Motherhood in Liminal Spaces: White Mothers' Parenting Black/White Children

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Abstract

Most of the extant social work research on biracial children and families has focused on the experiences of transracially adopted black or biracial children and their white parents or Afro-Caribbean/white children and their white mothers in the United Kingdom. This study adds to the body of knowledge by using focus group interviews analyzed through a feminist lens to understand the experiences of a diverse group of white women parenting their biological black/white biracial children. The findings suggest that having children locates them in a liminal space between whiteness and blackness. Many face racism from their families and communities, which they are unprepared for, given their upbringing as white Americans. Yet despite these experiences, many still practice color-blind perspective in socializing their children. Implications of these findings include the need for early intervention and support for white mothers raising biracial children as well as the need to challenge the assumption that mothers are solely responsible for the well-being and cultural and racial socialization of their children.

The population of multiracial individuals in the United States is rapidly increasing. The proportion of the population reporting more than one race rose 32% between 2000 and 2010 (Jones & Bullock, 2012). This increase is driven largely by the number of children under 18 identifying as two or more races, which grew from approximately 900,000 in 2000 to 1.6 million in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Despite this increase in racial heterogeneity, race continues to be a salient factor as evidenced by persistently entrenched inequities along racial lines (Oliver & Shapiro, 2003; Petit, 2012; Sharkey, 2014; Williams, 2012). African American children and youth are overrepresented in special education (O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006), juvenile justice (Osher, Woodruff, & Sims, 2002), and child welfare (Derezotes, Poetner, & Testa, 2005).

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However, little attention has been paid to the experiences of biracial black/white children and their families despite growing evidence that they may also be at risk for negative outcomes. For example, studies in the United Kingdom found black/white biracial children and their mothers to be disproportionately involved in child welfare services (Barn, 1999; Harman, 2010b) as have two studies in the United States (Fusco, Rauktis, McCrae, Cunningham & Bradley, 2010, Fusco & Rauktis, 2012). However, little social work research has been devoted to understanding the experiences of white women who have blurred racial lines by partnering with African American men and having children. Root (2001) writes that nowhere is the social construction, negotiation, and enforcement of race more apparent than when white women have children of mixed heritage. Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to better understand the experiences of white women parenting black/white biracial children by using a reflexive process and focus groups as the method of data collection. Early in the process of data collection, it became apparent that the narrative was one of how race and racism intersect with gender and class to impact how white women parent black/white biracial children. Drawing on race and feminist theories and analyses, this article describes these experiences and offers suggestions for providing additional social support to multiracial families.

Literature Review

Although race is acknowledged academically as a social and cultural invention, when women cross the color line to partner and have children, the challenges they face, both as a part of a couple and as a mother, are real (Root, 2001). These couples face multiple challenges, such as a lack of shared experiences and lower social support from families (Hohmann-Marriott & Amato, 2008; Root, 2001). Both quantitative and qualitative studies have identified family disapproval and lower social support of interracial couples (Fusco & Rauktis, 2012; Killian, 2001; Root, 2001). Interracial couples may be ostracized from their families of origin (Gaines, 2001) and actively discouraged by messages of "concern" about social acceptance and biracial grandchildren (Romano, 2003). There is some evidence that these relationships may be more vulnerable to dissolution (Bratter & King, 2008). Higher divorce rates may be related to the disapproval interracial couples face from family and friends, which may be particularly harsh when the pairing involves a black man and a white woman (Bratter & King, 2008). In addition, the black partner may feel angry, hurt, or isolated if the white partner is insensitive to racism (Killian, 2001), particularly instances of microaggression, the subtle commonplace verbal, behavioral, or environmental affronts that blacks experience in daily life (Nadal, Sriken, Davidoff, Wong, & McLean, 2013). However, some studies have found no difference in relationship satisfaction for interracial couples as compared to monoracial couples (Troy, Lewis-Smith, & Laurenceau, 2006). It is important to understand the challenges that interracial couples experience because this provides the context in which they are partnering and raising their children. Race is a socially mediated experience, and children learn how it is negotiated by observing their parents.

