

ETHNIC IDENTITY OF BIETHNIC MEXICAN AMERICAN/  
EUROPEAN AMERICAN RAISED IN TEXAS

by

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## ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of Mexican American/European American biethnic individuals raised in Texas. The present study looked at the applicability of Poston's (1990) five-stage model of biracial identity development to the experiences of 8 Mexican American/European Americans.

Results indicated that Poston's (1990) model was applicable to this cohort. The respondents gave responses indicating progression through the five stages of *Personal Identity*, *Choice of Group Categorization*, *Enmeshment/Denial*, *Appreciation* and *Integration*. These responses were narrations of current involvement or memories of childhood experiences. Also, Poston's (1990) suggestion that biracial individuals experience confusion and maladjustment because of their ethnicity was also applicable to the biethnic individuals in this study.

Other themes that influenced identity development of the respondents and also considered salient to their experiences were family experiences and what it means to be Mexican American and European American, separately. Respondents were aware of family's experiences with discrimination. There was an overall positive meaning assigned to being Mexican American and European American, however, it was not as strong for the latter.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### Statement of the Problem

“Interracial families and multiracial individuals are changing the face of America and the meaning and utility of race,” (Jacobs, 1992, ¶ 326). The growth of this virtually unknown population has sparked much interest and debate among researchers as a result of awareness of the uniqueness that results from belonging to such racial and ethnic groups. However, there are many areas yet to be catechized through empirical procedures. Specifically, this study is aimed at extending existing literature by focusing on ethnic identity development in biracial individual.

Previous research involving biracial individuals has tended to center around only a few areas. Primarily, the majority of research has been conducted on individuals with one White and one Black parent (Jacobs, 1992 & Sebring, 1985) or on Amerisians who are White and Asian mix individuals (Garcia-Coll, Meyer & Brillon, 1995). The second area of research has focused on how biracial children should be treated by school counselors and also the need for multicultural curriculum in the classroom (Echeverriarza, 1991). This call for changes in the educational field has allowed for the incorporation of attitudes that are understanding and accepting of being ethnically unique, as well as the incorporation of curriculum emphasizing positive behaviors and role models for a multicultural generation.

Much of the difficulty in studying biracial individuals is the lack of opportunity for people to claim this unique characteristic. It has been impossible to get an accurate count of mixed race individuals due to the “check one box” rule that has applied when listing ethnicity. According to federal statistics, about 1 million Americans (accounting for 3% of the total U.S. population) born in the 1970’s and 1980’s were of mixed racial heritage. By the 1990s the estimated number of biracial or biethnic children was 4 million (Wallace, 2001). The National Center for Health Statistics notes that the number of monoracial babies has grown at a rate of 15% since the early 1970’s, whereas the number of multiracial babies has increased more than 260% (Root, 1996, ¶ xiv-xv).

Only recently, with the 2000 census, has the opportunity to specifically acknowledge more than one race been available. In the past, those individuals wishing to do so were limited to the “other” category. With the 2000 census, there were many options for individuals to choose from. However, the category of White and Mexican-American was noticeably absent. While some progress is being made with the acknowledgement of mixed ethnicities, White and Mexican-American are not being distinguished (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1991).

Because of the history of discrimination experienced by Mexican Americans in the United States, being part Mexican American may pose unique problems to individuals with a mixed heritage. This study, therefore, is designed to investigate the experience of being a mix of Mexican and European heritage in the United States. Specifically, being biethnic and living in Texas as Mexico and Texas share a unique

history which may influence the Mexican American/European American individual's experience.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review will begin with a brief history of Mexican Americans in Texas. This will be followed by an examination of what biethnicity means, including definitions of ethnicity and race. The next section will focus on the theoretical model of biracial identity development. Finally, the empirical literature on biethnicity, because it is scant, will be included in the description of the model.

#### *Mexican-Americans in Texas*

Being half Mexican American and half European American may have significance because of the history of Mexican Americans in the United States, especially in Texas. Discord between the Euro-American population and the Mexican population in what is now California, New Mexico and Texas began to arise in the early nineteenth century, because of the westward migration of European Americans (Martinez, 2000). The Mexican-American war erupted from this discord and culminated with Mexico losing its northernmost territories to the U.S. in the mid 1800s. Due to the U.S. acquisition of land that was formerly Mexican territory, the bulk of Mexicans in this area became U.S. citizens overnight. This did not ameliorate the discord. In fact, although now considered citizens, "Mexican" became (and still is) a derogatory term.

Between 1910 and 1930 almost one million Mexicans immigrated to the U.S. in order to escape harsh economic and political conditions partly caused by the Mexican Revolution. The greatest number of Mexican immigrants during this period settled in

Texas. The numbers increased from 71,062 in 1900 to 683,681 in 1930, according to official statistics, although the actual numbers could have been significantly higher. As land that formerly belonged to Mexico, Texas had Mexican colonies that were already established, thus making it an easier physical transition for the immigrants (Gonzales, 1999). However, Mexicans were not necessarily welcome.

The injustices experienced by Mexican-Americans in Texas and other Southern states were (and still are) similar to those experienced by other minorities, especially Blacks, throughout the United States (Suro, 1998). However, theirs was a special predicament. Mexicans had been declared “White” by law, but they were subject to a sort of ‘back door’ racism. According to Suro (1998) “Jim Crow was the law of the land when it came to blacks and it was a matter of custom when it came to (Mexicans). That didn’t make it any easier to live with. It meant it was harder to fight sometimes” (§ 81).

Some of the discrimination felt by Mexican Americans was apparent in the educational system. Mexican American children attended segregated schools until *Delgado v. Bastrop Independent School District* in 1948 (this case was a noteworthy predecessor for the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954). *Delgado v. Bastrop* was the first legal challenge in Texas against the practice of school segregation. The favorable decision in that case called for an end to segregation in schools (Gonzales, 1999). Although segregation is now illegal, this practice is still continued in Texas as evidence by disparities in educational opportunities (Suarez-Orozco & Paez, 2002).

Education is not the only arena in which Mexican-Americans have experienced racism and discrimination. During World War II, it was rumored that Mexico was

plotting with Germany to enter the war to retake Texas. The result was a widespread paranoia throughout Texas against Mexican-Americans that became a cause for severe mistreatment by the Texas Rangers. Thousands of Mexican-Americans began to be executed, mostly through lynching, by the rangers (Suro, 1998). This hysteria was taking place at the same time that Texas had Mexican-Americans fighting in World War II for the United States. According to Suro, Mexican-American soldiers and their families felt that their service should be proof of their patriotism; after the war, they returned to Texas expecting to be treated differently by society. However, the racism, discrimination and segregation remained (1998).

Finally, Mexican-Americans have been used for cheap labor and exploited in their efforts to achieve what is known as the 'American Dream.' Most Mexican-Americans found work in the railroad and in agriculture. The Texas Proviso, which was in effect until 1986, allowed employers to escape being penalized for employing illegal Mexicans and often was stretched, by employers, to include poor treatment and economic exploitation of Mexican-Americans. According to Suro (1998), "it is easy to deny decent wages and working conditions to people who lack political standing and who have been marked as inferior creatures," (¶ 82).

Being Mexican American in Texas thus has been, and still is difficult. Being a mix of Mexican American and European America may dilute some of those negative experiences, or it may exacerbate the difficulties. The current study will attempt to give voice to this population by allowing them to speak about their experience.

### *Definition of Terms*

*Race.* Wallace (2001) defined race as “a sociopolitical category that changes over time and refers to perceived biological and social commonalities of a group of people; a system of classification that organizes people into groups according to characteristics perceived to be shared by the group (including phenotype, genotype, culture and other criteria)” (¶ xi).

*Phenotype.* A biethnic individual's phenotype refers to the outward physical appearance of the person. It is the characteristic that influences the perception of that person by others, recognition/disownment by ethnic groups, relationships within their family and other areas of their identity (Wallace, 2001).

*Ethnicity.* Ethnicity is defined as “pertaining to the lifeways of a social group defined by a common ancestry, culture, geographic origins, and sometimes religion” (Wallace, 2001, ¶ xi). Because Mexican Americans officially are considered White, the term ethnicity is more fitting than race.

*Biethnicity.* Biethnicity refers to “having recent ancestry from two different ethno racial groups; a word to describe the dual ethnic or racial nature of one’s heritage and/or identity; here synonymous with multiethnic/racial” (Wallace, 2001 ¶ xi). Being biethnic can be a positive or negative experience for an individual with the outcome being mainly determined by socio-contextual factors.

