionality statement will
synthesize current literature regarding the multiracial/ethnic identity development of students in higher education.

To help make sense of how to classify the experience of multiracial/ethnic students in higher education, Renn’s (2004) study highlights five patterns characterized by such populations: (1) student holds a monoracial identity, (2) student holds multiple monoracial identities shifting according to the context, (3) student holds a multiracial identity, (4) student holds an extraracial identity by deconstructing race or opting out of identification with U.S. historical racial categories, (5) and student holds a situational identity, where he or she identifies differently within different contexts.

As a multiracial/ethnic person of Haitian/French and Ecuadorian descent, there is no doubt that my cultural background has influenced the problem statement in question and shaped the way in which I approached my research. As I reflect back to my childhood upbringing, the first recollection of experiencing an “avoidance of race” during my upbringing (Jourdan, 2006) was when my brother and I were about to eat ice cream and I insisted that vanilla had to be my flavor of choice. In contrast, my brother, who is of a darker complexion, had to enjoy chocolate. At such an early age, I became aware of my phenotype as it relates to skin color with the “other” (Briscoe, 2005). Was I socialized at such a young age to identify monoracially? What factors contributed to this identification?

As a college student, my academic niche consisted of studying the experiences of historically underrepresented ethnic groups through a psychological lens, with particular attention to the Latino population. This particular emphasis was a direct reflection of how I not only identified ethnically, but the ways in which others identified me (Briscoe, 2005).
Professionally, I experienced yet another racial identity crisis when I came to the realization that I might have been hired for both of my university employment positions outside of graduate school because of my Latino appearance. Hence, could it have been the case that my Haitian identity might have been a disadvantage? As some multiracial/ethnic students experience in college settings, I experienced conflicting messages from external influences regarding how I should identify. For instance, when I apply for professional opportunities, particularly with a multicultural and diversity emphasis, I constantly think about the racial identity I should portray. Do I emphasize more of the Ecuadorian/Latino or Haitian identity? Or would it be favorable to embrace the multiracial/ethnic identity? Which racial/ethnic side would be more advantageous to securing the professional opportunity I am pursuing?

Many theoretical models assume that a fully integrated, multiracial identity is the desired end state, when the study of identity is much more dynamic, complex, and is impacted by many variables (Jackson & Wijeyesinghe, 2012). These variables include, but are not limited to, environmental, familial, interpersonal and intrapersonal factors. Given the complexity of understanding the experiences of multiracial students, there is no single, healthy resolution of identity conflicts applicable to all multiracial individuals (Paladino & Davis, 2006).

What happens when scholar-practitioners study multiracial student identity without considering the intersection of other identities, as relating to supporting such students in higher education? Ethnic identity is only one of several social or cultural identities that individuals hold within themselves; it may function as a compliment to those other self-identification factors. Such social and cultural identities include, but are not limited to, gender, sexual orientation,
socioeconomic status and disability/ability status. How will I best support students given the various dynamic and interrelated identities that they hold?

Given my experiences in reflecting on my own multiracial identity development, I am confident that I will have the cultural sensitivity necessary to engage in research discussing such diverse populations. How will I, however, remain objective throughout my engagement with such a personal topic? Will I allow my own professional and personal experiences to take precedence over my development as a scholar-practitioner? If and when I conduct a qualitative study, I will need to grapple with identifying and describing my perspectives and acknowledging my biases. Now, more than ever, do I realize that constant reflection of my positionality as an educational researcher is crucial, to prevent my background from impacting my scholar-practitioner interest. Furthermore, my positionality regarding the topic may also influence my research methodology, as I describe the experiences of multiracial/ethnic students and subsequently interpret the meaning behind such experiences.

**Research Questions**

The main research question for this thesis was: “What level of understanding do multiracial/ethnic students have regarding their identity-based and exploratory experiences in relation to their peers?” Secondary questions included: “What influences do peer relationships have in supporting students who are challenged by or exploring their multiracial/ethnic identity?” and “What is the nature of activities and experiences that higher education institutions provide for multiracial/ethnic students regarding their identity exploration and development?”
Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this section is to articulate a theoretical approach regarding multiracial/ethnic student identity development within educational spaces in higher education. The theoretical framework chosen to deconstruct and analyze throughout the thesis is based on an Ecological framework. Specifically, Renn’s theoretical framework (2003) is designed to help scholar-practitioners understand how multiracial students navigate their way through educational, social and cultural contexts and how their interpersonal experiences may facilitate a positive impact and contribute greatly towards not only students' identity development, but their overall campus life experience. This section provides: (a) a rationale for choosing the aforementioned framework, (b) the characteristics of Renn’s Ecological framework relative to its strength for explaining the particular aspects of studying multiracial/ethnic student identity, and (c) the application of the framework to exploring the problem-of-practice via research questions and strategies.

Selection & Features of Theory

Given the constructivist nature of examining the identity development of multiracial/ethnic students, the seminal theoretical framework that is currently referenced the most in the literature is Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1993) human ecology model. The model posits that environmental factors impact, influence, and shape the identity development of multiracial/ethnic students. Bronfenbrenner was specifically interested in developing a model that accounted for the interactive, rather than additive, effects of peer influences. From a human ecological standpoint, students are embedded in a system of intergroup relations, in which the person, process, context, and time influence one’s identity development. Furthermore, the model
illustrates how a person’s behavior (B) is a function (f) of the interaction of the Person (P) and the Environment (E). Such a human ecology approach used to understand college student experiences has proven to facilitate educational interventions designed to change campus peer culture on issues such as race relations and psychological developments in all spheres (Renn, 2004).

Given the importance of peer relations in determining how students choose to identify themselves, the ecology model (Renn, 2004) deconstructs how interactions among and between various microsystems form a mesosystem of peer influences. The following model showcases how the mesosystem interacts with exosystem factors to form a macrosystem that deciphers cognitive and developmental considerations for students.

The literature consistently references earlier models of ethnic identity development, models that have provided a foundational base in which ethnically diverse individual experiences
can be explored (Root, 1996; Thornton, 1996). The three stages, (1) unexamined ethnicity, (2) ethnic identity search/moratorium, and (3) achieved identity, present ways in which one’s ethnic development can be understood. Renn (2004, 2008) was critical of these models in that the details of how students explored their racial/ethnic identities, with the intention of achieving a particular identity, were not fully explored. Departing from “stage-like” and fixed models, scholars described how multiracial/ethnic student progress was more based on how they identify individually and how they make sense of self-definitions. Hence, the emphasis is on examining multiracial/ethnic students through a theoretical lens that provides more fluidity. Moreover, recent multiracial/ethnic literature examines a model with cognitive flexibility (Rockquemore, Brunsma, & Delgado, 2009), which includes more fluid and dynamic patterns of identity development consisting of monoracial identity, multiple monoracial identity, multiracial/ethnic identity, situational identity and extraracial identity.

**Theoretical Application of Topic**

With the introduction of frameworks regarding racial/ethnic identity beginning in the 1990s, and with the growing trend of multiracial/ethnic students in higher education, researchers have brought forth identity development theories that are more relevant to the needs of multiracial/ethnic students populations (King, 2008). The theoretical framework review provides scholarly evidence regarding the usefulness of applying an ecology model to multiracial/ethnic identity development in college, which facilitates the deconstruction of cognitive complexities that students may struggle with regarding their identity exploration.

The literature highlights how the foundational underpinning of multiracial/ethnic student identity development examination has been exhausted. The limitations in recent scholarship
showcase the importance of extending current research to explore other specificities such as differences between cultural heritage groups, gender differences and institutional contexts. With support from Renn’s ecology model, the following questions will be explored with multiracial/ethnic students in the study, where social-cultural elements of intersectionality may be further investigated. What factors within a private liberal arts and predominantly white higher education setting impact their identity development? How do students make sense of their perceived identity/background within their mesosystem and exosystem? In what ways is one’s identity development challenged in diverse educational and socio-cultural environments? What level of perceived support services (or the perceived effect of support services) exists to enhance their identity development?
Chapter Two: Literature Review

As the U.S. population becomes increasingly diverse, and as the number of interracial couples continues to rise, more multiracial students are entering higher education at a rapid pace (Ford & Malaney, 2012). Multiracial students enter this context with a myriad of social and cultural pre-collegiate experiences, in many cases differing greatly from traditional mono-racial groups. It is important that university administrators and student development professionals be prepared to support and enhance the collegiate experiences of such diverse populations (Kellogg & Niskode, 2008).

The scholar-practitioner topic reviewed consists of examining the process of self-identification and peer relations/influences for multiracial/ethnic students in higher education. A survey of the literature suggests that some multiracial/ethnic students may be more at risk for experiencing challenges related to their identity compared to other mono-racial/ethnic students in university settings (Jourdan, 2006; King, 2008; Nishimura, 1998; Paladino & Davis, Jr., 2006; Renn, 2008, 2004, 2003, 2000, 1998). Furthermore, some multiracial students experience difficulty in navigating their way through identity-based social, cultural and educational spaces in higher education (Nishimura, 1998). The proposed research intends to better understand how multiracial students navigate their way through “safe spaces,” and how such spaces have a positive or negative impact regarding not only students' identity development, but their overall university experience. Given the increase in multiracial/ethnic students in higher education and the special attention provided to such populations in scholarly literature, the review analyzes the research conducted on their experiences, providing information that will be useful to student development educators and professionals.
The areas of literature reviewed include: Discovery Argument, Advocacy Argument and Summation. The themes that emerged from the literature review include the following: experiences of multiracial/ethnic college students, methodological pursuits in understanding multiracial/ethnic student experiences, seminal work and multiracial/ethnic identity development frameworks, and university administration diversity efforts. For the purpose of this literature review, the inclusive term of multiracial/ethnic will be used.

**Experiences of multiracial/ethnic college students**

For some multiracial/ethnic students, post k-12 educational experiences can be the first time they are presented with opportunities to examine their multiple racial/ethnic identities (King, 2008). The literature overwhelmingly suggests that social and cultural factors greatly impact their experiences. When first-year students arrive at college, the campus milieu provides a context in which students explore their identity in a variety of ways. (Nishimura, 1998). This type of identity exploration within higher education, which is understood to be socially constructed, typically takes place within classrooms, student organization meetings and recreational activities. As students progress through their development and interact with people from diverse backgrounds, their identity becomes increasingly more dynamic and malleable (Sanchez, Shih & Garcia, 2009).

Even before students are admitted to college, multiracial students are asked to report their ethnicity, which may not include a category or categories they feel comfortable identifying with (Renn, 1998). Additionally, the literature underscores other difficulties experienced by students with their social interactions, dating and an overall underrepresentation of multiracial/ethnic people on their campuses (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). Again, consistent with the literature, some
students feel a pressure to align themselves within a particular mono-racial/ethnic identity to feel accepted by their peers.

Within the multiracial/ethnic literature, a great deal of attention has been placed on examining situational identity, which refers to how students identify in relation to their context (Renn, 2000). Given the description presented earlier regarding the differences between the terms multiracial and multiethnic, Renn contributed to the literature by exploring situational identity within these two groupings. In her study, Renn (2000) found that there were significant differences based on situational identity patterns between students who have two parents of ethnic minority backgrounds and those who have one parent of ethnic background and one Caucasian parent. This distinction highlights the need for scholars to examine how students make meaning of their race or ethnic-based identities across contexts in higher education (Nishimura, 1998).

The sense-making process of exploring one’s identity with social-cultural environmental influences contributes greatly to the situational ethnic identity of multiracial/ethnic students in higher education (Renn, 2000, 2008). The literature references how cultural identity exploration includes various dynamic and situational, psychological, and social-cultural factors that further complicate the topic at hand (Shih, Bonam, Sanchez & Peck, 2007; Miville, Constantine, Baysden & So-Lloyd, 2005). Absent from earlier biracial and multiracial literature, models of nonlinear identity development have proven to be the most useful for exploring the complexities of multiracial/ethnic identities of college students (Jackson & Wijeyesinghe, 2012).

Empirical evidence, particularly qualitative in nature, regarding the topics of identity-based space and peer influence have incurred increased attention as areas of research that could
provide more substantive meaning regarding student experiences (Renn, 2004). Consistent with racial identity and overall student affairs literature, Renn emphasizes the importance of claiming “space,” establishing a sense of belonging, and feeling like they fit into the campus milieu; scholar-practitioners are challenged to create environments to better support multiracial/ethnic student experiences in higher education.

In contrast to the majority of multiracial/ethnic literature regarding students’ experiences in higher education, scholarly findings from psychology-based research related to identity demonstrates more positive outcomes of being multiracial/ethnic. For instance, while some students felt pressured to fit into a particular mono-racial/ethnic category, others have experienced benefits in coming from multiple ethnic backgrounds. One particular benefit cited in the literature consists of the opportunity multiracial/ethnic students have in gaining access and support from multiple cultural groupings (Shih & Sanchez, 2005).

