

Edge Dancers: Mixed Heritage Identity, Transculturalization, and Public Policy and Practice in Health and Human Services

H. Rika Houston¹ and Mikel Hogan²

Abstract

This study uses grounded theory to explore the lived experiences of mixed heritage individuals through the anthropological framework of transculturalization. Qualitative data resulting from depth interviews of mixed heritage informants are utilized to identify three commonalities in the life experiences of these “edge dancers:” alienation, complexity, and celebration. Results also indicate that mixed heritage individuals use creative agency to “own” their respective identities and strategically manipulate their environments as they perform the social “dance” of identity negotiation that spans their entire lives. We propose a dynamic, emic agency model of mixed heritage identity construction followed by conclusions about how our study and model informs and expands our understanding of cultural change and transculturalization in the anthropological context. From an applied anthropological perspective, we also discuss the implications that this study and the proposed model have for enhancing public policy and practice in health and human services. [mixed heritage identity, transculturalization, cultural change, grounded theory, edge dancers, agency, public policy and practice, health and human services]

Introduction

No identity is stable in today's wild, recombinant mix of culture, blood, and ideas. Things fall apart; they make themselves anew. Every race carries within it the seeds of its own destruction (Liu 1998:82-83).

These encounters between Vietnamese multiracials and monoracial members of the Vietnamese American community can be described as a *dance*—the Vietnamese American individual leads with a series of questions, and the multiracial in turn engages the lead with some spins, dips, turns, and even sidesteps (Valverde 2001:133) [emphasis added].

According to Zachary (2000), the mixing of races, ethnic groups, and nationalities in the United States and around the world is a deep change toward which resistance is futile. The impact of this rapid and unprecedented change is an increasingly hybrid world in which people he refers to as “new cosmopolitans” are inheriting Planet Earth, with or without the blessing of the political and cultural elites. President of the United States Barack Obama, actress Halle Berry, and professional football player

Hines Ward, Jr. of the Pittsburgh Steelers are vivid examples of this growing population of “new cosmopolitans.” Fueled by the unstoppable forces of globalization and its natural consequences of increased exposure to diversity, international and interracial marriages, and the inevitable result of mixed heritage children, these “new cosmopolitans” construct themselves actively and perpetually from a fluid menu of dynamic options. Valverde (2001) explores this fluid menu in her ethnographic study of multiracial Vietnamese in the Vietnamese American community. Within a community context of class hierarchy rife with gross generalizations and stereotypes about multiracial individuals, she adeptly documents how multiracial Vietnamese negotiate and create a social space for themselves. The ability of these individuals to maneuver this classification system varies by person and situation, but Valverde (2001) perceptively refers to their performance as “doing the mixed-race dance.” In our current study, we also embrace the metaphor of dance as we explore the lived experiences of mixed heritage individuals in the United States and, ultimately, the implications their emic voices have upon cultural change and public policy and practice in health and human services.

As exemplified in our current study and the resulting dynamic agency model we propose (see Figure 1), the lived experiences of mixed heritage individuals provide a unique opportunity for understanding contemporary cultural dynamics in the context of culture change and acculturation theory (Broom et. al 1967). Specifically, the dynamic agency model we propose provides insight into the cultural dynamics occurring at the individual level—a process referred to as “transculturalization.” Originally defined by anthropologist Irving Hallowell in 1967b, transculturalization is defined as “the process whereby *individuals* under a variety of circumstances are temporarily or permanently detached from one group, enter the web of social relations that constitute another society, and come under the influence of its customs, ideas, and values to a greater or lesser degree” (Hallowell 1976:498-529). Hallowell referred to the individuals who had undergone the process of transculturalization as “transculturalites” (1976: 505).

Although it reached its peak in the late 1950’s, during the “high period” of anthropological research on culture change, the study of cultural change and acculturation produced one of the largest bodies of literature in anthropology to date. Such scholarship in turn has significantly influenced anthropological thinking up to the present time (Hallowell 1955, 1967a, 1967b, 1976; Bohannon and Plog 1967; Grumet 2003, 2004; and Haviland 2008). Originally defined in 1953 at the Social Science Research Council’s Summer Seminar on Acculturation, as “culture change that is initiated by the conjunction of two or more autonomous cultural systems,” the process of acculturation can be viewed through the cultural dynamics of integration and differentiation that emerge among the cultural systems that come into contact with each other (Bohannon and Plog 1967:255-286).

A natural evolution of acculturation, the personal cultural dynamics of transculturalization can be observed when an individual becomes detached from their original cultural group and temporarily or permanently becomes affiliated with another group. A seminal example is Hallowell’s (1967b) ethnographic study of the transculturalization process between the St.

Francis Abenaki group of Indians and Whites, as well as Blacks, in Quebec, Canada. In Hallowell’s (1967b) study, “Indianization” was the specific example of transculturalization. However, the same process has occurred in other parts of the world when individual “transculturalites” are presented with or seek out similar situations. Interracial marriages, for example, typically embody the process of transculturalization regardless of the national context. The mixed heritage informants in our current study embody the next evolution of transculturalization—one that has not been explored to date. This next evolution, marked by the contemporary emergence of a growing mixed heritage population, explores the lives and perspectives of those who are the children of “transculturalites.” Therefore, by exploring the personal cultural dynamics of mixed heritage individuals in contemporary United States, we can expand our understanding of transculturalization to examine what happens when an individual who is the social and biological product of two “transculturalites” embraces an identity that is comprised of all of their respective cultural backgrounds without contradiction, then chooses in turn to push or re-define the boundaries of those cultures both consciously and subconsciously.

In the following sections, we first provide an historical overview of U.S. census policy with regard to racial categorization, followed by a review of the existing literature on racial identity development models. After presenting this historical context and a brief overview of existing cultural models in mainstream U.S. culture, we provide a detailed, emic description of the lived experiences of a diverse group of mixed heritage informants. In our analysis of these voices, we identify common life themes shared by our informants and propose a dynamic agency model of mixed heritage identity construction that reveals a pattern of fluid, multidirectional cultural change. We conclude our study with a discussion about the implications our findings have for an expanded notion of transculturalization, as well as the implications it has for public policy and practice in health and human services with regard to mixed heritage persons and the families and communities to which they belong.

The Historical Context of Multiracial Identity

Although racial identification has been a part of the U.S. Census policy since its inception, neither race nor ethnicity is a scientific construct. Quite the contrary, they are socially constructed categories that vary by the society in which they exist and shift considerably over the span of social and political consciousness (Kato 2006, Henriksen and Paladino 2009:1-25). Few factors are more telling of this socio-political construction than the shifting labels that mark the practice of census reporting over time. For example, the original U.S. Census in 1790 had only three racial categories: free Whites (divided by gender), slaves (Blacks), and all other free persons (Indians) (Carnegie Reporter 2001). Every census since then has raised the question of race, but the racial categories employed have been added, dropped and revised based upon the prevailing social and political climate of the time. By 1890, the census categories had expanded to White, Black, Mulatto, Quadroon, Octoroon, Chinese, Japanese and Indian to reflect the multiracial legacy of slavery and the recent influx of early Chinese and Japanese immigrants. To complicate matters even further, "Hispanic" was added as an ethnic category in 1970 even though a person of Hispanic origin can be of any race. To this day, the Hispanic category maintains the distinction of being the only ethnic category explicitly tracked by the census even though ethnicity is a social construct that can be arguably claimed, albeit arbitrarily, by any person (Prewitt 2001, U.S. Census Bureau 2000; Henriksen and Paladino 2009:1-25).

In addition to *Loving vs. the Commonwealth of Virginia*, the landmark 1967 civil rights case that ended all race-based legal restrictions on marriage, recent immigration trends from non-European countries and powerful forces of globalization have created a natural laboratory for inter-group contact that has resulted in a plethora of complex questions for the army of politicians, public policy makers, educators, scholars and marketers who analyze such population trends when making their strategic decisions. The potential demise of racial categories that carefully segregate people into monoracial groups such as White, Black/African American,

Hispanic/Latino, Asian, or American Indian/Alaska Native calls into question a myriad of institutionalized practices that rely upon rigid classifications to design programs, products, and services that target these diverse populations. In contrast, the insistence of the fluidity of race is a social phenomenon more recently exemplified by the activist-driven notion of multiracial categories in the U.S. Census of 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau 2001, DaCosta 2007).

For all intents and purposes, the ability to check more than one box on the Census 2000 form is pushing the United States to the edge of a multiracial frontier that few people understand and even fewer may be ready to confront. Indeed, when first given the opportunity to check more than one box on the Census of 2000, almost 7 million people, or 2.4 percent of the U.S. population, identified themselves as belonging to two or more races (U.S. Census Bureau 2001). Equally important to census data collectors is that the parents or adults of the household, not the children, report the racial identity of their children. According to Kato (2006), one of the most surprising results of Census 2000 was that fewer than half of monoracial parents in interracial marriages reported their children as multiracial. While the propensity of many monoracial parents of multiracial children to deny social reality is somewhat disconcerting at first glance, it is nonetheless important to emphasize that 42% of those who were identified as belonging to more than one race were under the age of 18. Therefore, due to the relatively young age of the multiracial population in the United States, a decidedly different outlook for future census reports is a logical conclusion even by conservative estimates. The likelihood of this change in reporting behavior is even more salient when it is coupled with the fact that multiracial parents in the Census 2000 were much more likely to identify their children as multiracial when compared with monoracial parents in interracial marriages (Hirschmann et. al 2000, Kato 2006). Undoubtedly, all of these factors indicate a potential growth in the multiracial population as this population continues to mature, become parents, and foster a heightened awareness of multiracial identity within their own families and among their peers.