### *Identity Development*

When studying ethnic identity development of biracial children, the foundation of identity development must first be established. Known as the father of identity

development, Erik Erikson provides that necessary framework. He proposed eight stages of psychosocial development, each characterized by a crisis. Successful resolution of that crisis allows the individual to successfully attain the task of that stage and enter into the next stage. Identity achievement is the secure sense of self that is the optimal outcome of the identity formation process that culminates in adolescence. An unsuccessful resolution of the identity crisis results in identity disintegration, indicated by lack of clarity about oneself and one's place in society (Erikson, 1968). In a similar way, the process of ethnic identity formation appears to involve a crisis and exploration of the meaning of one's own ethnicity (e.g., its history and traditions) that, if resolved successfully, leads to a secure sense of self as a member of an ethnic group.

While Erikson's theory commonly has been applied to a Euro-American (and male) population, he was the first to highlight the importance of culture in identity development. According to Erikson (1968), men who share the concerns of an *ethnic group*, who are contemporaries in the *historical era*, or who compete and cooperate in *economic pursuits* are also guided by common images of good and evil. Noticeably diverse, these metaphors expose the mysterious disposition of cultural diversity and of historical variation; in the shape of modern community representations they presume crucial concentration in every person's toil for ego synthesis. It is for this reason that the ethnic identity development of mixed individuals is couched in his theory.

#### *Model of Biracial Identity Development*

Poston (1990) proposed a five-stage lifespan model of biracial identity development during which the individual develops reference group orientation (RGO)

attitudes. Poston recognized that identity development does not rest solely on the individual. The mixed individual's surroundings, i.e. society, prejudices, etc. does have a strong affect on this process and as a result, Poston proposed that all biracial individuals will undergo confusion and resultant periods of maladjustment. Poston (1990) wanted to lay a foundation for empirical study of biracial identity development and offered the following model to serve that purpose.

Poston's initial stage, Personal Identity, occurs when a young person's sense of self is independent of group identity or RGO attitudes because these have not yet developed. Their identity is chiefly based on factors pertaining to their personal identity, such as feelings of self worth, association with a sports team, or status as a fifth grader. These factors are developed and learned in their family or school. According to Poston, the children in this stage are often very young and membership in any ethnic group is becoming important. However, it has yet to be empirically proven just how great their sense of ethnic identity is at this stage (1990).

The second stage, Choice of Group Categorization, occurs when the young individual perceives him- or herself as compelled to choose an identity, usually of just one ethnic/racial group. This is considered the 'choice' stage and can be traumatic as well as a time of crisis for the individual. Poston (1990) states that there are factors that play an important role in which ethnic group the person will choose: status factors, such as family's status in community; social support factors, such as acceptance in cultures of various groups; and personal factors, such as physical appearance or age. The choice to be made during this stage is between identifying with the majority or minority group.

Poston claims that a biracial individual would not choose a multiethnic identity at this stage because they do not possess the cognitive ability that would tolerate the acquisition of knowledge of both cultures (1990).

During the third stage, Enmeshment/Denial, there are several processes that must be considered. First, this stage is indicative of an individual who has made a choice and has become enmeshed with one of their ethnic groups. They may experience guilt and self-hatred as to their choice vis a vis their non chosen identity. They may also face possible rejection from one or more of the ethnic groups due to the choice made. Poston states that the individual must work through these negative feelings of guilt and self-hate. They must also eventually acquire an appreciation of both parents' cultures or they will remain in this stage (1990).

The fourth stage, Appreciation, is an emerging receptivity to one's multiple heritages and a resultant broadening of one's reference group orientation. The individual may begin learning about their ethnic heritage originally pushed aside but they commonly recognize the ethnicity chosen during stage two. Even during the Appreciation stage, the individual may feel limited by the factors that influenced the original decision (i.e. physical or social factors) (Poston, 1990).

It is during the fifth stage of Integration that the individual perceives value in having a multiple identity. These individuals recognize and claim a multicultural verve. They continue to acquire knowledge regarding their multiple racial/ethnic identities and experience a sense of wholeness and integration (Poston, 1990).

A major weakness with Poston's model is that he did not conduct a study to investigate the validity of his propositions. Rather, he formulated his model based on his examination of support groups for biracial individuals.

### *Biracial Identity Development*

According to Kerwin and Ponterotto, (1995) biracial individuals who are the offspring of one White parent and one parent of color should identify with only one racial/ethnic group, specifically with the group of the parent of color. The biracial person has little choice but to adopt this identity because society will ultimately view the individual this way. The one consensus among researchers is that biracial individuals run the risk of being rejected by both races. They are stereotyped as people who will be rejected at face value by all ethnic/racial groups and considered to be marginal but not actual members of these groups (Kerwin & Ponterotto, 1995).

Researchers have conceptualized models of biracial identity development in response to the lack of generalizability of models for monoracial individuals. Two models have emerged from this literature, one by Jacobs, (1992) and one by Poston, (1990). These models have been developed based upon studies of Black/White individuals and Asian/White individuals. Jacobs' model focuses on biracial development in children and will not be discussed any further. As we are venturing into unknown territory, it has yet to be demonstrated if the existing model is also applicable to Mexican American/European American individuals. The focus of this study therefore is to test the applicability of Poston's model for Mexican American/European American biethnic individuals.

In the late 1990's, Wallace conducted an exploratory study to investigate how mixed heritage persons developed meaning of their ethnicities in relation to the context in which they lived. The general focus of the study was the development and significance of the participants' ethnic identity through their personal experience in their individual homes and in the community, at large (Wallace, 2001).

Mixed heritage high school and university students in the San Francisco Bay area in California were recruited (2001). Fifteen of those self identified as mixed heritage and were first generation of majority/minority biracial heritage and ranged in age from fifteen to thirty. Wallace's (2001) in-depth interviews were conducted using an Expressive Autobiographical Interview (EAI) that allowed a focus on context, individual experiences and life history.

Wallace's study did not place the respondents into stages, rather looked at the contexts that influenced their ethnic identity development (2001). From this perspective, the findings support Poston's (1990) model, especially in the area of factors influencing the choice of group.

#### *Status Factors*

Community demographics affected the biethnic individual's experience. These factors controlled the access to ethnic groups which in turn effects inter-group relations and access to similar peers. The community also plays a large role in the racism and prejudice experience by the biethnic individual. A study by Wallace (2001), reported that these experiences have an effect on a biethnic person's ethnic identity and mostly occurred while living in a community that was predominantly White.

### *Social Support Factors*

Being biethnic may place restrictions on relationships within the family. Many individuals recalled being estranged from extended family members because of one parent's ethnicity (Wallace, 2001). These situations, along with the recognition of their family being unique from the general public, shape the individual's definition of family and allows them to confront the strict societal boundaries upon which family is defined (Wallace, 2001).

Also critical to family relationships is the possibility of physical differences among family members. The experiences of the biethnic family range from assumed adoption, divorce or not being related (Wallace, 2001). Those incorrect assumptions made about biethnicity could affect that individual's self-perception. There are also differences in individual relationships within the family. Biethnic persons reported the perception of a stronger bond between siblings and the parent with whom they share more traits (Wallace, 2001).

### *Personal Factors*

Language is a salient aspect of identity development for a biethnic individual. Many biethnic individuals in the United States are raised as English speakers. For many reasons, parents feel that English as their primary language will shield their children from the bigotry that is known to be experienced by non-English speakers. However, the biethnic individual feels that their parent's native language is very important to that parent's ethnic background and therefore has a direct effect on their own ethnic identity.

Lastly, the lack of the ethnic language is felt by these individuals to contribute to the marginalization already felt from society (Wallace, 2001).

The participants in Wallace's study (2001) indicated that their phenotype influenced the perception of that person by others, recognition/disownment by ethnic groups, relationships within their family and other areas of their identity. However, phenotype is beyond the individual's control, therefore automatically giving the biethnic individual a set of boundaries in which they must reside. Wallace (2001) stated that in some racially segregated communities, an individual's phenotype is especially primary in the derivation of their ethnic group membership. Skin, facial, hair features and body type are individual factors that influence the biethnic individual's experiences.

