

Using The Extended Case Method to Explore Identity in a Multiracial Context

Abstract

Increasingly, multiracial research calls upon scholars to reconcile and clarify their stances on race as a biological versus a social construct and to situate their theorizing of racialized identities historically, socio-politically, and as experienced subjectively. While multiracial scholarship offers both critiques against and support for a so-called 'multiracial' identity, few have outlined the methodological implications of pursuing inquiry responsive to this diverse body of work. This paper highlights the methodological challenges posed by empirical inquiry pursuing non-essentialist but structurally and subjectively grounded analyses of multiracial identity. The Extended Case Method (Burawoy 1998) is introduced as one approach that epistemologically reflects these conceptual challenges in the field. Three elements of its application within a study of black-white multiracial adoptees are offered: (1) use of fluid concepts of race and identity, (2) conducting multisystemic analyses, and (3) using interpretive findings to extend existing theory.

Key words: Multiracial, Identity, Interpretive Methods, Extended Case Method, Transracial Adoption, Child Welfare

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Changes to Census 2000 allowing persons to check multiple racial categories, advocacy groups promoting ‘multiracial’ identities, and public obsession with celebrities who claim these identities (e.g., Tiger Woods), have occasioned a burgeoning literature both contesting and affirming ‘multiracial’ as a legitimate identity (Ifekwunigwe 2004; Spencer 2006). Further contributing to the U.S. multiracial landscape is the ‘adoption movement’ (DellaCava, Phillips, and Engle 2004) including anti-race legislation promoting interracial families by outlawing racial matching preferences. These realities mark multiraciality as a contentious subject of increasing social relevance among an expanding community of scholars.

While past efforts advocating multiracial identity and transracial adoption were almost exclusively driven by white parents (Miranda 2002; Spencer 2006), increasingly adults who claim this experience and others are now producing scholarship. In reading this interdisciplinary literature, one quickly recognizes opposing ‘camps’ of scholars labeled as *postmodern*, *colorblind*, *non/essentialist*, *pro-multiracial*, and *metatheoretical*. Readers are instructed to abandon monocentric ideas of race that marginalize multiracial persons and families (Tashiro 2001;

Williams-Leon and Nakashima 2001), informed that biological race is a fiction and therefore, so too is mixed race (Spencer 2006), or warned that multiracial identities fragment pan-racial solidarity (Spencer 1997) and are ahistorical identifications that ignore past racial-ethnic mixing particularly for African Americans (Morning 2002). Taken together, this literature challenges scholars to reconcile or clarify their stances on race as a biological versus a social construct and to situate (and balance) their theorizing of racialized identities historically, socio-politically, and as experienced subjectively. Yet for those interested in empirical and applied research, how do we study a biological fiction that operates as a social reality? How do we examine the integration or rejection of these fictions and realities within a person's identity? How do individuals negotiate an identity that is denounced and invalidated by some but glorified and promoted by others? Recognizing these challenges, this paper proposes the use of interpretive methods in general and the Extended Case Method in particular (Burawoy 1998). Ultimately, I argue that the Extended Case Method (ECM) represents one potential for empirical research—and the theory and practice it informs—to systematically theorize personal identity development within and beyond enduring structures and conceptions of race, family, and identity in society using data from the field. As Mark Christian (2000, p. 29) asserts 'theories of 'mixed race identity' have little to no relevance if they are not connected to the social reality of lived and subjective experience'.

The use of racial classifications as personal and group identities

The most fundamental challenge in studying racial identity is the researcher's stance on the reality or fiction of race itself and what exactly racialized classifications represent. Widespread belief in these socially constructed categories as signifying a single biological—embodied—essence have caused group *and* individual experiences of privilege, oppression, and positioned survival and achievement as either nurtured or placed at risk (Graves 2002). Despite the fact that most of today's U.S. population is either racially or ethnically 'mixed' (Morning 2002), single-race

classifications remain enduring systems of meaning around which group identities, families, and coalitions are formed, expressed, and sustained. The ‘multiracial movement’ is not inherently a revolution against racial categorization and instead, has been characterized as promoting a less stigmatized category that still falsely preserves ‘whiteness’ as the only racially unmixed class topping the racial hierarchy (Spencer 1997). Declaring ‘first generation’ status and pan-multiracial identities as this group’s only healthy outcome, multiracial advocates reify, not reject, biologically-driven and essentialist notions within all racialized categories (Coleman et al. 2003; Spencer 2006) and ignore historical racial-ethnic ‘mixing’ across the globe (Spencer 1997; Morning 2002).