Since the 1980s, this heightened awareness has fostered an increase in political activism among multiracial university students (DaCosta 2007). Such awareness is illustrated by the proliferation of student and community organizations such as the Mavin Foundation, Multiracial Americans of Southern California (MASC), the Association of Multiethnic Americans (AMEA), Hapa Issues Forum, Mixed Media Watch (MMW), Mixed Folks, and Generation MIX, to name just a few. As awareness about and among people who belong to more than one race or cultural group continues to grow, the need to understand the identities and perspectives of this dynamic population grows as well. However, existing racial and ethnic identity models for mixed heritage people have to date been limited in their scope and relevance. In the following section, we provide a review of the dominant models of monoracial, biracial and multiracial identity development.

Monoracial and Mixed Heritage Identity Development Models: A Review of the Literature

The disciplines of psychology, social psychology and counseling have been instrumental in developing a robust and well-intentioned foundation of scholarship on racial identity development. The following section provides an overview of the existing monoracial and mixed heritage (biracial, multiracial/multiethnic or mixed race) identity models that have emerged from this extensive body of literature.

Earlier Identity Models. The traditional focus of identity development epitomized in the works of Erickson (1950, 1980) Marcia (1976), and the cognitive structural approach of Piaget (1982, 1985) provides a psychosocial linear stage theory of development that centers on white male middle-class personality development. Issues of power differences based on race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic class, sexual orientation and ableness were not considered in these early models. The researchers' social class, race, gender, and ethnicity were invisible and unconscious because societal norms aligned with their ethnic, class, racial, gender and cultural values, beliefs and assumptions. The ethnic culture of early theorists, "Standard American Culture," was per-

ceived and experienced as a given --as a taken-for-granted culture (Chavez and Guido-DiBrito 1999:39). Standard American culture is experienced then and now as a "culture of no culture" (Perry 2004, Sobo 2009:111). These earlier theorists assumed they dwelled in a "culture without culture" and their psychological development models reflect that assumption.

Monoracial/Monoethnic Identity Models. By the 1970s and 1980s, research on racial identity models came into view. Some of these models focused on monoracial identity development. Cross (1971, 1991, 2001) proposed a racial identity development model of African Americans that allows insight into the experience of African American personality development within the oppression of U.S. mainstream culture and institutions. Cross purports with his "psychological nigrescence" concept that the healthy personality development of African Americans involves a resocialization experience in which they "progress" from a lack of awareness of race and its impact on their identity to embrace a positive Black identity. Following the adoption of a Black identity, a respect for their own and other cultures occurs. Thomas Parham (1989) offers a cyclic progression model of African American identity development that is a life-long, continuously changing process. Helms (1989, 1994, 1995) proposed a model of White racial development within the context of White racial superiority and institutionalized discrimination. In Helm's model, healthy identity development involves a progression away from a racist identity to a nonracist one. However, Helms research does not offer the insight into White racial identity development that Delgado and Stefancic attempt in their *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror* (1997), an extensive analysis of how Whiteness has been historically and culturally constructed to advance White privilege, or others who have contributed to our understanding White identity development (Richard 1996, Fine et al. 1997, Sciarra and Gushue 2003, Hartigen 2005, Jensen 2005, Wise 2005, Howard 2006).

Phinney (1987, 1989, 1990) proposes a model of ethnic identity development that applies to all ethnic groups in the United States. Phinney's model centers on two essential needs: (1) the need for all non-dominant group members to

resolve their experiences with prejudice and discrimination that is imposed upon them from dominant group members; and (2) to resolve the conflict between their two cultural orientations—their U.S. mainstream and ethnic identity cultures. Smith (1991), Chavez and Guido-DiBrito (1999), and Tatum (1992) each provide insight into implications and difficulties with developing healthy ethnic identity within U.S. mainstream institutions and describe implications for professional practice in the counseling and educational fields. Psychologist W. S. Carlos Poston (1990) treats the limitations of monoracial/ethnic identity models as they are applied to “biracial” persons. He describes monoracial/ethnic identity models as limited because they are static when, in fact, individuals might choose one group’s culture or values over another at different stages throughout life. Monoracial/ethnic models also fail to consider the integration of several cultural identities at the same time. Furthermore, monoracial models require acceptance into the minority culture of origin. Unfortunately, this experience does not necessarily apply to persons with mixed heritage identity. Instead, high rates of rejection and victimization of multiracial/ethnic people within their families, schools and community are commonly reported (Henriksen and Paladino 2009). And finally, another limitation of monocultural models is that they do not specifically address U.S. mainstream culture as one of the cultures that influences identity development in partnership with the other cultural models upon which the racial/ethnic identities of multiracial people are formed.

In addition to monoracial/ethnic identity models, multiracial/ethnic identity models also grew in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s (Sebring 1985; Spickard 1989; Poston 1990; Kerwin et al. 1993; Fromboise et. al 1993; Wehrly, et al. 1999; Phinney and Alipuria 1996; Fukuyama 1999; Wardle 1991, 1992, 2000; Aldarondo 2001; Wilson 1992; Hall 2001). The earliest multiracial/ethnic identity models of Stonequist (1937) and Gibbs (1987) assumed a deficit model of what they called biracial identity. They assumed the identity development of biracial people was problematic because biracial people were marginal in society. Poston (1990) said the

problems incurred by mixed race or biracial people do not derive from having parents of two different cultural backgrounds but from the rejection and discrimination of mainstream culture that causes people to feel marginalized in society. According to his five-stage developmental model, the mixed race person passes through the initial stage of a personal identity during which he/she identifies with U.S. mainstream culture (a “culture without a culture”) because he/she does not have a cultural reference group. Next the person is socially pressured to choose an ethnic group identity. This can be a time of crisis and alienation. The third stage is one of denial guilt, and anger because the person does not identify with the cultural heritage of both parents. The person is not expressive of his/her multiple heritages. The fourth stage is appreciation because the person begins to appreciate their multiple heritages, although he/she may still identify with one of their heritages as a result of group pressure. The fifth stage is integration in which the person feels whole because he/she embraces all of their cultural heritages. As illustrated by these preceding examples, the majority of developmental models, whether describing so-called mono- or multiethnic/racial identities, assume a predictable, linear process that proceeds in stages whereby “healthy” identity development culminates when the person accepts all his or her cultural/racial heritages. In contrast, our dynamic, emic agency model of mixed heritage identity construction conveys more complexity because it proposes a dynamic, multidirectional and perpetual identity construction process. In addition, our model, like contemporary multiracial/ethnic identity models, takes account of the cultural models within mainstream U.S. culture.

Contemporary Multiracial/Ethnic Identity Models. Contemporary research on multiracial/ethnic identity development, generally written since 2000, assumes more complex processes and choices of identity. In doing so, it provides more theoretical flexibility than previous racial identity or biracial models have done and embrace the notion that a mixed heritage person can still have a healthy identity if he/she does not accept all of the cultural/racial heritages with which he or she is born. Root (1992, 1996, 2003), for exam-

ple, suggests that racial identity is mitigated by individual personality, phenotype, interpersonal and familial relationships, geographical region, local communities, openness of groups to accept multiracial members, agendas of loyalty and solidarity, immigration processes and the social, economic and political consequences of racial group membership.

The research of McDowell et al. (2005) provides an overview of literature related to being multiracial, a framework for working with a multiracial identity and guidelines about raising multiracial awareness through "critical conversations" in family therapy to overcome the ongoing social invalidation of identity. These "critical conversations" include dialogue, reflection and action and critically interrogate the political, relational and personal aspects of racial identification. In this way, the contemporary models of McDowell and her associates promote broader, multicultural movements in the realm of family therapy.

In addition, McDowell et al. (2005) provide a summary of early identity development models and critique their reliance on a linear, predictable identity development process. They suggest the need for an ecological framework that embraces identity as a concept that is embedded within a sociopolitical context. This context is best understood as part of a more complex developmental process that occurs across the lifespan. McDowell et al. (2005) believe that the "ideal" of multiracial identity construction is the freedom to make active and informed multiracial identity choices, a goal that involves a process of self-emancipation from internalized racial myths and cultural constraints that maintain the hegemony of racial inequality.

In a similar fashion, Renn (2003) contributes to our understanding of the identities of mixed race college students through a developmental ecological lens. According to Renn, traditional ethnic identity models do not fit with the experience of multiracial/ethnic students because multiracial students have variable identities. The extent to which they identify with their mixed heritages is influenced by the context on their respective campuses. Renn's model relates to our dynamic agency model by providing important details with regard to our inclusion and analysis

of the individual's culture, ethnicity, positionality and lived experiences as factors in their identity construction.

