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## Giving Voice to the Voiceless

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Giving Voice to the Voiceless

Victoria L. Palmer

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April 27, 2018

A project based on independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Social Work

### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of matriculated, full time college students from a medium-sized Catholic, Liberal Arts College in the Northeast who identify as multi-racial or multi-ethnic, specifically identifying as coming from a white and non-white mixed background. In the ever-changing political climate in the United States, those who identify as mixed white and non-white backgrounds feel conflicted in how they ethnically or racially identify. Emerging adulthood (ages 18-25), and college experiences, are important years for identity development. This study tells the untold narratives of mixed non-white and white multi-racial, multi-ethnic individuals.

### Giving Voice to the Voiceless

Numerous quantitative research studies have been conducted on the multiethnic, multiracial, multicultural identity development of emerging adults. However, the research suggests a lack of qualitative research studies that delve into the narratives of those within our country that are of mixed backgrounds. To give an all-encompassing perspective of the identity development of those who have multiple cultural backgrounds, one must understand the shared experiences of individuals experiencing the ever-changing demographic changes in the United States (US Census Bureau Public Information Office, 2016). Sica, Sestito, & Ragozini (2014) propose college-aged students hit the most important point in their identity development through feeling accepted into their ethnic, or cultural, group. In the current political climate, post President Donald Trump election of 2016, the country is in a state of conflict in regard to topics such as race and ethnicity, and this can be conflicting for the ever-present population of mixed race individuals in our country. This paper will look into what affects college students' multiethnic, multiracial, multicultural identity development, and what are some of the best ways to assist in helping strengthen their identity development.

### Literature Review

#### Identity Development

**Psychosocial stages of development.** Erik Erikson created his theory of identity development based on the psychodynamic theory of Sigmund Freud but had a greater emphasis on the impact of society and the social aspects of development, ultimately introducing the concept of psychosocial development. Erikson studied prominent figures such as Martin Luther, Mahatma Gandhi, and Thomas Jefferson and was interested in their identity crises while also dealing with national identity crises at the time of their fame. Based on these studies, Erikson

found that one cannot simply separate their individual identity development with the contemporary crises that might be taking place in a historical context within one's own society because these two aspects help define each other (Erikson's Theory of Identity Development, n.d., 43).

Erikson believed there are aspects of identity development that undeniably differ from culture to culture, but there are common themes that can be seen cross-culturally such as the idea that a strong and healthy personal identity in adulthood, one must receive positive feedback for achievements and accomplishments throughout childhood (Erikson's Theory of Identity Development, n.d., 43). During the stage of identity vs. identity confusion, Erikson recognizes that one's identity formation has the danger of developing role diffusion, "which may result in alienation and a sense of isolation and confusion (Erikson's Theory of Identity Development, n.d., p. 51)." This feeling of alienation or isolation can be felt in a process that is referred to as psychosocial reciprocity because the adolescent has a need for peer group recognition and almost "compulsive peer group involvement" (Erikson's Theory of Identity Development, n.d., p. 52).

Erikson acknowledges that each stage is never completely resolved and individuals are constantly working on the stages of development, but they are labeled as such during the ages in which specific conflicts are the most prominent. Erikson's Theory of Identity Development states that identity crisis is most pronounced during adolescence, which is why the stage is labeled as such, but identity issues occur throughout life. An example that is provided in the book in which identity crisis is reoccurring after the stage of identity vs. identity confusion is when "major role changes occur, such as when college freshmen leave home and have to make their own decisions, often for the first time (Erikson's Theory of Identity Development, n.d., p. 46)." Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, a research professor of Psychology at Clark University in Worcester,

Massachusetts, challenged Erikson's theory that the peak of identity development ends at age 20. Arnett believed that our changing society has elongated the stage of identity vs. identity confusion and created the new supported theory of Emerging Adulthood (Panagakis, 2016; Sica, Sestito, & Ragozini, 2014; Schwartz et al., 2013; Schwartz et al., 2007).

**Emerging adulthood.** Jeffrey Arnett defines emerging adulthood as the stage in between adolescence and adulthood. The reason Arnett wanted to create this new stage was because of his observation of the trends of people getting first married and having their first child at later ages in life. Arnett wrote how the 2010 US Census stated the median age for one's first marriage was 28 for men and 26 for women, whereas in 1950 those ages were 22 and 20, respectively (Panagakis, 2016). The reason for this delay in life milestones, that Arnett later discovered, was that individuals were seeking higher education before starting a family, which ultimately delays the transition from adolescence to adulthood. This age of emerging adulthood can create some major identity confusion because people are still discovering who they are, and who they want to become, in their professional and individual lives. This stage is also conflicting in regard to identity development because individuals no longer see themselves as children, as they have much more independence than they once had at home, but they do not yet see themselves as adults either. Schwartz, among other authors, agrees that the majority of identity development in modern, industrialized societies takes place during the stage of emerging adulthood rather than during adolescence, but critics have disagreed that emerging adulthood is just an economic phenomenon and not a developmental phenomenon (Schwartz et al., 2007). While some critics may believe this stage to be nothing more than an economic phenomenon, it is well supported that this new theory of emerging adulthood is quite possibly the new understanding of individual identity conflict within college-aged students.

