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The Lines Between the Checkboxes : The Experiences of Racially Ambiguous People of Color

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THE LINES BETWEEN THE CHECKBOXES:

THE EXPERIENCES OF RACIALLY AMBIGUOUS PEOPLE OF COLOR

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ABSTRACT

THE LINES BETWEEN THE CHECKBOXES: THE EXPERIENCES OF RACIALLY AMBIGUOUS PEOPLE OF COLOR

By Tyce Nadrich

The influences of race on people's lived experiences are vast and enumerable. Despite advancements in multicultural counseling literature, the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color, or persons who do not align with preexisting ideas about race (Brown & Brown, 2004; James &Tucker, 2003; Young, Sanchez, & Wilton, 2013), are relatively unknown. Further, the racially ambiguous experience is often conflated with persons of mixed-race heritage (Young, Sanchez, & Wilton, 2013). The goal of this dissertation study was to understand the lived experiences of racially ambiguous people of color. Participants identifying as racially ambiguous were recruited to discuss their lived experiences. Grounded in Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Haskins & Singh, 2015), this phenomenological, qualitative study included two in-depth, semi-structured interviews. A cross section of 14 participants with varying ages, genders, racial compositions, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and cultures engaged in this study. Findings suggest that the construct of racial ambiguity is not confined to persons of mixed-race heritage, and racially ambiguous people of color have a unique lived experience. Participants identified being racially ambiguous resulted in a distinct understanding of race, varying interpersonal dynamics, and an emotional internal experience, affecting participants' sense of self, wellness, and belonging. Implications for counseling practice, counselor education and supervision, and future research were provided.

Keywords: racial ambiguity, racial categorization, racial identity, mental health

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the women that raised me, fostered me, guided me, loved me, held me, heard me, felt me, saw me, empowered me, challenged me, rebuilt me, and never gave up on me. Everything I am is because of you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

The Lines Between the Checkboxes: The Experiences of Racially Ambiguous People of Color

Chapter 1: Introduction

"Girl, you are so pretty. 'What are you?' The quintessential question for any tanned-skinned girl with soft, kinky curls, and a frizz that doesn't seem to quit. Because answering 'human' simply isn't enough for them. They can't handle my racially ambiguous figure. They itch to know just what I am."

Khalil and Jones, 2012

The above excerpt includes the opening lines of a poem performed by two self-identified racially ambiguous women. Throughout the 3-minute performance, they discussed receiving questions about their racial identity and emphasize the ubiquity of being asked "what are you?" They explain how people challenge their responses to questions about their racial identity, as people are often unsatisfied with their chosen racial or ethnic labels. They point to the multiple aspects contributing to their ambiguity, ranging from their appearance (e.g., hair texture, skin color) to the way they speak. They stated being viewed as a racial quandary and not as a whole person. They shared the social consequences of being racially ambiguous, including the myriad of stereotypes people project onto them and the intersection of their ambiguity and being women of color. They voiced their experiences as racially ambiguous women of color, an experience they believe is not understood or known broadly.

Racially ambiguous individuals, or people who do not phenotypically (i.e., biologically determined visible and observable attributes) align with others' preexisting ideas of race (Brown & Brown, 2004), are a population who are steadily growing (Funderburg, 2013; U.S. Census, 2012). However, little research exists exploring the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color.

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of the problem and the overarching research question. Then, I will discuss the significance of this study and the theoretical lens guiding the study. Finally, I will provide a roadmap of this study and a definition of key terms used herein.

Statement of the Problem

Counseling ethical codes emphasize the importance of understanding and respecting individuals' identities (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014). The ACA Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2015) focus on counselors understanding the relationship between clients' identities, worldview, attitudes, group status, and experiences, to provide best practices. This framework highlights the importance of understanding how clients' identities and worldviews are intertwined with their lived experiences and sociocultural contexts. Further, models such as RESPECTFUL (D'Andrea & Daniels, 2001; Neukrug, 2015) or ADDRESSING (Hays, 2016) use acronyms to encourage counselors to consider the many identities both they and their clients have, and how those identities affect everyone's lived experiences. Counselors using these models can examine the interplay between the identities we all possess and systems of power and privilege. However, the more complex individuals' identities are, the more unique their lived experience can become, especially within systems of power and privilege. Further, the complexity of people's identities is not merely additive, but intersectional. For example, Crenshaw (1989, 2014) discussed how the experiences of women of color are different from both White women and men of color. These differences are often accompanied by unique needs and experiences. Not exploring the intersectional needs and experiences of people's identities can result in a dereliction of specific populations. For example, the experiences of women of color were often unseen/unheard throughout both Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the

feminist movement (first- and second-wave feminism) during the last 1960s. Crenshaw (2014) described the aforementioned as an intersectional failure, or an oversight of this populations needs, and how the needs of distinct populations can be inadvertently missed, despite well-meaning intentions.

The United States (U.S.) government has a longstanding practice of enumerating and categorizing people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Since 1790, the U.S. census has consistently categorized people living within the U.S. by race, a socially and culturally constructed understanding of human differences based on physical features and assumptions about behaviors (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Categorization has continued despite scientific evidence for racial groupings of humans having been unfounded or disproven (Kolbert, 2018; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). That is, humans are over 99% genetically alike, with variations of phenotype being a product of ancestral migrations across locations with varying climates (Kolbert, 2018). Historical racial categorizations in the census have been tied to status and privilege. For example, historical census categories have always separated White people from all other racial categories, and attached Black people and people of color with slavery (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). While the practice of racial categorization precedes U.S. census, the categories used therein have been very influential. For example, the racial categories found on the census can also be found on the myriad of forms and checklists people complete throughout their lives. Additionally, for the last 200 years, racial categories on the U.S. census have been presented as discrete, insofar as people were unable to select multiple racial categories until the year 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). This system is problematic, as it promotes a fixed view of race, as opposed to fluid and evolving (Edmonds, 2018; Funderburg, 2013; Kolbert, 2018).

Nevertheless, systems such as the U.S. census have guided the current way people conceptualize race.

Racial categorization is rooted in essentialism, or the belief that certain characteristics or qualities are required to be of a specific group (Wilton, Sanchez, & Giamo, 2014; Young, Sanchez, & Wilton, 2013). Essentialist beliefs, which are often reinforced by mainstream, dominant culture, can include such notions as 'Black people must be a certain skin color,' or 'Native Americans must have particular facial features,' and 'White people must have specific hair colors and textures.' Essentialist beliefs also prescribe expectations for racial groups, such as behavioral trends (Young et al., 2013) or communication habits (Gaither, Cohen-Goldberg, Maddox, & Gidney, 2015). Essentialist beliefs have long effected racial categorization, as evidenced by the discrete categories themselves (i.e., White, Black, etc.), and other notions such as the one drop rule and hypodescent. The one drop rule refers to how people with any ancestry of sub-Saharan African descent would be considered Black, regardless of degrees of removal of the ancestry, individual identification, or phenotype (Roth, 2005; Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Tatum, 2017). Hypodescent refers to the practice that individuals of mixed-race heritage are more likely to be perceived as and identify as their race with less social privilege (Gullickson & Morning, 2011; Peery & Bodenhausen, 2008; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Both the one drop rule and hypodescent perpetuate the separation of White people and people of color. Further, the aforementioned separation in the U.S. has been connected with access to resources and freedoms, reinforcing the longstanding hierarchal system of race (Smedley & Smedley, 2005; U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Moreover, both the one drop rule and hypodescent reinforce essentialist beliefs, by forcing people with complex racial identities into discrete categories that may not be wholly representative of them.

Race undeniably influences people's lived experiences. Further, people's understanding of race often informs their assumptions and interactions with others; fallacious and generalized belief systems about race are at the core of racism and discrimination (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). "When people speak about race, usually they seem to be referring to skin color and, at the same time, to something more than skin color" (Kolbert, 2018, para 25), alluding to racism and the hierarchal belief systems that are deeply ingrained into society (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Trahan & Lemberger, 2014). Researchers have made vast advancements in the study of race and ethnicity, including discussions and explorations of the significance of race, power, privilege, and oppression (see Crenshaw et al., 1995; Trahan & Lemberger, 2014), as well as multiple oppressed identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Additionally, there have been significant contributions regarding the identity development of people of color (see Helms, 1995; Choi-Misailidis, 2010). However, despite these advances in research, the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color remains relatively unexplored. At present, the counseling field has limited research on the interpersonal and intrapersonal development and experiences of racially ambiguous people of color.

The existing body of literature on racially ambiguous people of color often does not examine the construct directly. That is, research on biracial and multiracial persons is often used to discuss ambiguity (Young et al., 2013). Notably, there is likely a correlation between being of mixed-race and being racially ambiguous. However, these two states are not causal; people of mixed-race ancestry can appear monoracial (Edmonds, 2018), and people of monoracial descent can appear as racially ambiguous (Wilton et al., 2014). Thus, while the existing research on mixed-race people may hold varying degrees of applicability to racially ambiguous people, mixed-race research is not a direct examination of racial ambiguity.

Racially ambiguous people of color exist in-between the essentialist ideas of race. That is, racially ambiguous people have been shown to challenge fixed notions about race (Young et al., 2013). Yet, "there is no socially sanctioned in-between classification" of race (Smedley & Smedley, 2005, p. 20). Further, the U.S. is growing in diversity, and diverse unions are continuing to rise (U.S. Census, 2012). Thus, it is only logical to assume the population of racially ambiguous people of color will grow (Funderburg, 2013). The aforementioned highlights the need for this study. There is a paucity of research exploring how racially ambiguous people of color develop and make meaning of their identities and lived experiences, or how racial ambiguity influences their interpersonal interactions. Moreover, little is known about the specific mental health needs of racially ambiguous people of color. At present, there are no research studies explicitly exploring the lived experience of racially ambiguous people of color.

Research Question

The guiding research question for this phenomenological study is: what are the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color?

Significance of the Study

Research on racial ambiguity is in its infancy. Much of the research on racial ambiguity has been conducted with participants who identified as multiracial (Wilton et al., 2014). Focused research on the construct of racial ambiguity directly, as opposed to indirectly through people of mixed-race heritage, can provide more accurate information into this population's experiences. However, this can be a difficult task to accomplish, as racial ambiguity can be a vague and subjective construct. Multiple authors have cited the receipt of numerous and consistent racial identification inquiries, or questions directed toward an individual to determine their racial

background (Tran, Miyake, Martinez-Morales, & Csizmadia, 2016), as an experience unique to racially ambiguous people (Jackson, 2012; Rockquemore, 1998; Tran et al., 2016; Wilton et al., 2014; Young et al., 2013). Therefore, using the aforementioned as a criterion for participant inclusion can increase validity. In this study, recruiting racially ambiguous participants meeting the above criterion can increase our understanding of the racially ambiguous experience. Further, this increased understanding can provide a basis for ethical and competent counseling strategies when working with this population.

Racial microaggressions are the commonplace insults or racially-based slights conveyed toward people of color (Sue et al., 2007). Additionally, researchers have discussed the negative effects on mental health associated with receiving frequent racial microaggressions (Gattis & Larson, 2017; Nadal, Griffin, Wong, Hamit, & Rasmus, 2014; Sanchez, Adams, Arango, & Flannigan, 2018; Sue et al., 2007). Racially ambiguous people are reported to experience unique racial microaggressions (Tran et al., 2016). These microaggressions most commonly occur through questioning and challenging a person's racial identity (Jackson, 2012; Rockquemore, 1998; Tran et al., 2016; Wilton et al., 2014; Young et al., 2013). However, little is known about how racially ambiguous people interpret this experience and the related consequences. This study can contribute significantly to the understanding of the lived experiences of racially ambiguous people of color, how this population is affected by racial microaggressions, and inform best practices for counselors working with this population.

Identity development models provide insight into how people understand and make meaning of their identities (e.g., Helms, 1995; Choi-Misailidis, 2010). However, people who are racially ambiguous are unlikely to neatly fit within the confines of any existing identity development model. That is, racially ambiguous people of color may have conflicting internal

and external identities. For example, a racially ambiguous person may identify as monoracially Black, but be perceived as of mixed-race, Latino, Native American, etc. Monoracial identity development models do not account for external ambiguity (i.e., being perceived as a race/ethnicity other than Black), while mixed-race models do not account for a monoracial self-identity. Thus, an identity development model exploring racial ambiguity, including incongruence between how a person identifies and how the world perceives them, can prove pivotal to conceptualizing and understanding this population's experiences. This study can contribute toward the foundation of such a model through the direct exploration of the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color.

Skin color is a prominent aspect of peoples' appearance. Skin color is both highly visible and is a core tenet to racist and discriminatory belief systems (Monk, 2015; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Colorism is central to racism; darker skin tones are viewed more negatively than lighter skin tones (Chavez-Dueñas, Adames, & Organista, 2014; Maxwell, Brevard, Abrams, & Belgrave, 2015; Monk, 2015). Further, Maxwell et al. (2015) discussed how colorism can influence an individual's perception of their own identity, in that people of color may experience skin-color dissatisfaction. Moreover, colorism exists among communities of color as well. For example, lighter skin toned people of color are viewed as having (and have historically held) higher status in some communities (Hunter, 2002; Monk, 2015; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Notions like this have perpetuated into present day, as evidenced by standards of beauty (Hunter, 2002; Kholmogorova, Tarhanova, & Shalygina, 2018), practices of skin bleaching (Charles, 2003; Charles & McLean, 2017), and even colloquialisms such as a Black person 'acting light-skinned' (meaning, they are acting better than). The skin tone of racially ambiguous people of color is likely to be a significant contributor to their experiences. This study will help to foster a

more thorough understanding of how skin color affects the lived experiences of racially ambiguous people of color.

Group membership and acceptance of individuals into their respective racial and ethnic groups can be vital toward healthy identity development (Choi-Misailidis, 2010). However, researchers have discussed how even groups comprised of people color are likely to label racially ambiguous people as out-group (Jackson, 2012; Willadsen-Jensen & Ito, 2015). Discussions about how racially ambiguous people are perceived and accepted are important. Skin color is only one factor of racial ambiguity. For example, the perception of racially ambiguous individuals can vary by their choices in clothing, communication habits, or socioeconomic or educational status (Telles, 2005; Tskhay & Rule, 2015). This study will help us understand the factors influencing the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color, as well as their experiences within racial and ethnic communities.

As counselors working with this growing population (Funderburg, 2013; U.S. Census, 2012), we must remedy the current dearth of literature regarding the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color. As people of color, this population is likely to be subjected to forms of racism, oppression, and discrimination. However, these experiences are likely to be unique, as their identities are not viewed as static, and their experiences may vary by context and setting. For example, racially ambiguous individuals may experience group membership exclusion from other people of color due to their physical appearance (Jackson, 2012; Willadsen-Jensen & Ito, 2015) or as a result of colorism. Divisions among communities of color are harmful to people of color and only perpetuate the current systems of power, privilege, and oppression (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Trahan & Lemberger, 2014). Social justice and advocacy work is essential to the counseling profession and the advancement of equity (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2014;

Toporek, Gerstein, Fouad, Roysircar, & Israel, 2006). Understanding and working to combat issues related to race aligns with the tenets of social justice and counseling. That is, it aims to challenge and dismantle current systems of oppression toward people of color (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2014; Toporek et al., 2006), as any form of racial conflict between communities of color only benefit those in privileged positions (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Trahan & Lemberger, 2014).

As racially ambiguous people of color are part of existing minority groups, some advocacy practices are likely to be similar to those of other minority groups (e.g., antidiscrimination, combatting racism; Pope et al., 2014; Toporek et al., 2006). However, the specific experiences of this population related to power, oppression, and group membership are currently unknown. This study will begin the process of understanding the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color within systems of power and privilege. Further, this study can inform advocacy and education aimed toward understanding the fluidity of race and its effect on social interactions.

Theoretical Lens

Race is a powerful facet of the lived experience. Critical Race Theory (CRT) positions race as central and examines the relationship between race, power, and privilege (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Trahan & Lemberger, 2014). Critical race theorists view race as an unavoidable influence on social interactions for people of color (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Trahan & Lemberger, 2014). Despite being a social construction, race is viewed as a permanent part of an individual's identity and will affect their experiences across numerous settings (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Trahan & Lemberger, 2014). Moreover, the goals for critical race theorists are the promotion of

social justice through accurate exploration of the experiences of people of color and challenging existing systems (Howard & Navarro, 2016; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015).

Though racial ambiguity can likely be applied to people of all races, the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color may be exceptionally unique. Notions such as racism, power, and privilege, which are central to CRT, effect people of color in distinct ways (Harrell, 2000; Jones, 1997). For example, people of color can experience racism in a myriad of ways, ranging from individual acts of oppression (e.g., violent acts, racial slurs) to exclusionary policies and discriminatory laws (Harrell, 2000; Jones, 1997). Regardless of how racism, oppression, and discrimination occur, the experiences are detrimental to people of color's health and wellbeing (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009). Racially ambiguous people of color exist in a perceived state of racial transience. That is, others may view their race differently across situations and contexts. Utilizing CRT, the implicit and explicit effects of being racially ambiguous can be explored and understood. Further, the understanding of racially ambiguous people of color will be interpreted directly from their descriptions, honoring and fostering their unique perspective to inform and challenge existing belief systems (McGee & Stovall, 2015).

Critical race theorists uphold the commitment to social justice work (Crenshaw et al., 1995; McGee & Stovall, 2015; Trahan & Lemberger, 2014). Thus, the counseling profession must consider both the unique individual experiences of being racially ambiguous, as well as their broader experience as people of color within a racist and oppressive society. CRT provides an effective framework to appropriately explore the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color.

Chapter Summary

Although existing literature exploring diversity and multicultural considerations is growing, the construct of racial ambiguity is relatively unexplored. As the U.S. continues to grow more diverse and interracial and interethnic unions increase (U.S. Census, 2012), it is only logical to assume the population of racially ambiguous people of color will grow (Funderburg, 2013). Yet, little is known about this population's lived experiences, including aspects such as group membership, identity development, experiences across both monoracial and mixed-race persons, and experiences with racism and oppression.

In this chapter, I introduced the construct of racially ambiguous people of color and highlighted gaps in the existing literature. I provided the research question guiding this study and argued the significance of this undertaking. I then discussed the how CRT is being used as a logical framework from this study. Hereafter, I will outline the organization of this dissertation and define terms salient to this study.

Organization of Dissertation

In chapter two, I will provide an in-depth literature review, exploring topics relevant to the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color, including racial categorization, racial ambiguity, colorism, identity development, essentialist thinking, and racism, discrimination, and racial microaggressions. Additionally, I will provide a detailed discussion regarding the utility of CRT as the theoretical lens for this study. In chapter three, I will discuss the use of a phenomenological approach in this study. Moreover, I will provide a researcher stance, as well as discuss specific methods, including participant recruitment, data collection, the data analysis process, and trustworthiness. In chapter four, I will discuss the findings of the study and overview salient themes depicting the essence of the experiences for racially ambiguous people

of color. Finally, in chapter five, I will discuss the importance of the findings and implications for the counseling profession and future research.

Definition of Terms

Language used to discuss constructs can shift across time and contexts. Although many of the terms were defined above, this section is intended to provide the reader with an explicit definition of terms. Important terms used within this study are defined below.

Race is defined as a socially and culturally constructed understanding of human differences (i.e., categorization), including physical features and assumptions about behaviors (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). In the U.S., racial categories have changed over time by recognition through the U.S. census. The latest U.S. census included six racial categories, one of which being of "Two or More Races" (U.S. Census, 2013).

Ethnicity refers to groups of people who share common cultural practices (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). The only ethnicity currently recognized by the U.S. census is Latino/Hispanic (U.S. Census, 2013).

People of color are defined as racial minorities in the U.S. As this study is framed within the U.S., the U.S. census racial categories can be used to guide this construct. The following racial categories are considered to be people of color in the context of this study: Black or African American, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander. Additionally, in this study, any participant self-identifying as a person of color and categorizing themselves as being of Two or More Races (U.S. Census, 2013) will also be considered a person of color.

In this study, racial ambiguity refers to "physical appearances that defy easy categorization within traditional racial categories" (Young et al., 2013, p. 461). Racial ambiguity

is also likely to include aspects of ethnicity as well. Additionally, in this study, racial ambiguity is only being discussed as it applies to people of color.

Essentialism is the belief system that certain characteristics or qualities are required to be of a specific category or criterion (Wilton et al., 2014; Young et al., 2013). Essentialist belief systems toward race would entail that people of specific races must have specific characteristics, such as skin color, hair texture, or certain facial features (Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Wilton et al., 2014; Young et al., 2013).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In the previous chapter, I introduced the construct of racial ambiguity, highlighted the lack of literature related to racial ambiguity, and argued the importance of literature on the topic. This chapter includes a review of the existing literature relevant to this study. First, I will discuss Critical Race Theory (CRT), the theoretical framework used in this study. Then, I will review existing literature in three content. The first content area is the construct of race, including understanding race and its effects, the nuance within the construct, and the importance of racial ambiguity therein. The second content area focuses on the internal experience of racial ambiguity, including racial identity development and how race can influence people's worldview. The last content area focuses on the social experiences of racially ambiguous persons, including a discussion about common experiences for the population, racial microaggressions, and group membership patterns. Finally, I will provide a conclusory discussion of the literature review and a summary of the chapter.

Theoretical Lens: Critical Race Theory

Race has historically and continually influenced people's lived experiences (Lee, 1995; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Due to the centrality of race within this study, CRT was chosen to provide the framework for this study. CRT originated from critical legal studies during and following the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, when "a noted group of legal scholars … began to question the role of law in maintaining and further constructing racially based social and economic oppression" (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015, p. 3). Central to CRT is an examination of racial dynamics, power, privilege, social justice, and challenging dominant perspectives of race (Howard & Navarro, 2016; Trahan & Lemberger, 2014).

CRT can be used as a theoretical lens for research aiming to highlight the importance of race and challenge existing perspectives that minimizes or fails to address racial dynamics. Studies guided by CRT should demonstrate "recognition that 'race' and racism are central factors in the social order" and "focus on 'race' and racism and its intersections" (Hylton, 2012, p. 27). As this study focuses exclusively on the experiences of people of color and the intersection between their ambiguity and minority status within the U.S., race is a central focus within this study. Additionally, when utilizing CRT as a framework, researchers should ensure the guiding tenets are represented within their study. However, "there is no single unchanging statement of the core tenets and perspectives that make up CRT" (Gillborn, 2015, p. 278) and core tenets have been defined multiple ways by numerous authors (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Thus, this study will be informed by Haskins and Singh's (2015) discussion of the five CRT tenets relevant to counselor education, which includes the three discussed by Trahan and Lemberger (2014) relevant to clinical counseling practice.

The permanence and intersectionality of race and racism is the first tenet discussed by Haskins and Singh (2015). According to the authors, "racism is deeply ingrained legally, culturally, and psychologically and intersects with sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation" (p. 289). That is, people of color are perpetually affected by their race, minority identities, racism, and discrimination (Trahan & Lemberger, 2014). Further, race and racism impact people of color in multiple areas of their lives and informs their worldview (Bell, 1992; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015).