Empirical evidence demonstrates that to better support multiracial/ethnic students in higher education, one must understand the cognitive complexities that students may struggle with regarding their identity exploration (Chaudhari & Pizzolato, 2008). For instance, physical appearance, is challenged in relation to the identity development process of majority student populations at predominantly white campus communities. In addition to the physical features primarily based on one’s skin color and perhaps hair texture, multiracial/ethnic students can also be challenged based on how they speak. Unlike monoracial/ethnic students, multiracial/ethnic students are more likely to encounter situations on campus where they are interrogated on their cultural background and heritage, which can cause other psychologically based challenges (Phinney & Alipuria, 1996).
Methodological pursuits in understanding multiracial/ethnic student experiences

Multiracial/ethnic identity development scholarship has been examined through various fields of study. These include, but are not limited to, K-12 Education, College Student Development, Psychology, Sociology and Ethnic Studies. Additionally, quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches with respective guiding research questions are used to study identity development. Within both approaches, researchers have explored factors related to family influences, intrapersonal vs. interpersonal relations, psychosocial, cultural contexts and socio-political/historical realities in explaining the ways in which students develop a sense of self (Jackson & Wijeyesinghe, 2008).

The identity-based experiences of multiracial/ethnic students in higher education have been investigated via quantitative and qualitative methodological paradigms. Nonetheless, qualitative studies have dominated the scholarly pursuits regarding identity development (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009; Renn, 2008). In particular, grounded theory methodology combines the analysis of data by the investigator with the unique perspectives of students. Hence, entering the subjective world of students via in-depth interviews and observations allows for a co-construction of knowledge that could not be assessed via quantitative methods. Ultimately, interpretive frameworks facilitate the exploration of ways in which students make sense of their multiracial/ethnic identities in different educational, social and cultural contexts.

The research questions asked in the quantitative-based studies suggested that the researchers presumed prior knowledge about a set of variables or experiences from the students studied. Subsequently, enough may be known about the variables or experiences that a hypothesis can be constructed from such preliminary knowledge. Typical questions from the
literature in examining multiracial/ethnic identity from a quantitative stance included: “What kind?,” “How Many?,” and “What is the relationship?”

Shih and Sanchez (2005) provide a useful example of a study operating from a quantitative methodology. The researchers measured multiracial individuals’ attitudes toward their racial identities, their perceptions of the attitudes others hold toward their identities, and their experiences in the process of racial identity development. They surveyed one hundred sixty-one students who self-identified as either being monoracial minority, monoracial majority (White), or multiracial. The researchers found that identity development and the relationship multiracial individuals have with their racial identity differs from the experience monoracial individuals have with their racial identity. Specifically, multiracial individuals show low public racial affiliation but high private racial affiliation, whereas monoracial individuals show the opposite pattern.

Some quantitative studies also incorporate qualitative data to strengthen the methodological approach. Within the aforementioned study by Shih and Sanchez (2005), seventeen Asian/White biracial, seventeen monoracial Asian, and seventeen monoracial White adolescents were administered the Marcia’s Identity Interview and Mars Asian Values Scale. Not only was a values scale administered, but additional data was accepted from interview research conducted. The result of the study was that there was little evidence that multiracial individuals experience poor outcomes in terms of their racial development. Although this research does not specifically examine the experiences of college students in higher education, the finding provides general patterns or laws of behavior that can be used to understand an aspect of the proposed problem of practice, even if the results differ from other research findings.
Consistent within the tradition of qualitative methodologies, researchers find it crucial to study individuals and take into consideration their personal characteristics, different human behaviors, opinions, and attitudes (Chaudhari & Pizzolato, 2008). Furthermore, the researchers acquire knowledge by investigating the phenomena of the world and humanity in many shared ways. In contrast to investigating multiracial/ethnic populations within a large sample size, more scholars have adopted a qualitative stance where researchers not only interview but observe participants as both co-construct their lived experiences. Moreover, researchers engage themselves in the subjective world of others through interviews and rich descriptions, facilitating a documentation of the lived experiences of the participants through their worlds (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). For example, Jourdan (2006) conducted a qualitative study with five multiracial/ethnic students, in which each individual participated in an open-ended interview lasting approximately one-and-a-half hours. The interviews allowed the participants to speak openly about their experiences as multiracial students. The data analysis occurred throughout the study; first the interview, then the analysis and theory development, another interview, and then more analysis. The combination of analyses and interviews continued until the research was completed.

Seminal work and multiracial/ethnic identity development frameworks

To study the topic of identity, regardless of one’s cultural background, one must reference the seminal scholarly work of Erik Erikson. Erikson (1966) posited that identity should be understood based on how individuals make sense of their environment. As students make sense of their environment and develop a more grounded sense of self, they can better engage in substantive and meaningful relationships with others. Given that all students progress
through stages, as posited by Erikson (1980), and if a stage in their development is stagnated, this could lead to a feeling of isolation. Erikson argued that multiracial/ethnic students may have challenges in progressing through some developmental stages without a solid support system to help them make sense of their identity crises. In sum, as conversations of race and ethnicity have existed in more recent literature (Renn, 2008; Jackson & Wijeyesignhe, 2012), identity is acknowledged as a social construction in which one’s environment and interactions with others determines how one may identify racially and/or ethnically at any given time.

Given the complexity of the social and cultural identities that multiracial/ethnic populations hold, the terms used to describe such populations are inconsistent across the literature. There is no general agreement among scholars regarding the use of terms. Words include, but are not limited to, biracial, multiracial, multiethnic, mixed heritage, mixed people and multiple heritages. To further complicate the terminology used in the literature, distinctions between terms such as multiracial and multiethnic are starting to be examined (Renn, 2008). As determined by scholars (Harris & Sim, 2002; Spencer, 2006), racial identity is a conceptually different construct than ethnic identity.

Empirical research regarding the identity development of students of multiracial/ethnic backgrounds was largely unexamined until the mid-1990s (Renn, 2008). For those scholars whose research interests focused on multiracial/ethnic identity development, the focus of their interests were based on the changing demographics of this population, as well as the examination of biracial experiences, in particular youth experiences. The literature suggests that since the 1990s, scholars have produced limited empirically-based evidence, but nevertheless urged
student development practitioners to advocate best practices and better support multiracial/ethnic students on their identity development journey in higher education (Renn, 2008).

Several frameworks of racial identity formation have been used to understand the developmental processes college students encounter (Chaudhari & Pizzolato, 2008). Generally, these frameworks consist of a progression from conformity with the mainstream White culture through stages of dissonance and resistance to immersion in ethnic minority culture, ending by integrating racial/ethnic identity with other aspects of student development (Renn, 2000).

With the frameworks regarding racial/ethnic identity since the 1990s, and with the growing trend of multiracial/ethnic students in higher education, researchers have brought forth identity development theories that are more relevant to the needs of multiracial/ethnic students populations (Jackson & Wijeyesinghe, 2012). Such frameworks help researchers discern and better understand how multiracial/ethnic students work through continuous questioning of their identity by others. Unlike the theories based on monoracial/ethnic identities, the literature suggests that identity development for multiracial/ethnic students is more complex and challenging to understand (Miville, Constantine, Baysden & So-Lloyd, 2005).

Although scholars are now clear about the importance of understanding the experiences and development of multiracial/ethnic students via dynamic and fluid theoretical frameworks, there is an important limitation that has been presented in the literature regarding the use of such all-encompassing models (Jackson & Wijeyesinghe, 2012; Renn, 2008). Such models do not always take into consideration the differences between multiracial and multiethnic populations, placing them into a broad-based category of people with multiple ethnic heritages or racial backgrounds (Harris & Sim, 2002; Spencer, 2006). Although multiethnic and multiracial/ethnic
students may share general experiences, a multiethnic (primarily cultural) students may or may not represent varying race-based (primarily biological) patterns. As previously mentioned, any model used to describe racial and ethnic background, including perceptions of “the other,” are based on social constructions that social scientists bring to the literature.

The literature consistently references earlier models of ethnic identity development, models that have provided a foundational base in which ethnically diverse individual experiences can be explored (Renn, 2008; Torres et al., 2009). The three stages, (1) unexamined ethnicity, (2) ethnic identity search/moratorium and (3) achieved identity, form yet another framework in which one’s ethnic or racial development can be understood. Renn (2000) was critical of these models in that the details of how students explored their racial/ethnic identities, with the intention of achieving a particular identity, were not fully examined. Departing from “stage-like” and fixed models, scholars described how multiracial/ethnic student progress was based on how they identified individually and how they made sense of self-definitions. Not only was emphasis placed on the importance of examining multiracial/ethnic students through a theoretical lens that provides more fluidity, but some literature also promoted the notion of “border crossings” across sociocultural contexts (Spencer, 2006).

Recent multiracial/ethnic literature examines a model with cognitive flexibility (Ford & Malaney, 2012), which includes more fluid and dynamic patterns of identity development consisting of monoracial identity, multiple monoracial identity, multiracial/ethnic identity, situational identity, and extraracial identity. The context in which these phases are explored, in which students are more likely to be challenged on their multiple racial/ethnic identities, include
physical appearance, peer relationships, familial environment, school setting and cultural outings (Herman, 2004; Renn, 2004, 2003).

**University administration “diversity” efforts**

Ethnic minorities are historically underrepresented and disenfranchised in higher education. The literature regarding underrepresented ethnic minority students has focused on the dire need of support networks for such populations, which is consistent with the deficit model that has been applied to the educational achievement of ethnic minority students (Chaudhari & Pizzolato, 2008). Universities have attempted to prepare for diverse populations in ways that can influence the overall structure and governance of institutions, but have fallen short in acknowledging the attention needed in support of multiracial/ethnic students.

Although the increasingly diverse student demographics in higher education have highlighted the benefit of increased diversity, the student development literature highlights a couple of main challenges regarding effectively increasing both diversity and the change it creates (King, 2008). First, if the diverse student population is increasing, support services geared towards these populations will also need to increase, not only from a staffing standpoint, but also a financial one. Second, when there is an intentional focus from enrollment management in the quantitative growth of underrepresented students, such an office can easily lose sight of the qualitative experiences of student populations with regard to their racial and ethnic identification. Consequently, if the institution begins to attract minority students less practiced at interacting with the institution’s current dominant culture and organizational structures, select students will likely experience a greater degree of identity-based conflicts.
During its recruitment efforts, the university may emphasize the quantitative statistics explaining how beneficial increasing the diverse student population can be. The emphasis demonstrates how the university is valuing this form of quantitative diversity; in other words, demonstrating how much value the institution is placing on the numbers. From the perspective of enrollment management administrators, particularly from offices of admission, what is most gratifying is to recruit the highest possible number of academically qualified students of color.

Several conclusions can be inferred from the analysis of literature about the impact of diversity initiatives on multiracial/ethnic students in higher education. In theory, the diversity component of mission statements and strategic plans are great additions to the university milieu; the reality is that there is a lot of work needed to make the intended impact of diversity efforts fruitful. University-wide diversity initiatives at predominantly white institutions lay the foundation for the increasingly diverse student populations entering higher education (Renn, 2004). Given the commitment placed on diversity and inclusion of institutions across the U.S., particularly with the increase in diverse student populations enrolling at premier universities, administrators will need to be better prepared to encounter the respective change. Furthermore, universities must simultaneously focus on the organizational change of its multiracial/ethnic student population and the organizational culture that embraces individual differences and identities. If a university leader wishes to approach diversity from a progressive standpoint, the person must understand not only how important the role of racial and ethnic identification may be for students, but also for the community at large.

Any effort from an organization to change its structure with the goal of improving the experiences for multiracial/ethnic populations must be comprehensive and long term (Kellog &
Niskode, 2008). The nature of a stable college system is to realize that institutional culture and populations change slowly. Therefore, the success of efforts for the diversity-related commitment emphasized in higher education will need to be studied further to achieve positive institutional change. Unfortunately, assimilation and segregation are far more common outcomes for organizational change than integration in higher education institutions (Nishimura, 1998). And while some universities may claim to succeed with assimilation, without actual, lasting integration, supportive organizational change for multiracial/ethnic students will cease to exist.

The inclusion of diverse demographics in higher education has impacted multiracial/ethnic student populations and the overall campus culture in complex and real ways. As showcased in the literature, diversity can provoke conflict, resulting in the voluntary withdrawal of outnumbered cultures (Khanna & Johnson, 2010). Diversity can also decrease the cohesiveness of a group. Cohesiveness is defined as the level of connectedness among group members. Student development literature regarding the impact of diversity on students demonstrates that the more similarity among group members, the more cohesiveness occurs (Torres et al., 2009). This results in benefits such as campus connectedness, cooperation, and university retention. The less similar the group members, the less likely they will benefit from such cohesiveness. It is apparent that efforts at increasing diversity will result in a mixture of individuals with possibly few commonalities. Heterogeneous groups may well have to put more effort into creating environments that foster the aforementioned desirable characteristics. Given this hindrance, can heterogeneous groups foster bonds on the same level as homogeneous ones?
Several overarching recommendations stem from the literature review analysis to increase the likelihood of making diversity initiatives work for multiracial/ethnic students. First, more venues can be created to facilitate informal student interaction across lines of difference. Studies show that students lamented that there were not more opportunities for socializing with students of diverse cultural backgrounds (Chaudhari & Pizzolato, 2008). Additionally, programs which do not directly address subjects of diversity and difference but bring together all students for other purposes enables relationship building to occur in noncontroversial or “hostile” settings. University communities can recognize and capitalize on venues where multiracial/ethnic groups may already gather, such as first-year student orientation, classrooms, and residence halls. Likewise, these intentionally inclusive events can be periodically hosted and sponsored by departments other than the typical multicultural-friendly offices in order to encourage attendance by students who have been inadvertently conditioned to avoid ethnic-based events.

