

PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **Advocating for Choice: Political Views of Multiracial Activists**

The post-Civil Rights era is characterized as an encouraging environment for Americans to assert their racial and ethnic identities. Yet, at the same time, because multiracial identities are a distinct contrast to past racial norms which enforced identification with only one racial category, we should not assume that multiracial identities are those that immediately come to Americans' minds. Rather, multiracial identities needed to be conceived and mobilized within the mass public. Today, there exist activists who dedicate time towards generating public attention to multiracial identities (Dacosta 2007). In fact, the "Mark One or More" option implemented on the racial identification in the U.S. Census was an institutional change made in response to lobbying efforts organized by a social movement network created by parents of multiracial children (Williams 2006). The presence of these activists who lobby on behalf of multiracial identities represents an important and unique dimension of the modern multiracial population.

This chapter presents data from in-depth interviews with a sample of these activists in order to learn about the logics that explain why representation of multiracial identities is important. Because a large majority of the activists I spoke with also personally self-identified as multiracial, these interviews also allow me to explore why a person chooses multiracial identities over other possible racial identities. Some scholarship shows that social identities can be largely symbolic in nature because they are motivated by the simultaneous desires of

belonging and individuality.<sup>1</sup> However, as the responses of these activists will show, there were not simply symbolic but, more significantly, political reasons used to explain why they chose to adopt a multiracial identity. In fact, these activists largely view their multiracial identities as a response to their everyday experiences of racialization. Activists reported their frustration with established practices of racial classification which led them to advocate strongly for the right to choose their racial identities. They contended that a person's racial classification and identification should be first determined by the individual, not by others who impose a particular racial classification on them. I thus find that activists adopted a unique approach to race: the logic that they generate highlights the primacy of individual agency and personal choice into how racial classification should be carried out in society.

The perspectives highlighted in this chapter represent a very specific type of multiracial identifier: activists who have dedicated personal time and effort towards the promotion of multiracial identification. They are unique because they demonstrate not simply self-identification as multiracial but a politicized group consciousness: a connection between their group identity and a set of ideological beliefs about the status of their group and how to improve that status (Chong and Rogers 2005; Miller et al 1981). Given this, the perspectives presented in this chapter are not necessarily representative of the larger self-identified multiracial population. At the same time these interviews, which offer insight into the organizational structure and mobilization activities sponsored by these activists, suggest that activists' ideas are often communicated to self-identified multiracial individuals in the wider mass public. Since research

---

<sup>1</sup> Early theories of social group identity revealed how quickly and easily individuals became attached to a group identity. Experiments showed that people could develop strong identities from inconsequential characteristics such as the same eye color (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Tajfel 1981). Brewer (1991) showed that the key factors that determined the strength of social group identification were both a desire for social belonging and the ability to maintain some individuality.

has shown that the frames disseminated and promoted by elites or activists often influence the attitudes of average voters (see for example, Stimson 2004), the narratives produced by multiracial activists may have more substantial implications on multiracial identification trends than what we might initially expect.

This chapter begins by first offering a historical background of the social movement to change the racial identification question on the 2000 Census. This background details the political agenda activists sought to promote and the political tensions that their agenda had caused. The contestation over racial identity revealed the many social and political consequences that could happen if an increasing number of Americans self-identify as multiracial. After providing this historical background, I then outline the state of multiracial activism following the 2000 Census change and present the key themes that were drawn from interviews with activists: the constraints of race, the proposed right to have identity choice and their continued status as non-white Americans.

### **Politics of Recognition: Lobbying for the Right to Identify as Multiracial**

Those groups involved in the efforts to change the 2000 Census race question did not organize at first with an aim towards political lobbying. Most of the initial organizations involved first began as support groups for interracially married couples, and later their families, in the late-1970's and 1980's. When the Supreme Court struck down state anti-miscegenation laws in 1967, the legal barrier to interracial marriage was eliminated but the social stigma against intimate interracial relations persisted. Therefore, interracial couples, primarily those with one white partner and one black partner, sought out accepting and inclusive spaces to socialize (DaCosta 2007; Williams 2006). Then, as these couples began to have families, concerns for

their mixed race children began to characterize the concerns of these groups. When the children of these couples began enrolling in school, parents realized that schools failed to recognize the diverse racial heritages of their children. Parents were often forced to follow official racial recording practices. They had to designate their child as only one race and normally had to follow the established rule of hypodescent by racially classifying their children as black (or another non-white category).

In 1979, parents in Berkeley, California founded *Interracial and Intercultural Pride*, later known as *iPride*, a group which organized primarily around the desire to lobby for the right of parents to report mixed racial heritages for their children on school records in the Berkeley public school system (Brown and Douglas 2003). They also sought to ensure that their children's multiracial identities were acknowledged and respected by teachers inside the classroom. Since the formation of iPride, other organized efforts were mobilized to represent and lobby on behalf of multiracial identification in schools. Starting in the early 1990's, mothers of biracial children, the vast majority of whom were white mothers, living in states such as Ohio, Georgia, Michigan, Illinois and Maryland successfully lobbied their respective state legislatures to include a multiracial category on official state forms (Williams 2006). Many of those parenting organizations formed an umbrella organization, Association of MultiEthnic Americans (AMEA) in 1988. AMEA sought to use the leverage of its membership size and geographic dispersion to effectively educate about and advocate on behalf of interracial families and multiracial identities at the national level.

