

## **Culture, Race, and the Self: How Mixed-Race Alaskan People Counter Micro aggressions, Stigma, and Identity Dilemmas**

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### **Abstract**

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This study investigated attitudes towards help-seeking among students on Historically Black University (HBCU) campuses. The sample included 407 students between the ages of 18 and 31 attending an HBCU. The Attitude toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (ATSPPHS) by Fisher and Turner (1970) was used as the data collection tool. In the data analysis, the following descriptive analyses were used: analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare the mean values of more than two groups; independent samples t-tests were used to compare the mean values of the two groups in normal distribution; and Turkey's test was run to perform a post hoc analysis. This research indicates that there are statistically significant relationships between student demographics in terms of age, gender, and classification level and students' attitudes towards help-seeking. These findings may be helpful to university professionals and policy-planners in addressing the decision-making challenges facing African American students regarding their utilization of campus-based mental health services.

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**Keywords:** attitudes, help-seeking, mental health utilization, planned behavior.

### **Introduction:**

This paper is about the lived experience and identity work of people sharing a highly marginalized or potentially marginalized identity—"mixed-race" people for whom neither parental race is privileged in the dominant society. Despite living in a place where others like them also live, they nonetheless face an identity dilemma: whichever racial category they choose as their own carries with it potential stigma and the possibility of multiple jeopardy (cite) always looms over them. The participants in this study are mixed-race African American (AA) and Alaska Native (AN). Some of them were raised in a small town in Alaska where number of similar families settled; others grew up in small towns that are primarily native; still others spent their lives in Anchorage. Most of them are the children of AA servicemen who married a woman. In this qualitative analysis of the stories, they told the first author about their childhoods and their adult lives, we first recount how they learned of their stigma, using the contemporary conceptualization of "micro aggressions" as illustrative of status rituals marking position, following Goffman (1956). Then, drawing upon critical race theory and a symbolic interactionist perspective on identity work; we explore their creative incorporation of elements from AA and AN culture into their self-concepts. We see this as a resilient and positive response to stigma from which social work practitioners, educators, and researchers can learn much, when working with mixed-race people. We conclude with some implications for social work practice and education with similarly complex marginalized populations.

### **II. Theoretical Framework**

The perspectives that inform our analysis come from critical race theory, critical social work, and symbolic interactions thinking about stigma and identity dilemmas. We begin by defining the key concepts we have found most useful for our purposes, and discussing their relevance. This section concludes with a brief summary and articulation of our synthetic approach.

A. Critical race theory, social work, and identity formation We begin with critical race theory (CRT) because the micro-level situation of participants in this study cannot be understood without attending to the macro-level context of race in the U.S., which, from this perspective, is a foundation of social organization. Race is at the center, because our society is highly stratified along racial lines and this stratification is "ordinary, ubiquitous, and reproduced in mundane and extraordinary customs and experience" (Brown 2003, p. 294). Racial stratification has profound consequences for a person's life chances and quality of life, but we don't always see this and may have difficulties changing it because racial ideologies obscure and elide the power of white privilege. Race is a social construction, not a biological essential, and because people at the bottom of a racial ranking system understand oppression through experience, we can learn from their stories and use this knowledge to work toward social justice in a wide range of disciplines (Crenshaw 1995, Delgado and Stefancic 2012).

Thus, we cannot understand the identity dilemma of the mixed-race participants who told the stories of being African American and Alaska Native without putting race at the center of our analysis. To be born Black and to be born indigenous is to enter a world in which these identities are ranked at the bottom of a hierarchy, and this ranking determines access to life chances including wealth and income, power, and prestige. It is to enter a world of differential rates of infant mortality, access to education and occupational opportunities, autonomy and self-determination (Gallagher 2003), and crucial to our analysis, treatment as "fully human" (Goffman 1963). In addition, children are born into a world of historical trauma (Brave Heart, Chase, Elkins, and Altschul 2011, Evans-Campbell 2008), in which massive group trauma (e.g., colonization, forced migration, cultural genocide, slavery, lynching, disenfranchisement, and other violent and or abusive or discriminatory collective experience) continues to affect the lives and psyches of subsequent generations (see also Feagin 1991).

Because racial stratification is so deeply implicated in the structures of the society of which the small towns and big cities in Alaska are a part, participants experience its effects early on, and race is a category that literally occupies their lives. Further, to be mixed-race when neither parent is of the privileged white race is to face the stratification-related obstacles and injuries of each race and the multiplicative, not additive, problems of intersectional and multiple jeopardy (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013). The particular problems and needs of mixed-race populations are becoming of increased interest to researchers in a number of fields, including sociology and social work, but have not yet been as well studied as those of other racially stigmatized populations (Siddiqui 2011). Here is where Critical Mixed-Race Studies (CMRS) and its application to social work practice, education, and research center in. Like CRT, CMRS "recognizes the salience of race while challenging racial hierarchies and radicalized access to power" and "can be used to informant-racist and anti-oppressive social work practices" (Siddiqui 2011, p. 257).