**Identity theory and social identity theory.** By understanding the stages of identity development in college-aged students, it is also important to understand the importance of identity development as a social phenomenon. Identity theory can be aligned with social identity theory in various ways. It is acknowledged in both identity theory and social identity theory that individuals are reflexive and can view themselves as objects to be categorized, classified, or named in relation to other social categories or classifications through processes of self-categorization, in social identity theory, or identification, in identity theory (Stets & Burke, 2003, p. 224). Humans are innately social beings who compare themselves to others and are either accepted or not accepted by individuals within specific groups. Stets and Burke (2003) explain that individuals are accepted into these categorized groups, they find a sense of belonging and a way to identify in line with others around that individual. They continue to describe identity theory, in which people take on roles based on expectations of others and categorize themselves into groups that they identify with based on their role they take on. The emphasis and importance of each of these theories is that one can identify with a group, but as long as they are accepted by that group, they may not completely develop a sense of identity or self-worth. Stets and Burke (2003) make the important point that “individuals may categorize themselves in particular ways (in a group or a role) not only to fulfill the need to feel valuable and worthy (the self-esteem motive) but also to feel competent and effective (the self-efficacy motive) (p. 233).” By finding social groups that individuals identify with, they wind up developing a part of how they identify as an individual.

**Exploration and commitment.** This process of investigation into one’s own identity is a process called exploration, a concept originally coined by James Marcia. Marcia describes exploration as “degree to which adolescents search for different alternatives with respect to their

goals, values and convictions before making commitments (Marcia, 1966).” Tying together the concept of exploration, identity theory, and social identity theory, this process of exploration would be the beginning stages of seeking out the social groups in which an individual identifies, the interests that help the individual make decisions, and finding a group that accepts them and gives them a sense of self-worth. When the individual feels they have found the way in which they personally self-identify, Marcia calls this commitment. Commitment is described as the degree to which adolescents made choices about important issues relevant to identity (i.e., commitment making) (Marcia, 1966).” Upon entering college, individuals may find many different social groups that form based on majors, interests, or even cultures. These social groups can be a prominent factor in one's decision making and identity development. Over the years of college, individuals can feel a sense of confusion and conflict when having to decide how they want to identify socially and professionally. The impact of commitment and decision making on college-aged students can ultimately determine the healthiness, or unhealthiness, of their identity development.

**Identity development as applied to college-aged students.** The first years of college can be daunting for individuals who are just starting to identify major changes and decisions they are making in their lives. Sica, Sestito, and Ragozini (2014) created a research study that examined the effects of identity coping in the first years of university students. The results of this study, in line with previous research studies conducted on college students, showed that “identity commitments plus identifying with these commitments (commitment making and identification with commitment) for young adults mean feeling integrated in a community that recognizes them as adults (Sica, Sestito, and Ragozini, 2014, p. 167-168).” This implies that individuals would overcome identity confusion, but also that they are accepted by other social groups as “adults”.



The findings in this study also showed negative correlations between identity distress and sense of adulthood. This means researchers found that college students in this study who had a better sense of adulthood had a lower sense of identity distress, and vice versa (Sica, Sestito, and Ragozini, 2014, p. 168).

### **Ethnic Identity Development**

Ethnic identity development is the way in which individuals seek out their own identity in specific regard to their ethnic or cultural backgrounds. The experience of ethnic identity development differs for all, especially when each individual is unique in their own race, ethnicities, and cultures. With this said, the racial and ethnic composition of the United States is becoming more diverse. The 2010 Census of Population and Housing conducted a study that showed interracial or interethnic households have grown by 28 percent over the decade from 7 percent in 2000 to 10 percent in 2010 (US Census Bureau Public Information Office, 2016). Accordingly, individuals are carrying backgrounds of white and nonwhite races and ethnicities. This specific ethnic identity development has been identified to carry a certain inner conflict due to evidence showing that white identity development includes that of privilege, whereas non-white racial and ethnic identity development includes oppression (Wakefield & Belanger, 2006). Tying in social identity theory with ethnic identity development, it is important for individuals to feel accepted into the social groups in which they feel they identify. Research has proven that part of the exploration process of ethnic group membership for most minorities includes identifying the feelings and meaning of membership in an oppressed and marginalized group (Wakefield & Belanger, 2006). However, if individuals have a background carrying white identity development privilege and non-white racial and ethnic identity development of oppression, these individuals might have feelings of confusion or a lack of acceptance within

these ethnic social groups. A primary factor of inclusion to the social group is the way these individuals define their experience of oppression and marginalization, but multiracial and/or multiethnic individuals might experience oppression as well as privilege.

**The role of ethnic identity and self-construal in well-being.** Worldwide, agreements have been made that ethnic identity development are related to conceptions of well-being. A study conducted in Italy contributed to this idea by finding that ethnic identity development was not only related to Western conceptions of well-being (i.e. psychological well-being), but also Eastern conceptions of well-being (Sugimura et al., 2016, p. 369).

**Ethnic identity development in multiethnic college students.** Ethnic identity issues are significantly more apparent during the college years than other years in one's life (Schwartz et al., 2013). Due to this evident impact during this stage of life, research studies have urged the importance of college student samples for testing associations between ethnic identity and psychosocial outcomes (Schwartz et. al, 2013; Yap et al., 2014, p. 444). The experience of college student multiethnic identity development can also vary depending on the diversity of race, ethnicities, and cultures experienced within the institution to which one belongs. Research has found that the importance of belongingness, attachment, and pride to one's ethnic identity development may be more important to non-white college students attending predominantly white institutions (Yap et al., 2014; Castillo et al., 2006).

**Impact of Family.** The literature on multiethnic identity development has supported the importance of interactions between immediate and extended family members in helping shape individuals' identities (Jourdan, 2006). Participants in the same study described family members as either supportive or unsupportive of ethnic identity, and this identification was vital to the way in which individuals identified perceived success in their own identity development. Participants

who described their family members as unsupportive identified more difficulties feeling comfortable with their ethnic identity around their peers and adjusting to the college environment than did participants who described their family members as supportive of their ethnic identity (Jourdan, 2006, p. 332).