These activities all served as the foundation for what Kim Williams (2006) labels the "Multiracial Movement:" a newly formed network of leaders and organizations and a specific political agenda focused on ensuring the representation of mixed race identities in governmental

forms and record-keeping. Although local level lobbying efforts could effectively resolve the immediate concerns of school enrollment, multiracial advocates quickly began to acknowledge that racial reporting is used in most areas of public life such as health care and grant funding. Because state and local data collection procedures follow federal guidelines outlined by the Office of Management and Budget, if changes to racial data collection were to have any significant impact, then they must be made at the federal level. The decennial census, the primary data collection tool used by the federal government, soon became the target of these multiracial advocates.

Originally, advocacy groups fought for a separate “Multiracial” category to be made available on census questionnaires. They argued that the rigid option of marking only one racial background constrained people into inflexible categories. More problematically, this system was argued to further uphold the “one drop rule” which historically was used to formally discriminate against blacks. Yet, demand for a separate “Multiracial” category mobilized unexpected advocates and opposition groups. Republicans in Congress were most prominent in their support of a “Multiracial” category. At a committee hearing in 1997, Republican Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, argued that a “Multiracial” category “will be an important step toward transcending racial division and reflecting the melting pot which is America” (quoted in Williams 2006: pg 55). In opposition, civil rights groups, which included National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, National Urban League, Mexican American Legal Defense Fund, National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, and the National Congress of American Indians, fought against a “Multiracial” category. These groups argued that a “Multiracial” category could be used to reclassify individuals into different categories and thus dilute the size of federally protected minority populations (Nobles 2000; Williams 2006). They

posited that many race-conscious public policies, such as affirmative action and racial redistricting, were originally created to increase representation of racial minorities in government, employment and education and thus relied on racial group enumerations collected by the Census. Therefore, it would make it more difficult to prosecute if no data were available to determine a violation (Goldstein and Morning 2002, Persily 2002).

In the end, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) revised its Statistical Directive 15, the formal rules governing data collection procedures, to include a multiple box option, or the ability to “Mark One or More,” on racial classification questions on official data collection forms (Nobles 2000). Although many in the Multiracial Movement preferred a “Multiracial” category, a mixed race designation was still possible with the “Mark One or More” option since a respondent could designate their diverse racial background by checking multiple racial categories. The decision to allow for a multiple-box option was largely attributed to the influence of civil rights organizations, who in the end, supported a multiple box option as long as the government continued to collect data on the primary racial categories (Williams 2006). For civil rights groups, as long as respondents are still required to check at least one established racial category, the federal government can continue to identify the size of black, Asian and Latino populations.<sup>2</sup>

Kimberly DaCosta (2007) argues that by earning official representation of multiracial identities, the Multiracial Movement effectively “made” a modern multiracial population. In line with existing political theory, DaCosta points to the powerful role of activists in framing the parameters of a multiracial political agenda. These activists successfully lobbied for state

---

<sup>2</sup> The federal government uses what is called a maximum allocation formula. For example, the black population is comprised of both those individuals who only select “black” as their racial category as well as those who select two or more races and include “black” as one of those races.

recognition of multiracial identities and sought to implement an institutionalized option to assert a multiracial identity. If they choose, Americans today can self-identify as multiracial precisely because the option has been made available by activists. The narratives developed by these activists thus represent an important dimension for understanding why and how Americans choose to self-identify as multiracial.

### **Interviews with Multiracial Activists**

#### *Data and Methods*

In 2006, after the initial distribution and analyses of 2000 Census data had been conducted, I sought to recruit a sample of multiracial activists to discuss the politics of multiracial identification and how things had changed since the implementation of the “Mark One or More” option. I began by contacting the network of organizations that were involved in the original Multiracial Movement to change the 2000 Census. Williams’s (2006) careful documentation of the Multiracial Movement allowed me to follow-up with the three most prominent organizations that had organized the Multiracial Movement: Association for MultiEthnic Americans (AMEA), Project Race, and A Place For Us. In addition to these three organizations, I also contacted seven of the eight<sup>3</sup> groups which had originally been organized by interracial parents that Williams had also identified as part of the Multiracial Movement. Overall, I found many of the original leaders and activists involved in the census changes remained active members in their respective local groups. Given this, I attempted to interview both the new leadership of these organizations and, if possible, those activists involved in the original Multiracial Movement to change the 2000 Census.

---

<sup>3</sup> One of the groups was located in Canada and so was excluded from the sample of organizations.

Researching about multiracial advocacy as well as information obtained from early interviews revealed that there were many new organizations which sought to advocate on behalf of multiracial identities that existed in addition to those involved with the Multiracial Movement. In particular, two organizations, Mavin Foundation and Swirl, were extremely active in multiracial advocacy at the time I conducted these interviews. I was also fortunate to have been conducting interviews in the midst of a major political lobbying effort that had been occurring in California. In the spring of 2006, State Senator Joe Simitian proposed SB 1615 entitled “Ethnic Heritage Respect and Recognition Act” to the California state legislature which sought to enforce the federal standards on racial classification for all state forms was introduced in the California state legislature. Although this was a policy specific to the state of California, the bill had attracted the attention of multiracial advocacy groups across the country since it identified the next bureaucratic step towards ensuring representation of multiracial identities. In the end, the bill was not passed through the state legislature but the process did effectively mobilize individuals and groups to take action. Given the political activity, I included interviews with those individuals involved in the efforts to push for the passage of SB 1615.

In total, I identified 18 groups or non-profit organizations for this study. For each organization that I was successfully able to contact, I interviewed, at minimum, the current president or director but often interviewed other leaders in the group. In total, interviews with 28 respondents were conducted between June and August 2006. The interviews were semi-structured and all were asked questions about the goals of their organization or efforts, their reasons explaining involvement in issues related to multiracial identification and their own personal experiences with their racial identity. The interviews were conducted primarily over the phone and lasted between 45 minutes to 2 hours. All interviews were tape recorded and fully



transcribed. Appendix A includes a list of the interview subjects and information about their background.

