

Body Paradox: Multiracial Students, Minority Status, and Higher Education

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This qualitative pilot study explored the extent to which three half-White graduate students identified as racial minorities, and how that understanding influenced their decisions to seek out and apply for minority-based resources at higher education institutions. To some degree, all participants recognized themselves as racial minorities, but did not actively seek out or apply for minority-based resources due to tensions between being “in the majority” and being “in the minority,” which seemed intricately connected to how participants personally defined racial minority. The study adds qualitatively to emerging research on non-monoracial identities and appropriateness for affirmative action and minority-based resources in higher education, and provides questions and implications for higher education administrators to consider.

BACKGROUND

Biracial, multiracial, and non-monoracial identities have become part of national conversations over the last several decades. For the first time in 2000, the USA census allowed people to choose more than one race, and 2.4 percent of the population did so (United States Department of Commerce). In order to reflect these demographic changes present in our lives and the lives around us, Cheerios, the cereal company, unveiled a new commercial featuring an interracial family: a White mother, a Black father, and their mixed-race child. The commercial received incredible national attention when praise for the commercial was matched almost equally by hate speech, prejudiced attitudes, and racist comments—so much so that Cheerios disabled users from commenting on the video on YouTube (Chandorkar, 2013). This mixed reaction from the public illuminated just how sensitive and controversial biracial and multiracial identities have been and still are in the USA. But this conversation is likely not one that will go away. Studies predict that the number of self-identifying non-monoracial people will more than double by 2060 (United States Department of Commerce, 2012). And, for their 150th anniversary publication, National Geographic recently featured an article titled “The Changing Face of America” (2013), which not only highlights the complexity of how biracial and multiracial people self-identify, but also challenges our assumptions of others’ racial backgrounds based on their appearances.

It is clear from recent public reactions and popular media that tensions around this topic will not be resolved soon, if at all. So where does that leave those who are racially mixed? Academics and practitioners have been exploring the unique experiences of biracials and multiracials in a variety of ways, from a variety of disciplines, and with a variety of purposes. What has been asked and said about biracial and multiracial identities? And, what *has not* been asked or said?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to narrow the topic of my study and inform my research method and questions, I conducted a modest search for literature on biracial and multiracial individuals. Search engines employed were Google Scholar, Academic Search Premier/EbscoHost, and JSTOR, using keywords “biracial” and “multiracial” only. Journal articles and books are included in this literature review. A total of 25 sources were collected, which were teased down to 21 after removing duplicate articles and sources that fell outside the scope of this review. These sources cover the fields of higher education, counseling, psychology, sociology, rhetoric, and ethnic studies, and research participants included college students, adolescents/youth, adults, and families.

Methods Employed by Authors

The literature reviewed employed a variety of research methods in their studies. In addition to “general” qualitative (Allen et. al, 2013; Holton, 2011; Khanna, 2011; Khanna & Johnson, 2010; Kilson, 2001; Renn, 2000; Rollins & Hunter, 2013) and quantitative (Good et. al. 2013; Herman, 2004; Jaret & Reitzes, 1999; Masuoka 2008; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002) methods, authors also engaged in narrative inquiry (Nuttgens, 2010), phenomenology (Miville et. al, 2005), rhetorical or theoretical approaches (McCall, 2005; Dawkins, 2012; Hall, 2001; Poston, 1990), mixed methods (Suyemoto, 2004), and reviewing existing literature (Shih & Sanchez, 2005).

Relevant Themes Discussed

Experiences of Prejudice and Discrimination

Based on the literature reviewed, biracials and multiracials experienced prejudice and discrimination from monoracial individuals, both White and non-White. Experiences of racism were explicitly described by several groups of participants (see, for example, Kilson, 2001; Miville et. al, 2005; and Rollins & Hunter, 2013). Biracials and multiracials were often asked “What are you?” by White individuals, which felt uncomfortable and “othering.” Some biracials, who were not assumed at first to be Black, experienced a negative change in attitude and/or interaction when White individuals discovered that the person they were talking with was half Black (Kilson, 2001).

