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Navigating Multiracial Identities for Women in a Predominantly Monoracial Society: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

The experiences of five multiracial women were documented in this study. A thematic analysis with a phenomenological framework was applied to the data analysis. Findings revealed five primary themes, including (a) experiences of microaggressions, (b) uniquely defined intersectionality, (c) making sense of one's multiracial identity, (d) significance of relational support, and (e) openness and understanding. Limitations of the study, as well as some helpful recommendations for counselors, are discussed.

Keywords Mixed-race · Microaggression · Multiracial · Multiracial identity · Multiracial individual

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2020), the number of individuals who identify as multiracial represented the greatest increase among all racial groups in 2020. In 2015, approximately one in seven infants, living in two-parent households, were multiracial or multiethnic (Livingston, 2017). Furthermore, the number of multiracial individuals increased considerably, from 9million to roughly 34million, within the past decade (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2020). Although the multiracial population in the U.S. continues to grow, the literature on multiracial individuals and counseling recommendations for effectively serving this population is scarce (Brunsma & Porow, 2017; Edwards & Pedrotti, 2008; Yoo et al., 2016). For instance, a systematic review

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of the pertinent literature on multiracial individuals revealed serious lack of representation of this population in six major counseling and psychology journals (Edwards & Pedrotti, 2008). While more literature exploring the challenges and strengths of multiracial individuals has become available in the past decade, additional studies that focus on this population are necessary to help counselors understand how multiracial individuals make sense of their racial experiences and how these experiences shape their self-understanding.

From a counseling standpoint, while seeking to identify common experiences among multiracial individuals is helpful, acknowledging experiences that are unique to each individual is equally important in supporting this population. Therefore, guided by the research question, "How do multiracial individuals create meaning and identity as a multiracial individual?" the purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of multiracial individuals, particularly regarding their racial socialization, identity development, and factors that contribute to their resilience. Roughly 67% of participants indicated that they consider their Hispanic heritage as part of their racial identity (Parker et al., 2015). For the purposes of this study, therefore, the identity of multiracial refers to individuals who self-identify with two or more races including Hispanic. First, we begin with a brief review of the pertinent literature on monoracial ideology, microaggression, and multiracial identity development.

Monoracial Ideology: A Social Fabric of the U.S. History

A history of the United States has been interwoven with systemic oppression towards interracial couples and their children (Brunsma & Porow, 2017; Laszloffy, 2008). Brusman and Porow (2017) contested that, "It is a myth that interracial couples and/ or their multiracial children are accepted in contemporary society" (p. 304). Factors such as globalization and advancement of technology might have contributed to increased public acceptance toward intercultural couples and families. However, society has continued to pathologize multiracial individuals as being confused and unable to fit into any groups (Wijeyesinghe, 2001). This pathological view can be manifested in microaggressions toward multiracial individuals, which refers to "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership" (Sue, 2010, p. 24). Examples of monoracial-centric microaggressions include being mistaken as a monoracial person or with a wrong race (Harris, 2017a, b; Nadal et al., 2011), being denied of one's multiracial identity (Harris, 2017b; Nadal et al., 2011), feeling excluded for not fitting into a monoracial framework (Nadal et al., 2011), and being objectified (Harris, 2017a; Nadal et al., 2011). The need to fit people into predetermined groups has transcended experiences in the United States.Townsend et al., (2009) posited that the perception of physical features often pushed societies across different parts of the world to have miscategorized individuals into different racial or ethnic boxes, disregarding the cultural traditions that these miscategorized individuals prescribe to. Brunsma & Porow (2017) explained:

Indeed, they are "more" accepted than they once were in a different set of racial structures and ideologies; however, if one listens closely to their stories and not only the story of the larger (read: White) culture of "acceptance," one will begin to understand the reality of their nonacceptance. (p.304)

A pathological view of multiracial people has existed within the scholarly community, counseling field, and higher education. For example, Stonequist (1937) was the first to develop a multiracial identity development model titled, The Marginal Man, which focused on deficiency in mixed-race individuals (as cited in Hendriksen & Maxwell 2016). Racial microaggressions have also existed within the mental health counseling system (Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2007) and higher education (Ford et al., 2019; Harris, 2017a, b). For instance, some well-meaning counselors, particularly White counselors, may engage in microaggressions unintentionally, and as a result doing more harm than good to clients of color (Sue et al., 2007). In an analysis of 271 university websites, Ford et al., (2019) found that roughly 52% of institutions did not include clear data about multiracial students on their websites despite the representation of this student body on campus. Such institutional level microaggressions included grouping multiracial student populations into other non-dominant racial groups, removing the category of multiracial, or reassigning the group into monoracial categories in institutional data displayed on their websites. Ford et al. further explained that these institutional microaggressions reinforce the notion of "monoracial normativity" (p.8) which refers to people's tendency to prefer and assume superiority of a single-race over multiracial identities. Similarly, some of the participants in a study by Harris (2017b) discussed how organizational structures and policies on college campuses have denied their multiracial identities and experiences. Examples included not having an option to identify one's multiracial background on a demographic form, facing confusion and resistance of people when disclosing one's multiracial identity, and witnessing a lack of institutional support toward multiracial students on campus.

