

**WHO AM I: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY ON MIXED ETHNO-RACIAL  
IDENTITY AND THE IMPACT OF VALIDATION WITHIN IN-GROUPS  
AND OUT-GROUPS**

by

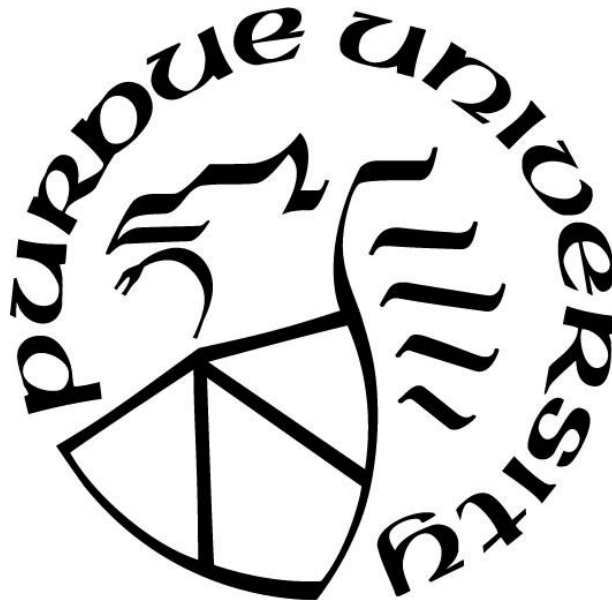
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*Dedicated to my mother, Patsy. I miss you dearly.*

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## ABSTRACT

The following thesis is an autoethnographic study that looks at narratives about communicative events and the social context that impacted the formation of identity, the deconstruction of identity and the reconstruction and integration of multiple identities housed in one body. The focus of the autoethnography is the lived experience of a mixed ethno-racial woman of Mexican heritage and Caucasian identity and how communicative events of validation and invalidation impacted the perceived identity of the individual. The conclusions drawn from the analysis stands as such. First, current theories and methods used to explore identity have limitations and the language and labels we use are inadequate. Second, while external factors including a person's in-groups and out-groups as well as the social context impact ones perceived identity, through integration of one's multiplicity of identity, we choose how much we allow it to impact our chosen identity.

*Keywords: Multi/mixed ethno-racial identity, autoethnography, intersectionality, narratives*

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As a third-generation, Mexican American woman of mixed ethnicity who passes as white, it has been an impossible challenge to concretely develop a foundational racial, ethnic, and cultural identity. The formation of what I have come to claim as my identity has come through years of splicing together both family-of-origin, or cultural-heritage stories, gathered from family, childhood narratives and events, public discourse centered on Mexican immigrants and culture, and communicative interactions with other Latinx peoples who often determine who comprises the in-group and the out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This autoethnographic research study looks at how my identity formed through communicative, interactive relationships and how that communication directly impacted how I view myself in the larger world; how my perceived identity was validated or invalidated in different groups and the impact the validation had on my self-concept; and, how I categorized myself by pondering whether I belong to a family, a community, and the much larger public.

This research is grounded in multiple identity theories, but particularly Bicultural Identity Negotiation, which is a “double-swing model” that includes both Identity Negotiation Theory (INT) and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which while not perfect, was the most applicable to the discussion (Toomey et al., 2013). The identity construction for bicultural people is often steeped in meaning-making of conversations had with ingroups/outgroups (CAT) and how they are validated by those relationships and conversations (INT), (Toomey et al., 2013). Toomey and company (2013) argue for a new theoretical model that combines the two, Bicultural Identity Negotiation, recognizing that for Bicultural people, ingroups and outgroups are fluid. Bicultural people, or what this thesis labels as multi/mixed ethno-racial people are simultaneously in and out in every group they are a part of and therefore are constantly

negotiating their belonging. Bicultural Identity Negotiation theory is used because, as a theory, it acknowledges a person's capability to be Bicultural.

This research aims to explore multiple identities that go beyond just the mixed ethnicity of Mexican heritage and Caucasian identity. The identity areas to be explored are mixed-ethnicity, origin/ heritage stories, 3<sup>rd</sup>-generation Mexican American, descendant of an undocumented worker and migrant farm family, and white-passing privilege. These often-colliding identities steeped in social context impacted how I've come to perceive my identity and so this research will also look at the "multiplicity of belonging" and the intersectionality of identities (Gaither, 2018, p. 443).

As we are currently at a crossroads moving towards a society that, in the United States specifically, is mixed-race, mixed ethnicity and multi-cultural, this research is timely as current discussions are engaging with issues of inclusion, diversity, belonging and acceptance, and uniqueness (Chaney & Clark, 2020; Gaither, 2018; Wehrly et al., (1999). The question we must ask ourselves is how can we be inclusive and celebrate uniqueness, while also celebrating our sameness and our reliance and responsibility to one another? How we answer this question will determine not only the future of identity research, but how we shape our global society.

At the time of the writing of this thesis, the world is currently amid another war that is steeped in what can be considered an identity war. Russia's narrative of identity (russkiy mir), ingroups and outgroups, and nationalism has butted up against Ukraine's people's desire to form their own unique identity, which Ukrainian leaders claim is clearly European (Hardig, 2022). Anders Hardig (2022) has recently written that the 2022 invasion of Ukraine is distinctly different than the one in 2014. He argues that this is because under the leadership of President Zelenskyy there has been a push to create a narrative that Ukraine is European and that this current war is a

European war “taking place on European soil,” (Hardig, 2022). While it seems unfathomable, this war shows we, as a society, are still attempting to determine ingroups and outgroups and the subjugation of those different than us. While it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the ins and outs of the Russian and Ukrainian conflict, the point is to highlight, what happens in the personal happens in the societal. How we determine ingroups and outgroups in families, carries over to how we determine them in communities, countries, and the global society. This paper will look at the small, intimate life of a single person, but the process of accepting people’s identities can be seen in the bigger picture.

While some research has been done on “bicultural/biracial identity”, most of the studies have focused on primarily African American and Caucasian mixed-race identity (Wehrly, et al., 1999; Toomey et al., 2013). Little research focuses on other mixed identities, such as the mixed identity of Mexican and Caucasian. This group of people have the additional challenge of being given limited choice on their racial distinction. In many demographic sets, including federal and state forms, people of Hispanic/Latino heritage are not given a “Hispanic/Latino” choice for race, only Hispanic/Latino ethnicity options. Leman (2018) said that on the Census a “large percentages of Latinxs answer the race question by selecting “some other race,” and then often provide either a specific Latin American ethnicity or country of origin, such as Mexican or Boricua, or a pan-ethnic label such as Hispanic or Latino, despite the explicit instruction that “for this census, Hispanic origins are not races.” (p. 436).

This further supports why bicultural identity negotiation can be even more challenging for this multi-cultural/ethno-racial group. Often used labels have no consistency making it difficult to latch onto a certain identity. This too will be discussed in this thesis as well as the limitations that come from making racial, ethnic, and cultural assumptions and distinctions.

For this thesis, I have chosen to use autoethnography as the method. One's perception of their identity, although influenced by external factors and relationships, is primarily an internal formation from how one perceives themselves, social context, and communicative events. Thus, autoethnography seemed to be the best fit. Autoethnography is often both the story we tell ourselves as well as the story we tell others about who we are. Autoethnography is "a method that combines tenets and techniques of ethnography and autobiography" (Adams & Manning, 2015, p.351). It is both the method and the product, for example "I am doing autoethnography." and "I wrote an autoethnography" (Adams & Manning, 2015; Doty, 2010; Ellis et al., 2011). Since its primary assumption is that culture permeates an individual, the individual could never get away from culture and its influence (Adams & Manning, 2015; Holt, 2003). Therefore, the personal can provide real-life examples and details of "social structures and processes" to better understand them (Adams & Manning, 2015, p. 352). This autoethnography is a detailed account of my life living as a mixed ethno-racial woman. As such, I will flesh out previous research done on social constructs, life, race, ethnicity, and multiplicity in identity.

This research does face some challenges. There is the issue of ethical storytelling when one's story is entwined with others or as Ellis (2007) calls it "intimate others" (p.5). Ellis (2007) calls this "relational ethics" and describes it as a recognition of the inherent dignity of both parties and a mutual respect they should hold for one another. It also acknowledges the "connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work" (Ellis, 2007, p.4). There is always some concern and care that needs to be taken when telling stories that involve others outside of the researcher. This is only further pronounced when those others are personal relationships to the researcher. As LeBlanc (2020) detailed when exploring a day in her life, she reiterated that this was her story. The others involved were plot

devices and changes to the story could be addressed at a future date. Hence why I've taken care to write close to the truth recognizing others might see things differently.

Second, there is the concern that any autoethnographic study is just one perspective and therefore it is nearly impossible to extrapolate out solutions and/or answers that can be beneficial to society as a whole (Holt, 2003). But I argue that the collection of individual perspectives through autoethnography may be the future of identity research as it may be one of the only methods that can speak with any authentic authority because identity is so fluid, complex and subjective. Autoethnography, is a qualitative method that is equipped to explore the intersectionality of identity and specifically the identity of multi/mixed ethno-racial people (Bright et. al., 2016). The hope is that this research will be another piece of the conversation and another voice of the underrepresented that can add to the much larger compendium of works surrounding identity, family, and ethnicity. Based on my research multi/mixed ethno-racial people's voices are both minority and underrepresented voices. As highlighted in Oliver-Rotger's (2016) work, autoethnography allows those that have been "othered" to construct a response to those in power, so we are able to see the other side of the story. My narrative will encourage others to further study not only bicultural identity, but mixed/multicultural identity, mixed/multi ethno-racial identity, non-binary gender identity, intersectionality, and more.

Finally, the purpose of this research is to shine a light on the vast language that is used to categorize, label, and define people, how that language and its meanings are inconsistent and fluid, and how a person of multi/mixed ethno-racial identity must wade through the murky waters to create and accept their own identity as well as feel confident in their ability to be accepted as such by others. This research will look at narratives of identities and their negotiation, acceptance, and rejection, as well as how both the internal and external factors influence my personal understanding

of my own identity. Gleaning from the work of Tajfel and Turner (1986), we know that our interactions both within a group and those between groups often influences our perception of our position in the world and where we fit in society. This thesis will look at key communicative interactions embedded in social context that influenced my identity formation and how I've developed an integrated understanding of myself as a mixed ethno-racial person.

This thesis is structured in chapters that are consistent with how qualitative, cultural communication research is structured. Chapter 2 looks at current and past literature whose focus are in the areas of identity, race, ethnicity, family, social context, and communication. Chapter 2 also gives the questions that will guide the research and determine which narratives have had the most impact and therefore should be shared. Chapter 3 looks at the methodology chosen for this thesis, autoethnography. It discusses that autoethnography is both the method and the product that is produced. Chapter 4 is a collection of narratives told with dialogue and thick description, and debriefings/findings of how those stories impacted my identity formation and future identity integration. Finally, chapter 5, the conclusion, attempts to make sense of the findings and recap the thesis. It will also provide the reader with my vision of where multi/mixed ethno-racial research and society are going.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature found on race, ethnicity, and identity is vast, but as will be seen, inconsistent. The terms and meanings that are used in the research discussing race, ethnicity, and identity are synonymous yet distinctive and divergent, broad yet narrow, vague yet precise. It has been the most confusing area of research and literature that I have ever attempted to study and process. Within race, ethnicity, and identity research, there seems to be no consensus on terms, what they mean, and actionable steps on how an individual goes about determining where they fit (Wehrly et al., 1999). Examples of this include the use of race and ethnicity synonymously, the barrage of identity labels used interchangeably, and theories that struggle to fully encapsulate an understanding of identity. In researching the topic of race and ethnicity, there have been various definitions and determinations of the same word. For example, Wehrly and associates (1999) define ethnicity as “a certain group's characteristics with regard to food, work, relationships, celebrations, and rituals that separate them from the larger society,” (p. 4). Padilla’s (1984) understanding of ethnicity is, “at its most basic level ethnic consciousness will mean an awareness of belonging and/or being different,” (p. 653). Ting-Toomey suggests that ethnic identity is defined by group-held values as well as how strongly one feels connected to those values (Toomey, et al, 2013). These are vastly different understandings and meanings of the same word. And so, this thesis, and particularly this literature review, will dive into the world of ambiguity, attempt to unpack some of the language used to discuss race, ethnicity, and identity, and look at the communication and identity theories that attempt to understand identity formation.

## **Ethnicity/Race**

Since this thesis looks at multi/mixed ethno-racial identity, it is pertinent to define not only the term ethnicity but a few other words that often get used synonymously. To start, based on my observation and lived experience, the terms race and ethnicity often get used interchangeably. And, when you add two or more ethnic distinctions, you get the addition of terms like multiracial, multicultural, mixed-race, biracial, mixed-ethnicity, and mixed/multi ethno-racial just to name a few. Personally, I have been labeled and called mixed race, multiracial, biracial, and half-breed (this last term was often used with a negative connotation).

## **Race**

While some people have argued that there are different races, Fullwiley, Collins, and Venter contend there is only one race and there has always only been one biological race and I would agree (John Harvard's Journal, 2008). Society's acceptable racial distinctions are socially constructed and more or less based on external, visible features, geography, or an antiquated understanding of biology (Dowling, 2005; Wehrly et al., 1999).

