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### Title

A Look into Mixed-Race Experiences from Childhood Through College

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## Abstract

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## A Look into Mixed Race Experiences from Childhood through College

**“If you’re of mixed-race in this country, it’s hard to embrace the idea of being beautiful. [But] what I love about how I look today is that so many people from all different races think I’m part of their group” -Ann Curry to People Magazine in 1998, in response to being named one of the magazine’s “Most Beautiful People in the World”.**

This excerpt from an interview with Ann Curry, former host of the Today Show was incredibly powerful for me, not only as a researcher, but as a person of mixed-race as well. Curry’s quote gives the reader an honest, however brief, glimpse into her perception of her own mixed-ness<sup>1</sup>, and how it can be influenced by the perceptions of society in the United States. Her statement that “people from all different races think I’m part of their group” highlights just how much our outward appearance shapes the way others view us.

Being viewed as “part of a group” or being labeled an outsider can make all the difference in how we view our abilities to communicate with in-group or out-group members. While some may find communication between different racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic groups to be easy, others may find it to be incredibly difficult or intimidating. Therefore, I believe what Ms. Curry may be trying to get at with her statement is that she feels comfortable interacting with different groups of people because of her racial ambiguity/universality, and in turn, others (that may or may not be a part of her specific racial/ethnic categories) feel more comfortable approaching her and including her as well.

When I first began conceptualizing what the aims of my research project would be, I thought of my experiences growing up, and how those things have shaped how I think about my own diverse cultural heritage and traditions today. In my elementary school, I remember not knowing very many Asian-American students, and knowing even fewer students of mixed

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Curry is of Japanese, Irish, French, and Dutch ancestry

racial/ethnic backgrounds. Because of this, many teachers, fellow students, and friends thought of me as Chinese, and my peers would often tell me that they knew I was Chinese, “because of my eyes”. While these comments about my outward appearance were not meant to be hurtful, and most of my classmates were merely making observations as young children do, these things ultimately resulted in complicating what it means to “look Chinese” for me, especially in terms of being both Chinese *and* white.

I can recall one instance in third grade, when it was announced that a new student, who had just moved to the United States from China, would be arriving at my elementary school. Many of the teachers instructed their third grade classes to be welcoming to him, especially since being a new student is scary, and being a new student in a *new country* is much, much scarier. I vividly remember my teacher asking if she could talk to me privately after class one afternoon, a few days before the new student was to arrive. She asked me if I would be willing to befriend the new student, sit with him at lunch, and even help him learn to speak English by translating things for him if necessary. She said that this was a special assignment, because I would be able to help him feel more comfortable at this new school and in this new country.

Looking back, this request was a lot to ask of an eight year-old, especially because at the time, it seemed to me that if I did not agree to befriend him, it would negatively affect him in many important ways. After hearing what my teacher was requesting of me, I quickly agreed; without thinking much about the fact that she hadn’t asked me if I was even able to speak Chinese (something I was, unfortunately, not proficient in at all). While my teacher probably thought her request to me would benefit this new student, she failed to realize that, as an eight year old student of mixed-race in the U.S., I was not as culturally or linguistically-versed in the ways she expected me to be. While I knew a bit about my Chinese ancestry, I certainly did not

have enough knowledge to single-handedly guide this student through peer interactions and homework assignments.

The first few times I spoke with this new student were awkward at best, as he could not speak very much English yet (although he did have some familiarity with it) and I did not know enough Mandarin to be able to converse with him in his native language (despite my teacher's encouragement to do so). One thing I remember distinctly from our brief conversations was when I told this student that I was Chinese as well, he shook his head and insisted, "you are American, *I am Chinese*". This will forever stand out to me as the moment I was first exposed to the differences in how people in the U.S. tend to view culture, ethnicity, and nationality, and how people from other nations may perceive these things completely differently. This student did not believe I was Chinese because I had grown up in the U.S. and never experienced life in China before, which was a starkly different interpretation of "being Chinese" than the one my teacher seemed to hold.

What ultimately made the experience easier for me was that many of our classmates flocked to this student to find out about his hobbies and interests, and often invited him to play with them or sit by them at lunch, even though they had trouble communicating linguistically with him as well. This student and I never established a friendship, as we didn't have many things in common besides a partial common ancestry. So eventually, I no longer needed to accompany him to recess or to lunch.

