

# “I Don’t Look Like Her”: Race, Resemblance, and Relationships in Multiracial Families

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## Abstract

Race and resemblance are tied to family membership, and relationships characterize family dynamics. In this article, we argue that race, resemblance, and relationships intersect in distinct, layered ways in multiracial families. While scholarship has documented how multiracial families have historically been considered outside of the norm, little research has explored the impact of this racialized reality on family relationships. This article examines how phenotype shapes family interactions and, over time, the family relationships between a child and her or his mother, father, and sibling(s) through the voices of 60 black/white biracial adults. By reflecting on their earliest childhood memories to their most recent encounters, their narratives illuminate experiences shaped by their status in a multiracial—and historically unorthodox—family. We underscore how multiracial families are perceived by others based on racial resemblance (or lack thereof), how family members contend with these racialized perceptions, and how black/white biracial Americans perceive their own family relationships.

## Keywords

family, bi/multiracial Americans, race

My mom is amazing, my mom is my life . . . but I don’t *look* like her . . . She’s got this long, red hair and green eyes . . . Sometimes I’m like “Oh my God, this is not okay.”

—Nina, 25 years old

Although interracial romance and bi/multiracial Americans have always existed, the repealing of antimiscegenation laws in 1967 expanded marriage options for Americans and altered family formation patterns that, decades later, forever changed U.S. Census reporting. These policy changes also ignited contentious debates about racial identity politics and initiated new racial vocabularies. The time period following the landmark *Loving vs. Virginia* U.S. Supreme Court decision has been referred to as the “biracial baby boom” because it has generated a steadily

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increasing bi/multiracial<sup>1</sup> population (Root 1992:3). This population has modified the traditional definition of family with the influx of multiracial and multiethnic families (DaCosta 2007; Dalmage 2000; Rockquemore and Henderson 2010). In addition, bi/multiracial Americans have disrupted long-standing racial identity binaries and asserted new racial classification schemes (Funderburg 1994; Korgen 1998; Renn 2004) or have rejected the concept of race altogether (Kilson 2001; Rockquemore and Brunnsma 2008). Due to this significant shift in the racial landscape in the United States, new areas of research have emerged to analyze the bi/multiracial population from various disciplinary vantage points. More recent studies that explicitly explore the role of white supremacy and ensuing privilege have been coined Critical Mixed Race Studies (Essi 2017). But less scholarly attention has been placed on how bi/multiracials' relationships with their mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers are shaped by phenotype. In this article, we concentrate on this gap in the literature with a critical racial lens by posing the following question: How does race, and more specifically, phenotypic resemblance, shape kinship relationships in black/white multiracial families?

A wealth of scholarly literature on bi/multiracial children and adults examines racial identification processes (Davenport 2016; Renn 2004; Rockquemore and Brunnsma 2008) and social psychological well-being (Binning et al. 2009; Bracey, Bamaca, and Umana-Taylor 2004; Campbell and Eggerling-Boeck 2006). Increasingly, scholars have explored racial socialization in multiracial families (Samuels 2009; Snyder 2012; Twine 2010); this scholarship emphasizes how parents teach their children about race and racism, or lack thereof. These studies do not revolve around how racial resemblance influences family relationships, and few, if any, mention siblings. Notably, France Winddance Twine's (2010) research calls attention to the monoracial parents' perspective, Gina Miranda Samuels (2009) investigates how transracial adoption impacts racial socialization, and Cyndy R. Snyder (2012) explores how multiracials and transracially adopted adults are taught to cope with racism. The aim of this study is to illuminate how the complexities of family relationships in multiracial families are layered by race. This family dynamic cannot be analyzed in a vacuum considering that these respondents are residing in a highly color-conscious society, the United States. Consequently, the way that our respondents experience and characterize their family relationships is influenced by the messages that they receive from society about those formative relationships.

Although bi/multiracial Americans are the fastest growing minority group in the United States (Bonam and Shih 2009), and multiracial families are on the rise, the relationships that comprise a multiracial family have received relatively little empirical attention. Literary works paint a picture of the relationships between parents and children in multiracial families that are woven into a larger story about overcoming racial adversity in adolescence and young adulthood (Cross 2006; Obama 2004; Walker 2001). The purpose of this article is to examine multiracial families with an emphasis on how race and resemblance shape those relationships based on how the family is perceived, both publicly and personally.

## **Multiracial Families: Interracial Couples and Bi/Multiracial Children**

Race scholars have documented the long history of legal, political, economic, and social sanctions against interracial coupling and subsequent multiracial family formation (Ferber 1998; Johnson 2003; Nagel 2003). The most obvious legal restrictions against interracial intimacy were antimiscegenation laws, enacted in 1662, which prohibited the legal union and, in some states, even the cohabitation of different races (Lopez 2006). This legalized government intervention ultimately preserved the physical (yet understood as "racial") differences "by limiting entrance to certain physical types and by altering the range of marital choices available" to the American population (Lopez 2006:11). In sum, state and federal legislation historically shaped reproductive choices for

Americans; as a result, the state largely determined the *physical features* of the American population. These racialized physical features, also called phenotypes, play a key role in how our participants experience family membership as well as how they and their family members experience everyday life in a multiracial family in the United States.