#### Purpose of Current Study

The current study will explore the ethnic identity development of biethnic Mexican American and European American individuals using Poston's lifespan model of biracial identity development. Poston's model was chosen as it is a lifespan model and this study will be conducted using the respondents' retrospective and concurrent accounts. This study will investigate the applicability of Poston's model to this unique biethnic group and explore the possibility that more than outside prejudices affect an individual's ethnic identity. The following research question will be addressed, "What are the experiences of Mexican American/European American biethnic individuals growing up in Texas and how does that impact their identity development?"

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

#### Qualitative Research

When conducting research in the social sciences, there are two basic approaches from which a researcher can choose. These are the qualitative and quantitative methods. Both make a valuable contribution to the acquisition of knowledge in the field of social sciences (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson and Spiers, 2002).

Quantitative research has the ultimate goal of producing “universal laws” that correlate to the laws in the physical sciences (Halmi, 1996). In this research, a hypothesis is tested in order to ascertain cause-and-effect relationships for purposes of prediction and explanation. The hypotheses are stated before the research begins, thereby making it a deductive process of research (Creswell, 1998). Quantitative research’s foundation lies in the belief that there is a reality that is detached from the researcher and it is constant and governed by rules. It also states that it is achievable for us to fully know this reality. The research is held to a standard of being impartial and value-free (Halmi, 1996; Creswell, 1998).

The goal of qualitative research, on the other hand, is to gain insight into a specific phenomenon from the perspective of the participants (Creswell, 1998). Qualitative research acknowledges that the informant’s realities are as valid as the researcher’s reality, recognizes that human experiences are subjective and include various layers of meaning that are continuously changing. Due to the fact that humans construct

their own meanings, the informants' experiences are profoundly influenced by their gender, race, social class and their environment (Creswell, 1998; Halmi, 1996).

Qualitative methods are not limited to descriptions but also include the appreciation of an individual's experience with a particular phenomenon and the data collection is not limited to a predetermined grouping of analysis (Halmi, 1996). Qualitative research involves three types of data collection: (1) direct observation; (2) in-depth, open-ended interviews; and (3) written documents, including such sources as open-ended items on questionnaires, program records or personal diaries (Patton, 1987). The qualitative method of research is used when there is not much known about the issue in question.

A qualitative research design will be employed in the current study because the goal of the study is to explore the experiences of biethnic Mexican American/European American individuals raised in Texas, an understudied and poorly understood population. Phenomenology is the main approach that will be utilized as it allows the researcher to enter into the participants' world in order to attempt to understand their experiences. The goal of phenomenology is to illustrate and comprehend personal significances and experiences of the participants (Bernard, 2000).

### *Phenomenology*

Bernard (2000) defines phenomenology as "a philosophy of knowledge that emphasizes direct observations of phenomena." It is different from other avenues of qualitative research in that it seeks to sense reality and the ability to describe it in a manner that mirrors awareness and realization. The emphasis of phenomenology lies in the experiences that are common among all human beings and our (humans') ability to

relate to others' feelings (Bernard, 2000). According to Turner (1982), phenomenology is the way a researcher can interpret and ascertain another person's reality while incorporating his or her own subjective reality.

### Participants

The participants for the study were 8 biethnic Mexican American/European American women raised in Texas. Participants met the following criteria for inclusion (See Table 1):

1. Self-identifying as biethnic Mexican American/ European American
2. Raised in Texas
3. Be between the ages of 18 – 30 years

### *Recruitment*

Several recruitment strategies were employed in order to obtain the sample. Emails (see Appendix A) were sent out to professors and graduate instructors teaching summer classes, asking for an announcement to be made to their classes. In addition, emails were sent to all graduate students in the Human Development and Family Studies department asking for referrals of individuals who might be interested in participating. Finally, individuals who were known to be biethnic Mexican American/European American were sent an email explaining the study and asking for their participation.

### Measures

All participants signed an informed consent form (Appendix B), completed an Ethnicity Survey (Appendix C) and also responded to the AIP (Appendix D).

### *Ethnicity Survey*

The Ethnicity Survey (see Appendix C) included a demographic section and a section on ethnicity adapted from Wallace's (2001) Race-Ethnicity Survey.

This questionnaire gathered information about the individuals' age, place of birth, gender, language usage and educational background. The ethnicity section requested that the respondent check subcategories that describe their ethnicity. It also gave them the opportunity to list any additional wording they may use. Lastly, the Ethnicity Survey gathered information about the respondent's parents' ethnicities as well as age, place of birth, language usage and educational background.

### *Autobiographical Interview Probe*

The AIP (see Appendix D) was adapted from the Expressive Autobiographical Interview Probes used by Wallace (2001). Out of the 31 questions that Wallace asked, 26 questions were retained in order to gather in-depth information that specifically encompasses the experiences of being Mexican American/European American biethnic. Questions included in the original probe were disregarded if thought irrelevant to this area. The AIP used for the current study included questions about the individuals' experiences with family members, social contexts and ethnic choices. Being a probe, it invited and requested specific examples and personal opinions about specific instances.

### Procedures

Via email, each respondent received three items. First, the participants were asked to sign an informed consent with regard to the purposes of the study. Next, they were

asked to complete the Ethnicity Survey and, third, the Autobiographical Interview Probe (AIP). It was requested that the three measures be returned within 2 weeks.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### *Data Analysis*

After collecting all of the interview responses, the author read each response. After this, the author and another coder worked on developing themes together. The pair first read two interviews independently and described to the other the major themes they had extracted. Next, they compared the themes in each of the responses of each participant. After this, the pair discussed differences and together worked to reach consensus. When a working set of themes had been agreed upon, each coder read two more responses independently. Again the pair met and compared themes. When there were disagreements, the two discussed the reasons for coding in such way and deliberation took place until both coders agreed. Finally, the author coded the rest of the interviews and the second coder reviewed those codes.

The responses given by the participants fit into Poston's five-stage model (Personal Identity, Choice of Group Categorization, Enmeshment/Denial, Appreciation and Integration) and themes of confusion and maladjustment. These stages were then selected as the major themes from which sub-themes and codes emerged. Finally, additional themes outside of the model were also identified and coded.

## *Stage Themes*

### Personal Identity

There were no statements made that would be considered reflective of an individual that has a sense of self independent of their ethnicity. This was most likely due to the respondents' ages being between 20 and 28 years.

### Choice of Group Categorization

The majority of statements given by the respondents seemed to indicate current placement in the second stage of biethnic identity development called *choice of group categorization*. Some participants indicated that they had made their own choices. However, others felt that those choices were made for them. In both instances, many felt it necessary to justify why those choices were made. Their justifications fit into the factors that contribute to biethnic identity proposed by Wallace (2001).

*Forced Choice.* Forced choice indicated that the respondents were passive participants in their choice of ethnic group categorization. These decisions were made on behalf of the respondents for reasons such as rejection by peers, a majority/minority context, in order to please others and official forms and/or applications. As 'Dora' reflected, "there were definite lines that were drawn from my Mexican friends early on as to which group I would hang out with." Other participants shared her experiences. 'Margarita' also recalled having to choose an ethnicity because of *rejection by peers*, "when I was feeling left out in my so called cool friends group I would always go hang out with the Mexican kids and they let me because they could tell even though others couldn't that I too was part Mexican."

Another arena in which the respondents experienced forced choice was in the *majority/minority context*. Many of the respondents talked about choosing one ethnicity because the majority of the people around them were of one ethnicity. “Dora” felt she had to choose whites as her close friends in college because she:

“had many more opportunities in my life’s path to be friends with more white people than with other races. Few of the Mexicans went to college after high school from my own school. Again, as far as dating preference, the majority of guys I met in college were white. As far as my husband, I don’t think race played a factor other than the availability of white guys as opposed to Mexican guys in college was more prevalent.”

‘Maria’ was able to clearly express her experiences of forced choice because of her minority status. “I became Mexican when I left Mexico. The more I travel north into the U.S. the more I feel Mexican. While the more I travel south into Mexico, the more I feel American. I think it has a lot to do with feeling like an outsider of either of ethnicities.” ‘Helen’ recalled that language played a role in her forced choice, especially when around certain members of her family. “They mostly all speak Spanish and I feel like that is so much a part of me. At the same time I don’t feel totally Mexican because I can’t speak Spanish as well as my cousins.”

‘Margarita’ believed that the ethnic distribution of her town impacted her experiences of being biethnic. “Growing up we kind of just stuck with being White...I think it is important to understand that we grew up in a small northern town where there was like a 5% Hispanic rate and then when I was older we moved to West Texas where there was about a 45% Mexican rate.”

