“Mom, You Don’t Get It”: A Critical Examination of Multiracial Emerging Adults’ Perceptions of Parental Support

Annabelle L. Atkin1 and Kelly F. Jackson2

Abstract
Multiracial families are becoming increasingly common in the United States, yet there is a dearth of research examining how parents of Multiracial youth provide support for navigating challenges associated with being mixed race in a monocentric society. The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the parental support strategies that Multiracial emerging adults perceived to be helpful in their own development. Twenty Multiracial emerging adults (50% female, mean age = 20.55) with diverse Multiracial heritages were interviewed about conversations they had with their parents regarding their racial experiences throughout their childhood. Critical supplementary analysis using constructivist grounded theory identified three themes of parental support (i.e., connection support, discrimination support, and Multiracial identity expression support) and informed a conceptual model demonstrating relationships between environmental context, parent characteristics, family dynamics, risks, and identity development. Findings are discussed in terms of implications for researchers and practitioners serving Multiracial families.

Keywords
Multiracial, constructivist grounded theory, parental support, identity development, qualitative

The Multiracial population is one of the fastest growing populations in the United States, with one in seven infants in 2015 having Multiracial heritage according to an analysis of Census data conducted by the Pew Research Center (Livingston, 2017). We define Multiracial individuals as those with parents of two or more different racial backgrounds.1 Despite the significant and growing presence of the Multiracial population, research on Multiracial families is sparse (Atkin & Yoo, 2019). This dearth of research has contributed to a gap in understanding how parents support Multiracial identity development and the impact this support has on how their emerging adult children navigate society as individuals who do not fit into monoracial categories. Given that the period of emerging adulthood, occurring between the ages of 18 and 25 (Arnett, 2000), is important in influencing the racial–ethnic identity development and well-being of Multiracial youth (Renn, 2003), understanding how support from parents prepares Multiracial youth to understand their Multiracial identity and cope with their uniquely marginalized status is essential for building a more holistic view of Multiracial development. Thus, the purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate the role parents play in supporting their Multiracial child’s identity development. Findings from this supplemental analysis extend existing knowledge by delineating the complex relationships between social context, family dynamics, parental support, and Multiracial identity development among Multiracial emerging adults.

Risks Faced by Multiracial Families in a Monoracial Context
Although race is socially constructed and has no biological basis, the consequences associated with race and racial discrimination are “socio-politically very real” (Chang, 2016, p. 12). Using a Critical Multiracial Theory, or MultiCrit (Harris, 2016) lens, we understand that racial categories in the United States are based on a monoracial paradigm, which assumes that everyone fits into neatly fixed and distinct racial

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categories and disallows the recognition of Multiracial realities. For example, on top of dealing with discrimination and stereotypes associated with their membership in monoracial minority groups (e.g., Black, Asian), Multiracial emerging adults face monoracism or discrimination toward those who do not fit into monoracial categories (Johnston & Nadal, 2010). Monoracism experiences can include denial from others of one or more of their racial backgrounds, rejection from monoracial group members, and pressure to identify with only one racial background. Ideologies of racial essentialism inform the monoracial paradigm and subsequently monoracism. Racial essentialism suggests that the boundaries of racial categories are discrete with essences that are inherited and immutable, preventing classification of individuals into multiple categories (Gelman, 2003; Ho et al., 2015).

Given that the monoracial paradigm is so prevalent in U.S. society, we consider U.S. society to be monocentric. Specifically, in a monocentric society, the one-drop rule prevails (i.e., Black and other minority individuals are labeled based on their lowest status minority heritage rather than recognized as Multiracial), White is considered the only racially pure category, monoracial identities are privileged as the norm, multiraciality is pathologized as abnormal and exotic, and racial essentialism is normalized (Jackson & Samuels, 2019). Previous research shows that the challenges faced by Multiracial emerging adults and adults have detrimental consequences for psychosocial outcomes such as higher levels of depression and social anxiety and lower levels of self-esteem and motivation (Coleman & Carter, 2007; Jackson et al., 2012; Townsend et al., 2009). However, scholars emphasize that these risk factors are not caused by one’s Multiracial background, but rather the challenges associated with having a multifaceted identity in a race-conscious society that constructs normative and healthy racial identity in terms of a single, mutually exclusive racial group (Jackson & Samuels, 2011).

The Role of Parental Support in Identity Development and Resilience

Conceptual models of Multiracial identity development allude to the significance of parental support in their discussion of how family functioning influences Multiracial identity development (Kich, 1992; Poston, 1990; Root, 2003). Kich (1992) also proposes that, “Within a context of safety and security, the experience and labeling of differentness as Biracial can be positively valued” (p. 307). Kich suggests that the structure and language provided by parents are crucial for helping Multiracial youth make sense of their experiences and develop their self-concept and self-esteem. Furthermore, Kich describes how is it essential for parents to model open communication about racial–ethnic differences in the family context, as this lays the groundwork for Multiracial youth to feel comfortable working through their experiences of social devaluation, differentness, and identity negotiation while conveying acceptance of their Multiracial child. Thus, parents may play an important role in shaping the identity development and health outcomes of Multiracial emerging adults.

