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# A Phenomenological Study of Biracial Identity Development

Felicia T. Case

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF BIRACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Graduate Studies

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

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by

Felicia T. Case

May 2010

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**Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTERS THESIS

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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Felicia Thompkins Case

entitled

A Phenomenological study of Biracial Identity Development

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the  
Master of Arts degree

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## ABSTRACT

A “biracial baby boom” has taken place in America (Root, 1992). More than six million people chose to check more than one box on the 2000 census and according to Herman (2004), children and youth constituted forty-two percent of the American multiracial population. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of biracial college students in order to understand the specific issues related to their racial identity development. Nine biracial individuals participated in this phenomenological qualitative study. A variety of factors emerged (parental influence, social networks and appearance) as determinants to how these biracial individuals self-identified. Participants also reported the specific challenges and benefits to being biracial. These findings present implications for the formation of a biracial identity development theory. These findings also have implications for Student Development programming targeted toward biracial college students.

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*Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think,  
according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to  
all generations, forever and ever.*

*Amen.*

*Ephesians 3:20, 21*

(For my Daddy who would be the proudest of all)

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Rod Woodson, former defensive end for the Pittsburgh Steelers and 17 year veteran of the NFL, was recently inducted into the Football Hall of Fame. To be inducted into the Hall of Fame is to become immortal in the football world. The honor of the induction comes with the privilege to not only address a large crowd gathered in Canton, Ohio, but to also address all those watching by way of television. Here was Rod Woodson's opportunity to speak to the world. He surprised everyone by talking about what it was like to grow up as a biracial child. He told the crowd "I am a product of an interracial marriage and I grew up in the 60's and the 70's. He paused then and said, "Society wants you to choose who you are". He said that people were always asking him, "Are you Black? Are you White?" Then with a voice that was cracking with emotion he said, "To all you people in biracial (interracial) marriages out there. Tell your kids they do not have to choose which side they are on." To the children He said, "God made you what you are..... remember that."

### **History**

The number of interracial dating relationships and marriages in America is steadily on the rise. Since the 1967 land mark decision of Loving vs. Virginia where a black woman and her white husband were legally allowed to stay married, Americans of all racial backgrounds are tying the knot. Though there has been great progress, vestiges

of old racial prejudices still exist today. In 2009 an interracial couple was denied the right to be married by a Louisiana justice of the peace. Justice Keith Bardwell put his own opinions above the law when he denied a marriage license to a black man and a white woman because “both blacks and whites would reject their mixed race babies” (Belonsky, 2009). Fryer (2007) contends that marrying across racial lines, though it is increasing, is still a rare event, even today. Interracial marriages account for approximately one percent of white marriages, five percent of black marriages and fourteen percent of Asian marriages. Fryer is quick to point out that throughout history, interracial intimacy has been taboo and there may still be underreporting of interracial marriage. According to Fryer, these unions are important because interracial intimacy can be used as a benchmark for race relations.

Ultimately, Fryer (2007) asserts, social intimacy is a way of measuring whether or not a majority group views a minority group on equal footing. These interracial unions speak to the changes in race relations in America. These unions are also important because they have led to what has been dubbed the “biracial baby boom” (Root, 1992). In the 1970s approximately one percent of children were products of an interracial union (Rod Woodson and his siblings were a part of that one percent). By 2000 that number had grown to more than five percent (Herman, 2004). The year 2000 was the first year that individuals were allowed to check more than one box for their racial heritage on the US Census (Jones & Smith, 2001). When given the opportunity, more than six million chose to check more than one box. According to Herman (2004), children and youth constituted forty-two percent of the American multiracial population in 2000.

These biracial baby boomers are now coming of age and are becoming an ever increasing segment of American society (Suzuki-Crumly & Hyers, 2004). As a result they are also forcing us to confront the meaning of race and the social order predicated by it (Root, 1992). Like Rod Woodson, biracial or multiracial individuals are becoming more prominent in many areas of American society. They are garnishing accolades in the arts through Academy Award winners like Halle Berry who is Black and White. Unarguably the best known athlete in the world is Tiger Woods who is Black and Asian, and most notably the President of the United States, Barak Obama who is African and White.

What is important for this study is that biracial students are becoming more prevalent on college campuses. The 2000 census indicated that 42 percent of those individuals who checked more than one racial box were under the age of 18 (Jones & Smith, 2001). Biracial or multiracial students are a recent force in college and universities, though at present, there is no accurate account of multiracial students and no systems in place to deal with the new “check all that apply” option (Renn, 2000).

### **The Purpose of This Study**

Root (1992) claims that to name oneself is to validate one’s existence and declares visibility. This study desires to give a platform to the growing number of biracial and multiracial students allowing them a voice in the formulation of their own racial identity model and helping to declare their visibility in American society. This study seeks to add to the growing body of research that endeavors to help formulate a racial identity theory for biracial and multiracial individuals. For the purposes of this study,

biracial individuals are being defined as individuals having parents from more than one racial group (i.e. Black/White, Asian/Black, Hispanic/White).

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were used:

- Research question #1: What has been the life experience of this group of biracial students?
- Research question #2: What were the key factors in determining how have they formulated their racial identity?

As the parent of three biracial children, the researcher hopes that the results of this study will aid those who are invested in the lives of biracial and multiracial students and who are endeavoring to develop healthy and well adjusted individuals with a “healthy resolution of mixed race identity”(Root,1996).

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Identity Development**

It is widely understood that the college years are critical in an individual's identity development. Erickson (1963; 1968) contends that it is during these years that an individual's identity is shaped and defined. Because of all the change and growth that occurs in an individual between the ages of 18 and 22, college will naturally provide "crisis" opportunities for identity development and the development of competency (Chickering & Riesser, 1993). James Marcia (1966, 1976), whose identity theory builds off of Erickson's work, believed that "crises" or times of critical personal exploration are key to the growth process (Chickering & Riesser). The university setting is a green-house for personal exploration and growth. Growth, as Chickering and Riesser's theory points out, is determined by the students' ability to navigate the "crisis" or challenge. Chickering argued that educational environments exert powerful influences on an individual's development and saw the establishment of identity as *the* core developmental issue facing college age individuals. Identity according to Chickering and Riesser includes among other things, comfort with body and appearance, a sense of one's social

and cultural/racial heritage, a clear self concept and comfort with one's role and a secure sense of self in light of feedback from significant others.

It is clear that identity development begins early in an individual's life. But according to Tatum (1997) although racial identity development and exploration can begin as soon as junior high and high school, a large part of racial identity development happens during those crucial college years. As biracial and multiracial individuals enter higher education, colleges and university student affairs offices should be better equipped to help them navigate their racial identities as they matriculate.

### **Racial Identity Development**

Why is formulating a racial identity important? According to Poston (1990) racial identity development is important for several reasons. First, it helps shape individuals attitudes about themselves, attitudes about others in their racial/ethnic groups and individuals from other racial/ethnic groups and attitudes about individuals from the majority. Secondly, it dispels the cultural conformity myth that all individuals from a minority group are the same with the same attitudes and preferences. Poston goes on to assert that both of these issues lead to the idea that there are different levels of development and specific attitudes associated with these various levels.

