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Haley K. M. Okamoto
Portland State University

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Mixed Plate: Exploring Multiracial Student Identities Within Higher Education

Haley K. M. Okamoto

Department of Communication Studies, Portland State University

Abstract

Race has been studied primarily from a monoracial perspective, which exhibits multiracial individuals from expressing themselves because their racial identities do not fit into the pre-established monoracial categories. The multiracial population in America is steadily growing, and as a result, the number of multiracial students on college campuses are predicted to increase. The purpose of this study was to learn about racial identity beyond a monoracial paradigm. This paper explores multiracial student identities within higher education at a public university in the Pacific Northwest using Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). Through interviewing eleven students, racial identity development, challenges, and coping strategies for mixed-heritage students were identified. The concepts of convergence and divergence– both deriving from CAT, were utilized to analytically comprehend the challenges and coping strategies multiracial students employ.

Mixed Plate: Exploring Multiracial Student Identities Within Higher Education

Higher education is an environment where students are able to explore and develop their racial identities: "the campus should be seen as a place that encourages racial dialogues throughout the students' college experience, and as a place where racial discourse is valued and appropriate in academic and social settings" (Museus et al., 2011, p. 24). While racial identity has certainly made its way into higher education curriculums, racial identity is still often conceptualized as singular and static. However, racial identity is increasingly complex and varied. As such, it is important to study multiracial student identities within the setting of higher education institutions because mixed-race students are often overlooked in relation to their racial and ethnic identities; simultaneously, they are overwhelmingly existent on college campuses and their presence will only continue to grow (Museus et al., 2015).

It is essential for higher education institutions to implement proper racial exploration tactics that are deemed appropriate for students who "fall outside of a monoracial-only paradigm" (Harris, 2017, p. 442). Faculty and staff need to be educated on how to engage in healthy conversations about race and ethnicity without making mixed-heritage students feel isolated. The expectation is that "college administrators and faculty members [should] work together to make connections between courses that address racial issues and cocurricular racial dialogues on campus" (Museus et al., 2011, p. 25). Students should feel comfortable expressing all parts of their racial and ethnic heritages both in and out of the classroom.

As the demographics on college campuses are quickly changing (Gaither, 2015), the conversation topics related to support systems must also remain relevant. It is important to acknowledge and discuss the diversity of racial identities amongst college campuses because the needs of the multiracial population are still being identified (King, 2008; Nishimura, 1998). It is

imperative for our education systems to be equipped to "address the needs of this newly emerging student group (Nishimura, 1998, p. 46). Multiracial students should no longer be unseen or unheard of on college campuses; we need to ensure that these students view their racial and ethnic identities as a tool of empowerment.

Literature Review

This literature review is divided into three different sections. The first part addresses multiracial identities by discussing attempted definitions, and later transitions into obstacles that are commonly faced by those who identify as multiracial. The second section adds an additional layer of understanding multiracial identities through focusing on the realm of higher education. Historical significance, racial identity development, challenges, coping strategies, and tactics for navigating the college campus are explained through the work of previous researchers. Finally, the theory used for this project, Communication Accommodation Theory, is defined and the differing contexts in which it has been previously applied is provided.

Multiracial Identity

Placing a strict definition on who is or is not a multiracial person is subjective, yet the U.S. Census defines a person who is multiracial as "anyone who identifies with two or more races" (Gaither, 2015, p. 1). The challenge in defining "multiraciality" is that race is a social construct therefore racial identity is an ambiguous and abstract concept. Regardless of its complexity, the multiracial population in America is steadily growing. According to the 2010 U.S. census, "the population reporting multiple races grew by 32.0 percent from 2000 to 2010, compared with those who reported a single race, which grew by 9.2 percent" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The way in which multiracial people define themselves depends on personal factors such as familial influence or societal pressures (Townsend et al., 2009; Nadal et al.,

2013). Literature on multiracial identities include several terms for "multiracial" including, but not limited to, mixed-heritage, mixed-race, biracial, multicultural, and multiethnic. These terms will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

Having a multiracial identity presents certain disadvantages that are generally linked to racial identity development. Mixed-race people often feel the pressure from society to conform to socially constructed racial categories (Townsend et al., 2009). The pressure an individual feels to pick a single category of race can derive from a multitude of social contexts but nonetheless, having to "conform to a monoracial category is a source of tension" (Gaither, 2015, p. 1). Furthermore, this tension can then create an experience similar to an identity crisis for multiracial individuals. Moving between racial and ethnic identities can be difficult to navigate without proper guidance.

In the U.S., a relevant example of pushing the monoracial paradigm is the lack of demographic categorization on surveys or forms. Many times, "institutional practices do not promote or accommodate bi-racial or multiracial identities" (Townsend et al., 2009, p. 187). Mandating individuals to "check the box that best applies" is a phrase that subconsciously encourages multiracial people to favor one of their identities over the others. Racial identity is simplified for the sake of a form and in doing so, effectively denies the identity of the mixed-race respondents. Thus, "limited choice is associated with lower self-esteem, reduced motivation, and heightened anxiety" (Townsend et al., 2009, p. 186). As humans, we are entitled to identify as we please yet contrary to this idea, lack of demographic racial categorization is a challenge that impedes mixed-race people's identity (Townsend et al., 2009). It is with high hopes that in the upcoming years the multiracial population will feel supported in their efforts to develop and understand their multicultural identities– within all aspects of life.

Waves of tension are also commonly felt through physical racial ambiguity (Gaither, 2015). Mixed-race people often appear racially ambiguous; thus, society has detrimentally perceived those who are multiracial as exotic. Gaither (2015) notes that "this ambiguity, combined with a public construal of race in which monoracial categories are the norm, leads to incidents in which multiracial individuals are blatantly asked dehumanizing questions like, "What are you?"" (p. 2). A review done by Shih and Sanchez (2005) found that other negative consequences of a multiracial identity are factors such as social exclusion, disapproval from extended family, increased discrimination, and lower psychological well-being. One's identity development and exploration should never be a negative experience but due to society's discomfort with being unable to racially categorize everyone, mixed-race people suffer the most. This is why it is important to research and understand the factors that affect how a multiracial person constructs and maintains her, his, their, cis identity.

