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Uncertainty and evolution: Contributions to identity development for female college students who identify as multiracial/biracial-bisexual/pansexual

by

Alissa Renee King

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2008

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Dedicated to the memory of:

Mr. Russ Miller

My 9th grade Earth science teacher

Mr. Miller told me that someday I would get my Ph.D. As a young freshman entering his high school classroom, I was terrified thanks to the stories I had heard from upperclassmen about how hard his class was. Science was not an interesting subject to me, nor was it one I was very confident about so I was intimidated by Mr. Miller. I wanted to earn his respect, however, so I came in every morning and talked with him about school and life, and I stayed after school to get help on my assignments. Before the course was over, I won the fossil display competition, successfully got my spaceship to the farthest star possible, Proxima Centauri, and even charted stars with my homemade astrolabe on cold winter nights, lying on the roof of my house out in the country. I left his class with an appreciation for science and a confidence that I could successfully complete any task I set my mind to.

I continued to visit him long after I graduated high school. Every time I saw him, he would ask when I was getting my Ph.D. In 2006, when I heard that he had cancer, I went back home to see him one last time. I, like many others, wanted to thank him for all he had done. I will never forget the smile that he gave me when I told him I had just completed my second year in the doctoral program. Shortly thereafter, he passed away. Mr. Miller had always believed in me and always encouraged me to set goals and achieve them. He had the confidence in me long before I did. I will never forget him and I will forever be grateful to him for believing in my success.
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ABSTRACT

In this study, I explored how female college students who identify as multiracial/biracial-bisexual/pansexual made meaning of their racial and sexual identities, how they described their identity development process, and the ways in which college contributed to their identity formation. Utilizing a proposed model of biracial-bisexual identity development and the ecology of student development model as foundations for this study, I sought to better understand the experiences both before and during college, and the impacts of those two environments on the processes of racial and sexual identity formation for the female college students in this study. Findings, based on in-depth interviews, revealed that the females in this study were impacted in different ways during the pre-college experience and during college, with influences coming from family, peers, and the school setting before college. The themes during the college experience at the time of the interviews were related to Trying On new labels, Negotiating Self within a variety of spaces, and Finding Fit in places where the participants felt safe and supported. Findings also revealed that context had the biggest impact on identity development and that racial and sexual identity were primarily separate processes rather than intersecting experiences. I offered contributions to biracial-bisexual identity models and I shared recommendations for current practice and future research to better serve females in both secondary and post-secondary institutions who identify as multiracial/biracial-bisexual/pansexual.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“*I have often said that my identity is a conversation, not a category.*”

*Israel* (2004, p.174)

Although race has been recognized for some time as a social construction, the fact that it has been treated as a real biologically based-phenomenon throughout the history of the United States cannot be denied. Conversations about multiracial identity exploded onto the academic scene shortly after the 2000 Census when respondents were able to “report as many race categories as were necessary to identify themselves” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The results of the Census showed that of the total population of 281.4 million people, 6.4 million (2.4%) chose more than one race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Although the use of the term “multiracial identity” and others like it (biracial, mixed-race, mixed-heritage, etc.) is a recent phenomenon, racial mixing is not and is deeply embedded in our history of colonial expansion (Daniel, 2004).

Since the publication of the Census statistics, numerous studies and articles have surfaced regarding the complexity of understanding multiracial identity in fields such as counseling psychology, sociology, and higher education (Cortés, 2000; DaCosta, 2003; Kenney, 2002; Miville, Constantine, Baysden, & So-Lloyd, 2005; Renn, 2000, 2003; Root, 2003; Spencer, 2003, 2004; Suyemoto, 2004). Recent scholars have been concerned about the lack of attention paid to the complexities of multiracial identity and the notion that monoracial, or single-race, identity theories are not adequate frameworks to describe the paths that multiracial individuals may take to identity formation (Root, 1997, 2003).
Frequently cited are the classic models of multiracial identity development such as Phinney (1993), Poston (1990), Kich (1992), and Kerwin and Ponterotto (1995). All of these theories have been hailed as useful foundational material for a better understanding of racial identity formation, but have also been described as being too linear in their design to adequately fit the experiences of multiracial individuals who may not follow a specific, orderly progression to identity development (Renn, 2003; Root, 1996).

Recognizing the importance of flexibility in identity for multiracial persons, Root (1990, 1996, 1998) designed a model of biracial identity development that has held its ground as a foundation for newer models of multiracial identity (Cortés, 2000; Renn, 2000; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). In Root’s (2003) model, five resolutions exist guided by the assumptions that individuals acknowledge “both sides of their heritage” (Root, 1990, p. 199): (1) Acceptance of the identity that society assigns, (2) Identification with a single racial group, (3) Choose a mixed identity, (4) Identification as a new racial group, and (5) Choose a white identity. This model will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

The growing literature base on multiracial identity has caught the attention of scholars interested in other marginal identities. Sex, like race, is a social construction. Individuals who identify as bisexual, for example, also appear to have paths of identity formation that are not distinct. Bisexuality, like multiracial identity, is fluid such that sexual identity development models meant for monosexual identities (single-sex – i.e., heterosexual, lesbian, and gay) are not adequate for representing the experiences of individuals who identify as bisexual (Collins, 2002).

Historically, sexual identity was viewed as a dichotomous construct with individuals identifying as either homosexual or heterosexual (Bradford, 2004; Fox, 2004). The work of
Alfred Kinsey and associates (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1952) encouraged an alternative view of sexuality that was open to more variation (Fox, 2004). Since then, many other scholars have written, theorized about, and offered fresh perspectives on bisexuality (Firestein, 1996; Fox, 1996; 2004; Klein, 1993; Rust, 2000, 2002).

Problem

While recent literature on identity development acknowledges the multiple identities that individuals hold (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Collins, 2000, 2004; Colker, 1996; Dube & Savin-Williams, 1999; Estrada & Rutter, 2006; Grov, Bimbi, Nanín, & Parsins, 2006; Jones & McEwen, 2000; Reynolds & Pope, 1991), few studies have combined multiracial identities and bisexual identities to investigate the experiences of individuals who identify as multiracial-bisexual. Scholars who have written on merging multiracial identity with bisexuality (Collins, 2000, 2004; Israel, 2004; Kich, 1996; Stanley, 2004; Thompson, 2000) have either written from their own personal experience (Israel; Thompson) or theorized about what the experiences of multiracial-bisexuals would be by extrapolating from previous studies of multiracial identity development in discussing bisexual identity development (Collins, 2000, 2004). In this study, I am exclusively interested in the experiences of female college students who identify as both multiracial and bisexual. Studies exist that look at the identity development and experiences of multiracial college students (Cortés, 2000; Renn 2000, 2003, 2004) and bisexual college students (Evans, 2007; Knous, 2005; O’Brien, 1998; Renn, 2007; Rhoads, 1994; Sullivan, 1998; Wall & Evans, 2000), but I did not come across any research that explicitly examines the experiences of female college students who identify as both multiracial and bisexual.
Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to better understand how female college students who identify as both multiracial and bisexual make meaning of their identities as well as what events in the college setting aided or hindered their identity development.

Research Questions

This study attempted to begin filling the gap in the research on the identity development process for doubly marginalized females specific to dimensions of race and sexual identity. In addition, my hope was that the findings of this study would provide important contributions to the growing body of literature on college student development. As such, the research questions below served to guide this study:

1. How do female college students at four-year institutions who identify as both multiracial and bisexual make meaning of their identities with regard to race and sexual identity?
2. How do females who identify as both multiracial and bisexual describe their identity development process?
3. In what ways do female college students who identify as both multiracial and bisexual see the college experience as contributing to their identity development?

Rationale

My attraction to the topic of identity development for individuals who identify as multiracial-bisexual stemmed from both professional and personal experiences. I have had a long-standing interest in multiracial identity and have spent time in my educational pursuits
and professional career learning about how individuals who identify as multiracial manage, balance, and navigate their identities in a world that operates within rigid categories. Trained as a sociologist, I have spent time observing college settings and environments that could act as inclusive or exclusive spaces to individuals who do not have a clear-cut racial identity.

My interest in sexual identity, particularly bisexuality, has grown over the years as I have worked closely with students who identify as bisexual in a college setting and have compared the stories of those marginalized by their “ambiguous” sexual identity with the stories of individuals who identify as multiracial. People who exist with liquid identities in each of those spheres have shared experiences of having to defend and legitimize their identities, as well as make their identities visible. In addition to working with students, I have participated in several research projects specific to multiracial identity and sexual identity. I have advised a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning student organization and I served on the MAVIN (a Yiddish term that means “one who understands”) board of directors, a non-profit organization that focuses on empowering mixed heritage people and families.

Personally, I hold an insider/outsider position to the topic of multiracial-bisexual identity. I identify as multiracial and bisexual/queer. My insider status as a person who identifies as both multiracial and bisexual/queer proved beneficial as I tried to locate others who also held these identities. While there is growing awareness of individuals with fluid identities as researchers continue to compile academic knowledge about multiracial and bisexual identities, and as the media offers a wider range of images along these lines, both identities may still provide barriers for and act to stigmatize the individuals who possess them. My insider status and capacity to understand and relate to the possible challenges,
concerns, and hesitations that participants with these identities may have, potentially aided in my ability to access a population that is otherwise invisible.

In addition to my insider position, I held an outside status because, even though I identify as multiracial and bisexual/queer, those identities may have different meanings for me than they do for the participants. I am also not an undergraduate college student, which set me apart from the participants in this study.

There were several factors that supported the need for this kind of study. First, as mentioned, very few studies exist that specifically look at the identity development of college students who embrace a multiracial-bisexual identity. Second, as the number of individuals who identify as multiracial or bisexual continues to grow, and as the student population becomes increasingly diverse (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Pascarella & Terrenzini, 1998; Pike & Kuh, 2007), findings from this study should inform student affairs professionals about how female students with multiple marginal identities come to understand themselves and how the college environment contributed to that understanding. Lastly, the previous studies that are examined and critiqued in this paper called for more rigorous investigation into the intersectionality of multiracial and bisexual identities. Not only did this study result in new perspectives for thinking about identity development, but it also provided a platform for future research on the topic of multiracial-bisexual identity development.

Significance of the Study

Charles Cooley (1902) developed the idea of the looking-glass self, a notion that holds that we form our self-concept based on the cues we get from others about who we are. Essentially, our identity is “what we make of ourselves within a society that is making
something of us” (Josselson, 1996, p. 28). The transition from high school to college is a time of adjustment for many students (Enochs & Roland, 2005; Friedlander, Redi, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007). College is also a time of great exploration and development as individuals between the ages of approximately 18 and 25 negotiate and resolve questions about who they are in an environment that offers many opportunities for “change before the stability generated by more fixed social, interpersonal, and occupational roles and responsibilities [takes hold]” (Chickering, 1969, p. 2).

According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), seven vectors of development exist that contribute to the formation of identity for college students. Among them is the task of establishing identity.

Identity includes comfort with body and appearance, comfort with gender and sexual orientation, a sense of one’s social and cultural heritage, a clear self-concept and comfort with one’s roles and lifestyle, a secure sense of self in light of feedback from significant others, self-acceptance and self-esteem, and personal stability and integration. (Evans, et al., 1998, pp. 39-40)

Chickering and Reisser (1993) acknowledged the powerful impact of the college environment on student development and proposed seven essential factors: (1) institutional objectives, (2) size of institution, (3) relationships between students and faculty, (4) curriculum, (5) teaching, (6) friendships and student communities, and (7) student development programs and services (Chickering & Reisser; Evans et al., 1998).

Specific to the identities on which this study is focused, D’Augelli (1991, 1992) suggested that college is an important time for developing a stable sexual identity, and is often one of the first opportunities that individuals who identify as bisexual have for exploring their sexuality (Eddy & Forney, 2000; Sanlo, 1998). Similarly, college offers a
variety of contexts in which students who identify as multiracial can learn about and develop their identities through interaction with others (Renn, 2000, 2004).

As noted earlier, while studies exist that look at multiracial and bisexual college students separately, no in-depth study exists that combines these two complex identities. The information from this study provides a more accurate and consistent view of how multiracial-bisexual college students form identity while also considering the impact of the college environment on identity formation. No two human experiences are alike. This study acknowledges the presence of identities that are often stigmatized and invisible, the challenges that females who identify as multiracial-bisexual face, and the barriers they must overcome while making meaning of their experiences and finding fit within themselves and their college environment.

Theoretical Framework

I found only one study that proposed a development model specific to multiracial and bisexual identity (Collins 1996, 2000). This model was conceptualized by intersecting multiracial identity and bisexuality identity models but has not been empirically tested. The biracial-bisexual identity model is a four-phase structure which consists of: Phase I – Questioning/Confusion; Phase II – Refusal/Suppression; Phase III – Infusion/Exploration; and Phase IV – Resolution/Acceptance. Each of these phases will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 2. External to these phases are seven basic tenets that can be applied, according to Collins (2000), to the identity development process of biracial-bisexual individuals:

- Self-definition is the key concept and it is subjective.
- There are many influences on the individual such as family, peers, and the environment.
• Biracial/bisexual identity is a personal construction.

• As an individual goes through the life course, external forces place the individual into different roles based on sex, gender, class, sexuality, and race.

• The model assumes that changes will occur in the self-definitions and that those definitions will relate heavily to a positive identity.

• Social change is inevitable, not static. Individuals will be faced with fluctuating information that will impact them.

• Cultural exposure is important to biracial/bisexual identity.

In addition, Renn (2004) offered a contextual framework mirrored off Bronfrenbrenner’s (1979) human ecology model that viewed the college environment in a systematic way. Each system, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem impacted the individual in a variety of ways. Briefly, the microsystem is the basic environment for students that houses academic settings, the mesosystem consists of peer culture and various other Microsystems, the exosystem encompasses settings that may or may not contain the individual, and the macrosystem is the sociocultural environment that impacts the student in broader ways. This model is explained in further detail in Chapter 2 and Chapter 6.

I utilized Renn’s (2004) ecology of college student development as a way to situate this study into the college context, and I employed Collins’s (2000) proposed model of biracial-bisexual identity development as a framework for this study to see how it withstood empirical evidence.

Tentative Assumptions

I entered into this research project with several assumptions about the experiences of female college students who identify as both multiracial and bisexual. My first assumption
was that individuals who identify as multiracial would come to college with an already semi-
to-fully formed racial identity because physical appearance and features are external and likely interpreted by outsiders. Female students who identify as multiracial would have been labeled, repeatedly questioned by others, and positioned within society based on their family-of-origin prior to the college experience. They have had longer to adjust and settle into some form of multiracial identity before being bombarded with new college experiences that challenged their preexisting identities. Individuals who identify as both multiracial and bisexual would likely rely more on external cues to understand their racial identity insofar as how they were accepted into or rejected from various spaces on campus.

My second assumption was that multiracial identity formation and understanding would be more complete than bisexual identity which would then serve as a framework for individuals who identify as multiracial and bisexual to draw upon as they came to understand their bisexual identity. The coming out process for individuals who identify as bisexual is more complex and time consuming than that of individuals who identify as lesbian or gay (Rust, 1993, 2000; Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994). Due to their preexisting understanding of the processes of marginal identity development, individuals who identify as multiracial and bisexual would recognize the experiences of negotiating space.

A third assumption was that identity formation would be an ongoing struggle and/or process as individuals who identify as multiracial and bisexual situated and resituated themselves within physical or psychological spaces on the college campus. I assumed that as individuals who identify as multiracial and bisexual managed relationships and others’ understandings of them, they also questioned themselves and their own understanding of identity.
A fourth assumption was that a small pocket of full identity integration existed that was similar to Maslow’s (1943) concept of self-actualization which is described as, “the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming” (p. 383); that is, with regard to one’s multiracial and bisexual integrated identity.

A final assumption was that the college environment provided a rich ground for encouraging processes of identity development among all college students but specifically individuals who identify as multiracial and bisexual. I assumed that the college environment offered many opportunities for individuals to be accepted into or excluded from groups as well as to interact with diverse others.

Definitions

This section provides definitions for terms that were used throughout this study.

**Biracial** – This term defines individuals whose biological parents are from two or more different racial backgrounds. This is a term that is more prevalent in the United States than anywhere else in the Western world. With such a broad definition, this term may be used to describe a wide array of racial mixtures (Christian, 2000).

**Bisexual** – A difficult term to define because, “there are many different situations which may lead [someone] to [identify as bisexual]” (George, 1996, p. 102). The term is used here to describe individuals who do not exclusively identify as lesbian/gay or heterosexual. To provide a better understanding of the complexity of this term, Klein (1993) explained that, ‘Bi’ means two, or dual…bisexuality…is generally the most complex state of sexual relatedness with people. It exists to various degrees in everyone. Its dimensions are multiple. Complexity in human behavior is fed by the exercise of choice. The more choices one’s environment and inner state allow, the more complex the exercise; in the everyday life of the bisexual, for example, more intricate responses and signals are called for. (p. 13)
**Bisexual Identity** – Since models specific to bisexual identity are scarce, it is difficult to locate a precise definition of this term. Early beliefs were that bisexuality was not its own identity but rather a transitional phase to acknowledging a gay or lesbian identity (Fox, 1995). For the purposes of this study, bisexual identity models the language that Evans, et al. (1998) used to frame racial identity. Bisexual identity is understood here as a collective identity based on an individual’s perception that he or she does not identify as heterosexual or homosexual. It is also important that when talking about bisexual identity, sexual identity be considered “an aspect of an individual’s identity, not defined by their current partner (i.e., the gender of one’s lover does not necessarily define one’s own orientation” (Hutchins, 1996, p. 241).

**Coming out** – This is a shortened term for “coming out of the closet” and refers to “disclosure of one’s same sex-gender sexual identity to others” (Hunter, 2007, p. 41).

**Essentialism** – A theoretical viewpoint where it is believed that parts of one’s identity are stable and there is a root, or “natural” cause to one’s behavior (Broido, 2000; Garnets & Kimmel, 1993).

**Ethnicity** – Refers to “a social subset whose members are thought by themselves and others to share a common culture that sets them apart from other groups in the society. These individuals also share a common ancestry or origin (real or imagined)” (Daniel, 2002, p. xv). Helms (1994) said that ethnicity includes “customs, traditions, and values rather than physical appearance” (p. 293).

**Gender** - A socially constructed concept that is independent of one’s biological sex (male/female). A person is referred to as a boy or a girl, a man or a woman because of what
society assigns to an individual based on his/her biological sex or his/her gender identity (Dennny & Green, 1996).

**Gender Performance** – Described by Elliot (2001) as performances that authenticate “cultural representations of masculinity or femininity” (p. 117).

**Identity** – Defined by Hogg and Abrams (1988) as “people’s concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others (whether members of the same group – *ingroup* – or of different groups – *outgroup*), [and] largely determined by the groups to which they feel they belong” (p. 2).

**Intersectionality** – A term that means “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” (McCall, 2005, p. 1772). This term is also used to reference a framework where intersecting dimensions cannot be understood singularly but rather “can only be understood in relation to other dimensions” (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 410).

**LGB** – An acronym that means lesbian, gay, or bisexual, that will be used when referring to the collective category of non-heterosexual sexual identities.

**Multiracial** – A term that, for the purposes of this study, also includes biracial individuals and describes a racial identity that integrates two or more racial heritages (Root, 1992).

**Monoracial** – Used in this study to refer to a single race (i.e., African American, white, Asian, Latino/a, etc.), separate from biracial or multiracial.

**Monosexual** – A term used for heterosexuals and homosexuals (Hutchins & Ka’ahumanu, 1991) which refers to individuals who have a preference for or attraction to only same- or other-sex individuals (gay, lesbian, or heterosexual). This term, however, can be viewed as problematic because it serves to “separate otherwise potentially allied communities”
(Hemmings & Blumenfeld, 1996, p. 312). Opponents of this term also suggest that it implies a “hierarchy of power…(with monosexuals as oppressors; bisexuels as oppressed)” (Hemmings & Blumenfeld, 1996, p. 315). Furthermore, Hemmings (2002) explained that “to term all nonbisexuals monosexuals erases the differences between lesbians/gay men and heterosexuals” (p. 29). The use of the term monosexual in this study is not meant in a political way, but as a way to distinguish between bisexuality (the focus of this study) and individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, or heterosexual.

**Multiple-marginal or doubly marginalized** – These terms are used throughout this study to refer to individuals who have more than one marginal identity, such as the participants in this study who identity as multiracial/biracial and bisexual/pansexual.

**Multiracial/biracial-bisexual/pansexual** – A term that is used throughout this study to refer to individuals who identify as both multiracial/biracial and bisexual/pansexual. It is all inclusive of the labels the participants used to describe themselves.

**Non-heterosexual** – This term is used to refer to any individual who does not identify as heterosexual.

**Pansexual** – A term defined by the Merriam-Webster online dictionary (n.d.) to mean “exhibiting or implying many forms of sexual expression” (http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pansexual). This term may also be viewed as a more inclusive term than “bisexual” because it can include males and females as well as individuals who identify as transgendered or who have a fluid gender identity.

**Performance** – This term refers to somewhat of a theatrical performance that an individual puts on when he or she wishes to solicit a desired response (usually a positive one) from an individual or audience. More specifically, Goffman (1959) described a performance as, “All
the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (p. 15).


**Queer** – This term may be used to encompass individuals who not only identify as gay or lesbian but who reject dominant systems of sex, gender, and sexual identification (Ault, 1999). It should also be noted that the term *queer* has a strong historical presence and was previously used as “pejorative slang [but which now] affirms difference and has become a label of affirmation in youth and politically active circles” (Matteson, 1996, p. 207).

**Race** – This term refers to a socially constructed concept “based on real or perceived differences in such things as physical appearance or place of ancestral origin” (Wijeyesinghe, 2001, p. 130).

**Racially Ambiguous** – A term used to describe an individual who “[lacks] phenotypic features indicating a clear racial category to which the person belongs” (Buchanan & Acevedo, 2004, p. 121).

**Racial Identity** – Defined by Helms (1993) as, “A sense of group or collective identity based on one’s perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group” (p. 71).

**Self** – Mead (1934) described the *self* as an entity that emerges within social interaction and is its own object.
**Sex-gender** - A term used throughout this study in keeping with the fluidity of sex-gender when it is unclear whether someone could be referring to the sex or the gender/gender identity of an individual. The focus of this study is on females (sex); however, the literature often refers to gender (woman), so this term is used to cover all bases.

**Sexual Identity** – This term is understood as “the enduring sense of oneself as a sexual being which fits a culturally created category and accounts for one’s sexual fantasies, attractions, and behaviors” (Savin-Williams, 1995, p. 166). Hunter (2007) distinguished sexual orientation from sexual identity by suggesting that sexual orientation “has to do with sexual dispositions, sexual fantasies, sexual desires, and sexual behaviors, [while] sexual identity has to do with what one identifies oneself to be” (p. 27). Throughout this study, sexual identity is the primary term used.

**Sexual Orientation** – This term is widely used to refer to individuals who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Perez, DeBord, and Bieschke (2000), however, suggested that the term sexual orientation “emphasiz[es] the importance of sexuality and ignore[s] the relevance of other aspects of people who identify themselves as LGB” (p. 6).

**Social Categorization** – A term introduced by Tajfel and Turner (1986) that means “cognitive tools that segment, classify, and order the social environment, and thus enable the individual to undertake many forms of social action. [These tools not only] systematize the social world; they also provide a system of orientation for self-reference” (pp. 15-16).

**Social Construction** – An approach that “questions…social roles and identities from a different philosophical perspective, believing that social and historical contexts shape and circumscribe the possible ways in which people can understand themselves and others” (Broido, 2000, p. 16).
Social Identity – This term refers to “those aspects of an individual’s self-image that derive from the social categories to which he [sic] perceives himself as belonging” (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 16).

Transgender – An umbrella term to describe “different sexual minorities who identify with the opposite physical sex and gender than the body in which they were born” (Hutchins & Ka’ahumanu, 1991, p. 371). The APA Task Force on Gender Identity, Gender Variance, and Intersex Conditions (2006) also said, “Broadly speaking, anyone whose identity, appearance, or behavior falls outside of conventional gender norms can be described as transgender” (p. 1).

Summary

In this study, I worked to fill a void in the growing bodies of literature on multiracial identity development and bisexual identity development, and inform student affairs professionals and educators by exploring the experiences of female college students who identify as multiracial-bisexual. Utilizing the ecology model of student development (Renn, 2004) and Collins’s (2000) proposed model of biracial-bisexual identity development to guide this research, I shed light on how female college students who identify as multiracial-bisexual make meaning of their identities and how the college environment impacted their identity formation. Furthermore, with this study, I hope I have raised dynamic questions for future research about the ways that individuals with complex doubly marginalized identities understand themselves.

In Chapter 2, I provide a broad backdrop of literature on racial and multiracial identity development, and sexual identity and bisexual identity development to situate and provide evidence for the lack of attention paid to the experiences and identity development of
female college students who identify as multiracial-bisexual. I start out with a brief overview of racial identity development and then move into the classic works on multiracial identity, offering critiques of the literature. Next, I follow the same pattern to inform readers about the historical context of research on sexual identity development and more specifically, bisexual identity development. Lastly, I review the few studies that have looked specifically at multiracial-bisexual identity to further frame this current study.

In Chapter 3, I offer a detailed explanation of the general methodological framework that I used for this study. Included is a discussion of the philosophical approach and theoretical perspective that guided this study, the basic principles of the methodology that I used, data collection and analysis procedures, and a discussion of the trustworthiness and delimitations of this study.

In Chapter 4, I provide a detailed profile of the college and universities that the participants attended, a composite profile of the 6 participants, and individual profiles of each participant to set the stage for the remaining three chapters.

Chapter 5 is the analysis of the data where I outline the three influences in the pre-college context: family, peers/friends, and school, and the three themes in the college context: negotiating self, trying on, and finding fit. I also share participant illustrations of the permeating theme of visibility/invisibility of multiracial/biracial-bisexual/pansexual identities, regardless of context.

In Chapter 6, I return to the literature from Chapter 2 to review identity, human ecology and student development, and several potentially useful frameworks used to guide this study which included: identity development of women, multiple identity models, multiracial identity models, sexual identity models, and biracial-bisexual models. I focus on
Collins’s (2000) biracial-bisexual model and share whether the findings of this study provide support for her proposed model, and I also offer contributions to existing information about multiracial/biracial-bisexual/pansexual identity development during the college years based on findings of this study.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I revisit the research questions and assumptions, I discuss the limitations of the study and offer a reflection on the research process, and I provide recommendations, implications for future research, and advice from the participants to other females who identify as multiracial/biracial-bisexual/pansexual.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I review the literature pertaining to multiracial identity and bisexuality. I share the findings of other studies to better frame the present study and continue the dialogue by locating gaps that exist in past and current literature. This review, therefore, establishes the need for this study (Creswell, 2003). It should be noted that the focus of this study was on race and not ethnicity, sex and not gender; however, when reviewing the literature, the original language used by the authors is honored.

Since multiracial identity and bisexual identity are two complex topics, I use this chapter as a way to provide a context to situate these identities. To provide context, I first explain the concept of identity and discuss how the college experience influences identity development in college students. Next, I talk about how identity development in females is unique from identity development in males since this study focused on college-age females. Then, I summarize information about racial identity and racial formation followed by a comprehensive review of the classic studies and literature on multiracial identity development. Finally, shifting away from racial and multiracial identity, I discuss the broader topic of sexual identity followed by a comprehensive discussion of bisexual identity formation.

Before narrowing the literature findings down to the study’s focus on multiracial and bisexual identities, I first share a brief overview of multiple identities which sets the stage for an analysis of the few pieces of literature that are specific to the topic of multiracial-bisexual identity development.
As an introduction to this chapter, I begin with a very brief discussion of two primary theoretical frameworks that have been embraced with regard to race, sexual identity, and gender: the essentialist viewpoint and the constructionist viewpoint. I offer an expanded discussion of the philosophical underpinnings of this study in Chapter 3.

Essentialist vs. Constructionist Perspectives

Essentialists believe that parts of one’s identity are fixed and stable and that there is a root cause to one’s behavior (Broido, 2000; Garnets & Kimmel, 1993). With regard to race, essentialists posit a unique essence for races that could be transmitted from culture to culture (Zack, 1997). Those taking on this viewpoint concerning the realm of sexual identity believe that there are specific causes for one’s sexual identity or same-gender desires. Broido shared that, historically, it was believed that, “Homosexuality and same-sex desire are the same thing and that homosexuality has existed, with fundamentally the same meaning, across many different cultures and historical eras, regardless of whether people have defined themselves as homosexual” (p. 16).

A social constructionist viewpoint, however, holds that context, both social and historical, shapes a person’s identity. Omi and Winant (1998) helped to reframe race as a social construction, citing that issues of power and privilege had little to do with biological roots and more to do with the social importance placed on them. As Seidman (2003) pointed out, “Constructionism states that sexuality is a learned way of thinking and acting” (p. 27). The social constructionist viewpoint also asserts that society attaches meanings to various categories such as race, sexual identity, and gender (Broido, 2000).
Identity

Erik Erikson (1950, 1968) has been recognized for providing a foundational understanding of the concept of identity. In brief, Erikson (1950) said that identity involved autonomy and the ability to choose how individuals see themselves. He best described adolescence as “the age of the final establishment of a dominant positive ego identity. It is then that a future within reach becomes part of the conscious life plan” (p. 265). Erikson (1950, 1968) pointed out that family background had a significant impact on identity development. In 1968, Erikson offered a greater understanding of adolescence and identity by suggesting that technological shifts in society granted young people even more time between school life and their launch into the workforce. This lengthened period of adolescence was wrought with a preoccupation in how the individual is viewed in the eyes of others compared to how the individuals viewed him- or herself.

The peak of Erikson’s (1968) career came when he coined the term “identity crisis” in the 1970s. This crisis was described as a stormy time when young people sorted through their various roles, resisting when they felt necessary, and ultimately seeking a clear path through “the social jungle of human existence…[a place where] there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity” (p. 130).

Building on Erikson’s (1950, 1968) groundwork, Marcia (1966, 1980) reformulated the polarized adolescent crisis of ego identity and identity diffusion by offering four paths to identity status based on the variables of crisis and commitment. Crisis, according to Marcia (1966), was explained as “the individual[’s] [requirement] to synthesize childhood identification in such a way that he [sic] can both establish a reciprocal relationship with his society and maintain a feeling of continuity within himself” (p. 551). In other words,
understanding the four modes of dealing with identity issues: identity-achievement (has experienced crisis and has resolved it, and has made a commitment to choices which leaves the individual free to act), identity-diffusion (a crisis may or may not have been experienced and no commitment has been made), moratorium (individual is in crisis and is trying to make a commitment), or foreclosed (no crisis has been experienced but commitment has been made), leads to a stronger sense of the amount of crisis or level of commitment a young person experiences. Moreover, Marcia (1980) described identity as a self-constructed process and a self-structure stating, “The better developed this structure is, the more aware individuals appear to be of their own uniqueness” (p. 159).

Tatum (1997) suggested that not only is identity development complex, but it is also an integration of one’s past, present, and future. The conclusion to that integration is to develop a “cohesive, unified sense of self” (p. 20). Tatum believed that identity development was a lifelong process and that “the salience of particular aspects of our identity varies at different moments in our lives” (p. 20). Aspects of our identity often go unnoticed to us because they go unnoticed by the larger public. According to Tatum,

The parts of our identity that do [italics in original] capture our attention are those that other people notice, and that reflect back to us. The aspect of identity that is the target of others’ attention, and subsequently of our own, often is that which sets us apart as exceptional or ‘other’ in their eyes. (p. 21)

In this passage, Tatum (1997) echoed the sentiments of Cooley (1902) and his notion of the looking-glass self. Part of one’s identity is formed in how he/she believes others view him/her. Cooley (1902) first stated that our self-idea is comprised of three principles: (1) how we imagine our appearance to be to others; (2) our imagination of others’ judgment of us;
and (3) a feeling tied to that imagination such as pride. In other words, the judgments of others have a great impact on identity.

As noted, adolescence is a time of great questioning during which the college experience can influence the development of young individuals (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Sanford (1967) offered a description of development as an “organization of increasing complexity” (p. 47), and viewed college as a time where various aspects of one’s self, or subsystems of who they are, become more specialized and take on different functions. These developmental shifts may pertain to psychological growth, personality growth, and overall maturation of the individual.

The field of social psychology took an interest in the concept of identity (Côté & Levine, 2002) around the same time that Erikson (1950, 1968) did his work on the identity crisis. At this time, identity inquiries branched off in different sociological and psychological directions. Some of the differences between these approaches include the “locus of identity” (Côté & Levine), or a determination of whether identity stems from internal factors or external factors. Psychologists take an inward approach and suggest that identity development is largely due to the individual and thus is property of that person. Psychologists posit that the best way to learn about someone’s identity is to ask him or her how “they think about certain matters…[thus]…identity elements are accessed through the conscious mental processes that people can communicate to researchers” (Côté & Levine, p. 48).

On the contrary, sociologists take a more group-oriented approach to understanding identity and suggest that it is something that is realized through interactions with others, such that identity development is both an internal and an external process. Côté & Levine (2002)
suggested that “a popular current sociological view is that identity is a product of the person negotiating passages through life and reflecting on these actions” (p. 49). If sociologists view identity as something that develops only in the context of society and society is at the helm of the process while individuals navigate the challenges, and psychologists believe that individual is navigating but that society has defined channels through which individuals must pass, then the fundamental question between the two disciplines is: who does the navigation? The answer to that question should be considered within the context of the various influences on identity development.

The Role of College in Developing Identity

The college environment is a hot bed of activity. Tensions and external environmental demands urge students to respond by adjusting, and ultimately experiencing some type of growth (Sanford, 1967). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) suggested that college offers “change on a broad front” (p. 572) and that change in any particular area of a student’s overall identity and growth reinforces other areas in a “mutually reinforcing network” (p. 572). The identity development that occurs in the college setting is, “the process of becoming more complex in one’s personal and social identities” (McEwen, 2003b, p. 205).

Since the focus of this study is on identity, it is important to mention the classic work of Chickering and Reisser (1993) who offered a vector-approach to understanding how the college experience impacted students. The fifth of seven vectors is establishing identity. The vectors surrounding establishing identity are: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, developing purpose, and developing integrity. All of these vectors are part of
the developmental web for young adults and are called vectors because of their direction and magnitude.

The vector of interest for this study deals with establishing identity. Chickering and Reisser (1993), however, stated, “At one level of generalization, all the developmental vectors could be classified under the general heading ‘identity formation’” (p. 173). To develop a strong and stable identity, one must achieve competence, manage emotions, become independent, and so on. This identity development task is likened, by Chickering (1969), to learning to drive, an experience wrought with intensity, concentration, learning, and failure. Students, during college, often experience struggle. Chickering and Reisser (1993) noted that the two important tasks to master on the path to establishing a sense of self are acceptance of body and appearance, and clarification of sexual identification, which is useful given that this study focused on multiracial identity and bisexual identity development of female college students.

What helps foster the identity development of college students are these three conditions: (1) freedom from pressure and anxiety, (2) various experiences and participation in different roles, and (3) achievements that are considered meaningful (Sanford, 1966). Chickering and Reisser (1993) suggested that environmental influences strongly contribute to aspects of the previous three conditions as well as identity development overall. Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito’s (1998) listing of these environmental influences included: institutional objectives, institutional size, student-faculty relationships, curriculum, teaching, friendships and student communities, student development programs and services, and integration of work and learning. Baxter Magolda (2003) pointed out that part of the learning process that occurs in college and that also serves to boost identity development is the
practice of exploring what one does not understand. She saw learning, related to both self and environment, as ongoing and a key to undergraduate education.

In the previous two sections I have discussed identity development as a whole and then the contributions to identity development that the college experience provides for students. Since this study focused on the identity development of college females, it is important that I highlight the ways in which identity development of females is different from identity development of males.

Identity Development of Females - Josselson

The college experience is a time when society grants young people the opportunity to experiment and play with their identity (Josselson, 1996), but the process of identity development for male and female college students is not the same. Female students face several unique challenges adjusting to the college environment (Enochs & Roland, 2006). Kenny and Rice (1995) suggested that females rely on different resources than do males, to help them adjust to the college environment. Females, for example, rely more heavily on relationships and other socializing experiences to ease in their transition to college. The experience of females on campus also differs from males. Sands (1998) suggested that undergraduate female students experience more hostile, intimidating, and demeaning situations than do their male counterparts and that self-confidence and assertiveness may help some females in their college adjustment and in overcoming some of the sex-gender barriers that the college environment can provide.

Not only are sex-gender differences in college students of interest, but so is the process of identity development. Factors that used to define a female’s identity were her appearance and her marriage partner, but the post-World War II era has offered many new
opportunities for females beyond marriage. No longer is her place and identity defined by her society (Josselson, 1987). In broad terms, female identity is constructed in a more relational and caring manner than is male identity. According to Josselson (1996), “Identity in women is more rooted in ‘being’ than in ‘doing’” (p. 32). In other words, females form their identity by discussing who they are in relation to others, by sharing feelings and intimacy, and by expressing themselves through interaction. They do not form their identity in isolation.

Using Erikson’s (1968) and Marcia’s (1966, 1980) work as a foundation, specifically the four types of identity-statuses developed by Marcia and discussed earlier in this chapter, Josselson (1987) developed her own interpretation of Marcia’s work in an effort to better understand the roots of identity development specific to college females. These four pathways are (Josselson, 1996):

**Guardians.**
These women made identity commitments using pre-developed plans of others rather than relying on their own choices to do so. These individuals avoided identity crisis as well as a period of exploration.

**Pathmakers.**
These females spent time exploring, following Erikson’s (1968) progression of exploration to commitment, and then made identity commitments on their own terms. They did what made sense to them. These women were the ones who followed Erikson’s (1968) path.
Searchers.

These women, by the end of college, still actively struggled, hoping to make choices but not fully committing to any one thing. They were still trying to figure it out and thus, experienced confusion, uncertainty, and crisis.

Drifters.

These women had not made any commitments and did not appear to be concerned about making any in the near future. They either felt lost or were impulsive.

Josselson (1996) stated, “Never again in life is identity as malleable as it is in adolescence” (p. 40). In other words, the college experience, for females, offers a myriad of opportunities to figure out who they are. By the end of this influential time, females have a better sense of where they are headed and how they will greet adulthood. Even then, however, their identity development continues to be an ever-changing, ongoing process.

Now that I have discussed the broad topic of identity, the influence of college on identity, and identity development for females, I narrow the focus of this literature review to my specific topic of identity development for female college students who identify as multiracial and bisexual. In the next sections, I first discuss racial identity development before delving into the multiracial/biracial identity models.

Racial Identity Development

This study focused on race, not on ethnicity. Therefore, it is most important to understand, broadly, how racial identity forms to better illustrate how a complex mixture of racial identities is experienced by any one individual who possesses them.

For the purposes of this study, race and ethnicity are not used interchangeably because each means something separate and specific. Phinney (1996) argued that race and
ethnicity could be collapsed into a single term; she assumed that by using the term ethnicity as an overarching, all-encompassing term, that aspects of race and culture would automatically fit under that label. Helms and Talleyrand (1997) suggested that in American culture, the term *ethnicity* really does not have a clear meaning other than immigrant status or culture, but that the term *race* is a term that is much more clearly understood.

According to Helms (1994), race is often understood as a nominal construct. In other words, each person is separated into a racial category using observable characteristics such as skin tone, eye shape, or hair texture, or by using self-designation (Census data) or geographic location. While *culture* and *ethnicity* are frequently used in place of race, neither really has anything to do with race or how it is understood in today’s society. Important components of race are its sociopolitical implications that are separate from culture or ethnicity.

Race was once viewed as being solely “natural” or biological (Holmstrom, 1997; Spickard, 1992; Winant, 1994). While parts of race, phenotypic aspects such as skin tone, hair texture, etc., are biological (Omi & Winant, 2004), the ways individuals are outwardly categorized into racial groups is better understood as a socially constructed method used to stratify individuals into various dominant and subordinate categories based on appearance or place of origin (Wijeyesinghe, 2001).

Race can play a major part in how people view one another and whether or not individuals hold dominant or subordinate identities within groups. Dominant groups are in privileged positions and therefore, wield power and control over subordinate others. The relationship between the dominant group and the subordinate group is clear; those who are not dominant must now carry the label of defective and are often viewed as less than or
substandard (Tatum, 1997). These sorts of pervasive messages can have an ever-lasting impact on how people view themselves with regard to identity.

In addition to status, one could argue that a level of knowledge about other groups is carried along with whether one is a member of a dominant or subordinate group. Dominant group members very rarely understand or are aware of the experience of those existing in a subordinate group. For example, individuals who identify as white are often unaware of the challenges of those who identify as non-white. However, those who identify as non-white are often very well-versed on the privileged positions that dominant or white-identifying group members hold (Tatum, 1997).

With regard to the earlier discussion of race, ethnicity, or culture, Americans understand how to group people into majority and minority statuses based on physical features or skin tone, and those who exist in racially non-dominant positions understand what it means to survive. Within those positions, they are skilled at recognizing the unequal treatment and distribution of resources they experience at the hands of racially dominant group members.

I acknowledge that race is complicated, full of changing social meanings, unstable, and continually metamorphosing (Omi, 1986), so in this study, rather than talking specifically about race, I wish to talk more about the processes that the participants use to understand their racial identity separate from and/or in the presence of their sexual identity. One cannot fully understand racial identity without situating it within the context of racial formation. Omi and Winant (2004) defined racial formation as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (p. 117).
From the racial formation perspective, both culture and social structure play a part in shaping notions of race. Race is also used as an informative tool to help individuals better understand who someone is, given that it is one of the first things people may notice about each other upon meeting. Racial social structures are used to interpret meanings attached to a person’s race, and part of that social structure is the presence of racial stereotypes. In other words, the concept of race means nothing without being situated in a historical, political, and social context (Omi & Winant, 2004). What Omi and Winant make very clear is that no matter how race is understood, it is deeply rooted in a history that informs the present-day understanding of race.

Within the context of how race is understood on a broader scale considering the cultural and social contributions of racial formation, I use the next section to introduce the complexities of multiracial identity and the various models used to explore it.

**Multiracial Identity Development**

When I talk to the Introduction to Sociology students that I teach about multiracial identity, they are unaware that it has only been within the past several years that a section about mixed-race identity has been introduced into their *Racial and Ethnic Inequality* (Schaefer, 2008) textbook chapter. They often do not realize that a multiracial “movement” (Daniel, 2004; Nakashima, 1996; Spencer, 2006) has erupted within the past 18 years or that there is any relationship between the emerging multiracial discourse and the ability to check more than one racial category on the U.S. Census (Spencer, 2006). What the students in the Introduction to Sociology course can acknowledge, and what many have been aware of for years, is that the United States is becoming an increasingly diverse place. An understanding
of the current state of multiracial affairs, however, requires some understanding of the history that has brought us to this point.

**Brief Historical Overview**

The historical backdrop to the current understanding of multiracial identity is extensive. For the purposes of this paper, I will only highlight, briefly, the background to hypodescent or the “one-drop” rule, the overturning of anti-miscegenation laws which sparked the biracial baby boom, and the changes to the U.S. Census that allowed for a more appropriate racial identification for multiracial people.

*Hypodescent – “One-drop”*

The tradition of hypodescent has a long history rooted in colonial conquests by Europeans of non-Europeans. When these unions first began, multiracial births were so rare as to go unnoticed. As time progressed and more unions, primarily between Europeans and African American or Indigenous peoples, took place, the growing numbers of multiracial individuals began to prompt attention (Fernández, 1996).

Wars, rebellions, conquests, and exploitation continued and so did racial mixing as the United States fell into a period of Civil War and the Jim Crow era. By this time, the U.S. was using terms such as “mulattto,” “quadroon,” or “octoroon” to describe individuals of mixed race, and legal ramifications and discrimination were often tied to their experiences. In addition, individuals who were multiracial were invisible courtesy of the rule of hypodescent that categorized them as non-white regardless of their mixed racial background (Fernández, 1996).

According to Ifekwunighe (1999), “Across the United States, by 1915, the one drop rule had become firmly entrenched in the collective American conscience” (p. 5).
Hypodescent, though not explicitly stated, served two primary purposes. The first was to increase the number of slaves (Nash, 1982), and the second was to maintain the purity of physical characteristics, cultural heritage, and white privilege (Daniel, 1996). “Legal repercussions of this structural mechanism for the maintenance of the White/Black power imbalance manifest[ed] themselves in virtually every social institution” (Ifekwunige, 1999, p. 5), which included marriage, the right to own property, housing, voting rights, inheritance, healthcare, and education. During the prevalence of hypodescent, individuals were not allowed to identify themselves; rather, to maintain power and privilege, dominant groups determined their racial make-up.

Two Turning Points: The End to Anti-Miscegenation Laws and the 2000 U.S. Census

Prior to 1967, it was against the law in many states to marry interracially or even to have intercourse if you were not of the same race. It was the ground-breaking *Loving v. State of Virginia* case in that year that overturned remaining anti-miscegenation laws that prevented interracial couples from forming legal unions (Fernández, 1996; Spickard, 2004). Shortly after this U.S. Supreme Court decision, the United States experienced a biracial baby boom (Root, 1996).