A lack of acceptance and support toward interracial couples and multiracial individuals has also existed within their close family circle. According to Brunsma & Porow (2017), perceptions of interracial relationships that are held by the couples themselves are often in conflict with how their support system (e.g., extended families, communities) perceives such relationships. Additionally, some multiracial individuals face microaggressions by their monoracial family members, often contributing to feelings of marginalization within their family (Nadal et al., 2013). Nadal et al. identified five themes of microaggression: (a) *isolation within the family* (for not fitting in); (b) *favoritism within the family* (favoring of monoracial and light-skinned family members over multiracial family members); (c) *questioning of authenticity* (e.g., being questioned about one's place in the family for not speaking the same language); (d) *denial of multiracial identity and experiences by monoracial family member;* and (e) *feelings of not learning about family heritage or culture* (e.g., being discouraged from embracing all races that a person is a member of, and as a result, regretting not knowing about their multiracial heritage). Understanding the effects of microaggressions on family dynamics and multiracial individuals is crucial because a lack of support from family members may put multiracial individuals at a higher risk

for developing psychological distress (Salahuddin & O'Brien, 2011). Consequently, making sense of and embracing a person's mixed-race heritage within environments that operate from a monoracial framework can present unique challenges for multiracial individuals.

The Influence of Racial Identity Development

Racial identity for multiracial individuals is "complex and evolving" (Wijeyesinghe, 2001, p. 14), and their lived experiences and perspectives on race may differ from that of people of color who are monoracial (McDonald et al., 2019; Shih et al., 2007). As multiracial individuals vary in their identification of race, a person's racial identity development may be fluid and shift dependent upon contexts (Rockquemore et al., 2006). Moreover, having multiracial experiences can both negatively or positively influence individuals (Cheng & Lee, 2009; Shih & Sanchez, 2005). For instance, Shih & Sanchez (2005) found that although multiracial individuals experienced challenges to their identity (e.g., feelings of rejection, being questioned about their racial identities), their mixed-race experiences also fostered their resilience in coping with these challenges effectively. Similarly, Cheng & Lee (2009) found that multiracial individuals who were able to recall positive experiences of being a multiracial person exhibited higher levels of multiracial identity integration compared to those who recalled primarily negative experiences of being multiracial. This concept of recalling positive or negative experiences of being multiracial may be due to being exposed to the idea of monoracial normativity being the dominant cultural structure at a young age (Jackson et al., 2012).

Additional examples include multiracial adolescent males experiencing higher rates of grade retention and school suspension, multiracial students seeking counseling for depression at higher rates than monoracial students, and multiracial students experiencing greater instances of microaggressions and discrimination compared to their monoracial peers (Cooney & Radina, 2000). As experiences of racial discrimination have been associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms among young multiracial adults (Marks et al., 2020), the pervasive psychological effects of negative racial experiences on multiracial individuals is concerning and can have long-lasting effects on their identities and psychological well-being (Cheng & Lee, 2009). Furthermore, as multiracial people face unique challenges of navigating their racial identities within a predominantly monoracial society, there is reason to believed that multiracial individuals are pressured to adopt a singular racial identity to avoid being racially discriminated against and to help protect one's well-being (Jackson et al., 2012). This constant pressure to fit into a monoracial category can affect multiracial individuals. For example, Townsend et al., (2009) found that multiracial individuals, who were not able to choose multiple racial groups when completing the demographic portion of a survey, indicated lower performance in studies of self-esteem and motivation. Conversely, Binning et al., (2009) found that multiracial participants who identified with multiple ethnic groups fared as well as or reported significantly greater positive affect and lower levels of stress than those who only identified with a single group.