First, skin color, or more broadly, externally visible features, is suggested to play a role in racial/ethnic identity determination and subsequently the discrimination, by others, of diverse racial/ethnic people (Dowling, 2005). While those with darker skin do not have much choice in how they are identified or othered, the biological genetic distinctions of color are not scientifically sound to argue for race distinction/biological distinction. Instead, externally visible features are more connected to environmental evolution, which leads to the distinction used to define race (John Harvard's Journal, 2008). Second, geography has often been used to claim racial distinctions, but here again, there is no scientific evidence to support such conclusions. In fact, according to Wells, "racism is not only socially divisive but also scientifically incorrect. We are

all descendants of people who lived in Africa recently,” (John Harvard’s Journal, 2008, p. 1). “We are all Africans under the skin.” (John Harvard’s Journal, 2008, p. 1). What may be closer to the truth or more accurate is that “widely acknowledged racial differences can sharpen in-group members’ self-identification and out-group acknowledgment of intergroup distinctions,” (Sanders, 2002, p. 328). Race is often exacerbated by ongoing territorial segregation and limited groups interactions. This may lead some to the inaccurate belief that race has some sort of genetic component tied to geography, but it does not. Finally, race distinction based on geography remains prevalent today because of policies that continue to inhibit people of color’s mobility even in their own country (Licona, & Maldonado, 2014). Segregation is not just limited to spatial segregation but where people work as well; this limits the interactions of intergroups and further enforces stereotyping and assumptions of differences based on geography (Licona & Maldonado, 2014). Licona and Maldonado (2014) find that localities are just an expression of what happens globally and that includes the disparity between countries, work availability and the type of work, and the ability to create wealth from that labor. Again, these distinctions are made based on social normality, not on biology.

Biologically, according to Fullwiley who studied the social consequences of the human genome projects, is the belief that “there is no genetic basis for races.” (John Harvard’s Journal, 2008, p. 1). Considering the recent fascination and obsession with genetic testing home kits, geneticists, as well as social scientists, have concerns about the faulty or inconclusive use of genes to differentiate race and ethnicity (John Harvard’s Journal, 2008). It has been found that an individual may share the same genetic markers as a person who lives halfway around the world and that there may be a more genetic difference between people who are in the same geographical

location, containing the same external visible features that have been used for centuries to distinguish “races” (John Harvard’s Journal, 2008).

While the above supports that race is not a biological distinction, this research does not deny that racial distinctions do exist. To do so, would be to minimize people’s very real, lived experiences. According to the *National Human Genome Research Institute*, “Race is a fluid concept used to group people according to various factors including, ancestral background and social identity. Race is also used to group people that share a set of visible characteristics, such as skin color and facial features,” (National Human Genome Research Institute). As Sanders (2002) stated, “the extent to which ethnic identity is optional varies by race” and the darker the skin the less likely the person will have the option to self-identify (p. 342). Race will be ascribed to them. Wehrly et al., (1999) highlighted, "race influences identity to some degree because physical appearance mediates acceptance and rejection of the individual by groups of his or her heritage and reflects a construction of reality that serves those who have desired resources and privileges" (p. 5). The argument is that our understanding of race is not built on facts but has been socially constructed and is therefore subjective and fluid. This fluidity, much like the fluidity in ethnicity, can cause confusion, particularly in identity formation and stability. As a society, we socially constructed racial distinctions; yet when pressed for a definition, society does not have a concrete answer for what race is. This has only become more “complex through rises in immigration, increases in interracial marriages, and shifts in language surrounding biracial and transgender populations,” (Gaither, 2018, p. 443). The bottom line is that race is a socially constructed house of cards that society accepts far too easily to be a firm foundation for the determination of acceptance and belonging. This ideology has influenced how we talk about race and study race (as

if it is in a silo by itself), and then we use race, this social construct, to determine policies and procedures that have real consequences that affect people's lives (Gilroy, 2013; Hall, 1997).

## **Ethnicity**

The term ethnicity and its socially accepted meaning may fair slightly better in distinguishing differences, while also acknowledging the fluidity of identity. As Sanders (2002) argues, “ethnic distinctions sometimes coincide with territorial segregation in the host society and with social constructions of racial identity”, but it includes more (p.328). Researchers theorize that ethnic identity is nuanced and complex and is impacted by both self-identification and outgroup labeling (Dowling, 2005; Ellis, D., 2019; Leeman, 2018; Martínez & Gonzalez, 2021; Padilla, 1984; Ting-Toomey, 2005; Sanders, 2002; Wehrly et al., 1999). Based on Padilla's (1984) understanding, “at its most basic level ethnic consciousness will mean an awareness of belonging and/or being different,” (p. 653). While ethnicity has often been studied in the past by geographical and cultural differences, more current research argues that “ethnic identities are more fluid across time and social context sometimes even to the point of ethnic switching” and merging (Chaney & Clark, 2020; Martínez & Gonzalez, 2021; Padilla, 1984; Sanders, 2002, p. 328). When studying ethnicity in a plural society one must recognize that ethnicity includes culture and geography, but also includes communication events that validate ethnic membership (Martínez & Gonzalez, 2021).

Panethnicity. Panethnicity, defined as “the development of bridging organizations and solidarities among subgroups of ethnic collectivities that are often seen as homogenous by outsiders”, is a conglomeration of groups of people that could be categorized into smaller ethnic groups (Martínez & Gonzalez, 2021, p. 597; Leeman, 2018). According to an article, *Hispanics are officially declared the largest minority group in the U.S.* (2019), the U.S. Census Bureau in

2003 released statistics claiming that the Hispanic population had grown by 4.7 percent “making Hispanics the largest minority group in the country,” (History.com, p. 1). The ethnic group Hispanic/Latino here in the U.S. is “the largest non-White ethno-racial group in the United States” and “have numerically surpassed African Americans” (Martínez & Gonzalez, 2021, p. 595). We are finding a greater acceptance of this broader panethnic identity now than with previous generations. Country of origin was often more widely accepted as the primary identifier over Hispanic and Latino (Martínez & Gonzalez, 2021; Padilla, 1984). More current research gives us some explanation or at least possibilities of why this has changed.

First, “government classification systems also create the foundation for panethnicity by assigning diverse ethnic or tribal groups, based on assumed shared cultural and linguistic characteristics,” (Martínez & Gonzalez, 2021, p. 598). This can be seen in panethnicity groups like Native Americans, Hispanic/Latino Americans, and Asian Americans. In regards to Hispanic/Latino, which is the ethnic group that is the primary focus of this paper, the U.S. government has repeatedly defined and redefined this panethnic group; sometimes using race and/or geography and other times using language and assumed cultural similarities (Leeman, 2018; Martínez & Gonzalez, 2021; Wehrly et al., 1999). Marks and Rios-Vargas (2021) who are the Chief, Racial Statistics Branch, Population Division and Chief, Ethnicity and Ancestry Branch, Population Division respectively share that “the U.S. Census Bureau has collected data on race since the first census in 1790 and on Hispanic or Latino origin since the 1970 Census.” In 2020 they improved the Census Hispanic Origin question by adding additional group examples, but the race question still included only five races besides other (White, Black, Asian, and American Indian or Alaska Native). There were individual boxes available for people of Asian descent. The Census still does not include a category for Multi/mixed ethno-racial people groups and often feel

the need to choose a singular ethnic identity (Leeman, 2018; Marks and Rios-Vargas, 2021; Poston, 1990).

Although the government has had its hand in the acceptance of the panethnic identifier, Hispanic/Latino, they are not solely responsible. Diverse ethnic groups have self-identified with this panethnic identifier because of the political and social leverage it potentially holds (Martínez & Gonzalez, 2021; Padilla, 1984). In the effort to bring about better living conditions, justices for labor issues, and immigration reform, diverse ethnic groups have banded together as a unified panethnic group to have their voices heard and for their concerns to be taken more seriously (Martínez & Gonzalez, 2021).

Still, there is much debate on ethnicity and the categorization of ethnic groups. There is the argument of primary and secondary identifiers. There is the discussion of ethnic switching based on social context and events (Padilla, 1984). There is a concern that a broader panethnic identity is just a way to lump distinct ethnic groups into a much larger group, thus nullifying their distinctive characteristics (Leeman, 2018; Martínez & Gonzalez, 2021; Padilla, 1984). Finally, there is the issue of having a race or ethnic identifier ascribed to a person based on external factors like physical features (Wehrly et al., 1999). While it is obvious that ethnicity terms and meanings have their challenges, they at least recognize their existence is purely socially constructed based on the meaning-making of the narratives we as a society tell and accept.

To complicate matters, in regards to individuals that make up the panethnic identity Hispanic/Latino, the labels within the group are numerous, fluid, and their definitions are not universally understood and/or accepted (Chaney & Clark, 2020; Leeman, 2018). There is the confusion and vagueness of the terms Hispanic and Latino, which although both share a connection to the language, Spanish, they can include people that are geographically oceans apart. Hispanic

was added as a category in 1980 “in order to identify and count all people of Spanish speaking backgrounds with origins from the western hemisphere,” (Wehrly et al., 1999). Latino, which was added to the 2000 census to run along the side of Hispanic seems to encompass most individuals from all Latin and South American countries as well as U.S. Americans from Latin American countries of heritage. And the ability to speak Spanish is not mandatory to be part of the Hispanic/Latino group (Leeman, 2018).

Within the U.S., terms like Mexican, Mexican-American, Hispanic, Latino/a, Chicano/a, and Tejano/a, just to name a few, exist and are often used interchangeably (Dowling, 2005; Leeman, 2018). Dowling (2005) has argued this has more to do with linguistics and with whom one is communicating with rather than physical location. Chaney and Clark (2020) agreed saying “Latinxs are constantly negotiating their identities as they navigate, through geographies of culture, space, place, home, and self,” (p. 286). Dowling (2005) interviewed multiple Mexican-Americans living in Texas about the different labels including Mexican, Mexican-American, Mexicano/a, and Tejano/a, and found that Mexican-Americans identified as such and not as Mexican because they were not from Mexico. But, when speaking Spanish, many felt it was fine to self-identify as Mexicano/a and Tejano/a. Dowling (2005) theorized that participants felt more comfortable with the Mexicano/a or Tejano/a label when in the company of their in-group while the opposite is true when communicating with the out-group and Anglo-culture.

There is also the added issue of “Whiteness” or being seen as or wanting to assimilate into White, mainstream American culture when self-identifying race and ethnicity. Ballinas and Bachmeier (2020) “challenge the notion that racially identifying as White on federal surveys signifies assimilation and integration for the Mexican-origin population (p. 312). A person of Mexican origin could want to identify as White based on the social advantages that it provides

them (Ballinas & Bachmeier, 2020). In fact, “Mexican Americans established the League of United Latin American Citizens in 1929 and the American G.I. Forum in 1948 as groups seeking to end discrimination mainly by insisting on their loyalty and patriotism as American citizens and their Caucasian racial status,” (Ballinas & Bachmeier, 2020, p. 313). But it could also not be the case for everyone. Ballinas and Bachmeier (2020) found that geography and historical context of the area of the U.S. these individuals lived in could influence an individual of Mexican origin to not self-identify as White.

All this is to say that ethnic labels are anything but stagnant. Sometimes they are chosen for us by outsiders. Sometimes we choose them ourselves. And sometimes we switch back and forth between labels depending on whom we are communicating with and what we want to communicate (Leeman, 2018). This is then further complicated when people are multi/mixed ethno-racial. While ethnicity seems to do better than race at acknowledging the fluidity of terms and their meaning, it is not without flaws.

Again, the denial of race and ethnicity distinction is futile in today’s society, so it is not in the interest of this paper to try to discredit racial and ethnic distinction. Instead, this thesis is interested in highlighting two things where race and ethnicity are concerned. First, there is a fluidity that can lead to real confusion around the terms that have been socially constructed (Leeman, 2018). Second, unfortunately, these labels and terms are what we currently have to work with.

### **Identity Theory**

The foundation of this research is rooted in theories of identity, its formation, and the communication that impacts both. This section will look at the literature on identity theory including the work done by Tajfel and Turner (1986) on “social identity theory” and “self-

categorization theory” respectively as well as theory developed interdisciplinarily with Sociology and Communication (Intergroup Theory) on how identity is communicatively negotiated (Gallois et al., 2018). Intergroup communication is complex and includes theories like Identity Negotiation Theory (INT) and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) as well as others like ethnolinguistic identity theory and social identity theory (Gallois et al., 2018; Giles, 2012; Pitts, 2005). Additionally, this section will look at Intersectionality theory, which can be used to explore other areas beyond identity, but for our purposes, the focus will be on identity. Finally, this section will look briefly at Biracial Identity Development.

Tajfel and Turner (1986) did groundbreaking work in the area of identity theory nearly four decades ago, and their theories are often used to make sense of identity formation still today. Tajfel’s social identity theory is made up of three tenets. First, the individual aims to keep a continued positive identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Zakiryanova & Redkina, 2020). Second, that positive identity comes from the categorization of groups, distinguishing and differentiating which are your ingroups and outgroups, and “showing favoritism” to your ingroups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Zakiryanova & Redkina, 2020, p. 2). Finally, the last tenet is, upon the “negative assessment” of the group they belong to, the individual will look to join a different group or attempt to frame their current group in a more positive light (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Zakiryanova & Redkina, 2020, p. 2).

The second theory is the Bicultural Identity Negotiation theory, which is a “double-swing model” that includes both INT and CAT, (Toomey et al., 2013, p.2). The identity construction for bicultural people is steeped in meaning-making of the communication within ingroups/outgroups (CAT) and how they are validated by those relationships and conversations (INT), (Toomey et al., 2013). Toomey and company (2013) argue for a new theoretical model combining CAT and INT

so they proposed the Bicultural Identity Negotiation and multiracial/ethnic family communication (Poston, 1990; Soliz et. al., 2006)

Before further exploring Bicultural Identity Negotiation, understanding the two theories behind the model is warranted. The first, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) was formulated by Giles and company and analyzes how we change our communication based on how our communication partners communicate with us (Littlejohn et al., 2017; Giles, 2016). Sometimes using communication convergence, we attempt to communicate similarly to our communication partner, while at other times we use communication divergence to differentiate our communication with our communication partner (Littlejohn et al., 2017). While CAT initially focused on linguistics, including accents, pitch, tone, and speed, it has evolved to include communication like language that either validates membership or denies group membership (Gallois et al., 2018). Examples based on my experience would be being called a gringa or “white chocolate” which were used in jest to invalidate my mixed ethno-racial identity. CAT makes three assumptions: 1. That our communication is steeped in historical and social context; 2. we communicate to give information, but also “for negotiating personal and cultural identities,”; and 3. we tend to use different types of “communication to converge and diverge in order to achieve information and identity needs,” (Littlejohn, et al., p. 402; Gallois et al., 2018). What is interesting is one can use both convergence and divergence communication to create connection and identity validation and in contrast use both as methods to discourage connection and identity validation (Littlejohn et al., Gallois et al. 2018).