My experience with this student and my teacher's request wasn't something I thought about critically until I got older, and realized that it was quite problematic. For one thing, my teacher was operating on the assumption that because I was part Chinese (and "looked the part"), I would be able to establish a bond with this student that others wouldn't be able to. While



there may be some truth to the idea that in-group members can support each other in environments where they are the minority (“power in numbers”), I don’t know how well that idea applied in this particular situation. This experience also later caused me to wonder if my teacher would have been different if my appearance were different. In other words, if I did not “look Chinese”, would my teacher have assumed that I knew as much about Chinese language and culture?

This experience, coupled with many others throughout my childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood thus far all influenced the ways I now view my own identity as a person of mixed-race. These experiences also informed my interest in researching the topic of mixed-race/ethnicity for my Honors Capstone. I was interested in learning more about the different ways other people perceive their “mixed-ness” and how people in their lives may have viewed them in-turn. The research question I hoped to answer by completing this project was: how and why does mixed-race identity influence early life experiences leading into early adulthood at the university level? Additionally, I hoped to add to the somewhat limited pool of research relating to mixed-race experiences, and encourage a deeper conversation about these topics as they relate to students in the U.S.

**Literature Review.** Previous research on the mixed-race experience has yielded many fascinating findings and raised questions about to what it means to identify as “mixed-race” in the United States of America. Research conducted by Professor Sarah Gaither in the Identity and Diversity Lab at Duke University is unique in that it primarily focuses on the experiences of mixed-race individuals. Gaither’s research, much like mine, was motivated through “self-seeking”, or in other words, attempting to answer her own questions about what makes her mixed-race experience (and that of the people she studies) different from other “racial

experiences” in the U.S. Some of her research has spoken of the possible benefits associated with having a multiracial/ethnic identity. She mentions that while many individuals of mixed-race note that they often feel compelled by outside forces to “pick” a racial identity they relate with more, being able to navigate within multiple identities actually gives them more flexible cognitive strategies than their singular-raced peers (Gaither, 2015).

Gaither’s research is by far the most extensive I have come across in my research on the mixed-race experience and scholarly articles related to the field. Although I did not come across her work until the mid-point of my research, her work gave me more insight on how I should direct my interviews with participants and where future research on this topic should aim. Additional research on mixed-race identities suggested that the social need to belong motivates people’s “need” to categorize faces of ambiguous race/ethnicity. In one study, results indicated that white participants were more likely to categorize faces of ambiguous race as “outgroup” members, while black participants were more likely to categorize faces of ambiguous race as “ingroup” members (Gaither, Pauker, Slepian, & Sommers, 2016). The need to categorize ingroups versus outgroups was closely associated with fears of racial exclusion and a need to “fit in” socially. These findings intrigued me because they forced me to recall my own experiences of being racially categorized and peers’ insistence on “clearing up” the ambiguity of my mixed-race identity. These findings made me wonder what motivates some monoracial individuals to demand clarification and categorization when it comes to the mixed-race experience? What makes U.S. Americans different when it comes to racial categorization and our “obsession” with race?

Another article discusses past problems with collecting demographic information on persons of mixed race. The author presents the problems associated with trying to fit people of

mixed-race or ethnicity into one box, rather than into ones that may fit them better (ex: White, Asian, Black, Latino, Hispanic, or “other”) (Poston, 1990). This article raised the question of whether or not collecting demographic information is truly necessary or arbitrary, especially when contrasted with countries who do not collect demographic information on their citizens in favor of a more unified, national French identity. Additionally, it is important to consider what information may have been lost in the years where mixed-race options on the census did not exist. It is also important to question what information is being missed/overlooked in the forms which do not offer multi-racial categorization today!

When thinking about the mixed-race identity as it exists today in the U.S., it is important to consider the history of racial inequality and discrimination which was pervasive through much of our country’s past and continues to bleed into today’s society. For example, in many states across the United States, racial intermarriage was not legalized until 1967, when the Supreme Court case, *Loving v. Virginia* ruled in favor of a marriage between a black woman and a white man, thereby legalizing intermarriage for the entire country (Cortes, 2008). The history of U.S. American skepticism toward racial intermarriage is, by and large, a phenomenon unique to this country, as it was (and still is) largely based on our history of racial oppression and segregation. It was in thinking about details such as these that I began to bring together my project’s aims as they relate to identifying what makes the mixed-race American experience unique. My research project attempts to answer questions concerning a broader “mixed-race identity”, and get a closer look at individual “testimonies” of what it was like to grow up with a multiracial/ethnic identity in the U.S.