One challenge faced during these interviews was that many of the activists hesitated to offer “on the record” statements revealing their unfiltered opinions about past and present events. Given the political conflict that had occurred during the committee hearings to change the 2000 Census, these activists had been subject to significant coverage in both the mainstream media and academic scholarship. They had believed that their actions and statements were often misinterpreted or taken out of context in these past reports. Therefore, in return for an open and frank conversation with these activists, I promised that I would not attach their names to any of the quotes presented in this chapter.

### *Characteristics of Multiracial Organizations and Activists*

Before turning to the interview data, it is first useful to offer a portrait of the multiracial activists, the organizations they lead and the activities they sponsor as of 2006 in order to show how the landscape had changed over the approximate span of a decade since the peak of the Multiracial Movement identified by Williams (2006).

First, the racial identification of activists can be categorized into two patterns: parents who identify with one established racial category who have multiracial children (10 out of 28 interviews) and self-identified multiracial (18 out of 28 interviews). Interestingly, the reported racial mixtures of self-identified multiracial activists did vary but 11 out of 18 of the self-identified multiracial activists included Asian as one of their racial backgrounds. Given that I did not survey the membership of these groups, I cannot generalize that membership base of these organizations matches that of the activists. In fact, these leaders are quick to note the racial

diversity of their membership. However, the overrepresentation of leaders that are of partial Asian descent was particularly striking (see also Lee and Bean 2010). Among those who were parents, 8 out of 10 respondents reported to be white mothers with biracial children and the other 2 respondents self-identified as a monoracial minority. Consistent with Williams (2006) findings on the demographic makeup of the Multiracial Movement, my research showed that white women continued to be active in multiracial advocacy in 2006. However, self-identified multiracial activists made up the majority.

Another striking characteristic of activists was their high level of education. Only four respondents had not earned a college degree but they had all taken some college courses. Half of the respondents had taken some graduate level courses and of those with graduate school experience, most had completed at least a master's degree. In the interviews, academic research was often cited to me as a justification for the respondent's viewpoint. Even those that did not hold post-graduate degrees often cited books or other scholarly sources that they believed had influenced their views on race and racial identity. Since my target population included activists involved in organizations with some focus on public policy, the fact that most were highly educated was not surprising. Research in political behavior does show that personal resources, in particular education and income, are strong predictors of individual political activity (Verba Schlozman and Brady 1995). However, academic research does not predict that activists will integrate abstract academic theories to their viewpoints. At the same time, the predominance of post-graduate degrees is consistent with the arguments made by other scholars who have posited that there exists an important connection between the college experience and multiracial identification (Renn 2004; Dacosta 2007). University culture as well as those ideas fostered in an academic setting could be seen as supportive conditions for multiracial identification. The

two newest organizations I identified for this study, Mavin Foundation and Swirl, were created as a result of the organizers' college experiences.

In terms of organizational characteristics, activists defined their targeted constituency as individuals of mixed racial heritage, interracial families and families with a transracially adopted child. This was a distinct contrast to groups that made up the Multiracial Movement who largely addressed the interests of interracial, primarily white-black, couples. Activists emphasized the existence of a more diverse multiracial community and believed that the three populations they identified as constituencies all shared the experience of living outside the confines of the established racial system. Activists reported that since Americans practice race as a set of discrete categories, those with mixed racial backgrounds as well as racially diverse families are often viewed as strange or abnormal. As a result, mixed race individuals, interracial families and families with transracially adopted children have been found to experience similar types of reactions and thus all feel a sense of shared community. While activists were quick to note that we should not simply lump together these three populations as if they were all the same, they at the same time believed that all three share the same basic set of concerns.

Related to the definition of the constituency, I learned that there were two primary populations that were recruited by multiracial organizations: college students and a virtual membership online. Activists saw young adults as those who would be most open and most likely to self-identify as multiracial. They believed that there existed many individuals who might want to self-identify as multiracial but did not have a language for doing so. They thus viewed their organizations in playing a role in the socialization of young adults. Outside of college students, activists' perceived their constituency to be largely a virtual community. Most leaders relied heavily on their organization's website to recruit new members. Respondents reported that

most new members have found their organization as a result of a web search on the internet rather than through personal recruitment. Thus, they described their community as a global one. Many organizations rely on email listservs to communicate with members and so that they can have reach outside the United States. In fact, two of the major leaders I identified for this study did not form an organization but rather sponsored websites dedicated to multiracial issues in an effort to mobilize a virtual community of interested persons.

Those groups who were originally involved in the Multiracial Movement, in general, did not continue their political advocacy activities after implementation of the 2000 Census. Most returned primarily to organizing social activities for interracial families. Groups who were originally involved in the Multiracial Movement that continued to be involved in politics tended to focus on promoting public awareness of interracial marriage and sought to develop new early childhood development programs for interracial families. In contrast, those newer groups that came into being after implementation of the 2000 Census were more politically active. These new groups had largely taken over the political battle to ensure a multiracial identification option on official forms. Newer groups tended to focus on issues related to multiracial representation and offered fewer programs for interracial families. Therefore, although it was often stated that organizations targeted a diverse constituency, most focused on one particular issue: either on the needs of interracial families or on representation of multiracial identities.

Finally, there appeared to be a distinctive legacy from the Multiracial Movement given that most of the political lobbying efforts continued to be focused on integrating the “Mark One or More” option on the racial identification questions on state data collection forms. Although the racial identification question was changed on the federal Census form, other federal and state agencies have yet to follow the federal guidelines on racial classification. Activists believed that

they needed to help enforce consistency across other federal and state agencies. One example that had been offered was those efforts aimed at lobbying the Department of Education in order to change the racial identification on school forms.<sup>4</sup> In addition to lobbying for the “Mark One or More” option, multiracial organizations sought to gain public recognition of the Loving Decision, the 1967 Supreme Court decision which banned all anti-miscengenation laws. Outside of political activities, organizations had goals of raising awareness and educating others about mixed race families. Activists wanted to promote appropriate images and frames about the multiracial community by organizing panels, distributing videos and organizing youth and college-level programs that foster multiracial identity development.