Finally, it was suggested that university administrators implement recruitment efforts aimed at attracting students who have experience with diversity and an understanding of its importance. As acknowledged in the literature (Renn, 2008), a core problem at predominantly white institutions is that some students are unaware of or apathetic about the experiences of multiracial/ethnic students. An effort aimed at bringing students who already possess such awareness would be a powerful way to create change within university communities. The presence of students with a passion for building an inclusive community can enhance diversity initiatives, and hopefully serve as a bridge between alienated communities on campus, ultimately fulfilling the diversity goals within university administration.
Advocacy Argument

Educational institutions need to be more responsive to their diverse communities so they can impact the needs of the larger society. As people strive to live and work in a rapidly changing cultural environment, increasingly they turn to institutions of higher education for knowledge, guidance and support. University administrators must ask themselves if all underrepresented student populations are supported adequately and equitably in education.

The passion in the topic stems from an introspective examination of personal and professional experiences in student development administration. Many higher educational institutions have embraced the merits of incorporating diversity and inclusivity within their missions or strategic planning efforts. With this added effort regarding diversity, broadly defined, as well as the vision presented in the mission statements of many universities, it is inevitable that university constituents and their interaction with diverse student populations will be influenced.

Higher education institutions need to engage faculty and staff in conversations regarding the invisibility of multicultural identity and encourage them to include multiracial/ethnic identity in their discussions about culturally diverse populations in and outside of the classroom. Additionally, recruiting and hiring faculty who identify as multiracial/ethnic would be helpful so that multiracial/ethnic students have visible mentors and role models to whom they might relate.

Multiracial/ethnic students can be presented with opportunities to join multicultural-based student organizations (preferably those that have a theme of being biracial or multiracial/ethnic), allowing them to engage with peers who share similar experiences. These organizations may facilitate a welcoming feeling and a sense of universality among students,
where they do not have to ascribe to a particular category nor feel forced to defend their identity; multiracial/ethnic students can just be themselves. Furthermore, university faculty and staff can help facilitate a welcoming campus environment by displaying images that celebrate and acknowledge multiracial/ethnic identity. For instance, highlighting multiracial/ethnic individuals whom have contributed to various academic disciplines or are influential leaders across the U.S can be beneficial for a campus community.

Given the emergent trend of theoretical approaches, such as critical race theory, the proposed scholar-practitioner topic of practice regarding multiracial/ethnic student identity experiences in higher education would challenge the power, privilege and overall inequity that exist within predominantly white institutions (Spencer, 2006; Torres et al., 2009). Given the interest in studying student experiences within predominantly white institutions, could it be the case that barriers and obstacles that multiracial students may face do not allow them to “fit in” with the campus culture? What structures exist within university settings that interfere with multiracial students and their right to feel welcomed and to experience “safe spaces,” or areas in which it they feel comfortable sharing their personal backgrounds and interests with others?

**Summation**

As a result of the literature review and analysis, the following questions emerged as areas to consider exploring further, as they relate to the proposed scholarly problem of practice:

- How is multiracial student identity development being investigated in higher education?
  - What is the nature or essence of multiracial student identity development being investigated in higher education?
• Are the experiences of multiracial students in higher education objective in nature or imagined?

• What are the bases of knowledge corresponding to multiracial student experiences in higher education, and how can this knowledge be acquired and disseminated?

• What is the relationship of multiracial students with their environment(s)? Are multiracial students conditioned by the environment or is the environment created by them?

In engaging with the aforementioned questions, the journey to discovering one’s purpose for conducting research through the existing literature will allow for a more narrow focus. The review confirmed the need for scholars to continue to produce more empirical research that addresses the gaps and limitations in the literature, with special attention to understanding the various “spaces” students engage in within their multiracial/ethnic identity exploration (intended or not). The scholar-practitioner study will add to the growing multiracial/ethnic literature, with the intention of providing educators, administrators and scholar-practitioners with increased knowledge and awareness to best support multiracial/ethnic students in higher education. Furthermore, the review suggests that more research needs to be conducted in understanding the complexities of social and cultural identities that multiracial/ethnic students hold, and how these identities manifest themselves within majority monoracial/ethnic educational contexts.
Chapter Three: Methodology

Overview

Given the scholar-practitioner interest in exploring the situational/contextual identity development experiences of multiracial/ethnic students in higher education, qualitative research methodologies, via Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), allowed me to study individuals and take into consideration their personal characteristics, different human behaviors, opinions, and attitudes regarding what it means to be multiracial/ethnic (Smith & Osborne, 2003). The main research question for the intended study, followed by sub-questions, consisted of the following: “What level of understanding do multiracial/ethnic students have regarding their identity-based and exploratory experiences in relation to their peers?” Secondary questions included: “What influences do peer relationships have in supporting students who are challenged by or exploring their multiracial/ethnic identity?” and “What is the nature of activities and experiences that higher education institutions provide for multiracial/ethnic students regarding their identity exploration and development?”

The chosen form of an interpretive paradigm helped the scholar-practitioner acquire knowledge by investigating the phenomena of the world and humanity in many shared ways (Willig, 2001). In contrast to viewing an educational problem of practice via a quantitative research methodology, qualitative researchers do not see themselves as objective. Rather, they interview and observe participants to co-construct and ultimately interpret their experiences (Creswell, 2007). The scholar-practitioner’s role was to engage with students in their subjective world via interviews and by providing rich descriptions accordingly. This way, the scholar-practitioner was able to document and attempt to interpret the lived experiences of the
participants through their worlds (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). Employing a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm resulted in exploring multiracial/ethnic identity within a particular context and generated initial hypotheses regarding new knowledge. Such a paradigm serves as an experience-gathering and knowledge-producing endeavor, rather than proving or disproving a hypothesis (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

To engage fully in the chosen paradigm and topic in question, I prepared myself both mentally and methodologically to conduct an enriching study with multiracial/ethnic participants. Given the personal experiences of one’s multiracial/ethnic identity, there is a heightened need and understanding of cultural sensitivity to engage in research with such diverse populations, particularly from an interpretative phenomenological approach (Seidman, 2006). The scholar-practitioner refrained from allowing his own professional and personal experiences to take precedence over the research participants in the study (Briscoe, 2005). Undoubtedly, within an IPA paradigm, the scholar-practitioner grappled with, identifying, describing, and acknowledging the different perspectives and biases honestly and upfront. Now, more than ever, did I realize that constant reflection of my positionality as a scholar-practitioner was crucial in preventing one’s background from impacting the research methodology (Nganga, 2011).

**Research Design**

The overarching research design that was employed for the study is qualitative in nature. The identity-based experiences of multiracial/ethnic students in higher education have been investigated via varied quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches. Nonetheless, qualitative studies have dominated the scholarly pursuits regarding identity development.
Qualitative methodologies combine the analysis of data by the investigator with the unique perspectives of students (Creswell, 2008). Hence, entering the subjective world of students via in-depth interviews and observations allows for a co-construction of knowledge that could not be assessed via quantitative methods. Ultimately, interpretive frameworks facilitate the exploration of ways in which students make meaning of their multiracial-ethnic identities in different educational, social and cultural contexts.

Qualitative-based methodologies take into consideration the personal characteristics, different human behaviors, opinions, and attitudes of the participants being studied (Creswell, 2007). Interpretive paradigms help researchers acquire knowledge by investigating the phenomena of the world and humans/humanity in many shared ways. In contrast with viewing an educational problem via a quantitative lens, qualitative scholars do not see themselves as objective. Rather, they interview and observe participants to co-construct their perspectives. From a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, researchers engage themselves in the subjective world of others through interviews and rich descriptions (Seamon, 2002). This way, the researcher was able to document the lived experiences of the participants through their worldview.

**Research Tradition (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis)**

IPA is a modern methodological approach, with origins and respective scholarship in psychology and nursing. Since then, IPA has been a proven methodology that is now adopted in the field of social sciences. The theoretical development of IPA is based on phenomenology and hermeneutics, which include philosophical ideas produced by Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre (Smith, 2003). Husserl, the founder of the phenomenological approach, posited
the importance of relating one’s experience to individual psychological processes. Heidegger studies existentialism, in which an examination of activities and relationships was forged by individuals within a particular worldview. Merleau-Ponty found that subjectivity and embodiment were key features of one’s experiences. Finally, Sartre noted how individuals are constantly in a process of understanding their experiences.

Given the research questions employed for the study, IPA provided a useful methodological research approach in understanding the situational or contextual experiences of multiracial/ethnic students. The research rationale for engaging in such a methodological approach, given the topic of multiracial/ethnic student identity development, was to understand how such students navigate identity-based social, cultural and educational spaces in higher education. In particular, there is a gap in the scholarly literature regarding the in-depth examination of additional contextual environments regarding multiracial/ethnic experiences, as well as the ways in which universities can best support students throughout their educational experiences (Renn, 2008). Subsequently, phenomenological research designs provide a rich and individualized perspective regarding particular challenges that people face in particular contexts (Larkin et al., 2006). With this approach, the scholar-practitioner was able to engage in a more in-depth exploration of the experiences of multiracial/ethnic students via an active and dynamic role throughout the research and data collection process.

According to Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), IPA is composed of an interpretation process, known as double hermeneutics (empathetic and questioning). Empathetic hermeneutics (phenomenology, or understanding what a given experience is like) is the scholar-practitioner’s attempt at understanding student experiences, while questioning hermeneutics (interpretation or
how someone makes sense of the experience) entails critical engagement via inquiry to further gain information regarding the phenomenon studied (multiracial/ethnic lived experiences). As a two-stage process, one must first understand students’ experiences prior to attending college and their actual college experience. Next, the researcher attempted to understand the process by which multiracial/ethnic students made meaning of their particular world. In summary, the dual interpretation process for the study allowed the scholar-practitioner to observe how multiracial/ethnic students made sense of their experiences. The researcher examined how multiracial/ethnic students’ made sense of their individual experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

**Participants**

The population for the study included five undergraduate students who self-identify as multiracial/ethnic. Given that racial or ethnic identification is socially and culturally constructed, for the purpose of this proposed study, multiracial/ethnic individuals self-identified with two or more racial or ethnic heritages, as designated by the U.S. Census Bureau. In an effort to avoid gender bias, both males and females who fit the aforementioned description were invited to engage in the study.

For the purpose of gathering information recruiting self-identified multiracial/ethnic students to conduct IPA research, nonprobability sampling was used. Within a qualitative methodology, and specifically in IPA, a small group of participants are typical of such a study (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Additionally, to gain an in-depth understanding of the perceptions of multiracial/ethnic students and their experiences while studying abroad, purpose sampling was utilized.
Recruitment and Access

To recruit participants, the scholar practitioner sent out electronic notices to various multicultural-based student organizations at a small, highly selective liberal arts institution in the southern region of the U.S. The notice was sent out via email and social media efforts. Within the notification, a $5.00 gift card was offered to those who were selected to participate, given criteria set forth for the study. Included in the notice was a Participant Information Sheet, which contained the researcher’s contact information and the invitation to reply if interested in participating in the study. Participants were given a specific deadline to reply, solidifying their involvement in the study. Once participants replied, the researcher made himself available to answer any questions they may have had regarding the study. Additionally, the researcher offered the opportunity to meet in person to review the consent form (see Appendix A) and schedule an interview meeting.

Data collection

According to Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), IPA comprises an interpretation process, known as double hermeneutics (empathetic and questioning). Empathetic hermeneutics is my attempt at understanding student experiences, while questioning hermeneutics entails my critical engagement via inquiry to further gain information regarding the phenomenon studied (multiracial/ethnic lived experiences). As a two-stage process, my first attempt was to understand student experiences prior to attending college and their actual college experience, which will may include travel abroad. Next, the researcher attempted to understand the process by which multiracial/ethnic students make meaning of their particular world.
The critical portion of the research process, questioning hermeneutics, is best obtained via semi-structured interviews with the students. In phenomenological based studies, the primary form of data collection consists of interviews (Smith & Osborn, 2003). With the use of semi-structured interviews, particularly via open-ended questions, the participant and researcher engaged in a dialogue where information was shared and clarified continuously. The interview questions developed for the study served as a guide and as a flexible data collection method. The questions were subject to change as the scholar-practitioner engaged with students regarding the information shared. The protocol of questions used for the interviews was derived initially from the scholarly literature regarding multiracial/ethnic identity via studies conducted by prominent scholars in the field. See Appendix B for the listing of questions.

All student interviews were audio-recorded and immediately transcribed. The reasoning behind the desire to transcribe the interviews immediately was to capture the emotions and feelings displayed and to make note of them accurately. Ultimately, the audio transcriptions will include verbal cues as well as non-verbal cues, which was emphasized throughout the interviews.

**Data Storage**

All participants were informed about confidentiality and its limits. I made note that a professional transcription service was used and that the company was required to sign a confidentiality agreement. It was made explicit that all identifying information, which include names, multiracial/ethnic identities and geographic locations, was removed completely from the transcripts. Additionally, I shared that academic and professional contacts might view the anonymous transcripts.
All audio tapes and written transcripts of interviews conducted for the study were kept in a securely locked place. Furthermore, all audio-recordings and copies of transcripts will be destroyed within one year of completing the study and thesis completion.