The second theory is Identity Negotiation Theory (INT). INT was developed by Ting-Toomey in their attempts to make sense of how identity is negotiated within relationships. It starts with making a distinction between personal identities, which are more unique to the individual,

and cultural identities which “are associated with membership in a particular cultural or social group,” (Littlejohn, et al., 2017, p. 79). Ting-Toomey suggests that cultural and ethnic identity is defined by group held values as well as how strongly one feels connected to those values (Littlejohn et al., 2017; Toomey, et al, 2013). Identity Negotiation is a “mutual communication activity,” where “at the same time communicators attempt to evoke their own desired identities in the interaction, they also attempt to challenge or support the others’ identity,” (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 217). Ting-Toomey is also interested in how one negotiates their personal identity with their cultural identity and INT suggests when you can switch from one cultural context to another during an interaction you have achieved “functional biculturalism” (Littlejohn et al., 2017, p. 80; Toomey, et al., 2013). INT further suggests that when one can navigate multiple cultures in a singular setting they have developed “intercultural competence,” (Littlejohn et al., 2017, p. 80).

The question becomes, what if biculturalism exists within the same person? A multi/mixed ethno-racial person must navigate their personal identity with their cultural identity, but also their cultural identity with their other cultural identity (Toomey, et al., 2013). I argue that multi/mixed ethno-racial people naturally have intercultural competence since they have had to navigate divergent cultural identities since birth. That navigation is further complicated by the communication the multi/mixed ethno-racial person has with both members of their divergent in-groups and outgroups. Intergroup communication, which both CAT and INT are a part of is the area of study that attempts to tackle how intergroup communication impacts one’s identity (Gallois et al., 2018). Toomey and company’s new theory, Bicultural Negotiation Theory is used to further extend how intergroup communication impacts the identity of multi/mixed ethno-racial individuals.

### **Bicultural Negotiation Theory.**

BNT combines the CAT and INT but changes the way one thinks about identity formation for the multi/mixed ethno-racial person. Research supports one cannot separate personal identity, cultural identity, acceptance, and denial by ingroups, acceptance and denial of outgroups, and finally their perception of communicative events (Leeman, 2018; Toomey, et al., 2013). Therefore, it becomes impossible to study and fully understand multi/mixed ethno-racial identity purely through distinctions that can be quantified in a survey like the Census (Leeman, 2018). The fact is two people could both have identical racial/ethnic makeup, but their communicative experience with ingroups and outgroups could impact how they view their identity and therefore how they experience the world (Leeman, 2018). “Identity may be in part intentional, in part habitual and less than fully conscious, in part an outcome of interactional negotiation, in part a construct of others’ perceptions and representations, and in part an outcome of larger ideological processes and structures,” (Leeman, 2018, p. 442).

Therefore, quantitative research has its limits when studying intersectionality, particularly for groups and individuals whose perceived identity does not line up with what has been ascribed to them. Autoethnography, allows for the individual’s experience to speak for itself.

### **Intersectionality**

It is impossible to talk about the lived experience of multi/mixed ethno-racial people, without talking about intersectionality. Their very existence encompasses multiple identities in one body. While I believe this is true for all people, for multi/mixed ethno-racial people it can be more obvious, and thus there is no way for them to get around grappling with it. Carbado and company (2013) describe intersectionality as both a theory and a method that was born out of Black feminism and Critical Race Theory. It has been used to explore the intersection of race and gender

as well as many other areas where multiple identities collide like sexuality, gender, and ethnicity (Carbado et. al., 2013). What has been found is that the privilege of one identity does not negate the discrimination of another and research that does not account for multiple identities in one body can misrepresent the lived experience of the individual and skew the data (Bright et. al., 2016). Furthermore, it explores how social justice initiatives that often only look at one identity can unintentionally further marginalize other minority or subordinate identities (Bright et. al., 2016; Carbado et. al., 2013).

### **Biracial Identity Development**

Research has been done over the years on identity development and race identity development (Poston, 1990). Early research done on race identity development often focused on minority race identity as a marginalized identity and the need to create clear distinctions between ethno-racial groups (Erikson, 1964; Poston, 1990). Poston (1990) highlighted the flaws in this early research, especially when researching multi/mixed ethno-racial people as an individual may find themselves in both a minority group and the dominant group and they may not choose one over the other. Early models “do not allow for the integration of several group identities” and expect an individual to choose one identity (Poston, 1990, p. 152). Poston (1990) developed a new model for identity development that acknowledges the lived experience of multi/mixed ethno-racial people called Biracial Identity Development. This new model includes 5 stages. 1. The personal identity stage where a child develops a personal identity that is not really associated with a race or ethnicity. 2. Choice of Group Categorization where the person is pressured to choose an ethnic/racial category. 3. Enmeshment/denial where the person, usually during adolescence, feels a cognitive dissonance because they have denied part of their identity. 4. Appreciation is where the individual begins to appreciate the identity that they previously dismissed. This is the start of

reconstructing their identity. 5. Finally, integration is where the individual starts to integrate their multiple identities.

### **Multiracial/Ethnic Family Communication**

Soliz, Thorton, and Rittenour (2009) highlight that for some time the studying of racial and ethnic identity in multi/mixed ethno-racial families was done as if racial and ethnic identity was concrete. As argued above, racial and ethnic identity are not just determined or formed by the color of one's skin or country of origin. It is also formed through communication both in the intragroup (within) and intergroup (between) (Ting-Toomey, 2005). Leeman (2018) argued that even the process of census-taking "does not simply record respondents' preexisting sense of self; instead, it is performative and involves the construction, negotiation, and production of ethno-racial identities," (p. 434). Racial and ethnic identities are sometimes chosen by the individual while at other times it is determined by outgroups (Leeman, 2018; Sanders, 2002; Soliz et al., 2009). Researchers are starting to explore "individuals' experiences as members of multiracial/ethnic families including the identity and experience of multiracial/ethnic children," (Soliz et al., 2009).

These experiences are communicative by nature. According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), we determine our place in the world by what groups we are in and what groups we are not, and I have found those ingroup and outgroup determinations are communicatively expressed to us (Ting-Toomey, 2005). We are validated or not validated as group members by other group members (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). And our "interactions with in-group members are typically more positive and satisfying compared to those with members of an out-group," (Soliz et al., 2009, p. 820). Ting-Toomey's (2005) research views the family system as a person's first in-group. Ting-Toomey (2005) state that "children in their early years internalize what to value and devalue, what

to appreciate and reject, and what goals are important in their culture through the influence of their family system,” (p. 212).

In multiracial/ethnic families, members can feel that they are both part of the in-group and the out-group simultaneously. How an individual is validated and accepted through communication by family members of differing racial/ethnic backgrounds can influence the individual’s identity formation. In contrast, if an individual is unclear on how they are to interact with family members and they feel disconnected communicatively, an individual may be less likely to identify racially and ethnically with those family members.

One caveat that will be explored is when a new identity stands out above all other identities. Soliz et al., (2009) stated that “differences in a family can be transcended through perceptions of a common familial identity,” (p.821). So, for example, when multiethnic backgrounds within a family become less important than being identified as the “Weavers”, a family can build a connection and unity regardless of their racial and ethnic differences.

An understanding of how and what is communicated within a multiracial/ethnic family is important when looking at multiracial/ethnic individuals, because it influences how one sees themselves (Dowling, 2005). Part of identity formation is how one self-identifies, but the other part of identity formation is how others identify the person. Unfortunately, that identity is still being primarily prescribed by society to a person based on external factors like skin color, accent, and cultural signifiers. As will be discussed in this autoethnography while one may self-identify as one ethnicity, the out-group and in-group will either validate and uphold that identity or they will refute it. Therefore, a multi/mixed ethno-racial person could have a difficult time continuing to self-identify as a particular race or ethnic identity if external people fail to accept it. And, unfortunately, “Individuals who want to claim their entire racial identity face the challenge of

creating an identity (multi/mixed ethno-racial) that has never been supported by society and, therefore, have to defend their choice as healthy,” (Wehrly et al., 1999, p. 3). The degree to which the person faces a lack of support from society is also impacted by geography and history. Depending on the historical events that happened in the location (ex. a Slave State vs. a Free State during the 1800s) where the multi/mixed ethno-racial person lives today, impacts their experience (Ballinas & Bachmeier, 2020). Ballinas and Bachmeier (2020) noticed a distinct difference in ethno-racial labeling between Mexican-Americans living in Texas (a previous Slave State) versus those living in California (a previous Free State). Those living in California felt less of a need to be identified as white (Ballinas & Bachmeier, 2020). It would stand to reason that multi/mixed ethno-racial people would face varying degrees of acceptance and validation depending on if the ethno-racial community they were partially a part of dealt with systemic racism.

### **Goal of Thesis**

The goal of this thesis is to share the stories of events that had the most impact on my identity formation. It is meant to highlight the complexity of identity and the intersectionality of multi-identities; explore how validation and communication influence one’s sense of belonging and acceptance; support as well as spur further study in the complex subject of multi/ mixed ethno-racial identity; and be another thread in a tapestry that gives us a clearer picture of how people experience the world. As such, the guiding questions for this research are as follows:

1. What impact have external influences had on my identity formation (conveyed primarily through communicative interactions), that have either validated or invalidated my identity perception?
2. What impact has my internal thought processes and sense-making of my body, family history, and public discourse had on identity formation?

3. What social contexts and communicative events influenced my deconstruction?
4. What has led to the reconstruction of my identity and the integration of all my identities?
5. What are the limitations of race and ethnic distinctions?
6. What did I learn from all this, and what can be extrapolated out for the greater good?

These questions will be thoroughly discussed in the findings in Chapter 4 and the conclusion in chapter 5. Chapter 5 will include propose conclusions supported by those findings.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODS**

### **Autoethnography**

Ting-Toomey (2005) states that identity “refers to our reflective views of ourselves and other perceptions of our self-images- at both the social identity and personal identity levels,” (p. 212). And since “Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that involves reflexive self-observation,” it is the method that can best address my research questions (Steiner, 2018, p.1). Autoethnography is when “a researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography” and is therefore both a “process and product” (Adams & Manning, 2015; Ellis et al., 2011, p.1, Oliver-Rotger, 2016). It aspires to expand our knowledge of both culture and personal experience by telling a story (Edwards, 2021, p. 1; Ellis, 2007; Hamdan, 2012; Holt, 2003).

Contemporary autoethnographies take on many forms and can be told of present events and interactions or focus on past events (Edwards, 2021; Ellis 2007; Hamdan, 2012; Steiner, 2018). It is a particularly beneficial form of research writing when one is studying identity formation as identity is negotiated within the context of relationships (Edwards, 2021; Hamdan, 2012; Ting-Toomey, 2005).

There are, of course, other methodologies that have been used and could have been used here to study identity, including both quantitative and qualitative frameworks. Identity, particularly race and ethnicity has been studied quantitatively, as shown above, by my examples of the U.S. Census, and it has been studied qualitatively through interviews, as exemplified by Torres, & Baxter Magolda (2004) and Licona & Maldonado’s (2014) work. But the questions I am exploring are more focused on the connection between internal dialogue and thought, and external communicative events. This negotiation process that occurred within me would be difficult to

explore outside of autoethnography as no one knows me more than I. No one has access to my thoughts like I do. Therefore, the questions I wish to explore are deeply personal (Hamdan, 2012). This is why autoethnography was specifically chosen for this current thesis as it is both the method and the substance. In autoethnography, the experience and the story of the researcher are allowed to bring to light very real lived experiences that can teach us more than the numbers ever could by themselves.

As Doty (2010) argues in her work, the scholarly writing that prides itself in the absence of self “enables scholars to present their work as authoritative, objective and neutral” (p. 1048). In academia, we seem so keen on being objective and neutral and valued as the expert (Doty, 2010; Ellis et al., 2011). While I could have attempted to tackle questions about ethno-racial identity in a more scientific fashion, I do not believe I would have gotten to some of the conclusions I did if I had. Autoethnography allows each writer to be the authority and expert of their own story and to make connections between their personal perceptions and ideas to, like in this case, the “identity claims” they are making, (Hamdan, 2012, p. 600).

What is powerful about autoethnography is that it makes no excuse for the writer adding themselves and their perspective in the research (Doty, 2010, p. 1048; Ellis 2007; Holt, 2003). “Autoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on research,” (Ellis et al., 2011, p.1). Since ethno-racial identity development involves emotion, perceptions, fluidity of concepts and terms, and perceptions of communication events, autoethnography provides a framework that can accommodate.

Autoethnographers do ride the line between connectedness and self-indulgence (Holt, 2003). Autoethnographers have been criticized by some as being “self-absorbed narcissists who

don't fulfill scholarly obligations of hypothesizing, analyzing, and theorizing," (Ellis et al., 2011, p.11). Based on my research, autoethnographers are using different scholarly methods including storytelling and thick description (Ellis et al., 2011). These methods and forms of writing lend themselves to research that describes in detail the human experience and has the potential of creating a connection with the author and the data in a way that other methods have limited ability. And, at least for me, there has been a great deal of analyzing the events of my childhood also.

This connection to the real humanness of the story can lead to empathy, which can be a catalyst for change. As a critical, qualitative researcher, my goal is to both highlight and explore stories qualitatively and critically argue for change and new ways of thinking. Again, autoethnography allows me to tackle both.