Due to historical institutional arrangements, it has been argued that “[t]he notion of a ‘multi-racial family’ has, until very recently, been an oxymoron in American cultural consciousness” (DaCosta 2004:20). After *Loving vs. Virginia* legalized interracial marriage, there was an increase in interracial couples and marriages (Gullickson 2006). However, interracial couples still face discrimination as they learn to navigate largely separate worlds, particularly black and white (Childs 2005), and as they become members of and build multiracial families (Dalmage 2000). The challenges of raising children with fundamentally different racial experiences and ties to multiple racial communities are evident in both social science literature (Frankenberg 1993; Twine 2010) and literary, autobiographical works (Lazarre 1997). Correspondingly, the racially informed parenting techniques of parents of bi/multiracial children have been emerging in scholarship (Samuels 2009; Twine 2010), which is useful considering that bi/multiracial children continue to report struggles with fitting in black and white peer groups. Research shows that bi/multiracials sometimes engage in strategies to generally “pass” as black and, in fewer cases, white (Khanna and Johnson 2010), in addition to being “force[d] to pass” (Rockquemore 2005:17) due to the rigidity of racial boundaries. In highlighting hurtful and, in some cases, defining experiences with friends and acquaintances, we show how contending with the racial boundaries of resemblance shape family interactions and, over time, family relationships. Also, beyond peers, we call attention to the role that teachers and strangers play in intensifying respondents’ understandings of phenotypic resemblance within their family, or lack thereof. We encourage readers to contemplate the cumulative impact of interactions that question family membership and influence family relationships during not only our respondents’ formative years, but also well into their young adulthood.

## **Family: Race, Relationships, and Socialization**

Family, like any social institution, is dynamic and interdependent. How a family functions is shaped by the economic, political, and cultural conditions in which that family is embedded (Taylor 2002). Thus, the race that is ascribed to a family heavily impacts the access to valued resources of that family, which in turn will have an impression on the norms, expectations, and values that are conveyed within the family unit. Family scholars have identified differences in family processes and relationships by racial and ethnic background. A key aspect of family socialization within American society is racial socialization (Samuels 2009) whereby “parents racially socialize their children based on their own experiences of racial identity development, on the broader social definitions of race, and the socialization they received growing up” (Stone and Dolbin-MacNab 2017:99). Studies on African American racial socialization show that parents raise their children to be aware and proud of the history of racial progress and to rely on family as a primary support system (Suizzo, Robinson, and Pahlke 2008) and on religion and/or spirituality to cope with institutional racism (Sharpe and Boyas 2011). These forms of racial socialization have been referred to as “proactive” and “protective” messages in which the former emphasizes knowledge about the strengths and legacy of African American culture, while the latter prepares African American children for the reality of racial oppression (French and Coleman 2013). Dawne M. Mouzon’s (2013) study on race, family relationships, and mental health shows that African Americans were more likely to provide some form of help, or instrumental support, to their relatives on a regular basis than their white counterparts. In Mouzon’s (2013) study, blacks also interacted more frequently with their family, while whites reported less emotional strain as well as more potential support providers. Furthermore, contextual and ecological factors

influence how families function and, subsequently, how relationships develop and change. For example, ethnic and racial minority families in the United States have endured forms of intergenerational, systemic oppression that affect family processes of caregiving, role expectations, and the expression of cultural traditions (Khafi, Yates, and Luthar 2013).

Racial socialization becomes even more layered in families with multiple racial heritages, as parents cannot rely on a shared racialized identity with their children. Transracial adoption scholarship demonstrates the unique family dynamic of parents who have different racialized experiences and realities than their children. Some white parents adopt a humanitarian or colorblind approach when raising children of color (Barn 2013; Samuels 2009), while others embrace a color-conscious approach that acknowledges racism and ethnic discrimination (Barn 2013; Smith, Juarez, and Jacobson 2011). In addition, skin complexion plays a significant role in the adoption process (Barn 2013). Cardell K. Jacobson, Leila Nielsen, and Andrea Hardeman (2012) find that the “ideal preference” for white couples looking to adopt is a phenotypically white child, although 39 percent of adopted children have a parent of a different racial or ethnic heritage. Samuels (2009) examines the racial realities of bi/multiracials adopted by white parents, the impact of the lack of racial resemblance, and how racial perceptions are managed, although how these factors shape relationships is not the center of her analysis.

Our study addresses the gap in the literature by examining how race impacts family relationships in racially heterogeneous families with both white *and* black parents with specific attention paid to racial/phenotypical resemblance. We explore how respondents’ family ties are perceived by others, how their parents react to these perceptions, as well as how respondents themselves characterize the relationship between race, resemblance, and family relationships, considering the frequent reminders of their phenotypic differences. Notably, participants describe their kinship ties in ways that are inseparable from public perceptions of family membership, which underlines the impact of how societal notions, however impersonal and outdated, impact familial relationships that are deeply personal and recent. These findings about family relationships and processes will add to our understanding of how multiracial families function while embedded in a society with a notoriously racially segregated past and racially contentious present.

## Method

Our findings are informed by data collected from 60 life-story, semistructured interviews with participants who have one white parent and one black parent. These questions followed a sequential order that facilitated a self-reflection of their life experiences (Weiss 1994), with an emphasis on how they were colored by the social construction of race. Because qualitative research explores the complexity of social groups by rigorously analyzing the meanings, processes, experiences, and interpretations of a given group (Sprague 2005), we adopted this research technique to examine participants’ experiences that relate to their status in a multiracial family. The sociological method of interviewing in a life-story format allows for multiple levels of understanding experiences, including how participants understood the experience at the time that it unfolded as well as their current interpretation of it (Auyero 2002).

