

# Considering the Significance of Ancestry through the Prism of Mixed-Race Identity

People of mixed ancestry promise to be a significant percentage of the population of the United States in the 21st century. This article describes a qualitative study of 20 older mixed-race adults of African-American–white and Asian-American–white ancestries and focuses on how the participants construct identity. Using grounded theory methodology, racial identity did not emerge as a singular, distinct entity in this study, and five dimensions of racial identity were observed. Significant differences in patterns of identity dimensions were noted for the two mixed groups. Implications for nursing practice are discussed. Key words: *biracial, ethnic groups, multiraciality, racial identity, symbolic interactionism*

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**I**N THE year 2000, approximately 7 million people indicated that they belonged to more than one race in their responses to the US census.<sup>1</sup> This was the first time in the history of the census that respondents were allowed to indicate membership in more than one racial category. This event has potentially far-reaching consequences for how we think about race and its relationship to health. Census racial categories play a major role in how health data are organized and presented. Morbidity and mortality statistics, which inform medical practice and public health efforts, are analyzed according to the Office of Management and Budget racial categories used in the census. This change has generated much discussion in public health circles, but the discussions have tended to focus more on the data management challenges of the multitude of possible racial mixtures and less on the deeper questions mixed race raises about the mean-

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*A National Institute on Aging Minority Supplement Grant supported this study.*

ing of race and its relevance to health.<sup>2,3</sup> (When I use the term "mixed race" in this article, I do so with full acknowledgment of the socially constructed nature of race and, therefore, mixed race. I use the terms "race" and "mixed race" because race is still an undeniable social fact in the United States, and its existence had great impact on the lives of the participants in the research described in this article.)

The very use of racial identification in health research is contested. One argument is that the persistent use of racial categories in medicine perpetuates the false belief that race is a meaningful biological construct.<sup>4</sup> Yet others make the compelling argument that although race is a social construction, doing away with race-based data eliminates the evidence for the persistence of inequality along racial lines.<sup>5</sup> Critical debates have occurred about the relative influence of genetics versus environment in relationship to health disparities.<sup>6</sup> Persistent confusion exists about the distinction between our socially constructed racial groups and populations that have evolved certain genetic patterns over time but that fail to correspond neatly to the boundaries of our categories.<sup>7</sup> As the largest group of health professionals, nurses need to become engaged in these debates. Mixed-race people confound many assumptions about race, and they offer nursing science an ideal entry point from which to explore more deeply the complex meanings of race in the United States and the complicated relationships between race and health outcomes.

Before we can begin to understand the full implications of the changes in the census and the meaning for health data on people of mixed race, we must first engage in a critical interrogation of what people mean

when they self-identify racially. Even before the 2000 census, there was substantial evidence of a lack of consistency in how people self-identify.<sup>8</sup> For example, 34.3% of household members switched their self-identification between 1971 and 1972, and 41% of people identifying as American Indian, when reinterviewed, stated that they had identified as white in a prior census.<sup>9</sup> As the research described in this article demonstrates, there are many reasons why people choose to self-identify with a particular group. Identifications can fluctuate over time as a result of the relative acceptability of minority status and the desirability of being seen as a member of a particular group. Social movements can forge new collective identities along racial lines.<sup>10,11</sup> Also, because census categories have reflected changing attitudes about race and demands by groups for recognition, the categories themselves have fluctuated. No more than two consecutive censuses have used the same classifications, and the categories have been internally inconsistent, mixing ethnicity, nationality, color, and language.<sup>12</sup> Yet, as health professionals, we often make broad generalizations about patient risk factors based on an individual's presumed membership in a racial group.

Given the instability of racial self-identification, how might people who are of mixed race experience identity? As epidemiologists and other public health professionals struggle with how to interpret and assign into meaningful groupings people who checked multiple boxes on the census, this seems to be a fundamentally important question. What implications, if any, are there for the health status and health risks of persons who check multiple racial boxes? For example, which aggregate should a per-

son who checks multiple race boxes be assigned to for health reporting purposes? What are the implications for nursing research in which race is used as a variable? Although this article is primarily concerned with what racial identity meant to a small group of mixed-race people, understanding what people mean when they check racial identification boxes is fundamental to interpreting their health profiles based on those identifications.

This article is based on extensive analysis of interviews conducted from 1996 to 1997 in a qualitative study that included 20 people of mixed African-American–white and Asian-American–white ancestries, ranging in age from 45 to 94 years. When I began this research, my primary questions were:

- How do older mixed-race people self-identify?
- What factors influence their racial identity and identification?
- What are the similarities and differences in the experience of being of mixed race, based on whether the parent of color was of African-American or Asian-American ancestry?
- Is age a factor in how mixed-race people self-identify?

As I was in the process of analyzing the data from this study, a much more fundamental question emerged for me. Simply put, what is mixed-race identity? In research involving race, I have found that racial identity is frequently assumed to be equivalent to the specific groups people say they identify with, or how they self-identify on official forms. However, the instability of racial self-identification previously discussed makes this assumption questionable. For people of mixed race, the construct of racial identity becomes even more problem-

atic. For the people in this study, no coherent entity of racial identity emerged. Rather, for the people I interviewed, racial identity seemed to be a collage of dimensions, often seemingly contradictory, if one is coming from the perspective that identity ought to be a fixed entity. However, in this postmodern era, there is increased problematizing of the notion of unitary subjects, along with greater exploration of the subjectivity of people who occupy hybrid and borderland spaces. People of mixed race are an example of such hybridity; so, too, are people in postcolonial states, immigrants, and others who occupy borderland spaces.<sup>13–15</sup>

## RATIONALE FOR STUDY DESIGN

The study focused on people of African-American–white and Asian-American–white ancestry for a combination of reasons. I wanted to interview people who were mixed between what I refer to as a “subordinate” group (meaning from a group considered to be of nonwhite race) and the “dominant” (or white) group. At various times in our history, whiteness has been a prerequisite for citizenship, employment, adequate housing, land ownership, and education.<sup>16,17</sup> Legal and social decisions about whether a particular group could be considered white have had tremendous material consequences, and the inequities engendered by such arbitrary decisions have persisted for generations.<sup>18</sup> Although I also was interested in mixed-race people whose parents were of two different subordinate groups, in this study I was concerned with the issues raised when the boundary of whiteness is transgressed, and this transgression is made apparent in a person of mixed race.