The most thorough, in-depth work on white mothers of biracial black/white children has been conducted in the United Kingdom by Twine (1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2010) who calls these women "transracial mothers," because of their "transgression" of racial boundaries through their romantic relationships and reproduction. Although this is a quickly expanding group, Twine (2010) argues that they have been marginalized in feminist academic work on race. Building on the work of black feminist theorists such as Collins (1994) and Roberts (1999) and white feminist analyses of race, such as those of Frankenberg (1993), Twine (2010) argues that these white women become "socially reconstituted" as "cultural equivalents of black women or women of color and thus [are] subjected to similar forms of surveillance, social ostracism, and discipline by members of the white community" (p. 61). Thus, similar to black women, they struggle "to control their own reproductive labor" and "to retain their children" (p. 63).

In addition, Twine (2010) argues that these white transracial mothers are often ostracized from white communities and experience racial abuse. In interracial relationships in general, whether the coupling involves a white woman/black man or a black woman/white man, women tend to experience greater challenges and consequences for being in an interracial relationship; they are more likely to experience racist comments in public and social rejection from friends and family (Twine, 2010). This, like the expectation of responsibility for child well-being, is related to sexist double standards. Twine (2010) further describes how mothers are the parent in interracial relationships, who are expected to provide ''race training'' for their children, regardless of whether they are the parent who has directly experienced racism. Ironically, however, white mothers of biracial children are often seen to lack ''racial empathy'' because they have not directly experienced racism. Thus, Twine (1999a, 1999b) demonstrates how these white women struggle with navigating the world as part of a family in which the other members are not part of the white majority. Other relevant scholarship from the United Kingdom includes that of Harman (2010a, 2010b), Barn (1999), and Tizard and Phoenix (1993). Collectively, their research, congruent with Twine's, finds that these white mothers, along with their children, experience racism that adds to the challenges of parenting.

The current study was motivated by our previous work on racial disparities in referrals to child protective services in an urban county in Pennsylvania. An unexpected finding of the first study was that biracial children were referred to child protective services at 4 times the rate of white children, which was higher than the rate of referral for black children who were 3 times more likely than white children to be referred (Fusco, Rauktis, McCrae, Cunningham & Bradley-King, 2010). Moreover, a significantly higher proportion of biracial children (64%) were rated at moderate to high risk for future child maltreatment because of caregiver age or physical, intellectual, or emotional status, compared with the percentage of African American (44%) and white children (37%) rated at this level of risk. A higher percentage (36%) of white parents of biracial children was assessed as having poor parenting skills, compared to less than a quarter (22%) of African American and 15% of white parents.

These findings then prompted us to explore partnering and parenting experiences of white mothers through analyses of data from the Longitudinal Study of Child Abuse and Neglect. Findings from this national sample of high-risk mothers revealed that white mothers of black/white children, when compared with white mothers of white children, were more likely to screen positively for alcohol abuse, experience intimate partner violence, have lower levels of social support, and were less likely to have adequate financial means (Fusco & Rauktis, 2012). The reasons why these white women had a different risk profile from other white high-risk mothers and whether there were differences in their parenting could not be determined from these data, suggesting the need for more information on the experiences of white mothers of biracial children.

Our next step was to review the research on transracial parenting, which has primarily focused on adoptions. Transracial adoptions in the United States have disproportionately involved children of black or black/white descent being placed with white families (Davis, 1991). Most of the research has focused on parental racial and cultural socialization (Barn, 2013; Samuels, 2009) and adoptees' racial and cultural identity development (Samuels, 2009), and psychological well-being (Lee, 2003). However, there are likely differences between families who transracially adopt and those families in which children are the result of an interracial partnership or marriage. Transracial adoptions typically involve two majority race parents, and the judicial system decides whether a child is adopted. Desirable adoptive parents are financially stable, have no history of substance abuse or criminal activity, and are usually part of an intact family (Yancey & Lewis, 2009). Clearly, there are some similarities between parenting a transracially adopted child and a biracial birth child, but the cultural and social differences are sufficient to justify continued research on white biological mothers of biracial children. Therefore, this study was designed to better understand the parenting experiences of white mothers of black/white children for the purpose of better supporting their families.

Method

Recruitment

University institutional review board approval was obtained prior to recruitment and data collection. This study was conducted in Southwestern Pennsylvania, and recruitment focused on women living in or around the city of Pittsburgh. The Pittsburgh region is primarily white, non-Hispanic (64.8%), and black (26.1%), with smaller percentages of Asian (4.4%), Hispanic (2.3%), and multiracial peoples (2.5%; U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The demise of manufacturing in the 1970s and the movement of white families to the suburbs concentrated poverty along the rivers as well as within the city of Pittsburgh. Currently, whites and blacks in the Pittsburgh metropolitan region live largely in racially segregated communities (Center on Race and Social Problems, 2015).