### **Mono-racial Identity Development Theories**

There are a growing number of mono-racial identity development theories most of which follow a stage model of development. W. E. Cross Jr. (1971, 1991, 1995) developed and revised a model of development of Black consciousness in his Model of Psychological Nigrescence (Ponterotto, Casa, Suzuki & Alexander, 1995). This 5 stage model takes the individual from stage 1 Preencounter: viewing race as unimportant and

seeing all people as human beings, to stage 2 Encounter: where the individual has one or more racial encounters that force them to think about race in a new way. Stage 3 Immersion-Emersion: the individual immerses themselves in Black culture shunning other groups and begins to formulate a Black identity. Stage 4 Internalization: the individual begins to internalize their new Black identity while embracing outside groups as well. Lastly, stage 5 Internalization-Commitment: along with the new Black identity the individual develops a group identity with Black people that manifest itself in continuing involvement in the Black community.

Kim described Asian American Identity Development in 5 stages (Sue, 1998). The first stage, the Ethnic Awareness stage, begins between the ages of 3 and 4 when the individual is highly influenced by family. Stage 2, White Identification, begins when the child enters school and begins to encounter differentness that can negatively affect how they view themselves. Stage 3, the Awakening of Social Political Consciousness, the individual becomes conscious of oppression and oppressed groups and pulls away from White society. Stage 4, the redirection stage, leads the individual back to their Asian heritage with a renewed sense of pride and anger against White oppression. Lastly, stage 5, the incorporation stage, is where the individual develops a healthy Asian identity apart from identification with or against White society.

Helms (1993) developed a two phase White Identity Development Model that (phase one) moves white individuals away from racist attitudes and (phase two) towards a nonracist white identity (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998).

Ruiz (1990) developed a Chicano/Latino identity model derived from case studies with Chicano, Mexican Americans and other Latino college students (Delgado-Romero

2001). His 5 stage model that begins with stage 1 Causal: messages from the environment negate or denigrate Latino heritage. In Stage 2 Cognition: false belief systems are developed as a result of negative messages like: your group members are associated with poverty and assimilation is the only escape to the good life. In Stage 3 Consequence: the individual may begin to reject their heritage. Stage 4, Working Through: brings an increase in ethnic consciousness and ethnic identity and finally stage 5, Successful Resolution, results in an acceptance of self and their ethnic identity.

Although most of these theories have been refined and redeveloped over time, a growing body of research suggests that these and the host of other mono-racial identity theories fall short in defining a biracial and multiracial student's racial development (Brown 1995; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002; Suzuki-Crumly & Hyers, 2004; Renn, 2000; 2003).

### **Limitations of Mono-racial Identity Development Theories**

Poston (1990) points out the limitations in mono-racial models. First, they imply that individuals might choose one group's culture or values over another. Secondly, these models suggest that individuals might first reject their minority identity and culture and then the dominant culture. This is problematic for biracial individuals who may come from both of these groups (i.e. the minority culture and the dominant culture). Thirdly, these models do not allow for the integration of several group identities. As evidenced by the 2000 US Census, biracial and multiracial individuals are choosing in large numbers to identify with both or all of their racial backgrounds. It is clear that the identity development of mixed race college students, those students whose parents are from more

than one designated racial or ethnic category does not appear to follow the path outlined in the traditional models (Renn, 2003).

The limitations of these models also led to and bolstered the mischaracterization of biracial and multiracial individuals as confused and marginalized. Because biracial or multiracial individuals could not neatly fit into the prescribed models of identity, the term “tragic mulatto” was applied to biracial people because they were said to be destined to have social and emotional problems. Phinney and Alipuria (1996) refute this notion of the biracial or multiracial individual being confused and tragic. In their research, they found that there was no significant difference between the self esteem of multiracial and multiethnic college students and their mono-racial and mono-ethnic counterparts.

The growing need for a racial identity development model that suits biracial students is coupled with the desire of a growing number of biracial and multiracial individuals who want to be able to classify themselves as more than one race. As has already been noted, in the past, multiracial and biracial individuals have had little choice about their racial identity (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). In other words, to be more than one race is like “having your television both on and off at the same time – a metaphysical impossibility” (Nakashima, 2001). As Rod Woodson movingly stated, biracial individuals were forced to choose what side they were on. The “one drop rule” was applied to any one with the smallest percentage of African American parentage. The “one drop rule” was born out of the “one drop law” adopted by the state of Virginia in 1930 that defined a Black person as anyone with a drop of African blood (Buchstein 2000) Although no such written rule exists in the Latino and Asian community, if a biracial person had a parent who was a minority and shared their minority features,

chances are they too were considered an ethnic minority. Again the 2000 census gave individuals the chance to no longer be squeezed into one box. Fitting in to a mono-racial identity can no longer be the only option for the biracial and multiracial individual.

Williams (1999) asserts that in a world where socially constructed categories of race are misconstrued as biological, little encouragement is offered to people like her to claim an identity that falls outside prescribed frameworks. Williams speaks for the growing number of biracial individuals who do not fit neatly into any of the current racial boxes and who do not want to.

The desire to self-identify as more than one race may be due to the encouragement of their parents. There has been an increasing tendency for interracial households to acknowledge and support their children's dual heritage, encouraging their children to identify with both backgrounds (Suzuki-Crumly & Hyers, 2004). It seems the days of the "one drop" rule may be giving way to accommodate new parameters for defining biracial and multiracial individuals.

Further research on biracial and multiracial individuals has concluded that they are more likely to have a heightened awareness of race as a social construct leading them to realize that racial categories are arbitrarily subjective and ultimately meaningless in a biological sense (Shih, Bonam, Sanchez, & Peck, 2007). Because biracial and multiracial individuals are the product of two or more races, they understand intrinsically that race is constructed with no real biological basis in fact.

Today biracial and multiracial college students are asserting the right to self definition and to be recognized by their entire ethnic and racial heritage. There is a proliferation of national organizations like Mavin: The Mixed Heritage Experience that

was started by Matt Kelly, a biracial college student, which caters to the needs of multiracial families and individuals (Kelly, 2010). Although a number of biracial and multiracial college students are involved in mono-racial student groups there are multiracial campus student groups and other organizations being formed by biracial and multiracial students on campuses all over the United States. Williams (1999) contends that there is no one correct identification for mixed race people - "it is the person herself or himself who gets to name his or her experience."

### **Biracial Identity Development Theories: Toward A New Model**

Early work by Poston (1990) on biracial identity development characterized biracial development as stage based much like mono racial development. Though theorists have attempted to develop stage models to describe biracial identity development, there is no clear consensus about which model best accounts for the variations in experience among this population (Tatum, 1997). When Dr. Beverly Tatum, child psychologist and educator, is speaking on racial identity development she is often asked, "What about the biracial identity development process for biracial children?" She admits it is a hard question to answer quickly because there are so many variables to consider.

Root's (1996) *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as a Significant Frontier in Race Relations* was ground breaking work in multiracial identity development. In it she introduced a nonlinear model of biracial development. Root proposed a theory of identity formation that does not depend on an orderly progression through developmental stages but rather relies on individual's ability to be comfortable with self-definition across and/or in between categories. In Root's model of healthy

identity development, biracial individuals remedy their biracial status through one of four “border crossings”. She identifies these border crossings as (1) having both feet in both racial groups and being able to hold multiple racial perspectives simultaneously; (2) situational ethnicity and race, or consciously shifting ones racial identification in different settings; (3) a decision to sit on the border of each racial group, claiming a multiracial reference point; (4) and creating a home base in one racial identity and making forays into others (Root).