Navigating and making sense of one's multiracial identity development has been found to be psychologically, "more complex than suggested by traditional theories of multiracial identity" (Shih & Sanchez, 2005, p.577). Sanchez et al., (2009) found that individuals with higher levels of malleability (a "tendency to identify with different racial identities across different social contexts" p.243) do not necessarily experience decline in their psychological well-being (e.g., depressive symptoms) when they are able to accept fluidity of their racial identity. On the other hand, lower malleability in racial identification can result in confusion and lower commitment to understanding their identities, adding the predisposition of higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms (Fisher et al., 2014; Marks et al., 2020). From an identity standpoint, multiracial individuals' ability to authentically identify with two or more racial groups could serve as a positive coping mechanism and buffer them against the effects of racial discrimination (Jackson et al., 2012). Similarly, Yoo et al., (2016) found that individuals with personal experiences of connecting with their multiracial roots and having a community that affirms their multiple heritages were associated with lower levels of identity conflicts and psychological distress.

While beyond the scope of this study, we encourage readers to review available literature on multiracial individuals, including their experience with microaggressions (e.g., Ford et al., 2019; Harris, 2017b; Nadal et al., 2011), the effects of racial discrimination and monoracial framework on their psychological well-being (e.g., Jackson et al., 2012; Townsend et al., 2009), factors that are associated with an integration of multiracial identity (e.g., Cheng & Lee 2009; Yoo et al., 2016), and potential benefits of a multiracial identity (e.g., Binning et al., 2009; Jackson et al., 2012).

Methods

Procedures

The research team consisted of three full-time counselor educators, one woman and two men, from three different institutions. An initial draft of the interview questions was developed by the first author based on the review of the existing literature and in consultation with the co-investigators. We collectively reviewed the initial draft and finalized the interview questionnaire. Subsequently, two external reviewers with expertise in multicultural counseling reviewed the draft. By incorporating the reviewers' recommendations, several questions were revised to ensure that the statements were framed in an open-ended format and inviting manner as much as possible. The final draft of the questionnaire consisted of 13 questions that were designed to explore each participant's personal experience of being multiracial in the following areas: (a) self-description of the person's racial backgrounds, (b) strengths, (c) challenges, (d) questions that they wished others would ask them about their multiracial background, and (e) sources of resilience and positive influence. After completing an online informed consent form, each participant completed an online demographic form and participated in one semi-structured interview. All interviews were conducted virtually and ranged from 50 minutes to an hour. The study proposal was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the first author's institution.

Participants

Upon IRB approval, each of us on the research team sent recruitment emails to individuals within our respective network. We identified certain individuals who we believed to have in-depth knowledge of and access to the multiracial community. The recruitment email asked individuals to share the announcement with potential participants within their community and network. The inclusion criteria for this study were that participants must be at least 18 years of age and self-identify as multiracial with two or more racial backgrounds. In this process, we did not focus on recruiting individuals with particular racial combinations or ensuring that the participants collectively represented all racial groups. This purposeful and snowball sampling resulted in seven potential participants. Of those, one participant completed and signed the informed consent but withdrew from the study due to a family emergency. Additionally, another participant was removed from the analysis because the participant did not meet the inclusion criteria of identifying with at least two racial groups. The participant self-identified as a multiethnic of the same racial group, which was not the focus of this present study. Hence, five participants were included in this present study.

All five participants were women. The average age of the participants was 35.2 years old, with range of 28 to 52 years of age. Four participants identified as heterosexual and one as Queer. Racial groups presented among the participants included a combination of White and South Asian (1), White and Latina (1), White and Indigenous/American Indian (1), Black and Latina (1), and Black, White, and Latina (1). On the demographic survey, the participants reported the following identities to be important to them: race (3), ethnicity (4), age (3), ability/disability (1), socioeconomic status (3), nationality/citizenship (3), gender identity (3), and physical characteristics (1). The participants reported high levels of educational attainment, including one bachelor's degree holder, three master's degree holders, and one post-master's degree holder. All five participants were either bilingual or multilingual. Collectively, they spoke English, French, Spanish, and Norwegian.

Data Analysis

As the purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding of the lived experiences of multiracial individuals, we chose to conduct a phenomenological study. In phenomenological research, researchers seek "to uncover the psychological truths *concealed* within the words of the participant" (Churchill, 2018, p.216). As a phenomenological framework is an appropriate method when wishing to gain an in-depth understanding of "individuals' common experiences of a phenomenon" (Hays & Wood, 2011, p. 291), we thought that this approach was fitting to our study. In particular, a thematic analysis within a phenomenological framework was used to analyze the data and to identify themes that are reflective of the participants' shared experiences. According to Maguire & Delahunt (2017), a thematic analysis can be used with various epistemologies and allows researchers to analyze the data in a meaningful manner.