## Sample

The first author primarily relied on convenience and snowball sampling to recruit respondents. She also placed one “call for participants” at a local university. Three factors shaped her sampling choices: bi/multiracial Americans are not easily discernible, there is no public location where they tend to regularly assemble, and she had limited financial resources as a graduate student. Thirty-five women and 25 men participated in the study, ranging from 18 to 32 years old. Notably, four respondents encouraged a sibling to be interviewed, resulting in four sets of siblings (three

brother/sister pairs and one sister/sister pair). The majority of respondents were born and raised in the Northeastern United States: as far south as Pennsylvania and as far north as Maine. However, a handful of respondents grew up on the West Coast, one in the Midwest, three in the South, and one in the Southwest. In addition, five interviewees spent formative years in several states or countries. Most participants (54 out of 60) have a white mother and a black father. While this outcome presents a limitation, it also corresponds with most black/white interracial unions in the United States, in which white women/black men partnerships are more prevalent than their black women/white men counterparts (DaCosta 2004). A preponderance of interviewees (50 out of 60) completed at least one semester of college. Although this might assume a middle-class lifestyle and/or socioeconomic status, 12 of the 50 reported economic circumstances that parallel working-class and low-income brackets (e.g., being raised in low-income neighborhoods). In addition, four respondents self-identified as gay: one woman and three men. Our participants' physical features span the phenotypic spectrum; collectively, they reported being perceived as black/African American, white/Caucasian, Latino/a, Asian/Asian American, Native American/American Indian, and racially (and/or ethnically) ambiguous or mixed.

### *Data Collection*

The interviews were conducted between January 2009 and January 2011 and each interview ranged from one to three hours. The first author interviewed most of the respondents in intimate spaces such as a quiet corner of a coffee shop or a park. With the verbal and written consent of each interviewee, she audiotaped and later transcribed, coded, and analyzed each interview. To respect and protect the privacy of her respondents and those mentioned within their life stories, she replaced names and other identifying information with pseudonyms. She asked questions regarding a variety of topics including, but not limited to, the respondents' family, racial identity, childhood, and experiences at school, at work, and with dating. Specifically, participants were asked "Tell me about your family," and depending on their response, the first author would probe accordingly. For example, if their parents were divorced, she would ask follow-up questions about when they divorced, if they spent more time with one parent, and so on.

The first author informed interviewees of her black/white biracial heritage upon recruiting and/or meeting participants. As Juanita Johnson-Bailey (2004) contends, revealing this information has the potential to provide a unique interview setting where respondents feel a salient connection when sharing their narratives with a researcher with a similarly distinct background. Maria P. P. Root (1992) and Lise Funderburg (1994) address the importance of bi/multiracial insider status by highlighting the inherent biases in early bi/multiracial research, such as misunderstandings of multiracial socialization processes and narrow definitions of race. In addition, as Chandra D. L. Waring (2013) argues, biracial insider status might facilitate a more honest testimony of provocative or emotionally intense encounters with whites and blacks as well as assumptions about these groups. However, the first author is also aware of the shortcomings that are associated with the "insider" status. Self-identifying "insiders" may be more inclined to code and analyze the data from a positive perspective, which jeopardizes their empirical contributions (Mannay 2010). Influenced by feminist methodologists González-López (2005) and Oyérónkẹ Oyewumi (1997), the first author understands that she paradoxically occupied a simultaneous insider/outsider position because other social categories positioned her as an outsider, such as gender and parental status.

### *Coding and Analysis*

The first author employed grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to code and analyze the interviews to allow for the emergence of prevailing themes without the direction of predetermined

coding systems or theoretical paradigms. This approach was considered appropriate because she was interested in developing a new epistemological direction by asking questions that had not yet been answered in the existing bi/multiracial literature. This technique involved reading transcriptions, identifying patterns and themes, and organizing these themes into categories (Saldana 2009). The first author also engaged in “member checking” (Merriam 2009) to ensure validity by sharing preliminary findings with a few of the initial respondents and requesting their opinion about how she interpreted their experiences. As the research progressed, the coding process intensified as the first author identified new themes regarding family relationships and dynamics, revisited previous transcriptions, and reconfigured the categories (Weiss 1994). Reading each transcription multiple times allowed her to draw distinctions between the different ways race shaped relationships, such as public and personal perceptions, by identifying subthemes (Ryan and Bernard 2003). In addition, she created memos (Lofland and Lofland 1995) about each code, which also allowed her to systematize which types of comments about participants’ physical appearance were connected to perceptions about family membership versus other themes, such as dating, or whether multiple themes overlapped.

## Findings

Belonging to a multiracial family that consists of monoracial parents and biracial children (and in some cases, also monoracial children) creates a family dynamic that is still, according to our participants, considered anomalous in American society, despite “post-racial” rhetoric. This article analyzes the impact of public and personal perceptions on familial relationships between a child and her or his mother, father, and sibling(s). First, we explore the public perceptions of multiracial families to show the variety of ways in which respondents were reminded that their family is an atypical family due to their racial heterogeneity. Second, we outline respondents’ parents’ strategies that counter these perceptions to underline how monoracial parents engage with their bi/multiracial children about belonging to a multiracial family. Last, we examine respondents’ personal perceptions of their relationships with their parents and siblings. As we stated earlier, how respondents characterize their family relationships are inextricably tied to public perceptions of what constitutes a family. This finding highlights how societal messages, however flawed, color family relationships that are incredibly intimate and influential. Furthermore, the majority of respondents, 87 percent, identified as black and white/white and black, biracial, multiracial, mixed-race, or other signifiers of dual or multiple racial heritages (i.e., “halfbreed”). This suggests that racial resemblance influenced family relationships, even in cases where the bi/multiracial child identified strongly with both parents’ racial backgrounds.