A growing body of research confirms Root’s assertions, pointing to the need to for further development of a much needed biracial identity development model (Renn, 2000, 2003; Rockquemore & Brunisma, 2001,2002). Current researchers have found that Root’s assessments were correct in that biracial and multiracial students identify themselves in a variety of ways and that there are multiple variables that contribute to how and why they classify themselves in these ways (Renn, 2003). Rockquemore and Burnsma (2002) have documented the fact that biracial individuals choose from among four different identity options: singular, border, protean and transcendent. Biracial and multiracial individuals will identify themselves as mono-racial(singular), biracial(border), and interchange the two distinctions(protean) or opt out of them all and choose to be above racial categories(transcendent). These different ways of self -identifying would be considered healthy resolutions for mixed race identity by Root (1996).

There is a notably different model of multiracial identity development that does not progress through stages. Wijeyesinghe (2001, as sighted by Cooper, Howard-Hamilton,Torres) designed a factor model of multiracial identity (FMMI) attributing eight factors that influence a multiracial person’s choice of racial identity. The eight

factors are (1) racial ancestry, (2) cultural attachment, (3) early experience and socialization, (4) political awareness and orientation, (5) spirituality, other (6) social identities, (7) social and historic context, and (8) physical appearance. Wijeyesinghe's FMMI cafeteria style model allows for a number of factors and varying degrees of involvement of those factors in the formation of biracial identity development.

Current research confirms Root's (1996) and Tatum's (1997) and Wijeyesinghe's (2001) assertions that there are a number of variables or factors that contribute to how these individuals would choose to self identify. Phenotype or physical appearance may influence the racial choice that one most strongly identifies (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 2001; Khanna, 2004). How an individual looks may determine his/her choice of racial category. If a biracial individual looks Hispanic her/she may choose to identify that way. Social class and the racial composition of social networks have also been proven to influence how biracial and multiracial individuals self-identify (Brunsma, 2005). The racial group that dominated the social make up of the biracial individual can affect the way in which the biracial person self identifies. The complexity of biracial development appears to necessitate a new model.

In summary, research has clearly shown that identity development is a significant issue facing college students and the development of a healthy racial identity is a part of that process. There are a substantial number of mono-racial identity theories that sufficiently define the development of racial identity for mono-racial individuals. But current research has shown that these mono-racial identity theories fall short in defining a biracial and multiracial student's racial development.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative phenomenological study of biracial and multiracial individuals. The phenomenological approach was utilized to identify the “essence” of human experience described by the participants in the study (Creswell, 2003). The overall aim of the study was to explore the lived experiences of these biracial and multiracial individuals and the specific issues related to their racial identity development. The researcher sought to explore the lived experience of biracial and multiracial individuals in order to discover the factors that impact their racial identity development.

#### **Participants**

Ten biracial individuals were recruited for this study from a small private Christian liberal arts institution located in the Midwest. Eight were undergraduate students. One was a current graduate student and the other was a recent Master’s graduate employed by the university. The university has a population of approximately 1900 students from 44 states and 31 countries. 55% of the student population is female and 45% is male. 12% of the population is ethnically/racially diverse: 8% American ethnic and 4% are international. The university is residential and though it has limited graduate

programs it is primarily undergraduate focused and prides itself on its commitment to “whole-person education”.

Number of participants: Class Rank, Gender, Racial Makeup

Class Rank	<u>Gender</u>		<u>Racial Makeup</u>		<u>Totals</u>
	Male	Black/White	Asian/ White	Hispanic /White	
Freshmen	1	0	1	0	1
Sophomores	0	0	0	0	0
Juniors	2	1	2	2	5
Seniors	0	2	2	0	2
Graduate Students	1	0	0	1	2
Totals	4	3	4	3	10

Participants will be referred to as A/W1, A/W2, A/W3, H/W1, H/W2, H/W3, B/W1, B/W2, and B/W3. A signifies Asian, W signifies White, H signifies Hispanic and B signifies Black. These significations allow for participant anonymity while maintaining an awareness of their racial make-up. (One of the student’s findings was removed from the study after it was later discovered that the student was not biracial.)

### **Procedure and Protocol**

Snow ball sampling was employed to recruit participants for this study. The researcher recruited from the pool of biracial and multiracial American ethnic students at the small private liberal arts institution where she is a graduate student. Because of her established relationship with the American ethnic students on campus, the Director of American Ethnic Student programs was enlisted to help recruit students. Students were also solicited via email. (See Appendix A)

Pilot interviews were conducted with two biracial individuals who are alumni of the university. These interviews allowed the researcher to gauge responses to the planned interview questions and refine them as necessary. Because the interview questions did not change and because of the richness of the data produced from the pilot interviews, the decision was made to include the pilot interview data in the study. Eight biracial undergraduate students were then recruited and interviewed for up to an hour giving the student's ample time to tell their stories. (See Appendix B)

### **The Role of the Researcher**

The researcher acknowledges that being a graduate assistant for the office of American Ethnic Student Programs at the studied institution has given her an association with some of the study participants. Although the researcher was aware of some of the participants prior to the study, she did not become familiar with their life stories until the study took place. The researcher is currently in an inter-racial marriage and is raising three biracial children and recognizes that her marriage and role as the mother of three biracial children could potentially bring an emotional attachment to this study that others may not experience. The researcher acknowledges this attachment as a perceived limitation but also considers her insider status as a means to establish a level of trust and comfort to those who participated in the study. The researcher contends that her association with the office of American Ethnic Student Programs, her interracial marital status and her parenting of biracial children was not a limitation but rather served to create a safe space for the participants to share their stories.

### **Data Analysis**

The ten interviews were conducted and recorded with the permission of the participants. The researcher then paid to have the recordings transcribed. The transcriptions were given back to the participants to read and ensure their accuracy. The transcriptions were then read by the researcher while listening to the recordings of the interviews. The researcher read through each transcript generating a list of significant phrases, and quotations. The transcriptions were then coded. The coding process involved sorting the data into “chunks” or categories to help generate specific themes (Creswell, 2003). Member checking was then employed by collecting the data and themes generated by the interview questions and e-mailing them back to the participants to ensure accuracy in the findings. The researcher also enlisted two others to review the themes. These themes were then interpreted into findings that are presented here.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

The results section includes the answers to the interview questions and the themes generated from those questions. Some of the questions were combined because of the way in which the participants answered them. The interview questions will serve as an organizational guide for presenting the data, allowing the participants to “speak for themselves” (Wolcott, 1994). The additional themes that were produced during the interviews will be presented after the interview questions data. These themes emerged throughout the interviews and were not in direct response to a specific question.

#### **Interview Questions and Additional Themes**

##### **Interview Questions**

##### **What were your parents’ attitudes towards race while you were growing up?**

All of the participants acknowledged that their parents’ had a profound influence on their lives. There was, however, a wide variation in the way the participants’ parents handled the issue of race. Some of the parents were very race conscience while others did not mention race at all. Some participants measured their parents’ race consciousness, by the breadth of experiences that they exposed them too. Others admitted that though their parents did not talk about race they understood inherently that it was important.

Five of the students commented that their parents were actively involved in exposing them to difference and/or encouraged them to explore racial issues. A/W3’s comments typify this practice: “My parents took us everywhere that they could....they

just wanted to expose us to stuff. I have parents who definitely care about exposing their children to different things.”