### **Importance of Storytelling/Narrative Interviewing**

**Spaces of non-acceptance in regard to narratives.** Spaces that students feel safe and accepted are proven to be the most effective for individuals to open up about narratives regarding their own life or personal identity. Stacey Hawkins and Kate Ducak created a method in which individuals shared narratives in an unstructured narrative interview with one participant, and had participants share what they visually pictured as a “safe space” and was turned into a painting (Hawkins & Ducak, 2017). The one participant in the study described how the social interactions within the space dictated whether or not she felt the space was a space of acceptance. She also described how the physical features of the space limited the feelings of connectivity with persons (and therefore feelings of acceptance) (Hawkins & Ducak, 2017, p. 92). The environment and the physical features of the room can often times affect the feeling of safety and acceptance that an individual may need to share a personal narrative regarding identity.

**Construction of self through storytelling.** A recent study was introduced to conduct research on how individuals construct their narrative of selfhood. Authors in the research study created a compilation of conversations in which participants tell their stories regarding their “construction of selfhood” (Sermijn, Devlieger, & Loots, 2008, p. 3). It was discovered that people tell “untamed stories” in “fragments of memories, feelings, events, and ideas” (Sermijn, Devlieger, & Loots, 2008, p. 3). We typically view stories in the Western culture as having a beginning, a middle, and an end. However, this is not always the case when people tell stories. In

listening to personal narratives regarding identity development, it is essential to understand that individuals may not tell their personal narratives in a typical idea of a “structured” story. Arthur Bochner, from the University of South Florida, found the purpose of self-narratives is to “extract meaning from experiences, rather than to depict experience exactly as it was lived... we narrate to make sense of experience over the course of time (Bochner, 2010, p. 270).” In listening to people’s narratives, this research study will begin to identify ways in which people have coped from multiethnic, multiracial identity development diffusion and conflict, and have found ways in which they identify in their mixed backgrounds.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of the current study is to explore matriculated, full-time students studying at a medium-sized Catholic, Liberal Arts College in the Northeast who are within the ages of emerging adulthood (18-25 years old) who identify as multiethnic, multiracial, and multicultural. As underscored in the research, identity development in mixed race and mixed ethnic individuals can be affected by environmental factors such as acceptance into an ethnic or racial group of friends and family (Jourdan, 2006; Marcia, 1996; Stets & Burke, 2003; Schwartz et. al, 2013; Sica, Sestito, and Ragozini, 2014; Wakefield & Belanger, 2006; Yap et al., 2014), or acceptance within one’s overall society which is considered to be a large social group (Erikson, n.d.; Panagakis, 2016). This study will begin to ask questions of sampled college students to see how their mixed background identity development was affected by their environment both at the college and in the ever-changing political climate in the United States. This study will ask these students what they perceive as possible impacts that affected their identity commitment, identity confusion, or identity diffusion.

The college from which the population sample is being taken is a predominantly white

institution that has had its fair share of dilemmas with diversity within the past few years. It has been observed that this dynamic has affected the students that attend this college and might have affected the students who are multiethnic, multiracial, or multicultural. It would be in the best interest of the college and its student body, as well as the Social Work Department, to understand how students from these backgrounds experienced identity development through the years of conflict regarding diversity on campus, as well as during the time of what some might call the most polarizing elections of this generation. The researcher in this study hypothesizes there will be differences in narratives of students collected in the sample of this study, but overall apparent similarities will be found and discussed in the research findings. There is also an assumption that there will be an apparent impact on these multiethnic, multiracial, multicultural student's identity development based on the events that have taken place within the past few years after the presidential election of 2016. Finally, it is assumed that there will be a positive relationship between familial support and multiethnic, multiracial, multicultural identity development in the results of this study.

## **Methodology**

### **Specification of Population/Sampling or Recruiting**

This study attempted to introduce a descriptive, qualitative research study design regarding the multiethnic, multiracial identity development experience within the United States, which has been identified as a gap in research studies. The participants accepted in this study were matriculated, full time college students from a medium-sized Catholic, Liberal Arts college in the Northeast. They were required to be in their second, third, or fourth year at this institution. These students identified as multiracial, multiethnic, or multicultural, specifically as having had a white and non-white mixed background. The researcher in this study identified the differences

in identity development with those who have white and non-white mixed backgrounds, as opposed to those who have entirely non-white mixed backgrounds. Participants were recruited using a combination of convenience and purposive sampling methods. This researcher recruited participants from her previous knowledge of individual backgrounds. From this group, the researcher asked participants if they knew of someone who would fit the study's purpose. There were five students who participated in this qualitative research study.

### **Specification of Data Gathering**

Participants in this study were individually interviewed in person at a single point in time, a cross-sectional research study, for approximately 20-30 minutes. The researcher in this study recorded the interviews of each of these students using an app called "Audio Memos" to assure the accurate depiction of each students' story within the study. These recordings were solely accessible to the researcher conducting the interviews and were kept in a locked cabinet. The researcher created a structured series of questions that were left to the interpretation of each individual to be answered. If participants decided to answer a question and tell their own narrative regarding their multiethnic, multiracial, multicultural experience, the structured interview did not confine the individual to answering only the questions within the interview. The researcher provided a safe space for the interviews, so the participants can freely tell their story. These interviews were conducted in a community room, a porch room with comfortable couch seating and enough light to create for a comfortable environment. The room was reserved for the time of the interviews so that the interviews will not be interrupted. Students were asked to share how they feel their family support or social group support has affected their identity development.