Focus groups were used as the method of data collection to generate a context-facilitating conversation among participants and to surface critical perspectives on their experiences (Pollack, 2003). Since our earlier investigations only included women who were referred to child welfare services or deemed to be at risk of involvement, we believed that in order to understand the range of experiences it was important to recruit participants more broadly rather than through child welfare services. The goal was to recruit enough women to hold four to five focus groups, each consisting of a small number of women. Smaller groups would allow for a more expansive discussion, and placing women with similar backgrounds into the same group would create a sense of similarity and comfort, also promoting discussion (Morgan & Scannell, 1998). However, in order to obtain as complete a picture of the range of experiences as possible, it was important to create groups by salient factors that may make their experiences of parenting black/white biracial children different due to access to resources, supports, or responses from their families. In her seminal book on interracial marriage, Root (2001) observed that social and familial responses to biracial marriages were politically and economically based. Research suggests that in addition to race, maternal resources including education and employment are important class status indicators and protective factors for children's well-being (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008; Sedlak & Schultz, 2005). Therefore, because we had hereto only investigated at risk mothers who typically had a high school degree or less and were not employed, we also wanted to recruit women with higher levels of education who potentially work outside the home.

Lacking access to a single place from which to recruit white mothers of black/white biracial children with the range of factors of interest, we recruited women with lower incomes and less education (lower socioeconomic status [SES] mothers) from two agencies where we had existing relationships and who were known to provide services to families of limited income. We asked the staff at several family support centers and an Early Head Start program to approach mothers using flyers and printed materials about the study. Recruiting women from a higher income group and with more education (higher SES mothers) proved more challenging but was accomplished using posters and flyers in community businesses such as food stores, hair salons, and coffee shops. We also tried to recruit from pediatrician's offices and University bulletin boards. In addition, a snowball sampling approach was used, in that once someone responded and agreed to participate, she was asked whether she knew of other white women who were parenting nonadopted black/white biracial children and whether she would be willing to give our information to them. In the early stages of analysis, we wondered whether creating the groups differently (agency vs. community) may have created a situation in which the community-recruited mothers were those who had greater access to social and personal capital and did not need professional support. However, as we continued to analyze the data, it became clear that there were similarities in experiences that transcended the method of recruitment: Even though the community-recruited mothers were not involved with

family support services, assumptions and judgments were made by educators, law enforcement, and child protection workers about their resources and capacities. In addition, the mothers recruited through community contacts also sought professional assistance from teachers, counselors, therapists, social workers, and medical professionals.

Data Collection

Two focus groups with women recruited from the family support center were held. The size of these groups ranged from three to five women. One group of four women were recruited from Early Head Start. The number of women recruited though community and snowball methods was smaller, with one group of two women and the other group of four women. In total, 18 women participated. Each group lasted approximately 90 min and was cofacilitated by two white female social work researchers. At the beginning of the discussion, the participants were also asked to fill out a short demographic survey. A semi-structured interview guide was used, starting with general questions about their children and then asking about their experiences partnering with black men and as mothers of biracial children. The small size of the groups and sense of comfort created a deep discussion between the women and a remarkable degree of honesty about their experiences. As a result, at the end of data collection, we believed that we had reached a point at which no new information was being revealed through the focus group discussions. The focus groups were digitally recorded and then professionally transcribed.

Description of the Participants

The age of women in the lower SES groups ranged from 21 to 42, with a median age of 26. Their average age at the birth of their first child was 21 years. Their average number of children was two, and the age of their children ranged from infants to young adults. Most were high school graduates; two did not complete high school or have a general equivalency diploma. All were either unemployed or working part-time. Most were currently partnered with a social or birth father.

The women who participated in the higher SES groups were between the ages of 36 and 50, with a median age of 45. All were college graduates, several held advanced degrees, and all worked full-time outside of the home as the primary wage earner in the family. One was currently married, another was in a long-term relationship but unmarried, and the rest had been married to fathers of their children but were currently separated or divorced. The average age at which they had their first child was 25, and the average number of children was three. Their children ranged in age from 10 years to young adults.