Other contemporary researchers include Wardle (1991, 1992, 2000), who offers an historical context of mixed race/ethnic experience in the United States. She recommends how to implement programmatic changes in schools by changing teacher training, exploring cultural heritages to increase sensitivity, assessing formal curriculum, reviewing the informal curriculum, revising ethnic and racial celebrations, addressing harassment and promoting anti-bias activities. Pellegrini (2005) offers insight into the need for institutions of higher education to become more culturally aware and competent. As a person of mixed Italian and Mexican heritage, he offers a compelling description of the identity suppression he experienced by professors at California State University, Los Angeles. David L. Brunsma (2005) explores the structure of the parental racial designation of mixed race children and purports that there are complex interrelationships among factors of class, social networks, family structural variables and appearance/phenotype that influence racial identity. The Brunsma model supports our proposed model because it points to the importance of cultural models and the positionality of parents in their perception and designation of their children's race/ethnicity. Arredondo et al. (2005) present a ten year content analysis of the *Journal of Counseling and Development* and identify that only 1 out of the 102 articles reviewed (1%) referred to biracial counseling issues. Accordingly, their study demonstrates the need for more research of mixed heritage identity and counseling issues. Lastly, Henriksen and Paladino (2009), also from the counseling realm, in *Multiple Heritage Identity Model*, write a practical counseling text based on their personal experiences as mixed heritage individuals in the United States. Their intention is to help counselors to understand the worldviews of mixed heritage individuals. And so, as revealed by these authors in their research on contemporary multiracial/ethnic identity development, the incorporation of more complex processes and choices of identity moves the discussion of identity development beyond the limitation and constraints of earlier research.

However, due to the emphasis upon primarily psychological and social-psychological approaches and perspectives, the application of these models has not been placed in the broader context of social and cultural change at the meso level or the micro level of the individual (transculturalization). Our proposed model addresses this limitation by placing the lived experiences of mixed heritage individuals into the broader context of cultural models and cultural change.

Cultural Models within the Context of Mainstream U.S. Culture

In order to understand the historical and cultural context in which existing models of racial and ethnic identity development take place, it is also important to understand the nature and context of the cultural models that define mainstream culture in the United States. For the purposes of our study, we define culture as the "... acquired knowledge that people use to generate behavior and interpret experience" (Spradley and McCurdy 1972:8). It is a multi-level, dynamic, and interactive phenomenon that encompasses not only a person's assumptions, values, beliefs, explanatory systems and behaviors learned in the family and other basic social groups, but also those learned in organizations and institutions such as schools, work places and media. Macro level culture, a source of "acquired knowledge" that individuals utilize on the micro level, is the broad structure and processes of a culture – such as norms, policies, procedures and sanctions of society's institutions and organizations. Schools, government, workplaces, business organizations, media and churches are also examples of macro level culture within which people live. In our current study, for example, we explore the implications our results and proposed model may have for the myriad of health and human service organizations in the United States. Macro level culture in today's context entails multiple processes of globalization, including international migration, technological integration, shifting national borders, interracial and international marriages, and mixed heritage identities—all of which contribute to the process of transculturalization directly or indirectly and therefore have immediate relevance to our current study. At the meso level, culture exists in the

groups with whom we identify and interact. Each individual belongs to many groups based on their race, ethnicity, class, age, gender, sexual orientation, occupation, religion, degree of ability, and region of the country. At the micro or individual level, culture manifests in a person's assumptions, values, beliefs and behaviors, which are learned and shaped by power relations in families and other social groups within which people interact.

Our group of informants includes individuals who are middle class, male, female, gay, straight and possess multiple racial/ethnic heritages. While the lived experiences of our mixed heritage informants is the primary focus of our study, it is important to understand that this micro or individual level of culture takes place with an established cultural context. Historically, race and ethnicity in the United States has been defined as monoracial categories viewed from a Black/White binary perspective. This perspective is deeply rooted in the historical legacy of slavery and the related notion of hypodescent, the historical practice of assigning mixed-race children to the race that is considered subordinate or inferior. As a result of the changes in immigration law during the 1960's, the Black/White binary system of classification has expanded to become a Black/non-Black divide that still devalues Blackness. Since they do not fit neatly into any one specific racial/ethnic category, our mixed heritage informants face multiple cultural challenges and complexities within this historical context. Their cultural challenges begin with the experience of invisibility in American society because they do not fit into a single "pure" racial or ethnic category that is defined by the existing racial classification system. The single-race classification system of the United States has served to keep one group dominant (Whites/Europeans) and all other groups separate within their own distinct group. Mixed heritage individuals thus face social invisibility in relation to macro culture and at the meso-level, members of the multiple groups to which they belong commonly reject them (Schartz 1998, Harris and Sim 2002, Nakazawa 2003, Di Consiglio 2004, Herman 2004, Lee and Bean 2004, Jourdan 2006, Henrikson and Paladino 2009). It is within this problematic context, one

that is deeply embedded and maintained throughout the multiple levels of culture, that we situate the lived experiences of the mixed heritage informants in our study.

Methodology

Since one of the primary goals of this longitudinal study was to gain an emic perspective of the mixed heritage identity experience, we employed two recognized qualitative research methods. Specifically, we conducted in-depth interviews and participant observation as described in the following paragraphs.

In-Depth Interviews. In-depth interviews are a data collection method designed to elicit a vivid picture of the informants' perspectives on a given topic, in this case mixed heritage identity. Such interviews are especially useful for getting people to talk about their personal feelings, opinions and experiences. By actively probing informants about the connections and relationships they see between particular people, events, beliefs and other phenomena, the researcher can gain valuable insights into how people interpret and order their worlds. In addition, the nuances in and contradictions to explicitly stated beliefs often emerge unintentionally through the process of in-depth interviews.

According to McCracken (1988), a purposive sample of eight individuals is sufficient to identify the cultural categories and schema that informants use to interpret and order their respective worlds. For this study, we conducted twenty-two in-depth interviews with mixed heritage individuals of varying ethnic and nationality backgrounds during an extended period between 1997 and 2009. One informant was interviewed twice, once at age seventeen and again at age twenty-three. Three informants were second-generation mixed heritage individuals. While this number of interviews far exceeds the quantity deemed necessary for this current study, both the diversity of our informant population and the longitudinal nature of our study warrant the examination of a larger population and the tracking of key informants over an extended period of time. See Table 1 for the demographic background of the informants interviewed. It is important to note the rather diverse range of heritage of the informants in

this study. While in certain research designs the diversity of a sample may be problematic, this is not a major concern in this particular study. As noted above and illustrated in our section describing the lived experiences of our informants, the design of our current study is to explore, through a grounded theory approach, the breadth of cultural categories that define the lived experiences of mixed heritage individuals. Accordingly, we have selected a diverse group of informants for the current phase of our study and intend to expand both the diversity and the depth of experience in future renditions of our longitudinal study.

Participant Observation. Participant observation is one of the most common methods of qualitative data collection, but also one of the most demanding and analytically difficult (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, DeWalt and DeWalt 2002). When conducting participant observation, the researcher (ethnographer) becomes the actual instrument of data collection. He or she must secure and maintain relationships with the informants under observation, take volumes of field notes on rather mundane activities and behaviors, and spend weeks or sometimes months analyzing those notes throughout and after the observations are complete. Participant observation is more than mere observation—it requires that the researcher becomes a part of the social world of the informants and participate within it to varying degrees. Eventually, through a process of observation, impromptu, unstructured interviews, and considerable reflection, the researcher can construct a contextualized model of the social system under observation.

Throughout the duration of this study, and still on an ongoing basis, we engaged in participant observation at conferences for mixed heritage student organizations, as well as various social and organizing events for mixed heritage student organizations, community organizations, family gatherings, reunions and other informal meetings of multiple heritage individuals and groups. These observations were instrumental in clarifying the context and salience of cultural categories identified through the depth interview process. They also revealed the cultural relationships between the factors identified in the resulting dynamic agency model.

Data Analysis. Depth interview transcripts and participant observation field notes were analyzed using the grounded theory method (Strauss 1987, Miles and Huberman 1994, Charmaz 2005, Corbin and Strauss 2007). Grounded theory is a qualitative research approach that inductively generates a theory from the data. When current theories about the phenomenon under investigation, in this case mixed heritage identity, either do not exist or are not adequate, grounded theory is instrumental in developing a new theory that is grounded in the data.

By definition, grounded theory is a rigorous research approach that involves a systematic coding process from which cultural categories relevant to the phenomenon emerge from the data. The basic process of grounded theory consists of reading the textual data and discovering the categories, concepts and properties of the phenomenon through a systematic process of open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Open coding is the analytical process of identifying, naming, categorizing and describing phenomena found in the textual data. In this step, the researcher identifies key emergent themes and cultural categories. Axial coding is the process of identifying and building the complex relationships associated with each category by exploring their respective properties, conditions, consequences, interactions and strategies. Selective coding is the process of identifying a core category then linking all other categories to it. The culmination of this rigorous process is the development of a model, based entirely on the data, to explain the phenomenon under investigation.

For this study, we used the grounded theory approach to identify the cultural categories and conditions that shape the identity construction process of mixed heritage individuals. Specifically, verbatim transcripts of in-depth interviews and field notes from participant observations were the primary data analyzed during this process. The strength of this particular research design is important to note. Our in-depth interviews allowed us to hear the emic voices of our informants in ways that surveys could never accomplish. Equally important, our field work and field notes from various participant observa-

tions provided an informed perspective that enabled us to identify and describe the lived experiences of our informants in ways that would not be possible with a more objective, decontextualized gaze. The emic voices that emerged from this rigorous process are discussed in the following section.