**Method.** For the purposes of this project, I have interviewed 6 people of diverse, multiracial backgrounds who had varying levels of connection to their “mixed-ness” (M=3,

F=3). Each of these participants participated in a one-on-one interview with me, where I asked them a total of 12 questions regarding their experiences as a person of mixed-race/ethnic identity from childhood through college (at UCR). I asked 3 preliminary questions in order to gather data on the person’s name, where they grew up (where they’re “from), and how they identify racially/ethnically. One important note is that *all* of the 6 participants I interviewed hailed from Southern California; with 5 of these 6 participants reporting to be from SoCal beach cities or the Inland Empire. Some of the participants were exposed to more multicultural communities, while others experienced far less.

The body of each interview consisted of questions regarding their familial and peer-related interactions as they intersect with their perceptions of their own mixed-race identity. The final question gives each participant the opportunity to add any last anecdotes/comments/experiences which they may have felt were not touched upon throughout the interview.

Each interview was audio-recorded with the participant’s consent and each participant was able to view and sign a copy of a consent form written by the main researcher of the project. Participants were not compensated for participating in the interview, but instead were able to benefit by gaining an opportunity to speak/think about their experiences as a person of mixed-race/identity.

Table 1: Racial/Ethnic breakdown of each participant

Participant : Z	Mexican	Peruvian	Chinese	Native American
Participant: B	Chinese (Hong Kong)	Caucasian (Unspecified)	X	X
Participant: L	Okinawan (Japanese)	Caucasian (Unspecified)	Puerto Rican	X

Participant: A	African American	Mexican	X	X
Participant: M	Lebanese	Columbian	X	X
Participant: S	Chinese (Vietnam)	Caucasian (Unspecified)	X	X

## Results

**Common Themes.** Throughout each of the six qualitative interviews I conducted for this research project, I came across 3 common themes people often spoke about in relation to their mixed-race experiences. These are Food (as it relates to culture and family), Peer interactions, and Language. The fact that these themes all appeared in separate interviews suggests that they seem to play a large role in the construction of cultural and ethnic identification/understanding.

### *Food, Culture, and Family.*

**“[I identify with all my racial categories] pretty evenly, maybe a little more on the Okinawan or Asian [side], just because I am really close to a lot of my family in Hawaii and my only living grandparents now are the Okinawan ones, so, like that’s why I identify with that a lot more. That and I didn’t know very much about my Puerto Rican family until this year when my grandmother died, because I never met most of them.” -L, on how he identifies with his cultural/ethnic background in relation to family members.**

L later emphasized the fact that he now tries to interact with every side of his family in an attempt to learn more about the cultural practices/traditions of each of his racial/ethnic backgrounds. He noted that he tries to do this through travel (to see certain family members who live out-of-state or in Puerto Rico). I found his statements to be very eye-opening in terms of how the loss of a loved one may sometimes have a unifying effect on extended family members.

In L's case, this unifying effect opened up the door for more communication between himself and his relatives with whom he was previously unfamiliar.

**“My mom moved here from Hong Kong when she was ten, so she didn't have the same grasp on the [Chinese] culture as someone would if they moved when they were an adult, but I still knew of Chinese traditions, probably more Hong Kong versions of them; like dim sum. I had my aunts who would watch over me and I used some terms and I know a little Chinese, but I was mostly influenced by the white side of my family. Probably because we are in America and there's more of a white predominant culture.” -B, *on her experiences growing up as a child of mixed-race.***

B later added to the above quote by mentioning that food was one of the main things that brought her closer to her family's cultural traditions, and that eating Chinese foods such as dim sum and other Cantonese dishes helped her feel more connected with Chinese culture and traditions on a broader level. She also highlighted the celebration of Chinese (Lunar) New Year as something that brought her family closer together and strengthened her bonds with her mother's racial/ethnic culture. She mentioned throughout her interview with me that she finds both sides of her identity to be important, and yearns to know more about her family's history on her father's and mother's sides of the family.