Consequently, this paper recognizes all race categories as simultaneously flawed because they falsely imply a biologically derived single identity, yet powerful in legitimizing a monocentric racialization of individuals and families as the normative experience of race (DaCosta 2006). The term ‘multiracial’ in this paper is used to reference racialized experiences that potentially depart from single-race conceptions of kinship and identity, while proposing a method of research that critically interprets all identities as potentially resisting and reifying these enduring constructions.

Yet racial categories (i.e., labels) are not just structural symbols or lexicons of race but are used to measure individual processes and outcomes of identity *development*. While sociologists first explored the concept of racial identity, its contemporary psychological meaning as a racialized self-perception was not used until the 1950’s (Ifekwunigwe 2004; Tizard and Phoenix 1994).

Traditional identity development is modeled as stages within a linear process of identifying with one’s ascribed racial category and ideally feeling positive about that group membership (see Cross 1991; Helms 1990; Phinney and Rotherham 1987). In this way, racial categories become dichotomous proxy variables for myriad domains, conflating race with culture and positioning one’s ascribed racial category as predictive of a single personal identity outcome. This is problematic as research indicates multiracials sometimes change the categories they report on forms and

documents and those they use in different social contexts (Rockquemore and Brunnsma 2002a). As scholarship continues to report multiple and shifting race identities and cultural affiliations without causal links to poor psychological health, using racial categories to measure, assess, or predict 'healthy' identities independent of context is increasingly problematic.

To address these limitations, alternative identity typologies have been proposed by some multiracial scholars (see Rockquemore and Brunnsma 2002a). Typological approaches to identity are useful in their strengths to illustrate within-group patterns of heterogeneity. Indeed, these empirically grounded typologies offer strong challenges to traditional stage frameworks that predict a single healthy identity based on a person's racialized ancestry. However, multiracial research including the works of those proposing typologies has also asserted that *individual* identities can be fluid and dynamic--changing over the life course and across contexts (Harris and Sims 2000; Rockquemore and Brunnsma 2000b). Identity typologies are less ideal for portraying this micro-level fluidity and experience of race and culture. Future use of typologies as a priori categories also risks reifying the very notions of identity that they conceptually reject: that a racialized biology produces a fixed set of predictable identity outcomes.

Multiracial research is arguably relevant for theorizing identity formation among adoptive multiracial families and children. Yet transracial adoption research remains largely disconnected from this scholarship. While critiques endure against this body of research as atheoretical and lacking rigor (Lee 2003), studies continue to use racial categories/labels as the primary measures of identity. Identities are considered healthy and transracial adoption a success when adoptees 'correctly' claim their socially ascribed categories (Miranda 2004). Reports of 'biracial' are inconsistently interpreted as acceptable derivatives of 'black,' unhealthy culturally white identities, or excluded as a legitimate option (Miranda 2002). While concerns regarding culture identity

outcomes persist, few studies have pursued a theoretically rich or rigorous investigation of this groups' identity work (Lee 2003).

Given ongoing critiques of multiraciality, transracial adoption, and the early stages of rigorous empirical multiracial research, some have suggested the field should resist solely advancing a universal identity model and continue empirically exploring processes of identity development more fully (Wijeyesinghe 2001) and rigorously (Spencer 2006). This includes delineating the various locations of racialized identities and the multisystemic factors that contribute to its development in ways that are potentially shared, while allowing for racialized experiences unique to specific multiracial sub-groups (Lee and Bean 2007) or types of multiracial families (e.g., adoptive). Therefore, the following discussion takes a step back to summarize the findings within existing empirical scholarship. The ECM is introduced as a complimentary method for exploring identity as both socially and personally constructed.

Identifying Methodological Challenges

Three conceptual themes from empirical multiracial scholarship have specific implications for the methods used in future research. These themes are: a) Non-essentialist –personal identities are not biologically-driven but are ascribed by, and learned within, family and society; b) Multisystemic— socio-political structures give meaning and legitimacy to race identifications, and c) Dynamic— within a shared socio-political context individuals have agency to make sense of, and co-construct, a reality as their environments shift and change. This section reviews these themes, and provides a summary of the range of definitions used broadly among both single and multi-racial and ethnic identity research (see Figure 1).

