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Biracial Identity and the College Social Environment: A Comparison of Black-White Biracial Students at Predominantly White and Historically Black Institutions

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Abstract

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The majority of the extant research on biracial identity focuses on documenting and describing
the variety of ways in which individuals of mixed black and white ancestry identify while paying
substantially less attention to the social factors that affect biracial identity development. This
study aimed to address this gap in the literature by examining some of the ways social context
affects biracial identity; this study specifically examined the effect of college racial composition
on black-white biracial students' racial identity construction and maintenance. In this paper I
draw upon the transcripts of twenty-two taped interviews with biracial men and women who
were currently attending one of three schools (an all male historically black college and
university, an all female HBCU, and a co-educational predominantly white institution) to show
how the racial composition of the institutions affected students' racial identities. Analysis of the
interviews showed cross-institutional differences in students' identity development and
maintenance. HBCU students were much more likely than PWI students to report changes in
their racial identity as a result of college. Moreover, HBCU students were more likely than their
PWI counterparts to experience an identity change in the direction of a stronger black identity.
Students' changes in identity were related to the racial composition of the school as well as the
peer and academic cultures of the institutions. This study suggests a powerful link between social
structure and biracial identity that warrants further exploration.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Following the passage of civil rights legislation and the abolishment of anti-miscegenation laws in the 1960s, births to interracial couples increased dramatically. Atkins (1991) reported that the number of births to black-white couples in the United States more than quintupled from 9600 in 1961 to 51,000 in 1988. Many of these members of what is sometimes referred to as the biracial baby boom are rejecting the traditional system of single-race classification in the United States and identifying as biracial (see Dacosta 2007; Khanna 2007; Renn 2004; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002a, 2002b). One indication of this challenge to single race classification appears on the 2000 Census. For the first time, the federal government allowed individuals to check multiple boxes to indicate their various racial backgrounds. Over 6.8 million people (or 2.4 percent of the population) indicated that they were multiracial, and eight percent of blacks under age seventeen were listed as being more than one race (Dacosta 2007; Renn 2004). Yet, despite this increase in the number of self-identifying multiracial Americans, biracial individuals remain an understudied and poorly understood group.

Many of the existing studies on biracial identity were conducted following the 2000 Census decision regarding the classification of mixed-race individuals, when academic interest in biracial identity increased dramatically (see Khanna 2007; Renn 2004; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002a, 2002b). The federal government's decision to allow individuals to indicate multiple racial backgrounds came after a heated debate over how this growing group of individuals should be classified. Multiracial advocates proposed the addition of a multiracial category, while civil rights organizations adamantly opposed the idea (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002b). According to those in favor of adding the category, biracial individuals identify as biracial, not as black, and thus a multiracial category is necessary in order to accurately reflect

the way this growing group of individuals views themselves (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002b). The black community, however, couldn't disagree more. Biracial individuals, they argued, view themselves as black because this is the way society sees them (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002b). The debate sparked the interest of researchers who embarked on projects to understand the ways in which individuals of mixed black and white ancestry identified (See Rockquemore, Brunsma, and Delgado 2009 for review of multiracial identity research). The majority of these studies, however, have focused on documenting and describing the variety of ways in which biracial individuals identify while paying substantially less attention to the social factors which lead to differential identifications. Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002b) describe the limitations of the current body of research on biracial identity thus:

> *Although social context is an important issue to consider given the social construction of race, few studies have considered how contextual factors influence the development of racial identity within the biracial population. Some empirical evidence supports the assertion that racial identity among biracial people may vary according to context; yet, little research exists measuring the effects of presumably important contextual variables such as neighborhood or community composition and/or socioeconomic differences on racial identity development* (p. 28).

I aimed to address this gap in the literature by specifically examining some of the ways in which social context affects biracial identity. I interviewed students attending either a predominantly white institution (PWI) or a historically black college and university (HBCU) in order to better understand how the racial composition of biracial students' college social environments affected their racial identity. In doing so I answered the call put forth by Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002b) for more researchers to break from the "prevailing trend of exclusively descriptive studies" and move toward exploring the role of social networks on biracial identity construction (p. 352).

In the following section, I review historical understandings of race and biracial identity. I then discuss the findings from studies which have examined the social and environmental factors affecting biracial identity development. Next, I describe my research methods. Then I present my results. And, I conclude the thesis with a discussion of how the qualitative data from my interviews with twenty-two college students attending historically black and predominantly white institutions add to this understanding of the social processes affecting racial identity development and maintenance.

Historical Understandings of Race and Biracial Individuals' Place in the United States Racial Hierarchy

Since the word race first entered the English language at the beginning of the sixteenth century, it has undergone several transformations in meaning and usage. Initially, race was thought of in terms of lineage. By the nineteenth century races were considered to be discrete types, or subspecies, of the human population differentiated on the basis of profound and heritable biological differences (Wade 1997; Smedley 1999). This conceptualization of race assumes that physical features, such as skin color and hair texture, are external signs of internal states and mental capabilities and that some racial groups are inherently superior to others (Wade 1997; Smedley 1999). By the twentieth century, the research of Darwin, Boas, Mendel and other scientists had convinced most academicians that this theory of race as a biological type was invalid (Wade 1997). Now, most scientists are in agreement that race is not a biological, but rather a social, reality, an idea created by humans through interaction (Wade 1997; Smedley 1999; Cornell and Hartmann 1998; Jung and Almaguer 2006; Montagu 1962).

Because race is a socially constructed category that does not reflect biological reality, there is no *natural* way to racially classify individuals of mixed African and European ancestry.

The location of these individuals within the United States racial hierarchy does not reflect their biological relation to the black and white "races" but rather the sociohistorical processes that defined what it means to be black and white. The fact that there is no natural or universal racial classification for individuals of mixed racial heritages is evidenced by the varying societal norms for classifying these individuals across time and context (Davis 1991).

In the United States for the larger part of history, the rule of hypodescent, informally known as the one-drop rule, has been the socially accepted rule for defining who is black (Davis 1991). The one-drop rule states that any individual with even a single drop of "black blood" is to be classified as black. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896, more commonly known for upholding racial segregation, also "affirmed the state's right to racially categorize people according to one-drop ideology" (Delgado 2004: 25). By the 1920s the rule had become deeply internalized by the majority of blacks, whites and multiracial individuals, and today this classification of all multiracial-blacks as blacks seems natural to many Americans; in fact, it's hard for many Americans to think of classifying multiracials in any other way (Davis 1991).

It is important to remember, however, that there is no natural or biological reason to classify multiracials as blacks, just as there would be no natural justification for classifying them as multiracial or white. The one-drop rule took hold in the United States for *social* as opposed to biological reasons; whites used the rule to oppress blacks and maintain the myth of a pure white race (Davis 1991; Spencer 2004). In an attempt to defend the institution of slavery against criticisms in the 1850s, including the criticism that individuals with mostly white ancestry were slaves, "all blacks came to be seen as natural slaves and all persons with any amount of black ancestry as blacks" (Davis 1991: 42). The majority of mulattos, too, came to accept the rule because of their common interests with blacks and the negative treatment they received from

whites (Davis 1991). And, by the 1920s blacks, who the rule was originally created to oppress, had deeply internalized the rule as well (Davis 1991).

Thus, the rule reflects the social, economic and political needs of the groups involved in defining who is black, and in other eras and various countries characterized by differing social, economic and political patterns of interaction, different rules emerged for classifying multiracial individuals (Davis 1991). While a complete discussion of the multiple understandings of what it means to be biracial is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note some of the ways mixed-race individuals have been classified. Davis (1991) identifies seven ways that racially mixed individuals throughout the world have been classified; he says "racially mixed progeny may have (1) a lower status than either parent group, (2) a higher status than either parent group, (3) an in-between marginal status, (4) a highly variable status, depending more on social class than on color, (5) a variable status independent of racial traits, (6) the same position as the lower-status group, and (7) the status of an assimilating minority" (p. 82). The one-drop rule, which classifies all mixed-race individuals as black, is an example of the sixth type listed by Davis; however, in other countries and even during certain periods and within certain regions of the United States multiracial individuals have been understood in one of these other six ways (Davis 1991).

While the one-drop rule still affects many individuals' understandings of race and identity, studies suggest that biracial individuals today have more freedom in how they identify (Dacosta 2007; Khanna 2004; Renn 2004; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002a, b). Individuals are now able to assert a biracial identity and have it acknowledged by the state (Dacosta 2007). In 1997 the United States Office of Management and Budget (OMB) revised Directive 15; these revisions changed the categories on federal forms used to collect information on race. One of

these changes was that individuals could now indicate membership in more than one racial group (Renn 2004). And, on the 2000 Census individuals were able to assert more than one racial background for the first time. Despite these recent changes, however, the one-drop rule still affects public discourse on race as evidenced by the debate surrounding the 2000 Census.

Past and Present Frameworks for Understanding Biracial Identity Development

While biracials in the United States have historically been considered black, many scholars have considered the ways in which these individuals' process of identity development may differ from that of monoracial blacks, if at all. Since the mid 20th century, scholars have utilized various approaches to understanding this population's racial identity development. Rockquemore et al. (2009) describe four main frameworks that have been used to understand biracial identity; they refer to these as the problem approach, the equivalent approach, the variant approach and the ecological approach. The first three approaches were introduced into the literature by Thornton and Watson (1995); the last one was introduced by Rockquemore et al. (2009).

The problem approach to understanding biracial identity originated during the late Jim Crow era. During this period, the one drop rule was the socially accepted principle for classifying mixed-race individuals, and many states had laws stating that individuals with any black ancestry were to be classified as black (Rockquemore et al. 2009). In an era characterized by the one-drop rule, de jure discrimination based on skin color, and conflict between the black and white races, the racial identity of mixed-race individuals was automatically assumed to be associated with a state of inner turmoil and crisis characterized by the "internalization of [racial] group conflict as a personal problem" (Rockquemore et al. 2009: 16). Reflecting its historical

origin, studies based on the problem approach focus on the negative experiences and stigma associated with being biracial (Rockquemore et al. 2009).

Rockquemore et al. (2009) state that during the 1960s many theorists began understanding biracial identity using the equivalent approach. The equivalent approach assumes that all biracial individuals adopt a black identity and that individuals with one black and one white parent are no different in any significant way from the rest of the black population. Underlying this mentality is the idea that the majority of the black population is racially mixed. Current estimates indicate that due to a long history of racial mixing somewhere between 30 and 90 percent of blacks have some white ancestry (Clifton 1989 as cited in Khanna 2007; Davis 1991; Spencer 2004). Because of the diversity within the black population, theorists relying on the equivalent approach see no need to differentiate between first generation biracial individuals (the offspring of interracial parents) and other blacks (Rockquemore et al. 2009). The equivalent approach assumes that a black identity is the desirable outcome of biracial identity development and that problems in identity are associated with internalizing racist ideas about being black (Rockquemore et al. 2009).

During the 1980s and 1990s, researchers, many of whom were multiracial themselves, began understanding biracial identity through the variant approach (Rockquemore et al. 2009). They asserted that biracial individuals were different from blacks and should be studied separately (Rockquemore et al. 2009). The variant approach holds that a biracial identity is the desirable outcome of mixed-race individuals' identity development. A black identity, in contrast, is considered to be the result of "over-identification with the black parent" (Gibbs 1989 as cited in Rockquemore et al. 2009: 18).

Finally, Rockquemore et al. (2009) describe the most recent approach to understanding biracial identity development as the ecological approach. This approach understands biracial identity as context dependent, emphasizing the role of different social and environmental factors in determining the ways in which individuals identify. Theorists operating under the ecological approach assume that there are multiple ways in which people with one black and one white parent identify, that biracial identity does not develop in a predictable, linear manner, and that there is no desirable endpoint for identity development (Rockquemore et al. 2009).

Results from recent empirical studies (Khanna 2007; Renn 2004; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002a, 2002b; Twine 1996) lend support to the ecological approach, indicating that biracial individuals may identify in several different ways and that this variation in identity is at least partially explained by differences in individuals' appearances, socialization, and experiences with blacks and/or whites within their social networks.

My study operates within this ecological framework, emphasizing the importance of social context on biracial identity development. Central to my understanding of biracial identity development is the assumption that individuals with one black and one white parent may identify in a number of ways and that any individual's identity may change over time as he enters different environmental contexts and interacts with different people.

Symbolic Interactionism: The Fluid Nature of Identity

Context-dependent explanations of biracial identity are guided by an understanding of race and identity as social constructs, created and recreated through social interaction. Researchers like Khanna (2007) and Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002b) have turned to the sociological theory of symbolic interactionism to explain the socially constructed nature of biracial identity.

Symbolic interactionists believe that humans act towards things on the basis of the meaning they assign to them; meanings arise out of social interaction and are modified through interaction (Blumer 1969). According to symbolic interactionists, the self is also created through interaction. The individual learns to see herself as an object in the environment because other people treat her as such. Others point to the individual's place in the environment, defining and labeling her as a social object---a girl or a student or a black person---and so the individual comes to see herself in this way (Charon 2007). Thus, the way an individual thinks of and acts toward herself depends in large part on the way others define her during interaction (Charon 2007).

Similarly, Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002b) describe the impact of others on our self-understandings through the concept of validation. Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002b) state that for an identity to become meaningful to an individual and to function effectively it must be validated by others. Thus, they define identity as a "validated self-understanding" that is created and recreated through interaction (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002b: 23).

Peter Berger (1963) explains the changing nature of the self as such: "its social nature means that [the self] is process rather than a stable entity. The self is no longer a solid, given entity that moves from one situation to another. It is rather a process, continuously created and recreated in every social situation that one encounters" (p.106).

Conceptualizing race through a symbolic interactionist perspective supports an understanding of race as a social construction as opposed to a biological reality. Symbolic interactionists believe that racial identity is constructed as individuals interact with significant others in various social contexts.

The Effect of Social Networks on Racial Identification

Understanding biracial identity as something created and recreated through social interaction, some researchers (Khanna 2002; Renn 2004; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002a, 2002b; Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005; Twine 1996) have begun to examine the social processes that affect biracial identity development. Based on both quantitative and qualitative data, Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002a, 2002b) found that individuals with one black and one white parent identified in various ways. Some adopted a singular (black or white) identity. Some identified as biracial. Some had a few different identities (black, white, biracial). And, others chose to opt out of the racial classification system, referring to themselves as human. Their findings showed that the racial composition of individuals' social networks as well as the experiences they had with black and white individuals within these networks affected the likelihood that they would choose either a singular black or border (biracial) identity.

Individuals socialized within predominantly black environments were the most likely to adopt a singular black identity; whereas, individuals raised within predominantly white environments were more likely to understand being biracial as a border identity (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002a, 2002b). These results are similar to Hall's (1980) findings which showed that black-Japanese biracials with more black neighbors were more likely to identify as black. Davis (1991) and Spencer (1997) state that black communities have deeply internalized the one-drop rule, coming to regard mixed-race individuals as black. Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002b) theorize that this "sense of inclusiveness" may pull biracial individuals socialized within black communities toward a black identity (p. 58). On the other hand, they suggest that biracial individuals raised in predominantly white contexts may come to think of themselves as biracial as opposed to black because within their white environment this identity option is "both available

(i.e., socially acceptable) and preferable to the singular black identity" (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002b: 58). Similarly, Khanna (2007) suggests that a biracial identity option may be more available in white communities than in black communities since the latter typically socialize children of any black ancestry to think of themselves as black.

Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002a, 2002b) state that in addition to the racial composition of individuals' social networks, the experiences individuals have within these networks affect their racial identity. They categorize these experiences in terms of push and pull factors. Push factors push individuals away from a certain identity because of negative experiences with that group, while pull factors pull an individual toward an identity because of positive experiences with the group (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002a, 2002b). Their findings indicated that negative experiences with blacks could push individuals away from a black identity and towards a border identity while negative experiences with whites could have the opposite effect, pushing individuals away from a white or border identity and towards a black identity (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002a, 2002b). Finally, Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002a, 2002b) state that the racial composition of individuals' social networks may affect their racial identity by increasing feelings of familiarity with and closeness to a particular racial group. This sense of closeness may serve as a pull factor, increasing the likelihood that an individual will identify with those he spends the most time with (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002a).

Building on the findings of Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002a, 2002b), Khanna (2007) found that the racial composition of individuals' social networks influenced their racial identity by affecting reflected appraisals (the way biracials believed others saw them), the messages individuals received about race, and the people available for social comparisons. Khanna's (2007) study also added to the literature on biracial identity by including respondents who

attended HBCUs. Previously, the majority of studies on biracial identity consisted mostly of students attending PWIs. While her study did not specifically focus on the effect of college racial composition on students' identity, excerpts from her interviews with students attending HBCUs suggest that the racial composition of the school affected the messages students received about race and their decisions related to racial identity. For instance, one woman said that within the context of her all black school her mixed background was always being brought up by other girls who wanted to remind her that they did not accept her as black. Other respondents reported "playing up" their biracial identity at their HBCU in order to feel unique (Khanna 2007).

Other researchers (Renn 2004; Twine 1996) specifically focused on the effect of biracial individuals' college social environments on their racial identity. In her study of mixed-race college students, Renn (2004) used Brofenbenner's ecology model of human development, which stresses the importance of the relationship between person, process, context and time in an individual's development, to explain differences in multiracial college students' racial identities. She found that the "particularities" of multiracial students' college environments (commonly referred to in her study as a college's *peer culture*) affected the ways in which they developed and maintained their racial identity (Renn 2004). Renn (2004) says that a college's peer culture sends powerful messages about what kind of identities are acceptable and desirable; these messages affect the identities of multiracial students and the approaches they take to "engage, explore, claim, and signify their racial and ethnic identities" (Renn 2004: 38).

Twine (1996) also examined the effect of campus dynamics on biracial students' racial identities. She focused on how black-white biracial women who had maintained white identities in their predominantly white childhood environments developed black identities after enrolling at the Berkeley campus of the University of California. She found that the women were no longer

able to maintain their white identity once they got to college. The "politicized communities of color" on campus encouraged them to claim a black identity and attend functions clearly marked as black events (Twine 1996: 14). The women's switch from a white to black racial identity was also aided by the introduction of a new, racialized ideological framework through which they viewed the world. At home the women were encouraged to think of themselves as racially neutral and understand the world through an ideological framework which stressed colorblindness. At Berkeley colorblindness was not the universally accepted campus ideal. African-American studies classes provided the training that the women had not received at home, leading them to begin to see the world through a racial lens (Twine 1996).

While Renn (2004) and Twine (1996) specifically examined the impact of particular college environments on biracial individuals' identities, neither one focused on the differing effects predominantly white and historically black colleges might have on biracial students' identities. Twine only examined one particular PWI, and while Renn focused on six different types of schools, she did not include an HBCU in her study. My study expands on the work of researchers like Renn (2004) and Twine (1996) by focusing on biracial students at two very different types of institutions: the PWI and the HBCU. My study examines the racial identities of twenty-two students attending a predominantly white or historically black college and shows how the racial composition of the institutions affected the students' racial identity development and maintenance.

Based on the findings of past researchers (Hall 1980; Khanna 2007; Renn 2004; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002a, 2002b), I believed that the racial composition of students' college environments would affect their racial identity, though I was unsure what the exact effect would be. The results from studies conducted by Hall (1980) and Rockquemore and Brunsma

(2002a, 2002b), which showed that biracials within black social environments were frequently pulled toward a black identity as a result of the inclusiveness of the black community and/or increased comfort with and exposure to blacks, led me to believe that biracial students at HBCUs would be more likely than their PWI counterparts to develop a strong black identity. On the other hand, it also seemed plausible that biracial students at HBCUs may feel less black within this environment because of social comparisons between themselves and their monoracial black peers; conversely, biracial students at PWIs may develop a stronger black identity because their black heritage would be more salient as they compared themselves to their white peers. Experiences of discrimination may also cause biracial individuals in white college environments to develop a black identity. This alternate hypothesis based on the idea of social comparisons is consistent with one of Khanna's (2007) suggestions about how the racial composition of biracials' social networks could potentially impact individuals' identity.

Methodology

Defining Biracial

Before collecting any data it was necessary for me to decide how to define biracial. According to Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002b), most existing studies on biracial identity do not explicitly define how they are understanding and using the term. Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002b) state that despite this failure to include a concrete definition, past researchers' implicit assumptions regarding biracial identity range from complete acceptance of the one-drop rule to more narrow definitions of the term biracial.

Spencer (2004, 2006) follows the line of reasoning employed by equivalent theorists, arguing that distinguishing between blacks and biracial blacks is a fallacy as the majority of

"blacks" are themselves mixed-race. He argues that researchers who continue to make this distinction between the two groups are perpetuating this fallacy.

My response to Spencer's argument follows the line of reasoning put forth by Khanna (2007). Khanna (2007) states that while biological race is a fallacy, social race (the understanding of race employed by the majority of current researchers on biracial identity) is a separate construct. She states that due to the historical emphasis on the one-drop rule through the 1960s, the majority of black-descent individuals during this time viewed themselves as black even if they had mixed ancestry. Thus, in Khanna's (2007) study, biracial individuals are those whose parents *claim* membership in different socially designated racial categories. I used this same understanding of biracial in my study; I considered biracial any individual who reported having one biological parent who self- identified as white and another who self-identified as black, regardless of either parent's actual ancestry.

Choosing Sample and Site

Because the main purpose of my study was to understand how the racial composition of biracial students' college social environments affected the construction and maintenance of their racial identity, I selected students from one predominantly white and two historically black colleges. Because I wanted racial composition to be the main difference between the schools, I chose schools that were similar in other respects, including location, affiliation (public/private) and prestige.

All three schools were located in the same Southern city of the United States. The South was an ideal site for this study because of its unique racial history (see Khanna 2007) and the scarce number of existing biracial identity studies (see Khanna 2007) which focus on this region.

In addition to sharing the same city, the schools were all private and prestigious institutions. Their main difference was thus their racial and gender composition.

Within the predominantly white institution (referred to in this study as PWI) approximately 37 percent of students belonged to minority groups. Ten percent of students were listed as black, and .8 percent of students indicated that they were multiracial. Despite the fact that PWI was working hard to increase diversity on campus (the most recent incoming class was 49% white and 51% students of color), its long history of racial exclusion and the significant difference between the numbers of black and white students on campus made it a good choice for the predominantly white school in the study.

I chose two HBCUs because one was a men's institution and the other was a women's institution. Although my study does not focus on gender, I took gender into account in my study design and attempted to include equal numbers of men and women in my sample. Many researchers insist that race and gender intersect in individuals' daily experiences in such a way that race is inherently gendered and gender is inherently racialized (Davis 2008; Rockquemore 2002; Weber 2001). Researchers studying biracial identity (Khanna 2007; Renn 2004; Rockquemore 2002; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002a, 2002b) have found gendered patterns of identity development which support this idea about the intersectionality of race and gender.

Renn (2004) found that women were more likely than men to identify as multiracial; conversely, men were more likely than women to identify as monoracial. Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002a, 2002b) did not find gender differences in the likelihood that individuals would choose one identity type over another; however, Rockquemore (2002) discusses the important differences in men's and women's racial identity development *process*, stating that "gender profoundly affects and delimits the social process through which biracial women construct and

negotiate their racial identity" (Rockquemore 2002: 486). She suggests that biracial women (more so than men) may be pushed away from a black identity and towards a biracial identity as a result of negative experiences with blacks; a similar trend emerged in Khanna's (2007) study. Rockquemore (2002) suggests that the low number of marriageable black men and the likelihood that successful black men will marry white women has created tension between black and biracial women. Moreover, black men have historically preferred light-skinned biracial women to black women (Davis 1991; Rockquemore 2002). Khanna (2007) and Rockquemore (2002) have pointed to these historical and contemporary trends to explain why biracial women in their sample reported that black women were jealous of them and rejected identification with them. Based on these findings, I believed that biracial men and women would have different experiences within their college environments and therefore found it necessary to include both male and female students in the sample.

The men's historically black college (referred to in this study as Men's HBCU) and women's historically black college (referred to as Women's HBCU) were located in close proximity to one another and sometimes held events together. Both were composed almost entirely of black students. In the 2009-2010 school year, 92 percent of Women's HBCU students were black. Four percent were listed as international/other. Another four percent were listed as biracial/bicultural/other. And, together, Asian, white and Hispanic American students made up less than 1 percent of the student population. Similarly, in the 2008-2009 school year, 96 percent of Men's HBCU students were black. And, Asian, white, American Indian and Hispanic American students made up less than 1 percent of the student body.

In order to participate in the study, students had to attend one of these three institutions. They also had to have one self-identified white (non-Hispanic) biological parent and one self-

identified black (non-Hispanic) biological parent. Third and finally, they had to be at least 18 years old.

Sampling and Recruitment

I recruited the majority of my sample (68 percent) through recruitment advertisements posted online (on PWI student conferences), posted in high-traffic areas on the college campuses, and distributed to students by professors. Several sociology professors at Men's HBCU distributed the recruitment ad to their students, and a sociology professor at Women's HBCU sent the ad to the student body via email. Four individuals were referred to me by others. The other three individuals in the sample were students who I knew to be of mixed heritage from previous personal or academic conversations with them; I contacted these individuals to ask them to participate.

In order to obtain variation in my sample, I avoided using the word biracial in the recruitment message. Aware that some students who fit my recruitment criteria may not think of themselves as biracial, I indicated that I was seeking individuals with one black and one white biological parent. This rationale was articulated by Khanna (2007). I also tried to obtain variation by contacting individuals who I or others knew to have one black and one white parent regardless of how they personally identified. This rationale was based on the methods used by Renn (2004). Finally, in order to obtain variation, I posted online recruitment messages on PWI student conferences likely to attract individuals with different racial identities, including the conferences for the black student association and the African student association, several multicultural organizations including one group specifically for mixed-race individuals, and several race-neutral conferences, including volunteer organizations and the PWI classifieds conference.

Interviews and Data Analysis

My research design involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with 22 biracial students. I chose to collect data through interviews as opposed to surveys because I believed in-depth interviews would allow me to better understand the complicated processes of biracial identity formation and negotiation that occur within different social contexts.

Each of the 22 interviews lasted between 33 and 84 minutes, and the mean interview length was 57 minutes. During the interview, I asked participants about their racial identity and childhood factors influencing their understanding of race, including parental socialization and experiences with blacks and whites during elementary, middle and high school. I then asked questions related to their college experience, including why they chose their particular institution, and a number of questions about the experiences they had as a mixed-race student at either their PWI or HBCU. When discussing racial identity, I asked questions which measured two dimensions of identity: the racial labels individuals used (both on forms and when answering others' questions about their racial background) and their internalized identity, or what they personally believed about their race, paying particular attention to the latter dimension. These two dimensions were explored by Khanna (2007). They also reflect the distinction Renn (2004) makes between understanding mixed heritage as a matter of fact (racial label) and a matter of identity (internalized identity). Interviews also explored changes in participants' racial identities throughout their life and across contexts. I paid particular attention to changes in identity that resulted from students' experiences in college. Participants were compensated $15 for participation in the interview.

I transcribed each interview verbatim and developed codes through both deductive and inductive coding. Based on findings from past studies, I created codes related to concepts such as

peer culture and social comparisons. Other codes emerged from the data itself. I used MAXQDA computer software to aid in the analysis of interviews.

Profile of the Research Sample

My data collection efforts resulted in a sample of 22 black-white biracial college students (see Appendix A for a summary of the sample). My sample included eight women at PWI, three men at PWI, six women at Women's HBCU, and five men at Men's HBCU. While I initially desired to include equal numbers of men and women in the sample, it proved difficult to recruit men at PWI. I am unsure at this point if this difficulty was primarily the result of lesser numbers of biracial men compared to women at PWI or if women were simply more willing than men to participate in this type of study. Other researchers, like Khanna (2007), have found women to be more likely to respond to advertisements and show interest in discussing their racial experiences and identity in an interview context.

The sample included students at different points in their college careers; 36 percent of respondents were freshmen, 18 percent were sophomores, 14 percent were juniors, and 32 percent were seniors. Of the 22 respondents, 13 (or 59 percent of the sample) had a white mother and a black father. Seven respondents (32 percent of the sample) had a black mother and a white father. The greater number of participants with white compared to black mothers is consistent with intermarriage rates in the United States where black men are more likely than black women to marry or live with a white partner (Khanna 2007). The remaining two respondents (9 percent of the sample) had a biracial mother and a black father. The two respondents with biracial mothers were both women at PWI and were included in the sample upon request despite the fact that they did not meet my preferred criteria for participation. While I believe that first-generation biracial individuals and other mixed-race individuals may differ in their biracial identity

development as a result of parental messages about race, I believed it would be advantageous to my study to include these two individuals considering their willingness to participate and my time constraints and relative difficulty recruiting mixed-race students at PWI.

It is important to note that while all but two participants had one white and one black self-identified parent, black did not always equate to African-American, and respondents' white parents were not always from the United States. Several respondents stated that their parents were born and raised outside of the United States, in various European countries or on Caribbean Islands, and that their parents understood their ethnicity as being English, German, French, Jewish, Jamaican, or some other ethnicity besides African-American or white American.

In addition to variation in maternal and paternal race and ethnicity, my sample included variation in regional origin, social class, pre-college racial network composition and appearance. The majority of respondents were from the South; approximately 59 percent of participants were from Southern states, including Georgia, Florida and Alabama, as well as areas such as D.C. and Maryland, which are sometimes considered as part of the Mid-Atlantic region. Eighteen percent of respondents were from the Northeast and 14 percent were from the Midwest. One participant was from the Western region of the United States, and one was from Europe and had only recently come over to the United States to attend college.

All respondents were currently enrolled in college and were striving to create or maintain at least a middle class lifestyle for themselves post-graduation; however, they did not all come from middle class backgrounds. Although some respondents were from middle or upper-middle class backgrounds, the children of lawyers, managers and other professionals, other respondents reported coming from working class or lower class backgrounds. There was also diversity in terms of the racial composition of respondents' neighborhoods growing up and of their

elementary, middle and high schools. About 45 percent of respondents reported attending predominantly white high schools. 23 percent attended high schools that were almost entirely black, and the remaining 32 percent described their high school as being mixed or diverse. Within their high school, neighborhood and other pre-college social contexts, some students reported almost complete association with blacks, others reported predominantly white pre-college social networks, and others reported interacting with a multicultural group of individuals.