The Lived Experiences of Edge Dancers

Mixed heritage informants described lived experiences marked by fluidity, liminality and a dynamic process of reframing their identities throughout life. This lifelong process of identity construction emerged from three distinct commonalities: alienation, complexity and celebration. Informants expressed alienation caused by cultural insensitivity at the hands of family members, other children at school, overly-curious strangers, co-workers and people in the community-at-large. Such encounters with insensitivity were intermingled with the complexities of the mixed heritage experience, marked by liminality, that cultivated broader perspectives on the issue of racial and/or cultural heritage than would otherwise be required. Rather than allowing this inescapable reality to limit their lives and identities, however, such complexities served instead to construct and strengthen identities grounded in the celebration of mixed heritage identity. Throughout their lives, using different strategies for different situations, our informants demonstrated creative agency as they intentionally and skillfully maneuvered a world that sometimes rendered them invisible or problematic. The following paragraphs provide a more detailed explanation of these three interconnected commonalities (emergent themes) as described and lived by our informants. A more in-depth discussion of our informants' creative use of agency follows in the subsequent discussion of our proposed dynamic agency model of mixed heritage identity construction.

Alienation. As outlined earlier in this study, the sometimes mortal wounds of existing cultural models, such as racism and sexism, weighed heavily in the lived experiences of our mixed heritage informants. While the weight of these cultural models is also shared by the members of most "monoracial" minority groups in

the United States, the lives of our informants were further challenged by existing societal norms and expectations within and between their respective, multiple heritage groups. As their emic voices reflect in the following paragraphs, our informants expressed great clarity about emotional pain as well as the residual impact of these alienating experiences. As children, informants were able to isolate particular family events or comments overheard, sometimes unintentionally but more often than not with strong intent, that served as eventual catalysts for their mixed heritage identity construction. DaCosta (2007) notes that such interactions within the racial divisions of family relationships are a central feature of a common multiracial experience. As illustrated in the comments below, young informants recall the frequent cultural insensitivity they experienced as mixed heritage children living within the multiple and often opposing realities of their respective dual heritage family cultures. In the first example, a young female informant describes the anger and frustration she experienced when relatives from both her Black father's family and her Japanese American mother's family would use mainstream cultural stereotypes to comment on her dancing prowess, hair and general physical appearance. Her father's family thought she was too Japanese and her mother's family thought she was too Black, but her lived reality was neither *and* both. In the second example, another young female informant of mixed White and Japanese American heritage describes the alienation she experienced at the hands of seemingly well-intentioned White grandparents as they privileged her "White" appearance over the darker phenotype of her two siblings. To make matters worse, the racial privilege she experienced at home was further juxtaposed against the racial ostracism she encountered at school when other children referred to her as a "Chinaman." In the final example, a male informant of mixed Mexican American and Irish American heritage expresses his sense of cultural and spatial limbo as he distances himself from his Mexican American heritage yet is unable to fully connect to his Irish American heritage due to a personal family history that has fostered negativity and isolation.

...I do remember incidents that stick in my mind and most of them were not that good. For example, I remember being at a family function on my mother's side [Japanese American] where I was dancing with my Japanese American cousins. We were all having a great time playing around and dancing and eating until I overheard a comment from one of my aunts. She said it was obvious where I got my dancing genes—from my Black [father's] blood. Now that I look back on it, I realize that she probably didn't even realize that her statement was racist or anything, but I sure was pissed when I heard it. My mother and my father were upset too, but it was just one more example of how I did not fit in there. And my father's family wasn't any better. Always talking about my hair and my "funny" looks. They thought I was too Japanese—even my Dad...*(African American-Japanese American female informant, age 19)*

I experienced a lot of racism [when I was a child]. Many children called me horrible names like "Chinaman" because I looked a little different. I sure felt different. I was different. My sister and my brother [names omitted] were treated even worse. My grandparents constantly reminded me that I was the lucky one because I looked White. My poor sister was a China doll and my poor brother was too dark too—he looked like a Hawaiian. My [White] grandparents made me feel awful, terrible almost every day. I didn't realize it at the time, but they were the worst of all racists. My parents got married in the 1950s. I couldn't understand how it happened in the first place. I remember looking at my parent's wedding album and remembering how miserable my grandparents looked in the all the pictures. *(European American-Japanese American female informant, age 29)*

I don't identify with my Mexican heritage because my dad was so vile, so filthy...I don't want to be reminded of him and his vileness. That's it. That's why I have not identified with my Mexican part. And as to my mother's Irish heritage, how important was Mom

in my immediate family? My dad belittled everything about her. Everything. He extinguished my mom's existence. How could I identify with her Irish culture in that context? He obliterated her ethnicity with his constant criticism of her and her family.

(Mexican American-Irish American female informant, age 36)

In addition to the alienation our mixed heritage informants experienced within their respective family structures, they were also targeted and harassed by other children who lived in their neighborhoods or attended the same schools. As exemplified by the following informant comments, it is apparent how strongly the cultural models discussed above have been internalized even by children and young adults who practice their tenets but who may not fully understand the ironic fallacies embedded within such belief systems. The following two female informants talk about their respective experiences in a university student organization and a personal relationship with a young "monoracial" man. In both cases, these mixed heritage informants faced tense situations in which their (racial group) loyalties were questioned or their personal relationship was jeopardized because of the internalized cultural models embraced by the Japanese American student organization members or the boyfriend's "monoracial" White mother. Since both Japanese Americans and Italian Americans have been marginalized in mainstream U.S. culture at different times throughout history and still today, there is genuine irony in the positions assumed by both the student organization and the boyfriend's mother in this case. Perhaps what is more amazing, at least in the case of the mixed heritage student, is that she was able to exercise agency so creatively and independently even in the face of such abject race-based discrimination.

I have just entered adulthood, so I can't really say except for my experiences so far at [name of university omitted]. I joined this student club called Tomodachi – that means "friend" in Japanese – and I thought it was great because I was making all these new friends. One time, however, I overheard two of the JA's [Japanese Americans] talking about me.

It was club election time and these two JA girls were questioning my ability to be in a leadership position for the organization because my loyalties would be "questionable." I quit that club after that and I didn't really fit in with the Black student groups either. People are so ignorant. It is their loss anyway.
(African American-Japanese American female informant, age 19)

Oh yeah, I remember one other significant experience during my childhood. I was a senior in high school. I had just received my driver's license and wanted to celebrate with my [White] boyfriend. Before that day, I had never met his mother. I had only talked with her on the telephone. She was always very pleasant on the telephone, but that all changed when I showed up at their house. His mother took one look at me and slammed the door in my face. I stood there for almost 15 minutes before I could move. She screamed that my boyfriend was not at home, but she would not open the door. Finally, I returned home. I was hurt and exhausted and depressed. Later that evening, I got a call from my boyfriend. He was at the police station. He got into a huge fight with his mother about me and she called the police on him. I guess she expected a pretty, blonde, blue-eyed girl and was shocked beyond belief when a JAP came to her door. And get this, she was Italian! He and I continued to date for almost six more months, but I guess his mother wore him down in the end. It certainly made me think about who I was and where I really belonged.
(European American-Japanese American female informant, age 29)

Frequent questions about heritage from co-workers or other people in the community-at-large, most typically presented as a variation of the ubiquitous "what are you?" question, continued to provide alienating experiences in the workplace or elsewhere for our mixed heritage informants. After experiencing numerous incidents of alienation throughout their respective childhoods, most of our informants had already developed sophisticated defense mechanisms to

address such questions with steel resolve as exemplified by the following informant's comments and experiences. What is also apparent in the following comments is the remarkable resilience informants exhibit as they construct their respective mixed heritage identities. In each of the following cases, the informants point indirectly or directly to a learned ability to either ignore or to pity the inability to understand their mixed heritage existence. By co-opting numerous experiences of alienation and using them as a springboard for positive identity construction and re-construction, these mixed heritage informants once again displayed creative agency to emerge victorious against the oppressive dominance of existing cultural models as they are internalized by family members, children, co-workers, and the community-at-large.