Essentialism is a powerful aspect of our social and scientific understandings of race and identity in the U.S. Racial essentialism can be defined as the idea that each 'race' has a fixed universal quality and validity, 'ascribing ultimate reality to essence embodied in a thing perceptible

to the senses' (Mish 2003, p. 427). In traditional identity models essentialism occurs as biological determinism in stating the best or most healthy outcome is one that matches one's racialized ancestry. The one-drop rule is a socially constructed extension of this; a 'blood theory' that ascribes a black identity to anyone with 'black blood' (Davis 1991). Empirical multiracial research is beginning to challenge biological determinism in theorizing any identity as inherently healthy or predictable because it emerges from an internal racial essence.

Research involving multiracials clearly indicates that inherited phenotypes can manifest in ways fully independent from one's racial-ethnic ancestry; even biological siblings report different racial identities (Root 1998). Moreover, multiracials with shared ethnic backgrounds do not always share a physical appearance. Many report being ascribed identities based on these *appearances* rather than their heritages; some adopting the languages and cultures of these groups to establish a sense of belonging (Williams-Leòn and Nakashima 2001). These findings challenge the biological determinism within traditional models suggesting a person will (or should) inherit a racial identity from biological parents, rather than learning one's racialized identity as it is ascribed and subjectively experienced in context.

The case of adopted multiracials only reinforces the need to theorize racialized identity development as context-driven. Some multiracial adoptees do not know their racial or ethnic origins (Miranda 2002). Research indicates transracially adopted multiracials are often raised within exclusively white neighborhoods (McRoy and Zurcher, 1983) and like any adoptee, can grow up in families where siblings represent innumerable unshared racial and ethnic origins (Samuels 2009). Their cultural and racial identifications can reflect or reject these family-based experiences of race and culture, and change over time into adulthood (Lee 2003). Some Latino and Asian transracial adoptees have reported identifying as 'white' (Lee 2003; Vroegh 1997)—identities that reflect their white adoptive parents rather than their biological parents. This calls upon

measures to recognize the salience of one's family context (DaCosta, 2006) as opposed to one's biological origins, in the formation of a cultural and racial self. In this paper, I propose that researchers find methods that position one's biology as a significant factor in producing physical appearances that become racialized within a society. This shifts biological notions of identity and race to structural factors within a developmental context, rather than one's biology as causing identities. This is not taking a postmodern stance as some multiracial critics might suggest (Spencer 2006), nor does it reject the existence of a shared group experience and identity around race (Christian 2000). Rather, it underscores that racialized identities and group memberships are acquired through interactions within a racialized social structure—identities emerge socially and familially, not genetically.

In releasing identity outcomes from one's biology another extreme is possible—identity as an externally fixed structure in one's environment. Single-race identity research has long recognized the power of one's context, both historical and contemporary, as posing constraints (Helms 1990; Tuan 1998; Lacy 2007) or more fluid identity options (Waters 1990). Multiracial scholars note a unique set of constraints and options particularly for black multiracials under the one-drop rule (Lee and Bean 2007). In his multigenerational study of black-white Liverpoolians, Christian (2000) found beliefs in the one-drop rule restricted identity options for his UK participants. While eight of 20 respondents included labels denoting their white British origins, most used their ascribed identities as black to explain their own black identity claims. This empirical work is a reminder that even multiracial identities are not developed idiosyncratically through free-will. Consequently, methods used to *measure* identity must account for the unique historical contexts in which one experiences and develops a racialized sense of self.

Yet, suggesting the environment as the sole or even primary contributor to one's identity implies that identities are merely ascribed to all and not co-constructed or even at times invented.

Literatures outside of the multiracial identity field have long supported the notion of a dynamic personal agency, even in the context of social and political constraints. Here, the environment is understood to contain identity possibilities (Markus and Nurius 1986). Individuals then select or reject these options as they are made available to them through parents, peers, communities, and society at large (Ezzy 1998; O'Toole 1998; Waters 1990). Some scholars have proposed that identities themselves are fluid and have co-existing dimensions reflecting differences between the social identities one is allowed in society, those s/he chooses privately, and those expressed and claimed in public spaces (Harris and Sims 2000; Tashiro 2002). Finally, use of ecological models and symbolic interactionism within empirical research provides evidence that identities comprise both ideographic and structural aspects. Some people do in fact identify with and as more than one racial and cultural group; others reject racial identifications (Ifekwunigwe 2004; Rockquemore and Brunnsma 2002a; Tashiro 2002; Wijeyesinghe 2001). Future inquiry must use methods and measures responsive to these findings.

Figure 1 summarizes these distinctions, used broadly among all racial and ethnic identity scholars, as various conceptualizations of an identity's location and quality. The following discussion continues to explore how research on multiracial identity, and to a lesser extent transracial adoption, has produced findings requiring multisystemic approaches to research.