**“Usually [growing up], I identified mostly with the Mexican and Peruvian sides, just because that's what my family is culturally with the foods we ate and stuff, and I didn't really know I was part Native American until the beginning of high school, when my dad showed us some pictures and said ‘look, these are your cousins that we never met before’ and they're Native American.”- Z, *on how his experiences as a child of mixed-race/ethnicity.***

Z was particularly interesting to me because he was not fully aware of every aspect of his mixed-race identity until he reached high school. He was unaware that he was part Native American until his father spoke to him and his siblings about it and about their Native American cousins that the family no longer has contact with. Although he was unaware of this part of his mixed-race identity, he always felt aware that he was a person of mixed-race because his parents made sure that he knew where his ancestors/family members came from.

His mother would show him pictures of her grandfather (a Chinese immigrant to Peru) and grandmother (a Peruvian woman) and would often try to incorporate Peruvian and Chinese traditions into his/his siblings childhoods. For example, his family would participate in traditions such as Chinese (Lunar) New Year, however they would also eat mostly Peruvian and Mexican dishes while he was growing up. Z also put a heavy emphasis on the relationship between family bonds, food, and language in getting to know every aspect of your cultural heritage.

**“I definitely identify more with my mom’s side because I grew up around my mom and her family. I stopped talking to my dad who is Mexican-American when I was five, so when I was younger, a lot of my memory of my Mexican culture was through social gatherings and music. So, I would say after we moved away [from Inglewood to Rancho Cucamonga] that’s when I started getting more disconnected from that side of the family.”- A, on her exposure to her parent’s cultures.**

A’s memories of her early childhood interactions with her father’s side of the family in the above quote emphasize how the exposure to family members and family practices influenced her to develop her views on identity. Earlier in the interview, she explained that she strongly identifies with being biracial (African American and Mexican) because her mother always made sure she knew that she was of two races. However, she also notes that she does identify a bit

more with black culture due to her stronger familiarity with family members from her mother's side. One interesting thing A noted was that she still feels strongly connected to the music and artistic side of Mexican American culture, and credits this as the main thing that has "kept [her] connected" to that side of herself.

**"Growing up was interesting because my parents are both immigrants from- well, my dad's from Lebanon, my mom's from Columbia; and so, like, they're very different cultures because Lebanon is in the Middle East and then Columbia is in South America, so they're really different. Both of them moved here when they were in their twenties, so they had, like- first of all, they're having trouble assimilating to American culture, but then they marry each other, and then they have to raise a child. It became kinda like a struggle of 'oh, how are we gonna raise her?' And they kinda ended up raising me as both. I grew up with, like the food of my dad's side and the Spanish language from my mom."- M, *on how her parents integrated their respective cultures into her childhood.***

Throughout the interview, M stated that she feels a strong connection to both of her parents' cultures and feels that this is because she was surrounded by family members from both sides from a young age. She also cites the importance of food and language in building bridges between her cultural backgrounds. For example, her father often cooked Lebanese food for her and her family growing up, and her mother often spoke to her in Spanish. This way, she felt that she could be connected to family members from both sides of her family for different reasons.

M shared with me that she felt that she embraced both sides of her family growing up, and the cultural, religious, and traditional activities that came along with them. In many ways, food and language mediated her understanding and appreciation for both of her parents' cultural



roots. This later led to her developing an intense pride for her mixed-race background, and connections with all of her family members.

**“My dad’s side of the family is kinda big, so I have a lot of cousins on my dad’s side, and they’re the ones that live, like, really close by me, so they’re the ones I saw more often.”-S, *on seeing his father’s extended family more frequently than his mother’s.***

This statement from S stood out to me as a potential reason that he sees himself as more “culturally/ethnically” white, or as “just American”. Because he saw his father’s side of the family a bit more often than his mother’s, S identified more with his paternal cousins and relatives, who happened to be white. This, coupled with the fact that he did not speak Chinese like his mother’s side of the family, and was not exposed to larger-scale Chinese practices/traditions resulted in his identity being shaped more toward more mainstream American perceptions.

### ***Peer Interactions***

**“When people hear the Native American part, they usually associate us with casinos, tribes, and getting money from the government, which isn’t true...besides that, there weren’t many negative assumptions made by anybody. I was never offended by anybody, you know, generally, if I saw myself I would probably say ‘he’s hispanic’. So when people tried to make guesses that I’m hispanic, I would say ‘yeah, I’m part hispanic’.”-Z, *on how he perceives peer comments about his ethnicity.***

This participant was by far one of the least concerned with certain racial microaggressions/assumptions directed at him by peers/friends. He noted that although some of his friends made jokes that he would “fill certain quotas” in college by being Native American and Mexican, he never took these sorts of comments to heart and always just explained that those

things were not true and that if her were to get into colleges, he believed it was because of his own merit rather than because of his racial identity.