Many respondents spoke of being forced to choose in order *to please others*. For example, ‘Dora’ was able to sum up into one sentence what most of the respondents struggled with. “I remember thinking that I had to choose to make people happy.”

Offering a unique perspective, “Maria,” discussed how she has been made to choose to please others.

“I have been made to choose, but I believe that people have wanted to put me in one or the other. For example, as a student I am more valuable if people think of me as Hispanic or Mexican because then I can help meet their minority “quota”. Sometimes I have been put on the “American” side because people need an Anglo or because they want to see the differences between them and me. It seems that it has only been important when I am a minority, when I can play the role of the “other”.”

When asked if she had ever wanted to identify as biethnic but not been able to, ‘Maria’ responded, “If I haven’t it has been because I have felt that people don’t want me to be both ethnicities at the same time. (There is) a message similar to full-blood is better than half.”

Overwhelmingly, all respondents indicated having to choose their ethnicity *on official forms and/or applications*, but not being given a choice that correctly identified them. ‘April’ stated, “the only times when I feel I have to choose which race I am, are on applications for things.” ‘Carmen’ was very adamant when discussing this topic. “I cannot stand having to fill out forms that make you pick your racial heritage. There has not been a time besides today when I had the option to pick biracial or a mixture of races” (the ethnicity survey gave the respondents an option to pick any number of ethnic or racial heritages). ‘Helen’ indicated, “the only time I can think of when I had to choose

was on a scholarship application when you have to check an ethnicity box. This is really the only time I can think of that I had to choose.”

*Self-Choice.* Self-choice refers to statements that clearly indicate respondents actively participated in their choice of ethnic group categorization. The arenas in which they were able to choose ethnicity were in *choosing peers*, *choosing intimate partners*, and *choosing how they classified themselves*. They stated that the reasons for choosing with whom to associate were based on *shared values, beliefs and experiences*.. ‘Carmen’ recalled, “When I was in Jr. High I would only hang out with Hispanic girls and guys. I would only date Hispanic guys.” She indicated *choice of peers* was due to their *shared beliefs and ideas*:

“I think we are friends because of our beliefs and ideas we have about life. We all work hard and go to school and we do not believe in getting drunk or drinking all the time. We do not smoke or do drugs either. We think family is very important.”

‘Maria’ admits that her close friends are those who share similar *experiences* and/or are also mixed.

“My close friends have been people who are ethnically mixed as I am, who are Hispanic or who are considered by US standards to be a minority. While I don’t think ethnicity was a factor in my decision, sometimes I don’t think that my rhythm in life is the same as my all White friends.”

Choosing one’s friends also included disassociating from some of their friends because of *beliefs* about mixed dating.. ‘Consuelo’ discussed

“Over the last year, I have lost three people who I considered to be close friends for many years as they did not understand my relationship with my significant other

[who is White] and as a result hurt me and attempted to hurt my relationship with my significant other. I guess you can say I am in a friendship cleansing mode right now.”

Participants also talked about choosing their romantic partners for similar reasons as choosing their friends: *shared values, beliefs and experiences*. ‘Carmen’ stated that *values and similar experiences* influenced her choice of boyfriend (Hispanic) for over eight years, “we have very much in common and hold education up. I know we understand where each other is coming from and his extended family is much like mine.” While ‘Maria’ was not currently involved in a romantic relationship at the time of the interview, she was very specific that similar *experiences* with regard to being different are what she is looking for in an intimate partner. “I don’t think I want to marry a pure-blood Mexican who has not lived in the States. I think it would be very hard. However, I would like to find someone who is either like me or has an appreciation or love for the Hispanic culture.”

Some of the participants talked about choosing partners who were of a different race or ethnicity in part because of the *comfort* they felt with these men. When discussing relationships, ‘Eva’ indicated, “I have always been most attracted to African-American men, which I am engaged to one right now.” She is not the only respondent that has chosen relationships with men that do not share any of her ethnic heritages. ‘Margarita’ is married to a Chinese man and ‘Helen’ exclusively dates African American men.

“I have mostly dated Black men. I am in a new relationship now with a Black man who I really like and it seems I am more comfortable with them for one reason I can think of. They make me feel more comfortable in my

own body. In high school I dated White guys but I really felt almost on the fat side like I was too curvaceous but the Black men always appreciated it and made me feel good about my body.”

At one time or another, all the respondents have made a deliberate decision as to what *they want to be classified ethnically*. The respondents gave different reasons for their choice. ‘Carmen’ revealed, “I have people ask what I am and I say I am half white and Hispanic.” In reflection ‘Margarita’ seemed to choose her ethnic label based on those around her. She shared, “have claimed different titles at different times in my life like when I was little I would only claim White *because that was what my mom was*. In high school and later life I said I was Hispanic *because that was who I was around* all the time.”

‘Helen’ also attributed her known choice of ethnicity to *whoever was her cohort* at the time,

“Before college, I identified myself as White when asked because I believe it was because I hung out with a lot more Anglo people in elementary and middle school. I wanted to be most like the group I was in so I saw the “White” side of me more. Now I have identified myself as Hispanic because I believe I hang out with many more minorities of different types and if I identify that way I have felt more readily accepted because I too am identifying as a minority.”

‘April’ was more ambiguous about her decision. “I usually say half white and half Hispanic or Spanish because my mom’s dad was a “Spaniard” as she says. I think I was raised very neutrally.”

In addition to self-choice and choice about associates, ‘Margarita’ indicated that although she was not raised bilingually, she made efforts to learn the *language* because it

was an important part of her heritage. “I took three years in high school and two in college of Spanish and it did nothing compared to working and hanging around Spanish speakers.”

### Enmeshment/Denial

None of the respondents would be considered to be solely in the enmeshment or denial stage of their ethnic identity. Statements fitting this stage were difficult to identify and separate from statements solely indicating choice. The statements coded as such consisted of indicating an *interest in immersing* oneself in the chosen heritage *by learning* about the culture. In addition, statements that indicated guilt for their choice were coded as in this stage. Two participants made statements that would suggest a slight involvement or pause, at one point, in this stage.

‘Carmen’s’ parents divorced when she was 7 years old and she feels that she missed out on the opportunity to “become immersed in her own ethnicity.” Regardless, she is the respondent who was most steadfast in her determination to surround herself with her Mexican heritage and the opinion of others mattered none.

“Someone told me this summer that they have never considered me to be Mexican. I was in shock and thought why does it matter? I thought it doesn’t matter if you think of me as Mexican or not because I am Mexican-American and that is my heritage.”

‘Carmen’ also made remarks regarding enmeshment of her Hispanic heritage and denial of her European American heritage. “I am part of the Hispanic Student Society and I do like learning more about the Hispanic heritage.” She also admits to surrounding herself with long-standing peers that are also members of the Hispanic community. “My

close friends are my sisters and two Hispanic girls. One of the girls I have known for over 10 years and the other I met in college.” ‘Carmen’ also identified her boyfriend, of over eight years, as Hispanic. Carmen is not considered to only exist in this stage due to other statements that she made in other parts of the interview that fit in other stages.

‘Consuelo’ recalled a time in her life when she *denounced* her Mexican heritage and *how badly she felt* for doing so.

“I was told that in order to be “cool” or accepted in a group I had to be less Hispanic and more “white” in addition to being less “Catholic” and more “Baptist”. This experience peaked in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. It was important to me at this time to be accepted as classes consisted of 6-8 students and it was important to me to be accepted by the majority. I knew in my heart it was wrong and many times I remember feeling bad for people of my same race or religion. After I began attending high school which was located in a different nearby town I learned to accept and embrace my differences. I, later, apologized to as many of these people in my jr. high years but to this day, it does not seem like enough.”

### Appreciation

Each respondent made declarations that indicated an emergent appreciation towards their multiple heritages. Even ‘Carmen’, who at first glance would seem in denial of her European background admitted, “I want to know as much as I can about being Mexican American and Caucasian.” When asked what being both Mexican American and European American meant to her, she responded it is “remembering where I came from and what the people who came before me went through.”

‘Margarita’ reported making efforts to learn more about her Hispanic legacy. “But now that I am older and have learned some Spanish, I initiate conversations in Spanish and she (grandmother) then tells me more of my heritage.” She also felt that her

increased awareness of her Hispanic background allows her “to benefit from both cultures.”

Involvement in both ethnic cultures is important to ‘Helen.’ “I just recently realized how closely I am connected to my ancestors that immigrated to the U.S. because my family hadn’t lost the language.” ‘April’ also recognized the value of her ethnicity and the connection with her family. “I’m proud of both sides of my family. I really love both sides of my family and all of the history and stories they both have.”