However, CMRS focuses specifically on mixed-race people. Mixed-race people face interactional and psychological challenges unique to their socially constructed categories, including differences from their parents' (and sometimes siblings') experiences, multiple but not equally positive options for self-definition (Rockquemore, Brunσμα, and Delgado 2009), shifting identifications over time (Doyle and Kao 2007), rejection of their chosen self-identifications by others and "identity denial" (Townsend et al. 2009, Shih and Sanchez 2009). They may face pressure to identify as monoracial instead of biracial (Coleman and Carter 2007, Sanchez and Bonam 2009), and, importantly, experience situational fluidity when some, but not other, visual identifiers of race become important (Camper et al. 1994, Kinsley 1994). Families of mixed-race children may lack the resources they need to prepare them for living with racial stratification, and within family racism directed toward mixed-race children can be a problem as well (Siddiqui 2011). We will see these potentialities actualized in the lives of the participants, and we will return to MRS and its implications for social work when we discuss our findings.

B. Symbolic interaction: Stigma, micro aggressions, and the self Symbolic interactions is a micro sociological perspective that focuses on the creation of meaning in social interaction. It is thus a social constructionist approach, treating "race" as a set of meanings or labels that are inherent in people but that are imputed to them on the basis of shared understandings. Race is a product of collective definitional processes (Blumer 1969). It emerges in interaction through the language we use, the meaning we attach to visible characteristics like skin color, and all the information we take into consideration when we are defining situations and the people in those situations (including ourselves). Importantly, although race is socially constructed and, like all meanings, fluid and situational, it is profoundly consequential because people act on the basis of the meanings they hold.

How one is treated and how one treats others depends upon racial (and other) meanings, and everyday interactions tend to reproduce systems of understanding that are prevalent in a culture or society. One way that this happens is through what Goffman (1956) called "status rituals," ceremonial expressions of deference and demeanor that mark a person's place in an encounter. One can indicate respect for a person who is higher ranking through appropriate deference and demeanor, such as the ubiquitous use of "yes sir" and "yes ma'am" directed by the young toward their elders in Texas. Conversely, failing to offer deference when it is expected indicates the opposite. Goffman writes of "civil inattention" and "tactful blindness," those courtesies we extend to people of rank and feel free to disregard when a person is low in a hierarchy (the person whom we feel free to stare at, or whose appearance we may comment on in public even if he is a stranger to us). More extreme markers of stratification come into play in the case of stigma, the situation of a person who violates our normative expectations in some way (Goffman 1963). Consistent with critical race theory, the normative expectation in a racially stratified society is to be white, and the further one veers from this expectation, the lower one ranks (the same is true for gender, social class, physical ability, physical normality, and moral categories).

Goffman puts it thus: "of course, we believe that the person with a stigma is not quite human ... we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances" (1963, p. 5). He goes on to identify multiple ways in which those chances are impinged upon, from being snubbed to being enslaved, from being treated rudely to being a victim of a genocide. Further, the concept of stigma uncovers a "language of relationships" of power and structure, of groups and individuals. Current interest in what researchers and activists are calling "micro aggressions" fits neatly into this paradigm. Micro aggressions have been identified as such in Critical Race Theory (e.g., Solórzano, Déjà, and Iosco 2000) and they are the "everyday verbal, nonverbal and environmental slights, snubs, or insults ... [that] communicate hostile, derogatory or negative messages about the individual based on their marginalized group identity" (Sue 2010, p. 3). From Goffman's perspective, they are always going to be directed "downward," i.e., toward the person who ranks low, the person who has the stigma, and they serve to inform the stigmatized of their position and to interactionally reproduce and affirm the type of stratification that is the basis for aggression. Goffman details a number of effects (e.g., shame) of stigma and also means of attempting to "repair" what he calls "damaged" or "spoiled" identity. These latter are what we refer to as "identity work," the efforts of the stigmatized to disclaim or remediate a devalued identity—both to others and to self. Indeed, the self is a set of meanings that emerges in interaction, and thus interactions including micro aggressions or other stigma markers can have distressing effects on the stigmatized person's self-concept.