I felt as though Z had a lot of interesting information to share about his family history and how he felt growing up as a person of mixed race/ethnicity. His perspective on the mixed-race experience was interesting because there was little he had to say about “negative” assumptions that can go along with being a person of mixed-race and rather, focused on more positive aspects of his upbringing and relationships with his peers in high school.

**“Growing up, people just pretty much always call me whitewashed. They would just assume that I’m not actually that ethnic, and I’ve actually had people say that [I] just claim to be every race so that [I] can just be obnoxious about it...”**

L is a man whose father is also mixed-race, but white passing (Puerto Rican and Norwegian/Irish) and whose mother is ethnically Okinawan (Japanese), but was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. This participant states that he thought “everyone” was mixed-race like his family until he became older and realized that his peers often viewed him and his family as being different.

This participant also made a mention of the fact that his friends often tried to downplay his multicultural identity simply because he enjoyed stereotypically “white” activities such as snowboarding, surfing, and skateboarding. He was often told that although he does not “look white”, he “acts” white, and was often (and still is) confused as to what “acting” white really means.

**“If someone asks, I’ll tell them that I’m half-Chinese, and then it starts a conversation like, ‘oh, you’re half Chinese? I couldn’t even tell!’.”- B, *on how she self-identifies when asked what her ethnicity is.***

B, whose mother is Chinese-American (mother's family is originally from Hong Kong) and whose father is a white American (of "mixed" European descent). This participant identified herself as being "white passing" and/or racially ambiguous and noted that many people, if they assumed her to be "ethnic", thought she was "Mexican"/Latina. This participant noted that being white passing often made things difficult for her growing up as many friends would question her identity as a person who was "half-Chinese". Although she felt pride in her Chinese heritage from a young age and often felt compelled to share that side of herself with her peers/classmates, people often assumed she was not very "ethnic" based on the way she looked.

**"I feel me and my siblings have very different experiences. Um, I have three siblings, two older sisters and a younger brother, and we all look very similar, but because we all acted differently and had different personalities, I felt like people treated us differently and either accepted us more or didn't." -A, on how peers viewed her and her siblings.**

In our interview, A broke down how each of her siblings identified racially/ethnically and how they each identified more or less with one or both sides of their cultural/ethnic heritage. She noted that because her family didn't really interact with very many extended family members (mostly due to distance and other factors), she felt that she and her siblings got most of their cultural knowledge from each other, music, media, and peer interactions.

A continuously emphasized the fact that she strongly identifies with being a person of mixed-race; however she mentioned the importance of remaining critical of certain privileges she may have as a lighter-skinned person. She acknowledged throughout the interview that she is often exoticized for being mixed-race and people tend to ask her point-blank, "I know you're black, but what else?" instead of attempting to meaningfully interact with her upon introduction.

A also mentioned that some of her peers may have seen her as someone who denied her “blackness”, simply by self-identifying as biracial. She attributed this sort of attitude to the idea that in the U.S., many people see you as “either black or not”, and because she was not one to subscribe to a single racial category, her peers assumed she attempting to deny her black side. On the flip side of this, many of her *close* friends growing up did not see her as “being black” because she didn’t “act stereotypically black”. She concluded that these opposing messages only served to add to her confusion on how she should identify herself, and if she was doing so in the “right way”.

**“I loved being mixed-race, I love being of mixed cultures. It adds a little flare to me because I’m not just one thing, I’m two things; and I’ve never wanted to be one more than the other or anything other than those [Lebanese and Colombian]. ” -M, closing remarks on her experiences as a person of mixed-race.**

M stated that she “loves” being mixed-race and thinks of it as an excellent conversation starter, especially when meeting new people who think she is racially ambiguous or “white-passing”. In the above quotation, she states that she welcomes conversation and guesses about her racial/ethnic background and is always excited to hear what people might guess about her. M’s enthusiasm for her racial/ethnic identity was strongly mediated by her parents’ efforts to immerse her in both of their cultures simultaneously, and she added that this gave her something special that she felt many of her peers did not have because they were not people of mixed-race.