**Data Analysis**

In using IPA, and to engage in its data analysis process, it is of utmost importance that the scholar-practitioner brackets his or her own biases regarding the data, so that the focus of the analysis is built around the experiences and sense-making process of the participant. Verbatim transcripts were coded with insightful detail, in which the relationship between the experiences shared and the scholar-practitioner’s interpretative work of such experiences were negotiated.

Smith et al. (2009) suggest conducting a systematic search for themes within the interview(s) and subsequent verbatim transcription conducted with each individual participant. Next, connections between themes for the participant were identified. Themes were then explored across participants, with the goal of producing overarching or “subordinate” themes. Finally, the analysis write-up included the themes supported by the verbatim transcript excerpts identified from participants. Given the iterative and inductive nature of IPA (Smith & Eatough, 2006), the data analysis consisted of the following specific guidelines:

**Stage 1:** Identify themes for each research participant; comments and words that appear to be significant were showcased in the left-hand margin of the transcript.

**Stage 2:** The comments and words on the left hand margin were interpreted into loosely defined themes.
Stage 3: The draft of themes were gathered and examined thoroughly for potential connections across them. This collection of themes were analyzed and compared to the original transcripts to ensure accuracy. Select quotes from the transcripts were featured to solidify the themes.

Stage 4: Superordinate or Domain themes were identified, followed by the respective subordinate themes. Again, to avoid research bias, the list of master themes gathered were coupled with excerpts from the transcript data.

Once the transcripts for each research participant were analyzed via the aforementioned iterative and inductive cycle, the master themes identified with the first participant were then compared to the second participant, where new evidence-based themes emerged. The new themes were then compared to each research participant, where this process was cycled over and over between the transcript and thematic clusters that emerged. Once the final themes across participants were identified, a narration was produced with excerpts from transcripts which provide substance to the themes identified.

Trustworthiness

Given that in qualitative studies the researcher is the primary instrument in gathering data, it is important to ensure the trustworthiness of the study in question. Creswell (2008) posits that the trustworthiness of qualitative studies is impacted by the perception of the scholar-practitioner and the chosen research paradigm. Given the importance of presenting data that is trustworthy and verifiable, Seidman’s (2006) three-interview process was employed and described thoroughly in the data collection section of the study. According to Seidman (2006), to support the trustworthiness of a phenomenological-based study, the three-interview structure, which consists of interviewing participants within a span of one to three weeks, helps the
interviewer solidify the validity of the responses made by participants. Additionally, when interviewing the students within a shortened timeframe, the scholar-practitioner can engage in a member checking process to ensure internal consistency. Furthermore, data that is internally consistent confirms that the statements shared by the participant are valid. Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) explain that to understand the essence of participant experiences and the process by which they make sense of those experiences, it is crucial that the information shared is authentic, which contributes greatly to the validity of interview responses.

In addition to the aforementioned strategy in obtaining trustworthiness in the study, the use of methodological triangulation was employed. The use of varied data sources, such as accessing academic assignments, journal writing entries, social media group affiliations and/or drawings helped solidify and confirm the development of themes showcased in the interviews (Creswell, 2008). The researcher worked with the participants to identify potential sources of data used as part of the methodological triangulation. Ultimately, the information gathered via triangulation added validation to the trustworthiness of the study.

From an internal validity standpoint, and given the topic of studying and recruiting multiracial/ethnic students, two major threats were data collector characteristics and data collector bias. To avoid these forms of bias, the scholar-practitioner made sure to be consistent with the questions asked of participants via the following strategies (Rubin & Rubin, 2012):

- Asking the questions of all multiracial/ethnic student participants in the same manner;
- Making sure that the multiracial/ethnic student participants were comfortable with the interview process by asking questions that are easy to answer, which forged a trusting relationship with them;
Interviews were conducted in a comfortable and inviting location;

To make the student participants feel at ease, it is important to ensure that their responses are not identifiable via their name or background, particularly for the outcome write-up of the study.

Finally, the scholar-practitioner engaged in member checking throughout the study, which also ensured the trustworthiness of the data gathered. Given that the data emerged from the interaction between the interviewer and participant, all themes and information gathered were verified and corrected accordingly. In sum, the combination of the aforementioned trustworthiness strategies contributed greatly to the authenticity and overall validity of the data collected for the study.

Protection of Human Subjects

The proposed study sought approval from The Office of Human Subjects Protection at Northeastern University and the University of Richmond, in compliance with institutional ethical standards and federal regulations to protect human subjects’ rights. The informed consent form (see Appendices) was given to each participant, sharing information regarding the purpose of the study will, and was approved by both higher education institutions prior to the initiation of the study. Approval letters from both institutions were obtained to proceed with the recruitment of students at the University of Richmond, where the study was conducted.

The potential minimal risk for the multiracial/ethnic student participants in the study was psychological in nature, particularly when one’s identity exploration triggers issues from childhood or negative experiences with other individuals. The researcher notified the student
participants before the interview via an informational sheet and informed consent form regarding
the study, so that they were aware of such minimal risks.

Participants’ respect, privacy, and information regarding confidentiality was protected
using a numbered code on all interviews and/or focus groups conducted. The principal
investigator (PI) assigned a student identification number to each individual in the order in which
the research participants enrolled in the study. No names or identifying information, such as
major, class year, or place of birth was gathered outside of the interviews. The PI maintained all
questionnaires in a locked and secure file cabinet in his home. Disclosure information forms
given to all participants; no consent forms were signed. The data was entered in a qualitative-
based software package, MaxQDA , in addition to numeric identification codes to identify
participants. The data entry was performed only by the PI. After completing the data analysis,
all of the administered notes from the interviews were destroyed via a paper shredder.

Chapter Summary

This study examined the experiences of multiracial/ethnic students to determine how to
best enhance their experiences at a predominantly White institution. Through the use of the
exploratory qualitative method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, a small number of
participants were asked to share their perceptions and experiences via semi-structured interviews,
allowing for the themes to emerge naturally. Given the level of subjectivity in this exploratory
study, as well as the positionality of the scholar-practitioner as someone who self-identifies as
multiracial/ethnic, the purpose of the study was not to find an absolute or fixed response to the
research questions. The intention of the research conducted was to explore the experiences of
multiracial/ethnic student within an academic context in an effort to better align the student
development and university goals, resulting in an understanding of the complexities in supporting diverse student populations.
Chapter Four: Summary Findings

Introduction

This chapter provides a description of the research findings of the current exploratory study, which examined the experiences of multiracial/ethnic students enrolled at a predominantly white institution. The participants in the study provided rich, detailed accounts of their unique experiences regarding their identity development, from pre-college experiences through current ones. The analysis of the data led to four broad-based domains, consisting of a total of eight themes (two themes per domain). The domains and themes resulted from similar statements made by participants during their interviews and established by the researcher upon analysis of the interview transcripts. The domains and themes are not necessarily presented in order of how they emerged throughout the interviews, given the fluidity of how responses were shared. This chapter will present the research findings by showcasing the domains as a guide.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis exploratory study:

- What level of understanding do multiracial/ethnic students have regarding their identity-based and exploratory experiences in relation to their peers?

  Sub-questions:

  - What influences do peer relationships have in supporting students who are challenged by or exploring their multiracial/ethnic identity?
  - What is the nature of activities and experiences that higher education institutions provide for multiracial/ethnic students regarding their identity exploration and development?
**Data Collection and Participants**

Five students participated in this study. Three identified as female and two identified as male. All participants were studying at the same private liberal arts college at the time of the study. The background of all participants were comprised of at least two or more races/ethnicities. For all five participants, their public and private identification was of mixed or multiracial background. Of the five participants, two identified as being part Black, African or African-American. The participants were traditionally-aged undergraduate students, ranging in age from 18 to 21. Four of the five participants were born and raised in the United States, while one was born and raised in Europe. All participants grew up with one or both biological parents. Three participants reported coming from a working class background and two reported they considered themselves to be middle class. All five participants are currently pursuing their bachelor’s degrees. The participants are briefly described below, in the order in which they were interviewed. The identification of participants will be presented from numbers one through five to protect their anonymity.

**Participant 1: Sally.** Sally is 19 years old and describes her gender identity as female. Both of her parents were born in the U.S. Her mother is of Chinese descent. Her father is of Spanish (European White) and Estonian descent. Sally described her racial/ethnic identity as Chinese, Spanish and Estonian, where she encompasses all of the cultural heritages in her background. As a faith-based person, she identifies as Christian. She grew up in Southern U.S., where she did not encounter a great level of cultural diversity within her educational and residential experiences. For instance, she was the only Asian student in her elementary school. Her mother was more influential in her life, which is consistent with having more phenotypically
Asian features. She has not connected greatly with the Spanish and Estonian cultural heritages, but seeks opportunities to learn more about those identities. After completing her bachelor’s degree, she plans to pursue an advanced degree in higher education.

**Participant 2: Deborah.** Deborah is 18 years old and identifies as a female. Her father is Nigerian and immigrated to the U.S. Deborah’s mother, who is Ecuadorian, also immigrated to the U.S. She described her racial/ethnic identity as multiracial/ethnic or mixed and culturally ambiguous due to not belonging to a monoracial grouping. She wishes to identify more closely with the Ecuadorian side of her background, given the exposure she has had to that culture. She finds religion fascinating and enjoys learning about other people’s religion; her religious identification is Christian. Deborah was born in Northeastern U.S. and grew up in a mostly White neighborhood. In addition to being Ecuadorian and Nigerian, she emphasized being American. She believes that many assumptions are made about her ethnic/racial background by others. She has not decided what major to pursue, despite her dad’s strong influence in what she should study. The participant is currently enrolled in a Chinese language course and hopes to study abroad in China.

**Participant 3: Bob.** Bob is 20 years old and identifies as male. Both of his parents were born in the U.S. His father is African-American and his mother is Caucasian-German. He described his racial/ethnic identity as mixed. Bob is Christian and was born in and grew up in a particular area on the west coast of the U.S., which is racially/ethnically diverse, largely Asian. He described experiencing being stereotyped by others due to his ambiguous phenotype but appears to be most connected to the African-American part of his cultural heritage. His parents are supportive of his racial/ethnic identity, and have expressed that even though he is mixed,
there are people who will see him as Black. He is currently pursuing a bachelor’s degree and hopes to have a career in the computer science field.

**Participant 4: Rachel.** Participant four is an 18 year old identified female born in the southeast U.S. Her mother is African American, White and Native American. Her father is African American. From a religious standpoint, she identifies as Christian. The participant views her racial/ethnic identity as mixed, which was encouraged by her mother throughout her life. Rachel is a student athlete and has experienced assumptions regarding racial/ethnic identity experiences within athletic and non-athletic environments. She is currently undecided as to what she will major in.

**Participant 5: Max.** Max is a 19 year old identified male who was born in Switzerland. His mother is Vietnamese and father is Swiss and French. He identifies as mixed, with heavy cultural influence from his mother’s side. Max has spent some time traveling all over the world, but has lived primarily in Switzerland. He points out distinct differences in how one is racialized in the U.S. in comparison to Europe. Unlike his experiences in Switzerland, he has noticed that individuals in the U.S. have a fascination with categorizing people ethnically and racially. Academically, he is pursuing a bachelor’s degree in business.

All data from the five interviews were collected and subsequently, the researcher submitted the audio recordings to an online transcription service. The data were transcribed and sent back to the researcher within two business days. Once the transcriptions were received, the researcher began the coding and data analysis process, following Smith et al. (2012) and implementing one of their suggested IPA approaches. In any IPA approach, what remains constant is the process of determining the phenomena being studied related to what is shared by
the participants, as well as what is described and how the researcher engages in the data analysis and respective interpretative process. Table 4.1 highlights the Domains and Themes in relation to the number of participants.

Table 4.1

*Results of Data Analysis (Domains and Themes) in relation to participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broad Domains (4) and themes (8)</th>
<th>No. of Participants with theme (N=5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Domain one: Pre-college experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Physical appearance</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Family influence</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain two: University engagement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Peer relations</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Labels and categories</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain three: Place and space</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Context matters</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Domestic and international cultural influences</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain four: Perceptions of identity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Exotic look</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Defending one’s identity</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis: Discussion of Domains and Themes**

The derived domains that are essential to the process by which multiracial/ethnic students clarify their identity are described below. The domains that emerged from the interviews were (a) Pre-college experience, (b) University engagement, (c) International travel, and (d) Labels and categories. The domains and themes from the data analysis are showcased in Table 4.2.
### Table 4.2

**Table of Domains and Themes from data analysis with excerpts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Pre-college experience</td>
<td>1) <em>Physical appearance:</em> “Somebody told me that I looked more Hispanic and I never got that before.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) <em>Family influence:</em> “My dad really wanted me to be Nigerian; he would kind of shove it toward me.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. University engagement</td>
<td>3) <em>Peer relations:</em> “I just feel like the looks and stares come more from White girls; it’s kind of discouraging.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4) <em>Labels and categories:</em> “I really don’t like it when they have a biracial or multiracial checkbox but and they won’t let you select multiple options.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Place and space</td>
<td>5) <em>Context matters:</em> “When I am in a place that is mostly Asian, being half-Asian comes out.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6) <em>Domestic and international cultural influences:</em> “That is the part of me that is Caucasian and it never really mattered to me, but when we went to visit it was so neat to see the culture there and the people were so accepting.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 4. Perception of identity by others | 7) *Exotic look*: “When I think of exotic I just always think of animals; I don’t like it applied to people.”  
8) *Defending one’s identity*: “Oh, everybody says that they have Native American in them; so what tribe are you from? Do you want to see a picture of my grandmother?” |

**Domain One: Pre-College Experience.**

This domain captures the experiences participants had regarding their multiracial/ethnic identity development prior to attending college. As the first domain that emerged from the data collection, the pre-college experiences shared have contributed greatly, and often served as a foundation to the participants’ identity development. This domain, overall, showcases select experiences, both opportunities and challenges, in which one’s identity sense-making process is described. The pre-college experience led to two emerging themes: physical appearance and family influence.