... most people think I am either Mexican or Italian, and Mexicans think I am Mexican...99% of the time. For example, Mexicans who don't know me immediately talk to me in Spanish, and when I don't speak to them in Spanish, they say, "You're Mexican aren't you? Why don't you speak Spanish?" Not all say this, but some do. Some show anger that I am Mexican and don't have dark skin. Some White people show shock to think I am Mexican. . . . "Where did you get a name like [name omitted]? I say I got it from my dad. . . . When I worked in a retail store a few years ago, I was clocking out and a stock worker named Julio was clocking out at the same time. When he saw my last name on my time card, he looked shocked and asked "Why don't you have dark skin?" He was visibly bothered. He then poked my forearm about five times saying "Why are you so white?" I said, "It is really OK, Julio, my mom is Irish and my dad is Mexican, and my Mexican grandmother was white-skinned too. And looking at him closely in the eyes, I said again "It is really OK, Julio" and then he calmed down. Yes, I get a lot of weird reactions. (*Mexican-Irish-Indian male informant, age 34*)

[People define my ethnicity] incorrectly most of the time. I get tired of it too. I get tired of

hearing "What are you?" I think most of the time people assume I am Black. Then, they really get confused when they see my Chinese American husband. They probably think—what is going on here? Now, wait a minute, is she Black or something else altogether. It just gets tiring, so I try to ignore it most of the time...The constant stares from other people. The stares and the questioning. People just can't seem to deal with my reality. (*African American-Japanese American female informant, age 33*)

I was born in Peru, but my family moved to the United States when I was three. My little sister was born here in the States...We used to go back and forth to Peru (to visit family on both sides) and China/Hong Kong (to visit my Dad's family). . . . I remember once when we were returning from a visit to China and we had to go through U.S. Customs. My sister had a U.S. passport, my dad had a Portuguese passport from Macau, and mother and I had Peruvian passports. . . . They really hassled us. They just couldn't deal with the fact that we were all one happy family. (*Peruvian [Afro-Latino descent]-Chinese-German-Portuguese female informant, 23 years old*)

It seems that there are more challenges in the sense that making people realize that you are not like them like when checking more than one race [on a standardized form]. I would check all that apply, but most people would still just choose one of them. Society sees in monotone, but I am not monotone. I can't be just one single race. I can't separate that inside of myself or mentally. I was raised to embrace all of them not any single one of them. There is nothing that I don't like about being Afroasian or mixed race. It is only other people that just don't get it. (*Canadian Scottish Irish-Japanese-African American-Native American second-generation mixed heritage male informant, 17 years old*)

Complexity. While mixed heritage informants often expressed frustration and resignation about the cultural oppression they frequently encountered, they also revealed high levels of

awareness and unusual clarity about the meaning and complexity of their mixed heritage existence. During interviews with informants, they divulged a deep understanding of the metaphysical dilemma their mixed heritage existence conveys to a society so deeply embedded with pervasive, monoracial cultural models and their accompanying baggage. While informants described lived experiences marked by liminality with regard to their multiple heritages, they also acknowledged strength rather than confusion in this position. Furthermore, as they constructed their identities around this position of strength, they actively called into question the existing cultural models and the many ways they are manifested in their daily lives and in their interactions with other people. Social scientists who study the mixed heritage experience also acknowledge this phenomenon in their numerous discussions of how the growing mixed heritage population challenges existing racial cultural models and ideology in the United States (Root 1992, 1996, 2003; Zack 1995; Williams 1996; Leong 1997; Williams-Leon and Nakashima 2001; Winters and DeBose 2003; Lee and Bean 2004; Sunderland 2004; Lezerette 2006; DaCosta 2007). As noted in the informant comments below, complexity (like alienation) has been embraced in a positive manner to inform the process of mixed heritage identity construction and re-construction. From the perspective of our mixed heritage informants, it is other people who have the problem—not them. One young male informant adeptly describes the rich range of experiences he encounters as he travels to the homes of different family members and embraces the rich immersion of food, aesthetics and experiences. Employing creative agency, he then uses these rich experiences to navigate the sometimes alienating and perpetually complex geographies of his mixed heritage existence. One female informant discusses the paradox of race as a cultural model in the United States and how it differs from her more complex reality of being a multinational and multiracial woman. This added level of complexity, a multinational gaze, triggers her need to question her complex identity within a broader context. Another female informant, a university student, reflects somewhat comically upon the “schizo-

phrenia” her parents often fostered as she was growing up, all the while exercising agency by claiming a more complex identity—one that was different from the racial identity of either of her parents.

Only my mother and then the rest of my extended family played a part [in the development of my ethnic identity]. My Aunt's [name omitted] house has a lot of Japanese things but it is very different from my mother's version of Japanese and then going to Japan and then going to Alabama to meet other relatives was even more different. All these different family members on both sides living in different places has really exposed me to my ethnic identity—all of it. Absorbing these experiences in different places increased and strengthened my personal ethnic identity. When I went to Alabama to visit African American relatives, I came back with corn-rowed hair. My cousin [name omitted] cooked grits and collard greens and all that Southern Black food. It was delicious and was a different experience from what I grew up with. Mom cooks all that Japanese food but she can't cook that Southern stuff. I learned a lot. (*Canadian Scottish Irish-Japanese-African American-Native American second-generation mixed heritage male informant, 17 years old*)

... arriving at this label [Afroasian] has been an evolution—I can't even say when it began. My first recollection is that you deal with the labels given to you—like hypodescent which would say I am African American. When I was growing up it was “Black.” That was the label and I was at a level of awareness that didn't allow me to critically question the label given to me. I was three when I came to the U.S. from Japan so my entire socialization and education process was in the United States. But, it wasn't that simple for me. There were a lot of questions that caused me to self-reflect. For one thing, I lived in a military town and all of my friends were half American and half something else. I think that was critical because it raised my questions to a nation-state level not a race level. . .

. I couldn't be just African American because I had a broader context, at a nation-state level of thinking. So, the mere fact that my mother was a Japanese national and most of my friends had mothers who were Italian, German, Korean, or Japanese. . . . "Other" was not about being Black, it was about being a "foreigner" in this post-World War II, post-Korean War era. . . . So my identity was formed around being Japanese and American. Being African American in part was secondary to that issue (*Japanese-African American-Native American female informant, age 46*)

Whenever I made a major accomplishment in school, my [Japanese American] mother would be telling me to be humble and my [African American] father would be telling me to be proud and loud and proclaim it to the world. It is a wonder that I didn't end up being schizophrenic or something. Whatever the case, I always knew I was different. I am not Black and I am not Japanese American. I am both—a different category altogether. (*African American-Japanese American female informant, age 19*)

As revealed through the emic voices of these informants, they consciously acknowledge and embrace the liminal complexity of their mixed heritage identities while using creative agency to strategically negotiate and create a malleable social space to call their own. Through a diversity of experiences, these informants deliberately and continuously embrace, reject, construct, reexamine, and reconstruct their identities in a perpetual and non-linear fashion. The racial script of endless "what are you?" encounters becomes the theatrical stage for identity-shaping performances that transforms the mixed heritage experiences of alienation and complexity into those that fortify a stronger sense of mixed heritage identity (Williams 1996). By negotiating the social space of this performance through numerous creative forms of agency, our mixed heritage informants performed what Valverde (2001) referred to as a negotiation of identities by doing the "mixed-race dance." With each new experience, mixed heritage persons perform a

social dance around the edges of a slowly shifting monoracial and monocultural world that fails to acknowledge the reality of their existence. And yet, with each personal declaration of mixed heritage identity and with each refusal to be categorized by the labels of pre-existing categories (acts we refer to as creative agency), these dynamic "edge dancers" push the reluctant boundaries of existing cultural models beyond their rigid comfort zones and call to question the very foundations upon which they exist. In doing so, they slowly but surely transform U.S. society and shift the binary Black-White boundaries of race and identity as we have known it into a new and hybrid vision of their own—one that acknowledges and embraces their existence within a new dialogue of racial and cultural identities. This startling phenomenon exemplifies the process of cultural change and transculturalization at its contemporary best.

Celebration. While acknowledging the incapable reality of existing cultural models and how the members of a society internalize them, the mixed heritage informants in this study moved beyond such barriers and expressed not only an acceptance, but also a celebration of their multiple heritages. Perhaps sustained by their trademark resilience, informants fused the inherent pain of alienation with the social reality of their respective complex backgrounds to celebrate their mixed heritage identities through innovative family rituals, counter-cultural perspectives on the meaning of racial identity and added value insights in relationships and the workplace. Repeatedly, informants described how their mixed heritage gave them more love, more holidays, more diversity of experiences and more fun. One female informant joyfully describes the recent discovery of the "magic" of her Irish American heritage—a heritage that had been suppressed by her Mexican American father throughout her childhood. Another female informant talks about the "chameleon effect" and how she is able to move creatively in and out of her Japanese and Italian American cultures with considerable ease and grace. Several informants talk about how "special" they feel as mixed heritage individuals and how their complex life experiences have fostered a heightened sensitivity toward their own identities and the

identities and concerns of others. As all of the informant comments below point out, mixed heritage informants were able to identify and seize the cultural power of the mixed heritage experience to dynamically frame the construction and re-construction of their own identities. The creative forms of agency they employed throughout the framing and re-framing process were as varied as their respective heritages would suggest. Nonetheless, the resulting celebration of identity in turn served to challenge once again the rigidity of existing cultural models in ways yet to be understood or explored at length.

It's great [being Afro-Japanese]. It's like a celebration most of the time. I get more holidays, more presents, more love, more culture, more everything just about. (*African American-Japanese American female informant, age 19*)

A part of me really likes being mixed. It gives me a foothold on different perspectives. The best part is that I know there is no right way to be. There are many very legitimate ways of being. . . . Even though its frustrating sometimes, I guess it is nice to be unique. I am different. That makes me special. It also makes me more sensitive about identity issues when I deal with my social work clients. (*Japanese-Italian American female informant, age 42*)

As a mixed person, I'm not completely immersed in either ethnicity...like, when we have Christmas and other family parties, there are so many races in the family. It is not a Jewish or Irish thing—it is a big bowl of rich diversity. . . . (*Israeli-Jewish American-Irish American-Mexican American male informant, age 23*)

I get to be different, unique. Like when people ask me what I am, that always stands out. Even my best friends . . . still ask me. It makes me different. At my school, there is a group called Racial Harmony for students that is set up by the high school. (Last year the subgroups were Latino, Black, White, Middle Eastern, and Asian . . . this year there is a multiracial group so that made me happy).