### *Public Perceptions: The Significance of Racial Resemblance in Families*

One of the dominant themes in our respondents’ narratives was the assumption that they were adopted when they were with a parent with whom they did not (seem to) racially resemble. This assumption was based entirely on racial resemblance determined by similarity of skin color and hair texture, and has been documented in other studies about multiracial families (Dalmage 2000; Funderburg 1994). This common trend demonstrates the resilience of essentialist categories of race (Omi and Winant 1994) that continue to be reproduced in a supposedly “post-racial” era (Bonilla-Silva 2010). The perpetual assumption by others about respondents’ adopted status had a strong impact on how participants’ families were perceived. The general inability of people to acknowledge and legitimize diverse families generated feelings of embarrassment, confusion, and, in some cases, insecurity, as their family was considered abnormal. The cumulative effects of these public perceptions constitute an assault on their identity and the legitimacy of their family. In addition, they are also examples of “microaggressions” or “brief and commonplace daily

verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, slights and insults . . .” (Sue et al. 2007:273).

Nicole is 23 years old and her brother Raymond is 19 years old. They grew up in a “pretty white,” upper-middle class suburb in the Northeastern United States. Both of their first memories of race include being asked in elementary school if they were adopted. Nicole explains that her classmates “only saw my mom, they never saw my dad so, like, *clearly* [sarcastic tone] a white woman can’t have a brown child.” Similarly, Raymond recalls being mistaken for adopted countless times when his mother picked him up from day care.

Growing up, I always knew that it was weird that every day I was getting picked up by my mom who was white and . . . I knew everyone was looking at her funny like, “What is this white woman doing with this lil’ black child?” I was like “I’m not adopted, this *is* my mom.” I’m only half black but the way things work, I came out with black skin color. Two of my brothers came out white.

Elijah, a 22-year-old college graduate, reflected on his first racial memory where he also recalled someone assuming he was adopted in his childhood.

I was young, maybe like 7 [years old], and I remember me and my sister were walking with my mother. Um, somebody asked her, you know they didn’t know that we were listening, but somebody asked her if we were adopted. I remember I thought “Oh . . . I guess I don’t look like my mom.”

In this quote, Elijah makes it clear that not resembling his (white) mother makes his family different from other families and, therefore, worthy of inquiry by complete strangers. Other scholars have noted that particularly with multiracial families, the “racialized conceptions of what families are supposed to look like” become startlingly clear with frequent staring and questioning from strangers (DaCosta 2007:88).

Scholars have noted that historically Americans have identified the dominant American family ideal as one of a heterosexual nuclear family with biological children (Andersen 1991) and that the crucial defining elements of kinship are genetic, which deeply impacts the experiences of adoptive families (Wegar 2000). In this regard, the narratives of our participants demonstrate that they are often perceived to be *not* part of a family as they lack racial resemblance, and/or they are assumed to be adopted, a process by which they are publicly identified as not a “real family.” The experiences of our participants are reflective of the fact that within American society, race is still characterized as “based in biology and genes” (Onwuachi-Willig 2013:811) and the presence of multiracial individuals and their families creates a dissonant experience. The entitlement of people from all walks of life to verbalize such assumptions is a clear pattern: Racial resemblance is still perceived to be a necessary component of family identity. Many participants shared stories about being in public with their parents and/or siblings and people assuming that the family members were not together. In some cases, these circumstances caused a scene. Amber, a 22-year-old college student, describes a situation where her mother was not recognized as part of her family, ironically at the most family-oriented occasion: a family reunion. Her experience shows how racially heterogeneous families are still perceived as out of the ordinary, regardless of the race(s) of the person who is doing the perceiving.

Just to be told that this is not your family . . . that’s kinda hard. It’s hurtful to your parents as well. I remember being at my [black] dad’s family reunion and people were loading the bus and the [black] bus driver was standing by the door and my [white] mom goes to get on the bus and he says “Oh, you must have the wrong bus” [laughs]. My mom was like “No, this is my bus,” and my dad’s whole family, there were like 40 of us, we all got off the bus and said “We want a new bus driver! This is ridiculous and offensive!”

Leila, who is 24-years-old, is often assumed to be a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Puerto Rican, Dominican, or “black and something,” depending on the company she shares. She explains how she is perceived when she is with her white mother in a public setting.

Typical experience will be if I am in a predominately white town with my mother and people kind of give [us] a second look . . . like “Are they lesbians?” It’s very strange. Or they don’t think we’re together. We’ll be in line and she’ll start ordering something and they’ll ask me to the next counter and I’ll be like “I’m with her. *Hello*, I just called her Mom!”

Leila’s recollections seem paradoxical; people either presume that she is romantically involved with her mother or they assume that Leila and her mother have no relation/connection at all. Her experience highlights the complexity of assumptions that bi/multiracials encounter in public, which often do not include the assumption of biological ties.