The 1965 Civil Rights Act sparked the beginning of government requirements to report racial data. At this time, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission requested that employers record the numbers of “Negro, Oriental, American Indian, and Spanish American people they employed” (Fernández, 1996, p. 25). Directive 15 became and remains the authority on racial classifications and in the 1970s, the Federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) decided to reflect the ways that the nation “[socially constructed race]” (Root, 1996, p. xvii), by establishing a policy regarding racial data. Since Directive 15
required that government agencies be able to collect and record racial data in a way that reflected one of the five categories only, individuals who identified as multiracial could only reflect their heritage monoracially (Fernández).

The five-race framework was quickly outgrown and in the “1990 decennial census, the ‘other’ racial category grew more than any other category” (Root, 1996, p. xvii). In 1993, conversations with the Federal Office of Management and Budget began to rethink the five racial categories and to determine if a multiracial category was needed. The decision to include a new category was turned down but the OMB decided to allow respondents on the 2000 Census, for the first time in U.S. history, to designate more than one category to more accurately reflect their racial identity (Brown, 2001; Renn, 2004). This shift marked the beginning of the surge in scholarly works on multiracial identity and also a digression from the monoracial identity models that were frequently used to understand the experience of multiracial individuals (Renn, 2004).

Emergence of Biracial and Multiracial Identity Models

The mixed-race “movement” emerged in the early 1990s as a way to bring awareness and voice to the experiences of individuals who identify as multiracial. The movement is best described as, “[The] emergence of community organizations, campus groups, magazines and newsletters, academic research and writing, university courses, creative expression, and political activism…with the purpose of voicing [the experiences, opinions, issues, and interests of mixed-race people]” (Nakashima, 1996, p.80).

*Deficit Models: The “Marginal Man” or “Tragic Mulatto”*

The first sets of theories, or deficit models, maintained the perception that biracial or multiracial individuals were marginal (Poston, 2001). In this regard, the “tragic mulatto” and
“marginal man” (Park, 1928; Stonequist, 1937) concepts were alive and well with the belief that multiracial individuals struggled with adjustment, and that the resolution to their identity was a place of discomfort, conflict, and confusion with their mixed-race heritage (Kerwin & Ponterotto, 1995; Spickard, 2001; Wijeyesinghe, 2001). The myth of the marginal man was accompanied by two other myths that included a belief that biracial individuals must identify with only one group and that biracial individuals wish not to discuss their racial identity (Kerwin & Ponterotto).

Deficit models (Cross, 1971; Morten & Atkinson, 1983) fell short of adequately describing the process of identity formation by suggesting that development followed a linear process. They also suggested that multiracial individuals rejected their minority identity, and that they failed to recognize multiple racial or ethnic identities (Poston). One of the major flaws that Poston distinguished in these models was the lack of attention paid to external factors that could be facilitating the negative experiences and difficulties in adjustment that scholars believed existed for the multiracial individual. The research of Herman (1970) and Hall (1980), as cited by Poston (2001), even suggested that individuals with a multiracial or biracial identity saw their identities as an asset rather than a hindrance.

**Stage Models**

After the long-held belief that biracial identity was problematic, scholars began to rethink deficit models and started proposing models that included various stages. Many of these models imitated frameworks for monoracial groups such as Cross’s (1971) model of psychological nigrescence and Helms’s (1992, 1993) model of white identity. In these models, individuals were thought to pass through stages in a sequential process that involved rejecting or abandoning one’s identity or attached racial labels, and ending at an integration
or internalization of one’s Black or white identity. These models, however, are not adequate for understanding bi- or multiracial identity because of their monoracial focus.

*Poston*

In an effort to supply a more accurate model, Poston (1990) proposed a five-stage model of biracial identity development that offered an integrated end-state.

*Personal identity.*

Individuals are young, just beginning to learn about their identities, and are somewhat independent of their racial or ethnic identity.

*Choice of group categorization.*

Individuals are pushed to choose an identity that is often a single identity. This may be a time of crisis for individuals as they seek to belong and are influenced by many societal factors.

*Enmeshing/Denial.*

Individuals experience guilt or confusion for having been forced to choose an identity that may not accurately reflect their racial or ethnic background. To move past this stage, individuals must resolve their anger and guilt and come to accept and appreciate their parents’ cultures.

*Appreciation.*

While still identifying primarily with one racial/ethnic group, individuals begin to appreciate their multiple heritages and start to expand their boundaries to learn more about their racial/ethnic background.
Integration.

Individuals at this stage have reached a point of comfort, integration, and appreciation for their multiple racial/ethnic backgrounds.

*Kich*

Kich (1992) suggested a three-stage model after researching biracial individuals with a Japanese-White heritage and discovering that all of her participants passed through three stages: (1) awareness of differentness and dissonance, (2) struggle for acceptance, and (3) self-acceptance and assertion of an interracial identity. Each of these stages was associated with approximate age-graded developmental patterns and followed the basic transitional path of a “questionable sense of self to one where an interracial self-conception is highly valued and secure” (p. 305). In this model, Kich believed that the primary developmental task for biracial individuals was to separate themselves from others’ evaluations of them and create their own self-identification.

*Kerwin and Ponterotto*

Following these simpler stage theories, Kerwin and Ponterotto (1995) offered a more complex stage model based on research with biracial children. In this model, they proposed age-based developmental benchmarks to understand children’s racial awareness. This model also subscribed to the notion that “identity formation is dependent on numerous personal, societal, and environmental factors [and that] the actual resolution is also individual” (p. 210). Later research by Miville, Constantine, Baysden, and So-Lloyd (2005) supported this theory. The stages of identity development include:
Preschool.

Children (up to 5 years) have an emergent racial awareness. Biracial children at this stage begin to notice the differences in their parents’ features, hair texture, etc.

Entry to School.

At this stage, children begin to use descriptive terms to define themselves or they may use a label provided to them by their parents, such as “interracial” (p. 212).

Preadolescence.

Children in this stage have a growing awareness of their own group membership as well as others’ group membership based on physical features, language, and culture. Environmental factors have an impact on the preadolescent’s racial awareness.

Adolescence.

Adolescence can be one of the most challenging periods for a biracial individual. Developmental factors and the added stress of peer pressure to choose or identify with one racial group over another can be enhanced during this stage. Involvement in activities not specifically related to race can help neutralize these effects.

College/Young Adulthood.

In this stage, young adults may continue to identify with one racial group or they may embrace a biracial identity.

Adulthood.
In this stage, biracial identity development is viewed as a lifelong process of continuing integration. One does not reach this stage without successfully resolving earlier stages.

Critique

Stage theories for understanding identity formation fall short when trying to explain the identity development of multiracial individuals. First, their linear progression assumes that all individuals will pass through the same stages to the desired end, failing to consider the impact of having more than one racial heritage with which to contend (Renn, 2004, Wijeyesinghe, 2001). Second, they assume that having a fully integrated self is a desirable end-stage (Root, 1998). Third, many of these processes are viewed as internal developmental processes without much attention paid to the impact of external factors such as friends, family, peers, etc.

Thematic Approaches

Upon the heels of the stage models previously discussed, two scholars, Cortés (2000) and Daniel (2002), provided another lens through which to better view and understand biracial identity development.

Cortés

Focusing on the college student population, Cortés (2000) used observations, workshops, and readings to develop five identity patterns.

Single racial identity.

Students following this pattern typically choose to identify with one racial heritage, which facilitates a strong identification with that heritage. With such a
strong identification with only one racial background, individuals may cease to acknowledge any other racial heritages that form their identity.

**Multiple racial identity.**

Rather than integrating their multiracial identity, students following this pattern maintain separate racial identities but continue to acknowledge that multiple racial identities exist. They do not feel compelled to ignore any part of their racial make-up.

**Multiple racial-multiracial identity.**

In this pattern, students transcend their understanding of separate racial identities. While still appreciating this separation, they also uphold their identities as racially mixed and identify as multiracial.

**Multiracial identity.**

Some students follow a pattern that is somewhat of a reverse of the multiple racial identity pattern by using a multiracial identity as their primary identity. They lack a strong identification with the various individual aspects of their racial ancestry.

**Nonracial identity.**

Some students claim they have no racial identity. According to Cortés (2000), this pattern is most consistent with recent immigrants who come from places where race is viewed differently than it is in the United States.

**Daniel**

Daniel (2002) commented that multiracial individuals (focusing primarily on black-white biracial-identified people) must work hard to deflect the impact of the one-drop rule and that many multiracial individuals are affected by the underdeveloped and often invisible
multiracial community in the United States. Daniel (2002) produced a three-trend model that consisted of:

*The synthesized identity.*

Since these trends focus, again, only on black-white individuals, people following this pattern manifest equal reference in the black and the white communities. In other words, they are comfortable in either setting and are concerned about issues unique to each setting separately. Another important component of this identity is that individuals enmeshed in it can function with credibility in either the African American or the European American communities as well as move about between them with relative ease.

*The functional identity/European American orientation.*

Individuals who adhere to this pattern may also identify in both the black and white communities, but within this particular trend, they are more closely aligned with the European American orientation.

*The functional identity/African American orientation.*

Conversely, while acknowledging a black and white identity, individuals following this orientation are more closely aligned with an African American orientation.

While similarities in the stage models and theme-oriented approaches exist, the theme-oriented models offer a bit more fluidity for the biracial individual. The limitations of both Cortés’s (2000) and Daniel’s (2002) models rest in the fact that no empirical evidence was collected to support these models; rather, both rely on observational and anecdotal
evidence. The other weakness of all the previous models is the lack of attention paid to outside influences that may impact the identity development of multiracial individuals.

**Ecological Models**

Unsatisfied with stage and typology models, several scholars argued for an even more comprehensive approach. Bronfrenbrenner (1979) suggested an approach that considered,

> Development-in-context...[which is concerned with] the progressive accommodation between a growing human organism and its immediate environment, *and* [italics in original] the way in which this relation is mediated by forces emanating from more remote regions in the larger physical and social milieu. (p. 13)

In other words, older identity models neglected to pay attention to the context in which individuals existed or the social influences that may influence identity (Miller, 1992). Johnson (1992) suggested that new models should be developed that considered the influences of such factors as family, peers, and the community.

The basic thesis of Bronfrenbrenner’s (1979) of the human development model is “that behavior evolves as a function of the interplay between person and environment” (p. 16). This interaction existed within the framework of the: (1) microsystem, (2) mesosystem, (3) exosystem, and (4) macrosystem, and is responsible for the growth of human beings.

Briefly, Bronfrenbrenner (1979) defined the microsystem as, “a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics” (p. 22), the mesosystem “comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates” (p. 25), the exosystem “refers to one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, both in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person” (p. 25), and the
macrosystem “refers to consistencies, in the form and content of lower-order systems that exist, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies” (p. 26).

Scholars who have used the ecology model as a basis for their understanding of identity development include Miller (1992), Stephan (1992), Wijeyesinghe (2001), Root (1996, 2003), and Renn (2004). Miller believed that social relationships and social structures had a profound impact on whether individuals with a biracial identity were marginalized. Identity options, in this case, were influenced by parents, peers, and the socialization of the community. Additional agents of influence included, “social status, resource distribution, economic attainment, and residential patterns” (Miller, p. 35). Stephan argued that factors such as culture, language, style of living, geographic area, status, and socialization into various cultures were responsible for influencing identity choice. Wijeyesinghe identified eight factors that affected racial identity choice in multiracial individuals. These included physical appearance, racial ancestry, cultural attachment, early experience and socialization, political awareness and orientation, spirituality, other social identities, and social and historical context.

These approaches sought to recognize the ever evolving identities of multiracial people but did not ground their approaches in any follow-up studies that offered validity. These studies also fell short by not considering the liquid experiences of multiracial individuals or the variety of ways that multiracial individuals may choose to identify. Two scholars who both followed an ecological framework as well as outlined the possible identity choices of multiracial individuals are Root (1996, 2003) and Renn (2004). These theories are based on sound longitudinal research, and could be applied to college students who identify
as multiracial, thereby acting as beneficial frameworks for student affairs professionals working with this population.

*Root*

One of the first scholars to write about multiracial identity, Root (1990) affirmed that biracial individuals do not have a clear reference group, nor do they have much control over how they are viewed by the outside world. In 1992, she offered a now frequently referenced book that focuses on the ecological way of understanding multiracial identity, the history of mixed race people, discussions on the experiences of children, and a dialogue about the census. Upon completion of 10 years of research on multiracial individuals, Root (2003a) unveiled a refined version of the ecological theory paying close attention to both identity choices and the factors that influence those choices.

Using her own experiences as a springboard to understanding, Root (1996) identified four ways that individuals of mixed race manage and manipulate their surroundings in what she described as “border crossings” (p. xx). Root believed that individuals’ social environment impacted the way that they negotiated their border crossings and that even the language used to speak about race provided little to no space in which the biracial individual could reside. After further study, Root (2003a, 2003b) added a fifth identity type.

Root (1995, 2003a, 2003b) also suggested that external factors should be taken into account when attempting to discuss the identity choices of mixed race individuals. These factors include “the geographical history of race, gender, family influences, individual ‘personality,’ community, and generation” (Root, 2003a, p. 11). She recognized that in doing so, “both racial and ethnic [identities] will always be in flux because they are dynamic” (p. 11). Taking external factors into account, the five categories at which she arrived are:
Accept the identity society assigns.

The dominant ideology for this identity is hypodescent, or the “one-drop,” rule. There is a fundamental belief that individuals are born into an identity which negates any options of choice. If an individual wishes not to identify with what society has defined for him or her, he or she is seen as confused or unfaithful.

Choose a single identity.

An individual adhering to this identity acknowledges that race matters and, therefore, makes a choice to identify with a single race. This may be on the basis of physical appearance or outside pressures, and may also be the result of understanding the repercussions of identifying as multiracial. This decision does not preclude an individual from racial questioning when he or she enters into a community where his or her identity is challenged.

Choose a mixed identity.

As the numbers of multiracial people grow, this identity choice becomes a more viable option. Individuals choosing this identity, however, may still be met with resistance and asked to justify their choice because they may be misinterpreted as lacking identification.

Choose a new race identity.

Not intended to be a subversive identity, it can be viewed as such. Individuals in this identity category choose to view themselves as blended, mixed, or multiracial without being specific about what racial heritages make up their background.
Choose a white identity.

Individuals who do not feel tied to their racial or ethnic communities may opt for this identity because they possess neither hatred for nor emotional attachment to their heritage. They choose this identity because it may reflect the communities in which they operate daily. Another reason individuals may choose this identity is if they are trying to distance themselves from family members of color (Root, 2003a).

Validating Root's Research

Many researchers have used Root’s (2003a, 2003b) work as a compass for understanding multiracial identity development, the labels that individuals use to describe themselves, and the factors that contribute to identity formation. To date, however, Root (2003a, 2003b) appears to be the only one to have validated her own theory even though the work of others has provided much support for her findings.

Studies that found support for Root’s (2003a) claim that individuals use a variety of labels to define themselves include Sands (2000), Brown (2001), and Collins (2000). Sands conducted a study of 6 biracial college students and found that 2 students preferred to identify with one race, 2 students preferred choosing a race that was beneficial given the environments they were in (i.e., choosing one race over another on college applications to gain benefits), and 2 students shared that they did not feel like they fit into either of the racial groups that made up their heritage.

The findings of Brown’s (2001) study of 119 Black/white young adults showed racial identity variation as well. In this study, some participants viewed themselves as Black, some as white, and others as multiracial. The distinguishing contribution here is the
acknowledgement of differences of public and private identities or what Brown (2001) considered, “compartmentalization” (p. 45). Participants may have publicly denied portions of their identity while privately embracing them; for example, publicly identifying as Black on forms that requested a racial identity while privately identifying as interracial. In this way, participants were able to balance internal feelings and external pressures.

Collins’s (2000) study of 15 Japanese-American adults supported this finding that individuals have situational identities that they may use to their advantage. Hall (1992) and Mass (1992) found in their studies of biracial Japanese individuals, that social forces to choose one race over another encouraged respondents to identify with one or the other of their racial or ethnic identities on surveys, but when interviewed and able to choose their identity more freely, participants preferred to identify with both of their cultural backgrounds equally.

While not overtly using an ecology model, Collins (2000), Brown (2001), and Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002) provided support for Root’s (2003b) claim that the ways in which multiracial individuals identify changes over time and is related to the environments in which they are situated. Collins (2000) suggested that individuals in her study were able to freely move between their two monoracial groups simultaneously, which provided evidence that identity is “fluid and flexible,” and which she labeled the “chameleon” effect (p. 240).

Factors Influencing Identity Choices.

Several scholars have focused primarily on the factors influencing identity development. Pinderhughes (1995) discovered, after reviewing the literature on biracial individuals, that geographic location, parental understanding, a sense of support from school, extended family and the community at large, and experiencing acceptance for and
acknowledgment of both racial heritages improved the growing up experiences of biracial children. These were similar factors to those included in Root’s (2003a, 2003b) framework. Other micro factors that can affect the identity process include gender and appearance (Brown, 2001), while macro factors such as geography, community, peers and family, and social class can also bear on an individual’s experience.

*Appearance and Sex-gender.*

Root (1997) suggested that mixed-race females endure the tri-fold pressures of their race, gender, and appearance. Enduring social value is placed on the physical appearance of women which then serves to provide or deny them social status within society (Hall, 2004). This same pressure is not apparent for mixed-race males. Hall (1996, 2004) pointed out that multiracial individuals have the unique experience of looking like no specific racial group, having an ambiguous appearance, or looking like all racial groups combined.

In her study of Black/white biracial young adults, Brown (2001) found that appearance had a huge impact on the identity choices that her participants made. “The more participants had the appearance of a black person, the stronger their black and the weaker their white identities tended to be” (p. 60). Part of this was because the less ambiguous they looked, the fewer questions they received from members of society about their racial identity. Looking racially different from siblings also had an impact on the participants in this study. Other studies have had mixed reviews on appearance. Williams (1996) found that of her 20 Black/white biracial respondents, many of them were asked “What are you?” by people attempting to racially categorize. Bowles (1993), who reported on clinical patients she had counseled over 30 years, stated that “integration [of ethnic identities] is difficult because an individual’s phenotype does not reflect dual group membership but instead communicates
membership in the minority racial group” (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002, p. 27). This was particularly true with biracial women who experienced more prominent negative psychological outcomes.

Sex-gender differences exist in the ways that society behaves toward multiracial males and females. The beauty ideal in U.S. society continues to be white. Multiracial females in Brown’s (2001) study struggled with their identities in terms of wanting to be compared with white women over black women. They also experienced lower self-esteem than did the males in the study.

Experiencing Acceptance – Peers and Family.

Family and friends offered a safety-net for many multiracial individuals and provided support and guidance during processes of identity development. Acceptance in Brown’s (2001) study was a conflict-reducing experience for the participants, especially when they were accepted by extended family. Acceptance by both Black and white relatives had the effect of improving self-esteem and helping to reduce conflict about identifying with either racial group.

Scholars such as Bowles (1993) and Kerwin, Ponterotto, Jackson, and Harris (1993) suggested that family provided a strong influence on how individuals saw themselves racially, mainly because explicit messages about race were communicated to children via their parents. If issues of race were discussed openly, individuals are more likely to self-identify (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). Furthermore, Rockquemore (1999) found, in her study of 14 biracial respondents, that socialization and peer influences had a greater impact on identity development than did appearance. In a later paper by Rockquemore and Brunsma
(2002), social networks were also found to have an effect on identity choice, offering a “push and pull” (p. 339) toward one identity choice and/or away from another.

Sands’s (2000) study also supported the importance of family. According to her findings, “By and large, the students’ families were the foundations of their identity development” (p. 51). Families were there to answer questions and offer universal acceptance for the biracial students in this study.

Community and Social Class.

Communities can offer inclusion or rejection for a multiracial person. For participants in Brown’s (2001) study, white communities offered a better education or more appealing surroundings, but biracial participants also experienced negative attention because of their Black roots. Strong norms about interracial dating also ran rampant in these communities so many participants had frequently not had any dating experiences. Black communities were unforgiving because participants were dubbed as not “black enough” (p. 85). Here again, sex-gender and appearance combined to form damaging experiences for multiracial females. Acceptance was experienced in racially mixed communities where participants could express both of their racial heritages. Gibbs and Hines (1992) found that integrated surroundings such as schools and neighborhoods along with growing up in an upper-class family aided in the positive psychosocial adjustment of multiracial individuals. In Sands’s (2000) study, racially diverse neighborhoods offered the best experience for the biracial participants that she interviewed.

In all of these studies, support was found for the affects of both internal and external factors that helped or hurt individuals on their racial identity development journey. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, many factors influenced individuals’ identity during their
college experience. While Root provided a strong foundation for understanding the process of identity development for mixed-race individuals, she did not talk specifically about the experiences of college students or the impact of the college environment as a factor of influence.

Renn

Seeking to fill a gap in the literature on multiracial identity development, acknowledging that the college environment offered a unique opportunity for development, and using an ecological approach as a framework, Renn (2000, 2003, 2004) set out to investigate the experiences of multiracial college students. Adhering to Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) approach but applying it specifically to a student development schema, Renn (2004) framed the three “systems” in a visual representation of this model which is replicated below.

![Ecology of college student development](image)

**FIGURE 1: Ecology of college student development**

Renn (2004) suggested that a relevant microsystem for a college student might include “workplace relationships, classes and study groups, partner and children, and
community and civic organizations” (p. 37). Mesosystems may involve “interactions between and among the various academic, social, co-curricular, and familial microsystems” (p. 37). Renn (2004) stated that peer cultures are extremely important for student identity but so are other mesosystems which may be formed by on-campus and off-campus microsystem interactions, such as “friendship groups interacting with family or academic work with faith community” (p. 38). Renn (2004) further stated that exosystems may include “far-away family, parents’ workplaces, and settings on- and off-campus, such as faculty committees and federal agencies, where policies are made that influence the individual…[furthermore]…marriage, separation, divorce, or sibling birth at home would affect most students” (p. 40). Lastly, the macrosystems may include “historical trends and events, cultural expectations, and social forces” (p. 43).

With this framework in mind, and using results from a study of 24 mixed-race students whose parents were either both of color or who had one white parent and one parent of color, Renn (2000) observed two major themes: the meaning of space, and the impact of the peer culture, where peer culture referred to “the forces, often tacit, that shape the life on campus in terms of group membership, acceptable discourse, and desirable behaviors” (Renn, 2000, p. 405).

*Meaning of Space.*

Finding fit, or a space to belong, was important to all of the participants in Renn’s (2000) study. “Space” could mean anything from physical space such as locations on campus that could be shared with others who had similar interests, or psychological space where students could define themselves in any way (Renn, 2000). Much like Brown’s (2001) public and private spaces, Renn also found that students held public and private identities which
consisted of personally held ideas and the meanings they attached to their identities as well as
the public experiences that helped them make sense of private spaces.

Experiences that helped students feel like they belonged, or clearly pointed out that
they did not belong, included shared cultural knowledge or lack thereof, the reactions they
got to their physical appearance, and the activities of legitimacy in which they participated.
With regard to a shared cultural knowledge or a cultural knowledge deficit, students spoke
about their experiences with multicultural groups where they either felt they were well-
equipped to participate courtesy of familial socialization about language, food, customs, etc.,
or fell short of the needed cultural knowledge to feel comfortable in those spaces. Physical
appearance often led to “enough” judgments – whether students were, e.g., “black enough”
(p. 407) to be accepted. Students frequently had to negotiate boundaries of other
communities such as student organizations or classes, as well as negotiating insider and
outsider status while trying to find a place to feel welcomed, accepted, and legitimated
(Renn, 2000).

Renn (2000) suggested that space was an important component to identity
development because it offered students “reference groups and immersion groups of like-others”
(p. 410). She also discovered five “border crossings” (p. 410) in which students
participated.

*Identifying as monoracial.*

Fourteen students always or often fit the pattern of choosing one monoracial
identity.
Identifying with more than one racial group.

Seven students fluidly maneuvered between monoracial categories, adopting a situational identity.

Identifying as multiracial.

Roughly 20 students created a new category that they termed, “multiracial,” “mixed,” “biracial,” “half,” “mixed heritage,” or “hapa” (Renn, 2000, p. 411).

Opting out of the system of racial categories completely.

Eight students subverted the entire notion of race by choosing not to identify along racial lines at all. Maintaining that race is a social construction, some focused more on culture rather than race but all viewed race as fluid and flexible even though they acknowledged that the consequences of race (racism) were very real.

Move among the options.

Fourteen students moved between options; sometimes they identified monoracially, sometimes as multiracial, and sometimes opting out of racial constructs altogether.

The key to racial identification for these students hinged on the feeling of fit – on locating spaces that offered the best representation of their identities. A sense of belonging was also important and was also a product of the peer culture on the college campuses they attended.

College campuses each have their own climate and offer a variety of communities and social groups in which students can situate themselves and participate. Boundary negotiation was a common experience for the participants in Renn’s (2000) study. In some
cases, students were able to permeate community and organization boundaries and move between groups fluidly, while at other times, the boundaries were rigid and unsurpassable. Whether or not students felt welcomed in a variety of group settings largely affected their choices regarding which spaces to inhabit.

Validating Renn’s Research and the Importance of the College Setting.

Several researchers have offered supporting evidence for the identity patterns found in Renn’s study (Kilson, 2001; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002; Wallace, 2001). Miville, et al. (2005) interviewed 10 self-identified multiracial students and found that most participants identified with one racial group while also identifying as multiracial. There was also confirmation of a situational identity, or a “chameleon” experience (p. 512) where participants used the fluidity of their racial identities to fit in different social settings. Similar factors influencing identity development were also identified in this study, including family members and belonging to diverse communities.

Numerous scholars share Renn’s (2004) view that college is a particularly stressful time for biracial college students (Brown, 2001; Cortés, 2000; Korgen, 1998; Wallace, 2003) at a time of major life transition when students leave the influences of their family. During this time, interaction among peers and building friendships is very important (Evans, 2007). Brown (2001) shared that participants in her study were frustrated by having to deny aspects of their racial background because college forms inadequately represented the range of racial identities. Having chosen a Black identity to receive the benefits offered to minorities, they were then continually contacted by Black student organizations to recruit them into their various groups. Students who were still developing their identities felt outcast by and uncomfortable with these interactions and experiences.
In this section, I have offered a thorough discussion of multiracial identity development that reminds us that race mixing is not a new phenomenon, but paying attention to the unique routes that mixed-race individuals take to understanding and naming their identities is. I have shared a variety of identity models used to understand the individual’s experience. These include: deficit models that view the multiracial person as marginalized and confused, stage models that suggest individuals pass through specific stages in a designated order that align with developmental tasks, typology models that offer identity themes within which individuals may align, and ecological models which offer a broader context in which to understand identity development. The last set of models focus on both internal and external factors that may affect a person’s identity formation trajectory and also acknowledge that identity development for multiracial people is fluid, evolving, and contains many elements of choice.

Ultimately, this project focused on not just multiracial individuals, but individuals who also identify as bisexual/pansexual. In order to provide a comprehensive understanding of a topic that has not been previously studied, I now present a review of the literature pertaining to sexual identity formation and bisexual identity formation as well as the various identity models specific to bisexuality.

Sexual Identity Development: Dichotomy and Continuum

Bisexuality, one focus of this study, is a complex and often misunderstood identity (Ellis, 1897, as cited by Storr, 1999; Firestein, 1996). To better frame it, a broader understanding of the literature on how sexual identity is formed is necessary. It should be noted that throughout this paper, the term sexual identity will be the primary term; however,
the reader may also see the term *sexual orientation* even though it is recognized that the latter term may be less preferred now than in the past. The term sexual orientation has been widely used and accepted but connotes an emphasis on sexuality that overlooks other aspects of one’s identity or “one’s sense of self in ways that are emotional, intellectual, political, sexual, social, spiritual, and vocational” (Perez, DeBord, & Bieschke, 2000). Sexual identity is conceptualized as, “The enduring sense of oneself as a sexual being which fits a culturally created category and accounts for one’s sexual fantasies, attractions, and behaviors” (Savin-Williams, 1995, p. 166).

Sexuality and discussions about it have had a long, drawn out, and hushed history. Rust (2000a) pointed out that prior to the 1960s, studying sexuality was stigmatized. No one understood this better than Alfred Kinsey and Associates who produced two groundbreaking and controversial books, *Sexual behavior of the human male* (1948) and *Sexual behavior of the human female* (1953). Other historical and political changes that set the stage for a more comprehensive investigation into sexuality and sexual identity included the gay liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s (Storr, 1999), removal of “homosexuality” as a form of psychological disability (mental illness) from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association in 1973 (Dworkin, 2000; Fox, 1995), the “family breakdown,” (Rust, 2000b, p. xii) and the AIDS crisis (Rust, 2000b).

Many of the viewpoints about sexual identity come from a psychological base but have blurred the lines with other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies (Chan, 1995; Firestein, 1996). More recent views on sexual identity also take a social constructionist approach, as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, which implies active participation from society in attaching meanings to behaviors and identities (Kitzinger,
In contrast, individuals holding essentialist beliefs about sexual identity have often come from fields such as medicine, law, and theology (Eliason, 1996).

One point of clarification that must be made is to distinguish between one’s sexual identity and the sexual behavior in which one engages. They may not correspond (Chan, 1995). Chan suggested that some individuals who engage in same-sex behavior do not identify as lesbian or gay while others who identify as lesbian or gay may not engage in sexual activity with same-sex others. Some individuals, for example, adopt a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity as a form of resistance.

What ultimately provides the scaffolding for an understanding of bisexual identity is the shift away from the heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy or binary that framed the beliefs of those in the field, and which also begged the question as to whether bisexuality was even a category at all (Bradford, 2004; Kinsey, 1953; Storr, 1997). The long-held notion was that individuals fit one category or the other, much the same as the previous discussion on race where it was believed that a person was either white or non-white, where non-white equaled black. If a person did not clearly identify as homosexual or heterosexual, then he or she was either categorized as homosexual or excluded altogether (Bailey, 1995). Believing that discrete categories did not exist, Kinsey et al. (1948, 1953) developed the well-known Kinsey Scale, a 7-point rating scale (see Figure 2).
The Kinsey scale offered a more flexible way for individuals to identify themselves rather than being limited to a heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual label. Even then, however, identifications were still unclear. Klein (1993) remarked that utilizing Kinsey’s rating scale still did not clarify the meaning of sexual orientation. What did it mean, for example, to identify as a 2 or 3 on Kinsey’s scale? Klein (1993) suggested that 7 variables must be taken into account when considering sexual orientation, which indicated that sexual orientation, and the understanding of sexuality, was far more complex than it first appeared. The variables include: (1) sexual attraction, (2) sexual behavior, (3) sexual fantasies, (4) emotional preference, (5) social preference, (6) heterosexual-homosexual lifestyle, and (7) self-identification.

Points 1 and 2 suggested that sexual attraction and behavior are not synonymous; rather, a person could be sexually attracted to one sex while being sexually active with another. Who one fantasizes about, variable 3, may also play a role in how one identified
sexually, suggesting that individuals do not always remain constant by having an exclusively same-sex or other-sex vision. Emotional preference, the fourth variable, offered that the sex an individual is sexually active with may not be the sex that that person emotionally prefers. The fifth variable, social preference, referred to the degree a person enjoys socializing with members of the same sex versus members of the other sex. The variable of heterosexual-homosexual lifestyle looked at the ways in which a person lives in the social world, who that individual’s friends are (primarily bisexual, homosexual, or heterosexual), and the type of social activities in which a person engages, e.g., attending gay or lesbian clubs. The last variable, self-identification, influenced both thought patterns and behaviors. In this regard, individuals could view their sexual identity as a way of life.

Klein (1993) acknowledged that even this scale for understanding sexual orientation was not entirely comprehensive and did not take into account how complex sexuality is. What Klein (1993) intended to do with this scale was offer a way to better understand how one identified with regard to sexuality. It did not fully acknowledge, however, that individuals may change their sexual identity over time. Klein (1993) stated:

Where a person is today (in terms of behavior, feeling, and identification) is not necessarily where he or she was in the past or for that matter where he or she will be, or would like to be, in the future. (pp. 18-19)

In other words, life circumstances impact sexual identity regardless of whether there is or is not a biological root. Klein’s (1993) grid, used to better understand how an individual identifies, still left out the following factors: partner’s age, love and friendship were not separated within the emotional variable, lust and “limerence” were not been separated within the sexual attraction variable (p. 20), frequency of sexual behavior was not clarified by the grid and could mean either number of partners or number of sexual encounters, and finally,
masculine/feminine sex roles were not discussed. These factors added to the complexity of one’s sexual identity: The Kinsey scale and the Klein grid established that sexuality was not as clear-cut as was once thought and provided further evidence for the social constructionist perspective, which posed that we attach meanings to behaviors and that sexuality is not fixed over time.

Bisexuality

“[Bisexuality’s] fate is symptomatic of the bisexual’s own lot in life: to be as common as can be but unacknowledged” (Baumgardner, 2007, p. 50).

Bisexuality is broadly understood as an attraction to members of the same-sex and the other-sex. It is an ambiguous, fluid, and complicated identity to grasp. Kinsey (1953) stated, “Sometimes [individuals’] homosexual and heterosexual responses and contact occur at different periods in their lives; sometimes they occur coincidentally. This group of persons is identified in the literature as bisexual” (p. 468). Even though today’s society is more accepting of sexual diversity, heterosexuality is still promoted as American society’s norm (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000) and it was not until the early 1990s that a bisexual movement became established, which continues to grow today (Udis-Kessler, 1995).

Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor (1994) described bisexuality as a riddle because people do not have exclusive preferences for one sex or the other and there exist many patterns of bisexuality that have not been widely studied. One of the lasting questions about bisexuality is whether it is an identity or a behavior but Storr (1999) cautioned against thinking in these terms as it referenced back to the dichotomous thinking of the heterosexual-homosexual binary. Storr (1999) stated, “the distinction between identity and behaviour [sic]
may have a reductive effect on the understanding of human sexuality if it is generalized too
far or applied too indiscriminately” (p. 5).

Prior to Kinsey et al. (1948, 1953) and Klein (1993), Ellis (1897, as cited by Storr,
1999) suggested that human sexual life was based in bisexuality and that even though
preferences toward heterosexuality or homosexuality might exist, it was unnecessary to think
exclusively about those categories. Firestein (1996) recognized bisexuality as being attracted
to more than one sex and also shared that, within the sexual identity literature, it is believed
that “bisexuals have consciously chosen to adopt an identity label reflecting their bisexuality”
(p. xx).

Zinik (1985) acknowledged that scholarly work on bisexuality has been limited and
also believed that certain criteria must exist for an individual to assume a bisexual identity.
Those criteria included: (1) experiencing sexual arousal from both men and women, (2)
wishing for sexual activity with both men and women, and (3) adopting bisexuality as a
sexual identity label. One may notice that the apparent focus of these points is the sexual
behavior of the individual rather than the many other facets of sexuality as suggested by

Frameworks for understanding bisexuality date back to psychoanalytic theory and the
researchers of the time who believed strongly that having an understanding of bisexuality
helped to better understand other issues such as psychosexual development, masculinity and
femininity, psychopathology, and homosexuality (Fox, 1996). For those who believed sexual
orientation was strictly dichotomous, the category of bisexuality simply did not exist. They
believed that those who adopted a bisexual identity were denying their homosexual identity
and that the default category for anyone displaying same-sex tendencies or attractions should be homosexual (Fox, 1996).

The interest in bisexuality arose as a response to its invisibility within the literature on sexual identity. Hansen and Evans (1985) suggested that three reasons existed as to why bisexuality was invisible in the literature and why it was difficult to define: (a) the belief that individuals who identify as bisexual are nonmonogamous and promiscuous, (b) the thought that it is impossible to both eroticize men and women at the same time, and (c) the belief that many LGB definitions are based on a normative heterosexual identity. It soon became apparent that more research was needed on bisexual identity to gain an understanding of the full range of diversity within sexual identity (Fox, 1996).

The Emergence of Sexual Identity and Bisexual Identity Models

It has only been within the past few decades that bisexuality has gained more attention as an identity unto itself. Kinsey et al. (1948, 1953) and Klein (1993) offered a preliminary understanding of the complexity of sexual orientation, a foundation on which more recent theorists and researchers could build. In the next section, I provide a discussion of the ways that bisexuality has been categorized, theorized, and adjusted into models of identity development.

Models of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Development

Most identity development models that relate to sexual identity can be divided into two categories and have either a psychological (essentialist) root or view the social environment as having an impact on one’s sexual identity (social constructionist). Early models focused on internal changes and challenges in developing a lesbian or gay identity and also pointed to the self-awareness, identities, and identity management experienced by
individuals (Evans, 2007b). Some early examples included works by Plummer (1975), Troiden (1979), and Minton and McDonald (1984). Most of these models focused on gay males; therefore, it was unclear if they could be generalized to females and almost certain that they did not take into account the experiences of those who identified as bisexual. These models cited similar stages, which were: (1) first awareness of a non-heterosexual identity, (2) some type of self-labeling, (3) becoming involved in one’s community and beginning to disclose a non-heterosexual identity to others, and (4) integrating one’s identity into a sense of self (Levine & Evans, 1991).

Other frameworks were characterized as social models, where the focus was on community involvement, identity awareness, social roles, and managing the stigma associated with a non-heterosexual identity (DuBay, 1987). Often these scholars concentrated on “coming out,” “the process through which LGB individuals first recognize their sexual orientation” (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000, p. 36), which was previously believed to be a single event (Gramick, 1984), but is now viewed as an ongoing process (Coleman, 1981-1982; Dank, 1971; Ponse, 1980).

Much like the critique of early stage models for multiracial identity development, these early sexual identity development models are not adequate for a variety of reasons (Levine & Evans, 1991). One of the first noticeable problems is the datedness of the models and the lack of acknowledgement of the political and social climate of the times in which they were developed, which are far different than today’s climate (Evans, 2007). Second, these models assumed a linear, sequential pattern that left no room for variation in the processes individuals may undergo to adopt a sexual identity (Evans, 2007; Firestein, 1996). Recent research suggested that individuals can adequately achieve an integrated
understanding of identity without following these consecutive stages and that the strong oppositional periods experienced by individuals throughout this process may have been a product of the times, when the gay rights movement was beginning in full force (Evans, 2007).

A third weakness exists in that assumptions are made in early models that public acknowledgement of one’s sexual identity and active participation in a gay or lesbian community was necessary for a positive self-identity and to be mentally healthy (Evans, 2007). A fourth weakness, noted by Reynolds and Hanjorgiris (2000), is the lack of empirical data to support these theories. Lastly, these models often focus on white, gay males and, therefore, are not generalizable to other populations such as females, bisexuals, and people of color (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Levine & Evans, 1991; Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000).

Stage Models

Stage models of sexual identity, specifically the classic model discussed below, like almost all of the earlier models, followed a sequential pattern of experiences that individuals used to recognize, accept, and affirm their otherwise deviant and stigmatized identities (Fassinger, 1998). Cass’s (1979, 1983) model included more stages than earlier models, but like many other stage models, it began with the stage lack of awareness and culminated in a more mature developmental stage and stable sexual identity.

Cass

One of the most frequently cited models of homosexual identity development is offered by Vivian Cass (1979, 1983). In addition to providing psychological elements, Cass introduced social elements into her model. She was one of the first scholars to develop a
model that could be applied to both gay and lesbian identity development (Grov, Bimbi, Nanín, & Parsins, 2006).

The basis for Cass’s (1979) model rested on two assumptions: “(a) that identity is acquired through a developmental process; and (b) that locus for stability of, and change in, behavior lies in the interaction process that occurs between individuals and their environments” (p. 219). After conceptualizing her model, Cass (1984) later went back and empirically tested it on gay and lesbian individuals in her native Australia. While the model was not initially formatted for individuals with a bisexual identity, Cass (1984) suggested that it could be applied to bisexual males and females. In her initial model, she proposed the following stages:

Stage 1: Identity Confusion.
In this first stage, individuals locate feelings, thoughts, or actions that may be labeled homosexual. Since the normative sexual identity is heterosexual, an individual may experience confusion or anxiety as he or she begins to question whether homosexual behavior is indicative of a homosexual identity. Two outcomes may occur. If individuals feel positively about this new identity, they may seek out additional information about it such as reading books or magazines. If they feel negatively about it, they may reject any evidence of a homosexual identity. Rejecting a homosexual identity leads to foreclosure.

Stage 2: Identity Comparison.
If foreclosure has not taken place, then individuals proceed to the second stage where they acknowledge that they may not be heterosexual, which considerably reduces their previous confusion and anxiety. Comparisons to others’ views of
homosexuality become important to the individual’s self-concept. If the feedback from others is negative, the individual may discontinue exploration of a homosexual identity. If the feedback is positive, the individual may be encouraged to contact members of a homosexual community for support and guidance.

*Stage 3: Identity Tolerance.*

Having acknowledged that he or she is likely gay or lesbian, the individual continues to seek support from like-identifying others. Feeling less alienated due to positive feedback from other individuals who identify as gay or lesbian, the questioning individual depends on positive contacts. These contacts determine if the individual will continue to embrace the newfound identity or if he or she will reject it. In this stage, the individual may lead a dual life, maintaining a heterosexual public identity and a homosexual private identity.

*Stage 4: Identity Acceptance.*

Individuals in this stage continue to make contacts with other individuals who identify as gay or lesbian and may come to accept their homosexual identity. Preference for lesbian and gay social contexts becomes more normative for the individual within this stage. Individuals who are working through identity acceptance may continue to “pass” as heterosexual while others may selectively disclose their homosexual identities to friends and family.

*Stage 5: Identity Pride.*

Distancing themselves from heterosexuals in an attempt to achieve congruence, individuals in this stage locate a sense of pride in their gay or lesbian identity, and
may take on an “activist role” and focus on issues pertaining to the gay community.

**Stage 6: Identity Synthesis.**

In the sixth and final stage, individuals resolve that there are heterosexuals that are accepting of their gay or lesbian identity thus softening the heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy. Individuals become comfortable with who they are as their gay or lesbian identity becomes integrated into their sense of self.

**Validity Test of this Model**

In a follow-up study to test the validity of this model, Cass (1984) offered a questionnaire based on the six-stage model to 109 male and 69 female respondents. Of the respondents, all but 12 of them were able to align themselves with one of the stages. The remaining 12 (6 males and 6 females) felt that they fit into more than one of the stages; therefore, they were excluded from the study.

Cass (1984) found that most individuals who identified as homosexual could find themselves within her proposed model with regard to the factors that make up identity. The follow-up study also revealed that the individuals will typically follow the order of the predicted model with regard to identity formation. Several adjacent stages were blurred (1 and 2, 5 and 6) which suggests that it may be more accurate to offer a four-stage model rather than a six-stage model. Studies by other researchers around this time (Allen, 1980; Troiden & Goode, 1980) found similar stages to the ones proposed by Cass (1984).

**Life-span Human Development View**

Disagreeing with the stage models, scholars such as D’Augelli (1994a), wished to focus more on the multiple factors that, over one’s lifespan, impacted the development of
sexual identity. Similar to the ecological models discussed earlier in this chapter, those taking a human development approach understood identity development to be a process situated within a broader context.

D’Augelli

Arguing against the essentialist view of sexual identity development and recognizing that the human experience is impacted by social circumstances in an ongoing process, D’Augelli (1994a) developed a model that conceptualized the “complex factors influencing the development of people in context over historical time” (p. 317). This model situated the individual in an environment where the impacts of social networks, communities, institutions, and culture could be examined. D’Augelli (1994a) stressed the importance of locating oneself within the web of the following three sets of factors: (1) subjectivities and actions – the feelings individuals have about their sexual identity and how they attach meanings to their behaviors, (2) interactive intimacies – the parental and familial influences as well as the impact of age-peer socialization, and (3) sociohistorical connections – local and global norms and customs.

In addition to these three sets of factors, which are linked constructs that focused on actions, intimacies, and historical connections, three assumptions also exist that further illuminate the identity development of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals.

1. Development and change occur over the lifespan.

   Developmental plasticity is important as humans act and react according to environmental stimuli.

2. Interindividual differences exist and influence the development of intraindividual behavior.
Behavioral differences exist, for example, between men and women. Each person has a unique and varied experience.

3. *Individuals have an impact on their own development.*

Actions that individuals take in their lives shape them.

*Identity Development Process*

One of D’Augelli’s (1994a) concerns with previous identity models was their emphasis on internal processes of personal development. The human development model, in contrast, recognized identity development as an interactive, dynamic process, rather than a sequential, stage process. He identified six processes that framed gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity development.


This is both a personal and social acknowledgement that the individual is not heterosexual. The “coming out” process begins as the individual first discloses his or her uncertainties. This process is ongoing as the individual continues to disclose and begins to publicly identify as a non-heterosexual.


An individual has to find a label, category, or meaning that adequately summarizes feelings and desires. Like-others are often needed who can confirm the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of the individual. In this process, individuals must begin to examine the myths they have internalized about nonheterosexuality.
3. **Developing a Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual Social Identity.**

Creating a large network of individuals who are aware of the individual’s sexual identification and who are able to offer support becomes increasingly important during this process. This network serves to affirm the individual and allows the individual to be open and honest about who he or she is. The reactions of others may also change over time as circumstances change, such as entering into an intimate relationship.