Scholars of micro aggressions have detailed a number of these: struggles with feelings of self-doubt, frustration, and isolation and exhaustion from constantly having to navigate fraught encounters (Solórzano et al. 2000), as well as anger, sadness, stress, invalidation, invisibility, distrust and resentment (Sue et al. 2008, see also Fagin 1991, Hunn et al. 2015). How, then, does a person respond? In the data we share with you, we will spend a little bit of time with the micro aggressions and other indicators of stigma in mixed-race Alaskan people's stories. They occupy a unique position "along the boundaries of singular racial categories and as such experience privilege, exclusion, and identity denial, in complicated, fluid, and sometimes contradictory ways" (Siddiqui 2011, p. 257). We will focus on that particularity, before moving on to the identity work in which they engage. Both in their descriptions of encounters and in the interviews with the first author, participants actively constructed valued, rather than devalued, selves. We link these self-processes to research on racial identity formation (cite) and to the resolution of identity dilemmas (Dunn and Creek 2015). We will show how a creative appropriation of elements of African American and, especially, Alaska Native cultural identities inform participants' sense of who they are: as worthy rather than "less than" people. Next, we say a little bit about the racial characteristics of the towns in which participants grew up and/or chose to live in as adults, and about the research project that generated the data we analyze here, before moving on to the accounts of participants and what we can learn from them about being mixed-race, about being stigmatized, and about responding to stigma by choosing racial and ethnic identities and communities.

### III. Background and Research Methods

In 1942, the United States Army assigned over 3,000 Black Army engineers to Alaska to build the Alcan Highway (Overstreet 1988). Black battalions were assigned to the Aleutian Islands during World War II to protect the United States from Japanese invasion.

General Buckner opposed African American soldiers in Alaska for fear they would stay and interbreed with Indians and Eskimos, producing an objectionable race of mongrels (Overstreet 1988). The Non-Discrimination Act of 1945 in Alaska outlawed segregation in public places (Gruening, 1973).

Miscegenation laws enforced in much of the contiguous United States were not included in the Alaska state charter that granted statehood in 1959. However, informal sanctions such as not being allowed into restaurants, certain housing markets, and the inability to engage in interracial marriage were enforced through prejudice and discriminatory acts (Overstreet 1988; Gruening 1972). Despite this, the increased translocation of African Americans to Alaska during the 1950-and 60s, predicated by the search for better paying jobs and to escape the racist climate of the south, resulted in intermarriage. Anchorage and Fairbanks were and remain the major communities in where African American settled (Overstreet 1988), but several of the participants in this study were born and raised in a small town we call "Village," where a relatively large number of mixed-race families lived ("two or more" races is listed by 4.4 percent of the population; 80.7 percent are Alaska Native and 11.3 are white). Village was in the Yup'ik region and other participants came from the Athabasca and Inupiaq regions. The original qualitative study that generated these interviews was conducted by the first author to understand and gain knowledge regarding the racial socialization experience of mixed race adults who self-identify as both Alaska Native and African American, in towns like Village and also in less diverse communities. Generic qualitative research is utilized to discover and understand a phenomenon (Endacott, 2007).

It gives understanding of relationships within a situation and provides avenues for further exploration. For this project, we used a symbolic interactionist framework and a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2000) in initial and subsequent coding of the data. We do this in order to gain access to the meanings that the participants gave to their experiences. An understanding of their symbolic interactions is revealed through the language they used to communicate. Human interaction is the central source of data and the participants' perspective is paramount regarding how they define the situation. The data were collected through a purposive sample that targeted individuals who self identified as both Alaska Native and African American. Purposive sampling allows the ability to capture a specialized population. This population was adults who self-identified as biracial, and was not specific to sex, gender, socioeconomic class or status. The participants engaged in individual semi-structured interviews with the first author, using an interview protocol in which she asked open ended questions and allowed the participants to talk about what they found to be most important. Most of the interviews took place on a university campus in private spaces, and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

Following the interviews, which were audio-taped with participants' permission, the first author transcribed the data for coding and analysis. We analyzed the data using grounded theory and ethnographic content analysis (Altheide?). This process develops themes to provide a thick description of how the racial socialization experience in the everyday life of biracial Alaska Native-African American adults impacted racial identification. We undertook a "systematic examination and interpretation of analyzing human communication to ascertain patterns, themes, and meanings" (Berg & Lune, 2012). In qualitative research content analysis goes beyond counting words but examines language founding the interviews to classify large amounts of text into efficient themes that represent similar meanings. Content analysis relies on developing good coding schemes to identify themes and meanings. This allowed for a constructionist, interpretative approach to illuminate the experiences and identity work of biracial Alaska Native-African American adults. People describe their lived experiences, and their thoughts and feelings about these experiences and the identities that emerged through them. In this way, they socially constructed their realities, for themselves and for the researchers.

#### **IV. Findings**

Below, we examine how race was woven throughout the stories participants told, how they learned of its importance, grappled with its consequences, and came to understand them through its pervasive lens. Then we show participants' strategies for self-identification and identity work.