Notably, Leila is not the only respondent who was assumed to be dating the parent whom she or he least racially resembled. Steven, a green-eyed, light-skinned, and racially indistinct 26-year-old graduate student, explains,

When I go out to eat with my [white] mom, people usually assume that we are dating, which is just bizarre because she is clearly *much* older than me. It’s never a possibility that I’m her son. Never.

Similarly, Malcolm, an 18-year-old high school student, expressed comparable experiences with his black father, who is 50 years his senior.

I’m light-skinned, so much so that most people think I’m white. There have been times when I’ve been out with my [black] dad and people never think we’re related. They think everything *but* that, like, even that we are partners . . . it’s so weird because he’s 68 years old.

Respondents characterize these experiences as “strange,” “bizarre,” and “weird,” but the frequency of these assumptions communicates understandings about race, family, and relationships. The tendency for strangers to assume biracial children are dating the parent whom they seem to not (phenotypically) resemble illuminates the significance of racial resemblance in families. This finding is particularly noteworthy considering the substantial age differences between interviewees and their parents. Furthermore, this finding indicates the sexualization of interracial dyads, where contact between two people who appear to be of different racial backgrounds, regardless of gender, presumes a sexual relationship, not friendship or kinship. Previous research underscores the hypersexualization of interracial relationships (Childs 2009; Frankenberg 1993); however, these studies are about people who *are* dating interracially, and who are not *assumed* to be dating simply because of their race and proximity.

The reoccurring theme of biracial children being told that they “do not look like” at least one of their parents becomes telling when they bear significant resemblance to their parent, but their skin color trumps other physical features such as facial shape, eye shape, lip size or form, dimples, and so on. Aaliyah, a 25-year-old college student and mother, asserts her resemblance to her parent. She explains, “I look exactly like my mom, I mean *identical*, except I’m a little bit darker and my hair is tight curls. Hers is wavy.” Some research suggests that physical resemblance serves as “explicit evidence” of family membership, even in mixed-race families (Moreno Figueroa 2008:289). Yet, our respondents’ narratives reveal the extent to which skin complexion reigns as the dominant character of resemblance and, accordingly, serves as a hallmark of family membership.

The salience of racial resemblance is also evident among siblings. Saul, a 20-year-old carpenter, discussed the standard response from strangers when he is in public with his white mother, white stepfather, and monoracial white half-sister, Molly.



We are all really close but I always feel weird going, you know, out to dinner with my mom, my stepdad and my little sister . . . then there is me. People look at us like “How is he connected to them?”

As mentioned before, these types of experiences qualify as racial microaggressions (Sue et al. 2007). Notably, the accumulation of these experiences is stressful, deeply frustrating, and can generate physical and psychological issues (Sue 2010). Saul’s older sister, Celeste, who is a 25-year-old nurse, offered a similar account of people not comprehending her biological connection to her white half-sister. Celeste explained,

My little sister’s 7 [years old] but she doesn’t see, like, color. She’ll be like “That’s my sister,” and her friends will be like “Your sister? But she’s a different color.” And she’ll be like “So!”

In these situations, Saul and Celeste show how other family members, in this case, their monoracial white half-sister who racially resembles both of her white parents, are not immune to the delegitimization that occurs within multiracial families. At the age of seven, their younger sister Molly does not face delegitimization with her white parents but she does endure these experiences with her older biracial half-sister and two biracial half-brothers.

### *Reactions to Perceptions: How Parental Strategies Impact Parent/Child Relationships*

Participants recalled numerous circumstances where they relayed a hurtful racial encounter regarding their multiracial family to their parent(s), and their parent(s) subsequently talked to them about the implications of being black *and* white in the United States, a nation with a strong racially contentious history and present. These conversations not only involved friends or peers but also incorporate people in positions of authority, such as a teacher. Respondents expressed a great deal of gratitude toward their parents for these conversations that allowed them to vent, experience validation, and strengthen their child/parent bond. Notably, most of these recollections included the participants’ mother, who, in most cases, is white. This is not a rare finding; previous studies show that white mothers (and fathers) of bi/multiracial children deliberately develop what Twine (2010:92) coins “racial literacy,” which includes “a form of consciousness that enables them to perceive routine and subtle forms of everyday racism that were not previously visible to them,” considering that they are white and enjoy the advantages of white privilege (McIntosh 1988). However, upon having bi/multiracial children, their white privilege becomes restricted, particularly with white single mothers, and they endure social sanctions as they help their children cope with racist acts in school, with extended family and in their local communities (Harman 2010).

Mario, a 23-year-old phenotypically white respondent, described a circumstance in Sunday school when his teacher vehemently challenged his racial heritage based on his Italian name coupled with his phenotype (e.g., fair skin tone and straight hair).

One day my teacher asked everybody’s race. I was probably like six, seven [years old]. My name is Mario Pezzello<sup>2</sup> so everyone’s thinking, “Eh, he’s *Italian*.” So she was like “Mario, what’s your background? Italian?” I almost didn’t want to stick up for myself. I felt, like, awkward saying it. I said “Oh, black and white.” She was like, “What? Wow, *really*?” I said, “Yeah, my dad is black and my mom is white.” She was like “No way! No, you’re not!” She was, like, *fighting* me about what I’m telling her.

Mario characterizes this exchange as the “the most uncomfortable that I have ever felt” and explains how his mother’s reaction provided him with the comfort and confidence that helped him navigate future delegitimizing and humiliating experiences. He exclaimed,

Mamas always come through [i.e. are reliable]! I told my mom and she went up to the school. She told my teacher that she shouldn't be asking those kinds of questions and it [race] shouldn't matter anyway.