**Theme 1. Physical Appearance.** All participants believed that as multiracial/ethnic individuals, there is a sense of others wanting to either guess or make assumptions about their mixed backgrounds. Deborah illustrated this point by stating:

> When I was younger people either assumed I’m Black or I got Dominican a lot…but it kind of depends on who I was hanging out with. For example, I have a lot of Hispanic friends and whenever I would be with them they would be like, “Oh, you’re Dominican.” I was just like, “No.” When I am with White people they would be like, “You are
Black,” and I was like, “Okay, I guess?” I would just prefer if people would ask me or have a little curiosity rather than just assume.

Likewise, Rachel shared a similar experience, in which her peers interpret the participant’s level of ethnic or racial identification with being mixed; appearing to have more of a monoracial background is not always in alignment with the person’s level of culturally mixed background:

People will think that I am White or they assume that I am mixed……I get that a lot……people will assume that I am Black and White. Sometimes they assume that I have more White than Black in me. When I explain what I am to people, they look at me kind of with a confused look. I have been dealing with this my whole life. The looks and stares that people give me …it kind of makes me not want to socialize with certain groups of people.

**Theme 2. Family Influence.** All five participants shared how their families have been an integral part of their upbringing and understanding of identity. In several cases, incidents or experiences that participants had regarding their racial make-up was discussed openly with their guardians. There seemed to be a sense of comfort in knowing that their families supported them in this identity development journey. Bob described a situation in which his mixed identity was challenged as a child:

I remember once in elementary school….somebody saying that I was Black and I was confused at that time because I was like, “Well, no, I’m half Black half White.” I remember that I had to talk to my mom about this and she basically said, “Yes, you are Black and White but people are going to see you as Black.”
Max added to this the impact that family may have in one’s multiracial/ethnic identity development by sharing the differences in cultural customs that he negotiates with his family:

Things are different when comparing my Asian family with Switzerland….I notice differences in behavior. For instance, my Asian side practices fung shui in everyone’s house….as well as Buddhism religion. Half of my mom’s siblings married Caucasians, so half of my cousins are just like me. Since the other half who are full Asians are not in Vietnam anymore, they act more European or American. So, when we are at family reunions and we see our whole family, the White in us comes out or is emphasized more….it is more noticeable.

Participant Rachel describes an example of how her family selected a monoracial background for her level of identification, at least when she was a child:

My parents even taught me when I was younger to choose Black, so....I think it was even, like, when I was younger, I think I did ask my parents, like, “What am I?” And they’re like “You’re black.” And, like, they went into this whole story about everything, um, like when I was younger, I didn’t understand. But, sometimes but I don’t know what the difference is, like why sometimes she’ll say Black or why sometimes she’ll say Black-White, Native American. I don’t know, a large part of it has to do with, um, again, like going to the whole story and, like, people asking questions or believing it. It has a big part of it. Another thing, I think she tells ... when I was younger, I think they ... they told each other that I was Black just because I do ... like I have more Black in me than my mom does. So I think that’s why they told me to identify as Black. Then another thing
with my mom, why she sometimes say Black, White, Native American, because of the way she looks. She looks more White than I do.

Additionally, Rachel shares two critical experiences or multiracial/ethnic identity crises in which her mother intervened on her behalf during elementary school:

So we were all like doing it, like, individually, like, selecting what race we were or whatever. And I had selected Black. And so my teacher was walking around checking everybody’s test and she got to mine, she looked at it and she took my pencil, erased my answer and selected other. And I was like ... But I went home and I told my mother what happened and my mother was furious. My mother was so upset and she called the school and she was like “That’s not okay, blah, blah, blah.” So my P.E. teacher, the next day she saw me, and she apologized ... Um, in elementary school again. I didn’t know what the term mulatto meant ... but one of my classmates called me that. So I went home [and] told my mom again. I told her everything. And again, she was very upset. She explained to me that the term mulatto was a derogatory term used to describe people of mixed ... descent like when she was growing up ... and she said that she used to be called a mulatto, a mutt ... “Whoever calls you that, tell them not to call you that,” and she doesn’t like that word.

Domain Two: University Engagement.

This domain explores significant experiences of the participants at the university related to their multiracial/ethnic identity development. Of the five participants, three shared instances in which
their identity was challenged, highlighting the capturing participants’ beliefs and approaches to identity development.

**Theme 3. Peer Relations.** All five participants shared experiences they have had in interacting with peers; Sally shared an experience in which a peer presented a preconceived notion of their level of multiracial/ethnic identification:

Recently, after coming to the university, I heard somebody or I had somebody tell me that I look Hispanic, too, which was strange to me because I have never gotten that before. So I don’t know, maybe now it’s more common to see Asian people around and Hispanics, and maybe when you’re comparing me to, like, 100% Asian then I look slightly different. But before, people didn’t have that comparison or that other person they’re comparing to.

Additionally, Sally further describes the types of relationships she has with select peers, particularly with those she is able to have a substantive conversation with regarding racial/ethnic make-up:

When I’m hanging out with my friends from Pre-O (a multicultural Pre-Orientation program for first year students) and I’ll discuss how it feels to be a minority, blah, blah, blah, but then when I’m hanging out with kids on my hall who are primarily Caucasians then I’ll kind of … I guess they don’t really seem to like care about that as much so I just won’t talk about it as much. And I mean, yes I’m still proud of it and, like, they know about it, but it’s just not a topic of conversation, and, like, my experiences as a minority aren’t interesting to them I guess. And so I don’t bring those sorts of things. That’s not what we talk about typically when I’m with Caucasians. I think we have more serious
conversations with kids who are a minority and that’s one of the topics that I guess I consider, like, serious is our experiences as minorities at the university and at home, like our different backgrounds and that sort of thing. But when you’re hanging out with Caucasians you feel like they don’t have those experiences so they aren’t curious as to how you handle that sort of thing or if that’s happened to you recently or … so they have more … you have a more shallow conversation with them, at least in my experience.

**Theme 4. Labels and Categories.** All five participants shared experiences regarding the use of labels or categories that are placed upon them, whether it is verbally or via the completion of a university demographic application. Moreover, an exploration of particular labels was presented to gather their perspective and level of comfort. Max discussed his perspective on being identified as multiracial/ethnic:

> Well in the terms, biracial or multiracial, I heard the word racist in them. So for me, there is a negative connotation. Now with the terms bi-ethnic or multiethnic, I think of ethnic food from back home. I think the word mixed fits the best. The others sound a bit too technical; I feel that it is a very precise term.

Participant 5, who is an international student, believes that there is an obsession in the U.S. in using labels to categorize people. Sally shares her discontent with the connection between racial/ethnic categories, resulting in false assumptions made:

> They typically categorize me as Asian American. When they have my application or just my name that are usually Hispanic American, which … I don’t know. I feel like how that bothers me a little bit more. Maybe it’s because they prejudge me without even seeing
me or something like that when people just assume that I’m Hispanic American because of my name. I guess I’d say those are the two categories that people sort of put me in.

Sally elaborates on why being classified racially or ethnically on a university application is problematic:

I think actually that is a problem sometimes, when they… on these surveys again really, or applications or whatever, when they ask you for your ethnicity and they have a biracial, multiracial checkbox. But I really don’t like it when they have that and they won’t let you select multiple options. So you can’t select that and tell them what you are. And if you can select multiple things, then it’s okay, but when they want you picking one thing, then you just say biracial. But then what does that mean? It doesn’t really show what you are because that could be a lot of different things. Like, I can say Asian American, Hispanic, Latino and Caucasian; that would be enough for me. I don’t need to say, like, Chinese, Estonian and Spanish but I don’t like it when they just lump everybody who’s more than one race as biracial. Yeah, there are so many.

Domain Three: Place and Space

Three of five participants discussed contextual experiences that have added to the sense-making process of their identities. International travel provides a transformative experience that appears to aid students with their multiracial/ethnic identity development, particularly when a student intends to learn more about one’s cultural heritage. This is consistent with the literature regarding high impact initiatives in higher education.
**Theme 5. Context Matters.** Four of five participants reported how their multiracial/ethnic identification would be impacted given the context. Sally, for instance, describes the multilevel awareness she had regarding her identity development as a child in school, as well as the stages she went through as she grew older:

> Before when I became older and became more aware of my Spanish and Estonian heritage I started identifying less as fully Chinese American and more as of three. But in terms of how comfortable and that sort of thing I felt with everything, and I think when I was younger before I entered school I identified pretty much as Chinese American, but I was very proud of it and I enjoyed like every aspect of it and the culture that came with it, the family that came with it and the things that my parents did. And then I went into school and when I got teased about it and it kind of repressed my pride for being Chinese American. So I try to fit in with everybody else and I think I kind of almost a little bit lost my ethnic identity and didn’t really care about it very much anymore. Like I said before, I wasn’t proud of it until I started discovering all three again and putting them back together and then from high school on I’ve been very proud to be all three and identify with all three and then I stopped trying to fit in with, like, the majority I guess.

Bob describes a contextual experience where, given the racial-ethnic make-up of the individuals he is engaging with, his level of identification changes:

> When I’m the only person, the only African American person in a room, I feel I identify more heavily with that than I normally do just because I’m aware that I'm currently the only representation. It’s just every once in a while I’ll just look around and be reminded.
Theme 6. Domestic and International Cultural Influences. Four of the five participants had significant experiences while studying abroad, which helped contribute to their identity development. Sally shares a critical point in which she had the opportunity to explore a lesser developed cultural heritage:

I mean, I think a critical point where I started to become interested in my Estonian side was when we actually went to visit Estonia with my grandmother and that was like three summers ago or something. So it was pretty late in my life and that was very, very interesting to me because, I mean, I knew what the country was and that sort of thing, but I never really, like, considered it. I mean, I was just like, “Oh, that’s the part of me that’s, like, Caucasian,” and it never really mattered to me, but when we went to visit, it was so neat to see the culture there and the people were so accepting and, like, our … we went to visit a lot of our relatives who we never met before and they were so excited to see us even though they had no clue really, I mean, who we were as people.

Deborah discussed one of the monoracial identities she held in which she shared experiences about Ecuador:

I was in the car with my mom and she was telling me all these stories about Ecuador and family, family that I don’t know, and that opened my eyes why she is who she is, how that, how her attitude shapes me and I honestly don’t hear that much about my dad’s side of the family. He talks about it, but usually, I don’t know, he doesn’t say that many positive things.

Max shared a comment about the differences one experiences in being racialized at least in Switzerland, compared generally to the U.S.
I think it’s something that they’re [the Swiss] actually not interested in. They just think it’s normal to see people from different backgrounds. But then here, within the first three minutes or so you are asked, “What are you?” But now that I came to the university, people are more likely to ask me more relevant questions, for example, of where I live exactly because they have, they have a knowledge of Switzerland, maybe they’ve been there, maybe they have relatives living there ... Um, and maybe unlike Switzerland and maybe other countries in Europe, you, you hear there are a lot of discussions around race and ethnicity.

**Domain Four: Perception of Identity by Others**

In the last domain, perception of identity by others, four out of five participants demonstrated how common perceptions are made regarding the connection between one’s phenotype and actual identification.

**Theme 7. Exotic Look.** When asked the question of being identified as exotic or having an exotic look, if this has been the case, mixed responses were presented. A couple of participants alluded to the use of the word as a form of objectification. Max, for instance, states the following:

> Exotic is used more for talking about girls. I like the word exotic……it makes me smile when I am told this. When I hear the word exotic, I don’t think of people, I think more of fruit.

Along the lines of using the word in relation to an object, Sally shares:
When I think of exotic I just always think of animals. I don’t like having it applied to people as much.

Deborah provides a different perspective regarding the use of exotic to describe a multiracial/ethnic person:

Right, I mean, it doesn’t, I would say that definitely people are sort of, people with mixed background as exotic, kind of depending on what they are, for me, I don’t find it offensive; I think it’s like a complement; it kind of indicates that you are unique. That is what I think when I hear the world exotic, but some people may take that the wrong way. However, I’m not one of those people.

**Theme 8. Defending One’s Identity.** In this final theme, three of five participants shared instances in which they have had to justify or defend their multiracial/ethnic identity. Deborah described an experience where not only was an assumption made by a peer, but she was challenged and, in a sense, her multiracial/ethnic identity was disregarded:

Over the summer, for instance, I was with a bunch of Mexicans and it was social gathering party and she was like, “Where are you from? Are you from D.R.?” I was like, “No, I’m mixed.” She was like [with a gesture], and I told her what I was. She was like, “Same thing, whatever.”