We get together to discuss what it means to be in an ethnic group but we [multiracials] were the only group that could really illustrate the true notion of racial harmony so it made me feel special. For example, I got to make a special connection with a teacher because I found out her middle name was Japanese and she has Japanese heritage. It is great to be Afroasian. (*African American-Japanese American female informant, age 19*)

What I like most about my life as a Hapa [mixed race Asian] is that I am able to be true to my ethnic identity, and not have to pass for a monorace just to make binary thinkers happy. I have to be me . . . (*Japanese-African American-Native American female informant, age 44*)

I now embrace my Irish heritage. I am re-learning, in my current stage of recovery. I am now identifying with something that was always really there..and that was good. He [my Mexican father] verbally assaulted my mom's family—all that was said about the family was as if it was a dirty word. The Irish was completely obliterated, so I didn't know the Irish was there until I found Me. . . . I like how successful my life is becoming . . . how successful my magic is . . . "thank you fairies!" . . . ha ha . . . That's all I can say, that's from the Irish. I'm having a lot of fun working with my Celtic heritage. For the past few years . . . I am having fun for the first time in my life. (*Mexican American- Irish American female informant, age 36*)

Being Eurasian has a definite impact on my friendships. I tend to lean toward open-minded, but marginal people. Something about my friends is always different from the norm. I feel comfortable with them, but I am also very flexible. I have what I call the "chameleon effect." I can act very Japanese with Japanese. I am always a little more Japanese in Little Tokyo. When I am around Whites, I can be a little more White and less Japanese. I can change according to the environment, because I have always had to do so. (*Japanese-Italian American female informant, age 42*)

A Dynamic, Emic Agency Model for Mixed Heritage Identity Construction

As demonstrated in the lived experiences of these “edge dancers,” the three interconnected commonalities of alienation, complexity and celebration guide new experiences throughout their lives and provide repeated opportunities for identity construction and re-construction. The perpetual interplay between lived experiences and existing cultural models also reveals high degrees of creative agency among our mixed heritage informants. As noted by Williams (1996:208), they are not mere receivers of the exclusionary social messages they receive—they “get race done unto them,” but they “do race” as well. Additionally, there is a growing body of social scientific research that shows mixed heritage individuals employ innovative coping strategies, what we refer to in our study as “creative agency,” to negotiate their unique social spaces (Root 1992, 1996, 2003; Comas-Díaz 1994; Leverette 1996; Williams 1996; Leong 1997; Winters and DeBose 2003; Sunderland 2004). As illustrated by the emic insights of our mixed heritage informants, these creative responses (agency) empower them to forge identities of their own design that were notably reflexive, non-linear and fluid in nature.

As the following comments demonstrate, the informants in this study describe incidences of “playing the system” with regard to racial categories on standardized forms, linguistic code-switching to take advantage of different ethnic encounters, creative counter-cultural labels for themselves that empower them to “own” their respective identities, and sometimes open recognition of the cultural power and enlightened understanding they possess because of their lifelong experiences as “edge dancers.” With regard to racial categories on standardized forms, several informants are quoted as displaying an open recognition of the advantages and disadvantages of racial categorization, as well as a well-informed understanding of how or why such categories were used in a particular context. On applications for employment, university admission or housing loans, when these informants were forced to “please check only one box,” they either strategically chose the most favorable racial category (in their opinion) or

wrote in an answer of their choice. As noted in one of following quotes, one young male informant demonstrated agency by creating his own mixed heritage label and sharing it with his ethnically diverse group of friends. In fact, quite a few of the informants in our study had chosen unique labels to identify their mixed heritage on their own terms (see Table 1). And, another male informant described his recent realization that being mixed was no longer odd—it was cool and even awesome. Like other informants, he also described how his mixed heritage experiences had fostered a heightened sensitivity towards others since, every day, he “walks a mile in a lot of different shoes.”

Oh, I check the—if the boxes force you to check only one—as many forms do—honestly, I analyze the form for the rationale for asking the question. I then answer in the way that serves me in the most advantageous way. I figure if they are going to use this data to their advantage then I will use it to my advantage. Recently, my husband and I re-financed our home to take advantage of the lower interest rates. One of the questions on the form . . . asked you to identify your racial category. And...the premise was the federal government was investigating discrimination in loan practices. Well, I am pretty well read on issues like that, and so on that form I checked African American. I am playing the system because it plays me. If I know on a form they are looking at discrimination against Asians, I check Asian. And I have no moral dilemma in doing this because I feel I pay the dues of being both African American and Asian and so I should also reap the benefits. (*Japanese-African American-Native American female informant, age 46*)

I check Hispanic [on standardized forms]. . . . I know how the system works. To be female and Hispanic may allow me to move up the ladder, so I check that box. For example, at my university [name of university omitted], they wanted me—a female Hispanic Chemistry major. I know how the system works and I can use it to benefit me. I check it because it looks good. As to posing a dilemma? Absolutely not!...It works for me and it works for the system—I was a good catch! (*Mexican American-Irish American female informant, age 36*)

I check Native American because . . . well (1) it may be a preferential factor if I am applying for admission or employment . . . it is usually optimal—may work to my favor and (2) it provides data about who is in their pool of applicants—I think there is value to that . . . the only dilemma is that it doesn't adequately represent who I am . . . by checking that little box. The person reading it may think I was raised on a reservation . . . that is a stereotype that will come to mind—I'm sure! (*Native American-Irish American female informant, age 33*)

[On standardized forms] it matters what mood I am in. I probably check "other" more and write in Mexican-Irish-Indian. Sometimes I have put "Hispanic" and sometimes "Caucasian" [White] because I am very light skinned. But with a name like [Hispanic surname omitted], people automatically classify me incorrectly. (*Mexican-Irish-Indian male informant, age 34*)

Living in Los Angeles always presented different types of opportunities. Whenever I went to get my car fixed or I ran into the janitors in my building, I always spoke Spanish because I didn't want them to think I was whitewashed. It always seemed to help the atmosphere. I also worked as a hostess in a Japanese restaurant for almost seven years while I finished my bachelors and masters degrees at [name of university omitted]. I always spoke English at that place. I knew that if I spoke Japanese, the Japanese men would treat me differently—in a more degrading manner. (*Columbian-Japanese female informant, 25 years old*)

. . . people usually identify me incorrectly. Yeah, they usually think I am Thai or sometimes Hawaiian or Pilipino. There was a teacher in 6th grade that kept asking me if I was Thai. Every time he saw me, he would ask me the same question over and over again. It was frustrating, but it was sad in a way. He was very old and a very odd guy anyway. I felt sorry for him sometimes, but he finally gave up asking. . . . I tell everyone that I am Afrochapanesitive and they say "Huh?" Sometimes, I explain the whole thing, but only if I feel like it. Let them figure it out. It's not my problem—it's theirs. My friends don't

care—they are all over the map, like Greekipino [Greek and Pilipino], African American, White, Afroswede [African American and Swedish], Mexican American, Chinese American, Japanese American, Hapa [mixed race Asian]. Who cares! They are my friends. We don't see things that way. We don't understand what the big deal is anyway. (*Chinese American-Japanese-African American-Native American, second generation mixed heritage male informant, 12 years old*)