Mario's mother then withdrew him from the class. He expressed that his mother's reaction to his teacher validated his experiences in addition to modeling behavior for how he would manage future encounters of delegitimization and/or stigmatization of his multiracial family or ancestry.

Denise, a 21-year-old college student, was raised by her white mother, her maternal grandparents, and her white stepfather. In discussing her childhood, she elucidates the role that her mother has played in helping her maintain integrity and sanity despite painful experiences of social marginalization because of her biracial ancestry and family make-up.

I had [white] next-door neighbors who wouldn't let me go in their pool and when I asked why, they said *because you're black* . . . and I ran home crying. When we'd play grocery store, they'd tell me I had to be the bagger because I was black. I would go home and cry to my mom all the time. I had a friend come over who saw my mother and stepdad and asked if I was adopted. I said "No" and she was like "Well, but, your mom's white . . . why?"

This example again highlights the delegitimization that multiracial family members experience, which may become more pronounced when one of the biological parents does not reside in the household, or is less active in the child's life. In Denise's case, a respondent who could never "pass" as white, her absent black father, and present white stepfather compelled her young friend to assume that she was adopted, rather than considering the possibility that Denise was biologically related to one of the white adults in her home. As she continued to tell her story, Denise recalls her mother's words following the incident:

"You're different because you are black *and* you are white. That's going to be confusing for people, especially children." She would say they just don't know any better; they are too young to really understand what they said.

Denise described her mother as honest and hopeful about such experiences, not only vindicating Denise's feelings of hurt and frustration but also encouraging her daughter not to let upsetting experiences take an emotional toll. "She said one day they might even apologize. They never did, but I appreciated her message." Her mother's guidance in these circumstances shaped the way Denise maneuvered subsequent situations, particularly with peers who attempted to alienate or tease her because of her biracial background.

Delilah, who is 26 years old, grew up in a military household and later enlisted in the military. Her mother is white and her father is black. One of the most travelled participants in the study, she has lived in two countries and six states and has been exposed to a variety of regional and cultural understandings of race and racial categories in the Southern, Midwestern, Northeastern, and Southwestern United States. She shared a traumatic childhood experience in which she came to realize the magnitude of her stigmatized family structure living in the Southern United States in the 1990s.

I had a birthday party in the fourth grade and I invited probably six or seven girls from my class. All of them said that they would come. I invited people who were both [races]; I remember that. My mom talked to their parents, everything was fine. Then on my birthday, not a single person came. When I went to school, I asked them "Hey, I had my party and everyone said they would come, like, how come no one came?" They didn't really have much to say.

Delilah was devastated when none of her friends attended her party. In fact, she never planned a birthday party again. Her mother explained her friends' absence in the context of race, region,

and religion. She assured Delilah that her friends had no say in the matter and that their parents probably did not agree with interracial marriages because of Southern cultural beliefs. Delilah's mother instilled in her that she was "a human being, first and foremost," as a means to reject racial stereotypes about Delilah's heritage, and encouraged Delilah to feel sorry for people who limited their lives by race. Her mother would often critique the "hypocritical Southern Christian culture" to counter the frequent messages of family stigmatization and delegitimization. This message was reiterated throughout her life. Consequently, Delilah critically evaluated racially motivated remarks by staunchly proclaiming that she refused to allow such comments to determine her future because, in her words, "then racism wins."

White parents' thorough explanations of the history of interracial relations and contemporary implications of the past have been detailed in previous literature (Twine 2010). This finding may be more common for white parents in interracial relationships due to their intimate and emotional bond with a person of color (Frankenberg 1993; Twine 2010). On the contrary, adoptive white parents coupled with other whites are less likely to communicate racial awareness by explicitly discussing race and racism (Snyder 2012). Parenting bi/multiracial children from a colorblind framework, particularly if also living in a predominately white community, leads to frustration, anger, and "a loss of self and racial kinship," for bi/multiracial children, although there are also gains to "being raised by white people" (Samuels 2009:88). In some studies, transracially adopted racial and ethnic minority children and teenagers stopped relaying racially derogatory slights made by peers to their white adoptive parents, in part because they thought their parents would think it was "trivial or [would] lack relevant knowledge necessary for handling the problem" (Docan-Morgan 2010:340). As our respondents demonstrate, parental communication strategies that explicitly discuss race and racism are significant in developing a positive racial and family identity.

### *Personal Perceptions: The Impact of Race and Resemblance on Family Relationships*

As the previous section illustrated, family interactions are profoundly shaped by race, phenotype, and stereotypes that accompany racial group membership. Therefore, family relationships are influenced by how parents and children decide to contend with the series of interactions that question their biological tie. Notably, how respondents perceive their own relationships *parallel the public perceptions* that we discussed earlier; respondents explicitly express how race and resemblance, or lack thereof, color their kinship bonds. Similarly, transracial adoption literature on bi/multiracials reveals the role of racial resemblance and how the lack of racial resemblance makes one's adopted status more pronounced when adopted by a white family (Samuels 2009).

Allen, a 21-year-old college student, explains his relationships with his white mother and black father based on their personalities.

I'm very close with my mom and [my relationship with] my dad . . . needs work. The reason why I am not close with him is because he's a very difficult person to get along with consistently. He gets very anxious and upset easily; he's kinda like a firecracker. Um, but I don't think race is a factor what-so-ever in that aspect.