Other respondents offered glimpses of pride because of their dual heritages. ‘Maria’ indicated, “I am proud of it. I like talking about it.” ‘Consuelo’ was in agreement with this emerging acknowledgement. “I am lucky – I have the better of two worlds instead of one.” ‘Dora’ reiterates this with her sentiment of, “I think that being both Mexican American and European American for me is great. I have had insight into two cultures that others do not have or will never have due to their ethnicity.”

### Integration

Integration, the final stage in Poston’s model, was represented in three ways by the respondent: first, statements of integration *from parents directed to the respondent*, *personal statements* of integration and finally the desire for integration for *the respondents’ children*. However, as it is the last stage in ethnic identity development, these statements, regardless of origin, were few in number.

Two participants reported *parental statements* promoting integration. For ‘Consuelo’ this message was an indirect one. “We always celebrated and inter-mixed the

traditions of the Caucasian and Hispanic heritages. For example, on Thanksgiving we have the dressing and the refried beans; we have the rolls and tortillas!”

‘Maria’s’ parents were very forthcoming in their message of valuing both ethnicities. “I can still remember my Mom’s words, as they were spoken many times. ‘You are 100% both. You are 100% Mexican and 100% American. You are not half and half.’”

A few respondents did make *personal statements* that could be considered complete integration into their dual heritages. According to ‘Carmen’, “I have formed my own ideas and thoughts about ethnic identity. I do not feel more of one than the other. I am both and I identify with both. When people ask I tell them I am both.”

‘Eva’ indicated that “I say I’m ½ Hispanic and ½ White. That is the way I identify myself inside and to others.” She further asserted “I feel like I can identify easily with both of my races. I feel equally proud to represent both.” Along those same lines of identification, ‘Dora’ stated, “I believe that as a mixed race individual, I have come to identify with all parts of my ethnicity up to this point in my life.”

‘Margarita’ alluded to the fact that her dance with this component of ethnic identity development is more recent. “There is not anytime now no matter whom I am around that I identify myself solely as one or the other. Now I just say I am biethnic.”

‘Maria’ eloquently described her stance of equality among ethnicity.

“I am Mexican and I am American (European American). I understand that Mexican-American is more thought of for Mexicans who have immigrated to the States, but to me it defines my dual 100% ethnicity. I am Mexican-American. My dad is Mexican. My mom is American. It does not change... I feel more capable to stand up for myself and

claim my dual ethnicity. Sometimes even going as far as demanding to be recognized as a European American rather than a Mexican (not because I prefer one over the other, but because I value both equally – and want “them” (teachers and friends) to do the same.”

A general consensus among the respondents was the importance of *their child's* (current and/or future) *integration*. When asked how she will view her future children's ethnic/racial heritage, ‘Dora’ indicated “family is an important aspect so they will be familiar with both sides, white from my husband and mixed from my side.”

‘Carmen’ stated “my child is multiethnic because he has my European American and Mexican American heritage along with my husband's Chinese heritage. I classify him as multiracial.” ‘Eva's’ children are also multiracial. “I will talk to my kids more about their ethnicity. I think it's important and they are mixed with three races. I want them to be proud of all their races.”

#### *Additional Themes*

In addition to statements coded for stage content, there were other themes that emerged from the interviews that appeared noteworthy. These included statements that suggested the participant felt *confusion or maladjustment about* who they were; comments regarding *experiences their family had*, and the *meaning* they ascribed to being Mexican- and European American.

#### Confusion/Maladjustment

A few participants alluded to feelings of *confusion and periods of maladjustment* regarding their experience of being biethnic. These were statements that indicated they

were not sure of how they should define themselves and at times stating that this uncertainty produced feelings of distress.

‘Maria’ admitted,

“...both worlds think of you as the other- as being faulty in some way. It is as if I know I am different, and that different side needs to come out. I am not sure if it is out of fear and wanting to hide and protect myself from others, or if I am doing it to prove to them that I am as different as I think. I am still puzzled by this”

‘Eva’ recalled the difficulties of being different from both ethnic groups. “The Hispanic girls didn’t like me because I wasn’t like them. ‘I acted White,’ is what they said. The Caucasian girls didn’t like me because I didn’t look like them. It was hard.”

‘Margarita’ shared this experience.

“I have difficulty now trying to identify my ethnicity to others when I am around Whites that say they just can’t see it. For example in cultural related topics discussed in classes and I might comment about my experience as a biethnic and there is always someone I know that says ‘I didn’t know that,’ or ‘you don’t look like it.’ It doesn’t bother me that much unless they use a tone in which they are questioning me as if I am making it up or something. Maybe it is my fault. Maybe I need to tell everyone my ethnicity when we first meet so it isn’t such a surprise later when it comes up.”

‘April’ relayed experiencing *confusion* when trying to apply certain ethnic labels to herself. In relation to her childhood, she remembered, “we never really were sure what to call ourselves. We mainly just joked around about being mutts.” She also recalled one difficult experience. “A good friend of mine’s dad gave her a hard time because I’m mixed and said some pretty hurtful things. I was very surprised!” As an adult, “I never know whether to put “other” or what. I just don’t know if I feel one way more than the

other.” Finally, even though ‘April’ is a parent, she is unsure about how to view her son’s ethnicity. “I still haven’t figured that out yet.”

### Family Experiences

Throughout the interview, the participants shared stories they heard from their families while growing up. Statements falling into this theme were those that had not been directly experienced by the participant, but nonetheless had impacted who they were. These experiences were reported as both negative and positive. ‘Dora’ recalled, “there are times when the family is together that they would talk about growing up and traveling to and from the valley for the fields and how they were made fun of because so many people would travel in one car together.” She also reflected as to why she was not raised bilingually. “Unfortunately, since my dad was punished when he was learning English, he was very hesitant to speak it (Spanish) to us.”

Others offered remembrances of difficulties for their families based upon their *parents’ choice* of partners. For example, ‘Eva’ shared, “I always knew my grandma and grandpa were against my mom having interracial children.” ‘Carmen’ stated, ‘She (mom) did tell me that it was hard being in an interracial couple because her family did not approve of it. She still thinks that being in an interracial couple is difficult today.’ In agreement, ‘Margarita’ recalls conversations with her parents. “My parents have always kind of talked about my dad’s Mexican heritage because it wasn’t something my mom’s family approved of at first.”

‘Consuelo’ is acutely aware of her mother’s struggles. “My mother has experienced a lot of judgment in her life by marrying two different men of a different

race both from the public and from her family and my stepfather's family. She has overcome these differences.”

‘Helen’ offers positive experiences for her mom. “She really didn’t realize or see herself in a biethnic relationship when she moved here from California. She was very much accepted into the “Texan” culture. She remembers being very welcomed and loved.”

#### What it Means to be Mexican American

Each respondent was asked specifically what *being Mexican American* meant for them and why. The answers given referred to *values, beliefs, and/or traditions*, to having *personal significance and pride*, or were very *literal* and superficial responses. According to ‘Carmen’, being Mexican American meant adhering to the *values* of the culture: “it means being close to family and showing respect to your elders.”

‘Margarita’ and ‘Helen’ gave detailed responses that included *values, beliefs, and traditions*.

‘Margarita’:

“being Mexican American means being part of a wonderful culture that has wonderful traditions and beliefs. I love going to Mexican Balas and dancing cumbias. I can really feel the music deep in my soul. Plus being Mexican American means I can be part of a group that prides itself on togetherness, something I think everyone should appreciate.”

‘Helen’:

“That means holding family very close. Being very respectful of elders like my grandma and also letting men lead in many aspects of life. It also means piñatas and long lunches and

parties outside with Mexican music playing in the background like Alejandro Valasquez or Fernando. It means bullfights in Tijuana and speaking Spanish. It also means I have a rich heritage of family members who came to Mexico and helped create a culture in Tijuana.”

‘Maria,’ having lived in Mexico offered a very unique and more inclusive perspective.

“Being Mexican American has a different meaning to me. I take the label as incorporating equal parts of both ethnicities. However, I do realize that that is not the case for the majority who means it to be Mexican who is now living in America. So I would rather answer this question as, ‘what does being Mexican mean to me?’” It means pride. It means pride in my family, my work, my country. It means valuing the concepts of community, friends and extended family. It means valuing the power of connections with other people – to be real with them, to laugh, to cry, to be passionate. It means hard work. It means being able to rely on friends. I believe all of this because I automatically associate my Mexican heritage to a warm feeling where connections to individuals and family are the most important.”