Studying Multiracial Identities in Higher Education

As the multiracial population continues to increase, so does the number of mixed-race students on college campuses (King, 2008). Over 20 years ago Gibbs (1987) and Nishimura and Bol (1997) predicted based on their research that educational systems would experience an increase in their multiracial student population. In fact, "interest in racial identity development among college students had just broken the surface in the 1990s" (King, 2008, p. 33). Colleges and universities are a rich site to study multiracial identities because this is a time in students' lives where they are provided opportunities to "explore and reflect on their racial heritage, prompting them to think about their identity in different ways" (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012. p. 524). Previous studies have looked at minority monoracial identities in higher education, but

there remains a lack of research on multiracial identity development, challenges multiracial

students face, coping strategies they employ, and how they navigate college campuses.

Racial identification is a major component of self-recognition (Gaither, 2015), thus

developing a strong multiracial identity is essential for mixed-race people. Multiracial identity

development is a process that commonly begins with the person becoming aware of the

differentiation of races (Renn, 2000). Upon establishing racial distinctions, a multiracial

individual will feel the societal pressure of having to conform to one of their races over another

(Renn, 2000). If the multiracial individual is able to accept all of their racial heritages, they are

then able to achieve a multiracial identity (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012). This type of identity, while

seeming to be a simple concept, is actually quite complex and requires different factors to be

taken into consideration. Kellogg and Liddell (2012) along with Renn (2000) aim to dissect the

intricacy and intersections of mixed-race identities. They do this by establishing multiple options

as to how people in the multiracial population might choose to identify. Kellogg and Liddell

(2012) assign identity resolutions based off of Root's (1990) model. The ideology breaks off

into 4 categories: (a) Acceptance of the identity assigned by others, (b) Identification with a

single racial group, (c) Identification with both racial groups, and (d) Identification as a new

racial group (Root, 1990). In Renn's (2000) later work, five mixed-race identity categorization

groups were established. They are: (a) Choosing one existing monoracial category, (b) Moving

between existing monoracial categories; adopting situation definitions of monoracial identity, (c)

Creating a new identity-based category– multiracial, (d) Opting out by deconstructing the

category of race, and (e) Moving between or among any of the aforementioned groupings (Renn,

2000). Regardless of category, Kellogg and Liddell (2012) wisely note that "racial identity is a

fluid construction" (p. 525), meaning that it is normalized for multiracial people to adjust their

racial identity based on situational context.

There are a variety of elements that help multiracial people establish their mixed-race

identity. Renn (2003) uses a macro to micro level developmental ecology lens to understand the

identities of mixed-race college students. At the macrosystem are historical trends and events,

social forces, and cultural expectations. The exosystem is comprised of federal financial aid

policy, immigration policy, faculty curriculum committee, and parent's or spouse's workplace.

The core of the microsystem is the multiracial student. The student faces elements such as

roommates, classes, and friendship groups surrounding them. The fourth component, the

mesosystem, is maintained by having two or more microsystems interact. By looking at a

person's multiracial identity through an ecology model, it gives a greater perspective as to what

is influencing one's choice of identification (Renn, 2003). There are also larger systemic

structures that may affect the way in which one identifies, which is essential to take into

consideration while examining racial identity development. Maintaining a multiracial identity is

not as simple as black and white; it is an intricate combination of personal and societal

influences.

Alongside to monoracial people of color, multiracial individuals face identity challenges

such as racism, microaggressions, or colorblindness. In a study done by Kellogg and Liddell

(2012) they looked to learn more about critical incidents that impacted multiracial students and

their racial identity. One of their incidental categories included confronting race and racism. In

this category, college students shared personal stories that made them realize race is a pertinent

matter to themselves and others (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012). The anecdotes described situations of

racial separation which in turn made students realize that race would be a major factor as to how

the institution and peers defined them. Other prevalent issues involved racial slurs, jokes, derogatory comments, or hate crimes on the college campus (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012). A circumstance unique to mixed-race people is the issue of racist comments being made thinking it would not offend anyone based on the physical appearance of others. For example, Kellogg and Liddell (2012) included an example of a Native American and Filipino student who sat through hearing their friends make racist jokes towards Filipino people. The student's friends did not know she was also Filipino because her main physical appearance was Native American. Damaging circumstances such as the aforementioned does not promote inclusivity and belonging towards multiracial identities on college campuses.

In addition to living with the presence of racism, microaggressions– a stem of racism– are another problem that mixed-race students face. Studying microaggressions against multiracial people is distinctive because this specific group of people experience microaggressions in a different way than those who are monoracial. Harris (2017) noted that "multiracial students may experience multiracial microaggressions at the intersections of racism and monoracism" (p. 432). Harris (2017) studied multiracial microaggressions in the setting of college, but specifically for women. The findings broke down into three categories: denial of a multiracial reality, assumption of a multiracial identity, and not monoracial enough to fit in. Each of the categories carried damaging effects on the students, which mainly had to do with the inconsistencies between how the student viewed their racial identity versus the misinterpretation of their racial identity from outside others (Harris, 2017). To simplistically sum the problem of multiracial microaggressions, Harris (2017) determined that "this subtle racism occurs because perpetrators of these microaggressions are unable, and possibly unwilling, to view race outside of a monoracial-only paradigm" (p. 440). Microaggressions can only be solved if the people

committing them are aware of the adverse effects they are perpetuating onto the mixed-race population.

The colorblind ideology is another subtle form of racism yet remains extremely harmful. The basis of colorblindness holds the idea that "race and racism do not significantly influence people's experiences" (Museus et al., 2011, p. 21). Museus, Yee, and Lambe (2011) conducted a study to learn about mixed-race college students' ordeal with going to a college that promoted the colorblind ideology. Immediately, feelings of frustration, isolation, apathy, despair, and depression were brought to the forefront as emotions experienced from attending the colorblind university (Museus et al., 2011). Sustaining the colorblind ideology takes away from the concept of college being an opportunity for racial discourse to be valued and appropriated within academics (Museus et al., 2011). Ultimately, the absence of racial awareness discouraged students from understanding and accepting their multiracial identity.