B/W1 commented on her parent’s encouragement to work through racial issues on her own this way:

[My parents] kind of taught us – like even though you are a mixture of things - you kind of can’t be against one or the other because you are one or the other. You’re both of them and like, I guess they kind of let us figure it out on our own because we never had problems.

Three of the students said that when they were growing up the subject of race was hardly ever broached by their parents. They noted that they did not recall their parents ever explicitly talking to them about race or about being biracial. B/W2 explained, “I don’t remember them ever pulling things out and making that distinction, it was more like me noticing things and like me asking questions.”

One student lamented the fact that her parents had denied them and their sibling their racial and cultural birthright, because their parents not only did not talk about race, they neglected to tell them that they were not just White. Their parents had not made them aware of their racial and ethnic heritage until they were in their teens. H/W1 recalled:

My dad was willing to support my mom’s denial of her culture. My mom identifies more with White culture than with [Puerto Rican]...and because my dad supported her not wanting to really share our culture my brother and I kind of discovered it on our own.

Although there was a wide variation in the way that the participants' parents handled the issue of race, their parents' perceptions of race and culture had an influence on how they viewed themselves.

**Was where you grew up an ethnically or racially diverse place?**

The participants grew up in a variety of settings that led to a multiplicity of social networks and influences on their lives. The environments in which they grew up ranged from the very diverse to completely homogeneous. Some participants had lived in both diverse and homogeneous settings in the course of their childhood. Two of them noted that they grew up in urban settings, and they mentioned the diversity of their social networks. Both of them voiced the influence these environments had on them. B/W1 said:

We were in an inner city environment anyway, that's where I lived so like we are surrounded by Black people, White people, Hispanic people, just like the mix so we have never had issues of accepting people or discriminating against people.

H/W2 grew up in Miami and described its diversity and its influence this way, "[there were] African American, Hispanic and Whites. It's like, there is more tension there, but it is more cosmopolitan area so it's more accepting."

Two others grew up in environments that were not ethnically diverse. They described their environments as predominantly White. The homogeneity of their social network had a profound influence on how they viewed themselves. B/W3 remembered the following:

I was pretty much raised to think I'm White. That kind of sounds bad but I'm not from an ethnically diverse area. My grandma used to get funny looks when she would walk around town with me. I was pretty much the only person that wasn't 100 % White until I was about twelve.

Most notably five of the nine participants mentioned that they had moved when they were growing up. H/W3 had moved five times. The moves are worthy of mention because in some cases they took the participants from a very diverse setting to a much more homogeneous one, thus changing their social networks and in some cases changing the way they viewed themselves. Two of the participants noted the moves from diverse environments to homogeneous ones. A/W1 recalled:

We moved around a lot ...one of the places we lived was Maryland...It was very diverse racially and so there I was one of the White kids...When we moved to Michigan...there everybody was White. I went from being one of the White kids to being a Chinese kid.

A/W2 experienced a significant move as well. His move marked recognition of his racial identity in a way that he had not experienced before. He remembered, "I moved from Mississippi [and my Korean Church family] to Texas. Almost all of [the Texans] were Caucasian and I think that's the point where I really started to feel it."

Two of the participants were missionary kids who moved in and out of very different racial and cultural climates. These two mentioned their missionary kid status as adding to the "otherness" that they sometimes felt. H/W3 relayed, "I don't know really

where I am from. That's one of the hardest questions for me to answer when people ask."H/W2 recounted her moves and their impact on her life this way:

I was four and a half when we moved to Quito, Ecuador...I [later] grew up in Chicago...[it felt like] I did not fit in anywhere...I did not feel comfortable with the White kids I did not feel comfortable with the dark kids.

The environments in which the participants grew up were important because they determined their social networks. Some experienced diverse social networks while others grew up in homogeneous environments. The participants noted that their social networks were influential because they impacted who they were and how they perceived themselves.

**What is your first race conscious memory?**

**When were you conscious of being biracial?**

Two of the students couldn't recall a race-related memory, but the majority of them could recount an event from their childhoods that made race and culture salient to them. Three of them had specific memories during and around third grade. B/W 3 remembered without offense being called the "brown girl" on the playground.

Two others recalled incidents from the third grade that were not very positive. Both incidents were racially charged and left a lasting impression on them. A/W1 recounted his memory this way:

It was 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and there were some Black girls making fun of my friend because he was not a very good basketball player. They were making fun

of him saying ‘White kid can’t jump.’ I said ‘Black girl can’t read’ and started a little fight. So [it was] not a very positive memory.

Two others mentioned race related memories from an earlier time but couldn’t pin point the exact age of the occurrences. A/W2 fondly and simply stated, “I remember eating Kimchee hamburgers. I feel like that describes my childhood.” B/W2’s memory made her recognize that as a Black person she was different, “My first realization was when I was 4 or 5, just by like watching TV and stuff. Like all the moms that I saw were White.” H/W2 recalled a memory mixed with race and language. He remembered talking to his father having to sort through what his Hispanic name was and how others said it. (This participant allowed the use of his name.)

I don’t know how old I was but ...just my name ...I’ve been called George often...and people would read my name on paper and it was Jorge and I was like which one is it ..And he’s [my dad] like well your name is Jorge, but George is your nickname.

Although many of the participants could point to an early race conscious memory, none of them could pin point a time when they became aware of their being biracial. For the most part they described it as something that they just innately understood. One student reflected, “It wasn’t like an epiphany moment.” Another concurred saying, “It just seemed like a gradual realization.” Unlike their initial encounters with race which were stark, the realization of their biracial status emerged seamlessly.

**How do you self-identify racially and why?**

**Are there circumstances in which you change how you identify racially?**

**Have you ever been asked to choose between your different racial groups?**

All of the participants were cognizant of their biracial status or they would not have participated in the study. Still, there were a variety of ways that they lived out their biracial identities. Though there was variation in their responses to the question of how they self-identified none, of them indicated that circumstances changed how they identified. It was also true that none of the participants could recall a time when they were asked to choose between their different racial groups

Four of the participants found themselves committed to a biracial identity. They were the product of two worlds and wanted to be viewed that way. H/W2 noted, “I always feel connected to both.” There was one participant who although he acknowledged his biracial parentage, his lived experience was predominantly in a White cultural context. This made him feel White.

A/W1 shared, “I would say racially, I’m biracial [but] I don’t really identify with being Asian because culturally in our family it wasn’t like that.”

Another student who identifies as biracial communicated the perplexity they felt and at times they did not fully identify with either race. A/W2 articulated the complexity of their identity this way, “I feel like I am transcending something, like I have never felt completely Asian or completely Caucasian. I always feel somewhere in between”.

The responses from the three participants who were racially Black and White were noteworthy because they were all different. Each identified themselves differently and had different reasons to explain why. One student identified themselves as Black, the other as biracial and the third as White. These comments exemplify their views on their racial identities. B/W1 said, “This is tricky because I say that I’m mixed because I am but culturally I definitely say that I am Black.” By contrast B/W2 responded:

My little cousin, we would hang out and she would say you are Black and I would get really upset because I am like no, I am mixed, I'm biracial...you're negating a whole half of me. I would very much correct them.

And lastly B/W3 communicated that, "I would identify myself more as White than as Black just because I was raised in a White community."