There was also variation in appearance within the sample. Respondents' skin color ranged from white to medium brown, and there was considerable variation in hair color, eye color and facial features. I took note of respondents' physical appearances and indicated what I thought I would believe about each student's race if I were to have originally seen him/her outside of the interview context. From this subjective stance, a little more than half of the respondents appeared to be black or multiracial black, meaning that if I had seen the students on the street I would have believed them to be either monoracial black or, more likely, of mixed-black heritage. The majority of the remaining respondents looked racially ambiguous, and I would have probably had difficulty determining their racial background had I first seen them outside of the interview context. One respondent looked Latino; when I saw him walking around campus immediately preceding the interview I believed him to be of Mexican or South American descent. And, one respondent looked white; her skin was white, and she had light brown (almost blonde) hair and blue eyes. The categories I used to take note of respondents' appearances were based on the codes developed by Khanna (2007) who divided respondents into those she felt appeared "white," "black or multiracial black," and "racially ambiguous."

In addition to my notes on respondents' appearance, the participants, themselves, discussed their looks and how they were generally perceived by others. Their reports of others'

perceptions of them were fairly consistent with my notes on their looks. A couple of respondents said almost everyone they met assumed they were black. These respondents stated that they were rarely asked about their racial background. The majority of respondents, however, reported being asked "what are you?" or "where are you from?" somewhat frequently. A few respondents said that people frequently mistook them for being Latino/a and would sometimes come up to them and start speaking Spanish. The respondent who I noted as appearing Latino said that even after he informed people of his racial background, they had trouble believing him and insisted that he must be Puerto Rican or Mexican. Furthermore, nine respondents said they were occasionally believed to be monoracial whites.

Finally, there was variation in racial identity within my sample. This will be discussed in-depth in a later section.

My positionality

Before discussing findings, it is important to consider the way that my racial background may have affected the results I obtained and my interpretation of these data. As a college student with one black and one white parent, I am a member of the community I am studying. My insider status presented a couple of challenges throughout the research process. I had to be cautious of my position relative to the subjects and work to ensure that I did not project my own personal experiences onto the participants. I also had to remind myself to ask participants to expand on questions even when I assumed that I already knew the answer based on my lived experiences. For the most part, however, I believe my insider status to be an advantage. Root (1992) suggests that much of the research on multiracial identity be conducted by individuals who are "intimately informed of the experience" (Root 1992 as cited in Khanna 2007:71). This allows researchers to "ask questions from a position of knowing" (Khanna 2007: 71). My position as a biracial woman

has allowed me insight into the unique experiences of multiracial individuals. I am able to generate questions and hypotheses from my life experience and ask questions from this position of knowing.

My racial background also seems to be an advantage in that respondents reported feeling more comfortable with me than they would have felt with an interviewer of another race. I told respondents about my racial background at the beginning of the interview and asked at the end how they thought the interview might have been different if I had been a different race. The majority of respondents said that the race of the interviewer would make a difference in how comfortable they felt and the information they revealed. The following excerpt from an interview with a student from Men's HBCU reflects the idea of censoring that emerged when participants responded to this question about the interview process:

> *R: To be honest, it would have been very different. Because I feel like since you're mixed, you understand me to a certain degree. If I was talking to a white kid I don't know I would've been like I wouldn't have said nigga and all that stuff. I wouldn't have been as me about it.*
> I: And what if I was just all black and I didn't have a white parent? Would that affect it at all or no?
> *R: I think it would. I really do, yeah. Like when I was talking about white people I feel I would… I would definitely not say anything about white people in a negative way. 'Cause I don't want to like… if you were like a dark just brown skinned girl with like dark brown eyes and all that stuff I just feel like a lot of black people try to be mean towards white people so I don't want to like be like what's the word…advocate that and just say something that wouldn't be like very flattering.*
> In addition to censoring in order to not seem like advocates of certain positions, several

respondents said that they would have censored themselves if the interviewer had been a monoracial white or black so they would not have offended her when discussing their views on white or black people. Thus, I believe my biracial identity to have been an advantage in that students generally reported feeling comfortable with me due to perceived racial similarity, resulting in more honest and less-censored interviews.

Findings

In the remaining sections I discuss findings from the interviews with 22 biracial college students. Analysis of these interviews revealed variation in respondents' racial identities. The data suggest five categories of biracial identity, including: a monoracial black identity, a monoracial white identity, and a biracial identity, which can be further subdivided into three categories: black-leaning biracials, white-leaning biracials, and neutral biracials. Detailed description of these categories is provided in the next section.

Analysis also revealed cross-institutional differences related to students' racial identity construction and maintenance. HBCU students were much more likely than PWI students to report significant changes in their racial identity as a result of college. PWI students, in contrast, were more likely to report no changes in their identity as a result of college, although a fair number did report subtle changes in identity. Moreover, the majority of HBCU students who reported either a change in or a strengthening of their racial identity moved toward a stronger black identity, while no PWI respondents reported a strengthened black identity.

In the sections that follow I provide an overview of the racial identification categories that emerged from the data. I then briefly discuss the effect that parents, appearance and pre-college social networks had on individuals' racial identity development. I conclude with an in-depth discussion of the changes in individuals' identities as a result of college and the facets of the academic and peer cultures of the institutions which led to these changes.

Racial Identities

There was variation in my sample in terms of both public and internal identity. Public identity refers to the racial labels that individuals used to describe their race both on forms and in response to others' questions; internal identity refers to individuals' self-understanding of their

race (Khanna 2007). In my analysis I am particularly concerned with individuals' internal identity, or how they self-identified.

Public identity seemed to be less stable than internal identity and less meaningful to the individual. Many respondents identified differently publicly depending on the form they were filling out. The same individual may have identified as black on one form, multiracial on another and Alaskan native on a third, the last response simply an attempt to show irritation with having to indicate his/her race. Several respondents also reported identifying publicly in a way that was inconsistent with their internal identity in order to receive perceived advantages or out of concerns for "accurately" indicating their race. For instance, some respondents who did not primarily see themselves as black indicated that they were black on college applications because they believed this would improve their chances of being admitted into their desired institutions. And, some respondents who self-identified as black indicated that they were multiracial on forms out of concerns for accuracy. Moreover, regardless of individuals' internal identity, they tended to tell people that they were biracial (or more accurately, that they had one white and one black parent) when specifically asked about their racial background.

Thus, it became evident that public racial identity was not consistent across contexts and was frequently inconsistent with individuals' internal identity. The fact that public and internal identity are two separate constructs that are not necessarily consistent was articulated clearly by Corey, a 22-year-old senior at PWI who said: *" How you have to identify yourself on a piece of paper I feel like shouldn't really affect how you identify yourself."* For this reason I decided to pay more attention to individuals' internal identities.

Based on the data, I developed five categories of internal identification: monoracial black identity, monoracial white identity, and biracial identity which I subdivided into black-leaning biracials, white-leaning biracials and neutral biracials.

Monoracial Identity

The monoracial black and white identity types are consistent with the singular identity type articulated by Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002a, 2002b). Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002b) state that individuals with a singular identity understand being biracial as "merely acknowledging" that they have one black and one white parent (p. 46). They describe this type as follows: "At the extreme, respondents did not deny the existence of their opposite race parent, but it was not salient in defining their self-understanding and may not have been offered as identifying information unless specifically requested" (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002b: 46). Individuals within the monoracial black or white categories acknowledged that they had one parent of each race and some stated that this experience of having interracial parents made their upbringing different in some respects from that of monoracial individuals. Some of these individuals even identified as biracial on forms; however, internally these respondents felt strictly black or white and *self-identified* as black or white, not as biracial individuals. Five respondents, or approximately 23 percent of my sample, fit into this category.

The following excerpt from an interview with Tia, a senior at Women's HBCU, illustrates the monoracial black identity type among biracial respondents:

> *I usually just identify with black. I never ever once considered myself white or wanted to associate myself with that. And, it's really confusing for other people to understand where I come from sometimes because if they're saying like you're both, why do you have to say one? And, I'm just like that's just what I how I was how I grew up in that culture. Like, I don't know anything about whiteness, really. I can't relate. So, that's what I say. But, I'm aware of the fact that my mother is white and my father is black. But, like if I can't relate to the whiteness then I can't identify with it.*

Lanette, a 22-year-old senior at PWI also described her racial identity as black, saying:

I would say I like I self-identify as bi well my parentage I'm biracial, but I feel like I self-identify as a black woman. Um, I definitely don't look at myself as white. Um and I probably make comments here and there about those white girls or whatever when I'm clearly half white. Um, but so yeah I identify as like a black woman but you know I know I'm biracial and um if people really want to ask me my ethnicity, I'll go through Irish, German, Cherokee Indian, Swedish, and black you know like African-American, that's what I tell them.

At the time of the interviews, five respondents reported understanding their racial identity as a monoracial black identity. It is important to note, however, that some of these respondents reported understanding their race differently at other points in their life. Furthermore, a few respondents who did not currently understand their racial identity in this way reported identifying solely as black during childhood or high school. Out of the respondents who currently fit within the monoracial black identity type, two were female students at PWI, one was a student at Women's HBCU, and two were students at Men's HBCU.

No respondents currently fit within the monoracial white identity option; however, I am assured of its existence by the fact that previous studies (Khanna 2007; Renn 2004; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002a, 2002b; Twine 1996) have found evidence of it as well as by the fact that one respondent who identified as biracial at the time of her interview reported identifying solely as white in high school. Viola, a freshman at Women's HBCU, said that until recently she identified as white. She explained her white identity in the following way:

"Um I would say up until this year I identified as a white person. I kinda had an illusion that I was, you know, like everybody else. Like literally like I felt like I was white."

Biracial Identity

While some respondents internally identified with just one part of their racial background, the majority of respondents (77 percent) primarily understood themselves as being biracial. These respondents typically spoke of their racial identity in terms of being neither black

nor white and both black and white at the same time. This identity pattern is similar to what

Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002a, 2002b) describe as the border identity and what Renn (2004)

calls multiracial identity. Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002a, 2002b) said that 58 percent of their

sample understood their racial identity "as neither exclusively black nor white but, instead, as a

third and separate category that draws from both of these group characteristics and has some

additional uniqueness in its combination" (p. 43). Renn (2004) also found that the majority of her

sample (89 percent) identified as being multiracial as opposed to identifying with just one racial

group.

Isaiah, a sophomore at Men's HBCU, illustrates this understanding of biracial identity,

saying:

> *I just came to the realization that I am white and black. That's how it is. I'm*
> *mixed. That's what I am. I'm not black. I'm mixed. That's my race.*

Like Isaiah, respondents from my sample who identified as biracial typically referred to

themselves as both white and black throughout the interview, but saw these two heritages as

combining in a unique way that made them different from monoracial whites and blacks. They

differentiated between themselves and "normal," "regular," or "real" white and black people, and

usually objected to being identified as black or white.

Tabitha, a freshman at Women's HBCU, said people would frequently call her white in

her all black high school to which she'd reply *"I'm really not; I'm both."* Similarly, Bryan, a

freshman at Men's HBCU, said he corrected people when they called him black, reminding them

that he was not black but mixed. And, Lisa, a senior at women's HBCU, said it bothered her to

be called black or white, saying: *"and it bothers me because you know I'm both. I can't be*

separated. I'm a whole person."

While fifteen respondents understood their identity as being biracial, there were important differences within this group. All fifteen respondents understood their identity as being some combination of white and black; however, some felt a stronger connection to their white heritage while others identified more with their black heritage. Still others did not feel that they leaned more towards identifying as white or black. Because of the wide variation within this group, I felt it appropriate to divide it into three subcategories: black-leaning biracials, white-leaning biracials, and neutral biracials.

This division of individuals based on their strength of identification with their white and black sides is similar to Khanna's (2007) separation of individuals who publicly identified as multiracial into three groups: those who identified more strongly with being white, those who identified more strongly with being black and those who did not identify more strongly with one group than the other. My conceptualization, however, differs from Khanna's in an important way. Khanna (2007) describes her respondents as only *publicly* identifying as multiracial. That is, they used multiracial labels on forms or in response to others' questions; however, most of them *internally* identified more strongly with being white or black. Within my sample, however, all individuals within the biracial category, including white leaning, black leaning, and neutral biracials, identified *internally* as biracial; this, after all, is what distinguished them from those in the monoracial black and white categories. These individuals were not just using multiracial labels; they *self-identified* as biracial, understanding their biracial identity as something unique and different from being white or black. At the same time, however, some of these individuals felt a stronger connection to their black or white heritage.

My conceptualization of white- and black- leaning biracials is also similar in some ways to Daniel's (1996) discussion of individuals with functional integrative identities. Rockquemore

and Brunsma (2002b) summarize Daniel's (1996) findings; they state that individuals with functional integrative identities "are able to identify and function in both communities but feel a stronger orientation to, acceptance in, and comfort with either blacks or whites" (p. 49).

While there are key differences between my conceptualization of biracial identity and those put forth by Khanna (2007) and Daniel (1996), what they all have in common is the idea that biracial individuals may have a stronger identification with one part of their racial heritage while still identifying, on some level, as multiracial.

About half of the respondents within the biracial identification group (8 respondents) felt a stronger connection to their black heritage and were thus classified as black-leaning biracials. An excerpt from an interview with Timothy, a freshman at PWI, illustrates this identity option. When discussing his racial identity Timothy said:

> *"[Some mixed kids] feel white. And, some like would only feel black, for example. But me, I'm aware of my two sides and stuff, and like, I don't know, it's complicated. I wouldn't say I'm black. Or, I wouldn't say I'm white. But I'd say I'm more black than white."*

When Timothy said he was more black than white, he was not invoking "biological" percentages. Rather, he was implying that while he did not see himself as fully black or fully white, he identified more with his black heritage.

This black-leaning biracial identity was also expressed by Abigail, a freshman at Women's HBCU, who said:

> *"I identify more with black culture, but I see myself as a biracial person."*

Abigail said she was proud of being biracial (black and Italian) and that she identified with and celebrated both cultures; however, she also said that she identified as African-American and felt a stronger connection to this side of her heritage.

Of the eight respondents who understood themselves as biracial but felt a stronger connection to their black heritage, two were female students at PWI, one was a male student at PWI, four were Women's HBCU students, and one was a Men's HBCU student.

On the other side of the spectrum were individuals who understood themselves as biracial but felt a stronger connection to their white heritage. Ashley, a junior at PWI, illustrates this identity option. She described her identity thus:

> *"I identify myself as both and not one or the other because I consider myself mixed because I am both sides. And I didn't really see a bad side to being both. But, I definitely associate myself more with my white side. I did lean towards the white side. I identify as both, but more so with white."*

Two respondents within my sample fit into this category. Both were students at PWI. One was a female student, the other a male student.