There are several reasons for comparing the perspectives of those who have one African-American parent with those who have one Asian-American parent. To identify characteristics of mixed-race identity, it was necessary to distinguish the effect of mixed race from the effect of the subordinate race alone. Studying two different groups offered the opportunity to do so. There have been both commonalities and differences in the racial rules applied to people of African and Asian descent in the United States. Each minority group in the United States has had a unique collective history and location in the racial hierarchy. In the United States, the most severe and restrictive racial definitions have been applied to people of African descent. Davis<sup>19</sup> provides a detailed account of the evolution of the "one-drop" rule, or the rule of hypodescent, meaning that anyone with a "drop" of African ancestry had to be considered black, which prevailed for much of the 20th century in the United States. As a result of this practice, people of various skin tones and mixtures of ancestry traditionally have been absorbed into the African-American community and culture. This increases the complexity of the concept of mixed-race identity for African Americans, given that so many African Americans have mixed ancestry but historically have been categorized as black, and have identified as such.

The situation for people of Asian descent has been somewhat different, although

there have been some similarities with the black experience. Discrimination against people of Asian descent in the United States historically has taken the form of exclusionary immigration, labor, and citizenship laws based on race.<sup>20</sup> These policies have fluctuated with labor needs and have been differentially applied based on country of origin and sex.<sup>21</sup> As for mixed African Americans, there is historic evidence that mixed Asian-white persons could not be considered white. The impact of this practice was on their eligibility for citizenship. For example, in 1909, the case of Knight, who was half white, one-quarter Japanese, and one-quarter Chinese, established that a person of such mixed ancestry could not be considered white, and thus was ineligible for citizenship.<sup>16</sup> However, such exclusionary practices were not applied as consistently to mixed Asian Americans as they were to mixed African Americans.

There are also important reasons for studying older people of mixed race. Most of the published studies of mixed-race identity at the time I began conceptualizing this research focused on identity development in children, adolescents, and young adults.<sup>22-24</sup> For these age groups, issues of racial identity are intertwined with general identity development, and therefore are somewhat difficult to disengage. These studies were psychologically focused and gave minimal attention to the role that changing social attitudes toward race might have for the meaning of racial identity for different age cohorts. After all, there has been race mixing for centuries, but it has been only in the past few decades that people of mixed race have demanded to have all of their ancestries acknowledged. Historical changes such as the Civil Rights movement and the

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various ethnic power movements of the 1960s and 1970s fundamentally changed the meaning of minority group membership and also ended the legal necessity of self-identifying solely as black for mixed African Americans. In addition, I was interested in hearing the experiences of mixed-race people who were born when antimiscegenation laws prevailed in many states. (Antimiscegenation laws prohibited interracial marriage. The last such law was overturned by the US Supreme Court in the *Loving v Virginia* decision in 1967.) Although most of the people I interviewed do not have living parents, all were very aware of the obstacles their parents faced and have vivid stories to tell of the challenges their parents experienced just to be together.

Identity, though multidimensional, was not randomly expressed by the participants. Even in this small study, certain patterns began to emerge, particularly related to differences between how identities were ordered for people based on their nonwhite ancestry. Constructing a theoretical framework for analysis was challenging, because although I was dealing with individual responses to questions about identity, race as a group identity has been highly subject to structured relations of power and privilege. I needed to be able to connect the micro and macro levels of personal identity and social structure before I could apply this work to nursing practice. The complexity of the topic demanded an interdisciplinary approach. I found the symbolic interactionist sociological perspective on the constructed self to be a useful framework, combined with an understanding that this process occurs within a society that has been structured along clear lines of racial hierarchy.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST SOCIOLOGY**

Sociological perspectives on identity tend to emphasize social or group identities. In dealing with issues of race, one cannot just examine identity at the individual level, because racial identity is by its nature a type of group identity. Within sociology, the symbolic interactionists particularly emphasize the situational nature of identity, its social construction through interaction, and the constant negotiation and renegotiation of identity that occurs through a sense of group position, articulated best by Herbert Blumer.<sup>25</sup>

The philosopher and psychologist William James<sup>26</sup> exerted a strong influence on the early symbolic interactionists, and his attempt to classify “the self and its selves” focuses on the multiple and situational nature of selfhood, which is highly relevant to the multiple identities expressed by the participants in this study. “Properly speaking, a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind.”<sup>26(p173)</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois,<sup>27</sup> the great African-American social theorist and activist (and student of James) describes the phenomenon of viewing himself through the eyes of others as a black American. In his classic articulation of “double consciousness,” his words eloquently portray the existential dilemma of being unable to avoid seeing himself through the eyes of a society that despises him: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”<sup>27(p179)</sup>

Because our sense of self is established through interaction and in relationship to the reflections we get from others, the outsider cannot develop a consciousness that totally excludes the concept of himself or herself projected by the majority or "normal" society. For Du Bois and others, this is an excruciating and soul-wrenching truth. Yet, for people of mixed race, the situation is even more complex, in that they are often outsiders in two or more social worlds. For the people of mixed race in my study, double consciousness may be too limiting; the complexity of their responses goes beyond double consciousness to a kind of multiple consciousness that can vary situationally.