While on the college campus, multiracial students also have to consider their physical appearance and cultural knowledge when entering racially designated areas on campus. Access to physical spaces is an integral part of the racial identity developmental process (King, 2008). Multiracial students face the possibility of either being judged based on their physical appearance or cultural knowledge while occupying cultural resource centers. These judgements can be based on factors such as physical traits (e.g. skin color, hair type) or knowledge of native languages. Ambiguous racial appearance is one of the main causes that stops students from feeling welcomed in spaces on their college campus (King, 2008). Society can be very quick to make judgements based on looks; this does not help the multiracial population as there are endless racial and ethnic combinations thus the way in which genetics are passed down is not a straightforward or clean-cut process.

Lastly, one of the most prevalent issues the mixed-race population faces is being asked, "What are you?" (King, 2008). This inquiry can be interpreted as challenging the legitimacy of a multiracial person's identity. Challenging the racial legitimacy of mixed-race people relates to the idea of inquiring about how much cultural knowledge one carries (Renn, 2000). When students are raised in a mixed-heritage household, it requires a balance of cultural knowledge. An individual may be well versed in one of their racial backgrounds yet not know as much about the other. This lack of knowledge can be seen as a deficit to others who judge the legitimacy of mixed-race students. Examples of this include not knowing how to speak the language of a racial/ethnic group, not understanding the historical or cultural traditions of a race/ethnicity, or simply, not having the physical characteristics that most people in the traditional monoracial group carry (Renn, 2000). It is important to note that multiracial students are generally unable to have strict authority over which cultural lessons their family decides to teach them, or how their parent's genetics were passed down to them. There is a multiracial phenomenon of not feeling "enough" (i.e., not feeling Japanese enough) which derives from feeling culturally inadequate. This type of phenomenon occurs when mixed-race people think about how they do not possess all physical characteristics of their many races and/or ethnicities or have full cultural knowledge of every heritage they hold (King, 2008).

The aforementioned difficulties that mixed-race students face during college provides a slight glance into the world of the multiracial population. Similar to other monoracial minority groups, there are certain coping strategies utilized by mixed-race students in order for them to move forward and progress throughout their years in college (Museus et al., 2015). Museus, Sariñana, and Ryan (2015) researched how multiracial students coped with challenges they faced during their college career. The authors found four primary coping methods. First, some

multiracial students find that *educating others* is a way for them to embrace their multiracial identity. For example, the researchers found that participants "engaged in educated conversations about their identity and experiences when they were confronted with…the invalidation of their identities" (Museus et al., 2015, p. 399). Shedding light on the reality that there is a multiracial presence can be an empowering experience for multiracial students (Museus et al., 2015). Second, multiracial students relied on *support networks* such as multiracial student organizations. Having access to a network of individuals that can relate to the complexity of being mixed-race is a powerful tool used to enable validation or relatability along with "[providing] a safe space for dialogue about racial issues among mixed-race undergraduates" (Museus et al., 2015, p. 340). Third, multiracial students use the method of *embracing the fluidity of their multiracial identity* to respond to the societal pressure of fitting into neatly, pre-organized monoracial categories. Instead of giving in to the predominance, students are able to use their mixed-race identity to reject this process and embody the ability to move between various racial groups. Multiracial people have the privilege to refuse being constrained by racial boundaries (Museus et al., 2015). The last coping strategy embraced by students is the process of *avoiding confrontation*. Students commonly make the choice to completely avoid confronting racial prejudice or discrimination. Mixed-race students have the right to dismiss physical or cognitive interactions during situations deemed as racially charged.

The overarching theme of the challenges and coping methods described above is that the experiences of multiracial students within higher education are incredibly diverse and contextually dependent. Many students on college campuses may face racism or microaggressions, but not all may experience colorblindness. Similarly, coping strategies are unlikely to be identical amongst all mixed-race students. The multiplicity of experience makes

studying multiracial student identities in higher education even more important, as experiences

are deeply personal, and no mixed-race person will have an equivalent experience to a

multiracial peer. Understanding these experiences on college campuses is imperative because

higher education allows students the opportunity to develop and explore their racial identity;

with the proper tools, administration, faculty, and staff have the chance to support their student's

racial identity growth in ways that are healthy and encouraging.

If a mixed-race student decides to commit their education to a particular college campus,

it is essential that they know how to navigate and access spaces where they feel welcomed, safe,

and comfortable. Fortunately, some college campuses have specific spaces designed for

multiracial or multiethnic students to gather. In addition to providing this space, the literature has

shown that there are great benefits to having a multiracial student organization or club on

campus (Renn, 2000). Students may not share the same racial or ethnic combination, but "they

[share] the experience of navigating campus life as multiracial people" (Renn, 2000, p. 410).

However, it is most common for universities to offer solely monoracial student clubs, which are

not always a good fit for multiracial students. Mixed-race students that join a monoracial club

can either end up feeling as if they are denying a part of their racial identity, or that they are

favoring one of their cultural backgrounds over another (King, 2008). The creation of multiracial

or multiethnic student organizations can play a key role in supporting mixed students. These

organizations provide a space for mixed-race students to connect and talk with their peers who

face the same racial or ethnic situations. Visibility, awareness, and open conversations are a few

elements that will help multiracial students feel as if they belong and are welcomed on their

college campus.

Communication Accommodation Theory

One way to theorize and understand multiracial student experiences is through concepts from Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). CAT was developed to better understand intercultural communication in the 1970s (Gallois et al., 2005). The theory originally began as Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT) to understand the differences in speech dialect based on situational context (Gallois et al., 2005). Prior studies have used SAT (in its transitional stages to Communication Accommodation Theory) to study communication among different social groups, countries, and cultural linguistic groups (Gallois et al., 2005). In the most recent adaptations of the theory, CAT has largely been the framework for researching intergenerational communication (Griffin et al., 2015).