But experiences of rejection and discrimination were not only felt from White monoracial groups—Black and other communities of color also treated biracials and multiracials negatively at times. Michelle, one of Khanna’s (2011) participants, shared that, because of her self-described White features, she was sometimes told by other Black women that she was not “actually” Black despite being half Black (pp. 80-81). Khanna notes that, among Black and African-American communities (and particularly between Black and African-American women), there was a “skin color stratification”—known as “colorism”—that resulted from a resentment toward those women of color whose skin and features were “lighter” and, thus, were thought of as being more privileged (p. 83). College students in Renn’s (2000) study also shared similar sentiments when they attempted to affiliate with racially-based student groups on campus: “[E]ven when these students do choose to affiliate with monoracial student cultures, they are often rejected if they express their multiraciality” (p. 402). Overall, most biracials and multiracials attributed their experiences (or lack of experiences) with racism, colorism, and discrimination to their physical appearance e.g., skin color, hair, and facial features.

Psychological/Mental Health and Wellness

Despite ongoing stereotypes that biracial and multiracial adolescents and adults more often experience (or are often more prone to experience) developmental difficulties, the authors included in this literature review presented alternate findings—or, at the very least, mixed results. Holton’s (2011) study of biracial and multiracial families (e.g., children and their parents), for example, found rather positive results regarding the self-esteem of her participants, who averaged in the intermediate to high ranges on the Culture-Free Self-Esteem Inventory (CSI) test she administered.

Shih and Sanchez (2005) also focused on the mental health and wellness of biracials and multiracials, and they found striking differences between clinical and nonclinical sampling populations:

“[S]tudies that sampled clinical populations tended to find negative outcomes such as higher depression, problem behaviors, lower school performance, and lower self-esteem... [and] studies that sampled from nonclinical populations found more positive outcomes, such as periods of happiness and high self-esteem.” (p. 577)

So, it seemed biracials and multiracials did not necessarily experience psychological and mental health and wellness issues disproportionately as compared to their monoracial counterparts, and that perhaps part of this stereotype stemmed from studies using particular population samples.

Racial Identity Development and Developmental Models

Biracial and multiracial identity development models, though providing a needed alternative to monoracial identity development models, were insufficient in fully capturing the developmental processes of all biracial and multiracial individuals who participated in these studies. What came across most significantly was the importance for some authors to distinguish between different “mixes” or expressions of biraciality and multiraciality (Allen et. al, 2013; Hubbard, 2010; Jiménez, 2003; & Suyemoto, 2004). Because monoracial identity development models had been criticized for not accurately reflecting or speaking to the experiences of all members of a particular monoracial group, it was no wonder that biracial and multiracial identity development models also face similar criticisms. For example, Allen et. al (2013) argued that Polynesian/White biracials experience unique sets of circumstances that necessitated studies focused solely on these populations. Suyemoto (2004) would agree, and even wrote that “biracial status and meaning are constructed so differently within each racial group in the United States,” which is why she studied Japanese European Americans’ experiences with multiracial identity development.

Despite differing self-constructions, biracial and multiracials did have some things in common—namely, a variety of racial identities/labels they used to describe themselves, which could change over time and/or depend on context. Some biracials and multiracials labeled themselves as such, while others chose monoracial identities, a different term to describe their non-monoracial heritage (e.g., “mixed”), or, as Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002) and other researchers discovered, resisted racial labels all together. The different ways biracials and multiracials identified themselves appeared across a variety of racial mixes and in both women and men.