## A. Race Matters

In our discussion of sociological and social work theory, we noted that race is a central category for understanding the experience of people in a racially stratified society such as the U.S., and that people who rank low in these kinds of hierarchical systems face micro aggressions and other interactional indicators of stigma that serve to mark their place and to teach them that others devalue them on the basis of race. For mixed-race people, these problems are complicated by their status as potential members of the racial groups that are stigmatizing them (in addition to the micro aggressions they face from the dominant white population).

Thus, people told us of experiences in which they encountered the racism of whites, and learned that both their African American (AA) and Alaskan Native (AN) identities were discrediting. Michael, who grew up in the village as well as Wasilla and Anchorage, said this about leaving the village to go to college in California: There was a lot of racism there, towards Blacks and Natives ... especially when I was first going there 'because I wasn't from the valley. I'd just kind of sit through and let the things I heard slide off my back, not always, but people would say I was Mexican or Hawaiian ... there was definitely racism, because I was taught from the mainstream media and culture that Natives were nothing but drunks and stupid and these kinds of things so I didn't want to be identified with them and Blacks were nothing but thugs and stupid and inferior to white people, American culture, so I just tried to slide by because no one knew what I was.

Here Michael refers both to the people he was around and to what he identifies as "mainstream" cultural messages telling him that first, he did not in fact belong to the racial groups of his parents, and in addition, that both of those groups were stigmatized. Thus, he did not want to be seen as a member of either group, and tried to be invisible, to "slide by" when people made offensive comments and said insulting things in her presence. Several people told about experiencing micro aggressions and stigma due to being categorized (often by the Alaska Native community) as African American. Samantha, who was raised by her A grandparents in a village where she was the first AA person, said that when she was little, "Kids would tease me because I'm Black. They couldn't touch me, or play with me, and they would call me the Yupik word for Black." Another participant, Jennie, who was born and raised in Anchorage, said: My Native side is, the majority of them, are pretty racist against Black people, my mom got a lot of strife from the whole Native community about having Black kids... they even called us a Native name for Black people, "taqsevuk" means Black people.

No one will ever tell me whether it is derogatory or not; I don't know if it means the color of your skin or if it's a derogatory name, although I'm sure it is. People also talked about negative stereotypes of Alaska Natives. Janae told of the racism of her Black friends from college. "Some of them are so outright racist when I was younger I wouldn't even have been around them. I even forgot some of the derogatory names for Native people like "clutch," and "eskimo," I forgot some of them that everybody would say." She then described her son as follows: My kids, the oldest one is 16; he is ashamed of being Native. At first I was sad, it hurt my feelings, because all their life I taught them to be proud of whom they are, but now I'm like, he will get over it. He says all Native people are drunk, I tell him do you know how many Native people aren't drunks or don't even drink? When I was younger I felt the same way. At first it hurt, but now I tell him he will get over it, when he gets older, and he will be proud of being Native. While several people related this kind of radicalized experience, even more talked about what Siddiqui calls "(In) visibility," which is "situations in which parts of their identities become invisible or visible, including denial of their self-identification and processes of racialization" (2011, p. 260).

So, for example, Janae said this: Even when I was little people would call the areas in the tundra that look like afros "niggerheads." I couldn't believe they would say that outright in front of me, but a lot of people can't tell I'm Black. People just let it spill out ... [and I would think] "do you not see me?" Or, in an opposite experience of invisibility, Native identity could be denied, as Darlene explains: People would talk about negative about Natives and I would speak up and they would ask why. I would get all mad and I told them because I am Native, "well we didn't mean it like that" well what did you mean? Janae told of visiting AA family in Mississippi, and learning that her skin was too light: when she asserted that she was not white, "they say what you "injun" are?

Similarly, Michael said that on his trip to South Carolina, Black people were not accepting of me as well because I wasn't Black enough and I quickly learned about acceptance according to how dark your skin is it high yellow, redbone, mulatto, I never heard these terms before I lived over there. When Black relatives and strangers deny a mixed-race person's AA identity, this can create tensions and confusion. However, this only intensifies when a mixed-race person is denied membership in both of their parents' groups. Janie said: "I always knew I wasn't Black enough [for the] Black side, and not Native enough for the Native side." Leticia described her childhood experiences thus: Some of the Black kids I went to school with didn't like me, some of the Native kids didn't like me 'cause I looked different, and I experienced people who didn't like me cause I was Native or Black and I have had people who just didn't like me 'cause I was mixed. Growing up it like was one or the other and trying to figure out where I fit in. People didn't know what to think about me.