Finally, five respondents identified as biracial and did not feel like they leaned towards the black or white side. Some of these respondents, like Jillian, a junior at PWI, felt a strong connection to both their black and white cultures. When asked if she identified more strongly with being black or white, Jillian responded:

> *I guess half and half. More I guess the identity is more of being German, with the culture. And maybe that's why. And then because so there's a lot of culture. We celebrate a lot of the holidays, cook the food, listen to the music. And, then most of my dad's family lives here, so when we go there there's a lot of Caribbean culture. So maybe that's why I identify so strongly with both. Because it's always like a constant mix of both.*

Other respondents, like Bryan, a freshman at Men's HBCU, felt equally black and white but did not report a strong cultural connection to either side. Bryan described his racial identity thus:

> *"I don't choose either side because I think it makes me unique that I am both."*

When asked if he was always proud of his white heritage and his black heritage, he replied:

> *"I guess. Can't say that I focus on one or the other."*

Of the seven individuals who fit into this category, three were female students at PWI, one was a male student at PWI, one was a student at Women's HBCU, and two were students at Men's HBCU.

These five categories---monoracial black, monoracial white, black-leaning biracials, white-leaning biracials, and neutral biracials---represent some tentative categories to describe individuals' self-understanding. In addition, however, there was another way that some individuals understood themselves. Some respondents, in addition to understanding themselves in one of the five ways mentioned previously, also had a strong ethnic identity. Respondents reported feeling a strong connection to Jamaican, Caribbean, Italian, German and Jewish ethnicities. This ethnic understanding, however, did not replace their racial understanding, but supplemented it.

It is important to note that these categories represent tentative ways of understanding biracial identity and function more as ideal types. The majority of individuals reported understanding their identity in different ways throughout their life, and over their lifespan individuals may have drifted between some of these categories or wavered between two. In addition, it is important to note that there is both HBCU and PWI representation in the majority of these categories. Only one category, white-leaning biracials, consists solely of PWI students and no category consists solely of HBCU students. In the next sections, I will discuss the factors which influenced racial identity before exploring the ways in which students' identities shifted between these categories as a result of their college experience.

Overview of Factors Influencing Racial Identity

Respondents' racial identities were influenced by a number of factors. Most notable among these factors were parental influence, the racial composition of individuals' social

networks, appearance and the one-drop rule. These are some of the same factors that past researchers (Dacosta 2007; Khanna 2007; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002a, 2002b; Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005) found to be significant in determining biracial individuals' identities.

The majority of respondents mentioned their parents' influence as a major factor shaping their identity. This influence took two forms. Some respondents' identities were shaped by direct messages from their parents about who they were and how they should identify. Other respondents identified in certain ways based on the strength of their connection to each parent or a desire to acknowledge, respect or identify with both parents. The following excerpt from an interview with Tabitha, a freshman at Women's HBCU, illustrates how direct messages from parents affected individuals' racial self-understandings. When discussing her racial identity Tabitha said:

> *Um I pretty much identify as biracial just because that's how I was taught to*
> *identify. I wasn't taught to identify as white or black. My mom told me that*
> *identify as both sides. My mother taught me to accept the fact that there are things*
> *that you're going to be able to identify with white people about and there are*
> *things that you're going to be able to identify with black people about. So you just*
> *have to pretty much embrace both sides.*

Tabitha's racial identity was directly influenced by her white mother's messages about how she should identify herself racially. Like Tabitha, several other students reported direct messages from their parents about how they should identify. Some parents stressed to their children that they should realize that they were black because this was how the world saw them. Other parents encouraged their children to identify as multiracial and even suggested terms such as mulatto that their children could use to identify themselves to others. Direct messages from parents about race were usually internalized by children, at least to some degree, as Tabitha's interview excerpt illustrates.

A sizable number of participants, however, reported no direct messages from their parents about how they should identify. Moreover, some respondents said that their parents never discussed ideas of racial identity with them, directly or indirectly. Dacosta (2007) discussed this lack of communication about racial identity in her study on multiracials, saying: "Given multiracial families' peculiar place in U.S. understandings of family, a surprising number of respondents told me that their parents never openly discussed racial identity" (p. 111).

Some of the participants whose parents did not discuss race with them wished that they had, saying that this conversation could have made their process of racial identity development easier; however, even those who did not engage in conversation with their parents about race often developed a racial self-understanding based on ideas of parentage and family. For these respondents, as well as some respondents who did openly discuss race with parents, racial identity served to symbolize family connection and identification with parents.

Corey, a senior at PWI, discussed how his understanding of himself as a biracial man was related to his connection to his parents. When asked why he didn't see himself as white or black Corey said:

> *Um I really don't know, like I guess it's like just because when you have a parent*
> *of both races like you kinda see yourself like in your mom, and you see yourself in*
> *your dad, too. So like you identify with like a black self-image and like a white*
> *one at the same time, I feel like.*

Corey's biracial identity was thus partially the result of seeing himself in both of his parents. Other respondents with biracial identities said that they identified as biracial because to do otherwise would be to deny one of their parents. This rhetoric of biracial identity as symbolizing allegiance to parents is consistent with the findings of Dacosta (2007) who states that many multiracial activists within her sample viewed multiracial identity as a symbol of

family connection; for these individuals being asked to choose just one race was synonymous to having to choose between their mother and father.

While the majority of individuals with biracial identities mentioned a desire to affirm ties to both parents through their racial identity, several individuals who leaned towards their black side mentioned the strength of their connection to their black parent as a reason for this leaning. Interestingly, none of the respondents with monoracial black identities explained their sole black identity in relation to the strength of their relationship with their black parent.

In addition to parental influence, the racial composition of respondents' pre-college social networks influenced their racial identities. Tia said that she held a monoracial black identity largely because she was brought up in a black environment and interacted solely with black individuals. Because of this immersion within black environments growing up, she came to identify strongly with her black heritage. And, because she wasn't exposed to white people or culture, she said she didn't know what whiteness was and thus could not identify with it. Similarly, many of the black-leaning biracials said they identified more strongly with their black heritage because they lived in black neighborhoods, attended black schools or interacted predominantly with black peers. This finding is consistent with Rockquemore and Brunsma's (2002a, 2002b) discussion of the effect of the racial composition of social networks on biracial identity; Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002a, 2002b) state that frequent association with a racial group may pull biracial individuals towards identifying with that group because of feelings of familiarity and comfort. This idea is explored further in the subsequent section on the effect of college racial composition on students' racial identities.

Appearance was another factor that influenced the way respondents identified. Consistent with Khanna's (2007) findings, many respondents in my sample cited reflected appraisals---or

the ways they believed others understood them---as factors affecting their racial identity. The

majority of respondents said that a monoracial white identity was unavailable to them because

they did not physically *appear* white, and some respondents with monoracial black or black-

leaning biracial identities mentioned others' perceptions of them as black (based on their visible

black features) as a reason for their black (or "more black than white") self-understanding. Viola

was the only respondent to report ever understanding herself as a white individual; Viola's white

childhood identity was probably facilitated by the fact that she had light skin and did not

definitively appear black. In fact, Viola reported sometimes being mistaken for a monoracial

white.

While appearance affected many individuals' racial identities, it did not determine

individuals' racial self-understanding. Some individuals who appeared Latino or racially

ambiguous continued to identify more strongly with their black side despite claims from others

that they did not look black or could not possibly be black. And, some individuals with dark skin

and noticeably black features continued to identify more strongly with their white heritage or

weigh both sides evenly.

The following excerpt from an interview with Abigail, a freshman at Women's HBCU,

illustrates how racial identity was not always consistent with physical appearance. Abigail had

olive skin, green eyes and predominantly white facial features. She said that in her black high

school she was not accepted as black largely because of her appearance and was believed to be

Latina or white by many students and strangers. While she identified herself as biracial, she

continued to identify more strongly with her black side, despite the fact that she was frequently

not perceived as black based on appearance. She continued to identify as African-American

despite her looks because of the strength of her relationship with her black side of the family and

her immersion within predominantly black social networks. When discussing her appearance and identity Abigail said:

> *So really racially I identify myself as African-American. But, people don't see me that way. They think I'm white, Hispanic, a lot of things. But, that's just how I identify myself. I see myself as how I I identify myself and not on how I look. I know I look more like my father's [white] side of the um family, but um I identify myself based on what I feel as best and biracial so.*

Abigail said that she felt biracial but more strongly identified as African-American than Italian despite the fact that she looked more Italian than African-American, implying that other factors (i.e. parental influence, social networks) can sometimes trump appearance as determinants of internal racial identity.

Finally, the one-drop rule influenced individuals' racial identities. The fact that many respondents reported being understood by others as black reflects not only respondents' physical appearances (as many respondents had black features) but also the legacy of the one-drop rule. Even respondents who did not definitively appear black were frequently considered black by others once it was revealed that the individual was of partial black ancestry. Being viewed by others as black in turn led some individuals with racially ambiguous appearances to consider themselves black or "more black than white." The fact that Viola's white identity was still largely validated even when others knew she had a black mother suggests that the one-drop rule may be waning in importance; however, the majority of respondents still cited examples of times when the one-drop rule was invoked by others (or by themselves) as a determinant of their racial identity. While knowledge of the one-drop rule did not always affect individuals' internal identities (several individuals continued to identify as biracial despite others' attempts to classify them as black) the rule did have a considerable effect on other participants' identities.

A complete discussion of the effect of family, racial composition of early childhood social networks, appearance and the one drop rule on racial identity is beyond the scope of this paper; however, it is apparent that these four factors act as powerful influences on individuals' racial identities.

How Racial Identity Influenced College Choice

Analysis of the 22 interviews indicated that individuals' racial identities were affected by various social factors. In turn these identities affected the social networks individuals chose to engage in and, to an extent, the colleges they chose to attend. The majority of respondents stated that ideas of race, identity or diversity influenced their college decision. The effect of race on college choice, however, was not always in the same direction. Some individuals selected either a PWI or HBCU because the racial composition of that school supported their current racial identity. Others intentionally selected schools that would force them to leave their racial comfort zone.

Tabitha's discussion of her college decision reflects the idea of selecting environments that would support existing understandings of race and identity. When discussing why she chose Women's HBCU Tabitha, a freshman with a black-leaning biracial identity, said:

> *And um another reason [why I chose to go to an HBCU] was because I didn't know anything about any other institutions and I had become so comfortable in the African-American environment, I was almost scared to expose myself to another environment where I would have to go through the same issues I went through in middle school all over again. Like that wasn't going to work for me. So I felt like at an HBCU I would be accepted. I would---and if I wasn't I would know how to deal with it.*

Tabitha stated that she purposefully selected an environment that she was familiar with so that she would not have to rethink questions of race and belonging like she was forced to do in middle school. Like Tabitha, many other students reported selecting schools based on their racial identities. Some PWI students with biracial identities said they selected PWI in part because of

its diversity; because PWI was somewhat diverse, they believed they would feel comfortable there. Furthermore, some of these students said they did not consider any HBCUs because they did not think they would fit in or be accepted there.

The following excerpt from an interview with Jillian, a PWI junior with a neutral biracial identity, reflects this theme of selecting PWI at least in part for its diversity:

> I: Did you ever think about the diversity or the racial makeup when you were considering schools?
> R: *Mmmm yeah I did look at the percentages and so I thought there were higher percentages of diverse people here so that was exciting. And, then I looked at the clubs and I saw [Mixed Students] so I said Oh, wow; there's actually a club for um biracial and multiracial kids.*
> I: Okay. Did you ever think about going to a historically black college?
> R: *Mmm not really.*
> I: So you never thought about [Women's HBCU] or anything like that?
> R: *Well, I thought about it, but I didn't really want to go. I wanted to go to one that was more diverse, more mixed in general.*
> I: Do you think that you would have felt uncomfortable if you had gone to [Women's HBCU]?
> R: *I don't know about uncomfortable but maybe that the thing also with kind of forming cliques and not feeling totally accepted.*

While some students, like Tiffany and Jillian, chose colleges that they felt would support their racial self-understanding, other students reported purposefully selecting a college with a racial composition that would cause them to reconsider their ideas on race. Kimberley, a sophomore at PWI with a black-leaning biracial identity, grew up in a predominantly black neighborhood and attended black high schools. She said she purposefully avoided going to an HBCU so that she could experience an environment that was different racially from the ones she'd always been in. When discussing her college decision Kimberley said:

> *But I mean I don't know, personally, I kind of wanted to leave my comfort zone. And I just I didn't see myself doing that at an HBCU. I saw like that as a continuation of everything I'd been doing. And, I saw [PWI], and [PWI is] like what a you know like what 13% black or something like that? Now and you know it's like 30% Asian and the rest is white. And you're just like oh, okay, this is different. I I have not seen this before. This is this is this is interesting. So it's like*

it's a part of me leaving my comfort zone.

Like Kimberley, Viola sought out a racial environment that would cause her to leave her comfort zone. Viola identified as white throughout the majority of high school but senior year she began to think more about her black heritage. Her black mother suggested she consider Women's HBCU, and Viola ultimately decided to attend in order to experience the side of her culture which she was not in touch with throughout the majority of her life. Viola described this process of college selection thus:

> *That's when my mom first ever like opened up the conversation about race or anything like that. Because it was like when I was applying for colleges, she wanted me to consider [Women's HBCU]. I'm just like why would you want me that's a historically black college; why would you even say that? And, she's like well, you know, because blah blah blah blah blah you know you do have a black, and that's when we first started talking about it. And, it just kinda like man I I I've kinda been I feel like I've been deprived. I'm like she's always she's always been herself and she likes all kinds of music, but she likes a lot of, you know, black like artists and so we've been exposed to a lot of things. But, um I had never really she never really spoke about it directly, and I feel like she me and her had many talks about it directly, and I felt like it opened up my uh mind about it. And, I really wanted to come here just for that experience.*

While excerpts from interviews with Tabitha, Jillian, Kimberley and Viola show that students were considering race when selecting colleges, it is important to note that not all students' college decisions were influenced by race. Some respondents chose schools strictly for academic or financial reasons. Others got offered the chance to play a varsity sport at their particular institution. For these students race did not figure prominently into their calculations about which school to attend. It is also important to note that while race influenced many students' choice of college environment, the college environment also had a powerful impact on many students' racial identities. I explore this subject in the remaining sections.

Changes in Identity as a Result of College

The majority of respondents did not report maintaining one understanding of their racial identity throughout their life. Instead, many respondents reported changes to their racial self-understanding over time and/or across contexts. Several respondents reported struggling to understand their identity during middle school before reaching a somewhat stable understanding of themselves during high school. Still others reported changes in their racial identity as a result of college.

HBCU students were much more likely than PWI students to report significant changes in their racial identity as a result of college. Six out of 11 HBCU students reported a significant change in their racial self-understanding as a result of their college experience, compared to only one out of 11 PWI students. HBCU students and PWI students were equally likely to report strengthening of an existing identity; three HBCU students and three PWI students said that their college experience strengthened their racial self-understanding. Finally, PWI students were more likely than their HBCU counterparts to report no changes in their identity as a result of college; only two HBCU students reported absolutely no change in their racial identity compared to four PWI students. The remaining three PWI students reported slight changes in the way they thought about race in general but did not report changes in their *internal* racial identity. (See Appendix B for a summary of changes in individuals' identities.)