Critical race theorists acknowledge the changing presentations of racism and discrimination. That is, racism and discrimination are not always obvious, and more commonly occur in discrete and covert manners (Trahan & Lemberger, 2014). These covert interactions,

also known as racism microaggressions, are ubiquitous forms of racism and discrimination (Sue et al., 2007). The negative implications and mental health outcomes of racial microaggressions are well documented in existing literature (see Huynh, 2012; Nadal, Griffin et al., 2014; Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014; Sue et al., 2007; Tran et al., 2016). The permanence and intersectionality of race and racism are central to this study, as it explores how race and racial ambiguity affect lived experiences of people of color.

The focus of the second tenet, the critique of liberalism, is twofold: to challenge existing beliefs about both meritocracy and colorblindness (Haskins & Singh, 2015). Both concepts are rooted in liberalism, a philosophy that promotes equality. Yet, both concepts serve as beliefs that minimize notions of power, privilege, and racial discrimination (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). Meritocracy is the belief that opportunities, such as employment or admission to specific programs, are granted solely on efforts (Haskins & Singh, 2015). Colorblindness is the notion that race is not important and people of all races and colors are treated the same (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Colorblindness can also manifest in the dismissal of race. Consequently, the beliefs of meritocracy and colorblindness fallaciously deny race as affecting opportunity and experience (see Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Cornileus, 2013; Henfield, Woo, & Washington, 2013; Holcomb-McCoy & Addison-Bradley, 2005; Wells, 1998). The critique of liberalism tenet is central to the research question of this study. That is, exploring the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color connotes that their lived experiences are affected by their race and racial presentation.

The third tenet discussed by Haskins and Singh (2015) is counter-storytelling. Critical race theorists posit that the mainstream narratives, or dominant culture's discourse, often invalidates and dismisses the experiences of people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012;

Haskins & Singh, 2015; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). When using a CRT framework, it can be effective to promote the use of storytelling to better understand the experiences of people of color (Trahan & Lemberger, 2014). Narratives can provide counselors with significant and salient insights into the experiences of people of color, while empowering people of color by allowing them to share their worldview and experiences (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Trahan & Lemberger, 2014). Further, the narrative storytelling tenet of CRT aligns strongly with phenomenological inquiry, which places focus on the stories and lived experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Interest convergence is the fourth tenet discussed by Haskins and Singh (2015). This tenet includes the theory that all forms of racism advance the interest of White people and efforts toward racial equality are only supported by White people when the efforts appear to be self-benefiting (Bell, 1995; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Trahan & Lemberger, 2014). Further, it has been argued that legislative gains toward equality for people of color often "provided only basic rights and that these rights often came with significant losses for people of color" (Haskins & Singh, 2015, p. 290).

The final tenet discussed by Haskins and Singh (2015) is Whiteness as property. According to Harris (1995), Whiteness as property is based on power and privilege, with White people being in dominant placement in society and having access to myriad of opportunities, and people of color being in subordinate positions with limited access to opportunities. Further, because Whiteness is viewed as an asset, it is protected by White people, both socially (i.e., hypodescent) and legally (i.e., "one drop rule"; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). The notion of Whiteness as property is likely to be applicable to the racially ambiguous experience for people of color. That is, racially ambiguous people of color are likely to experience hypodescent

(Gullickson & Morning, 2011) and not be viewed as White. As such, racially ambiguous people of color will not have access to the power and privilege granted by Whiteness.

The use of CRT as a framework for research has increased in recent years (Hylton, 2012). CRT can provide researchers with a lens to view and inform research practices that are sensitive to historical and ongoing race-related issues. In this dissertation study, CRT is used to guide the process of exploring the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color. The tenets of CRT inform the process of conceptualizing race (i.e., the permanence and intersectionality of race and racism), how race influences the experiences of people of color (i.e., interest convergence and Whiteness as property), how data will be collected (i.e., counter-storytelling), and the utility of the data obtained in the study (i.e., a critique of liberalism).

Review of the Literature

The construct of racial ambiguity is relatively unknown. Little research exists related to how racial ambiguity affects people of color and the relationship between racial ambiguity and mental health. Herein, I will review the existing literature on the construct of race, including discussions related to how people perceive race, the relationship between race and identity development, and how race and racial ambiguity influence people's lived experiences.

Race

Race is defined as a socially and culturally constructed understanding of human differences (i.e., categorization), including physical features and assumptions about behaviors (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Race can also refer to a region to which people's ancestors are from (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). The consensus throughout existing literature agrees that race is not a biological construct (Kolbert, 2018; Smedley & Smedley, 2005), but rather socially derived and driven.

Race has historically influenced how people were perceived and treated. Privileges were often granted to groups of people based on race (Gotanda, 1995). Further, race has been ingrained into the U.S. legal system, allowing for laws to apply to, benefit, or inhibit only certain groups of people (Alexander, 2010; Averick, Barish, & DuVernay, 2016; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Hajnal, Lajevardi, & Nielson, 2017). Race continues to be a factor today; race is often collocated with a myriad of topics, such as police brutality (Alang, McAlpine, McCreedy, & Hardeman, 2017; Fridkin, Wintersieck, Courey, & Thompson, 2017), imprisonment rates (Fosten, 2016; Saperstein & Penner, 2010), and mental health diagnosis, treatment, and outcomes (Eack & Newhill, 2012; Delphin-Rittmon et al., 2015; Morgan & Farkas, 2016). Race may also be highly perceptible and is often one of the first aspects we notice of the people we encounter. Moreover, race has historically been viewed through distinct, non-overlapping categories, such that mixed-race people have been forced into existing racial categories (i.e., hypodescent and the "one drop rule"; Smedley & Smedley, 2005).

Gotanda (1995) discussed four ways race can be understood: status-race, formal-race, historical-race, and culture-race. Status-race is described as race being an indicator of social status (Gotanda, 1995). This idea of race was used as a social classification system to distinguish different types of people. For example, during the late 18th century, race was used to place Whites as a dominant group, Blacks within a "nonhuman status" (p. 19), and other people of color above Blacks and beneath Whites (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Formal-race is reflective of race as many know it today (Gotanda, 1995). Formal-race is the social construction of race, where people are categorized by their physical appearance or regional ancestry. Smedley and Smedley (2005) described this as being viewed as a broad classification system, similar to "breed" (p. 19). However, unlike all the other conceptualizations of race, formal-race is meant to

be devoid of assumptions about social characteristics; formal-race is the categorization process, separated from social context. Historical-race is a temporal view of race, considering how "past and continuing racial subordination" is relevant in the present (Gotanda, 1995, p. 257). Historical-race is often used within the courts to determine relevant legislation for historically disadvantaged groups of people. For example, improving opportunity for historically disadvantaged groups is central to affirmative action policies (National Conference of State Legislation, 2014). Finally, culture-race is the conflation between race and social practices (Gotanda, 1995). For example, culture-race aids in the explanation of why researchers have discussed how White people view densely-populated Black neighborhoods more negatively (Tatum, 2017). That is, Black people are assumed to behave in certain, unfavorable manners.

Broadly, the present understanding of race is likely a combination of the four aforementioned conceptualizations. Further, these notions may vary to some degree by person or situation, with certain ideas of race being intermittently more prominent than others. However, little is known regarding how these conceptualizations of race influence the lived experiences of racially ambiguous people of color.

Racial categorization. Central to any understanding of race is the notion of grouping or categorizing people. In the United States, the long-standing, formal practice of racial categorization was undertaken through the census. The first census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015) occurred in 1790 and consisted of three racial categories: free White males and females, all other free persons, and slaves. Since the inception of the census, race and social status were intertwined. That is, White people were separated from all other groups, including other free persons, and the enslaved were their own distinct group. The conflation between race and social status continued for decades through clear designation of people currently and/or historically

without freedoms, and distinction between White people and all other groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

As the census was modified each decade, overt signifiers of social status (i.e., "free") were removed and additional categories were added. Numerous terms were used to enumerate people of varying ancestry, with many terms being added, removed, and combined. The current census classification was first established in 1980 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Noteworthy, the census of the year 2000 was the first to allow respondents to check more than one category, permitting people to identify as mixed-race. The current categories of race in the U.S. are White, Black or African American, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and Native American or Alaska Native (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Additionally, the current census allows respondents to identify as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish, recognized as an ethnicity.

Although the current census is used for population counting and statistical analyses, the social process of racial categorization is far more nuanced. That is, people tend to equate race with skin color and, simultaneously, "something more than skin color" (Kolbert, 2018, para 25). Racial categorization is an ongoing social process, whereby people's perceived race can elicit biased beliefs about their characteristics (Gaither et al., 2015; Stepanova & Strube, 2012; Willadsen-Jensen & Ito, 2015). For example, Stepanova and Strube (2012) conducted a quantitative study examining the relationship between physical presentation, including skin color and facial physiognomy (features), and racial categorization (n = 250). The sample included predominantly undergraduate students from the Midwest, was approximately 55% White, and 60% female. Participants were shown computer-generated faces that were "equivalent for affective expressions but [varied] systematically in skin color and facial physiognomy" (p. 869) and asked to categorize the faces. The results indicated skin color and facial features as

significant markers for influencing racial categorization of White or Black, with skin color being the more important aspect. The aforementioned is consistent with other authors who have discussed skin color as a major factor, if not the most important factor, toward racial categorization (see Brebner, Krigolson, Handy, Quadflieg, & Turk, 2011; Chao, Hong, & Chiu, 2013; Chen, Pauker, Gaither, Hamilton, & Sherman, 2018; Kolbert, 2018; Skinner & Nicolas, 2015; Smedley & Smedley, 2005).

Stepanova and Strube (2012) also reported racial bias was associated with participant racial categorizations. That is, "participants with higher implicit racial prejudice rely more on skin color in racial [categorization]" (p. 872). The notion of negative implicit associations being related to racial categorization was also discussed by Willadsen-Jensen and Ito (2015), who explored racial categorization as it applies to racial ambiguity. In a quantitative study, the authors asked participants to categorize computer-generated, racially ambiguous faces. The participant pool consisted of mostly males (16) and all participants identified as White (n = 22). The authors reported that "more negative associations were activated" (p. 890) in participants when racially ambiguous faces were coded as Black. Further, Willidsen-Jensen and Ito (2015) found that cues (i.e., racial labels) influenced participants' processing of racially ambiguous faces. The latter results are consistent with a similar quantitative study conducted by Tskhay and Rule (2015). The authors exposed participants (n = 150), 66 of whom identified as female and 112 identified as White, to computer-generated faces that varied in racial presentation and associated racial labels. Tskhay and Rule (2015) posited that semantic information (i.e., racial labels) influenced the racial categorization process. That is, some participants categorized the same ambiguous faces differently when different semantic information was presented. The aforementioned studies provide additional information about the negative associations with

certain racial categories, the importance of skin color in the racial categorization process, and how the categorization process of racially ambiguous faces can be influenced by contextual variables.

Hypodescent. Hypodescent refers to the way mixed-race people are categorized. According to Gotanda (1995), hypodescent "holds that any person with a known trace of African ancestry is Black, notwithstanding that person's visual appearance" (p. 258). Broad views of hypodescent were also reinforced by society and the U.S. legal system. This is evidenced through the "one drop rule," a mid-twentieth century law that stated a person would be considered Black if they had any ancestor, recent or distant, of African or sub-Saharan descent (Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Tatum, 2017). Despite legal enforcement of the "one drop rule" ceasing in 1967, racial categorization practices congruent with hypodescent are ongoing (Campbell, 2007; Chen et al., 2018; Gullickson & Morning, 2011; Krosch, Berntsen, Amodio, Jost, & Van Bavel, 2013; Peery & Bodenhausen, 2008; Roth, 2005; Smedley & Smedley, 2005).

In a quantitative study, Campbell (2007) aimed to explore the prevalence of hypodescent in multiracial persons. Using data from a nationally representative survey (n = 124,534), the author analyzed the self-identification patterns of multiracial persons with Black ancestry (n = 1,274; e.g., Black/White, Black/Native American, etc.). Campbell (2007) reported varying responses from multiracial participants when they were forced to choose a single race (i.e., Black, White, Asian, Native American, or "some other race"), including self-identification patterns toward and away from hypodescent. Context, such as region or generation of maturation, also seemed to effect self-identification patterns. For example, Campbell (2007) stated "ties to Latino or non-black communities are significantly related to lower probabilities of

black identification" (p. 941), and Black identification was high for people born before the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

The results discussed by Campbell (2007) illustrate how context and the life experiences of multiracial persons may further influence their self-identification. Further, hypodescent may not be a finite rule for newer generations of multiracial persons. The latter notion is also discussed by Roth (2005), who indicated that different race parents may be more likely to identify their children as mixed-race compared to a single race, rejecting hypodescent. Moreover, numerous authors have discussed how context and cues (e.g., parent racial identities, social settings, socioeconomic status) influence the patterns in which people self-identity (Campbell, 2007; Holloway, Wright, Ellis, & East, 2009; Rockquemore, 1998; Roth, 2005; Townsend, Fryberg, Wilkins, & Markus, 2012; Young, Sanchez, & Wilton, 2016).

Gullickson and Morning (2011) conducted a study examining the self-identification patterns of multiracial individuals. Utilizing census data, the authors reported higher rates of hypodescent in multiracial Black/White and Black/Native American populations. However, Gullickson and Morning (2011) also reported higher rates of hyperdescent (identification with a race with more social privilege) in White/Native American participants, and higher rates of multiracial identification in part-Asian participants. The results discussed by the authors further highlight the nuance in multiracial persons' racial self-identification. That is, Gullickson and Morning (2011) posited that both racial history and ancestry matter. For example, "in the cases of the longstanding hypo- and hyperdescent customs, we have been able to draw on a well-established literature concerning the social, economic, political and legal factors that gave rise to these regimes of single-race assignment" (Gullickson & Morning, 2011, p. 509). The history of each racial group may be relevant to current and ongoing self-identification patterns.

While the aforementioned studies focused on self-identification, Chen et al. (2018), Krosch et al. (2013), and Peery and Bodenhausen (2008) each focused on the identification and classification of others toward racially ambiguous and mixed-race faces. All three studies tasked participants to categorize racially ambiguous faces and included multiple experiments and participant counts. Chen et al. (2018) conducted a total of three experiments (n = 72, 41, and 100, respectively). All of the participant samples were comprised of predominantly females and people identifying as Asian. Peery and Bodenhausen (2008) recruited 59 undergraduates (35 identified as White, 32 identified as female) in the first experiment, and 47 undergraduates (33 identified as White, 31 identified as female) in the second experiment. Krosch et al. (2013) conducted three experiments (n = 31, 71, and 62, respectively). The majority of the participants identified as female and White, with two of the three studies including only White people. Both Chen et al. (2018) and Peery and Bodenhausen (2008) found that participants asked to categorize mixed-race and racially ambiguous faces are more likely to exhibit hypodescent. That is, participants were more likely to label mixed-race and racially ambiguous faces as racial minorities and not White. Further, Krosch et al. (2013) found that political ideologies were correlated with people's racial categorization tendencies. That is, people with self-reported conservative ideologies exhibited higher rates of hypodescent when categorizing racially ambiguous faces. Ultimately, existing literature on the categorization of racially ambiguous people highlights patterns consistent with hypodescent and singular racial identities.

The research discussed herein highlights an interesting parallel between self-categorization and categorization done by others related to racially ambiguous and mixed-race persons. Although hypodescent is not moot, multiracial people demonstrate efforts toward embracing pluralistic identities and rejecting the traditional, singular identity status akin to the

"one drop rule" (Campbell, 2007; Gullickson & Morning, 2011; Roth, 2005). Simultaneously, research supports that individuals perceiving multiracial and racially ambiguous persons have the tendency toward singular identity categorization, consistent with hypodescent (Chen et al., 2018; Ito, Willadsen-Jensen, Kaye, & Park, 2011; Krosch et al., 2013; Peery & Bodenhausen, 2008). However, little is known about the interaction between these two tendencies, and the intersection of a person's self-identity and perceived identity.

Racial ambiguity. The historical conceptualization of race and racial categorization are not congruent with racial ambiguity. That is, racially ambiguous people "[do] not fit into the dominant racial schema" (James &Tucker, 2003, p. 154) and have "physical appearances that defy easy categorization within traditional racial categories" (Young et al., 2013, p. 461). Existing literature on the understanding and experiences of racially ambiguous populations is limited. However, there is an abundant and growing body of research on the experiences of biracial and multiracial persons. Biracial and multiracial people can appear monoracial (Brown & Brown, 2014; Edmonds, 2018) and monoracial people can present as ambiguous or of mixed-race (Brown & Brown, 2014; Wilton et al., 2014). Moreover, Young et al. (2013) reported "visual racial ambiguity is often used explicitly to signify biracial status in research contexts" (p. 462). Therefore, in reviewing the literature on the experiences of racially ambiguous people, biracial and multiracial research is included due to the conflation of the topics.

Racial ambiguity and racial categorization are both connected to essentialist thinking and racial essentialism. Essentialist thinking is the belief system that certain characteristics or qualities are required to be of a specific group or category (Wilton et al., 2014; Young et al., 2013). Racial essentialism is "the belief that racial-group membership is fixed and reflects an underlying essence shared by like individuals" (Pauker, Xu, Williams, & Biddle, 2016, p. 1410).

Beliefs congruent with racial essentialism can include racial likeness across skin color, mannerisms, speech, clothing choices, socioeconomic status, and educational attainment (Pauker et al., 2016; Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Tawa, 2018; Telles, 2005; Wilton et al., 2014; Young et al., 2013). Although racial categorization is congruent with racial essentialism, racial ambiguity is not. People who are racially ambiguous challenge the fixed status of racial categories and racial essentialism (Sanchez, Young, & Pauker, 2015; Young et al., 2013).

In two separate studies, Young et al. (2013) and Sanchez et al. (2015) explored racial ambiguity and racial essentialism. In a multistage, quantitative study, Young et al. (2013) presented photos of racially ambiguous individuals to 84 self-identified White participants (55% identified as female). Subsequent analysis examined participant categorization of the ambiguous photos and whether exposure of the photos effected beliefs about racial essentialism. Young et al. (2013) found a positive correlation between racial ambiguity and minority racial categorization. That is, the more ambiguous the person presented, the more likely they were to be categorized as African American. Further, the authors reported "exposure to racially ambiguous targets shifted [reduced] essentialist beliefs . . . suggest[ing] that essentialist beliefs about race are malleable" (p. 464). Sanchez et al. (2015) conducted a multistage, quantitative study, in which participants' beliefs about race were assessed and participants directly interacted with racially ambiguous persons. All participants identified as White across the three experiments (n = 50, 83, and 72, respectively). The authors indicated that exposure to racially ambiguous individuals dissuaded beliefs of racial essentialism. The results of both studies (i.e., Sanchez et al., 2015, and Young et al., 2013) are consistent with other researchers' suggestions about patterns of hypodescent toward racially ambiguous persons (Chen et al., 2018; Ito et al., 2011; Krosch et al., 2013; Peery & Bodenhausen, 2008) and that context can affect beliefs

toward racial categorization (Campbell, 2007; Holloway et al., 2009; Rockquemore, 1998; Roth, 2005; Townsend et al., 2012; Young et al., 2016). However, neither study directly explored the experiences of racially ambiguous people.

In this section, the construct of race was discussed, as were the related racial categories, patterns of categorization, and the current understanding of racial ambiguity. The conclusions herein are twofold: racially ambiguous individuals present as simultaneously existing in between and in contrast with the traditional understanding of race, and racially ambiguous individuals are often viewed as people of color. However, this section presented little data into the practical meaning of these two conclusions. Therefore, the subsequent discussions will focus on the internal and external experiences related to being racially ambiguous. That is, how racially ambiguous individuals develop their identities and how society interacts with this population.

Racially Ambiguous Identity Development

As discussed above, racially ambiguous people are likely viewed as people of color due to hypodescent (see Chen et al., 2018; Ito et al., 2011; Krosch et al., 2013; Peery & Bodenhausen, 2008). However, the identities of racially ambiguous people of color may be more nuanced (see Campbell, 2007; Gullickson & Morning, 2011; Roth, 2005). That is, there may be conflict between how racially ambiguous people of color see themselves and how society may see them. This incongruence, in addition to a myriad of other contextual factors, may influence the identity development of racially ambiguous people of color.

The formation of a healthy identity has been connected with positive interpersonal, intrapersonal, and mental health outcomes (Forsyth & Carter, 2012; Mandara, Gaylord-Harden, Richards, & Ragsdale, 2009). However, existing racial identity development models may be insufficient to conceptualize the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color. Thus, the

counseling profession may have little understanding of how racially ambiguous people of color develop their identities and potential related consequences. Two relevant identity development models are Helms' (1995) People of Color Identity Development Model and Choi-Misailidis' (2010) Multiracial-Heritage Awareness and Personal Affiliation (M-HAPA) model. The former can be used to better conceptualize this population's experiences as people of color and stages/statuses related to development, while the latter can be used to further understand the process of development and implications of an incongruent internal (self) and external (perceived) identity.

Identity development models. Helms' (1995) model of racial identity development is intended to be applicable for all people of color. In the model, Helms included five statuses that are described as "interactive" and "permeable" (p. 182), and that people "may exhibit attitudes, behaviors, and emotions reflective [of multiple statuses, simultaneously]" (p. 183). Helms also posited that all racial and ethnic groups will have different experiences across a similar developmental continuum. In this model, individuals may begin in a status of ignorance toward race and conclude with both an awareness and critical understanding of their racial identity and how that identity impacts their experience within society. Further, progression through the statuses is contingent upon increased self-awareness and coming to terms with internalized oppression (Helms, 1995).

Helms (1995) explicitly acknowledged that the model assumes different social and ethnic groups will have different experiences throughout their development. That is, Helms' model (1995) may speak very little to the specific process of identity development for racially ambiguous people of color. The process of identity development for this population may become apparent during the second and third statuses of Helms' model. The second and third

statuses, entitled *dissonance* and *immersion/emersion*, are defined by an "ambivalence or confusion concerning own socioracial group" (p. 186) and by people of color tending to idealize and commit themselves to their own group, respectively (Helms, 1995). These statuses may be complicated for racially ambiguous people of color as they may have conflicting ideas about their socioracial groups. For example, racially ambiguous people of color can be of various racial heritages (i.e., monoracial, biracial, or multiracial; Brown & Brown, 2014; Edmonds, 2018; Wilton et al., 2014) and may also exhibit various patterns of social group memberships (Doyle & Kao 2007; Quillian & Campbell, 2003; Quillian & Redd, 2009). It may be the case that racially ambiguous people of color encounter additional confusion regarding their socioracial group due to the complexity of their racial identity.

Helms' model (1995) provides a framework for understanding how people of color develop their identities. In fact, the statuses discussed by Helms are likely to be applicable to racially ambiguous people of color. However, understanding the identity development of racially ambiguous people of color may require further exploration into the process of development. The M-HAPA model (Choi-Misailidis, 2010) may provide some insight into how the identity development process for racially ambiguous people of color occurs.

The M-HAPA model (Choi-Misailidis, 2010) was created to better conceptualize the development of persons of mixed-race and heritage. The model includes three identity statuses: marginalized identity, singular identity, and integrated identity. Similar to Helms' model (1995), Choi-Misailidis (2010) posited that development occurs through increased self-awareness. The M-HAPA model progresses from a state of people lacking awareness regarding their racial/ethnic identity (marginal identity), to firmly identifying with one of their racial/ethnic identities (singular identity), and culminates with an integration of their racial/ethnic identities

(integrated identity). The author notes that the integrated identity status does not have to include equal representation of each identity. That is, multiracial people do not have to equally identify with all their identities to achieve an integrated identity, but they must acknowledge the existence of all their identities. Further, Choi-Misailidis (2010) indicated that healthy identity development occurs when individuals find harmony between their internal (self) and external (perceived) identity.