4. **Becoming a Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual Offspring.**

This process involves disclosing, to family, one’s non-heterosexual identity. This disclosure may disrupt relationships temporarily but the hopeful outcome of this action is reintegration into the family.

5. **Developing a Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual Intimacy Status.**

This process is a complex one rooted in the heterosexist myths that gay and lesbian individuals cannot maintain healthy, long-term, and/or committed relationships. D’Augelli (1994a) stated, “The lack of cultural scripts directly applicable to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people leads to ambiguity and uncertainty, but it also forces the emergence of personal, couple-specific, and community norms, which should be more personally adaptive” (p. 327).

6. **Entering a Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual Community.**

The last process is marked by commitments made to political and social action. If the individual views his or her sexual identity as a private matter, this process may never occur. If an individual chooses to take this step, he or she may do so at great risk of losing jobs or housing. To be an empowered gay, lesbian, or bisexual
person and to have a meaningful identity, the individual may wish to understand the history of oppression experienced by LGB people.

Critique

While offering a more comprehensive and fluid view of identity development for lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons, no measure exists for D’Augelli’s (1994a) model (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). There has been, however, support for the lifespan model (Savin-Williams, 1995), a model that focuses on the broader context and its impact on a lesbian, gay, or bisexual individual’s identity development.

Research that validates D’Augelli’s model has documented many varying patterns of identity development for gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals, which suggested that development occurs over a wide age range (D’Augelli, 1994b; Savin-Williams, 1995). The environment has been found to have an influence on development. One example is how youth who grow up in urban areas have more of an opportunity to meet gay, lesbian, and bisexual others as well as be exposed to gay culture. Urban youth also tend to come out earlier than rural youth (D’Augelli, 1991; Savin-Williams, 1995; Sears, 1991). Supportive family and friends also facilitate a positive lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity and self-disclosure (Kahn, 1991, Rhoads, 1994, Troiden, 1989).

Evans and Broido (1999) studied the identity development of lesbian, gay, and bisexual college students who lived in the residence halls and found that the students’ coming out process was affected by the three factors that D’Augelli (1994a) hypothesized: personal subjectivities, interactive intimacies, and sociohistorical connections. A second study, conducted by Evans and Herriot (2004), examined the effects of first-year students’ participation in a campus climate investigation for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students. The
findings of this study showed that involvement within the college campus, interactions with significant others such as peers and mentors, and reflections on their experiences impacted the identity development of a gay student and a student who questioned her sexual identity.

In addition, a recent literature review by Evans (2007b) discussed several other studies that offered further evidence for D’Augelli’s (1994a) identity development model for gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals (Bilodeau, 2005; Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005; Stevens, 2004).

Typology Models of Bisexuality

Monosexual stage models first framed our understanding of sexual identity. Then, process models offered a wider range of sexual identity and took into account both psychological and sociological factors. While not proposing necessary steps that one goes through to integrate a bisexual identity, several researchers noted that different types of bisexuality existed.

Klein

Klein (1993) differentiated between the following kinds of bisexuals:

Transitional.

The transitional view suggests that bisexuals move thorough heterosexuality to homosexuality in a transitional phase. In a study conducted by Klein (1993), this was found to be true for only a small percentage of the bisexual participants. In those few instances, participants in a transitional process used their bisexuality as a bridge to the other side.
Historical.

Individuals in this facet of bisexuality have historically existed in either a homosexual or heterosexual lifestyle, but have a history of either having bisexual encounters or fantasizing about the same- or other-sex individuals.

Sequential.

Individuals displaying this common type of bisexuality partner with only one sex at any time; for example, a man might partner with a man for a period of time, then switch to partnering with a woman.

Klein (1993) also distinguished between (1) episodic, (2) temporary, (3) experimental, (4) or situational homo- or heterosexual activity. In episodic bisexuality, individuals may engage in episodes of bisexuality under certain circumstances such as inebriation. Temporary bisexuality may occur if an individual who primarily identifies as homosexual engages in a relationship with an other-sex partner and only has sex with this person. Experimental bisexuals are just trying out same-sex activities to see what it is like. Lastly, situational homo- or heterosexual activity could be illustrated by males or females in prison who would prefer other-sex partners but, due to environmental circumstances, resort to same-sex sexual activity.

Paul

Paul (2000), citing work by McDonald (1981), suggested three bisexuality types that reinforced the heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy:
Transitory.

The individual displaying a transitory bisexuality is in search of his or her “true” orientation and may identify as bisexual to appear “chic” or in style. This type of bisexuality may also indicate disturbed interpersonal relationships.

Transitional.

This type of bisexuality is the same as Klein’s (1993) transitional stage where an individual moves between the anchors of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Those in the transitional position are often labeled “fence-sitters” who have trouble committing or are avoiding commitment to a particular sexual identity.

Denial of Homosexuality.

Individuals displaying this type of bisexuality are said to be fearful of or denying their intrinsic homosexual desires, which may be a product of internalized homophobia.

McDonald (1982) offered similar variations on bisexuality that included: (1) individuals who preferred one sex over the other or who maybe had no preference at all, (2) individuals who had both male and female partners at the same time or one after the other (sequentially), (3) individuals who were either monogamous or polyamorous (numerous partners at the same time), or (4) who displayed transitory, transitional, homosexual denial, or enduring patterns.

Critique

These typologies served to describe the behavior of a person claiming a bisexual identity and the possible duration in which they did so. They do not, however, offer reasons as to why an individual may identify in these ways at different times. The existence of these
Typologies also adds to the confusion about bisexual identity because they offer further evidence to support its fluidity.

_Bisexuality Models_

Typology models categorize and label individual behavior rather than provide an explanation of _how_ an individual’s bisexual identity develops. One of the few models that describes a possible bisexual identity process is offered by Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor (1994).

*Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor*

Building on previous stage models, Weinberg et al. (1994) stated that “not every person follows through each stage. Some remain locked in at a certain point. Others move back and forth between stages” (p. 26). As a result of field work and interviews designed to understand how individuals come to identify as bisexual, Weinberg et al. identified four stages:

*Initial Confusion.*

Many of the participants in the study shared that they experienced a period of confusion before adopting a bisexual identity. They described the experience of having same- and other-sex attractions as unsettling, disorienting, or scary. Some worried that their same-sex attractions meant they were not heterosexual, and others admitted to not having the language to describe their feelings; in other words, being unaware of a “bisexual” identity so they could not classify themselves.
Finding and Applying the Label.

For many individuals, who had struggled for years trying to understand their feelings, learning about a bisexual identity was a turning point for them. Having a label facilitated meaning making for the emotions and thoughts they were experiencing. A turning point for others was their first same-sex or other-sex experience that helped them recognize that sexual activity with same- and other-sex partners was enjoyable. Applying a label also came from interactions with organizations that provided support and guidance.

Settling into the Identity.

The time from first attraction to full understanding and identification as bisexual took years and was often a consequence of becoming more self-accepting. Continued support from friends, family, and organizations helped facilitate the processes in this stage. In this particular study, changes in sexual behavior were more likely to occur than changes in sexual identity.

Continued Uncertainty.

Long-standing beliefs about bisexuals being confused individuals, the continued invisibility of the bisexual identity, and vacillating feelings of the homosexual and heterosexual communities toward bisexuals helps individuals who identify as bisexual retain their feelings of uncertainty. Uncertainty also came because of an exclusive intimate relationship. If individuals partnered with someone of the same sex, they questioned the heterosexual side of their identity and conversely, if they partnered with someone of the other sex exclusively, they questioned the gay or lesbian side of their identity.
Bradford

In contrast to Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor’s (1994) theory which followed individuals through a trajectory of heterosexual-to-bisexual, Bradford (2004) found that one-third of her participants initially identified as homosexual and then later adopted a bisexual identity. Her study consisted of 20 self-identified bisexuals (10 males and 10 females). The results of this study suggested that adopting a bisexual identity involved three main processes with a possible fourth:

**Stage 1: Questioning Reality.**

In this stage, individuals experience pressure to define themselves. They doubt their same- and other-sex encounters as well as the invisibility experienced by identifying as bisexual.

**Stage 2: Inventing Identity.**

In this stage, once acknowledging and affirming their same- and other-sex attractions, individuals must make meaning of their experiences. They may need to reject already created labels and search to find a way of defining themselves that is more realistic. Once they have done this, they must struggle to maintain their identity in a society that often does not recognize them.

**Stage 3: Maintaining Identity.**

In this stage, individuals struggle to preserve their identity in a society that often does not acknowledge their existence. Individuals in this stage experience marginalization by both gay/lesbian communities and heterosexual communities. This stage is different than Weinberg et al.’s (1994) third stage in that for Bradford’s (2004) participants, establishing community and receiving affirmation
of their bisexual identity, regardless of experiences of marginalization, increased their self-reliance. In Weinberg et al.’s third stage, a lack of commitment to the bisexual identity remained.

Stage 4: Transforming Adversity.

This stage involves transforming negative experiences into social action and leadership. Individuals in this study expressed certainty about their bisexual identity, which differed from the final stage in Weinberg et al.’s (1994) study where individuals were in a constant state of uncertainty.

Critique

The bisexual identity models shared here continue to follow a linear pathway, which is not an adequate way to gain understanding of such a complex process. These models, while specific to bisexuality, seem to leave out the external factors, as explained in D’Augelli’s (1994) model. It is interesting to see the similarities and differences between the stages of Weinberg et al.’s (1994) and Bradford’s (2004) models given their differing starting points – heterosexual-to-bisexual or homosexual-to-bisexual. A more in-depth analysis of these differences would be useful.

Other factors that impacted bisexual identity formation but that were not necessarily addressed in these two recent models include how open individuals are with others about their bisexuality, the context in which an individual lives, and the relationships in which a person is involved (Doll, Peterson, Magaña, & Carrier, 1991). Fox (1996, see also Blumstein & Schwartz, 1976a, 1976b, 1977; Golden, 1994; and Rust, 1992, 1993, 1995) shared that the fear of being out as gay or bisexual, political beliefs, and loyalty to gay or lesbian communities were also factors in developing a bisexual identity. A more thorough discussion
of these factors supported by empirical evidence would offer a stronger understanding of the pathways to a bisexual identity.

College, Bisexuality, Student Development, and Dual Minority Status

The previous discussion of sexual identity, sexual identity formation and various stage models, and the few, specific bisexual identity models has laid a foundation for the current study on female college students who identify as multiracial and bisexual. Since little research focused specifically on bisexual college students, I offer a discussion of the sexual minority college-age population that will help to frame this study.

Evans (1991) stated, “College and university environments are a microcosm of society. The same issues that exist in the larger community also exist in the residence halls and student organizations found on our campuses” (p. xiii). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, identity development is impacted by a variety of factors, and experiences in college play a large part in the adolescent’s overall identity formation (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2000). Virtually no research exists that explores bisexual identity development in college, but research that focused on factors of timing and age for students who identify as gay or lesbian suggested that these developmental issues occur during traditional undergraduate years (Levine & Evans, 1991).

In their discussion of the unique developmental issues experienced by gay and lesbian college students, Wall and Evans (1991) shared that the college experience offered a time of extreme change where students are faced with a variety of challenges. If, during this time, students are also questioning their sexuality, the processes to overcome these challenges may be more complicated just as the answer to the “Who Am I” question becomes increasingly difficult to answer. Evans and D’Augelli (1996) acknowledged that for traditional-age
students, the “coming out” process often starts in college while older LGB students may notice a shift in their self-understanding during the college years.

Campus climates impact the experiences of LGB individuals, with few campuses presenting a welcoming environment (Evans & D’Augelli, 1996). Since sexual identity formation is an ongoing process and may not be resolved until later in the college experience, gay, lesbian, and bisexual students may encounter feelings of isolation (Wall & Evans, 1991). Finding social groups with which a student can identify is an important component for positive adjustment during the college years, especially since “the oppression, stigmatization, hostility, and rejection experienced by lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals can cause mental health problems and can exacerbate other psychological problems they may have” (Evans & D’Augelli, p. 204).

Students with a lesbian, gay or bisexual identity must also navigate interpersonal relationships that include family, friendships, and intimate relationships. The turmoil experienced in this regard may be greater for LGB youth since their sexuality is not clear-cut (Evans & D’Augelli, 1996). The geographical distance between college student and family may allow for more freedom in sexual exploration than what was previously available, but relationships between family members during the college years can also become strained. Physical distance can offer safety for the exploring college student but can also make openness and communication more difficult. LGB college students may first disclose their sexual identity to friends and also develop friendship bonds within their new-found LGB college communities. Also within these communities, individuals begin to meet individuals of the same sex with whom they can develop romantic attachments, yet heterosexism, homophobia, and biphobia can place strains on these explorations (Evans & D’Augelli).
While one hopes that the college environment is a welcoming, open place for adventure, the reality is that many college environments are hostile to lesbian, gay, and bisexual college students and require individuals to mask their true selves in order to avoid victimization. Many campuses lack the proper services and knowledge to adequately handle the stressors and challenges faced by lesbian, gay, and bisexual college students (Evans & D’Augelli, 1996).

Attention must also be paid to the experiences of college students who inhabit more than one marginalized identity. Students facing this reality may not know who they are, may not understand which of their identities is most important, may not know how to cope with one part of their identity oppressing the other, may not have any support network or people whom they can talk to about their experiences, or they may feel misunderstood by the various groups with which they affiliate (Wall & Washington, 1991).

Section Summary

In this section, I have discussed bisexual identity development and illustrated the various complexities of defining bisexual identity. I have shared the different ways that scholars have looked at and tried to understand how one comes to identify as bisexual. Some of these ways include: the Kinsey and Klein scales, stage models that focused on monosexual identities, life-span views that considered the context in which one navigates, typology models that sought to categorize types of bisexuality, and developmental models specific to bisexuality. Next, I offered a discussion of scholarly works that have looked at the college environment’s impact on LGB individuals, and then I argued for more attention to be paid to college students who have multiple marginal identities as a way to introduce the next section.
In the following section, I share the final pieces of the puzzle by focusing on theoretical frameworks on multiple identities and conversations about biracial-bisexual identities.

Multiple Identities

Stanley (2004) suggested that most models of identity development take a uniform approach and are then believed to be generalizable to other populations. Illustrating this viewpoint, Stanley stated, “Consider, for instance, how research on women is often generalized to represent all women, even though a high proportion of such research is based upon White, heterosexual, middle class, college-aged women” (p. 161). This statement, again, reflects the inadequacies that exist in many identity models (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000).

Sex-gender and Bisexuality

Since sex-gender and race were already discussed earlier in this chapter, this section focuses on sex-gender and bisexuality. Herek (1996) suggested that a gender difference existed between males and females and that females were far more likely to describe themselves as bisexual than were males. The increase in the number of females who identify as bisexual may be due to relaxed sexual norms and the accomplishments of the women’s movement (Levine & Evans, 1991). Fox (1996) suggested that females typically experience homosexual attractions shortly after experiencing heterosexual attractions while males who identify as bisexual often experience these attractions in the reverse order or at the same time. According to a study of self-identified lesbian and bisexual females conducted by Rust (1993), bisexual females experienced same-sex desires around the average age of 18, which was three years later than females who identified as lesbian.
Much like individuals with a multiracial identity, individuals with a bisexual identity have had to exist in the middle of a dichotomy. Believed to be lesbian or gay by the heterosexual community and abandoned by the gay and lesbian community for allegedly hiding behind their heterosexual privilege, individuals with a bisexual identity had nowhere to go (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000). It has not been until recently that individuals who identify as bisexual have had an active and visible community with which to identify (Fox, 1996).

Perceptions of others also have a huge impact on the experiences of individuals who identify as bisexual and more specifically, on individuals who identify as both multiracial and bisexual. If an individual is not viewed outwardly as a person of color (due to ambiguous appearance), others may make hurtful comments around him or her that they may not normally make in the presence of other persons of color (Kerwin & Ponterotto, 1995). If a person is not outwardly viewed as bisexual, there again, comments may be made that further serve to isolate, ostracize, and denigrate individuals unknowingly.

The word “bisexual” falls into a binary and is subject to binary thinking – that a person is either gay or straight. This dichotomous mind-set renders bisexuality as an often invisible status (Ochs, 1996). A dual experience for individuals who identify as multiracial and individuals who identify as bisexual is the experience of invisibility. How a multiracial-bisexual female identifies may be very different from how society identifies her with regard to her race and sexual identity. When ambiguity exists, individuals often take cues (eye color, hair texture, with whom the person is seen partnered) in order to more easily categorize that individual (Stanley, 2004). Having to make a choice to disclose one’s racial background or
sexual identity, or not to disclose it at all, can be anxiety-producing and individuals may experience cognitive dissonance, or psychological discomfort (Festinger, 1957), as they are asked to identify their loyalties to specific groups (Gillem, 1996).

Stereotypes also play a role in the self-perception of individuals who identify as bisexual in general, and also multiracial-bisexual females specifically. Bisexuality is often treated as synonymous with promiscuity; therefore, females who identify as bisexual are often believed to be nonmonogamous and thought to have multiple partners simultaneously (Ochs, 1996; Stanley, 2004). The media acts as a catalyst for these stereotypes by purposefully showing individuals whose sexual identity is interesting and controversial. These images further promote and reinforce the view that individuals who identify as bisexual must maintain a male and female lover at the same time (Ochs). These hurtful and inaccurate stereotypes may lead to a feeling of invisibility as the female who identifies as multiracial and bisexual gets lost in the mainstream.

Ochs (1996) noted that individuals of various marginalized populations, such as “African Americans, Asian Americans, [people with visible disabilities], and some transgendered/transsexual individuals are visible minorities” (p. 219). When their marginal statuses are identifiable, they can more easily be targets of oppression. Other groups, which include bisexual individuals, are invisible. What Ochs shared that may apply to both multiracial and bisexual individuals is that, sometimes, individuals can “pass” in order to escape prejudice and discrimination. This may not be as easy for multiracial individuals who can be categorized into a specific racial group, but some people with an ambiguous appearance may be able to do so. Bisexuals, however, have the advantage of being able to
“pass” for heterosexual but this also means that it is more difficult for them to find like-others with whom to identify (Fox, 1996; Ochs).

Multiple Identity Models

It is inaccurate to theorize identity development as occurring in isolation, that single identities form irrespective of one another. Until recently, identity models have focused on single identities, which have been inadequate to explain the often intersecting, cumulative, and complex experiences of individuals (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000). For individuals whose identities are less clear-cut, multiple oppressions may be faced (Collins, 2000, 2004; Kich, 1996). People of color experience racism, sexual identity minorities experience homophobia, and females experience sexism (Fukuyama & Ferguson). If one is a female who identifies as multiracial and bisexual, oppression may be tri-fold.

Multidimensional identity models are useful for understanding possible ways of viewing multiple identities. Several such models are explained here; however, the framework used to guide this study is specific to the collective experience of multiracial and bisexual identities.

The first model is the multidimensional identity model (MIM) proposed by Reynolds and Pope (1991), the second model is a Venn diagram displaying the interconnectedness of gender, race, and class, suggested by West and Fenstermaker (1995), and the third model is the model of multiple dimensions of identity proposed by Jones and McEwen (2000), which builds upon the Reynolds and Pope (1991) model.

Reynolds and Pope

Reynolds and Pope (1991), dissatisfied with the linear models of identity that offered only a one-dimensional image of diversity, wished for a model that would adequately reflect
the multiple dimensions of identity, human diversity, and within group differences “such as sex, age, race/ethnicity, affectional-sexual orientation, and religion and their effect on the developmental process” (p. 174). They suggested that the only models available were located in theories that attempted to explain the identity development processes of biracial and bisexual individuals. Building upon Root’s (1990) biracial identity model, Reynolds and Pope (1991) developed the MIM, which offered four possible identities.

FIGURE 3: Multidimensional identity model

In the first two quadrants, individuals may choose to identify with only one aspect of self, either one that they have consciously decided upon, or one that has been assigned by society that they have passively accepted. In the third quadrant, individuals attempt to acknowledge all of their identities, but those identities exist in detached, independent forms. For example, a black-white multiracial female may pass between a community of females, a black community, and a white community, retaining a separate self in all of those locations. Lastly, in a position of identity resolution, the individual forms a new group that allows for a full integration of multiple identities. These new groups, which are becoming more readily
available, allow the individual to exist with her intersecting identities rather than with segmented selves.

Reynolds and Pope (1991) allowed for all choices in this model to be acceptable and highlighted the fluid nature of the choices, suggesting that individuals did not have to have a stable identity choice but, rather, could move about throughout their life course “based on personal needs, reference group, or environment” (p. 179).

Critique

While not supported by empirical evidence, this model allows for the fluid and dynamic interactions of multiple identities. What remains unanswered is whether individuals float among these choices, whether there are only four options, what leads individuals to adopt the single identity that society assigns or if that is even a possibility, and what processes lead to identity integration.

West and Fenstermaker

Interested in the effects of multiple oppressions and recognizing that “no person can experience gender without simultaneously experiencing race and class” (p. 13), West and Fenstermaker (1995) developed a visual representation of the intersections of race, class, and gender:
The purpose of displaying this diagram is to highlight the style that other authors have used to illustrate intersectionality. The overlapping circles suggest that individuals residing in the center section experience the effects of their race, class, and gender at the same time, while individuals on the outer edge, for example, may only experience their gender, or race, or class.

West and Fenstermaker’s (1995) goal in developing this perspective was to “demonstrate the usefulness of this perspective for understanding how people experience gender, race, and class simultaneously” (p. 30); furthermore, they stated, “While sex category, race category and class category are potentially omnirelevant to social life, individuals inhabit many different identities, and these may be stressed or muted, depending on the situation” (p. 30).
Jones and McEwen

Recognizing that no models existed that was specifically concerned with multiple identities, Jones and McEwen (2000) followed the lead of Reynolds and Pope (1991) in conceptualizing a more advanced understanding of multiple identities and their intersectionality. The model of multiple dimensions of identity (MMDI) was the result of in-depth interviews with 10 undergraduate women and was intended to “capture the essence of the core category as well as the identity stories of the participants” (p. 408). Like Reynolds and Pope’s (1991) model, the MMDI was constructed to be fluid and dynamic allowing for the continual construction of identities and taking into account the changing contexts throughout an individual’s life.

FIGURE 5: Model of multiple dimensions of identity

Present at the center of these multiple dimensions is the core sense of self or core identity. This is a somewhat invisible, personal identity. This identity was more difficult for participants to describe in comparison to other external identities. The intersecting circles
symbolized identity dimensions and context for the individual “such as gender, race, culture, and religion” (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 409). The intersectionality of these dimensions represented the reality that no one dimension can be understood on its own. This also suggests that multiple identities can be engaged in at one time. The larger circle in Figure 5 represents the context, which includes both the internal and external aspects of identity, and which affects the development of these identities.

**Critique**

Aspects of this model provide a more complex version of what West and Fenstermaker (1995) offered with their diagram of oppressed people. They focused on the simultaneously held positions of individuals who are oppressed by race, gender, and social class. What Jones and McEwen’s (2000) model offered is more complexity and focused on the internal and external factors that make up the self.

Unlike Reynolds and Pope’s (1991) model, this one is rooted in research. While possibly applicable to the focus of this present study, none of the 10 participants who provided the framework for the MMDI identified as multiracial and there was no discussion about the sexual identity of the participants. The age range of the sample was also a bit older (20-24) than the traditional college-age student (18-22).

Following up on this study, Abes and Jones (2004) used the MMDI as a framework for exploring how lesbian college students made meaning of their identities taking into account other dimensions of identity such as religion, race, gender, and social class, and how their capacity to make meaning shaped their perceptions of identity. The sample for this study consisted of 10 traditional college-age females (18-24), including 3 multiracial individuals. The results of this study were combined with the previously discussed MMDI
and a constructivist-developmental theory framework, offering a broader understanding of the intricacies of these female’s identity development.

The females in this study relied heavily on contextual influences to make meaning of their identities and often seemed unable to recognize that their identities overlapped. Some participants, while speaking as though their identities intersected, still believed that identity dimensions remained independent. Abes and Jones (2004) concluded that this was likely due to the conflicts participants experienced with their sexual orientation and external factors such as religion, culture, or race.

What may be presumed from this study, just in observation of the differing ages of participants, is that older college females have a stronger understanding of self and the factors that contributed to their identity formation than do younger college females. On the other hand, one could argue that the participants in the original Jones and McEwen (2000) study did not have to contend with the complexities of a marginal sexual identity coupled with a marginal racial identity, which may likely change the processes of identity development and one’s understanding of self.

All of these models provided a unique way to view multiple identities but it is unclear how individuals with the specific identities focused on in this study fit within these models. A more appropriate focus is on specific multiracial-bisexual models which are discussed in the next section.

Multiracial-Bisexual Identities

The intersection of sex and race is the primary focus of this study. The research specific to individuals identifying in marginal positions in both race and sexual identity is limited. What is available are anecdotal accounts and observations from those in the
counseling profession (Stanley, 2004), exploratory discussions (Collins, 2000, 2004; Kich, 1996), and first-person accounts of those who identify as multiracial and bisexual (Israel, 2004; Thompson, 2000). While some studies have included individuals who held both multiracial and bisexual identities, the studies did not necessarily focus on the process of development of these two identities (Bradford, 2004). The information that exists suggests that multiracial-bisexual individuals, specifically females, have a unique experience with regard to identity development and that multiple marginalization may lead to either acceptance or rejection of the messages and attitudes of the mainstream (Rust, 1996).

**Biracial-Bisexual Identity Model**

Kich (1996) discussed biracial and bisexual identities, side-by-side, in an effort to illuminate the similar marginal experiences of both populations. Fukuyama and Ferguson (2000) also acknowledged that previous biracial identity models, such as Poston’s (1990), could be relevant for bisexual individuals and that several of the five stages paralleled the stages of the coming out process for individuals adopting a bisexual identity. Similarities existed, according to Fukyuma and Ferguson (2000), in “the forced choice of one ethnic identity (like choosing between being gay or straight) when in fact the individual may identify with more than one ethnic group (or, as a bisexual, be attracted to both genders)” (p. 87).

In my review of the literature, I came across two first-person accounts. Israel (2004) discussed her own experiences as a Chinese/American/Jewish American woman who also identified as bisexual much the same way that Thompson (2000) shared her story as the daughter of a Chinese mother and an Anglo-American father, who also began identifying as bisexual. While both of these narratives are compelling, they only provide a glimpse into
what the identity development processes of females who share a multiracial-bisexual identity might involve.

Israel’s (2004) narrative provided support that the college experience is a time of great change, learning, and exploration. It was in college that she learned about sexuality and sexual identity and where she became involved in the gay community. She followed some of the previous bisexual identity models of self-disclosing to friends, becoming politically active, and experiencing ongoing uncertainty about her sexual identity. She also discussed her invisibility, her search for community, and the need for a biracial-bisexual paradigm that could help those in the counseling field.

Thompson (2000) shared her confusion in identifying racially and with regard to sexual identity and also shared that much of her identity development occurred in college. She, like Israel (2004), gained a feminist consciousness, and searched for a community of other biracial-bisexual females.

Collins

Collins (2000) provided one of the more detailed philosophical inquiries into the experiences of biracial-bisexual individuals after conducting a study of 15 Japanese American adults to gain a better understanding of ethnic identity development. After completing this study, Collins (2000) theorized that individuals who identified as bisexual may undergo a similar process in identity formation. Collins (2000) suggested that both biracial and bisexual individuals go through the following four phases:

Phase 1: Questioning/Confusion.

This phase explains the experience of people who have two identities that are distinct, where they transition from a position of self-devaluation to holding a
positive perception based on the coexistence of their identities. Dual minority status is compounded and Collins (2000) asserted, “All biracial/bisexual individuals regardless of racial background have had similar early and ongoing experiences of feeling differentness or dissonance” (p. 243).

**Phase II: Refusal/Suppression.**

Individuals in this phase attempt to define who they are, which may be impacted by the label they are given by others. This phase is a period of identification where biracial-bisexual individuals attempt to form friendships with a wide variety of individuals and where they may experience anxiety due to the firm boundaries of in-groups and out-groups. By identifying with varying subgroups, individuals gain a stronger sense of who they are.

**Phase III: Infusion/Exploration.**

In this phase, individuals may choose a single identity but experience dissonance as a result of that choice. They may connect with others in the hopes of locating and integrating the pieces of their identities that may be absent. During this process, individuals seek out reference groups as a means of support, which serves to broaden their identity groups.

**Phase IV: Resolution/Acceptance.**

After a long process of turmoil that includes feelings of self-devaluation, mislabeling, and identity confusion, individuals resolve and accept their identities and acknowledge “I am who I am” (p. 245). In this phase, biracial-bisexual individuals realize their uniqueness and locate environments where they feel supported.
**Critique**

While it may be relatively safe to make the claim that biracial and bisexual individuals experience the same things, it appears a bit lofty to align both of the experiences and suggest that a single person who inhabits both identities absolutely experiences the phases suggested by Collins (2000), especially since there is no empirical evidence to support this argument. Another weakness of this model is that Collins (2000) repeatedly generalized the experiences of the Japanese-American participants to the overall category of biracial. As has already been established, physical appearance plays a large part in the experiences of biracial individuals and Collins (2000) does not distinguish between ethnic and racial background, which may further complicate the identity development of individuals who identify as biracial-bisexual.

In the final stage of Collins’s (2000) model, she stated that biracial-bisexual individuals develop guides, which included their self, ideal self, and future self, that are used as standards of comparison. The explanation of these guides is unclear and, again, I question the existence of supporting evidence for these components. Collins (2000) essentially outlined variations on identity that include: (a) separate identities (blue and yellow), and (b) coexistence of identities (mixing blue and yellow to get green). Collins (2000) considered the coexistence of identities to be a multiple identity but only provided an analogy rather than concrete evidence to support this thought. I am left wondering what the process is to that identity integration, especially when the identity development process for a single biracial or bisexual identity is, on its own, so complicated. This model also does not discuss sex-gender differences nor the age of the individuals, both of which may play important roles in the process.
**Other Considerations**

Individuals with multiple identities and, therefore, multiple statuses must work to manage these identities and to integrate these identities into other group memberships (Rust, 1996). This integration can be difficult with so many mixed messages from society. As Rust (1996) shared, “Individuals whose mixed heritage have produced unresolved cultural difficulties sometimes transfer these difficulties to their bisexuality” (p. 70). This statement suggests that individuals’ multiracial or biracial identity informs their bisexual identity as they struggle to make sense of their multiple identities, to be seen in a world where they are often invisible, and to manage their multiple statuses.

Stanley (2004) acknowledged that “parents, siblings, extended family, friends, peers, colleagues, and partners, through home, educational institutions, organized religion, neighborhoods, and communities have a significant impact on one’s identity development” (p. 164). Since it has already been established that socially constructed categories of race and sexuality are quite rigid, one can only imagine the difficulties that individuals identifying outside of those boundaries may experience. Females who identify as both multiracial and bisexual may find it difficult to locate reference groups that are accepting and supportive of them, and therefore, may be left feeling rejected or isolated (Stanley).

While family, friends, and the community may traditionally be havens of safety, individuals with multiple marginal identities may find it difficult to explain their experiences to these individuals and may also receive mixed messages. An individual who is multiracial may receive support from family and friends on dimensions of race but may not be understood on dimensions of sexual identity. Communities may be welcoming to individuals with a particular sexual identity but may not understand how to provide support or empathy
with regard to racial identity. The uncertainty of where support may be coming from or whether an individual will lose support from a LGB community or racial community may also encourage individuals with a bisexual identity to remain in the closet about their identity (Rust, 1996).

Stanley (2004) and Rust (1996) pointed out that racism and homophobia exist everywhere and various social groups may feel that individuals are denying parts of themselves or are not fully committed to a certain identity. For example, a female who identifies as bisexual may be ostracized by a lesbian support group for being seen as not fully committed to a lesbian identity. Likewise, a Black-white biracial female may be rejected from a Black community for being viewed as not fully committed to her Black identity (Stanley).

Rust (1996) suggested that racial or cultural backgrounds and norms may serve to limit or facilitate the formation and expression of a bisexual identity. In cultural environments where sexuality is not discussed, heterosexuality may be viewed as the norm. In cultures where sexuality is openly discussed, individuals may feel more freedom to recognize same-sex feelings, but if homosexuality is still condemned in this environment, individuals with a bisexual identity may have difficulty developing a positive identity. In the mainstream literature, bisexuality is more accepted but the racial or cultural backdrop may affect the experiences of people of color who also identify as bisexual (Rust, 1996).

Summary

In this chapter, I have reviewed an extensive amount of literature to reach the very specific point that this present study addresses, the identity development process of female college students who identify as multiracial-bisexual. Since multiracial identity and bisexual
identity have many similarities, this literature review has followed parallel paths that have converged with a discussion of multiracial-bisexual identity. First, I have shared the fundamental camps in which both racial identity development and sexual identity development exist, the essentialist viewpoint and the social constructivist viewpoint. These overarching beliefs have been responsible for the types of studies and models that have been produced throughout the history of identity research on race and sex.

I then shared a brief discussion of what identity is to frame the more focused conversations about racial identity and sexual identity. I included information on the ways that the college environment impacts identity overall and expressed that adolescents experience numerous changes within a college setting due to freedom, exploration, and personal and academic challenges. I also broadly discussed identity development in females as the present study focused only on female college students.

Next, I highlighted racial identity formation to frame a more detailed discussion of multiracial identity development, and I acknowledged the historical markers that made that discussion possible. Here, I talked about the dichotomous, Black-white view of race and the ways that multiracial identity was conceptualized using primarily monoracial frameworks. Once researchers realized that developing a multiracial identity was a unique process of its own, the development of specific biracial and multiracial models emerged. These models followed roughly four paths, the plight of the marginal man/deficit models, stage theories, typology approaches, and the more robust and comprehensive ecological models. Within the ecological framework, I shared the models of Root (1990, 2000) and Renn (2000, 2003), the leading theorists of multiracial identity development and also shared important factors within this process, which included appearance, gender, and acceptance by family, friends, and the
community. Within this section, I also highlighted Renn’s (2000) ecology of student development model which is one of the guiding frameworks for this study, which emphasized the various contexts within which college students must navigate and which are potential influences for identity development.

After that, I repeated the same process with a whole new body of literature on sexual identity formation and bisexual identity development. I explored the history of sexual identity development and shared the works of Kinsey et al. (1948, 1953) and Klein (1993), then I looked at the prevailing dichotomous view of sexual orientation, that an individual is either homosexual or heterosexual, which highlighted the invisibility of the bisexual identity, and I explored the new understanding of sexuality as residing on a continuum that allowed for more flexibility. I then discussed bisexual identity models which, much like multiracial identity, were first conceptualized using monosexual frameworks that were not adequate to explain the experiences of bisexual people. I shared the classic models of Cass (1979, 1984) and D’Augelli (1994a), discussed typology models that highlighted the variations within bisexual identity, and then focused on the most recent bisexual identity development models offered by Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor (1994) and Bradford (2004).

In keeping with the topic of the present study, I discussed the impact of college on bisexual identity development and then shifted my focus to the intersection of identities. Here, I introduced several multidimensional identity models which included the work of Reynolds and Pope (1991), West and Fenstermaker (1995) Jones and McEwen (2000), and the research by Abes and Jones (2004) that explored the model of multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000) with female college students who identified as lesbian.
Had there not been a proposed model of biracial-bisexual identity, I would have utilized the multidimensional identity models as a guide for this study.

The final discussion of this chapter focused on multiracial-bisexual identities where I shared the anecdotal evidence of Israel (2004; Israel & Mohr, 2004) and Thompson (2000). Lastly, I described Collins’s (2000, 2004) proposed model of biracial-bisexual identity development which is the specific framework used for this study.

In Chapter 3, I share the details of my methodological approach, which consists of a discussion of my philosophical belief system, the theoretical perspectives that guide this study, the methodological approach I used, and the methods employed to collect the data. I conclude Chapter 3 by sharing the ways that I addressed trustworthiness and the delimitations of this study.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to better understand how female college students who identify as both multiracial and bisexual make meaning of their identities as well as what events in the college setting have aided or hindered their identity development. In this chapter, I describe the philosophical foundations and theoretical framework that guide this study, the methodological approach used, information about the participants, data collection and analysis techniques, criteria for trustworthiness, and finally the study’s delimitations. To assure that the procedures used in this study met ethical standards concerning the use of human research subjects, I submitted the necessary documents to the Office of Research Compliance at Iowa State University and received approval on October 30, 2007.

Methodological Approach

To acquire the data in a manner that accurately reflected the stories of the participants, I chose to use a qualitative methodological design. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) stated that, “Qualitative research is situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible…. [it] involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world” (p. 3). Taylor and Bogdan (1998) referred to qualitative methodology, “research that produces descriptive data” (p. 7).

The research questions for this particular study lent themselves to the use of qualitative methodology over other methods because they dealt with meaning making, the description of the identity development process for the participants, and a discussion of the participants’ college experience and how it impacted their identity. These questions could not
be answered adequately using, for example, a quantitative methodology that forced participants to choose from pre-set responses.

Taylor and Bogdan (1998) outlined eight characteristics of qualitative research or the qualitative researcher:

1. **Qualitative researchers are interested in the meanings that people attach to their lives.** In other words, researchers allow participants to share how they experience reality.

2. **Qualitative research is inductive.** Rather than analyzing data in a frame of preconceived ideas, qualitative researchers focus on the emerging patterns and themes from the data to gain insight into the phenomena.

3. **Qualitative researchers take a holistic approach when researching individuals and include factors such as setting, people, and groups during inquiry.** Taking a holistic approach means that the researcher includes the context of a person’s past and present that help shape that person’s experience.

4. **Qualitative researchers consider the ways that individuals think and act in their everyday lives.** In other words, researchers take great care to keep the settings of research as naturalistic and unobtrusive as possible.

5. **The qualitative researcher believes that all perspectives are worth studying.** The goal of qualitative research is to “examine how things look from different vantage points” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 9). With this perspective, the goal is to eliminate positions of privilege, which means that one person’s experience is no more important than another’s.
6. **Meaningfulness is the emphasis of qualitative research.** This approach, through a systematic process, offers data through human experience, observations, and descriptions of the person’s everyday life. Qualitative researchers are able to stay connected to their data and gain direct knowledge of social life.

7. **All settings and all groups provide useful information for the qualitative researcher.** In other words, anything can be studied. The researcher determines which environments, contexts, or groups will be most interesting and provide the greatest results.

8. **Qualitative research is a craft.** Unlike other research methodologies, qualitative research does not adhere to a standardized format. Researchers using qualitative methodologies must be flexible and creative about how they obtain their data. There are guidelines to follow but no hard and fast rules.

   In agreement with Taylor and Bogdan (1998), Snape and Spencer (2003) stated that “there is no single, accepted way of doing qualitative research” (p. 2). They suggested that the researcher’s beliefs about the social world, the knowledge of ways that information can be acquired, the goals of the research, the audience, and the position of the researcher impact the ways that the project is carried out.

   Flick, Kardorff, and Steinke (2004) outlined the basic theoretical assumptions of qualitative research as:

   1. Social reality is understood as a shared product and attribution of meanings.
   2. Processual nature and reflexivity of social reality are assumed.
   3. ‘Objective’ life circumstances are made relevant to a life-world through subjective meanings.
4. The communicative nature of social reality permits the reconstruction of constructions of social reality to become the starting point for research. (p. 7)

Ritchie (2003) suggested that qualitative research was useful for describing what exists, understanding the reasons for what exists, evaluating the effectiveness of what exists, and developing theories or implications based on the information gained from studying what exists. In other words, qualitative research provides researchers with the opportunity to “unpack” issues, to see what they are about or what lies inside, and to explore how they are understood by those connected with them” (p. 27).

The topic for this study, female college students’ meaning making of their multiracial-bisexual identity, is a topic that cannot easily be understood using methods that distance the researcher from the participants, such as surveys, for example. Rather, the researcher needs to develop a relationship with the respondents, listen to their stories in order to gain an understanding of their experiences, and “describe life-worlds ‘from the inside out’, from the point of view of the people who participate” (Flick et al., 2004, p. 3).

McCracken (1988) shared that “qualitative methods are most useful and powerful when they are used to discover how the respondent sees the world” (p. 21). Flick et al. (2004) stated that qualitative research contributes “to a better understanding of social realities and [draws] attention to processes, meaning patterns and structural features” (p. 3). They also suggested that qualitative research provides thick, rich description which, for this study, is useful for gaining an understanding of females’ experience in the college setting and their understanding of their identity processes.

Qualitative research has been used in a variety of disciplines including sociology (Campbell, 2000; Fitzgerald, 2007; Pappas, McKenry, & Catlett, 2004), psychology (Buki,
Kogan, Keen, & Uman, 2007; Marsiglio & Hinojosa, 2007), and more recently, student affairs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Josselson, 1996; Manning, 1992; Renn, 2004). It offers unique perspectives on topics where little is previously known (Straus & Corbin, 1990).

Manning (1992) suggested that qualitative research offered student affairs professionals the ability to answer difficult questions, address the meaning of complex situations, and look closely at others’ perspectives to gain understanding. Prasad (2005) may have summarized it best, stating that qualitative methodologies align with craftwork which “involves the disciplined creativity that results in a tangible and well-made product – in this case, the piece of research” (p. 7).

Epistemology-Constructionism

Crotty (1998) defined epistemology as “the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology” (p. 3). The epistemology embodies understanding and supplies us with the philosophical underpinnings of how we know what we know. The three epistemological questions, as outlined by Snape and Spencer (2003) are:

1. What is the relationship between the researcher and the researched?
2. What is the truth?
3. How is knowledge acquired?

The epistemology that frames this study is the constructionist paradigm that was explained in Chapter 2. Crotty (1998) described constructionism as a viewpoint where “truth – or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities of our world…meaning is not discovered, but constructed” (pp. 8-9).

Broido and Manning (2002) offered four characteristics of the constructionist paradigm that appear to align with the points made by Snape and Spencer (2003):
1. The researcher-respondent relationship is subjective, interactive, and interdependent.

2. Reality is multiple, complex, and not easily quantifiable.

3. The values of the researcher, respondents, research site, and underlying theory cannot help but undergird all aspects of research.

4. The research product (e.g., interpretations) is context specific. (p. 436)

Constructionism is an appropriate philosophical framework for this study because of the importance of each female’s unique story, the meaning she makes of her identity, and the impact of the college environment on her identity development. On par with the case to use qualitative research over other frameworks, Manning and Broido (2002) shared that “the movement to instill ethics and the action toward social justice find continued expression in a future movement in qualitative research” (p. 443), which further supports my choice in using a qualitative methodology and a constructionist philosophical foundation.

Theoretical Perspective and Methodology

To better understand how the female college students in this study make meaning of their identities with regard to race and sexual identity, as well as the impact that the college environment has on their identity development process, I chose phenomenology, which falls under the interpretivist umbrella, for exploring the participants’ experiences. Prasad (2005) suggested that interpretive qualitative methods are useful because they allow for the interpretation of socially constructed phenomena, in this case, race and sexual identity

Phenomenologists, according to Taylor and Bogdan (1998), view human behavior, “as a product of how people define their world” (p. 10). The role of the researcher, using this theoretical perspective, is to capture the meanings that people attach to experiences and the
ways that people construct their realities. Phenomenology encourages the researcher to set preexisting meaning systems aside and to be open to the emergent properties of the phenomena. Crotty (1998) stated that phenomenological research “emerges as an exploration, via personal experiences, of prevailing cultural understandings” (p. 83).

An assumption of phenomenology is that reality can only be understood through interpretation (Prasad, 2005). In interpreting the data, however, Moustakas (1994) warned researchers to approach data freshly, to avoid making assumptions, and to develop questions to help guide the research process. The role of the researcher is to become an expert on the topic and to have enough knowledge about the topic to determine where and how current findings can relate to past findings and future inquiries.

Phenomenological interviewing is employed for this study and is considered to be “a specific type of in-depth interviewing grounded in the theoretical tradition of phenomenology” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 82). It includes three basic steps: (1) epoche – a period where the researcher self-reflects to locate and remove any personal biases, (2) phenomenological reduction – where the researcher crafts his or her thinking in a way that allows for identification of the phenomenon in its purest form, and (3) structural synthesis – where the phenomenon is described deeply and richly (Patton, 1990).

My intention with this study was to add to what little is known about multiracial and bisexual female college students, to provide support for, if applicable, Collins’s (2000) model of biracial-bisexual identity development, and to shed light on the identity development process of females who identify as both multiracial and bisexual. Utilizing a phenomenological approach allowed me to focus on the participants’ voices and to decipher
the emerging themes to better understand their experiences and the ways that their identity development was impacted by the college environment.

Phenomenology provides a useful approach when studying the experiences of college students or when the topic may be sensitive. In a study by Cornett-DeVito and Worley (2005), the phenomenological approach was used to gain an understanding of the experiences of 21 students with learning disabilities. The authors suggested that their use of this methodology was because phenomenology focuses on the lived experience of the participants and “is sensitive to the uniqueness of persons” (p. 318).

Another example of a phenomenological study used for student affairs work is the study by Logue, Hutchens, and Hector (2005) that was conducted to describe the experience of college students in leadership. The authors chose this methodology so the phenomenon could be explored and so the 6 participants could freely share the information about their personal experience. The hope was also that themes would emerge during the data collection.