In regards to autoethnographic works that focus on minority voices, whether that be racial, ethnic, gender, sexuality, or multi/mixed ethno-racial in nature, these autoethnographies allow marginalized or subjugated voices the opportunity to tell the story from their point of view (Holt, 2003; Oliver-Rotger, 2016). Oliver-Rotger's (2016) research looked specifically at how an ethnographer and travel reporter used autoethnography to touch on her own identity, and how her perception as well as the perception of others on that identity, influence the subjectivity of her travel writing. Through autoethnography, Stephanie Elizondo Griest could touch on her experience of writing in Mexico about Mexico, while having this "self-consciousness as a doubly marginal subject ("Mexican" in the U.S.; "American" in Mexico)", which impacted her writing because of her position (Oliver-Rotger, 2016, p. 129). The knowledge gained from this autoethnographic storytelling of feeling not Mexican enough brings a richness to her travel writing that would not have been there without it.

Similarly, as I have found limited research on being multi/mixed ethno-racial, and an even smaller number of autoethnographic works dedicated to Latino/Caucasian identity, this

autoethnography aims to explore this mentioned minority voice and create space for the story to be told. In my lived experience, I have not heard many stories of multi/mixed ethno-racial people, and fewer still of Latino/Caucasian. As a mixed ethno-racial person, I appreciate autoethnography as it is a way to share a self-reflective narrative of my own lived experience as a way to add more stories about multi/mixed ethno-racial people, (Holt, 2003).

**Ethics.** It is important to briefly discuss the ethical dilemma autoethnography creates. A person's story is intertwined with others' stories, and this can create some ethical concerns (Ellis, 2007; Ellis et al., 2011; Edwards, 2021). Edwards's (2021) work highlights that it is often difficult to protect the identity of those in connection to the autoethnographer's story even with the use of fictitious names. So, how does one overcome these ethical dilemmas? Some choose to write the autoethnography as fiction, still, others choose to gain consent from those involved or to allow them to read the work before it is published to validate that it is a fair representation (Edwards, 2021; Ellis, 2007; Ellis et al., 2011). Others choose to write under "Anonymous" or with another pseudonym as a way to protect both the privacy of the characters and sometimes as a way to protect themselves from retaliation (Ellis, 2007). One thing is clear, a researcher choosing to write autoethnography must consider the ethical dilemmas posed by writing stories that include third parties (intimate others) and determine how to do so in the most ethical fashion, (Edwards, 2021; Ellis, 2007; Ellis et al., 2011).

For this thesis, as I have considered my ethical responsibility to my family based on the research done by Ellis (2007) on relational ethics in autoethnography, the following questions arose. Why do I feel the need to share and explore my story of ethno-racial identity formation, deconstruction, and reconstruction? What are the possible consequences of telling what could be

perceived as negative stories about some of my family members? What responsibility do I have to them and our relationship?

First, I do feel the need to both share and explore my narratives because I hope that it will add to the much larger academic conversation on mixed ethno-racial people's lived experiences, and the experience and challenges they encounter in identity formation and acceptance (Hamdan, 2012). I did not have the ability during my formative years to integrate all my identities. This is because of familial structures, cultural structures, social structures, and language limitations. I struggled to integrate my Latinx and Caucasian identity as well as my other identities as a heterosexual woman. The concept of having a multiplicity of identities or the ability to enact more than one of them at the same time was beyond my knowledge capacity and understanding. And unfortunately, it was not modeled to me by my family or the community I encountered. By doing this autoethnography, I am engaging in "a process of refiguring the past and in turn reconfiguring the self in a way that moves beyond what had existed previously" (Hamdan, 2012, p. 11).

To the second question, I am aware that some of my narratives do not position my father in a positive light. I recognize that someone could read this and formulate the opinion that my father was "bad." My answer to this is that the telling of my story is just that, it is my story of the events that took place. The narratives are influenced by my perception of the events that happened as well as my perception of myself and the others mentioned. It is not objectively true. It feels true to me and my truth, and therefore it has real consequences for my personal life, but it is not objective.

This leads to the next question, "what responsibility do I have to my family and our relationship?" I have the responsibility, to be honest, but also conservative in my telling of the stories. I need to honestly portray my perceived experience. But I must recognize my position in

the story influences my perspective and remember to share with some level of humility. I need to be conservative, meaning I only share what is necessary to the point. It would be unethical to share things just to share them, knowing they could be damaging. It is necessary to honor my family and bestow on them the same level of dignity in my writing as I would anyone while remaining true to myself (Ellis, 2007).

For this thesis, I have chosen to share as myself. My goal is not to widely publish this work in a journal at this time, but I do recognize it will be shared with interested readers through the Purdue database. This is purely an academic exercise. I chose to change the name of certain people in the narratives. These people included cousins and acquaintances. For my family, I chose to leave out their names and refer to them as dad, mom, uncle, aunt, and grandma and grandpa. I did include the name of my grandmother on my father's side as she is deceased, and no harm can come to her in the telling of this story. Because of the nature of the relationship, I have with my father, it would be impossible to share the stories of how our interactions made me feel with him. Whether it is a generational thing or a Latinx cultural thing, we do not share our feelings. I feel that doing so will only further complicate the already complicated relationship. So, I have chosen not to share my research with my family. I have told my father the subject matter of my work and that I used examples from my childhood.

## CHAPTER 4: NARRATIVES

This chapter is about my life. It is what Hamdan (2012) calls “bits and pieces of a personal narrative,” and a sharing of my life experiences “in my historical and cultural context,” (p. 587). It is about my formative years and the construction of identity heavily influenced by social context and communicative events with family, community, and society. It is about my teen years, my early twenties, and the deconstruction of my life and my identity, and the new questions that arose of “who am I?”. Finally, this chapter is about my late thirties, the present, and the reconstruction of my identity that now aims to integrate and accept the multiplicity of my identity. The narratives will be italicized, and the debriefing, analysis, and context will not. Hopefully, this will eliminate confusion on what is the narrative and what is information about the narrative. I have also included family pictures as a way for readers to fully grasp how much skin color played a part in my mixed ethno-racial family. This section may be long, but of course, it would be. It truly is a longitudinal study of my journey of self-discovery. Others may find their own story embedded in mine while also seeing their own uniqueness and experience. I offer up a vulnerable look into my life in the hopes that we will see that we all belong.

### Origin Stories

This first group of stories is origin stories, stories that lay out the history and provide context to the family values that were upheld by grandparents and parents. These stories provide a look into the real, lived experiences of multiple people with diverse and conflicting identities, each being influenced by their heritage past. These stories cannot be separated from the social context because they are deeply embedded in the social context. Oliver-Rotger (2016) states after analyzing Stephanie Elizondo Griest's *Mexican Enough*, “the self must come to terms with the ways in

which history has affected selves and communities,” (p. 1). Elizondo Griest (2008), as well as Oliver-Rotger (2016), recognize that history influences identity and a common historical narrative as in the case of people of Mexican heritage influences at the very least a shared historical identity. My own family’s origin stories, particularly my Latino family’s origin stories are embedded in the much larger Mexican ethnic identity origin stories. My family’s experience has been impacted by many societal structures including governments and policies, geography and socially constructed country borders, and class and race/ethnicity discrimination as well as family and community communication, much like other Latino families. And according to Ellis, D. (2019) ethnic identity is developed in part by a share, collectively created origin story.



Figure 1: Grandma Rivera holding me at 3 months

### **Grandma Rivera**

The story of Grandma Rivera’s journey to the U.S. would not be quite the story without certain external factors like governments, geography, and society’s understanding of Mexican identity. Her identity, the identity of her children, and the identity of her children’s children as well as their lived experiences were shaped by social context as well as communication events.

The stories of my grandmother and her life journey can only be described as stories of a lifetime of struggle, toil, and pain, with scattered moments of happiness.

*The Story of the Journey Across the border*

*In the 1940s Grandma Rivera lived in León, Mexico where she married her first husband and gave birth to three beautiful brown children: two boys and a girl., Grandma Rivera's first two children died sometime before the age of two or three of unknown illnesses.*

*Grandma Rivera said that they lived in a small village up near the mountains and both times they didn't make it to the hospital before her babies died. I do not know how long there was between the death of her children or if it was the same sickness that took them both, but I can't imagine how devastating the loss was.*

*After their deaths, Grandma Rivera, her first husband, and my uncle, her last living child, moved to live in the tanning district of León, Mexico. Their barrio and street, lined with small stucco and concrete homes, remain standing today, being one of the oldest sections of León.*

*Grandma said, "Ernesto's dad was killed in a knife fight."*

*There my grandmother found herself a single mother who had lost two kids and a husband, poor, with few options.*

*She had a family member that said he knew of a man that lived in Texas that was single, and looking for a wife. He showed my grandma a picture of Grandpa Rivera.*

*She said, "he looked handsome."*

*With no other information about the man, she took her surviving child across the U.S/Mexican border to meet and marry the man from Texas.*

*My uncle filled in the gaps in this story.*

*My uncle said, “I don’t remember much about that time in my life. I remember getting in a boat, crossing the water, and when we got to the other side, some of our family were waiting with a truck. I remember it being at night and that I was told to be quiet as we ran across the field to jump into the vehicle. I crawled across the seat and lay in the section next to the rear glass. I was so small.”*

*He continued, “Mom married your grandpa within a few days of meeting him. He took her to some fancy dinner for their wedding night. The next day they snuck back across the border where your grandpa went through the process of getting us green cards so we could come back to America legally.”*

*‘After we were back in Texas, we moved to San Antonio where they worked on a migrant farm. We lived in a little building that could hardly be considered a house and I didn’t go to school. I just played with the other kids while our parents all worked.’*

The above story has undertones of deception, dishonesty, and everything that is wrong with immigration. However, this story speaks of a woman desperate to see her son and herself survive. After having lost so much, the fear became suffocating and overwhelming. Instead of giving up, Grandma Rivera picked herself up out of the dirt and decided to not lose anymore. Grandma Rivera was poor and alone, but she courageously seized an opportunity for a chance at a better life and protection. It was an opportunity to see her child fed. We delude ourselves if we believe everyone is at the level of Maslow’s hierarchal needs that they have the chance to focus on self-actualization (Kenrick et. al., 2011). Sometimes, we are just trying to survive and see that our children survive.

I know this is not what everyone sees. In fact, I know this is not what everyone in my extended family sees. It has been difficult to even hear and learn about this story as my extended

family does not like to talk about it. Most have seemed to detach from this origin story and would prefer to forget it altogether. For me, I do not want to forget it. I want to accept it and integrate it. I want to proudly speak of my grandmother's bravery because if she didn't defy imaginary lines drawn and redrawn to distinguish country borders, I would not be here. To forget her story is to forget the start of mine.

### **The Story of the Church**

*Grandma Rivera had a well-worn postcard of her church that she loved to pull out every time I went to visit her. The first time I remember her telling me the story of the church, we sat in her bedroom as she pulled it out of an old, brown trunk when I was about four or five. I dutifully sat beside her on the floor as she spoke. I couldn't understand a thing she said, but somehow, intuitively I knew it was important.*

*As I got older, my grandparents moved to an assisted living facility in town. It was a far better home than the old, dilapidated house they lived in before filled with bugs. I loved that we had to be buzzed into the three-story apartment building by using the keypad outside the front door. It felt so fancy. There, at the kitchen table of their small one-bedroom apartment, my grandmother would show me the picture of the old church time and time again. She would point out the weathered façade, the doors, and especially the stained glass windows. She would speak reverently, and I would listen reverently. Sometimes she would pull out her rosary to go along with her story. Grandma was Catholic and often prayed, although I didn't understand her prayers.*

*One time I remember my mom sat at the table with us. Grandma Rivera talked in Spanish while my white mother translated. "She says this is the church close by where she lived and where here niños were baptized," mom said. "She is telling you about the colors of the windows and doors."*

*Sometimes grandma would begin to piece parts of multiple stories together and mom would look confused. I heard that Grandma Rivera was considered crazy and didn't make sense. I still to this day do not know what they meant by that. I know she often got confused and would have flashbacks of earlier times in her life. She would forget that her children had grown up. How else she suffered mentally the family never spoke of it. It seemed to me they were all embarrassed.*

*"What did she say?" I asked with eagerness one of those times where grandma's stories melded together.*

*Mom put her hand out to signal me to wait as she focused on what my grandmother was saying. Then she turned to me and said, "I don't know. Something about the old days." I sometimes wondered if that is what my Grandma Rivera really said.*

I did not understand at the time what the significance of the church was to my Grandma Rivera or why she felt like sharing the story of it every time we came to visit. It wasn't until 2019 when we visited León, Mexico and I got out of the white, taxi van, that the memories of that church came flooding back. And it was only after finding the baptism records of her first two children that I realized why it meant so much to her. It was a story of faith, home, and family. It was a story of a life lived long ago, a separate life lived, before coming to the U.S. According to Chaney and Clark (2020) "The memories of and nostalgia for these immigrants' places of origin coupled with cultural, discriminatory, and legal hurdles they contend with in receiving communities continue to divide their notions of home (and attachment) between the places they came from and where they resettled" (p. 283). Based on the conversations we had over the years I would say my grandmother's experience was consistent with the research. I don't believe that my grandmother ever truly felt at home in the U.S. I've come to believe this because she never told me stories of living here in the U.S. She shared no stories of her time in Texas or raising her niños in Ohio. What

I know of her life after she moved to the U.S. was told to me by my mother. Grandma didn't speak the language and moved to a rural community in Northeast Ohio where there were only two Hispanic families that lived there year long. She was isolated from community and had only her children to keep her company. These were not the memories that she shared with me though, and I assume the reason she didn't is that they were not happy times.