The M-HAPA model can be applicable to racially ambiguous people of color. The model includes both specific indications for multiracial persons' internal identity, as well as considerations for the incongruence between internal and external identities (Choi-Misailidis, 2010). Further, the significance of multiracial persons' social experiences on healthy identity development is consistent with existing literature (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002; Rockquemore, Brunsma, & Delgado, 2009). Thus, identity development for racially ambiguous people of color can be conceptualized through the processes outlined within the M-HAPA model (Choi-Misailidis, 2010) and the statuses discussed by Helms (1995). However, there is insufficient research that explores the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color with identity development, and any potential connections with mental health and/or wellbeing.

Identity development and mental health/wellbeing. The identity development process can have both intrinsic and extrinsic effects for people. Further, understanding the identity development process can be useful for conceptualizing problems and vulnerabilities, as well as strengths and resilience. In fact, Forsyth and Carter (2012) stated, "racial identity is an important internal resource that can influence how [people] appraise racial incidents as well as the strategies they use to cope with them" (p. 137). The authors conducted a quantitative study examining the relationship between racial identity development and coping with racism. Their

study included self-identified Black adults in the United Stated (n = 233) who recorded their responses examining their capacity to cope toward race-related incidents, their racial identity developmental status, and their mental health and wellbeing. Forsyth and Carter (2012) reported that participants with less developed racial identities may require additional support in coping with stressful race-related situations. Mandara et al. (2009) also conducted a study assessing the relationship between identity development and wellbeing. The quantitative study (n = 259) focused specifically on African American adolescents (12-14 years of age). Mandara et al. (2009) reported that successful and healthy racial identity development is positively correlated with self-esteem.

The relationship between racial identity development and mental health and wellbeing seems to be applicable to many minority groups. Wakefield and Hudley (2007) conducted a literature review on adolescent wellbeing and racial and ethnic identity development. The authors stated

> Research based on stage models of either racial identity or ethnic identity consistently finds that those at higher stages of development enjoy a higher level of self-esteem, and this is true for adolescents of African American, Asian, Latino, and Middle Eastern descent. (p. 150)

Furthermore, Wakefield and Hudley (2007) reported that healthy identity development may be connected to a more positive self-concept and decreased a prevalence of depression and anxiety symptoms. Lastly, the authors discussed healthy identity development being related to positive school outcomes.

Unfortunately, little is known about the experiences and identity development for racially ambiguous people of color. However, researchers have highlighted that racially ambiguous

individuals often have their identity questioned and challenged (see Buchanan & Acevedo, 2004; Grier, Rambo, & Taylor, 2014; Jackson, 2012; Rockquemore, 1998; Tran et al., 2016; Wilton et al., 2014; Young et al., 2013), an experience that may be viewed as undesired or negative. Further, "negative societal reactions to one's race are problems that can deeply affect the wellbeing" (p. 41), as well as hinder identity development (Hud-Aleem & Countryman, 2008). That is, people subjected to having their racial or ethnic identities challenged may have negative implications on identity development and wellbeing.

One method of identity challenges was explored by Durkee and Williams (2015). The authors investigated the effects of being accused of acting White. The accusation of acting White is viewed as an attack toward the validity of non-White people's racial and ethnic identity (Davis, Stadulis, & Neal-Barnett, 2018; Durkee & Williams, 2015; Murray, Neal-Barnett, Demmings, & Stadulis, 2012; Neal-Barnett, Stadulis, Singer, Murray, & Demmings, 2010) and can occur in response to a myriad of behaviors (Neal-Barnett et al., 2010). Durkee and Williams (2015) examined the relationship between experiencing the acting White accusation, identity development, and mental health (i.e., anxiety, depression, and emotional stress). The authors recruited self-identified Black or African American college students (n = 145; 79% identified as female) and conducted multiple parametric tests to examine the data. The authors reported 74% of participants experienced the acting White accusation, with a significantly higher proportion of females reporting the experience compared to males. Further, Durkee and Williams (2015) posited that the acting White accusation was related to less developed racial identity statuses and lower levels of wellbeing. Although the research discussed above included Black participants, little is known about how racially ambiguous people experience identity challenges.

Neal-Barnett et al. (2010) described the hindering effect of the acting White accusation on racial identity development as a consequence of the "acting White trap" (p. 120). That is, it is normal for people of color to react, in some manner, to the acting White accusation. However, if people ruminate in response to accusations and begin overcompensating their expression in rebellion, negative consequences may occur (Neal-Barnett et al., 2010). For example, people may overemphasize a single identity to counter the accusation through self-identification, presentation, and/or behaviors. This may result in embracing stereotypical behaviors or ideas antithetical to their originally intended goals, as well as potentially limiting healthy identity development (see Choi-Misailidis, 2010).

The aforementioned results are consistent with existing literature examining the effects of the acting White accusation. Murray et al. (2012) conducted a quantitative study examining the effects of the acting White accusation on the mental health of African American adolescents. Participants included 110 low-income adolescents (72% identified as female). The authors reported significant ANOVA results, indicating that experiencing the acting White accusation was related to increased symptoms of anxiety in participants. Similarly, Davis et al. (2018) indicated that Black female adolescents who reported experiencing the accusation (n = 31) reported higher symptoms of social anxiety and feeling bullied.

Though little is currently known about how racially ambiguous people of color develop their identities, researchers have illustrated the importance of a healthy identity development process for people of color. Healthy identity development is connected with numerous positive outcomes (Mandara et al., 2009; Wakefield & Hudley, 2007). Further, identity development can be negatively affected by frequent identity challenges (Davis et al., 2018; Durkee & Williams, 2015; Murray et al., 2012; Neal-Barnett et al., 2010), an experience common to the racially

ambiguous population (Grier et al., 2014; Tran et al., 2016). It is possible that racially ambiguous people of color encounter unique experiences throughout the identity development process.

Racially Ambiguous Experiences

Existing literature on racially ambiguous people of color often does not examine the construct of racial ambiguity directly. Racial ambiguity often is discussed and conceptualized through the experiences of biracial and multiracial people (Young et al., 2013). People of mixed-race ancestry can appear monoracial (Edmonds, 2018) and people of monoracial descent can appear as racially ambiguous (Wilton et al., 2014). Therefore, although research on the experiences of biracial and multiracial people are included in discussions of racial ambiguity, potential limitations should be considered.

Identification inquiries. Racially ambiguous people often receive numerous and persistent identification inquiries (Jackson, 2012; Tran et al., 2016; Wilton et al., 2014; Young et al., 2013). Rockquemore (1998) conducted in-depth interviews with biracial (Black/White) undergraduate students (n = 14). In Rockquemore's (1998) research, identification inquiries were discussed as the "what are you experience?" (p. 206). The author stated that in response to their racially ambiguous presentation, biracial persons are often asked "what are you?" Other phrasings of this question can include "where are you from?" or "are you mixed?" (Gaither, Babbitt, & Sommers, 2018; Jackson, 2012). The "what are you experience?" was said to occur in two different ways (Rockquemore, 1998). The first manifestation is questioning in direct response to phenotype. Thus, racially ambiguous people receive identification inquiries due to their physical presentation. The second manifestation is in response to racial identity. Rockquemore (1998) indicated the question commonly used is "what you are really" (p. 206),

which typically follows racially ambiguous people disclosing their racial identity. This occurs when the inquirer registers a discrepancy between the stated and visible identity. Further, the exchange can result in a negotiation process, where the inquirer attempts to reconcile the perceived discrepancy.

Though the "what are you experience?" was discussed in relation to the experiences of biracial people, the catalyst for the experience is racial ambiguity (Rockquemore, 1998). In either manifestation, inquirers are responding to racially ambiguous people not presenting in congruence with their essentialist ideas about race. Therefore, being racially ambiguous should be viewed as requisite for identification inquiries, not being biracial. In fact, Grier et al. (2014) conducted a qualitative study (n = 11) exploring the experiences of both monoracial and multiracial people who have received frequent identification inquiries. The authors obtained life narratives from participants through open-ended, life history interviews. Noteworthy, the researchers used having "been asked repeatedly over their life span some version of the question 'What are you?' in regards to their race" (p. 1012) as the primary inclusion criterion. The researchers reported that racially ambiguous participants endorsed receiving frequent identification inquiries, regardless of racial composition (i.e., monoracial and multiracial). Moreover, racially ambiguous participants described the question as "disrespectful" (p. 1013) and "inappropriate" (p. 1014). The aforementioned coincides with research on frequent identification inquiries being viewed as microaggressions (Tran et al., 2016).

Additional results discussed by Grier et al. (2014) validated that context (i.e., specific setting) and visible features (i.e., complexion, hair color) influence ambiguity. Further, the authors discussed how participants were accused of either not being good enough or acting better than others for their respective racial groups. Both accusations may be indicative of racially

ambiguous people's capacity to "pass." Passing refers to people being viewed and accepted as a valid member of a particular racial group, often different from their own (Brown & Brown, 2014; Khanna & Johnson, 2010). Thus, the degree to which a racially ambiguous person passes for a specific social group may influence their lived experiences.

Racial microaggressions. Sue et al. (2007) described racial microaggressions as exchanges when people of color experience negative and insulting communication regarding their race or identity. The authors specified that racial microaggressions occur frequently and perpetrators may not be aware they are being committed. Moreover, racial microaggressions have been described as ubiquitous and potentially more prominent than overt forms in racism (Nadal, Wong et al., 2014; Sue et al., 2007).

Researchers have reported multiple types of negative outcomes correlated with racial microaggressions. Experiences with racial microaggressions have been connected with increased anger, anxiety, and stress (Huynh, 2012), depression and negative affect (Nadal, Griffin et al., 2014; Sue et al., 2007; Sue et al., 2008), and lowered self-esteem (Nadal, Wong et al., 2014). Further, continuous or increased exposure to racial microaggressions can have a compounding negative effect (Nadal, Griffin et al., 2014) and occurrences during high-stakes situations, such as school or a place of work, may be exceptionally deleterious (Nadal, Wong et al., 2014). Moreover, racial microaggressions seem to be experienced differently across race and ethnicity (Nadal, Griffin et al., 2014; Nadal, Wong et al., 2014; Sue et al., 2007). That is, different groups of people may report different outcomes after experiencing racial microaggressions. However, little is known about how racially ambiguous people of color experience and respond to racial microaggressions.

As discussed previously, racially ambiguous people often experience frequent identification inquiries (Jackson, 2012; Rockquemore, 1998; Wilton et al., 2014; Young et al., 2013). Tran et al. (2016) conducted a mixed methods study exploring self-identified multiracial undergraduate students' perspectives of identification inquiries (n = 40). Further, the authors posited that frequent identification inquiries are racial microaggressions. The authors stated

> Inquiries such as *Where are you from?* or *What country are you from?* can be invalidating because they assume an individual is a foreigner or outsider but it can be rationalized by the communicator as being intended to get to know or express interest in another person's heritage or background. Racial identification inquiries can be perceived as noninclusive, alienating, hostile, or discriminatory, and their delivery may be perceived as aggressive. (p. 27)

Considering the aforementioned, Tran et al. (2016) utilized a racial microaggressions framework to explore how multiracial people experience and perceive identification inquires. The authors reported that over 90% of participants endorsed experiencing identification inquiries, that participants responded to identification inquiries in a variety of ways, and participants reported both negative and positive responses to identification inquiries. Some participants described negative responses to receiving identification inquiries as offensive and hostile, while some participants described the inquiries as a welcome opportunity to discuss their identities (Tran et al., 2016). The authors concluded that a racial microaggressions framework "was relevant but not sufficient in reflecting the complex nature of racial identification inquiries for multiracial individuals" (p. 34), as the framework was not effective at examining the positive responses to identification inquiries.

Experiences with racial microaggressions are likely to be just one aspect of the racially ambiguous experience. Further, how racially ambiguous people of color experience racial microaggressions may be more nuanced, as racial microaggressions may be targeted toward their ambiguous appearance as well as their identities as people of color. Further, social interactions with racially ambiguous people of color are likely to be influenced by a myriad of factors, including individuals' self-identity and how their identities are expressed. However, the current understanding of how racial microaggressions affect racially ambiguous people of color is limited.

Codeswitching and passing. Skin color tends to be a prominent feature relied upon when attempting to determine people's race (Kolbert, 2018; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). However, other aspects of people's presentation, such as mannerisms, education status, language, and socioeconomic status, are simultaneously influential (Pauker et al., 2016; Tawa, 2018; Telles, 2005; Wilton et al., 2014; Young et al., 2013). Many of these aspects are fluid and can change over time and context. For example, people's socioeconomic status or level of attained education can change throughout their lifespan. People can also shift the manner in which they convey their identities, such as situational changes in vernacular, attire, and mannerisms. The shifting of presentation is referred to as codeswitching (Cross & Strauss, 1998; Jackson, 2001; Koch, Gross, & Kolts, 2001), though some researchers refer to it as styleswitching (Gaither et al., 2015). Further, the perceived combination of people's presentation affects their capacity to pass (Brown & Brown, 2014; Khanna & Johnson, 2010). Skin color is not a reliable determinant for race (Brown & Brown, 2014; Edmonds, 2018; Wilton et al., 2014), despite it being used as such. Thus, notions such as codeswitching may be salient to the perceptions and classification of

racially ambiguous people of color, as other aspects of their presentation may serve as determinants.

Codeswitching is often discussed as it relates specifically to language (Gaither et al., 2015; Koch et al., 2001). That is, codeswitching is often viewed as a change between casual register (e.g., use of slang and colloquialisms) and formal register (e.g., use of prescribed grammar; Hays, 2016). However, other researchers have described codeswitching as being inclusive of other forms of presentation, such as mannerisms (Cross & Strauss, 1998; Jackson, 2012; Khanna & Johnson, 2010). In fact, Jackson (2012) conducted qualitative, narrative research with ten multiracial participants. The author gathered stories from participants to better understand their experiences as multiracial persons. One of the findings from the study included participants shifting their racial/ethnic expression. That is:

> Expressions varied from checking a particular ethnic or racial box on a form, to dressing and/or talking in an ethnically or racially stereotypical way in certain social situations . . . often in an attempt to align more closely to their interpretation of the other person's racial identity (often a stereotypical interpretation) and make the other person or group feel more comfortable. (Jackson, 2012, p. 49)

Further, Jackson (2012) reported participants as shifting their appearance and gender roles depending on the context as well. Moreover, participants demonstrated codeswitching in an attempt to increase their likelihood of being accepted. The author also highlighted that the participants often encountered identification inquiries (due to their ambiguous presentation), felt rejected from multiple racial groups, and desired social acceptance.

The act of codeswitching is intertwined with societal interactions. That is, social engagement can influence codeswitching and codeswitching can influence social engagement.

In a two-part study (n = 22 and 34, respectively) involving biracial (Black/White) participants, Gaither, Sommers, and Ambady (2013) explored how priming influenced participants' racial identification and social interactions. The authors primed participants by asking them to write about one of their racial identities (i.e., Black or White) and how that identity influenced their lives. Thereafter, participants engaged in race-related dialog with either a Black or White individual. Gaither et al. (2013) reported that priming either the Black or White identity of Black/White biracial participants influenced their subsequent behaviors, including nonverbal behaviors (e.g., eye contact) and level of engagement. Further, the authors reported that when the primed racial identity was congruent with the racial identity of the person involved in the race-related dialog, participants reported and demonstrated lower levels of anxiety. Moreover, in a separate series of studies, Gaither et al. (2015) reported that priming biracial participants influenced their speech patterns. Herein, Black/White biracial participants had one of their identities primed and subsequently engaged in a recorded dialog. Blind coders then rated how Black or White the primed participants sounded. The authors reported that Black primed participants sounded significantly more Black, and White primed participants sounded significantly more White, according to blind coders. Said differently, participants passed as either Black or White solely on their speech patterns. The aforementioned studies highlight the fluidity in racial expression that can be demonstrated by multiracial and racially ambiguous persons, that social interactions (i.e., priming) can influence racial expression, and that codeswitching can influence people's ability to pass.

Codeswitching and passing are, in many ways, interconnected. That is, codeswitching may be requisite for anyone attempting to pass as a member of a specific group. Notably, Khanna and Johnson (2010) explored how biracial participants intentionally make efforts to pass

for one of their racial groups. The authors argued that it can be advantageous to pass within certain contexts. For example, during the period when Jim Crow laws were enforced, Black people successfully passing as White would have gained access to resources unavailable to the Black population. Relatedly, Koch et al. (2001) reported that in certain situations, casual register congruent with Black culture is viewed more negatively than formal register by dominant society. Further, the authors reported that negative perceptions of casual register congruent with Black culture are reflective of biased beliefs toward Black culture. These negative perceptions (and potentially related biased attitudes) can have unwanted implications in certain situations for those unable to codeswitch (e.g., job interviews). Khanna and Johnson (2010) found that participants employed multiple, volitional tactics toward codeswitching and passing, including "verbal identification/disidentification, selective disclosure, manipulation of phenotype, use of cultural symbols, and selective association" (p. 393). The authors also reported that most participants implemented these efforts to pass as Black, as opposed to the historical pattern of attempting to pass as White. It was purported that this pattern likely occurred due to biracial participants having difficulty passing as White (i.e., hypodescent and rejection from White groups) and seeking community (Khanna & Johnson, 2010). The aforementioned literature highlights the unique ways in which racially ambiguous people interact socially, including both this population's racial expression and how they are perceived by others.

Group Membership. Friendships and group membership are a part of human development. However, like the majority of social interactions, race can influence the establishment and maintenance of social networks. In fact, Doyle and Kao (2007) posited that the influences of race in social networks are noticeable as early as grade school. Adolescents tend to choose friends they perceive as in-group, with race and gender being two notable

identities influencing group membership (Doyle & Kao 2007; Joyner & Kao, 2000). Notably, friendships provide a sense of togetherness among people. The sense of togetherness, which often occurs through a shared lived experience or worldview during adolescence, can bolster social understanding and identity development (Tatum, 2017). Yet, little is known about the group membership patterns for racially ambiguous people of color.

Race can establish boundaries for relationships to exist within. That is, race can dictate both what relationships can exist and what social contexts they are allowed to exist within (James & Tucker, 2003). Pertaining specifically to romantic relationships and racially ambiguous people, James and Tucker (2003) stated:

> Notably, the fact that racial identity by racially ambiguous persons is fluid and situationally determined is proof that how one identifies in a given situation really does matter. Whether one presents her- or himself as Black or White in a social setting may influence whom one approaches and the manner of the approach. As a relationship progresses, this may determine with whom the couple socializes, the nature of their activities, and the responses to the relationship of those within their respective social networks. (p. 162)

The social boundaries informed by race can be difficult to comprehend for racially ambiguous people of color, as the boundaries may be inconsistent across social settings and influenced heavily by racial expression. Further, researchers have posited that multiracial people may experience social rejection, as they do not fit neatly into existing racial groups (Quillian & Redd, 2009).

To increase the understanding of multiracial friendship networks, Doyle and Kao (2007) analyzed data from a nationally representative, longitudinal questionnaire completed by

adolescents (n = 90,118). Specifically, the authors assessed the friendship patterns of the multiracial adolescent participants (n = 3,058). Doyle and Kao (2007) reported that all multiracial groups exhibited amalgamation friendship patterns, defined as a tendency to befriend groups representative of one of their identities. For example, multiracial Black persons are more likely to choose Black friendship networks. In fact, multiracial groups that included Black identities were more likely to have Black friend groups, and multiracial groups that included White identities were more likely to have White friend groups (Doyle & Kao, 2007). The friendship patterns of adolescents with Black/White identities is noteworthy, as it may be a manifestation of hypodescent specific to multiracial people and their group membership patterns.

The results of Doyle and Kao (2007) have interesting implications for racially ambiguous people of color. The amalgamation pattern may coincide with a singular identity status (Choi-Misailidis, 2010). That is, racially ambiguous people of color (as well as mixed-race persons) may be categorized within a specific racial group, influencing their social interactions, regardless of how they self-identify. The amalgamation pattern may also speak to racially ambiguous persons' ability to pass (Brown & Brown, 2014; Khanna & Johnson, 2010). For example, it is possible that mixed-race populations with White identities find it easier to pass for White compared to mixed-race populations with Black identities. Further, it appears that the presence of a Black identity supersedes White identities, as multiracial Black/White participants were more likely to have friendship networks with Black people (Doyle & Kao, 2007).

Contrary to the aforementioned, Quillian and Redd (2009) reported results indicating multiracial participants had more diverse friendship groups. The authors reported that multiracial adolescents were similarly as popular as their monoracial peers, while having more diverse friendship groups. The results are congruent with the notion of blending friendships

(Doyle & Kao, 2007) and challenging essentialist racial categories (Sanchez et al., 2015; Young et al., 2013). That is, multiracial and racially ambiguous populations may choose to and be able to challenge or cross racial boundaries more easily than monoracial populations. Thus, the current understanding of the friendship networks and group membership patterns of racially ambiguous people of color is still underdeveloped.

Conclusion

Throughout this literature review, I underscored what is known and unknown about the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color. A major shortcoming of the existing literature is the conflation between being of mixed-race and being racially ambiguous (Young et al., 2013). Consequently, much of the existing literature on the racially ambiguous experience is extrapolated from research on biracial and multiracial populations.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned, this literature review overviewed the social significance of race and tendency for people to be placed into finite racial categories. Additionally, racially ambiguous people are likely to be viewed as people of color, although specific classification therein can vary. Further, existing outside of the boundaries of finite racial categories can result in a unique experience, including frequent identification inquiries and other racial microaggressions. Moreover, racially ambiguous people may have varying experiences related to group membership and establishing relationships, as well as a unique identity development process and mental health concerns. Unfortunately, research directly exploring the construct of racially ambiguous people of color, their lived experiences, and mental health needs are scarce, as this area study continues to emerge.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I overviewed the theoretical lens guiding this study and discussed its utility herein. Thereafter, I reviewed the existing literature related to racially ambiguous people of color, discussing the importance of race in society and how race influences people's identity development and lived experiences. Finally, I provided a brief summary of the literature review. In chapter 3, I will present the methodology for this study, including details regarding the research design and data analysis.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In the previous chapter, I reviewed literature on the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color. Unfortunately, much of the existing literature on this population is limited. Many studies conflated being of mixed-race heritage and being racially ambiguous, and few researchers reported the nuance of the lived experiences of racially ambiguous people of color. Consequently, the experiences of this population remain relatively unknown, as are recommendations toward advancement of the counseling profession. Therefore, this qualitative study aims to increase the understanding of the lived experiences of racially ambiguous people of color.

The qualitative research process requires researchers serve as the instrument of data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). That is, the researcher is situated within the research and is an extricable part of the process. Therefore, qualitative researchers must practice reflexivity throughout the research process to acknowledge their positionality and potential effects on the research (Berger, 2015; Suzuki, Ahluwalia, Arora, & Mattis, 2007). In this chapter, I will provide my researcher stance and discuss my epistemological assumptions. Then, I will provide an overview of the research design for this study, including a discussion of phenomenology, the participant recruitment process, and participant demographics. Thereafter, I will discuss data collection and analysis methods. Finally, I will discuss trustworthiness within the study and provide a summary of the chapter.