The motivation and dedication towards promoting multiracial identification represents a dimension unique to activists and likely does not characterize the beliefs and activities of self-identified multiracial individuals in the mass public. At the same time, these activists show that they have taken on leadership roles and actively seek to promote multiracial identification by creating organizations that have broad reach within the mass public. Their strategy to recruit college students and other young adults make them an influential socializing force for newer generations. So although activists may represent a unique subpopulation, their views likely influence those in the mass public.

### **Multiracial Identities According to Activists**

---

<sup>4</sup> At the time these interviews had been conducted in 2006, only certain federal entities like the Census had implemented the Office of Management and Budget’s guidelines for the “Mark One or More” option. However, other federal agencies and state and local agencies later adopted the “Mark One or More” in order for their data to be consistent with that collected by the Census. For example, the Department of Education published new guidelines for collecting race and ethnicity data option in 2007 which included the “Mark One or More” option. By doing this public schools in each state were then required to follow federal guidelines. When state and local government entities use federal funds to provide services, their data collection practices must be correspond with federal guidelines.

The activists I spoke with had clear ideas and logics they used to describe multiracial identities. However, as stated above, I found that activists represented two different patterns of racial identities: the majority self-identified as multiracial while a smaller group primarily identified as white mothers of multiracial children. For the first group, multiracial identification is a personal identity but not so for those who were parents. Given this difference I did not analyze all respondents together and instead present the results for the two groups separately. First I present interview data from those who self-identify as multiracial. Because the experiences of racialization were a common theme for self-identified multiracial activists, I include the respondent's reported racial makeup with each quote. The final section presents interview data from interviews with white mothers.

### **Interviews with Self-Identified Multiracial Activists**

In interviews with self-identified multiracial activists, there appeared to be a common theme in how they experienced race. Many of the respondents recounted similar stories about how often they were classified into only one racial category which they felt was frustratingly incorrect. As a response to these experiences, respondents had developed a general narrative which promoted their belief that racial classification and identification should originate from their own preferences and not be the imposed race assigned to them by others. This theme of "choice" characterizes the primary opportunity activists sought to fight for in their activities.

### *Experiencing the Constraints of Race: Restrictiveness of the One Drop Rule*

All Americans experience the consequences of race in their everyday activities. What was particularly illuminating in these interviews was that most of the self-identified multiracial

activists shared similar frustrations about how race constrained their personal belief system and daily activities. The most dominant narrative was the belief that race was a process of “forced” categorization in which individuals are constantly compelled to identify with only one of the existing racial categories regardless of how one prefers to be racially identified. As this respondent described, daily social activities persistently ask individuals to describe their race:

Well I think one of the major problems that multiracial individuals face is constantly being forced, to you know, [say] something that they’re not. So, I think it’s a considerable amount of social pressure causes a lot of internal stress and trauma. [For example,] business applications you have to apply for grants and stuff, they want you to go to the internet, you know they want to know what race you are, and when you look at all the options they do not list “choose more than one race.” There is no reason why they cannot put that on there. There’s no reason whatsoever, but that’s the kind of social pressure that multiracial families and individuals face all the time: that you have nowhere to check. [Regardless of] what your family looks like, you got to be one or the other, but you can’t be [multiracial]. Or, you get to be “other” where you’re essentially not counted at all.

--Self-identifies as multiracial, racial makeup is Black, White and Native American

The common social practice to only identify with one race was viewed as not only limited but also upsetting because respondents felt that the complexity and distinctiveness of their real identities were being silenced. Multiracial individuals often attempt to racially classify themselves as something outside of the typical racial categories but respondents argued that they are rarely offered a legitimate opportunity to report their own conceptualization of their race. These barriers are not viewed as isolated or rare instances, but rather are seen as extremely common.

Another common frustration was that, in everyday activities when race was brought up, multiracial respondents are often incorrectly classified. Since many of the respondents reported to have racially ambiguous features, they would recount instances when others tried to guess

their racial background by trying to point out particular physical traits. One respondent reminisced about one such experience:

When my youngest child was a baby, there were people would see him in all kinds of different groups Latino or even Arab. We had one [of these experiences when] we were looking for cars and he was probably 6 months old and the car salesman thought we had adopted him in Saudi Arabia. He was enthusiastic about it like, "oh we adopted a baby out of Saudi Arabia, that's my home." No, that's not quite what happened...

--Self-identifies as multiracial, racial makeup is White and Native American

Misclassification of a multiracial person's racial background was reported to occur in relatively harmless situations, such as the experience reported in this quote. But because of the social emphasis on racial classification, many respondents emphasized that this experience happened to them often. More strikingly, some argued that their racial ambiguity often encouraged persistent discussions about their racial classification even when the respondent did not feel like discussing his or her race. These types of experiences with racial ambiguity often led respondents to perceive the need to have greater personal control over their racial classification.

What was communicated to be particularly problematic was the assumption that other people, in particular strangers, played a more powerful role in deciding a person's racial identity than an individual had in determining his or her own identity. Many expressed aggravation over why outsiders were given the right to exercise control over their racial identity:

We've got to be able to honor people's right to have an opinion different from our own. The only problem I have is when someone outside of my community was telling me who I was, you don't get to do that. If you're not paying my taxes and you're not living my life, then you have to accept my definition of me. And I think that's where a lot of multiracial people come from.