FIGURE 1 APPROXIMATELY HERE

The field of racial identity generally, and transracial adoption in particular, has yet to explore the full range of its methodological options in pursuing theory-building research. Some researchers are beginning to articulate this as the next step in research on multiracial identity (Tashiro 2001; Wijeyesinghe 2001) and transracial adoption (Lee 2003). This paper is a response to the call to improve how we study race, '...to treat it as a social variable, not a biological one, and to argue for research approaches that acknowledge its complex meanings' (Tashiro 2001, p.182). The

remainder of this paper will explore how the Extended Case Method can address the challenges of endorsing a multisystemic approach to identity research through the reconstruction of theory.

Using an Interpretive Method to Study Identity as Multisystemic and Fluid

In assessing approaches to study racial identity, one must consider the conceptual frame and theoretical assumptions guiding the research. Thus far, I have argued for the use of a method that epistemologically compliments three conceptual domains: a) is non-essentialist; b) acknowledges socio-political structures of race and identity and c) acknowledges agency of individual to co-construct reality –in this case an identity. The following section will introduce aspects of ECM that position it as one option for this research agenda because of its epistemological orientation.

Why ECM to Study Identity?

In the U.S., the ECM was first presented within the sociological text *Ethnography unbound: Power and resistance in the modern metropolis* (Burawoy et al. 1991). The studies and essays in this edited volume build upon the methodological strengths of Ethnography and Grounded Theory Method, while addressing some of their limitations specifically regarding the use or creation of theory. Consequently, not only is ECM a hybrid method, but it also draws from both social constructivist and critical theories of science (Miranda 2002). The research agenda becomes collecting data that will allow for a multisystemic analysis of a case, and the use of this analysis for the extension of an existing theory.

Recognizing the broad value of multisystemic approaches to social science, a growing number of researchers have expanded use of the Extended Case Method (ECM) for cultural analysis of the social world (Eliasoph and Lichterman 1999) and to explore how individuals and communities both experience and transform their environments (Hines, Merdinger, and Wyatt 2005; Miranda 2002; Sullivan 2002). Through in-depth interviews, participant observation, archival research, and political analyses, ECM researchers demonstrate how theory can be expanded and

improved with data from the field. The following discussion highlights aspects of the ECM as ideal for empirically exploring race identities as structurally and experientially grounded.

One of the ways in which ECM is distinct is in its approach to theory. In fact, the purpose, or end product, of any ECM study is the reworking of pre-existing theory or concepts. Burawoy argues for researchers to not ‘reinvent the wheel,’ and instead choose theories that may be greatly improved simply by their reconstruction rather than complete rejection (Burawoy 1991). This combined inductive-deductive approach is a radical departure from traditional interpretive analyses that are either strictly inductive (e.g., Grounded Theory Method), or discourage a deliberate use of theory early in the research process (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). In the context of identity development models, using ECM responds to the call for research that builds upon or complicates previous theorizing and empirical work in this area (Spencer 2006; Tashiro 2002), but does so in ways that are grounded in subjective experience (Christian 2000).

Secondly, the ECM develops theory through examining the diversity of an experience and mapping these findings onto pre-existing generalizations (theory). Individual experiences can both reify and resist social structures. ECM studies become testimonies of the interdependence of individual experience and the broader social, political, and economic milieu (Burawoy 1991). The detail required to explain context-driven exceptions to generalized assumptions, adds complexity to the research findings that may be overlooked by the quest for similarities despite variations in context. This is also a limitation within multiracial literature--the quest to promote a single identity as the more ‘healthy’ than others. When the researcher’s theoretical expectations are violated, the relevant constructs are reworked, not rejected. Choosing a method that requires researchers to portray complexity and account for unexpected variance could help avoid the pitfalls of assuming a shared experience of race, or engaging structural or biological determinism to interpret identity claims as healthy or pathological independent of its function in a given context.

Finally, ECM engenders a multisystemic episteme, drawing from both social constructivist and critical theories of science, recognizing both the micro-level world and the external structures that shape or constrain daily life. As an interpretive method, ECM uses the techniques of in-depth interviewing and participant observation to examine interpersonal and micro-level experiences. However, ECM researchers include other sources of data –policy, pop-culture, media, and historical documents –to contextualize interviews and observations within macro-level structures. Yet the goal of this research is not to privilege one aspect of reality over the other. Instead, ECM researchers explore the many ways people both defy and reify the very structures that attempt to disenfranchise or oppress (Burawoy 1991). In a study of multiracial identity development, researchers would be required to explicate how identities, both individual and group, are constrained and facilitated by traditional cultural and racial norms (i.e., one drop rule) and how identities reject or transcend these structures.