Each of these articles illustrated the importance of a methodology that allowed for fluidity, participants’ personal experience, and uniqueness. One study investigated a potentially sensitive topic, learning disabilities, and offered implications for classroom instructors, and the other study focused on a specific college student experience, participating in a leadership role, and shared ways in which student affairs professionals could better engage and develop college students in their leadership positions.

Since phenomenology helps the researcher identify the participants’ essence and the research procedure requires “extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning” (Creswell, 2003, p. 15), I believe that phenomenology as a philosophy and a method is most appropriate. Information on this topic can only be gained
from the voices of those who identify as both multiracial and bisexual. In the next section, I describe how the research participants were selected.

Participants and Gaining Access

An essential piece of the research process is determining who will and will not be included in the study. Maxwell (2005) suggested that using the term “sampling” within qualitative research is problematic because it connotes representing the population that is sampled. It is difficult, if not impossible, to represent an entire population given the topic of this study because the population is invisible and because the focus is only on females who identify as multiracial-bisexual. Individuals for this study were located using a sampling strategy.

Several types of sampling strategies exist. Probability sampling allows for each participant to have an equal chance of being selected to participate in the study (Lewis, 2003; Maxwell, 2005). Ritchie, Lewis and Elam (2003) stated that what qualitative researchers use is a non-probability sample where,

Units are deliberately selected to reflect particular features of or groups within the sampled population. The sample is not intended to be statistically representative: the chances of selection for each element are unknown but, instead, the characteristics of the population are used as the basis of selection. (p. 78)

Criterion or purposive sampling is a commonly used strategy to select participants (Creswell, 2003; Ritchie et al., 2003). In this type of sampling, participants are selected based on what purpose they serve or the type of location they represent. Ritchie et al. suggested two principal aims of this strategy: (1) to ensure that the key constituencies of relevance to the subject matter are covered, and (2) to ensure that some diversity is included so that the impact of specific characteristics can be explored.
Maxwell (2005) stated four possible goals of purposeful selection: (1) achieving representativeness, (2) adequately capturing heterogeneity, (3) deliberately examining cases that are critical for the theories included in the study, and (4) establishing particular comparisons that might illuminate differences between participants or settings.

For this study, I purposefully chose participants who fit the following criteria: (1) identified as full-time college students, (2) were between the ages of 18-22, (3) attended a four-year institution, (4) identified as female, and (5) identified as multiracial/biracial and bisexual. I hoped that the students involved in this study would offer me information rich in accounts of their identity development processes and the impact of the college environment on how they made meaning of their multiracial-bisexual identity.

Since this sample was not an easily identified one, I employed a “snowballing or chain sampling” technique where I asked existing participants to identify anyone else they knew who might fit the participant criteria. Ritchie et al. (2003) stated that this approach is particularly useful for “dispersed and small populations, and where the key selection criteria are characteristics which might not be widely disclosed by individuals or which are too sensitive for a screening interview (for example sexual orientation)” (p. 94).

One concern of the snowball sampling approach is the lack of diversity that could be produced as participants suggest other individuals who meet the criteria; however, since I did not designate what racial mixture one must be in order to identify as multiracial, nor did I designate whether an individual was out as bisexual or in a current relationship with a male or female, diversity of the sample was still honored.

Since I believed that locating female college students who identify as multiracial and bisexual might be difficult, I did not limit myself to any particular four-year institution, nor
to any one region of the country. One of the major requirements in terms of location was that participants attend a school within the United States as a logistical matter. I was more interested in locating the individuals who met the above five criteria than their location within the U.S.

Seidman (2006) stated that “building the interviewing relationship begins the moment the potential participant hears of the study” (p. 46), and urged researchers to make contact with participants themselves rather than going through a third party. Sometimes, however, access to participants may be controlled by both formal and informal gatekeepers (Seidman, 2006), or those who have the power to grant access to participants.

Seidman (2006) suggested that when a researcher is not focusing on a particular site, there need not be access through an authority and “the more adult and autonomous the potential participants, the more likely that access can be more direct if a particular site is not the subject of the inquiry” (p. 44). Since this study focused on college students who were between the ages of 18-22, accessing the participants was relatively simple. I sent out a call for participants (Appendix A) to several electronic lists (list-serves) and individuals including: (1) the MAVIN board of directors on which I was a board member at the time of this study, (2) an electronic list of student affairs professionals contributing to a book chapter on multiracial identity of which I was a contributing member, (3) the Social Justice Training Institute (SJTI) list-serve which connects student affairs professionals all over the United States who have participated in any of the social justice institutes, (4) the National Consortium for LGBT Directors which includes over 200 colleges and universities, (5) and a personal contact with Dr. Robyn Ochs, a bisexual activist who has speaking engagements all over the United States.
The gatekeepers for this study were the initial point-persons for several of the list-serves but I acquired a verbal agreement from each of them to disseminate my call for participants. I received one email from a college LGBT office that shared their procedures for sending the call on to their students, but I did not address this particular email since, within two weeks, I had received enough participants who fit my criteria. The ease with which I obtained participants surprised me since I suspected I would have difficulty locating enough individuals to provide an adequate sample.

Following Seidman’s (2006) suggestion to “do it yourself” (p. 46), I developed the call for participants that was disseminated by others and then explained the study directly to the participants who contacted me. Although 10 participants initially expressed interest in the study, I excluded 3 in the beginning because one was a male, one was a female who thought she only needed to answer a survey, and one was a female who initially expressed interest but then stopped responding to emails. I met with the 7 remaining participants to conduct interviews and later excluded one of the participants because when I met ze (a gender neutral term for he/she) in person, ze informed me that ze no longer identified as a bisexual female, but rather, identified as a heterosexual male, and therefore, no longer met my requirements for inclusion. In the next section of this chapter, I describe the data collection procedures used to understand the identity development process of female college students who identify as multiracial and bisexual.

Data Collection Procedures

Several qualitative methods exist which include but are not limited to: participant observation, focus groups, life histories, document analysis, and narrative. The method employed for this study was in-depth interviewing.
In-depth Interviewing

Kahn and Cannell (1957, p. 149 as cited by Marshall & Rossman, 1995) described in-depth interviewing as “a conversation with a purpose” (p. 80). Seidman (2006) stated that,

At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience...At the heart of interviewing research is an interest in other individuals’ stories because they are of worth. (p. 9)

In-depth interviewing allows for the participants to frame and structure responses in a climate of acceptance. The participants’ experience and voice are valuable and useful to understanding the phenomenon. Furthermore, Taylor and Bogdan (1998) described in-depth interviewing as “repeated face-to-face encounters between the researcher and informants directed toward understanding informants’ perspectives on their lives, experiences, or situations expressed in their own words” (p. 88).

Interviews provide researchers the opportunity to gain a significant amount of information quickly and immediate follow-up for clarification is possible (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). According to Taylor and Bogdan (1998), in-depth interviewing is a well-suited data collection procedure when: (1) the research interests are clearly defined, (2) the settings or people are not easily accessible, (3) there are time constraints placed on the researcher, and (4) the researcher is interested in a wide range of settings or individuals. Interviewing provides a context for people’s behavior and has an underlying assumption that the ways people make meaning of their experience affect how that experience is carried out (Seidman, 2006).

In this study, the stories heard were those of female college students who identify as multiracial and bisexual. In an attempt to be true to these stories and following the
suggestions of Rubin and Rubin (1995), I encouraged participants to describe their experiences in their own words using language that was relevant to them and accurately described how they saw themselves in the context of the questions they were asked. I worked to develop a relationship between myself and the participants, and I remained aware of the ethical issues involved in the researcher-participant relationship. That relationship was honored and was true to the completeness and the accuracy of the final written product.

*Types of Interviews*

Several types of interviews exist which include structured and semi-structured or unstructured techniques. Structured interviews are described as closed or forced choice where participants are limited in their responses (Schwandt, 2007; Seidman, 2006), while semi-structured or unstructured interviews are viewed as a friendly conversation (Seidman, 2006; Spradley, 1979). Semi-structured interviews were employed for this study as a way to provide the opportunity to “[explore] people’s views of reality and allows the researcher to generate theory” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 18).

This approach allows researchers the opportunity to work within a nonstandard framework to better assess the diversity among participants. Reinharz (1992) believed that this approach was particularly useful when interviewing females because it allowed for female participants to share ideas and memories in their own words rather than having others (males) speak for them. Furthermore, Reinharz (1992) stated that “interviewing is also consistent with many women’s interest in avoiding control over others and developing a sense of connectedness with people” (p. 20).
Three-Interview Approach

Though several types of interview formats exist, I used a three-interview approach originally designed by Dolbeare and Schuman (as cited in Seidman, 2006, p. 17) when I interviewed the participants for this study. Seidman (2006) described the model for conducting phenomenological interviews.

**Interview One: Focused Life History**

This interview helps put the participants’ experience into context when the participants share as much information about themselves in light of the research topic up to the current time.

**Interview Two: The Details of the Experience**

This interview concentrates on the participants’ present experience as it relates to the topic area of the study.

**Interview Three: Reflection on the Meaning**

The third area provides an opportunity for participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience. Meaning refers to “the intellectual and emotional connections between participants’ work and life” (p. 18).

Seidman (2006) stressed the importance of adhering to this three-structure process because of the specific purpose of each interview and because each subsequent interview builds on the one previous, offering a chronology. This format allowed me to gain valuable information offered by the participants about their experiences prior to their entrance into college, the impact of the college experience on their identity development process, and their reflection on and meaning making about their identity as multiracial-bisexual females.
Seidman (2006) suggested a 90-minute timeframe because 60 minutes may encourage participants to watch the clock while two hours seems too long to sit in one place. “Given that the purpose of this approach is to have the participants reconstruct their experience, put it in the context of their lives, and reflect on its meaning, anything shorter than 90 minutes for each interview seems too short” (Seidman, 2006, p. 20). The interviews conducted for this study averaged between 45-90 minutes long with the second interview typically lasting the longest.

Debates exist about the spacing of interviews. Seidman (2006) advised that interviews be spaced three to seven days apart. This offered participants time to think about their responses from the previous interview and allowed the researcher several weeks to work with the participants. Alternatives to this spacing, however, may be necessary. As long as the structure of the three-interview series remained the same, and “participants [are able to] reconstruct and reflect upon their experience within the context of their lives” (Seidman, 2006, p. 21), the duration and spacing of the interviews can be a little more flexible.

In this study, since interviewing 7 participants face-to-face required me to fly to three different states over a four-week period, I structured the interview over a 2-3 day span. I conducted the first interview with each participant/s on the first day, transcribed the tape/s, and conducted the second interview/s on the second day. In some instances, I interviewed two or three participants per trip since several were located at the same college. The third interview was conducted over the phone within a week or two after the face-to-face visit. The structure of Seidman’s (2006) three-interview process remained in place so that I could obtain thick, rich data in context. One of the participants was located within driving distance
from me, so I was able to adhere more closely to Seidman’s (2006) initial three-to-seven day timeframe with that person.

To ensure confidentiality, participants in this study were asked to sign an informed consent document (Appendix B) and they chose pseudonyms for themselves. To help develop a clear participant profile, the females in this study were asked to share demographic questions such as age and year in school as part of the interview protocol (Appendix D). The in-depth interviews were tape recorded with the participants’ consent and transcribed by me.

Field Texts

Clandinin and Connelly (1998) referred to journals as field texts which “become important...in personal experience methods [such as interviews] when we acknowledge the relationship we have as researchers with our participants. The nature of these relationships shape the construction of the records” (p. 168). Field texts offer the researcher the opportunity to keep an ongoing record of thoughts and reflections.

Taylor and Bogdan (1998) also encouraged researchers to keep detailed notes after face-to-face interviews as well as telephone encounters. These authors suggested that field notes should include specific details of the setting, descriptions of the participants, and the feelings of the researcher. They stated that,

To distance yourself from personal feelings is to refuse to take the role of the other person and see things from his or her point of view. What you feel may be what informants feel or may have felt in the past. (p. 73)

In other words, it is important, as a researcher, to reflect on the experience of the research process as a way to organize what has been covered, to document possible emerging themes or interpretations, and to keep track of comments that occur between researcher and participant outside the interview space (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). I kept detailed field texts
which aided me in making sense of the information gained from the participants as well as to
detail my feelings both before and after each interview.

Additional Considerations

This study posed several complexities that must be addressed. These include the
potential sensitivity of the topic, terminology associated with multiracial and bisexual
identification, considerations of the sex-gender of the participants as well as the researcher,
considerations of the race of the researcher, and the insider/outsider position of the
researcher.

Emotions and Sensitive Issues

The researcher-participant relationship should be managed with care. Since I worked
to establish what Seidman (1998) defined as a “deeply sharing, mutually intimate
interviewing relationship” (p. 83), I was respectful and responsible with the emotions of the
participants. Traditionally, the role of emotions during the interview process has been
avoided as a topic of inquiry or has been given a negative connotation by those who believe
that researchers exploit their participants by manipulating their emotions as a way to build
rapport (Oakley, 1981). Owens (1996), however, suggested that in some cases, the research
topics evoke emotions due to their sensitive nature.

When managing possibly sensitive topics, the researcher should work to create an
environment that is comfortable and encourage participants to speak freely about their
experiences. The researcher must also, however, work to remain professional and detached
during this process. This balance is delicate and can be further managed by the
professionalism and appearance of the researcher (Owens, 1996).
The topic of this interview, meaning making for female college students who identify as multiracial and bisexual, may be considered sensitive and did trigger various emotions in the participants. Requesting that participants reflect on the private aspects of their lives delves into the intimate sphere of their worlds. As a researcher, I asked participants to consider and share experiences that, in some cases, they had not shared before. This occurred when I invited them to “engage in [the] reflexive project [of interviewing]” (Birch & Miller, 2000, p. 189). As a caretaking measure, all participants were provided with the contact information of their school’s counseling center in case they required assistance during or upon completion of this study (Appendix C).

Self-Identification of Participants

In this study, I have framed the criteria for my participants around those who identify as multiracial and bisexual. One of the important factors is the participants’ ability to self-identify within those limits. Attention was paid to the varying labels within the racial identity dimension such as multiracial, biracial, mixed-heritage, or mixed race; and the sexual identity dimension such as bisexual, pansexual, or queer. I asked participants how they identify their racial and sexual identities. Terms used throughout the study for racial identity included biracial, multiracial, and Hispanic. Some of the participants, when asked about race, shared labels that are not currently understood as racial terms (French, Dutch, Hispanic), but will be used as such throughout this study to remain true to the participants’ understanding of them. Terms used throughout the study for sexual identity included bisexual, pansexual, and queer, and when referring to the collective identity, the term multiracial/biracial-bisexual/pansexual is used.
**Sex-gender**

Evidence exists that suggests when researchers and participants are or are perceived to be of different sex-genders, the results differ from the dynamics of same-sex-gendered research relationships, though same-sex-gendered research relationships are not without potential problems such as false assumptions or unspoken competition (Seidman, 1998).

Reinharz (1992) argued that “for a woman to be understood in a social research project, it may be necessary for her to be interviewed by a woman. Such a situation represents woman-to-woman talk” (p. 23). The woman-to-woman dynamic was present in this study since I, the researcher, am perceived as female and the participants included in this study self-identified as female. A female researcher who listens carefully and cautiously may encourage her female respondents to construct meaning, cultivate new ideas, or clearly say what she means (Reinharz).

Following Seidman’s (1998) suggestion, I reviewed interview transcripts, reflected on my perceptions of the sex-gender research dynamic in my journal, and processed that experience with my peer reviewers. Ultimately, my concern was for the care of the participants and that equity existed within the research process.

**Race**

It is necessary that I acknowledge the racial dynamic between myself and the participants, given the pervasiveness of racism in the United States today. Again, the balancing act between being similar to the participants which helped build rapport, and distanced enough to conduct quality research, still existed (Seidman, 2006).

Multiracial identity is complex in that no two people, even with the same racial mixture, look alike or have the same experiences. My hope, with this study, is that I was able
to highlight these unique experiences given that all participants identified as multiracial/biracial. I believe that the racial power dynamics did not come into play between researcher and participant nearly as much in this study because I also identify as multiracial.

It is important to state that cross-racial interactions between researcher and participant can produce quality data. Seidman (2006) noted that “the three-interview structure can mitigate tensions in other cross-racial interviewing relationships…[and] by returning to the participant three times, an interviewer has the opportunity to demonstrate respect, thoughtfulness, and interest in that individual, all of which can work toward ameliorating skepticism” (p. 100).

*Insider/ Outsider Status*

As mentioned earlier in this study, my insider status as female or female-appearing, multiracial, and bisexual/queer proved useful in collecting the data. Schwandt (2007) described the insider/outsider status as:

An internalist or insider perspective holds that knowledge of the social world must start from the insider or social actor’s account of what life means. To know the world of human action is to understand the subjective meanings of that action to the actors. In contrast, an externalist or outsider perspective argues that knowledge of the social world consists in causal explanations of human behavior. (p. 152)

Griffith (1998) further stated that the insider/outsider debate really centered on the relationship between the researcher and participant. The insider is,

Someone whose biography (gender, race, class, sexual orientation and so on) gives her a lived familiarity with the group being researched…[and the outsider is] a researcher who does not have an intimate knowledge of the group being researched prior to their [sic] entry into the group. (p. 362)

As a researcher who holds similar identities as the participants, I have some knowledge about the possible experiences that this study’s participants may have
encountered. I could relate to having an ambiguous appearance and feeling that both sexual and racial identities were invisible. I recalled trying to navigate the coming out process and working to understand my racial and sexual identity labels while negotiating the college environment. These insights offered me some privileges that other researchers might have possessed.

Although having a similar sex, racial, and sexual identity as the participants may have been useful, I inhabited the outsider status with regard to their experiences in the pre-college and college campuses. Each participant had unique family and community circumstance, and each college campus was situated in a different region of the United States. Therefore, I had no understanding of the college climate or culture in those areas. My goal in this study was to create rapport with the participants by making them aware of my insider status but remain distanced as I learned from them their individual experiences.

Several researchers have shared the advantages of the insider status. Guardia (2006), for example, acknowledged his insider status as a member of the Latino and Latino fraternity communities when doing his study on how participation in a Latino fraternity at a Hispanic Serving Institution contributed to ethnic identity development. His insider status offered him access to participants as well as knowledge about the organizations he studied that non-Latino/non-Latino fraternity member researchers would not have had.

Acker’s (2001) study focused on the insider/outsider status of feminist qualitative researchers who were female faculty members in the disciplines of social work, education, pharmacy, and dentistry. Acker (2001) stated,

Members of the research team had connections to the four fields, and [it was] originally believed that their insider status in that regard would facilitate access to the
participants, rapport in the interviews, analysis of the data and communication of the results. (p. 153)

The five researchers who participated in this study found their insider status to be useful in gaining access to their participants. Furthermore, they anticipated that they would enjoy the studies because they would, for the most part, be women interviewing women. One specific example of how the insider positioning of the researcher aided in gaining unique qualitative research is shared in the passage below:

A small number of [the researchers’] interviews were very emotional, perhaps because the interview situation provided a unique opportunity for these women in science to express their grief at being misunderstood in a field to which they had made such a strong commitment. A few were in the process of leaving the field and shared their emotions about this prospect with the interviewer, who was also about to leave the field. It appeared that the interviewer’s extensive knowledge of the field and the people in it, plus her own experiences, put her in a better position to generate trust, sharing, and emotional expression than was the case for interviews conducted by ‘outsiders,’ i.e., the rest of us. (p. 157)

Both of these examples offer support that the insider status is useful for gaining access and building a strong researcher-participant relationship. The insider position, however, can pose some problems. Acker (2001) suggested that when other researchers read the transcripts of interviews from insiders, they were sometimes difficult to interpret due to the shared understandings between researcher and participant that were often unclear. The ease at which an insider researcher may experience the researcher-participant relationship may also result in interviews that veer off topic. Insider researchers are also often familiar with the language used by those within the shared community. With regard to the external-outsider position, Acker (2001) shared, “External-Outsiders had their own problems…they were often marked by exchanges where the interviewer had to ask for clarification of information given” (p. 161).
Several considerations for this study have been discussed. The sex-gender, race, and insider/outsider position of the researcher has the potential to impact the relationship developed between the researcher and the participant and may ultimately affect the quality of research obtained. In the next section, I discuss the data analysis procedures.

Data Analysis Procedures

Qualitative researchers must remember that, “Research is a craft. To be a successful researcher is to be something more than a technician. You must create technique rather than slavishly follow procedures” (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975, p. 101). Once research has been conducted, the researcher has the arduous task of analyzing the data, otherwise described as “messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and [a] fascinating process” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, 111).

The general formula for analyzing data, according to Marshall and Rossman (1995) is:

1. **Organizing the data**

   This step involves reading and re-reading the data to become familiar with it in intimate ways. During this process, the researcher “cleans up” the data, but pays close attention to how the data is reduced, working hard to keep the stories true to the way the participants intended.

2. **Generating categories, themes, and patterns**

   This may be the most complex process where salient themes, reoccurring topics or patterns, and language are linked together.

3. **Testing emergent hypotheses**
The search for plausibility of hypotheses and theories occurs in this stage. “Part of this phase is to evaluate the data for their informational adequacy, credibility, usefulness, and centrality” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 116).

4. Searching for alternative explanations

This step calls for the researcher to critically analyze the findings. The researcher must search for any alternative explanations and describe them in ways that express plausibility. Conclusions are made in this step which relates to future research directions.

5. Writing the report

This final stage involves choosing words carefully to best reflect the complexity of the data. Researchers must shape the information they have obtained and make meaning of it.

Similarly, Seidman (2006) suggested the following tips for managing data:

1. Begin working with the data once an interview has been completed. This process includes mentally reviewing each interview and preparing for the next, which may include developing additional research questions.

2. Transcribe the interviews. Transcribing provides a detailed, written account of the verbal interview that is recorded so that analysis can take place.

3. Begin the coding process. The first step in this process is to reduce the text by choosing passages that are of particular interest. This stage is one where judgment is exercised by the researcher. This is a critical stage for the researcher as data begin to be interpreted. Sharing those decisions with the participants can aid in the accuracy of this process.
4. Two ways to present and analyze data include crafting profiles and organizing the data around emergent themes. The profile is in the words of the participants and “allows [the researcher] to present the participant in context, to clarify his or her intentions, and to convey a sense of process and time” (Seidman, 2006, p. 119). Researchers may also take a thematic approach where, when coding the data, topics are categorized. Passages can then be chosen that connect with and illustrate the identified themes.

5. Interpreting the data is an ongoing process. Researchers must continually ask themselves what they have learned, what connections can be made, and what meaning can be made from the data. Interpretation may lead to suggestions for future research directions.

The process I followed consisted of conducting the interviews, transcribing the data, journaling about interesting topics and emergent themes after each interview, comparing all of the transcripts, coding the data by highlighting similarities and cutting/pasting the blocks of text into a single document with the theme heading, and then interpreting the themes and quotes that were pulled from the data to write the final chapters of this document.

Trustworthiness

A central concern for using a qualitative research technique is the issue of validity, or the meaningfulness of the research. One way that I validated my study was by operating within Seidman’s (2006) three-interview process.

[This process] places participants’ comments in context. It encourages interviewing participants over the course of 1 to 3 weeks to account for idiosyncratic days and to check for the internal consistency of what they say. Furthermore, by interviewing a number of participants, we can connect their experiences and check the comments of one participant against those of others. Finally, the goal of the process is to
understand how our participants understand and make meaning of their experience. If the interview structure works to allow them to make sense of themselves as well as to the interviewer, then it has gone a long way toward validity. (p. 24) Credibility, or the trustworthiness criteria, is defined as, “that quality of an investigation (and its findings) that made it noteworthy to audiences” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 299). Schwandt (2007) further shared the four criteria in addressing trustworthiness:

1. Credibility addressed the issue of the inquirer providing assurances of the fit between respondents’ views of their life ways and the inquirer’s reconstruction and representation of the same.

2. Transferability dealt with the issue of generalization in terms of case-to-case transfer. It concerned the inquirer’s responsibility for providing readers with sufficient information on the case studied such that readers could establish the degree of similarity between the case studied and the case to which findings might be transferred.

3. Dependability focused on the process of the inquiry and the inquirer’s responsibility for ensuring that the process was logical, traceable, and documented.

4. Confirmability was concerned with establishing the fact that the data and interpretation of an inquiry were not merely figments of the inquirer’s imagination. It called for linking assertions, findings, interpretations, and so on to that data themselves in readily discernible ways. (p. 299)

One way that I established both dependability and confirmability was to leave an audit trail, or systematic documentation of the research process, which consisted of field texts, tape recordings, and transcripts.
Credibility was maintained by utilizing peer debriefing and member checking procedures (Schwandt, 2007). I enlisted the services of three colleagues for peer debriefing purposes. They were sent copies of all of the transcripts and my active journal and I spoke with each of them multiple times throughout the data collection and coding processes. I returned all of the transcripts and the profiles to the participants for member checking purposes which offered them the opportunity to review and comment on my interpretations of the data. This collaborative procedure allowed for the development of richer data (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

Delimitations

Several delimitations existed for this study. As noted in Chapter 1, only female-identified college students were involved in this study, which left out the possibility of a sex-gender discussion such as the inclusion of transgendered individuals (this applied to the transgendered person who was excluded from this study) or males. Participants younger than 18 or older than 22 were also not considered, nor were individuals who attended two-year colleges, or individuals residing outside of the continental United States.

An additional delimitation of this study was the focus on multiracial identity and bisexuality, both of which are complex and fluid identities. Other identities that may have contributed to the identity development of the participants, such as religion, gender, ability, or social class were excluded.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the identity development of female college students who identify as both multiracial and bisexual, as well as the impact of the college experience on their identity development process. This chapter offered a detailed account of
the general methodological approach and philosophical belief system framing this study. In
addition, I have discussed the theoretical perspective, methodological approach, and methods
that were employed to collect and analyze the data. I have included a brief discussion of
considerations such as the researcher’s sex-gender, race, and insider/outsider status, and
lastly, I have shared how I ensured trustworthiness and noted the delimitations of this study.
CHAPTER 4

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

The purpose of this chapter is to provide context for the reader by presenting a profile of each college or university that the participants attended, a composite profile of the 6 participants in this study, and an individual profile of each participant. The individual profiles were constructed using the interview data. I have structured this chapter in a way that offers the composite profile of the participant group first and then divides the college and universities so that the participants who attended those schools are matched accordingly.

Composite Profile

The ages of the 6 participants ranged from 18 years to 22 years old. Participants attended schools located in the midwest, the south, the northeast, and the southwest. One participant was a freshman, three were sophomores, one was a senior, and one was a 5th year senior at the time of this study. Their multiracial/biracial identities include white, Mexican, Spanish, Hawaiian, Native American, Cherokee, Black, and French. Five of the 6 participants identified as bisexual and one identified as pansexual noting that her attraction to or relationship experience with individuals who identify as transgender led her to claim a pansexual identity. All 6 of the participants self-identified as female.

With regard to birthplace, one participant was born in a country other than the United States and one participant was born outside of the continental United States, with the other 4 participants being born and raised in the United States. The college majors of the participants included film, journalism, art, sociology, psychology, and biochemistry.
In the next section, a general profile of the college and universities that were visited is shared along with the individual profiles of each participant. The names used throughout the remainder of this study are pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

College/University and Individual Participant Profiles

Three universities and one college were visited to interview the 6 participants. Within each college or university profile, a brief discussion of the type of school as well as student demographics is offered. Following the college or university information is the profile of the student/s who attended that college or university.

University A

University A is designated as a 4-year-and-above public institution located in the south with an enrollment of over 50,000 students. The majority of students are undergraduates who attend full-time and the campus is primarily nonresidential with a high rate of transfer students. The university is considered an arts and sciences institution (http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications).

This institution was established in the 1800s and has grown to include several satellite campuses today. The University A satellite campus location enrolls 11,000 undergraduate students and has a diverse student population. The latest data that could be found (2006-2007) showed that, overall, the dominant racial category for students attending University A was white (56.6%), followed by Hispanic (15%), and Asian American students (14.4%). Females comprised 51.1% of the student population (websites withheld for confidentiality).

Allyse

Born and raised in the south, Allyse, who at the time of the study was a 20-year-old sophomore, identifies as Hispanic and bisexual. She stated that “Hispanic” was her version of
multiracial. Her story was unique and complicated and her family background placed her identity development process in context. Allyse’s mother is Mexican but Allyse shared that her mother’s skin is the fairest she has ever seen in her life. Allyse’s father and his side of the family contributed the complexities to Allyse’s story. Her father grew up in the south and is a full-blooded Spaniard but “[he] would never admit to that,” says Allyse.

Recently, Allyse found out that her father’s family came from Spain as conquistadors. They settled in the southwest and then moved to the south. With the hope of dropping their racial identity as a way to avoid prejudice and discrimination, her ancestors began changing their names even on birth certificates. Allyse’s grandfather instructed her father to say that he was white. “We are American, there is no other blood in us, we are purely white,” was the message her grandfather wanted conveyed. When Allyse was younger and began asking her dad what race they were, he became incredibly uncomfortable, would not answer, and would not offer her any explanations. That information was left up to Allyse’s mom to explain.

Allyse identified as Mexican and white until the death of her grandfather at the beginning of high school, which triggered her interest in finding out her racial heritage. “As I got older, I finally started figuring out the pieces of my dad’s crazy family history and [I] just started identifying as Hispanic because I couldn’t deny the fact that I am Spanish in some way.”

Allyse has one older brother whose respect for and idolization of their grandfather affected his racial identity as well. “Whatever my grandfather said was truth and so if we weren’t Spanish or if we were Native American that was truth. I was the one that was like ‘But wait, we’re not. You’re lying to me!’” Allyse explained.
Allyse grew up in a predominantly white suburb with little racial diversity in her high school. The only time students mixed racially was in sports. Even though Allyse identified as Mexican in high school, she did not hang out with the Mexican group. With regard to appearance, Allyse described herself as having dark hair and looking Hispanic but felt that others might not notice her Hispanic heritage if they met her in person.

[Some people have thought] I was Egyptian…my skin is olive colored, it’s not necessarily brown [and] it has a tint of yellow. It’s not the typical Mexican-colored skin and Spaniards, some of them are incredibly white but I’m not incredibly white…Most people do not assume that I’m Mexican or Spanish in any way…some of them guess Middle Eastern.

Allyse also shared a story about another time when she was not believed to have any Mexican heritage.

There was a guy from my Spanish class…he was Mexican and he was telling me that his sister was having a quinceañera. He asked me if I wanted to go with one of his friends. I met his friend and his friend said I wasn’t Mexican and I shouldn’t go. It didn’t traumatize me but I remember it because I was like, “I am Mexican.”

Allyse also did not grow up speaking Spanish. “[My mom speaks Spanish] but it wasn’t my growing up language which really upset me when I was younger.” Allyse speaks Spanish now and will often speak it when she is around her cousins, several of whom speak Spanish fluently.

Understanding her sexuality was a bit easier for Allyse. Internally, she understood that she was attracted to females while in high school but outwardly, she never would have labeled herself bisexual. For Allyse, college was the time where she could explore her sexuality.

Even though her sexual identity did not fully begin to develop until after she was out of her parent’s home, Allyse was still influenced by messages at home. “My dad, of course,
was [into] everything having to be normal, [and] he verbally expressed how he did not think that homosexuality [was] right at all [and that] he was disgusted by it.” The messages Allyse got from her peers about bisexuality was that bisexual behavior, such as two females together, was “hot” unless those two females actually identified as lesbian or bisexual. The conservative climate of her neighborhood and school made it difficult for anyone to break the mold and be different. Allyse was even excluded from her school’s political club because her views were seen as too liberal. She was asked to stop attending the club meetings.

When Allyse graduated from high school, it was the artsyness of University A, the southern university that she chose to attend, that was one of the main features that attracted her. Majoring in radio, television, and film, Allyse sought out a place where her liberal attitude could flourish and where she could surround herself with like-minded people. Her friend group in college included other film majors and also a large population of queer-identified people. Allyse involved herself with clubs and organizations related to her major, as well as groups that celebrate women. Once in awhile, she attended events catering to the LGBT population. Speaking about the way that her friend group and college environment helped her sexual identity develop, Allyse said,

I feel like a lot of my straight friends here are definitely open to those things versus had I still been in high school. In general, most of my friends here know that I’m bisexual which is definitely a contrast to [before]. I guess meeting people that were like-minded, meeting people that were going through the same things and were willing to talk about it, finding myself able to talk about it with more people, having more resources at school, meeting other people, and the friends that I have made [have contributed to the changes in my identity].

College drastically impacted Allyse’s life in terms of sexuality and she felt that if she had stayed in her home environment, it would have been “detrimental to my growth…I don’t
think I would be the same person right now, honestly, because this city and this college were just really nurturing for people that are struggling.”

**University B**

Designated as a four-year-and-above institution located in the midwest, University B provides public education to more than 26,000 students. In addition to graduate studies, University B offers an arts and sciences education and has a high undergraduate enrollment. With a primarily residential campus, University B is described as a large four-year research university ([http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications](http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications)). Established in the 1800s, University B has a hometown feel and strives to recognize diversity of all types. The largest racial demographic (2007) on this campus is white (18,000 students) with females comprising 41.1% of the student body (website withheld for confidentiality).

**Jayla**

Jayla was a 22-year-old fifth-year senior from the midwest who attended University B where she double majored in art and design and sociology at the time of this study. Her parents are still married and she is the oldest of three children with a 15-year-old sister and a 16-year-old brother. She describes her growing up environment as happy and says that her family is pretty close although her father is “really intense so he comes across as mean but I’ve never been scared of him.”

She agreed to participate in this study because she currently identifies as biracial and bisexual, although she did not used to always label herself that way. She explained that “on official forms where they have you mark race, I usually mark Mexican because it seems to work in my favor sometimes, but when I’m talking to someone I just tell them I’m part
Mexican, part Caucasian.” Jayla’s mother is Caucasian and her father is ½ Mexican. Jayla said,

> When I was in middle school and high school I never really thought of myself as Mexican even though my family was. I didn’t think ¼ was enough to claim but my sophomore year of high school I started dating a black guy, we dated for three years and he would tell people “Oh yeah, she’s Mexican,” so that helped me see more that other people view me like that even though I didn’t view myself that way.

Growing up, Jayla said that her family never really talked about race, that her neighborhood and school were diverse, and that race did not matter in her family. She said that growing up with her racial identity was difficult because,

> A lot of my Mexican family live [on the west coast] so we were always around the Caucasian side even though my grandpa was there with my grandma and she cooks Mexican food, but we never were around the family.

With regard to her sexual identity, Jayla never really thought that she was anything but straight until she started college where she began exploring her sexuality and realized that she really was attracted to both same-and-other sex individuals. She did not apply the bisexual label to herself until college.

Jayla’s friend group, before attending college, could be described as very (racially) diverse with “a lot of minorities.” Her friend group in college was also diverse but now included “a lot of gay friends, a lot of bisexual friends, but I also have a lot of straight friends. It’s about half-and-half with [half] being minority. [I have] a lot of black friends.”

The decision to attend University B was what Jayla described as “a funny story.” She was accepted into a midwestern art institute and was very excited to attend it, but her mother sent in an application to University B as a backup plan in case her family could not afford the art institute. Her mother also filled out a minority scholarship application.
I received the letter that I got the scholarship and that all I had to do was complete the interview with the head of admissions, so pretty much after that I knew that I wasn’t going to an art school because I got a free ride here. It was kind of devastating. It was not what I planned….but at the same time, how could I turn down all that money?

An evolution in Jayla’s understanding of her racial and sexual identity occurred in college due to the things she learned in classes and her interactions with her peers. “I think [my identities changed by] just learning more about both things…I guess I didn’t really know what biracial really incorporated [and] bisexual, I just didn’t know that I was bi until I got here.” With regard to race, because Jayla received a full ride scholarship to college, she also had to attend a class and weekend retreat for the scholarship recipients. It was in this class and during the retreat that she learned about what it meant to be biracial and about different cultures. “When I was on the retreat, people kept coming up to me and being like, ‘So what are you?’ I don’t know. I had to learn how to answer that question.”

One thing that Jayla noticed in college was the invisibility of biracial and bisexual identities in her classes.

[In classes] they skip bisexuals, like I never hear anything about it in class, it’s either gay or straight or transgender, that’s all I ever hear. [In this one class the professor] really irked me a lot because, it was a sex and gender class and we would talk about gender but whenever we would cover issues she’d be like, “Oh of course this is not just for straight marriages, it’s for gay and lesbian marriages.” I wrote on a comment sheet and was like, “Why don’t you ever talk about the in-between like bisexual?” [Did you ever take a race and ethnicity class?] Yes! That class we talked about different countries and their races, we didn’t even cover America…we didn’t even talk about like [multiracial].

Jayla received support for her identities from her family, friends, and significant others which greatly impacted the way that she thinks of herself now and the labels that she applies to herself.
C College

C College is a four-year-and-above private institution located in the northeast region of the United States. With an enrollment of approximately 2,000 undergraduate students, C College is categorized as a small, four-year institution. It is primarily residential and focuses on arts and sciences. (http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications). Founded in the mid-1800s, C College is highly selective with 21-26% of its recent freshmen classes comprised of students of color. International students from over 45 countries make up 8% of the student population. The freshman class of 2011 is made up of a student body that is 60% female and 40% male (website withheld for confidentiality).

Joan

Joan primarily identified with her Native American heritage but sometimes also identifies as multiracial. Though she was a 19-year-old sophomore majoring in sociology at C College in the northeast at the time of the study, Joan grew up in a suburb on the west coast.

My mother is white and my father is where I get all the mixing from. They were together until I was about six [and then] they divorced and that was pretty much the end of my father having a big influence in my life. He is a convicted felon. My mother is a single parent, no child support or anything. I grew up living with her. [We] moved around a lot because we didn’t have a lot of money. My Grammy has also been a huge thing in my life. [My dad] is Native American and a little bit Hispanic and then my mother is Scottish, Irish, English, and American.

Although Joan grew up in an environment wrought with financial stresses and other emotional strains, she was almost perfect academically and was very involved in extracurricular activities.

I’ve always done very good in school…up until this year I’ve always been pretty much perfect academically and then I just sort of realized that I wasn’t really doing this for me. I was doing it for her [mother]. Also up until high school I was very, very
involved in just every sort of extracurricular activity you could think of…it was kind of annoying actually.

Understanding her racial identity was a process. In her elementary school years, many people thought that Joan was Hispanic. Joan’s mother shared many negative messages about Hispanics and Mexicans and so Joan would always respond by saying, “No, I’m white.” Joan attended a boarding school for some time and when she returned to her high school, she began to delve into her racial background. Joan received encouragement from her step-grandmother on her father’s side to embrace her Native American heritage and was often given gifts of turquoise jewelry by her step-grandmother.

Joan’s high school was not very diverse.

I thought it was until I came here [to college] because it’s [high school] primarily white and Hispanic. I would say probably 50% of the school is white and probably 40% of it is Hispanic and then the last 10% is mostly Asian and then there’s a very small percentage that’s Black and I didn’t realize that that’s not how the world was.

Joan received a lot of mixed messages growing up.

I got all these different messages about what it was okay to be and what I should be ashamed of, if anything, and what I shouldn’t be [ashamed of] and what I should be proud of depending on who I was talking to. Basically anytime I was with my father’s side of the family or with my father it was always very much you know, “Be proud of your Native American heritage, it’s nothing to be ashamed of.” They never mentioned my Hispanic [side, the] small portion of me that’s Hispanic. My mother always sort of asked me to downplay the fact that I was Hispanic, she never said anything against me being Native American but she didn’t exactly encourage my stepping into it at all.

Joan’s racial identity development was clearly complicated and her sexual identity development and experiences were equally so. Joan identifies as bisexual. Growing up, she was attracted to boys until the end of junior high when she then began to think that she was a lesbian. What really triggered her sexual exploration was not necessarily anything that she physically did, but rather, a negative push from her peers.
I thought I was a lesbian for awhile…then I realized that I’m not a lesbian, I definitely still like men and I still want the attention from men…so I came back to high school [after boarding school] and by the time that happened somehow everyone knew that, “Joan is bisexual” or “Joan is a lesbian” or something. They all had their own opinions about it. [How did they find out?] I talked to a few friends about it, like a few what I thought were close friends but of course in high school…friends aren’t exactly what they are now. When I came back there was trouble so I was like, “No, no, I’m straight, I’m totally straight.”

Joan struggled with her peers and lost friends because of the rumors. She also gained new friends in two girls who both identified as bisexual when she was a sophomore in high school. “[My sophomore year] was when I had my first girlfriend.” Even though Joan experienced trials and tribulations regarding her sexuality while she was in high school, her mother was not aware of how she identified sexually.

Even though Joan’s mother was unaware of Joan’s sexual identity, Joan mentioned that she received mixed messages, again, from her mother regarding sexuality.

I have no idea if my mom even knows anyone who is bisexual. She’s always given me positive messages about the queer community…but at the same time [I] had a very clear undercurrent of, “You are marrying a man.” Really, it comes down to the fact that she feels like she was a failure in her life and so she wants me to be the perfect woman and in her mind the perfect woman is straight apparently.

Joan chose C College because a friend of hers also applied there and thought it looked like a good fit for Joan. Joan did not want a college that was too competitive that would remind her of her time in high school, and she felt like the campus was very open and supportive of both her racial and sexual identities. Joan appreciated the large gay population on the campus. The diversity center on campus also began sending her information. “They started sending me stuff right away which always made me feel good even though I’ve never actually been there or used the resources.”
Scarlet

Scarlet was 19 years old and a sophomore in college majoring in biochemistry at the time of the interviews. Her story offered a contrast to the others because she is not from the continental United States, but does attend school at C College located in a northeastern state. She described her growing up situation as convoluted.

I was raised by my mother. My parents got divorced when I was about two, after ten years of marriage. My father was not part of my life for a good portion of it because he had problems with drugs, so I was raised by my mother. [My father] actually just recently started to be a presence, a bigger presence [in my life].

Scarlet shared that her father’s racial make-up is “Hawaiian, Chinese, Portuguese, Filipino, German, [and] Danish,” and her mother’s is “English, Irish, [and] Scottish.” Scarlet used the term multiracial to describe herself but also says that she looks white.

Scarlet attended a private Montessori school until the fourth grade and then she went to one of the best private schools available in Hawaii, Dale High School. Scarlet shared her thoughts about attending Dale.

My experiences at Dale had a lot of affect on how I grew up because…I often got picked on for looking white. In high school and previous to college, I never identified with my Hawaiian culture. I was very much anti-Hawaiian, anti-anything cultural about Hawaii. I took Hawaiian for two years in high school and promptly forgot everything, which I regret now.

Scarlet went on to say that she did not identify with her “of colorness” sharing that,

So many people in Hawaii are such mixed races that I looked stranger at people who had like one or two races than I did at people who were ten different races or ethnic groups put together…so many people are of mixed ethnic backgrounds [in] Hawaii.

Not being recognized for her true racial identity frustrated Scarlet. “Growing up, I didn’t really have much of a defined racial identity, but looking back on it now, most of my identity was with my mother because that’s who I grew up with.”
The messages that Scarlet got about race were unique to her growing up environment in Hawaii and Dale High School. Since so many people have a mixed racial makeup where Scarlet is from, the messages from school suggested that that was normal. [We were taught that] “That’s okay. Be nice to each other. You’re all still the same [on the] inside.”

Scarlet’s sexuality had a large presence in her life before she went to college. She explained her experience,

I think I sort of always knew what lesbian and bisexual and gay and all of that [was]…I like to say that I chose my identity as pansexual and bisexual or whatever, as not straight…I previously wasn’t aware that there could be such a thing as bisexual or gay and then I had this friend who came out to me as bisexual…she told me about it and I said, “Why am I limiting myself to guys?” …So I came out as bisexual my freshman year and then I was very involved in activism within my high school…people didn’t fuck with me in high school because I was the big, scary dyke.

Scarlet became heavily involved in an underground counseling group, she started a club at her high school for LGBT individuals, she participated in activism in her broader community, and she was involved in activism on a national level. It was during her strong activism that she became friends with one of the leaders of one of the organizations.

She was amazing. She definitely had a big affect on a multiplicity of my identities. She actually graduated from C College. She’s the reason why I’m at C College. She had me apply and they [C College] ended up giving me the most money so I ended up coming to C College, and then she got a teaching job [here] my freshman year, so she moved up here with me.

Scarlet went on to explain why she identifies as pansexual.

In high school I was dating primarily women. I identified as bisexual and then I started dating transmen. I got into several very involved relationships with transmen. I was made aware of the term pansexual and I decided that that fit me better because I don’t like the gender binary…[transmen means] F-to-M trans, genderqueer, generally I am more attracted to people who were born female than [those] who were born male and then transition to female.
For Scarlet, her sexual identity was fully matured in high school; it was her racial identity that began to evolve once she got to college. She described both identities, however, as invisible to the general public. Her friendship group prior to college was “very gay or very gay friendly [and] very multiracial.”

In college, Scarlet described herself as “friends with everyone.” College was a big adjustment and offered her the opportunity to compare her time growing up in Hawaii to the race relations within the United States. It gave her a broader perspective and context to understand her place and her own identities.