Like Janie's son, Michael struggled with being mixed-race and with the consequences of each race being a stigmatized minority. Depending on the situation, as a child he would choose one race or the other, but as an adult, he experienced alternating marginalization: I would go back and visits my dad's side and I was the little Black boy, of course was different because initially I spoke only Yupik, but I put aside my Yupik sideband identified with who I was with. And then when I was home in [the Village] I was Yupik and grew up traditionally, a traditional hunter, fisher, a subsistence fisher, and put away my Black side and I continued that way until I was probably in the university system and I kind of struggled with my identity, all that time, sometimes being ashamed of either one. These stories express the painful reality of growing up mixed-race, particularly when neither race is the dominant white racial category. As Root (2003) tells it, for mixed-race people more generally, being exposed to the kinds of policing and gate keeping that continually test a person's racial authenticity can lead to feelings of hurt and rejection as well as marginalization, or what we call "stigma."

Root adds that not only are the "rules for passing the test determinedly the gatekeeper," but that "simultaneously, these youths are subject to the same discriminations other people of color" (2003, p. 112). Haritaworn refers to people in the circumstance of our participants as "dually minorities" (2007, p. 392). Following (authors deleted), we see this as an "identity dilemma"—a situation in which the choices available to a person all are costly. In this case, there are clearly stigmas attached to being African American, and to being Alaska Native. Identifying as mixed-race brings additional problems, which we can assume only worsen when a person is a non-White mixed-race or "bad mix" (Haritaworn 2007). How to respond? Although (authors deleted) are pessimistic about the resolution of true identity dilemmas, it is to participants' strategies for coping and for developing valued racial identities that we now turn. B. Choosing Racial and Ethnic Selves Scholars of racial identity formation describe a multitude of active decision-making in processes of self-expression and identification (for good reviews, see Root 2003 and also Daniel 1996). As Rockquemore (2002) and others argue, there are compelling reasons to believe that the "once impenetrable" color lines of the past are more permeable and shifting now, and that "racial identity for mixed-race people involves choosing between available options" (p. 486). Depending to a great degree on the responses of the people in their social worlds, mixed-race people can choose a "border identity that blends both of their racial backgrounds into a new and unique category of self-understanding," monorail identities, or multiple categories that shift depending upon the situation and the race of the people interacting (Root 2003).

Some people choose to "eschew any racial designation whatsoever" (Rockquemore 1999, 2002, p. 486, and Daniel 1996). When a stigmatized person is interacting with the "normal's" they have choices regarding how to manage impressions and repair any damage to identity accruing from the ways in which they violate normative expectations (Goffman 1963). In a society in which the "norm" is to be white, all people of color face potential treatment as "less than human" in virtually any interaction, and must decide how to present themselves in ways most likely to remediate acts such as micro aggressions—to cope with them if experienced or, ideally, to fend them off entirely. (Authors deleted), like the racial identity scholars above, describe different possibilities in their work on identity dilemmas. They too refer to "blended identities," as well as Goffman's (1963) strategies of seeking the structural "own" (people with the same stigma) or the culturally "wise" (people who understand and sympathize) for affirmation and support. There is also "amplifying" one identity over another, compartmentalizing identities when possible, or abandoning one identity entirely (authors deleted 2015, p. 3).

This list is not exhaustive, but represents the variety of ways in which participants in this study talked about their own identity work. A few people talked about situated identities (Root 2003), in which they chose to focus on being Black in one context or Native in another. Like Janae above, people sometimes chose to investigate their Black heritage as adults, or moved back and forth from the villages as children. Here is Geena, talking about her decision to pledge a Black sorority at college in Washington State, after becoming “immersed in Black culture” and trying, but failing, to identify with the American Indian students there.

After describing the area around Pullman as “racially charged” and saying that “things happening as to how white students treated Black students” as a “constant” issue, she tells about becoming deeply committed to being an AA peer mentor, a McNair’s Scholar<sup>1</sup> and a resident advisor (RA). Of the sorority, she said that despite being one of two mixed-race students, the sisters saw her as “just Black” (and earlier in the interview, she commented that “when you are Black you can’t escape being Black so you are socialized as a Black person” when referring to her AA father). At her high school in Anchorage, she talked about how the white kids were “affluent” and “if you were Black you probably came from a pretty good situation” and she said that “there weren’t that many Native kids. And I learned quickly that the Native kids were the worst kids and it was tough for me.”

Interestingly, after 10 years in the “western” world, Geena ultimately chose to come back to Alaska and the village. Here is what she said about this decision: All I wanted to do was get away from the entire western and back to what I grew up doing and learning what I needed to know traditionally. I was super good in the western world but I couldn’t do what my girl cousins could do, like braid seal intestines ... I do as much as I can to be close to Native traditions. I work 9 – 5 and travel a lot but spend most of my evenings with my family, I am usually thoroughly exhausted most of the time, but with whaling, which is year around, you need certain animals when they are available, you are making sure people gifted, you are always thinking about what do we need to be successful, what clothes do we need, but if there is something needed I try to be there all the time, and there is so much laughter and story time when we are all together I don’t want to be anywhere else. I tell my friends I don’t want to hang out, my family is always first. Although Geena does not say explicitly that she is choosing an Alaska Native racial identity becoming back, later in the interview she talked about spending time with her AN grandparents and that even though her AA father “didn’t like to talk about race or make it an issue” he encouraged this, telling her “you have to be around them to learn from them.”