Researcher Stance

In qualitative research, the researcher acts as the means of both data collection and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The researcher's positionality, or their belief systems, identities, and worldviews, impact the study, including its design, and

collection and interpretation of data (Creswell & Poth, 2017). My researcher stance, or the practice of researcher reflexivity as it relates to the study, allows readers to know who I am in relation to the study, what influenced me to pursue this study, and how my identities affect the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Additionally, a discussion of my epistemological assumptions, or my beliefs about knowledge and the relationship between what I know and what I seek to know (Staller, 2013), further permits readers to understand my relationship to this study.

I am a Black and White biracial male who strongly identifies with his Black identity. I was raised in a lower-middle class home, although I am currently considered middle to upper-middle class. I was raised predominantly by my mother (who is Black) and her extended family and friends, in a neighborhood comprised of mostly people of color. My mother completed graduate school and highly values education. It was always her intention for us (my brother and me) to surpass her educational achievements and social class. I have carried a value for education and upward social mobility with me throughout my life.

Firmly embedded in my belief system are my mother's words: "if you're not White, you're Black." That is, she wanted me to know that despite my being biracial and relatively light-skinned (compared to her), the world would always see me as Black and treat me accordingly. She was bracing me for the effects of racism. Thus, I have always viewed myself as a person of color and that heavily influences my worldview. My mother, who was raised in the Civil Rights era in the suburban South, instilled in me the stories of her youth. She shared stories about segregation and how the culture of segregation lasted far beyond Brown v. Board of Education. I carry these stories with me, coupled with my own experiences, and they informed and continue to inform how I view the world. I was wary and untrusting of systems and those

that had decision-making power over me (e.g., teachers). Simultaneously, I engaged with my father's family (who are White) approximately twice per year, usually on holidays, until my mid-adolescent years. While my Black identity was fitting and embraced in my home, maternal family, and community, my brother and I were the only people of color at gatherings of my father's family. We stood out visibly and culturally. I can recall the myriad of racial microaggressions delivered from my father's family, negatively referencing my neighborhood, clothing, mannerisms, and stereotypes about music and food. During encounters with my father's family, I remember feeling both confused and alienated. I always felt like an outsider, but it was difficult to identify exact moments that provided evidence. I remember wanting to be treated like my other cousins and to feel simply that everyone was happy to see me. Instead, everything felt awkward, forced, and distant. When reflecting on these experiences, I often feel indifferent or upset. I do not want to care about these experiences anymore, but a part of me still does. I know these experiences further shaped my worldview and my identity from an early age. I began to understand that being a person of color influenced my social position. These experiences were foundational toward my conceptualization of the social importance of race.

Throughout my adolescence, my identity as biracial and racially ambiguous began to emerge. My complexion can be described as "light-skinned" or, as my mother's family would say, "high yellow." I can recall being asked "what are you?" as early as high school. I was often mistaken as Latino and immediately spoken to in Spanish. Further, I began to experience exclusion from peers who I identified as my community members (i.e., Black). I was told that I "talk White" or was "too White to get it" regarding specific activities or gatherings. I was also often assumed to be Latino or Middle Eastern. When I was asked about my racial identity (i.e., "what are you?") and I responded, "I am Black," many people challenged me and did not accept

that as a sufficient answer. Indicating that I was biracial was often sufficient, ceasing the questioning. Yet, sometimes people would persist, as they were convinced that I was something else. I often felt invalidated after occurrences such as these. I felt I was not "enough" for any group and no peer group would claim all of me.

Simultaneously, as my identity was challenged, I continued to experience systemic and individual racism and discrimination. I recall being rejected from a job with the reason being that they "already had a Black boy" working for them. I have experienced racial slurs more times than I can recall throughout my life, and once while being subjected to police brutality. I have been followed in stores and had people cross the street away from me at night. I struggled (and perhaps continue to struggle) with the dichotomy of being subjected to many negative experiences associated with being Black while often having my Black identity challenged. Being Black was all I knew and to have that challenged was painful. However, it is also important for me to remember that because I have lighter skin and because I am racially ambiguous, my experience is different from people who are perceived solely as Black. Along with my internal and external struggles, my presentation grants me some degrees of privilege.

I expect to experience a variety of emotions and difficulties in exploring the experiences of other people who are racially ambiguous. I believe that people's worldviews are socially constructed, and that our knowledge and understanding are a product of social, cultural, and historical factors (Heppner, Wampold, Owen, Thompson, & Wang, 2016). I accept and expect that people who look similar to me will have encountered different experiences and hold different beliefs about the world. However, there is a part of me that is looking for a sense of validation of my own experience. I want to hear that others have had their identities questioned and that their appearance and presentation has affected their group membership. I want to know

that I was not the only one. Further, I find it frustrating when I encounter existing literature that frames racial ambiguity solely as a biracial/multiracial experience. I acknowledge there is some validity to this approach. However, I also believe it further perpetuates an encapsulated view of race, such as only people of mixed-race ancestry can present as ambiguous. Although I am biracial, I have met many monoracial-identified persons who present as ambiguous and have experienced similar occurrences as me. Yet, their voices are not accurately represented in the literature, and there is little to no discussion on the experience itself. Although many forms of media have discussed the nuance of racial ambiguity as it applies to people's lived experiences (see Demby & Meraji, 2017; Khalil & Jones, 2012; Meraji, & Demby, 2017; Meraji, & Demby, 2018), I have yet to see my experience reflected in academic literature. Further, I doubt I am alone in feeling this. In addition to my own experience, hearing stories of how ambiguity has influenced the lives of others via podcasts, blogs, and social media has influenced me to pursue this topic.

Research Design

As discussed in the previous chapter, researchers studying racial ambiguity have indirectly approached the construct (Young et al., 2013), focused on group membership (Quillian & Redd, 2009; Gullickson & Morning, 2011), or examined racial categorization (Tskhay & Rule, 2015; Willadsen-Jensen & Ito, 2015). However, existing literature has mostly ignored the lived experiences of racially ambiguous people of color. A qualitative, exploratory approach to research is warranted when there is a "need to study a group or population, identify variables that cannot be easily measured, or hear silenced voices" (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 45). Therefore, a qualitative, phenomenological approach to better understand this population's lived experience is appropriate.

Phenomenological research comes from the philosophy of phenomenology, or the understanding of the lived experience (Finlay, 2009). A central tenet of phenomenology is that the individual and the world are inextricably connected (Finlay, 2009; Young, 2017). Thus, the researcher must not aim to separate the individual and the world, but examine them both together as they relate to the phenomenon.

A phenomenon is an experience that is directly felt and occurring for the individual (Finlay, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Young, 2017). To begin understanding an experience, the researcher must gain access to the individual's life-world, or their unique perspective and understanding. The term life-world derives from the German word *lebenswelt*, and encompasses an individual's identity, sociocultural context, and worldview (Finlay, 2009; Young, 2017). The individual's life-world must be preserved, as the phenomenon can only be truly understood through the individual themselves (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Finlay, 2009; Young, 2017).

To preserve the participant's life-world, phenomenological researchers are to practice *epoche*, or the process of bracketing their own experiences (Finlay, 2009; Young, 2017). The goal of epoche is for the researcher to set aside their preconceived ideas about the phenomenon being examined, as to not distort the data and preserve the participants' perspective and experience. Epoche should be practiced before and throughout the research process.

The goal of phenomenological research is to highlight and report the essence of the experience within a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Finlay, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Young, 2017). That is, the researcher aims to convey both what the participants experienced and how they experienced it. The essence is understood through the direct reporting of the participants and is a rich and meaningful description of how individuals experience a

specific phenomenon. It is the product of the collection and analysis of rich data obtained directly from the participants.

Participant Recruitment

In phenomenological research, participant recruitment is purposeful and criterion based (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). That is, there is an intentional effort to recruit participants who meet a specific criterion (Palinkas et al., 2015). In this study, the primary criterion is that participants self-identify as racially ambiguous people of color, as it is defined within this study. Thus, I purposefully recruited racially ambiguous people of color. Additionally, snowball sampling, or the process of allowing participants or other persons of interest to assist in the recruitment process via referrals, was utilized (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Snowball sampling was implemented because the term "racial ambiguity" is not well known broadly or within the research community. Throughout the participant recruitment process, I carefully explained racial ambiguity to potential participants and referral sources to encourage additional recommendations for participants. Finally, discriminant sampling techniques were used to ensure diverse representation within the sample, including people identifying as monoracial, multiracial, and of varying genders, ages, and ethnicities (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

The full participant inclusion criteria included the following: being at least 22 years of age, available to be interviewed either in-person or via video conference, self-identify as racially ambiguous, and self-identify as a person of color. The assessment of these four criteria, as well as the collection of additional demographic data, occurred for all potential participants via the Screening Questionnaire (see Appendix A). The rationale for the age requirement was twofold: being 22 years of age allowed participants to consent for participation, and to recruit participants who have occupied multiple contexts and engaged in a variety of experiences throughout their

lives. Although there are undoubtedly persons younger than 22 years of age who would have occupied multiple contexts, and people of or older than 22 years of age who would not, this age was selected to allow for potential participants to experience some common aspects of life (e.g., residential moves, participating in the workforce, and attending various schools) and reflect on their lived experiences. All potential participants were asked to confirm their age of at least 22 years (see Appendix A). The second criterion required that participants be accessible for either in-person or video conference interviews. Although distance interviews are viable and useful for a phenomenological approach, Seidman (2013) does not recommend distance interviewing if in-person interviewing is possible. Therefore, I made every reasonable effort to conduct in-person interviews and only permitted video conference interviews as needed and appropriate. The third criterion required that participants self-identify as racially ambiguous. This criterion was assessed via participant self-report and experiences (see Appendix A). Potential participants were asked if they identified as racially ambiguous. However, because racial ambiguity is a relatively unknown term, participants may not be familiar with it. Therefore, I provided participants with a detailed definition of the construct as was being used within this study (see Appendix A). Additionally, participants were asked if they experienced numerous racial identification inquiries in their lives (e.g., what are you? where are you from?), a common experience for racially ambiguous people (Jackson, 2012; Rockquemore, 1998; Tran et al., 2016; Wilton et al., 2014; Young et al., 2013). Participants that did not self-identify as racially ambiguous and have not received numerous identification inquiries were excluded from the study. Additionally, the recruitment flyer (see Appendix B) depicted racial identification inquiries common to people that are racially ambiguous. The final inclusion criterion required that participants self-identify as a person of color. Racism, racial prejudice and discrimination,

power, and privilege effect people of color in unique ways (Harrell, 2000; Jones, 1997). Further, people of color have the burden of trying to determine whether a given interaction was influenced by their race, such as experiencing racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007). That is, it is not uncommon for White people to view cross-racial interactions as being influenced by other (i.e., not race-related) factors while people of color perceive the interaction differently (i.e., race-related). Therefore, participants viewing themselves as people of color will provide deeper insight into how their race and racial ambiguity influences their lived experience. This criterion was assessed through directly asking potential participants if they identify as a person of color, and if at least one of their biological parents identify as a person of color (see Appendix A).

Prior to the recruitment and interview process, I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Montclair State University (see Appendix C). As emphasis was placed on interviews being conducted in-person, recruitment efforts were focused within and around an urban, northeast city within the United States. Flyers were posted at accessible cafes, supermarkets, and community centers in diverse neighborhoods. Additionally, flyers were shared with colleagues and peers for dissemination, as well as posted on my social media outlets (i.e., Facebook, LinkedIn) and accessible social media groups and forums (i.e., Facebook group *Academics of Color*; sub-Reddits *mixedrace*, *biracial*).

Once initial contact was made with potential participants, I introduced myself, explained the study being conducted, and assessed their interest in participating. If they verbalized continued interest, I requested they complete the informed consent form (see Appendix D). Following my receipt of the signed informed consent form, I requested participants complete the screening questionnaire (see Appendix A) and scheduled an individual interview with participants.

There are multiple ways of determining the end of data collection in phenomenological research. Some researchers will engage in participant recruitment and data collection until data has reached the saturation point (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). That is, recruitment and data collection stops once no more new information is being obtained. Other researchers will commit to obtaining data from specific, predetermined number of participants. In phenomenological research, Creswell and Poth (2017) noted that sample sizes can vary significantly. However, the authors generally recommended participant samples ranging as low as three to as great as 25. Data saturation was reached at 14 participants and no new data was required. Additionally, the inclusion of 14 participants allowed for a cross section of different ages, genders, racial compositions, ethnicities, and cultures. Participant demographics are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Demographics (n = 14)

Pseudonym	Age	Racial/Ethnic Identity	Sex/Gender	Region(s) of Maturation	Highest Completed Education
Adi	32	Asian American	Female	Philippines; NY	Associate's
Artemis	28	Indian	Female	NJ; NY; IL; India	Some College
B-Man	30	Latino	Male	NY	Associate's
Casey	40	Black American	Female	NJ	Master's
Javier	31	Latino	Male	NJ	Master's
Jenny	29	Latinx	Female	NJ	Master's
Jmi	32	Black / White (Black identified)	Male	MD; MO; KS; Germany	Bachelor's
Kai	29	Black / White	Male	NJ	Bachelor's
Lee	29	Black / White	Male	FL; NY	Bachelor's
Lily	39	Black / White	Female	NJ	Doctorate
Lisa	48	Latina	Female	NY; Dominican Republic; FL	Doctorate

Table 1 (continued)

Scott	28	Asian American	Male	NY; NJ	Bachelor's
Sinclair	50	Black / White	Male	MI; GA	Doctorate
Tati	27	Black / White (Black identified)	Female	NJ	Master's

Data Collection

Phenomenological researchers aim to understand the lived experience directly from the individual (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Finlay, 2009; Young, 2017). Therefore, in-depth interviews were conducted with participants to better understand their lived experiences (Seidman, 2013). The goal of the phenomenological interview is "to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic of study" (Seidman, 2013, p. 14). That is, the interview process is aimed toward gaining a deeper understanding of the lived experience of racially ambiguous people of color.

Two interviews were conducted with each participant in this study. Prior to the first interview, participants completed and returned the screening questionnaire (see Appendix A). To promote client confidentiality, each client chose a pseudonym to be used throughout the study. Thereafter, the first semi-structured interview was conducted, guided by a predetermined interview protocol (see Appendix E). The semi-structured interview process allows for structure to guide the interview, as well as flexibility for participants to share additional information. Thirteen of the initial interviews were conducted in-person. Follow up interviews were conducted following initial data analysis of all first-round interviews and field notes, and served as a form of member checking (Seidman, 2013). Prior to the second interview, I shared a copy of each participants' interview transcript. During the second interview, participants were asked to confirm the accuracy of their transcript, respond to initial themes from preliminary data

analysis, and encouraged to contribute any additional data that may have been withheld or unrealized during the first interview, including corroborating artifacts or documents related to their experiences (Young, 2017).

Interviews were recorded on a digital audio recording device. Recordings were stored an encrypted, password protected digital storage device. Recordings were outsourced for transcription. The transcription service provided both encrypted transmission (uploading and downloading) and storage of all audio recordings and agreed to delete the audio recordings after the transcription process was completed.

Journals and field notes. It is recommended that phenomenological researchers practice epoche throughout the research process (Moustakas, 1994). I kept a researcher journal throughout this research. The exploration of the racially ambiguous experience proved emotional for me, as the process reminded me of my own experiences. Often, the more negative memories and respective emotions were more prominent than the positive memories. I began keeping a journal to document my thoughts and emotions once the dissertation process commenced and I continued to journal on an as-needed basis throughout.

Prior to and following each interview, I recorded field notes to reflect my thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the interview process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Field notes are a form of data and allow for critical analysis of my reactions to the emerging data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Field notes were created immediately before and after each interview to maximize accurate reflection and minimize errors, such as forgetfulness (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Field notes, along with journaling and consulting with critical friends, was utilized throughout the data collection and analysis process to promote self-awareness and minimize biased data processing.

Journals and field notes were either written in Microsoft Word or digitally audio recorded and stored on my personal computer. When journals or field notes were audio recorded, I subsequently transcribed and saved them as a Microsoft Word document, along with other existing reflections. No identifying information of any participants was included in any journal entries or field notes. Additionally, I used the content of my journals and field notes to guide dialog with my critical friends.

Critical friends. A critical friend (CF) is an individual who provides both support and critique to another (Storey & Wang, 2017). That is, a CF embodies a relationship that is simultaneously friendly and critical of a person's process. Further, "key elements of critical friendship are trust, provocative questioning, an alternative perspective, constructive critique, and advocacy" (Storey & Wang, 2017, p. 107). I had three CFs throughout my research process. All of my CFs are doctoral candidates and former classmates of mine. I communicated with my CFs regularly throughout the research process. I discussed my journals and field notes with my CFs, as well as my data analysis and results. My CFs provided feedback on my research process, including data collection and analysis. I placed high value on the feedback of my critical friends and infused their feedback into my research process.

Data Analysis

Moustakas (1994) outlined multiple steps required for phenomenological data analysis, including: epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. As discussed above, epoche is the process of bracketing the researcher's worldview and experiences to separate it from the data. The process of bracketing should occur before and throughout the entire research process, in an effort to preserve the participant's life-world and data. I engaged in

bracketing through maintaining a personal journal and creating field notes when engaging with participants.

Phenomenological reduction is the process of sorting the data and beginning to understand the "what" of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). During the process, researchers begin by horizontalizing the data, or viewing all the data as equal and analyzing it for meaning. Thereafter, the reduction process begins, as the researcher begins to remove redundant and unnecessary data. This process of reducing the data begins to form horizons, or groupings of data that are interrelated. These horizons inform the groupings that will ultimately become themes within the data. I began the phenomenological reduction process with horizontalizing the data and utilizing open coding. Also known as initial coding, open coding is the process of reducing data to units that can be compared for similarities and differences (Saldaña, 2016) and removing unnecessary data. Thereafter, I coded via lumping, a process which "gets to the essence of categorizing a phenomenon" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 24). As data was lumped, specific quotes and their corresponding codes were maintained in my codebook.

A codebook is a database used to record and store codes, as well as definitions and examples of each code (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011; Saldaña, 2016). My codebook was maintained both in Microsoft Word and in Dedoose, a software designed for qualitative research. The process of adding and examining codes continued until all data were reviewed and all unnecessary and redundant data were removed (i.e., reduction).

The third step of phenomenological data analysis is imaginative variation, the process of contextualizing the data (Moustakas, 1994). Also described as the "how" of the data, imaginative variation involves placing the data within settings and contexts. This process further highlights the world in which the data resides, giving light to situational, temporal, and

contextual factors surrounding the phenomenon. As stated previously, a central tenet to phenomenology is that the individual and the world are inextricably bound; the process of imaginative variation ensures that this tenet is observed within the data, highlighting the world in which the phenomenon occurs.

Imaginative variation manifested in my second round of coding. I reexamined the data and existing codes, focusing on the settings and contexts related to the reported experiences. I modified codes as necessary, lumped existing codes where applicable, and split codes (splitting data into multiple, smaller codes; Saldaña, 2016) if required, until categories began to emerge. Each category, or grouping of coded data (Saldaña, 2016), and the respective quotes were temporarily named to effectively maintain distinction across categories. Open coding continued until themes and subthemes, or major elements of the data (Saldaña, 2016) highlighting the essence of the participants' experience, emerged.

The final stage in phenomenological data analysis is synthesis (Moustakas, 1994). In this stage, researchers begin to synthesize the data obtained in the previous stages. By combining the "what" and "how" of the phenomenon being studied, the essence of the experience begins to emerge. The product is an illustrative depiction of how the individual experiences the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Each theme and the respective quotes were reexamined for accuracy, and themes were renamed to depict the essence of the experience. The units created throughout the synthesis process highlight the essence of experiencing the phenomenon, the ultimate goal of phenomenological research.

Trustworthiness

For qualitative research to be trustworthy, it must demonstrate credibility. Heppner et al. (2016) outlined three significant methods of demonstrating credibility: member checking,

bracketing, and triangulation of data. Member checking is the process of allowing participants to examine analyzed data (Seidman, 2013). By performing member checks, participants are allowed to voice their affirmation or disagreement with how their data will be shared. The second interview in this study served as the member check. Prior to the second interview, all participants were asked to review their transcripts for accuracy. During the second interview, participants were encouraged to share any additional data that may have been withheld or unrealized during the initial interview, and respond to preliminary findings. Ultimately, I adopted the member checking policy discussed by Siedman (2013), where I "retain the right to write the final report as I see it" (p. 100), so long as my conclusions are accurate, validated by my CFs and dissertation advisor, and did not place added and unnecessary vulnerability on the participants.

Bracketing is the process of researchers disclosing and attempting to set aside their biases and preexisting beliefs regarding the research (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Finlay, 2009; Young, 2017). In relation to trustworthiness, it is important for the bracketing process and researcher's positionality to be transparent to readers. That is, readers should be made aware of what the researcher did throughout the bracketing process, as well as understand the researcher's potential biases and position within the research. I embraced bracketing through multiple methods, including providing a researcher stance, journaling throughout the research process, maintaining field notes to document immediate reactions to experiences with participants, and engaging with CFs.

The final aspect outlined by Heppner et al. (2016) is the triangulation of data. Researchers should make efforts to collect data exhaustively and from multiple sources. That is, qualitative researchers should conduct multiple interviews, with multiple participants, and

include multiple questions surrounding the same construct. The results of the research gain credibility by broadening the amount of data collection about a construct. My strides toward triangulation of data were apparent through my sampling methods (i.e., purposive and discriminant), interview protocol (see Appendix E), and use of multiple interviews with participants.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I provided my researcher stance and detailed my research design. I discussed participant criteria, recruitment methods, and data collection procedures. Thereafter, I discussed methods of bracketing, use of critical friends, and procedures for data analysis. Finally, I discussed the promotion of trustworthiness, including member checking, bracketing, and triangulation of data. In chapter 4, I will present the findings of this study, including themes and related participant quotes.

Chapter 4: Results

In the previous chapter, I discussed the methodology for this dissertation study. I provided my researcher stance, the rationale and tenets of a phenomenological approach, and overviewed my research methods. I also discussed my use of use of member checking, bracketing, and triangulation of data to establish trustworthiness within this study. In this chapter, I will provide the findings from thematic analysis of the participants' interviews conducted for this study.

Findings

Existing research on racially ambiguous people of color is limited. Much of the existing literature has conflated being of mixed-race descent and being racially ambiguous (Young et al., 2013), excluding persons identifying as monoracial or solely through their ethnic identity. Additionally, none of the existing literature on racially ambiguous people of color has focused on their lived experiences and needs related to mental health and wellness. As such, the purpose of this study is to expand on the current understanding of this population's lived experiences. The guiding research question for this phenomenological study was: what are the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color?

Two interviews were conducted with each participant within this study. The first interview served as the primary method of data collection; the second interview served as a member checking interview, allowing for participants to share additional data, verify the accuracy of their initial interview transcript, and respond to preliminary themes. Phenomenological thematic analysis of participants' interviews occurred throughout and following data collection process.