Another student of James, George Herbert Mead,<sup>28</sup> expanded the concept of the reflected self to a vision of the self as a social structure. As such, there can be multiple selves corresponding to the social groups to which the individual belongs: "The unity and structure of the complete self reflects the unity and structure of the social process as a whole; and each of the elementary selves of which it is composed reflects the unity and structure of one of the various aspects of that process in which the individual is implicated."<sup>28(p247)</sup> Thus, according to Mead, a sense of personal identity, or knowing who one's self is, arises out of social process. People of mixed race are exposed to contradictory social processes around race, raising the question of how they construct the unity of self to which Mead refers.

It is also important to recognize that relations of power structure social processes. We cannot see ourselves without something or someone to reflect back at us. How people like us are represented and who has the power of representation are central to questions involving race. If people who share an

aspect of our identity are represented in a negative fashion, it will influence our perception of that aspect of our selves. When W.E.B. Du Bois<sup>27</sup> talked about experiencing double consciousness, he did so in a historical period during which he lacked the power to define or represent himself as an African-American man. That power belonged to others who viewed him as inferior and who had the means to promote the image of his inferiority broadly throughout the society. This is very relevant to the most dominant dimension of identity for the mixed-race African Americans in my study, what I call "ascribed identity," meaning the identity others "put on you," as one participant described it. Thus, the symbolic interactionist perspective on the multiplicity of selves constructed through interaction must always be grounded in the structural realities influencing the meanings of social identities.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Reviewing the literature on mixed race reinforces the importance of understanding how prevailing attitudes influence the production of knowledge. For example, Charles Davenport, the first American geneticist to focus on human genetics, alleged that cross-breeding between two different races was ill-advised because combining the different characteristics of the parents would lead to disharmonious results in the offspring.<sup>29</sup> Thus crossing a tall race with a short one would yield children with either large frames and small organs or small frames and large viscera. Davenport's interest in race crossing was shared by other geneticists in the first two decades of the 20th century. In general, geneticists of that period believed that the human races differed

in intelligence, and that crosses between the races, particularly between blacks and whites, were dangerous and would lead to the harmful dilution of the superiority of the white race. Such so-called scientific analyses both reflected and reinforced popular perceptions of mixed-race people as unstable, tragic, and doomed to failure.<sup>30</sup> It is important to note that scientific medicine played a prominent role in upholding and promoting beliefs in racial difference and the inferiority of blacks.<sup>31</sup>

### Classics

One of the first scholars to actually study people of mixed heritage was sociologist Robert Park,<sup>32</sup> who departed from the view that mixed people were inherently unstable. In his study of cultural hybrids, he writes of the “divided self” in terms reminiscent of Du Bois, produced by the necessity of living in two antagonistic societies. His student, Everett Stonequist,<sup>33</sup> in his classic *The Marginal Man*, expanded Park’s concept of marginality in his study of various racial mixtures in several different countries. Stonequist argued that the social reference of the self is the social group, and since the mixed person belongs to several hierarchical social groups, the result is multiple selves and social references. Thus, the conflicts he observed in mixed-race people were a result of the impact of hierarchies of racial power on the mixed-race person and not because of inherent instability.

### Contemporary literature on mixed-race identity

The 1990s witnessed an explosion of work on mixed race, primarily in the form of edited volumes that included the work of many authors who had been writing on

mixed race for years, as well as the work of new scholars. Much of the work on mixed race prior to that period had not been published. Two edited volumes were produced by Maria Root<sup>34,35</sup> and one by Naomi Zack.<sup>36</sup> There was a growth in the sophistication and disciplinary breadth in the short period between the two Root volumes, published in 1992 and 1996. Many of the chapters on identity in the first volume described psychological studies of mixed-race children, adolescents, and college students. The primary focus of these studies was on how mixed-race people identified racially and on accompanying issues of adjustment and personality development.<sup>22–24,37</sup> A few studies did include adults,<sup>38,39</sup> but none of these studies questioned the meaning of racial identity as a construct, nor did they explore in much depth what it means to “racially identify.” Generally, there is an assumption of a “one at a time” construction of identity in which the mixed-race individual identifies with one parent’s race or both, or as a separate mixed-race identity. There was minimal exploration of the possibility of simultaneous multiple ways of identifying. The implicit assumption was that through the process of identity development, the mixed-race person reaches resolution.

Root<sup>40</sup> proposes a more complex model of mixed-race identity. She views identity development as a spiral process with four possibilities for identity; acceptance of the identity society assigns the person, identification with both racial groups, identification with a single racial group, and identification as a new racial group. Significantly, there is no linear path of progression among these possibilities. Instead, they may be used episodically, based on contextual factors, and may even coexist in the same time

frame. Root's model is significant for its acknowledgment of the coexistence of multiple ways of identifying, which was certainly the case for the participants in this study. However, neither Root nor the previously discussed authors delve into a deeper questioning of the meaning of racial identity beyond identification. Equally important, there is little discussion of the influence that structural restrictions, such as Jim Crow laws, in different historical periods might have on identity development for people of different age cohorts.

In the more recent Root volume, King and DaCosta<sup>41</sup> present a new theory pertaining to the processes by which race is socially constructed in their analysis of the "four faces of race," or the four levels at which race is constructed. The first two levels are concerned with the active work of constructing the racial self. The first level involves how people construct their ideas about who they are racially. The ability to do this is limited by the existing racial framework, or racial definitions, for mixed-race people. The second face of race looks at how people project a racial identity. Mixed-race people may engage in strategies to appear authentically as a member of one side or the other of their heritage, but they are at risk for having that authenticity challenged. "This is the social situation where someone asks a mixed-race person, 'What are you?' What they are really asking is what racial category do you see yourself in and how does that fit with what I see you as."<sup>41(p231)</sup> The third face of race involves the construction of images of groups via interaction among the groups' members. The fourth face is that racial groups are constructed in relationship to each other in a hierarchy. Much of what these authors say is

borne out by how the participants in this study described their experiences and how they came to understand who they are racially.