Sally shares an experience in which she felt the need to look for a picture of a family member to prove her identity to another person:
A lot of people like to [challenge my identity] ....I don’t know how to word it but it is kinda like if I say that Black, White, and Native American, they are like, “Oh everybody always says they have Indian or Native American in them,” and it’s almost like ...They will be like, “What tribe are you from?” and I don’t know what tribe. But I’m just like, “Do you want to see a picture of grandmother? She’s clearly Indian.”

Overview of Findings

As a result of the data analysis, the researcher uncovered several essential findings for further discussion and consideration. First, multiracial/ethnic students encounter experiences prior to and during college that contribute both positively and negatively to their identity development. These cultural experiences cause mixed and complex emotions, and awkward social situations. Second, multiracial/ethnic students fully develop and start to think deeply about their identities after experiencing critical incidents or transformational experiences, such as living, or traveling internationally or learning about other cultures. From a global standpoint, different countries develop varied racial categories, and how such categories are ascribed by society largely reflects the sociopolitical climates of the country of origin. This was most apparent in the case of Max, given his extensive international travel. Third, if a person’s race is considered ambiguous, multiracial/ethnic identity is that much more complicated. The very presence of an increasingly growing population who do not precisely fit into one broad-based category may well lead society and educators to question the concept of race and what it means to be multiracial in the U.S. and internationally.

The multiracial/ethnic students represented in the study serve as a reminder that defining a person’s racial/ethnic identity based solely on their physical characteristics often proves
inaccurate. These multiracial/ethnic individuals force universities and educators to think critically about the reasons why we continually try to define others, as well as ourselves. Finally, universities are in an opportune position to create awareness regarding multiracial/ethnic identities and provide space for such students to process their identity in a relatively safe context. Dividing individuals into four or five broad-based monoracial/ethnic categories as a way to quantify their ethnic diversity is problematic. If multiracial/ethnic individuals are being denied a racial category, from an inequity standpoint they are also being denied the same privileges as other underrepresented ethnic groups.

Summary

This chapter described the findings of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of transcribed data from five semi-structured interviews with multiracial/ethnic students enrolled at a predominantly White institution regarding their perceptions and lived experiences regarding their identities. The analysis resulted in the identification of four superordinate themes, including two subordinate themes each, showcasing how the participants made sense of (or negotiated) and attached meaning of their multiracial/ethnic identity from their pre-college experiences through their university experiences.

A discussion of these findings will be the focus of the following chapter. Within the next chapter is a discussion of the salient themes with an emphasis on how such themes support and contribute to the research literature regarding multiracial/ethnic student identity development and ways in which students cope with identity crises. Also included in the subsequent chapter is a discussion on the findings and implications for the higher education community to consider, with
particular attention to the significance of the themes, resulting in ways to best support and enhance the experiences of multiracial/ethnic students on college campuses.

Overall, eight themes, grouped in four domains, emerged from the data gathered and analyzed in the present study. The interviews demonstrated broadly that the participants had common significant experiences influencing how they navigate experiences related to their multiracial/ethnic identity development. Areas of convergence consisted of situational or contextual experiences in which their identity development was challenged or accepted understood better. Another commonality was when they thought about other multiracial/ethnic students at their institutions, not focusing on their individual experiences related to the topic at hand, and they realized that they found themselves somewhat in a privileged position, in which other students may have had more challenges regarding their own identity development. Most of the participants felt that it was important to explore their cultural heritage further, as a way to enhance the full spectrum of their identity development. In alignment with this cultural exploration is the opportunity to travel internationally, where they can engage with the cultural backgrounds that they may not be familiar with. Participants seem to yearn for such opportunities, especially if they feel wrongly perceived or if they want to better understand their multiracial/ethnic identity.

While each participant’s experience was unique in many regards, they experienced peer relations in their lives in similar ways. Overall, this data provides some support for the idea that multiracial/ethnic students are impacted by their cross-cultural exploration in similar ways related ways. Additionally, as the U.S. becomes increasingly diverse and globalized, exposure to multiracial/ethnic populations will become more widespread. Chapter Five will discuss these
results at greater length and outline both the strengths and limitations of the present study. Recommendations for future research and practical implications for university administrators, including student affairs’ professionals, and faculty will also be discussed.
Chapter Five: Discussion of Findings and Implications for Practice

The current study explores the experiences of multiracial/ethnic students and their identity development processes within a higher education environment. This chapter includes 1) a discussion of the results, 2) Strengths and limitations of the study, 3) Suggestions for future research, 4) Implications for practitioners, and 5) Conclusion.

Discussion of Results

This exploratory study examined the stories of multiracial/ethnic students in higher education. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted, focusing on their identity development using contextual learning experiences. Using the qualitative method of interpretive phenomenological analysis, eight salient themes emerged from the transcripts and data analysis, and were categorized into the following four domains:

The primary research question explored in the proposed study asks, “How well do multiracial/ethnic students understand their identity-based and exploratory experiences compared to their monoracial peers? Secondary questions include: “What influences do peer relationships have on in supporting students who are challenged by or exploring their multiracial/ethnic identity; Are they always supportive, or sometimes neutral or destructive?” and “What is the nature of activities and experiences that higher education institutions provide for multiracial/ethnic students regarding their identity exploration and development?” The following table illustrates the Domains and Themes in relation to the research questions.
Table 5.1

*Summary of Domains (4) and Themes (8) in Relation to Research Question*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| RQ1: What level of understanding do multiracial/ethnic students have regarding their identity-based and exploratory experiences in relation to their peers? | Pre-College Experience University Engagement Place and Space Perception of Identity By Others | 1) Physical Appearance  
2) Family Influence  
3) Peer Relations  
4) Labels and categories  
5) Context Matters  
6) Domestic and International Cultural Influences  
7) Exotic Look  
8) Defending One’s Identity |
| SQ1: What influences do peer relationships have in supporting students who are challenged by or exploring their multiracial/ethnic identity? | Pre-College Experience University Engagement Place and Space Perception of Identity By Others | 1) Physical Appearance  
2) Family Influence  
3) Peer Relations  
4) Labels and categories  
5) Context Matters  
6) Domestic and International Cultural Influences  
7) Exotic Look  
8) Defending One’s Identity |
| SQ2: What is the nature of activities and experiences that higher education institutions provide for multiracial/ethnic students regarding their identity exploration and development? | Pre-College Experience University Engagement Place and Space Perception of Identity By Others | 1) Physical Appearance  
2) Family Influence  
3) Peer Relations  
4) Labels and categories  
5) Context Matters  
6) Domestic and International Cultural Influences  
7) Exotic Look  
8) Defending One’s Identity |

Exploring multiracial/ethnic students’ collegiate experiences via Renn’s ecological model (2003), together with an interpretative phenomenological analysis lens, the scholar-practitioner
investigated the interpersonal, social-cultural and overall educational experiences that contribute to understanding how students make sense of their mixed racial/ethnic identity. With the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis, the researcher was able to formulate a robust study via the aforementioned research questions. IPA was well suited for this study given its ability to take an introspective look at the experiences of students and identify patterns that are consistent with Renn’s (2010) ecology model of multiracial ethnic identity development.

According to Torres (2009), identity is generally understood as one’s individual beliefs about self, in relation to socio-cultural groupings such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and sexual identity or orientation. Moreover, beliefs about one’s self are related to the experiences that one engages in from the past, present, and anticipated future. Identity is further developed not only via situations but also through interactions with other individuals. Hence, identity is a socially constructed phenomenon. A sense of self is formed through engagement with others and the socio-cultural context in which dominant philosophies guide general norms and expectations.

Theoretically, Renn’s ecology model (2010, 2004) provides a useful framework, highlighting the importance of understanding ecological factors such as family background and heritage, and extent of knowledge and experience with one’s culture within a microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. In addition to the model, Renn argued that there are identity patterns that multiracial/ethnic students experience, but not necessarily in a prescribed order. The following table demonstrates the connection between the research question, domains, data and theoretical framework used for the study.
### Table 5.2

**Connection between Research Question, Domains, Data, and Theoretical Framework**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question and Sub Question</th>
<th>Domain and Themes</th>
<th>Participant Data Interview Sample</th>
<th>Connection to Ecology Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **RQ:** What level of understanding do multiracial/ethnic students have regarding their identity-based and exploratory experiences in relation to their peers? | **Pre-College Experience**  
University Engagement  
**Place and Space**  
Perception of Identity  
By Others | **Rachel:** I Identify more with black group than whites or mixed. Assumptions people make about the light skinned-girls with the pretty hair and the pretty eyes--going back to what I said, like the stares I get from the girls here--it’s kinda discouraging, so it makes me ... it even makes me want to identity myself with, more with being Black than White. I guess that’s another reason why I do most of the time say I’m Black more than ... Just because I have just dealt with it my whole life so it kinda discourages me from trying to be friends with them. | In Multiple Mono-racial Identity patterns, individuals represent a combination of their parental heritage. In this pattern, individuals have substantive background information regarding their ethnic/racial identity and history and typically label themselves accordingly prior to starting higher education. Once the participants engage in a university setting, peer influences tend to play a role regarding how they will identify. From a practical standpoint and given how influential peers can be, perhaps engaging in multicultural student organizations can provide an opportunity to experience a wide variety of ethnic/racial backgrounds. Students will then... |
SQ1: What influences do peer relationships have in supporting students who are challenged by or exploring their multiracial/ethnic identity?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-College Experience</th>
<th>University Engagement</th>
<th>Place and Space</th>
<th>Perception of Identity By Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Sally:** I began to make more ethnic friends. I guess they helped me to feel like I fit in more, to explore what it meant to be ethnic and not be just like hiding it, I guess because they could identify with me and my experiences as well.

Participants in Multiracial Identity patterns like to use terms to self-identify themselves. These students think beyond the monoracial/ethnic paradigm and present a broad view big of being multiracial/ethnic, identifying readily with others of mixed background. These students serve well as leaders on campus, and are able to promote diversity and inclusivity across difference. Hence, these student leaders would serve well in orientation and transition programs for first year students.
| SQ2: What is the nature of activities and experiences that higher education institutions provide for multiracial/ethnic students regarding their identity exploration and development? | Pre-College Experience University Engagement Place and Space Perception of Identity By Others | Deborah: I have seen and I’ve heard experiences where people, teachers and faculty expect, they assume someone is of a certain race and then they expect them to be the advocate for that particular race in class or in some discussion. I think people should be aware of it but they don’t have to constantly need to hear that. It’s part of who someone is, but you don’t need to learn about who everyone is, but some people are sensitive about that. Rachel: First year orientation. So, um, in my orientation group, I remember, like, me giving some looks, like, kind of confused, like, what is her race or trying to figure to me out because I know, I know those looks. 'Cause I do look Students who are of monoracial identity often are perceived as having the physical traits and/or knowledge of their cultural background. These students would benefit greatly from workshops that engage students in exploring their ethnic/racial identity further. Despite a formation of a particular monoracial identity prior to higher education, if these students are placed with students from diverse backgrounds, they may start to question their cultural identity and begin to explore other facets of their backgrounds. |
kinda different ...
But I can tell when people are always, like, trying to figure out what I am.

Max: Studying Abroad. I think it's more than being multi-racial, its understanding really where you're from, like having a knowledge of where you're from. For example, I travel a lot for tennis tournaments before coming here. I've probably been to 50 plus countries. So, I can relate a lot to where people come from and the reason why they act some way or I can relate to maybe their attitude or what they like or dislike or what they think about people or, sort of, people or things like that. I have a really broad view of everyone, you know. It's really like I'm above and I can see and
The patterns, as described below, are comprised of monoracial identity, multiple monoracial identity, multiracial identity, extraracial identity, and situational identity. Based on the data collected for recruitment purposes, all students initially identified with the multiracial identity pattern. After the participants were interviewed, it became clear that the students have experienced situational identity sometime in their pre-college and college experience. None of the participants were classified under extraracial identity. Thus, the primary patterns witnessed with the participants were monoracial identity, multiple monoracial identity and multiracial identity. Overall, the data analysis would suggest that each participant’s current identity pattern is as follows:

- **Monoracial Identity**: The student selects one of his or her cultural heritage backgrounds to identify with, which becomes the more salient identity. Rachel, who is Black, White and Native-American, identifies more saliently with being Black.

- **Multiple Monoracial Identity**: Conscious of more than one racial identity, but each identity has a separate place in the individual’s self-concept. Bob, who is Black and White, presented information acknowledging his multiple monoracial identities. Max,
who is Asian (Vietnamese), French and Swiss, identifies racially as being Asian, but ethnically or culturally as being Swiss. Sally, who is Chinese, Spanish and Estonian, also tends to identify in this category.

- **Multiracial Identity**: The individual elects an identity that is neither one heritage nor another, but of a distinct “multicultural” group on par with other racial categories. Hence, the integration of all identities equates to one positive self-concept.

- **Extraracial Identity**: Individual chooses to identify with a race that is different from his or her mixed heritage. Race or ethnicity is deconstructing or the student simply opts out of identification with the U.S. racial categories as a whole.