Five interviews were included in this data analysis. We used the six phases as described by Braun & Clarke (2006) as a guideline for conducting a thematic analysis of the first four interviews. The first author read the transcriptions several times and analyzed them by using an open coding system to identify codes in the first four interviews. Next, she organized codes into primary themes that applied to all or most of the interviews. Subsequently, the fifth interview was analyzed to reach sufficient saturation of each theme. No new themes emerged from the analysis of the fifth interview. The second and third authors cross-referenced the themes against the transcripts to ensure that consensus was reached on the established themes and that no new themes needed to be added to the analysis. Where questions or disagreements arose, we discussed our rationale and made adjustments until all were satisfied. Once this process was completed, we reached final consensus.

After we finalized our themes, a summary of the preliminary themes was developed for participants' review. Each study participant received an invitation to take part in a member check and review of the summary document. In reviewing the summary, the participants were asked to determine whether the primary themes reflected their personal experiences, and if they believed that any important information was missing from the summary. Four participants agreed to review the summary and three followed up with the first author stating that the findings reflected their experiences as a multiracial individual. One participant offered an additional comment on the findings, which was incorporated into the final reporting.

Reflexivity

The first author's racial background is Asian. The second author self-identifies as an Asian American Pacific Islander, and the third author identifies as White. Although our race is different, all three of us have a single-race background. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the potential limitation of deeply understanding unique experiences of multiracial people. As social justice oriented counselor educators, we hold the assumption that systemic barriers and oppressions affect lives of marginalized groups including multiracial individuals. Additionally, we assume that people possess strengths that could foster their ability to be resilient.

Trustworthiness

After each interview, the first author who conducted the interviews kept a journal by reflecting on her reactions to the interview and potential biases and assumptions that might have come up. In addition to this *bracketing*, the first author checked in with each participant during the interview process by acknowledging that she might unintentionally make assumptions about multiracial individuals, and that she welcomed the participant's feedback if this occurred during the interview. The data gathering phase took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the participants were also asked to reflect on how the current national and global pandemic might have an influence on their responses to the research questions. The participants did not

believe that the current pandemic had a significant influence on their responses to the interview questions. Furthermore, member checking was conducted to ensure that the results reflected the participants' experiences accurately. Finally, to further hold our positionalities and identities in check, we the authors met at multiple points through the study to discuss and share our personal feelings, reactions, questions, and challenges to the study. This process allowed us to support and challenge each other on our biases or other projections and to ensure that we were not allowing our personal dispositions to impact or influence the trustworthiness of the study.

Results

As mentioned previously, multiracial individuals are often forced to categorize their racial backgrounds within a framework that is ascribed by society. To respect each participant's way of identifying their racial background, the terms that the participants indicated on the demographic form and/or in their interview to refer to their mixed-race heritage were used in this section. Five themes concerning the participants' experiences emerged from the analysis: (a) experiences of microaggressions, (b) uniquely defined intersectionality, (c) making sense of one's multiracial identity, (d) significance of relational support, and (e) openness and understanding.

Experiences of Microaggressions

This theme consisted of four subthemes: (a) misunderstanding of racial background through a monoracial lens, (b) denial/negation of a person's multiracial heritages, (c) being questioned about race (What are you?), and (d) mistaken identity based on stereotyping. Although some of the participants did not use the term, microaggression, to describe their experiences, all of them spoke about incidents in which they have been subjected to microaggressive statements and/or acts.

Misunderstanding of Racial Background through a Monoracial Lens

All participants spoke about the incidents where others made assumptions about their racial backgrounds. While participants' physical appearances seemed to be the primary determinant of others' perceptions of their race, some also had people assuming their racial background based on their speech, name, or behavior. Participant One, who identifies her multiracial background as Indigenous and Caucasian, spoke about the public's tendency to perceive her as a White person based on her physical appearance. "I feel that when people see me, the assumption is that I am Caucasian, and that is what they see first is what they are able to visually understand and interpret, which is me being, I present as White." Perceived racial identifications also affected siblings differently for Participant Two who identifies as White and Latina of Puerto Rican descent. She could recall several incidents where people made assumptions about each of her sisters' racial backgrounds based on their appearance. Specifically, one of

her siblings is often perceived as monoracial Latina, whereas, another sibling and the participant are perceived as monoracial White. She explained:

> You sometimes don't feel like you belong anywhere, racially or culturally. And then, you know, with family members, some of us represent our background a little bit more. So, people make assumptions about that compared to the way they would make assumptions about me.