Others, like ‘Eva’ indicated a sense of *pride* in their heritage. “I am confident with being Mexican American and I feel that side has made me be a stronger more independent person.”

Finally, ‘April’ gave a very literal meaning with no indication of personal reference. “It means being of Mexican heritage and living in America, because it was literally like that for my relatives.”

#### What it Means to be European American

The responses given regarding being European American seemed to have an underlying negative tone and overall absence of the warmth the participants had expressed about being Mexican American. The responses related to being ‘*normal*,’

*values and beliefs*, the *benefits*, or again, a *literal* and superficial response. Responses reflecting being normal included ‘Margarita’s’ statement: “being European American kind of just means that I am part of the ‘norm’.

‘Helen’ added:

“Being European American means being generic to me honestly. That doesn’t sound good but I am glad I am not only White. But to me, being European American is secondary to my ‘Mexicanness’ because that part of me seems less interesting than being Mexican American.”

Other responses focused on the *values* of the Euro-American culture:

‘Maria’:

“It means to be independent. To learn to be trustworthy, accountable and reliable. It means to have integrity. It means to value your nuclear family and protect it. It means to take care of oneself, have dreams and be able to achieve those dreams. It means to be an adult. It means to be educated. It means to raise your children in the best manner. It means to value everyone. I believe it means all of this for me because although I don’t have that instinctive warm feeling of connection, I have a feeling of respect and admiration. It is almost as if it were a feeling of getting things done in the best and most accurate way. Not necessarily cold, just warm in a different way.”

‘Carmen’:

“being family oriented and striving to do my best at all times.”

There were those, however, that talked about the *benefits* of being European American. For example, ‘Eva’ stated in response to what being European American meant to her: “I feel like it has made me be understanding and open. I am proud of my culture and family strength.” ‘Margarita’ stated: “I don’t have to worry about people judging me on my ethnicity because I am part European American.”

Finally, ‘April’ responded with a very *literal*, response: “Having European descendants and living in America, although most of my relatives have lived in the States for over 200 years.”

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to explore the relevance of Poston's lifespan model of biracial identity development to Mexican American/European American biethnic individuals. The answers given by the respondents, for the most part, fit into the model, although there were answers that indicated the participants' placement in different stages at the same time. Poston (1990) did not discuss the fluidity between stages, instead offered his model as a development stage model. The current study adds to his proposition in that while it was found that the majority of the statements the participants made fit into one stage, suggesting that they were in that stage, they seemed to provide answers that fit into multiple stages. There were no participants that gave responses that would fit into one stage only. Instead, one participant may have given several different responses that would place her in different stages simultaneously.

#### Personal Identity

Based on answers given, none of the respondents were found to be currently in this stage of ethnic identity development. However, reflections of childhood experiences indicated a presence in this stage at one time. For example, when referring to previous experiences with peers, 'Dora' stated, "When I was in grade school, I don't think it mattered as much. Mexicans and Whites hung out and race did not seem to be an issue." The lack of answers placing participants in this stage could have been due to their age. Although Poston's model did not indicate ages in his descriptions of persons in this stage,

he referred to these individuals as being ‘children’ or “very young.” A stance in this stage indicates a lack of cognitive ability to understand ethnicity as a self-defining referent. The current study’s participants had the cognitive skills to base their identity on ethnicity. Future research should include younger participants in order to classify responses as belonging to this stage.

#### Choice of Group Categorization

The majority of the participants could be considered, at least partly, in the stage of choice of group categorization. Wallace (2001) and Poston (1990) both highlighted the importance of factors that influence the decision of group categorization. These also appeared to be highly salient for the current study’s participants. Often times, the respondent’s felt that the decision was out of their control because it was dictated to them by what group they belonged to. The participants were able to recall their experiences of being categorized ethnically by others and what influenced their decision when they were in control of their alliance.

The respondents made statements that alluded to not being active participants in their choice of identification or preferred social environment. This seemed to be the case especially when they were filling out forms, responding to questions about what ethnicity they were, as a result of peer rejection, or because of the level of ethnic saturation in their place of residence. These statements are in accord with Wallace’s (2001) findings that peers often coerced biethnic individuals in choosing one ethnicity over the other. The current study’s findings also support the findings of Poston’s (1990) choice of group stage and strong peer pressure to choose. For example, most participants complained

about having to choose only one ethnicity/race when filling out forms. They appeared to want to have a “mixed” category that would better describe who they were. The subjects also communicated difficulty convincing others of their ethnicity. There were times that ‘Margarita’ recalled that Whites did not believe she was part Mexican and she had a hard time convincing them. Another example given of being rejected by peers was ‘Maria’s’ recollection of being made fun of due to mispronunciation of words.

While forced choice was a major theme of this identity stage for our respondents, they also indicated instances when they were able to be active participants in the decision. The subjects recalled at times being able to decide for themselves the ethnicity of those with whom they would associate, with whom they would be involved as romantic partners, and the ethnic label they used to identify themselves. Shared values, beliefs and life experiences became apparent as salient factors when making choices about friends and intimate partners. As adults, the respondents were able to seek out commonalities, such as education, love of culture and appreciation of family, as foundations for important relationships. The participants were also able to recall opportunities when they made a conscious decision as to how they wanted to be categorized ethnically. This decision appeared to be based solely on the themes surrounding them at that time. For example, many respondents indicated that they chose to be classified as ‘White’ if their nuclear peer group was predominantly White. The choice to be labeled as ‘Hispanic’ was based on a close association with other ethnic minorities.

The factors that influence biracial identity development given to us by Wallace (2001) are the same given by the current study's respondents that were considered to be in stage two of Poston's (1990) biracial identity model. During this stage of identity development, their choice of group categorization was not based upon an intrinsic value of that group. It is upon entering the next stage that a personal value is assigned and complete immersion into one ethnic group is undertaken.

#### Enmeshment/Denial

Poston described this stage of identity development as being traumatic for individuals as they would be experiencing feelings of self-hatred and guilt (1990). Based on that criterion, none of the respondents would be considered to be solely in this stage. However, this discrepancy could be due to the interview chosen for the present study. This stage is also marked by immersion into one culture. The lack of responses indicating may be because some respondents were in complete denial of their minority heritage, but that conclusion could not be empirically substantiated and was not considered in order to avoid making inferences.

'Carmen' is the only participant that gave answers indicative of current immersion into her Mexican American heritage, yet at the same time provided responses characteristic of other stages. 'Carmen' admitted to making a conscious effort to participate in organizations that are focused around her Mexican heritage and to form intimate relationships only with those that share her heritage. However, 'Carmen' did not disclose any feelings of self-hatred or guilt. On the contrary, she was very happy with her decision to be immersed in her Mexican ethnicity. One possibility for this finding

may be that if the ethnicity chosen is that of the minority group, individuals do not find it problematic. Responses supporting this possibility were given by ‘Consuelo’.

‘Consuelo’ was able to recount experiences in her childhood of her denial of her Mexican heritage. When she discussed this, she expressed feelings of guilt. She felt so guilty she attempted to apologize to those she felt she may have offended during this time.

If Poston’s (1990) model was to be considered a development stage model, the two respondents that indicated instances of enmeshment/denial would be the only ones to progress to the following stages. However, this was not the case based upon respondents’ answers. Many respondents made statements that fit into the next two stages, suggesting that perhaps the stages are not all sequential, or that not everyone goes through all the stages. It is not clear, though from this study, whether this is the case or that respondents heard others making statements of appreciation and/or integration and merely repeated them in the interview. This is an empirical question that needs to be addressed in future research.

### Appreciation

All of the participants recognized an appreciation for being of dual ethnicities. Even if the respondents generally identified with only one of their ethnicities, they agreed upon a sense of pride gained from being biethnic. Some even admitted a need or desire to learn about the culture in which they were not raised. For instance, ‘Carmen’ who was raised with a European American mother stated that she wanted to learn about both Mexican American and European American. The respondents felt that their dual heritage

gave them an opportunity to experience more than one culture and gave them passage to a unique history.

According to Poston (1990), this is not a very dramatic stage but rather the opportunity for a biracial individual to broaden their horizons and learn about both heritages. However, the current study indicates that this decision to begin incorporating both ethnicities is very telling and a major step in the respondents' ethnic identity development.