Parental support processes are broadly defined as parent behaviors that allow their child to feel comfortable, recognized, and approved by the parent (Antonio & Moleiro, 2015). As a source of social support, parental support can serve as a critical protective factor within the risk process that helps buffer stress and enhance health as youth transition into emerging adulthood (Bartoszuk et al., 2019). Given that Multiracial emerging adults face risks such as discrimination and lack of belonging due to their Multiracial identity, having the support of parents to help foster a sense of belonging and develop resilience to such stressors may be vital to positive development during this vulnerable stage of identity exploration and formation (Crawford & Alaggia, 2008; Lorenzo-Blanco et al., 2013).

Unfortunately, because the literature is significantly constrained by a monoracial paradigm, there is a dearth of research examining how parents of different racial backgrounds provide support to their Multiracial children. Specifically, the monocentric misconceptualization of a “normal” family unit suggests that parents are only equipped to support their children’s racial–ethnic identity development if they are from the same ethnic or racial group (Samuels, 2009). To our knowledge, there is only one qualitative study that addresses how parent support influences Multiracial identity formation (Crawford & Alaggia, 2008). Analysis of interviews with eight Black and White Biracial emerging adults identified three themes as necessary for support: (1) parents’ understanding of the experience of being Biracial, (2) exposure to both biological parents, and (3) parents’ willingness to communicate about race issues. Without these, participants reported feeling frustrated and unsupported, unprepared to deal with racism, and disconnected from their parents’ racial background. Feeling silenced and alone, they eventually stopped sharing their experiences with their parents (Crawford & Alaggia, 2008).

Although parents are a critical source of social support that children are likely to turn to for guidance, Multiracial youth may not always receive the support and advice they need from their parents because of parents’ limited understanding of their racial experience (Crawford & Alaggia, 2008; Laszlofyy, 2008). In particular, parents who are monoracial are unlikely to relate to experiences of monoracism and may be unaware of the challenges their children face as Multiracial individuals (Jackson et al., 2019). Moreover, if one or more caregivers is monoracial White, their understanding of what it is like to be a racial–ethnic minority in the United States may be limited and they may be less concerned with racial issues, which can result in not knowing how to support their Multiracial children of color on issues of racism and racial identity (Crawford & Alaggia, 2008; Laszlofyy, 2008; Rockquemore & Laszlofyy, 2005).

Even in families in which one parent or both are Multiracial, their racial background may not be identical to the child’s (e.g., a Biracial Asian and White mother with a Latinx husband would have an Asian, White, and Latinx child), so they may not relate to all of their child’s experiences. Interviews conducted
with Multiracial parents in the United Kingdom found that parents themselves did not start identifying as mixed race until having their own Multiracial children, as their parents had not discussed their racial–ethnic backgrounds with them and the vocabulary around multiraciality was not available during their childhood (Song, 2019). Time spent with each parent also played an important role in supporting the connection to both parents’ cultures, as participants with less contact with one parent did not feel as strong of a connection to that side of their heritage (Song, 2017). Thus, even Multiracial parents can have barriers to relating to their child. In addition, in families in which the biological parents are not both present, the lack of availability of one parent makes it harder for the child to feel supported in learning about both sides of their heritage.

In sum, the incongruence between parent and child racial experiences in Multiracial families raises the question of how parents learn to effectively speak to their child’s experiences and provide support on identity development and dealing with discrimination as their emerging adult children go off into the world. Thus, the goal of the present study was to examine Multiracial emerging adults’ perceptions of the various ways their parents provided support for navigating challenges associated with being Multiracial in a monocentric society. Through this investigation, our study illuminates the potential factors contributing to parental support processes and Multiracial identity development in emerging adulthood.

**Method**

This study was a secondary data analysis (SDA) of qualitative data obtained from an earlier study that examined the racial–ethnic socialization of Multiracial individuals. During the analysis for the original study, the construct of parental support emerged as an overlapping yet distinguishable concept from racial–ethnic socialization. Specifically, certain racial socialization messages (e.g., telling children to stay away from racial out-group members) did not constitute support and certain supportive messages or behaviors (e.g., listening to children talk about racial discrimination experiences) did not necessarily involve racial–ethnic socialization. Therefore, and considering the inherent benefits of SDA, including enabling a more robust analysis of data from potentially vulnerable subgroups (Smith, 2008), it became logical to conduct a supplementary analysis of the original study data to critically investigate the new emerging concept of parental support (Heaton, 2004).