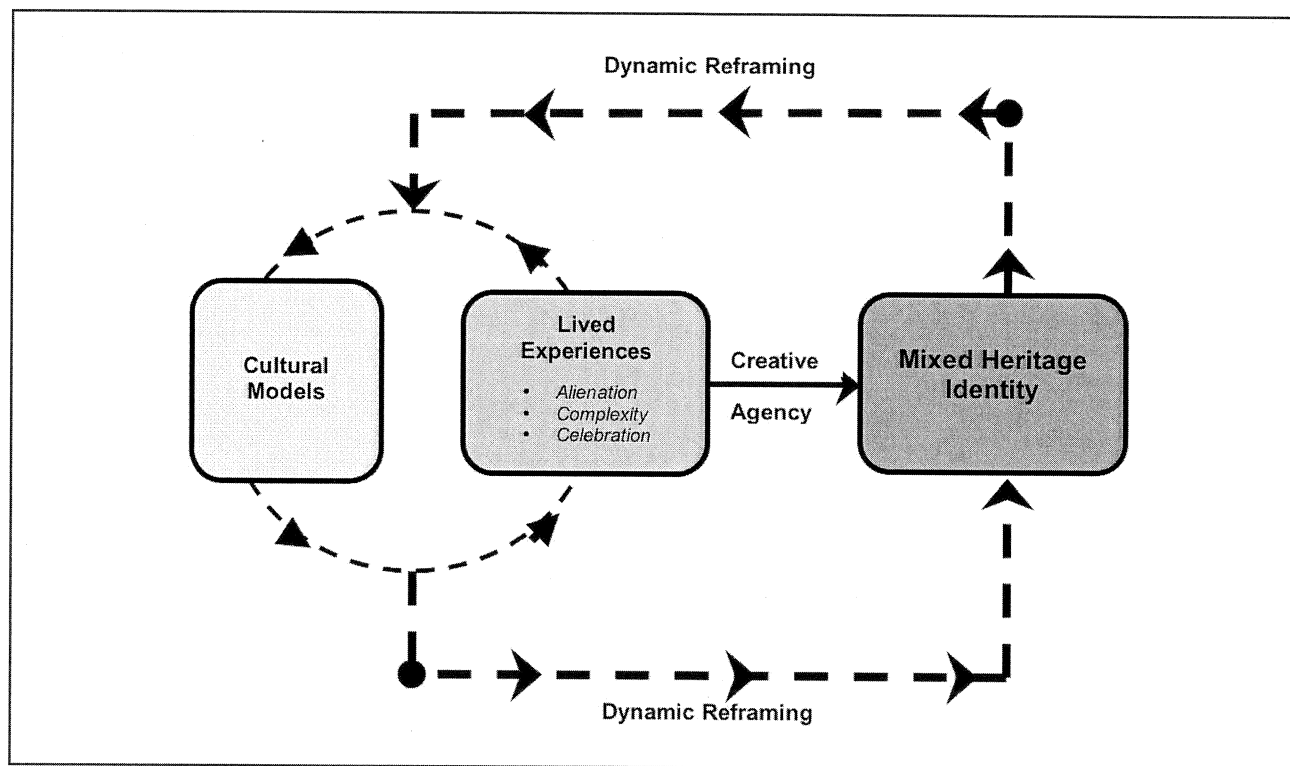
When I was in 10th grade, all of the sudden I realized that being mixed was no longer odd; it was cool. All of the sudden, I was unique, interesting, awesome even. It was a topic for party conversation. Since then, I definitely view it [my mixed heritage] as an asset. Even the bad memories are good ones because they help me to maintain perspective and use my knowledge to my advantage. I apply it to other areas such as homosexuality and gay-bashing or racial bias and stereotyping—it's stupid. It hurts good people and it's stupid. Because of my earlier life experiences [with being multiracial], I can always relate on some level with these other issues. My experiences give me a fresh and unique perspective on life and people. If I didn't have them, I would not have the ability to see or understand so many things the way I do. . . . Everyday, I walk a mile in a lot of different shoes. (*Canadian Scottish Irish-Japanese-African American-Native American second generation mixed heritage male informant, 23 years old*)

In summary, as noted in the above informant comments and depicted graphically in Figure 1, new experiences and relationships throughout life become transformative opportunities to dynamically re-frame earlier perspectives and opinions, as well as to re-construct the respective mixed heritage identities of informants accordingly. The dynamic nature of this identity construction process not only highlights the trademark resilience of these informants in their dance through life, but also points to the invisible power of this process to create changes in the very cultural models that challenge the mixed heritage lived experience in the first place. And

equally important, unlike many of the earlier social-psychological models of racial identity development, our dynamic, emic agency model emphasizes a fluid mixed heritage identity that is perpetually negotiated and re-negotiated over the span of a lifetime in the context of existing cultural models. However, this model is also in direct opposition to those models when they do

not yield expected or desired results. As our diverse group of “edge dancers” illustrate so creatively, the dance of identity construction is neither linear nor static. It is a fluid, multidirectional, and dynamic dance marked by the promising possibilities of cultural change at the individual (micro), group (meso) and cultural (macro) levels.

Figure 1: Dynamic, Emic Agency Model of Mixed Heritage Identity Construction



Edge Dancers: Expanding our Understanding of Transculturalization

Like Zachary’s (2000) “new cosmopolitans,” the “edge dancers” in our study construct and re-construct themselves throughout their lives, intentionally and adeptly manipulating what Zachary refers to as their “identity toolbox.” Armed with their trademark resilience and their enlightened understanding of the hybrid world in which we all now live, the “edge dancers” in this study use these valuable social tools to measure, define, reinvent and reframe themselves, all the while maintaining stable, countercultural identities that defy mainstream categorization. The creative strategies they employed, what we refer to as “agency” (see Figure 1), reveal some of the underlying mechanisms of how transculturaliza-

tion takes place (Hallowell 1967b). In this particular case, as our “edge dancers” construct themselves in the process of “owning” their identities, they also consciously and subconsciously push the boundaries of existing “racial” categories beyond their comfort zone. Even within their own families, “edge dancers” cause a visual and metaphysical disruption of categorization. Family members who are bound to the narrow vision of prevailing racist ideology are forced, sometimes reluctantly and subconsciously, to re-think the meaning and implications of their mixed heritage family members. Even when they choose the path of denial, monoracial family members may be verbally and visually assaulted by the celebration of identity their familial “edge dancers” may display.

In a similar, but perhaps less intimate manner, “edge dancers” also cause disruption in the world outside of their respective family homes. At school, at work and at play their mere presence is cause enough to garner constant curiosity, occasional hostility, and the never-ending procession of “what are you” questions. In these inappropriate and often insensitive questions and behaviors, we see subconscious boundary-maintenance at its best. Needless to say, at least in this case, the boundary that is under threat is that of “race” as it is defined by the mainstream culture. Seemingly innocent social inquiries about perceived mixed heritage, then, can be viewed in a different light as the cumulative discomfort of culture change at the meso-level, as well as the threat of what that could mean when there is a critical mass. This perceived threat, already identified as a contemporary reality, drags mainstream U.S. culture and its accompanying baggage of cultural models to the center of an inescapable cultural crossroads (Krebs 1999, Zachary 2000, DaCosta 2007). And, as a result, the racist ideologies of hypodescent, the “one-drop” rule, and the binary Black/White divide are destabilized, uprooted and opened up for contemporary revision through a new and hybrid lens.

The opportunity for cultural change cannot be underestimated, nor can the significant contribution of mixed heritage individuals and communities. The “edge dancers” in this study not only embody the process of transculturalization itself, but they also expand this notion into the previously unexplored realm of mixed heritage individuals, one of the primary social products of the very “transculturalites” who have been examined in previous studies of transculturalization (Hallowell 1967b). Future studies of transculturalization could further explore the creative agency and strategic negotiation of social identities and spaces that “edge dancers,” unlike their typically monoracial parents, are born to live. By doing so, we can begin to understand the dynamic process of identity construction and reconstruction as it impacts not only the framing of individual identities for “edge dancers,” but also as it impacts the framing of existing cultural models in mainstream U.S. culture.

Edge Dancers: Implications for Public Policy and Practice in Health and Human Services

In addition to providing a previously unexplored gaze into the study of cultural change and transculturalization in the context of the growing mixed heritage community, our study has significant implications for public policy and practice in health and human services. Organizations that provide such services *de facto* implement and embrace existing cultural systems that influence the identity construction process of mixed heritage individuals. Through the emic voices of the “edge dancers” in this study, for example, we identified the common experiences of alienation, complexity and celebration. This wide continuum of experiences and emotions presents many opportunities for stress that can adversely impact the health and longevity of mixed heritage individuals as they perform the perpetual social dance of identity construction.

While public policy and practice in health care impacts the lives of all people, regardless of race or ethnicity, it has been noted that it disproportionately and adversely impacts the lives of racial and ethnic minority groups in the United States (Kronenfeld 2008, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2008, Williams 2007). Health care disparities between the White population and various racial and ethnic minorities in the United States include, but are not limited to critical issues such as access to health care services, quality of health care, lack of health care insurance, lack of childhood vaccinations, lack of immunizations in general and pervasive inequalities in the diagnosis and treatment of chronic and communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, heart disease, asthma, diabetes and AIDS. The research on health care disparities is extensive and fortunately, has now moved beyond the mere documentation of health care disparities to examine the underlying mechanisms and possible interventions to reduce or eliminate them (Nerenz et al. 2006). The importance of policy and practice to address the persistent challenge of racial and ethnic disparity in health care cannot be understated. However, it is also important to collect accurate racial and ethnic data, with all of its inherent flaws, in

order to design and test interventions that will work effectively and in a culturally competent manner (Nerenz et al. 2006).

While health care organizations and providers can certainly collect primary data on their own, much of what is done to design and test possible health care interventions utilizes secondary data from the U.S. Census Bureau. And, since the racial and ethnic categories that are used to collect data for the U.S. Census reflect the prevailing standard of perceived monoracial categories, mixed heritage individuals are subsequently lost in the analysis and design of possible interventions (Tashiro 2001, 2003, 2005). Equally important, as noted by Tashiro (2005), uncritical use of race as a variable in health disparities research can inadvertently reinforce the prevailing ideology of race as a biological construct, when current research has established that race is a socially constructed construct that has changed considerably over time. For example, it is important to remember that existing monoracial categories used by the U.S. Census are in fact multiracial categories themselves since many White/European Americans, Black/African Americans, Native Americans, and Americans of Hispanic origin have mixed race ancestries. The socio-political process that has categorized people into monoracial groups is rarely acknowledged, but important to emphasize since it is a critical component of the ideology of race in the United States and the power relations that ideology is designed to maintain (Tashiro 2005).