### Integration

The statements were coded for three types of statements of integration. Respondents made reports of messages of integration from their parents, personal statements of integration and hopes of integration for their current and/or future children. The participants discussed specific messages from their parents reiterating their biethnicity. They recalled being told that they were beautiful and that they were not less than their peers because of their biethnicity. "Consuelo" also remembered how holidays were always a combination of both ethnicities.

No participants would be considered to be solely in the integration stage. This is not unusual since this is the last stage of Poston's (1990) ethnic identity model. It is, however, important to note this applicability of the model. It may be that the current study's participants were too young or had limited experiences that would have allowed them to progress through all stages and achieve this level of ethnic identity. Nonetheless, there were personal statements of integration made by the respondents that would

indicate glimpses into this stage. The participants stated that they recognized being of both ethnicities and that is how they classified themselves to others.

Even though some respondents made personal statements, contradictions soon became obvious. For example, 'Carmen' stated that she identified as both Mexican American and European American and that is what she tells others when asked about her ethnicity. However, she was very adamant about telling a classmate that she was Mexican American and that the classmate's opinion was irrelevant.

Many of the respondents already had children. Some of the fathers were African American while others were European American and one was Chinese. Regardless of father's race or ethnicity, all respondents agreed that their children will be educated about their dual ethnicities. They further stated that their family of origin will remain important and will be used as a tool to educate their children about all of their ethnicities. This is a salient plan even for those that do not yet have children.

In sum, it appears that the participants in this study were in Poston's second stage of his biethnic development model: Choice of group. For many of the participants, it seemed that forced choice was an experience of late adolescence/ young adulthood in that their recounts sounded recent. For example, the first time many of them had to fill out a form and choose one ethnicity was in college, not earlier. Also, for some the need to describe themselves as one ethnicity or the other was as something that happened as they left the environments of their childhood. These are issues that Poston did not discuss and merit further research.

In addition to statements that could easily fit into Poston's stages of biethnic development, participants made statements that are worthy of discussion. Some of the statements were mentioned by Poston, while others were new ones that emerged from these interviews.

### Confusion/Maladjustment

Poston (1990) indicated that the biracial individual would experience periods of confusion and maladjustment while they are trying to come to terms with their ethnicity. The current study also found this to be a reoccurring theme among its participants. They discussed feelings of having to please others while they were thought of as an 'other'. Memories of not being able to fit into peer groups were recalled. Finally, the participants discussed feelings of having to prove themselves to others and difficulty convincing people that they were in fact Mexican American or European American. These feelings of confusion call into mind Erikson's adolescent identity crisis. The participants in this study appeared to be distressed at others' comments and uncertainty in how to describe the self. It is possible that if the participants were more experienced/older and were in integration, those feelings of confusion may not have been so prominent.

### Family Experiences

One of the areas that seemed to influence self perception of the participants was the experiences that their parents had felt when marrying someone of another ethnicity, or for being Mexican American. Most of the respondents were aware of difficulties that their family members experienced. Often times their parents of Mexican heritage were discriminated against or made fun of because of traditions or cultural ties. A general

consensus among the participants, with three exceptions, was that the parent of Mexican heritage would not teach their children the Spanish language because of the discrimination they had felt and difficulties they had because they spoke Spanish. It is because of family experiences that the majority of the respondents were not given the opportunity to be bilingual.

The respondents were also aware of difficulties that their European American parent had faced. Often the choice to become involved in a mixed relationship or marriage was not approved of and was looked down upon. These parents expressed to the respondents the hardship of being in a mixed relationship. An exception to this was one mother who did not recall being discriminated against and in fact felt very accepted upon moving to Texas.

While the respondents were aware of their family's experiences, there was not a direct indication of those experiences having personally affected them or their personal experiences. It did not seem to be something that was a major theme in the individual households while the respondents were growing up and, therefore, more of family history yet not personally indicative. It would be useful to explore how the experiences of their parents directly influenced the participants' sense of self.

#### What it means to be Mexican American

Another theme that emerged was related to the meaning ascribed to being Mexican American. When asked what it meant to be Mexican American the answers given alluded to beliefs, traditions and/or values to having pride and personal significance. Others gave very literal responses that did not indicate personal assignment

to being Mexican American. Many respondents indicated that being Mexican American gave to them a sense of family and belonging. It also referred to being respectful to elders. The music, food and holiday traditions were also included. Overall, being Mexican American was a very positive thing and the respondents attached a feeling of warmth to it. Respect, unity, family and interdependence were reoccurring positive themes attached to the responses and no one indicated negative meaning to being Mexican American.

‘April’ is the only participant that did not attach a personal significance to being Mexican American. To her, it was only indicative of her ancestors’ journey to America.

The eloquence used to explain the meaning of being Mexican American may be due to the fact that it is the unique aspect of the participants’ ethnicity, as their European American is the dominant culture in which they reside.

#### What it means to be European American

The meaning assigned to being European American, by the respondents, varied. Overall, the warmth association with being Mexican American was absent. Some even referred to being European American as being generic or ‘just part of the norm.’ Others referred to independence and reliability in their definitions. ‘Eva’ recalled that being European American made her stronger and more accepting. Few responses were overflowing with personal attachment to being European American as was the case when discussing the meaning of being Mexican American.

Again, ‘April’ referred to her ancestors when discussing her meaning of being European American and did not give personal significance.

The lack of significance assigned to their European American heritage may be based on the fact that the participants live in a society dominated by that culture and therefore it may be somewhat invisible in terms of their ethnic heritage. Overall, being raised in Texas had an apparent positive effect on the participants even though they were able to recount personal and family experiences of discrimination

### Conclusions

This study provides support to Poston's (1990) model of biracial identity development in Mexican American/European American biethnic individuals. However, salient contradictions can be found. First, Poston's (1990) model suggests that identity development is formed in stages but the respondents' comments indicate they could fit in multiple stages at a single time. This suggests that a stage model may not be accurate when exploring the ethnic identity development of biethnic individuals. An adaptation to Poston's (1990) model addressing the need for fluidity between stages would be an important contribution to research in the area ethnic identity development.

Poston's (1990) model was based on a sample of biracial individuals in support groups. Future research should focus on larger and more varied samples and specifically address biethnic individuals. It could be that if more participants are interviewed, findings would be different, possibly providing further support for Poston's model or highlighting the need for a new model. Investigation of a cohort using longitudinal or cross sectional methods and different age would also be a variation from Poston's (1990) model but an important contribution.

### *Strengths of the study*

This study surveyed a population that has received little recognition. The testing of Poston's (1990) model to this cohort is a new and significant contribution to the field of ethnic studies. Secondly, the method of emailing the questionnaire to the participants gave them the opportunity to carefully consider their responses and gave them ample time for thorough reflection.

### *Limitations of the study*

Results may have been different if a face-to-face interview was conducted. This study was conducted using university students. The education of the respondents may have biased the responses. Finally, although unintentional, none of the respondents were male. Different findings may have been available if there had been male participants.

### *Recommendations for future research*

Future research should address the limitations of Poston's (1990) model that were highlighted by the current study. Also, as listed in the limitations, examination of biethnic males or individuals without exposure to secondary education would be an interesting addition. An exploration of gender differences or implications of educational effects on Mexican American/European American biethnic individuals would serve to strengthen the foundation laid by this study. Finally, any further investigation on Mexican American/European American biethnic individuals is much needed and welcomed research.

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APPENDIX A

TABLE ONE

Table 1: Demographic Breakdown of Respondents

<b>Name*</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Primary Language</b>	<b>Self-Identified As**</b>	<b>Mom **</b>	<b>Dad**</b>	<b>Bilingual</b>
April	23	English	Hispanic, Mexican, Mexican American, Latina, Caucasian, White	Hispanic	White	No
Carmen	22	English	Hispanic, Mexican American, Latina, Caucasian, White	European American	Mexican	Yes
Dora	25	Not Indicated	Hispanic, Mexican American, Caucasian, White	European American	Mexican	No
Margarita	25	English	Hispanic, Mexican American, White, European American, Caucasian	European American	Mexican American	No

\* Pseudo names were given to each participant. Names typically found in Mexican homes were given to those respondents whose father was identified as Mexican or Mexican American.

\*\* These are listed as indicated by the respondent on the Ethnicity Survey.

Table 1: Demographic Breakdown of Respondents, Cont.