**Procedures**

The original study and a modification including the new research question examined in this article were both approved by the university’s Social and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board and interviews were conducted during March and April 2018. In order to select information-rich participants to examine central familial processes in-depth, the original study utilized purposive sampling (Patton, 1990) to recruit a sample of 20 Multiracial students from a large Southwest university. A sample size of 20 was intentionally sought due to literature that reports little new data that are generated from qualitative interviews with 20 or more people as it pertains to a particular category (Green & Thorogood, 2004). Multiracial students who identify with two or more races comprise approximately 3.8% of the student body at this university.

Participants were recruited through an ad on the university’s student homepage and through emails to participants in previous survey studies that indicated they were Multiracial and interested in participating in future research. In order to be eligible, individuals had to be 18 years or older, be undergraduate students at the university, and have biological parents of different racial backgrounds. The following groups were recognized as distinct racial groups due to their uniquely racialized experiences: White, Asian, Pacific Islander, Black, American Indian, Middle Eastern/North African, and Latinx. Multiethnic individuals (e.g., Chinese and Thai) were not eligible for the study.

Equal numbers of self-identified males and females were recruited to juxtapose the majority female samples that comprise the majority of existing Multiracial research (Charmaraman et al., 2014). Semistructured interviews were conducted privately in a small conference room on campus and typically lasted between 1 and 2 hours. The first author, who self-identifies as Biracial Asian American, facilitated the interviews. Interview questions were developed based on a review of existing racial–ethnic socialization measures designed for monoracial groups, racial identity and racial–ethnic socialization research with Multiracial groups, and the first author’s own Multiracial family experiences. The interview protocol was reviewed by the professor of a graduate-level qualitative interview methodology course and a professor experienced in quantitative research with Multiracial individuals. After making revisions in response to the feedback, the interview protocol was pilot tested with a Multiracial graduate student. The semistructured interview script asked participants to discuss how they talked about their racialized experiences with their parents over the course of their lifetime (e.g., “What experiences did you have with racial discrimination growing up? Which experiences did you share or not share with your parents? How did your parents respond? How did their response make you feel?”). At the conclusion of the interview, participants were given a US$30 Amazon gift card.

**Participants**

Of the 20 participants in the study, 10 were male and 10 were female (see Table 1 for details on participant gender, age, and parents’ racial–ethnic background). Participants were emerging adult college students ranging from ages 18 to 23 (M = 20.55). Determination of racial–ethnic heritage was based on participants’ self-report in response to open-ended questions about their parents’ racial–ethnic backgrounds. Eight participants were considered majority–minority Biracial because they reported having one White parent and one monoracial minority parent. Six participants were considered minority–minority Biracial, given they had two monoracial minority parents. Six
participants were considered second-generation Multiracial because they reported having one or two parents who also had Multiracial heritage.

**Data Analysis**

In seeking to critically examine how parents support the racial–ethnic identity development of their Multiracial children, this qualitative SDA utilized constructivist grounded theory methods of analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Such methods align with this study’s challenging of the monoracial paradigm and the privileging of single-race families and individuals in existing research and literature on parental support and racial–ethnic identity development. Specifically, constructivist grounded theory centers critical analysis of the experiences of marginalized participants in an attempt to gain new understandings of experiencing and redressing injustice (Charmaz, 2017). For the purpose of developing a conceptual model about the underlying structure of parent support processes that emerged from the transcript data (Thomas, 2003), three sequential stages of inductive coding were utilized in this study, including open coding, thematic coding, and theoretical coding (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014).

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first author identified those interviews (approximately five transcripts) that were considered richer in terms of participant responses associated with the emerging concept of parental support. During open coding, the authors engaged in immersive grounded theory co-coding (Charmaz, 2017) by independently assigning a label or in vivo (in participants’ words) code based on the study theme to meaningful segments of text, representing a sentence, paragraph, or several paragraphs (Fassinger, 2005; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). These open codes were compared with other emerging codes to decipher important meaning and gradually form larger groups of related codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These groups informed thematic categories that were continuously compared and contrasted with existing data and emerging codes (Fassinger, 2005). During this time, the authors engaged in several data analysis meetings to exchange both reflexive and analytic memos and discuss and compare/contrast independently generated themes.