- **Situational Identity**: Individual chooses one race to identify based on the events/circumstances. Ultimately, the student has the ability to deconstruct contexts and construct racial identity in relation to particular contexts. This pattern entails a highly evolved skill requiring emotional maturity and cognitive complexity. Deborah, who is Ecuadorian and Nigerian, tends to identify with a racial background that makes sense for her contextually.

For discussion purposes, there was enough overlap across domains and themes, showing how complex multiracial/ethnic identity development can be. Most of the participants discussed critical experiences that made them realize that identity for monoracial/ethnic individuals is quite different than for multiracial/ethnic students. Some of the participants emphasized particular communities where identity exploration took place, which was mainly within the immediate family unit and educational environment. Parents were seen as instrumental in advancing one’s identity development. The realization that from early childhood the participants did not ascribe
into nicely perceived categorical groupings helped the researcher critically question the social structures that have been in place for the students, and the ways in which educators can provide opportunities to build a sense of confidence and healthy definition of self. There were a couple of participants who shared maladaptive experiences with elementary school teachers, in which people in positions of power and privilege had the opportunity to support and enhance the experiences of multiracial/ethnic students, but proceeded to do the opposite. Several of the participants spoke about assumptions and preconceived notions within their communities due to phenotype (i.e. skin color), having to prove membership, and even needing to quantify their sense of belonging to a race or ethnic background in their heritage.

The data analysis demonstrated that race and ethnic identity are fluid, dynamic, affected greatly by context and socio-cultural influences, and changeable over time. To enhance the experiences of multiracial students and help monoracial individuals understand the experiences of such students, scholar-practitioners have an obligation to raise awareness of educators regarding how the concepts of race and ethnicity are constructed historically, and present alternative constructionist perspectives that better represent reality.

Within the microsystem, which is the center of the ecology model, the focus is on the day-to-day interactions that the participants have with one another, while on the outer circle the views and treatment of race outside of a university is still relevant to how students make sense of their identity. Given the data collected and analyzed, identity is too complex of a phenomenon to study and explore via a model with fixed stages. Hence, the ecological model in question does not present a prescribed path for students to follow in their journey of self-understanding,
knowing that students will develop and flourish through multiple ways of exploring their individual identities.

**Strength and Limitations of Study**

The present study has several strengths and limitations in its subject matter and methodology. The leading strength of this study is that it is the first to investigate the experiences of multiracial/ethnic students from a student affairs standpoint, at a highly selective liberal arts college, while employing an interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology. The type of institution is mentioned, given the strong campus life pressure to conform to the mainstream culture made up of a significant percentage of upper-class White students. The use of IPA allows for an in-depth examination of the stories shared, and their interpretation. For this reason, the study expands the literature regarding not only the population and awareness of multiracial/ethnic experiences, but also the investigation of a particular university type and research methodology. The one-on-one semi-structured interviews provided unique insight into each student’s cultural experiences, perceptions, and emotions. Given the rapport established with the student participants by the researcher, the data produced was rich enough to be analyzed via four domains and eight themes. The stories shared through the interviews showcased how valuable it is to implement a qualitative methodology for this type of study. The results presented in this study provide solid findings for practical implications and future research recommendations with multiracial/ethnic college students.

As no research study is perfect, flaws are inevitable. Major limitations include sample size, type of institution studied, racial/ethnic and geographic make-up of students, consideration of the intersection of identities, the researcher’s own multiracial/ethnic identification and data
coding and analysis. First, with a sample size of 5, generalizations of the findings cannot be made in relation to the larger multiracial/ethnic population of students at college across the U.S. A larger sample size spanning a wide variety of higher education institutions would be needed. The type of institution in which the study takes place also matters. Race relations and politics play different roles at institutions across the U.S. From an Office of Admission and Campus Life lens, the institution used for the present study generally attracts a type of student that may have an interest in blending into the mainstream white culture. This form of assimilation does not encourage the recruitment of students who identify as or have ever thought they might be multiracial/ethnic students. Perhaps conducting the same study at a very ethnically diverse institution would produce different results regarding levels of identification and developmental experiences shared. Given the recruitment efforts based on convenience sampling, some students think about their multiracial/ethnic backgrounds in a more nuanced and complex way than their peers. Furthermore, there may be institutions where being multiracial/ethnic is more accepted and celebrated than at other institutions.

When the email announcement was sent out, the email went to all self-identified non-white students. There may have been students who are multiracial/ethnic and would have been valuable candidates for the study, but did not express interest in participating. Additionally, maybe there were multiracial/ethnic students who for admission purposes self-identified as white.

Regarding the racial make-up, two of the five students self-identified as black and white from a U.S. domestic standpoint, while another participant partly self-identified as Black (Nigerian). In the broad view of the racial make-up of participants, the challenge is recruiting a
completely diverse group of participants, or to have a common group of multiracial/ethnic students to explore the levels of identification among participants. Additionally, one out of the four students is of an international status for admission purposes, and the responses of an international student versus a U.S. domestic student can differ greatly, given the experiences they have had. Furthermore, the protocol of questions asked of the participants may have been more in alignment with a U.S. experience. Perhaps a study on international students as one group, compared to U.S. domestic students, would have produced a more robust overview of experiences from a geographic and global standpoint.

Student development literature suggests that identity is considered to be fluid and dynamic. It is important to pay close attention to the intersection of identities that may contribute to the holistic development of one’s multiracial/ethnic identity. From a data coding and analysis standpoint, the broad-based domains and themes that emerged were coded by a single researcher, which automatically reduced the reliability of the findings. Without the use of multiple data coders, the likelihood of having the data skewed or biased in some way is great.

Finally, given the use of IPA as a research methodology, and how the researcher’s own multiracial/ethnic background is closely tied to the topic at hand, it is inevitable that bias may exist in the exploration and interpretation of the experiences presented.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice/Significance

The findings from this study provide scholar-practitioners with insight into how multiracial/ethnic students at a predominantly White institution experience experienced their identity development and understanding, as well as the respective challenges to such ways of
self-identification. The four themes derived from the study provide a foundation for further research, and for the development programs and services to enhance the experiences of multiracial/ethnic students. The study findings also offer additional knowledge regarding how multiracial/ethnic students navigate and make sense of their identities contextually.

The outcome of this study may have significance at all higher education institutions. Some research has overlooked transformative experiences for multiracial/ethnic student populations such as studying abroad. Although this population is not new to higher education, significant challenges exist as institutions are becoming increasingly diverse. The rich data gathered firsthand from the study participants confirms that identity exploration is connected to one’s feeling of belonging to a campus community.

The research garnered from this study may provide students, development administrators, and faculty with a level of awareness that enables them to understand how fluid and dynamic one’s identity development is. Firsthand accounts from these multiracial/ethnic students divulge how misunderstood they can be and how assumptions can impact their college experience.

Several practical recommendations would help multiracial/ethnic students thrive throughout their university tenure. First, a campus climate assessment should be implemented to know the campus population from a qualitative standpoint. The stories and experiences shared by students can determine whether the campus climate is conducive to such diversity. From a policy standpoint, providing the opportunity for students to select all racial and ethnic options on a university form would provide a heightened level of awareness and comfort for students in question. Additionally, just as efforts have been made in enhancing the experiences of select monoracial/ethnic groups on college campuses, outreach geared towards self-identified
multiracial/ethnic students should be embedded into the fabric of student affairs. Sponsoring multiracial/ethnic student organizations and programming would be a worthwhile start.

Institutional and structural enhancements can also make a difference in the lives of multiracial/ethnic students. Utilizing multiracial/ethnic faculty and staff as a resource would be a great use of social capital on campus. Faculty and student governments can advocate for an expansion of the curriculum regarding multiracial/ethnic identity, just as select institutions have done with other forms of monoracial/ethnic studies. Finally, bridging the gap between monoracial/ethnic and multiracial/ethnic populations in intentional environmental designs can foster collaborative efforts that are mutually beneficial.

From a scholar-practitioner standpoint, engaging faculty and administrators in intellectual activities with theoretical contributions from ecological models, such as those from Renn and Bronfrenbrenner, can promote an awareness that is scholarly and practical enough that all factors can be engaged. Faculty, in particular, must understand how the focus on theories allows them to miss important aspects of human development and identity. As much as theories help capture constructs in understanding phenomena, the experiential side of supporting student development and growth must be emphasized. As humans, we have curiosities, beliefs and ideas as to how students grow, think critically and develop personally. Such perspectives are grounded in our individual experiences and are inevitably connected to how we see students thrive in higher education. Holvino (2012) presents the following information to facilitate movement of multiracial/ethnic identity (and forms of simultaneity of identity) theory to practice:

- The flexibility to speak in two or more voices, code switching, language, styles of communication, and empathetic understanding
- Owning complexity and multiplicity
- Managing the expectations and pressure for singularity; individuals dread the middle and will try to remove ambiguity
- Making an effort to hold on to the various selves and ones’ multiple identities. Everyone must tolerate contradictions and ambiguity
- Thinking “location” in time and space: how do identities shift in response to specific social and geographical spaces?

**Recommendations for further research**

The outcome of this study, including the limitation presented above, undoubtedly leaves several areas for scholar-practitioners to research further regarding such a complex population. First, other research methodologies should be used to provide an opportunity to study multiracial/ethnic students through various empirical lenses. In addition to implementing varied types of qualitative methodologies, quantitative methodologies can enhance the study of such populations by examining the occurrence of the four domains and eight themes across participants. Quantitative studies can take place across types of institutions, with or without diverse populations, to compare and contrast the experiences students have given the contextual classification of their institutions. The outcomes of this research would be useful to help tailor programmatic and support efforts across institution types. Nevertheless, the use of qualitative methods is still needed to examine the personal stories and intricate experiences of multiracial/ethnic students, which may be lost in translation via quantitative methodologies.
Conclusion

This research study sought to understand the experiences of students with two or more ethnic/racial backgrounds at a predominantly white higher education institution. Much of the literature regarding mixed race or ethnic populations focuses on students of black and white descent, as well as pre-college aged students. Additionally, the literature regarding multiracial/ethnic populations is examined via a U.S. domestic lens, while this present study begins to include international foci into understanding one’s identity development.

The results of this study are in alignment with the research questions in many regards. The themes have addressed the level of complexity that the research participants face in making sense of their identity. Furthermore, select themes will contribute to the growing literature regarding the learning and growth that takes place from critical experiences and transformative experiences such as traveling abroad. The findings will also contribute to the misunderstanding of supporting the experiences of select multiracial/ethnic students, compared to the attention given to enhancing the experiences of monoracial/ethnic groups. Additionally, the research findings of this study reaffirm those from previous studies and theoretical contributions via ecological models, as they relate to patterns of identity that students experience in their developmental process.

The study provided an opportunity for multiracial/ethnic students to share the impact that interpersonal relations and context have on them, including pre-college anecdotes that have contributed to the formation of their identity development journeys. The four broad-based domains and eight themes that emerged from the study provided a glimpse of the individual experiences of multiracial/ethnic students and the process of navigation of their identities within
an educational setting. Moreover, the intention of the study was not to generalize the findings to broad-based populations, but to provide an additional scholar-practitioner viewpoint to enhance the literature and provide future recommendations for scholarly consideration. Undoubtedly, the information provided by this study will be useful to higher education practitioners and educators, providing a sense of awareness when working with diverse populations.

As higher education institutions are becoming increasingly diverse in their student bodies, it is important that student affairs professionals or staff and other educators understand the positive attributes in being multiracial/ethnic, as well as the challenges that such populations continue to face. As demonstrated, context and interpersonal interactions seem to be the most salient factors that contribute to the development of a healthy sense of self regarding one’s racial/ethnic identity. The assumptions made about student identities can leave long-lasting effects on his or her experience on college campuses, which may determine how they engage with others post-graduation. Multiracial/ethnic students do not always fit nicely into the broad-based categories and labels that are generally established at universities across the country. Given that race is a socially constructed and as the population of multiracial/ethnic students increase, such individuals may find themselves in situations where their mixed identity can afford them social currency. For instance, multiracial/ethnic students may be able to blend and weave their way through social networks in strategic ways that monoracial students may not have access to. Nonetheless, the discrepancy between how one identifies publicly and privately, along with the perceptions of how society portrays the way one should identify, leaves students in a vulnerable position in establishing an identity that is developmentally healthy, and an identity with which one can flourish.
References


Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

Unraveling Identity: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Multiracial/ethnic Student Experiences

Dear Participant:

You are invited to participate in a research study that will attempt to understand the social, cultural and educational experiences of self-identified multiracial/ethnic students at the University of Richmond. You can decide not to participate. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not you would like to participate. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask. You are eligible to participate in this study because you have reported being of a multiracial/ethnic background.


Purpose of the Project: This study will investigate the social, cultural and academic experiences of self-identified multiracial/ethnic students at the University of Richmond.

Procedures: You will be asked to participate in an interview and allow the primary investigator to possibly observe you during social or cultural events at the University of Richmond. The interview will take approximately one hour to one-and-a-half hours of your time. The interview will be audio-recorded and will take place at your home. During this interview you will be asked a series of questions. These questions are designed to allow you to share your experiences at the University with special attention to events or experiences related to your multiracial/ethnic background. Additionally, you will be asked to fill out a demographic sheet that will ask for demographic information and questions where you have reflected on your experiences as a multiracial/ethnic individual.
**Risks and/or Discomforts:** There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research. As previously mentioned, minimal risks may include triggering traumatic memories from childhood or negative experiences with others.