The fact that HBCU students were more likely than their PWI counterparts to report changes in racial identity as a result of their college experience was related to cross-institutional differences in the amount of freedom students had to choose social groups that supported their existing pre-college racial identity and to avoid academic courses that may cause them to reconsider their racial self-understanding. PWI students had a lot of freedom in this regard and

could select locations within their college environment that were consistent with their racial identity. Within the PWI campus black, biracial and even white identities were available to biracial students within certain areas of campus life. PWI students could and *did* report selecting clubs, activities and friendship groups that would support their existing racial identity. Sometimes participation in these activities served to strengthen individuals' racial identities. Other times, it simply left their identities intact. PWI students also had a lot of freedom in selecting their academic courses, and many students did not take any classes related to race or identity. Thus, the majority of students did not develop new understandings of race through academic coursework that caused them to reconsider their identity.

In contrast, HBCU students interacted within a campus with one dominant racial peer culture and academic culture. Thus, they had fewer options to seek out academic and social paths that would support their existing identity. They were surrounded almost entirely by black peers, and the dominant message from the peer culture was that black was the most available and desirable identity for biracial people. HBCU students were also surrounded by a central academic culture which stressed African-American history and culture. Every student at both Men's HBCU and Women's HBCU took at least one class that dealt with race. And, at Women's HBCU all freshmen were required to take a two-semester class on the concept of race and African history which caused many students to think about their race and identity.

The peer and academic cultures at the institutions also help explain the direction in which students' identities changed. The emphasis on African-American culture and history as well as exposure to black peers at the HBCUs led the majority of the HBCU students toward a stronger black identity, although some students' identities did change from black to biracial. The multiple peer and academic cultures at PWI allowed students to maintain or strengthen various identities,

although it's important to note that no PWI students reported a strengthened black identity as a result of their college experience. In the following sections, I will take a closer look at each institution and examine the ways in which students' racial self-understandings were affected by the school racial composition and the peer and academic cultures.

PWI: Multiple Available Identities and Opportunities for Movement

In order to understand the ways that PWI affected students' racial identities, it is important to understand the racial composition of the institution and the racial dynamics of student interaction. While PWI was a predominantly white institution, the majority of students saw it as being at least somewhat diverse. They also saw it as being somewhat segregated. This diversity and segregation led to spaces within the campus that were divided by race. Black students tended to hang out with black students, whites with whites, Asians with Asians, and so on. The following excerpt from an interview with Corey, a 22 year-old PWI senior, illustrates this theme of segregation:

> *R: Um I feel like in general like everyone everyone like has friends…they're not self-segregating in the sense of like their acquaintances, I guess. But in terms of their close friends, I feel like they are. Like in terms of their close friends that you hang out with all the time, I feel like it's mostly like white students, Asian students, black students, just kind of like grouping.*
> I: Where have you observed that? Just walking around? Or are there specific places on campus or times, events or anything where you've noticed that?
> *R: I think like walking around campus, like eating dinner at the [Cafeteria], like um if you go to frat parties like I'd say like all aspects of campus life, it's just kind of you observe it.*
> Kimberley, a PWI sophomore, also spoke on the issue of racial self-segregation on

campus, saying:

> *I think that [the black community is] pretty much too cohesive but if the black community is too cohesive than every community is too cohesive. Like I think that it's pretty much just like that for all of them. Like honestly people of the same race hang out with other people of the same race, normally. Like you see that everywhere. Like if you go and look in the [cafeteria] then you'll see like Indians*

*they group with each other. Asians, like the Koreans, international students, they
all group with each other.*

But, in addition to the general racial self-segregation on campus there were some groups

and programs that stood out as being multicultural. Such programs included Intersection, a pre-

orientation program for freshmen that stressed diversity and inclusion, as well as various other

programs sponsored by the Office of Multicultural Affairs. Chandra, a PWI junior, talked about

how she perceived PWI as a diverse place. Her participation in multicultural programs was one

factor that shaped how she viewed the school. When asked if she believed PWI to be

predominantly white, Chandra responded:

> *R: I think so, yeah. I would say it is, but it's definitely like since I've been on
> campus and the programs I've been involved in, like Intersection, and just the
> when you sort of notice people when you're walking around campus, you
> wouldn't think that.*

Lanette, a senior at PWI, also talked about the diversity on campus and the institution's

attempt to foster an atmosphere of inclusion and multicultural awareness, saying:

> *I think [PWI] does a decent job at trying to expose the campus to different things,
> uh with I mean just I saw flyers for [an African event], there was a multicultural
> event the other day, um the dance performances that they have. So, I feel like
> there's always something on campus being advertised. So I do feel like…even in
> the [student center], all the little flags and stuff um that's nice to see.*

Implicit in the PWI students' descriptions of the diversity profile and racial dynamics of

the school was the idea that students could choose to be involved in multicultural events and

diverse social networks or they could surround themselves almost entirely by one racial group.

Within the sample of 11 PWI students, five reported hanging out with a diverse group of

students, while six reported associating almost entirely with black or white students; four

students said virtually all of their friends were black, and two said almost all of their friends were

white. Moreover, the majority of students reported *purposefully* selecting friendship groups or

activities based on race. Many students sought out social networks and associations within PWI

that were consistent with their racial identity and avoided situations, groups and activities that

were inconsistent with their racial self-understanding. Involvement in these activities then served to strengthen students' existing racial identities or, at the very least, leave them in tact, without challenging them in any way.

Ashley, a junior at PWI, discussed this idea of purposefully selecting social groups that were consistent with her racial identity while avoiding groups that were less consistent with her racial self-understanding. Ashley entered college with a white-leaning-biracial identity. As a freshman she attended both black and white Greek events before deciding to join a white sorority in which she felt more socially accepted. She said:

> *I went to a couple events just kinda to test the waters, to see if I wanted to go either to a predominantly black sorority or a predominantly white sorority because I knew I was going to rush either way. I just didn't know, you know, which side. And, I think that's the hardest thing for me being mixed because I do have both sides to consider and like it's hard because I was like which one do I consider myself more comfortable with and more like socially accepted and then I just said predominantly white. But yeah towards the beginning of freshman year I went to a lot of different functions that had predominantly black people. And, I felt like these are close tight knit sisters, but at the same time like I just feel like they identify themselves more as a black woman than I do. That's just how I felt like when I went to those functions. Like, I didn't feel comfortable. I just felt like because I identify myself as both and not one or the other, because I didn't identify myself fully as that, I didn't feel like, this is my opinion, this is what I thought, I didn't feel like they were comfortable with me because I didn't fully you know apply myself to be a black woman. Because I consider myself mixed because I am both sides and I did lean towards the other side. Because I didn't fully 100 percent say I'm black, yes I'm other parts, but I'm black that's why I felt like I felt like that. Like I felt like not isolated or outcast, but along those lines because I didn't follow their perceived rules of what I had in my head basically.*
> Because Ashley felt isolated within the black community at PWI due to her biracial

identity, she decided to join a white sorority where she felt like she would be more accepted. Ashley's discussion of her decision to join the white sorority highlights the idea of purposefully selecting environments on campus that support individuals' internal racial identities. Her discussion also suggests that within certain sectors of the PWI campus biracial students could be accepted as white, or at least included within the white community. Ashley described the

availability of a white (or white-leaning-biracial) identity option thus:

> *I want to say like for the black population because there's such low numbers they all kind of stick together in their own group but because there's so many people on the other side who are white or other diverse groups who are still in their own groups but like I guess more open to letting new people in. Like I feel like here especially at [PWI] being in the black population is like a selective secret society like you can only identify yourself as black in order to enter this room. You know what I mean? Sometimes I feel like that when it's like a group of them together then I especially like ones that I know in combination with them being in like the same sorority or like the same classes or the same group outings. I feel more open to being considered white.*

Because Ashley felt uncomfortable in black spaces on campus, and because she felt that she could be "considered white" and be socially accepted in the white community at PWI, she associated almost entirely with this group of students. In turn, this frequent association with white students served to strengthen her existing understanding of herself as a biracial woman with a stronger connection to her white side. Ashley described the strengthening of her identity thus:

> *Here, like I said because of the small percentage of the black population that we have here, I just automatically associate myself more with white women. When I do see and visit other people it's predominantly white, I've noticed. I mean also including the fact that I'm in a white sorority so obviously I'm going to see more white females than I will black females. So I feel like not only because I felt equal in high school, but I still identified as white in high school. And, then here because of the small black population then I still gravitate towards identifying myself as um you know relating more to white female.*
> I: Even more so now than in high school?
> *R: Yeah, more now.*

While Ashley leaned toward her white side in high school, she said she felt more equal (between her black and white sides) in high school than she did as a junior in college. As a result of both the low numbers of blacks on campus and her frequent (and purposeful) association with white students at PWI, she reported leaning even more toward her white side than she did before college.

Jillian, a sophomore at PWI, also reported a strengthening in her racial identity as a result of college. Like Ashley, Jillian purposefully selected environments within PWI that supported her existing identity and in turn, this participation strengthened her racial self-understanding. Jillian entered college with a neutral-biracial identity; she did not lean more toward her black or white side. While she occasionally participated in black cultural events on campus she did not join any black organizations because she didn't feel like she'd be accepted fully. Jillian described her hesitation to join black organizations in the following manner:

> *Maybe that's why I didn't really join any black community uh black organizations for that I didn't feel that I felt completely a part of it. I guess I didn't feel like totally totally uh fit in I guess all the way. But, if I do things every once in a while then it's not that big of a deal.*

In an attempt to find somewhere where she'd fit in, Jillian became active in a student group for multiracial students, referred to in this study as Mixed Students. Mixed Students existed before Jillian enrolled at PWI but then died out. At the time of our interview, Jillian and a few other students of various multiracial backgrounds were working hard to get it back up and running. The executive board met throughout the year to discuss plans for events that would promote awareness of the multiracial community on campus and generate interest in the group. In addition to planning, the group had also held a couple general body meetings and set up tables during student activities fairs to try to recruit members. Through participating in Mixed Students, Jillian was able to assert a public biracial identity and associate with other students with similar backgrounds. For these reasons, Jillian's involvement in Mixed Students served to strengthen her biracial identity. The following excerpt from Jillian's excerpt illustrates this idea:

> I: Okay, so when you first got to campus, thinking about how you identified racially then, and thinking about how you identify racially now, has there been any kind of change in your identity?
> *R: Maybe it's more of like a process of being more comfortable more outward with being biracial I guess. And, maybe feeling a little bit more included with being biracial I guess. Not really not versus acceptance or not being accepted but*

having other people who share the similar thing.

In the preceding quote, Jillian emphasized the impact of associating with "people who share the similar thing" on her biracial identity. By interacting with other multiracial students on campus Jillian became more comfortable and outward with her biracial identity.

While Ashley and Jillian were the only two PWI students to report a strengthening of their racial identity as a result of participation in purposefully-selected race-based organizations, they were not the only students to engage in this sort of intentional group selection. Several other students reported choosing friends and activities that supported their racial self-understanding. PWI students with monoracial black identities or black-leaning biracial identities were more likely than neutral- or white-leaning biracial students to associate almost entirely with black students. Moreover, all PWI students with black or black-leaning biracial identities reported feeling accepted by the black student community. The two PWI students with white-leaning biracial identities joined white Greek organizations and hung out almost exclusively with white students. And, students who did not lean toward their white or black side were the most likely to report diverse friendship groups.

Samantha, a freshman at PWI who identified equally with her white and black sides, discussed her selection of friends as a method to maintain her biracial identity. The following excerpt from the interview with Samantha illustrates how biracial individuals may purposefully select friendship groups for racial reasons:

> *R: I never want to be like my friends um who are mixed and just go straight towards the black. And that's what most people are expecting, most of the black people; most of the mixed people are going towards the black. Um and I feel like a lot of people are just going like a lot of my friends now are wanting to pledge with black sororities just because they're black.*
> I: So what are the kinds of things that you're doing to not be like your friends who kind of just go towards the black?
> *R: Um I definitely just, I reach out and talk to different people different kinds of people um like I was the first one to talk to my Ukrainian friend.*

Here Samantha discussed purposeful engagement in diverse networks as a strategy to maintain her current racial identity. While most respondents did not explicitly state that they were attempting to maintain their current racial identity, their reported behavior indicated that they actually did select friendship groups and activities that supported their current racial self-understanding. Because PWI was somewhat diverse, and because black, biracial, and white identities were all relatively available and desirable identities within certain sectors of the campus environment, biracial students were able to actively select niches within the college environment that supported their existing internal identity. Thus, students were not likely to experience dramatic changes in their racial self-understanding.

Only one student, Chandra, a college junior, reported a significant change in her racial identity as a result of her PWI experience. This may be because unlike the majority of respondents Chandra did not seek out networks that supported her existing racial identity. She entered college with a monoracial black identity; however, unlike the other two PWI students with monoracial black identities, she did not predominantly associate with black students. Instead, she participated in Intersection, and after this multicultural pre-orientation program was over, she continued to hang out with a multicultural group of students. She said that this participation in multicultural organizations was one factor in her transition from a black to a mixed (black-leaning biracial) self-understanding. She described the change in her identity thus:

> R: I just think um by the time I got to college I was in a more diverse environment. Um I heard a lot more people more specific about their background you know other than saying black they might be um Haitian um Dominican um so that was that was one thing. Nowadays I'm more uh mindful of identifying myself as Jamaican American or as mixed. And, if I identify as mixed I'll be more specific, and I'll be black and Caucasian. And when it's, it's interesting because in high school if there had been a black and a white group it would have been very easy for me to just go straight to the black group because that's what I felt like I was. But now it has to be more specific which is where Intersection is nice, because we

organized ourselves according to how we thought um how we wanted to identify
as opposed to how others saw us.
I: And, so what do you think caused that change from in high school seeing
yourself as black to now wanting to be more specific?
R: Um Intersection probably helped a lot.

Considered together, the excerpts from Chandra, Jillian, Ashley and Samantha's

interviews show that changes in identity as a result of college are possible, particularly if

individuals (like Chandra) are involved in college social environments which call into question

their pre-college internal racial identities. But, since PWI had multiple racial peer cultures and

white, biracial and black identities were all available, individuals could choose to become

involved in areas of campus life that supported their existing racial identity. This purposeful

selection of friends and activities explains why the majority of PWI students did not report

significant changes in their internal racial identity as a result of college.