Biracials and multiracials also tended to identify differently over time. In her study of biracial children and their parents, Holton (2011) outlined how each child currently identified and, then, what labels they used previously. Identities included black-white, mixed, zebra, none, and monoracial labels (p. 24). These patterns were mirrored in Kilson’s (2001) study of biracial adults. These and other authors have found how racial identity labels can sometimes even vary depending on context. Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002, citing Rockquemore, 1999) used several identity constructs as a framework for understanding their participants’ experiences in these different contexts, including one construct that specifically captured the fluidity of racial identity just mentioned. Labeled the “protean identity,” biracials and multiracials in this category “[call] forth whatever racial identity seems situationally appropriate in any particular interactional setting and cultural community” (p. 338). This allowed mixed-race individuals more flexibility and comfort in their choice of racial identity.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The literature on biracial and multiracial identities discussed the nature of feeling oppressed and/or marginalized by various groups in various contexts (Herman, 2004; Khanna, 2011; Kilson, 2001; Miville, Constantine, Baysden, & So-Lloyd, 2005; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). Several studies focused on those feelings within higher education contexts (Good et. al, 2013; Renn, 2000), but only Good et. al (2013) focused on biracials and multiracials in relation to race-based affirmative action and/or minority

resources. Their study suggested that the amount of White ancestry a student had impacted perceptions of those individuals' minority status and appropriateness for accessing affirmative action and minority resources. Specifically, Good et. al found that "individuals with both Black and White ancestry are less likely to be categorized as minority and are thus viewed as less appropriate for resources reserved for minorities (e.g., race-based affirmative action) than are monoracial Black individuals," and that those perceptions were also "based partially on expectations of past discrimination" (p. 283). As the authors contended, those findings could have broader implications for who is considered a racial minority and who is eligible to access minority resources and/or receive race-based affirmative action, yet one critical perspective was missing—that of half-White biracial and multiracial students themselves.

Given the literature reviewed, and specifically Good et. al's recent study, there remained a deeper curiosity about the experiences half-White biracials and multiracials have had with minority resources and race-based affirmative action, and how they see (or do not see) themselves as racial minorities. In this study specifically, I explored the extent to which these students considered themselves a racial minority, if any, and how those perceptions of themselves as racial minorities influenced their actions in specifically seeking out and applying for minority-based or diversity-based resources.

METHODS

Because my research questions aimed to explore the lived experiences of participants with very specific demographic information, and because this was a pilot study, I used convenience sampling to acquire research participants. I created a call for participants and sent it electronically to individuals who I either knew to be biracial/multiracial college students or who were professors or administrators on a college campus and, thus, could distribute it to qualifying college students on my behalf. Five individuals meeting my study's participant criteria contacted me electronically. Two of them contacted me approximately one month before the study was to be completed and, given time constraints, were not interviewed or otherwise included in this study.

Each respondent participated in one-to-one interviews with me lasting approximately 60 minutes each. One interview was conducted in-person in the participant's home. The other two interviews were conducted virtually: one using Skype, the other over the phone. I employed an "interview guide approach" (Patton, 2002), which ensures researchers cover specific topics in advance and "makes data collection somewhat systematic for each respondent" and also allows interviews to "remain fairly conversational and situational" (p. 349). To support an interview guide approach, I developed a semi-structured interview guide that listed prompting questions for participants and also allowed for questions to arise based on participants' responses.

Once I finished conducting and transcribing the interviews, I coded the transcripts using a blend of four different coding strategies. First, I developed categories and codes based on my research questions and how participants responded. For example, I created "minority" as a category since I prompted questions about this in interviews. Within that category, I created "minority as not White" as a code since at least two participants discussed "minority" in this way. Then, I used a blend of three strategies Saldaña (2013) calls "In Vivo," "Themeing," and "Simultaneous" coding. Because this was an exploratory study—and because participants each had varying and sometimes opposing phrases and worldviews—these strategies for coding seemed appropriate. Both the In Vivo and Themeing strategies allowed me to "prioritize and honor" participants' voices by using codes that reflected what they said verbatim (p. 91) as well as develop "extended phrases or sentences" to use for coding (p. 175). As I began coding transcripts, I saw a need for using Simultaneous coding because certain passages spoke to "multiple meanings" (p. 80). For example, in the findings section of this paper and under the first theme listed, the block quote from Victoria illuminated not only her understanding of what constitutes a minority experience, but also her perception of herself in relation to that understanding, thus necessitating two codes for the same passage.