*University D*

University D is a four-year public institution in the southwest with over 60,000 students. It offers arts and sciences degrees as well as graduate programs and has a high enrollment of undergraduate students. Most of the students who attend University D do not live on campus (http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications).

University D, which was established in the late 1800s, has four satellite campuses and is high in cultural diversity with students enrolling from all 50 states and over 100 nations across the world. The satellite campus on which the interviews were conducted is in a metropolitan area and is the largest of the four campuses with just over 51,000 students. The racial majority at this campus are white students (66.7%) with the second largest designation going to Hispanic students (14.2%). On the entire campus, the percentage of women attending University D is 52% (website withheld for confidentiality).

*Talisa*

Eighteen-year-old Talisa calls the southwest her home and, at the time of the interviews, had just completed her first semester as a freshman at University D as a
psychology major. The oldest of several siblings, Talisa grew up primarily with her mother and has an intermittent relationship with her father. Racially, Talisa identifies as multiracial because her father is Black and her mother is Mexican, but not having much interaction with her father left her feeling as though she did not act the way that people expected her to.

If anyone asks me, I’d say I’m Black and Mexican, but growing up the whole big joke about me is that I’m so like not Black cuz [of] how I talk and how I act. I wasn’t really around [that] as much. I was living in urban areas [but] I went to a tiny little Catholic school so I was very secluded from a lot of things. I just grew up not being so Black or urban. People called me the white girl or blonde because I’m ditzy. I haven’t actually come into being more or dressing more Black, [or] seeing myself as Black because I always thought being Black was what the stereotypes are…loud or obnoxious or just attitude…I’ve always been giggly and laughing and funny.

Growing up, Talisa’s peers in school were mostly Mexican with the exception of one Black student who ended up leaving. Talisa described what it was like for her being the token Black person.

[So I ended up being] the token Black girl but not being Black and they [peers] didn’t understand some things about me like I had to put grease in my hair and I didn’t wash my hair every night.

Talisa found her racial identity to be confusing when she was younger because, for the first two years in school, she attended an all Black school and then she switched to a Catholic school that was predominantly Hispanic. Initially, Talisa identified as Black but then, due to her new surroundings, she began to shift away from that identity and began to identify more with her Mexican side.

At first I used to be, “Well, yeah, I’m Black,” but then being around a lot of Hispanics, [I began] pulling away from my Black side of the family. People usually can’t guess that I’m Mexican at first so I’ve always had to kind of make it a point to say, “I’m Hispanic.” A lot of times I’m more attached to my Mexican side. I make more of an effort to be more a part of my Mexican culture than I do my Black culture just because I identify with it a lot more sometimes.
Not only did Talisa struggle to understand and embrace her biracial identity with the absence of the Black culture within which many people categorized her based on her appearance, but she also did not speak Spanish, which made it difficult for her to gain legitimacy as someone who identifies as part Mexican.

I remember going to a place [restaurant] which is like a Mexican pizza area thing…it was me and my cousin who you would never guess was my cousin because she’s light-skinned with red hair and freckles. [So, at the pizza place] it was me and my cousin and my best friend who is also Hispanic and we were talking to the guy [who works there] about getting a job there and he was like, “Well, do you speak Spanish?” and all three of us were like, “No, not really. We can understand it okay but not really.” And he’s like, “Oh, that’s a shame, that’s a shame.” And we said, “It’s not our fault.”

Talisa went on to explain that the story she had gotten from her mother about why her mother could not speak Spanish was because when her grandmother was a child, her grandmother was discouraged from speaking Spanish. At that time, parents were told that if their kids were allowed to speak Spanish, they would have an accent and then it would be harder for them to get a job and be successful. In an effort to gain a better understanding of her culture, however, Talisa is taking Spanish classes in college and has also taken some Salsa and other Latin dance classes.

Having worked hard to adjust to her confusing racial identity, Talisa is now, in college, tackling her sexual identity.

[Identifying as bisexual] is a funny process because it wasn’t even until recently that I actually started identifying as bisexual and even so I don’t really talk about it much with people simply because I don’t talk about my sexuality or relationships with anyone. I have never had a real actual boyfriend. I realized it [bisexuality] around fifth or sixth grade because my best friend was a lesbian.

Watching her best friend struggle for acceptance with her family and peers kept Talisa from coming out about her own sexual identity. Talisa was not out to her family, at the
time of the interviews, but she does have gay cousins and felt that her parents would still love her.

They’d love me either way…that would probably be the hardest thing about me finally telling my family…having to explain it [and] I probably wouldn’t tell them until I maybe had a girlfriend that I wanted to start bringing around the family.

As a new freshman at University D, Talisa was exploring her identities. Her racial identity is what prompted her to attend University D, as well as her extreme distaste for cold weather. A participant in a program for young Hispanic females since 8th grade, Talisa was groomed to attend University D. She also felt comfortable on the campus because participants in the program attended classes on the campus every once in awhile and she believed that University D had a good program for her area of study. In her first semester in college, Talisa had intentions of exploring her Black culture. “I attended a little thing that they had for incoming Black freshmen and that was where I met some people, but I haven’t really kept up with that as much.”

**Jasmine**

Jasmine, at the time of this study was a 19-year-old sophomore who identified as multiracial and bisexual. She attended University D and majored in journalism with a focus on film. At the end of the first interview, she explained that her goal was to become the editor of *Vanity Fair* and given all of her accomplishments to date, this is a very achievable goal for her.

Jasmine explained her multiracial identity and her family configuration in this way.

On my dad’s side I am Black, Cherokee, and French and then on my mom’s side I’m a full-blooded Spaniard. Both my parents have a daughter each that I’m half-sisters with. [My parents] were divorced, married each other, and then had me. There’s a 14-year age difference between my mom’s daughter and me and there’s a 10-year age
difference between my dad’s daughter and me so I’ve never really grown up with siblings.

Jasmine was born in Germany as a military brat and spent the next five years of her life in Italy until her parents moved to the United States and settled in the southwest. The European influence, Jasmine believed, is what made race invisible to her because her parents simply did not talk about it when she was growing up.

Before high school, I didn’t really understand race. It wasn’t talked about in my house. My dad [was] never like, “You’re mixed.” That never happened until I went to high school. I went to a predominantly white high school. It was a private school. There were only three black kids in the entire school and so it was like, “Oh, you’re the Black girl,” and then finally, I was like, “No, I’m Black, and I’m Cherokee, and I’m French, and I’m Spanish. I’m not just Black.” So I didn’t really start to identify as multiracial until high school.

The most that Jasmine recalled her parents discussing race was when they explained why her skin was darker than other people’s.

They’d have to explain that [my skin was darker] because, “You’re a product of me and your dad and so your skin is going to be somewhere in the middle and so you’re not going to be as light-skinned as everyone else.”

Jasmine was not even aware of her parents’ racial identity for a long time. “I always thought that my dad was just Black and my mom was white. I didn’t even know my mom was a Spaniard…she’s so pale and she’s got green eyes and she’s naturally blonde.” Jasmine also shared that her mother speaks Spanish, but she thought that was just because her mother liked the language.

Jasmine said that she was often mistaken for Black in school.

I’m just lumped into a category, “Oh, she’s Black, she’s tall.” I’ve noticed [that] a lot of people have difficulty describing people and I’m pretty sure that’s usually the thing that clicks in someone’s mind. They’re like “Oh, do you know Jasmine? Yeah, she’s the Black one.” It’s annoying but I can understand it with the group of friends that I hang out with. I am like the Black girl…it’s easy to identify me, but it’s kind of annoying that that’s the only way I’m identified.
Just before starting high school, Jasmine began to realize that her sexual identity was something other than heterosexual. She explained that the doctors had told her parents she was going to be a boy and when she came out as a girl, her father still treated her like a son. She grew up playing sports and in high school, she realized that many of her basketball teammates identified as lesbian. It was during this time that Jasmine began feeling attractions toward females. To date, Jasmine has only shared her sexual identity with her friends and a few close relatives.

I still actually haven’t verbalized it to my parents. I talked it over with one of my friends and then I finally just was like, “You know what? I know I am [bisexual], there’s no more doubt in me.” I told my sister and then I told my best friend, which was the hardest thing in the world to do because me and my best friend are polar opposites and she is as far right conservative as you can possibly be, so when I told her this, I was scared. She was just like, “Okay.” I think that’s what helped me through…[if] she’s okay with it, then other people are going to be okay.

Much of Jasmine’s hesitancy about her sexual identity stems from her religious upbringing and the messages that she grew up receiving from the church about homosexuality. The passage below is just one illustration of what Jasmine experienced in school.

[In school] we actually had a teacher fired because he came out…he was fired by the Archbishop. They said it was because he was teaching kids that gay is the right way and he was leading them astray. Really, he was [fired] just because he was gay; he wasn’t doing any of those things that they said and because it’s a private school he can’t really do anything about that.

Jasmine took all of those influences with her when she enrolled in University D. What encouraged Jasmine to attend University D was one thing: money. She received a full ride scholarship, which was something she simply could not pass up. Her friends in college almost all identify as heterosexual and are all mostly “really strict Christian.” The racial
makeup of her college friends is an assortment. Jasmine is very busy in college acting as president of a multiracial/biracial student organization. She is also involved in a Christian fellowship, a student leadership organization, a community service organization, and a mentoring program. She hopes to, upon graduation, attend NYU to complete her master’s degree in journalism.

Summary of Profiles

The summary of the college and university profiles as well as the individual profiles details the diversity among schools and participants. The variety in school size, setting, and location support the validity of the findings given that the participants shared many experiences as females who identify as multiracial/biracial-bisexual/pansexual. These individuals can also be viewed as a group. All of the participants displayed uncertainty and evolution during their processes of racial and sexual identity development.

The participants were all significantly influenced by their family structure, pre-college environment, friends, and college environment. Many of the participants had physically or emotionally absent fathers and were either raised by or shared a close bond with their mothers. Extended family also played a role in identity development for many of the participants.

All of the participants wanted to share their story to impart awareness and knowledge on the general public and academic community. All participants also had suggestions for changes either at the high school level or college level that would help others like them feel safe, secure, and included.
In Chapter 5, I provide an in-depth analysis of the data that were collected to help draw together the similarities and differences among the participants’ experiences, and illuminate the challenges and celebrations of 6 diverse individuals.
CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS

The 18 transcripts from the interviews I conducted offered a wealth of data about the lives and experiences of the 6 female participants. In this chapter, I interpret the stories told to me by describing the emergent themes of influence that comprise the pre-college context: family, friends, and school, and the themes that describe the experiences of the participants within the college context. These themes are entitled: negotiating self, trying on, and finding fit.

Discovery: The Pre-College Context

In the Introduction to Sociology courses that I teach, students learn about the agents of socialization or the “familiar settings [that] have special importance to the socialization process” (Macionis, 2007, p. 77). In other words, several key social environments affect how we come to understand who we are. Three primary social settings that had a strong influence on the participants in this study were family, friends/peers, and school.

Family

Previous literature has suggested that family greatly impacts socialization and the ways in which young people develop identity (Brown, 2001; El-Khawas, 2003; Hancock, 1995; Lal, 2001; Nurmi, 2001; Renn, 2004). According to Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002), “Families provide a social context in which individuals develop a sense of self, values, and beliefs” (p. 59). Furthermore, families provide a context within which “children learn…who they are in relation to themselves, their family, and others in society” (p. 59).
The 6 participants in this study described the messages that they received from family members about race and sexuality as mixed and confusing. Some mothers, for example, were supportive of their daughters’ quest for answers about their racial identity. Other mothers, primarily white mothers, insisted on a white identity for their daughters and were not supportive of any other identity.

To recapture the trends in familial relationships for the participants, an understanding of family structure is needed. Three participants (Jayla, Allyse, and Jasmine) had parents who were still married to one another, 2 participants (Scarlet and Joan) were only children, 2 participants (Talisa and Jasmine) had half-siblings with whom they had relationships, 2 participants (Scarlet and Joan) had physically absent fathers growing up, 2 participants (Jasmine and Talisa) had fathers who were around sporadically, 1 participant (Allyse) had an emotionally absent father, and only 1 participant (Jayla) described an uneventful and supportive upbringing.

Literature on father-absence cites a variety of potential adjustment challenges that could be experienced by daughters, such as loss of security and higher rates of teenage pregnancy (Griffin, 1998), stunted emotional development, and difficulty forming and maintaining relationships (Krohn & Bogan, 2001). Perkins (2001) suggested that relational issues during childhood may surface in college when adolescents try to understand themselves “separate from childhood dependencies and develop an intellectual and emotional depth to their identity” (p. 616).

In addition to father-absence, and sometimes as a result of it, all 6 participants had relationships with grandparents and other extended relatives that played a role in their understanding of their racial identity, whether it was by seeking information about their racial
background, being encouraged to explore their heritage, or seeking solace when immediate family was not understanding. The proximity of grandparents was a factor for Jayla, whose grandparents on her father’s side lived in Mexico. Their long distance away from her meant that she did not have the opportunity to interact much with them growing up.

The openness of racial discussions at home, or the lack there of, had implications on how the participants felt about race later in life. Two participants (Jayla and Jasmine) had little to no discussion about race growing up and, therefore, seemed to lack awareness or ownership of their identities and easily adopted the categories into which others put them. Three participants (Allyse, Joan, and Scarlet) received either negative messages from family members or the topic was avoided entirely, which encouraged them to seek more answers about their racial identity on their own, and 1 participant (Talisa) was rather indifferent about race because it just was not a big deal in her family since multiracial identity was “normal.”

Buckley and Carter (2004), in their study of biracial females, described similar findings. Three of the 5 female participants in their study said that race was not discussed at home and was often treated as a secret. One participant felt that because race was not discussed, she was confident in who she was. Three participants also internalized feelings that race should not be discussed and explain to others that race was too “personal” to disclose or talk about.

Family also contributed to the participants’ understanding of their bisexual identity. Four participants (Jayla, Jasmine, Scarlet, and Talisa) had relatives who identify as non-heterosexual, and 2 participants (Allyse and Joan) shared stories about either gay or lesbian friends or co-workers of their mothers. Having access to lesbian or gay relatives, or at least
being aware that there were identities other than heterosexual, affected how the participants thought about their own sexual identity.

With regard to openness about bisexual identity, 2 participants (Jayla and Scarlet) were “out” to immediate, and in some cases, extended family, 3 participants (Allyse, Joan, and Talisa) said that they did not plan to come out unless they absolutely needed to (i.e., they partnered with a female), and 1 participant (Jasmine) expressed intense fear about coming out to her family because of her father’s behavior toward non-heterosexual individuals. Fathers, whether present or not during their daughter’s upbringing, sent many negative messages about non-heterosexuality, which then encouraged several of the participants (all but Jayla and Scarlet) to keep their bisexual/pansexual identity quiet.

To further support the findings noted above, segments of each participant’s story as it relates to family structure are shared in the following pages. These vignettes illustrate, in the participants’ own words, the complexities of their racial makeup and family dynamics, the level of support from family with regard to racial and bisexual identity, and the amount of navigation that these females had to do to better understand their identities.

*Jayla*

Jayla, who has a white mother and a father who is half-Mexican, shared this reflection about her family,

Well, I knew my dad and his family [were] Mexican, but the issue never really came up as to what I am. Race was always blended as far as our family was concerned. There was never any mention of people because of the color of their skin. It didn’t really matter to anyone in my family. I think that is why it never came up.

Jayla repeatedly shared that no one really discussed race in her family and, therefore, she did not have a strong understanding of her racial identity until she went to college. The
oldest of three siblings, she said that her father and siblings all identified racially the same way, though she was not clear on what way that was.

Out of all of the participants, Jayla had the most ambivalence and detachment about where her racial and sexual identities came from but continued to express that her family was supportive and never pressured her. This may contribute to her nonchalant attitude about these issues. She said this about bisexual identity and the expectations of her family,

I don’t think they really expect anything out of me, they never really do. As far as what I’m gonna do next, I’m kinda random. They expect me to achieve but not like (laughs) as far as being straight or whatever.

Many of the participants had physical or emotional separation from their fathers. Jayla detailed a supportive upbringing but described an intensity in her father that may have been perceived negatively by others. “[My] family has always been pretty close…my dad is really intense.” This statement suggested that there may be some tense dynamics between her and her father, or at least, between her father and others; however, no other information throughout Jayla’s interviews supported that.

Jayla also talked about her family’s reaction to her participating in this project, which further supported their impartiality to her racial and sexual identities. “Something that was interesting when I told my mom that I was doing these interviews cuz I was bisexual and biracial she was like, ‘oh, yeah I guess.’”

Allyse

Allyse, who has a mother who is Mexican and a father who technically is Spanish but who would never admit to it, shared a complicated story about her racial identity. She grew up believing she was Mexican and white until a triggering event, the death of her grandfather, caused her to further explore her heritage. Growing up, she never felt
comfortable talking with her father about his racial background because of how he behaved when she brought it up. “When I was younger and asking my dad what we were…my dad would get incredibly uncomfortable with it and would not answer and would tell me “Why does it matter what you are? You’re here now.”” Allyse continued by saying, “Most of my life I had no idea that my dad was anything but white, he was so dark but they [grandparents] would have rather me thought that he was Native American.” Allyse was deeply affected by the information that her father and grandparents kept from her and explained further what it was like for her growing up,

It was almost a don’t ask, don’t tell [topic and [growing up], since my dad tried to make it such a non-topic thing, I tried to avoid it as a topic in general. Since my dad was like that, it was hard for my mom to appropriate her culture into my family growing up so anything that I did do relating to a cultural background was mostly with my mother.

The impact of family on Allyse, with regard to her bisexual identity, was less involved, but much like her race, the don’t ask, don’t tell policy rang true. She felt she would not come out to her family unless she absolutely needed to; for example, if she brought a same-sex partner home. Allyse said that her father sent her negative messages about homosexuality.

My dad, of course, was “everything has to be normal.” I think he verbally expressed how he did not think that homosexuality is right at all [and] he was disgusted by it. My brother, following my dad, grew up the same exact way and absolutely did not like gay people and would hope he didn’t know any.

Allyse, whose family was intact, had little to no support from her father about race or bisexual identity and a brother who modeled her father. Her mom, who was her safe haven, encouraged the expression of the Mexican side of her identity and was supportive of individuals with a non-heterosexual identity.
[My dad] didn’t want to raise kids in a non-Americanized family although the hard thing about it is that my mom’s side of the family pushes Mexican on people more than detracts from it so they’re the ones that try to have all these extravagant Mexican dinners…. [With regard to bisexual identity] my mom…she kind of knows. My mom was my sanctuary [from the negative messages of her brother and father] for this cuz my mom was the one that was always like, “Everyone is a person. You have to give everyone a chance.” She would never be like, “I very much support homosexuality,” but she would say, “You’re too quick to judge.”

**Joan**

The family influence for Joan, primarily from her mother and grandmother, was strong. Her father was physically absent during most of her upbringing which greatly affected the way that she identified racially. Joan’s mother is white and her father is primarily Native American with a little bit of Hispanic heritage. Since her parents divorced when she was six, Joan lived with her mother and moved around a lot. “We didn’t have a lot of money. My Grammy [grandma] has been a HUGE thing in my life. She’s my mother’s mother.”

Since Joan’s white mother was who she spent her time with, Joan classified herself as white. It was not until late high school that she began to seek out information about her racial background and was encouraged by her step-grandmother to do so.

My grandmother on my father’s side was actually my step-grandmother. My father’s actual mother is 100% Native American and she married a white man and then she died and then he remarried a white woman. She [step-grandmother] recognized that all of his sons and him had a little bit of Native American or were full-fledged Native American so she, from a very young age, was always like, “You need to be proud of your Native American heritage.”

Joan’s mother’s influence affected her in several ways. Joan described how her mother pushed her to be perfect and to fulfill the many things that she had not fulfilled in her own youth. Her mother held stereotypes about Hispanic individuals that were passed on to Joan. This was an example of the conflicting messages that Joan received during her upbringing about how she should identify.
My small portion of me that’s Hispanic, my mother always sort of asked me to downplay the fact that I was Hispanic. She never said anything against me being Native American but she didn’t exactly encourage my stepping into it at all...and my Grammy has just always been very, “You’re just a mutt, you’re just you.” My mother suddenly became more supportive [of my Native American heritage] because she thought I was gonna go so far as to register and get the money for it.

Bisexual identity was also something for which Joan’s mother would not have expressed support but that her mother’s mother [Grammy] did. Even though Joan had a difficult high school experience with regard to bisexual identity, she did not believe that her mother knew about her bisexuality. Much like Allyse, Joan felt that her mother did not need to know unless she partnered with a female. “I don’t really feel the need to tell her because she’s very, very critical and there’s just no need.” Joan acknowledged that growing up, before she entered college, she spent a lot of time pleasing everyone but herself. “It almost sickens me now. I didn’t have any idea who I was and I was just doing things because they made mom happy. Once I stopped doing them that somehow angered people.”

Joan summarized the mixed messages she received from her mother by explaining that many things were okay to her mother if they were affecting other people but not okay if Joan was directly involved. With regard to race, Joan said about her mother, “Some stuff is okay but you’re going to be white or we’re not going to talk about it,” and similarly said about sexuality,

My Grammy, who loves my mom dearly and is always trying to defend her just kind of looked at me and said, “Yeah, I’m pretty sure that’s exactly how she would react. Like she’s okay with it [bisexuality] for other people but I don’t think she would be okay with it with you.”

Scarlet
Scarlet, who grew up in Hawaii, and is the daughter and only child of a white mother and a very racially and ethnically mixed father (Hawaiian, Mongolian, Filipino, Portuguese,
German, and Danish), immediately shared that her father was absent during her upbringing, much like Joan’s father was. The bitterness could be heard in her voice.

My family situation was a little bit convoluted. I was raised by my mother. [My parents] had been married for ten years, had me, and then two years [later] they got a divorce…yeah, that’s a little bit of a source of personal confusion there. My father was not part of my life for a good portion of it.

Scarlet said that race was not really something that came up for her growing up because of her white appearance and the types of schools that she attended when she was younger. “I have a very white mother and a very non-white father…I look more like my mother.” She went on to say, “Growing up, I didn’t really have much of a defined racial identity, but looking back on it now, most of my identity was with my mother because that’s who I grew up with.”

Scarlet, who now identifies as pansexual because of her attraction to transgendered individuals, focused more on her bisexual/pansexual identity before attending college and shared a story about coming out to her mother and father.

I have a few distinct memories as I was getting older about my father talking like “That’s so gay,” and talking about that “Queer on TV,” but I never really let that get to me. Coming out actually is an interesting story. I told my mom [my] sophomore year and she was fine with it and afraid of her boyfriend’s reaction. Her boyfriend, at the time, is very conservative. She’s still with him and we, to this day, clash quite often about my appearance, my piercings, my tattoo, [and] my sexual orientation…that was her concern. I didn’t come out to my father until much, much later because I was afraid of my grandparents’ reactions. They are old and very Christian and very proper, but I ended up telling them or I told my father and he was like, “Duh, I’ve known for so long.” [And] I have this aunt who is this great big old dyke. So, my father knew well before I was ready to tell him, but he’s definitely okay with it. He’s just kind of like, “Okay, whatever makes you happy go ahead,” but the rest of the family generally thinks it’s a phase. Scarlet also experienced mixed messages growing up about her racial and bisexual/pansexual identity in terms of how she should identify and what was acceptable or
not. Scarlet shared later that her friends and school environment had a larger impact on her identity development processes than did her family.

_Talisa_

Born to a young Mexican mother and Black father, Talisa, like several of the other participants, had an intermittently absent father and therefore, had close ties to her mother and grandparents while growing up. Her family experience is shared below.

My mom was really young when she had me so we moved around. My grandparents have been our big support system, helping to raise me and my sisters and brothers. My [parents] are not married and they’ve been together on and off most of my life. They’ve never really had something stable. I’ve always lived with my mother. My dad would come and go sometimes. Like he’d be there for some months and then he wouldn’t and it’s actually his parents, my grandparents, who live [here] and who we were mostly raised by.

Talisa explained that her father potentially has six children with other women and that she has two full-siblings who are 13 and 15 years younger than her. “There are still more than that [kids that her father has]. He once said he wanted six kids, now he has more than that. I have two younger [half] siblings [but] I’m not sure what age they are.”

Extended family support was necessary for Talisa and her family’s survival since her father was not always reliable. Talisa’s mom made sure that the children had some connection to her father’s parents and her siblings and since almost everyone lived in close proximity to her, this was always possible.

Talisa described her identities in a way that suggested she had the stereotypes of Mexican and Black culture deeply embedded in her. She saw her father as fitting into the stereotypical Black man role but felt that she did not fit into Black culture quite as easily.

[Because of where I went to school] I was very secluded from a lot of things and so I just kind of grew up not being so Black or urban as most people, so people called me the white girl…I haven’t really actually come into being more of the Black side of
myself, seeing myself as Black or as the stereotypical Black person. My dad is a stereotypical Black man, very much so actually. [Do you think that the reason that you’re maybe not into your Black culture, you don’t fit into that is because he was sort of in and out?] Probably yeah. It’s confusing because on that side of the family [father’s], I’ve always been around them and I grew up around them all the time but I’m not close to them. They’re not very tight-knit.

The lack of presence of her father made it easier for her to identify with her mother’s heritage even though she spent time with her father’s parents growing up. “I’m more attached to my Mexican side. I make more of an effort to be more a part of my Mexican culture than I do my Black culture just because I identify with it a lot more sometimes.”

Many of Talisa’s other stories involved cousins or siblings and being questioned about her racial identity because her appearance did not match theirs. One other story that shed light on her upbringing and also illustrated the influence of family was about her mother’s father.

Most of the time, growing up, I never really thought about it [racial identity] too much. Within my family it wasn’t a huge deal. My family just learned to accept it. I know, at first, when I was really young it was kind of an issue because my grandfather, my mom’s dad, wasn’t happy about it. When he first found out my mom was pregnant, he was not happy about it at all. I remember he said something about he didn’t want a coon baby or something like that and I remember she told me the first time he met my dad, he walked in and my grandfather was sitting in his La-Z-Boy recliner with a rifle at each side (laughs) so that scared my dad a lot. [But] when it came time to have the baby and my dad kind of ran out at that time, my grandfather was the one who actually helped my mom out and we lived with [them] when I was a baby.

During this same interview, Talisa shared that most of her aunts have biracial (Mexican and Black) children, so it is “kind of becoming like a norm. It’s [biracial identity] not even really a big deal anymore.”

With regard to bisexual identity, Talisa said that she realized her attraction to females in sixth grade but that she has not come out to anyone in her family. Since she watched a
friend of hers struggle and become alienated by her family during the coming out process, Talisa was discouraged from coming out and said, “I don’t like causing drama and complications.” She felt that if she did come out, however, her family would be supportive.

My family is very... they love anyone for who they are as long as you’re a good person. I have gay cousins and there’s lesbians in our family, too, but more distant. [My family jokes], they’ll say, “Oh, she’s a lesbian,” because I’ve never brought a boy [home]. I have a girl cousin that says, “Talisa, I know it, you’re a lesbian.”

Like Allyse and Joan, Talisa does not want to come out to her family until it is absolutely necessary.

I probably wouldn’t want to really talk about it or tell them until I maybe had a girlfriend that I wanted to start bringing around the family and that’s when it would probably get confusing because they’d probably try to say, “Well then you’re a lesbian.”

Talisa’s bisexual identity was new to her. As the youngest participant and the one who had been in college the least amount of time, the identity that appeared to be influenced the most by her family was her racial identity.

Jasmine

Jasmine presented yet another unique family structure and family influence on her racial and bisexual identity development. Raised by her Spanish mother and Black, Cherokee, and French father, Jasmine admitted to not really understanding race growing up because it was not talked about in her house. It was not until classmates began questioning her racial identity that she began to even think of herself as multiracial. Her parents’ reaction to her multiracial identity could be described as indifferent. “They were like, they didn’t think of it [race] as a big deal, that’s why we never talked about it and so when I started [identifying as multiracial], they didn’t really care. They’re like, ‘Okay, you’re multiracial. That’s good.’”
Jasmine, who was born in Germany and spent her first five years living in Italy as a military brat, explained that her parents’ indifference about race had less to do with them not caring and more to do with European influences.

My parents have a lot of European influences, like my dad was in the military and my mom’s parents are from Spain. In Europe, people don’t consider race. They consider nationality and so if I’m American, I’m American, it doesn’t matter what I am and so that’s kind of the view my parents always had, so I never separated people into groups.

This European influence that affected Jasmine was very clear when she said that she really had no idea that her mother was anything but white. Even though her grandparents are from Spain and her mother speaks Castilian, Jasmine had effectively misidentified her parents’ racial categories.

[My racial awareness came] partly [from] people asking me and then I really wanted to know because I always thought that my dad was just Black and my mom was white. I didn’t even know my mom was a Spaniard and so it was kind of interesting when she’s like, “Your grandparents speak Spanish, like how does this not click to you that we’re Spanish?” And I’m like, “I just never thought.” I just always thought my mom was white because she’s so pale. She dyes her hair dark, but she looks just white to the normal person and then my dad is just Black, he’s dark-skinned. I didn’t know that he’s Cherokee and French in there as well. [Does your mom identify as Spanish?] Uh huh. She says Hispanic; she’ll call herself Latina. I guess I never, before high school I just never really paid attention.

Jasmine’s bisexual identity was very new to her. Growing up, some of her experiences and identity development processes were influenced by her school setting and peer group. She came out to a friend and also to one of her sisters, but expressed intense hesitation in coming out to her parents. Throughout the interviews, Jasmine became emotional when discussing her bisexual identity in relation to her father and her religious beliefs.
In high school, Jasmine realized that her aunt’s “friend” was really her life partner. She had been oblivious to this fact much like she had been to her mother’s and father’s racial identity.

I always thought that was her friend and I found out once I got in high school that [she] was her life partner. You don’t think of life partners when you’re younger. I call her Aunt Lexi because my dad tells me to.

In terms of support, Jasmine said that her mother was supportive of her aunt’s family structure but her dad was less supportive. In sharing the next passage, Jasmine began to cry.

My mom is, but my dad’s really iffy, because my dad...like his, my aunt is on his side and, he’s always really been um, I don’t want to say prejudice cuz he’s not, he’s okay, like he’s okay with gays, he’s just not comfortable. I guess I don’t know...he uses the word that I absolutely hate and it makes me cringe every time he uses it but it’s my dad so I don’t feel like I can stand up to him. He uses the f-word but not the f-word that we use, like the f-word that rhymes with Bob Sagat and it makes me cringe so I want to say something but it’s my dad, I can’t really say something to my dad. I found out in my last year of high school that my favorite cousin on his side was gay and had just come out and my dad kind of was like he was really kind of gay-bashing at that time and then that’s when I was like, “I don’t think I’m going to be coming out to my dad.”

When questioned about her emotions, Jasmine explained,

It’s hard when I try to talk about my relationship with my dad because, I’m a daddy’s girl hard core but my dad hasn’t always been around because of the military and then once he retired, he got a new job where he was working even more hours and so I’ve never really been like super close with my dad. My dad’s approval is the biggest thing for me so then anything I think he would be disappointed with really makes me emotional because that’s my dad.

Jasmine’s recount of her relationship with her father illuminated the reasons that she was afraid of coming out to her parents and also the confusion and uncertainty that she felt in doing so.
Another agent of socialization and influence was the peer group in which the participants developed friendships. While family had a larger overall impact on racial development, friendships seemed to weigh more heavily on sexual identity development.

**Friends/Peers**

Youth culture today is highly impacted by friends and same-sex and other-sex peers (Morgan & Thompson, 2006; Nurmi, 2001; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1997). Fitting in is often a concern for adolescent girls (Phillips, 2004), and friendships can be just the relationship to offer support. Friendships, however, may “also provide varying experiences ranging from affirmation to prejudice” (Stanley, 2004, p. 164). Friends offered participants individuals in whom to confide, bi-curious counterparts with whom to experiment (Dempsey, Hillier, & Harrison, 2001), lesbian or bisexual friendships, and general support. Peer and friend relationships also offered experiences of betrayal, ridicule, and exclusion, which played a role in how and when the participants explored, disclosed, or settled on a sexual identity that best fit them.

Several of the participants shared that they knew they were not heterosexual long before they entered college. In some instances, they had childhood crushes on males and females or even experimented with their female friends. Jasmine’s first kiss was with a female and so was Allyse’s. Allyse explained that she and her “best friend from kindergarten until elementary school would make out and we would kiss all the time.” Allyse then developed a relationship with a female in high school. Though she acknowledged that most of her bisexual identity development occurred in college, she recognized that this high school experience influenced her.
There was one girl in high school that I would consider my first... it wasn’t a relationship really, we both just kind of acknowledged the fact that our friendship was, it didn’t stop at friendship but we didn’t really date. It was just the first time that another girl said, “Maybe we should be more than friends.”

Joan had boyfriends until the end of junior high and then, “all of a sudden,” she thought she was a lesbian. “I would look at pictures of women and say, ‘Wow, they’re really pretty. I kind of want to kiss that,’ and I thought I was a lesbian for awhile.” She went away to boarding school and realized she was still attracted to males and subsequently decided she was not a lesbian. She confided in a few friends about her sexual identity, so upon her return to her high school, everyone knew that she was bisexual and they “all had their own opinions about it.”

The moral of Joan’s story was, “Friends aren’t exactly what they are now.” She had some trouble finding new friends because of the rumors about her within her school so she began adamantly denying that she was anything but heterosexual. Joan then befriended two bisexual females and in her sophomore year of high school, she had her first girlfriend. At that point, she was out at her high school.

Scarlet had a friend her freshman year of high school who confided in her that she was bisexual. This prompted Scarlet to begin thinking about her own sexuality.

I kind of thought about it for a little while. A lot of my friends don’t understand this but the way I like to think of it is that I previously wasn’t aware that there could be such a thing as bisexual or gay and then I had this friend who came out to me as bisexual. I said, “Why am I limiting myself to guys?” So I came out as bisexual my freshman year. I was OUT!

This vignette illustrates Scarlet’s openness to try new things and her confidence with being true to herself even when the environment may not have been outwardly supportive.
Scarlet later described her friend group prior to entering college as gay or gay-friendly and multiracial.

Talisa explained that her time in school was not particularly easy because she could not racially fit in and her classmates did not understand her. One of her best friends, growing up, identified as a lesbian and Talisa became her confidante. Talisa recalled having similar feelings to what her friend described but not feeling comfortable enough to tell her.

I’m actually pretty glad I didn’t say it because [we] became very close friends and I had to help her, even now I still help her. She started telling people in junior high so she ended up getting ostracized from her school. She switched to another Catholic school that was even more strict…the whole process for her was pretty terrible. She got beat up once in high school.

The experience of watching her friend struggle kept Talisa from sharing her bisexual identity with anyone. Talisa went on to say that her friend group, because she was in such a small school, was comprised of the same people and that her graduating class only had 14 people in it. All of her friends were Mexican, though she said that race did not come up a lot.

With regard to sexuality, Talisa said, “I do have a friend who was, like now he says he’s gay. He was a close friend of mine junior-senior year.” She also confided that being out in a Catholic school was not the best thing, which implied that it was not easy to identify other non-heterosexuals in her high school.

Jayla described her friend group in school as diverse.

I grew up with a lot of Black and Mexican and Asian friends. I had two different groups of friends, one was a lot of minorities and my boyfriend was Black so we hung out with them all the time. The other group of friends were like more popular in my high school and they were known as the Crazy Girls. I mean, the group of friends that I was really close with [were all] mostly minorities.
With regard to race, Jasmine’s friends referred to her as “The Black girl,” which annoyed her. Her closer friends, however, knew that she was multiracial, but still called her “The Black girl.”

Jasmine’s participation on the basketball team is what introduced her to non-heterosexuality.

In high school, I was in basketball and of the 11 girls on my basketball team, 6 were lesbians. I was kind of just like, “Okay, I think I might be a lesbian but I like guys too, so what does that mean?” I finally recognized [that] I might be bisexual.

Jasmine was surprised by her experiences in school because many of her peers were gay or lesbian; therefore, she was able to find an “an assortment [of friends].”

Finding a support network was important for the participants as they came up through elementary, junior high, and high school. None of the participants described themselves as loners, so even if they struggled working through their racial identity or bisexual identity, they had people in whom they could confide and who would accept them.

Peer groups also sent messages about race and sexuality that influenced the ways that the participants thought about themselves or the behaviors in which they engaged. Many of the messages that the participants heard were about bisexuality. These stereotypes included that bisexual females were oversexualized, confused, in a phase, or interested in multiple partners. These stereotypes often eroticized females’ sexual behavior (Stanley, 2004). Joan shared,

[The messages I hear are about] threesomes and you know people will always ask, “Okay, well how many women have you been with and how many men have you been with?” and based on that answer they can tell me what my sexuality is.

Jayla said that in her school, bisexual females were thought of as “cool” or “hot.” Most of these messages came from male peers. Talisa actively wished to avoid the cliché of
bisexuality, such as females kissing in bars. “I know a bunch of girls who say they’re bisexual and they’re just, they just like to get love wherever they can. I want to try to avoid that at all costs.” Her response to anyone who told her that she is just confused was, “I’d want to punch them in the face.” She admitted that she wanted to help open people’s minds by talking about what bisexuality is rather than falling into the stereotypes.

Jasmine explained that the stereotypes that she heard about bisexual females caused her to worry about how dateable male peers might think her to be. She wondered if she should disclose her sexuality to them or if it would cause them to oversexualize her or scare them off.

With regard to race, messages from peers were often directly related to the appearance of the participant. Peers regularly questioned the participants as to whether they were “enough” to fit into a certain culture. If the participant did not know the language, the style, the clothing, or the behavior, then they were not seen as legitimately a member of that group.

Peers sent messages about “enough” status by way of inclusion and exclusion too. Most participants expressed that they were included throughout high school, except for Allyse who said that her views were too liberal for the political organization at her school and therefore, she was asked not to attend any more meetings. Joan was ostracized from her peer group after they believed her to be a lesbian or bisexual. Jayla said that her cultural organization at school was inclusive of everyone. Scarlet explained that her high school only admitted native Hawaiians and that there were legal battles going on about whether or not non-Hawaiians could attend. Her story about the struggle to get the gay-straight alliance started at her high school also indicated exclusion. Neither Talisa nor Jasmine really shared
clear examples of exclusion from any groups although both alluded to the religious overtones
of their schools in not condoning same-sex behavior.

Access to friends and interactions with peers were intertwined with the school setting
given that many of the participants developed their friendships within the walls of their
elementary, junior high, and high schools.

School

Berkovitz (1993) identified that the schooling experience influenced the development
of individuals and stated that, “the preschool and elementary school experience provides
crucial early socializing experiences” (p. 192), and specific to females, school provided
“person-related and female-related” (p. 193) effects. Person-related effects included,

Support of self-esteem, feelings of self-worth, pride in one’s ability, motivation, sense
of mastery, and trust in adults…female-related refers to effects which are more
directly related to female development, namely specific roles, advantages, liabilities,
prerogatives, mores, etc. prescribed overtly or covertly for women in the culture of
the particular school. The school can be seen as a microcosm and agent of the larger
society. (p. 193)

The schooling experience, whether school location, school type, or school curriculum,
influenced both the racial and sexual identity development of the participants.

School Influences on Racial Identity

Many schools do not include discussions about multiracial identity or bisexuality in
their curriculum, especially those with a religious doctrine. Similarly, if a school is in a rural
location or is small in size, access to diverse others may be limited (Burleson, 2005).

For most of the participants, their time in school affected both their racial and sexual
identity development, with a larger impact falling on the sexual identity of some. The school
setting was described by several participants as “diverse,” while others categorized their
learning institutions as “not diverse.” Some used the term “conservative” and others used “liberal” as a way to explain their school climate. Several of the participants attended parochial schools where the belief systems impacted their sexual identity development. All of the school climate descriptors offered by the participants had some bearing on the socialization that occurred there.

Almost all of the participants shared thoughts about the level of diversity that existed in their schools with regard to race and ethnicity. Allyse and Talisa described schools that were not very racially diverse. Allyse explained,

I grew up in a suburb. It is in the most conservative county in [state name]. I think [it is] 90% white in my town. My high school was definitely, I don’t know, of the few Black people and of the few Mexican people, they all hung out with each other.

For Allyse, fitting in was difficult because she had such a complicated racial identity process. She did not have a clear group to which she could relate. “I didn’t hang out with the Mexican group of my school at all. I definitely wouldn’t have been included.”

Like Allyse, Talisa described experiences that she had at several schools she attended, where she encountered difficulties finding her spot as a multiracial person in an environment that did not have many others who shared in her racial experience.

I went to an all Black school in kindergarten and first grade. It was all Black except for my one cousin who was Mexican. That wasn’t very easy either being the one like light kid in the whole place. Then, when I switched schools to Catholic school in the second grade it was predominantly Hispanic. That’s probably the hardest thing is growing up in a school that was so small and so little like diversity, I felt kind of on the outside of everything. That no matter what, I wasn’t exactly Mexican but I wasn’t really Black either.

When Talisa went to a public school, she described a much different experience in terms of race.
When I switched to public school, my first time in public school ever, and it was just different. Not only just seeing different races so much but just seeing different cultures. I was used to everyone wearing the same uniform. When I switched [schools], I saw every color of the rainbow at our school. People had a lot more attitude so I just got used to that and that was like a culture shock and then just seeing people who are Black and people who are Mexican trying to find a space in-between and it was weird having to actually explain like, “What are you?” “I’m Black and Mexican.”

Scarlet, however, had a much different experience in a Hawaiian school that only admitted native Hawaiians. She attributed her lack of interest or awareness in her racial identity prior to attending college to her experiences in Dale High School where racial diversity was expected and encouraged.

I’ve always gone to private schools. Private schools in Hawaii are a little bit interesting. Up until fourth grade I went to a Montessori school, which was a very rounded way of looking at education that I think gave me an interesting take on learning. After that, I went to Dale High School. It’s one of the best private schools in Hawaii. Actually, it’s one of the best private schools in the nation. [The messages I received about race from Dale High School] would be slightly different from the average American message. A lot of the emphasis on race was that, “Yeah, we’re all Hawaiian but we’re also all completely different. No one in this school has the same ethnic makeup as anyone else and that’s normal.”

In other words, while Allyse’s and Talisa’s schools illustrated self-segregation by students and a lack of a racially diverse population, Scarlet’s school celebrated the racial and ethnic differences among the students, which made race a non-issue.

Joan attended public school until her freshman year of high school when she then went to a private boarding school. Most of her conversations about school illustrated her peer group experiences and friendships made there. Jayla also did not share much as to whether her school was racially diverse, although she did say that she had a diverse peer group.

Lastly, Jasmine, like Talisa, attended a Catholic school. She described it as, “Everyone was either white or Hispanic. We were a school that was 70% white, 29.5 % Hispanic, and then
School Influences on Bisexual Identity

All but one of the participants described some experience, within the school setting, that contributed to their bisexual identity. Allyse shared that the lack of openness in her high school caused her to feel unwelcome or unable to express her ideas. The overall message within the context of school was that “If you don’t conform, then you’re going to lose.” She went on to say,

I want to like shake the administrators at my old school district and be like, “Why did you not help others who were struggling?” I didn’t feel open to going to my counselor to talk about it. I mean, I was plagued by the idea that gossip would start because my school was very into appearances. If you mentioned something intense with your counselor they could have spread it to the secretary and the secretary could spread it to the teachers, and you know, it was ridiculous. I didn’t feel like there was anywhere to turn. I didn’t feel like there were people that were solely wanting to help you.

What Allyse described was an institution that was both unsafe for students who were exploring or questioning their bisexual identity, and an institution closed off from dialogue. While attending school in a conservative, non-racially diverse setting, Allyse also struggled to understand her bisexual identity and had no outlets or individuals with whom she felt comfortable to talk.

Joan’s experiences in school, as they related to her bisexual identity, were described by her as “negative.” She attributed some of that to her drastic personality change as she transitioned from junior high to high school and the petty behavior of her peer group.

While Scarlet explained that her school was open to racial diversity, the same could not be said about its openness to sexual diversity. Scarlet said, “It WAS high school,” when asked about her bisexual identity development, meaning that she was very out and also
heavily involved in starting a gay-straight alliance there. Her high school was not open to the idea of the organization. The alliance did not become official until Scarlet’s junior year and even then it was tucked under the umbrella of the diversity club and died after she graduated. “There was a diversity club thanks to the chaplain who never actually said anything, but the president, the headmaster, didn’t want to bother the alumni or the parents so we put it [the LGBT organization] under the diversity club.”

One of the biggest influences on Jasmine was that her drama teacher was fired. My high school was pretty conservative. Right before I came out, my drama teacher was fired because he was gay. I went to a Catholic school and the actual thing that they put for his reason being fired was that he was leading kids on the wrong morality or something like that. It kind of was like maybe I can’t say things like this for awhile. But everybody else within the school, like not the administration, but everyone else was okay with it so I felt fine when I did finally come out to my friends.

Jasmine was one of the only participants who briefly mentioned the school curriculum.