--Self-identifies as multiracial, racial makeup is Black and White

As this respondent's plea demonstrates, many multiracial individuals want to define themselves but how others see them ends up imposing a racial classification that does not match their personal identity. As many see it currently practiced, racial classification is a social force that is



upheld and policed by members of society and offers little opportunity for individuals to have agency to determine how they are racially classified.

Connected to the idea of “forced” classification, respondents reported how they were often confronted with various stereotypes about mixed race people. One respondent summarized multiracial stereotypes as one of two types. First, there is the “tragic mulatto” trope where mixed race people are assumed to have psychological difficulty adjusting to society given that they are not clearly part of one racial group. The second stereotype was labeled the “best of both worlds” stereotype in which it was seen as lucky to be able to practice more than one culture. Even though the second stereotype was framed as positive, this respondent saw how these tropes oversimplified the multiracial experience. As such respondents believed that stereotypes of multiracial people are assumed to be inaccurate and can be used to form problematic assumptions about multiracial people. Their exposure to these stereotypes was also noted as a reason why their race represented a salient feature in their everyday lives.

Respondents believed that the structural nature of race was particularly vivid and consequential for multiracial people. Multiracial individuals do not fit into the established norm of race because they do not self-identify with only one racial category yet most of their everyday experiences of race enforce the existing norm that they must identify with only one racial group. Given the saliency of race in the United States, respondents are made constantly aware of the problems and challenges associated with racial classification in their everyday activities. It is this awareness that motivated many of the respondents to advocate on behalf of multiracial identities.

*Expressing the Right of Personal Choice*

Because race was understood as “forced” categorization, respondents saw the need to advocate for the right of personal choice in those activities that collected information about a person’s race. One of the primary problems respondents identified was the fact that when a person attempts to assert a multiracial identity, that identity is often rejected by others. One respondent offered an example:

Who else, you know like Barack Obama, the senator from Illinois, he mentions like, “oh, I’m half white,” people were like, “oh black guy in denial,” that kind of thing. Even when he accepts he’s mixed race, he still puts forward this mono-racial character. And I think part of that is because, in the public we do things similar to [what we do in] private, in everyday life. You know, where it’s just like you want to put people in one box. You want to make people kind of choose because if people are in the middle, it’s kind of uncomfortable...overall, I would say that in society today, it is not okay to be multiracial.

--Self-identifies as multiracial, racial makeup is White and Japanese

By promoting the right of personal choice, respondents wanted individuals to hold the authority and agency to define their own racial identities and have those identities respected by others. Many respondents cited the “Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People,” written by Maria Root, one of the earliest writers on the modern multiracial experience. This bill of rights included a list of rights such as the right “to identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify;” “to identify myself differently than how my parents identify me;” “to create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial;” and “to change my identity over my lifetime--and more than once” (Root 1996: 7). Embracing a similar sentiment written by Root, respondents commonly expressed the right for the person to choose his or her identity. For example, one respondent explained to me:

There are going to be some people in the community that will not say they’re multiracial and that’s their prerogative, it was all about choices to be begin with. We wanted to have choice in the matter.

--Self-identifies as multiracial, racial makeup is Black and White

There were many different racial “choices” respondents wanted. Most wanted the choice to declare a hybrid, multiracial identity. Some who advocated for a multiracial identity wanted to note that, although they were frustrated when a monoracial category was imposed on them (for example the insistence that a person of white-Asian descent is “Asian” instead of “white”), the imposed monoracial category was not believed to be insulting but rather an incomplete description of what they saw as their “true” identity. In fact, many emphasized to me that by asserting a multiracial identity, they were not trying to “run away” from their minority backgrounds as they felt was sometimes characterized by racial minority groups. Rather, their frustration had developed from the fact that racial classification was forced on them.

Others defined “choice” as the option to identify with their mother’s race or their father’s race was because they were children of interracial marriages. Those respondents who wanted this form of choice recognized that this option is atypical since most Americans do not have parents of two different races. But even though they saw themselves as a small minority in the nation, they believed it was important that they be given the right to choose. Some respondents reported that they often only identified with one of their minority identities if they believed that the political or social circumstances warranted this identification. For example:

For me, whenever I’m told to check one, and I’m half Latino and I’m half Asian, sometimes [I’ll say Asian], but because my last name is [Japanese sounding] and everybody can see through my name I’m Japanese, I tend to pick Latino because of that particular thing and also there aren’t a lot of people at my education and income level statistically that are Latino. I want to beef up those numbers, so I’ll check off and I’ll be basically 100% Latino for whatever survey I’ve taken.

--Self-identifies as multiracial, racial makeup is Japanese and Mexican

As this above respondent explained, multiracial individuals can sometimes make a strategic choice by emphasizing one identity over another in order to serve a particular goal. However, I was surprised to find that, of those respondents who reported to emphasize one of their racial

identities over the others, the general preference was to use what they believed was the more marginalized racial identity. Respondents often believed it was more politically valuable to represent the marginalized racial identity group.

The racial identity that was never framed as a choice was the option to identify as only white. Perhaps in the context of the post-Civil Rights era, the respondents I spoke with did not believe it was culturally or normatively appropriate to desire whiteness and so it may be the case that respondents privately want the choice to identify as white but chose not to openly discuss it in a formal interview. While I cannot rule out the role of social desirability, respondents seemed to recognize that identifying as (only) white was not perceived as an identity option (Dalmage 2004; Spickard 2003; Spencer 2010). However, a few respondents reported that they could visibly “pass” as a white person because they held phenotypic features that induced others to view them as white. They recognized circumstances when others assumed they were white (see also Rockquemore and Arend 2002). In general, being racially identified as white was only understood as possible when others assigned that racial category, and did not exist as a personal choice.