A review of the recent literature reveals that several studies have been done on the topic of mixed-race identity in the past few years, but few have been published in peer-reviewed journals. For example, a paper given at the Southern Sociological Society meeting described a study of factors influencing ethnic/racial identity for Asian-white adults in which appearance, Asian language capabilities, and time spent in the country of origin of the Asian parent were found to be associated with racial/ethnic identity.<sup>42</sup> The author considered racial/ethnic identity to be synonymous with the racial or ethnic group that respondents felt most a part of, not how they would self-identify on the census form. Responses to questions on these two aspects of identity were frequently contradictory, as they were in my study. One published study of biracial Japanese-American adults proposed yet another model of identity development, culminating in resolution and acceptance of mixed heritage.<sup>43</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

A total of 20 people were interviewed, ranging in age from 45 to 94 years. There were 7 people of African-American-white ancestry and 13 people of Asian-American-white background in the study. The mixed Asian-American group included people of Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese-American ancestry; they were of first, second, and third generations in the United States. For



the sake of brevity, I refer to the African-American–white participants as “mixed African American,” and the Asian-American–whites as “mixed Asian American” or “mixed Chinese, Filipino, or Japanese American.” Eleven women and nine men participated in the study. The family backgrounds of the participants were primarily working class or midlevel professional. Although the majority lived in Northern California at the time of the interviews, about half grew up in other parts of the United States or Asia.

I used a variety of methods to recruit people. These included advertising on the Internet at a mixed-race Web-site, through an adult mixed-race support group that I observed, flyers given to people who work with organizations of multiracial people, and word of mouth. Word of mouth was by far the most successful method. Unless people knew who I was or knew someone who knew me, it was difficult to get them to talk to me about this topic. For many older mixed-race adults, racial ancestry is a very sensitive issue and involved considerable pain in their lives and in the lives of their families. For older mixed African Americans in particular, there is a history of coercion and shame associated with cross-racial liaisons. Trust was a very important issue. Thus, I make no claims to this research representing the universe of mixed-race people. I also immersed myself in autobiography, fiction, and interviews dealing with race and mixed race for both African Americans and Asian Americans. Although not primary data sources, these accounts provided me with other voices and perspectives that I could use to enrich my knowledge of life for older mixed-race people. The use of different sources, including texts, is an ac-

cepted method for “triangulating” the data in qualitative research<sup>44</sup> and increasing theoretical sensitivity.<sup>45</sup>

### Analysis

Each participant was interviewed one to three times, using a semistructured interview schedule. Interviews typically lasted about 1 hour. Interviews were taped and transcribed. I initially analyzed each interview transcript through open coding. From my codes, I developed the categories of racial identification and racial identity. I used a modified form of Strauss and Corbin’s<sup>45</sup> grounded theory axial coding to analyze the relationships between these categories and causal and contextual factors. For each respondent, I listed the various identities and identifications they had mentioned in the interviews. These were the phenomena of interest as described by Strauss and Corbin. For each identity or identification, I developed a list of causal conditions, the “Events, incidents, happenings that lead to the occurrence or development of a phenomenon.”<sup>45(p96)</sup> The modification of the Strauss and Corbin model consisted of combining “Context” and “Intervening Conditions.” According to Strauss and Corbin, Intervening Conditions are the “structural conditions bearing on action/interactional strategies that pertain to a phenomenon.” In analyzing the transcripts of my interviews, I found it unproductive to disengage context and structural conditions, because structural conditions concerning race, such as Jim Crow laws, were so embedded in the contexts of the participants’ lives. I therefore modified the model and included structural conditions within Context. I produced coded summaries for each of the participants. From these summaries, I gen-

erated lists of causal and contextual factors, which I then reduced to categories of factors associated with the phenomena of identity and identification.

Although I felt pleased with the material I was gathering, I became increasingly concerned that there were differences in the qualities and the processes of production of the identities and identifications my respondents discussed. For example, one participant, a 57-year-old man of Japanese-American-Jewish ancestry talked about identifying as a Jew during the Six-Day War and as Japanese when Hiroshima was bombed. In contrast to these episodic feelings that were stimulated by pivotal events, he also said that he felt white a good part of the time, yet that he really identified as both and neither. People talked about their identification in terms of how they filled out forms requiring that they indicate a racial group. This response to a bureaucratic requirement had a very different quality than when they would say, "but I *really* identify as \_\_\_\_." I felt increasingly uncomfortable with grouping all the ways people mentioned they identified under one broad classification of "Identity." During this period, I wrote copious memos about the meaning of racial identity, and through much analytical processing, I eventually sorted the data on identity into what I named "dimensions of mixed-race identity."

## FINDINGS

Within the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, racial identity, as a presumed component of the self, arises out of social experience. If the self arises in social experience, it can vary with differences in those experiences. However, such variation occurs within the context of a social

structure built on historic inequality and a racial hierarchy. Although situational variation existed for the people in this study, it did not mean that unlimited identities were available to them. Rather, identity emerges in the spaces available to it. Those spaces are demarcated by a variety of contextual conditions, some of which are more rigid than others, such as the historic practice of categorizing anyone with African ancestry as black. Yet, as Erving Goffman<sup>46</sup> noted in his work with people who suffered from a variety of stigmatizing conditions, a stigmatized group identity can become incorporated into the self, a phenomenon that was corroborated in this study, in that those participants who had experienced the most racism tended to identify with their non-white heritage the most.

### Dimensions of mixed-race identity

Rather than a single entity of racial identity, I found that there were multiple dimensions to matters pertaining to race and identity for the people I interviewed. Some of these dimensions were stable and some fluctuated, based on circumstance and historical context. I organized participant comments about race and identity into five dimensions of racial identity. These terms are widely used, and some, such as cultural identity, have a variety of associated meanings. More often than not, there are differences in the dimensions expressed by the

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same person. For the purposes of this discussion, I invoke the following meanings when using these terms:

- Cultural identity: Encompasses one's core values and ways of being in the world. It may be such a core part of one's self that its characteristics are unconscious until difference is encountered. It is influenced by family and community experiences.
- Ascribed racial identity: How one is racially identified by others.
- Racial identification to others: The way one identifies oneself to others, such as when selecting a racial group on an official form.
- Racial self-identification: How one truly identifies; probably the closest in meaning to the popular use of the term "racial identity." This dimension can include multiple identities.
- Situational racialization of feeling: This refers to feeling one's whiteness, Asianness, or blackness, based on circumstance and context.