### **Specification of Data Analysis**

Recorded interviews of participants were transcribed once each interview was concluded. Once the information was gathered, this researcher immersed herself in the transcriptions and interview notes and analyzed the data for content and commonalities. This researcher identified themes and subthemes recognized in the narratives provided by the participants of this study. These categories allowed the researcher to describe specific commonalities of college-aged students that are most commonly experienced. Once the findings were compiled, this researcher shared the findings with the participants of the study as a member check. A member check enhanced the validity of this study that might have been lost in the researcher's personal interpretation of the subjective experiences of the participants within the study.

### **Findings**

The researcher in this study conducted five in-person, audio recorded interviews utilizing semi-structured questions regarding personal experiences and perceptions. Participants identified as multi-racial, multi-ethnic, or multi-cultural with a white and non-white mixed background. The topics of the questions in the interviews included: the individual's experience of ethnic/racial identity development, familial impact on their development, and a socio-political experience of their identity development. These questions were created to help guide a conversation regarding the individual's personal narrative on their own identity development in our current socio-political climate as a college student.

The participants in this study all identified as having one white parent and one non-white parent. Participants identified as being Vietnamese and Italian, Chinese and Irish-Italian-French Canadian, Guatemalan and Portuguese, Argentinian and Irish, and Costa Rican and Irish American. Participants were asked to report their birth place during the interviews. Of the five participants, four participants were born in the New England area of the United States, and one

participant was born in Argentina, reporting dual citizenship in both the United States and Argentina. None of the participants in this study identified as having an African American or African mixed background. Participants reported their ages as being nineteen, twenty-one, and twenty-two years old; collecting findings from one, second year college student and four, fourth year college students. The study was predominantly female, with one male and four female participants in the study.

### **Appearance as Related to Multiethnic, Multiracial Identity**

After gathering demographic information from participants, the researcher began by asking if the participants identify as multi-ethnic or multi-racial. While all participants in this study identify as having a non-white and white mixed background, those who perceived themselves as having a fair or light skin tone only reported feeling “allowed” to identify as multi-ethnic. Many participants appeared to rely on the researcher to make the decision of if they are multiethnic or multiracial, because those who appear more “white” felt they could not identify as multiracial. Whereas those who perceived themselves as having a darker complexion reported as identifying as multiracial and multiethnic. One participant reported he identifies as multiracial or multiethnic depending on the given situation. This participant stated, “I often feel I’m double dipping, so it depends on the scenario.” Another participant reported that she felt she could not identify as multiracial because she has not been maltreated due to her skin tone, while other members of her family that appear darker in skin tone have had those experiences. This participant continued to state:

*“I recognize the differences that brings to someone. My mom is much darker skinned than I am and so is my brother. And it’s interesting hearing their experiences being Latino compared to my dad’s because he’s also very white, super Irish. And it’s just difficult sometimes to separate because on the outside I’m one thing, and on the inside I’m something else. But I still reap the benefits of what I am on the outside to people. So I guess that’s the best way to say I feel white on the outside because that’s what people see,*



*and not something I can change. And inside is what I've grown up with and more of my culture, and more of what I would say my history is. But it's interesting to see even my own family how certain experiences are different because they aren't white."*

This participant felt she could not identify as multiracial if she herself had not experienced any sort of injustice or discrimination due to her race or her outward appearance.

Participants in this study were then asked a follow up question about their understanding of how they identify, whether they said "multiethnic", "multiracial", or "both". When asked what their understanding of their multiethnic, multiracial was, participants paused and appeared to become confused. Participants would respond with hesitation and uncertainty to my question, stating they didn't know what it meant to be multiethnic, multiracial, or both. However, when they thought about it more, they realized that their understanding of their identity was based on how they were raised, their family, their culture, and their outward appearance. They reported their definition of their identity was defined depending on their social setting and those around them. Participants reported feeling more comfortable identifying as multiethnic and multiracial when they are surrounded by other people of color or other multiethnic, multiracial, multicultural individuals. One participant stated:

*"So when I'm in my family I'm kind of like the 'token white girl' kind of like stereotypical. And I poke fun at it and it's just kind of a known thing. And then when I'm at school, people just see me as a white girl. And then when I tell them I'm part Chinese I'm whatever, then it's like... some people's opinions change. I find that people who are also nonwhite change for the better, they often feel more comfortable around me knowing that I am other race besides white. And then people who are white usually, it'll change and be like, 'oh that's weird' or 'oh, that's interesting'. Or it'll just kind of stay the same it doesn't improve for the better or worse. But I have experienced that people who are of a different ethnicity or race do appreciate when I tell them. They feel they can relate to me better."*

Social settings and the way individuals felt in any given social environment changed the way in which they identify ethnically or racially. Another participant responded in a similar way, stating

“A lot of my classes are mostly white, so, in those classes I’m just solely Latino” but when he was surrounded by people who are multiethnic or other people of color, those individuals view him as white despite knowing he is “mixed”. One participant stated that if she outwardly identified as Latina, as she internally identifies, she felt people would laugh at her because she does not appear Latina and she does not know how to speak the language.

### **Impact of Language**

Out of the five participants involved in this study, only two of them were bilingual in the languages to which they both identify multi-ethnically. One of the two participants who identified as bilingual was born in the US, spoke Italian, and identified as Italian and Vietnamese. The other bilingual participant was born in Argentina and grew up speaking Spanish in her home. When this participant was speaking about her experience being bilingual and moving to the United States, she told a story about her upbringing. She reported:

*“I really appreciate it now, because... not even being able to just speak Spanish, but being bilingual is such an important asset to have. And I really like being able to communicate in someone else’s native tongue as well. I would say though, I still saw myself as Latina, but I didn’t really grow into that as much until probably before I studied abroad, and my study abroad experience really brought it to the forefront. I would say it’s pretty hard sometimes to be able to display that other ethnicity that you have when you are always surrounded by people that display that one, in this situation the American culture, because I definitely agree with the part of when you can relate to someone it’s a lot easier to bring your inner self and your inner person out.”*

This participant clearly spoke about her feeling of acceptance of her authentic, multiethnic self when she was surrounded by people who spoke the same language as her. One participant who did not speak Spanish, despite her Costa Rican multiethnicity, stated that her father identifies as Irish American and does not know how to speak Spanish. Therefore, since she did not learn Spanish in the household, or in school where the primary language was English, she never learned how to speak the language. Of the three participants who did not speak the language to

which they ethnically identify, all three of the participants stated they wish they did speak the native language of their non-English speaking ethnicity.