Data Analysis

The analysis team consisted of four members: two white women who conducted the focus groups, a white feminist scholar and qualitative researcher, and a black child welfare scholar and grandparent of black/white children. This team configuration allowed for the transcripts to be read and discussed from several perspectives critical to understanding the experiences of white mothers parenting biracial children. Although the quantitative research previously conducted suggested using social support and critical race theories as a framework for organizing the analyses and testing theory, the team began the analysis with no a priori theories in mind. Rather, a grounded theory methodology approach was taken (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory provides a systematic yet flexible approach to the development of theories grounded in data, allowing scholars of race to engage in research methodology that "builds from the knowledge of Communities of Color to reveal the ways race, class and gender, and other forms of oppression interact to mediate the experiences and

realities of those affected by such suppression'' (Malagon, Huber, & Velez, 2009–2010, p. 264). The interviewers debriefed after each focus group in order to write memos that became part of the data set and to reframe questions for the next groups. Each team member read the transcripts and memos, took notes, and created a set of codes, which acted as descriptive labels for the text. The team met on multiple occasions to discuss the individually generated codes and to create definitions for a working set of codes; some were discarded or combined, and some new codes emerged after repeated reading and discussion. As a result of this process, 13 codes and several subcodes were identified. Relationships between codes and temporality were also identified, for example, negative social support from family and friends who over time provided positive support. This process was documented so that how decisions were made and when a code changed, or did not change, based on the discussion, then became part of the data. QSR International NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software was used to assist in coding, documenting, and organizing the data. Finally, one of the investigators randomly coded segments of the transcripts to see how well the codes ''fit'' and then made some minor revisions to the definitions of the codes. Next, different teams of two coded each transcript using this set of codes in order to ''chunk'' the text into coded segments; these chunked segments were then further reviewed by the entire team to see whether there was agreement about the content that was coded. Through this iterative process of comparing segments of coded text, examining the relationships among codes, and then comparing them across categories (e.g., high and low SES), a story emerged about the experiences of white mothers parenting their black/white children.

Findings and Discussion

In the process of analysis, several themes quickly emerged: After the birth of their children, these white mothers found themselves in an ''in-between space'' on the borders of both whiteness and blackness. It is in within this liminal space (Turner, 1969) that they were able to recognize that their white skin had allowed them to rarely think about race and racism and the privileges that accompany being white in the United States. After having children, it became apparent that while they still ''looked white,'' their interactions with legal and educational systems and even their own families suggested that their public status as a white person in a white culture had changed and had become more tenuous. Yet at the same time, these white mothers continued to embrace a ''color-blind'' rhetoric, particularly as it pertained to racial socialization of their children. The findings are organized by these emerging themes.

"I Never Realized How Difficult It Was Going to Be": Recognition and Contingency of White Privilege

Romantic partnerships between white women and black men do not inevitably lead to a better understanding of race and racism. The women we interviewed were often surprised when their black partners shared a racialized incident or a perception. For example, one explained:

> See, I think I'm still slightly oblivious . . . when we go places as a family, I'm the driver. And, so, like, we'll go someplace and he'll go, ''Oh, I have to run back inside. I forgot my wallet.'' And I'll say, ''You don't need your wallet, you're not going to spend any money.'' And he's like, he said, ''I'm a black man, I don't leave home without identification . . . that would never in a million years occur to me.''

Perhaps they remained largely unaware of their partners' experiences with racism because, for the most part, before they had children the women were not treated much differently. An example, from another participant, demonstrates this:

> When I was dating their dad … I never noticed anyone treating me differently …. But after I had children, I noticed I was treated differently, immediately. And my partner's family would say to me, "Well, now that you have a baby, you are black." And they would say it like it was funny, ha ha. But I never realized how difficult it was going to be until I had children.

This mother's description of her experience was common among the mothers with whom we spoke. Although some did describe prior incidents of racism experienced with their partners, they noticed a change when they became mothers to children of color.

They all gave examples, such as strangers making disparaging remarks about them and their children, people asking intrusive or rude questions, being called names or harassed by strangers. It is well documented that when white mothers have biracial children, they face censuring as a consequence of violating racialized social norms (Caballero, Edwards, & Puthussery, 2008; Harman, 2010a, 2010b; Katz, 1996; Twine, 2000). They are confronted with a "critical racialized social gaze," which may also call into question the quality of their mothering as a result of transgressing this social norm (Britton, 2013, p. 1314). This was illustrated in two events described by women in the higher SES group who became involved with the judicial and child welfare systems. One was pulled over for a minor traffic violation while driving with her husband and child and was imprisoned overnight. In the second case, both parents took their child to an emergency room and were reported to child protective services for suspected physical abuse. Although charges were dropped, these incidents were dramatic examples of their realization of the loss of the social advantages that accompany whiteness and the potential consequences. As a result, both of these women retained a sense of "hypervigilance" to the police and the medical professions, and they tried to avoid or would plan on how to present themselves in situations that would bring them to the attention of these systems.