The main components of CAT that apply to multiracial students, as explained by Griffin, Ledbetter, and Sparks (2015), are the concepts of convergence and divergence. *Convergence* is "the strategy of adapting your communication behavior in such a way as to become more similar to another person" (Griffin et al., 2015, p. 393). It is typically employed by communicators when they have a desire for social approval. *Divergence* is "a communication strategy of accentuating the differences between you and another person" (Griffin et al., 2015, p. 393). Divergence is utilized when a communicator has a need for distinctiveness with their social identity. To provide examples of how convergence and divergence can apply to multiraciality, imagine a person who is Asian and Native American. If this individual were with a group of predominantly monoracial Native Americans and showcasing convergence, they would try to appear as solely Native American by speaking or acting the same as their peers while simultaneously erasing or ignoring their Asian identity. Conversely, if this person were in the same scenario but demonstrating divergence they would remain true to both of their racial identities and work to

represent their Asian identity as well; they would not conform to the majority of the group but rather choose to stand out as the unique mix they are.

CAT has been used in the medical field, media, and higher education. In an Australian study done by Jones, Sheeran, Lanyon, Evans, and Martincovic (2018), CAT was the framework utilized to "examine, in a neonatal nursery, nurses' perceptions of communication with parents with different crosscutting identities" (p. 175). The researchers looked through the lens of CAT to examine how nurses in the neonatal nursery were communicating with parents of a minority group (e.g. young people of color) in comparison to parents where no group membership assumptions were able to be made (Jones et al., 2018). In the mass media sub-field, CAT has been applied to social media and instant messaging. The theory was employed to observe classroom student interactions via Twitter, and to test temporal convergence with priming and instant messaging (Parcha, 2014; Riordan et al., 2013). CAT was also used in studies about higher education through examining disability disclosure. Blockmans (2015) used concepts in CAT to research disability disclosure at five Belgian higher education institutions.

Communication Accommodation Theory has rarely, if ever, been used to explore multiracial identities in higher education. The CAT framework is particularly useful for understanding multiracial identities because it provides a theoretical framework to comprehend why people might embrace the fluidity of their racial identity as opposed to incorporating a multiracial identity regardless of situational context. This study will bridge the gap between mixed-heritage identities, higher education, and the field of Communication. Through utilizing CAT, the concepts of convergence and divergence have the potential to shed light upon the complex dynamic of being a multiracial college student.

Research Question

Given the multiplicity of experiences multiracial students can face, and the importance of supporting those students on college campuses, this study focuses on a singular research question: What are the racialized experiences of multiracial students at a large, public university in the Pacific Northwest?

Methods

Procedure

A qualitative approach was taken because this study aims to contribute to the understanding of racial and ethnic social systems. Therefore, it was determined that one-on-one semi-structured interviews were the best option for comprehending the racialized experiences of the participants. Interviews took place in the research laboratory located in the Communication Department at a time that was convenient for participants. Participants answered questions about their college experiences as multiracial students. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Transcripts underwent a thematic analysis at the sentence level. An initial codebook was developed based on previous research surrounding multiraciality in higher education, and concepts from Communication Accommodation Theory. The type of coding utilized was directed content analysis. This approach is used to "validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). Transcripts were analyzed using the predetermined codes, and "any text that could not be categorized with the initial coding scheme [was] given a new code" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). The coding software employed for this study was the online program, Dedoose. This study was completed by a research team of one therefore the intercoder process was completed by providing the faculty mentor with the results section and discussing in person.

Participants

The 11 undergraduate participants in this qualitative study are students from a large, Pacific Northwest, public university who self-identify as multiracial or multiethnic. Participants were recruited via email listservs of racially focused student organizations on campus, and through the university's diversity retention programs. Snowball sampling was utilized to gather additional participants.

Results

Consistent with the literature that was reviewed for this project, the participants in this study had similar experiences related to racial identity development, challenges, and coping strategies. The concepts of convergence and divergence were applied to the "challenges" and "coping strategies" sections.

Racial Identity Development

Previous research found that college is an optimal setting to study racial identity development (Nishimura, 1998; Renn, 2000; King, 2008; Museus et al., 2015; Kellogg & Liddell, 2012), which was echoed by the results of this research. One participant, for example, reflected on her personal journey with understanding her multiracial identity ever since beginning college: "I feel like I've been doing [racial exploration] a lot since college because of the resources I've had access to, to learn more about myself." Another participant also felt that college has been an opportunity for him to explore his mixed-heritage identity:

> I felt that right when I started as a freshman, just being around so many different people and getting to know all these people from different backgrounds it made me a lot more curious [about] myself…I think that I just became more open as I came to college.

In addition to the college experience, more generally, there were three primary factors that assisted participant's racial identity development including college courses, political climate, and birthplace.

While the generalized college environment is an optimal setting equipped to help students engage in racial identity development, the discussions taking place in the classroom and types of courses offered were just as important to participants. A participant had a positive experience displaying her mixed-race identity through an art class: "In my painting class I made…a collage of like all the flags of my ethnicities. My classmates thought that it was cool [and] I think it's just cool to see that [my racial/ethnic identity] is accepted."

Other academic programs such as the social work or public health departments have provided courses and conversations in which mixed-race participants were able to critically analyze their identities. When talking about her "Introduction to Oppression and Privilege" course, a participant stated, "It was just so much information and it was overwhelming, and it was also really interesting because I hadn't really thought it about myself and my race [or] ethnicity, in that way."

Another participant spoke about a guest speaker that came to her public health class to talk about decolonizing data. Her experience with the speaker played a crucial role in understanding the intersection between the health field and her mixed-race identity. The participant explained that,

> If you were to do a demographic survey and I identify as mixed, [the guest speaker] said, if the lowest percent so far is with Black people, because one of my backgrounds is Black, [they] would count me as Black, even though I don't identify as [only] that.