Additionally, some participants noticed that people in different geographic regions perceived their race and ethnicity differently. Participant Three who identifies as Black and Mexican noticed how her race and ethnicity were perceived differently by people in different regions.

> It depends on where I am. I was on the East Coast for a little while, and there are a lot of people from the Dominican Republic and from Puerto Rico and Cuba, and they all think I'm Puerto Rican and Cuban that it's assumed that, I speak Spanish. They are surprised that, I'm not. And on the West Coast, people are surprised that I speak some Spanish, that my mom is Mexican because they perceive like "Oh, you know, Latinos are all light-skinned" because the Latinos on the West Coast are more light-skinned generally.

Denial / Negation of a Person's Multiracial Heritages

All participants recalled situations in which people questioned and/or denied their mixed-race background. Although people might have not intentionally done so, such interactions left the participants with feelings of isolation and frustration. Coping with this type of disapproval has been a part of Participant Four's life as a multiracial person of South Asian and White descent. "You don't look Indian, or you are not really Indian, you act White. People making assumptions based on how I look, or how I speak that I must not be a certain, you know, I can't be associated with that culture or that ethnic group." Similarly, Participant Three spoke about judgments made by others about her race and ethnicity.

> I was not necessarily Black enough, and I am making air quotes, or maybe to some people who are, like, who's, both of their parents are from Mexico, because my Spanish isn't fluent. I wasn't always Mexican enough, but I think that's ridiculous to say about another person and their identity.

Some participants also recalled experiencing microaggressions at an early age. Participant Five, a multiracial person of Colombian, French, and African American descent, spoke about an incident of a microaggression in which others invalidated the father-daughter relationship due to differences in their physical appearances.

> One time I was being picked up from a track practice by my dad, and the next day a girl told me that she thought I was being kidnapped. So, we have kind of

comments that were very confusing, and I started to realize, Oh, I'm different. I think that was a bit traumatic in the beginning to really have these very sort of negative things said to me.

Being Questioned about Race: "What Are You?"

The question of "What are you?" is a familiar one to many multiracial individuals. This was the case for the participants of this study. One participant stated that she did not feel defensive when people asked her this question as she welcomed the opportunity to share with others about her multiracial upbringing. For those who felt unease about the question, how people posed the question seemed to have generated feelings of hurt and frustration for them. For example, Participant Three spoke about situations when this question felt more invasive or awkward for her.

> I think it is a combination of, it is not just when they ask, "What are you?" but, which is usually how they phrase it, "What are you?" It is when we are having a conversation, but I can tell they are distracted, and they really want to know, and then they finally ask, and it has nothing to do with the conversation. That really bothers me.

Mistaken Identity Based on Stereotyping

Two participants discussed experiences where people made stereotype-based comments about their racial and ethnic backgrounds. Participant Three who identifies as Black and Mexican multiracial, recalled a situation in which a teacher perceived her as a mixed-race of White descent because of her strong academic performance. She stated:

> I had a teacher in seventh grade who really liked me. She was my science teacher, and one day, it was the middle of the school year, and one day she was handing back tests, and she like admiring her hand, and she kind of pulled it back and she goes, "[Participant Three's name], what do you mixed with?" And I said, well, I am Mexican and Black, and she said, "Oh, well, your parents raised me [you] so well, I thought you were half White."

Uniquely Defined Intersectionality

All participants acknowledged that there are other aspects of their identities besides race that are important to them. Collectively, the participants spoke about one or more of the following aspects to be salient to their overall identity: gender, immigration history, nationality, ethnicity, religion and spirituality, class/social class, disabilities, mental health, relationship status, location of residence, occupation, and

personal talents. The analysis did not yield any one particular pattern of intersections of identities. Rather, this intersectionality seemed to be significant and unique to each individual. For example, Participant Two stated that she considers her ethnicity, disabilities, bilingual background, and race as salient identities for her. Because these identities tend to also be invisible to others, she often feels the need to disclose these identities to people in order to establish a genuine relationship with them. Participant Two explained this internal dilemma as follows:

> My learning disability is fairly hidden, and then, also, my multiracial background is also hidden, in a sense, because of the fact that I look White. Sometimes I feel like I have to reveal them in order for people to understand the context of and also the content of what I'm saying, or why I'm saying something the way I'm saying it.