In this sense, they were similar to the women in the lower SES who described similar examples of harassment and racism, as well as instances in which their mothering was called into question. However, some acted preemptively, as in this example about how to talk to a social worker about Mongolian spots, skin discoloration commonly observed in dark-skinned infants that can look like bruising:

> So you always want to make sure you tell every worker you have, just in case you might be changing your daughter or son's diaper and service is in your house, and they might see that "bruise" and not know anything about a mixed child.

In fact, many of the lower SES women had experiences in the past with child welfare and so were more prepared for the potential of authority figures questioning their parenting capabilities. However, this seemed more the result of their own histories than awareness that they were being looked at more critically. They, like the higher SES women, were raised amid media stories and school lessons in which racism is described as a relic of the past and the current context is touted as one in which race makes no difference, an era of "color-blind ideology" (Bonilla-Silva, 2010).

"It Doesn't Matter What Color, We're All the Same": Belief in a Color-Blind Society

Most of the participants in this study, like most Americans, had the belief that we are all same no matter what "color." One woman said, "People are people. I don't look at people by color." Another mentioned her extended family's response to her biracial children, "My [aunt's] been telling me, 'Oh, well, it doesn't matter what color they are. They could be purple, you know, like, they're still human, you know. Nobody's perfect.'" Of course, the aside that "nobody's perfect," seems to indicate some level of recognition that "color" *does* matter.

Their color-blind beliefs are challenged, however, not only by their own treatment but also when their children encounter racism. For example, one reported:

> I don't think about, "Oh, they're mixed, I'm not." We just go on like nothing. People have to draw that to our attention, 'cause it's just not top of mind. But every now and then a little incident will happen. And, this one, I dropped her off and like twenty minutes later she's calling for me to come pick her up, and I'm like "What happened?" and she goes "I'll tell you when you get here." I pick her up and she's upset, and she also puts her defense mechanisms up 'cause she doesn't want to be different, and she doesn't want kids to like, lay it on even thicker, but some boy that she didn't really know called her "dumb N word" right in front of all these people, and she's like "That's it, I'm leaving."

Because they are white, these mothers do not always recognize the many ways that race shapes American society and differentially affects whites and blacks. However, experiences with their children have challenged this color-blind ideology. At the same time, they are not black and do not have a lifetime of experience as people of color to help their children make sense of their treatment. Thus, the mothers and their children have been thrust into a liminal or borderline space, in which they cannot be categorized and, often, do not want to be categorized. The mothers no longer can be ignorant of the ways race and racism mediate everyday life, an option that their children never had, but they cannot fully relate to being (and often-resisted categorization of their children as) black.

"She's not Black to Me": Parenting "Mixed" Children

One of the best illustrations of the state of being between two worlds is when the women spoke of their children, referring to them as "mixed." One mother said, for example, "They have pretty much been identified as African American by pretty much everyone—schools, communities—and I've always taught them that they're not just African American, they're biracial, they're mixed." Some of the mothers were very clear that they did not see their children as black. For example, one mother said of her daughter, "A lot of my black friends will say that she's considered black, but to me she's not black. She is a little dark, but she's not black to me." Another mother said, "I don't think my kids identify as black."

The love and pride that the mothers felt for their children were apparent in every discussion. The women traded photos with each other and told stories about their children's accomplishments. Their overriding concern was for the well-being of their children, both physical and emotional. Several of the mothers went to great lengths and expense to live in neighborhoods where their children would not be the only biracial children in the school and to find counselors for their adolescents, who had experience working with biracial children. Although most were single parents, they expended great effort to keep their partners, ex-husbands, and extended families involved in their children's lives. Some, particularly in the lower SES group, also sought help from systems such as child welfare when they needed resources:

> My mother-in-law ended up calling [child welfare] on me . . . The caseworker came and said, "You know, I don't think there's any reason to keep this case open." I said, "Well, I don't either, but you can open it and I'll be more than happy to sign that paper because you can only help me at this point. I don't do nothing wrong with my children."