In addition to the campus peer culture, the academic culture of the institution has the

potential to shape individuals' self understandings; however, since students exhibited a lot of

freedom in selecting their courses, they did not have to take any classes on race which may have

caused them to reconsider their place in the United States racial framework. Four students did

not take any classes that addressed race, and only a few students took more than one class on

race. Two students, John and Willa, were sociology majors who studied race in virtually all of

their classes. This academic attention to race affected the way that both students thought about

race. Willa took a race and ethnic relations course and participated in an independent study

where she read multiple books on multiracial girls. She said that studying biracial identity in

college and learning about the social construction of race strengthened her understanding of

herself as a biracial woman. She said:

I think my racial identity is more solidified as a result of college, so the way I think about
my race is very different from high school, mostly in part to a new understanding about

the social construction of race from a Race and Ethnic Relations class. The meaning of the word race is very ambiguous and means many things to so many different people. I realized that more and more in college as I interacted with people. I think that when I was in high school, I did think that everyone had to fit into one of those perfect little boxes that labeled someone as black, white, Hispanic. etc., and I was the outlier.
Like Willa, John's academic study of race affected the way he understood race and the

world. John entered college with a white-leaning biracial identity. While he still identified in the

same way as a college senior, his academic knowledge of race led him to see the world through a

more racial lens. John described this change thus:

I: When you're in [white] settings do you feel different or do you feel like you're just like everybody else?
R: I feel like I'm just like everybody else but it's been different at college because I'm a sociology major, too, and um so I've been learning you know I took a race and ethnicity course and so now I feel like I understand more of the like you know the sociology of it. And, so I take away I I like notice things more than I would than I did before.
I: Can you tell me about that, like the sociology of it?
R: Um, like one instance that we just talked about like it happened like two weeks ago. It I'm sure you're aware of like the colorblind ideology. And, it's just an instance of that came up in my [white] frat where they said that everyone has the right to vote. And, I mean they do but not everyone has the same kind of power to vote. And, so it was just one of those instances where I knew that like black people have less political power in this country, but everyone's just like yeah, everyone has the right to vote, you know? And, they were saying that if black people really wanted to change things they should just vote more. And, I was like they historically they can't, you know?
Here, John stated that while he felt similar to white people, he believed that the

knowledge of race that he gained in college made him view the world differently than the

majority of the white people in his fraternity. John's new perspective on race and the United

States is similar to the perspective developed by the biracial respondents in Twine's (1996) study

who began to see the world in racial terms after studying race in college; prior to college the

students' families had emphasized the virtue of color-blindness.

It is likely that if more PWI students took classes on race and studied the topic more

extensively, they, like John and Willa, would begin to see the world, and possibly themselves,

differently. But, since the PWI academic culture allowed students freedom to select courses, many students did not develop new racial self-understandings as a result of college academic work.

Men's and Women's HBCUs: Emphasis on Black Culture and Identity

In contrast to PWI where students were able to avoid thinking about race in an academic context and where students could select social networks that supported their pre-college racial identity, students at Men's HBCU and Women's HBCU were required to study race and were largely unable to select between white, black and multicultural social networks. This forced academic exploration of race and identity combined with their complete immersion within majority black peer networks explains why biracial HBCU students were more likely than PWI students to report significant changes in their racial identity as a result of college.

Six HBCU students reported changes in identity as a result of their college experience. Mark, Rebecca and Lisa all held monoracial black identities during childhood but came to understand themselves more as biracial individuals as a result of their college experience. Mark transitioned from a monoracial black identity to a neutral-biracial identity. Rebecca transitioned from a monoracial black identity to a black-leaning-biracial identity. Lisa also transitioned from a monoracial black identity to a black-leaning-biracial identity; for Lisa this transition began towards the end of her high school experience but was completed as a result of her experience at Women's HBCU. An excerpt from Mark's interview provides one example of this potential identity change. When discussing his racial identity, Mark said:

> R: I used to think of myself more as a black guy when I lived in Maryland just
> 'cause it was more thrown in my face like oh yeah Mark, he's black, he's black,
> he's black. But as I've come here I'm really the token white guy here so I've come
> to think of myself as more of a mixed person. You know, my [Men's HBCU]
> experience has made me think of myself more as a mixed person.

Unlike Mark, Rebecca and Viola, Myles transitioned from a biracial identity to a black

identity as a result of his college experience. When discussing his racial identity, Myles said:

> *R: For the most part [I think of myself as] a black man just from having lived*
> *down here for the past couple years. That might have like adapted since I've come*
> *down here. Like I don't know; that's the way I'd identify it.*
> I: So in high school what'd you think of yourself as?
> *R: Just like mixed or half and half.*
> Viola transitioned from a white identity to a neutral-biracial identity as a result of college.

She described the change in her racial identity thus:

> *R: I would say up until this year I identified as a white person. Now I would say*
> *almost I don't really identify with I don't really pick. I don't I wouldn't say I pick*
> *at all actually now. And, coming here I feel like everybody has a common goal,*
> *everybody has a common cause, and I agree with it and I don't know I just, I*
> *don't feel more black. I feel more black, but I feel like I'm balanced now. I feel*
> *like I was leaning all the way to the white side and then there was no in between.*
> *It was like either I felt like I had to go one way or the other. Now, I feel like it's*
> *okay to be right just me.*
> Finally, Isaiah transitioned from a neutral-biracial identity to a black-leaning biracial

identity. In high school, Isaiah identified as biracial, but didn't feel particularly black or white,

but his experience at Men's HBCU caused him to lean more towards his black side, while still

identifying as biracial. Isaiah described this change in his racial identity thus:

> *I always did identify myself as mixed but um I just I really under…like I knew I*
> *was black but I didn't feel it. I didn't feel white either but now I feel like you know*
> *black culture and black things like that.*
> In addition to these six respondents who reported changes in their racial self-

understanding as a result of their HBCU experience, three other students reported a strengthening

of their racial identity. Two respondents entered college with monoracial black identities and

stated that their college experience strengthened their desire to identify with their black side.

And, one student entered college with a black-leaning biracial identity and felt a strengthening of

this identity and an increased commitment towards working to help the black community as a

result of her HBCU experience.

It is important to note that while three respondents felt less black as a result of their

HBCU experience, the majority of respondents (six students) felt *more* black. Throughout their interviews, all nine of these respondents mentioned social factors that influenced the way they thought about their racial identities. Most notable among these factors were the racial composition of the school itself, the peer culture of the school and the academic culture of the institution.

The racial composition of the school seemed to affect individuals' identities in two different ways: through the people available for social comparisons, as Khanna (2007) found in her study, and by increasing students' exposure to black people and culture, as Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002a, 2002b) found to be important.

Mark's transition from an understanding of himself primarily as a black man to an understanding of himself as mixed stemmed from comparisons with others in his environment. In his predominantly white high school his peers constantly reminded him of his black identity. When he transitioned to Men's HBCU the racial composition of his environment changed dramatically. Here, people did not point out that he was black; they pointed out all the aspects of his behavior (primarily his speech) that they perceived as culturally white. Thus, Mark said he felt like the token white kid and began to think of himself as a mixed student. His appearance when compared to the white students in his high school made him feel black; whereas, his cultural differences compared to the black students at Men's HBCU made him feel mixed. Mark's change in identity also reflects the importance of others' definitions of us in our understandings of ourselves; because others labeled him as black Mark saw himself as black. When others began to label him as culturally white, he began to see himself differently.

It is important to note, however, that at the same time that Mark's HBCU experience made him understand himself more as a mixed person, it also increased his identification with

black males. In high school Mark understood himself as a black guy not because he felt

particularly connected to black culture but because he believed others saw him as black. In fact,

he reported feeling more similar, culturally, to white males in high school simply because this is

who he interacted with the most. His Men's HBCU experience, however, "evened him up" in

this respect; at the time of his interview he said he identified equally with black and white males

as a result of being exposed to more black males in college. When asked if he identified more

with black or white males, Mark responded:

> *Um, let's see in some…uh…I think my experience at [Men's HBCU] especially has made me more even on that. I think I used to identify like with white men more but I think um just having…seeing both sides has really evened me out. But I uh I don't think I identify with either side more than the other. Even though um people in both settings, [Men's HBCU] and back home, may disagree because of the way they perceive me, but uh I know that I don't really you know prefer one or the other or any of that.*

This increased identification with black people as a result of frequent contact was not

unique to Mark. Other HBCU students reported feeling more black as a result of their complete

immersion within black social networks at Men's HBCU or Women's HBCU. Unlike PWI

students who could choose to hang out in all black, all white or multicultural settings, HBCU

students rarely had contact with non-black students on campus. As Rockquemore and Brunsma

(2002a, 2002b) suggested, this frequent contact with black peers served as a pull factor toward a

black (or at least blacker) identity. As students spent more time with black peers they became

more familiar and comfortable with black culture which led to increased identification. This was

the case for both Viola, who transitioned from a white to a neutral-biracial identity, and for

Isaiah, who transitioned from a neutral biracial to a black-leaning biracial identity.

For the majority of her life Viola identified as white. She associated almost entirely with

white peers in her high school and felt, for the most part, just like everyone else. She said she

began discussing college with her black mother who suggested she consider [Women's HBCU].

At first, Viola was shocked by the suggestion since she identified as white and the school her

mother suggested was a historically black college. But, after more discussions with her mother,

Viola began to acknowledge that she was in fact different from her white high school peers and

decided that it might be a good thing to explore her black heritage by attending an HBCU. She

described her decision to attend Women's HBCU as a *"strategic planning thing to see what the*

rest of my culture was like." After spending a semester and a half at Women's HBCU, Viola

reported feeling more black than she did in high school as a result of her immersion within this

black environment. She previously identified as white, but after spending time with black peers

she saw herself more as white *and* black.

Similarly, Isaiah described the impact of immersion within a black environment on his

identity. While Isaiah still understood himself primarily as a mixed person, his Men's HBCU

experience caused him to lean towards his black side. The following excerpt from Isaiah's

interview shows how his frequent contact with black peers led him to identify more with his

black heritage:

> I: Do you feel like you've tapped more into [your black heritage] here than before
> you came here?
> *R: I think so, yeah*
> I: And, just because you're around more black people or what?
> *R: I think you're around black people and you experience like that black culture*
> *and that black experience.*
> I: And would you say that it's affected your racial identity at all? Like being
> exposed to that? Has it changed how you think about yourself racially?
> *R: I think so. I feel like I understand black people more as a whole and like what*
> *we are and just us as a people than I did you know before.*
> *Like in a classroom if I was in high school and I was in class and it was an all*
> *black class, I would feel less comfortable than I would if it was a mixed class. I*
> *feel like I would feel just as uncomfortable in an all black class as I would…I*
> *would've back in high school in an all black class…ok if I was in an all black*
> *class or an all white class I would feel just as uncomfortable in both of them. But*
> *now I wouldn't, except in an all white class.*
> I: Why do you think that changed?

R: 'Cause I came here and you know you spend so much time with black people you know black people all the time that it doesn't feel different to me anymore. You know I...the only time I was only with black kids was at church; that was it growing up. So I think I think you know I learned a lot here just about being black. I'm much more comfortable being half black and still being an African American. Um I feel like at a white school it would have been like high school, you know? I would have been around a bunch of white kids and I wouldn't have learned a lot about myself and being black. I don't feel like it would have been a bad thing, but I feel like I'm much more comfortable here but you know just being around black people all the time but yeah, I feel like I understand myself as a black person now.

While Isaiah, Mark, and Viola's interviews show that simple immersion within a black social network can affect biracial identity, it is important to note that it is not only the racial composition of an environment that affects individuals' identities. As Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002a, 2002b) state, the experiences individuals have *within* their social environment also affect the development of individuals' racial identities. Similarly, Renn (2004) talks about the importance of peer culture messages on college students' identities.

Within Men's HBCU and Women's HBCU, students frequently interacted with others who sent out powerful messages about what kinds of identities were acceptable and desirable. The racial peer cultures at both institutions sent out the message that black was the most acceptable and desirable identity for biracial students. Biracial was a less acceptable and desirable identity, though it was more acceptable at Women's HBCU than Men's HBCU. And, white was largely unacceptable and undesirable at both institutions, though again, this message was stronger at Men's HBCU than Women's HBCU.

Students at both Men's HBCU and Women's HBCU spoke about the unavailability of a white identity. As noted earlier, for an individual to hold an identity it must be validated by others (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002b). White identities have been largely unavailable for biracial individuals in most contexts due to the primacy of the one-drop rule in classifying

individuals of partial black ancestry. In other words, for much of history white has not been an available identity for mixed-race individuals because it has not been validated by others. Historically, individuals who were able to assert a white identity and have it validated were said to be "passing" as white. In order to pass as white individuals had to appear white physically and usually denounce all ties to the black community and relationships with black family members (Davis 1991). Some recent research has suggested that the power of the one-drop rule is declining; however, studies (Khanna 2004; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002a, 2002b) also show that only a small fraction of biracial individuals hold a white identity, suggesting that this identity option is still less likely to be validated by others.

While white identities are largely unavailable to biracial individuals in a variety of contexts, it seemed that enrollment in a black institution made this identity option even less realistic. Every student said that they felt like a white identity was an unavailable option within their school environment or at least a difficult identity to maintain. This difficulty was related to two factors: one, since students were enrolled in a *black* institution, their physical location in the school was used by other students to assess their racial identity. Because the students were at the school, they were assumed to be black regardless of how they appeared physically, thus making it difficult for the students to "pass" as white. This finding is consistent with Haney-López's (2006) discussion of race and physical space. In "White by Law," Haney-López (2006) discusses how a long history of racial segregation in the United States has led to a link between race and physical space. He says that individuals' occupation of physical locations helps others determine their race, especially when the individual in question is of ambiguous racial appearance. In some ways where a person lives influences their external racial identification; the person who is "not clearly White or Black" sometimes has his race determined by the racial composition of the

physical space he occupies (Haney-López 2006: 86).

In addition, once students revealed that they were black and white, their black HBCU peers typically disregarded the white part and thought of the biracial students as black. This is consistent with the idea articulated by past researchers (Davis 1991; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002a, 2002b) who asserted that the black community has deeply internalized the one-drop rule, coming to think of all mixed-race individuals as black. While biracial individuals in white or mixed contexts *may* be able to reveal their biracial background but claim a white identity and have this validated, the black students in the HBCUs were not likely to validate an appeal to a white identity from a biracial student, thus making a white identity more difficult to maintain in this setting.

The following excerpt from an interview with Isaiah illustrates the unavailability of a white identity within the HBCU context:

> I: Do you feel like it would be acceptable if you wanted to identify as white on campus or if you wanted…
> R: Absolutely not. People would think I was crazy.
> I: Why do you think they would think you were crazy?
> R: Because I'm half black, so they would be like I mean, you know, you sat in the colored section 50 years ago, you know things like that. And why would you be at an all black school if you were white? I mean you have Negro hair. All that.
> When listing reasons why fellow students would think he was crazy if he identified as

white, Isaiah not only referenced the historical one-drop rule (*"you sat in the colored section 50 years ago"*) and appearance (*"you have negro hair"*), but also the simple fact that he was at a historically black institution (*"why would you be at an all black school if you were white?"*)

Perhaps more telling are the responses of Women's HBCU students who successfully identified or were identified by others as white outside of the HBCU context, but felt that white was a relatively unavailable identity option for them within their campus environment. Lisa, a senior at Women's HBCU, said that outside of Women's HBCU people frequently asked what

her racial background was and sometimes believed her to be monoracial white or Latina. Within

the Women's HBCU campus, however, she said that people rarely asked because they assumed

that since she was at the school, she was black. Thus her involvement in Women's HBCU made

a monoracial white identity largely unavailable because her peers believed her to be and treated

her as a black woman. When discussing how she was viewed by others on campus, Lisa said:

> *R: I think I think some maybe most people see me as black. No, I think most*
> *people see me as being mixed with something but um at the end of the day that*
> *still equates to being black for a lot of people. ...If people if you are in an all*
> *black environment people assume that if you're of a different race you wouldn't*
> *necessarily throw yourself in that environment. But, because I am comfortable*
> *they assume that some somewhere along the line there's black in me 'cause a*
> *white woman wouldn't just you know regularly voluntarily go to an HBCU, go to*
> *a black church, you know?*
> In the preceding quote, Lisa stated that she was believed by others to be black (or

multiracial-black) because of her enrollment at the HBCU and her comfort in the environment.