Making Sense of One's Multiracial Identity

Three subthemes emerged from the analysis that were related to the participants' perceptions of what it means to develop a multiracial identity. These included (a) understanding the identity development as an ongoing process, (b) self-affirmation and empowerment (affirming a person's perception of self instead of conforming to socially ascribed perceptions), and (c) awareness of white privilege.

Understanding Multiracial Identity Development as an Ongoing Process

Four participants perceived making sense of their multiple heritages and having a strong sense of self is an ongoing process. Understandably, it can be difficult to describe such a process, as it is highly personal, is ever evolving, and continuously influenced by different social contexts. Participant Five stated:

> I think it is going to be a lifelong process of understanding what all these things mean. … because I had this strange balance between wanting to be accepted for who I am, regardless of my background but also it is nice to be known and understood as having this particular experience.

Self-Affirmation and Empowerment

A person's multiracial identity may be distorted by others in some contexts, and their identities are misunderstood due to assumptions and biases. As a result, multiracial individuals face situations in which they have to explain to others their multiracial heritages in order to feel authentic and accepted. Despite these challenges, some participants spoke about their journey of becoming more authentic to themselves by affirming and asserting their multiracial backgrounds, including parts of them that may be invisible to others or deviate from socially ascribed perceptions of their race.

This self-affirmation called for the participants to focus less on others' perceptions of them and more on nurturing their perception of self. Participant One spoke about the challenges of being perceived as a monoracial White person based on her appearance. Her conscious effort to embrace her Indigenous heritage without having to conform to society's perceptions of the Indigenous population was reflected in her statement.

> I can't be darker or look more Native. People normally would think was Native, I can't. How do I, how do I navigate this scenario, right? … I don't feel like I need to walk around in my regalia or wear tribal earrings every day just to be like, "Hey, this is me, do you get it?" Now, I don't know. I don't want to be having to do that for people to understand where I'm at.

For Participant One, she has learned to empower herself as a multiracial individual by nurturing her view of the self as opposed to conforming to others' perceptions of her. She stated, "It is definitely been sort of, a very long transition for me to get to a place where I feel like I can be my authentic self, rather than, you know, kind of operating off of how people perceive me." Similarly, Participant Three has come to affirm her identity as a multiracial person of Black and Mexican descent. She explained, "My expression of my Blackness doesn't have to be what, you know, what somebody else says is what Blackness looks like."

Awareness of White Privilege

In addition to the two abovementioned subthemes, the theme of white privilege emerged from the interviews with all four multiracial participants of White descent. These participants spoke about their awareness of white privilege that they have or might have been ascribed to them by others due to their appearances. Participant One's statement speaks to the complexity of understanding white privilege within a framework of a multiracial identity.

> I try to be really conscious about my privilege because I do understand that the perception is that I am White, even though that is not the truth, and so I try to think about when I'm in spaces with other marginalized people, What is the privilege that is here, assumed or otherwise?

For some, this perceived privilege created tension within a family. For Participant Two, she became aware of different effects that white privilege had on her family members, in this case, her parents.

> What angered me really was just the way the treatment was different, the way my mom would get treated versus, you know, if I was there with my father who is White, you know what I'm saying, I get treated better. Some of that could have been a gender thing back then, too.

Significance of Relational Support

The participants spoke about different supportive relationships that they believe have been instrumental in developing a positive multiracial identity. Four participants identified at least one family member (e.g., parent, grandparent, sibling), and three mentioned mentors and friends who have shared the same or similar backgrounds with them as positive influences. Additionally, four participants spoke about finding support in group settings, including being a part of a group of diverse individuals who share similar interests with them, attending professional development opportunities, and engaging in the exchange of perspectives and information with others through writing. Participant Five's statement illustrates the significance of having supportive relationships.

> My dad has certainly had a positive effect on how I view myself and, yeah, friends who have been accepting or willing and open to talk about, too. Anytime I have an opportunity to explore, because it is such a salient question for me, that has been really helpful to me, too.

For Participant Four, being a part of a research group with people who share similar backgrounds has been enlightening. She stated:

> It is actually a really good place, in terms of being able to read, like learn more about critical, mixed-race studies, and also talk to other people who identify as mixed-race and be able to talk about similarities and differences and experience. I think that having that community has been really helpful.

Openness and Understanding

The participants were asked to think of the strengths that they possess as a person of a mixed-race background. All spoke about their willingness and ability to be open to differences that exist among people of various cultural backgrounds. They have also developed a genuine sense of curiosity to learn about others while keeping their assumptions in check. Additionally, some participants discussed how they have become more understanding of and patient with people who struggle to practice cultural sensitivity and appreciation. Participant Five's statement captures this point. She stated, "Because I've had to learn, and I know that it takes time, and I've not always correctly understood what it means for me, I think I'm more forgiving when people don't understand either."