Allen then mentioned race by drawing parallels between his relationships with his parents and his closeness with whites and blacks.

Since I'm really good friends with my mom, she has a huge influence on me. My dad doesn't have such a deep influence on me and I think that contributes to the fact that I have more of an association with white people.

Allen appears phenotypically white with sandy blonde hair, light skin, and green eyes. Throughout the interview, he explained how he has mostly white friends and girlfriends and “feels guilty” about not looking black and, thus, not being treated as most black people are treated.

People look at my dad and see a black person and make judgments right off the bat, I’m sure. But me, I blend in with a crowd of white people.

Although Allen initially stressed that his relationship with his father is not influenced by race, his comments suggest that because he is racially perceived as white, this distances him from the experiences of black people, including his father and other black relatives. In discussing a recent family reunion, he states,

It was, like, a *bunch* of African Americans and some of them date white girls and guys but I’m actually *blood related* to these people and I feel like such an outsider.

Allen’s phenotypically white appearance makes him feel uncomfortable around his black family, although there are other “white-looking” people at the family reunion. However, the white guests are not “blood related” to his black family and, consequently, do not need to *look black* to fit in. Allen’s story shows how race and resemblance shape his relationships with his father and other black family members.

Previous studies have documented the meaning and implications of diverse skin complexions in families of color; however, this scholarship concentrates on colorism, or the favoring of light skin tones (Burton et al. 2010; Wilder and Cain 2011). This literature does not address the *disadvantages* of having light skin as a person of African heritage and, thus, feeling guilty about being disconnected from African American experiences, and by extension, African Americans as a group, including relatives. Furthermore, colorism has been studied through a distinctly gendered lens that mostly centers the experiences of black women (Thomas, Hacker, and Hoxha 2011; Townsend et al. 2010; Wilder 2010), rarely drawing attention to black men’s experiences with skin color, family, and relationships, although some scholars have noted the advantages of light skin for African American men with regard to greater access to prestige, power, and wealth (Daniel 2002).

When Nina, a 25-year-old doctoral candidate, described her relationship with her mother, she became emotional about their intimate bond.

My mom is amazing; my mom is my life. She went through so much raising my brother and I [tears coming down her cheeks]. But . . . she was never, like, comfortable with her body and even if she was, I don’t *look* like her. I don’t have her skinny little body. She’s got this long, red hair and green eyes. I never got her body, she has double D’s [breast size] and no butt. I have no boobs and a huge butt. Sometimes I’m like “Oh my god, this is not okay.”

Nina’s relationship with her mother is inextricable from her mother’s phenotype, body image, and Western ideals of beauty. This quote exposes a complex intersection of race and gender that compares Nina’s body image with that of her mother, a white woman with long, red hair, green eyes, a large chest, and “no butt.” Nina has a light brown skin tone with curly brown hair that falls past her waist with honey-colored eyes, a smaller chest, and a “big butt.” Nina continued to discuss her relationship with her mother when she talked about her friends in high school. She voiced the racial patterns with regard to body confidence that she observed among her female friends:

I’ve found that my black friends are way more comfortable with their body than my white friends. Now that I’m thinking about it, I think a lot of it has to do with their moms, *they* are more comfortable with *their* bodies.

While research shows that African American women are generally more satisfied with their bodies than white women, this satisfaction is moderated by a variety of interpersonal factors, such as peers, men, and family (Kelch-Oliver and Ancis 2011). Moreover, studies show that African American women who spend a large amount of time with whites report higher levels of body dissatisfaction (Sabik, Cole, and Ward 2010). Consequently, it is implied that white standards of beauty, because they are the dominant standard of beauty in American society, influence all women who have high rates of interaction with whites. However, in Nina's case, this shapes one of her most intimate, formative relationships. Although she articulates undeniable respect and admiration for her mother, her relationship with her mother is shaped by the lack of racial resemblance, which is often pointed out by others, and the implications of this racial incongruity for family bonds. Hence, the gender and racial composition of a multiracial family has an impact on how mother/daughter relationships develop, specifically as they relate to femininity, body image, and beauty ideals.

Olivia is a 30-year-old event planner who was raised by her white mother and her white stepfather. Olivia's sister, Aubrey, was a former student of the first author who shared her first racial memory during a class activity.<sup>3</sup> She later became interested in the research project and recruited her biracial half-sister. Aubrey accompanied Olivia during the interview. In recalling the same racial memory that her white 20-year-old half-sister shared in class, Olivia explains,

Aubrey was like 3 years old, barely old enough to talk or understand anything, and my mom told her that I'm half black and half white. I remember she started crying! She was like "But what does that mean?" She was so upset [chuckling], like, it was so *literal* to her. How funny is that? She thought I was going to be split down the middle and, literally, be white on one side and black on the other!

Aubrey then interjected, "It was traumatic!" This dialogue was a defining moment in both of their lives; both sisters recalled this 17-year-old family conversation with their mother, and they recalled their reactions to this dialogue fundamentally differently. Aubrey was traumatized by the information her mother shared and Olivia found Aubrey's literal interpretation amusing. This memory is noteworthy because their sibling relationship was characterized by a racial difference that was not pointed out by a peer or a stranger, but by their mother.