For these reasons it would be difficult for Lisa to "pass" as white in the HBCU context.

Furthermore, Lisa said that for many students being biracial was equivalent to being black. Thus,

it would be difficult for Lisa to assert a white identity as a biracial woman and have it validated

by her peers.

Like Lisa, Viola was frequently believed to be monoracial white outside of school but

was understood by the majority of her Women's HBCU peers as a black woman. She said she

believed they saw her as black primarily because of her matriculation at the historically black

college. When describing why her classmates saw her as black Viola said:

> *R: 'Cause I'm here so it's kinda like oh you're here so you must be black, so, they*
> *just kinda assume there's black in me somewhere even though there's some*
> *people who don't have black in them here.*

Not only did Viola believe that her peers saw her as black, she believed that they wanted

her to identify as black and that they would be shocked and displeased if she identified herself to

them as white. The following excerpt from Viola's interview illustrates how a white identity was

supported in her majority white high school context but unsupported within the Women's HBCU

environment:

> I: So if you were here and you wanted to identify as white, how would that be
> taken?
> *R: *laughs* Um if I wanted to identify as white? I don't know. I don't feel like, I
> feel like unless somebody asked me they wouldn't know, number one. Um people
> ask me all the time like so are you more white…even people ask me what is your
> racial identity? And, I'm just like why do you care? But, um*
> I: Or if they asked you that and you said I'm white…
> *R: I don't, yeah. If I said I'm white they'd gasp. They would gasp and be like why
> are you here? Like, you're trying to infiltrate our system or something. It would
> be like that. It would really literally be like a gasp, like oh my God.*
> I: And so if you wanted do you think it would be easier for you to identify as
> white at a predominantly white school than it would be here?
> *R: Way. I feel like they would want me to at a white school. At a white school they
> would want me to identify as white. And here they would want me to identify as
> black.*
> I: In your high school did they want you to identify as white?
> *R: Yes.*
> I: And how do you know that?
> *R: Because I don't know I feel like just because it was predominantly white, it was
> almost like you'd be in the bigger group. Like why would you wanna make
> yourself like why would you want to be over there? They're this this this this and
> this and all these connotations when you could be over here, basically. And they
> didn't say it exactly like that but it pretty much was. It was like why would you
> hang out with them? Uh because they're people? But, at the same time it's like oh
> we don't hang out with them.*

Viola's interview suggests that there may be more identity options for mixed-race

individuals within predominantly white or mixed social networks where students can choose to

identify as white and can display this identity through association with white peers. Viola said

she identified as white throughout the majority of high school and this identity was validated for

the most part; however, she believed asserting a white identity within her historically black

college context would be more difficult and less socially acceptable.

It is worthwhile to compare the situation of Viola with that of PWI student Ashley. As

noted earlier, Ashley held a white-leaning biracial identity and found this identity to be validated within PWI. Ashley even went as far as saying that she felt she could be considered white at PWI. This is consistent with Viola's account of her high school where she was basically considered white by her fellow students. These two experiences stand in sharp contrast to Viola's (and other students') experience at Women's HBCU, further supporting the idea that a white identity is more available within predominantly white as compared to predominantly black spaces.

Not only did the Women's and Men's HBCU peer cultures send out the message that a white identity was unavailable, they also sent out the message that it was undesirable. A white identity was particularly stigmatized within the Men's HBCU environment. Here, behaviors, speech patterns, and clothing styles were frequently racialized, and any actions or mannerisms that were considered white were mocked, sending out the message that acting or identifying as white was undesirable. Four of the five Men's HBCU students described situations where they were teased or mocked for being white or acting white. While some respondents seemed to consider this playful joking, others took the comments more seriously. The following excerpts from interviews with Isaiah and Mark illustrate the undesirability of a white identity within the Men's HBCU context. Isaiah said:

> R: Like you don't ever wanna…like you need to speak some Ebonics, and you need to understand Ebonics, too. If you do not at least understand somebody who's speaking Ebonics to you, they call you white. Like to be a white boy, that's a bad thing out here. Even white kids, you can't just be a white boy; you gotta be something else. It goes back to that…like it's okay to speak proper English, but if you don't speak Ebonics, you a cracker, you a white boy, you lame as hell. You not down. You not one of us. Stuff like that.

Similarly, Mark said:

> R: [My friend at Women's HBCU] takes like every opportunity to be like oh, oh you sound white or that little gesture you did was white. That, you know, everything you're doing is white, like you know as something negative.

I: So it's generally like a bad thing to act white here?
R: Oh yeah. Yeah it…no one wants to be called white.
In addition to sending out the message that white was an undesirable and unacceptable

identity, the peer cultures of Men's HBCU and Women's HBCU informed students that biracial

was a less available and desirable identity than a black identity. This message was more direct at

Men's HBCU than at Women's HBCU.

At Men's HBCU students frequently reported pushback from fellow students when they

tried to assert a biracial identity as something distinct from a black identity. All students reported

that at least some of their peers invoked the one drop rule, telling them that since they were part

black, they were black and needed to accept it. Isaiah discussed the difficulty in asserting a

mixed identity on campus:

I: So here do people say no you're black?
R: Yeah, I've gotten that a couple times. I'll be like I'm mixed. "No nigga you
black." I've gotten that many times here; many. And like "No nigga you black." I
swear to God. Like those exact words.
I: And what do you say back?
R: I'm like No, I'm not! I'm white. What are you talking about? I have white
family. My blood is the same as white people.
I: And then what do they say back to that? Do they keep arguing with you?
R: They say if you're black…if you're just a little bit black you're black. Like
white people don't see you as well he's only half black…which is true I think uh
they say you're black.

Like Isaiah, Myles discussed the difficulty in holding a biracial identity at Men's HBCU.

Myles said that he felt like a biracial identity would not be validated by his peers at Men's

HBCU. The following excerpt from my interview with Myles illustrates this idea of the

unavailability of a biracial identity within Men's HBCU.

I: So if you decided that you just wanted to tell people "Don't call me black. I'm
not black, you know, I'm mixed" Do you think that would be accepted?
R: They'd be like alright dude. But, they'd definitely go tell people yo, that dude's
crazy or something. They'd be like alright, I hear you, then go tell somebody else
like yeah he's crazy, or something like that.
The peer culture at Women's HBCU operated differently than the peer culture at Men's

HBCU. While students at both schools received the message that black was the most desirable

and acceptable identity for biracial students, the message was stronger and more antagonistic at

Men's HBCU. Three of the five Men's HBCU respondents reported harsh teasing related to their

white or biracial background and/or their perceived white cultural habits, such as patterns of

speech or dress. One of the Men's HBCU students even stated that he almost got into a fight with

a fellow classmate who he believed called him white in an attempt to humiliate him. At

Women's HBCU, no students reported bullying or ill-spirited teasing, which is notable

considering every Women's HBCU respondent reported bullying or ill-spirited teasing from

black peers during high school. Some students attributed this acceptance within the

predominantly black female college setting to the unique atmosphere of Women's HBCU. Lisa

said:

> R: [Women's HBCU] is a very loving, nurturing environment. And, I think that
> even people um that are foreign exchange get that, you know? People that aren't
> black get that, too. So I would say yes, I'm accepted, but I would also like to
> attribute that to [Women's HBCU] in itself.

Other students attributed their greater acceptance at Women's HBCU compared to their

lesser acceptance among blacks in high school to the large number of multiracial students at

Women's HBCU. Most respondents at Men's HBCU could only name a couple of other biracial

students, and most Women's HBCU respondents could only name a few, if any, other biracial

students from their high schools; however, almost every Women's HBCU respondent could

name several biracial students within their college environment, and they estimated that there

was a large number of people like them on campus. Furthermore, many Women's HBCU

respondents said that this large biracial population on campus made them feel less weird and less

isolated. This trend in Women's HBCU respondents is illustrated by an excerpt from Viola's

interview:

R: I feel like there are a lot of there are a few like there are people from multiple from biracial backgrounds, whether it be white and black, whether it be Hawaiian and black, whether it be Chinese and black, you know there's a lot of people who have mixed backgrounds, so I don't feel like weird.

Yet despite the more tolerant atmosphere of Women's HBCU compared to Men's

HBCU, the predominant message from the two peer cultures was the same: you can and should

identify as black. While many Women's HBCU respondents identified as biracial, most felt that

publicly expressing this identity as something distinct from a black identity would be frowned

upon. When asked if they thought a club like Mixed Students, the student organization for

multiracial students at PWI, would be accepted at Women's HBCU most students believed that

such a public display of biracial identity would be unaccepted by the larger black community.

The following excerpt from an interview with Lisa reflects this theme:

I: And what if there was, I know at PWI there's a club for multiracial people. Is there anything like that here?
R: No.
I: How do you think that would be received?
R: I don't think it would be received well at all.
I: Why not?
R: Just because of the stereotypes I guess because people say if you have one drop you're all black. There's too much division in the black community anyway so that would be just a, that would be too sensitive to deal with. Because there's division in the black community it is the mentality that every student comes in with. So if you see a if you see a multiracial [club] it's okay in an all white institution but if it's an all black institution it's not okay because it's the whole idea of these people separating themselves. Because in the black community you know people always want to claim that they're mixed with something. I have Indian in me. No one is ever okay with just being all black. So with this this would kind of affirm that. You're not okay with just being black, you know? And it would hurt people.
I: So you think they would be offended by that, but you don't think they're offended by you individually saying that you are biracial?
R: No.
I: And what is the difference?
R: Because I'm not denying that I am black. And I think that would even if even if let's say the club came out with a mission statement and everything that kind of cleared that up, that they're not um separating themselves from being black, just the idea of its existence would say that there is a problem with being black. But um me personally I can talk to someone and you know describe who I am. But,

you know an actual organization is a bigger symbol than one person.

Lisa said that she believed personally identifying as biracial was acceptable, but public endorsement of a biracial identity would be more problematic; however, other students reported discontent among the black students even when single individuals personally identified as biracial. Tia said:

> *R: But, for the most part people here get angry if you're biracial and you don't want to say you're black. So, people will accept you as black here if you're biracial. Like people there's people in my class that have said I'm biracial; I'm not black. And, people in the class have just went off.*

Overall, students at both Men's and Women's HBCU were receiving this message: we would like you to identify yourself primarily as black, not white and not biracial. These messages affected the construction and maintenance of students' identities. The power of the messages regarding acceptable racial identities caused Myles to change his identity to conform to the peer culture. When asked why he now identified as black when he had previously identified as mixed in high school, Myles said that he was adapting to his environment. The following excerpt reveals the effect of the college peer culture on Myles's identity:

> I: Do you feel like people here expect you to identify as black or do you feel like if you wanted to you could identify as white or as mixed?
> *R: Um no, it seems like you have to pretty much adapt and conform to the environment down here. There's not too much room to act freely, I guess you could say.*
> Other students said that these messages influenced the strategies they used to express or

maintain their racial identities. For instance, some students reported working hard to assert biracial identities despite pushback from peers. Another student reported purposefully changing the way he spoke so as not to be stigmatized for his "white" habits. Finally, Tabitha, a freshman at Women's HBCU, said that the messages from the peer culture caused her to begin to wear her hair natural and to develop a somewhat more afrocentric perspective.

In addition to the racial composition of the schools and the peer culture of the institutions, the academic culture of the institutions had a direct impact on several students' racial identities. Unlike at PWI where several students did not take many classes on race, students at Men's HBCU and Women's HBCU had no option but to study race. At Men's HBCU various classes in the history, English and sociology departments, among other departments, focused on race. And, at Women's HBCU students were required to take a two-semester course on race and African history. Lisa stated that this academic focus on race made it impossible for her to avoid thinking about her racial identity. The following excerpt illustrates the effect of the forced academic exploration at Women's HBCU:

> I: Okay so can you just tell me a little about your experience at [Women's HBCU] in general and how it's made you think about race?
> *R: Um so um everything every single class um teaches with a lens of race. So whereas before I would be able to um ignore it in a way, I'm faced to confront it here and everything that I do, it informs everything that I do. Um so it's just helped me confront myself and implications of what I look like, how I was raised.*
> Five respondents said that the academic focus on race and African-American history at

their institution strengthened the salience of their black identity. Another student said that it led to a greater self-awareness which resulted in a stronger biracial identity. For students who reported a strengthened black identity as a result of their academic exploration of race, this was usually the result of learning about the history of African Americans and the racism of white Americans. Learning about their shared history with African Americans pulled individuals toward a black identity while learning about the racism of whites pushed them away from a white identity.

Tia, a senior at Women's HBCU, was a sociology major who took many classes that addressed the concept of race and racial disparities in the United States. She said that learning about racism perpetuated by white people strengthened her desire to identify as black. The

following excerpt illustrates this effect:

> *R: But, I'm so aware of different things like it's like I see it, and I don't know if I see it because I'm looking for it or if I or if it's just because I'm aware of it now. But, I see a lot of racism, undercover racism like it's just you learn to notice more. I don't know if I'm looking for it or it's just that I see it, but I notice a lot more. And, I think that even makes me want to identify with my black side more because I see racism in white people a lot.*

Similarly, Charlie talked about how the academic culture at Men's HBCU strengthened his black identity, saying:

> *R: I probably stick to the black side of me more than like the white side. I still acknowledge it but I learned like I knew when you're on the white side you basically cover that in high school and stuff but I'm learning more about like my afro well my African ancestors and all that like make me realize like it wasn't what I was taught, you know what I'm saying? Like all these ideas and stuff I had are kind of being bashed. This is in history. And English. But it's like English we learn right through history kinda you know what I'm saying?*

Unlike the majority of respondents, Lisa's academic focus on race did not result in a strengthened black identity. Instead, Lisa said she developed a new sense of self-awareness and comfort which led her away from a monoracial black identity and toward an acceptance of her whole self for exactly what she is, black *and* white.