Five themes represented the lived experiences of racially ambiguous people of color, including 1) *Understanding Your Identity*, 2) *Defining Racial Ambiguity*, 3) *Social Experiences and Racial Ambiguity*, 4) *Internal Experiences and Racial Ambiguity*, and 5) *"I'm Gonna Use it to my Benefit."* Each theme included multiple subthemes. Additionally, the five themes are presented conceptually. That is, the *Understanding Your Identity* and *Defining Racial Ambiguity* themes represent participants' understanding of the foundational aspects and tenets of the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color. The remaining themes represent participants' lived experiences as racially ambiguous people of color. Further, all themes and subthemes are presented in order of prevalence (i.e., the most prevalent themes and subthemes are presented first). Moreover, excerpts from participants' interviews were selected for their representation of the corresponding theme. Table 2 summarizes the demographics of the participants in this dissertation study, allowing for easy reference to participants' self-reported identities when reading about their lived experiences.

Table 2: Participant Overview (n = 14)

Pseudonym	Age	Racial/Ethnic Identity	Sex/Gender	Region(s) of Maturation	Highest Completed Education
Adi	32	Asian American	Female	Philippines; NY	Associate's
Artemis	28	Indian	Female	NJ; NY; IL; India	Some College
B-Man	30	Latino	Male	NY	Associate's
Casey	40	Black	Female	NJ	Master's
Javier	31	Latino	Male	NJ	Master's
Jenny	29	Latinx	Female	NJ	Master's
Jmi	32	Black / White	Male	MD; MO; KS; Germany	Bachelor's
Kai	29	Black / White	Male	NJ	Bachelor's
Lee	29	Black / White	Male	FL; NY	Bachelor's
Lily	39	Black / White	Female	NJ	Doctorate
Lisa	48	Latina	Female	NY; Dominican Republic; FL	Doctorate

Table 2 (continued)

Scott	28	Asian American	Male	NY; NJ	Bachelor's
Sinclair	50	Black / White	Male	MI; GA	Doctorate
Tati	27	Black	Female	NJ	Master's

Please note, this table is a duplicate of Table 1: Participant Demographics

Theme 1: Understanding Your Identity

Participants in this study discussed how they learned about and understood their racial and/or ethnic identities, as well as other's perceptions of their racial ambiguity. Herein, there were three subthemes describing their experiences, including 1) *Learning by living*, 2) *Being racially "different,"* and 3) "*We never really talked about it."* Throughout these subthemes, participants discussed the experiences that conveyed the importance of their race and/or ethnicity, subsequently informing their worldviews. Participants discussed the importance of both positive and negative interpersonal communications and interactions, as well as observing societal dynamics and various forms of media.

Learning by living. This theme was exemplary of participants' learning about their racial and/or ethnic identity(ies) through social interactions. That is, participants learned about their race/ethnicity through social experiences, interpersonal interactions, and discussions with their parents and community. All participants in this study spoke about this social learning process. These exchanges seemed to be the primary form of learning for participants, and learning started at an early age and continued throughout adolescence and adulthood. For example, Jmi discussed how his father overtly influenced his understanding of his racial identity. He said,

> My dad was extremely pro-Black. He grew up in poverty and we experienced, like, some of that poverty early in life, but we never experienced racial identity or anything like that.

> All, all I know is growing up my dad was so adamant, "you're Black. Like, if anybody ever asks you, you're Black. Like, if you, if you put anything down, you're Black." And it was just, we were always told that, and so I was like, "okay, whatever that means." You know what I'm saying?

In addition to parental dialog, participants discussed how their extended family and community influenced their learning about race and/or ethnicity. School was also often a pivotal setting for learning about race, as it could serve as a social hub for attendees. For example, Lee discussed how he learned about his racial identity through his experiences both at home and school. He stated,

> Yeah, I would say that a couple of significant moments, I think the first was in elementary school [PAUSE] I'm not sure what grade or how old I was but just like, after meeting my Black side, my cousins, umm, there was this very distinct "hey you don't go to our school, which is the Black school, you go the White school." So like, when I was home there was like this feeling of "okay they're my cousins or my family by blood but I don't belong with them." But then, showing up to the quote, un-quote "White school" very much being identified as, like, the Black kid or being perceived as like, you know, Latino, Hispanic, whatever that is. Umm, so I think it was just like me asking myself the questions and trying to sort of putting the dots together around like "hey my family doesn't really feel like I'm the same as them but obviously my friends and peers don't look at me the same so what am I?" Umm, and then finally coming to the realization that like, hey, I'm mixed and this is actually something, you know, by itself.

Participants also discussed the role that media played in learning about their racial and/or ethnic identity. Media sources often included television and the internet (e.g., Facebook,

Wikipedia, etc.). For example, Lily, explained how she learned about her racial identity through seeing people that looked like her on television. She shared,

> So, in terms of home life [as an adoptee], I had these two White parents, and me. With no one else who looked like me around me. Umm, yeah, nothing. Again, a household that wouldn't talk about race … So [PAUSE] what I often [PAUSE] in home life, that I would hang on to, this is like the 90s, right, early 90s. So, you know, hip hop, Yo! MTV Raps, like, that was my jam, and that's how I started to really identify.

Being racially "different." As participants learned about their racial and ethnic identities, many discussed a moment when they realized they were perceived as racially different from their peers. This understanding often was preceded by being treated differently compared to others, such as their peers or family members. Ten participants explicitly stated this understanding. For example, Tati said "it was at a young age, though, cause I [PAUSE] because it started in elementary school, when I noticed, like, there's something different about me, and I don't know what it is or why it is, but I'm different." Many participants discussed this realization, which often represented a shift in their understanding of themselves and their social experiences. Kai discussed when he realized he was perceived as different. He stated,

> Umm, I think probably [PAUSE] probably grade school. Probably through that experience of, of moving to a new town, and being [PAUSE] feeling like the outsider, I think this is probably when I started to really understand, like, that I was different, and that [PAUSE] that was something that other people perceived, and that [PAUSE] that, you know, the experiences that I was starting to have were connected to that in some way. I didn't obviously at the time understand how [PAUSE] how significant it was, and, like, that it was going to be something that was going to follow me for the rest of my life,

> but, umm, I think that's probably when I started to really understand, like what that, what being racially ambiguous meant.

Although many participants shared learning about being racially different through social interactions, Lily discussed knowing she was racially different from a very early age without being able to identify preceding social interactions. She shared,

> It's funny because, I must've known [very early] … [my mother] goes, "well there was this day" [PAUSE] I had to be five, I remember her going, she went on a trip to DC. And apparently when she came back, this part I don't remember, I said to her, "so when am I finally gonna be White like you?" … So I guess even a little bit earlier than I remember, that there were moments of me realizing that I was different.

Although the participants above reported understanding they were perceived as different early in life, other participants discussed not recognizing it until late adolescence or early adulthood. Nevertheless, the recognition evoked a shift in participants' worldviews and an understanding that being perceived as different can result in being treated differently too.

"**We never really talked about it."** Participants disclosed that despite learning about their racial identities and their racial ambiguity, they did not explicitly discuss the topic of racial ambiguity. In this study, seven participants spoke directly to this lack of communication about being racially ambiguous. This lack of explicit dialog about racial ambiguity was often, in hindsight, viewed as a missed opportunity to learn more about their identity. For example, Jenny stated "my parents didn't realize that I was gonna be this racially ambiguous child," acknowledging that her parents may not have had the language and/or understanding of what being racially ambiguous would entail. Further, Tati indicated that conversations about racial ambiguity did not occur, even though she felt that they should have. She shared, "like, was this

something that we talked about at home? We live in a house with some pretty racially ambiguous people [PAUSE] we never really never talked about it."

When conversations did occur with family and caregivers, they often lacked depth and/or understanding. For example, Scott shared how he attempted to have a conversation with his mother about his experience as a racially ambiguous person of color. He said,

> I had to explain to my mother that when I was growing up, it wasn't the easiest because of racial ambiguity. And she did not understand what I was talking about at all. Like, "you're just like everyone else, you're White." And we have an interesting debate about this with Barack Obama, because he identifies as an African American, or as Black … And, my mom just didn't get it, where I was coming from … And I was like, "no, you just don't get it because you're not living that way."

Theme 2: Defining Racial Ambiguity

Throughout this study, participants discussed factors that contribute to their being perceived as racially ambiguous; this often required a lot of thought from participants. That is, participants were not used to discussing racial ambiguity and defining it was a relatively new task for them. Ultimately, three subthemes were indicative of participants' experiences, including 1) *Physique influences racial ambiguity*, 2) *Presentations influence racial ambiguity*, and 3) *Location influences racial ambiguity*. Jenny shared a sentiment that effectively conveyed all aspects of the *Defining Racial Ambiguity* theme:

> It depends how I wear my hair. It depends what I'm wearing, how my make-up is, where I'm at, who I'm with. I'm not as light skin, where they know I'm not White, but I'm not as dark skin, where they know I'm not Black … they're trying to figure out where I am and I

> don't match what they … They're trying to figure it out. I don't fit into something and so they're so curious. They need to know, "where do you belong?"

Physique influences racial ambiguity. All participants in this study discussed how their physical attributes contributed to their being perceived as racially ambiguous. These were phenotypical aspects, such as skin color, facial features, and hair texture. Although some of these features can be modified or changed, doing so could be difficult for some and/or in contrast with their natural being. For example, B-Man shared the importance of skin color related to racial ambiguity and the fact that it cannot be hidden. He stated,

> Skin color, definitely. That supersedes anything I'll ever say because that's their first impressions [PAUSA] soon as you look at me. That's it, that's what you're seeing … skin color is definitely number one. That's the one thing I can't hide. I can change the way I speak at any given time. I could probably speak a foreign language that no one would expect me to speak, however, as soon as they lay eyes on me, they're seeing my skin color and then they're looking at my facial structure because that definitely plays a role in this.

Although skin color was described as one of the largest factors of being racially ambiguous, it was not the only relevant aspect of participants' appearance. Jmi shared, "I believe it's more my skin complexion," speaking to the other phenotypical factors that he and other participants discussed as integral toward their being racially ambiguous. Participants mainly described how racial ambiguity is an amalgamation of physical features—among other aspects—that influence people's perception. Lisa stated "hair, skin color, my features … my lips are thicker, my hair is coarse when it's not straightened." Further, these physical features are not all weighed evenly. For example, Lily discussed the nuance of racial ambiguity and how light-

colored eyes can heavily influence racial ambiguity even when the person has darker skin color. She shared,

> Like, I have a friend who is also biracial. If you put us together in pictures, we look a lot alike. But her eyes came out blue. So she gets more White presenting, although her skin is kinda dark as mine, but just having that one different feature [PAUSE] our hair, probably the same, you know what I mean? That one different feature somehow makes her more White presenting.

Presentations influence racial ambiguity. In addition to physical attributes, all the participants in this study discussed how their presentation choices influenced their racial ambiguity, including participants' behaviors in social interactions, such as manner of speech and communication. Further, participants also discussed choices in presentation as being influential, such as choices in clothing. For example, B-Man discussed how his manner of speech influenced how people racially categorized him. He said,

> And the way in which I speak, yes. I've been told I speak "White" several times in my life and I've been correcting the person, being like, "that doesn't make sense. What is speaking White? Because that's not a thing. Or do I speak grammatically correct? Is that what you're saying?" … the way I speak definitely plays role because, I guess, the more slang [I use], the more [I am] perceived in a certain way.

Similarly, Javier shared how sometimes he may be racially coded as White, but once he speaks, people's ideas of his racial identity tend to shift. He shared, "it's a different story once we start talking … when they are like 'wait a second. You don't sound White. You don't act White … so what are you?'"

Although speech was a salient aspect of how presentations related to racial ambiguity, many more aspects were discussed. For example, B-Man went on to discuss how his choices in clothing also influenced how people perceived him. He shared,

> Especially when I was younger … I had bigger clothes, baggier jeans, all that stuff [PAUSE] fitted hats and stuff … soon people were like, "oh, he's probably just a Black guy. He just looks a little different." So, for that, yeah.

These aspects of presentation contributed to how participants' racial identities were understood by others. Further, as shared previously, all of these factors interacted with each other, as well as the physical features discussed above, adding to the complexity of racial ambiguity.

Location influences racial ambiguity. Participants discussed how their location in the world further influenced how they were perceived. Nine participants indicated that region influenced racial ambiguity. Lily's experience provided a thorough explanation of this subtheme. She said,

> As I travel the world, and internationally, I get perceived in different ways too … I mean, it really does show the idea that race is socially constructed, right? Cause everywhere I go I'm being constructed in different ways that I was not expecting.

Additionally, participants discussed how both within the U.S. and abroad, racial ambiguity elicits different responses. For example, Adi described her partner as racially ambiguous as well. She discussed a time when he was viewed differently based on where he was located. She said,

> [My partner] was telling me, when he was in Florida, because I guess he still also is racially ambiguous, people assume he's Cuban, because he's in Florida [CHUCKLES]. He goes to another place, he went to Thailand, "hey, you're Thai." But no, he's not.

Some participants made attempts at understanding how different locations influenced how people conceptualized racially ambiguous people of color. Ultimately, many participants attributed differences across locations to what persons are used to seeing and what they have language for. In Adi's example above, if Floridians are used to coding ambiguous persons as Cuban, then many racially ambiguous people there will likely be defaulted to Cuban. In fact, Sinclair shared how he empathized with how race is socially constructed and understood, as he was internally racially coding others during his travels. He shared,

> I remember being in Hawaii and running into people and I'm just like, "that dude is Black. That dude is Black." That dude's not Black, dude's from Hawaii. I mean he's Hawaiian, native Hawaiian … [He's] not Black in the way that we understand, what I mean is the ancestry doesn't come from Africa. All the ancestry has been Polynesian, Asian, whatever."

Moreover, different locations place different values on specific identities. That is, some regions may prioritize ethnicity or nationality over race, thus influencing how racially ambiguous persons are perceived. Casey provided an example of this, where her race and racial ambiguity were not deemed relevant as she traveled abroad. She said,

> It wasn't until I went to Paris … and I lived there that I realized that being Black and American or being Black and Parisian are very different things. Also, being an American in Paris is a very different thing. Like they had to explain it to me that you're not Black, you're American … because the Black that they were talking about are Black Africans or Black African immigrants … So, your Black doesn't even matter, we still don't like you because you're American … So, it didn't matter. They were equal opportunity disrespecters. Like, just because you were American, it didn't matter.

The first two themes represented the foundational aspects of participants' lived experiences as racially ambiguous people of color. This illustrated both how participants learned about their race and what they learned about being people of color. Additionally, participants also shared how they understood racial ambiguity. The following three themes move beyond participants' foundational understanding and are indicative of the external and internal interactions and consequences of being racially ambiguous people of color.

Theme 3: Social Experiences and Racial Ambiguity

Participants in this study shared their various social experiences that related to their being perceived as racially ambiguous. The *Social Experiences and Racial Ambiguity* theme depicted the depth of the unique social experiences of this sample. This theme was defined by how people react and interact with racially ambiguous people of color and included five subthemes: 1) "*Please explain yourself to me*," 2) *Experiencing discrimination and/or microaggressions*, 3) "*You're not one of us*," 4) *Being more comfortable in racially/ethnically diverse settings*, and 5) *Intersecting identities*.

"Please explain yourself to me." This subtheme depicted one of the most salient aspects of the social experiences of racially ambiguous people of color. Herein, participants discussed the myriad of questions or assumptions they encountered related to their being perceived as racially ambiguous. These assumptions and questions were directed toward their perceived race and expected behaviors and/or characteristics. Four subthemes represented these experiences, including 1) "*They don't know what box to put me in*," 2) *Expectations and stereotypes*, 3) *Experiencing hypodescent*, and 4) *Having to negotiate your racial/ethnic identity*.

"They don't know what box to put me in." This subtheme was defined by how people perceive and understand the racial identities of racially ambiguous people of color. All

participants in this study shared experiences such as receiving questions about their racial identity, or people making assumptions about their racial identity. These questions seemed to be pervasive, starting very early and continuing throughout participants' lives. For example, Lisa recalled receiving questions about her identity at a very young age. She shared,

> Like my earliest memories, maybe in grammar school [PAUSE] before that. There used to be a bodega on the corner, and my mother used to take me there, buying whatever, and the guy used to always harass me, the owner, in a playful way, but at the time I was like "what's wrong with this man?" [the man working at the store would say] "What are you? You're not Black. You're not White. You're not Dominican. You're not American. What are you?" I remember that. And when I went to school people would say, "What are you?" Was I Arab? Was I Black? What was I? People didn't know what I was.

In the example above, the man working at the convenience store was saying that Lisa was not the ethnicity she identified as (Dominican), while also saying she could not be multiple other races, and not American. Questioning and guessing of identities, such as in the quote above, were frequent occurrences for all the participants in this study. Additionally, people's approaches to the questioning varied. For example, Kai discussed the prevalence of the questioning and how the question can change. He said, "my whole life I've gotten the question, 'what are you? What's your background? What's your heritage?' All the different funny ways that people try to dance around the question, because they don't know exactly how to ask it."

The different ways participants described receiving questioning about their identity seemed to convey it as an investigation. That is, questioners seemed to go to great lengths to draw comparisons to things and ideas to narrow down participant's identities. For example, Lee

shared how people would draw comparisons to regions of the world, inanimate objections, or fictional ideas when guessing his identity. He shared,

> People make up races which is [PAUSE] I've heard Polynesian, I'm like isn't that a sauce at Chick-Fil-A? [CHUCKLES] I've heard all kinds of stuff. I think people have so many ideas around what they think things are and they [PAUSE] when you're ambiguous they just will assign any label that they feel fits. I've gotten food references, I've gotten coloring book references, crayon colors, just all kinds of stuff. It's funny and it's cute but it's also a little demeaning. Because at the end of the day you are a person and there's an identity there.

Jmi further spoke to this idea, highlighting the reactions of questioners once he revealed his identity. He said,

> They're always like, "okay, what are you?" … It's "what are you, where are you from," you know what I'm saying? … I'm either Hispanic or some other tan race, like Middle Eastern or Ethiopian or Puerto Rican. It doesn't matter. It's just everything but Black, but when I tell them I'm mixed they're like, "I can see it." It's always afterwards and I'm just like, "okay." I don't know.

***Expectations and stereotypes*.** This subtheme was indicative of the expectations people have of racially ambiguous people of color. Specifically, people tend to expect certain behaviors or qualities of racially ambiguous people, connected to how they racially categorize them. Twelve participants discussed encountering people who had expectations about their behaviors, with the majority of them being connected to language. For example, B-Man discussed a situation that occurred where he was expected to speak Spanish. He shared,

> I worked at McDonald's in the kitchen, and the kitchen was nothing but Hispanic people … And, they started speaking Spanish, and then they didn't know that I didn't know Spanish. And, when they figured out I didn't know Spanish, they were like, "what are you?" And I was like, "Puerto Rican." They're like, "oh. You don't know Spanish?" And they're like, "oh, just like a Puerto Rican."

Once B-Man shared his identity and inability to speak Spanish, he was subjected to a form of social ridicule and stereotyped as an outsider within that specific setting. Similarly, Kai shared that "people have come up to me and started talking to me in Spanish."

Although the expectation of being able to speak a language other than English (primarily, but not exclusively, Spanish) was prevalent, it was not the only expectation reported by participants. For example, Lee explained how his behaviors were often attributed to his racial identity, something that would not occur if he were not of mixed-race or did not present as racially ambiguous. He said,

> I'm someone that in my mind and in my heart I can dance, right. I actually can dance, I can hold a rhythm, I can hold everything but let's say I'm off and I just decide to do something crazy and outrageous and outlandish and it's not on beat, chances [are] someone's gonna make a remark that "oh hey that's that White side coming out." … It could be that my friends want to go out to the club on Friday and I just don't, I want to stay and work on my website. I can hear someone saying, "oh that's that White side."

Experiencing hypodescent. This subtheme represented how participants reported experiencing hypodescent. Hypodescent is the practice of racially categorizing people as the race with less social privilege (Gullickson & Morning, 2011; Peery & Bodenhausen, 2008; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). For example, eleven participants spoke directly about being coded

as a person of color and not being perceived as White, despite some participants having White ancestry. Lisa directly stated "I don't think I can pass as White. You know what I mean? I don't look White. Nobody's ever told me, 'hey, are you White?'" Similarly, Kai shared,

> I don't think that anyone has ever looked at me and thought that I was White. I think that people thought that I was mixed, people thought that I was Hispanic. I don't think that anyone has ever looked at me and just thought that I was White, though.

Lily further supported the notion of hypodescent, while also noting the contrast between how she is perceived socially and what her genetics indicate via testing. She said "what I will never be considered is White. And yet, hilariously enough, that's the largest percentage [of my DNA], according to all the genetic stuff, that I come out as."

One participant (Javier) shared that he is sometimes coded as White by others. However, his being coded as White is often short-lived and dependent on the context and his presentation (as discussed in previous themes). However, he indicated that he is more often coded as a person of color despite his intermittent capacity to pass as White. He said,

> It's funny because growing up [PAUSE] there are people I grew up [with], the majority were Latino, African American, and going to school and just being where we were, like [PAUSE] I never identify as White. They never saw me as White and even people like [PAUSE] with pale skin, if you're Latino or even African American, we didn't see each as [PAUSE] we just saw us as us … we never saw each other different.

Having to negotiate your racial/ethnic identity with others. Participants discussed negotiating their identity with persons who ask questions regarding their race and/or ethnicity. That is, participants would disclose their racial identity and questioners would not accept or agree, forcing a negotiation about the participant's identity. These negotiations often ended in

some form of stalemate (i.e., both sides agree to disagree), or some form of concession is made, typically by the participant (i.e., some additional information is given that appeases the questioner). Six participants directly discuss these types of exchanges. Sinclair provided an example where the negotiation ended in a stalemate, with both sides overtly disagreeing with each other. He shared,

> I remember I was talking about race, [PAUSE] I was talking about Blackness and White supremacy and stuff like that, and … I would get into arguments with people who tell me that I'm not Black, right? They'd say, "well, why are you talking about race in such a way? Why do you talk about Black people?" [I would say] "Well, I'm Black." [They would respond] "Well, no, you're not." [I respond] "Yes I am." [They respond] "No, no, you're not." [I respond] "Yes I am."

Jmi shared a similar experience where he had to negotiate racial identity. In this exchange, he tried to convince the questioner of his racial identity by providing evidence. He shared,

> Like even when people are like, "oh your hair is like curly and straight and da, da, da, you must be, you know, from somewhere else." I'm like, "no I'm Black." And they're like … "but how are you Black?" And I'm like, "so Black people can't have straight hair, I'm confused?" They're like, "well they can." [And I respond] "Okay so what's your question?"

In both examples, participants had to negotiate their identity in an effort to convince another person of their racial identity. However, Sinclair refused to negotiate and remained firm, while Jmi tried to convince the reluctant questioner with evidence. Tati shared a situation where enough information was provided to the questioner that the negotiation was ended. She shared "… when they find out my mom's from New Orleans, they're like, 'oh, that makes sense.

You're not actually Black. You're Creole.'" In this exchange, the negotiation ended because the questioner determined Tati was not Black, despite Tati's insistence.