Discussion

According to Nadal et al., (2013), microaggressions can take place both outside and within a family. Moreover, multiracial individuals are likely to experience as many microaggressions as monoracial people of color and significantly more compared to monoracial Whites (Nadal et al., 2011). The present study revealed that all participants experienced various types of microaggression. For instance, some participants spoke about being perceived as monoracial which is consistent with the findings in previous studies (Harris, 2017a, b; Nadal et al., 2011). Harris (2017a) warned that "monoracial stereotypes attempt to categorize, racialize, and fit multiracial peoples into monoracial understandings of race" (p. 484) and thus can negatively affect the well-being of multiracial individuals. In our study, this monoracial framework created dynamics where only a part of the participants' mixed-race heritages was visible to others, which resulted in invisibility of other parts of their racial heritages. Specifically, a few participants remembered incidents in which people assumed their racial backgrounds based on their physical appearance and expressed some confusion when the participant did not fit into their preconceived notions about a certain racial group. For example, some participants recalled an experience of people questioning authenticity of their multiracial identity (e.g., "I was not necessarily Black enough"), which has been noted in previous literature (Harris, 2017b; Nadal et al., 2011). Society's tendency to operate from a monoracial lens also affected a parent-child relationship for one participant when a stranger thought that she was being kidnapped by her own father due to a lack of physical resemblance between them. These findings suggest that the notion of monoracial normativity (Ford et al., 2019) can be imposed upon multiracial individuals and have significant influence on their experiences and interactions with others.

It is worth mentioning that all participants of White ancestry discussed their awareness of white privilege, and how it has influenced interactions with others. For example, one participant explained how she works to create a safe space for people of color in meetings because she is aware of people's tendency to perceive her as a monoracial White person and potential effects of white privilege on marginalized groups. For another participant, despite not being of White descent, whiteness and white privilege seemed to have had an impact on her. Specifically, the participant who is Black and Latina spoke about her interaction with a teacher who assumed that she was a multiracial person of White descent because of her excellent academic performance. This interaction may be best explained by what Sue (2010) refers to as an *ascription of intelligence* which is based on an implicit assumption that "people of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites" (p. 35). Although it is beyond the scope of this study, the participants in our study seemed to demonstrate in-depth understanding of potential effects of white privilege on their lives and others. What was most striking was the participants' awareness of and openness to examine their privilege as a white descent while also identifying with racially marginalized groups.

All participants in this study could recall painful experiences of race-based mistreatments and challenges of asserting their multiracial identity in a society that operates from a monoracial framework. However, the participants also believed that their personal experiences as a multiracial person contributed to them becom-

ing more forgiving, patient, understanding, and open-minded. Our findings support previous research (e.g., Jackson et al., 2012; Yoo et al., 2016). Furthermore, some participants in our study affirmed their multiracial identities by questioning instead of conforming to socially-constructed racial identifications. For instance, one participant spoke about how she learned to foster her expression of Blackness that is not necessarily consistent with others' views of her race. This is similar to Shih & Sanchez (2005) who found that multiracial experiences contributed to individuals' resilience. Thus, we believe that resilience is a salient factor in the lived experience of multiracial individuals and may contribute to their increased sense of authenticity and self-empowerment.

Another important finding from this study was the significance of relational support to multiracial individuals. According to Cheng & Lee (2009), environmental factors can reinforce positive or negative experiences for multiracial individuals and consequently foster or hinder their multiracial identity. Specifically, factors such as peer support and mentorship can buffer against negative effects of race-based experiences, whereas a lack of such support can hinder their ability to develop an identity that encompasses all aspects of their racial backgrounds. Having supportive relationships seemed to be vital to the participants in the present study. In particular, a few participants found connecting with mentors and peers, who are persons of color or multiracial, helpful to their personal growth. Our findings are similar to Yoo et al., (2016) who found that having a support network of racially diverse peers was positively associated with resilience among multiracial individuals. Although four participants identified at least one family member who had a positive impact on their racial identity development, a few also described how racial differences among family members have created some tensions and emotional pain within their families. This tension may be influenced in part by the larger monoracial ideology and culture of the U.S. (Brunsma & Porow, 2017). Furthermore, a lack of acceptance of a person's multiracial heritage by family members may be a stronger indicator of psychological distress and depression than a lack of acceptance by others (Salahuddin & O'Brien, 2011). Therefore, helping to build family support may be crucial for the well-being of multiracial individuals in addition to creating a network of supports outside the family.