Like my high school never really covered what homosexual[ity] was except for the fact that it was wrong, so there wasn’t really any understanding of, “Okay so if you like a girl then this…what it might mean,” there wasn’t, it just wasn’t there. It was one of the schools that the way they do their sex ed. is that they rely totally on abstinence and they don’t even talk about condom use. I think they need to be more…how they handle sexuality and how they handle identity, like racial identity, should be evaluated because I know my high school didn’t do a good job.

The school setting, therefore, provided a context for the students to explore both their racial and bisexual identities. In some cases, one identity was celebrated more than others. According to the participants’ perspectives, schools were conservative with regard to sexual identity and lacked racial diversity.
Section Summary

The strongest influences of discovery in the pre-college context were: family, friends/peers, and school. In these various settings, the participants’ identity seeds were planted. In some cases, those seeds were nurtured and began to flourish. In others they were suppressed only to thrive in different, more supportive and open settings.

Messages about race and sexual identity were sent from the aforementioned influences and were often internalized by the participants. I argue that the largest influences were family and friends/peers with family influencing racial identity development the most because it provided a race-of-origin and encouraged or discouraged racial exploration. Friends/peers, however, had a strong affect on bisexual/pansexual identity, offering a place for sexual experimentation, other LGB role models, or support that was not available to the participants from their families.

The school setting was a place to meet new people, experience inclusion or exclusion, and learn about race and sexuality (or not) within the curriculum. Many of the participants did not fit in racially because there were no other students who looked like them. They either did or did not fit in with regard to sexual identity because they could not easily identify other students who were questioning their sexuality. If the school was a parochial school, the setting was, in some instances, not safe for them to share their experiences because administration or the religious values of the school did not provide a venue to do so. Since school and peer groups were often intertwined, it was clear that the school setting offered access to others who provided friendships which often aided in the participants’ racial and sexual identity development.
The next section describes the movement of the participants from the pre-college context to the college context where they could further explore their identities and gain a more solid sense of who they are in terms of trying on, negotiating self, and finding fit.

**Exploration: The College Context**

Three themes of exploration surfaced within the college context that related to multiracial/biracial-bisexual/pansexual identity development: (1) “Trying on” is a theme that illustrated the ways that the college setting allowed the participants to explore new identities; (2) “Negotiating self” is a theme that featured the ways the participants maneuvered psychological, emotional, and physical spaces; and (3) “Finding fit” is a theme about locating a space to belong, which occurred for the participants primarily in the college setting.

**Trying On**

After conducting the interviews and rereading the transcripts, I identified a clear theme of exploration. The participants, however, did not just embark on identity adventures, but rather, they sat with labels that others gave them and tried out theories that they had about their racial and sexual identities. I labeled this “trying on” because almost all of them did it in some manner. College offered an important venue to practice using labels or involving themselves in activities and unfamiliar experiences to develop a stronger sense of self.

There was not a clear finding of whether trying on was always about race or always about bisexual identity; rather, the influences of family, friends/peers, and school determined when and how the participants tried on these experiences. For some, college was the best time to try on their bisexual label or even have their first same-sex experience. For others, it was the opportunity to try on a person-of-color label and join groups and organizations that fit their own racial identities.
Allyse struggled, before college, to find a label that adequately described her bisexual identity. She knew that she was not heterosexual but she was not sure how to identify.

In high school I would not have considered myself bisexual but I would have internally. I internally acknowledged that I was attracted to women but I would have never said that to anyone. I wouldn’t have called myself bisexual internally either, it was almost like maybe I’m attracted to women, maybe I’m not. It took until college to realize that was not the case.

College provided the environment to try on same sex desires to determine if Allyse’s same-sex feelings were a passing phase or an identity. Her contradictions on whether she would have identified herself as bisexual internally provided further proof that her identity development process was still active.

Jayla also used college as a time to physically explore her sexuality. “I never really thought of myself as anything but straight until I got to college, but I always knew that something was different.” When she got to college, an alcohol-induced threesome with her boyfriend and a female down the hall helped her sort out her feelings. Since Jayla had never tried on the bisexual label, she misidentified herself as a lesbian. She described it in this way,

After that [experience] happened, the next day we [Jayla and her boyfriend] were sitting in my dorm room and I was talking to him about it and I was like, “I really liked that and more than I thought I would.” My boyfriend was all for it of course and then I was like sitting there and just kept thinking about it and finally I whispered in his ear, “I think I’m a lesbian.” He’s like, “No you’re not, you’re just bi,” and I was like, “Yeah.”

Jayla shared several examples of how she donned labels that others gave her, such as “Mexican” or “bisexual” and then later settled into them after wearing them for awhile and deciding they accurately reflected her identities.

Jasmine tried on her bisexual identity by telling a few key people first and waiting for their reaction. When her extremely conservative, Christian best friend did not disown her,
Jasmine felt more comfortable telling others. She also actively became more comfortable with her multiracial identity by taking on the presidency of her college’s multiracial/biracial student organization. Throughout her later years in high school and now in college, Jasmine clearly demonstrated her willingness to try on new ways of thinking about herself.

Joan began trying on her new Native American identity and other parts of her heritage, such as her Scottish and Irish heritages, by using a class project as an opportunity to talk more with her grandfather about where her ancestors came from. She also talked about potentially redefining her bisexual identity as pansexual.

For awhile I was reconsidering possibly redefining myself as pan but then I realized no, I’m not pan, I’m bi. [How did you make that distinction?] Um, I am currently in a relationship with a transman and it’s not working out so really it’s that. [So the experience helped you readjust how you’re feeling about that?] Right.

“My trying on” may also mean trying on new people, new types of relationships, and new ways of thinking about personal boundaries and values. Scarlet shared that both of her identities developed in the absence of other identities.

My sexual orientation developed in high school when I wasn’t surrounded by all this queer positive, queer bisexuality stuff. I did most of my developing in the absence of queer positive things and then I did most of my racial identity developing once I was removed from Hawaii, from the place where I get my racial ideas.

Talisa just recently began identifying as bisexual, so again, she demonstrated trying on a new label, even in the absence of having any physical relationships with males or females. She discussed not knowing how to really identify herself racially before college because she did not feel like she fit Black standards or Mexican standards. She described her thought process as she began to “come into her own.”

My junior year in high school is when it kinda started, I [began to] come into my own saying, “Okay, who cares what everyone else says?” Now, since I’ve been in college, I’ve kind of looked at it like, “Okay, no matter what, I’m still always going to be
Black. No matter what, I’m still always going to be Mexican,” whether or not like I’m really involving myself or going along with the stereotypes. I’m still that and I’m proud of both sides of it. With my bisexual identity, I’ve been thinking since I’ve kind of made this declaration and kind of come into my own saying, “Okay, this is what I am like, I’m this, I’ve done the checklist.” I’ve thought in my head, “Okay, how am I going to explain this to my family?”

Talisa, the youngest of the 6 participants, clearly described the essence of “trying on,” and illustrated it as a process of coming into her own and deciding what was best for her regardless of external pressures from family and friends. She shared that college was a great opportunity for her to “make my identity more concrete,” because of the many clubs and organizations, support networks, friends, and community that were available. She expressed enthusiasm at not having to report to anyone and being able to express herself in any way she saw fit.

College was a hotbed of “trying on” activities because it offered a significant amount of freedom for exploration, for questioning oneself in the absence of parental controls, and it provided a context with diverse others who were also trying to find their place. The next section describes the notion of “negotiating self,” a process by which participants worked to negotiate who they are, how they behaved, and the ways in which they presented themselves.

**Negotiating Self**

Negotiations came in a variety of forms for the participants. Allyse had to negotiate her family in terms of race since the messages from her parents followed a strict, “don’t ask, don’t tell,” policy. She and Joan discussed performing their gender differently depending on whether they had an interest in attracting males and females.

The concept of performance has been discussed by Goffman (1959) and Butler (1999) and is simplified here by Elliot (2001), who described gender performance as,
Performances of self [that] are fashioned after the cultural representations of masculinity and femininity that we see all around us in modern society; [and] through imitation we perform the self in such a manner as to weave together sexuality, gender, eroticism, sex, and desire. (p. 117)

Allyse described her performances in this way,

It’s hard when you are bisexual because when you’re meeting people that [you] could potentially date, you want people to know, you want them to know you’re open and to both and it’s when you cross a certain line maybe the other sex is no longer attracted to you. If I’m girlier then maybe the girls aren’t as attracted to me because they’re looking for someone more neutral or a little bit more masculine, but then if I go that route, the guys may not be attracted to me anymore. So it’s hard for me to try and get people to acknowledge it without verbally telling them or putting myself in places where it’s kind of a given, like maybe at a gay club or a gay bar. Then at the same time, a lot of straight people go to gay bars and clubs so once again it’s making it a lot harder.

Allyse went on to talk about the type of females that she has dated and how some liked her to be more feminine while others preferred that she be more masculine. She negotiated this by her clothing choices. She described her style as “fluid” and said that she tried to “mold that to [what] other people [like].”

Joan described having to negotiate her behavior with regard to her sexuality. She had to think about how coming out might affect those around her.

[My sexuality] was a huge problem in high school because of all the things I was involved in and not wanting to cause problems. For instance, in jazz choir I was traveling all the time and we were staying in hotels and it was like you know if I tell them that I’m bisexual are they going to say, “Oh, well now you can’t bunk with women, now you’re going to have to bunk by yourself,” so I just didn’t. I would never say anything.

She also shared a story similar to Allyse’s about negotiating her appearance to connect with males or females.

I’ve gone out to a bar and I’m like, “I would very much like to connect with a man tonight,” not even in a sexual way, but like you know, I want to sit down and have a conversation with a guy tonight. I will dress a certain way and if I want attention from a woman, I will dress a certain way. They’re really small changes. Like when I go out I pretty much always do like ‘50s, ‘40s vintage kind of look but with women, when
I’m trying to get attention from women, I pull my hair back because, from what I’ve experienced, they like to see more of my face whereas men want the really long silky hair thing. Really small changes like that. [Sometimes] it’s how I do my hair, or make up, or if I choose to paint my nails or not.

Joan acknowledged that having to make those negotiations was frustrating. “I don’t want to have to make those decisions based on who I want to connect with.”

Talisa and Jayla discussed negotiating the ways that others viewed them. Jayla shared that she was very concerned with what other people thought about her and therefore, she negotiated her visibility. “I don’t try to advertise who I am. If people want to ask me, I’ll tell them. I’m not gonna try and hide it.” She was referring to race in this instance. With sexuality, her answer was almost identical but she also said that if someone tells her that he or she is gay, lesbian, or bisexual, she will tell him or her that she is bisexual. Her addiction to her self-image, however, was a driving force for her, and although she did not verbalize as many negotiations as other participants did, I suspect that she made them just the same. “I think a lot about what other people think, how people see me. I don’t know why. It’s like an addiction. I’m like addicted to the way that other people see me. I hate it” (Jayla).

Jasmine’s discussion about negotiation also focused on bisexual identity. She talked about growing up with her mother who always put her in girl attire and encouraged her to become involved in dance. Her father pushed her to be involved in other sports like basketball, football, soccer, and track. Her first kiss was with a female but she went to the school dance with a male. In college, she found herself negotiating her behavior so that she did not fall into the stereotype of the girl who kisses other girls just for attention.

Behaving a certain way for bisexuals, especially in college, that’s your typical girl so that’s not, I don’t think that…I try not to be like the joking girl who is always all over other girls. I don’t want people to think, “Oh, she just wants attention.”
Jasmine’s involvement in her church group in college also put her in the position to negotiate her sexuality. While she was not out on campus except to a few friends, she described a time when she spoke up about misinformation that someone had about homosexuals.

I had to do a training because I work for a church. I had to do training with the diocese and we were talking about like, I teach classes [about] how to spot child molesters and how to prevent it and there’s so many people in there that are so ignorant and they’re like, “It’s only gay men,” and I’m like, “No actually…it’s all straight men pretty much, there are very few gay men who are child molesters.” I’m sitting there and I’m like, “Okay, I’m gonna try to argue logically without getting emotional.” I guess when it comes to arguing I feel like I have to defend gays and lesbians. I don’t know if it’s because, just because I identify with it or I feel like they just need to be argued for.

Still working on developing her bisexual identity, Jasmine’s story illustrated that she negotiated her values and beliefs by the causes she defended. In this way, she could stand up for herself and other sexual minorities without outing herself.

Scarlet discussed negotiating spaces, especially people of color spaces. She described a frustration with not being perceived as a person of color, which tied in with the ways she made her racial identity visible.

In the college realm, I identify more strongly as a person of color than I do as a white person and so it’s frustrating because I don’t feel comfortable going to students of color spaces because I’m not perceived as a student of color.”

Her solution to this negotiation was being more vocal about her experiences as a white-appearing student of color.

Talisa talked, throughout her three interviews, about negotiating the stereotypes that exist for people who identify as Black and people who identify as Mexican. She discussed how she talks and how she acts and how she grew up not having as many Black influences as she had Mexican influences. She described her behavior as more like a “white girl” or
“blonde” because of her “ditzy” personality. She went on to say that she had not really “come into being more, or dressing more Black…or seeing [herself] as Black or the stereotypical Black person.” She also talked about negotiating her bisexual identity by avoiding fitting into the stereotypes that exist of females who identify as bisexual.

That kind of cliché is something that I want to try and avoid. I know there are already people that I’ve talked to that are like, “Oh yeah, I know a bunch of girls who say they’re bisexual and like they’re just, they just like to get love wherever they can.” I’m like, “Okay, well maybe they do. I know I don’t.”

This illustration is similar to Jayla’s acknowledgement of caring what other people think, and Jasmine’s comment about not wanting to play into the stereotypes of doing things just for attention.

All of the participants described a negotiation of their identities within either a psychological, emotional, or physical context. They were often aware of the consequences of their actions, who they were attracting, how they were playing into or resisting stereotypes, what spaces they could comfortably move into or out of, how they were making themselves visible or invisible, and how they ultimately came to recognize and understand their multiracial/biracial and bisexual/pansexual identities.

Similarly, each of the participants discussed the struggles they encountered because of their complicated, in-between identities. They talked directly and indirectly about finding psychological, emotional, and physical spaces where they could belong. In most cases, these places of fit were found in the college setting, which is the focus of the final theme.
Finding Fit

Many of the participants, in their first interviews, described their experiences of struggling to find places to belong as they thought about and processed their racial and sexual identities. One was ostracized by peers for questioning her heterosexual identity (Joan), one had parents who did not acknowledge her unique racial background (Allyse), one listened to the stereotypes that existed about race and bisexual identity and made decisions about how she wished to present herself (Talisa), one threw herself into activism (Scarlet), and two tossed around labels assigned to them by others simply because they had not given their identities much thought (Jayla and Jasmine).

College provided many opportunities for the participants to find a place to belong, whether with new friends or within clubs and organizations. College offered an environment where they could meet and interact with others who thought like them and looked like them.

Meeting people that were like-minded, meeting people that were going through the same things and were willing to talk about it, finding myself able to talk about it with more people just cuz they were open-minded, just having more resources at school [is what college did for me]. (Allyse)

Even roommates in college provided support and safety.

My freshman roommate, she, in general, I guess kind of talked me through a lot of things. She is a white, non-bisexual and yet she was incredibly open. She was one of the first people that I actually talked about this with at college. She was willing to listen and help me out and apply what she knew to what I was going through both racially and sexually. (Allyse)

Jayla met others like her at a retreat and in the class she was required to attend for being a scholarship recipient. College was one of the first times that she had to acknowledge her multiracial identity; in fact, it was one of the first times she really donned the multiracial label and expressed that she was part Mexican. “We had a class we had to go to and I had
friends from the class.” Though Jayla made friends in this class, she also described being made to feel like she did not belong because of her appearance. “People were definitely wondering why I was there. Some people gave me looks and stuff.” College, however, was a place where Jayla said she was able to better understand herself.

I think because going to college or especially a university, everyone expects you to find yourself so I think that had a lot to do with that. I know if I didn’t go to college, I probably wouldn’t be the person that I am today and label myself the way that I do.

For Jasmine, there was one underlying factor that she never fully expressed but that I could tell strongly influenced how she thought about her bisexual identity. Religion played a large role in her life. In college, she was able to be involved in a church that she described as “more liberal” than the one she was in during high school. Her college church even had a gay-straight alliance. She listed off a Christian fellowship, a student leadership team, a community service organization, a multiracial/biracial student club, and a mentoring program as organizations to which she devoted her time. Like Jayla, however, Jasmine described a time when she entered into an environment that did not feel comfortable to her.

There was a time when they had a Native American weekend and one of my friends was like, “Oh come with me.” She’s Navajo and because I am 1/8th Cherokee, she was like, “You should come, I think it’ll be fun.” When I was there I was really awkward cuz I’m like, “I don’t look like I have any Native American in me and these people are going to be like, ‘What are you doing here?’” I ended up leaving because I felt so uncomfortable. That was the first time being like, “Okay, I can’t accept that side of myself.”

Jasmine’s story is an example of looking for places of fit and having to renegotiate what those experiences mean in terms of comfort level. Jasmine went on to say that college got her involved in getting to know more about her multiracial identity. College was the first time she met others who had had experiences similar to her. She also acknowledged that
college had a bigger impact on her racial identity and helping her find fit than it did on her bisexual identity.

Like the others, Joan found fit on her college campus. In her case, it was for her bisexual identity. This was a new experience for her after being ostracized in high school. “I definitely felt more comfortable with it [bisexuality] when I got here. College is pretty much surrounded by…I think 90% of the guys who are here are gay. There’s much more of a queer community here.”

Scarlet described her fit within a group of LGBT friends, as well as her role at the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender student house on campus. She continued to work on finding fit with regard to her racial identity.

I, as someone who’s perceived to be white, like I said before, [am] very uncomfortable in places for students of color, which I don’t think is the actual feeling of those groups. I feel like they want to be inclusive but I’m not really sure how to balance that because I still feel uncomfortable in those groups. I think being in a place surrounded by other people, other intelligent people, and actually seeing, for the first time, the big difference between racial dynamics at home and racial dynamics everywhere else really had an effect on my racial identity.

Scarlet’s experiences with race in Hawaii were so different than her experiences on the Mainland that she continues to evolve in how she feels about herself and in what spaces she feels most comfortable.

Talisa found fit in the Hispanic community on her campus. She has met many other people through the same program she started in 8th grade at her college.

I was in the [program] for so long that it’s helped me kind of connect and find a lot more people who are Hispanic who come here and we have that in common. I’m learning more and more about my Hispanic culture. I hope to kind of embrace that side of my culture and then even for my African American culture, I do want to get more involved with the other African American groups and movements.
Section Summary

All of the participants described the opportunities they had available to them in college to find places to fit, support networks, and like-minded people. All of them expressed a level of comfort with one or both of their identities in the college setting that did not exist as clearly in their pre-college stories. Each participant has undergone a maturing process as she has embarked on college life. In general, their college experiences have been positive ones.

One of the reoccurring challenges for the participants, both before and during college, was the invisibility of their racial and sexual identities. Invisibility was a result of ambiguous appearance and the lack of attention paid to these identities within classroom curriculum. Visibility was gained by some by speaking a language that reflected their racial heritage, or offering visual cues for others about their racial identity.

Visibility/Invisibility: Universal and Pervasive

The issues of visibility and invisibility were discussed by all of the participants both within the pre-college and college contexts. All of the participants talked about people not recognizing that they were multiracial or understanding that appearance was not necessarily indicative of a monoracial identity (Hall, 1996; Root, 1997).

Visibility/Invisibility of Racial Identity

Allyse, Joan, Jayla, and Scarlet were often believed to be white even though they are multiracial. Jasmine and Talisa were categorized as Black, even though their racial heritage is more diverse. “Most people do not assume I am Spanish or Mexican. A lot of them guess that I’m white” (Allyse).
Even in Allyse’s case, her self-identification as Hispanic encouraged the invisibility of her Spanish and Mexican identities. She understood the label “Hispanic” to be her version of multiracial. Since Hispanic is a panethnic term that refers “to a wider collective of ethnic and racialized groups that are commonly associated by phenotype or race, language or world region” (Kim & White, 2005, p. 1), Allyse felt that both her Spanish and Mexican identities best fit under that label. She admitted that her Spanish identity was often overshadowed by her Mexican identity.

“Most people think I’m just Caucasian unless I tell them and then they’re like, “Oh really?” and then I bust out the family photos” (Jayla). Jayla said that at her minority retreat, many people questioned why she was there or questioned if she was “minority enough” to have earned the minority scholarship. Because her appearance made the Mexican heritage invisible, she had to justify her existence at the school-related event.

Jasmine stated something similar. “Most people don’t think that I’m multiracial at all, they’re like, ‘Oh, she’s the Black girl.’” She described this as “annoying,” but she also understood that it was easier for people to identify her that way. Joan said sometimes she was asked the “What are you?” question but that most of the time people guessed her to be white.

Scarlet’s racial identity was invisible, even to her, because of her upbringing. “I didn’t really identify with my of-colorness because I didn’t stand out…I look like a white girl.” Scarlet went on to say that “multiracial students are invisible,” but that C College was just starting a group for multiracial students under the Students of Color organization.

Talisa said that the way she wears her hair often determined how people identified her. “A lot of times people will look at me and they’ll think, ‘Okay, is she just Black?’ or if I have my hair straight or if it’s long and curly they’ll be like ‘Okay, is she biracial or mixed
with something?”. The importance of hair as a racial marker was supported in the literature (Buckley & Carter, 2004; Fitzgerald, 2007; Nishimura, 2004).

Jayla, Joan, and Scarlet shared examples of how multiracial identity is often left out of the classroom. Jayla spoke about a race and ethnicity class that she took. She expressed her frustration at not being able to see herself represented in the college curriculum. Joan talked about a course called Imprisonment and the Prisoner:

We talked a lot about race and we didn’t really talk about multiracial prisoners, but we talked a lot about race playing a factor in the way that the criminal justice system is targeted towards a certain racial makeup.

Lastly, Scarlet said that most of her college classes discussed only monoracial groups, leaving out discussions about multiracial identity or interracial dynamics.

Most of the class discussions that have to do with people of color, um, are about Black people. There’s very little diversity outside of the Black community and there’s very little especially in discussions. Most of the focus is on Black-white relations and dynamics.

Each of these examples reiterates the reality that multiracial identity is often left out of the race discussion and that those who identify as multiracial/biracial take notice.

Increasing Visibility through Language

In a 2007 study about individuals who reclaim their Native American identity, “food and language [were] cultural practices engaged in by reclaimers as an affirmation of their ethnic identity” (Fitzgerald, 2007, p. 132). Similarly, one underlying theme related to family for the participants in this study was the use of a native language or a connection to cultural artifacts to legitimize their multiracial identity.

Jayla, who expressed no overt interest in exploring her Mexican culture, said that when people find out she is part-Mexican, they often ask her if her family speaks Spanish.
She replied, “I’d be like ‘Some of them [do], but I don’t (laughs).’ I took Spanish in high school and I failed it (laughs). I didn’t grow up with it so I don’t really know.” Jasmine, Talisa, and Allyse all expressed a different view about speaking Spanish.

Allyse explained that on her father’s side, they did not speak Spanish, which is in line with her grandparents wanting, desperately, to be identified as white and to erase their Spanish heritage. The story was slightly different on her mom’s side.

[My mom] does [speak Spanish, but Spanish] wasn’t my growing up language, um, which really upset me when I was younger because I was more fascinated with language in general than [the] culture. When my grandmother would come to visit I would sneak in the room that she was in and hide and listen to her speak Spanish on the phone because I wanted to speak another language and I loved Spanish and I thought it was a beautiful language. I would always ask my mom, “Why don’t you know Spanish? I want to speak Spanish (laughing),” and she’s like, “I do know but I don’t know enough (laughing).” So my mom will speak Spanish if we go to Mexico. She can converse and she can understand but she wouldn’t choose to if she didn’t have to. She chose not to with my brother and I which could partially be maybe some influence from my father.

Allyse began learning Spanish in high school and was able to test out of four semesters of it in college with the help of several of the cooks at her place of employment who were native Spanish speakers. She said that when she wants to tap more into her Hispanic side, she will speak Spanish when she is around her family. Allyse also talked about listening and dancing to Tejano and Conjunto music with her grandparents and attending quinceñearas, which are unique celebrations held for young females, in Spanish-speaking regions, when they turn 15 (Davalos, 1996). A telling statement that Allyse made suggested that she was unclear how to embrace her Spanish side because of her lack of cultural knowledge. “With my Mexican race I’ve got a Mexican culture. With my Spanish race I’ve got a white culture. I don’t have a culture to attribute to my Spanish side at all.”
Jasmine acknowledged that her grandparents and mother speak Spanish but it had not occurred to her that the language was a connection to her mother’s Spanish heritage until she got to high school. Much like Jayla, Jasmine did not show a strong desire to learn the language more fluently as a way to tie into her mother’s side of her racial identity.

I can understand it (Castilian) perfectly but when it comes to speaking I’m just like, uh, and my Spanish is Castilian so it differs a lot. I can’t really communicate too well with Mexicans because I use vosotros which is a form that they don’t use and I use words that they don’t know and I’m like, “Okay, never mind.”

Talisa stated that her mother, who is Mexican, did not speak Spanish, and related that to her mother’s level of Mexican-ness. “She doesn’t speak Spanish, she’s not super Mexican.” Talisa is now exploring her Mexican heritage and is making more of an effort to learn Spanish. “It’s a beautiful language. This semester I’m actually taking Spanish so it’s more about being in the culture. I’m taking Salsa too; it’s so fun.” Language and dance were two ways that Talisa sought to learn more about her Mexican heritage.

Artifacts to Increase Visibility

Not all participants had language available to them or wanted to use language as a way to embrace certain parts of their identity. Scarlet grew up in Hawaii but explained that speaking Hawaiian was strongly discouraged. In fact, relating to Hawaiian culture was something that, pre-college, she strongly avoided.

When the participants’ multiracial identity was not clearly reflected back to them by others, they used more visual cues instead. Both Scarlet and Joan used tattooing as a way to express their non-white side. Scarlet’s father, however, was not supportive of her tattoo ideas.

I began to really identify after I got my first tattoo and I started thinking about other tattoos. That was sort of how I got into my identifying with my culture because I got
into, I got very interested in the art of tattooing and tribal tattooing and native Hawaiian tattooing. In Hawaiian culture, each family has two protectors, animal species that are protectors that when your ancestors die, they are revived as one of these two species. I had the idea for a tattoo of the two protectors basically and so that got me more interested in my Hawaiian culture. There’s some grief with my father about actually getting the tattoos because you’re not supposed to tell other people what your [protectors are] called but that conflict and resolving that conflict personally kind of helped with my discovery of my identity.

Joan received turquoise jewelry from her step-grandmother on her father’s side and even though her mother discouraged her identification with her Native American side unless it meant that she might receive financial assistance for school, Joan shared her intentions of embracing her Native American heritage. “I have tattoos planned that will identify me as Native American and Scottish and Irish and a mix of everything that I am, so eventually that will be an identifying factor.”

In support of what Joan and Scarlet shared, both tattooing and jewelry were described in Fitzgerald’s (2007) study as a way for Native American reclaimers to identify with their Native American heritage. One reclaimer’s outward appearance, like that of Scarlet and Joan, did not clearly identify him as Native American.

This reclaimer views himself as Native, but this racial/ethnic heritage is rarely reflected back to him by others. In fact, his appearance, more often than not, results in challenges to his racial/ethnic identity claims. This appears to result in him relying on more outward cues in terms of impression management: he wears long hair, silver and turquoise jewelry, has tattoos of Native significance, and often wears t-shirts which explicitly declare his connection to Native peoples.” (p. 173)

Visibility/Invisibility of Sexual Identity

Invisibility was not just a function of racial identity; it also existed in relation to bisexual identity which added yet another layer of frustration and anxiety for the participants in how they represented themselves (Stanley, 2004). Allyse said,
I guess for the most part, both of them [multiracial and bisexual identity] are fairly invisible because both of them I feel like aren’t incredibly strong in themselves. I don’t know. I guess I’m not fully lesbian [so] it’s harder to tell and since I’m not fully Mexican or fully Spanish it’s harder to tell. I’m kind of in-between both so I guess that makes it definitely more invisible to the common eye person I meet. It’s harder to recognize outwardly.

What Allyse described was a balancing act that she had to do. This experience was echoed by several of the other participants. They felt that they were not fully one identity and that people overlooked them. Joan articulated it best, “I think it’s interesting because I think, in general, you know people like to talk about lesbian, people like to talk about Black, people like to talk about Hispanic, [but] they don’t like to talk about the blurs.” This sentiment could be found in the literature as well (Burleson, 2005; Macalister, 2003).

Jasmine, who expressed hesitancy in making her bisexual identity visible, said that she allowed her bisexuality to remain invisible unless she was close with someone and wanted them to know. This is not much different than being labeled a “Black girl” and having to “out” herself as multiracial. Her invisible identities provided her with more control on what information she gave to others.

Joan described the negative feedback she got about her bisexual identity and shared that among gay and lesbian individuals, bisexuality did not exist. “I’ve gotten a little bit of a backlash [for being bisexual] but nothing nearly as bad as what happened in high school.” Scarlet said, “Bisexuality was pretty much not acknowledged [growing up].”

Another setting where the issues of bisexual, as well as racial, identity were invisible was in the classroom. Jayla recounted,

Most classes [in college] talk about different sexualities but they skip bisexuals. I never hear anything about it in class. It’s either gay or straight or transgender. [In a class] I wrote a comment sheet [and asked], “Why don’t you ever talk about the in-between like bisexual?”
Joan also talked about a college course, Imprisonment and the Prisoner, which perpetuated the invisibility of bisexual identity.

Did you talk about sexuality? A little bit when we were talking about women’s prisons because most women who are imprisoned have been beaten and/or abused in some way and so when they come to prison a lot of them find sisterhood amongst each other and then some of them become lesbian as a result. But did they talk about bisexuality? No.

The females who find sisterhood are labeled “lesbian” rather than bisexual when, essentially, they are displaying bisexual behavior. The prisoners go from being heterosexual to lesbian, skipping the bisexual identity entirely.

Talisa described trying to write a research paper for a psychology class on bisexual identity and the trouble she experienced trying to find quality literature to support her statements.

It was hard for me to go through the research and kind of like find something concrete, a good concrete topic to talk about cuz there’s not a whole lot like official stuff out there on bisexuality. I was mad because there was even a Journal of Bisexuality and I would have loved to have had my hands on that but I couldn’t because our library wouldn’t allow me to have it because it was too new.

Making Identity Visible

All of the participants shared ways that they made their identities visible or stated that context was a key factor in whether they even wanted people to know more about them or not. Being vocal about their multiracial/biracial-bisexual/pansexual identities was the primary way that the participants made themselves visible. Allyse, for example, let others know about her Hispanic-multiracial identity by speaking Spanish. “Not everyone can speak Spanish, so whenever I get the opportunity to I will always speak Spanish.”
Jayla put her Mexican identity on a scholarship application and got a full-ride scholarship to college. Jasmine became president of an organization for multiracial/biracial college students on her campus, which is a very visible position. Likewise, Scarlet worked in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender student house on campus. Even before college, she was very active in the LGBT community. “I came out as bisexual my freshman year [in high school] and then I was very involved in activism within my high school, on the island, and nationally.” Joan said that when people see who her friend group is, they may make assumptions about her sexual identity. Both Scarlet and Joan talked about getting tattoos that permanently identified their racial heritage. Talisa was involved in various programs that identified her racially as Hispanic and said that context was what determined whether or not she made her identities visible.

To become or remain visible, or to keep various identities hidden, the participants had to manage their multiple identities and be active in their performances, self-presentations, and negotiations of space to accomplish the desired goal.

Summary

In this chapter, I have shared examples of two separate contexts, the one prior to college that involved the influences of family, friends/peers, and school, and the college context where participants tried on different behaviors and identities, negotiated themselves, and found places to belong. Lastly, I have provided information about the transcendent theme of visibility/invisibility that encompassed both pre- and college contexts and related it to multiracial/biracial-bisexual/pansexual identities.

Each of these themes and contexts offered insight into the ways that identity has developed for the 6 female participants in this study. Family, the starting place for all of
these participants, had a large impact on their multiracial/biracial identity development due to the family-of-origin racial information, and to a lesser degree, their bisexual/pansexual identity as they learned, primarily from their fathers, that a non-heterosexual identity was wrong. For many of the participants, fathers were absent so mothers’ racial identity influenced them more. Mothers’ relationships with individuals who were not heterosexual sometimes provided mixed messages for the participants as they came to understand that what was okay for other people was generally unacceptable for them.

Friendships and peer relationships, usually within the school setting, offered the participants more experiences as they managed new relationships with friends. Influences of friends and school bombarded the participants with messages about identity that they often internalized. Sometimes school provided opportunities to explore their racial and sexual identities and sometimes school and the peer groups within it served to further closet them in either or both their racial and sexual identities.

The messages that the participants received from their pre-college influences were often mixed. Parents taught them to be proud of their racial heritage or encouraged them to hide their racial background. Friends supported their bisexual identity or ostracized them for being different. The school setting either encouraged and embraced diversity or lacked racial or sexual variety.

College, for almost all of the participants, was a place they could finally breathe in a world that had long suffocated them. It provided resources, organizations, and people who thought like them or looked like them. It gave them a chance to try out new ideas and explore the feelings some of them had kept inside. In many cases, the participants were geographically far away from parents and childhood friends and were thus able to make
decisions on their own, in the absence of controlling others, and away from the judgments of the people whose opinions often mattered most.

Invisibility penetrated the social environments, both pre-college and during college. This was often due to the participants’ ambiguous appearance that made it difficult for others to recognize their multiracial identity, the invisibility of sexual identity altogether, and the lack of attention paid to multiracial and bisexual identities within the classroom. Several of the participants went to great lengths to reclaim their racial identities by learning a language that reflected their racial heritage or collecting and displaying visual artifacts such as body art or jewelry.

Many times throughout this study, I saw visible sighs of relief from the participants as they took me through their experiences before college and their experiences in college. Their stories seemed pained before they reached a place of understanding and acceptance for their identities. They all chose to share their stories so that others could gain a better understanding of the challenges and celebrations they have experienced in their young lives, and more importantly, to provide encouragement for others like them, and advice for the institutions that serve them.

In Chapter 6, I return to the literature to discuss the original theoretical frameworks guiding this study as well as various identity development models, to see how they withstand the findings of this study.
CHAPTER 6
DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I review the nuances of the literature from Chapter 2, draw connections between the findings of this study and the pivotal topics of identity, and revisit the theoretical models used to guide this study to make even deeper sense out of the participants’ stories.

Identity and Related Concepts

The hub of inquiry for this study was identity development, a process that involves a variety of developmental tasks and challenges, ultimately resulting in the individuals’ acquisition of a stable and coherent sense of self (Nurmi, 2001). As explained in Chapter 2, there is a debate about whether society steers the individual or the individual navigates society (Côté & Levine, 2002). The navigational process, regardless of what entity is in control, requires individuals to make many decisions, choose unique paths, plan behaviors, and construct and reconstruct strategies to meet the many challenges that they face (Nurmi).

In reviewing this study’s data, several other concepts surfaced related to identity. Those concepts are: self, performance and impression management, and personal and social identity.

Self

The self is another concept whose locus is debated by psychologists and sociologists. Psychologists see it rooted internally, as something private, and sociologists view it as a canvas drawn upon by “other people, the wider society, as well as cultural norms and moral norms” (Elliott, 2001, p. 22).
In this study, I am really no closer to resolving the sociological vs. psychological debate because the participants exhibited a mixture of both. Identity development appeared to be largely an internal, private process, much like the suggested psychological viewpoint, yet heavily influenced by external, sociological forces such as interactions within various social settings through which the participants navigated (family, friends/peers, school, and college) and relationships that they developed and maintained throughout their identity development process.

*Performance and Impression Management*

Related to self is the notion of performance, or the ways that individuals present themselves and inhabit roles, within the context of day-to-day interactions, to elicit favorable impressions (Goffman, 1959). Managing impressions involves adjusting and readjusting as social situations warrant for believable performances (Goffman).

Impressions and performances were not a large part of this study, but several of the participants, Allyse and Joan particularly, shared the importance of making good impressions on males, if they hoped to entice males, or females, if they desired female company for the evening. Seeking favorable impressions from the individual or desired sex object involved performances that exuded more feminine tendencies or more masculine tendencies. The performance was sometimes a balancing act for each of them depending on whether they wanted to be open to males and females or if they sought the attention of one over the other.

Jasmine illustrated impression management and performance in her story about attending the event for Native Americans and shared her discomfort with not being “believable” in that context, or looking as though she belonged.
In some cases, the use of Spanish was a way to make the performances more believable when the participant was trying to legitimize her multiracial identity. Allyse talked about speaking Spanish whenever she was around her cousins or in any social situation where she wanted to be tied more closely to her Mexican and Spanish heritage. Talisa also discussed taking Salsa dance classes and Spanish language classes to better educate herself about her heritage.

The need to be believable appeared to only matter in social settings where racial or sexual issues emerged. Jayla, Jasmine and Talisa were not interested in fitting into stereotypes about bisexuals so they said they would not kiss other females in settings such as parties or bars.

The unique feature for these participants was their ability to permeate a variety of boundaries and appeal to multiple audiences. Goffman (1959) stated, “When an individual plays a part he [sic] implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them” (p. 17). The participants in this study were still determining which parts they wished to play, which impressions they sought to make, and to which audiences they wished to appeal.

**Personal and Social Identity**

Personal identity is defined by Côté and Levine (2002) as “the more concrete aspects of individual experience rooted in interactions” (p.8). They suggested that individuals locate themselves between their personal identity and their social identity. The social identity is the level of identity where individuals are “most influenced by cultural factors and social roles, with varying degrees of pressure to fit into the available identity ‘molds’ created by these influences” (p. 8). Turner (1982) described social identity as “the process of locating oneself,
or another person, within a system of social categorization…[and] the sum total of social identifications used by a person” (pp. 17-18). Furthermore, social identifications arise within the processes of social groups (Tajfel, 1982).

In this study, the participants experienced pressures from family members who had clear ideas of who and what the participants should be, how they should view themselves, and what were acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. Joan, for example, was pressured to be the female that her mother never was, the model of perfection. Allyse talked extensively about the pressures to fit various Mexican ideals and the constant competition between her mother and aunts over whose children are doing what.

There really is a don’t ask, don’t tell policy…I know how judgmental her [mom’s] side of the family is, they love to gossip. I don’t want my mom to be embarrassed [if I come out] for me but I don’t want her to be embarrassed in general. There’s a competition between the sisters and kind of whose children are doing what. One of my cousins took a really bad path in life and her mom would take any chance to knock me down to make her daughter feel better or look better and that’s something I’ve struggled with a lot with her [and] with that side of the family.

Jasmine shared that her mother really wanted her to be a “girlie girl” while her father pushed her to be the boy that the doctors said she was supposed to be. She also perceived a heterosexual mold set by her religious beliefs and parents and did not want to disappoint her father by coming out as bisexual. She and Allyse were both concerned about how childhood friends would perceive them if they came out and, therefore, both held their bisexual identity out of the social identity they presented when they interacted with people who might disapprove.

Personal identity required that participants find fit between their own uniqueness and the force of their social identity. Especially for these participants who had identities that may not be supported by the society at large, balancing their individuality with what was socially
acceptable proved challenging. College allowed the participants to shift their personal identity into their social identity and therefore, find fit. They were able to be out as bisexual or as whatever racial identity they chose, if they so chose, or could affiliate with groups and student organizations that helped them feel like they belonged.

Allyse described being able to breathe in college because her personal identities could be expressed, whereas, at home, she encountered her father who was very uncomfortable exploring their racial heritage. Joan illustrated the navigation of personal and social identities when she talked about being “out” with her sexuality in college but having to adjust her behavior to conceal it when she went back home.

The participants in this study may not have used the terminology “personal” and “social” identity but they clearly depicted their ability to decipher what identities they portrayed in the various contexts they moved in and out of throughout their daily lives.

Human Ecology and Student Development

Since one of the major findings in this study was the importance and role of context in sculpting the participants’ identities, revisiting Renn’s (2000, 2003, 2004) version of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) human ecology model in the form of her ecology of college student development model is essential.

To review, Renn (2004) framed the three “systems” of her model in this way: (1) Microsystem – includes academic settings, family settings (residence halls), community settings (student clubs and organizations), and social settings (social groups), (2) Mesosystem – may include interactions between various microsystems such as academic, social, or familial settings, (3) Exosystem – may include distant family or on- and off-campus settings that do not involve the student. An event that happens to a family member that does
not directly involve the student may still have an effect on the student, and (4) Macrosystem – educational traditions or geographic locations may fit under this system. The following chapter sections view this study’s data within these three systems.

**Microsystems**

Microsystems influenced the participants in this study. Few talked about jobs outside of their academic responsibilities, but Jasmine discussed her involvement with a religious organization where she trained individuals on how to identify child predators, as well as several other organizations within and outside of her college community. Talisa and Joan discussed class projects where they were encouraged to explore bisexual identity and Scottish heritage respectively, and Scarlet was active in her LGBT student organization on campus as well as more widespread LGBT activism. This level of context allowed the participants to develop important relationships and further explore their identities.

Prior to college, this system would have included relationships with friends, family, the school environment, and the community which clearly influenced the ways in which the participants viewed themselves and their level of growth prior to college. Several participants acknowledged growth before college as they explored the parts of themselves that they had the opportunity and freedom to examine, but college also offered a time for them to further expand their explorations in a newly situated context.

**Mesosystems**

Renn (2004) suggested that peer culture was incredibly influential for student development and that it “sends powerful messages about the desirability and acceptability of certain identities, attitudes, and behaviors” (p. 38). Clearly, this level of ecology has had a strong impact on the participants in this study within the college setting. Based on the
findings of this study, peer culture prior to college was also credited for pushing participants to explore identities or hide their identities. In Jayla’s case, her peers helped her claim a multiracial identity and also, because of their diversity, shielded her from questioning her differences. Joan’s pre-college peer group ostracized her which resulted in her changing her identity labels several times. Scarlet’s pre-college peer group supported her efforts in establishing a gay-straight alliance in her school.

Allyse felt embraced by her peer group in the college setting, as did Joan and Scarlet. Jayla, Jasmine, and Talisa all discussed having diverse friends within the pre-college and college setting. Jasmine and Talisa shared about their involvement in various clubs and organizations specific to their identities as an illustration of finding belonging and acceptance.

**Exosystems**

The exosystem does not contain the individual but still has an impact on her. Allyse’s brother befriended a gay man from his workplace and this relationship peripherally helped Allyse. She explained,

> I found out my brother, he’s coming down for New Year’s, um, he’s bringing his girlfriend, and his gay friend and his gay friend’s boyfriend are coming down too so I’m excited about that. [Is this the guy he works with that you were telling me about?] Yes! Yes… [That’s a big deal for your brother isn’t it?] Ah yeah it is. I’m really really happy for him or them I guess. I don’t know. I’m happy to meet this guy, give him a little high five, and say “thanks” for making him a little better.

In the pre-college setting, several of the participants discussed relationships that their mothers had with gay or lesbian individuals that, again, peripherally affected them. Jasmine’s retelling of the high school teacher who was fired would also fit into the exosystem and was still something that impacted her to this day. Scarlet discussed the closing down of the gay-
straight alliance in her school upon her graduation, an event that frustrated her as she began to situate herself on the college campus. These settings, while not directly linked to the participants themselves, impacted their experiences within the social world.

*Macrosystems*

Macrosystems “include patterns of social stratification and mobility, the economic systems and capitalist ideology, a belief in the idea of meritocracy and achievement of individual potential” (Renn, 2004, p. 40).

In the context of this study, greater awareness about multiracial and bisexual identities overall such as: numbers of individuals, experiences of individuals, the impact of demographic and societal shifts on these invisible identities, etc., to which this study contributes, is necessary. Also important for the developing female student who identifies as multiracial/biracial-bisexual/pansexual are shifts in policy to allow individuals to identify themselves in a variety of ways (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), and a broader understanding of the social and cultural expectations of the participants’ current generation, which are presently unfolding.

Renn (2004) suggested that macrosystems are the outer ring of social influence that, while important to identity development, may not be overtly detected by the participants. In this study, examples for the macrosystem were difficult to find.

*Section Summary*

In this section I have presented a discussion of some of the nuances of identity development such as self, performances and impression management, and personal and social identities, as well as aligned the study’s findings within the ecology of student development model offered by Renn (2000, 2003, 2004) to illustrate the importance and
impact of various levels of context. Even though Renn’s model focused on multiracial and biracial students, I believe it can be utilized for students with multiple-marginal identities, such as the female participants in this study.

The next section of this chapter offers a dialogue about how the findings from this study can be positioned within the most recent identity development models for women, multiple identity models, multiracial identity models, bisexuality models, and biracial-bisexual models.

**Fit Within Models**

Since no empirical research has been conducted on female college students who identify as multiracial/biracial and bisexual/pansexual, I believe it is useful to review some of the more recent identity models discussed in Chapter 2 in the context of this current study.