A Final Distinction: Being Native and Researcher in ECM

Burawoy also challenges the need for objective distance from participants, and instead advocates for collaborative knowledge construction. Anthropology's traditional use of ethnographic fieldwork and observations of the 'other' are critiqued as confined to the same detached descriptions that reflect positivist preferences for 'objective' scientific knowledge (Burawoy 1991; 1998). Traditionally, the researcher-respondent relationship is dichotomized into two extremes. Either distance is sought as a method to control bias or researchers become overly immersed, what ethnographers pejoratively label 'going native' (Kanuha 2000). Alternatively, ECM proposes researchers do not speak for unheard voices or describe observations of the 'other,' but rather share insights (e.g., findings) resulting from interactions *with* the participants (Burawoy 1998; 1991). This constructivist approach reflects ECM's attempts to subvert traditional understandings of theory development as confined to an elite or distanced scientific community. Instead, ECM presents the

research process as a dynamic exchange in which participants, researcher, and ultimately knowledge is transformed. This process necessarily extends to those conducting research in their own racial/ethnic communities—*being* native (Kanuha 2000).

As with other fields of research that evolve from a need to include emic perspectives, multiracial scholarship is not only pursuing detailed narratives from multiracial persons, but include researchers who indicate multiracial backgrounds. In fact, most recent multiracial scholarship is now dominated by persons who are ‘multiracial’ (Christian 2000; Dalmage 2000; Ifekwunigwe 2004; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002a; Spencer 2006; Tashiro 2001). This holds increased possibilities for the development of a research agenda that may be enriched by the diverse lived-experience of inquirers who are native to the studied community (Kanuha 2000). This does not advance a privileged location of an ‘insider’ to capture authentic or bias-free truths. Multiracial researchers, like all researchers, have a range of personal biases, experiences, and identities. Yet bringing one’s lived experience to the table as a researcher within an ECM framework is considered a potentially valuable lens, not an automatic liability of bias to be controlled.

Pulling it all Together: An ECM Study of Multiraciality and Transracial Adoption

This final section draws examples from an ECM study that explored identity development among 25 adult black-white multiracials adopted by white parents (Samuels 2009). Transracial adoption continues to represent a highly contested family type with identity politics that parallel oppositions to the multiracial movement as disenfranchising and depleting pan-racial communities. While this group dominates the transracial adoption research involving ‘black children,’ multiraciality remains a conceptual anomaly in theorizing racial identity outcomes. Similarly, theorizing multiraciality has often ignored the power of one’s family context (DaCosta 2006) generally, and adoption specifically (Samuels 2009) as salient in shaping individual racialized identifications. The ECM became an ideal method to examine the overlapping and conflicting social narratives of race,

biology, and kinship and how these are subjectively experienced among this population. In hopes to encourage the use of ECM among researchers interested in multisystemic approaches to theorizing racial identity, this final section outlines three components that were central to this study. Those components include using fluid and dynamic conceptualizations of racial identity, collecting and analyzing data multisystemically, and extending the conceptual framework of biculturalism.

Using Dynamic and Fluid Conceptualizations of Race and Identity

This study used definitions of race and culture that reject biologically-driven notions of a healthy identity and are, therefore, adoption-relevant constructs. This expanded the focus beyond racial label reports to critically examine the meaning and content of these labels as used or ascribed in various contexts. Consequently, racial labels were not assumed to reflect single fixed identities with matching cultural identities or affiliations. Nor were some identities assessed independent of context as more 'healthy' or developmentally advanced than others. Likewise, the definition of *racial identity* outlined within Figure 1 within the lower right quadrant *fluid and dynamic* was developed for use within this study, and informed the design of research and interview questions. Collecting multisystemic data that reflects these conceptualizations is discussed next.

Collecting Relevant Data

Within an ECM study, techniques of data collection (e.g., interview, observation, political analyses) are selected for their ultimate use in obtaining multisystemic case-specific data to extend theory. No techniques of data collection automatically fall outside the realm of an ECM study. Similar to studies using ecological (Rockquemore and Brunnsma 2006a) or socio-historical approaches (Christian 2000; Lacy 2007; Tuan 1998; Waters 1990) this study began by collecting social, historical, and political analysis specific to constructions of black-white multiraciality in the U.S. and within the adoption arena. In this case, movies, television programs, media images, and policies attached to transracial adoption, black-white multiracials and interracial families were

relevant data to collect. Portrayals of transracial adoption and interracial couples as creating 'rainbow families,' stereotypes of both as racially confused, and enduring politics and policies that contest and promote multiraciality and transracial adoptive families collectively represent this group's legal and socio-political context for development. Because U.S. folk theories of race also assume one's racial identity is visibly discernable, racially ambiguous phenotypes can mediate unique micro-level experiences of race, recruiting questions from strangers in public (e.g., *Are you mixed?*) which further assign 'difference' to multiracials. This study collected self-described racial appearance, participants' reports of how others perceived them racially, and color photographs as multiple data points for triangulating this analysis.