Importantly, Geena was not the only participant to make this kind of choice, to come back to the villages and immerse themselves in the culture of their youth, or not to leave at all. In this excerpt, Leticia commends her mother for enrolling her in an Alaska Native cultural enrichment program in elementary school. She says that it was “mainly about Yupik and Athabascan culture but it still exposed us to Native Alaska culture” and goes on to say:

And I think over the years I taught myself a lot about the Aleut culture and through that process I have learned a lot about the history. [My mother] didn’t know just some of the cultural trauma she didn’t know or understand, I’ve kind of put the puzzle pieces together, and because I am so immersed in the Alaska Native culture I identify more with the Aleut culture than Black, because I didn’t have a lot of Black people in my life growing up. For Angela, whose mother was and a woman who met Angela’s father in Anchorage, the choice to live in the village was first made by her mother, and then, later, by Angela herself. Her mother moved the family to the village “because she wanted to be closer to her family, which is the tradition, for Native women to move back to her home after they married.” Angela’s father came along, and from her account, it was a happy time. Sadly, her mother died when Angela was six, and her father moved everyone to Compton, CA.

Here, there was little information about a culture, but her father would take the children to American Indian powwows. “It helped me to embrace my Native side... he always told me never forget who you are, yes you are Black, but you are also Eskimo. Even in my mind it rings like a bell.” This knowledge sustained her as a teenager when her father died and she and her siblings were returned to the tribe and the care of her grandfather. In the village, she said, the “Elders talked to us about how to live, and teach us morals and to value our culture and tradition.” Because there were so few Black people in the village, Angela decided to leave the village to get a boarding school<sup>2</sup> for high school. Ultimately, she returned to the village to live permanently. Of this move, she said: When I came back to Alaska, it was literally as if I was meeting a familiar friend for the first time.

I threw myself into Native dance which is an art form for us, learning how to sing our Native songs, I threw myself into sewing, as a woman you learn to make things with your hands, and making kask picks (Native dresses).

Beading and cooking and going out hunting, is really a part of my life. Because I am still able to [live off] subsistence from the land. When you are Native and grow up eating the foods you begin to crave them. Angela repeatedly used the term “embracing” when she talked of a culture, and she said this about her community: “Our people are Yupik, meaning ‘real [humans].’ People who don’t have that or don’t accept their cultural identity and who are trying to assimilate to white America ‘because they don’t know who they are, our people are genuine and it is truly an awesome thing.” For Angela, it appears that her identity is closely interwoven with a customs and tradition, and moreover, that “embracing” A culture is perhaps a way of solving the problem of authenticity testing (Root 2003). Her people are “genuine” and through them, she is genuine as well. Now consider how she describes her grandfather and the Yupik more generally: My grandpa, he is very open-minded to other cultures, I like to think of him as traditional Yupik man. Our people are very open-minded and accepting of different cultures and people, and so it was never a problem for him. And for me it really helped, because I was able to understand a lot better of whom I am. Angela also described the village as a “shelter,” with “a lot more people mixed like I am,” and repeating her claim that “Yupik are genuinely accepting of other people and other cultures.”

This view of the village could explain Jerald’s mother’s choice as well. Jerald’s mother is A and his father NA, the reverse of the other participants’ pattern. Interestingly, when Jerald was nine years old, she returned to Alaska as a single parent of three mixed-race boys. Jerald explained “she wanted my brothers and I to have our Yupik identity.” Later in the interview, he said his mother didn’t want her children growing up in Philadelphia because she wanted them to “know their culture” and be “loved by the Yupik culture.” While we do not have more information about why Jerald’s mother chose to return to the village, we can find clues in some of the things that other participants said about Alaska Native culture, particularly regarding race. After an incident on a hunting trip where a racist term for a Native plant was unknowingly used by a relative, Michael was told by his father (who is AA) that “the Yupik people are not inherently racist” and “racism didn’t come from here, it was brought in by the ‘Man’.” Jenae had a bad experience when she visited Mississippi with her father, and described the people there as “mean.” In contrast, she said “My Alaska side is very welcoming.

We have big, big dinners when people come to town, just completely opposite of what I experienced down there.” Natalie, who grew up in a village as well as in Anchorage, and who related not being accepted by her a side of the family, still identified more with this category. She said as a person, I like being connected with my A heritage, I’m on the Johnson-O’Malley<sup>3</sup> education committee. I can relate with the desires of making the A community better. I identify myself more as an AN rather than AA, although AA is the first thing seen. I guess that’s my thing, I think it a combination of the community I grew up with, with family connections not being very close-knit, butte culture is close-knit.