*Identity Development of Females*

The sex-gender perspective was not the main focus of this study in the way that the racial and sexual identities of the participants were. The literature (Enochs & Roland, 2006; Josselson, 1996; Kenny & Rice, 1995; Sands, 1998) suggested that females have a different experience adjusting to college and pursue a path of identity development differently than do males. Josselson’s (1987, 1996) findings were about identity commitments with regard to “occupational choice, religious and political beliefs, and concerns about relationships” (p. 35) rather than sexual or racial identity; however, using this general framework, I believe the participants can still be located within Josselson’s model, which included the pathways of guardian, pathmaker, searcher, and drifter.
Guardians

Females following this pathway used pre-developed plans of others rather than relying on their own choices and, thus, avoided an identity crisis. Their internal voice said, “This is how I am because it’s how I was raised or how I’ve always been” (Josselson, 1996, p. 35). Jayla exemplified this notion and illustrated it by repeatedly sharing that she adopted labels that other people gave her. Her ambivalence toward her identities was also a product of her socialization in that race and sexuality were non-issues in her family during her upbringing.

Pathmakers

Pathmakers have experienced some exploration or crisis but made identity commitments on their own terms. Allyse, Scarlet, and Joan all talked about moments of crisis either with family or friends, as well as moments of exploration either prior to or in college. By the end of the third interview, each expressed contentment with their identities but also viewed themselves as dynamic, changing individuals. Their identities were developed under their own self-imposed conditions. Josselson (1996) stated that a pathmaker’s identity orientation was, “I’ve tried out some things, and this is what makes most sense to me” (p. 35), which is quite similar to statements made by each of the 3 aforementioned participants.

Allyse said, “I consider myself a Hispanic-bisexual female…understanding my racial identity…had more outside influences helping me figure it out…[and] sexuality was mostly me figuring it out and me deciding for myself.” When asked about the level of growth, she responded with, “I like constantly changing my life and having options,” which implied her own agency toward her identities and taking ownership of them. Joan’s discussion about defining herself as pansexual, exploring it, and deciding not to was another indication of her
position as a pathmaker. Both her racial and sexual identities, while influenced by others, were her own decision.

Scarlet did less exploration with regard to her sexual identity within the college setting and, in fact, came to college with that identity already in place, but her path to making that identity commitment was one of exploration and personal choice. Scarlet said, “I very strongly identify with my Hawaiian culture, [and] my identity as a person of color,” which was a vast difference from her dismissal of her non-white heritage prior to entering college. She attributed her racial exploration and identity to moving away from home and mentioned that part of her racial identity exploration came with getting a tattoo. “I began to really identify after I got my first tattoo…that was sort of how I got into my identifying with my culture” (Scarlet).

All 3 participants mentioned here have settled on racial and sexual identities based on crisis and exploration, but those final identities were personal choices rather than labels awarded by others.

*Searchers*

Females following the *searcher* pathway are actively struggling and exploring. Their attitude is summarized by the following statement, “I’m not sure about who I am or want to be, but I’m trying to figure it out” (Josselson, 1996, p. 35). While I do not believe any of the 6 participants solidly fit this pathway, I do think that Jasmine and Talisa were somewhere between the Pathmaker and Searchers trail. With regard to bisexual identity, I think both of these participants fit more solidly as Searchers. Talisa said, “Being biracial and bisexual is very confusing, there’s no clear cut definition for who you are….I’m going to continue to grow but it’s going to be more uncertainty…I’m just going to keep learning.” Many of her
statements indicated uncertainty about both her biracial and bisexual identity but she also indicated that she was going to keep exploring and learning more about herself and her identities as a way to figure it all out.

Jasmine asked several “what if” questions about her sexual identity. “What if I marry a man, do I still consider myself bisexual? If I end up with a woman, does that make me a lesbian?” She appeared more concrete about her racial identity and firmly rooted herself as a multiracial person; however, when asked what she could celebrate about having a multiracial and bisexual identity, she could not come up with anything. Her biggest challenge was not fitting into a certain category and not fully belonging. Her uncertainty also indicated that she had a desire to continue figuring out her identities.

*Drifters*

Josselson (1996) identified females who did not have any commitments and appeared uninterested in making any as drifters. They were “leaves blown by the wind, living each day, sometimes happily, sometimes despairingly, but they tried to ignore the approach to the future” (p. 38). In this study, none of my participants fit this category, nor did their retelling of their experience pre-college indicate that they had ever been uninterested or unconcerned about figuring out their racial or sexual identities. Even Jayla, who was uninvolved with her identity development and adopted labels assigned by others expressed an understanding of why she had the identity labels that she had and appeared to believe in them.

Josselson’s (1996) pathways presented an interesting and useful way to conceptualize identity on other dimensions aside from the ones used to develop them. Since this current study is not longitudinal, it would be useful to follow females with multiple-marginal
identities beyond college to see what identity commitments or revisions to their identities they made.

Multiple Identity Models

There is no doubt that this study contained a focus on multiple identities. Within Chapter 2, I outlined two multidimensional identity models offered by Reynolds and Pope (1991) and Jones and McEwen (2000). Overall, I did not find these models to be comprehensively useful. I believe that a model specific to the identities in question that also allowed for fluidity and considered context would be more appropriate.

Reynolds and Pope (1991) offered four possible identities in their multidimensional identity model (MIM) that included: identifying with one aspect of self where society assigns the label, identifying with one aspect of self where the individual chooses the identification, identifying with multiple aspects of self in a segmented fashion, and identifying with combined aspects of self using identity intersection. This model allowed for fluidity among and between the various dimensions throughout the life course.

Jones and McEwen (2000) suggested a more comprehensive model, the model of multiple dimensions of identity (MMDI), which took into account changing contexts of an individual’s life. A distinguishing feature of this model was the invisible personal identity which is the core of an individual. The core is affected by other identities and context.

Reynolds and Pope’s (1991) model offered usefulness in the fluidity of its structure, such that individuals could move about in the ways they identified; however, the important feature that was lacking was the broader social context that contributed to those decisions. The participants in this study made conscious decisions about whether or not to accept the identities assigned by society. Externally, they may have appeared to have identified with
only one aspect of self, while internally, they may have identified with multiple aspects of self. Their identities, however, did not seem to intersect or overlap, which implied a segmented identity.

Another useful model is Jones and McEwen’s (2000) model of multiple dimensions of identity (MMDI). This model seemed appropriate for gaining a holistic understanding of an individual, but in the context of this study, where race and sex were the focus, it seems inverted. The graphic (see Figure 5) suggested that the core personal identity was in the center with the other identities surrounding it, while the participants suggested their personal identity was the shell around the other identities. The MMDI model allowed for external context such as family background, experiences, life planning, and sociocultural conditions to affect individuals.

**Multiracial Identity Models**

In Chapter 2, I discussed several multiracial identity models beginning with deficit models (Cross, 1971; Park 1928; Stonequist, 1937), followed by stage theories (Kerwin & Ponterotto, 1995; Kich, 1992; Poston 1990), then thematic approaches (Cortés, 2000; Daniel, 2002), and lastly ecological models (Root, 1990; Renn, 2000, 2003, 2004). Since I situated this study within an ecological framework, reviewing Root and Renn’s work is necessary.

**Root**

Root (2003) identified five identity choices within an ecological framework that considered external factors such as “geographical history of race, gender, family influences, individual ‘personality,’ community, and generation” (p. 11). Three of these characteristics: geographical history of race, family influences, and community are significant to this study.
Three of the locations reported in the article as having an increase in mixed-race populations happened to be three of the locations where participants responded to my research inquiry and where I traveled to conduct interviews. Root (2003) stated that, “one of the explanations for the presence of mixing must be attributed to more opportunities for interracial contact that come through assimilation and immigration in a post-civil rights era” (p. 11).

Family influences, which proved to be important to the participants in this study, according to Root (2003), offered socialization, cultural markers, biology, language, sexual identity, and more. The participants also discussed the community in which they grew up, which was described by Root (2003) as, “one’s actual home, neighborhood, school, workplace, place of worship, and places of recreation” (p. 13). The participants’ communities presented challenges and supports for them during their pre-college years for both racial and sexual identity.

Root’s (2003) five identity choices influenced by the aforementioned context are: (1) accept the identity society assigns, (2) choose a single identity, (3) choose a mixed identity, (4) choose a new race identity, and (5) choose a white identity. The participants in this study resided solely in the mixed identity category. I attributed this to the ages of the participants, who were 18-22 and who grew up during the 1980s when choosing a mixed race identity was possible for them at a much younger age.

Renn

Renn’s (2000) conceptualization of the ecology model, specific to the college culture, in conjunction with her expansion of Root’s five identity choices, occurred in a time more relevant to the participants in this study. The five patterns that she developed offered
more flexibility in language and design are: (1) identifying as monoracial, (2) identifying
with more than one racial group, (3) identifying as multiracial, (4) opting out of the system of
racial categories completely, and (5) moving among the options.

None of the 6 participants in this study identified as monoracial within the college
setting. All of them, at some point during their pre-college upbringing, identified as
monoracial for various reasons, primarily related to their parents’ identity. Talisa was the
most clear about her situational identity within the “more than one racial group” category
when she described acting like, dressing like, or being like a Mexican or a Black person. She
more frequently referred to herself as biracial while the other participants used multiracial as
a term to describe themselves. Again, the third category of identifying as multiracial claimed
the majority of the participants in this study including Talisa. Allyse’s “multiracial” category
was Hispanic, Talisa’s term of biracial fit this category, and the rest described multiple racial
components to their identity that contributed to the reasons they identified as multiracial.

None of the participants opted out of a racial category since they all worked hard to
claim or reclaim their racial or ethnic heritage, and now in the college setting, none appeared
to move between options. Appearance may have played a role in the participants being
viewed as monoracial individuals. Some of the participants (Talisa and Jasmine) discussed
the challenge of being forced to make decisions about racial identity and deny parts of
themselves for college forms or scholarship applications, much like what Brown’s (2001)
findings were in her study of interracial young adults.

Relationship to Renn’s Findings: Space

In addition to the ecology model of student development and the five dimensions of
identity, Renn (2000, 2004) also acknowledged the theme of space, which was supported by
this study as well. The participants in this study highlighted the importance of space on the college campus. Renn (2000, 2004) shared, “Students spoke about finding space – both physical and psychological – to fit in” (p. 405). For her participants, public spaces included “residence halls, student organizations, classrooms, and social events” (p. 405).

The participants in this study spoke clearly about public spaces such as student organizations, of which they were aware or participated within leadership positions, or student social events that they attended. These public spaces offered like-minded and sometimes like-appearing or like-experienced others with whom they could interact.

Renn (2000, 2004) described private spaces as spaces where students could “[sort] through meanings of peer culture, family background, and personally held notions of culture, race, and self” (p. 405). Private spaces were accessed “through journal writing, academic projects, or conversations with trusted others” (p. 405).

In this study, private spaces in the way that Renn defined them were realized by the participants in their responses to my question about what they learned about themselves by participating in this project.

Jayla gained a new awareness about herself and her identities by participating in this study, and solidified her realization that “you can’t necessarily label a person one thing or another [because] a whole lot of things go into it.”

Allyse reflected on her interviews and better understood why her brother clung so tightly to the “truth” that their grandfather told him about being white.

What I learned was the idea that, awhile back about my brother and how since he respected my grandfather so much he hasn’t admitted that my grandfather wasn’t telling the truth [about race]. I hadn’t thought about that at all until this interview. It made sense to me. I have now accepted why my brother wasn’t strange about it. I realized that’s probably the reason, he didn’t want to [see it], so recognizing things
about my family kind of came out more than I had known before in terms of my Spanish side of the family. I don’t know. I thought deeper into that, [and I] am analyzing how they are and why they are.

Joan reflected on the mixed messages she received growing up about race and sexuality and what a huge impact they had on her. Doing the interviews and thinking about her identity development process brought that awareness to light and acted as a cleansing process from which she could move on.

Oh goodness, it’s really just a matter of realizing that I was really shoved around a lot when I was younger. I’m just happy that I’ve done this now because I can move on from that and you know that’s not a block anymore. [Gave some insight into some of those situations then?] Yes.

Joan’s reflection illuminated that working through her identity process out loud with someone else offered her the opportunity to process her past, to make sense of how she came to her current identities, and to recognize the hurdles she crossed to get there.

Scarlet said,

[Participating in this study] definitely made me a lot more conscious of and aware of the processes [of identity development]. I like looking at the evolution of my identities. It’s interesting to go back and look at where I’ve been [and] where I come from.

Talisa carved out private space by doing a class project on bisexuality. She also felt that participating in this project helped her come to terms with her identities.

When I first heard about [the project] in the beginning of last semester, I had just started getting into the whole bisexual identity thing and in doing this I was kind of like, “Wait, so if I do this it’s kind of official, isn’t it?” It required me to think about it more and delve into exactly what it means to be me. I have to learn how to understand and communicate the kind of person I am before other people can understand it as well. It’s helpful for me to sit and think about, “Okay, who am I [and] how would I describe myself to other people?” I learned more about myself.

Jasmine was able to re-discover her identities by participating in this project. She realized that her identities did not just happen, but rather, there was a process or an evolution
to her development. “Going over the process, I can see like, ‘Oh, okay. This is how it slowly happened.’”

All of these illustrations provide clear support for the type of psychological and physical space suggested by Renn’s model (2000, 2003). In addition to offering support for Renn’s study, this study supported previous studies (Brown, 2001; Cortés, 2000; Korgen, 1998; Renn, 2000, 2003, 2004; Wallace, 2003) that found that college was a time of stress, transition, and peer interaction.

This study also supported Renn’s (2000, 2003) conceptualization of the ecology model related to the college setting, but did not provide much support for the five racial identity choices offered by Renn (2000). Instead, the participants in this study identified as monoracial (pre-college) and multiracial (in college) without showing clear signs of identifying with more than one race, opting out of a category, or moving between categories. This may be due to the different sampling strategies employed in each study, demographic shifts, or increased multiracial awareness between 2000 (when Renn’s article was published) and 2008.

**Sexual Identity Models**

Sexual identity models, which usually focused on gay and lesbian identities, followed a similar pattern as multiracial identity models beginning with stage models (Cass 1979, 1983), life-span human development models (D’Augelli, 1994a), and typology models (Klein, 1993; Paul, 2000). Before synthesizing one of the only models to describe a bisexual identity process (Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994), I wish to review D’Augelli’s (1994a) model in the context of this study. His model offered the inclusion of a bisexual identity and considered external factors over the lifespan.
This view of identity development took into account the environment in which the individual is situated and focused on three factors: (1) subjectivities and actions, (2) interactive intimacies, and (3) sociohistorical connections. Each of these factors addressed a different level of influence, from micro- to macro-level. Six processes existed in D’Augelli’s (1994a) model: (1) Exiting heterosexual identity, (2) developing a personal lesbian-gay-bisexual identity status, (3) developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual social identity, (4) becoming a lesbian-gay-bisexual offspring, (5) developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual intimacy status, and (6) entering a lesbian-gay-bisexual community.

The participants in this study supported the 6 processes suggested by D’Augelli (1994a). All of the participants explained that they realized they were different or not heterosexual, which supports the first process of D’Augelli’s (1994a) model. Each female in this study explored her curiosities by engaging in physical activities with females and males or discussing her thoughts with friends. Joan, for example, told a few friends about her attraction to females. Unfortunately, as a result of this, she experienced rumors and ostracism, so she responded by quickly relabeling herself as heterosexual. Disclosing same-sex desires was a slow process for the participants, but each one did share examples of confiding in others.

Each of the participants shared examples that supported process 2, about finding ways to describe themselves more accurately. In this study, “bisexual” was an accurate label for all but Scarlet, who claimed a pansexual identity. Developing a personal LGB identity happened for several of the participants before they entered college and for others, it was a college experience. Jayla and Allyse found the comfort and support of gay, lesbian, and bisexual
peers once they entered college. Scarlet, Joan, Talisa, and Jasmine found meaning in their feelings by talking with friends or community members.

Scarlet, Joan, Allyse, and Jayla appeared to be in the third process of developing a LGB social identity within the college setting. They each connected to a larger social network where they found support and validation. Jasmine and Talisa did not express interest in having their bisexual identity serve as a social identity, but both were also quite uncertain about their identities at the time of the interviews.

Only two of the participants were in the fourth process of D’Augelli’s (1994a) model, becoming a LGB offspring, which involved disclosing one’s identity to family. Scarlet and Jayla were the only two who were out to their families. Allyse, Joan, and Talisa conveyed only wanting to disclose if they partnered with a female permanently, and Jasmine expressed serious reservations about disclosing at all to her parents for fear of disappointing her father, in particular.

I did not get into details about the intimacy status of the participants. I do know that Talisa and Jasmine had not had physical relationships with same-sex individuals and Joan was in a relationship with a transman. Jayla displayed her position in the fifth process of the lifespan model since she was in a committed two-year relationship with a female.

The only participant who clearly appeared to be within the sixth process, entering a LGB community, was Scarlet, who was active pre-college and currently in a variety of political and social activities.

This study validated D’Augelli’s model. The participants’ identity development began at an early age and was influenced by family and friends. Similar to the findings of
Evans and Herriot’s (2004) study, the participants in this study were also impacted by their on-campus involvement, peer groups, and ability to reflect on their experiences. 

**Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor**

Though offering a stage model, Weinberg et al. (1994) acknowledged that not every person followed a specific set pattern of stages. This model has four stages: (1) initial confusion, (2) finding and applying the label, (3) settling into the identity, and (4) continued uncertainty. The participants in this study, if focusing solely on their bisexual/pansexual identity, fit within the model well.

**Initial Confusion.**

Five of the participants, excluding Scarlet, expressed confusion at the initial stages of their identity development. Scarlet seemed to jump right into her bisexual/pansexual identity without much confusion. Allyse said, “It was almost like maybe I’m attracted to women, maybe I’m not. I don’t know, but in elementary school I had crushes on boys and I had crushes on girls.” Jayla stated, “I never thought of myself as anything but straight until I went to college but I always knew that something was different.”

By the end of junior high I had my little boyfriends…and then the end of junior high all of a sudden I thought I was a lesbian because I was finding women attractive. I would look at pictures of women and say, “Wow, they’re really pretty.” (Joan)

Talisa became aware of her same- and other-sex attractions in fifth or sixth grade.

Lastly, Jasmine explained,

My sexual identity I think I started realizing it before high school…once I got to high school [there] were girls considered lesbians…I started to feel more toward girls and I didn’t realize why because when all these girls have a crush on him and him and I’m like, “I don’t, I play basketball with him, I’ve got a crush on you.”
Finding and Applying the Label.

As mentioned in an earlier discussion of D’Augelli’s (1994a) model, the participants in this study have all adopted a bisexual or pansexual label. One of the examples in this stage from Weinberg et al.’s (1994) study that is supported by Jayla, is the turning point by having a same-sex or other-sex experience. Jayla was unsure about her sexuality until the experience she had in college with her same-sex neighbor and her boyfriend. That solidified her interest in both males and females and spurred her to don a bisexual label.

Settling into the Identity.

Weinberg et al. (1994) described this stage as one of comfort and self-acceptance of the identity. The only two people who I believe were in this stage were Jayla and Scarlet. Both had fully disclosed their sexual identity to family and friends and were living an “out” lifestyle, whereas the other participants were still feeling their way around with the identity and making decisions about whether to disclose and to whom to disclose.

Continued Uncertainty.

This stage is dominated by feelings of uncertainty due to the messages portrayed about bisexuals being confused individuals who are pulled between homosexual and heterosexual communities. Specifically, Weinberg et al. (1994) shared that participants in their study often questioned their sexual identity if they partnered with a male versus a female. Talisa and Jasmine embodied this stage. Illustrations of Jasmine’s curiosity about whether she would identify as a heterosexual if she married a male, or a lesbian if she partnered with a female were shared previously.

This study supported the Weinberg et al. (1994) study in that each of the participants could clearly be placed within one of the stages of bisexual identity development. Weinberg
et al. looked at individuals who initially identified as heterosexual who later adopted a bisexual label. Most of the participants expressed feeling “different” when they were younger and some of them (Joan, Jayla, Jasmine, Allyse) vacillated between identifying as heterosexual because they did not have the language for what they were feeling, or it was a matter of safety (Joan) and self-preservation among pre-college peers, and identifying as bisexual.

The stages in Weinberg et al.’s (1994) study are not concrete, which offered fluidity among them. As stated earlier, this model appeared useful in viewing the process to forming a bisexual identity (if only focusing on that identity), but it does not outline how or why individuals arrived at these stages. The findings from the current study essentially transplant Weinberg et al.’s (1994) model of bisexual identity formation within Renn’s (2004) ecology model of student development as a way to help explain the external factors that contributed to the process of bisexual identity development. The one outlier was Scarlet, who now has adopted a pansexual identity. Since her process to sexual identity development followed that of the bisexual identity model, and she identified in that way for some time, she could still be said to have followed the process even though her pansexual identity widens her scope of relationship possibilities.

Multiracial-Bisexual Identities

The narrower the focus of this study, the harder it was to find similar research projects focusing on the same topic. The literature presented only a few scholars who theorized about the experience of individuals who identify as multiracial and bisexual (Collins, 2000, 2004; Israel, 2004; Kich, 1996; Stanley, 2004; Thompson, 2000).
The most recent author to provide a model that may apply to both multiracial and bisexual individuals is Collins (2000); however, this model was derived from research that focused only on race-ethnicity rather than sexual identity. Collins (2000) stated about the model that, “These phases describe people who have two distinct identities that place them in a position of self-devaluation. From there they move to a position where there is a positive perception of identity based on the coexistence of their identities” (p. 243). The four phases are: (Phase 1) Questioning/confusion, (Phase 2) Refusal/Suppression, (Phase 3) Infusion/Exploration, and (Phase 4) Resolution/Acceptance. In addition to these phases, Collins (2000) offered seven basic tenets which are summarized here:

- Self-definition is the key concept. It is subjective.
- There are many influences on the individual, such as family, peers, and the environment.
- Biracial/bisexual identity is a personal construction.
- As an individual goes through the life course, external forces place the individual into different roles based on sex, gender, class, sexuality, and race.
- The model assumes that changes will occur in the self-definitions and that those definitions will relate heavily to a positive identity.
- Social change is inevitable, not static. Individuals will be faced with fluctuating information that will impact them.
- Cultural exposure is important to biracial/bisexual identity.

The participants in this study provided support for almost all of these tenets. They each self-identified in a way that fit them best, they were influenced by many external factors, their identity development was personal to them, and other aspects of their perceived
identities did influence their self-presentations and performances. By the end of the third interview, they all described feeling comfortable (positive) about their identities, they all spoke about the messages they heard about their identities, and exposure to others was important for finding spaces within which they could fit. While the findings of this study corroborated Collins’s (2000) tenets, the participants fit less comfortably into the proposed biracial-bisexual identity model.

**Phase I: Questioning/Confusion.**

Collins (2004) described this first phase as one that most bisexuals and biracial individuals experience and since biracial-bisexual individuals have a dual minority status, it is a phase they would experience doubly. This phase is characterized by being challenged with questions such as “What are you?” Biracial individuals are confronted with reminders about their ambiguity due to appearance and bisexual individuals struggle with the invisibility of their identity and the negative messages attached to it. The result of this phase is hope that “they would incorporate only those items that result in a more positive identity, and reject those that are devaluing because to incorporate those items which are devaluing may marginalize the individual” (p. 244).

Support for this phase was found in the current study. The participants, however, each described developing their multiracial/biracial and bisexual/pansexual identities as separate processes due to the external factors that influenced the rate at which their identities developed. Each participant shared the confusion she experienced while working to understand her multiracial/bisexual identity. Appearance contributed some to this confusion since most participants were perceived to be white or Black, when in fact, they had a rich mixture of other racial heritages. Allyse, Jasmine, and Joan described being asked, “What are
you?” once in awhile but most of the confusion came from reactions from and interactions with family members.

As previously described within this chapter, all of the participants but Scarlet described some type of confusion about their bisexual identity, or recognition of being or feeling different. Allyse clearly stated that her Hispanic-multiracial identity development process was external and impacted by family while her bisexual identity development process was more internal.

Jasmine was the only participant who, at the time of the study, displayed guilt and emotion about her bisexual identity. This was because of her concern about disappointing her father. She appeared more comfortable with her multiracial identity once in college and was working through her uncertainty about her bisexual identity. The other participants, by the time I interviewed them within the college setting, had navigated through many of the perceived challenges, and resolved their identities in a way that was acceptable and positive to each of them.

Phase II – Refusal/Suppression.

In this phase, Collins (2000) explained that biracial/bisexual individuals work to define themselves and often assume a label given to them by the environment, later rejecting that identity because it is not one they designated for themselves. This period is one of self-identification. “If there is an opportunity to develop relationships with peers from many different backgrounds, then this will facilitate a positive identity” (p. 244), and access to biracial/bisexual role models is ideal. A feature of this phase is the importance of the individual’s position within the social structure. Collins (2000) further stated, “This is a
period where they select one identity over the other, and attempt to suppress or deny what they have rejected” (p. 244).

The participants in the current study did not pass through this phase in quite the way that Collins (2000) suggested. Yes, the participants continued adjusting and readjusting their identities and labels to find one that accurately reflected them, but the only participant who clearly adopted societally-given labels was Jayla. Jayla did not spend much time thinking about her identities or the labels she should adopt to refer to herself; rather, if someone gave her a label and it seemed to fit her at the time, she adopted it. Her attitude was that of indifference rather than confusion. One example that illustrated this was when Jayla enjoyed a same-sex experience and after discussing it with her boyfriend she said, “I think I’m a lesbian.” He told her that she was not, that she was bisexual and so she adopted that label instead.

The other participants utilized labels that fit how they viewed themselves at the time. For example, Jasmine referred to herself as Black because her friends did and, for some time, she did not really understand that she was multiracial. Allyse called herself Mexican and white because that is how she viewed her parents’ identities, but after receiving more information about her father’s heritage, she began labeling herself Hispanic.

The participants did not describe seeking out reference groups for their racial identity, though several participants (Jasmine, Scarlet, Talisa, and Joan) stated that they did interact or talk with individuals who had a non-heterosexual identity. The need to find others just like them did not seem to be as important as having support from family or friends.
**Phase III – Infusion/Exploration.**

In this phase, Collins (2000) suggested that individuals choose a single identity but are then confused by this decision. As a result, they reach out to others to locate the pieces of themselves that appear to be missing.

Access to environments containing the missing pieces would have to be available for the participants (Collins, 2000). College would appear to be a time when this would be possible. The participants in this study did use college as a time to explore the parts of them that were silenced during their pre-college time as a way to integrate these experiences into their whole being and make informed decisions about identity labels.

One of the ways that Collins (2000) suggested individuals do this is by seeking out identity reference groups. The college environment offered opportunities for the participants to meet supportive others and to become involved in identity-specific clubs or activities.

Also in this phase, situational identification was believed to occur, where biracial-bisexual individuals changed themselves to blend into specific contexts (Collins, 2000). During the pre-college time period, the participants in this study did not actively change their identity or appearance to conform to a specific setting. In college, Allyse, Joan, and Talisa discussed appearance as a way to stand out rather than blend in, to make themselves more visible within various social environments.

Collins (2000) made two other assertions about this phase that were not supported by this study. The first is that “participants ‘overidentified’ with their minority side” (p. 245) and the second was that the final product of this phase was to “blend both [identities] into an inter-identity label” (p. 245). Since Collins’s study, from which the biracial-bisexual identity model surfaced, was based on Japanese biracial individuals, the concept of overidentifying
potentially worked only if the participant was a white-non-white biracial person. Three of the participants in the current study were white-non-white multiracial individuals, yet there was no indication that any of the 6 participants overidentified with their minority side. In Jasmine’s, Allyse’s, and Talisa’s case, they were non-dominant multiracial, as in, they were not mixed with white.

The notion of blending both identities into an inter-identity label, in the way that Collins (2000) conceptualized it, is unclear. She stated,

An analogy for the end of this phase is the attempt to mix oil and water. As participants acknowledged their minority-ness, some shook their identities vigorously, attempting to blend both into an inter-identity label. Unfortunately, after time, the oil and water separated, producing a dilemma for biracial/bisexual individuals. Perhaps an inter-identity label was not an acceptable solution to their identity.

A discussion regarding the integration or separateness of identities for the participants in this study commences in the final chapter, but none of the participants indicated a need for, or interest in, fusing their identities together, or a disappointment in not being able to do so.

Phase IV – Resolution/Acceptance.

In this phase, individuals acknowledged, “I am who I am” (Collins, 2000, p. 245). They have shed the stereotypes, identity confusion, feelings of self-devaluation, and mislabeling, and located a space where their identities are supported. Collins further expanded this phase, detailing that individuals, upon locating a reference group, decide whether to redefine themselves or accept both parts of themselves. They develop a “double sense of identity” (p. 246), or a multiple identity that is “intermeshed [and] cannot be separated” (p. 246).
This phase, however, seems idealistic and unattainable in the way that Collins (2000) has presented it. She suggested that to reach this stage, the individual has shed stereotypes, confusion, and self-devaluation. She also presented it as an end stage without room for growth or movement and an underlying message that if an individual is still questioning or is still influenced by stereotypes, then he/she has not reached resolution or acceptance.

The participants in this study all appeared to have reached acceptance with their identities. Each one shared her own version of the “I am who I am” sentiment; however, the participants did not provide evidence that this stage was the ultimate ending for them. Instead, they all expressed that they would continue to evolve and grow as they learned more about their racial heritage and/or gained comfort with their sexual identity. Finally, since each participant suggested a separation of their identities, their stories would also not offer support for Collins’s idea of an intermeshed identity; rather, they might more aptly display a double identity.

Critique

The participants’ stories supported all of the tenets offered by Collins (2000) which were general enough that they could have been applied to almost any type of identity development. The findings of this study, however, supported only pieces of the proposed model, which was of primary interest. The participants all accepted their identities as stable pieces or evolving pieces of themselves. They acknowledged the facts about themselves, with regard to racial background, and in some cases, sexual identity, or came to terms with the choices they may have to make about behaviors or disclosures in the future in light of their sexual identity. College offered an environment where they found fit within supportive spaces. They had freedom to navigate their identities because, in college, they could make
choices about hiding or disclosing their identities. All of the participants accepted their multiracial/biracial and bisexual/pansexual identities and considered those identities as multiple identities within themselves, though the notion of an intermeshed or integrated identity was not supported.

In the concluding paragraph of Collins’s (2000) article, she called for future research to validate her proposed model or research that focused on integrating bisexual and biracial identities into a new paradigm. This study focused on female college students who identified as multiracial/biracial-bisexual/pansexual individuals and in the context of Collins’s (2000) proposed model, many of the phases were not supported.

Contributions to Our Thinking About Multiracial/Biracial-Bisexual/Pansexual Identity

After considering the models reviewed in this chapter, I propose a way to think about the experiences of the 6 female participants in this study during the timeframe of their pre-college and college experiences. The four elements involved in the identity development process can be categorized as: (1) Confusion/Awareness, (2) Parallel Exploration Relevant to Context, (3) Transitioning to Safety, and (4) Acceptance of Dynamic Identities.

Confusion/Awareness.

Participants expressed confusion about both their racial and sexual identities early on as they became aware of their attractions to same- and other-sex individuals or the facts about their racial heritages in the context of family or repeated acknowledgements of racial ambiguity from external sources (What are you?). Realizations about both racial and sexual identity were spurred on by feelings, friendships, role models and mentors, societal messages, peer exposure, and academic settings.
Parallel Exploration Relevant to Context.

Exploration into these identities was not specific to a pre-college or college setting. The degree to which participants were able to ask questions, research, or physically explore was tied to context and the openness or freedom of that environment, which includes community, family, friends, religion, and the school setting.

In this phase, participants were not yet able to explore both identities fully because, often, one identity was supported over the other. If communities were not racially diverse, for example, then participants may not explore their multiracial identity. If communities were not supportive of non-heterosexual identities, then participants focused on only their racial identity, the identity they could acknowledge and investigate. Parallel exploration may have been occurring, often with one identity remaining internal while the other was external. In many cases, the internal exploration was related to sexual identity, but several participants indicated they were more open about their sexual identity than their racial identity.

Transitioning to Safety.

This phase occurred in college, where individuals could find like-minded others, like-appearing others, or student organizations, resources, and supportive others that provided validation of explorations, feelings, and identity labels. Pre-college environments may have provided safety for one identity, but the college environment typically provided safety and space for a more comprehensive exploration of both racial and sexual identities. This transition helped the participants solidify their feelings about their identities and feel well-informed about them.
Acceptance of Dynamic Identities.

This phase was one of acceptance of the chosen identities, and recognition that as humans, growth and evolution were inevitable. While uncertainty may still exist, participants were content with that notion, and excited about the possibilities of change and re-definition in the future to reach authenticity of self.

This model allows for multiple identity processes to be occurring at the same time, but also takes into consideration the internal and external forces that influence this process. The college setting is included as a location where exploration occurred, and the model leaves the phases active and open rather than ending in a resolution so that constant change and adjustment over the life course can occur.

Summary

While multidimensional identity models seemed to potentially be the most useful for understanding the multiple identities of the participants in this study, they fell short by being too vague or not considering external influences and context. The best framework was one that rooted identity development within a larger social context first, such as Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) human ecology model. Since the focus was on college, an adaptation of the human ecology model, Renn’s (2004) ecology of college student development was even more accurate. Renn’s (2004) findings regarding the meaning of space were also supported by this study, and if trying to situate the participants within her five-pattern model of multiracial identity by only focusing on their process to a multiracial/biracial identity, then the participants could be located within it, providing even further support for her model.
The participants could also be located within D’Augelli’s (1994a) identity development model for lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, which further provided support for that framework. Specific to a bisexual identity model, this study provided support for the Weinberg et al. (1994) model if excluding their multiracial/biracial identity and only looking at the bisexual identity development of the participants.

Since no empirical research existed to support Collins’s (2000) proposed model for biracial-bisexual individuals, I considered the model as a framework for this study. Little support was found for the entirety of Collins’s model. Her model was specific to white-biracial individuals so did not leave room for individuals who did not have a white racial identity as part of their multiracial/biracial identity. There were also many negative connotations about the experiences and needs of individuals with a biracial-bisexual identity, and the resolutions to each phase were too limited to explain the experience of my participants.

As a result of this study and the lack of support for Collins’ (2000) model, a new model was proposed. This model allowed for fluidity among and between processes, considered the influences of the pre-college and college contexts as well as external relationship influences, and took into account factors that might encourage or delay the parallel identity development processes.

In the final chapter, I revisit the research questions and assumptions, and provide recommendations and implications based on the findings of the study.
CHAPTER 7

FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND SUMMARY

The completion of this project provided a wealth of data and several surprising findings. In this chapter, I revisit the research questions and assumptions, and discuss their outcomes in the context of the participants’ stories. I offer a discussion of the limitations of this study and share my reflections on the research process. I provide recommendations based on the study’s findings, followed by suggestions for future research. Finally, I share the implications for educational practice and an overall summary of the project which includes advice given by the participants to other young females who identify as multiracial/biracial-bisexual/pansexual.

Research Questions and Findings

The data gathered from this research offered surprising and interesting findings for each of the three research questions listed below. In this section, I detail those findings.

1. How do female college students at four-year institutions who identify as both multiracial and bisexual make meaning of their identities with regard to race and sexual orientation?

2. How do females who identify as both multiracial and bisexual describe their identity development process?

3. In what ways do female college students who identify as both multiracial and bisexual see the college experience as contributing to their identity formation?
Finding #1: Meaning Making and Context

In her book, *Identity in Adolescence*, Kroger (1996) reviewed the concept of meaning-making by drawing upon Kegan, Noam, and Rogers’s (1982) definition. This definition described identity development as meaning making such that organisms are situated within environments where they must continually restructure their relationships. Kegan et al. described meaning making as “a series of qualitative reconstructions of the relation between the subject and the object of experience” (p. 107). Kroger (1990) said, “Identity formation (or meaning making) is an ongoing process in which the boundaries between self and other become structured, lost, and reformed” (p. 146).

Seidman (2006) suggested something similar in the context of interview data stating that, “[meaning-making] requires that [they] look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation” (p. 18). Furthermore, participants must think about the context in which they developed these meanings and in so doing, they develop meaning from the choices they make in the information that they choose to share.

Meaning-making, however, is an abstract and high-order concept (Ivey & Ivey, 2007). It is the process of “making sense of the world, and then losing that coherence and sense of self to a newly emerging way of being and making sense” (Kroger, 1996, p. 146). In the context of this study, what does it mean to identify as multiracial/biracial-bisexual/pansexual?

Perhaps the reason that this was a difficult question to answer was because the participants were still exploring who they are within the context of college. Life outside of college may offer new and different ways to understand their identities so I believe that as the
participants age out of adolescence, they will gain a much stronger understanding of what their identities mean to them.

In reviewing the data, meaning-making for race appeared to be fairly stable for the participants once they finally arrived at a label that they felt accurately represented how they saw themselves. The racial labels changed over time to the current label due to various contextual factors such as family, peers/friendships, and school.

Allyse believed she was Mexican and white until her grandfather passed and she began to unravel the mystery of her father’s Spanish heritage. Jayla always saw herself as white until others pointed out that she had a Mexican heritage and she donned the multiracial label in college. Scarlet, raised by her white mother, did not acknowledge her Hawaiian side until later into high school and college when she began to embrace her multiracial identity. Joan also saw herself as white until she, like Scarlet, also began to embrace her Native American heritage and saw herself as multiracial. Talisa began to fuse her Mexican and Black identities into a biracial or multiracial label, and Jasmine became aware that her mother was Spanish, not white, and her father was more than just Black, which resulted in her claiming a multiracial identity.

Many of the participants’ racial explorations occurred before college so that at the time of the interviews, the participants could explain why they identified as multiracial or biracial. Several of the participants referred to “the facts” (Talis, Scarlet, and Allyse), or being able to look at their parents’ appearance or grandparents’ heritage to find evidence for a multiracial identity.

With regard to sexual identity, meaning-making was more variable. Scarlet originally thought of herself as bisexual but once she realized her attraction to transgendered
individuals, that meaning changed and she began identify as pansexual. Jayla believed she was a lesbian, rather than bisexual, after she enjoyed a sexual encounter with another female even though she was dating a man at the time. She initially believed that because she had engaged in same-sex sexual activities, she should accept a lesbian label, but her boyfriend explained to her that she was bisexual. Jasmine, because of her religious beliefs, wondered how she would identify if she had a physical encounter with a female even though her religious belief system and pressures from her parents told her that she should marry a man and be heterosexual. Joan thought about identifying as pansexual but realized bisexual was a more accurate label for her because of the difficulties with her current transgendered partner. Talisa had never had any physical experience with a male or a female and said that she did not need to have experienced physical intimacy with either sex to recognize her attraction to both and to accept a bisexual label.

Meaning-making for both of these identities was fluid with bisexuality appearing to be more flexible than multiracial identity. No single factor, however, affected meaning-making for racial or sexual identity more than the contexts in which the participants were placed throughout their identity development processes. Context included family, friends, and the pre-college or college environment. Ongoing and evolutionary, the meanings that the participants attached to their multiracial/biracial and bisexual/pansexual identities could be reflected in one or two words.

The ways that Jayla made meaning of her multiracial and bisexual identities may best be summarized using the words, “other-imposed” and “non-issue.” Throughout her interviews, she had trouble answering questions directly related to the identity development process or the meaning she made of that process. Her pre-college environment was
uncomplicated and her family rarely, if ever, discussed race. She repeatedly expressed that
the labels she now uses – bisexual and multiracial – were given to her in high school and then
again in college by her peers who seemed to be more concerned about those issues than was
she. She fell into the other-imposed labels and she maintained them after gaining a better
understanding of their meanings. My interpretation of Jayla’s story is that she carried these
labels long enough and had plenty of supporting evidence from peers, literature, and
experience to feel comfortable in the labels. In reviewing my journal notes of the interviews
with Jayla, I identified statements congruent with this finding.

Consistently, Jayla seems uninterested in how her identity developed, or maybe a
better term is unaware…it is not something she has a lot to say about. It is not on her
radar for things to really think about. Other people define her. There is something else
going on here because Jayla is the oldest participant thus far, so it has nothing to do
with age. It has to do with context and socialization. Her discussion of what
bisexuality means to her is also fascinating. Her use of “bi” really means anything.
She wasn’t aware of other labels (such as pansexual).

This journal entry about Jayla supported the terms I have applied to describe how she
has made meaning of her identities. She is content not to think about her identities unless
other people bring them up or provide her with new labels that accurately describe her
experience.

Two terms that best describe the way that Allyse made meaning of her identities are,
“balance” and “struggle.” Even though she identified that her path to understanding her
identities was full of conflict, pain, and confusion, she felt that she was not alone. “It’s
something people go through no matter what identities they’re struggling with. It could be
something simple…it’s not new to teenagers [and] I think it’s a critical part of growing up.”
Allyse understood that to get to her current state, she experienced challenges. She also
recognized that others her age experienced obstacles in one way or another too. Allyse
described her struggle as “character building” and said it helped her to become more open-minded.

The balancing act that Allyse described related to both her Hispanic-multiracial and bisexual identities. “I feel like [they] aren’t incredibly strong in themselves. I’m kind of in-between in both [identities].” The way that Allyse made meaning of her identities, especially her Hispanic-multiracial identity was that she was not just Mexican, but Mexican and Spanish even though she was not entirely sure of what it meant to be Spanish. “The Spanish thing is still something that isn’t fully developed in me culturally because I never got a glimpse of that culture. I haven’t always felt like my Spanish side was yearning to come out.” Her Spanish heritage, however, was not something that she could deny which is why she donned the Hispanic-multiracial label. Her bisexual balancing act, as illustrated in Chapter 5, is a combination of gender performance to attract either males or females, and making something which is often invisible, visible at the right times and in the appropriate places.

“Adaptability” and “mixed messages” described the undercurrents of how Joan understood what it meant to be bisexual and multiracial.

Oh goodness, mixed messages, which I only realized after doing this interview. I honestly don’t have any sort of conclusion that I can come to except that you know people change and I’m glad that I’ve been able to adapt to that. There were so many mixed messages from family, friends, [and] from the media. Trying to figure out which of those was real…and not even what was real but what I needed to figure out myself really and what was extraneous and what was not helpful for me. Just basically mixed messages about what it means to be multiracial and bisexual. I love myself for being this way and I’ve become more comfortable with it.

Sorting through the various messages, adapting to the circumstance, and accepting what fit and what did not was how Joan came to make meaning of her identities. She identified her bisexual identity by exploring other options and adjusting the label to better
reflect her. To be bisexual meant to enjoy only males and females rather than being more open to transgendered individuals. To be multiracial meant accepting and reclaiming her Native American heritage, learning more about her Scottish and Irish background, and expressing the new identity to others. Again, making what was often invisible, visible.

Words to describe Scarlet’s meaning making process are “absence” and “recognition.” Scarlet made meaning of her identities in the absence of those identities. To be multiracial meant acknowledging, embracing, and celebrating her of-colorness, her Hawaiian and other non-white heritages. Being pansexual meant recognizing that she was attracted not just to males and females, but to people. “Why am I limiting myself? When I was in high school I identified as bisexual and then I started dating transmen. Transmen don’t fit into bi.”

Scarlet’s unique context of living in Hawaii and attending college on the Mainland encouraged her meaning-making process, especially with regard to her race. In Hawaiian schools, racial differences were celebrated, which was a different experience from what she encountered at C College.

“Questioning her fit” and “uncertainty” are two ways to describe how Jasmine made meaning of her identities. For her racial identity, what it meant to be multiracial was that she did not cleanly fit into any category. “My biggest challenge has been not being able, the fact that I’m not able to fit into a category has been hard. I do not fully belong.” Taking on the presidency of the multiracial/biracial student organization at University D helped her provide a home for others like her, a place of shared experience. Her bisexual identity was also a struggle as she shared her concerns about what it meant to be bisexual.

Our society is uncomfortable with anything that’s not normal and so [the task is] trying to find people that are gonna be okay. If I define myself as bisexual now, [then] what if I marry a man? Do I still consider myself bisexual or am I now heterosexual?
If I end up with a woman, if I go against my original plans, does that make me just a lesbian or am I still bisexual?

Jasmine expressed uncertainty with her identities, which illustrated that her belief systems, experiences, and environments now may have a great effect on how she makes meaning of her identities in the future.

Like Jasmine, “continued uncertainty” is how Talisa described the meaning she had for her racial and sexual identities, though she explained that the uncertainty was more in line with her sexual identity rather than her racial identity. She also described looking for a place to fit and “feeling alone.”

I’ve come to the conclusion that I’m Black and Mexican. The world is becoming more politically correct and trying to leave out race in so many things so it’s a lot easier. I kind of have to prove myself and make other people understand what it means to be biracial. I always felt like I lived outside the box. I’m a loner type sometimes. With bisexuality, it’s something I have to deal with. I’ll always feel like I have to prove myself. I’m putting myself even more separate from everyone else, even a little further outside the lines. It makes me feel a little more alone.

The youngest of the 6 participants and the one who had experienced the least amount of college, Talisa’s meaning-making also demonstrated room for manipulation. Likely, if she were interviewed at the end of her college experience, she would have a firmer answer on what it means to be biracial and bisexual.