Experiencing discrimination and/or microaggressions. Every participant in this study reported experiencing discrimination and/or microaggressions related to their racial and/or ethnic identity. These experiences ranged from overt, identity-based discrimination to microaggressions. For example, Lily shared an experience early in her life depicting overt racism. She shared, "I'm walking to this McDonald's. And these kids are wearing these [PAUSE] they're high schoolers wearing the varsity jackets, I remember so clearly. They started calling me 'nigger.'" Artemis also shared an overt example of identity-driven discrimination in a story about a professor she encountered. She said,

> This professor was in his 50s, so for him to ask me stuff about Indian women, and Kama Sutra, and he was like, "oh, I saw this movie with this Indian lady in it. I have the Kama Sutra at home" … I was like … "he thinks I'm an expert on Kama Sutra because I'm Indian? That's crazy" … It was just a bad feeling in my stomach, and I was like, get away from this person. And … it's a good thing I did because he was a professor, and he asked me out on a date. He said, "why don't we go to [a local] diner, and you can talk to me more about Indian people and Indian women." I was like, "what does he want me to [do]?"

In both examples, there was no mistaking that race and ethnicity were the driving force behind the actions. However, participants also shared more subtle experiences. For example, Scott shared an exchange he had with a peer that commented on his physical appearance. He said,

> My partner's roommate in [a major city]. He came down and I guess I had gotten a haircut. He's like, “you look really good today for an Asian.” I was like, “why did you have to add that last part? What does that have to do with anything? You automatically put me in a separate class. So I am less attractive than everyone else? But I'm attractive for that secondary class … did you just bifurcate myself from every other man on the face of the earth and put me in an Asian only category?” He's like, “no, that's not what I meant.” … He's like, “well, it's a [LONG PAUSE].” He didn't really know what to say.

Scott found the remarks of his partner’s roommate insulting. He felt the comments reduced him to only his Asian identity and compared his attractiveness to that of other Asian persons, as opposed to all people.

Another example of experiences with microaggressions was exoticization. Participants reported being told that they are mysterious or exotic, primarily in a sexualized manner. For example, Javier discussed how this manifested in a previous romantic relationship he was engaged in. He said,

> It's interesting because, the men that I dated, it depends [PAUSE] the White men I dated, it was interesting, because they thought I was exotic because, they found out that I was Latino and Puerto Rican, right? So they're like, “oh, you know … I get the best of both worlds … you look White so my family won't have a problem with it, but you're, you're Latino so like, you’re Puerto Rican, so I'm still getting that spice or that exoticness” … it was like, “ooh, I'm dating a Puerto Rican. Ooh, he's exotic, look at him.”

Similarly, Tati shared “I think they perceive being racially ambiguous as this really great thing, and, ‘oh, that's so, oh, mysterious, exotic’ … It's kind of sucky sometimes.” Regardless of the nature of these interactions, they were grounded in biased and often faulty beliefs. Whether

overt or covert, the participants' perceived identities were central to the motivation of the exchanges.

"You're not one of us." Every participant in this study discussed how their racial ambiguity affected their experiences within peer and social groups. Specifically, participants shared how being racially ambiguous often excluded them from social groups. This exclusion was often described as undesirable and unwanted. Many participants discussed this experience occurring throughout their childhood and adolescence, although some reported it occurs throughout their adult years as well. For example, Casey shared how her being perceived as racially ambiguous influenced her peer interactions. She shared,

> In some spaces … [being racially ambiguous] can get me beat up. Now we're going back to middle school. Yeah, there's this idea of not being Black enough. I was never White, so, it's not about being White enough, it's always about proving the Blackness. Oh, yeah, I used to get picked on and hit on the bus and steal my stuff.

As Casey discussed, her racial ambiguity seemingly influenced others to perceive her as lacking enough racial/ethnic authenticity to be a welcomed member of a group. Tati shared similar experiences,

> I'm racially ambiguous. When people look at me, they don't know what box to put me in, and so it makes it difficult for them to feel comfortable with me in different spaces … [with White people] it's like, "well, she's not one of us." But then Black people are always like, "oh, well you're not really Black. You have curly hair, and you have freckles, and you're really, really light skinned, so you have to be mixed with something, and you don't actually understand the things that we experience, either." I'm in this middle ground, where I'm just who I am.

Two participants described their racial ambiguity as positively affecting their group membership among peers. This positive reporting was exclusive to their adult years. Adi discussed how she thinks she is socially accepted more than she is rejected as an adult. When discussing how her racial ambiguity influences her social interactions during her adulthood, she said "I don't think of it as a negative. I think it's a positive." Similarly, B-Man shared,

> I don't feel like I'm ever out of place anywhere now because I know [PAUSE] not just because of my ambiguity. It helps. It totally helps. But … "Oh. I can fit in just slightly better." But, I don't know. I don't know … I can't test it. I can't say this is definitively what happens. But, I feel that way.

Being more comfortable in racially/ethnically diverse settings. Participants discussed being more comfortable in settings that were racially/ethnically diverse. Ten participants directly discussed this theme. The comfort described by participants seemed to be related to negative experiences with White people. That is, participants described White people as more likely to ask questions about their racial/ethnic identities and to commit discriminatory acts and microaggressions. For example, Sinclair described briefly living in a predominantly White neighborhood before moving to his current residence. He said,

> I first moved to [a predominantly White neighborhood] and quickly realized that, that's not a place that I was comfortable … I've lived in the South. I never felt as excluded as I felt in [this predominantly White neighborhood]. [It] was the worst, was the most alienating place … the ways I'd be in a store, or in public places in [that neighborhood] and try to strike up a conversation with somebody, and have them look right through me. Look right through me like I wasn't there. [PAUSE] Then not respond in any way. It was just unbelievable.

Sinclair subsequently moved to a very diverse neighborhood and said, “it's one of my favorite places that I've ever lived, and I've lived in a lot of places.”

Participants also discussed valuing racially/ethnically diverse friendship groups. For example, Jenny discussed a positive shift after developing more diversity within her peer groups. She shared,

> It wasn't until a little later in school where it was a little bit more diverse, that I had a little bit more of a connection for other friends. I remember I had maybe three close best friends. Again, as I got older in school, I realized a lot of my peer group had been people of color. That's usually where I feel the most comfortable [PAUSE] at ease … Nobody was like, “where are you from?”

Additionally, participants discussed having racial/ethnic diversity within their places of work as beneficial too. For example, Lee discussed his pleasure in having a boss that was also a person of color. He said,

> I've worked for typically White people. Being able to work for someone who is a CEO of a company that identifies as the same thing I am has been a gift. I think there's such an understanding … that has enabled me to really flourish in many ways. My gifts and talents and things that I enjoy, I get to bring those into my workspace in a way that doesn't feel like I have to stifle it. I attribute that to the fact that they are mixed-race.

Relatedly, Javier was unhappy at a previous place of work that lacked diversity, stating “that's one of the reasons I actually left. I couldn't be in that environment anymore. It wasn't me.”

Intersecting identities. In addition to discussing their experiences as people of color, participants discussed how their various other identities (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, etc.) influenced their lived experience. Ten participants discussed how being perceived as racially

ambiguous intersected with other identities they have. These intersecting identities fostered unique social experiences for some participants. For example, Kai explained how being racially ambiguous and gay influenced his social experiences. He said,

> It's almost like when you're gay and when you're a minority, fitting into a box becomes even more important. It's like you're already racially ambiguous and you're gay. It's just another layer on top of figuring out who you are … then it's like, "okay, well if you're gay, you fit into White gay culture, or you fit into Black gay culture" … then being gay and then not fitting into gay White culture, and not fitting into gay Black culture, it's like another question.

Kai had to understand the social impact of his racial identity and sexual identity separately, as well as the intersection of the two. His racial ambiguity seemed to add another level of consideration because he was not immediately welcomed into preexisting social groups.

Jenny shared how she noticed the intersection of her racial ambiguity and her gender influenced her lived experiences. She discussed how her racial ambiguity influenced the motivations for how men would interact with her. She shared,

> I think certain boys liked me for different reasons. I think the White boys usually liked me because it was like, "oh, this is different. I'm interested to know this world." Then Black guys were interested in me because I think there was a little bit more connection and like, "oh, I could kinda vibe with you. I kinda get [PAUSE] We speak the same language here. You're a little different, but that's kinda cool." Again, I didn't understand it then as much as I do now. Yeah.

In Jenny's example, men approached her because they viewed her as different. However, she understood White men as attempting to resolve or explore curiosity, while Black men were

seeking potential commonalities. It is evident that the interplay between racial ambiguity and other identities has the potential to create unique experiences that participants were forced to navigate and reconcile.

Theme 4: Internal Experiences and Racial Ambiguity

Throughout this study, participants shared how their racial ambiguity created a myriad of internal experiences. These experiences included emotional responses related to being racially ambiguous, thoughts and feelings about their identity and sense of self, and confusion about deciding how to socially engage with others. This theme illustrates cognitive and emotional aspects of the racially ambiguous experience. Herein, four subthemes represented participants' experiences: 1) "*Why am I always a thing that I'm not*," 2) *Deciding to disclose*, 3) "*This is an important conversation to have*," and 4) "*But I don't feel ambiguous*."

"Why am I always a thing that I'm not." This theme exemplified how the racially ambiguous experience was internalized by participants. These internalizations related specifically to participants' emotions and their sense of self or sense of identity. That is, being racially ambiguous people of color often evoked a complicated emotional experience, as well as various considerations toward participants' identity development. B-man shared a sentiment that seemed to capture the essence of this theme. He said,

> Yeah. Initially [being asked "what are you?"] was confusing. [PAUSE] The very first couple [of times], it was confusing because it wasn't something I'd ever experienced before … And then, when it happened more and more, when I started interacting more and more with different people in different groups, it was like, "huh" … And, getting my head around that, and learning to accept that, that little process [PAUSE] I don't know how long it took … But, there was a slight confusion. So like, "… I am always something

> else than what I actually am?" And, that bit of confusion was just like, "why? What's happening here? Is there something wrong" … That confusion kicked in. And, dealing with that was more like, "should I just be [PAUSE] can I be angry? Should I be angry?"

Herein, this process was best defined by two subthemes: 1) *It's an emotional experience* and 2) *Identity limbo*.

It's an emotional experience. Participants discussed the various emotions they encountered secondary to their experiences as racially ambiguous people of color. These emotions were often in response to interpersonal interactions where participants believed their racial ambiguity was a factor. All participants within this study expressed experiencing emotional responses related to their racial ambiguity. For example, Artemis described her emotions when receiving questions about her identity (e.g., 'what are you?'), stating "sometimes it makes me feel really frustrated … I get really agitated sometimes about this." Emotional responses to receiving identification inquiries ranged from mild to severe. For example, Lisa expressed that she has found herself having emotional responses along this continuum. She said,

> Yeah. I remember I … when people asked me back then, I thought it was annoying. That was one of my words … I thought it was aggravating or annoying … angry or annoyed … I wouldn't say angry, more just like irritating.

Similarly, Lee shared how his emotional response can vary when receiving identity inquiries. He said,

> I don't think I've ever heard it and it's felt like, "oh, okay. That's a great question. Thanks for that question." I think it's always been … like mild to almost severe to the point of "don't fucking ask me that question." So yeah.

Jmi emphasized that he becomes especially angry if people label him as White because he equates Whiteness with racism and discrimination. He said

> One thing that irritates me, it's when people call me White. It's because I completely don't fuck with that … I don't even accept that because I see how White people treat Black people and I'm like … It's like, I don't even want to associate with something like that because I would never treat people like that or anybody of that nature.

Participants also shared additional, more complex emotional experiences. For example, Casey described a complicated emotional experience while she was abroad. In response to a person assuming she was Spanish-speaking, she said,

> I felt like [PAUSE] I don't know, traitor is not the right word. I felt like an imposter. Like how I looked let me experience or gateway into a place that I didn't belong, 'cause I'm not Spanish … but I don't know, I felt extremely uneasy. Like there was this expectation that I couldn't meet.

It should be noted that the emotions expressed by the participants in this study were connected to how frequently these events occurred. That is, the ubiquitous nature of racially ambiguous participants receiving questions or assumptions about their identity was relevant to their emotional experience. Some of the participants' experiences were described as significant and affecting their mood and emotional state.

Identity limbo. Participants disclosed experiencing confusion, conflict, or uncertainty related to their sense of self or sense of identity. Thirteen participants spoke to concerns related to their sense of identity. These experiences were often in response to receiving conflicting messages about their racial and/or ethnic identities within their communities and during interpersonal exchanges. For example, Jmi said he was raised to believe he was Black but often

received invalidating messages from peers and those in his community. Consequently, he said "racial ambiguity, I would say it's pretty much my life … I honestly struggle. My whole life I struggled with growing up, like 'who am I? I don't know.'"

One response to identity confusion was participants' feeling that they are not enough for their social groups. For example, Scott shared, "In that way, I was like, 'well, okay. I'm not good enough for White people, I'm not good enough for Korean people, so how do I fit in to that?'" Similarly, Tati discussed her experiences of feeling as if she was not enough and the questions she ultimately asked herself. She said,

> I think, it's like being between two worlds. It's like, wanting really, really badly to have this group that you identify as, to validate you, and say, "you are, you're great, and you're awesome, and we accept you." And not getting that, but also having the other identity, and being like, "well, you definitely don't fit in here, so I don't know what you're going to do." And so, being in between those two worlds, it's like, "what is wrong with me? Why can't I get it together? Why don't people accept me? Or, why am I not enough?"

Adi shared a similar feeling as other participants. Although she overtly stated having a strong Filipino identity, she also stated the following:

> I feel, sometimes, disconnected, like I'm not part of any culture, because I've experienced this culture, but when I go back home, I'm not part of it, really. It's weird. When I'm here, I am American, but I didn't grow up here, and people can tell, sometimes.

Adi endorsed feeling as if sometimes she is existing on a line in between social and cultural groups.

Deciding to disclose. Participants discussed having to make decisions related to how they will engage with others. This process took place specifically in response to their racial

ambiguity, often as a result of identity questioning or assumptions about participants' race or ethnicity. Decisions participants made were typically related to whether they would disclose or withhold their identities in question, and how they would proceed. Specifically, the three subthemes here are 1) *Withholding your identity*, 2) *Asserting your identity*, and 3) *Throwing in the towel*.

Withholding your identity. Participants discussed a process of deciding to not share or disclose their racial or ethnic identities with others. Eleven participants spoke directly about intentionally not sharing their racial identity. Often, the process of not disclosing is motivated by vigilance. That is, participants described being wary of people's intent and subsequently reluctant to share their identity. For example, Artemis shared what goes through her mind when someone she does not trust asks her 'what are you?' She said, "what will you do with it? … so you being a person that I don't know, what will you do with that information? Why are you asking me this?" She discussed that her previous history with people stereotyping her has made her vigilant.

Similarly, Jenny shared how she would try to avoid answering the question directly, in an attempt to ascertain a questioner's intentions. She said,

> When people ask me where am I from, I turn the table back on them and I'm like, "where do you think I'm from?" I always ask them that right back because I find that, again, if you have a question for me that's none of your business, now I wanna know your intent.

Sinclair discussed a similar awareness as Jenny, recognizing that the person asking questions may have poor intentions. Further, he even shared finding satisfaction in attempting to befuddle persons commenting or questioning his racial identity. He said,

> I can't feel anything personal about it really, because the person doesn't know me. It's unlikely that the person will, because what they're trying to do with the information that I'm going to give them, or not give them, is fairly predictable. So yeah, I think maybe I'm not being truthful about it, because I think about the way that I responded when the guy was [PAUSE] there've been a few people that have asked me about a suntan. But there's a little bit of enjoyment that I get from, [SINCLAIR STATING] "Well, I'm Black." [and they begin to stutter in confusion] "Uh, uh, it's uh, uh, oh, uh."

Although participants' approaches to withholding their identities varied, the choice to withhold was consistently motivated by mistrust of or vigilance toward others.

Asserting your identity. Participants provided examples in which they would assert their racial or ethnic identity. Seven participants shared moments when they made this decision. Often, this decision arose out of participants' desire to not be viewed as racially ambiguous. For example, Lily shared how she felt when she made decisions about asserting her racial identity. She said "yeah, I would say for myself at least … it was questioning, feeling like an impostor, and then a, 'oh, I'm going to show you.' It almost became a hyper-identity."

Some participants described making efforts to assert their identity as adults. For example, Jenny discussed making intentional efforts to ensure she is viewed as a person of color. She said,

> For me, I don't want to go with it. I don't wanna pass for being White and I'm not interested in being perceived as White so I'm intentional about having those conversations about race. I'm intentional about wearing my hair and it being out and full of volume and curls. I'm intentional about challenging this idea of what's acceptable.

Similarly, Casey discussed her motivation for asserting her racial identity, specifically within her place of work. She shared,

> Here is how I'm asserting my Black girl hair edition [points at her hair]. Like, this, "no, you don't have to ask [about her racial identity]" … but it's like, I'm in place right now where I don't really wanna attend to that. I don't wanna have to answer those questions. I don't wanna have to do that. I'm very comfortable being Black in my workspace right now. I don't want no new friends. Like I don't wanna do that. So, this is part of my way of saying don't ask me. And they still ask. So, clearly something's not working. I'm just gonna have to go to the tanning salon. But I don't know. I'm gonna start dying my hair black again. That's what I'm gonna do, 'cause I also realize, it's crazy, the lighter my hair the more people question.

All the participants who discussed asserting their identity expressed and emphasized the intentionality of the behavior.

Throwing in the towel. Some participants discussed experiencing exhaustion from the extensive questioning, negative experiences, and assumptions people make about them and their racial and/or ethnic identity. This exhaustion would sometimes manifest in an emotional or behavioral detachment from the experience. That is, five participants discussed either wishing they could find a way to permanently remove these experiences or find ways to not engage. For example, Lily discussed wishing she had a way to deter others from asking her questions. She shared, "[people constantly asking me the question, 'what are you?' If I could wear a shirt that says, 'why do you care?' as a response, that'd be great. 'Cause it's just so exhausting. It's such an exhausting question."

Tati expressed disengaging in dialog with persons who ask her questions about her identity. She explained finding ways to satisfy them with the intention of ending the conversation. She shared,

> "If that's what you want me to be, I'll be it, and I'll, like, I'll want to keep it moving." Yeah. That's kind of sad … I have to be what you want me to be, instead of being who I am. Or being who I see myself to be, and so, and I do it, too. If you want me to be, whatever, I'll do it, because I'm tired of this conversation. But it's sad that I just can't be.

"This is an important conversation to have." Twelve participants explicitly discussed the importance of talking about their experiences as racially ambiguous people of color. For nearly all participants, their engagement in this study was their first time explicitly speaking about their experiences with being racially ambiguous. Participants shared that these conversations helped them better understand their experiences, feel more comfortable and/or empowered to continue the conversations, and recognize the utility of having a dialogue about racial ambiguity. For example, during the closing moments of our interview, Artemis shared:

> I just wanted to say that I think that this [PAUSE] I mean, the first time we met, I mean, I was so like agitated about the whole thing. I think that this topic is pretty stressful. And, you know, I can't believe how stressful it had been for me when I was a teenager or a freshman in college. I think that what you're doing with this topic, and how it affects mental health, it's a good thing because, like you, we need more people to believe that this thing can affect mental health and emotional wellbeing.

Lee spoke to how he found having a conversation about racial ambiguity fruitful and empowering. He shared,

> I think it was good to talk about it. It's not something I talk about a lot … This conversation for me has solidified there's an invitation for me to share more with my friends and my social circles around what my experience is … There's been some things that have come up that I'm interested in looking at deeper, specifically around my relationship and how my home has been built, created, and how my race has interacted with that.

Although these conversations were viewed as beneficial, they were not always described as easy. For example, Kai shared that the conversation was difficult for him at times, but he hopes to continue to engage and learn about himself and his experiences. At the close of our first interview, Kai shared,

> It was challenging. Like I said, this is the most I've ever talked about [PAUSE] and a lot of times, even when I talk with my mom … A lot of times it's not about me personally, it's just about the construct of race … I've never really talked about myself and how I perceive myself and my identity, so it was hard. It was emotional, I guess I would say, but I really enjoyed it. I feel like it was probably cathartic … It's probably something that I shouldn't feel like it's a challenge. I mean, I hope eventually I get to the point where I don't feel like it's challenging. But I enjoyed it.

At the close of our second interview, Kai followed up by saying "I just, kind of, throughout my life have always felt like, it's been a sensitive subject and I feel like talking about it has actually helped me feel more comfortable in talking about it with other people."

"But I don't feel ambiguous." Participants discussed the contrast of how the world perceived them and how they perceived themselves. That is, ten participants discussed not seeing themselves as racially ambiguous. Although participants did admit to understanding how

others perceive them as ambiguous, when they view themselves, they see themselves unambiguously. For example, Scott shared "I don't perceive myself to be that way [racially ambiguous], because I've looked in the mirror at myself for good and bad for the last 28 years." Lisa explained her understanding by saying "I'm not ambiguous about what I am, or what I look like, or whatever, but I'm understanding that others may not know who I am."

Javier shared a similar view as other participants. However, he explained how his social location and upbringing has influenced his perspective. Further, he expressed understanding how others that do not share his experiences may see him as racially ambiguous. He said,

> Honestly, no I don't [see myself as racially ambiguous]. When I'm with other people who are Latino or like with my community, there isn't a difference, they see me as a person of color, I see myself as a person of color. The thing is, I looked at it from the outside in, so I would understand the definition from the perspective that those who don't come from the community, but when I'm looking from within out, I don't question, I don't see [it].

Casey disclosed that although she does not view herself as racially ambiguous, the fact that others do affects her. Specifically, she discussed that because persons who are close with her speak to her ambiguity, she has begun to assess it as well. She said,

> I don't believe myself to be racially ambiguous, but over the course of my life enough people have challenged it. And not just strangers. People who said they love me have challenged [it] … to lead me to question, "hey, maybe I'm not as Black as I think I am."

In the example above, the incongruence between how Casey identifies and how the world views her resulted in Casey questioning her own identity. This interaction, as well as the many others presented within the *Internal Experiences and Racial Ambiguity* theme, illustrate the potential cognitive and emotional consequences of being a racially ambiguous person of color.

Theme 5: "I'm Gonna Use it to my Benefit"

Participants discussed being able to use their racial ambiguity as an aid in navigating their social situations. That is, participants acknowledged that being racially ambiguous provided them with certain access and means. Privilege was central to this theme. Specifically, participants received varying degrees of privilege due to their appearance, which sometimes allowed them to pass as different racial or ethnic groups, and to be viewed as an insider. Additionally, participants could utilize codeswitching to further skew how they are perceived, highlighting the intentionality of using racial ambiguity as a social tool. As such, there were three subthemes representing the aforementioned: 1) "*I'd be able to pass as …*," 2) "*It's codeswitching*," and 3) "*There's definitely privilege that comes with it*."

"I'd be able to pass as …" All the participants in this study discussed the capacity to pass for racial and/or ethnic groups different from their own. That is, all the participants recognized that they probably could pass, should they choose to act the part, or perhaps pass without realizing they had done so. For example, Scott discussed the possibility that he passes for White without realizing it at his place of work. He said,

> It's the more obvious one [being considered White compared to other racial groups at work]. It's not called out, but I guess in that way, I may be coded as White. It's just not pointed out to me. It's not really apparent. 'Cause I'm treated like everyone else, who around me is all White.