### ***Language***

**“Um, I know the food, but I don’t know the language so if anything I just say that I’m American”-B, on how language barriers strengthen her cultural disconnect.**

B cited language barriers as a major roadblock in connecting more intimately with her Chinese heritage and family members. She noted that because her parents wanted her to grow up speaking English, and because her mother immigrated to the U.S. at age 10 and does not speak much Chinese (Cantonese) herself, she often felt unprepared and unable to interact with certain family members from her mother's side of the family, even though she wanted to. She cites this language barrier as the main reason why she does not consider herself as close with her Chinese "roots", but also mentioned that the way others perceived her (and continue to perceive her based on her outward appearance) also affect how she sees herself ethnically.

**"I speak very little Spanish. Only from what I've learned in high school and college and a *little bit* from family, but I don't speak it at all, especially not when I was younger. There were many times when we were in parts of Los Angeles or at family parties and people would try to speak Spanish to me and I would have to call my mom over to tell them that, you know, I can't speak Spanish." -Z, on his limited familiarity with Spanish.**

Z mentioned that he is eager to learn more Spanish so that he can more easily communicate with his family members and people he sees in Riverside who sometimes try to speak to him. He shared with me that he often becomes embarrassed when family members or people in his community try speaking to him in Spanish, because he is unable to respond. Often, as described in the above quotation, when he is with family, Z's mother has to explain that he and his siblings don't speak Spanish; however, this is something he would like to change for himself. He intends to do this by completing the Rosetta-Stone language-learning program in the hopes of being able to achieve some level of fluency/proficiency in Spanish.

Z's eagerness to pick up a language that will open communication lines between him and his family members serves to highlight the importance of language acquisition on establishing

bonds between different generations of family members. For some of his family, Spanish may be the only language they speak fluently, therefore, Z hopes to be able to strengthen his relationships with these family members through direct communication, rather than by having his mom or someone else translate for him.

**“My grandmother recently died, and it was cool to be able to go to Puerto Rico to learn about it, because when my dad was growing up, my grandma tried to raise them with the idea that they’re only American, so they never learned Spanish or anything...My dad and his brothers look very Caucasian, so my grandma raised them to kind of, I guess be able to hide their Puerto Rican ancestry in that way.” -L, *on why his father never learned to speak Spanish.***

In the above quotation, L talks about how his paternal grandmother tried to raise her children “as Americans”, and opted not to teach them any Spanish, even though she herself was bilingual (Spanish and English). L mentioned later in his interview that language was not a barrier for his family, as most of them spoke English. This meant that he never had any trouble communicating with his close relatives. He noted that the only real barrier to communication with some members of the family was distance-- as some of his family members (on his mother’s side) live in Hawaii and others (on his father’s side) live in Utah.

I found L’s statements on his family’s use of English to be very interesting, especially considering he was one of the only participants that did not note any issues with language as a barrier to cultural/familial ties. Because all of his immediate family can communicate fluently in English, he is able to speak to them openly about their experiences and stories.

**“I didn’t grow up multilingual or anything unfortunately, um, but then later in high school I was kinda getting more fascinated with my Chinese side, so I even went to Chinese**

**school to kinda learn the language, but didn't get too far.”- S, on his familiarity with Chinese language(s).**

I found S's quote about his attempts to learn Chinese languages to be very interesting, as I saw a few parallels between his comments and that of earlier interviews from B and Z. S, like some of his fellow study participants, found language to be a gateway to learning more about one side of his family. Therefore, he attempted to learn Chinese in response to his growing interest in his Chinese heritage. He later added that while he thought many aspects of Chinese language and culture were “cool”, he was never very involved in ethnic/cultural practices and considered his childhood to be stereotypically “American”.

One important theme that came up throughout most, if not all, of the interviews I have conducted is the relationship between peer interactions and their influence on how people conceptualize their own mixed-race identity. Often, it seems that most “interrogations” surrounding mixed-race identity and cultural practices stem from peer interactions between monoracial individuals and those of mixed-race/ethnicity. I found this to be important because most of our ideas about ourselves are shaped by how other members of society view us, therefore if peers are more likely to encourage you to “choose” one identity over another, it is more likely to generate confusion for individuals whose racial/ethnic background may be a bit more complicated than that.