In this study, traditional Ethnographic approaches to data collection through immersed participant observation were not appropriate. Communities do not have sides of town or physical concentrations of multiracial adoptive families or persons for researchers to gain access and immerse themselves within. In fact, for many multiracials and transracial adoptees, their naturalistic environments are ones in which they are a perpetual minority. Consequently, multiracial researchers may be limited to observing organized groups (e.g., multiracial support networks, student clubs, and advocacy organizations). Also the growing number of internet groups now organized by multiracials and adoptees should be included as potentially rich locations to observe discourse and community building. My observation of identity work engaged web-based groups, conferences, multiracial/adoptee social networks, and student clubs.

In-depth interviews were the primary technique of data collection for exploring personal constructions of race and identity. As noted earlier, research has indicated multiple dimensions to individual identity (Harris and Sims 2000). This study used circular questioning, common in family systems theory but only recently introduced to ethnographic interviewing (Krause, 2003) to guide participants in exploring multiple contexts and dimensions of their racial and cultural identities.

Solely to illustrate the type of interview data that this renders, this final section presents a quote taken from one such interview. I will return to this quote in the final section to explore how findings can be used to extend theory.

Adopted at birth by a white couple, Marcia is now 32 and lives in a large Midwestern city. Though her identity experience is not unique among study participants, her quote was chosen because it succinctly illustrates her individual identity as multidimensional, driven by the social meaning ascribed to her racialized appearance, the developmental context of her white family system, and her own shifting identity work in relationship to these external factors. In using circular questioning, Marcia was asked how she identifies racially including if this changes in different contexts (e.g., social versus professional, in different cultural communities), and the ways in which others perceive her racially as opposed to how she identifies herself. She was then asked a similar series of questions about her cultural identifications. In summarizing her response to these questions she explains:

I call myself biracial today. There's times when I say black. I don't ever call myself white.... Culturally I cannot say I'm black. Culturally I was raised in a white community and culturally...I identify more with the white community. [But] I'm a black woman on the street. They don't see me as biracial. White people deal with me as black. ...Now, a lot of people tell me I look Ethiopian. People are so certain that they speak Amharic. So I've learned a few words. Just because people will get angry and think I am denying my history because of political issues...

Among other things, Marcia's statement makes clear that the methods and measures we use lead to the data we get. There are at least three aspects to highlight about this quote in terms of measurement and data collection. First, her multiple responses to how she identifies represent the importance of moving away from forced choice or single interpretations of racial categories. For

example, if Marcia had participated in a typical survey study or interview protocol that requested one response, we would have missed important data that she racially identifies in more than one way. Using more fluid and dynamic conceptualizations and matching interview questions (e.g., What are *all* the ways you identify? When? Why?), this study was able to capture that although she has identities as biracial and black, there are no situations in which she would identify white. Secondly, this quote illustrates that *cultural* identities can be independent from *racial* identities. If the research design used racial labels as proxies for cultural identity, separate data on cultural identity would not have been collected. Missing from the analysis and the findings would be her response that she does not have a white racial identity to match her white cultural identity, and lacks a black cultural identity to accompany her black and biracial race identities. We would also miss her identity work around being ascribed the identity 'Ethiopian.'

Finally, this quote provides data that racial and cultural identities are not necessarily fixed singular entities, but can shift over the life course (e.g., I call myself biracial *today*) and shift across context (I'm a black woman *on the street*, a lot of *people think* I'm Ethiopian). Consequently, use of circular questioning techniques enabled this study to obtain data that evidenced *individual* identities as fluid, contextually driven, and multisystemic. Using both phenomenological measures of identity through in-depth interviewing and the adoptees' language and meaning systems, however, is a technique not exclusive to ECM. This study is an ECM study also because it requires the use of multisystemic analyses for the explicit extension or reconstruction of theory. While other scholars have individually chosen to analyze their qualitative data multisystemically (see Christian 2000; Lacy 2007; Rockquemore and Brunnsma 2002b; Tuan 1998), ECM *requires* this multisystemic analysis for reconstructing theory. In exploring the application of ECM within this study, it is hoped to expand the use of this and other theory-building approaches more generally to a broader group of scholars.