It is clear that the use of race and ethnicity when examining health care disparities is problematic. Emerging research in this area also strongly emphasizes the social causes for these disparities rather than biological or genetic ones (Tashiro 2005). Social factors such as emotional stress, geographical context and socioeconomic status, among others, may lie at the very root of these ongoing disparities. Tashiro's (2001) personal account and reflections on being measured for bone density, a factor closely associated with the disease of osteoporosis, carefully considers the issue of baseline bone density scans and the race-based standards that compared her test results with those of other Asian American women. In this case, both her referring Asian

American physician and her attending Asian American nurse visually identified her as Asian American even after she declared the fact that she is half White. Her question in this situation was, "Shouldn't you also analyze the results by averaging them [Asian American and White baseline standards]?" (Tashiro 2001:174). Needless to say, her comments were ignored and her test results were compromised accordingly.

On a different health care issue, and one that does possess a genetic factor, mixed heritage identity is critical in the recruitment of bone marrow donors for mixed heritage patients with leukemia, lymphoma, and other blood-related diseases (Horiuchi 2009, Landro 2009). For such diseases, finding a donor that closely matches the "race" of the patient reduces the risk of the donor and recipient cells attacking each other, thereby allowing the patient to survive the disease. Mixed heritage patients often have complex and uncommon genetic profiles that make it difficult to find acceptable donors. The National Marrow Donor Program, assisted significantly by the Mavin Foundation's MatchMaker program, has been trying diligently to diversify their donor base. To date, however, only three per cent of their donors are mixed race or mixed heritage (National Marrow Donor Program 2009, Mavin Foundation 2009).

In both the routine case of a baseline bone density test and the more critical case of finding a matching bone marrow donor, the salience of mixed race or mixed heritage identity looms large. The mixed heritage informants in our study described numerous incidents of alienation and complexity that may contribute to fluctuating periods of emotional stress tempered by the celebration and positive evolution of their mixed heritage identities. While the informants in our study openly acknowledge these lived experiences, they are rarely incorporated into health care policy or practice. Instead, they are more typically subsumed under the statistical umbrella of monoracial categorization that ignores the complex reality of the mixed heritage experience and relies upon diagnosis and treatment procedures developed for "monoracial" persons. Health care organizations and providers who already attempt to identify the race of patients through first or second-hand visual

assessments of phenotype could instead request self-identification from patients so that “race” could be more accurately assessed for diagnosis and treatment purposes. Indeed, health care professionals should be constantly vigilant about assumptions based upon the appearance of a patient (Tashiro 2003). In service encounters such as these, an error on the part of the health care professional could lead them to rule out important risk factors or to not consider testing for genetically-bounded diseases such as Tay Sachs Syndrome or sickle cell anemia. The results could potentially be life-threatening for the respective patients. In addition to avoiding assumptions based upon phenotype, Ahmann (2005) recommends that health care professionals learn to be more sensitive about family diversity. When a child and parent do not appear to belong to the same race visually, for example, culturally competent health care professionals should not ask insensitive questions regarding “belongingness” that may cause unnecessary comfort for the families of mixed heritage individuals. The alienation expressed by the mixed heritage informants in our study, while ultimately resulting in a process of positive identity construction, is clearly a source of stress that one would hope to avoid in a professional health care setting. Finally, culturally competent practice could include the availability of resource materials in the form of mixed heritage organizations, journal articles, books and other digital and printed resources to help mixed heritage individuals and their families find supportive connections and information within their respective communities (Ahmann 2005).

In addition to the practice-related implications of our study, public policy regarding health care issues should also begin to embrace the importance of a mixed heritage background to improve the quality of care, diagnosis and treatment for health care issues. Hopefully, such efforts would extend to the realm of clinical and epidemiological research much in the same way that recent research in that context has begun to incorporate the issue of gender. In doing so, medical researchers can not only begin to explore the implications of race upon health status, but also can begin to do so in ways that can more closely examine the complexities of race at the intersec-

tion of class, geography, poverty, diet, exercise, gender, sexual orientation and other possible related factors of stress. The practical implementation of such findings could improve the diagnosis and design of medical interventions, as well as the quality of health care for individuals of all races, including those of mixed heritage.

Conclusion

While previous research on persons of mixed heritage has begun to explore the complex realities of such individuals, the majority of this research has been limited to social-psychological approaches that serve primarily to illustrate the phases of identity development and the specific factors that contribute to these phases. There are notable exceptions to these approaches, however. For example, through extensive field work, Takada Rooks (2001) turns an anthropological lens upon history and community and how it impacts mixed heritage identity among multiracial Asians in Alaska. In addition, Williams-Leon and Nakashima's (2001) examination of the experiences of mixed heritage Asian Americans visibly moves the mixed heritage dialogue beyond the Black/White binary system that typically marks the discussion of race relations in the United States. And taking a critical look at multiracials and the redrawing of the color line in the United States, DaCosta (2007) provides an insightful perspective on the mixed heritage social movement and its powerful influence upon existing cultural models and ideologies on race.

In the current study, we offer an applied anthropological approach that fully embraces the insightful and prolific mixed heritage scholarship to date in the fields of social psychology, sociology and counseling. However, we also move beyond this foundation to address the process and role of transculturalization as it applies to a previously unexplored community—mixed heritage individuals. Through the emic voices of our mixed heritage informants, we identify the common life experiences of alienation, complexity and celebration that can encompass the lifetime of a mixed heritage person and do so in varying ways at different points in time. In our resulting dynamic, emic agency model we introduce the construct of “creative agency” and illustrate how mixed heritage individuals, as they perform their

perpetual and multidirectional “dance” of identity construction, visibly shift and change the seemingly rigid boundaries of race and ultimately power relations in mainstream U.S. culture (see Figure 1).

This contemporary example of cultural change at the meso/societal level and transculturalization at the micro/individual level expands our understanding of these important social and

cultural processes and offers the opportunity for future research to explore transculturalization in this and other cosmopolitan populations more closely. We also employ our dynamic, emic agency model to address the numerous and previously under-emphasized opportunities available for public policy and practice to expand the relevance of how and what we do in the realm of health and human services. As the population of mixed

Table 1 Informant Demographics

GENDER	AGE	MIXED HERITAGE BACKGROUND	SELF-DESIGNATED LABEL
Female	33	Native American, Irish American	Mixed
Female	26	Irish American, Italian American	Mixed
Female	36	Irish American, Mexican American	Mixed
Female	35	Irish American, Mexican American	Mixed
Female	22	Thai, Laotian American	Asian American
Female	19	West Indian, South Asian, Italian American, Native American	Mixed
Female	19	African American and Japanese American	Hapa or Afro-Japanese
Female	22	West Indian, South Asian, Italian American, Native American	Mixed
Female	23	Peruvian [Afro-Latino] and Chinese-German-Portuguese	Mixed
Female	25	Japanese and Columbian	Haafu
Female	29	White (WASP) and Japanese American	White or Other
Female	33	African American and Japanese American	Afro-Japanese
Female	42	Japanese and Italian American	Eurasian or Amerasian
Female	44	Japanese, African American, and Native American	Afroasian or Amerasian
Female	46	Japanese, African American, and Native American	Afroasian
Male	31	Native American, Irish American	Mixed
Male	12	Chinese American, Japanese, African American, Native American (Second generation mixed heritage)	Afrochapanesitive
Male	15	Chinese American, Japanese, African American, Native American (Second generation mixed heritage)	Asian
Male	23	Israeli, Jewish American, Irish American, Mexican American	Mixed, Middle Eastern or Other
Male	34	Mexican, Irish, Indian	American
Male	17, 23	Canadian Scottish Irish, Japanese, African American, Native American (Second generation mixed heritage)	Afroasian

heritage individuals continues to grow, health and human services practitioners will increasingly begin to encounter mixed heritage clients and families in search of a more complex understanding of cultural competence—one that respects their complex emotional and physical needs and one that no longer renders them invisible. This study of such “edge dancers” and the dynamic, emic agency model we propose is a first step toward helping both public policy makers and service providers expand the direction and scope of public policy, as well as practice in health and human services, in a culturally competent manner for the growing population of mixed heritage individuals and their families. ○

Notes:

1. H. Rika Houston is an Associate Professor of Marketing at California State University, Los Angeles. Her primary research interests are interdisciplinary critical studies of consumer culture that explore the intersection of gender, culture, and (bio) technology in global consumer culture and the global marketplace. She also conducts research in the areas of emerging markets; ethnoritual consumption; visual consumer culture; identity and consumption; and emerging families and mixed race identity in consumer culture. Her

applied public policy research examines the intersection of ethnicity, culture, gender and poverty in health care marketing and the consumption of health care services and products. She received her Ph.D. in Marketing from the University of California, Irvine in 1997. She can be reached by mail at the College of Business and Economics, Department of Marketing, California State University, Los Angeles, 5151 State University Drive, Los Angeles, CA 90032-8127, USA and by email at hhousto@calstatela.edu.

2. Mikel Hogan is a Professor of Anthropology and Human Services and the Chair of the Human Services Department at California State University, Fullerton. Her primary fields of research and practice are applied anthropology in health and education; pedagogy; mixed heritage identity; the four skills of cultural diversity competence; and the intersection of race, ethnic and gender relations in the United States. She received her Ph.D. in Social Science/Comparative Culture from the University of California, Irvine in 1985. She can be reached by mail at California State University, Fullerton, College of Health and Human Development, Department of Human Services, 800 North State Boulevard, Fullerton, CA 92831, USA and by email at mhogan@fullerton.edu.

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