In accordance with Charmaz’s (2014) approach to constructivist grounded theory analysis, the personal and professional experiences of both authors were exchanged and discussed during these meetings to aid in new understanding of parental support by challenging and contributing further evidence to emerging themes (Singh & Estefan, 2018). Specifically, we used theoretical comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), or the reflexive process of comparing researcher experiences to the experiences of participants, to extrapolate dimensions of an emerging theme. The authors discussed how their own parents were both supportive and unsupportive of their Multiracial identities. For example, during one analysis meeting exploring the emerging theme “phenotype differences,” both authors recalled incidents where their own parents had commented on their racial appearance. Through this reflection, the authors were able to add conceptual depth to their understanding of how such incidents influence parental support and Multiracial identity development. A product of the initial data analytic meetings was a thematic codebook that labeled and defined our combined initial categories ($n = 11$) based on approximately

### Table 1. Racial Background and Gender of Study Participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Multiracial category</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Mother’s Racial (Ethnic) Background</th>
<th>Father’s Racial (Ethnic) Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Majority–minority biracial</td>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Asian (Chinese)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Asian (Japanese)</td>
<td>White (Italian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ryan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Asian (Taiwanese)</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Black (Liberian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hero</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>American Indian (French Guiana)</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Latino (Mexican)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Edward</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Latino (Mexican)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority–minority biracial</td>
<td>Spike</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Asian (Chinese)</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mariah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Asian (Japanese)</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Latina (Puerto Rican)</td>
<td>Asian (Filipino)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diego</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Latina (Mexican)</td>
<td>Middle Eastern (Iranian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bernadino</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Latina (Mexican)</td>
<td>Asian (Vietnamese)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Amara</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Asian (Filipina)</td>
<td>Pacific Islander (Chamorro)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second-generation Multiracial (three or more races)</td>
<td>Malia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>White and Black</td>
<td>Latino (Mexican)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>JFK</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Latina and White (Spanish and Mexican)</td>
<td>Black and American Indian (Columbian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>White and Latina (Mexican)</td>
<td>Asian (Sri Lankan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reikan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>American Indian and White Latina (Spanish)</td>
<td>Asian (Filipino) and White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Janine</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Latina (Mexican) and White</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>White with distant American Indian ancestry</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $N = 20$.

*Parent that individual had the most exposure to as parents were separated or divorced. If both parents have *, then individual had equal exposure to each parent (i.e., shared custody).
44 groups (e.g., “ability to understand,” “discrimination support,” “feeling connected or othered by parents,” “communication with/between parents,” “claiming Multiracial children”). The thematic codebook guided the first author’s continued comparative analysis of the remaining 15 transcripts. Inductive thematic saturation was determined when themes became repetitive and no new themes emerged in the transcripts (Saunders et al., 2018).

The authors then engaged in theoretical coding or analyzing how thematic categories relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory (Glaser, 1978). In constructivist grounded theory, this involves the researchers importing their own ideas and perspectives based on both their theoretical knowledge and personal experience (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). To think more critically and systematically through the relationships between the categories and potentially any cause-and-effect implications, the authors revisited existing data (e.g., those participants whose experiences were outliers in comparison to the majority) and other forms of study data (e.g., demographic data and research memos) to interrogate the emerging theoretical codes (Charmaz, 2000). To guide this process, we referred to the prescribed theoretical categories as identified by Strauss and Corbin (1990), including (1) risks or factors that precipitated the need for parental support; (2) strategies or the actions parents took to support their Multiracial children; (3) intervening conditions or specific situational factors that influenced parent support strategies; (4) outcomes or the potential impact of parental support processes on the Multiracial individual; and (5) overarching contextual conditions or broad situational factors that influenced risks, strategies, intervening conditions, and outcomes.

To assess the dependability of theoretical codes, a unitization strategy was deployed (Campbell et al., 2013) where the authors randomly selected five transcripts, representing 25% of the interviews, and identified meaningful segments of text in each transcript based on the study purpose (n = 25). Interrater reliability was then conducted and revealed a Kappa value representing moderate agreement, $\kappa = .642$, 95% confidence interval (CI) [0.397, 0.887], $p < .001$ (Landis & Koch, 1977). Code disagreements were discussed between the first and second authors to reconcile discrepancies and further substantiate theoretical codes (MacPhil et al., 2016). Following this process, a second inter-rater reliability assessment with the modified theoretical codes was conducted and revealed a Kappa value representing excellent agreement, $\kappa = .938$, 95% CI [0.818, 1.058], $p < .001$.

Finally, the authors used diagramming to visualize the relationships between the theoretical categories (e.g., intervening and contextual conditions, risks, strategies, and outcomes), which were further refined in comparison to existing theoretical models related to family processes, racial–ethnic identity development and well-being (e.g., Root’s, 2003, Ecological Framework for Understanding Multiracial Identity Development; Kich’s, 1992, Stages of Biracial, Bicultural Identity Development; Spencer’s, 2006, Phenomenological Variants of Ecological Systems Theory; Garcia Coll and colleagues’, 1996, Integrative Model for the Study of Developmental Competencies in Minority Children; Olson et al., 2016). This resulted in a conceptual framework that was subsequently used to structure the reporting of study findings (Figure 1). Throughout the study, qualitative data analysis software, specifically Nvivo Version 12 and Atlas.ti Version 8, was used to improve study validity and audibility by allowing the researchers to compare and contrast emerging codes across interviews (St. John & Johnson, 2000).