From these excerpts, it is possible to discern how some of the participants seem to amplify their AN identities as they describe a culture they perceive as not only close-knit, but for many, as more accepting of mixed-race people. This is especially true for people who were raised or who returned to the Village where this is more common, but also true for people like Natalie, who never lived there, but who “identifies more” with AN, and who found her AN connections through organizations at the University. “Here on campus, when we have events,” she said, “I enjoy going to Native students’ services, and just sitting, and I feel more relaxed, and the environment feels more familiar.” Of course family remains an important source of racial identity formation and acceptance. Nori’s parents “made [her] excited” about being mixed-race, and “excited about their mixture in a crazy sort of way, and they helped us to blend ourselves with the Native side.” In addition, her AN grandmother played an important role: I have no trouble blending in with my relatives because of my grandmother, who would take us to Illumina and places like that.

Grandma kept us all together, and kept us in close quarters with other family members. Family member’s would come and visit when she was in Anchorage. She was very pro-family, nothing more important than family and because of her strong family ties and desires, she kept us close to each other, and it benefitted all of us. Mariah was raised by her A mother, and did not have contact with her father’s side of the family. Of this experience, she says: I know my heritage, but I never really felt I could know my African American heritage.

I know also of AA and I was raised around them but I could never fully understand it because I never lived with an AA family, they could live different from the way we lived growing up. I tried to look for my dad and his family so I could have an understanding of what it would be like or who am I. Not having this resource, she benefitted most from the attitudes within her AN family.

"They are very accepting," Mariah said, adding that "They don't like to play the race card, they don't discriminate. They love everybody." Here is how Janae, who was rejected by "mean" AA family members when she went to Mississippi, handled "not being Native enough for the Native side": There was a part of the family that was not racist, that wasn't racist ... and my grandmother's sister lived up the street from me so I would always, she was like second mom to me, I would go to her house rather than go home. She was a master skin sewer and beadier, so I would go to her house and pick up her beads. She would make me parkas and really fancy earrings, more than my own grandmother. So all of her kids were more like my aunties 'cause I was always over there, they weren't racist. I do beading now; I just started beading a parka belt. I would always be at my cousins' house. Kept all of grandma's beads when she passed away. This response is particularly interesting.

Janie's story shows that she was proactive on her own behalf, seeking out family who would be the most accepting of her as a mixed-race child. At the same time, she found a way of being socialized into an AN identity, by helping her grandmother with a culture-specific task and then learning how to do it herself. The final response that we want to discuss here is a "blended" identity (Root 2003; authors deleted).

These are mixed-race people the first author interviewed who, in the face of identity dilemmas and multiple jeopardies, respond by incorporating significant elements of the culture and race of each 'side' of their parentage. Angela, who returned to the Village and fully engaged her AN heritage and way of living, still saw herself as AA as well. After explaining that she and her siblings had been taken in by the tribe, and taught a values and life skills, she said: My Black side, we are bold people – we make things happen. Now that I 'molder, I embrace both sides, I make things happen. I am able to teach, to mentor our cultures. For me and my boldness, I am encouraging the next generation to embrace who they are.

Later, she added, You come from people who have overcome amazing things, and so because of that you have a different kind of amazing strength, people who overcome slavery, who hunted whales, who understood mathematics and how to harvest land, so just remember that place you came from, the blood that you have. Michael, who told about switching between identities as a child and about trying to be invisible as a young man, explained the place that he had come to by the time of the interview. He said, So I when I was in the university, I was ... thinking more deeply about the idea of identity, being away from home alone the first time kind of got those thoughts rolling, and I began to start to think about my identity and why I did the things I did when I would uplift one and not the other, when I should be uplifting both. That's when I kind of made a concerted effort to uplift them both, and to teach and bring that awareness to people. So I started doing that through the arts and I started teaching culture and biculturalism, and multiculturalism. I play music as well and I do it through singing traditional [AN] songs but I sing with a kind oaf, soul rhythm harmony so it's a blend of my two cultures. I've been a musician for a long time now because I recognized the destruction of people's self-identity and self-worth when they shunned one culture over the other, particularly with biracial people. Michael's story is a good example of how people make racial identity choices, in his case a "blend of my two cultures" that encompasses both and, importantly, values and honors both Hsia and AN heritage.