After coding each transcript using these strategies, and then saturating codes by reviewing the first two transcripts coded, I had created 11 categories and 98 codes and sub-codes. In order to make sense of

these codes, I looked at code frequencies in three different ways: code co-occurrence, code frequency among all participants, and code frequency for each participant separately. This strategy helped me make sense of what each participant focused on as well as how each participant's experiences and responses connected together.

FINDINGS

A Word about Participant Demographics

Both race and ethnicity were salient for Victoria, a 29-year-old doctoral student in Nebraska. Her mother is racially White and ethnically Polish, and her father is an African immigrant who is ethnically Ethiopian. It was not enough to simply say she was multiracial because her ethnicities, especially her Polish ethnicity, were important to and meaningful for her. Thus, she identified as multiethnic and multiracial.

Emily, a 29-year-old doctoral student in Texas, has a White mother and Iranian immigrant father. Emily did not use racial labels because she did not recognize Middle Eastern as a race because of her White skin:

“I’m kind of reluctant to set up my own ethnic identity as another race that needs to be acknowledged and recognized, partly because as a White-skinned person, my privilege, in that sense, kind of outweighs any kind of racial identity I might latch on to.”

At the same time, Emily also did not identify as White: “I’m both in the majority as somebody with White skin but I’m in the minority as well because my experience of Whiteness has been different from the dominant narrative.” Ultimately, Emily used the label multiethnic to describe herself.

Jasmine is a 35-year-old doctoral student in California, and has a White and Black father. She recognized that others place racial/ethnic labels upon her based on assumptions of her background and appearance. These labels included, for example, Black, Black and White, biracial, mulatto, and Puerto Rican. However, she resisted using a specific label to identify her racial and ethnic background, particularly the label biracial, because it “is built off of historical connotations from the dominant discourse in the way that they choose to label the specific group of people with one Black parent and one White parent.” In her perspective, labels like biracial, and even Black and White monoracial labels, were created and were/are reinforced by people in power—“the White majority”—in order to serve the majority’s needs. This has motivated Jasmine’s research interests to investigate other possibilities for labels that come from those who hold non-monoracial identities, specifically Black-White non-monoracial identities.

Theme 1: The ways in which participants described “minority” influenced the extent to which they identified as a racial/ethnic minority.

Participants each emphasized different elements of what they perceived a racial minority experience was, and described the extent to which they were or were not a minority based on how their life experiences compared to those emphasized elements. Victoria primarily described a racial minority as “a person defined by certain struggles of location trying to get here” and in terms of “sheer number.” Because she did not, in her perspective, experience that type of struggle of location, she did not feel comfortable identifying herself as a racial minority:

“They—‘they’ being the institution—might want this [racial minority] so that they can draw attention to their struggle, and I really didn’t have a struggle like they did, right? My dad did, but I didn’t. You know what I mean?”

So, while she recognized that being multiracial and multiethnic was technically a racial minority status, she did not feel she could claim a minority status because she did not struggle in the same way as “real” minorities.

While all participants described minorities as not White, Emily emphasized this specifically. So, because of her White skin, she didn’t “identity as a minority.” Emily also recognized that she did not experience struggles like her father, who was an Iranian immigrant to the USA, and explained how this lack of struggle, particularly regarding emigrating from Iran to escape the revolution and learning a new language (English), prevented her from identifying as a minority. But Emily also didn’t “identity as a majority,” making it “difficult to choose either/or.” She provided more detail about the reasons for not identifying as either:

“[T]he long answer would be as a White-skinned person, I’m in the majority. And, as a White-skinned person whose ethnic identity and whose ability to connect to the culture of her grandparents has been stolen from her by U.S. political special interests, in terms of oil, in terms of war, in terms of political power in the geographic area of the Middle East—I honestly feel that that would be a minority experience.”

Thus, while Emily recognized that she was primarily in the majority because of her White skin, she also understood that her multiethnic heritage has impacted her experiences in ways similar to minorities.