Another woman in that group shared how she contacted child welfare for help, "I called them because I was depressed and needed help . . . they helped me, got my kids new beds and dressers."

They also shared how they tried to advocate for their children. This took on particular urgency when their children began attending school. One mother said:

I've had to point out that, to a certain teacher, that, um, my oldest daughter's reading level was much higher than the work that they were giving her. Um, and that they had not put her in the accelerated reading group in her class. The teacher was like, "I never even thought of that for her." And I wasn't really sure what it was about, but I kind of felt like it was a race thing, 'cause I knew that the group of accelerated readers was all white.

It is particularly challenging to navigate such situations amid the color-blind ideology that leads mothers to question whether or not their children are experiencing racism.

Similarly, the mothers had heard from their children of struggles with rhetoric of a color-blind society, when their peer groups were clearly telling them that race mattered:

'Cause it's like the black kids are like, "Well, your mom's white," and then there's the white kids like "Well, you're black" . . . . So then it sort of confuses the kids, like, "Who, what are we? Are we with the black crowd, or are we with the white crowd?" So I told my kids, "Be your own person and just go with yourself. That's always the best leader."

As this example illustrates, the mothers became increasingly aware of their children's challenges, but they had trouble offering effective solutions. What does it mean to "just go with yourself?" By insisting that their children are "mixed" and not black, are some mothers further pushing their children into a liminal place or unconsciously insisting that their children also occupy the liminal space where the mothers now find themselves?

Their children at times try to protect their parents from these racially fraught interactions, as illustrated by one mother:

We're getting ready to go to [an amusement park], and my son said he didn't want his father going, and we couldn't figure out why he didn't want his dad. And so we started talking to him more, and here, the kids at school were calling him half-breed, zebra. They're calling him all kinds of stuff. And we asked him, "Why didn't you come and tell us, you know, what those kids were doing to you?" He didn't want to hurt our feelings.

From what the mothers reported, it seemed that many of their children were aware of the differences in appearance and treatment between their mothers and themselves. For example, one daughter told her mother, "You don't know what it's like to be me." At the same time, many wished to be like their mothers, and we heard poignantly in two separate focus groups, about young children who said to their mothers, "Mommy, I got white teeth like you" in an effort to find commonality in their appearance. Clearly, negotiating racial liminality in a society that insists that race no longer matters is a stressful, challenging task for both white mothers and their biracial children.

No Safe Haven

For black people in the United States, public spaces are often fraught with tension and microaggression, requiring one to "be on guard," whereas family can be a place to safely destress (Rollock, 2012). However, for the women in this study, family was not always a place of sanctuary where they could go to escape racism or attempts to stereotype them and their children. For many, family was a source of stress, where there was little understanding of racist experiences and they and their children were the object of criticism and/or rejection.

The liminal space that these women occupied was reflected in their relationships with their white families and how the relationships changed over time. Without exception, their families initially expressed ambivalent or negative feelings about their partnering with a black man, even when they liked their partner. Their white families sometimes used metaphors, such as "My mom was like,

'Zebras go with zebras; red birds go with red birds and blue jays with blue jays. You don't see purple birds and stuff like that." Race and racism were not directly discussed but rather expressed as a need to keep the "colors" separate.

Others told of how their parents expressed concerns as to how the women, and by extension the white family, would be perceived by their communities: One of the women shared her father's initial reaction to her marriage which she continues to reflect upon, despite having reconciled with her parents: "'What are people going to think?' and 'How, how do you expect your mother to go to the grocery store with a black kid?' And it was very difficult to get past that." Experiencing and negotiating racist attitudes of family members have been reported in more detail elsewhere (Harman, 2010a; Root, 2001), and similar to these reports, some of the women in this study were shunned by their families and asked to leave home, as one young woman recounted:

> My family actually sent me to placement when I was pregnant with my daughter. I was only 15, but, um, you know, I felt like ... they just weren't OK with it, so I moved into placement to raise her, and none of my friends wanted anything to do with me. I stayed there till I got my own place ... But, yeah, I kind of lost everybody in that process.