Just as his music incorporates the "traditional" AN and elements of AA "soul rhythm harmony" his sense of who he is brings together two sources of pride. Perhaps this came in part from his parents: "My father and mother are both very strong in the culture; my mom very much be proud of who you are [AN] and my dad also be proud of who you are you are Black." We will conclude with Angela, who lost both parents when she was young, was raised by her mother's tribe, pledged a Black sorority and was active with AA organizations in college, and ultimately, came back to the Village and a subsistence, culturally embedded AN life. She said, near the end of her interview, A strength of who I am as a Native person has helped me to be who I am today and the endurance of Black people has taught me to endure. When I think about things that happened, I tend to go back and think about the things I was taught, if from my dad, mom, or grandpa, because I am so fortunate to be [AN] and African American and I wouldn't have it any other way.

People try to make me choose between the two and it's not something I can do, it's not like I can separate which half of me is Black and which half is [AN] because it's just who I am. And I feel very privileged going out to the states and experiencing that and coming back home. V. Conclusion The stories so generously shared with the first author reveal the complex lived experience of mixed-race (African American and Alaska Native) people. Participants recounted various "moral careers," Goffman's (1963) term for how stigmatized people come to learn about their differentness.

They face racial identity formation challenges compounded by occupying multiple on-white racial categories and the often devalued status of being "mixed-race" (Rockquemore, Brunnsma, and Feagin 2008). We have seen examples of the "thousand cuts" of micro aggressions (Hunn et al. 2015); the interactional display of hierarchies in which participants learn of their low ranking in this highly racially stratified society of ours. Consistent with recent scholarship on racial identity formation (Rockquemore, Brunnsma, and Feagin 2008, Sellers, Martin, and Lewis 2006) and the second author's previous theorizing of identity dilemmas (authors deleted), participants told stories of choosing self-identifications that helped them survive, manage stigma, and build self-respect. Their strategies and their choices varied according to situations and circumstances. Geena amplified her African American identity when at college and there were few Alaska Natives in her social worlds, but ultimately returned to the Village and embraced an AN culture and along with it, her AN self. Michael "switched" identities as a young person and as an adult, developed a blended identity that emphasizes both his AA and AN heritages. Similarly, Angela refused to "choose between" the two or to try to "separate which half," although like the majority of the participants, she lived in Alaska after experiencing life downstate, where her AA identity dominated.

Reflecting on the stories, perhaps the most compelling themes emerging from them are the narratives of drawing upon cultural heritages, and family as a source of learning the values and traditions of both AA and especially, AN culture. Weaver (2008) has documented commonalities in the historical struggles of Native Americans and African Americans in the U.S., and argues for shared strengths as a result: communal values, resilience, and spirituality linked to culture. Similarly, House et al (2008) have asserted that it is the values and practices embedded in Native American cultural traditions that undergird resilience to historical trauma. Cultural support is much needed in biracial families for the development of positive self-identification that enhances this resilience and that fosters pride and self-acceptance (Morrison and Bordere 2001, Crippen and Brew 2007, Hall 2002).

Oriti et al. (1996) suggest that social workers help mixed-race clients "give voice" to the traditions, rituals, political aspirations, and aesthetics of their mixed heritage, and Ponteretto, Mendelowitz, and Collaballetta. have this wonderful list of strengths that multicultural people can draw upon: "cultural empathy, open-mindedness, emotional stability, social initiative, flexibility ... critical thinking skills, higher states of racial and ethnic identity development, humor, expanded gender role networks, bilingualism, self-reflection and introspection, social activism, and a sense of spirituality or the experiencing of connectedness among all life's forces" (2008, p. 97). In sum, this study underscores the need for social work research, practice, and education that is sensitive to the particular experiences, needs, resources, and strengths of mixed-race people like the participants whose powerful stories we have excerpted here. When theorizing, studying, working with, teaching, and learning, we must put race at the center of our understanding and pay close attention to the voices of the people whose life chances and treatment as fully human are the most diminished.

It is one thing to be non-white, another to be mixed-race, and yet another to be mixed-race when neither parent is white. There is compounding of effects structured at the macro-level and experienced at the micro-level, as these stories make quite clear (and we note here that we have not even touched upon gender, sexuality, social class, or other profound ways in which our society and our lives are organized). A Critical Mixed-Race Studies (CMRS) approach is appropriate, in which social workers and social scientists pay careful attention to the "complex experiences, identities, and fluid subjectivities" (Siddiqui 2011, p. 265) of people encountering this kind of stigma and this kind of identity dilemma. Further, this approach is self-conscious about fostering anti-racist and anti oppression social work practices, including those directed toward supporting self-identification and an appreciation of the complexity of multiple, intersecting systems of stratification, as Siddiqui's (2011) review details.

To her call for client-centered approaches that are: “inclusive and affirming, including critical reflection; validation of self-identification; complex experiences of racism; exclusion and silencing; and inclusive programming for mixed-race clients” we add our own conclusion. The agency and creativity of people who can draw upon cultural resources as they actively choose who to be is a powerful resource, suggesting that when these resources are unavailable, we seek them out and find ways to help make them salient and tangible in the lives of people who can use them.

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