The participants also said that within their families there was variation in the way that they self identified. B/W1 claimed that she and her three siblings would self-identify differently. One sibling would choose to identify with White culture, she would identify with Black culture, and her third sibling was adamant about identifying with both. This variety in racial and cultural identification was evidenced in the families of four of the other participants as well. The participants attributed these variations to a number of factors. A/W1 noted that her sibling identified as Asian because of the scholarship money available to them if they did. Others noted that their sibling looked more ethnic than they did or that they just felt more comfortable with the ethnic minority side of the family. Others pointed to the more dominant role that the minority parent played in the life of a sibling or in theirs. B/W1 stated, "I'm just a little momma's girl (her mother being Black) so I think that's just kind of understood [that I would identify with her].H/W2 mentioned his sister's connection to his mother based on gender, "My sister needed a strong motherly role model...so she's gravitated to that side."

Though, all of the participants in this study are biracial, it is clear they self-identify in a variety of ways and have a variety of lived experiences as biracial people.

**What are the challenges/benefits to being biracial?**

The participants found that the benefits and challenges to being biracial were really two different sides of the same coin. Most stated that there was much to be gained by growing up in two different cultures. Seeing daily that different races and ethnicities can coexist and even thrive together greatly enriches one's life. All but one was able to articulate this benefit. However, it was also pointed out that melding of these two worlds was at times isolating and confusing, because it was a challenge to figure out who they were.

### **What are the benefits to being biracial?**

Eight of the participants mentioned the benefits of experiencing two different cultures. They see racial and cultural interaction on a daily basis. This has benefited them in helping to understand people who are different, and it has expanded their capacity to embrace others. H/W2 asserted that "there are benefits to having all those experiences," and A/W commented "I really appreciate both sides." Because of the experience of melding two races, the students found themselves acting as a 'bridge' or 'ambassador' for racial and ethnic harmony. They saw themselves as the important link between their two worlds. They did not see this role as a burden. They saw it as a natural outpouring of who they were. B/W1 said "I guess I bridge a gap in a sense and kind of shed light on things." They believed that they were able to do this because they could relate to people in both situations. This benefit came with built in challenges.

### **What are the challenges to being biracial?**

On the other hand these same students said that they have struggled with the duality of their lives. The struggle of successfully blending their two worlds was a very real challenge. A/W2 stated, "I will never completely be part of either world." And H/W2

noted, “You get misunderstandings on both sides.” H/W1 communicated the challenge this way, “I am struggling blending the two. I want to be accepted by both cultures and not feel like because I am one I can’t be the other.”

From the challenge of blending the two worlds emerged the challenge of trying to find a place to “fit” in. At times it was difficult for some of the participants to find a place within themselves and without that would encompass all of who they were. A/W2 shared, “I just felt very different from everybody. [Wondering] does anybody really understand me?” It was difficult for the participants at times to remedy this issue. B/W2 conveyed it in this way, “I wondered what it would feel like if I was on the other side and not in the middle. It is cool to be different, but it is a bit isolating.”

For some of the participants in the study the place to “fit in” was found in other biracial people. A/W2 mentioned the name of another participant in the study as someone with whom he would talk about biracial issues. He said, “[biracial individuals] are the only people I can relate to 100%.” The participants’ siblings also became sounding boards for them because they were all in the same boat. There was a sense of biracial solidarity. H/W1 shared, “I love meeting other biracial people. It is like an instant connection.”

The participants in this study found that the challenges and benefits to being biracial were inextricably tied to each other. The duality of their parentage brought them both a depth and wealth of experiences coupled with the challenge of figuring out who they are as they blend their worlds.

**Are you involved with any racial or ethnic groups on campus?**

The participants' involvement with the racial and ethnic groups on campus was as varied as the students themselves. But they had very clear reasons for their involvement. Three were very involved, with one even taking on major leadership positions. Three others were minimally involved, sporadically attending campus wide cultural events and doing so mostly because it was a requirement of a scholarship. The final three opted out of any involvement at all.

Those participants who were very involved found the groups were meeting their needs. B/W1 said she was really involved, and the ethnic student programming met her needs because "of the way she identified." Those who opted out of involvement with the ethnic or racial groups on campus did so because they did not really understand what the purpose was or saw them as being too limiting. A/W1 noted that, "It kind of scared me to think, well there's this group on campus that is celebrating this race thing, and I didn't really understand." And B/W2 opted out saying, "I don't want to be categorized."

Ethnic student programming is provided for the participants at the studied institution. There are however, varying levels of interest and involvement on the part of the participants.

### **Additional Themes**

These themes were not generated from a specific interview question but emerged throughout the interview process.

#### **"Fake Asian."**

Five of the participants mentioned their inability to speak the language of their culture/ethnicity as a determinant for how they identified themselves. While some only mentioned language in passing others wondered whether being half Asian or half

Hispanic and not speaking the language disqualified them from really being Asian or Hispanic. These participants also mentioned that they felt as if they were somehow cheating in their minority status. A/W1 recalled, “There was a big Asian population...and so my parents only spoke English, and so I’m a White kid. It was a language thing.” H/W2 mentioned language as well. He noted, “I’m not fluent in Spanish...You know that is a big cultural identification. It kept me from feeling completely part of the Hispanic culture.”

Three participants noted this feeling of not being completely ethnic as they moved in and out of predominantly White settings. But they were also aware of this feeling when they were in predominantly Asian or Hispanic settings. A/W1 recalled, “Around Whites, I’m the Asian kid [but when] I’m around international students, I’m a fake Asian.” A/W2 communicated it this way, “It feels like cheating...my existence feels like cheating. I feel like I am transcending something.” H/W1 echoed these sentiments when she said, “I can chameleon into any situation...it feels manipulative.”

For five of the participants their ability or inability to speak the language of their ethnic heritage had bearing on how they identified themselves. For them, their mastery of the language help determined how they would racially identify.

### **Appearance.**

Many of the participants mentioned their skin color or their overall appearance as an indicator of how they identified themselves and how others identified them. It was mentioned repeatedly that biracial people aren’t easily placed into categories. A/W3 student said, “Because they can’t figure out who you are, they do not know where to

place you.” No matter what the racial makeup of the participant, the general consensus was that they were most often mistaken for being Hispanic. B/W3 commented that in the summer when she was very tan, “People thought I was Latino.” B/W1 said about her appearance, “I look ethnic just not Black and White. I look like I am Hispanic.” And A/W 3 recalled, “Sometimes we’re (my brother and I) are mistaken for being Hispanic.”

Others mentioned their appearance out of frustration at not being recognized as an ethnic minority. A/W1 commented, “Most people don’t think that I’m Asian.” Two others expressed their frustration this way: B/W1 said, “I am not as dark as normal [biracial people], a majority of mixed people have the darker skin tone and a little coarser hair. I guess I am trying to compensate for not looking it.” And H/W1 dismayed, “I hate looking White. [My brother] looks Puerto Rican. I want darker skin. I want to be acknowledged as being Latino.”

Another participant mentioned their appearance as a way of identifying with a particular parent. A/W1 stated, “We look like my mom’s side of the family.” There was the question among the participants as to whether or not the gender of the parent of color had any bearing on how the participants viewed themselves. B/W1 noted that she, “still took after my mother’s race because I was closer to her [even though I don’t look Black].” By contrast another participant noted with sadness that because of how she looked she was not easily associated with her mother who was White. A/W3 shared, “The fact that I don’t look like my mom and that people don’t put us together, it is not hurtful, it just made me sad.”

The study showed that appearance has an effect on how the participants viewed themselves. How others perceive them based on their appearance also had an influence on how the students self-identified.