### **Impact of Family History and Culture**

The participants were then asked to describe their upbringing and experience specifically in regard to being multiethnic, multiracial, and/or multicultural. In regard to individuals' upbringing and their multiethnic, multiracial identity development, all participants brought up the importance of cultural foods and preparing cultural foods as being a defining feature of their ethnic identity development. Foods that were mentioned ranged from Vietnamese Pho, Costa Rican Tamales, and Argentinian Asados, Portuguese Malassadas (doughboys) or sweet bread. However, what was most important to all of these participants was not just the foods themselves, but the preparation of these foods with their family members. The overall experience of being with family and celebrating their culture, ethnicity, or race was what they felt was most influential and impactful to their experience as a multiethnic and/or multiracial individual.

All participants brought up holidays as an experience during their upbringing that related to ethnicity and culture as providing a closer attachment to their multiracial, multiethnic identity. The participant who identified as Vietnamese and Italian spoke about how she celebrates traditional Vietnamese holidays such as Tet and Lunar New Year. The participant who identifies as Chinese and Irish-Italian-French Canadian celebrates Lunar New Year. All participants described holidays like these as being specifically related to their multiethnic, multiracial identity development. One participant felt her multiracial identity development was related to the religion that one practices. When asked about her upbringing in specific regard to her multiracial identity development, she immediately spoke about her connection with religion and culture. While

holidays are often correlated with religion, this participant correlated religion with culture in general.

### **Impact of Visiting One's Country of Origin**

Visiting the originating country of one's ethnicity or race appeared to increase the feeling of multiethnic, multiracial identity within participants in this study; whereas not visiting the country makes some participants feel distant to that side of their ethnicity or culture. The participant who identified as Costa Rican and Irish American stated she grew up visiting her family in Costa Rica for three months out of every year for as long as she can remember. She reported feeling happy and understood when she was visiting her family, because she was with the people who she identifies with. Another participant reported sending barrels to family members in Portugal with items they did not have there made him feel more connected to his family and his multiethnic, multiracial identity. He reported

*“Every three months we send barrels to Portugal, since I was a kid, you would sit on top of the barrel so we could clasp it closed. I did that two weeks ago. But I remember being like four, and I, my cousin and my other cousin were standing on it in the living room... I felt very close to my family even though they were an ocean away.”*

Another participant stated,

*“I would go to Italy like every summer as a kid, so I definitely feel a lot more like closer to Italian side because I've been there and I know the country. But I've never been to Asia, my mom has never been back to Vietnam after the war, so it's like all I know is what she's carried here.”*

This participant specifically spoke about how she identifies more closely to her Italian side because she has visited the country from which this side of her multiracial identity came from.

### **Challenges Faced in Multiethnic, Multiracial Identity Recognition**

Four participants spoke about a defining experience during their upbringing in which they realized for the first time that they felt conflicted about their multiethnic and/or multiracial identity. One participant spoke about how growing up, he lived in the same house as his mom and his sister, as well as his mom's sister and her children. He reported:

*“Their dad was black, my dad was Guatemalan, and both of our moms were white. So I remember having a conversation with my cousins actually and one of them had to sit me down. I was like ‘we’re all the same because we are all fairly same, all light, but still a drop of cream in the cup of coffee, you know, it gives you that tint.’ But she said, ‘no, we’re half black.’ And I had no idea what she was talking about, especially at a young age. I just saw us as that: the same.”*

Another participant spoke about her experience one night with her mom. She was unloading groceries from their car, and boys in her neighborhood “threw firecrackers” at her mom, “and called her a chink and yelled out stuff.” This participant continued by saying, “I think from that moment on, I realized I identify as what she does too, and this makes me subject to possible bad things.” Two other participants spoke about their experience of appearing white but being insulted by individuals around them who insult people who outwardly appear Hispanic/Latino. One participant shared a story about an experience at her predominantly white college, where one of the male students in the dining hall was making derogatory comments toward one of the women that works in their dining hall. This participant spoke about how the worker did not understand what the student had asked for, and the student made a derogatory comment toward Spanish speaking individuals, not realizing that the participant standing in line behind him was a Spanish speaking individual as well. The other participant who shared an experience in regard to appearing white but identifying as Latina shared an experience that she had with her mother who identifies as Costa Rican:

*“We’ll be around people who are white and they’ll say things like, ‘spick’, and me and my mom will just sit there. And it’s bad that we just sit there because we should say stuff. And sometimes we say stuff. But like if half my friends at [predominantly white college in*

*the Northeast] knew I was Hispanic, and know that I have a Costa Rican grandma who kills her chicken, and ya know, cooks it right there, and who is poor... she's not but that's their perception of it, or who is stupid because she doesn't speak American... they would totally see me a different way. But if I looked like my mom's sister's children who are more Hispanic looking, I don't think I would have the same friends. Not in this house, but the boys at [college in the Northeast], definitely.”*

All participants who were involved in this study said that appearance has a huge impact on how they identify multi-ethnically or multi-racially. Participants feel uncomfortable sharing that they are multiethnic or multiracial if they feel that other people won't believe them, or accept them, due to their appearance. Participants reported feeling the most self-conflict in regard to appearance versus multiethnic, multiracial identity while attending the predominantly white college that they all attend.