Even though the respondents had a clear sense of the choices they wanted, most did not believe that the ultimate goal was to impose a particular racial identity on others. I found that many respondents were quick to acknowledge that even though they preferred multiracial identities, they did not think a multiracial identity should be embraced by all. Rather, most were staunchly committed to the idea of personal choice:

I think that, even [when events are] not explicitly about identity, like a discussion group about identity or something like that, our other events, like social events, can really provide a supportive place for people to feel like their identity is developing and supported. I also think that [our organization] supports choices and identity. So people might have a primary identity as a black person or a Asian person and a secondary identity as a mixed person; or primary identity as a

mixed person and secondary identity as a black person or Asian; or whatever.  
Yeah, so I think that's really what we're about.

--Self-identifies as multiracial, racial makeup is Italian and Japanese

Activists also noted that by advocating for choice, they also wanted the opportunity to embrace and employ different identities at different times. As, this respondent articulates, choice could also refer to the option of changing your racial identity at different points in one's lifetime or when one changes his or her surrounding context:

You know it's funny because sometimes I would mark if they had Japanese or Asian; sometimes I would mark white; sometimes I would mark other. It really just depended on the time in my life and I think if you ask most mixed race people, that especially of our age generation, I'm sure they would say something very similar.

--Self-identifies as multiracial, racial makeup is Japanese and German

Because the efforts were focused on framing race as a more complex and fluid construct, I found that many multiracial activists viewed their race as a flexible identity in which individuals were not expected to remain committed to any one category or identity. In this way, racial identity is conceptualized as context-specific in which identity is matched with the given circumstances (see also Rockquemore and Brunsma 2001; Renn 2004).

Given their awareness of the constraints imposed by racial classification, my respondents recognized that the act of identifying as multiracial is a challenge to the existing practices of race. As a result, respondents could see their identities as a small but significant act of resistance:

I just check multiple boxes anyway. Like I said, I officially work in statistics, so in some ways, I feel kind of bad because I know what kind of havoc that is causing with whatever poor data-entry clerk they have. But, it's something I have to do for myself...If they have an "other" or "mixed" box, I'd check that. But, if they don't really give you any options for me to choose one, [I check multiple boxes]. I just feel like in my life I've been forced to choose one, so many times that, if can get away from choosing one, I'm just not going to do it.

--Self-identifies as multiracial, racial makeup is White and Japanese

By advocating for choice, the self-identified multiracial respondents wanted to shift the authority of determining racial classification away from society and place it in the hands of the individual. Many saw multiracial identities as their preferred identity which best reflected how they saw themselves even though these identities were not commonly recognized as legitimate racial identities by others.

### Multiracial Activists' Political Attitudes Toward Race

Since activists' demands for choice and multiracial identification were direct responses to existing racial practices, I asked respondents to discuss their views on American race relations more broadly and how they saw multiracial identification related to other racial identities.

Overall, the majority of activists adopted a liberal or progressive stance on politics and believed that multiracial people could be in alliance with other minority civil rights groups in addressing efforts to reduce racial inequality. What was particularly striking was that even though these activists had been advocating for a distinctive multiracial identity, they believed that they were treated as a (monoracial) minority by society:

Of course, yeah, I think that a lot of times I experience racial discrimination. I suspect that is because people think I'm Latino. So they follow me in stores, or I may get poor service, And I think that I also experience racial discrimination in kind of more subtle ways: certainly of being a person of color or mixed person in a predominately white class or things like that.  
--Self-identifies as multiracial, racial makeup is Italian and Japanese

This respondent reported to have one white parent and one Asian parent but often experienced situations in which others classify her as Latino. Because of this, she speculates that her experiences with racial discrimination do not occur because she is multiracial but rather because she is believed to be a racial minority, in this case Latino. She thus personally identifies with those experiences of racial discrimination witnessed by monoracial minority groups.

Nearly all of the self-identified multiracial respondents reported to be treated as a racial non-white “other.” In other words, they saw their racial background as a source of many experiences of social exclusion, differential treatment or sometimes blatant discrimination. But surprisingly, respondents often did not attribute their experiences with racial discrimination to fact that they were multiracial. Most often, respondents described forms of discrimination that were waged against all people of color:

Those guys are not thinking that way, in terms of he’s multiracial [or] he’s African...No, they’re just saying this guy has brown skin, I don’t like him. You know, and they don’t really care about what color brown skin, you know, got brown skin...if he’s not white he’s not pure, he should go back to wherever he came from. Forgetting, of course, that he came from somewhere else. No, I think racism doesn’t go for the finer points  
--Self-identifies as multiracial, racial makeup is Black, White and Native American

Although respondents did report specific negative experiences due to their multiracial background, those more severe forms of racial discrimination witnessed were often connected with being a non-white racial minority. In this way, I found descriptions of racial discrimination to be similar with those often expressed by Asian Americans, blacks and Latinos (see for example: Garcia Bedolla 2005; Rogers 2006; Tuan 1999).

Given these experiences, I found that these respondents emphasized a progressive and racially conscious stance towards politics. In fact, multiracial activists believed that, by advocating on behalf of multiracial identities, they were encouraging public awareness about race and racial discrimination more broadly:

People say, oh, that we don’t talk about mixed race issues, well we don’t talk enough about race issues in general. In any sort of mixed race curriculum for parents, like the one we’re developing right now, the first step is always teaching parents how to talk to their kids about race. Because even before you can talk to your kids to talk about mixed race, most parents just never talk to their kids about race.  
--Self-identifies as multiracial, racial makeup is White and Japanese

One respondent believed that mixed race groups could be understood as another organization included in the existing coalition of groups that are aimed to promote civil rights:

They probably never thought about, “oh, we should really confront the racism that is happening at the polling station, let’s contact the mixed contingency.” We’re not really thought of as a political force at all, and I’m not saying we should be thought of as a force in of itself. I just think that for the most part mixed raced people are unseen, we’re not really thought about too much when it comes to race. People still think in these very finite boxes. So part of it is really trying to get out there more, to lend a hand to all of these causes that matter to all of us.