This anecdote directly relates to the misrepresentation of racial and ethnic data in the health field. Additionally, one of the participants noted that it was a series of classes that helped

her understand her mixed-race identity. She started with a course entitled "Race and Social Justice", then took women studies and queer studies classes to help expand her knowledge of the components that make up who she is as an individual. Another participant indicated that he took an "Indigenous Philosophy" course to help him learn more about his newfound, mixed indigenous identity.

College courses have also been successfully utilized to bridge a student's academic life with his social life. A participant recalled a moment that helped him (and his partner) get involved on campus with an organization that supports his multi-national identity.

> Members of KSA (the Korean Student Association) [went] into [a Korean language] class and let [everyone] know about a program called K-Table where they, a typically American student, would be paired up with a Korean student who wanted to improve their English skills…we got assigned our buddy, and we've done it two years in a row and then, because of that, we've just constantly gone to KSA events.

The second theme that emerged regarding identity development is the nature of the current political climate. One of the participants eloquently weaved together mixed-heritage individuals, college courses, and the political climate:

> The political system we're in right now is just so relevant and it does get brought up in the classrooms and that can be a great way to talk about multiethnic students or people of color.

A different participant mentioned the political climate in relation to her feeling the need to represent her heritage, "Especially right now, with what is going on politically– I feel that I just need to say, "Yeah, I am Mexican."" Even though this participant mentioned being white passing, she still wanted people to know she is Mexican along with her other racial identities; this participant had a strong understanding of the importance in embracing every part of herself.

Current political events also resonated with a third participant, who spoke about the political debate regarding Mauna a Wākea versus the Thirty Meter Telescope that is happening in Hawaiʻi:

> Right now, with what we've seen happening in Hawaiʻi, I'm more inclined to be telling people who I am and what my racial identity is…in this political climate, where Native Hawaiians are starting to be more recognized in media, I do feel like it's a responsibility of mine for my people to make myself known in these situations.

Whether students are in or out of the classroom, politics still have the ability to impact their racial identity development. As college students become more aware of the political climate, they are using what they see in the media as a source for developing their mixed-race identity.

The third and final theme related to racial identity development was birthplace. It was evident among participants that where they were born and raised played an important role in their racial identity development and continues to impact them to this day. Participants explained that if they were born and raised in an environment that either related directly to their racial identity, or supported their racial identity development, the individual came into college with a better understanding of their mixed-heritage identity. One of the participants stated, "Culturally, I was raised to celebrate all my identities and I knew exactly how my identities came to America and all that. So, it was very celebratory."

Conversely, racial identity development can be detrimentally impacted if a mixed-heritage individual is not raised to understand all of their racial or ethnic backgrounds. A different participant described what it was like not being raised to fully embrace all of her heritages:

>I have had a hard time fully identifying with either [race] because growing up
>here in the states and in my home, it hasn't felt like there's been a huge emphasis
>on [learning my cultures].

The location in which multiracial people are born can leave an everlasting mark on their perception of their racial identity. Out of the 11 total participants, nine of them voluntarily spoke about where they were born and raised and how it positively or negatively affected their racial identity development in college. In sum, participants who were raised to embody all parts of their cultural heritage felt more secure with who they are whereas those who were not expressed feelings of curiosity or discomfort towards their racial identity.

Challenges

Prior work has identified several challenges commonly faced by those who identify as multiracial, including racism, microaggressions, physical appearance, cultural knowledge, and being asked, "What are you?" (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; Harris, 2017; King, 2008; Renn, 2000; Museus et al., 2011). The obstacles that the participants encountered reflect the aforementioned challenges.

A participant recalled a racist experience he had with a professor during his first year of college. During class, his professor passed around a sign in sheet and had the word "Asian" typed out next to his name. The participant was baffled that his professor did not double check the list before passing it out and felt offended that he was the only student being labeled based on his racial appearance. Another participant also remembered a situation she found to be racist where a peer compared her racial identities to a mixed-breed dog: "After I told them my identity, they called me a mutt. And that really took me aback because it happened multiple times…it's just, confusing."

Both of these racist occurrences were based on how participants physically appear therefore convergence and divergence are not applicable in these situations. Convergence is utilized to make oneself appear to be more similar; this can be done through how a person dresses, acts, or speaks. When judgement is based on physical features, as it happened for the participants, it is impossible to instantly and tangibly converge. Divergence was not applicable to either situation because after the racist actions or comments were made, both participants did not choose to accentuate their differences. Encountering racist attacks can make victims feel vulnerable therefore drawing more attention to the source of the racism is not a path that is often taken. Racist comments or occurrences like these are what makes it difficult for mixed-heritage students to feel like their college campus is a safe and inclusive environment.

Microaggressions were evident among participants. In addition to the racist comment a previously mentioned participant faced, she also spoke about a situation that made her feel uneasy about her multiracial identity: "In certain programs I'm introduced as like, "Oh, this is the minority scholar." And that makes me feel, for some reason, like…I need extra help."

One of the participants, a Mexican/Japanese student, had an encounter with a microaggression amongst his Mexican peers: "It's exclusion. They just say, "Ah, you're not fully it, so I just don't want to associate with you."" These subtle versions of racism have just as much of a negative impact on mixed-race students as blatant racism does because "racial microaggressions are a form of everyday, systemic racism…the accumulation of racial microaggressions [have] a deleterious impact on people of colors' psychological, mental, emotional, and physical health" (Harris, 2017, p. 430).

Convergence and divergence are relevant to microaggressions in the same way they apply to racism. The participants were incapable of altering their physical appearance therefore they

could not converge to the majority of the group. Both participants also did not mention

highlighting how they were different after they encountered the microaggression ergo divergence

was not used.

An underlying aspect of being multiracial is physical ambiguity (Kellogg & Liddell,

2012). One of the participants mentioned, "Because I am a white Latina, [people] automatically

think I am just European-decent." Another participant explained a resembling situation:

> I am majority Filipino and I'm very Filipino passing. There's not a lot of people
> who would think that I'm Native Hawaiian and so I just feel like I am oscillating
> between those two identities.

It is a perplexing experience for multiracial individuals to represent one of their cultures

when they do not physically appear to belong to that community.