After the birth of their children, many of the women reported improving relationships with their white families. For example, one explained, "And my dad—I'm not sure if it was a prejudiced thing, but he hated my fiancé. He actually went after [physically attacked] my fiancé. Now ever since we had my son, my dad is cool with him." Several of the women, in both the higher and lower SES groups, spoke of the emerging supportiveness of their families in helping them to raise their children, providing childcare, and giving them instrumental and emotional support. While at times the support was conditional, they believed that the support afforded to their children was essential to their continued well-being. Unfortunately, when support from grandparents emerged, this often came several years after the child's birth; early childhood is the time when family support is most beneficial (Sweet & Applebaum, 2004). Having family involved in their children's lives was important, but at times they were left wondering how to interpret and negotiate negative experiences, and their complicated relationships with their white and black families sometimes meant that home was not always a place to regroup. Moreover, despite their efforts to understand and protect their children, it is likely that their parenting efforts may have been ineffective in creating a safe space where their children could understand their racial selves and explore multiple identities. The lack of a safe haven could be true for both mothers and their children.

Implications and Conclusion

The principal narrative and related theory which emerged from the analyses is a story about white women trying to parent black children, as biracial children are often considered to be, in a culture in which race is a primary defining attribute and racism still prevails. These mothers do not have the social and cultural experiences of being black; however, once they had children with a black man, they were perceived differently by their families and communities, and thus existing in a liminal sociocultural space (Turner, 1969) or what Anzaldúa (1987) calls "Nepantla"—an in-between space. Existing "betwixt and between" (in Turner's terms) impacted how their white and black families interacted with them, how they spoke about race and parented their children, and how they interacted with formal systems. Unlike their children who must learn how to live in a state of racial fluidity (Brunsma, Delgado, & Rockquemore, 2013), these mothers had previously experienced their racial roles as unambiguously white. Anzaldúa theorizes that living on the thresholds—simultaneously inside and outside of groups—is a place/time of great confusion, anxiety, and loss of control (Keating, 2006). However, though self-reflection and seeing past the restrictive cultural and

racial scripts, Anzaldúa posits that this space becomes one of transformation. The mothers in our study were in this space and spoke of the pain and confusion that they sometimes experienced. While they may not have had a deep understanding of their changed status in society, a few did reflect on how they no longer assumed their skin color would protect them. Their relationship with whiteness became complicated: They didn't understand the privileges of white skin until they realized these privileges were not automatically transferred to their own children. At the same time, many of these women engaged in color-blind talk, particularly when discussing race with their children, suggesting that they were not completely transformed by this in-between space. Factors usually identified as bestowing protective effects, such as being in a higher social class, having more education, or being older did not move them out of this liminal space.

While the initial impetus for this qualitative inquiry was to uncover the reasons why black/white biracial children might enter the child welfare system at disproportionately high numbers compared to children of other races, what we discovered early in the process of data collection and analysis was a story about how mothers navigate the borders of the color line and how they experience their own white identity after having children. More importantly, we discovered that while their children were trying to make sense of their identity and negotiating multiple interpretations of their race, their mothers struggled to varying degrees with racial socialization of their children. Similar to what we found, other research studies report that white mothers of black biracial youth are likely to provide messages about developing the self, striving, and working harder as a way to combat current and future bias and discrimination (Rollins & Hunter, 2013). At times, they engaged in "color-blind" thinking, denying the significance of race for their children, even when experiencing racism from their own families (Reich, 2002).

We do not believe that white mothers are more abusive or neglectful of their biracial children than mothers of monoracial children, but rather that some of the contextual factors that contribute to child welfare identification and involvement may be elevated upon crossing the color line. All of the mothers, regardless of education and employment, reported some degree of social isolation and familial estrangement, yet at the same time they experienced heightened scrutiny from strangers, coworkers, and systems workers, for example, police, caseworkers, and medical staff. They also spoke of difficulties in their relationships with their children's fathers, often as a result of racism and microaggressions. Several talked of efforts to engage and sustain involvement with the extended black families of their children. Family conflict, low family cohesion, lack of family engagement and investment in young children, and a lack of formal and informal supports have all been linked to maltreatment risk (Stith et al., 2009).