Unlike Victoria or Emily, Jasmine firmly identified as a minority. Her understanding of herself as a woman of color and her experiences of discrimination based on stereotypes associated with being a Black woman strongly aligned with her understanding of a minority as opposite of the “White majority.” She described the experience of being the “spokesperson” for Black women in classroom settings, particularly in her Ph.D. program where there are only a few Black women, and how that created “even more of the minority feeling of, wow, now I’m representing the whole world of people who they’re perceiving fall into this category [of Black woman].” These and other experiences of stereotypes and discrimination as a woman of color have led Jasmine to perceive herself as a racial minority.

Theme 2: The ways in which participants identified their racial identity on forms depended on the racial/ethnic identity options provided as well as the form’s intended audience or purpose.

All participants described how the process of identifying their racial/ethnic identities on forms depended on what racial/ethnic categories were available. Victoria explained how she was “morally opposed” to the “Other” box, but remarked that, “if I do have to mark it because there’s really no other option,” then she will mark that box and “usually write in something.” In contrast to Victoria, Jasmine and Emily usually mark the Other box when the option is available. Jasmine shared that she will mark the Other box, or that she will check more than one monoracial box. If she is only allowed to check one box, and Other is not an option, then she will choose Black: “[I]f I’m only allowed to check one, I [will] check Black because sometimes they don’t have the Other on there.” And Emily usually marks the Other box and writes in “Iranian-American” or “Middle Eastern;” if there is not an Other option, then she will mark White. However, as she stated, “if there is no Other box, and I can’t opt out... There have been times when I feel that they want me to say I’m White, so I’m going to say I’m White, because I want to get the thing that I’m applying for.” Emily explained later the different circumstances under which she would identify as White or Other. For example, she described applying to a Women’s Studies Ph.D. program where there was an ability to explain her choice of Other; under those sorts of circumstances, where she can be “given the opportunity to explain [her] position,” Emily will usually mark Other. But under a different set of circumstances, even with the ability to mark Other, she will choose White instead:

“[I]f I’m at the DMV, and I get to choose from four things, and White is one of them and Other is one of them, I’m going to choose White. I don’t think that it’s strategic on my part—and this is definitely a privilege—but it’s not strategic on my part to identify myself as Middle Eastern on these federal documents that are going to cause people to

look at me differently, whether I'm getting stopped by the police in my car or whether I'm getting on a plane to travel somewhere.”

Emily offered this example to support her earlier statement that it is “always more strategic to mark myself as White,” particularly over identifying as Middle Eastern or Iranian-American. This ability to mark White and pass as White was what informed Emily’s understanding of her ability to “passively pass” as White.

Jasmine and Victoria also spoke to identifying differently depending on the form’s intended purpose or audience. Jasmine remarked that “of course” she was going to identify as a woman color in order to give her “extra points to get into the [Ph.D.] program.” Victoria mentioned explicitly that she will identify as “the opposite” of the group the form is going to—that if the form is going to a predominantly Black group, for example, she will “always say the opposite” because she feels like “they're not going to see me as that.” Furthermore, Victoria identified as White when applying to her Ph.D. program because she wanted to know she was not “given this opportunity based on diversity” and, instead, was admitted based on her merit:

“I don’t know where I heard it, but... if you put that you are a person of color and you're applying to a predominantly White institution, they might give a second look at your application. And I remember thinking, oh, well, that might have some benefit where I might get some federal funding that I might have not otherwise received, and I don’t know why but I just, in that moment [of applying to the Ph.D. program], said I'm going to put White. I mean, I put down White because I want them to want me more than... I want them to see me not as different and say, ‘Okay, do we want her based on her research interests?’”

Given the flexibility of racial identity choices available to participants, the choices they made or make regarding how to identify on forms varied according to the limits of the form and their perceptions of how these identity choices would be received (and who would receive them).

Theme 3: Because participants did not feel they struggled as minorities, or because they did not feel a sense of belonging to minority groups, or both, they did not seek out and/or apply for minority-based institutional resources.