### **Discussion/Future Directions**

Throughout each of these interviews, I was able to identify four major “themes” that are common among each of my participant's responses. These are: Food, Language, Peer interactions, and Family relations. These themes suggest the varying ways in which

environmental factors/exposures are tied to a person's view of self, and view of their own cultural literacy.

One lingering question that I began to ask myself upon the completion of this project was: why do some individuals have different perceptions of peer interactions than others? In other words, why do some see certain interactions as positive or neutral, when the same kinds of interaction may be interpreted by someone else as negative or hurtful? Possible explanations for this phenomenon could be:

1. The racial climate<sup>2</sup> of the surrounding community or schools the participant attended. For example, schools or communities with a more negative racial climate could have influenced some individuals to perceive these interactions as more negative. Conversely, schools and communities with a more ethnically diverse/positive racial climate could have influenced students to view the interactions as more positive, funny, or neutral.
2. Some participants reported thinking more or less about the topic of race, and these differences could have caused some to view certain race-related interactions from a more critical lens than others.
3. Individual differences among the participants. Some may have been more or less likely to perceive their friends/classmates comments or questions as positive or negative based on differences between each participant's personality. Additionally, comments or questions from peers/friends may have been framed or expressed in different ways, depending on how the friend or peer's attitude came across to the participant.

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<sup>2</sup> For this study, I define racial climate as a student's personal perceptions of how their community/school views people of varying racial or ethnic backgrounds.



Future studies should seek to further analyze these differences among participant responses. This could be accomplished by asking more detailed questions about the racial climate of participants' schools or communities, and how much they think about race in their everyday lives.

One limitation I encountered throughout my research thus far is my sample size; therefore, I hope future research on the topic of mixed-race is able to analyze larger populations of mixed-race individuals and thereby gather more diverse perspectives on the mixed-race identity. Future research should also seek to gather a pool of participants from varying age groups. My sample size consisted mostly of individuals in their early twenties; therefore generational differences between their responses and the potential responses of older or younger people of mixed-race could have influenced my findings.

As with all retrospective, qualitative research, my project relied mostly on each participant's own recollection of their experiences. Some of which may have been more or less accurate due to each person's ability to accurately recall past feelings, emotions, and thoughts. A potential remedy to retrospective bias could be to conduct a longitudinal study which follows individuals of mixed-race/ethnicity from early childhood (early elementary school) through high school and beyond. A study of that nature would allow researchers to encapsulate individual experiences from childhood through high school/college/beyond *as they are happening*, rather than "after the fact".

One final limitation of my study is that all participants reported growing up in Southern California, and each of them is enrolled as a student at the University of California, Riverside. Being that Southern California is a diverse region all on its own, and that UCR is one of the most ethnically diverse universities in the U.S., it is possible that some of the participants responses would be different if they came from other regions throughout the United States. Therefore,

future studies should perhaps look to a more regionally diverse group of mixed-race U.S. Americans (from different places throughout the country), in order to encapsulate a better picture of what it means to be “mixed” in the United States.

When considering my research question, “how/why does mixed-race identity influence early life experiences leading into early adulthood at the university level”, I think the answer lies somewhere within each of my participants’ responses. For most of my participants, food, language, and peer interactions were really what shaped their level of identification with each of their respective racial/ethnic categories. Therefore, early childhood experiences relating to race/ethnicity (and assumptions thereof) informed how these students perceived themselves, their environment, and how they may have viewed race-related interactions.

These experiences are all somewhat unique to the “mixed-race American”; as some of my participants pointed out, the U.S. seems to have more singular views on race, and those who identify with more than one racial category are sometimes encouraged to identify with one over another. Generally speaking, the race individuals may be encouraged to identify with is often directly related to the race that they physically resemble. Therefore, more racially ambiguous individuals may be perceived as harder to understand, and therefore, harder to label within the contexts of racial categorization in the U.S.

Ultimately, I hope that my research serves to open up a dialogue concerning mixed-race experiences, and the differences between being mixed-race in the U.S. and being mixed-race in other countries. Throughout this process, I feel as though I have learned a great deal about the differences in the experiences of “white passing”/racially ambiguous individuals and more “ethnic”-looking individuals. I hope to be able to further explore the differences between individuals of mixed-race who are part white and individuals of mixed-race who are mixed with

2 or more minoritized races/ethnicities in the U.S. Future studies on this topic should seek to understand more about individual experiences and differences within groups of people who identify as being of mixed-race/ethnicity.

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