### **Experience of Multiethnic, Multiracial Individuals in College**

The participants were asked to describe their experiences with race, ethnicity, and culture at their college. Three out of the five participants reported they have not been directly affected by discrimination due to their race, ethnicity, or culture at their college, but they have seen others who outwardly appear their race, ethnicity, or culture experience extreme discrimination and maltreatment. One student reported consistently feeling out of place in his classes at his predominantly white institution because he outwardly appears non-white. He shared his experience of appearing outwardly non-white at this college as being “very difficult”. He said:

*“It is very hard to make friends who are white here. Unless I'm like forced to be in classes, like my major classes, I'm friends with all of them. But I'm not sure I would have reached out to them. And often it's hard because I commute, so it's also hard making friends while living off campus. And all my friends at home are people of color. So it has been very difficult.”*

Another participant shared her personal experiences with racial discrimination on this campus.

She reported:

*“My roommate last year would sometimes ask me why I sometimes talk badly about white people, or why do you criticize white kids at PC. She’s like you only view yourself as Asian. And I’d be like ‘no I don’t’. Or she would sometimes tell me things about how I’m more white, and somehow I wasn’t Asian. I guess a lot of people, if you don’t look a certain way it’s like you’re not. I think a lot of people through first impression... people will believe their identity is based on the perception of others not on the perception of themselves. I could easily identify as white if I wanted to. I guess a lot of multiracial people could. Because there’s a lot of privilege that goes along with that, there’s a lot of benefits that go along with that. Or conversely if I have black and white mixed friends who have faced a lot of oppression because they look mono-racial black. So I guess that’s one of the biggest things at PC, is not really seeing a lot of people that have the same experience or that looked like me. And not really knowing how to portray myself because some people will think one way, and it’s like I think differently. I see myself as white and Asian, like half and half. So, when people deny that I don’t think it’s fair.”*

Three of the five participants in this study participated in a pre-orientation program in which they were invited into because they identify as multiethnic, multiracial, or multicultural. This program is made available for multicultural and first-generation college students so that they can become acclimated with all aspects of the college. While the college encourages all students of color and multicultural backgrounds to feel welcome into this pre-orientation program, two of the students involved in this study were the only two multiethnic, multiracial individuals that outwardly appeared white that attended the program during the year before their first year of college. One student shared her story saying:

*“I felt kind of stupid for being there because I was literally probably one out of the three white people. And I got attitudes from the African Americans and Hispanics who might have grown up in Costa Rica grew up in Puerto Rico and stuff and they were just like ‘why is she here?’ and ‘you don’t know what I’m going through.’ and maybe I don’t and maybe I didn’t grow up where they did, but my family grew up similarly to their family, and their parents and their grandparents. So honestly, I wouldn’t talk up as much and felt like they were giving me dirty looks. I just felt uncomfortable that I was there, sitting there and listening to their stories, and me having some stories, they were just like ‘oh this girl doesn’t understand’.”*

Later in another interview, the researcher found that the other individual who had attended the program that outwardly appeared white was speaking out during this study on her experience.

She spoke about how she and one other girl were the only two multiracial, multiethnic individuals that outwardly appeared white. She, however, had a positive reaction to feeling “different” from others in the program. She told her story:

*“I didn’t do it because I had the mindset of, ‘oh I’m part Chinese’. But I didn’t really know what to expect. I figured it would be a lot of people who identify as black, African American, Latino, etc. But people who looked quote, ‘cultural’. Not that white isn’t a culture, you know what I mean. So, I did that and I showed up and I was one of like two people who had white skin... it was really eye-opening for me, because I- besides being in my family where it’s always been a joke I’ve never taken it personally- I’ve never felt that minority presence because I was just, you know, the majority of where I went to school was majority white, and here is majority white and I’ve always felt very comfortable. So it was interesting having it reversed, especially for the first week and a half of college. But it was also really cool because I felt like I had an in with people who were more culturally aware than I was, and would ever be, and might be more culturally aware and competent than people I may ever meet as part of our class.”*

Participants were then asked if their overall experience at their college has been a positive or negative one. This response from participants was often split. Two individuals stated they felt their college had a positive impact on their multiethnic, multiracial identity development due to the fact that they felt more inclined to talk about their mixed background with other multiethnic, multiracial individuals. They reported receiving positive feedback from other people of color or multiethnic, multiracial individuals because those individuals would feel more comfortable with them after finding out they could relate to them more. However, two individuals stated they felt their college had a negative impact on their multiethnic, multiracial background because they felt they lost a lot of their cultural practices by blending into the predominantly white, American culture that is present at the school. They also felt they could not speak out about their multiculturalism in fear of being discriminated against and not accepted by the multicultural community on campus.

### **Impact of Socio-Political Climate**



The final question in this study asked participants to speak on their experiences being multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and or multi-cultural in the current socio-political climate. The responses to this question varied depending on their personal perception of their race or ethnicity. The participant who identified as Guatemalan and white stated:

*“I found myself, not completely renouncing my whiteness, but in a way I was. There were comments being made, not only from politicians and debates, but also in classes, my peers who identified as multi-ethnic. And it was, I found myself covering that up. I remember talking openly about it and saying, ‘well as a Latino person’ and I even mentioned yes I’m half white, and feeling divided.”*

He felt in this socio-political environment, he could not confidently feel white and non-white, he felt divided. Another participant spoke about how people don’t even realize that she and her family are being directly affected by policies that are currently changing in our country due to the current presidency. However, because she outwardly appears white, her peers and other individuals around her don’t realize she and her family are going through a significant amount of stress. She stated feeling “stuck in this bubble” at her college where she feels she is helpless and hopeless for the future of our country, but she is fighting to have hope that things will change for the better.