The commonality between racism, microaggressions, and physical appearance is that in

all of the situations that were mentioned by participants, it related to other people's perceptions

of them, typically based on looks. Again, convergence depends on physical features being

altered; it is uncommon to instantaneously change one's physical appearance. While

convergence can also be seen through ways of dressing or speaking pattern, these factors were

not mentioned by participants.

Although, the way in which the participant reacted to the situation of being called a

"white Latina" would be an exemplification of divergence. The participant responded to the

situation by informing the other person that "there are plenty of Mexicans that are white." This

can be seen as divergence because the participant chose to continue to emphasize one of her

distinctions that was called out. While the participant did not purposely accentuate what made

her different, divergence is still applicable. She could have chosen to convergence with the other

person because of the complexion of her skin, but instead she deviated and remained proudly

dedicated to her mixed identity.

A dilemma mixed-heritage people encounter is identifying with multiple cultures but not

knowing the entirety of those cultures. A participant shared her struggle with trying to balance

her Indian/Fijian identity. She explained how she does not enjoy having to frequently go into a

history lesson about Indians being brought over to Fiji while simultaneously explaining that she

is Indian, yet she does not speak Hindi. This participant showcases divergence because while

explaining her experience with multiraciality, she does not exclude any of her identities.

Nearly all participants (nine out of 11) expressed their dislike towards being asked the

question, "What are you?" Participants felt that being asked this question made them feel like the

person asking them was trying to categorize them or place them in a box. A participant stated:

""What are you?" That's kind of a weird question to ask. It's like [the person is] trying to

categorize you as a human." One of the other participants echoed, "It's sort of like a heavy

loaded question, like you're trying to figure me out and you're trying to like put me into

whatever box or category that you think."

Other participants shared that this question made them feel tension towards their racial

identity, and that they were appalled they were being asked the question in the first place.

Feelings surrounding this topic also included being offended, shocked, and unwillingly pried

open.

A participant spoke about her encounter with the question, which aligns with a

convergent strategy. Her racial identity is comprised of Asian and Pacific Islander, yet when

faced with the question of "What are you?" she expresses more of her Asian identity. The

participant articulated, "When I've been answering that question, to say Indian makes it easier

and it's because of how our society has been socialized to think about [racial/ethnic] identities."
Contrary to the idea of convergence, this same participant also recognized that "[Categorization]
is not how the world works, things are complicated, and they cross over and it's great to have a
good understanding of who you are and all the identities that you hold."

There were two participants that did not mind being asked the question. One of the
participants enjoys being asked the question because she feels proud of who she is. She
explained that she would want to be asked how she racially/ethnically identifies rather than
having the person assume. A second participant also willingly shares his racial identity because
he believes being asked, "What are you?" comes from an innocent place of curiosity. Both of
these participates exemplify divergence as a strategy for answering the question. Instead of
feeling the pressure to conform to the societal standard of racial and ethnic categorization, they
use their mixed identities to stand out as unique individuals who can represent all of their
cultures.

Coping Strategies

Previous studies have identified several coping strategies used by mixed-heritage
individuals, including educating others, relying on support networks, embracing racial fluidity,
and avoiding confrontation (Museus et al., 2011). The current study found a multitude of
examples of these strategies being put into practice by participants.

Almost all of the participants (10 out of 11) had an outlet in which they were able to find
systems of support. Taking advantage of cultural resource centers, cultural student groups,
scholarships, and programs designed for students of color were all mentioned as ways that
participants felt safe, supported, and included on campus. These support networks also helped
participants learn to embrace and accept all parts of their racial identity. A participant felt very

appreciative towards one of the retention programs on campus– the program is designed for first

year and transfer, first-generation, low-income, Asian/Asian-American and Pacific Islander

students. She stated, "I feel like [this program] was a really great start for [my racial identity

development] because before [the program] I wasn't really thinking much about who I am." Two

of the participants expressed their gratitude for the few faculty members that provided safe

spaces for them to explore their multiracial identity. One of them shared that,

> Getting access to professors who really do support me, I think, was a really big
> thing, and professors who were really interested also, in learning more about
> Native Hawaiians. I think that's what gave me the excitement to sort of explore
> more of myself in college so far.

> Participants noted that educating others was a common coping strategy for them.

Teaching others about their cultures were a way for participants to diverge and serve as a

representative of their heritage. For example, a participant illustrated what it is like for him to

educate his peers about his Filipino/Irish background:

> People [know] I'm not some white guy…[I'm] like half and they can relate with
> me by being Caucasian, but then I feel like I can culture them in other ways that
> they're not used to.

> Divergence is also showcased through one of the participants, a Filipino/Native

Hawaiian/Portuguese student. She articulated that,

> So far, in college, I've really just taken up a lot of my Native Hawaiian-ness
> because no one really recognizes Native Hawaiians anyways, so I felt like it was
> my responsibility to take on that identity.

> A valid strategy of managing racial challenges is to avoid confrontation. Some

participants expressed that when they need to educate others, it can become an emotionally

draining task. One of the participants exhibited convergence through her statement: "I think

being with groups of people…it's a lot easier to identify as one thing and fit in than be multiple

things…there's a lot of pressure to be just one thing."

Avoiding the reality of having multiple racial identities and choosing one to predominantly identify with one culture is an example of convergence because as the participant noted, it is easier to fit in. One of the main concepts of convergence is doing what is necessary to make oneself more similar to others.

Another participant also mentioned avoidance as a strategy when it comes to his mixed-heritage identity: "The reason that I'm not really that into ethnic groups and clubs [is because] I'm just more into sports." While this does not display convergence nor divergence, the participant is opting not to pay much attention to his racial identities.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the racialized experiences of mixed-heritage students in higher education. Participants were able to recall incidents in college that related to their multiracial identity development, challenges they encountered, and coping strategies they implemented. Nine of out eleven participants expressed negative feelings or reactions when asked the question, "What are you?" Ten out of eleven participants relied on a support network to cope with the challenges they face as a mixed-heritage student. Support networks included cultural resource centers, cultural student groups, and encouraging faculty members.