All three participants did not apply for or seek out minority-based institutional resources, financially or otherwise, because their experiences of struggles did not match what they perceived were “real” minority struggles or because they did not feel a sense of belonging to a particularly minority group, or both. Jasmine shared that she did not feel like she fit in with her father’s side of the family growing up because she was not “Black enough.” She also talked about two experiences she had with Black student groups at her undergraduate and doctoral institutions, and how she “just didn’t connect” with the Black Student Union as an undergraduate and felt “segregated” from the Black graduate student association as a doctoral student. To provide more detail, in her doctoral program, Jasmine was invited to attend a meeting of the Black graduate student association, something she did not actively seek out. Jasmine was removed from the association’s e-mailing list after attending her first (and only) meeting, which she perceived to be an indication that they—and particularly the Black female president—did not want a biracial person a part of the group: “so it felt just more, I don’t know, I guess the word that comes to me is ‘segregated’ from the community.” So, when the association e-mailed her an invitation to join the group a year or so later, she did not respond to the invitation or attend meetings. For Jasmine, it appeared that not feeling a sense of belonging to the Black community or to Black student organizations during her childhood and her undergraduate education impacted her decision to not actively seek out minority-based institutional resources at either of her graduate institutions.

Victoria felt like she had not struggled enough or would not be the type of minority that scholarship funders were looking for. She referenced several times throughout the interview how she would feel like a

“cheater” and “didn’t want to be a disappointment to somebody looking for something else” if she applied for, and then received, minority-based financial resources:

“I hear myself contradicting myself. And I can’t explain that, and I don’t know why I’m contradicting myself because it makes no sense. I know I’m a multiracial person. I am a minority. But, yet, my answer is always that I’d be cheating those real minorities, and I don’t know why that is. I don’t know. I really don’t. I hear it, and I don’t know.”

Victoria explained this in several ways, though. She offered examples of how “real” minorities, like Mexican immigrants and her own father (an African immigrant), struggled with learning a new language and culture in ways she did not. Further, Victoria felt her not having “Black hair” and not always being a person of color reinforces her not being a “real” minority.

Similarly, Emily also spoke about not feeling like it would be ethical for her to apply for and receive financial resources designated for minorities and people of color:

“There are times where I could use my Iranian identity and share that to get something that I otherwise would not get as a White-skinned person or as somebody who is read as White... But my personal ethnics would prevent that completely.”

As previously mentioned, Emily did not see herself as a minority because she did not struggle in ways other Middle Eastern people have. She “will never understand what it is like to be a Muslim woman in the United States” or an “immigrant” or “to learn English as a second language.” Furthermore, Emily did not feel like she belonged to Muslim communities because she would not be able to “contribute... in terms of making linkages to others through culture.” Thus, similar to Victoria, she did not feel she met criteria for minority-based scholarship, as well, at least racially/ethnically.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

All participants described how they identified themselves differently depending on what form they filled out, and where that form went. This is consistent with many other studies and articles (e.g., Funderburg, 2013; Kilson, 2001; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002) that document the ways biracial and multiracial people identified differently depending on the context. With universities, particularly predominantly White institutions, focusing much attention on the recruitment and retention of students of color, the way students identify on forms themselves matters when it comes to providing student support and assessing students’ persistence through undergraduate or graduate programs. This study’s findings prompted questions about the ability of universities to provide relevant student support to non-monoracial students given the incredible flexibility and range of choices they made (or could make) when identifying their racial/ethnic identities. For example, Jasmine received invitations to participate in minority-based resources on three occasions—two from the same association—because she marked Black (or Black and White, she could not remember) on forms to her Ph.D. program. In Veronica’s case, she identifies as multiracial and multiethnic on forms, but, in applying to her Ph.D. program, identified as White despite declaring that she will never be seen as a White woman, “ever.” She was not reached out to in the same way.