Some of these dimensions were more meaningful to the participants, particularly cultural identity and ascribed identity. These differences in perceived importance are reflected in the amount of material presented for each dimension.

### Cultural identity

Cultural identity encompasses one's core values and ways of being in the world. Cultural identity is about who we are and what we have absorbed from the people around us, such as family, close friends, and community. For example, Gus (all names are pseudonyms), a 57-year-old mixed Filipino American, describes the process he went through one evening after a friend asked

him about his "genesis," meaning "who are your people?" This happened when he was in his late twenties on a night when his mother asked him to take her to a dance at the Filipino social hall. He arrived at the dance hall pondering the answer to his friend's question.

and when I got into the building there were all these people that hugged me and held me and called me *Ninoy* like they did when I was a kid, and *Ninoy* means in Filipino darling little boy. There were all these friends of my father's and people I had seen all my life . . . so I walked around and saw all the pictures that go all the way back to 1932 when the club was first founded, and then from 1940, all the way up into the fifties, there were pictures of me and my sisters and my brothers on this wall. Each year. Me, as a boy, and on and on and on . . . and really looking at all these people from these newfound eyes and sensitivity about my genesis and saying, *this is who I am. This is what I come from.*

His white mother's family had essentially disowned Gus, his parents, and his siblings. He was raised in a multiracial neighborhood with strong ties to the local Filipino community. Culturally, he identifies as Filipino American. Gus' sense of self is affirmed by the recognition of his community and the continuity he sees displayed in the pictures of his family in the community hall. He "knows where he comes from" because he sees himself embedded in a community of Filipinos that provided a rich and nurturing social environment for him and his family when he was growing up, unlike the white side of his family, to which he had little exposure.

In contrast, the lack of exposure to a community can contribute to a lack of cultural identification with it, resulting in dissonance between how one is perceived racially and one's cultural identity. This dissonance

seemed to be more pronounced for the mixed African Americans. For example, Brian, a 57-year-old mixed African-American man, was raised by an adoptive black family, but in a rural area with very few black people. He describes his sense of not being accepted by black people based on the lack of traits he associates with black culture:

They ran into a problem with my style and my way of talking and walking and lack of knowledge of how to be black—I just never lived in a black environment at all. So I was almost too white, or too straight, or I don't know the words to use. But to them it was apparent that I was different.

Although Brian can fit in with other African Americans on the basis of skin color, he cannot pass culturally. He lacks the kind of intimate community connections that Gus had. There is dissonance between his ascribed black racial identity and his cultural identity. Some participants described strategies for fitting in culturally that involve something like the "doing" of blackness,<sup>47</sup> the second face of race described by King and Da Costa,<sup>41</sup> trying to behave or "speak black" when around African Americans. But there is a sense of being on the outside, on the fringes, as one participant put it. Although they are seen as racially different by whites, several of the people I interviewed also described challenges to the authenticity of their identities as black or Asian by people of color.

### **Ascribed racial identity**

Ascribed racial identity is how one is racially identified by others. As Fred, a 55-year-old mixed African American said, "Race had not been important *to* me, but it had been important *on* me." Ascribed racial identity is that which others "put on you."

We are not born with racial identity. We learn that we have a race from the people with whom we come in contact, who reflect that identity back to us. Several of the people I interviewed described their earliest memories of awareness of their difference. The relentlessness of ascribed racial identity was particularly pronounced for the mixed African Americans. Grace, a 48-year-old mixed African-American woman described this process:

They saw me, and I saw myself that way . . . their view and my view were sort of comingled in determining who I am. And no matter whether I could stand and scream and say I am just me, I don't know if that is even possible. I'm black. Someone said to me, well, why did you choose it? Choose? They said, but you're half white and half black, why didn't you choose white? What? There was no choice. I was raised with that notion, and I mean, that is one thing I heard from as far back as I can remember, one drop of black blood, you are black. That's it.

When the reinforcement for the externally ascribed identity is relentless, it can become inextricably mixed with racial self-identification, similar to the process Goffman<sup>46</sup> described for the incorporation of stigmatized identities into the self. In Grace's case, as for all of the mixed African Americans I interviewed, there was little choice in how she could think of herself racially. Her statement that "they saw me, and I saw myself that way" is a classic description of a reflective social process of identity formation, structured by the oppressive rules of racial categorization for blacks. All of the mixed African Americans echoed Grace's comments about "one drop of black blood," and all were seen as black by others. Although currently one's assigned race is based on self-identification,

this is a relatively recent phenomenon. For most of our history, race has been determined by others. The legacy of Jim Crow laws, with their restrictive racial definitions, was alive in the society that Grace and the other mixed African Americans grew up in.

The power of ascribed identity is such that it may exceed other aspects of identity. Larry, a 50-year-old mixed African-American man, explained how ascribed identity can outweigh cultural identity in terms of where he feels safest:

I probably feel more a part of white culture in certain values than I do black culture, but I always feel an affinity with black people on another level that I don't feel for white people, just because my experience externally has been more that of a black person and not of a white person. . . . Your strongest experiences are negative ones often, and where I've felt most threatened in my growing up was by white people. I never would feel if I walked into a poor black neighborhood that it would be a problem. And it never was. But it was always from white people, especially in the teenage years.