Previous research indicates that less than half of reportable child maltreatment is actually reported, and there are racial and economic differences in who gets reported and the types of maltreatment reported (Ards, Chung, & Myers, 1998; Detlaff et al., 2011; Gryzlak, Wells, & Johnson, 2005; Sedlak & Schultz, 2005). At the same time, all of the women in this study struggled with several aspects of raising children who were perceived as being of another race. While many new mothers feel incompetent, this is likely to be exacerbated when some of the child's needs seem different from the mother's and are publically commented on by members of the community. Although participants were not directly asked about parenting competence, many felt unsure about their ability to parent their children when certain issues arose. In particular, these mothers did not feel prepared to cope with the racism experienced by their children or themselves. While black mothers often make deliberate attempts to racially socialize their children to prepare them for racism (Hughes et al., 2006), the white mothers in this study were unprepared for this aspect of parenting. This can lead to unintentionally minimizing their children's negative experiences and thus weaken the mother–child bond.

Mothers who are parenting biracial children may benefit from early intervention. A program like Nurse Family Partnership could be helpful. Results from randomized control trials across the United

States show the program's effectiveness in decreasing involvement in the child welfare system and improving the lives of mothers as a general group, reflected in fewer subsequent pregnancies, greater workforce participation, and reduced need for public assistance and food stamps. The program also increases the mother's social contacts (Olds, 2010). However, it has yet to be specifically targeted toward white mothers of biracial children.

Another practice implication is the need to assist these mothers to begin the conversations with their children about identity, race, and racism at an early age. Given their choices to partner and have children, one might think that this would naturally occur. However, the persistent American belief in a color-blind society suggests that these mothers are unlikely to have received any racial socialization messages from their own parents about coping with and resisting racism and building a racial identity, a form of socialization that is essential for biracial children (Robinson-Wood, 2010). These are complicated and potentially difficult conversations for a white woman with little personal understanding of racism to have with an adolescent. A psychoeducational approach, which provides information in a therapeutic, but educational context for the parent and child, may be an area for evidence-based development of a parent–older child intervention. In addition, early racial and cultural socialization through books, preschools, and mother–child play groups may give mothers the language to talk to their younger child about race and may also help her to "earn competence" within the black community (Twine, 1999b).

Understanding their own racial identity is an additional area where mothers could benefit from support and education, as this is a necessary step in understanding their children's experiences as multiracial individuals. With one exception, the women in the study had grown up in monoracial white families and reported few discussions in their own families about having a "white" identity or the privileges that accompany having white skin. The lack of understanding about white racial identity has been reported by others who have studied white women parenting black/white children (O'Donoghue, 2004; Robinson-Wood, 2010).

A feminist perspective highlights another important implication—the need to challenge the assumption that mothers should be solely or primarily responsible for their children's well-being. Creating a society that holds fathers to the same expectations and provides them with support to be centrally involved in their children's lives, and particularly to help with their racial socialization, could lessen the challenges faced by these mothers and children. The experiences of the women we interviewed are congruent with Twine's (2010) finding that women in interracial relationships face more private rejection and public racism than the men with whom they are partnered. Such societal double standards must be addressed.

While the current study adds to the literature on experiences of white women in the U.S. parenting biracial children, it has several limitations. First, this study was conducted in a region in which racial diversity is limited; parenting a biracial child in regions with more racial and cultural diversity may result in different experiences than those reported here. Second, determining adequate sample size in qualitative research is a matter of judgment and experience (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Although the groups provided rich data and we believe we reached a point of not hearing new information in the group discussions, the sample size was relatively small. Another limitation is that by recruiting the lower SES women from agencies rather than through the community, we may inadvertently have narrowed the range of experiences that we sought to obtain. This decision was based upon efficiency: Recruiting using the community approach was taking more resources than were available. Additional qualitative studies in which women are recruited from a more diverse region in the United States and avoiding an agency-based sampling approach would add to the knowledge base.

The shifting demographics of the United States will likely lead to further changes in family composition. However, individual and institutional racism in the United States is likely to continue challenging parents of black/white children. The mothers who participated in this study were undaunted in nurturing and protecting their children, even when they had limited personal and social

capital with which to do so. However, all needed assistance in recognizing and dealing with racism, in understanding the unique needs of their children, and in talking with and supporting their children. Being in a liminal position was frequently difficult for the mother/child dyads. Further research on multiracial families using Turner and Anzaldúa's theories of liminality as a framework could begin to tell us more about multiracial families. In addition, the complex issues facing multiracial families point to the need for research-informed interventions to aid parents in their exploration of race (Csizmadia, Rollins, & Kaneakua, 2014). Future research should focus on developing and testing targeted prevention and early intervention programs that specifically address the needs of biracial children and their families.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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