### **God/Faith.**

Four students mentioned their faith in God during the course of the interviews. Though their faith in God was not always mentioned as a specific determining factor in how they self-identified, it was mentioned as a factor in determining how they came to be biracial. Many of the students mentioned God and how He personally directed their lives. He is also mentioned as the match-maker when recounting stories of how their parents met. God (or Jesus) was also a unifying agent in their lives and/or enabled them to deal with society in a more gracious way. B/W2 claimed that, “For whatever reason God made me mixed, so I am going to embrace it.” And A/W1 found much of his identity grounded in his faith. He said, “I find my identity in Christ and in being a Christian first, citizen of the US [second], whatever my racial identity is third.”

A/W3 mentioned how her faith helps her to bridge her dual heritages when she commented, “The great equalizer is Jesus.” And lastly, B/W3 mentioned her faith as a means to deal with how she deals with others. She shared:

I think [Jesus] has to do with how I respond to how I identify. I wouldn't say that [He effects] the actual act of having identity or choosing which identity I feel. [He effects] whether I can be racist or whether I'm going to show the love of Christ.

Although a faith in God was mentioned by the participants as having influence on their lives it did not appear to be a strong determinant in how they self-identified racially.

**Having children.**

Two of the older participants were recently graduated. They had been thinking a lot about issues of identity in relation to how they were raising their own children. Each agreed to do the study because they thought it was “interesting” and because as A/W1 said “there are still issues or things that I am trying to work out myself.” They each had one child, and both mentioned wanting to understand their own identities in order to impart the right things to their children. A/W1 stated:

And so I think having him [his son] has brought this renewed interest in it.

You know I think... how we raise him...he is growing up and he is about twenty-five percent Asian, what do we tell him about that.

H/W1 had communicated regret in how her parents dealt with her ‘biracialness’ and wanted to be sure she did not follow in their footsteps:

My son at school they had him checked as a white male....He is twenty-five percent Puerto Rican..I don’t want to be like my mom. I don’t want to deny him his heritage. Um, I want him to understand and know.

Although only two of the participants mentioned how having children is affecting how they think about racial issues, the researcher found it noteworthy because they were the only two participants with children.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

This section will discuss the data and themes that emerged from the interviews in answer to the research questions. The two research questions driving this study were:

- What has been the experience of this group of biracial students?
- What were the key factors in determining how they formulate their racial identity?

Identity development is a significant issue facing college students, and developing healthy racial identity is a significant part of that process. The participants of this study are currently steeped in that process.

#### **Biracial Identity Choice**

Though all the participants in this study have identified themselves as biracial, their lived experiences as biracial people are not all the same. Root (1996), Rockquomore and Brunsma (2005) and Renn (2003) asserted that biracial individuals will self identify in four possible ways. It has been hypothesized that biracial individuals will identify themselves as mono-racial, biracial, interchange mono-racial and biracial identities, or opt out of racial categories altogether. This study's results were in keeping with current researchers findings. The participants identified themselves in two of the four ways presented by Root (1996). Two of the participants, although they acknowledge their biracial parentage, chose a mono-racial identification, strongly identifying with the racial

and cultural identity of their ethnic/racial parent. Two other students opted for a mono-racial identification but chose to identify as White. The remaining participants identified themselves as biracial. Not only did this group of biracial individuals self identify in differing ways, but some of them claim that their siblings would identify differently from themselves. Root (1996) speaks to this different way of identifying within families in her *Bill of Rights of Mixed People*. She notes that siblings can have different experiences and different goals and purposes that guide and shape their experiences of themselves in the world. Root's findings were evident in this group of biracial students.

Root (1992) also specifically stressed the importance of the power to name oneself for biracial individuals to come to a "healthy resolution" in their self-identification. According to Root, it was important that the individual name themselves and be comfortable with their self choice. While it is clear that most of the participants in this study are still processing their identity development, it should be noted that they are exercising the power to name their own racial identities. The "one drop" rule of biracial designation was not being enforced in the lives of this group of biracial individuals. This researcher recognizes this ability to name oneself as empowering and asserts that it is a step forward in the formation of their identity development. While it was true that the participants in this study were able to name their own racial identities they did so while being influenced by a number of factors.

### **Factors influencing biracial identity development**

There are a number of researchers (Renn 2003, 2004; Rockquomore & Brunisma 2002, 2005; Root1996; Tatum 1997; Wijeyesinghe 2001) who found that there are many factors that contribute to the formulation of a biracial identity. Renn (2008) points out,

“although there is no consensus regarding what the factors are, there is enough evidence to suggest that personal and social/environmental elements combine to influence biracial identity.” The participants of this study did not emphasize all the same factors cited by Wijeyesinghe (2001) and others but they did mention the following as determinants in their identity development process.

### **Parental influence**

All of the participants in the study mentioned their parents as strong influences on their lives. The participants cited their parents as being responsible for imparting culture to them, exposing them to a variety experiences and shaping the way they viewed race. Brunsmas (2005) longitudinal study on mixed race children notes the power of the parent to influence racial identity development. The two parents who participated in the study are currently grappling with how they will deal with racial issues with their sons. Those participants whose parents either talked about race and/or gave them a diversity of experiences claimed a mono-racial ethnic identity or a biracial one. By contrast those students whose parents did not talk about race either struggled to integrate their racial/ethnic minority status or opted out of their racial/minority status and lived a White identity. This study evidences that having race-conscious parents may help individuals talk about and process race earlier, allowing race to become salient at a much earlier age. Tatum (1996) points out the difficulty that many adults have with issues of race and concurs with Root (1992) who noted that race is sometimes avoided as a topic because parents do not know how to talk about it. Root (1992) also found that some parents of biracial children assume their ability

to transcend racial barriers affords certain racial protections of their offspring. This assumption dismisses parents from talking about race with their children.

The participants in this study whose parents talked about race with their children and/or exposed them to a diversity of experiences were more able to integrate their ethnic minority status into their racial identification. These findings have implications for how parents raise biracial children and, as we will discuss later, where they raise them.

### **The gender/race connection in parenting**

Four of the participants mentioned the connection between racial identity and the gender of the ethnic minority parent. A/W1 in particular wondered how his biracial sister viewed her femininity in light of their White mother. He wondered this as he contemplated his own masculinity in light of his Asian father. Another participant noted her strong association with her ethnic identity because it is her mother who is the person of color, and she is a “momma’s girl. Some work has been done on the combination of race and gender. Work by Khanna (2004) showed that Asian mothers play a substantial role in their child’s ethnic socialization while others cited the father as the dominant determinant. Like Khannas’ (2004) findings this study highlights the need for a better understanding of how gender and race connect and what the influence of same gender parenting or opposite gender parenting has on biracial identity development.

### **Environmental/social network influence**

Parental influence was found to have a strong effect on these participants and closely tied to it is social networks. It was stated by some of the participants that their parents were race conscience and that they were also conscience of the diversity of the

environments in which they lived. The work of Brunsma (2005) and Wijeyesinghe (2001) found that social networks or social context can have a formidable effect on biracial identity development holds true for this study. This study shows that the combination of these two environmental influences led some in this group of biracial individuals to integrate their minority status into their identities.