Figure 2: Dad and I on the plane to Hawaii

### **Dad**

My grandparents worked in Texas on a migrant farm for a few years from the late 1940s until the early 1950s. Grandma Rivera gave birth to two of my aunts during that time. Grandpa Rivera was an alcoholic and abusive man who regularly fought and beat my grandmother. After one altercation, my Grandpa Rivera moved his small family to Ohio where he worked as a child on a migrant farm. My eldest uncle speculates that they had moved because my grandma threatened to leave my grandpa and move in with family there in Texas.

## **The Story of Life in the Midwest**

*My grandparents moved to a rural farm community in Northwest Ohio with three kids in tow. They worked the fields picking beans and tomatoes while living in the migrant camp on a small farm outside of a small rural town. They worked, and fought, and worked and fought some more all while having seven more children. Their life consisted of alcoholism, food scarcity, and abuse.*

*I asked my dad once, why he and my mom never fought. He said, “my parents fought all the time. The screaming and crying never stopped. I was determined that when I got married that that would never happen.”*

*After a few years of living in the migrant camp, they were kicked off the farm since my Grandpa Rivera got a job in a local factory and he no longer worked the fields. The farmer that they had worked for offered to let them stay in a run-down farmhouse on the edge of the property. The house was rat and roach-infested, with no indoor plumbing or running water, and should have been condemned, but the farmer had allowed them to stay there for next to nothing. My Grandpa Rivera continued to work on again off again, getting jobs and then losing them, all while drinking and abusing his family.*

*My uncle once said, “Your grandpa was an absolute monster. And I hated him. And I hated that my mom stayed with him.”*

My dad never told us much about his childhood when my brother and I were kids. He never told us that Grandma Rivera, his mother, had been an illegal immigrant. He never told us stories about our family heritage on his side. We had known that our dad had grown up poor, but never the extent of their poverty. I wonder if we had known more about his past, we may have been able to understand why he was so hard on us.

“Latino families dealing with various facets of illegality face notable barriers” including limitations on job prospects and geographical freedom (Abrego, 2016, p. 7; Licona & Maldonado, 2014). I assume that even my grandparents perceived legal status (none of my family has been able to answer whether my grandmother gained full citizenship) impacted their job opportunities, especially in a rural community in Ohio where the majority of Mexicans other than my family were seasonal migrant workers hired to work the fields. In addition, my Grandma Rivera’s inability to speak English further impacted their economic mobility and perceived legal status, and thus as Abrego (2016) mentions often leads to poverty.

As mentioned above, Dad never said much about his childhood. What he did say was, “you are so spoiled,” or “you don’t know how good you have it,” or “pick up your toys from the yard, we don’t want the neighbors thinking dirty Mexicans live here.” He strived his entire adult life to escape the poverty he grew up in and beat the odds stacked against him.

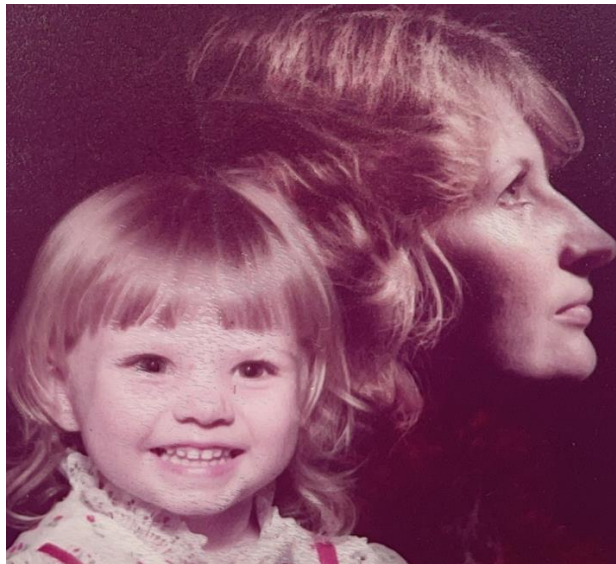


Figure 3: Mom and Me (age 3)

## **Mom**

### **The Story of Life in Indiana during the 1960s**

*Mom was born in 1958 to a poor working family in Indiana. She had three siblings: two older brothers and one younger. Her dad, my grandpa, a White, blue-collar worker born shortly before WWII, worked as a supervisor for a local tire company and her mom stayed home. My grandpa struggled with gambling so while he had a stable income, he would at times gamble his whole paycheck away. They were quite poor.*

*Mom grew up in central Indiana during the 1960s in a community that was greatly divided on race/ethnicity. There was literally “the other side of the tracks” where the racial/ethnic minorities lived. My grandpa was deeply racist and quite vocal about it.*

*My mother said that she knew at a young age that she was attracted to dark-skinned boys. In the second or third grade, she said their family went to see “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner” at the drive-in theater. My grandpa proceeded to yell the whole ride home about how disgusted he was. My mother, being around nine or ten at the time, spoke up and said, “I think it was beautiful and one day I want to marry a dark-skinned man.”*

*Of course, Grandpa was furious and said, “If you ever bring an n\*%#%\* home I’ll shoot him dead.”*

*This threat did not stop my mom from liking or dating dark-skinned boys. Most of her boyfriends were Puerto Rican, Mexican, or Black. She told me that she never let them walk her home after school or bring her home after a date so that my grandpa would never find out.*

*Mom said when she was in high school her dad “got saved” and everything changed. He stopped gambling, and drinking, and became devoutly religious. His views on race changed too, though only a little.*

*Mom met my dad after she graduated high school. She met him at a little Pentecostal church, in a small, Northwest Ohio town where they both lived. Mom said, "your grandpa accepted your dad as his son-in-law. I think he was just happy that he wasn't black."*

One might question why I feel the need to add my parent's stories to a paper about my identity formation. I think it is important to explore their upbringing as it establishes their individual identities and values as well as how they came to be an interracial couple in the 1980s when it was still not widely accepted by society as well as their families. According to Qian & Lichter (2011), Americans may have become more accepting of interracial marriage for other people, but still hold prejudices when it comes to individuals in their own family choosing a spouse of a different race/ethnicity.

I have wondered why my parents would risk social challenges and alienation by intermarrying. I have, at one point in time, assumed that my dad wanted to escape his past to assimilate and validate his "whiteness". I recognize this accusation borders on affirming the myths that led to the Exchange theory, which is the belief "that people of color who marry Whites are trying to 'raise' themselves economically, socially, and racially," (Wehrly et al., 1999, p. 28-29). I no longer believe that this was the intention behind the relationship. It is much more likely that my parents found themselves in a homogeneous community where my dad had very few options of marrying a Mexican and became employed in a union shop, at GM that catapulted him into the economic middle class without dealing with economical hindrances and limitations because of his ethno-racial identity. In addition, mom was actively seeking out a dark-skinned man (her words not mine). Mom spent her high school years learning the Spanish language and Latino culture because she intended on marrying a Latino man.



Figure 4: Parents (1981) and me (9 mo)

### **Interracial Marriage in the 1980s**

Interracial couples have faced challenges in our society for decades and continue to do so today. As interracial marriage was not even legal nationwide in the U.S. until 1967, which incidentally was the same time the movie “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner” starring Sidney Poitier was released, it is understandable that my parents faced some challenges in the 1980s. It was especially difficult for a couple that lived in the Midwest which had statistically along with the South, had the lowest percentage of interracial marriage (Wehrly et al., 1999). There wasn’t much diversity within their community and there were strong religious opinions my parents faced being devout Pentecostals. I do not know, nor will I share all the stories of the challenges they faced, but below are three that highlight the challenges of being an interracial couple.

*Mom told me of a time not too long after I was born when she went to a neighbor’s house. My parents at the time lived in “Taco town” which was the unofficial name of an area on the*

*southeast side of the small town where we lived where individuals of the Hispanic race/ethnicity also resided. This neighbor was Mexican, and mom had been invited to a Tupperware party. Most of the women invited were Mexican and proceeded to speak Spanish to one another during the party. My mother didn't say anything. At one point one of the Mexican women said to another in Spanish, "It's such a shame he had to marry a white woman. They are always taking our good men. They come in here like they are better than everyone, the white bitch."*

*My mother looked at the woman and in perfect Spanish said, "Who are you calling a bitch? He obviously found something he liked and if you have a problem keeping a man, that is your problem."*

This conversation is certainly not the most intellectual savvy sparring match, but what can you expect from a few small, town twenty-year-old girls. The reason I share this particular narrative is that this is an example of the challenges my parents faced marrying interracially. They risked the judgment of both their communities to be together and there was a common belief that "intermarriage and multiracial people represent the loss or the 'dilution' of distinct ethnic and racial groups; and mixed-race people and their families have dubious political and social loyalties," (Wehrly et al., 1999, p. 29).

### **Discrimination in the Church**

*Mom said we were going to go to another church. I was sad. The little Pentecostal church where my mom was the song leader, and my dad was the youth leader, was the only church I had been a part of. We had spent hours there. It felt like home. I couldn't imagine going somewhere else for church, but mom said we had to go. She didn't say why we were leaving only that we were going to go somewhere new.*

Years later my mom told me the story of why we left the little church that contained family memories, as it was the place my parents married and where they baptized me.

*The church had gotten a new pastor and he was wanting to make changes to the “church leadership.” He called a meeting and had us come to his office.*

*“Bruno. Patsy. The church elders and I need you to step down from ministry. We can no longer have you serve in leadership.”*

*Mom looked at dad stunned and then back to Pastor Smith. “But why?” she asked perplexed.*

*“You are unequally yoked in the sight of God. The scripture says, ‘You shall not intermarry. Deuteronomy 7:3 and 2 Corinthians 6:14 say, Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness?’*

*‘You being married outside your race is a sin and we can no longer have you working with the youth of this church leading them astray,’ he said.*

*Mom became overwhelmed with fury, and dad was dumbfounded but there was no way to stay. They could argue over the interpretation of the scripture, but it would do no good. “So that’s why we left and found another church.”*

Sometimes the challenges they faced were petty comments made by racially/ethnically narrow-minded individuals, but other times there were issues of real danger.

*Our family was taking a greyhound down to Florida from Ohio and we had a stop in Atlanta. My parents decided that we would walk around downtown for a little bit to stretch our legs. We were maybe a block away from the bus station where we were walking side by side when my parents gave each other a look, stopped holding hands, and moved to each take one of us by*

*the hand. My mom took my hand and walked on ahead while my dad took my brother's hand and slowed their pace. I tried to stop to let them catch up, but my mom pulled at my hand harder and said, "keep walking." I didn't know what frightened her, but I was frightened too. I instinctively knew that it had something to do with my parents being an interracial couple.*

*We made it safely back to the bus station and not another word was said about it. We didn't leave the station again until we got back on the bus to go to Florida.*

*It wasn't until years later that my mom told me about what happened. Evidently, as we walked down the street, my parents were receiving disapproving looks by those we passed by. This in and of itself is not really a big deal, but at one point they had passed a group of young, black men and a few had made some racial comments and comments about the two of them together. Mom wouldn't tell me exactly what they said, only that my parent's realized it wasn't safe to be out and about walking together in downtown Atlanta.*

The above story stood out because it was the only time I felt unsafe being biracial. I became keenly aware at that moment, walking down the street, that people had a problem with interracial couples. Before this, I was aware that people had a problem with Mexicans, but I did not know people had a problem with a Mexican being married to a Caucasian. This is the first time I recognized that society did not accept our family and by extension me.

### **Construction of Identity**

While the above narratives impacted my parents, their identities, and their relationship, this next section focuses on the stories and the communication events that happened and impacted my identity formation during my formative years. To give some brief context, I am a mixed ethno-racial woman, born in 1980, whose father is Mexican-American and mother is Caucasian/White. I grew up in a Midwest rural community that was racially/ethnically divided. My family climbed

from what would be considered economically poor to become a working, middle-class family by the 1990s. You will see in these stories both the communication that took place as well as how they were often steeped in societal structures which during that time I knew nothing about. I wonder if I knew then what I know now if these communication events would have taken on a different meaning. First, we will look at stories that validated my identity as a mixed ethno-racial person. Then we will look at exclusion stories that invalidated my identity as a mixed ethno-racial person.

### **Inclusion Stories**

As discussed in the literature review, communication events that validate one's sense of belonging and acceptance have a tremendous impact on one's identity (Soliz et al., 2009; Ting-Toomey, 2005). Below are the few memories where I felt cultural, ethnic, and familial acceptance or inclusion by my Latino side of the family. The small number of stories is not lost on me. I could only think of three. Just three memories where I felt truly a part of the family, and ethnic group, and only two, which are shared here, were in my formative years.

#### ***Grandma's House***

*I sat there on my knees next to my grandma on the old, faded carpet, in front of a large, weathered brown trunk. It felt sacred in a way, like the opening of a time capsule that held the memories of a lifetime ago. She pulled out a stack of pictures and postcards that were once black and white, some muted colors, but all now a faded yellow.*

*She handed me a postcard with a picture of a church and began her story. Of course, I didn't understand it, since she spoke in Spanish, but she spoke so reverently as she pointed to the elements on the postcard. She pointed at the tall steeple that stretched into the heavens and the*

*stained glass windows that I figured were once colorful and I nodded as if I understood. Then she handed me another tattered, worn paper. This time a picture of a little boy. She proceeded to share yet another story that I could only assume was about the brown little boy in the picture.*

*Who was he? How did she know him?*

*Although I could not understand her, I never grew tired of listening to her speak. I sat dutifully on that carpet next to her as she continued to pull things out of the large trunk and share them with me in a language I didn't understand. I felt in those moments connected to her and my heritage and no language barrier could break that connection. I was accepted. I belonged.*

### ***California Conversation***

I remember the first time we went out west to California to see my dad's sisters. Two of his older sisters had lived in Southern California since before I was born. I had seen them on a few occasions when they came back to Ohio to visit, but it had been over four years since I last saw them. We stayed a few nights with my oldest aunt and her husband and their one daughter. My cousin had a dark brown, flawless complexion and straight, thick, dark, brown/black hair. Most of my cousins were darker-skinned than me and none of them had the blond hair that I had as a child. I had grown accustomed to looking different.