Figure 1. Conceptual model of factors associated with parental support of Multiracial youth.
Results and Discussion

The conceptual model resulting from the three stages of the inductive qualitative analysis depicts the potential relationships between risks, parental support strategies, intervening conditions, and contextual conditions in association with several Multiracial youth outcomes. The entire model is situated within the broader conditional context of a monocentric society, which encompasses multiple levels of contextual conditions. These contextual conditions contributed to risks faced by Multiracial youth that necessitated support (i.e., mono/racism and racial/ethnic/cultural disconnect). Our in-depth analysis identified three sites of parental support strategies, which included connection support, racial discrimination support, and Multiracial identity expression support. Strategies were informed by several intervening conditions associated with particular parent characteristics and family dynamics. Finally, our analysis revealed several potential Multiracial identity outcomes influenced by strategies and intervening conditions of parental support. These included sense of belonging, (Multi)racial racial/ethnic/cultural pride, racial–ethnic identity, and well-being. Each aspect of the model is described in detail in the following sections.

A Monocentric Society

The major contextual condition encompassing all of the processes occurring within the model is the context of a monocentric society, in which individuals are bound to exist within mutually exclusive monoracial categories and are marginalized if they violate these boundaries. For example, the various contexts within society, such as the home, school, neighborhood, community, and time spent with extended family, were predominantly monoracial spaces. Being surrounded by monoracial people increased Multiracial youths’ risks of being discriminated against for being different and feeling a lack of belonging. The norm of monocentrism in society even permeated the family, regardless of whether parents were monoracial or Multiracial, as communication about race and parents’ understanding of youths’ Multiracial experiences were limited to monoracial frameworks. Even in their attempts to acknowledge multiple heritages, there were no examples of parents understanding multiraciality as an integration of multiple backgrounds and cultures, instead focusing on the distinct pieces of youths’ identities associated with each race (i.e., you are this AND this). Thus, the norms of the United States’ monoracial paradigm affected each aspect of the model, including parents’ ability to understand and support youth. Thus, the role of monocentric societal norms are discussed within each category.

It is important to situate the processes in the model in the context of a monocentric society to acknowledge how racial norms are socially constructed. For example, the finding that Multiracial youth suggested that being Multiracial and part of a Multiracial family was “weird” supports how their experiences were framed by a monoracial paradigm and their awareness that they live in a monocentric society where being monoracial is the norm. Furthermore, the processes in this model may not function the same way in another society where racial categorizations and multiraciality are viewed differently (e.g., Brazil). Thus, the monocentric society of the United States is informed by its specific sociopolitical historical context.

Risks Faced by Multiracial Youth

As Multiracial individuals in a monocentric society, youth described experiencing the risks for which they sought support from parents and discussed the impact of these risks on outcomes such as their sense of belonging to groups and their well-being. Specifically, the two major themes of risk included mono/racism (i.e., monoracism and general racism) and racial/ethnic/cultural disconnect. Although phenotype is not a risk in and of itself, in the context of a monocentric society, it seemed that Multiracial youths’ phenotypes were relevant to both their experiences of mono/racism and feelings of disconnect. In other words, because the monoracial paradigm, informed by racial essentialism, has prescribed that individuals from specific racial groups are supposed to look a certain way (e.g., have a certain skin color, hair texture, eye shape), strangers, peers, and the Multiracial youth themselves questioned their belonging to their heritage monoracial groups. Thus, phenotype and racial essentialism were factors in both experiences of mono/racism and racial/ethnic/cultural disconnect.

Monoracism. Multiracial youth in the study described encountering discrimination targeting both their single-race minority heritages (i.e., racism) and Multiracial backgrounds (i.e., monoracism). Encounters with racism and monoracism were influenced by monocentric notions of biological race, white supremacy, and the one-drop rule. Specifically, participants experienced discrimination associated with their racial minority heritage and phenotype. For example, Malia (age 19, White and Black mother, Mexican father) shared an experience of being called the N-word, “When I got called the N-word for the first time, that showed me like, it really does hurt.” Other Multiracial participants described discriminatory incidents that targeted their physical features presumed to be associated with their Multiracial identity. Specifically, Megan (age 21, White mother, Black father) described how Black male athletes would refer to her as “the light skinned girl” rather than using her name. Megan described how these incidents made her feel exoticized.