**Benefits:** The information gained from this study may help us to better understand the experiences of multiracial/ethnic students so that administrators and faculty can enhance their experiences in higher education.

**Confidentiality:** During the interview, you will be asked to provide a pseudonym to insure that your identity is kept confidential. The audio-recording will be assigned the pseudonym that you pick during the interview. The demographic sheet will not identify you. The demographic sheet will only have the pseudonym that you chose during the interview. Audio tapes will only be used to transcribe the interview. Once the interview is transcribed, the audio tapes, interview transcripts, and any documents you provide will be kept for five years in a locked cabinet at the university in the office of the primary investigator and he will only have access to them. You will not be asked to write your name on the anonymous demographic sheets. Once all demographic sheets are entered in a database, they will be destroyed. The information obtained during this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings, but the data will be prepared as aggregated data.

**Compensation:** You will receive a $5.00 gift card for participating in this study.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:** You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate or during the study. You may call Jean-Pierre Laurenceau-Medina at any time at (804) 349-6267 or email jlaurenc@husky.neu.edu. If you have questions concerning your rights as a research participant that have not been answered
by the investigator or would like to report any concerns about the study, you may contact the University of Richmond/Northeastern University Institutional Review Board.

**Freedom to Withdraw:** You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigator or the University of Richmond. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to engage with the Office of Multicultural Affairs.

**Consent:** To participate in this study, you will be interviewed, observed, and asked to fill out a questionnaire regarding your experiences at the University of Richmond. You are voluntary making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate after having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

____________________________________________      ___________________
Signature of Student       Date

I hereby give consent to be audio recorded.

_________________       ___________________
Initials of Student       Date

In my judgment the student is voluntary and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

____________________________________________  ___________________
Signature of Investigator      Date

Jean-Pierre Laurenceau-Medina, M.Ed  
Doctoral Student  
Northeastern University- College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program- Higher Education Administration
360 Huntington Avenue- 50 Nightingale Hall
Boston, MA 02115-9959
804-349-6267
Appendix B: Interview Question Protocol

Primary research study question: “What level of understanding do multiracial/ethnic students have regarding their identity-based and exploratory experiences in relation to their peers?”

Secondary research questions: “What influences do peer relationships have in supporting students who are challenged by or exploring their multiracial/ethnic identity?” and “What is the nature of activities and experiences that higher education institutions provide for multiracial/ethnic students regarding their identity exploration and development?”

Pre-collegiate and University of Richmond experiences:

Q1. Describe the ethnic and racial background of your biological parents. Probe: How would you identify or describe your parents?

Q2. Discuss the first recollection of an experience you had where you explored your racial/ethnic background?

Q3. Describe how you self-identify from an ethnic or racial standpoint?

Q4. How and when do children become aware of their ethnic/racial group membership?

Q5. How does this understanding affect their behavior?

Q6. How does this understanding affect how children see themselves and others?

Q7. What role do parents play in the development of ethnic/racial identity?

Q8. What have other people around you and society at large categorized you as?

Q9. Who represents your referent group? Probe: With a singular racial category, with multiple racial categories, with no racial categories, as biracial/multiracial/mixed or other ways or is it how you described your racial background in an earlier question, or as American?

Q10. With what ethnic/racial/cultural group do you share attitudes and beliefs?
Q11. When seeking answers related to your racial identity, where do you look---at self or external factors?

Q12. Have you experienced any critical incidents or experiences that have shaped your feelings and understandings of your racial identity? What is the first thing that comes to mind?

Q13. In what areas of your life has being multiracial had the greatest impact?

Q14. What skills and tools have been helpful in their process of seeking identity?

Q15. What are the best parts of being multiracial? Most challenging?

Q16. What would you want people to know about being ……

Q17. How do you feel about other’s racial identity?

Q18. How do you feel about my own referent group?

Q19. Is there a difference between your ‘background’ and how you self-identify? (People might not want to use the language of ‘race’ but rather nationality, culture or ethnicity. Explore the nuances of these categories for them)

Q20. Do you think of yourself as ‘mixed race’ or ‘mixed’? Do you identify using these terms or other mixed race identities such as biracial or multiracial?

Q21. How do you feel about terms such as biracial/multiracial?

Q22. Has how you identify changed at different times in your life?

Q23. Does how you identify vary according to the circumstance or situation? Probe: Privately identify in one way, but identify in another way publicly

Q24. Do others think of you/see you as “mixed” or “mixed race.” If participants has two non-white parents, get thoughts on whether the default of someone who is ‘mixed with’ white
Q25. How do you find people racialize you? Probe: Assumptions that you belong to a racial category or questions about what racial category you belong to.

Q26. Has this changed at different times in your life? Has this affected how you self-identify? Why/when/how? Do you find that people try to categorize you in a certain way? Do you find that people have certain expectations of how you identify? Probe: Do you get asked questions such as “what are you?” or “where are you from?”

Q27. Do people try to impose categories on you? Does this vary according to the circumstance or situation? What is your reaction to people’s expectations and categorizations?

Q28. Are you aware of any stereotypes that exist around people of mixed race? Probe: Confused about racial identity, physically attractive appearance, exotic connotations. Do you think that your ‘mixedness’ has affected your experiences with dating in any way? What about friendships? Bring up towards end of interview, if have not been brought up:

Q29. What do you think of people who decide to identify with a singular category, even though they are of a mixed racial background? What about those who identify as mixed even though they look like they are of a singular category?

Q30. Do you find that the word ‘exotic’ is used to describe people of mixed race? How do you feel about the word ‘exotic’?

Q31. Do you get asked the question, or some version of the question, “what are you?” How do you feel about such questions being asked of you?

Q32. Do you consciously form your response to such questions?

Q33. Is there anything else you would like to add?
Appendix C: Institutional Review Board Approval

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: December 13, 2013  IRB #: CPS13-12-05
Principal Investigator(s): Kristal Clemons
                        Jean-Pierre Laurenceau-Medina
Department: Doctor of Education Program
            College of Professional Studies
Address: 20 Belvidere
         Northeastern University
Title of Project: Unraveling Identity: An Interpretative Phenomenological
                Analysis of Multiracial/ethnic Student Experiences
Participating Sites: IRB Approval for University of Richmond on file
DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents: One (1) signed consent form
Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: DECEMBER 12, 2014

Investigator's Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when
   recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new
   information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must
   be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month
   prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any
   other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Jean-Pierre Laurenceau-Medina and I am a doctoral student in Education at Northeastern University.

My reason for contacting you is that I will be conducting a qualitative research study on the lived experiences of multiracial/ethnic students at the University of Richmond. As part of my research, I am recruiting self-identified multiracial/ethnic students to participate in my study.

Please know that you are in no way obligated to take part in this research project. However, should you agree to take part in it, please know that all information you provide me with during the interviews will be kept in the strictest confidence, with such information being destroyed at the completion of this study. Furthermore, your name will not appear anywhere in the publication of this research dissertation. Also know that you may stop the interview process completely at any time, and you may also refuse to answer any questions asked during the interviews.

Your voluntary participation in this study will contribute to a better understanding of multiracial/ethnic student identity and related experiences. In addition, you will be given a $10.00 dollar gift certificate to Sweet Frog or Chipotle as a token of my appreciation for your part in this research.

Please contact me either by email: laurenceau-medina.j@husky.neu.edu or by phone at: 804-289-8356 so that we can discuss your potential participation further and possibly arrange for interview times and dates.

Respectfully,

Jean-Pierre Laurenceau-Medina
Informed Consent Form

Research Study Topic: Unraveling Identity: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Multiracial/ethnic Student Experiences

Principal Investigator: Dr. Kristal Clemons
Doctoral Student/Researcher: Jean-Pierre Laurenceau-Medina

Dear Participant:

You are invited to participate in a research study that will attempt to understand the social, cultural and educational experiences of self-identified multiracial/ethnic students at the University of Richmond. You can decide not to participate. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not you would like to participate. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask. You are eligible to participate in this study because you have reported being of a multiracial/ethnic background.


Purpose of the Project: This study will investigate the social, cultural and academic experiences of self-identified multiracial/ethnic students at the University of Richmond.

Procedures: You will be asked to participate in an interview which will take approximately one hour to one-and-a-half hours of your time. The interview will be audio-recorded and will take place at your home. During this interview you will be asked a series of questions. These questions are designed to allow you to share your experiences at the University with special attention to events or experiences related to your multiracial/ethnic background. Additionally, you will be asked to fill out a demographic sheet that will ask for demographic information and questions where you have reflected on your experiences as a multiracial/ethnic individual.

Risks and/or Discomforts: There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research. As previously mentioned, minimal risks may include triggering traumatic memories from childhood or negative experiences with others.

Benefits: The information gained from this study may help us to better understand the experiences of multiracial/ethnic students so that administrators and faculty can enhance their experiences in higher education.

Confidentiality: During the interview, you will be asked to provide a pseudonym to insure that your identity is kept confidential. The audio-recording will be assigned the pseudonym that you pick during the interview. The demographic sheet will not identify you. The demographic sheet will only have the pseudonym that you chose during the interview. Audio tapes will only be used to transcribe the interview. Once the interview is transcribed, the audio tapes, interview transcripts, and any documents you provide will be kept for five years in a locked cabinet at the university in the office of the primary investigator and he will only have access to them. You will not be asked to write your name on the anonymous demographic sheets. Once all demographic sheets are entered in a database,
they will be destroyed. The information obtained during this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings, but the data will be prepared as aggregated data.

**Compensation:** You will receive a $10.00 gift card for participating in this study.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:** You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate or during the study. You may email Dr. Kristal Clemons at k.clemons@neu.edu or Jean-Pierre Laurenceau-Medina at laurenceau-medina.j@husky.neu.edu (or call 804-349-6267). If you have questions concerning your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigator or would like to report any concerns about the study, you may contact the University of Richmond/Northeastern University Institutional Review Board.

**Freedom to Withdraw:** You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigator or the University of Richmond. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to engage with the Office of Multicultural Affairs.

**Consent:** To participate in this study, you will be interviewed regarding your experiences at the University of Richmond. The study has been described to me and I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may discontinue my participation at any time without penalty. I understand that my responses will be treated confidentially and used as described. I understand that if I have any questions, I can pose them to the Principal Investigator, Jean-Pierre Laurenceau-Medina. By signing below I attest that I am over 18 years of age and that I consent to participate in this study. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

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**Signature of Student**

**Date**

I hereby give consent to be audio recorded.

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**Initials of Student**

**Date**

In my judgment the student is voluntary and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

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**Signature of Investigator**

**Date**

Jean-Pierre Laurenceau-Medina  
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Northeastern University- College of Professional Studies  
Doctor of Education Program- Higher Education Administration  
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804-349-6267

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**APPROVED**

NIU/IRB 06/34-005  
**VALID** 11/12-13  
**THROUGH** 12/12-14
UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS OF RESEARCH (IRB)

NOTICE OF ACTION

Date: December 3, 2013 (Date of Convened IRB)

Name(s): Jean-Pierre Laurenceau-Medina

Faculty ☐  Student ☐  Other ☒  University of Richmond staff member

Faculty Mentors: Dr. Kristal Clemons at Northeastern University

Is this for a class? ☒ yes  ☐ no

If yes, department and course number  Doctoral Dissertation at Northeastern University

Project Title: Unraveling Identity: Examining Multiracial/ethnic Student Experiences in Higher Education

The IRB has reviewed your research protocol by ☒ full review  ☐ expedited review. Full review of proposal; expedited review of revisions.

Your application is:

☐ Exempt from further review  Your project does not fall within federal or university guidelines requiring review. If the nature of the project changes, you must resubmit this project for further review.

☒ Approved  Please review the criteria for approval at the end of this form.

☐ Approved with conditions  Please respond via email to the Chair of the IRB how you plan to address the concerns outlined at the end of this form. Research may not begin until the conditions of approval have been met and approved.

☐ Disapproved  The IRB has some concerns regarding your proposed research; therefore, your project cannot be approved at this time. Please contact the Chair of the IRB to discuss the issues outlined at the end of this form.

☐ Incomplete  A decision on your protocol has been temporarily withheld until the information listed at the end of this form is provided for IRB consideration.

[Signature]
December 6, 2013

Richard Kirk Jonas, Chair

Institutional Review Board (1565)

Conditions of Approval

Your proposal has been approved by the University of Richmond Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research (IRB). This approval is based upon the conditions listed below. It is your responsibility to ensure that your research adheres to these conditions.

1. IRB approval is for a period of one year. If this research project extends beyond one year from the date of this letter a request for renewal of approval must be filed.
2. Any substantive changes in the research project must be reported to the chair of the IRB. Changes shall not be initiated without IRB approval except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to subjects. Based on the proposed changes, a new review may be necessary.
3. Any adverse reaction or other complication of the research which involves real or potential risk or injury to subjects must be reported to the Chairs of the IRBs at the University of Richmond and Northeastern University as soon as possible but no later than three days after the occurrence.