But what I will always remember, is how my dad's other sister treated me. She looked at me and my brother so lovingly, like she genuinely cared about us. She was by far my favorite of all my dad's sisters.

*One evening my aunt and her Hispanic husband came over to her sister's house for dinner. We sat around the table for what felt like hours. I was getting sleepy as I was still adjusting to California time.*

*I sat there quietly as the adults talked until my aunt asked, “Rachel, do you speak Spanish?”*

*“Uh, no,” I said sheepishly.*

*“Well, you must learn. It is important you speak Spanish. Be sure to take it in school.”*

*I looked at my mom and then back at my aunt and said, “ok.”*

*She continued, “And when you marry, be sure to marry your own kind and teach your kids Spanish.*

*I looked at her dumbfounded. “But Auntie, what is my own kind?”*

*She looked at me for a second and said, “you need to marry a Mexican.”*

I remember being both thrilled and saddened by what she said. I was thrilled that she considered me Mexican and family because I often didn't feel accepted. But I also remember feeling a little sad that my Whiteness seemed to be invalidated. That it somehow needed to be weeded out. This conversation also perpetuated the idea that you could not be more than one thing. From my perspective, it seemed to me that for a second, my Aunt forgot that I was mixed ethno-racial. When she saw me, she saw me as family and Mexican, which I deeply appreciated, but by not recognizing my mixed ethno-racial identity she was unintentionally denying a part of who I was that I didn't want to deny. Growing up, I often felt like I was being compartmentalized and could only ever be half of who I truly was.

### **Exclusion Stories**

The next set of stories from my formative years caused me to question the validity of my identity as a mixed ethno-racial person. I don't know if my disconnect with my ethnicity is correlated more with the fact that my skin is White or that I have a complicated relationship with my father who is Latino. Probably, like most things, it is both so I will attempt to break down both.

The first is that I am White passing. I cannot remember a time when it was not obvious to me that I looked different than my dad and my dad's side of the family. I became aware of it through the many narratives I heard, the jokes that were made, and the stares I received.

There were the typical jokes like "are you the mailman's kid?" or "are you adopted?", which were repeated affirming I was different. And then there were the stories repeated and shared as if people needed the entertainment at my expense. I can't count the number of times I heard the following tale told by my late mother.

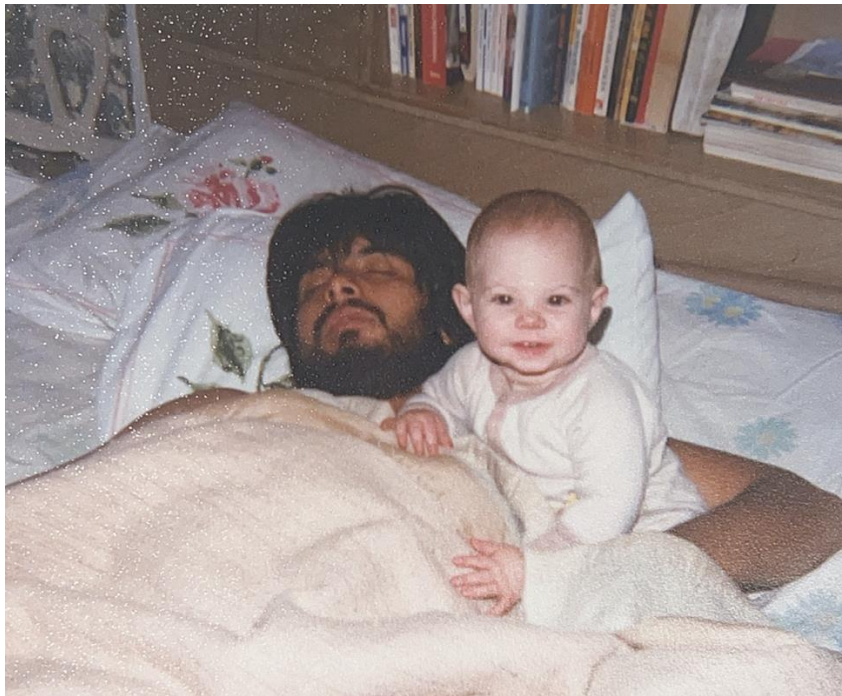


Figure 5: Dad and Me (1 year)

### ***She Can't be Yours***

*When we moved to Florida, Bruno worked construction building the new Tampa Bay stadium. He was dark before, but working out in the sun all day, he got really dark. And Rachel, she was white as can be with snow-white hair. No one thought she was his.*

*For a while, he would take her to the store, but then she'd start crying that she wanted her mom. "I want mommy. I want mommy," she laughed.*

*Bruno said the stares he would get from the women in the store were murderous. He thought for sure someone was going to call the cops thinking he kidnapped her. Finally, after a few more times of this happening, he said, "that's it."*

*He said he wasn't taking her until she was older and she could say she wasn't being kidnapped.*

I don't believe this story was told to make me feel any certain way. It was just an interesting story to be told. People seemed to enjoy the fascinating narrative of a mixed ethnic, colored family in the 80s. I do think the distinctions and differences highlighted were more about me than my brother.

The narrative surrounding my brother growing up was, "you look just like your dad." There was a narrative of belonging. What is further interesting is there were never any narratives about how different my brother was from our mom. Maybe this is because his external features truly looked like a mixture of both mom and dad.

My family was not the only ones who noticed or made mention of me not "looking" like I was Mexican. I heard it in school. When I would hang out with my Latino friends, most of them of Mexican heritage, all of them being darker skinned than me, issues of racial discrimination would come up. I was told I couldn't possibly understand because I wasn't "Mexican, Mexican."

And when I hung around white friends who at times would make jokes about "beaners and tomato pickers," I would get angry, but they didn't understand why. I would then have to go into the lengthy explanation that I was Mexican and then deal with either their looks of disbelief or their offense that I had somehow lied to them about who I was.

Usually, I could count on my name for some ethnic validation. If it hadn't been for my last name, Rivera, no one would have assumed I was anything but white.

### ***The Hispanic Academic Achievement Award***

*In 7<sup>th</sup> grade, I won the Hispanic Academic Achievement award. I remember being surprised my name was called, not because the award was for Hispanics, but because I was doing well in school. As I went to stand up in the large assembly hall, a boy sitting a few seats down from me said, "You're not Mexican."*

*There were a few giggles from the girls next to me. I glared at the boy and with all the sass a typical 7<sup>th</sup> grader had, I replied, "Yes, I am, my last name is Rivera, isn't it?"*

*He laughed, "You're not a real Mexican though."*

*I glared once more attempting a vibrato I didn't quite feel. As I made my way down the aisle in the auditorium with 200 or so pairs of eyes staring at me, I felt my cheeks begin to heat. I felt every person assessing me, judging me, determining whether I measured up to the stereotype they had of what a "real Mexican" looked like. I felt the need to explain to every person that stared at me with calculating eyes that I was not a fraud. I was just as much Mexican as I was Caucasian. But there was no time to explain. I stood there, instead of being proud of my accomplishment, feeling like an imposter. I was embarrassed once again, not of being Latina, but not looking like one.*

The few stories demonstrate how my skin color excluded me from belonging completely as part of an ethnicity I longed to be validated as a member of. Instead, I felt shame, isolation, embarrassment, anger, and insecurity. While I am sure these are feelings felt by most teenagers at that time, these feelings for me were directly tied to my body and the color of my skin.

This story and my subsequent feelings about the event and by extension myself plays right into the myth that a multi/mixed ethno-racial person will always struggle with trying to integrate a split identity and that this internal struggle along with the rejection of their group will lead to the person living a marginalized life (Wehrly et al., 1999). What I have come to realize now is that “the historical events and political meanings of race have affected the psychological issue of multiracial identity,” meaning that structural flaws in society have led to this so-called pathological challenge multi/mixed ethno-racial people face, (Wehrly et al., 1999, p. 29). Society has created a problem, meaning not allowing space for the multiplicity of identity and accepting the hierarchal structure of race, and the economical need for competition and then said, look people with multi/mixed ethno-racial identity struggle with their identity in our systems, (Ballinas & Bachmeier 2020; Sanders, 2002; Soliz et al., 2009; Wehrly et al., 1999).

As I said in the paragraph at the beginning of this section of exclusion stories. I can’t always determine if my feelings around my identity were brought on more by the communication events that focused on my body and being White passing or if it is more directly related to perceived unwantedness by my father. The stories below, do not paint a pretty picture of my father or our relationship so I want to preface these stories by saying, I have never spoken to my dad about them. I have no idea how he felt and how he perceived the events. I imagine that he perceives them quite differently if he remembers them at all. These divergent perspectives could be a generational issue, a cultural issue, or a family issue. I don’t know. Both perspectives are valid to the individual. What I can say in response to my perspective is that my sense-making of these events directly impacted my perception of him, myself, our relationship, and my identity validation and formation as well as increased my feelings of abandonment and rejection. Musetti and company define the feeling as “parent-related loneliness (i.e., a lack of meaningful relationships with parents that

implies feelings of rejection and abandonment),” (2021, p. 2). My perception of my father’s feelings for me impacted how I made sense of the events and perceived truths can have real consequences.

### ***You’re on Your Own***

*When I walked out of school that afternoon in ninth grade, I felt the crisp winter breeze on my exposed cheeks. I waited by the brick wall next to the front doors for my mother to come. High school was tough. Not academically, but socially. I wasn’t really popular, but I wasn’t an “untouchable” either. I was somewhere in the middle like the sea of other students that poured out the front doors moments ago when the 3 o’clock bell rang.*

*I saw Jordon, the boy that recently broke up with me to get back together with his previous girlfriend, storming toward me. His eyes held so much hate, but I couldn’t for the life of me understand why.*

*“He broke up with me! I didn’t break up with him,” I thought as he charged forward pushing me against the hard, cold brick wall. I dropped my bag and for the first time that I can remember, I felt completely helpless. He wrapped his freezing hand around my neck and pushed me harder against the brick.*

*“What did you say to her?”*

*I couldn’t think. I couldn’t make sense of what he was asking. I just gasped for air and pushed him away.*

*“Say to who? I don’t know what you are talking about.”*

*“To Kristin,” he yelled. “She broke up with me and I know it is because of you. What did you say? You had to say something you lying cunt.”*

*“I didn’t say anything.”*

*“You’re a fucking bitch. I should have never went out with you.”*

*He started to lean toward me again and I thought for sure he would hit me this time. But seconds before he made his move, my older cousin, Jimmy, who attended the same school, grabbed him by the collar of his jacket and pulled him away. He threw him to the ground and in a menacing voice said, “if you ever come near my cousin again, I will beat the shit out of you.”*

*Jordon got himself up off the ground and stared at my cousin who was two times his size. He walked away towards the bus stop, not uttering another word.*

*The realization of what just happened began to sink in. I felt the rage begin to build and I screamed a wordless, guttural scream at his back as he walked away, my cousin wrapping his arm around my waist so I could not chase after him. And then, I cried.*

*I was embarrassed. I was scared. I was angry.*

*Why didn’t I fight back?*

*Why did I freeze?*

*A few weeks passed and we, my dad, mom, brother, me, and my cousin (the sister of Jimmy), were at a Pizza Hut eating lunch after church. My cousin brought up the incident and my mom looked at me in horror as I blushed. I hadn’t told her and I told her everything. I tried to make light of it as if it was not a big deal, but my cousin felt the need to retell the whole story.*

*I looked at my parents, hoping they wouldn’t be angry, but never expecting what came out of my dad’s mouth. “Well, if that’s the kind of guy she wants.” He didn’t even give me a second glance. He went back to eating his pizza.*

*This is just one of the many stories where I felt like I was on my own, at least in regards to my father. I felt no familial protection from my dad or a sense that he would always have my back. I perceived this to mean I was unloved and uncared for. The message I received although maybe*

not intended but was received just the same you don't belong to me, and that perceived message only further validated my feeling of neglect.

As I began to grapple with the feelings of neglect from my father, the detachment I felt from him grew. With repeated communication events where he stated I was just like my mom, I quickly leaned into my relationship with my mother whom I came to believe I was more like.



Figure 6: From Left to Right: Mom, Me, Brother, Dad

### ***Time to meet the family***

*It was July and we were on day 3 of our drive from Ohio to San Antonio, Texas. It was another trip I do not ever remember being consulted on. But that was how all the family trips were. My dad wanted to go somewhere, and we were along for the ride. This time, Dad had planned a trip to drive down to San Antonio for his cousin's daughter's quinceañera. I had never met them.*

*None of us had, not even my dad. And, he never talked about them. There were no stories of past holidays, no traditions we were a part of. These people were strangers.*

*We pulled up to the small, tan ranch in the middle of nowhere. The surrounding land was barren and open. As I got out, ready to get some fresh air, I was greeted with humidity and heat that felt like you were in a sauna. I instantly started sweating.*

*My dad's cousin stepped out of the house with his wife and kids to greet us. My brother and I were barely introduced before my dad and mom followed the couple into the house. I was then introduced to the couple's daughter who took me back to her room. I don't remember what we talked about. I just remember feeling completely lost and out of place.*

*I don't remember much of the next few days other than staying glued to my mother's side. We went to the quinceañera where I sat by mom in the old Catholic church with no air conditioning. Then, after the two-hour ceremony which included a mass, we walked next door to the church's rec hall which was decorated with paper flowers and streamers. The band was playing traditional Tejano music and there was the smell of fresh tortillas and carne asada in the air. We sat at a table much as you do at a wedding reception with rows of long rectangle tables covered in white paper tablecloths.*

*We waited as my cousin, along with her damas and chambelanes, proceeded in. They completed their well-choreographed dance and then others began to filter out on the dance floor.*

*I didn't dance in the beginning. I sat in the sweltering heat in my spaghetti strap dress feeling extremely out of place and bored. My mother, who could always tell when I felt uncomfortable tried to pull me on the dance floor for a cumbia. Again, it was obvious I didn't fit in. My alabaster skin stood out next to all the beautiful brown-skinned girls dancing around me.*

*What was my issue?*

*Was I being racist?*

*My father had many times before hinted at such when he made remarks such as I was “stuck up” and thought I was better than everyone else. But I didn’t. I felt less than. I wanted so much to belong. To belong to this family and this culture that the color of my skin prohibited me from being a part of.*

Looking back, I wonder if my feelings of isolation came from the color of my skin, the fact that these people were strangers, or the lack of acceptance as my father’s child, both by him and others.