Although Larry felt more culturally white (he says this in other parts of the interviews as well), he has an affinity for black people because of the safety he feels with them. His use of the term "externally" to describe his experience as a black person magnifies the degree to which his "blackness" is about what shows on the outside, as contrasted with what he feels internally. Yet the magnitude of the racism he has experienced because of his apparent identity as a black man has profoundly influenced his sense of affinity.

In general, the mixed Asian Americans talked less about the effect of how they were viewed externally on their internal sense of identity, except for those who had experi-

enced intense racism. For example, Louise, a 65-year-old mixed Filipina American whose family experienced harsh discrimination in housing, employment, and education, in addition to physical assaults by the Klu Klux Klan, identifies purely with her Asian side. As she answered my question about how she identified, her remarks were similar to Grace's. After describing her ancestry, she said, "But of course when I look in the mirror, I'm Asian, I'm Filipino, and that's how people see me, and they wonder why I speak English. . . . I am Asian to the larger society, that's all there is to it."

Although none of the mixed African Americans mentioned having been seen as anything other than black or "colored," there was a wide range in how most of the mixed Asian Americans described being identified by others. They have been identified as Hawaiian, Mexican, Native American, Italian, sometimes by their actual Asian ethnicity, and as generic "third world," brown, or people of color. Although ascribed identity did influence the mixed Asian American group to feel not white, the lack of specificity of how they were seen in comparison to the mixed African Americans correlated with a greater sense of freedom and, in some cases, advantage. For example, several of the mixed Asian Americans mentioned the benefits of being able to fit in with different minority groups and in international settings because of the ambiguity of their looks.

Many participants from both groups distinguished between their cultural identities and their ascribed identities. Like Brian, they perceived a difference between these aspects of their identities. The potential dissonance between appearance and cultural identity has great relevance for nursing practice. The

need for cultural competence in nursing is firmly established; however, information on different racial and ethnic groups must not be applied in a cookbook fashion. This is even more important for people of mixed background. It is essential that nurses avoid assumptions about important culturally related factors such as beliefs and behaviors based solely on appearance.

### **Racial identification to others**

There were two ways that people talked about racial identification. I have divided them roughly into how they identify themselves to others and how they say they "truly" identify. Sometimes these are similar, sometimes not. Racial identification to others refers to how mixed-race people self-identify publicly, particularly when they are confronted with forms that ask them to choose a race. (The interviews were conducted before the 2000 census, in which respondents were allowed for the first time to indicate membership in more than one racial group.) For all of the mixed African Americans, this meant choosing "black" on the forms. For the mixed Asian Americans, there was more variation. Some would choose "Asian," mentioning such factors as their appearance (not looking white) and a desire to help increase the numbers of Asian Americans as an act of political solidarity. Some might choose "other," or write in a category like "Eurasian," or simply check multiple boxes. Most expressed frustration at not feeling represented by any of the standard choices. None of the people I interviewed would check "white." The reason most often stated for this was because they were not seen as white, as Charles, a 48-year-old mixed Japanese-American man pointed out. When I asked Charles how he

would identify himself, he responded, "It would depend on who was asking, and why. If it was like the forms . . . if it says Asian, I check Asian; if it says Japanese, I check Japanese." However, he said he would not self-identify as white, "Because white's generic, for one thing. And also, because when a person's half anything nonwhite and half white, they're identified as the non-white part. And whatever statistics are being done, whatever the importance is to be identified by ethnicity, I want it to be known."

However, later Charles said, "Yeah, and to tell you the truth, I don't really feel very Asian." Although these interviews were done before the multiple race option in the census, Charles's remarks underscore the perils in attributing too much meaning to the way mixed-race people self-identify on standard forms. There can be a situational aspect to it; as he says, the answer depends on who is asking and why. There frequently was little relationship between the act of fulfilling a bureaucratic requirement to categorize oneself and how people described actually *feeling* they racially identified.

A good example of the health implications of relying too heavily on racial classification was related to me by Grace. She had gone to her nurse practitioner to get information about her risks for osteoporosis. Because Grace had always identified herself to the clinic as black, her nurse practitioner told her that, as a black woman, she did not have to worry about osteoporosis. Given that Grace is a light-skinned, fine-boned, middle-aged woman, she would have undoubtedly received a different message about her risks had she identified herself as white.<sup>48</sup> Yet she is the same person, with the same set of risks that should have been

ascertained by appropriate clinical assessment, not by inappropriate reliance on a racial category. Statistically, black women are less at risk for osteoporosis than white women. Yet the category “black” may include a variety of ancestries, and why should membership in a social category ever outweigh good clinical judgment?

### Racial self-identification

This brings us to the second use of racial identification, how people say they truly identify. Mixed African Americans said they really identified as black, colored, people of color, third world, and mixed. The terms they used were influenced by their generation. Helen, who was 65 years old when interviewed, used the term “colored,” a term that none of the middle-aged mixed African Americans used. There was variation in the dimensions of identity people expressed. For example, Larry, who felt white in his cultural values and had a sense of affinity for blacks because of his ascribed identity, said in terms of his actual self-identification, “But I see myself as third world more. ‘Cause that’s how I identify more than being black.” He also said he sees himself as a “minority person” and “something else.” There are multiple aspects of identity and identification within Larry’s interviews. He feels a sense of affinity and safety with black people because that is the way he is identified by others, and he would identify himself to others as black. Yet culturally he feels more white. For Larry, there is nothing that corresponds in a consistent way with a unitary concept of racial identity.

The mixed Asian Americans self-identified as American, Asian, Filipino, Eurasian, people of color, third world, both, neither, and,

in some cases, did not feel they had a racial identity. Among this group, there were more people who felt that race or ethnicity were not prominent in their daily lives, and that other aspects of identity are more important for them. Like Larry, many also expressed identifying in contradictory ways within the same interview.