All of the participants stated the influence of their environments on their lives. They mentioned the communities that they grew up in, especially those who had moved. Two of the participants, H/W2 and B/W1 noted the diversity of their environments and its effects on their racial identity formation. It should be noted that these two biracial students live mono-racial identities. Three other participants talk about the predominantly White environments that they grew up in and how they influenced their racial identity formation. All three mention the homogenously White environments as determinants in their choices to identify racially as White or as causing them to examine themselves as racial minorities. B/W3 was adamant that her predominantly White environment was the greatest determinant for why she identifies as a mono-racially White person, even though her appearance evidences her ethnic heritage.

Understanding the role of social networks in the life of a biracial person has implications for how they self-identify, it also has implications for where they or their parents choose to live. Field (1996) contends that “communities of color” may have something to offer biracial individuals that White communities do not. Greene (as cited by Field, 1996) contends that these communities can offer their knowledge of racism and the survival skills needed to deal with it. Field (1996) goes on to assert that these communities offer “standards of beauty, emotional expressiveness, interpersonal

distance, a degree of extraversion and comfort with physical intimacy that is often quite different from the White norm”(p.225). Simply put, communities of color socialize differently than White communities do. The experience of these participants bears evidence to this fact, and these findings have implications for interracial couples/parents of biracial children as they consider where they will raise these children. As stated earlier social networks are only one of the factors that influenced these participants. This study found that appearance was also a determinant in how they self-identified.

### **Appearance as an influence**

Brunsma and Rockquemore (2005) and Khanna (2004) found appearance to be a dominant factor in biracial identity formation. Brunsma and Rockquemore asserted, “Appearances present our identities to others and allow us to infer the identities of others” (p.30). In this study it became clear that how a student looked and how others perceived their appearance affected the students’ self-identification. But it was also clear that the appearance factor was not the dominant factor. B/W1 adamantly self-identified as a Black woman in spite of her racial ambiguity. B/W3, who definitely looked like an ethnic minority, identified as White in spite of her appearance. And H/W1 who appeared to be and was admittedly constantly mistaken as White, identified as biracial.

Brunsma and Rockquemore (2005) noted, “appearances help define a situation and provide some cognitive context for all the individuals involved” (p.30). Though most of the participants who identified as biracial did so because of their obvious ethnic appearance; it was also true that these same participants sometimes appeared racially ambiguous to others. This study shows that biracial individuals must at times grapple with the incongruence between what others see and how they perceive themselves.

Appearance is clearly a determinant in how biracial individuals self-identify, however, its influence is tempered by other factors.

### **The God factor**

The influence of a faith in God was mentioned by five of the participants.

Wijeyesinghe (2001) does mention spirituality as one of the eight factors in determining biracial development. The participants talked about God in the context of many areas of their lives. They talked about God and His providence in the meeting of their parents and/or how they decided to attend the studied university. God was also mentioned as a unifying agent in their lives.

Only two students said they found their identity in their faith in Christ, and another that they accepted their biracial identity because it was providentially ordained. Still another mentioned her faith as empowering her to respond graciously to society in general. Because of the lack of strong evidence pointing to spirituality and its effect, this researcher suggests further study be done to examine spirituality and its effect on racial identity development.

This study confirms previous research (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 2002,2005; Renn, 2003, 2004; Root , 1996; Tatum, 1997; Wijeyesinghe, 2001) that biracial identity development is influenced by a combination of factors including: parental influence, social networks, appearance and, to a lesser extent, spirituality. Wijeyesinghe's (2001) factor model of multiracial identity (FFMI) is evidenced in this study in that it encompasses the factors mentioned by the participants and allows for the interplay of those factors in varying degrees of involvement. The researcher concedes that there is not enough evidence here to solely purport a factor model but there is enough to suggest its

part in the process of biracial identity formation. This study proves that the process is at times difficult and confusing.

### **The “tragic mulatto” revisited**

In the past, biracial individuals were called “Tragic Mulatto” because they were said to be confused about who they were. Although this group of biracial individuals should not be classified as tragically confused, they did display levels of ambivalence about who they are. While they all extolled the benefits of being from two worlds, all of the participants also communicated the complexities of blending their two worlds and the challenge of reconciling their dual heritage. This researcher asserts that this aspect of biracial identity development does not need to be classified as tragic or confusing, but should be noted as a developmental stage of biracial identity formation. Every mono-racial identity development theory has a stage in which the person of color experiences some kind of dissonance about their racial or ethnic heritage (Cross 1995; Kim 1981; Ruiz 1990; Helms 1993). This dissonance is necessary to help people of color process racial issues and find a racial resolve. This dissonance also seems to be evident in the lives of this group of biracial individuals. As noted earlier, Wijeyasinghe’s (2001) FMMI and other factor models help us understand the many variables that influence the identity development of biracial individuals, and these are important. But, this researcher contends and this study evidences that the further development of a stage model of biracial identity development may bring insight into how and when those factors are processed. This researcher asserts that the process is important.

The biracial experience is not monolithic. This study’s findings emphasize the need to understand the importance of the individual story of each of these participants.

While it is important that we develop theories to help biracial individuals make meaning of their experience, it is imperative that student development professionals know their stories in order to validate and help them navigate their biracial identity development.

### **Campus involvement/programming for biracial students**

Understanding how biracial college students process their racial identities is crucial for those in higher education. The participants in this study had varying involvement in student development programming targeted toward students of color that were offered at the studied institution. Those students who identified strongly with a mono-racial-ethnic identity attended the activities targeted toward their particular racial groups on campus. Those students who chose a biracial identity sporadically attended the programming offered on campus. Some only did so because it was a requirement of the scholarships that they were receiving. Other students opted out of any participation. The solutions for how to program for these students will be as multifaceted as they are. Lierste (2010) asserts that the complexity of biracial individuals will make programming toward these students very challenging because the Race-Oriented Student Services (ROSS) that currently exist on college campuses were not designed with them in mind. Lierste (2010) notes that ROSS were developed in the 60's and were targeted toward individuals who were solely Native American, African American/Black, Latino or Asian. This continues to be true today. Higher Education is in need of a new paradigm of ROSS that encompasses biracial and multiracial individuals.

In light of these findings, this researcher contends that Student Development professionals should consider programming through students rather than at students for the time being. Wijeyesinghe (2001) asserts that dealing with multiracial individuals

requires an understanding of the personal choices individuals have made about their own racial identification. This approach is a fluid and complicated programming solution, but the establishment of a biracial identity is fluid as well. In their article *Multiracial Student Services Come of Age*, Buckner and Wong (2000) did note that the problem with this approach is that when you program through a specific group of students and those students graduate, the programming ends. But it should also be noted that the program was beneficial to those students who participated in it while they were matriculating. Renn (2000) cited the importance of providing a safe space for the identity development of students. Biracial students are in need of a safe space to process their unique identity. As Literte (2010) has recently documented through her work *Revising Race: How Biracial Students are Changing and Challenging Student Services*, higher education and more specifically Student Development professionals should begin to think of more fluid, dynamic and progressive programming so that its current initiatives don't become "relics of the past."

While some biracial student's needs are being met by these groups and should continue to be allowed to do so, we must look at how we can meet the needs of the spectrum of biracial individuals. Higher education is really only beginning to understand the complexities of programming for multiracial students. Buckner and Wong (2008) believe that higher education is in the beginning stages of a movement toward multiracial programming. However, they have concluded that "based on the number of existing programs and the newness of the underlying theoretical constructs, it is difficult to determine a set of best practices for multicultural services at this time (Buckner & Wong, 2008)."