*“You look just like your mother,” they’d say. “You act like your mother.” I could barely remember a time when I didn’t feel like an outsider.*

I did not hate being Latina.

I hated being white-passing in a Latino family.

I hated that I couldn’t look and be more like my cousins or brother. Then maybe I would be loved.

Oliver-Rotger’s (2016) research highlights this feeling as she quotes Ricardo Pérez Vivancos, who “calls it the “outsider-insider,” that is the “ally” or “proxy” who does not totally share in the culture, occupies a “marginal” position within it, and yet seeks to give voice, preserve, and represent it.” (p. 1). This desire to be “in”, I know full well that it can never be so.

## **Deconstruction**

My formative years left me with an unstable, confused identity foundation. I knew I was a mixed ethno-racial girl, but that was not an identity that I understood and certainly not an identity that was integrated and fully accepted. I had a perceived understanding of what it meant to be White and what it meant to be Latina, but I didn’t understand what it meant to be both in the same

body. There was no language available to effectively united the two nor did I have experiences that could at least model the concept of mixed ethno-racial identity. I didn't know many other mixed ethno-racial people other than my family and those that I did know seemed to either pick or be ascribed to one single identity. It was usually ascribed by the color of one's skin. My brother was Mexican. I was White.

It often felt like a warring or a splitting in two or three within me. I sometimes joked that *“the white man in me wanted the Mexican to shine his shoes, while the American Indian was ready to kill them both.”*

While the above sentence is culturally insensitive and laced with ethno-racial stereotypes, one needs to understand I didn't know any different. The only knowledge I had about the diversity that was within me is based on a racial/ethnic discriminatory society and a community that only seemed capable of labeling, distinguishing, and categorizing one another. My Latino family was no better than my White family. They both seemed to dislike Black people. They would make racially charged jokes about other groups, “all in good fun.” It seemed based on the people in my life that someone couldn't be more than just one thing and the cognitive dissonance building inside me was quickly becoming too much, which led to the deconstruction of my identity (Derrida, 2010). Derrida's (2010) philosophical concept of deconstruction is purposely difficult to define but for our purpose, it is both “a strategy” and a “mode of inquiry” (Derrida, 2010, p. 1). When applied to identity, deconstruction is a purposeful strategy to question one's understanding of their identity and the structural language used to define it (Derrida, 2010, p.1).



Figure 7: Top left: Dad, Top right: Mom, Bottom left: Brother, Bottom right: Me

### ***Unequally yoked and born out of Sin***

*My brother and I went to a small Christian school in rural Northwest Ohio and at that school, a requirement was a Bible class. We had different teachers over the course of our high school years as they could never seem to find someone to stay. None of the Bible class teachers had teaching degrees and only a few had some form of theological training. In my senior year of High School, Bible class was taught by Mrs. Reader, a local pastor's wife. I will never forget her or the words she spoke that day.*

*We were discussing what it meant in the Bible when it said to not be unequally yoked. She clarified with certainty, "It means not to marry someone different than you. Of course, it means an unbeliever, but also someone of a different race. It is a sin."*

*I put my head down and my cheeks began to redden. I didn't say a word. Others in the class who knew I was half-Mexican looked back at me to see how I would respond, but what could I say? I was essentially told my existence was not meant to be and I was born out of sin.*

*I grew tired of having to defend my identity to narrow-minded people.*

*I was tired of explaining to white people what kind of food I normally ate.*

*I was tired of explaining to Mexicans why I was such a *gringa*.*

*I was tired of fighting to feel accepted and validated.*

*I began to hate myself and it would take years before I began a journey back to self-acceptance.*

### ***The Divorce***

*My dad knocked on my bedroom door, which he rarely did, and came into my room to talk to me. He sat next to me on my bed and said "I'm leaving. Your mom and I are getting divorced. The only reason we married in the first place was she got pregnant, and we were Christians and felt like it was the right thing to do, but I never loved her."*

*I sat there in silence. I didn't know what to say. I was too stunned to be angry yet. Not stunned that they were getting divorced. We knew that was coming. I was stunned by what he was saying.*

*How could he say that?*

*How could he say that I, an accident, was the only reason they got married?*

*I looked away quickly and stared down at the cream-colored carpet knowing damn well that if I kept looking at him, I would break down and cry. I would not cry in front of him. All I could think about was how I was the reason both of my parents had lived the last twenty years of*

*their lives miserable. My brain could not cope. All my fears were true. I was unwanted, an accident, and it had just been confirmed.*

My parents separated when I was eighteen. After a reconciliation that lasted maybe six months, their divorce was finalized in 2001. The divorce shifted my whole world as it did not just feel like my parents were splitting up but that my own identity was being severed. My identity as a mixed ethno-racial child seemed to be splitting. While it is difficult to explain, I felt like I did not just choose my mom's side for wanting me, I felt like I was deliberately choosing my Whiteness, the only side I had ever felt like I belonged to.

This was confirmed repeatedly, when my dad, after their divorce, stopped inviting me to the Rivera family events. My brother and I weren't invited to holidays or gatherings. It felt as if my dad did not just sever ties with my mom, but with us as well. At first, I was angry. I felt unloved, and unwanted by not only my dad but my whole Latino family. None of my aunts or uncles ever reached out to us. While I am sure this wasn't done to be malicious, it hurt just the same. Eventually, I came to accept the loss. I had to. I still had my mom and my mom's family. It felt easier to just forget that whole other side of me than to face the feelings of abandonment and being unwanted. It was easier to just pretend I was whole, and white and loved.



Figure 8: Dad and Me (2002)

### ***The Wedding***

*My wedding was the day I changed my name. The day my father walked me down the aisle and metaphorically “gave me away,” But let’s be honest, he gave me away a long time ago. I had even hesitated to let him come to my wedding as I knew his presence would be difficult for my mom. Frankly, her feelings mattered more to me than his at the time. But in the end, I did let him come. He did walk me down the aisle. He did dance with me for the “father/daughter dance” and then he left. It was complete. I was a Rivera no more. I was a Mitchell, and I was happy.*

My last name has been Mitchell for almost 20 years. Now no one asks about my ethnicity. No one assumes Rachel Mitchell is anything but White. I don’t know what is worse, being questioned repeatedly for having a Hispanic last name, but looking White, or being mixed ethno-racial, but never being identified as such. It’s as if the loss of the Rivera name was the end of my Latina identity. When I married my husband and changed my name, I relinquished the last identifier I had to my culture, my family, and my ethnicity. This has affected me more than I thought it would.

## **Reconstruction**

Things began to change in my late twenties and early thirties. Although I had somewhat lived successfully for many years by leaning into an identity that was and would be loved and accepted (White, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender, Christian, and “American”), I started to feel this shadow self or forgotten self slowly rising to the surface. Ethnic identity theories do not often address the catalyst for reconstructing one’s identity, but Torres and Magolda (2004) find that cognitive dissonance is that starting point and I would agree. For me, the cognitive dissonance about my identity could no longer be ignored at the time when my kids were born.

### ***Baby Boy***

*They put him in my arms, and I was in awe. He fundamentally changed my worldview in an instant just by lying in my arms and breathing. My view on love changed. My view on Christianity and sin, was shattered. My view of my own identity, new, strange, and unfamiliar. He instantly belonged to me. All of him, not just parts of him. All the good, and if there was any bad (impossible), but if there was, it belonged too. I realized in a moment that there was absolutely nothing I would not do, give, or sacrifice for this baby boy.*

My son’s birth and eventually my daughter’s would come to teach me about full acceptance where everything belonged that I couldn’t quite grasp before I had them. I had people in my life that loved me: my mother, my brother, and my husband. But I couldn’t understand it. I felt it had to be earned and I had to wear a mask, never fully sharing my true self. It wasn’t until I learned it was possible to give love unconditionally to others, that I knew it would be possible for me to have that too. My kids did not just expand my ability to love in general; they opened the possibility of expanding that love to myself.

### ***Goodbye Labels, Welcome Integrated Identity***

*Over the last ten years, I have been on a journey of saying goodbye to labels that no longer serve me and welcoming identities and pieces of myself I had buried, forgotten, and never explored. I dropped the label and identity of Christian, or at least in the form that I had always known. I embraced new gender roles and shattered old ones. I could be a wife and mother, and also be educated and strong. I could speak up and not play the role of the silent wife who stood dutifully beside her husband never speaking her mind. I could work outside the home and go to college. I became a first generational college student on both my father's and mother's sides. I will be the first to gain my master's degree on both sides of my family. I have worked on integrating every piece of my identity because no person is just one thing.*

It took a long time to recognize the truth that integration was key to wholeness. Oliver-Rotger (2016) highlighted a quote by Gaspar de Alba “For this writer and critic, the Chicana writer is capable of making sense of a dual heritage by preserving memories, rituals, and stories, and also, and most importantly, by changing the culture and breeding “a new language and a new lifestyle, new values and images and rhythms, new dreams and conflicts into that heritage, making all of this brouhaha and cultural schizophrenia a new legacy for those who have still to squeeze into legitimacy as human beings and American citizens” (p. 1). This quote highlights a way of honoring the past and integrating it into the present and creating a new future.

I will not share every story and communication event over the last decade that has been instrumental in integrating and accepting myself. I will share just two more stories as they are pertinent to my acceptance and identity.



Figure 9: Left to Right: Aunt, Uncle, Dad, Donna, Me, Cousin

### ***The Trip***

In September 2019, my father offered to take his eldest living brother to Mexico to see where he was born and spent the early years of his life. My uncle is the third oldest of twelve children and was born in León, Mexico. I requested to tag along as I, too, was interested to see where my grandmother came from. On September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019, my dad and his fiancé, my uncle and his wife, and my cousin and I got on a plane in Detroit and flew to León, Mexico.

*The itinerary was to search for information on my grandmother, my uncle's father, and the two siblings that died years earlier there in Mexico. We started our search at the church where we believed my grandmother and her first husband got married and where the eldest three siblings were baptized. I explained to my uncle and dad that the Catholic church often held birth and death records that were often unable to be found through the government especially when poor families often did not go to the hospital to have their children. Sure enough, we found the church still standing in the neighborhood where my grandmother lived in the 1940s and they had records of*

*the three siblings' baptism. I could have sat in that church all day. There was so much history. And for the first time in a long time, I felt connected to my family heritage.*

*The baptism records had the street address where they lived at that time, Fresa Street, or Strawberry Street. We loaded back in the van to find the street and it was still there. It continued to be in one of the oldest neighborhoods in the city, the tanning district. As we unloaded from the van, we were greeted with a pungent smell that we later came to understand came from the tanning factories in the barrio. Someone told us many of the factories had updated their technology, but there were still a few that used the old ways.*

*As we stood on the side of the road, the houses that lined the street looked nothing like I had seen before. They were made of stucco or clay and were single story, small square structures. Some of them had bright painted doors but the exterior of most of the houses was brown or tan. These houses had been there for nearly 100 years and some of the people that came out on the street curious about the tourists that were standing on the street looking around looked nearly that old as well. My uncle and dad proceeded to show the neighbors pictures of my grandma, her first husband, and my uncle as a boy, but no one remembered them. Of course, they would have all been children at the time.*

*The people were fascinated with my uncle's story. Although they didn't remember him, most of them had lived there all their lives. They had said the neighborhood had looked the same for over 50 years.*

*I looked around in awe. This is where my grandmother lived in her twenties. This was where she started her family, where she lost her first husband and her first two children. This was the home she left to travel hundreds of miles with a seven-year-old in tow, to a different country to marry a man she had never met. I couldn't help but be impressed with her resilience and strength.*

*In the 1940s as a single mother, she had found a way to survive and attempt to provide a future for her son.*

*The trip lasted six days, but the impact was momentous. I learned more about my grandmother, uncle, and dad in those 6 days than I had in my whole life. I felt for a brief time that I was part of the family. This was not just their ancestry, it was mine as well, and nothing could take that fact away from me. Not the narratives I grew up with, or the color of my skin. Sebastiana was my grandmother, and I was part of a resilient lineage. It was in my blood.*

I realized then that communication events can and do validate and invalidate one's identity, but I didn't have to allow it. I could courageously accept what I wanted as mine and not accept what others believed or validated. My well-being now dictates what I integrate and those that truly love me will accept all of me. The new information I gained from life experiences, events, histories, and academic knowledge, butted heads with previous ways of thinking, and "developmental growth" happened (Torres and Magolda, 2004, p. 335).