--Self-identifies as multiracial, racial makeup is Jewish and Chinese

At the same time, even though respondents often believed that their organizations sought to advance discourse about race, few had actually worked with other civil rights or minority organizations. Respondents believed that working with minority organizations was a good idea but most had not investigated the option.<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that the multiracial organizations worked in isolation: multiracial activists reported collaborations with other multiracial organizations, church groups, other non-profit groups and social service agencies in their sponsored activities. It was often reported to me that civil rights organizations continued to perceive multiracial efforts as threatening as what had happened in the 1990’s during lobbying efforts to change the 2000 Census:

I think in a lot of rhetoric in certain areas have equated the idea that a multiracial or mixed heritage experience with the idea that race is no longer important; it should be done away with; the idea that civil rights laws and collection of data on race that affirmative action is no longer important. So the minute we say that we work with mixed heritage communities, red flags go off.

--Self-identifies as multiracial, racial makeup is Latino and White

Thus, while multiracial respondents believed to be aligned with the politics of monoracial minority groups, they perceived continued tensions between these two sets of groups.

---

<sup>5</sup> I spoke with one respondent who was involved in the lobbying efforts to pass SB 1615 in California that was not a member of a multiracial organization but rather a local chapter of the Japanese American Citizen’s League (JACL). This self-identified multiracial respondent had been organizing activities involving multiracial issues within his JACL chapter and had collaborated with other multiracial organizations to mobilize support for SB 1615.



Although most of the self-identified multiracial activists considered themselves to be aligned with the politics of monoracial minorities, this was not the only viewpoint expressed by activists. A second but less dominant perspective was the belief that multiracial identification can demonstrate the absurdity of race and racial categorization:

I view multiracial category as something that all Americans could and eventually would migrate to. A large number of people, if not a majority in this country, would claim mixed ancestry. You know, at a certain point, if a majority people check the multiracial box, why should there be a need to maintain these categories at all?

--Self-identifies as multiracial, racial makeup is White, Black and American Indian

Some of the activists believed that the problems associated with race stem from the continued emphasis on racial categorization.<sup>6</sup> As such, those that held this view believed that multiracial identification or encouraging Americans to mark all boxes on the racial identification question would help to make race a socially meaningless feature. Although this was a perspective communicated in these interviews, it was expressed by a small minority of multiracial activists.

Like any group, the multiracial activists I spoke with revealed different perspectives on politics and race relations in America. At the same time, I was struck by the fact that most of the self-identified multiracial respondents perceived themselves to be aligned with civil rights and racial minority groups. I had expected that since respondents had opted to self-identify with a distinct multiracial identity, they chose to do so because they failed to see commonalities with other racial groups. Yet, respondents appeared to be aware that they were treated like racial minority groups and subject to racial discrimination (sometimes due to the assumption that they

---

<sup>6</sup> This was a viewpoint expressed by Republican leaders during committee hearings to change the 2000 Census race question (Williams 2006). This viewpoint also was publicly prominent when Ward Connerly, a conservative activist sought to pass a voter initiative in California, Proposition 54 entitled the "Racial Privacy Initiative," which aimed to eliminate the race question from official forms all together (Hosang 2010). Connerly posited that by eliminating racial categories, citizens would be less likely to emphasize racial boundaries which, with in turn, would reduce those tensions and problems associated with race. This proposition was placed on the ballot in 2003, three years prior to the time I conducted these interviews.

were a monoracial minority). Multiracial activists might assert a distinct identity, but their treatment by society still labels them as a racial “other.”

### **Interviews with White Mothers of Biracial Children**

The role of monoracially-identified parents, particularly white mothers, has been a key focal point of past research. Because of this, DaCosta (2007) noted that there existed an inherent connection between family and ethnic identity since “expressions of an ethnic identity are often used to symbolize relations with family members and ethnic celebrations participated in as a means to preserve the family (2007: 16). I found that white mothers of multiracial children continued to play a visible, albeit less dominant, role in multiracial organizations.

While self-identified multiracial activists commonly spoke about their experiences with race and perceptions about being a racial “other,” those who were white mothers of biracial children reported different reasons for promoting multiracial identities. In particular, they saw racial identity as an action that communicates family heritage and respect for parents. One white mother describes how racial identity influences even the extended family:

You can say that it doesn't matter to you because you have a white family, but what if your children grows up and marries someone of a different race or ethnicity. So in a way, this does affect a lot of people, its not just the multiracial kids, it's the family the parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. It's the whole family. So the multiracial movement is not just for multiracial people but also their family. More awareness around the whole family to be supportive is a good thing too.

As this quote demonstrates, white mothers believed that through racial identity, an individual communicates his/her family heritage. This logic implies that the child's race should match that of both parents. For the most part, these mothers wanted representation of both parents in the description of their child's identity. One respondent had explained that, given the rule of

hypodescent, children are always racially classified in the same way as the minority parent, which diminishes the role of the white parent. Many white parents wanted their racial identities reflected in their children's identities.

Although the mothers equated racial identity with family heritage, like self-identified multiracial activists, they also advocated for the importance of personal choice:

We're hoping that...the schools will recognize and include biracial and multiracial students in their curriculum so that the kids will grow up being themselves and not have to choose whether which parent they are going to align with racially. Some multiracial and biracial kids do identify with one parent or the other, that's you know their choice, but that it is okay for kids to align with both parents if that's how they identify.