They’d be like, oh is that light skin girl coming over tonight to hang out? And I’m like I have a name, but it’s fine. And they would tell me that they only liked me because I was light-skinned. Like that made me more attractive to them . . . . And that to me was degrading . . . that that is the only reason people liked me.

Thus, Megan felt exoticized by the males defining her solely by the desirable skin color associated with her mixed race body (Newman, 2017). Participants described how phenotype was used by peers and even family members as a physical marker to differentiate their racial group membership and impose
mono-centric stereotypes presumed to be associated with members of a particular racial group. For example, Megan shared,

People would make comments that I didn’t have a Black booty. Like I don’t fit that stereotype… It caused a lot of stress for me… because of people… telling me that I’d be so much better if I was light-skinned with a big butt.

Mono/racist encounters based on mono-centric and racial essentialist thinking also involved making assumptions about the Multiracial youths’ racial group membership and relationship to parents based on their facial features, skin color, or hair texture. For example, Mariah (age 21, Japanese mother, Black father) said that she would often be asked if she and her mother were together, because the assumption was that they could not be related due to differences in phenotype: “Even to this day, going shopping with my mom, they’ll be like, are you guys together? Or if we’re going to a restaurant, they’re like, are you guys together or apart?” The employees engage in essentialist thinking by perceiving Mariah to be Black without considering the possibility that she could be a mix of both Black and Asian.

Parents also made racial essentialist assumptions that their children did not have certain racial group experiences, such as in Hero’s (age 22, White mother, Black father) experience:

My father never really addressed with me about the fact that I was Black. I think he expected that because I’m lighter-toned, and because I was raised by my White mother… that I wouldn’t have dealt with anything he would’ve dealt with.

Thus, support provided to youth around discrimination was also influenced by parents’ perceptions of their phenotype and assumed racial experiences.

Racial/ethnic/cultural disconnect. Multiracial youth also reported feeling racial/ethnic/cultural disconnect from one or both of their parents. In the context of a monocentric society, participants internalized essentialist notions that to be a member of a specific racial/ethnic/cultural group, there were specific inherent traits or characteristics required of them such as speaking a certain way, wearing certain clothes, or eating certain foods. Without these traits or characteristics, Multiracial youth felt less connected to parents and a lack of belonging to particular racial/ethnic/cultural groups. For example, participants discussed feeling disconnected from parents because they were not taught about or exposed to cultures associated with their multiple racial heritages, expressing that they wished their parents had taught them more. Bernadino (age 19, Vietnamese father, Mexican mother), who was emotional during the interview when discussing not feeling close to his father, described how he tried to learn more about his father’s culture in college by joining the Vietnamese Students’ Association (VSA):

I feel like college is a place where I’m being a lot more connected with Asian culture and heritage… we just talked about how I’m a lot more involved with the… VSA or whatever. My dad is like, oh yeah! I hung out with VSA kids at my school… but I didn’t really do any of their things other than intramural sports… [Getting choked up] I feel like I definitely am trying to, in a subconscious way, but probably just like, compensating just for a lack of, especially from the divorce, of Asian culture and interaction. And so [clears throat], I don’t know. I feel like I would hopefully like to talk to him about it one day. Like hey, I’d like to be really involved with this, how do you feel about some of these, I don’t know, issues or the community.

While learning about one’s culture is important for identity development, Bernadino demonstrates how learning about his culture was also something he felt he needed to do in order to better connect with his father. Language was another salient issue relevant to youth feeling connected to their culture. As Junior (age 19, White mother, Mexican father) shares, “I wish they would’ve first off taught me Spanish. ‘Cause that would’ve made me feel a lot more comfortable especially associating with being Hispanic. . . . Still sometimes I’m like, I feel out of place.” Junior describes how knowing Spanish would have helped improve his sense of belonging among Latinx people.

Monocentrism was also internalized by Multiracial youth starting as early as kindergarten, in that they thought they needed to look similar to their parents to be biologically related to them. In response to questions about phenotypical differences between youth and their parents, youth shared distress they felt as young children as a result of looking phenotypically different from their parents. One interesting phenomenon was the fear of being adopted because they could not see a physical resemblance with their parents. Bella (age 23, Japanese mother, Italian father) shared,

“When I was growing up… my older sister… was like, you look nothing like mom or dad, you’re adopted…. There was a solid couple years where I believed that I was literally adopted.”

Thus, Bella internalized the racial essentialist idea that because she did not look like her parents, she might not be related to them, impacting her sense of belonging among her own family.

In sum, experiencing mono/racism from a young age taught Multiracial youth the monocentric norms of society, and as they internalized these monocentric ideas, they started to feel disconnected from their parents and their heritage because they did not feel they fit the racially essentialized image of what someone from a particular racial or ethnic group should be. Feeling disconnected from parents and experiencing monoracism resulted in feelings of sadness, anger, and frustration. These risks of mono/racism and racial/ethnic/cultural disconnect had implications for outcomes such as sense of belonging, (multi)racial/ethnic/cultural pride, racial–ethnic identity, and well-being, suggesting these were issues that Multiracial youth needed support with.