All of the participants alluded to the ways that they thought of themselves but none of them firmly shared what it meant, exactly, to be multiracial/biracial or bisexual/pansexual. They each showed growth in the process from pre-college to college, shifts in identity labels, and a better understanding of how and why they identified the way that they do, but each seemed open and expectant of changes in their future. Their meaning-making reflected more, “This is who I am now,” rather than, “This is who I will always be.”
Finding #2: Separate or Under One Roof

In discussing identity development, all participants illuminated the long and challenging process of coming to understand their multiracial/biracial-bisexual/pansexual selves. Three participants described the identity development process as completely separate and 3 participants described it as what I call “under one roof,” where they saw these two identities as separate but still pieces of a collective “me” identity. In addition to the separate or sometimes separate processes, the participants also generally described the multiracial/biracial identity development experience as more external because of appearance, and the bisexual/pansexual identity development experience as more internal.

The biracial thing was definitely longer. It started off from when I was born because I’ve always been around different looking people. The bisexual journey, I mean I always knew something was different but I never really thought about it until college and then it just exploded. (Jayla)

I asked Jayla if she thought that growing up with liberal open-mindedness contributed to why she had difficulty answering some of the questions in the interviews. She responded with “yes.” She had not given her identities any thought because she had not needed to.

For most of the participants, one or both of their identities were invisible to others, such as family or friends, and growing up, they could not easily discuss, for example, their sexual identity. This contributed to the identity development process and the separateness that many of the participants experienced. “I do think of them separately because I’ve dealt with them separately. One involved my family more and the other one involved myself more. The two haven’t crossed yet. I think of them separately” (Allyse).

Jasmine was slightly indecisive about the level of separateness she gave to her identities; however, in the context of all of her interviews, I have categorized her with the
two other participants who described separate processes. “I always think of them as separate. I’ve never really combined my two identities. I mean all of my identities make up me but I feel like they’re separate parts of me.”

Joan expressed that context determined whether these identities were “under one roof” or separate; however, her story illustrated separateness in her process to reaching her current identity understanding. She explained,

I would like to think that I’m just me and that they’re just part of me and you know that neither one really defines me so much but I think that in interacting with other people depending on the other people, they sort of intersect in some places, in some places they collide, and in some places they are parallel. It just depends on the interactions. I’d like to say that I’m just this whole individual and those are just pieces of me.

Like Joan, Scarlet also wanted the “final conclusion” of herself to be pieces of her identity under the same roof of a single “me” identity, but she acknowledged that the processes were different. While for many of the participants, their racial identity development was external and their sexual identity development was internal, Scarlet’s experience was the opposite.

I think the processes that I went through to come to each of my identities was very different. My sexual orientation process was a lot more extroverted and had to do a lot more with the people around me than it had to do with me internally, and my racial identity was a lot more of an internal thing. The processes to get to each identity were very separate but I think the final conclusion is [that] they are two very different facets of the same thing. They are different parts of my identity, but they are still both me and so they have that commonality, [a] common thread.

Talisa echoed what the two “under one roof” participants stated by saying, They’re both kind of separate from one another but at the same time they work, like they kind of mesh together and they kind of work to create the kind of person that I am all together. They’re both important aspects of my identity as a person but at the same time they’re not entirely what I’m about. I can be more than just bisexual and biracial. I don’t use those two identities as the only way to define myself.
Separate identity development processes make sense given all of the contextual factors that went into helping the participants identify, understand, and accept their identities.

Josselson (1996) referred to the separate and “under one roof” processes when she spoke about the “many selves within identity” (p. 243). According to her, “Women have multiple layers to their nature, and the solution to the riddle of identity formation is to include as many strands as possible” (p. 243). Additionally, when females are first gaining an understanding of who they are, they may favor certain aspects of their identity over others. In the case of the participants in this study, some favored their racial identity first while others favored their sexual identity. Both of their identity choices were dependent on context and their level of understanding at the time.

Furthermore, Josselson (1996) said, “As women grow, they struggle to make space for these disused or disavowed parts of the self, widening the expanse of identity to encompass what was left behind” (p. 243). In other words, as females mature, they stop seeing their identities as separate and combine them to fit entirely within themselves (under one roof).

Finding #3: College Offered A Place to Find Self, Breathe, Grow, and Experience

Unanimously, the participants expressed that college has, in some way, affected one or both of their identities and the overall identity development process. As I mentioned in the discussion of “finding fit” offered in Chapter 5, each of the participants described the importance of the college environment and the impact that it has had on how they view themselves racially and sexually. Growth, in this context, is best defined as “an expansion of the personality – the addition of parts and the enlargements of existing parts” (Sanford, 1967,
Development, “the organization of increasing complexity,” (Sanford, p. 48) was also described in the participants’ responses as a result of their college experiences thus far.

Jayla credited her time in college with shaping who she is today and helping her with the labels she used to identify herself. Allyse said,

In terms of sexuality, [college] drastically impacted my process. Before college, I was still questioning, I was still nervous about it, I didn’t really feel comfortable but after college, everything changed. I don’t think I would be the same person right now [if not for college] because this city and this college were just really nurturing for people that are struggling.

Joan felt that college had a greater impact on her sexual identity because of the large “queer community on campus.” Scarlet, who attended the same college as Joan, felt that while college did not directly impact her racial identity, being surrounded by like-minded people in a place where she was absent from the racial influences of Hawaii, made a big difference.

Jasmine and Talisa, whose meaning-making process I described as being uncertain and who both sought a place to belong, each stated that college provided places for belonging, although not necessarily for both of their identities.

College really got me involved. I didn’t really consider my [multiracial] identity [until] I went to the What Are You? Forum. That’s when I was like “Okay, there’s other people who have experienced similar things to me.” I think college was big for that [racial identity] but for being bisexual, not really.

Talisa shared,

I think being in college [has kind of helped me] develop myself more. [Before college] everything was kind of in theory. In college, it’s really all up to me and there are so many opportunities out there for me to reach out and branch out and start to get out of my shell. I know that I’ll be able to basically get more comfortable with who I am and how I want to live my life.
Section Summary

The findings from this study in conjunction with findings from similar studies (Josselson, 1996; Renn, 2000, 2004) offer new information about the experiences of female college students with multiple identities, but also substantiate contemporary knowledge. First, meaning-making is an esoteric concept that appeared to be affected by environmental context, other external factors (family, friends), and experiences. It is also variable, especially in the college years when young people are bombarded with images, messages, opportunities, and resources. For 4 of the participants (Allyse, Jasmine, Jayla, and Talisa), racial identity was more fixed at the time of the interviews, while bisexual or pansexual identity was more uncertain. Scarlet and Joan, however, had a more fixed sexual identity prior to attending college.

Second, the participants described separate processes to achieving a multiracial/biracial identity and a bisexual/pansexual identity, but the majority of the participants viewed themselves as having one “me” identity, with their racial and sexual identities as facets of the larger whole. This pattern is in line with Josselson’s (1996) work on female college students through midlife, where maturation displayed a further unraveling, reorganizing, recognizing, and integration of identities.

Lastly, the participants described college as a time that impacted their identity development. Each participant described whether college impacted both of their identities or one more than the other. College offered a space to experiment, to join groups and organizations, and to gain an even stronger sense of identity and self. Similar to Renn’s (2000, 2004) findings, the participants described participation in public and private spaces to better support and understand their identities. Each participant shared how they privately
viewed their identity development upon completing this project, which provided support for the need to safely explore their identities within the classroom setting, and with like-others or trusted-others.

In this section, I have presented findings and support for each of the research questions that framed this study. In addition to research questions, I outlined five assumptions that are addressed in the next section of this chapter.

Return to Assumptions

I began this research project with five major assumptions primarily derived from my insider status.

Assumption #1 - Level of Racial Formation Upon Entering College

In my first assumption, I believed that the participants would come to college with an already semi-to-fully formed racial identity because of their physical appearance providing an external feature that would force them to think about their race. The fundamental flaw in this assumption was that it suggested that outsiders would find the participants’ appearance to be so ambiguous that they would not cognitively categorize them into a specific racial grouping. What I found was that appearance was somewhat important to the participants’ racial identity development, but that external others often perceived them to be members of a single racial category rather than as biracial or multiracial individuals.

Jayla, Allyse, Joan, and Scarlet all said that they felt most people categorized them as white. “Most people think I’m just Caucasian unless I tell them” (Jayla). “They usually guess white or I had someone guess Filipino the other day which kind of confused me. I guess people describe me most of the time as white” (Joan).
How do people describe you? A white girl. Do they ever mistake you for anything else? No. Never. Never, but people who look more Hawaiian and more Asian and more mixed races from Hawaii often get mistaken for Mexican. (Scarlet)

My skin is an olive color, it’s not necessarily brown but it’s not the typical Mexican colored skin. Most people do not assume that I’m Spanish or Mexican in any way. A lot of them guess something Middle Eastern or white or just Caucasian. (Allyse)

The white identity for Joan and Scarlet also came from their white mothers since their fathers, who were responsible for the non-white pieces of their multiracial or biracial backgrounds, were absent. Toward the end of high school and near the beginning of college, Joan and Scarlet began to question, explore, and reclaim their racial and ethnic heritages.

Allyse’s racial formation prior to college was primarily due to the triggering event of her grandfather’s death which sparked a curiosity about her racial heritage and resulted in her beginning to have conversations about it with other family members. Jayla’s continuous “racial outing” by her boyfriend gradually resulted in her adoption of a Mexican and white label which developed into a multiracial label in college.

Talisa explained that most people believed her to be Black but that her hair prompted even more questions about her racial identity. Similarly, Jasmine was perceived to be Black prior to college.

I was unable to find a fully formed racial identity in any of the participants before they entered college. For all of them, however, the questioning, exploration, and awareness of difference with regard to their multiracial/biracial identity as well as ethnicity and culture were well underway by the time they entered college. Appearance mattered a little bit in the beginning of the racial identity process, but relationships with others had a much larger impact on how they began to process and understand what it meant to be biracial or multiracial.
Assumption #2 - Multiracial Identity Informing Bisexual Identity

The assumption that the participants’ multiracial identity would inform their bisexual or pansexual identity presumed several things: (1) That the multiracial identity formed first, (2) that the two processes were similar enough to inform one another, and (3) that even if there were similarities to the two identity development processes, the participants would actively draw upon either identity to facilitate the development of the other.

This assumption was not supported. When asked if either identity informed the other, most of the participants referred back to the separate processes they endured. Jayla shared, “I think they were way different. They were similar just because they’re both kind of in the middle but the process of it all coming together was definitely way different.” Allyse struggled with that question as well, “[That question] makes sense [but] I really don’t know if that applies to me. I feel like they’re almost independent just cuz one was more shaped by my family and one was just me coming to terms with it.” Joan, Scarlet, Talisa, and Jasmine all responded that the identities were separate and did not inform one another.

When this assumption first came to mind, I drew upon my own experiences as a multiracial-bisexual/queer college student. I had my multiracial identity semi-formed before college. When I began to think about my bisexual/queer identity, I recognized similar experiences such as feeling pulled in different directions or not fitting in anywhere. The participants in this study, however, had very few examples of exclusion in the college setting and even though they described similar experiences related to each identity, they did not actively draw linkages between them within their stories. The conclusion I drew from their
interviews was that even though these processes had similarities, they were still two very
distinct processes of identity development and did not inform one another.

Assumption #3 – Identity Formation: An Ongoing Struggle

The third assumption, that identity formation would be an ongoing struggle and/or
process as the individuals situated and resituated themselves within spaces on the college
campus, was supported, unanimously, by the participants. An important note, however, is
that the support for this assumption only came in the context of process rather than struggle
since I did not gather from the participants that “struggle” was how they framed their
experiences. An air of uncertainty existed in Talisa and Jasmine with regard to their bisexual
identity since both were fairly new to the college environment, but overall, the participants
indicated an ongoing process as they continued to better understand themselves within the
college setting and beyond.

Each participant illuminated the importance of belonging to a supportive
environment. Each found psychological and physical space in the college setting which
triggered their continued thinking about identity and which also provided them with the
opportunity to explore their identities more fully in the absence of family, friends,
judgmental others, and conservative religious or community environments. None of them
expressed an interest in remaining in a stagnant identity, but rather, expressed excitement in
stretching themselves to their fullest potential.

Jayla felt comfortable with her identities now but said that she was open to whatever
life had to offer her. “I’m definitely open to these other things if it ever comes up. I wouldn’t
just close the doors and be like, ‘This is me.’”
Allyse saw no end-point to her process. Joan was open to learning more about each of her identities and said,

I’m pretty happy with my sexual identity and I think that that’s going to be there for all of my life. I try not to make any predictions in terms of that but right now, I’m very happy and I am just open and ready for anything to happen with either of those really.
Scarlet felt that constant change and evolution were in her future, both within and outside of the college setting and outside of it, and that relationships with others would impact those changes.

I think I, as a person, will always be evolving so my identities and how I talk about those identities, how I see those identities, and how I experience those identities will always be evolving. I’m sure that’ll depend on where I live, who my friends are, and the kind of people I’m surrounding myself with. Yeah, constantly evolving, constantly changing.

Talisa described a similar sentiment about growth, change, struggle, and the continued processes of identity development.

I definitely would say I’m going to continue to grow and change. Probably every aspect of myself in my life and my identity [will change] because I’m one of the people who thinks, who believes that you’re always gonna learn something new every day like and you’re always going to continue to increase your knowledge and learn more about yourself. I think that it’s going to always be an ongoing process, the whole continued uncertainty, but I don’t think it’s going to be more uncertainty. I’m just going to keep learning about who I am as a bisexual and who I am as a biracial and who I am in every other different identity that I decide to take on.

Jasmine rounded out the comments with an echoed, “I think it’s always an ongoing process. Your entire life is about discovering who you are so I don’t think it will ever end. I think it’s gonna be a continuous thing.”

These responses all suggested that identity development was ongoing, which has been substantiated by earlier research (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The participants started pre-college with the influences of family, peers, and school, and entered a college setting where
they gained more freedoms to explore, try on, and resituate themselves within these identities. They all acknowledged the malleability of their identities and did not expect to be the same people once they left college as who they had been when they entered it.

Assumption #4 - Existence of an Integrated Space

This assumption suggested that participants would locate a space of integration within their identity development process, where their multiracial/biracial-bisexual/pansexual selves would come together as one. Nothing in this study supported this assumption, which is evidenced by the discussion of the second research question in this chapter. Overwhelmingly, the participants saw their identities as separate, and while they could exist under the umbrella of “me,” the identities were not integrated.

Assumption #5 - College Environment Encourages Identity Development

The final assumption suggested that the college environment encouraged identity development. This assumption was strongly supported. As described in the discussion of the themes in Chapter 5, and the third research question in this chapter, the participants spoke about the ways that the college environment provided a culture rich in adventures and opportunities. This assumption aligned with student affairs and higher education literature that college is a prime time for identity development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Josselson 1987, 1996; Marcia, 1980). After all, colleges and universities are often intentional about providing a learning environment that impacts students’ growth and development by offering challenging and supportive structures, ways for students to become involved, and validation of their development (Evans et al., 1998).
Section Summary

In this section, I have reviewed the initial assumptions of the study. Appearance as an external, visible factor had a slight impact on racial identity development but was not an isolated contributor to identity. In addition, relationships with others and triggering events influenced the rate and order of racial identity. There was no support for multiracial/biracial or bisexual/pansexual identities informing one another. While similarities between the two processes and experiences could be identified, the processes were still unique.

Support for the continued growth of the participants within and out of college existed. There was no evidence of an integrated space where the two identities converged into a single “me” identity, and lastly, strong support was found for the impact of the college culture and environment by way of providing public and private spaces, supportive and like-minded others, and opportunities for exploration, to facilitate the participants’ multiracial/biracial and bisexual/pansexual identity development.

The next section describes the limitations of this study and my reflections on the research process.

Limitations and Reflection

Several limitations existed within this study. They include the barriers to generalizability, the spacing of interviews, the age of participants, and the exclusion of other identities such as gender, religion, or socioeconomic status.

Limitations

Since qualitative researchers typically study a single location or a small sample of individuals using purposeful sampling strategies, they often avoid making distinct claims about generalizability (Maxwell, 2005). Two types of generalizability should be noted:
internal and external generalizability. “Internal generalizability refers to the generalizability of a conclusion *within* [italics in original] the setting or group studied, while external generalizability refers to its generalizability beyond that setting or group” (Maxwell, p. 115).

Several factors made this study difficult to generalize to the wider population of multiracial-bisexual individuals. First, this study focused only on female college students. Second, these college students were from several colleges and universities across the United States. Third, there existed a wide variation in multiracial identity with regard to make-up, identification, and appearance. Fourth, bisexuality could be considered a behavior, lifestyle, or overall identity, which adds to its complexity. Fifth, this was not a longitudinal study but rather a snapshot of the lives of the 6 participants, so I was unable to create a developmental model based on the limited data. Lastly, some of the data was retrospective, based on the memories of the participants’ pre-college experiences. Though the results of this study cannot be generalized, I believe that student affairs professionals and practitioners in other fields such as sociology, psychology, and counseling will find the information a useful starting point when working with female college students who identify as both multiracial/biracial and bisexual/pansexual.

In addition to the sample, another limitation is the time frame in which this study was conducted. Since the sample was spread out across the United States, I had to conduct the first two interviews back-to-back. This procedure, while useful in that I was able to meet the participants face-to-face and do the first two interviews in person, was somewhat problematic because the participants and I were unable to take adequate time reflecting on the results of each interview before the next interview in the sequence was conducted. I hesitate to say that, ideally, the participants would live closer together because I feel that one of the
strengths in this study is the saturation of the data and shared themes across physical location. I do believe, however, data may have been richer had I been able to adhere to the “3 days to a week apart” spacing recommendation (Seidman, 2006, p. 21).

Another limitation may have been the inconsistent ages of the participants. While no glaring differences existed among their stories and my goal was not to track where they were on their identity development process, it may have been noteworthy to focus more closely either on the first two years of the college experience or the last two years of the college experience to see if that made a difference in how their identities developed.

For the most part, identities outside of sexual and racial identity were excluded. I considered this a necessity given the scope of this study; however, examination of the impact of identities such as socio-economic status, religion, and gender may have offered an even deeper insight into the participants’ stories.

Lastly, in my call for participants, I asked for female college students. My intention was not to focus on gender identity in this study and with the 6 participants that I interviewed, I did not have to make that distinction since all participants self-identified as female. One participant who I was unable to use for this study brought to light the importance of gender identity. Originally, Jared self-identified as a biracial-bisexual female but when I went to conduct the interview, I was informed that he now identifies as a heterosexual male. The intricacies of sorting out Jared’s gender, racial, and sexual identity were too complex for this study but my interactions with him and hearing his story raised my awareness on the relationship of the three identities.

While I would have liked to have explored gender identity further with the participants, I did not to avoid further complicating the study. In hindsight, questioning the
participants more rigorously on gender identity and gender performance as it related to their sexual identity and/or same- or other-sex partners, could have strengthened this study even more and added yet another unique element to it.

Reflection

This study took me 8 months to complete. Within that timeframe, I travelled to three different states in addition to the one in which I live, and conducted 21 interviews. I utilized my training as a sociologist as I listened to the stories of the female college students whose identity development process unfolded before me.

My observations about the process were that several fundamental issues surpass age, space, and time. Those are: (1) a need to belong, (2) a desire to be heard, (3) a need to exist (visibility), and (4) an understanding of who we are. Each participant had a different upbringing and a unique set of values and beliefs. Only two of them knew one another, but no matter the distance between all of them, those four factors still remained a common thread. What I also observed was the emotion tied into these stories. I sensed bitterness, loneliness, pain, fear, and relief. All of these emotions were connected to relationships that the participants had with others or relationships that they wished they had, and their biracial/multiracial-bisexual/pansexual identities were weaved into the reasons that they felt so strongly. Each participant appeared to have a yearning to be her authentic self, and to be true to her identities without hurting others.

During these interviews, I reflected upon where I was at their age, struggling to understand my multiracial identity, changing labels constantly to find one that best described me, and sorting through confusing feelings about attractions to both males and females. I
found that what separated their experiences from mine was a shift in societal acceptance, or perhaps, societal fascination with the personal lives of others and with identity overall.

Times have changed. No longer are these issues confined to college. Almost all of the participants talked about the effects of high school on their identity development. They talked about issues in high school that I never would have dreamed of discussing 10 years ago. Several of them were able to be out and proud about their bisexuality/pansexuality and a few described the gay-straight alliance in their high school. These facts illustrate the movement of our society in a direction of growing awareness of difference, and perhaps an acceptance of it as well.

What was also confirmed for me during this study was how important it is to be unique, but to also connect with like-others. The participants were often unable to name others who shared these two identities with them, so they branched out and joined organizations or found groups of friends that satisfied parts of their identities. It did not seem to matter that there was not an overflow of multiracial-bisexual people out there, as long as they could find multiracial, students-of-color, or LGBT spaces that accepted them.

I felt comfortable in this process, probably because these identities were personally familiar to me. I knew that having an insider status, however, did not mean that I could tell their stories for them. I was careful about how I managed the data collection process and only once or twice did I interject with a personal story to help facilitate the interview and to gain rapport, as this was a sensitive topic for at least one of the participants (Jasmine). I was not reliving my adolescence, but rather, understanding what adolescence is like today.

I emerged from this research experience with a newfound hope for young people today but also with a renewed awareness that there is a long way to go. I was reminded that
This study focused on individuals who attended 4-year institutions and that the 2-year institution where I work is much further behind in creating the type of environment that the individuals in this study said they needed. Not all institutions are created equal, nor do they have the same types of resources available to students, but as the student population continues to increase in diversity, I believe the likelihood of students similar to those who were the focus of this study attending public, private, 2-year, and 4-year institutions will increase.

The participants let me into their lives but they did not ask me to stay. My request for their time appeared to be a mere stop-over in their busy schedules. They did not seem to fit a mold that required pity or sympathy; rather, they seemed strong, in control, and, for the most part, confident.

I began this study without assurances of what I would receive, or who I would meet. I did not ask the participants to describe themselves, to tell me what bisexuality or pansexuality meant to them, nor to tell me what their racial make-up was before I met them each in person. I went into this study hoping to be surprised, and I was. I did not want to limit my options too much and I was pleased with the results.

I found it interesting that the majority of the participants had Spanish or Mexican heritage and I wondered how or if the story would have been different if any one of the participants would have had Asian influences. Several of the participants also were multiracial with one white parent and again, I would have enjoyed hearing additional voices from non-white multiracial participants. However, the 6 participants that I included in this study shared many similar experiences among them, so it is very possible that having more
diversity in the sample would not have changed the overall story. That question is a starting place for my next study.

Recommendations for Practice

American higher education has changed and as a result, college campuses are in constant flux (Evans et al, 1998). One of the primary challenges “facing postsecondary educators today is the creation and maintenance of campus environments that attract, satisfy, and sustain students in their efforts to achieve their educational goals” (Strange, 2003, p. 297). While the focus of this study was on post-secondary institutions, it became apparent, upon its completion, that the recommendations that accompany it are useful for the secondary level as well. An important reminder is that change is possible at all educational levels when the organizational structures are dynamic ones, “flexible in design and [able to] respond more readily to change” (Strange, p. 303). The recommendations from this study are: (1) Expand awareness of invisible identities, (2) Provide supportive, safe spaces, (3) Speak and listen, and (4) Improve counseling services.

Recommendation #1 - Expand Awareness of Invisible Identities

Invisibility was a common theme in all the stories within this study. One hope that I have for this study is to expand awareness for student affairs practitioners and other educators who may find this study useful. Many individuals today embody identities that are invisible, but which hold strong significance in their lives. People do not fit neatly into little boxes, so having documents that ask students to “check one,” for example, is not realistic and serves to further alienate individuals who are already on the margins. As Renn (2004) stated, institutional policies and paperwork need to respond to the fluidity of students’ identities and promote change in how these issues are addressed on the college campus.
Classroom curricula should also include discussions about in-between or marginal categories, especially in courses that address topics such as sex and gender or race and ethnicity. Classroom instructors should avoid talking only about monosexual or monoracial categories, which leaves those who reside in the blurs out of the conversation. Furthermore, embracing only one identity, such as race, removes opportunities for individuals to express other aspects of their identity and further marginalizes pieces of themselves.

Institutions should strive to better educate their administrators, faculty, and staff on the nuances of the human experience by way of the many identities that students today possess. Encouraging faculty to assume that there are students in their rooms who possess multiracial and/or bisexual identities or some derivation of those is a movement in the right direction.

The participants in this study requested knowledgeable and open-minded administrators at both the high school and college level who encourage students to organize and lead student groups so that peer-on-peer support and mentoring can take place. Doing this not only provides visible physical spaces where students can congregate, but it also offers visible role models to whom students might relate. Additionally, the participants in this study also wanted to see faculty, staff, and administrators who are people of color or people who identify as non-heterosexual.

This recommendation was similar to a finding in Renn’s (2004) study of mixed-race students where the importance of visible like-others was supported. “Supporting mixed [race] faculty and staff in any efforts they might make to ‘come out’ as multiracial would be an important step toward increasing the visibility of mixed people in higher education” (p. 248). Likewise, the findings from this study suggest that supporting multiracial and bisexual
faculty and staff to “come out” is a necessary action. Chickering (1969) also advocated for faculty and staff letting students know who they are, both personally and professionally, as a way to encourage “critical modeling” (p. 238).

One of the key factors in this recommendation is to review college mission statements. If the mission of the institution is to promote, develop, or maintain diversity, in fact, if any facet of the institution is concerned with the diversity of the student body, then the term and perceptions of diversity should be expanded to include everything – the edges and the in-betweens.

Recommendation #2 - Provide Supportive, Safe Spaces

One of the major findings in this study was the importance of space. Secondary and post-secondary institutions need to be more intentional about creating spaces – physical and psychological (Renn, 2004) – where students can belong. Allowing for new student organizations to develop, providing classrooms and professors who are open and willing to discuss a variety of issues that may concern today’s students, and developing a school or campus environment that recruits open-minded people will help individuals, like the participants in this study, find a place to belong.

One of the findings in Madison’s (1969) study, though nearly 40 years old, is that students have a strong emotional response toward other students. Chickering (1969) also stated, “A student’s most important teacher is another student. Friends and reference groups filter and modulate the messages from the larger student culture” (p. 253). The findings in this study substantiate these claims and thus bolster the need for spaces where students can interact with one another.
Outlets for discovery do not necessarily need to come in the form of events and organizations, but can also exist by way of classroom activities and assignments. Any venue for students to stretch their imaginations, explore their identities, and have conversations with others in a supportive environment will aid in the identity development process and overall comfort and sense of belonging in today’s student.

Recommendation #3 - Speak and Listen

Repeatedly, the participants in this study spoke about wanting to be heard and wanting to see teachers talk about the issues that were so often left out, such as multiracial and bisexual identities. Secondary and post-secondary institutions need to provide environments where students can share their feelings and opinions. Students also need to feel heard by peers, faculty, and administrators, especially when they voice concerns.

Students today need verbal outlets, whether these are discussion boards, online chat sessions, text messaging, focus groups, classroom assignments, or even just the one-on-one attention from faculty. Professors who are able to involve students in class discussions about the climate of today’s society, or who are not afraid to share their thoughts about issues of race or sexuality, provides hope for marginalized students.

Being able to speak about issues and to have open, honest discussions is one thing, but allowing students to be heard is another. The participants in this study suggested that one thing students desperately need is to be heard. They wanted to feel as though they had a voice, that they were listened to, and that they had many opportunities to share their stories and experiences.
Recommendation #4 - Improve Counseling Services

As society becomes more complicated, more diverse, and more fast-paced, today’s student will require added support in many facets of their lives. Secondary and post-secondary institutions need to enlist full-time counselors to aid students in addressing these societal shifts. Students who are supported and who have access to staff who are knowledgeable, aware, able to provide safe, supportive spaces, and who can speak and listen, can better adjust to and focus on the academic dimension of their high school or college experience. Having skilled counseling professionals available as students work through identity development processes in both high school and college will become increasingly more important in our changing society and as today’s students evolve.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study opened doors for many future studies. First, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted that the “long-term impact of college attendance on identity development remains largely unexplored,” (p. 268), citing that many of the studies that have a post-college focus highlight change processes without tying those processes or changes to the college experience. Since the evidence is clear that “identity formation begun in the college years continues to age 30 and beyond” (Pascarella & Terenzini, p. 268) a longitudinal qualitative study of participants from entrance into junior high through graduation from college and/or beyond would provide rich, unique data about the identity development process and the impact of environment, family, peers, and media.

A comparison study of multiracial/biracial-bisexual male college students would shed light on the sex differences of identity development. Further exploring the role and importance of appearance as well as gender identity in female college students in the
understanding of one’s racial or sexual identity would serve to bolster the findings of this study, and adding a sex comparison would add an element of interest.

Future research with a global perspective would provide great insight into the ways that other countries and cultures understand race and ethnicity as well as sexual identity. Focusing on the college age would also offer additional useful information about student development. Information from the 2 participants in this study who either lived or grew up outside of the United States, suggested that the U.S. has a much different perspective on race relations than other parts of the world, so exploring those differences further appears to be a necessary next step.

Research that looked at a wider range of identities held by college students would also provide insight into the ways that individuals prioritize their identities. It would also offer more information on the impact of identities such as religion or social class on other identities.

In a collaborative effort, the participants in this study provided suggestions for future research too. These include:

- Further research on intersecting identities and continued integration of social justice concepts into the academic community (Scarlet).
- Exploration into the ways that high schools handle issues such as bisexuality or sexuality in general (Jasmine).
- A more expansive study on society and culture in an effort to explain why we are the way that we are (Jayla).
- A focus on the impact of family on one’s racial and sexual identity (Joan).
Investigation of teachers at the high school level and how they handle issues of marginal identities as well as a focus on school policy (Allyse).

Utilizing qualitative research that includes the voices of marginalized students, such as those in this study, to locate institutions that provide excellent, inclusive learning environments, would also serve as an educational tool for other institutions, much like a best practices for institutions of higher education.

If the goal is to better understand today’s student as well as gain insight into their experiences and development, then more qualitative research like this study needs to be conducted so that researchers, scholars, and practitioners can hear the stories from those who live the experience.

Contributions to this Study

The major contributions of this study include: (1) providing further support for identity models specific to female college students (Josselson, 1996), models of bisexuality (D’Augelli, 1994a; Weinberg et al., 1994), and multiracial identity models (Renn, 2000, 2003, 2004), (2) further validating Renn’s ecology of college student development model (2004) which offered a clear understanding of the various systems in which college students operate, (3) supporting the importance of and need for space, both physical and psychological, for college students today (Renn, 2000, 2004), (4) reviewing Collins’s (2000) model of biracial-bisexual identity development in light of the findings of this study, and (5) offering new elements to consider when thinking about the biracial/multiracial-bisexual/pansexual identity development of female college students.
Another contribution addresses the concept of intersecting identities. While several important pieces of literature (Collins, 2000; Jones & McEwen, 2000; Reynolds & Pope, 1991) discussed how multiple identities converge, the results of this study tell a different story. The multiple identities possessed by these participants remained parallel, rarely coming together and rarely being conceptualized in this way. Rather than intersecting, the identities of most of these participants coexisted as multiple identities within the person.

This study also reaffirmed the impact that college has on identity development and from it, several key suggestions about the needs of female college students with invisible identities emerged. Student affairs practitioners should be more intentional about how they make these often invisible identities visible within the wider college setting.

A final implication is the importance of all of the factors external to the college environment such as family, friends, and the role of the pre-college academic experience. These factors heavily impacted the self that the participants brought into the college setting and influenced the degree to which they explored while there.

This study highlighted the importance of communication, visibility, knowledge, awareness, support, safety, open-mindedness, and expanded perceptions of diversity. The findings from this study are useful in secondary and post-secondary institutions, within faculty training, and in the counseling psychology field among other disciplines.

From Those Who Know - Summary

Utilizing a qualitative approach, 6 female college students were interviewed about their multiracial/biracial-bisexual/pansexual identities. Their journey from childhood to adulthood, navigating pre-college contexts influenced by family, friends/peers, and school and college contexts where they tried on many different identity labels, negotiated
themselves, and eventually found spaces in which they could belong and flourish, was (and still is) an experience of uncertainty and evolution.

The participants, like those in Josselson’s (1996) study, revised and redefined themselves, adapting and improvising to life circumstances and displaying, at such young ages, their strength and spirit. From their stories, I developed a potentially more accurate model to better understand their life transitions and paths to self-definition, one that allows for continuous movement, accepts the internal and external influences of the environment, and acknowledges the parallel processes of identity development.

My hope is that future, similar studies will be conducted that will continue to push scholars even deeper into the ever-churning waters of identity development, and I encourage other researchers to investigate the accuracy of the identity model that has been proposed in this study.

In closing, the 6 participants in this study offered advice to young females who are figuring out who they are, and who might also identify as multiracial/biracial-bisexual/pansexual.

**There’s light at the end of the tunnel.** [There are] people you meet early in life that will only make it harder for you, but once you get past that…you’re going to find people [who want] to help you and want to give you a hand. It’s just having to push through those that won’t help you and the environments that are not conducive to letting you be your own person to moving onto someone that will [help you] and [who wants] you to develop and wants you to be unique. (Allyse)

That’s hard because part of me wants to say don’t take advice because of all the different messages that I’ve gotten and how much that confused me. I was getting too much advice and input, but at the same time, it’s something you have to navigate for yourself and you can’t let people push you around. You can’t let people push you into making decisions about your sexuality or racial identity before you know, before you are comfortable with it. **Take your time and don’t push it.** (Joan)
You can’t listen to what other people say, it has to be something that you figure out for yourself. People are constantly wanting to put labels on things and so they’re gonna be like, “Oh well, that’s just this.” You kind of have to explore it before you can actually say, “Oh yeah, I’m bisexual,” or “Yes, I am multiracial.” Just explore things. (Jasmine)

I say this to everyone that ever asks me for advice about anything, “Just be yourself and don’t let other people get you down. You can rely on other people so much but you’re the only one that you can rely on.” (Jayla)

Don’t worry about what other people think and [don’t] really worry so much about their misunderstandings and misconceptions about who you are because having the identity of being either biracial or bisexual is very confusing. There’s no clear definition for who you are. There are other things to focus on until you get to the point where you can actually focus on those parts of your identity. Do your best to educate other people. (Talisa)

Lastly, I provide a final thought from Scarlet who summarizes the significance of this study.

“People are beautiful for their differences” (Scarlet).
APPENDIX A

CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

Looking for research participants:

Female college students who identify as both multiracial and bisexual

I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at Iowa State University. I am looking for 4-7 female college students who identify as both multiracial and bisexual to participate in my study. Participation is purely voluntary and will consist of three interviews each lasting up to two hours. I will travel to your location to conduct the first two interviews and the third interview will be conducted over the phone. Compensation will be offered.

Below are the definitions I am using for “multiracial” and “bisexual”:

**Multiracial** - A term that, for the purposes of this study, will also include biracial individuals and describes a racial identity that integrates two or more racial heritages (Root, 1992).

**Bisexual** - A difficult term to define because “there are many different situations which may lead [someone] to [identify as bisexual]” (George, 1996, p. 102). The term will be used here to describe individuals who do not exclusively identify as lesbian/gay or heterosexual.

Please respond if you meet the following criteria:

- You are a female.
- You are between the ages of 18-22.
- You are currently enrolled and will continue to be enrolled through May of 2008, at a four-year institution.
- You identify as multiracial AND bisexual (the research deals with the intersections of both of these identities).
- You are willing to participate in several in-depth interviews (lasting up to two hours each).

Contact: Alissa R. King – arking2@hotmail.com – 515-460-5494 with any questions or comments or if you are interested in participating in this study.
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Study: Integrated space: Contributions to identity development for female college students who identify as multiracial-bisexual.

Investigators:
Alissa R. King, Principal Investigator
Doctoral candidate – Educational Leadership and Policy Studies – Iowa State University
Assistant Professor of Social Sciences – Iowa Central Community College
515-460-5494 (cell)  515-574-1180 (office – ICCC)  arking2@hotmail.com

Dr. Nancy J. Evans, Major Professor
N247D L’Marcino Iowa State University Ames, Iowa 50011
515-294-7113 nevans@iastate.edu

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this in-depth phenomenological study is to understand the processes and experiences of female college students who identify both as multiracial and bisexual in forming their identities as well as the impact of the college experience on their identity development. You are being invited to participate in this study because you have indicated that you identify as female, multiracial, and bisexual and you are a college student between the ages of 18-22 attending a four-year institution at the time of the project.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will last for four months and will involve three interviews that could last up to two hours. Two of these interviews will be conducted in person and the final interview will be held over the phone. During the study you may expect the following study procedures to be followed: I will contact you to arrange a time for me to fly to your area and meet with you. A face-to-face interview will be conducted regarding the themes of your identity development and collect experience. The first interview will be transcribed on site, and a second face-to-face interview will be conducted before I leave your location. Once that data has been coded, I will contact you again to arrange a time for us to talk on the phone for a final interview. I may also ask you to review the transcripts of your tapes to make sure I have accurately understood the information you have provided me.
All three interviews will be tape recorded, transcribed by me, and erased upon completion of the study in August of 2008. During the interview, you may skip any questions that you do not wish to answer or that makes you feel uncomfortable.

**RISKS**

The risks in participating in this study are minimal, but may include the possibility of temporary discomfort due to the sensitive nature of the study subject matter. To address this issue, you will be provided with the location and phone number of your school’s counseling center should you wish to use their resources.

**BENEFITS**

If you decide to participate in this study, which consists of completing two face-to-face interviews and one phone interview, there will be no direct benefits to you; however, you may consider it a benefit you are contributing to an area of research that has not been directly studied. It is hoped that the information gained from this study will benefit society by providing a better understanding of how women with complex identities make meaning of their identities and college experiences. This information will be useful to practitioners in institutions of higher education in such areas as campus programming and student counseling, as well as contribute to other psychological and sociological areas. Your participation in this project may even help the principal investigator to develop a new identity development model for individuals who identify as both multiracial and bisexual.

**COSTS AND COMPENSATION**

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will be compensated for participating in this study. You will need to provide your social security number (SSN) and address in order for me to pay you. This information allows the University to fulfill government reporting requirements and confidentiality measures are in place to keep this information secure. You may forego receipt of payment and continue in the research study if you decline to provide your SSN and address.

For completing all three interviews, you will receive $50.00. If you decide not to continue your participation in the study, you will be compensated $15.00 for each interview that is completed.

**PARTICIPANT RIGHTS**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide not to participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.
CONFIDENTIALITY

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken. All participants will choose a pseudonym that will be used as an identifier on the tapes, on transcripts, and within the final report. Any other identifying information, i.e., institution name, state, etc. will receive a generic name and be referred to by region, respectively. The only person who will have access to the study will be the principal investigator. She will also be the only one transcribing the tapes and handling the data. All tapes will be kept in a secure location off-campus location that is 60-miles from the originating institution, in a home office, and computer files will be kept on a personal computer that is password protected. The data will be retained until the completion of the project in August of 2008. If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study contact Alissa R. King, 515-460-5494 or Dr. Nancy J. Evans, 515-294-7113.

- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office of Research Assurances, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

***************************************************************************

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant’s Name (printed) __________________________________________

___________________________________ (Participant’s Signature) (Date)

INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant
understands the purpose, risks, benefits and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

__________________________________________  ______________________________
(Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent)   (Date)
APPENDIX C

COUNSELING REFERRAL INFORMATION

Title of Study: Integrated space: Contributions to identity development for female college students who identify as multiracial-bisexual.

Due to the sensitive nature of the topics discussed in this study, multiracial and bisexual identities, I wish to provide you with the location and phone number of your college or university’s counseling center should you need assistance during this study or upon its completion.

College/University Counseling Service Contact Information:

Investigators:
Alissa R. King, Principal Investigator
Doctoral candidate – Educational Leadership and Policy Studies – Iowa State University
Assistant Professor of Social Sciences – Iowa Central Community College
515-460-5494 (cell)  515-574-1180 (office – ICCC)  arking2@hotmail.com

Dr. Nancy J. Evans, Major Professor
N247D L’Marcino  Iowa State University  Ames, Iowa 50011
515-294-7113  nevans@iastate.edu
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview 1 – Focused Life History

This set of interview questions aims to understand your life history and your identity development processes. The questions will focus on your life pre-college.

Demographics
1. Please state your pseudonym.
2. Please state your age.
3. Please state your year in school.
4. Please state your major.

Background
5. Tell me a little bit about your background:
   a. Tell me about your family – who is in it?
   b. Where did you grow up?
   c. What was your life like growing up?

Identities (Pre-College)
6. Tell me how you identified racially before coming to college. Describe the process of how you came to understand your racial identity.
   a. Describe your physical appearance (in the way that you view it).
   b. Describe how you believe others view your physical appearance (or how others have described you).
   c. What have other people believed your racial identity to be?
   d. Describe your experiences growing up with this racial identity.
   e. Growing up, what messages did you hear or see about people who identify as multiracial?
   f. How did your family contribute to your understanding of your racial identity?
   g. How did the environment in which you grew up contribute to your understanding of your racial identity?
   h. Describe experiences that you have had as a woman who identifies as multiracial.

7. Tell me how you identified, with regard to your sexual orientation, before coming to college. Describe the process of how you came to understand your sexual orientation and your coming out story.
   a. Describe, if possible, your experiences growing up with this sexual orientation.
   b. Growing up, what messages did you hear or see about people who identify as bisexual?
c. How did your family contribute to your understanding of your sexual orientation?

d. How did the environment in which you grew up contribute to your understanding of your sexual orientation?

e. Describe experiences that you have had as a woman who identifies as bisexual.

**Pre-College Experiences of Inclusion/Exclusion**

8. Tell me about any experiences you have had pre-college that involved inclusion or exclusion from any certain groups, organizations, or activities because of your multiracial identity or bisexual identity (if applicable).

**Friends and College Choice**

9. Describe the types of friends that you have/had pre-college and in what ways they have contributed to or influenced your understanding of your multiracial and/or bisexual identities.

10. Tell me how you made the choice to come to this particular school.
   a. Describe the types of friends that you have on campus.
   b. How did you meet these friends?
   c. Talk about the types of groups (clubs, organizations, etc.) and/or activities that you are involved in on campus.

11. Is there anything that I have not asked you that you would like to share?

*Interview 2 – Details of Experience*

**This set of interview questions aims to understand, in light of the previous interview questions, what your current experience is with regard to multiracial and bisexual identity.**

**Current Identification**

1. Describe how you identify with regard to race and sexual orientation right now.
   a. In what ways are these identities similar to or different from how you identified before you started college?
   b. In what ways are these identities different from how you identified before you started college?
   c. If your identities changed in college, what contributed to these changes?

2. In reflecting on your identity development, how would you describe the processes of understanding your multiracial and bisexual identities?
   a. Did one identity form before the other and if so, which one?
   b. In what ways have your multiracial and bisexual identities informed one another?
c. What similarities and differences do you see or experience in having a multiracial and bisexual identity? In other words, have you had similar experiences as a woman who identifies as multiracial as you have had as a woman who identifies as bisexual?
d. Multiracial identity can be invisible as can bisexuality, do you allow either or both of these identities to be invisible, if so – why? If not, how do you make sure that one or both of your identities are visible?
e. What types of choices have you or do you have to make with regard to your identities? In other words, both identities can often be rather flexible, how do you determine (if you do) the ways in which you display, enact, or inhabit those identities?
f. Talk about how open you are with regard to your multiracial identity and your bisexual identity.

Messages
3. What messages and/or stereotypes have you heard about individuals who identify as multiracial or bisexual?
   a. Where have these messages come from?
   b. Who have these messages come from?
   c. What types of messages/stereotypes have you heard, if any, about women who identify as multiracial and/or bisexual?

Experiences
4. What experiences in the college setting would you say have contributed to your understanding of your identities? Please describe.

5. Discuss any experiences you may have had with inclusion or exclusion from student groups, organizations, or activities in college because of your multiracial and/or bisexual identities.

Eroticism/Exoticism
6. Some authors have said that there is a level of eroticism or exoticism placed on individuals who identify as multiracial and individuals who identify as bisexual. What has been your experience with being labeled erotic or exotic or what are your thoughts about that statement?

7. Is there anything that I have not asked you that you would like to share?
This final set of interview questions will look at the meaning you have made of your identity development.

Making Meaning
1. Given what you have said about your multiracial and bisexual identities before coming to college, and now having experienced college, how do you make meaning of your identity development process?
   a. How do you make meaning of the role of the college experience on your identity development?
   b. What part of your life, thus far, would you say has had the biggest impact on your identity development – pre-college or your time in college? Explain.

Pieces of Advice
2. What piece or pieces of advice would you offer to a young woman who may be similar to you with regard to identity? What would have improved your identity development process?
3. What would you like student affairs professionals to know about the experience of a woman who identifies as multiracial and bisexual? If student affairs professionals were looking for ways to help individuals with similar identities to yours, what would you suggest?
4. If a space exists where your identities are perfectly integrated – what would that be like for you? Do you feel you have achieved that? If so, how do you know? If not, why not?
5. What is something that you wish is gained by your participation in this research project?

Your Future
6. Given what you have shared in these interviews, where do you see your identities/identity in the future?
7. Is there anything that I have not asked you that you would like to share?
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