### ***Covid***

*I walked into work early on a Wednesday morning, the air brisk, and felt a frustration rise as my phone began to ring. I fumbled through my bag and pulled my phone out, looking at the caller ID. It was Deb, my dad's fiancé.*

*"Hey, Deb. What's up?"*

*I could hear the trembling in her voice. She was scared. "It's your dad. He's got Covid. We both have it, but he is not doing well. We drove back from South Dakota and went straight to the hospital. They sent him home and said to keep an eye on him and come back, if necessary, but Rachel, he doesn't sound so good. He can't catch his breath and every time he talks, he starts a coughing fit."*

*Time stood still.*

*I stopped walking standing in the middle of the parking lot and my heart dropped.*

*“Okay.” That’s all I could think to say.*

*“He didn’t want me to call you at first. You know how your dad doesn’t want you to worry, but I thought you should know. I think he should go back to the hospital, but he doesn’t want me to take him.”*

*I grew angry and snapped. “I don’t care what he wants. If you think he needs to go to the hospital, then take him. This isn’t a joke.” I tried to calm myself before speaking again. “Can I talk to him?”*

*I heard muffled sounds as she handed the phone to my dad. Through labored breath, his weak voice came through the phone. “Hey Rach.” He coughed again.*

*“Hey. Deb says you aren’t well.”*

*“Yeah.”*

*“Dad, if Deb thinks you need to go to the hospital, then let her take you to the hospital.”*

*“Yeah.” Another gasp for breath came over the phone.*

*I didn’t know what to say. My father was stubborn. It wasn’t like him to give in so quickly. He sounded scared and helpless. I felt scared and helpless. “I love you. You need to go to the hospital. It’s gonna be okay.” I thought to myself, how the hell did I know he would be okay. He certainly didn’t sound okay. “I love you. Give the phone back to Deb.”*

*Another minute of muffled sound. “Rachel. I’m here.”*

*“You take him to the hospital. I don’t care what he says. He needs to go now.”*

*“Yes. I agree.”*

*“Call me as soon as they see him.”*

*"I will."*

*I hung up the phone, still standing in the middle of the parking lot, thinking, 'Oh God, he's gonna die.'*

For the next few months, my father fought for his life. He was on a ventilator for fifty-six days and in a medically induced coma for over two months. We had good days and bad days, and days when we thought it was the end.

*As I sat by his bed holding his weathered hand one evening, while he lay there in a coma, letting the machine breathe for him, I thought about his life. It is only natural to think about life in the face of death. There he laid, so frail and broken, and not nearly as scary as he once seemed.*

*On one of the days I visited, he woke up and looked into my eyes. My breath caught in my throat for a moment, but then I smiled and said, "hey."*

*He didn't say anything at first. He came to slowly over the course of a few weeks, each time for a little longer. Slowly he began to remember us and what had happened. Slowly my dad came back.*

My brother, my dad's fiancé, and I would sit for hours by my dad's side trying to help him regain his memory. We talked about our childhood.

We talked about his childhood.

We talked about his grandkids and the future.

As he lay in that hospital bed, unable to walk, still shaking with tremors that are often a side effect of his condition, we had nothing else to do but talk.

*One day, as I sat by his bed just talking about life, we broached the subject of his retirement. "I've worked at GM for over 40 years. I guess it is time to retire," he said.*

*"Do you remember when you started at GM?" I asked.*

*“Oh yeah,” he said with a slight slur to his speech. “Your uncle got me that job at GM. I had just graduated high school and he got me in. I couldn’t believe how lucky I was to be making that kind of money.”*

*Dad was so proud of his work accomplishment, and I can see why. Though he never graduated college, he took a few classes that led him to move up to skilled trades at GM. Coming from a family that had no stability, he prided himself on creating a stable, consistent income for his family. We never felt the sting of going to bed hungry or being embarrassed for having to wear raggedy old clothes. My dad had worked hard and made his way to the economically middle class. We had lived in a White neighborhood, he married a White woman, and he successfully assimilated into the mainstream, White culture.*

It would be unfair to assume that my dad married my mom purely because she represented an identity that he greatly desired “mainstream, White culture,” but it is fair to say that my parents fit the stereotype of interracial couples found in the research. “For America's ethnoracial minority populations, greater exposure to the majority White population presumably increases as they become assimilated or incorporated into the social, political, and economic life of mainstream American society,” and this has been seen to lead to an increase in interracial marriage (Qian & Lichter, 2011, p. 1067; Wehrly et al., 1999). As was stated in the introduction of this thesis a person cannot separate themselves from the culture, they are a part of. The more my dad was immersed in the White culture, the more he came to be a part of that culture and it would make sense that he would choose a partner that also reflected that culture, a white woman.

*Although dad had found a way to make peace with his identity, not through integration, but assimilation, unfortunately, through all his striving, he couldn’t provide the only thing I ever wanted. To belong and be validated as his.*

*I sat there that day, talking to him about life and stories of the past, awkwardly fumbling through the silences, and thought to myself 'look how far I've come.'*

*I had done the work, the soul searching, the integrating and accepting of my whole identity. I was even to the point where I could forgive him for his inability to give me the love and acceptance I so desperately needed in my childhood. I forgave him because I understood him better now. I knew he couldn't give me, what he was never able to give himself. An acceptance of his own identity.*

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

In the introduction of this paper, I posed a question and said that how we answer that question would determine not only the future of identity research but how we shaped our global society moving forward. The question we must ask ourselves is how can we be inclusive and celebrate uniqueness, while also celebrating our sameness and our reliance and responsibility to one another? We can start by allowing individuals to speak for themselves, speaking their truth, and then looking for common ground and truths that apply to all people.

I shared my story, and my journey over the last forty years towards integration, healing, acceptance, and wholeness. I attempted to share the stories and the communication events that were the most influential in my identity formation during my formative years, those that led to the deconstruction of a partial, unstable identity, and those that have led me on a path towards wholeness and self-acceptance. Although I aimed to answer the guiding questions throughout this thesis, I will do so more succinctly here in the conclusion in the form of a personal interview. I chose a personal interview for a few reasons. 1. The collection of interviews is a common qualitative practice in ethnographic and auto-ethnographic work (Bright et. al., 2016) 2. An interview allows the researched to speak for themselves using language that better expresses their truth (Ellis et. al., 2011) 3. An interview allows me to come full circle in this thesis, embedding myself fully in the research process and avoiding the temptation to create a seemingly objective analysis. I recognize that a personal interview is a little unorthodox and “narcissistic”, but I felt it was the best way to capture my lived experience and analysis, including tone (Ellis, 2011). After the interview, I will end with some closing statements including hopes for future research.

## **The Interview**

*Q: What impact have external influences had on my identity formation (conveyed primarily through communicative interactions), that have either validated or invalidated my identity perception?*

A: I would say that external influence had a tremendous and possibly irreparable impact on my identity formation, particularly through my formative years. Most communication events focused on my differences, and I perceived were framed as negative. Although some of the events were probably not meant to invalidate my identity as a mixed ethno-racial girl, they did just the same. Bicultural Identity Negotiation theory rings true as the language used in communication events throughout my life invalidated my desired identity as half Mexican (Toomey et. al., 2013).

*Q: “What impact has my internal thought processes and sense-making of my body, family history, and public discourse had on identity formation?”*

A: My perception of my identity has been one of shame and embarrassment and was directly influenced by the communication events listed above. My internal thought processes were influenced by external factors. “Ethnic identity (the intrapersonal dimensions) is intricately interwoven with cognitive and interpersonal dimensions of development,” (Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004, p. 343). What is still unclear is whether external factors were the only reason for my negative perception of my identity or if some of it was innate. I will say, my perception had real consequences and may have made some of the communication events become exaggerated in my mind as being more negative than if I would have had a healthy sense of self.

*Q: “What social contexts and communicative events influenced my deconstruction”*

A: While I mentioned my parent’s divorce (a communicative event) and a church (social context) that invalidate my very existence, there were plenty of other examples not mentioned that led to the deconstruction of my identity including living in the Midwest, attending a school that

lacked any ethno-racial diversity, and lacking any mentors or leaders in my life, community, or national stage that I saw represent a mixed ethno-racial identity. These examples triggered the cognitive dissonance that led me to question everything I knew about my identity and the terms used to explain it (Derrida, 2010).

Q: *“What has led to the reconstruction of my identity and the integration of all my identities?”*

A: Reconstruction came out of necessity as my previous understanding of my identity which was steeped in structural systems and language was causing cognitive dissonance and low self-esteem (Torres and Magolda, 2004). I don’t know how long someone can survive living with that much hatred towards themselves. Based on my experience what is hidden will always find its way out. The cognitive dissonance caused by beliefs and ways of thinking that no longer meshed with my current knowledge and lived experience spurred the need for identity reconstruction (Torres and Magolda, 2004).

Q: *“What are the limitations of race and ethnic distinctions?”*

A: Historically humans like to focus on categorizing, distinguishing, and labeling. At its best, race and ethnic distinctions allow a person to find their place in this world and create a solid foundation for identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Zakiryanova & Redkina, 2020). At its worst, race and ethnic distinctions can lead to exaggerated difference, othering, and disjointed personal identities as no person neatly fit into one category (Chaney & Clark, 2020).

Q: *What did I learn from all this, and what can be extrapolated out for the greater good?*

A: My takeaway from this analysis of my journey of self-discovery is that my journey although unique and personal, based on the research is also similar to the experience of other multi/mixed ethno-racial people (Poston, 1990). The literature and studies that have been done by

people before me confirmed what I already knew, but it has given me words and ideas to better express that knowledge, (Abrego, 2016; Ballinas & Bachmeier, 2020; Chaney & Clark, 2020; Gaither, 2018; Qian, & Lichter, 2011; Wehrly et al., 1999).

You do not need to tell a mixed ethno-racial person they will face challenges in identity formation. They do not need to be told that it is challenging to integrate multiple identities housed in one body. They do not need to be told that people will attempt to validate and invalidate their experience based on socially constructed ideas on race, ethnicity, religion, geography, and several other ways we categorize people. Mixed ethno-racial people are born into intersectionality and have lived experiences and life lessons of how that is played out.

Society has attempted since the beginning of society to label, distinguish, differentiate, privilege, and show favoritism to individuals and groups of people. Since the beginning, we, as a society, have attempted to group and categorize ourselves and others to gain a sense of belonging and to determine where we fit in the world. As has been shown in the literature on the Census, we have attempted to do so in a much more sophisticated fashion in recent years, but all our labels have fallen short.

I am convinced now more than ever that we may have been going about this the wrong way for quite some time. As Soren Kierkegaard once said, “Once you label me, you negate me.” Maybe, moving forward, a more constructive way to study identity, particularly mixed ethno-racial identity is qualitatively and specifically through autoethnography. As shown in this paper, perceptions of self are deeply intertwined with social systems and communicative events. Therefore, future research may want to focus even more on the individual to extrapolate “truths” for society.

Furthermore, I have found that autoethnography is a beneficial method for the exploration of one's own identity and its formation and ongoing development. By undertaking the process of autoethnography I have further developed an understanding of my identity and therefore it has impacted how I see myself.

This research has highlighted a few key points when studying multi/mixed ethno-racial identity. 1. That language and definitions are vague and changing and so the multi/mixed ethno-racial person must navigate how to self-identify and be accepted by other's perceived definition of terms. 2. Identity development includes deconstruction and reconstruction processes and integration of intersectional identities. 3. Because of the obvious intersectionality of multiple identities, as well as diverse communication events, and unique perceptions of those events, each multi/mixed ethno-racial person's experience and understanding of their identity is unique. This thesis also provided a qualitative, autoethnography that looks at the individual lived experience of being a mixed ethno-racial woman growing up in the Midwest during the eighties and nineties. The personal has highlighted ideas that can be used to have a better understanding of societal structures.

### **Closing Statements**

To all those that continue to study race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and intersectionality, I hope they continue to push the boundaries and the antiquated systems that we have used for thousands of years to validate and invalidate people's identities and lives. We need better theories. We need better terminology. But above all else, we need more understanding, openness, acceptance, empathy, and belonging. I believe to do that we need more stories. Diverse stories and voices will rage against the status quo in every area of life until everyone came to be accepted just as they are.

To those that have spent their entire life or at least part of it waiting to be validated by external factors whether that be people or societal norms, stop waiting. Be courageous and fight for every piece of your identity, integrating all of it. Shed the labels that no longer serve you.

To everyone, I hope that you will hold your beliefs loosely and allow yourself to be changed. What has always been does not always have to be. Open your mind and heart. Do it for your neighbors, your friends, your family, our children, and our children's children. Let's work towards a world that leads with empathy, compassion, and acceptance.

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## APPENDIX A: DEFINITIONS OF TERMINOLOGY

**Anti-miscegenation:** “against intermarriage or race-mixing,” (Wehrly, B., Kenney, K., & Kenney, M.,1999, p. 3)

**Bicultural/biracial identity:** generally defined as an individual whose identity is composed of dual cultural/racial heritage influences with one parent from a particular racial group and the other parent from another distinct racial group (Toomey, Dorjee, Ting-Toomey, 2013)

**Deconstruction:** “an attempt to contest the claim prevalent within structuralism” and “contesting the authority of the linguistic, of language, and of logocentrism” (Derrida, 2010)

**Ethnic consciousness:** “at its most basic level ethnic consciousness will mean an awareness of belonging and/or being different,” (Padilla, 1984, p. 653).

**Hypo-descendent:** “a social system that maintains the fiction of monoracial identification of individuals by assigning a racially mixed person to a racial group in their heritage that has the least social status,” (Wehrly, B., Kenney, K., & Kenney, M.,1999, p. 3)

**Identity:** “the reflective self-conception or self-image that we derive from our family, gender, cultural, ethnic and individual socialization process” (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p.212).

**Illegality:** “the historically specific, socially, politically, and legally produced condition of immigrants’ legal status and deportability” (Abrego, 2016, p. 6)

**Interracial:** describes “a relationship between two people from two or more socially designated racial groups,” (Wehrly, B., Kenney, K., & Kenney, M.,1999, p. 3)

**Multiracial:** “an individual who’s parents are of “two or more different socially designated racial heritages,” (Wehrly, B., Kenney, K., & Kenney, M.,1999, p. 3)

**Panethnicity:** is defined as “the development of bridging organizations and solidarities among subgroups of ethnic collectivities that are often seen as homogenous by outsiders” (Martínez and Gonzalez, 2021, p. 597).

**Race:** “is a fluid concept used to group people according to various factors including, ancestral background and social identity. Race is also used to group people that share a set of visible characteristics, such as skin color and facial features” (*National Human Genome Research Institute*)

**Transracial:** “indicates movement across racial boundaries and is sometimes synonymous with interracial and used in the context of adoption,” (Wehrly, B., Kenney, K., & Kenney, M.,1999, p. 3)