The combined narrative of family heritage and identity choice described by these white mothers is similar to the narratives Mary Waters (1990) found in her study on white ethnic identity. According to Waters, whites construct their ethnic identity based on their knowledge of their family background and ancestry. Therefore, when whites explain their ethnicity, they construct narratives that explain their family tree. At the same time, whites embrace the availability of identity options. Waters found that when respondents told stories about their identities, they often simplified their family tree by selectively reporting only one identity which they believed is more desirable or the one that better fits the given social context. By framing ethnic identities as products of choice and family heritage, Waters explains why whites largely understand ethnicity to be a positive attribute worth celebrating rather than as a negative feature.

As I saw it, white parents applied those logics they use for understanding their own ethnic identities to the racial identities of their children. There are important similarities: many white Americans understand themselves to be multi-ethnic (of multiple European ethnicities) and so see the option to choose among many different European ethnicities when describing their ethnic identity. They see their multiracial children as individuals who also are of diverse family

backgrounds and so believe that their children should have the option of choosing between multiple races. These perceived similarities open the possibility to use the same logic for understanding white ethnicity and apply them for understanding a multiracial identity (see also Karis 2004).

Although the self-identified multiracial activists and white mothers differed on how they defined and understood race, they both shared the objective of framing racial identity as a product of personal choice. The fact that multiracial advocacy is populated primarily by both white mothers and self-identified multiracial individuals mean that there is an important family dimension to multiracial advocacy. One white mother had described a sort of generational change of multiracial advocacy in which the self-identified multiracial children had taken over for their interracial parents. Since I originally entered into these interviews with the objective of understanding multiracial advocacy, I did not fully investigate the relationship between parents and their children. But interviews with those white mothers who continued to be involved in multiracial advocacy led me to wonder how parental influence (particularly of the white parent) is an explanatory factor for the decision to self-identify as multiracial.

### **Lessons from Activists**

These interviews offered insight into why activists chose to adopt multiracial identities and why it is important for multiracial identification to exist as an option for Americans. Activists' multiracial identities were largely developed as a response to the perceived constraints of the current practice of racial classification. Because they personally saw how current practices of racial classification do not account for their own experiences, multiracial activists reported to be persistently made aware that racial classification is a rigid social process which "forces" a racial

identity onto individuals. The conflicts over racial classification they experience occur regularly, even in everyday activities such as trips to the park or interactions with a new person. Most respondents reported that they choose to publicly assert a multiracial identity because they believe that a multiracial identity better reflects how they personally understand their race.

What was particularly striking from these interviews was that both self-identified multiracial activists and white mothers adopted a particular viewpoint that embraced the power of personal choice and agency to determine a person's racial classification. There existed a normative claim that racial identity should be created by the individual, not by others. Moreover, they believed that their identities could be a "choice:" individuals should have multiple options for their racial identification and they should be able to change their identity depending on the given context. This perspective about race has been informed by respondents' own experiences, but interviews with white mothers also suggest that parental influence could play a role. White parents who largely understand race through the lens of ethnicity apply these views to their promotion of multiracial identities.

At the same time, while self-identified multiracial activists embrace the right of choice, they also revealed the amount of effort that is required to assert a multiracial identity. Self-identified multiracial activists report that multiracial identities are still not commonly understood or expressed by others. As a result, respondents must purposefully promote multiracial identities. For activists, their multiracial identities are not inconsequential identities but rather ones that are developed with clear intention. This shows how multiracial identity and likely the belief that one has racial identity choices are contingent on open and inviting environments for these practices. Although there existed multiracial organizations across the country, most of my respondents were at the time living in large, metropolitan areas. Those self-identified multiracial

activists involved in what appeared to be the most active organizations within my study sample were originally from the West Coast or in the Northeast (see Appendix A). Moreover, activists target college students because they are strategic in their efforts to identify populations that will be receptive to claims of multiracial identity.

Some scholars describe multiracial self-identification as an act of political resistance (Daniel 2002; Root 1996). To be sure, many of the activists involved in the changes to the Census racial identification question originally sought their own “Multiracial” category while others saw how multiracial identities disturbed existing assumptions. However, multiracial activists did not seek to challenge most of the existing racial practices (see also Spencer 2010). All of the multiracial activists I spoke with, including the white mothers of multiracial children, were blunt in their assessment that existing American practices of race were rigid and difficult to change. Most viewed categories such as “white” and “black” as dominant racial categories which serve as firm constructs for orienting interpersonal interactions. These activists revealed that they did not seek to change use of established racial categories through their advocacy of multiracial identities. In fact, the self-identified multiracial activists continued to use and embrace existing racial categories, with some revealing that in past instances they have personally identified with only one racial category.

The contrast between the normative belief that individuals should have a right to choose their racial identity and the acknowledged reality that society continues to be structured by the longstanding racial order is a clear reflection of the tension between racial classification and racial identification that characterizes today’s racial norms. As demonstrated by the historical analysis in the previous chapter, Americans interact in a racial environment which increasingly emphasizes the importance of self-identification. However, longstanding practices of race, such

as the rule of hypodescent, continue to orient individual behavior and attitudes. Multiracial activists respond to this environment in a unique way by capitalizing on an opening created by the tension between racial identification and classification to make a case for their preferred multiracial identities. Activists want to add new racial categories, in particular multiracial categories to the existing racial system. Their approach to race emphasizes the modern norm to privilege self-identification. However, rather than be understood as acts of political resistance, multiracial activists articulate the desire to have multiracial identities recognized as legitimate racial constructs *alongside* the other established racial categories.