The results from this study also highlighted the role of professors and how they can support mixed-heritage students. When equipped with the proper tools and resources, professors have the ability to design their courses in a way that allows multiracial students to explore their racial identities. These opportunities have the potential to be provided through projects, guest speakers, or connecting with campus partners. Through classroom engagement, mixed-heritage students are enabled and given the space to dissect the layers of their multiple cultural

backgrounds along with the other intersections of identity (e.g. gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc.).

Additionally, if professors incorporate current political events, it can be a seamless way to allow mixed-heritage students of color to express their identity and talk about relevant issues going on in the world. Regardless of what the focus of the course is, current events can always be applicable to students. "If experiences with racial prejudice and discrimination are such salient aspects of multiracial individuals' experiences, we believe it is important for postsecondary educators to acknowledge and help students manage them" (Museus et al., 2011, p. 21). This idea is discussed further within the "Implications for Practice" section below.

Many of the findings from this study aligns with previous literature and studies. Higher education has consistently been identified as an optimal setting for studying racial identity development (Gibbs, 1987; Nishimura & Bol, 1997; King, 2008; Kellogg & Liddell, 2012). Participants in this study expressed that college was a setting that encouraged them to learn more about their mixed background as well as understand how to embrace their multiracial identity. The results showed that racism and microaggressions were present in participants' lives. Participants also expressed that physical appearance and cultural knowledge were barriers they faced with their classmates or peers. Three of the four coping strategies (educating others, relying on support networks, and avoiding confrontation) were employed by participants. Results differed from previous research in two ways. First, experiencing colorblindness on campus was not mentioned by any of the participants. Second, the coping strategy of embracing racial fluidity was seldom mentioned. Overall, the results from this study were congruent with the previous literature and studies that were reviewed.

The concepts of convergence and divergence from Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) were used to analyze the "challenges" and "coping strategies" sections. It was difficult to apply convergence to the topics of racism, microaggressions, and physical appearance because individuals cannot immediately change their physical features. Divergence can be applied to situations involving racism, microaggressions, and physical appearance only if the person desires to carry on with pointing out their difference. This can be a sensitive situation because the individual essentially has to respond to a comment meant to belittle them. Furthermore, convergence and divergence were found very relevant to analyze the, "What are you?" section. Depending on how the participant felt about the question, their response either directly aligned with a convergent or divergent strategy. Participants showed that if they felt the need to provide a simple answer, they would converge to one of their racial identities. Conversely, the participants who liked being asked the question demonstrated divergence because they used the question as a way to display their multitude of racial identities. In relation to coping strategies, *educating others* aligns well with divergence. An element of divergence is that a person can choose to represent their backgrounds. Educating others about a culture is a prime example of how one can serve as a representative of that identity. Lastly, convergence was applied to the coping strategy of *avoiding confrontation.* One of the participants indicated that it was easier to fit in when she identified with one thing, which illustrated convergence. However, it is important to note that not all instances of avoiding confrontation aligns perfectly with convergence.

Implications for Practice

In addition to exploring racial identity development, challenges, and coping strategies utilized by multiracial students, this study sought to identify tangible ways that the university

could improve the environment for multiracial students. Many suggestions were given to better

the experience of mixed-heritage students at this school. The university claims diversity as a core

value, however; a participant questioned the university's commitment to diversity:

> I also figured out how much this whole "diversity" commitment that [the
> university] has, really doesn't know diversity. Again, that points back to the fact
> that we don't have people at the top representing people on the bottom.

Along with representation, participants stated that administrators and faculty members

should be equipped to have conversations about racial and ethnic topics such as the social

construction of race. One of the participants shared that professors should capitalize on the

opportunities they have in the classroom to have conversations about "[Remembering] that the

institution was not set up for P.O.C. [people of color] and multiethnic students." It was indicated

in the interviews that participants believe it would be useful for administrators, faculty, and staff

to have trainings or workshops about how to ensure mixed-heritage students feel included and

welcomed at the predominantly white university.

Additional suggestions included recommendations for the social atmosphere on campus.

A participant mentioned that there should be a club or student group for mixed-heritage students

to talk about similar experiences or events related to being multiracial or multiethnic. Awareness

events such as tabling or programs that will allow students to have the space they need to engage

in conversations about race and ethnicity were given as suggestions as well. In the event that

these recommendations were to be implemented, funding was another topic that participants

talked about. Adequate funding is needed in order to provide either a club on campus or

educational events and programming.

Limitations

There were two main limitations this study faced. The first limitation is that the study was done on one college campus therefore participants were not able to fully encapsulate the perspectives of all mixed-heritage students that attend college. The second limitation related to allowing participants to self-identify as multiracial or multiethnic for the interview. A few participants had a multinational identity, but not necessarily a multiracial identity. This brought into question redefining what constitutes a multiracial or multiethnic identity. Regardless of nationality, race, or ethnicity, the mixed-heritage population tends to have overlapped experiences.

Future Research

Due to one of the limitations of this study, future research could include a sample size that includes a diverse representation of higher education students. If researchers were to interview multiracial students at both two-year and four-year colleges along with private and public institutions, it could provide results that truly encapsulate the experiences of mixed-heritage students that are navigating higher education.

Future studies also have the potential to use the concepts of convergence and divergence to understand the motives as to why a person will converge or diverge their multiracial identity. Convergence and divergence were showcased within the current study, but it is unknown as to why a person either consciously or subconsciously made that decision. Specifically, convergence and divergence can be used to explore situational identity– the concept of switching between racial identities based on the context at the time. Situational identity is also comparable to the coping strategy of *embracing racial fluidity,* which was not seen in this study. Convergence could potentially be used to analyze how multiracial individuals navigate situational identity.

Researchers could additionally look at the similarities and differences of multinational, multiracial, and multiethnic identities. Many previous studies mentioned the importance of studying multiracial and multiethnic students in higher education. Multinational identities could be just as complex therefore incorporating this group within multiracial studies has the potential to flourish.