Finally, the two participants who identified as mixed white and Asian had complex but correlated responses. They both responded to this question stating that they felt Asian Americans are not as affected as other people of color. They both identified Asians as having more privilege than other people of color, because they have been told by others that they are the “most white of the people of color”. Their stories are as follows:

*“I feel Asian people are not as affected. When I think of the people who are affected by the current presidency, it’s not the first type of people that come to my mind. Which I could be completely ignorant and blind to... but I think there’s an advantage. If there were an order of races where people assume bad things about, I don’t think that Asians are right up on there, so I feel like less concerned... I basically have more sympathy for*

*people of other races. So because I am two ethnicities that I feel aren't super, super affected in a negative way, I don't think it's changed my perception a lot."*

The other participant identifying as Asian stated socioeconomic status also had a large role in the current socio-political environment and how she is affected. She said:

*"I would say I haven't been that affected by it, by virtue of my skin color really... I would definitely say my family is middle class, money hasn't been a huge problem, and money always plays a huge role in society. If you have money and you have resources you're already ten feet ahead of people that don't. So I think that my multiracial identity has definitely aided me in a lot of ways. I guess it's also drawn me closer in solidarity with other people of color, and gravitating towards movements of individuals who are going through a lot worse things. And I think I would have to use my privilege to advocate for those people. I haven't been personally too affected but I know other people have."*

To conclude the interviews, all participants were debriefed on the overarching purpose of the study. Participants were asked if they had any further questions or concerns regarding the interviews. All further responses were noted in this cohesive findings section.

The largest impacts on the participants' multiethnic, multiracial identity development were found to be appearance, language, social acceptance, family history, family support, family culture, and visiting one's country of origin. Participants reported defining their multiethnic or multiracial identity depending on their social setting and those around them. Language impacted participants because if they were able to speak the language of their ethnic identity, they had a feeling of acceptance of their authentic, multiethnic self. Of the participants who did not speak the language to which they ethnically identify, these participants stated they wish they did speak the native language of their non-English speaking ethnicity. Overall, all participants brought up the importance of cultural foods and preparing these foods with their family members. The overall experience of being with family and celebrating their culture, ethnicity, or race was what they felt was most influential and impactful to their experience as a multiethnic and/or

multiracial individual. Holidays and religious practices during their upbringing that related to ethnicity and culture provided a closer attachment to their multiracial, multiethnic identity.

Visiting the originating country of one's ethnicity or race also appeared to increase the feeling of a strong understanding of one's multiethnic, multiracial identity within participants in this study. Participants reported feeling happy and understood when visiting family in their country of origin. Whereas not visiting one's country of origin makes some participants feel distant to that side of their ethnicity or culture. The primary challenges found in the multiethnic and/or multiracial identity development were identified in defining, almost traumatic events that occurred during their upbringings or while in college. Participants often felt uncomfortable sharing that they are multiethnic or multiracial, specifically at the predominantly white college to which they belong, because they feel that other people won't believe them, or accept them, due to their appearance. Participants reported their overall experience at their college as both positive and negative. Those that felt college had a positive impact on their multiethnic, multiracial identity development identified increased feelings of empowerment, feeling inclined to talk about their mixed background with other multiethnic, multiracial individuals. Those that stated they felt their college had a negative impact on their multiethnic, multiracial background felt they lost a lot of their cultural practices by blending into the predominantly white, American culture that is present at the school. Responses related to the socio-political climate varied depending on participants' personal perception of their race or ethnicity. Most participants felt in this socio-political environment, they could not confidently feel white and non-white. Rather, they felt divided and conflicted about their white and non-white backgrounds.

### Summary

The current study was intended to extend the current research on multiethnic, multiracial, multicultural identity development in college students. The primary effort was to augment a qualitative research study that delves into the narratives of individuals who identify as having mixed white and nonwhite backgrounds. In our current socio-political climate, white and nonwhite individuals in our country are outwardly in conflict. This can be distressing to the large population of individuals who identify as having both white and nonwhite mixed backgrounds. The two parts of their identity that make them who they are, are inherently in conflict. This research study has identified that this conflict can add to internal conflict during the crucial stage of multiethnic, multiracial identity development for college aged student. One's appearance may lead an individual to only identifying as one part of themselves, never truly identifying as their true, multiethnic, multiracial, authentic self. Social circles may perpetuate the issue of identifying with only one racial or ethnic background when friends, family, and other peers view multiethnic, multiracial individuals as solely from one ethnic or racial background. This can lead to feelings of low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, lack of acceptance from a social group, and lack of acceptance from one's own ethnic or racial group. If multiethnic or multiracial individuals cannot speak the language of their originating ethnic or racial background, this can lead to feelings of self-doubt in their own multiethnic, multiracial identity. They may feel they have to prove their ethnic or racial identity to those who identify as the same nonwhite racial or ethnic background, solely because they appear fair or lighter skinner. This can lead to feelings of decreased self-worth.

### **Conclusions**

This research study provides a lens into a world of individuals who are not often heard from. In our ever-present socio-political climate of conflict, we are constantly surrounded by race, ethnicity, and culture, but people are categorized into one specific race, ethnicity or culture. The United States' population of multiethnic, multiracial, and multicultural individuals is growing in size every year. It is important that policies and procedures regarding diversity encompass, not only diverse cultures, subcultures, races, and ethnicities; but that it also encompasses the importance of understanding the ethnic identity development of those who identify with more than one race, ethnicity, or culture.