Lisa said that her first few years at Women's HBCU were difficult because she was forced to confront implications of her race in her academic classes. She said it was difficult being the minority and that she began to feel ashamed of herself and her white features. Ultimately, however, her continued academic exploration of race, which culminated with her reading of Check All That Apply, led to a sense of acceptance of her complete racial background. Lisa said that in high school she would not be offended if someone identified her simply as black, but with her new self-awareness, she would be bothered by this and desired to be identified as both black and white. She also said that in high school it would offend her if someone talked negatively about black people but not if they talked badly about white people; however, now since she

identified as a biracial woman, both negative comments would offend her. Lisa described this

process of self-discovery thus:

> *R: Coming to [Women's HBCU] um being the minority you know of mixed white whatever, it was hard, especially taking this class where it just taught us about um it just taught us about white oppression and just the story of African of the African Diaspora all over the world. I started to be ashamed of my heritage you know ashamed of some of the white features I had: fair skin, narrow nose, wavy hair. Just because I learned about how um Eurocentric standards of beauty have oppressed black women. So you know, it was difficult at the time, I'd say freshman and sophomore year. But you know junior, senior year just accepted who I am.*
>
> I: And, so I know you mentioned taking a class and how that kind of made you feel ashamed of some of your traits. But, then you also said being here has made you feel more comfortable and not ashamed. So, how does that go together?
>
> *R: Because um because that tough period made me face things about myself um answer questions about myself that ultimately led to me being comfortable. So and some of the questions were just like um you know does it does it mean I'm an enemy of people of color because my father's the white man? Or, um does it mean that I'm still black if my father is white? And, I answered being able to answer those questions made me comfortable with who I am.*
>
> I: And what were your answers?
>
> *R: Um, no, it doesn't make me the enemy. I can still have, I I am I can still have an affinity and a passion for my people. But, I have to understand that because of my upbringing I don't have the same experiences and be sensitive to that and to how people may um receive me. And am I still black? Yes.*
>
> I: So you're black and white?
>
> *R: Yes, I'm a whole. It was [a gradual process]. I think the culmination was when I read this book called Check All That Apply and um it talked about it spoke about being biracial and then like accepting your identity from God's perspective. So, just understanding one day that um you know God didn't make any errors in creating me you know creating who I am, so that just I guess started the foundation of me exploring that. Now as a senior just accepting my whole self I'll just wanna I just wanna tell it like it is, you know. This is what I am. This is where I come from.*

For students at Women's HBCU and Men's HBCU this academic culture, the peer

culture messages and the racial composition of the school affected the construction and

maintenance of their racial identities. For the majority of the nine students who reported either a

change in or a strengthening of their racial identity, this shift was towards a stronger

understanding of themselves as black. Students' complete immersion in a predominantly black

environment, the peer culture messages stressing the desirability of a black identity and the academic focus on African-American history and white oppression explain why the majority of students' identities shifted towards black.

Implications/Future Directions

Analysis of the interviews with students from PWI, Women's HBCU and Men's HBCU showed cross-institutional differences related to the construction and maintenance of students' racial identities. Students at PWI were substantially less likely than their HBCU counterparts to report a change in their racial identity as a result of college. This difference in the likelihood of racial identity change was related to the number of available racial identities within the campus environments and the amount of freedom students had to select peer networks and academic classes that did not challenge or cause them to reconsider their racial self-understanding.

As Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002b) state in their discussion of race and symbolic interactionism, social actors are placed in environments that "designate available categories of identification" (p. 40). Within PWI black, white and biracial identities were available to students within certain sectors of the campus, and students reported purposefully selecting locations within the school environment where their racial identities would be supported. Because students could select areas on campus that supported their pre-college internal racial identities, there was little change in students' identities.

In contrast, at Men's HBCU and Women's HBCU white was not an available category of identification and biracial was a less available identity option than it was at PWI. The dominant message from the HBCU racial peer culture was that black was the most available and desirable identity option for biracial students. Because HBCU students were deeply immersed within a black environment with clear messages about race and were not able to select niches within the

campus that would support various existing identities (at least not to the same extent that PWI students could), many students began to reconsider their racial identity. For the majority of respondents, immersion in this environment pushed them or pulled them in the direction of a black identity. Furthermore, students' forced academic exploration of race at the HBCUs caused many students to think about their race, partially explaining why more HBCU students than PWI students (who were not required to study race) reported changes in identity.

This study adds to the existing body of research on biracial identity development. The results from this study are consistent with the findings from past studies (Khanna 2007; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002a, 2002b) which suggest that the racial composition of biracial individuals' environments affects their racial identity by influencing available identity options and the individuals available for social comparisons and by increasing individuals' comfort and familiarity with a particular racial group or groups. Moreover, this study extends the existing understanding of the effect of social context on biracial identity development by exploring, in-depth, the effect that both predominantly white and historically black institutions may have on college students' racial identities. Previous studies on biracial identity that involved college students focused heavily on students at predominantly white institutions, and studies that included respondents from HBCUs (see Khanna 2007 for example) did not make the unique culture of HBCUs a central focus of the study.

While this study adds to the body of research on biracial identity and helps further our understanding of the relationship between social structure and identity development, a relationship that continues to be understudied, it is important to note the limitations of the research design and illuminate areas that would benefit from further study. The main limitations of this study are the nonlongitudinal research design and the small sample size.

While many respondents reported changes in their identity as a result of college, I did not interview them as high school students and do not plan to interview them in the future. It is important for studies to begin to study social processes like the ones mentioned in this study through longitudinal study designs which would allow researchers to measure and document changes in individuals' racial identities as they move between social environments with varying racial compositions. This would allow researchers to make more definitive claims about cause and effect. Furthermore, while many of the 22 respondents I interviewed reported changes in their identity related to their college experience, the small sample size makes it impossible to generalize from this study to the larger biracial population. While generalizability was not my goal, it is undeniable that conducting further studies on biracial identity and the college social environment that incorporate larger numbers of participants would further understanding of the subject.

In addition to the small sample size, the small number of institutions involved in this study prevents a complete understanding of the effect of college racial composition on biracial students' identity development and maintenance. I only interviewed students attending one particular PWI and two particular HBCUs. Moreover, several of the students attending PWI believed the school to be diverse and contrasted it with other institutions of similar caliber which they perceived as being almost entirely white. Thus, in order to further the existing understanding of the ways that college racial composition affects biracial students' identities, future researchers could extend this study to include predominantly white institutions that are less diverse than the PWI considered in this study. Understanding of the subject would also be strengthened by including students from multiple HBCUs and PWIs of varying levels of prestige and within different regions of the United States.

While there are a few ways that the research design of this study could be altered to strengthen the understanding of the relationship between college racial composition and biracial students' identities, this study also illuminates issues unrelated (or only tangentially related) to the subject of college that warrant further consideration. Students' personal accounts of parental influences on their racial identity were particularly interesting. The majority of respondents listed their parents as one of the most important influences on their racial identity. While I was only able to dedicate a small fraction of my paper to this subject, future researchers could further examine the relationship between familial socialization and biracial identity. Khanna (2007) states that while much research has been done on racial socialization within black families, little research has been done on the socialization of children within multiracial families. Furthermore, because parents appear to be so important to biracial individuals' racial identity development, I believe that first-generation biracial individuals (individuals with one black and one white parent) would have different racial socialization experiences than would individuals who understand themselves as multiracial for other reasons (i.e. individuals with two multiracial parents or one black or white parent and one multiracial parent). Future research could test this idea that there are differences in identity development and maintenance between first-generation biracial individuals and other multiracial individuals.

This study also suggests that further exploration of the relationship between gender and racial identity would be worthwhile. While this study does not focus on gender, the differences between the experiences of male and female HBCU students are notable. While past studies (Khanna 2004; Rockquemore 2002) found that biracial women reported more negative experiences with their black peers than did biracial men, I found the opposite to be true among the HBCU respondents in my sample, at least within their college context. Consistent with

Khanna (2004) and Rockquemore's (2002) findings, all Women's HBCU students in my sample reported negative experiences with black women during high school; however, within their college environment, Men's HBCU students were more likely to report negative experiences with blacks than were women's HBCU students. These findings suggest that further consideration of biracial men's unique experiences would be worthwhile. Finally, because validation from others is a critical component of individuals' identities, it would be interesting to conduct a study which assesses monoracial individuals' perceptions of and ideas concerning multiracial individuals. The results from the current study indicate that all of these future directions would be worthwhile areas of study.

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Appendix A: Profile of Research Sample

	College	Year in School	Gender	Mother's Race	Father's Race	High School Racial Composition	Region
Ashley	PWI	Junior	Female	Biracial	Black	Mixed	Northeast
Chelsea	PWI	Freshman	Female	Biracial	Black	White	West
Samantha	PWI	Freshman	Female	White (Jamaican)	Black (Jamaican)	Mixed	South
Jillian	PWI	Junior	Female	White (German)	Black (Caribbean)	Black	South
Kimberley	PWI	Sophomore	Female	Black	White	Black	South
Chandra	PWI	Junior	Female	Black (Jamaican)	White	White	South
Willa	PWI	Senior	Female	White (German)	Black	Mixed	South
Lanette	PWI	Senior	Female	White	Black	White	Midwest
John	PWI	Senior	Male	White	Black	White	Northeast
Timothy	PWI	Freshman	Male	White (English, Jewish)	Black (French Caribbean)	Mixed	France
Corey	PWI	Senior	Male	White	Black	White	South
Viola	Women's HBCU	Freshman	Female	Black	White	White	Midwest
Lisa	Women's HBCU	Senior	Female	Black	White (Jewish)	Mixed	Northeast
Rebecca	Women's HBCU	Senior	Female	White	Black	White	South
Tabitha	Women's HBCU	Freshman	Female	White	Black	Black	South

Tia	Women's HBCU	Senior	Female	White	Black	Black	South
Abigail	Women's HBCU	Freshman	Female	Black	White (Italian)	Black	South
Bryan	Men's HBCU	Freshman	Male	Black	White	Mixed	South
Charlie	Men's HBCU	Freshman	Male	White	Black	White	Northeast
Myles	Men's HBCU	Sophomore	Male	White	Black	White	Midwest
Mark	Men's HBCU	Sophomore	Male	Black	White	White	South
Isaiah	Men's HBCU	Sophomore	Male	White	Black	Mixed	South

Appendix B: Changes in Identity as a Result of College

	High School Racial Identity	College Racial Identity	Effect of College on Identity (change, strengthen, no change)
Ashley	White-leaning Biracial	White-leaning Biracial	Strengthened Identity
Chelsea	Black	Black	No Change
Samantha	Neutral Biracial	Neutral Biracial	No Change
Jillian	Neutral Biracial	Neutral Biracial	Strengthened Identity
Kimberley	Black-leaning Biracial	Black-leaning Biracial	No Change
Chandra	Black	Black-leaning Biracial	Change
Willa	Neutral Biracial	Neutral Biracial	Strengthened Identity
Lanette	Black	Black	*Slight changes in the way she thought about race but no significant change in internal racial identity*
John	White-leaning Biracial	White-leaning Biracial	*Slight changes in the way he thought about race but no significant change in internal racial identity*
Timothy	Black-leaning Biracial	Black-leaning Biracial	No Change
Corey	Neutral Biracial	Neutral Biracial	*Slight changes in the way he thought about race but no significant change in internal racial identity*

Viola	White	Neutral Biracial	Change
Lisa	Black	Black-leaning Biracial	Change
Rebecca	Black	Black-leaning Biracial	Change
Tabitha	Black-leaning Biracial	Black-leaning Biracial	Strengthened Identity
Tia	Black	Black	Strengthened Identity
Abigail	Black-leaning Biracial	Black-leaning Biracial	No Change
Bryan	Neutral Biracial	Neutral Biracial	No Change
Charlie	Black	Black	Strengthened Identity
Myles	Neutral Biracial	Black	Change
Mark	Black	Neutral Biracial	Change
Isaiah	Neutral Biracial	Black-leaning Biracial	Change

Appendix C: Interview Guide

<u>Background Questions:</u>
- Tell me a little about where you're from and what life was like for you growing up (Prompt for the following):
- Where are you from?
- What was it like living there? How would you describe your neighborhood growing up? (urban/rural; racial composition)
- Did you live with both of your biological parents growing up?
- Are your parents still married?
- What race is your mother? Your father?
- What do your parents do (career)? Have they always done this?
- How much contact did you have with your mom's side of the family while growing up? Your dad's side? How would you describe your relationship with your mom and dad; with your mom's family and your dad's family?

<u>Racial Identity</u>
- How would you describe your racial identity?
- How strongly do you identify with being black? With being white? (very strongly, somewhat strongly, very little, not at all)
- Is there one racial group (white or black) that you more strongly identify with?
- Do you feel a strong connection to/identification with black men? Black women? White men? White women?
- What do you usually fill out on forms?
- How did you identify yourself on your college admission form?
- Does how you identify yourself to others differ depending on who is asking you or who you are with? Why?

<u>Experiences with race/factors leading to racial identification</u>
- At what age did you become conscious of race?
- Can you tell me about any memorable experiences you had growing up when you first became conscious of race?
- Was the topic of race explicitly dealt with in your family?
- Did your parents try to shape your racial identity or tell you how to identify yourself? Can you walk me through a conversation you remember having with your mom or dad about your racial identity?
- What was the racial composition of your elementary school? Middle school? High School?
- How would you describe your friendship groups growing up? Were you mostly friends with black kids, white kids… a diverse group?
- Did you have friends who were mixed race? Did you talk about being biracial with each other? Can you tell me about a conversation you had with each other about your race?
- What types of names (either positive or negative) can you remember people calling you?

- Can you remember times in your school (elementary, high school) experiences when you were very conscious of being your race?
- Have you ever experienced hostility or negative treatment by other blacks because of your multiracial background? Because of your looks? Because of your white background?
- Have you ever experienced hostility or negative treatment by other whites because of your multiracial background? Because of your looks? Because of your black background?
- Do you think that how you look has affected the way you identify? How?
- Do you feel like others try to categorize you/label you racially (put you into one group)? Can you tell me about a time that displays that at its clearest? How did that make you feel?

Factors leading to college decision:
- How did you decide to come to this college?
- When choosing a college, do you feel like you made a conscious choice to surround yourself by a specific racial group or groups?
- In what ways is this college different from/similar to your high school?

The college experience:
- Year in school?
- Current residence (on/off campus?); roommates?
- Number of years spent living on campus
- Think about yourself when you first came to college. Did you describe yourself (racially) in the same way then that you do now?
- What do you think contributed to that change/reinforced that description?
- Tell me about your friends and other peers here. How do they identify racially? How does your sense of identity play off your relationships with them?
- Have you made a conscious choice on campus to surround yourself by a specific racial group or groups or did it happen by chance?
- What kind of activities are you involved in on and off campus? In what ways do your activities reflect or contribute to your racial identity?
- Are you in/have you ever been in any race-centered organizations, like a black sorority/fraternity or black or multiracial student group?
- Do you know if there are any groups on campus for multiracial students? Do you belong to one? If there aren't any, would you like there to be groups like this?
- How would you describe race relations on your campus? Where do you fit into the picture?
- In terms of academic work, what is your major? What kinds of classes have you taken? Have you ever done coursework or an assignment that dealt with your racial identity?
- Is it more or less important to you now that you are in college to identify yourself as black/white/biracial?
- If you attended a historically black college (or predominantly white college) like [examples] do you think you would continue to identify yourself in the same way? Why/why not?

- Can you tell me about how people typically react to you on campus? What do they assume about your racial identity? Can you think of a specific time that displays this at its clearest?
- Are people here typically supportive of the way you choose to identify yourself? Do you feel pressure to identify in a certain way? Or do you feel that you can identify however you want?
- Have you ever experienced hostility or negative treatment from anyone on campus because of your looks or racial identity?
- Can you think of a situation on campus when your identity wasn't supported?
- Is there anything else you'd like to add about your experience here?

Feelings Associated with Racial Identity (Regard):
- Overall, do you feel like being biracial is an advantage a disadvantage or has no meaning in life?
- Have you ever tried to make yourself look physically more or less black or white?
- Have you ever tried to hide any part of your racial background?
- Are you proud of/happy about your black heritage? Your white heritage?
- Have you ever wished you were another race? Why?

Final Background Questions:
- Age
- Zip Code
- Parents' yearly income

- Is there anything else about your biracial identity that you would like to share with me that we have not discussed?

*Some questions are taken from previous studies, including:

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