### Situational racialization of feeling

People often mentioned feeling one side of their heritage more than another. The conditions that produce episodic shifts in how one feels racially can involve both similarity and difference. For example, although they stated they do not identify as white, some of the people I interviewed discussed the conditions under which they “feel more white.” How they described these moments resonates with the notion in the literature that white identity is experienced as a lack of definable characteristics.<sup>49</sup> The times of feeling more white are experienced as the absence of race and the absence of feeling different, not as a separate racial identity. Whiteness equals not having to think about race and being able to go about your business.

For example, Grace talked about feeling more white when she is alone than when she is with her darker-skinned husband and children.

There’s a different way internally even how I carry myself. And how I’m viewed. . . . I mean,

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*The times of feeling more white are experienced as the absence of race and the absence of feeling different, not as a separate racial identity.*

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when I shop, and I'm alone, I feel less—like if I don't have my kids with me, or if I'm not with my husband, I don't feel like I'm suspicious. It's that ridiculous, but it's sort of like, I can go in, and I'm a lot more relaxed. I'm not worried about people thinking that I'm gonna shoplift or take something or that I'm going to be a less credible buyer. And I'm gonna be treated differently.

There is more freedom associated with the experience of whiteness; the freedom to shop without surveillance, to not feel different, to not stand out. One of the partial privileges of some mixed-race people is the ability to occasionally escape the oppressiveness of racialization and feel the freedom of whiteness.

The exception to the view of whiteness as the absence of identity was for those people whose white parent had a strong ethnic affiliation. Sam, a 52-year-old mixed African American whose mother was a Hungarian Jew, described himself as a “wannabe black Jew.” To Sam, feeling more Jewish is not an absence of culture. At the same time, he says he never feels white. He distinguishes a Jewish identity from a white one. There is a sense of positive identification with being Jewish because of the richness of the cultural exposure he had to his loving Jewish immigrant grandparents who lived with his family when he was growing up. Because most of the Jewish side of his family was killed in the Holocaust, Sam grew up with intimate knowledge of Jews as a racialized oppressed group as well as blacks. As he has gotten older, Sam feels an urge to go back and study Judaism. Although he identifies strongly as a black man, anti-Semitism in the black community disturbs him. He feels his difference when he is around other black people who make anti-Semitic comments. He understands the long history of

black and Jewish alliances in progressive causes like the Civil Rights movement. However, given his feelings about black anti-Semitism, he makes some interesting remarks about what makes him feel black:

And that particular kind of warmth brothers feel for each other that have been through stuff together, that we've been taught to share again by Minister Farrakhan. In his own way, he's brought a whole bunch more brothers together than has ever been before. . . . I think the Million Man March was an epiphany for a lot of black men. It really made me proud to be a black man, and know that my sons were.

Sam feels his blackness through his sense of belonging with other black men and described himself as black in this passage. The fact that Sam identifies as a Jew and praises Louis Farrakhan could seem to be quite contradictory, as Farrakhan is known for his public anti-Semitic remarks. Yet, it is not a contradiction to Sam. Perhaps it is only a contradiction if viewed from the perspective that you can be either black or Jewish, but not both. Time and again, the people I interviewed displayed viewpoints that seemed contradictory, but only if identity is conceptualized as singular and exclusive. If there is a defining characteristic of mixed-race subjectivity that emerged in these interviews, it is the ability to transcend dichotomies effortlessly.

There are also times when mixed Asian Americans feel more like people of color. A typical scenario would be when someone makes a racially offensive remark, even if it is about another ethnic group. Charles described his internal reaction: “And when the topic of conversation comes around to something that has to do with ethnicity, then I feel it more acutely. . . . I feel kind of chameleon-like sometimes.”



Charles was describing how he felt when he was with a group of white people at work and someone said something racially offensive. He went on to describe how, though he may not be consciously aware of it at the time, he feels a shift within himself toward people of color. Although he feels like a chameleon, it is the experience of difference that prompts Charles to shift. He is chameleon-like in terms of his changeability, but not in terms of blending with those around him. In fact, it is in relation to them that he feels his difference, his color.

The mixed Asian Americans were more likely to feel white or, more accurately, to not think about race than the mixed African Americans. As Mary, a 52-year-old mixed Filipina says, "I think I feel white all the time, in a way. Unless the situation makes me feel uncomfortable because I look different." Yet, she also says that she really identifies as mixed, unique, and Filipino.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Differences by race**

The symbolic interactionist perspective on identity as constructed through social interaction was borne out in this study, with the caveat that this process occurs within existing structural conditions that shape the contours of the identities available. Given the different conditions experienced by mixed African Americans and mixed Asian Americans, it is not surprising that they show different patterns in their dimensions of identity. The mixed African Americans described greater consistency in ascribed racial identity than the mixed Asian Americans. Although the terms may have changed from "colored," to "black," to "African

American," the people of mixed African ancestry were still overwhelmingly identified by others on the basis of that ancestry alone. The legacy of the one-drop rule was very much alive for them. This difference between the two groups is also apparent in the ways that they identify themselves to others. Again, the members of the mixed African-American group primarily identify themselves to others as black or colored. Thus, there is consistency between ascribed racial identity and racial identification to others for this group. Most have incorporated a black or colored identity into racial self-identification. There is more variability for the mixed Asian-American group in their dimensions of identity.

Lack of choice for mixed African Americans was expressed consistently in the interviews. There is a relentless quality about constantly being made aware that one is seen as black. There is nothing comparable for most of the mixed Asian Americans, who are seen in a variety of ways. Consequently, the mixed Asian Americans seem less restricted by racial definitions. They have a greater range of factors available to them that can influence how they identify. There is more of an element of volition about their remarks, a greater play in the ways they are able to identify. There has not been as much systematic definition by race for mixed Asian Americans. Discrimination against Asian Americans has been aimed at reinforcing their "foreignness" by restricting their immigration and access to citizenship and by questioning their loyalty.