Conclusion

This study has provided insight about how to incorporate the concepts of *convergence* and *divergence* from Communication Accommodation Theory while studying mixed-heritage students in higher education. The study also acknowledges the need to explore the ways in which multinational identities can be included while studying multiracial and multiethnic students. Future mixed-heritage researchers must dive forward because the mixture of nationality, race, and ethnicity is irreversible– this growing population of students must be embraced rather than dismissed. It is necessary for higher education institutions to understand how they can move past the conventional and repressive monoracial paradigm. What students learn in college will not only stay in college; if mixed-heritage students are enabled to embody their racial identity, it will set them up for a lifetime of success. Ultimately, it is pivotal that we aim to refute the socially constructed narrative that has been built to oppress and erase the mixed-heritage community.

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Appendix A

Participant Backgrounds

Participant	Self-Described Heritage
Participant 1	Native Hawaiian/Filipino/Portuguese
Participant 2	Mexican/Japanese
Participant 3	Afro-Cuban/Mexican/European
Participant 4	European/Native American
Participant 5	Filipino/Japanese/Native Hawaiian/ Korean/Chinese/Portuguese/French/English/Spanish
Participant 6	Samoan/Japanese
Participant 7	Indian/Fijian
Participant 8	Filipino/Irish
Participant 9	Filipino/Korean/Black/White
Participant 10	Chinese/Vietnamese/Cambodian
Participant 11	Korean/American

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

1. How would you characterize your racial/ethnic identity?

2. Do you feel comfortable with your racial/ethnic identity? Explain why or why not.

3. Imagine someone approached you and asked, "what are you?" in regard to your race and ethnicity. How would that make you feel?

4. How, if at all, have you felt the pressure to identify with a single category of race?

5. Describe an experience you have had related to being multiracial or multiethnic that happened during your time here at this university.

   a. Follow up: What did this event mean to you? (Renn, 2000)

6. Can you describe a situation that caused you to feel tension regarding your multiracial identity during your college experience? (Townsend, et al., 2009)

7. Can you describe an incident that occurred in college that you believe has been critical in shaping your multiracial identity? (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012)

8. As a student at this university, how, if at all, is your multiracial identity being supported?

9. What can this university do, if anything, to help better their support of multiracial students?

Appendix C

Codebook

Code	Definition	Example
Convergence	"A strategy of adapting your communication behavior in such a way as to become more similar to another person" (Griffin et al., 2015, p. 393).	"I was just saying like I'm American, I'm mostly American, just to kind of fit in better with everyone else because I was the only Asian there."
Divergence	"A communication strategy of accentuating the differences between you and another person" (Griffin et al., 2015, p. 393).	"I can represent my culture because I know there's not many Samoan electrical engineers."
Racial Identity	The way in which a participant views their racial identity.	"I am half Samoan and half Japanese."
Racial Identity Development	The way in which an individual learns to express their racial identity.	"I felt that right when I started as a freshman, just being around so many different people and getting to know all these people from different backgrounds it made

		me a lot more curious [about] myself…I think that I just became more open as I came to college."
College Courses	Classes taken during college that helped the participant explore their racial identity.	"I went to college and studied race and social justice. I think that was sort of like the foundation of me getting more interested in racial issues and understanding the dynamic of this nation so that I could understand myself."
Political Climate	Political events that occurred since the participant began college.	"A lot of the times, on Korean news, it's them talking about the US and how the president is kind of making things worse, and then they blame Americans, and I like to think of myself as Korean and not a part of the problem."

Birthplace	The place in which a participant was born and raised.	"I think just being raised in Hawaiʻi, identity wasn't really that important, unless you were 100% white, then I think you would stick out. But culturally, I was raised to celebrate all my identities and I knew exactly how my identities came to America."
Racism	Prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one's own race is superior.	"And then [the professor] passed out like a name list…I think she was assigning groups or something…but she passed out a name list, and on my name, she wrote…Asian."
Microaggressions	"A form of everyday, systemic racism that upholds the status quo, specifically white supremacy" (Harris, 2017, p. 430).	"I'm just like, "I don't want to answer this question." Because one, it is people coming up to you and asking what you are because you know you look different, meaning…you're not white."

Physical Appearance	The physical features a person possess.	"I am majority Filipino and I'm very Filipino passing. There's not a lot of people who would think that I'm Native Hawaiian."
Cultural Knowledge	The education a person has about their multiple cultures and how they balance it based on situational context.	"I also didn't want to keep like validating to other people or keep voicing to other people like, "Hey, I'm Native Hawaiian" or "Hey, I have to speak my native tongue for you to realize that I am Native Hawaiian." That's like sort of the struggle that I have with my identities."
"What are you?"	Participant's response to being asked the question, "What are you?".	""What are you?" That's kind of a weird question to ask. It's like they try to categorize you as a human. Kind of like, "Are you really this part or that part?" Because if you can't put it in a box, it's like

		you can't really describe who you are."
Relying on Support Networks	A coping strategy; "cases in which students sought and constructed support networks for multiracial college students" (Museus et al., 2015, p. 338).	"Getting access to professors who really do support me, I think, was a really big thing, and professors who were really interested also, in learning more about Native Hawaiians. I think that's what gave me the excitement to sort of explore more of myself in college so far."
Educating Others	A coping strategy; "how mixed-race students directly respond to individuals by educating them about their racial backgrounds" (Museus et al., 2015, p. 338).	"People [know] I'm not some white guy…[I'm] like half and they can relate with me by being Caucasian, but then I feel like I can culture them in other ways that they're not used to."
Avoiding Confrontation	A coping strategy; "the ways in which mixed-race students minimized the salience of their experiences with	"The reason that I'm not really that into ethnic groups and clubs [is because] I'm just more into sports."

	prejudice and discrimination to lessen its effects" (Museus et al., 2015, p. 338).	
Suggestions	The ways in which the university could improve their support for mixed-heritage students.	"Maybe there should be some sort of club or organization that…supports multi-racial people by meeting, maybe like...once a month where they can just talk it out or talk about things or maybe certain events that kind of like promote being multi-racial and multi-ethnic."