Contextual conditions and risks. The model identifies the contexts of home, school, neighborhood/community, and extended...
family as environments in which youth experienced risk. Similar to Mariah’s experience in restaurants, participants shared that strangers in the community questioned whether the Multiracial youth were related to their parents. More direct discrimination often was experienced at school from peers or teachers, such as in Malia’s example of being called the N-word. In addition, youth such as Junior (age 19, White mother, Mexican father) described experiences with extended family members that contributed to racial/ethnic disconnect from his White heritage:

“We’ve had a bad experience with my mom’s side of the family because they’re kinda racist and I mean it sucks. So my mom didn’t like to just be like, hey you’re White too. She was like, you’re more Mexican so don’t worry about it.

The racist attitudes of Junior’s White family and his inability to spend time with them as a result of these attitudes affected his pride and sense of belonging with his White heritage.

The racial, ethnic, and/or cultural composition of these contexts was also an important factor in Multiracial youth’s experiences of risk. For example, Ryan (age 21, Taiwanese mother, White father), who grew up in a military family, lived for some time in Okinawa, Japan, and also often visited his mother’s home country of Taiwan. He described his experiences of living in different countries,

To Asians, I look extremely White. And then to White . . . people, I look extremely Asian. So, there wouldn’t be a direct fit wherever I was. And when I would go back to Taiwan . . . people know that I’m not Taiwanese. Even though I have family there . . . people look at me and they’re like, you’re extremely American, you look American, you stand out. But here, I look Asian and I stand out.

Thus, Ryan’s feelings of disconnect from his heritage varied according to the context he was in and what the majority of people in that context looked like. Despite being seen as Asian in America, he was seen as White in Asia, resulting in feeling like he did not belong anywhere. Therefore, contextual conditions played an important role in how Multiracial youth experienced the risks of mono/racism and racial/ethnic/cultural disconnect.

Sites of Parental Support

As youth gained awareness of their marginal racial status across the many contexts they experienced within monocentric society and struggled with the risks of mono/racism and disconnect associated with being Multiracial in these contexts, they often turned to their parents to discuss their experiences and seek support. Specifically, in response to the various risks they faced, youth described three sites of support strategies received from their parents.

Connection support. The theme of connection support was constituted by parents’ affirmations that (1) youth could be mixed race and have a unique phenotype from their parents but still share racial/ethnic/cultural similarities with their parents, (2) being different was positive, and (3) parents were proud of their child’s multiple racial–ethnic group memberships and physical characteristics. Such affirmations that supported the connections between parents and children strengthened feelings of belonging and (multi)racial/ethnic/cultural pride, helping them cope with discrimination from others that attempted to deny the child’s group membership while also helping youth overcome racial essentialist thinking and feelings of disconnect from parents due to racial/ethnic/cultural differences.

For example, Mariah (age 21, Japanese mother, Black father) explained that she internally struggled with the obvious difference in skin color between herself and her mother, who raised her after her parents divorced. Although she did not feel comfortable enough to talk openly with her mother about this issue, she explains that her mother supported her in other ways:

We visit Japan almost every summer to visit my grandparents. And . . . she would always make sure the people around her knows that she loves us and she’s proud of what we came out to look like. But she’s never actually brought up, oh your hair, she’d just be like, what do you need, how can I help you, what products do you need. But she never pointed out our differences, because I think to her, she loves us and what we look like . . . She just supported us, like ok if you need this with your hair, or with your skin or your makeup, I will get that for you . . . she’s very open, she’s very supportive with our differences.

Even though Mariah’s mother did not explicitly point out phenotypical differences between them, she acknowledged that she was aware of those differences and how others might perceive them negatively by being vocal about how proud she was of her daughters’ appearance and offering help with her hair care needs.

Differences in hair texture were also an issue discussed by study participants as something that made them feel disconnected from their parents, who often did not know how to help them take care of their hair, which then led to frustration and shame on their racial features that prevented them from being proud of their racial–ethnic background. However, parents still found ways to support and connect with youth despite differences in hair textures and styles by learning how to style their child’s hair. Megan (age 21, White mother, Black father) explained that her mother learned from a Black woman how to braid hair really well:

Megan: My mom has paper-thin hair. And so the lady was like, well I’ll teach you how to do her hair. And so, we went over to her house one day, and she just taught my mom how to do it.

Interviewer: How did it make you feel that your mom did that?