The history of racial classification of multiracial blacks as black and black only shapes mixed African-American identity. If it were simply a matter of one classification among equally valued racial groups, this racial defi-

nition would be of limited significance. But for centuries, being black meant being relegated to the bottom of the racial hierarchy, facing discrimination and racism in every aspect of life. Being excluded from white society meant that African Americans developed a group solidarity built on racial identity. This solidarity extended to people of mixed ancestry. The black community has historically embraced people of a variety of ancestries. As Helen said of when she was growing up in the South, "I think people understood then why people in the black race were so many different colors, that there had to be a mixture, and they accepted it." In Helen's time, there "had to be a mixture" because there was no choice unless the mixed African American could pass into the white population. Even though the mixed-race person might have experienced "some stuff" (as one participant put it) about having light skin and straight hair in the black community, he or she could be accepted as part of the "black race." Although the mixed African Americans I interviewed experienced a variety of different dimensions of identity, they have an affinity for blackness that was not as consistently expressed by the mixed Asian American group for their Asian heritages. According to what the mixed African Americans told me, that affinity is made up of a complex mix of loyalty, safety, comfort, shared history, lack of choice, and the common experience of the pain of racism. The mixed Asian Americans, except for those who had experienced racism at a level similar to the mixed African Americans, did not experience a comparable shared group identity with other Asian Americans.

### **Implications for nursing practice**

Returning to where this article began, with a discussion of the implications of the

new census policy, some relevant issues arose in this study for nursing practice. First, it is clear that for many of the participants, identification to others on official forms may have little to do with how they experience themselves as people of mixed race. Frequently, other dimensions of identity had more meaning for them in their everyday lives. As Grace's experience with her nurse practitioner demonstrates, it can be dangerous to make assumptions about patients based on how they identify themselves on forms.

One result of the use of the standard racial categories to track health and illness differences between populations has been the reinforcement of belief in the genetic homogeneity of the races for both the general public and health care providers. This has direct bearing on the delivery of health care to all people, but especially to those of mixed race. When we make assumptions about risk and behavior based on how people look or how they complete a form, we fail to deliver competent care. It is important for nurses to distinguish between knowledge about aggregate populations and the specifics of the people they care for. As we have learned to stress the importance of treating the person rather than the disease, we also must learn to treat the person, not the race. I want to make it clear that I do not advocate an end to race-based health statistics; to do so would mask the very disparities that inequality has engendered in racialized populations. But we must put that information in context for the individual patients we serve.

As nurses, it is imperative that we recognize the increasing complexity of the racial landscape. We cannot assume that we know everything about patient risk and behavior based solely on race. Nurses must have the

skills that prepare them to work with people from all sorts of backgrounds, and, most of all, they must be willing to listen, observe, and challenge their assumptions. We need to be prepared for the increasing number of families whose members come in all colors. This is important for all nursing specialties across the human lifespan.

The differences between the experiences of the mixed African Americans and mixed Asian Americans in this study highlight the importance of not lumping all mixed-race people together when assessing health needs. The degree of racism experienced by the mixed African Americans because of their ascribed identity as black may mean that some of their health risks are more similar to those of other African Americans than to those of other mixed-race populations. I am referring specifically to those health problems such as hypertension that are beginning to be shown to have a relationship to experiences of racism.<sup>50</sup> Clearly, much more research is needed in this arena.

Finally, it is important for nurses to recognize the existential space occupied by people of mixed race, as well as others who occupy borderland spaces. Many of the mixed-race people in this study described a persistent sense of difference from those around them. In addition, dissonance between ascribed racial identity and cultural identity can produce a sense of difference within oneself. The theme of authenticity is an integral part of this issue. In addition to appearance, issues of culture, class, and language can mark the mixed-race person as different. This raises additional questions for future research. What are the long-term implications for the mental and physical health of mixed-race people in a society still organized very deeply along racial/ethnic lines, in which they experience a persistent

sense of otherness? What unique support needs do multiracial families have, and how can we best facilitate a sense of wholeness for them and their children? It is imperative that more research be done on mixed-race people as their numbers grow.

### **Study limitations and implications for future research**

There are important limitations to this study, particularly its size and representativeness, and more research is needed to determine whether similar patterns of identity dimensions will emerge in larger studies. In addition, studies of different age cohorts, mixtures of ancestry, and regional populations of mixed-race people are needed. Studying different age groups will offer the opportunity to evaluate the influence of structural factors on identity. For example, as the legacies of Jim Crow laws and the one-drop rule recede, how will that affect identity for mixed African Americans? There is also a need for longitudinal research to determine whether a trajectory of mixed-race identity development occurs with aging.

Addressing the five dimensions of identity in future research can add complexity to the questions we ask study participants. In addition, questions designed to elicit these dimensions could possibly be translated into a survey format, which would allow the findings from this qualitative study to be tested on larger populations. Seeking information on dimensions of identity offers a way to collect data that address the complexity of identity in matters of race without essentializing people into fixed categories. I also believe this research has implications for the study of identity in people who are not of mixed race, and that if we do so, we might find that so-called racial identity is not such a stable construct for them either.

## CONCLUSIONS

I entered this research focused on questions related to the construction of identity for older mixed-race adults and how it varied based on whether the parent of color was of African-American or Asian-American ancestry. I found that identity is not a fixed and changeless entity for older mixed-race adults, and I organized what participants said about identity into five dimensions of mixed-race identity: cultural identity, ascribed racial identity, racial identification to others, racial self-identification, and situational racialization of feeling. Identity itself is a social construction and is always negotiated through

social experience. Thus, for mixed-race people, the situational character of the construction of identity is particularly apparent, because they are the embodiment of difference from others. Although some of the dimensions of identity in this study are situational, some of the most powerful, such as ascribed racial identity, are not, particularly for mixed African Americans. This study demonstrates the importance of giving identity more than a superficial look and situating it within social and historical contexts. It reinforces the importance of informed nursing practice that both recognizes the influence of historical factors on diverse patients and the complex meanings of race in our society.

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