Limitations

The present study explored lived experiences of five multiracial women. Although generalizability of the study findings was not the focus of this qualitative study, it is important to consider the following potential limitations when interpreting the study outcomes. First, the participants identified with several different combinations of racial groups, but the sample size was small. Having a larger sample size might have increased the credibility of the data and helped to identify additional themes that are reflective of shared experiences of multiracial individuals. Second, all participants in this study self-identified as women. While the participants shared diverse perspectives, it is worth noting that participants of other gender identities may have different perspectives and experiences. Future researchers who wish to replicate this study

may want to be intentional in recruiting a more diverse participant sample. Having a larger and more diverse participant sample may also help to discern which cultural factors tend to be salient and intersect with race for multiracial individuals. Third, potential influence of researcher bias on the interpretation of the data needs to be acknowledged. Although the participants were invited to review and offer their input on the summary of the themes with the research team, recognizing that the researchers' experiences as monoracial individuals and assumptions about multiracial people might have influenced the study findings is important in qualitative studies.

Counseling Implications

The following recommendations are drawn from the present study findings for counselors who work to advocate and create a therapeutic space for multiracial clients. These include (a) creating a therapeutic space that is free of microaggressions, (b) promoting a client's resilience and strengths, and (c) building a support system across multiple contexts. Participants in this study provided several different examples of microaggression. Experiences of racial microaggressions have been documented in previous studies (Harris, 2017a, b; Nadal et al., 2011, 2013). One of the explanations for difficulty in eradicating microaggressions is that people often engage in them unintentionally due to a lack of awareness of implicit biases they hold (Sue, 2010). Although these acts may not be malicious, their effects on multiracial individuals can be detrimental and long lasting. Counselors are highly encouraged to increase awareness of their implicit biases in order to avoid engaging in microaggressions in counseling. For example, counselors may perceive multiracial clients as monoracial persons or ask them about their racial backgrounds only when they appear to be a person of color. Such interactions could inadvertently impose a monoracial framework onto clients and invalidate their experiences as multiracial individuals. As Sue et al., (2007) suggest, microaggressions can also exist within the structure of mental health services such as a counseling agency that is staffed by only White counselors. For some multiracial clients, having only monoracial counselors at an agency or a school might discourage them from seeking help if the counselors are unaware of insidious and harmful nature of microaggressions.

Some participants spoke about challenges of affirming their multiracial identity due to their ascribed racial identification by society. For example, a few participants discussed incidents where monoracial individuals perceived them as not being good enough to claim their racial background (e.g., not being Black enough). Although these are painful experiences, the participants in this study also reflected on how they have become more understanding, patient, and open-minded with others through such experiences. A few participants also asserted their multiracial identity by critically examining the monoracial ideology and their ascribed racial identification by society. Hence, it is critical that counselors are equipped to help clients examine and challenge socially constructed racial identifications and society's emphasis on the monoracial framework. Moreover, counseling can be empowering to clients and facilitate greater self-understanding and growth when counselors work to foster clients' resilience and personal strengths. Developing an optimal multiracial identity

may contribute to an individual's capacity to reject society's pressure to identify as monoracial and embrace their self-defined racial identity (Binning et al., 2009). In this process, counseling can be an outlet for clients to reflect on positive impacts of their multiracial experiences on their personal development and interpersonal relationships. As the findings from a study by Cheng & Lee (2009) suggest, reflecting on positive experiences of being multiracial may strengthen individuals' integration of their racial identities.

Maintaining supportive relationships was essential to affirming their multiracial identities for the participants in this study. Having communities that reflect and affirm multiracial identities has been associated with lower levels of identity conflicts and psychological distress among multiracial individuals (Yoo et al., 2016). In addition, connecting with role models who are multiracial themselves may help individuals navigate the complexity of racial identity development (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). The present study findings suggest that it may be most beneficial to clients when a network of support consists of individuals with different roles and from different contexts, including but are not limited to family members, personal mentors, peers, and people from a client's cultural communities (e.g., a community member who is willing to help a client connect with their cultural roots). Furthermore, connecting with other multiracial individuals may be particularly helpful in validating their unique race-based experiences. Therefore, it would be important that counselors collaborate with clients on expanding their support systems by identifying individuals in multiple contexts that can nurture their multiracial identities as well as buffer them against harmful effects of discrimination.

Conflict of Interest We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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