Furthermore, the role of racial resemblance in the family operates in a distinctly different way in Olivia's case. She appears phenotypically white; most people assume that she is Italian or Portuguese, not African American or black (to her knowledge). Hence, Aubrey and Olivia both look white in terms of racial classification, but they are constantly told they do not resemble each other because Olivia has curly, dark brown hair (that she often straightens) and dark brown eyes, while Aubrey has straight, blond hair and blue eyes. Essentially, despite being racially perceived in the same way, their phenotypic differences trump racial similarities. Both sisters rolled their eyes when telling "annoying" stories about people emphasizing the racialized difference of their physical features and making remarks like "That's your *sister*? But she doesn't look anything like you!" While the pointing out of a lack of physical similarity between the sisters may seem innocuous, both Olivia and Aubrey asserted that these comments carry a different meaning in multiracial families than in monoracial families where siblings might not resemble each other. The phenotypic variation between Olivia and Aubrey shaped how they talked about their sisterhood and how they remembered their childhood.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In her pioneering work 25 years ago, Root (1992:3) argued that the growing bi/multiracial population was "transforming the 'face' of the United States." Without a doubt, Root was right. When the U.S. Census allowed Americans to claim more than one race for the first time in 2000,

6.8 million Americans reported at least two races (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000); this number increased to nine million 10 years later (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2010). Also, one of the most famous faces in the world, President Barack Obama, comes from a multiracial family. In his campaign speeches, he regularly referenced his biracial ancestry from his “white Kansan mother” and “black Kenyan father.” Collectively, the burgeoning bi/multiracial population and the election of a biracial president (although he is celebrated as African American) represent two pivotal racial milestones in American history. However, we dilute and delude our understanding of race, family, and structural changes if we simply look at numbers or isolated events, however historic. To comprehensively grasp the changing racial demographics and family formation patterns in the United States, we must examine the family on a deeper, more intimate level through family relationships. Black/white biracials are an optimal group to study multiracial family dynamics because they comprise the largest bi/multiracial cohort at 1.8 million (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2010).

Although autobiographies and memoirs increasingly discuss family relationships in multiracial families (Lazarre 1997; Obama 2004; Walker 2001), we offer a sociological, qualitative analysis of family relationships with 60 participants, including four pairs of siblings. Through our participants’ stories, we gain an understanding of a ubiquitous and underlying message: Family membership is fundamentally linked to racial resemblance, which presumes a single-race (or monoracial) family. Hence, our analysis elucidates how public and personal perceptions of family membership in turn shape intimate family bonds. In addition, our study calls attention to the implications of half-siblings in multiracial families, an understudied group. The small amount of research on half-siblings focuses on parent/child relationships rather than sibling/sibling relationships (Schlomer, Ellis, and Garber 2010), and emphasizes the negative impact that half-siblings can have on a family unit and a child’s development (Strow and Strow 2008), or a sibling’s mental health (Vogt Yuan 2009). These studies make no mention of multiracial families and the unique intersection of being both a half-sibling and, to some degree (or fraction of ancestry), a different race. Furthermore, scholarship on siblings and resemblance is often termed “facial resemblance” (Bressan et al. 2009) and, therefore, is devoid of an analysis that explores the significance of racialized physical features in sibling relationships. Considering the increase in multiracial families, scholars would benefit from a more nuanced understanding of sibling relationships and racial resemblance.

In conclusion, our findings support other studies within the racism literature that unveil the masquerade of a “post-racial” (Bonilla-Silva 2010) or “colorblind” (Herring, Keith, and Horton 2004) American society, where race no longer matters in everyday experiences or opportunities. However, we also add to this literature by outlining how family—and formative—relationships in multiracial families are shaped by race through both public and personal perceptions about family membership as racially homogeneous and subsequently, phenotypically congruent. These findings emerged as a dominant pattern in our study. In fact, the majority of interviewees’ first racial memory included someone identifying the *lack of* racial resemblance in their family or questioning their family membership. The cumulative impact of frequent family delegitimization is evident: Our respondents were relentlessly reminded that they were not merely children, but *biracial* children of a *white* or *black* parent and/or that they were not merely siblings, but a *biracial* sibling of a *white* or *black* sibling. These reminders served as salient markers of difference that punctured their most intimate relationships in poignant ways. American society needs to remove the cataracts of colorblindness to delve deeply into how race continues to create barriers on how we experience being human. Our hope is that people from all backgrounds read this work and rethink their own assumptions about family membership and encourage others to do the same. More research is needed to develop a deeper analysis of the multiple dimensions of multiracial families as well as transracial adoptive families. Additional studies will help us understand

how to better support these families and how to, ultimately, redefine and *update* the definition of the “American family.”

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### Notes

1. We use the term “bi/multiracial” to refer to individuals of African/Black and European/White ancestry, or to refer to the greater American community of people who possess at least two racial ancestries as a means to be inclusive of individuals who identify as “biracial,” “multiracial,” and “mixed-race.” We use the term “biracial” when referring to our respondents because most of them identified with this term.
2. All respondent’s names (and names mentioned during the interview) were replaced with pseudonyms. This pseudonym reflects the same ethnic roots as the participants’ given name.
3. This activity was used in a *Principles of Sociology* course in which students are asked to answer the following questions during a pair activity (and later, share with the class if they feel comfortable): What is your first memory of an incident, comment, or discussion that had to do with race? Have you been exposed to racial diversity in your home, school, community, or through activities (i.e., sports, religious groups, etc.) and what do you think the impact has been? Last, what has the media taught you about race?

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### Author Biographies

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