Other participants discussed being aware that they passed for a specific racial or ethnic group in certain situations. In these cases, participants did not overtly endorse being the identity that they passed for. However, they also did not deny being labeled as an inaccurate race and/or

ethnicity. Moreover, participants reported receiving social gain for passing within specific communities. For example, Adi discussed a time when she passed as Hispanic. She said,

> It's mostly Hispanic, so I feel like, at that one point in my life, I did want to be part of them, because, like I said, I could already identify with them anyway. “Hey, I'll be Hispanic. I'm cool with that.” But I never pretended to be anything else. I would always say, "I'm Asian," or I'm always saying that I'm Filipino, but … when they assumed that I was Hispanic … I felt like I'm part of them or a part of their group, you know? It was cool.

Similar to Adi, Artemis did not explicitly state her racial or ethnic identity, but she also did not refute the inaccuracy of how others coded her. She shared,

> I'll be honest, I did use it a few times to my own convenience, because I figured, if you think I'm X, Y, Z, then I'm not gonna tell anything. You know, I'm just gonna, like, let it be. I think that it's something that's gonna happen anyway, so why not use it for your own convenience? Because most of the time, people are gonna ask you, you know, “what are you?” And then make assumptions. So the one time when people do not ask you that, and they let you pass, just take care of it. Like, you know, just [PAUSE] yeah.

The notion of passing was not viewed as positive among participants. In fact, many participants described passing as deceitful and duplicitous. However, participants discussed the utility of it, at least in theory, and how it could garnish positive interactions in certain situations.

“**It’s codeswitching.”** Participants shared how they shifted their presentation to conform with their environment. Nine participants described codeswitching as a useful tool to make others more comfortable around them. Codeswitching seemed to be especially useful for racially ambiguous people of color, as it was used to sway their ambiguity in a specific direction. For

example, Javier discussed how he felt it was necessary to codeswitch within his place of work and outside of his community. He said,

> I guess it depends. When I'm at work or I'm talking to other people outside my community, I switch my tone. I switch, I guess, the pronunciation of specific words and just make sure I'm speaking standard English … So I'm at work, I need to do what I need to do for work and then when I leave I can just be my normal self.

Javier viewed codeswitching as necessary to thrive within his place of work. Jmi shared a similar sentiment about having to codeswitch to succeed in his work.

> In thinking about it, I believe on certain occasions I do because I change my speech, I change the way I dress to be more appeasing to their culture … it's like I know I have to act more like these people, so I do change [PAUSE] not my skin complexion or my hair … but more or less just how I speak and how I present myself to be more appeasing to, I guess make them feel comfortable … I had to actually learn how to dress different. I had to wear clothes that actually fit, I had to learn how to speak the corporate lingo. It's shit like that, man, I'm realizing what I have with my skin complexion and I'm trying to do what I can for the good, for people who can't. You know what I'm saying?

In this excerpt, Jmi discussed that he has the capacity to codeswitch and his racial ambiguity provides him with a unique position to help others, specifically those that may not have the access that he does.

"There's definitely privilege that comes with it." Participants shared their views that being racially ambiguous can provide varying degrees of privilege. Nine participants discussed racial ambiguity and privilege, primarily that being racially ambiguous was associated with skin color privilege. That is, because participants were not viewed as a definitive member of a

specific racial group, some of the stigmas attached to specific groups were not immediately attributed to them. For example, Sinclair discussed that he is viewed with less stigma than other men who are unambiguously Black. He said,

> Well, one is, I think that I can talk about, because there's a disarming quality in being racially ambiguous, and then the way that I dress and the way that I present myself or whatever. I think that I'm able to [LAUGHS] I'm able to be a little bit more of the angry Black man in my classes, in ways that I wouldn't be able to get away with if others saw me as more threatening … the racial ambiguity definitely helps.

Similarly, B-man also believes that he is viewed with less negativity because he is racially ambiguous. He said,

> I probably can say things that people can't say … I probably would have lost a job or two by now for the things I say just in passing conversation with friends or just co-workers … but coming from me, it's less offensive.

Casey described her experience as being able to easily cross social or cultural divides. That is, because she is racially ambiguous, her presentation allows her to more easily be accepted within different social communities. She explained,

> I think that being me makes it easier for me to say more of the critical things then if I look differently … there's this ability or opportunity to navigate transculturally that is not always just [PAUSE] it can be attributed to your physical appearance or it can [PAUSE] but there is also this movement in between that's not just physical.

The aforementioned three themes depicted participants' lived experiences as racially ambiguous people of color. These themes illustrated how racial ambiguity fosters a unique internal and external experience. Participants discussed racial ambiguity influencing their social

interactions, peer relationships, and cognitive and emotional experiences, as well as using their ambiguity as a tool within social situations.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented the findings from this dissertation study. I discussed the five overarching themes and respective subthemes that emerged through phenomenological data analysis. The *Understand Your Identity* and *Defining Racial Ambiguity* themes depicted participants' foundational understanding of race and racial ambiguity. The *Social Experiences and Racial Ambiguity*, *Internal Experiences and Racial Ambiguity*, *"I'm Gonna Use it to my Benefit"* themes were indicative of participants lived experiences as racially ambiguous people of color. I also provided excerpts from participants' interviews to illustrate the essence of all themes and subthemes. In chapter 5, I will provide a discussion of the findings, including how the findings relate to existing literature and theory, strengths and limitations of this study, and implications for the counseling profession.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In the previous chapter, I presented the findings from this study. I discussed the five overarching themes and respective subthemes that emerged through data analysis. I also provided excerpts from participants' interviews to convey their lived experiences. In this chapter, I will provide a summary of the findings, followed by interpretations of the results related to existing literature. Then, I will discuss implications for the counseling profession, including counseling practice, education and supervision, and future research. Lastly, I will discuss the strengths and limitations of this study.

Summary of Findings

This study was designed to understand the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color. Over two interviews, participants shared their perceptions, understandings, and experiences. Ultimately, being racially ambiguous resulted in a unique understanding of race and its related consequences. Additionally, being racially ambiguous influenced others' perceptions and interactions, shaping participants' social experiences. Finally, the racially ambiguous experience was described as stressful, emotional, and affecting participants' sense of self, wellness, and belonging.

Foundations of Race

Through the *Understanding Your Identity* and the *Defining Racial Ambiguity* themes, participants discussed their foundational understanding of race. Participants discussed experiences of learning about their race, racial ambiguity, and related real-world implications, often through social and interpersonal interactions. Participants predominantly learned about their racial identity through family, extended family, and within their communities (e.g., school, local neighborhood). Participants also spoke about the realization of being identified as racially

different, which often occurred during their childhood or adolescence. This realization was indicative of their understanding of being racially ambiguous people of color. Additionally, participants discussed their desire for deeper conversations about their racial ambiguity. Although race was an openly discussed aspect of participants' experiences, they reported rarely, if ever, having open conversations about racial ambiguity and related implications throughout their formative years.

The *Understanding Your Identity* theme was consistent with existing theory and research. The importance of race was evident throughout this theme and critical race theorists posit that race is central to both people's lived experiences and their worldviews (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw et al., 1995; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). Participants discussed race as something they learned about early in their lives and also reported experiencing racism and/or race-related discrimination, highlighting the effects of race on their lived experiences. The effects of race and racism on participants' foundational experiences and developing worldviews also were discussed throughout this theme. Participants' experiences with learning about race and experiencing racism coincided with the permanence of race and racism tenet of Critical Race Theory (CRT), or the notion that race will continually affect the lives of people of color (Haskins & Singh, 2015; Trahan & Lemberger, 2014).

The importance of storytelling and narratives, a component to CRT (Haskins & Singh, 2015; Trahan & Lemberger, 2014), was also central to how participants learned about their racial identities. Critical race theorists emphasize the importance of people of color hearing stories and narratives about race that are counter to mainstream discourse (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). That is, people of color are likely to encounter negative messages about their race from broader society and can benefit from positive and affirming messages. Participants in this study

discussed learning about their race and/or ethnicity from their families and communities, such as through conversations with their parents. Further, for these participants, these teachings served to combat beliefs about colorblindness, or the minimization of the importance of race, another tenet of CRT (Haskins & Singh, 2015; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015).

Participants' foundational understanding of race was further shaped by their realization of being racially different (i.e., racially ambiguous). This finding is consistent with existing literature. People tend to hold essentialist beliefs about race (Wilton et al., 2014; Young et al., 2013) and biased beliefs about racial groups (Gaither et al., 2015; Stepanova & Strube, 2012; Willadsen-Jensen & Ito, 2015). Additionally, Jackson (2012) noted that being viewed and treated as racially different was a common experience for racially ambiguous people of color and that it was a consequence of stereotypical beliefs about race. Further, participants in this study reported experiencing consequences related to essentialist and biased beliefs about race from both White people and people of color. Consequently, racially ambiguous people of color are subjected to varying biased beliefs people have about race and/or questioning of their race, resulting in their realization that they are racially different.

In the *Defining Racial Ambiguity* theme, participants shared their understanding of racial ambiguity. Participants discussed factors that contributed toward racial ambiguity, informing a definition for the construct. Factors included physical features (e.g., skin color, hair texture), social presentations (e.g., manner of speech, clothing choices), and geographic location. Generally, participants viewed physical features as the most important factor contributing toward racial ambiguity, specifically skin color/complexion. Ultimately, people's understanding of racial ambiguity is comprised of innumerable variables and both state (e.g., impermanent,

situational) and trait (i.e., permanent, consistent) factors, all of which could vary across people and situations.

Participants' descriptions of contributing factors to racial ambiguity were consistent with existing literature. Researchers have discussed the role of physical features in racial categorization, including skin color (Brebner, et al., 2011; Chao, Hong, & Chiu, 2013; Chen, et al., 2018; Kolbert, 2018; Skinner & Nicolas, 2015; Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Stepanova & Strube, 2012), facial features (Stepanova & Strube, 2012), and hair texture and eye color (Grier et al., 2014). The role of behavioral presentation and geographic location in racial ambiguity is also represented within existing research. Researchers have discussed how behaviors, communication style, and clothing choices can further influence racial ambiguity (Gaither et al., 2015; Telles, 2005; Tskhay & Rule, 2015; Young et al., 2013). Additionally, Gotanda (1995) discussed culture-race, or the conceptualization of race as a combination of historical racial categories and social practices. Culture-race would explain how race and behaviors become intertwined and would also be applicable toward understanding how conceptualizations of race can vary by location, as social practices are influenced by regional, ethnic, and cultural factors. Relatedly, researchers have discussed how racially ambiguous persons are viewed and categorized differently across locations and social contexts (Grier et al., 2014; Telles, 2005). That is, race is socially constructed, and people's understanding of race can vary across locations (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Kolbert, 2018; Smedley & Smedley, 2005).

Racial Ambiguity in Society

Through the *Social Experiences and Racial Ambiguity* theme, participants discussed the myriad of interpersonal experiences they navigated. Participants shared often having their racial/ethnic identity questioned by others (e.g., "what are you?") and, in some cases, having to

negotiate their racial identity with others after receiving questions about their race/ethnicity (e.g., "what are you really?"; Rockquemore, 1998, p. 206). Participants in this study also discussed experiencing hypodescent and being subjected to racial/ethnic stereotypes, microaggressions, and racism. Further, participants shared being more comfortable in racially/ethnically diverse settings, sometimes being excluded from peer groups due to their racial ambiguity, and described unique ways in which their racial ambiguity intersects with their identities, such as their sexual orientation and gender.

The *Social Experiences and Racial Ambiguity* theme is consistent with existing literature. However, there are some aspects of the theme that add to the existing literature. Foremost, participants' experiences with receiving questions about their racial identity and subsequently having to negotiate their identity is well documented. Rockquemore (1998) discussed this phenomenon for biracial (Black/White) individuals, calling it that "what are you experience?" (p. 206). Additionally, subsequent researchers discussed how the aforementioned applied to both monoracial and multiracial persons, further supporting the experience as a response to racial ambiguity (see Grier et al., 2014; Jackson, 2012; Tran et al., 2016; Wilton et al., 2014; Young et al., 2013).

Participants' experiences with hypodescent are congruent with the Whiteness as property tenet of CRT (Harris, 1995; Haskins & Singh, 2015) and existing literature. As discussed in chapter two, hypodescent has both a legal and social history within the U.S. (Gotanda, 2005; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Tatum, 2017). Further, researchers have discussed how racially ambiguous people are generally viewed as people of color (Chen et al., 2018; Krosch et al., 2013; Peery & Bodenhausen, 2008). Therefore, it is unsurprising that the participants in this study would experience hypodescent.

Participants in this study reported being subjected to stereotypes, discrimination, and racial microaggressions. These experiences are well documented in existing literature. That is, people often hold essentialist beliefs about race, commonly accompanied by expectations and biases (Pauker et al., 2016; Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Tawa, 2018; Telles, 2005; Wilton et al., 2014; Young et al., 2013). Additionally, Tran et al. (2016) posited frequent identification inquiries may be viewed as microaggressions. Participants in this study reported receiving identification inquiries throughout their lives, describing them as unpleasant and rooted in bias. Although this is consistent with existing literature (Grier et al., 2014; Jackson, 2012; Tran et al., 2016), more research is needed to understand the effects of identification inquires on this population.

Participants in this study discussed a variety of social experiences, including being more comfortable in diverse settings, seeking community with similar persons, and experiencing social acceptance and rejection. Participants' comfort with diversity and desires for community were consistent with existing literature. Researchers have discussed how people tend to gravitate toward similar racial groups, often due to comfort or seeking community (Joyner & Kao, 2000; Tatum, 2017). Further, Jackson (2012) stated racially ambiguous persons "expressed a collective desire to connect to a community of peers who shared similar experiences and values as themselves" (p. 52). Similarly, participants' varied experiences with social acceptance and rejection also were consistent with existing literature. Researchers have discussed various patterns of social acceptance and rejection of multiracial persons (see Doyle & Kao 2007; James & Tucker, 2003; Quillian & Redd, 2009). However, additional research is needed to thoroughly understand the nuanced social experiences of racially ambiguous people of color.

In the *"I'm Gonna Use it to my Benefit"* theme, participants shared how they intentionally use their racial ambiguity to influence social interactions. Participants discussed codeswitching to exert control within interpersonal situations. Additionally, they discussed their capacity to pass for racial or ethnic groups different from their own. Codeswitching and passing were often related, insofar as codeswitching could influence participants' ability to pass for different racial or ethnic groups. Further, participants shared their beliefs about racial ambiguity granting varying degrees of privilege, specifically related to their skin color. That is, participants indicated being less likely to be stereotyped or stigmatized in certain situations due to their racial ambiguity and using that privilege to their advantage.

Researchers have outlined the many ways people shift their expression (i.e., codeswitching), including changes in communication, attire choices, and other nonverbal behaviors (see Gaither et al., 2015; Koch et al., 2001; Pauker et al., 2016; Tawa, 2018; Telles, 2005; Wilton et al., 2014; Young et al., 2013). Participants' experiences with codeswitching to influence their social interactions coincides with existing literature. For example, Khanna and Johnson (2010) discussed how biracial people intentionally used codeswitching in an attempt to pass as racial/ethnic groups different from their own. Further, Jackson (2012) reported that racially ambiguous people use codeswitching to increase their likelihood of social acceptance.

Participants in this study described their privilege manifesting as a disarming or destigmatizing quality connected with their racial ambiguity. The notion of privilege has not been directly explored in relation to racial ambiguity. Therefore, this finding may add to the existing literature. However, researchers have discussed the relationship between privilege and colorism. It may be that participants' discussions about privilege are related to their skin complexion. Lighter skin complexion has been related to increased favorability and privilege

(Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014; Hunter, 2002; Maxwell et al., 2015; Monk, 2015; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Therefore, it is possible that participants are benefitting from colorism and not being subjected to as many stereotypes or biased beliefs as darker complexion people of color. However, further research is needed to explore this phenomenon.

Through the *Intersecting identities* subtheme, participants discussed how their various identities intersect with their racial ambiguity, fostering unique experiences. These experiences correspond with research on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; 2014), a salient aspect of CRT (Haskins & Singh, 2015). Further, it is noteworthy that the identities participants discussed regarding intersectionality were minority identities (i.e., gender for female participants and sexual orientation for gay-identified participants). Although the experiences discussed by participants align with the tenets of intersectionality, there is no existing literature beyond this study examining how racial ambiguity uniquely intersects with other personal identities. Therefore, this finding adds to the existing literature, and further research is warranted to understand the intersectional experiences for racially ambiguous people of color.

Reconciling Racial Ambiguity and Racial Identity

In the *Internal Experiences and Racial Ambiguity* theme, participants discussed their various cognitive and emotional experiences. Participants shared numerous cognitive and emotional responses related to their racial ambiguity, such as confusion about where they belong or frustration related to their social interactions. Additionally, participants described experiencing a wide-range of emotions when speaking about their racial ambiguity, generally recognizing the significant role of racial ambiguity in their lives. Participants also discussed experiencing concerns related to their racial and/or ethnic identity, such as feeling like they were not enough for their racial/ethnic community or feeling disconnected from their own racial

and/or ethnic identity. Further, participants shared having to make decisions about how they engage with others, specifically related to sharing or withholding information about their racial/ethnic identity.

Researchers studying racial ambiguity have predominantly focused on social experiences. Thus, there is a dearth of research exploring the cognitive and emotional experiences of racially ambiguous people of color. However, Jackson (2012) and Tran et al. (2016) both discussed how participants found identification inquiries and negotiating their identities as unpleasant experiences. All participants in this study reported negative emotions related to identification inquiries and negotiations, with some participants reporting significant emotional responses that effected their mood or emotional state. Although the participants' experiences coincided with existing literature, this study adds to the existing literature, depicting the intensity and potential emotional consequences of these experiences for racially ambiguous people of color.

Many participants in this study described feeling as if they are not enough for their racial/ethnic group or feeling disconnected from their racial/ethnic group secondary to difficulties with social acceptance. Participants' identity experiences are closely aligned with the Multiracial-Heritage Awareness and Personal Affiliation (M-HAPA) model of identity development (Choi-Misailidis, 2010). That is, an essential aspect of the M-HAPA model is that healthy identity development occurs when there is harmony between people's internal (self-identified) and external (perceived by others) identities (Choi-Misailidis, 2010). Participants in this study discussed feeling othered by both people of color and White people, resulting in limited group acceptance and identity validation. Incongruence between internal and external identities was seemingly central to the identity concerns for participants in this study, adding to the existing literature and illuminating the need for additional study.

Participants in this study expressed making decisions related to disclosing or withholding their racial identity. This finding adds to existing literature on racially ambiguous people of color, as there are currently no research studies exploring the cognitive processes of this experience. Researchers have discussed how race-related teachings and/or experiences (i.e., racism and discrimination) can influence how people racially identity (Campbell, 2007; Gullickson & Morning, 2011). However, these studies did not explore the cognitive processes related to people's decision-making process (i.e., racial identification). Helms' (1995) racial identity development model may provide some insight into the decision-making process for racially ambiguous people of color. For example, if participants are within the *dissonance* status of Helms' model, defined by "ambivalence or confusion concerning own socioracial group" (p. 186), racially ambiguous people of color may choose to withhold their racial identity due to uncertainty or limited confidence regarding their racial identity. Additionally, if participants are in the *immersion/emersion* status, defined by commitment and idealization of one's racial group (Helms, 1995), they may be more likely to assert their identity. Moreover, if participants are in one of the final statuses of Helms' model (*internalization* and *integrative awareness*, respectively), both of which are defined by flexibility, complexity, and critical thought about race, they may choose to assert or withhold their identity based on the specific situation. However, more research is needed to better understand this experience.

Participants in this study expressed a desire to speak openly about their experiences as racially ambiguous people of color. In fact, many participants reported their engagement in this study as their first time explicitly speaking about their experiences related to racial ambiguity. Participants also discussed their experiences as potentially being connected to their mental health and wellness; participants indicated their racial ambiguity evoked complex emotions and identity

concerns, and they experienced benefits from discussing their experiences openly. This adds to the existing literature, as this study is the first to examine the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color with considerations for mental health, wellness, and counseling. However, additional research is needed to further inform the counseling profession.

Implications

This study was the first to explore the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color with considerations for their lived experiences and mental health and wellness. Additionally, this study is one of the few studies to explore the construct of racial ambiguity with persons of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Research on mixed-race persons often is used to discuss racial ambiguity (Young et al., 2013). However, including only multiracial persons would exclude numerous groups of people, such as people identifying as monoracial or solely through their ethnic identity (e.g., Latino). As such, there are numerous important findings from this study for counseling practice, counselor education and supervision, and future counseling research.

Recommendations for Counseling Practice

This study can be used to inform multiple aspects of counseling practice. Participants in this study expressed positive notions regarding openly discussing their racial ambiguity. It may behoove practicing counselors to continue to encourage conversations about race with clients, including racial ambiguity. Counselors can engage in difficult dialogues, or "planned interactions and discourse . . . about complex social and moral dilemmas or controversies" (Worthington & Avalos, 2017, p. 362), with their clients about racial ambiguity. Worthington and Avalos (2017) discussed the utility of difficult dialogues in promoting positive psychological outcomes, including increased cognitive complexity and promotion of identity development.

Many participants discussed this study as being their first time speaking about their experiences as racially ambiguous people of color. This suggests the importance of being able to have conversations about racial ambiguity within counseling, as clients may not have or be aware of opportunities to have these conversations elsewhere. Participants in this study described speaking about their racial ambiguity as empowering, cathartic, validating, and potentially providing benefits to their mental health. Moreover, it may be fruitful for counselors to indicate that conversations about racial ambiguity are safe and welcomed. Clients may not have the language to express their experiences effectively, potentially dissuading them from speaking about their racial ambiguity. Counselors can take the lead on discussions about race and ethnicity, promoting clients' recognition of the counseling relationship as receptive to complex racial dialog.

Practicing counselors should also be mindful of the myriad of areas racial ambiguity can influence clients' lived experiences. That is, counselors should be prepared to assess for the role of racial ambiguity across multiple domains, including clients' mental health, identity development, and peer relations. For example, participants described receiving identification inquires as being stressful and eliciting strong, negative emotions. Because it is common for racially ambiguous people of color to receive frequent identification inquiries, which may be interpreted as microaggressions (Jackson, 2012; Tran et al., 2016), it may be important for counselors to explore the potential consequences of these experiences.

Participants' experiences with hypodescent, racial discrimination, and racial microaggressions were noteworthy. Participants in this study discussed generally being identified as people of color. This further affirms the continued practice of hypodescent (Chen et al., 2018; Krosch et al., 2013; Peery & Bodenhausen, 2008; Smedley & Smedley, 2005).

Relatedly, it is important to recognize this population's potential for experiencing racism and racial discrimination. The consequences of racism, racial discrimination, and racial microaggressions can include a variety of negative mental health outcomes and are well documented within existing literature, including increased anxiety, increased depression, and lowered self-esteem (Huynh, 2012; Nadal, Griffin et al., 2014; Nadal, Wong et al., 2014; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Sue et al., 2007; Sue et al., 2008). Additionally, participants in this study reported experiencing frequent identification inquires, which may be interpreted is microaggressions (Jackson, 2012; Tran et al., 2016). Thus, the participants' experiences herein emphasize the need for clinicians to be aware that racism can affect all people of color. Further, clinicians are ethically bound to ensure proper services are made available and delivered to all clients, especially those vulnerable to prejudices (ACA, 2014).