### **Implications for Future Research**

This qualitative study contributes to the needed qualitative work that seeks to understand the lived experience of biracial individuals in order to help them navigate their unique experience. This study adds to the growing body of research on biracial identity formation but there is much more to explore.

This study confirmed that there were a number of factors that influence how biracial individuals self-identify. Spirituality did not emerge as a strong determinant in racial identity development but was cited by five of the participants as influential to their lives. The five participants talked about God in the context of many areas of their lives but only two mentioned God in relationship to their identity development. As mentioned earlier, Wijeyesinghe (2001) does note spirituality in the Factor Model of Multiracial Identity (FMMI) as one of the eight determinants in biracial development. In light of this, this researcher suggests further study be done to examine spirituality, its role in the lives of biracial individuals and its effect on racial identity development.

The gender of the participants was clearly identified but the impact of gender on the racial identities was not explicitly explored in this study. The connection between gender and race was questioned by four of the participants. Participants noted the gender of parents having an impact on how they self-identified but the influence of their own gender was not highlighted. One student wondered how his ideals of “maleness” were shaped by his Asian father. It has been noted earlier that work by Khanna (2004) showed that Asian mothers play a substantial role in their child’s ethnic socialization while other researchers cited the father as the dominant determinant. Further research is needed to understand the influence of same gender parenting or opposite gender parenting on

biracial identity development and for a better understanding of how gender and race connect in identity formation.

Lastly, this research was conducted to determine factors related to biracial identity development. The results are in keeping with previous research that determined a number of significant factors related to biracial identity development (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 2002; Khanna, 2004; Tatum, 1997; Wijeyeyesinghe, 2001). It has also been noted that there are a number of mono-racial identity theories that progress through the stage model (Cross, 1971; Kim, 1981; Helm, 1993; Ruiz, 1990). While it is true that biracial individuals have a unique identity development process, the participants in this study still had to grapple with their ethnic minority status in light of a majority White context. Realizing that identity development is a process, this researcher contends and that further research be done that seeks to develop a stage model of biracial identity development. This stage model could both identify the key factors that influence biracial identity as well as explain how biracial individuals process those factors.

### **Limitations**

Creswell (2003) notes the limitations imbedded in qualitative research when relying upon interviews to produce data. While all the participants were given equal time to share their stories, some did so with more depth of insight and articulation. This is noted as a limitation but is also to be expected in light of the varying ages and maturity levels of the participants.

The number of participants in the study is a limitation. There were many more biracial students on campus who were solicited for the study. But they chose not to

participate. A larger pool of students would have been beneficial in providing a broader perspective and for solidifying the findings.

The racial makeup of the students who participated was also a limitation. All of the participant's racial makeup included one parent who was White. There were no students whose racial makeup was a combination of two racial or ethnic minorities. As a result it would be hard to apply these findings to biracial individuals whose racial background does not include White parentage.

The gender of the participants was clearly identified but the impact of gender was not explicitly explored in this study. This was clearly a limitation and also an issue for further study.

Wolcott (1994) noted that because it takes a human observer to conduct qualitative research, the possibility of providing "pure" description does not exist. Every researcher brings a measure of personal bias to the study. As noted earlier the researcher is currently in an inter-racial marriage and is raising three biracial children. These distinctions could lend a certain level of emotional attachment to the study. The researcher acknowledges this attachment as a perceived limitation. The researcher attempted to eliminate her bias through member checking and by soliciting two outside observers to review the process and themes generated from the data. The researcher contends that her assistantship with the office of American Ethnic Student Programs, her interracial marital status and her parenting of biracial children may have also benefitted the study by creating a safe space for the participants to share their stories.

## Summary

The population of biracial and multiracial individuals is on the rise. The number of biracial individuals that responded in the 2000 Census was nearly seven million (Jones & Smith, 2001) and the 2010 census promises to be higher due to expected population growth and a more accepting racial climate created by the election of this country's first biracial president. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of this group of biracial individuals and identify the key factors in determining how they develop their biracial identity. The nine biracial students who chose to share their stories and experiences have enriched our understanding of this complex issue. The result was that this study confirmed previous research (Renn 2003; Rockquomore & Brunnsma 2002; Root1996) that concluded that biracial individuals self identified in four distinct ways (mono-racial, biracial, interchanging the two and opting out of racial categories all together). This study also confirms that there are a number of factors: appearance, social environment and parental influence, which, combined in a variety of ways, influence how biracial individuals self identify. This researcher contends that knowing the factors that influence biracial identity development is only half the story. This study evidences the need for further research to determine if a stage model could better explain how biracial individuals process those factors. These findings have implications for how biracial individuals formulate their identities and for student development professionals who seek to help biracial students navigate their identity development as they matriculate. Herman (2004) recorded that children and youth constituted forty-two percent of the American multiracial population in 2000. According to Lierte (2010) these individuals are forcing higher education to reevaluate Race Oriented Student-Services (ROSS) and their abilities

to meet the needs of this growing population. In lieu of “best practice” and because Wijeyesinghe (2001) found that assisting biracial individuals requires an understanding of the personal choices they have made about their own racial identification, this researcher contends that ROSS should be fluid, programming through current students and their needs.

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*Appendix A*  
*Request to Participate*

Name,

Hello, my name is Felicia Case and I am a graduate student here at [institution name] in the Masters in Higher Education program. I am also a graduate assistant for the office of American Ethnic Student Programs.

I am writing to ask you to consider taking part in a research study I am conducting with biracial college students. This study seeks to explore the issues of biracial identity development and I would appreciate input and insight from your experience as a biracial college student.

I will be conducting one hour long interviews, giving you ample time to tell your story. I know your time is valuable so I will conduct these interviews at your convenience.

Please respond to this email before [designated date] if you are willing to participate and let me know what times would work best for you.

I will be happy to answer any questions you might have concerning the study and want you to be confident that your input in this study will be confidential.

Thank you for your consideration.

*Appendix B*  
*Interview Protocol*

General questions: name, major, year and why you chose to attend this university.

Why did you agree to do this study?

What is your racial background? Mother \_\_\_\_\_

Father \_\_\_\_\_

Are your parents still married?

If your parents are no longer married, which one do you live with?

What were your parent's attitudes towards race while you were growing up?

Was where you grew up an ethnically or racially diverse place?

What is your first race conscious memory?

When were you conscious of being biracial?

Have you ever been asked to choose between your different racial groups?

How do you self identify and why?

Are there circumstances in which you change how you identify racially?

What, if any, are the challenges to being biracial?

What, if any, are the benefits to being biracial?

Are you involved with any racial or ethnic groups on campus?

What do you want others to know about being biracial?

*Appendix C*  
*Informed Consent*

This research study is being conducted to better understand the experiences of biracial and multiracial college students. One on one forty five minutes to one hour interviews will be conducted on 8 to 12 students like yourself. You will be asked various questions pertaining to your experience as a biracial/multiracial individual.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty. All answers will be kept confidential.

Our interview will be audio recorded for transcription purposes. You will be given a copy of the transcription to confirm what you have said. The recording will then be destroyed. Transcribed data will be stored in safe location.

There are minimal perceived ill effects from participating in this study. If, however, you should experience any feelings of anxiety, the Taylor University counseling services are available. Appointments can be made through Patty Stigers (765.998.5360).

\*\*\*\*\*

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in this research project. The study has been thoroughly explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Principle Investigator's Signature  
Felicia Case, Graduate Student  
Email: felicia\_case@taylor.edu

\_\_\_\_\_  
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