Implications for Theory Development

The most central aspect of an ECM analysis of identity is moving beyond the literal reporting of ‘voices’ (Sandelowski and Barroso 2003) or identities toward a critical interpretive analytic process. Researchers must look to socio-political *and* individual interview data to answer questions of *why* variations and discrepancies exist in the narratives of their respondents. But findings do not privilege a structural interpretation of identity (e.g., *they see me as black*), nor privilege the exception to that structure (e.g., *I call myself biracial today*). In this way, ECM provides a methodology that explicitly requires researchers to uphold the complexities and competing tensions between sociological and idiosyncratic constructions of race and identity. Theory development ultimately becomes an ongoing process of data analysis and theory reconstruction, as opposed to deductive approaches that use data for theory verification or falsification. While this study resulted in a number of theoretical extensions, this paper will briefly introduce how findings were used to extend the concept of ‘biculturalism’ for relevance to adopted multiracials.

Biculturalism is traditionally theorized as a skill required of racial-ethnic minorities to negotiate and survive in predominantly white cultural contexts (LaFramboise, Coleman and Gerton 1993). Whiteness, both culturally and racially, is assumed to be external to all families of color, but a necessary competence to develop outside of the home. Literature on biculturalism suggests that the goals for acquiring ‘mainstream culture’ is neither to obtain insider membership nor facilitate a personal identity as white. Rather it is used to achieve economic success and psychological health in a Eurocentric society (Garcia Coll et al. 1996). Findings from this study extended biculturalism as a developmental outcome for people of color, to a population whose primary and early developmental context included, sometimes exclusively, mainstream white culture. Like Marcia, participants described their process of acquiring bicultural identities as different because they were ‘raised in a white community’ within a white adoptive family, had a biological parent designated as white and

as children, often lacked contact with persons who identified culturally or racially as black. Consequently, this study found their bicultural process was reversed—they acquired white cultural identities *first* inside their family systems and later, as children or adults, learned black cultural competencies independent from their parents. Likewise, biculturalism for this group was about grounding their existing racialized identities within a matching cultural and racial-ethnic community. For many, this included searching for black biological parents, international travel, and/or moving to more racially diverse communities as adults. As Marcia's case further illustrates, participants were culturally agile and built *multicultural* competencies. Presented with the identity demands from a third cultural group, in her case Ethiopians, Marcia chose to build linguistic skills in order to successfully navigate these contexts. The findings from this ECM study affirm the conceptualization of biculturalism as the cultural adaptation to one's environmental demands, but in using a 'unique case,' complicates the assumptions that universalize the order, number, and function of acquiring more than one culture.

Conclusion

This paper highlights an ECM approach to the study of racial identity development among transracially adopted multiracials. An ECM approach, however, could be useful in extending racial identity development models generally through articulating the case-specific complexities and context-driven particulars among any racialized group. Moreover, there clearly are examples of individual scholars, using other methods, who bring a level of complexity and theory development to their analyses (see Rockquemore & Brunson 2002b; Lacy 2007; Tuan 2005; Waters 1990). In methodologically *requiring* this, the ECM is unique because it ensures this complexity and theory extension is not left to the individual discretion of researchers. Yet, the development of an empirically-based theory of racial identity development cannot solely be dependent upon the use of one interpretive method or even qualitative methods generally. Researchers whose questions are

better answered through quantitative or mixed method designs are not excused from limiting their reliance on racial labels as proxy variables to instead engage multi-factor models and context-driven theories to operationalize variables, interpret findings, and extend existing theory (see for example, Waters 1990). Likewise, continued use and development of typologies remain important departures from single healthy identity models; they are invaluable in reframing the exploration of identity possibilities observed through empirical investigation.