<b>Name*</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Primary Language</b>	<b>Self-Identified As**</b>	<b>Mom **</b>	<b>Dad**</b>	<b>Bilingual</b>
Eva	20	English	Hispanic, White	White	Hispanic	No
Consuelo	28	English	Hispanic, Caucasian	European American	Mexican, Mexican Indian	Yes
Maria	26	Spanish, English	Mexican, Mexican American, Caucasian, European American, White	Caucasian, European American	Mexican	Yes
Helen	22	English	Mexican American Caucasian	Mexican	Caucasian	Yes

\* Pseudo names were given to each participant. Names typically found in Mexican homes were given to those respondents whose father was identified as Mexican or Mexican American.

\*\* These are listed as indicated by the respondent on the Ethnicity Survey.

APPENDIX B  
EMAILS FOR RECRUITMENT

## EMAILS USED FOR RECRUITMENT

### EMAIL 1: NOTICE TO PROFESSORS AND GRADUATE STUDENTS

Hello all. I need help with my thesis. I am looking for college-age individuals that are biethnic Mexican American/Euro American. I will send out a questionnaire to them via email to fill out if they agree to participate.

If you know anyone who may be biethnic, please let me know. Also, if you are teaching, please make an announcement in your class.

Thank you for your help!

Kristal Lewis Menchaca

### EMAIL 2: NOTICE TO KNOWN BIETHNIC INDIVIDUALS

As you know, my thesis is on biethnic Mexican American/European American individuals. It is time to gather data for my thesis and I was wondering if you would be willing to answer a lengthy questionnaire if I emailed it to you? Also, if you know of anyone else who is biethnic and might be willing to participate, please let me know.

Thank you for your help!

Kristal Lewis Menchaca

APPENDIX C  
CONSENT FORM

## INFORMED CONSENT

I hereby give my consent for my participation in the current study, which will explore ethnic identity development in biethnic Mexican American/European American individuals. I understand that the persons responsible for this study are Dr. Yvonne Caldera whose phone number is 742-3000 extension 262 and Kristal Lewis Menchaca whose telephone number is 742-3000 extension 270. It has been explained to me that the objective of this study is to describe the important features of identity in biethnic Mexican American/European American individuals.

Ms Menchaca has explained to me that 1) my participation in this study will involve a written or emailed questionnaire which will focus on components of my identity and experiences growing up; 2) the information obtained in these questionnaires is expected to increase understanding of how biethnic Mexican American/European American individuals see themselves; 3) there are no expected risks to me as a result of my participation in study; and 4) I understand that there is no financial compensation for my participation.

Ms. Menchaca has explained to me that my participation in this study is voluntary and that there will be no negative consequences to me if I choose not to participate. She has also explained to me that any information that I provide will be kept confidential. Only Dr. Caldera and her associates will have access to the information that I provide and my name will never be attached to any information that is produced from the study.

The investigator has agreed to answer any questions that I may have concerning the procedures.

I understand that I may not derive therapeutic treatment from participation in this study. I understand that I may discontinue my personal participation at any time I choose without penalty.

---

Signature of Participant

---

Date

---

Printed Name

APPENDIX D  
ETHNICITY SURVEY

ETHNICITY SURVEY

Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_ Place of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

Primary language(s): \_\_\_\_\_

What is the highest grade/degree you have completed in school? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



Please check as many of the subcategories within as many of the groups you feel best describe your ethnic and racial heritage. If something is not included, please write it on the lines provided by the other group/word.

**Latino-a or Hispanic American, etc.**

Please check as many as apply:

- Hispanic
- Mexican
- Mexican-American
- Latino-a
- Chicano

Other group/word: \_\_\_\_\_

Please describe

**White/European American, etc.**

Please check as many as apply:

- Caucasian
- European American
- White

Other group/word: \_\_\_\_\_

Please describe

Please indicate your ethnic heritage below:

mother's heritage: \_\_\_\_\_

date of birth: \_\_\_\_ place of birth: \_\_\_\_\_

primary language (s) \_\_\_\_\_

highest grade completed: \_\_\_\_\_

father's heritage: \_\_\_\_\_

date of birth: \_\_\_\_ place of birth: \_\_\_\_\_

primary language (s) \_\_\_\_\_

highest grade completed: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX E  
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL INTERVIEW PROBE

## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL INTERVIEW PROBE

This written questionnaire is in place of a face-to-face interview. Please take your time in completing this questionnaire in order to be as thorough and specific as possible. Personal stories and examples are preferred as well as any additional information that you may feel relevant about the experiences of growing up biethnic Mexican American/European American in Texas.

*Which parent do you think or have been told you are most like? Why? (skin tone, facial features, personality, etc.)*

*When in public with your mother, father or siblings, how do strangers interact with you? Do they assume that you are related (or not related)?*

*Growing up, did your parent/s talk about their own ethnic, racial heritage or identity? If yes, can you think of a time recently? (give example) If no, why do you think it wasn't talked about?*

*Growing up, did anyone in your family talk about your own ethnic, racial heritage, or identity? If yes, can you think of a time recently? (give example) If no, why do you think it wasn't talked about?*

*Have you and your sibling(s) ever talked about being Mexican American **and** European American?*

*Growing up, how did your parent(s) talk about people being different? What kinds of things did they say about interracial couples, about your ethnicity, about mixed heritage children, etc.? Can you look back and see any general messages that they gave you?*

*Have you gone through times in your life when you have been told that you had to choose to be one or another race? If yes, tell me about those times. What led up to this? What happened? Why do you think it mattered?*

*Has there ever been a time at school when your mixed heritage mattered or came up? (e.g., in class, an assignment, teacher comment, clubs, friends, etc.) If yes, tell me about this. What led up to this? What happened? Why do you think it mattered?*

*Tell me about your life outside of school. Who are your close friends? Why do you think you are friends with them? (give example) Did ethnicity/race factor into your decision?*

Do you participate in any informal or organized groups or activities?  
Do you have any dating experiences and any preferences? (Give examples. If you are married and/or engaged, please discuss partner as well as if there is any reason you chose to be in a permanent relationship with someone of his/her ethnicity?)

*Have you noticed that there are times you change the way you talk or act depending on the context you are in? If yes, please describe.*

*Have you ever had someone you do not know or do not know well ask you about your ethnic or racial heritage and/or identity?*

If yes, what led up to this? What happened? Why do you think it mattered?  
How did you feel about it?

*Have you ever had someone give you a hard time about your mixed heritage?*

If yes, what led up to this? What happened? Why do you think it mattered?  
How did you feel about it?

*How do you identify racially/ethnically?*

Are there any particular words that you like to use to describe your ethnic, racial heritage or identity?

Why do you think you identify this way?

Does this change depending on the person with whom you are talking?

*How do you think others (family, siblings, teachers, friends, strangers) see you and why? Perhaps due to:*

Physical appearance (features, color, hair, etc.)

Language or dialect or both

Name

Other (clothing, speech, mannerisms, etc.)

*Is language somehow important in the Mexican American community? In the European American community? If so, how and why, in your opinion?*

*Are there times when you feel more Mexican American than European American? Can you give me an example?*

Would there ever be a time when you would identify solely as Mexican American? Can you give me an example?

Would there ever be a time when you would identify solely as European American? Can you give me an example?

*Have you ever had strangers or people you don't know well make comments about how you look, positive and/or negative?*

If yes, tell me about these times. What led up to this? What happened? What types of things were said? Why do you think it mattered to them? How did you feel?

*Have your parents or friends ever encouraged you to try to change your physical appearance?*

If yes, tell me about these times. What led up to this? What happened? What types of things were said? Why do you think it mattered to them? How did you feel?

*What do you think has shaped your ideas about racial or ethnic identity?*

If yes, how and why?

Do you think they will change in the future? Why or why not?

*Have you ever wanted to identify with all parts of your ethnic or racial heritage and not been able to?*

If yes, tell me about these times. What led up to this? What happened? How did you feel?

*What does “being Mexican American” mean for you and why?*

*What does “being European American” mean for you and why?*

*What does being both Mexican American and European American mean for you and why?*

*Do you think that people that are monoethnic (one ethnicity) would experience what you have growing up? Why or why not?*

*If you have children (or will have someday), how do (would) you view their ethnic/racial identity? Would it depend on anything in particular?*

*Do you feel that being raised in Texas has had any effect on your experiences (as opposed to Ohio or Montana, etc.)? Why or Why not?*

PERMISSION TO COPY

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Agree (Permission is granted.)

Kristal Lewis Menchaca  
Student Signature

5-1-2005  
Date

Disagree (Permission is not granted.)

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Student Signature

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Date