Students of color are not only provided campus resources like identity-based centers and student associations to join, or connections with faculty and administrators of color, but they are often also provided access to financial scholarships and awards based on their race/ethnicity, as Veronica thought about as she was deciding how to identify her race/ethnicity for her Ph.D. application to her current institution. All three participants decided not to apply for or seek out these financial resources, with Veronica and Emily specifically citing how they were not the appropriate type of minority to receive them. How are scholarship and award forms communicating qualifications to potential applicants? And, given the impact of the language and structure provided on forms surrounding racial/ethnic identity

categories, how are institutions structuring forms to acquire information about racial/ethnic demographics, and what is the impact on half-White applicants who are thinking of applying?

Even if forms and resources are made easily available to half-White students, belonging appeared to be a contributing factor to not only participants' understanding of themselves as minorities, but also their decisions to neither seek out nor apply for minority-based resources. Participants experienced discrimination, stereotypes, and other marginalizing situations that led them to feel like (or reinforced that) they did not belong to one group or another. These experiences are consistent with those found from participants in other studies, particularly the studies from Khanna (2011) and Renn (2000), who found that non-monoracials can feel isolated or excluded from a racial/ethnic group based on the extent to which they interpret the words and actions of others as prejudiced and discriminatory. This was particularly seen in Jasmine's experiences with a Black graduate student association, further reinforcing, as other studies have, that this particular finding of Renn's study is not unique. How inclusive are these student resources of non-monoracial (and specifically half-White) students? What sorts of larger conversations are taking place at institutions regarding the inclusion of biracial, multiracial, and non-monoracial students? Given the experiences of my study's participants, what can existing student groups do to better support and include mixed racial and ethnic identities? These sorts of questions and implications are worth further exploration and attention.

LIMITATIONS

Researcher's Positionality

I identify as a non-monoracial person, and specifically someone who is half-White. The impact of my racial identity on my motivations to study this topic, however obvious or noble, are likely a concern for other academics and consumers of academic knowledge. This is a reasonable concern, and one I hope to address here.

I saw my positionality impact this study while interviewing participants, all of whom I knew in some fashion prior to them agreeing to participate in my study. There were moments where I could relate or empathize with what they shared, which sometimes resulted in my inferring meaning that, while I believe they were accurate inferences, perhaps was not there. Thus, I did not ask follow-up or clarifying questions where other researchers might have. As I coded, this became an issue at times because I wanted to assign codes to passages based on my inferences and on what I knew of participants prior to interviews. I could not ethically assign codes based on what I inferred from the passages; the participants' words were needed. In other words, I could not assign codes to text that was not there.

Did this negatively impact the study? I do not think so. While the amount of depth and texture to my findings could have been increased and enhanced had I asked more follow-up or clarifying questions, I firmly believe the findings to be representative of the responses to my research questions. Additional feedback, whether through participant confirmation/clarification or from an outside reviewer, would be helpful in addressing my and others' concerns regarding the impact of my positionality on the study.

Generalizability

Another limitation to the study, as for any pilot study, is the "generalizability" of the findings and implications. While qualitative research—this study included—does not aim to generalize, it does typically hope to capture a well-rounded representation of the topic being explored. In this sense, further exploration is needed to build upon the findings of this study. I only acquired female doctoral students as participants for my pilot study. Further studies, by me or others, would do well to include the voices and perspectives of male, undergraduate, and/or masters-level students, or even accounting for different institution types, in order to capture a more representative picture and deepen our understanding of racial minority identity, half-White students, and minority-based higher education resources.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative pilot study explored the extent to which three half-White graduate students identified as minorities, if any, and how that understanding influenced their decisions to seek out and apply for minority-based resources at institutions of higher education. I found that all participants recognized themselves as minorities, but did not actively seek out or apply for minority-based resources because they either did not feel, to one extent or another, like “real” minorities, or they did not feel like they belong to one or more racial minority groups, or both. This tension of being a minority and not being a minority seemed intricately connected to how they describe and understand what is and is not a minority—non-White people who have experienced specific struggles and discrimination in navigating their racial/ethnic identities in the USA. While limitations existed regarding my positionality to the research and the extent to which findings are representative or generalizable, my findings still prompt questions regarding definitions of minority, motivations for not accessing minority resources, and how to best provide student support given flexible and sometimes changing identity choices of participants.

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