The contentious debates surrounding the multiracial movement within multiracial scholarship not only signifies the legitimizing function served by social structures (e.g., racial categories), but remind us that all racialized identities are undeniably relational, interconnected, and emotion-laden. The methods and models used to explore identity development must recognize that the racial labels one uses matter beyond personal identifications to also function as symbols of allegiance to or rejection of others who are ascribed racialized identities. This is made clear in the statement of multiracial critic Jon Spencer (1997) who explains while ‘some multiracialists begin down the road of racial bigotry by cock-a-doodling about their alleged specialness ... they subtly assault the identity and self-esteem of black Americans’ (p.128). This paper has argued against the theorizing of any identity as inherently pathological or healthy, to recognize that multiracial identities (like any racialized identity) can represent denial, rejection, and internalized racial bigotry as well as indicate racially and culturally inclusive identifications against racial bigotry. Likewise, there are multiracials who do not have black heritage (Williams-León and Nakashima 2001) or white heritage (Nakashima 2001). Research indicates these racialized experiences require alternative frames beyond a black-white paradigm for exploring their identity development processes (Lee and Bean 2007). Theorizing all claims to multiraciality as solely an attempt to abandon blackness, or as the authentic healthy identity, ignores the diversity among multiracials and the complexities embedded within any identity development process. Using a case-sensitive

approach such as ECM could allow researchers to examine these distinct experiences of race and identity instead of assuming homogeneity among all ‘multiracials’ or ‘transracial adoptees.’

The use of ECM to extend biculturalism to account for the experiences of multiracial adoptees raises questions about other populations who might also challenge an assumption that all children grow up in racially or culturally homogenous families and communities. Non-adopted children of color, including second-generation immigrant youth (LaFrambois et al. 1993), who grow up in predominantly white communities can also acquire mainstream culture first or exclusively. In an increasingly multicultural world some children are exposed to other cultures that become incorporated into their family and personal identities. Non-adopted multiracials can be raised by single parents and exposed to only one parent’s culture. While the study highlighted here is limited to the case of transracially adopted multiracials, using a case-specific method requires future inquiry to remain flexible in its exploration of identity processes that may be both unique and shared.

The third largest racial category of births in the U.S. is ‘multiracial’ (U.S. Census 2000) and transracial adoption continues to receive heightened public attention (DellaCava et al. 2004). Despite enduring critiques, these children will grow up during a moment in U.S. society that is perhaps most supportive of multiracial and multiethnic families and identities. It is not surprising that adult multiracials and transracial adoptees are now critiquing and advancing this scholarship. Rigorous research that builds multisystemic theory can offer an empirically-grounded knowledge base for use in transracial adoption policy to guide culturally relevant practices and inform parenting approaches that support children in navigating an experience of race that may be unshared with parents. Adoption research has, to varying degrees, been used to create policies guiding adoption practices including the legality and ethics of transracial adoption itself, and used to design training programs for parents and professionals (Miranda 2002). Theories and models of racial identity development are used clinically for psychological evaluations of children’s mental health

and adjustment. ECM studies that contribute empirically grounded case-specific findings are well positioned to make important contributions to the field of adoption policy, theory, and practice. The use of the ECM and other methods that can provide theoretical insights grounded in diverse lived experiences will be central to achieving this important objective.

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Figure1: Defining the quality and location of identity

		Identity Quality →	
		<u>Fixed</u>	<u>Not Fixed-Fluid</u>
Location ↓	In person	Traditional identity theories: Identity is singular and biologically fixed within an individual-- does not/should not change across contexts, or after reaching a particular stage.	Traditional identity theories as life span approach: Identity is developed across the life course. Despite implicit assumption that changes in context may occur, this perspective maintains identity inheres in the individual. Identity development is conceptualized as an internal, psychological, and personal process.
	In context	Sociological and ecological models that assert the environment determines identity through prescribing roles and social groups to individuals. Identities are fixed in place and time, and tied to a single social identity. Many purely critical theory or structuralist perspectives take this approach.	Identities shift across contexts and can be fluid or even multiple. Any identity, however, is given meaning only by one's current context. It is, therefore, the context or social group that determines or gives legitimacy and meaning to these identities and is a process located within, and nurtured by, a given environment. This makes identity formation, beyond choosing to conform to society's race-norms, a process largely outside individual control.
	In between Multi-systemic	Identity is a fixed singularly expressed outcome of interactions between an individual and his/her environment. This suggests identity development is the outcome of complex social and psychological negotiations between self and social context. Many contemporary studies using an ecological approach rendering identity typologies reflect this perspective.	Identity is fluid and is shaped by interactions between one's changing environment and one's changing self. It is both a sociological and psychological process of navigating identity options in a given place and time over the life course. Identities may be unrelated to one's 'heritage' but relevant to lived experiences, others' perceptions of one's phenotype, or represent cultural capital/skills required environmentally. Race identities are given meaning through other social identities (e.g., ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, culture) and can vary across generations, regions, neighborhoods, and family systems. Identities are products of living in contexts where they are required, are road maps to negotiate one's social world, vehicles to facilitate group memberships, and tools to assert personal agency, allegiance, or resistance within existing social structures.

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