Professional counselors should also attend to any specific concerns related to identity development for racially ambiguous people of color. Researchers have discussed the relationship between healthy identity development and positive mental health outcomes (Forsyth & Carter, 2012; Mandara et al., 2009; Wakefield & Hudley, 2007). However, it is possible racially ambiguous people of color may experience unique challenges in their identity development. Counselors should be prepared to discuss identity related concerns with racially ambiguous clients of color. Specifically, counselors can discuss the potential impact of clients having their identities invalidated or feelings of incongruence related to their racial/ethnic identity.

Lastly, counselors should be prepared to attend to potential concerns of racially ambiguous clients related to group membership. Researchers have discussed the varying ways in which multiracial persons may develop friendships and experience social acceptance or rejection

(Doyle & Kao, 2007; Quillian & Redd, 2009). Similarly, participants in this study discussed experiences of social acceptance and rejection among peers. As such, counselors should discuss clients' experiences with peers, friendships, and social groups, assessing for stable community and support. Counselors can directly inquire about clients' experiences with social acceptance and rejection, determining if their experiences are developmentally appropriate or possibly related to their racial ambiguity. Further, if clients are not developing healthy social relationships, counselors can provide appropriate interventions to foster mental wellness.

Recommendations for Counselor Education and Supervision

This study offers multiple implications for counselor education and supervision. Foremost, counselor educators should continue training students on the importance of race within society. Race is generally conceptualized as a categorical aspect of people's identity. However, race is more complex and carries social and cultural meaning. It is important for counselor educators to teach race as a nuanced construct that intersects with other identities and society, potentially eliciting innumerable experiences. Further, counselor educators can begin to discuss racial ambiguity as it is applicable to people of color and the related experiences discussed within this study (e.g., group membership, identity development). For example, counselor educators can provide students with information regarding the potential mental health and wellness needs for racially ambiguous people of color, specifically related to identity development concerns and in response to microaggressions.

In addition to a commitment to ongoing multicultural training, counselor educators should consider increasing the multicultural education component of counseling programs. Many counseling programs require only one course in multicultural training. The single course is typically devoted to covering a vast number of topics ranging from education about

terminology and theory, to increasing insight and awareness of counselors in training. In fact, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), a major accrediting body for counseling programs, provides only broad objectives for multicultural training (CACREP, 2016). As there is little existing research on racial ambiguity, it may be impractical for counselor educators to teach it given semester time constraints. This study helps to provide a rationale for increased multicultural training in counseling programs. Celinska and Swazo (2016) stated "a single multicultural course to cover the 'quota' established by the accrediting and licensing bodies is not only insufficient but also professionally irresponsible" (p. 305). As such, counselor education may be enhanced through additional required or elective multicultural coursework, or successful infusion of multicultural teaching across the counseling program curriculum, allowing for more complex multicultural discussions to occur throughout training.

This study also provides ongoing rationale for the recruitment and retention of faculty and supervisors of color. Participants in this study discussed finding comfort in racially/ethnically diverse environments. Additionally, Jackson (2012) shared that racially ambiguous people are seeking community with shared experiences. The importance and benefits of diversity and representation in higher education have been expressed throughout existing literature (Pope et al., 2014). Further, the benefits of mentorship and the significance of active mentorship for people of color have also been discussed (Boswell, Wilson, Stark, & Onwuegbuzie, 2015; Chung, Bemak, & Talleyrand, 2007; Hannon et al., in press). Therefore, increasing the diversity among counselor educators and supervisors may foster benefits for all people of color, including those who are racially ambiguous, through increased representation of

people of color and increased potential for mentors with shared experiences of racially ambiguous people of color.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study provided a foundation for multiple areas of subsequent research important to the counseling profession. Specifically, this study informs future research to explore the needs of racially ambiguous people of color related to their identity development, group membership and affiliations, experiences with microaggressions and discrimination, and overall mental health and wellness. Additional research can inform counseling and identity development theory, supervisory considerations, and best practices for counselor pedagogy, counselor supervision, and counseling interventions.

Research on racially ambiguous people of color is limited, especially within the field of counseling. Further, researchers exploring racial ambiguity often have defined the construct (i.e., racial ambiguity) themselves (see Brown & Brown, 2004; James & Tucker, 2003; Young et al., 2013). Although the same is true for this study, participants herein were asked to describe and define racial ambiguity from their perspective. Thus, participants in this study provided additional information about the aspects of racial ambiguity, beyond what researchers have proposed. Specifically, although phenotype is likely to be the most important aspect of racial ambiguity, participants discussed the importance of behavioral presentations and regional location. This study contributes to the current understanding of racial ambiguity by corroborating its tenets among both researchers exploring the construct and people who self-identify as racially ambiguous. However, future researchers can examine the interaction between phenotype, behaviors, and location on racial ambiguity to further understand the construct. Additionally, researchers can explore the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color with

different participant samples, including persons from different regions within the U.S. or internationally, as well as participants of different age groups and with different educational attainment.

Nearly all researchers examining racial ambiguity have recruited multiracial-identified participants. This practice occurred despite the knowledge that racial ambiguity was not synonymous with identifying as or being of mixed-race heritage (Brown & Brown, 2014; Edmonds, 2018; Wilton et al., 2014). This study's inclusion criteria were based on people's lived experiences (i.e., receiving identification inquiries). Participants in this study conveyed similar experiences despite having various racial and ethnic identities. Therefore, this study provided a foundation for continued exploration of racial ambiguity as it affects both monoracial and multiracial persons. Further, future research on racially ambiguous people of color can benefit from adopting participant inclusion criteria informed by this study and its findings. Moreover, future researchers can examine if the racially ambiguous experience is different across racial and ethnic identities.

Participants in this study discussed varying experiences with social acceptance and rejection. Researchers have discussed similar experiences among multiracial persons (Doyle & Kao, 2007; Quillian & Redd, 2009). However, the experiences of the participants' in this study suggested that membership issues (i.e., varying experiences with social acceptance and rejection) can affect both monoracial and multiracial people alike. That is, racial ambiguity may have a direct influence on people's group membership experiences. Therefore, additional research examining group membership experiences is warranted. Researchers can qualitatively examine how racially ambiguous people of color approach and navigate group membership. Additionally, researchers can quantitatively assess patterns of group membership of racially ambiguous people

of color (i.e., homophily, blending, or amalgamation; see Doyle & Kao, 2007). Moreover, researchers can determine if there is a relationship between the group membership experiences of racially ambiguous people of color and their mental health and wellness.

Participants discussed how racial ambiguity may foster unique, intersectional experiences. Specifically, participants discussed distinct interactions between their racial ambiguity and their gender and sexual orientation. However, there is no existing research exploring the relationship between racial ambiguity and other minority identities. This study provided a rationale for continued exploration of intersectionality and racial ambiguity, and potential consequences on mental health and wellness. For example, researchers can examine whether experiences with exoticization impacts the mental health of racially ambiguous people of color. Additionally, researchers can explore how racial ambiguity and sexual orientation intersect and influence people's lived experiences.

Throughout this study, participants discussed their unique stressors, significant emotions, and identity-related concerns connected to their racial ambiguity. Although these experiences have been discussed by researchers focusing on multiracial populations (see Jackson, 2012), this study is the first to explore the emotional experiences of racially ambiguous people of color (including monoracial persons). Moreover, participants in this study reported desiring increased and continued discussion of the racially ambiguous experience and related effects. Thus, this study provided a rationale for more thorough examination of this population's unique needs and concerns. Researchers can examine the identity development processes for racially ambiguous people of color, potentially informing a new identity development model for this population. Future research can also focus on the potential mental health concerns common for this population, as well as effective interventions that can be adopted in counseling practice.

Strengths and Limitations

There are multiple, noteworthy strengths regarding the execution of this study. This study adds to the growing body of literature on racially ambiguous people of color. In fact, this study is one of the few to recruit racially ambiguous participants based on self-reported experiences (e.g., receiving identification inquiries), as opposed to their racial identity (e.g., being multiracial). This strength allowed for participants of color to be included regardless of their racial identity.

This study was a qualitative, phenomenological exploration of the lived experiences of racially ambiguous people of color. To increase the likelihood of accurate representation of participants' lived experiences, member checking interviews were conducted, as well as frequent consultation with critical friends throughout the data collection and analysis process. Further, in-person interviews were prioritized to minimize barriers between the researcher and the participants. Moreover, bracketing was performed throughout the research process to minimize the manifestation bias or contamination of participants' data. Another strength of this study was the composition of the sample. People with differing racial/ethnic identities and self-reported genders were intentionally sought to increase diversity among participants. Within this study, participants reported diversity among race, ethnicity, religion, gender, educational attainment, and sexual orientation.

Despite the aforementioned strengths, this study does have limitations. Many of the limitations are those common to qualitative research. That is, the sample size of this study (n = 14) does not allow for generalizability. Additionally, despite having diversity among participants, the sample was highly educated (13 of 14 participants hold college degrees and 7 of 14 hold graduate level degrees), located predominantly in the Northeast Region of the U.S., were

mostly U.S. born, and ages was skewed toward young adulthood (mean age = 33.7 years). Lastly, although in-person interviews were prioritized, only 71% percent of first-round interviews were conducted in person, and only one second-round interview was conducted in-person. Though these limitations are important to note, the strengths of this study are such that it effectively contributes to existing literature.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I provided a summary of the findings and discussion of the results related to existing literature. Then, I discussed the implications of this study, overviewing the importance of this study and its contribution to existing literature. Thereafter, I provided implications for the counseling profession, including relevant information for counseling practice, counselor education and supervision, and future counseling research. Lastly, I discussed the strengths and limitations of this study.

In conclusion, this study included a rigorous, in-depth exploration of the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color. The results provided a wealth of information relevant to the counseling profession and a foundation for future research on the complexity of race and the lived experience. Finally, this study highlighted the voices and experiences of an under-researched, growing population of people, who deserve the counseling profession's best practices.

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Appendix A

Screening Questionnaire Part 1 of 2

Thank you for your interest in this research.

In conducting this research, I aim to learn more about the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color. Below, I have included two definitions to help familiarize you with common terms used in this study.

- In this study, racial ambiguity refers to when a person has an appearance/presentation that defies easy categorization within traditional racial categories, including White, Black or African American, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander. Racial ambiguity may also include ethnic categories as well, such as Hispanic or Latino.
- In this study, person of color refers to any person who is, at least in part, a racial minority within the United States. In the context of this study, racial minorities include Black or African American, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander.

If you are interested in being a participant in this study, please note the following:

- You must be at least 22 years of age
- You must be perceived as racially ambiguous
- You must be a person of color

- You must be able to participate in two interviews, approximately 60 minutes in duration each, to be conducted within the next 6 months

Although in-person interviews are preferred, digital (Skype, Google Hangouts, etc.) interviews can also be used. If you believe you meet the requirements and would like to participate in this study, please follow the instructions provided in Part 2.

Screening Questionnaire Part 2 of 2

Please answer the questions provided below to the best of your ability and return the completed document to nadricht1@montclair.edu.

1) What is your name? _____
2) How old are you? _____
3) What cities, states, and countries were you raised in?

   _____
4) Please answer at least one of the following questions:
   a. Based on the definition provided in Part 1, are you perceived as racially ambiguous? _____
   b. Based on the definition provided in Part 1, do you self-identify as racially ambiguous? _____
   c. Have you received numerous racial identification inquiries throughout your life (e.g., "What are you?"; "Where are you from?")

      _____
5) Do you identify as a person of color (please circle one)? Yes / No

   If yes, how do you identify racially and ethnically? _____

   _____

   a. Please indicate the racial makeup of your biological parents, and, if applicable, adoptive parents/primary care give(s):

   _____

_____

6) Will you be available for two interviews (scheduled in advance), either in-person or digitally, throughout the next 6 months? _____
7) How do you identify in terms of gender? _____
    a. What are your preferred pronouns? _____

Please use the space provided below to indicate any other identities you hold that you believe are important to your experience, such as your religion, disability status, academic degrees, etc.

_____

_____

_____

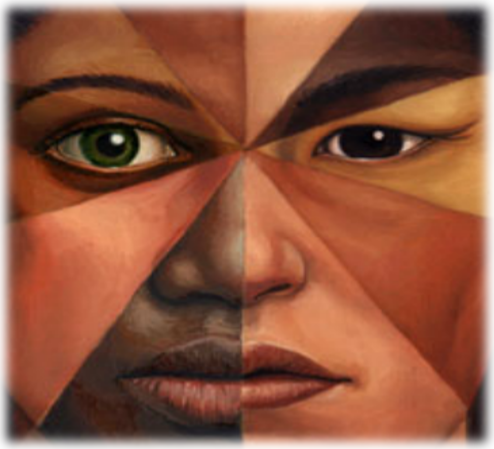
_____

Appendix B

Recruitment Flyer

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

College of Education and Human Services
Department of Counseling and Educational Leadership
Voice: 973-655-7216



Research Participants wanted!

- Have you been asked questions such as "What are you?" or "Where are you from?" in reference to your physical appearance?
- I am exploring the experiences of people who are racially ambiguous.
- This study will involve two interviews, approximately 60 minutes in duration.
- You must be at least 22 years of age to participate in this study.

Tyce Nadrich, Doctoral Candidate in the Counseling and Educational Leadership Department is conducting this study. If you are interested in participating or have more questions, please contact him at nadricht1@montclair.edu

This study has been approved by the Montclair State University Institutional Review Board, MSU IRB-FY 18-19-1157

Appendix C

IRB Approval Letter

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Tyce Nadrich <nadricht1@montclair.edu>

IRB-FY18-19-1157 - Initial: Expedited Post 2018 Rule

cayuseIRB@montclair.edu <cayuseIRB@montclair.edu> Mon, Oct 8, 2018 at 2:4
To: ahluwaliam@mail.montclair.edu, nadricht1@montclair.edu
Cc: reviewboard@montclair.edu, reynosod@montclair.edu, irbsupport@montclair.edu

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board
School of Nursing & Graduate School Building
Room 333
Office: 973-655-7583
Fax: 973-655-3022

Oct 8, 2018 2:42 PM EDT

Mr. Tyce Nadrich
Dr. Muninder Ahluwalia
Montclair State University
Department of Counseling and Ed. Leadership
1 Normal Ave.
Montclair, NJ 07043

Re: IRB Number: IRB-FY18-19-1157
Project Title: SS The Experiences of Racially Ambiguous People of Color

Dear Mr. Nadrich,

After an expedited review:

- 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
  7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Montclair State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this protocol on **October 8, 2018**. With the implementation of the new 2018 MSU IRB Policy and Procedures, non-federally funded expedited studies no longer have an expiration date. Instead we will ask that you complete an Administrative Check In, every two years, updating our office with the status of your research project. Your check in date is October 8, 2020. We will send you a reminder prior to that date.

All active study documents, such as consent forms, surveys, case histories, etc. , should be generated from the approved Cayuse IRB submission.

When making changes to your research team, you will no longer be required to submit a Modification, unless you are changing the PI. As Principal Investigator, you are required to make sure all of your Research Team members have appropriate Human Subjects Protections training, prior to working on the study. For more clarification on appropriate training contact the IRB office.

If you are changing your study protocol, study sites or data collection instruments, you will need to submit a Modification.

When you complete your research project you must submit a Project Closure through the Cayuse IRB electronic system.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB requirements, please contact me at 973-655-5189, cayuseIRB@montclair.edu, or the Institutional Review Board.

Sincerely yours,

Katrina Bulkley
IRB Chair

cc: Ms. Deborah Reynoso, Graduate School, Academic Services Coordinator

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Tyce Nadrich <nadricht1@montclair.edu>

IRB-FY18-19-1157 - Modification: General - Post 2018 Rule
1 message

cayuseIRB@montclair.edu <cayuseIRB@montclair.edu> Tue, Oct 16, 2018 at 9:2
To: ahluwalliam@mail.montclair.edu, nadricht1@montclair.edu
Cc: reviewboard@montclair.edu

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Institutional Review Board
School of Nursing & Graduate School Building
Room 333
Office: 973-655-7583
Fax: 973-655-3022

Oct 16, 2018 9:27 AM EDT

Mr. Tyce Nadrich
Dr. Muninder Ahluwalia
Montclair State University
Department of Counselling and Ed. Leadership
1 Normal Ave.
Montclair, NJ 07043

Re: IRB Number: IRB-FY18-19-1157
Project Title: SS The Experiences of Racially Ambiguous People of Color

Dear Mr. Nadrich,

After an expedited review, Montclair State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study's modification on October 16, 2018. It has been reviewed to MSU's 2018 IRB Policies and Procedures. It is valid through the current approved period .

This modification submission included the following changes:

- Revisions to recruitment flyer
- Revisions to screening instrument

Please note that you will no longer be required to submit an Modification to add or remove personnel from your research team, unless you are changing the Principal Investigato As Principal Investigator you are required to make sure all of your Research Team members have appropriate Human Subjects Protections training, prior to working on the study. For more clarification on appropriate training contact the IRB office.

If you are changing your study protocol, study sites or data collection instruments, you will need to submit a Modification.

After your study is completed, please submit a Project Closure.
If you have any questions regarding the IRB requirements, please contact me at 973-655-5189, cayuseIRB@montclair.edu, or the Institutional Review Board.

Sincerely yours,

Amy Krenzer
Senior IRB Coordinator

Appendix D

ADULT CONSENT FORM

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to other people before you sign this form.

Title: The Experiences of Racially Ambiguous People of Color
Study Number: MSU IRB-FY 18-19-1157

Why is this study being done? The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of racially ambiguous people of color. Racially ambiguous people of color are those who are racial minorities within the United States and often have their racial and/or ethnic identity confused with others'. They may experience questions about their race or ancestry, among other unique experiences. As with all groups of people, this population is likely to have a unique lived experience. I intend to learn more about this population's lived experience and specific mental health concerns to inform counselor education and practice.

What will happen while you are in the study? Prospective participants can expect to:

- Read and complete a short screening questionnaire. This form serves to determine your appropriateness for the study and collect basic demographic information. You must be at least 22 years old to be in this study.
- Schedule and participate in an initial interview. This interview will be approximately 60 minutes in duration. It will be strongly encouraged that this interview face to face. However, digital formats such as Skype or Google Hangouts can also be used.
- Receive a copy of your initial interview transcript and be asked to review it for accuracy.
- Schedule and participate in a final interview. This interview will be approximately 60 minutes in duration. While it will be preferred that this interview occur face to face, digital formats such as Skype or Google Hangouts will be allowed.

Time: This study will take about approximately two hours to complete, spanning two separate interviews.

Risks: You may experience discomfort when discussing issues related to your lived experiences. However, we do not anticipate any significant emotional or psychological risks associated with this study.

Benefits: You may benefit from participating in this study as it offers the opportunity to speak candidly about your personal, lived experience. Additionally, others may benefit from your participation in this study, as the data obtained can be used to inform both counselor education and counselor practice.

Compensation: There is no monetary compensation related to your participation in this study.

Who will know that you are in this study? Your interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. However, your identity will not be directly linked to any presentations or publications related to this research. I will keep who you are confidential. However, specific quotes you share may be used publicly after all identifying information has been removed.

You should know that New Jersey requires that any person having reasonable cause to believe that a child has been subjected to child abuse or acts of child abuse shall report the same immediately to the Division of Youth and Family Services.

Do you have to be in the study?
You do not have to be in this study. You are a volunteer! It is okay if you want to stop at any time and not be included in the study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

Do you have any questions about this study? Please contact me directly at nadricht1@montclair.edu. You can also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Muninder Ahluwalia at ahluwaliam@montclair.edu.

Do you have any questions about your rights as a research participant? Phone or email the IRB Chair, Dr. Katrina Bulkley, at 973-655-5189 or reviewboard@montclair.edu.

Future Studies It is okay to use my data in other studies (your data and information will remain confidential in any and all future uses):

Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

As part of this study, it is okay to audio record and transcribe our interview:

Please initial: _____ Yes _____ No

One copy of this consent form is for you to keep.

Statement of Consent
I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement, and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I am 18 years of age or older and have received a copy of this consent form.

_____	_____	_____
Print your name here	Sign your name here	Date

_____	_____	_____

Name of Principal Investigator	Signature	Date
Faculty Sponsor	Signature	Date

Appendix E

Interview Protocol 1 of 2:

Foremost, I want to thank you for taking the time to meet with me. I want to be respectful of your time and get started as soon as you are ready. I have prepared 8 overarching questions for today and I may have some follow up questions along the way. I encourage you to speak to each question as much as you would like and feel comfortable doing so. At the end of the interview, there will be an opportunity for you to share anything further about the topic. Do you have any questions? Are you ready to begin?

1. How do you identify racially and ethnically?
    a. How did you learn about your race/ethnicity?

2. Do you consider yourself to be racially ambiguous (or, do you believe others see you as racially ambiguous)?
    a. How would you describe or define racial ambiguity?
    b. What contributes to your racial ambiguity? (physical attributes, behaviors, etc.)
        i. What feature(s) do you believe contribute most to your ambiguity?

3. Please discuss the environments you grew up in and the presence of race therein? (i.e., home[s], neighborhoods[s], school[s], social group[s])
    a. When did you learn that you were racially ambiguous?
    b. Did your ambiguity influence your lived experience while growing up? If so, how?

4. Please discuss the environments you currently occupy and the presence of race therein? (home[s], neighborhoods[s], school[s], social group[s])
    a. Does your ambiguity influence your lived experience now? If so, how?
5. Throughout your life, how has being ambiguous influenced your social interactions?
    a. Has being ambiguous influenced how others engaged with you? If so, how?
    b. Has being ambiguous influenced how you navigate social situations? If so, how?

   c. Did others make assumptions about your racial identity?
      i. If so, did the assumptions match how you identify?
      ii. Did these assumptions effect you in any way? If so, how?

6. Throughout your life, how has being ambiguous influenced your sense of self / sense of identity?
   a. If so, can you please provide examples or stories to help illustrate this?

7. Throughout your life, do you believe any of the other identities you hold (e.g., gender/sex, being a person of color, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.) uniquely affected your lived experience connected with your ambiguity?
   a. If so, can you please provide examples or stories to help illustrate this?

8. How did it feel speaking about this?

9. Do you have anything else you would like to share regarding this topic?

10. What pseudonym would you like me to use to protect your identity within this study, ongoing?

Interview Protocol 2 of 2:

Thank you for speaking with me a second time. I truly appreciate your time and consideration for this research. In this session, I have three questions I would like to ask you.

1. Before our session today, I sent you a copy of our interview transcript from our first meeting. From what you have seen, do you believe what you shared during that session was accurately recorded in the transcript?

2. Last time we spoke, I asked you a lot of questions about your lived experience as a racially ambiguous person of color. In this session, I would like to allow you the time to share anything you feel is pertinent to the topic that we did not discuss previously.

3. Since we last met, I have spent time looking at all the interviews I have conducted and have begun seeing themes. I would like to share them with you and hear your reactions and responses to what I have found, thus far.

Thank you for your time and dedication to this research. If you think of anything you'd like to share going forward, please feel free to email me at nadricht1@montclair.edu.

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