The purpose of this study was to break down implicit racial and ethnic biases within social work and other helping professional practice. If helping professionals can begin to understand the ethnic identity development of individuals who identify as having a mixed white and nonwhite background, these professionals might be able to develop intervention methods to help guide healthy multiethnic or multiracial identity development. Helping professionals may be able to better identify intervention methods to assist multiethnic or multiracial individuals who have a decreased sense of self-worth, self-confidence, or lack of acceptance within social circles. Being conscious and increasingly aware of how the political climate affects college students who identify as multiethnic or multiracial will only continue to become increasingly more important over the years. Further research should be conducted to understand and identify ways to approach difficult dialogue that may benefit the identity development of all individuals from differing racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

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**Appendix A: Instrument**

Where were you born?

How old are you?

What year are you? 2018 2019 2020

What is your gender identity?

Do you identify as multi-ethnic or multi-racial? How do you identify?

What is your understanding of your multi-racial/multi-ethnic identity?

Do you speak any other languages (specifically from the ethnicity you identify)?

Can you tell me about your upbringing and experience specifically with being multi-racial/multi-ethnic?

Did your family actively practice cultural traditions of your ethnic background? If so, do you feel your family's practices impacted the way you perceive your ethnic/cultural/racial identity? How?

Describe your experiences with race/ethnicity/culture here at PC?

Has the PC campus community/culture impacted your identity development? If so, has this impacted you positively or negatively?

Tell me more about your experiences being multi-racial/multi-ethnic/multi-cultural in our current social/political climate?

## Appendix B: Recruitment Form for Participation in a Research Study

I am a student at Providence College conducting a research study regarding the experience of ethnic and racial identity development, specifically at a medium-sized Catholic college in New England. You are being asked to participate in this research study because you have identified yourself as a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, or multi-cultural individual with a white and non-white mixed background.

This study will be utilizing in-person, audio recorded interviews comprised of semi-structured interview questions regarding your personal experiences and perceptions. The topics of the questions include: your experience of ethnic/racial identity development, familial impact on that development, and a sociopolitical experience of that identity development. These questions are intended to create a structured conversation that should discuss your own identity development as your own story, or narrative, that you wish to share with me. Duration of interviews are expected to last approximately 20-30 minutes.

If you have any questions regarding this research project, or would like further information before participating in the study, please contact Victoria Palmer at [vpalmer@friars.providence.edu](mailto:vpalmer@friars.providence.edu) or the faculty member: Katherine M. Kranz, Ph.D, LICSW at [kkranz@providence.edu](mailto:kkranz@providence.edu).

If you are willing to participate in this research study, please fill out this form and return it to the primary researcher. The researcher will reach out to you via email to set up a scheduled interview time.

Thank you for your consideration.

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Participant's Name

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Participant's Phone Number

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Participant's Email

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Participant's Class Year

## Appendix C: Informed Consent

### Principal Investigator: Victoria Palmer

**Study Title:** Multiethnic, Multiracial, Multicultural Identity Development Experienced by Matriculated Full-Time Providence College Students

#### Introduction:

You are invited to participate in a research study on the experience of ethnic and racial identity development, specifically at a medium-sized Catholic college in New England. You must be 18 or older to participate in the study.

You are being asked to participate in this study as you are part of the student population enrolled at Providence College. As such, you likely have experiences in identifying yourself as a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, or multi-cultural individual with a white and non-white mixed background.

#### Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to gather information on the experience of ethnic and racial identity development during the current sociopolitical climate as well as the experience as a college student attending a medium-sized Catholic college in New England.

#### What are the study procedures? What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to take part in this study you will be asked to complete an in-person interview with the researcher. The interviews will be audio-recorded, unless you specify otherwise. The interview questions will ask you to answer a few brief demographic questions, as well as questions regarding your experience of ethnic/racial identity development, familial impact on that development, and a sociopolitical experience of that identity development. These questions are intended to create a structured conversation that should discuss your own identity development as your own story, or narrative, that you wish to share with me. Interviews are expected to take around 20-30 minutes.

#### What are the risks or inconveniences of the study?

There are no foreseen risks associated with this research study aside from the possibility of being unsure of how to answer or uncomfortable with some questions. If any issue should arise, you are invited to decline from answering any question(s) that you wish and/or withdrawing from the study.

#### What are the benefits of the study?

You may not directly benefit from this research; however, it is hoped that your participation in the study may positively impact the understanding of multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multi-cultural identity development in college aged students attending a predominantly white institution. The goal of this research is to increase an understanding of the experiences of college students who identify as multi-racial, multi-ethnic, or multi-cultural, what they identify as

impacts on their identity development, and create environments that allow for discussion surrounding multi-ethnic/multi-racial experiences.

Will I receive payment for participation? Are there costs to participate?

Individuals will not receive payment for their participation, but your participation is greatly appreciated.

How will my personal information be protected?

The information gathered from this study is collected by the researcher. Identifying information will not be included in the final outcomes of this research study.

Information collected from your responses during the interviews will be recorded on a digital audio-recorder, for later transcribing and statistical analysis. The hardcopy original audiotape, along with the transcripts completed will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the faculty researcher's (Dr. Kranz's) campus office and destroyed within three months of the date that you completed it.

Can I stop being in the study and what are my rights?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not wish to. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time.

Who do I contact if I have questions about the study?

If you have further questions about this study or if have a research-related problem, you may contact Dr. Kranz at 401-865-1581 or Victoria Palmer at vpalmer@friars.providence.edu.

By signing the line below, you are agreeing to participate in this research study. Through providing your consent, you are agreeing to allow the research team to use your responses for outcomes in this study.

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Participant Printed Name

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Date

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Participant Signature

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Date