Megan: Really good. It became like a big bonding thing for me and my mom, because like, I knew that every Friday or Saturday night, I would go, take
For Megan, even though she had different hair than her mother, because her mother learned how to take care of her hair, it became a difference they were able to bond over.

In sum, connection support strategies that Multiracial youth perceived as supportive included parents pointing out similarities between themselves and their children regarding phenotype and personality. In addition, it was important for parents to recognize and acknowledge differences, providing positive compliments about their child’s unique characteristics and finding ways to connect with and support children despite the differences. Parents’ expressions of pride in their children’s multiraciality were also important, especially in claiming their child as their own when others questioned their relationship. Multiracial youth also felt supported when parents validated and praised their efforts to learn about their different cultural heritages or when parents made efforts to share their cultural heritage with their children. Furthermore, when one parent participated in cultural activities and cooked foods from the other parents’ culture, youth appreciated their efforts and felt that parent was supporting the entire family unit. Thus, connection support involved interactions between parents and Multiracial youth that assured youth of the strength of their relationship in light of racial, cultural, and phenotypical differences.

Racial discrimination support. When youth experienced discrimination, they often shared these experiences with parents in search of support. Youth reported feeling supported when parents (1) validated their discrimination experiences (rather than trying to brush them off), (2) related to and empathized with their situation through sharing their own discrimination experiences, and (3) gave helpful advice for how to respond or even took action themselves to stand up for their child. Feeling supported helped youth cope with risks of discrimination and racial essentialism while making them feel more connected to and understood by their parents, which then facilitated a sense of belonging based on shared racial experiences and/or more pride in their (multi)racial/ethnic/cultural identity.

Participants also appreciated when their parents worked together to support them. Bella (age 23, Japanese mother, Italian father) describes how her parents dealt with a racist incident at school involving a teacher assigning the book Hiroshima and debating why Japanese people “deserved” to be bombed:

The first time I brought it up, they did not want to handle it . . . my dad pretended like I didn’t say a word . . . . And when I brought it up with my mom, it just made her so mad that she didn’t want to talk about it at first. And it took them a little while, I think, to process that it had happened, and what we were gonna do about it. And then we sat down, and they, we together wrote an e-mail to the principal, and explained what happened. And then it was okay . . . .

When asked how she felt about her parents’ initial reactions, Bella said,

I still had to go to school and see that teacher every day . . . [my parents] brushing it off like that made me mad! . . . Once we finally handled it, obviously it felt a lot better because it felt like they were on my side, and they wanted to help me not be discriminated against.

In Bella’s case, she was upset at her parents’ initial nonresponse, but felt good when they all worked together as a family to handle the situation.

Another common experience among the families was strangers or child peers questioning whether Multiracial youth were related to their parents. This is a good illustration of monoracism in the context of a monocentric society that assumes everyone in a family must have the same racial background. In these instances, Multiracial youth felt supported when their parents stood up for them and claimed them as their children. In some families, parents taught their children how to respond themselves. For example, Megan (age 21, White mother, Black father), stated, “They taught me different responses to things, and if people were like, oh is that your kid, like to say, no this is my mom.”

To summarize, parent strategies that Multiracial youth perceived as supportive included standing up for children in front of discriminatory peers, teachers, strangers, or extended family members; being present for conversations about discrimination, even if the other parent has more personal experience with discrimination or does more of the talking; preparing children for racial discrimination (e.g., teaching them about stereotypes); and listening, empathizing, and sharing their own stories of discrimination.

Multiracial identity expression support. When it came to supporting Multiracial youth as they tried to explore and express their Multiracial identity, two parent strategies that were perceived to be helpful included (1) emphasizing that all of their heritages were important and (2) giving youth the freedom to identify as they wished. Parents did not typically talk to their children about being “Biracial” or “Multiracial,” but they indirectly supported Multiracial identity by encouraging youth to identify with all of their racial heritages. Spike (age 21, Chinese mother, Black father), for example, shared:

Spike: They encouraged me acknowledging both parts, but they also wanted me to make more of my own decision. So it’s like, you claim what you are and I’m like, I know what I am.

Interviewer: How have they reacted to your different choices of identification? So whether you share it with
them that you call yourself Blasian or Biracial or Black and Chinese, how do they react to that?

Spike: They both laugh and get really happy and they smile a lot. So I think they’re very accepting of the nickname and how it like takes into account both parts.

Having learned the term “Blasian” from a good friend and deciding to adopt that term, Spike found that his parents were supportive of him identifying as Biracial, which engendered pride in his identity.

Edward (age 22, White mother, Mexican father) also expressed that his parents encouraged him to identify with both racial groups, “As long as I’m saying, acknowledging both halves…. If I were to deny one of them, they’d have some issues with that.” Meanwhile, Henry (age 19, French Guianan native mother, White father) was given the option to choose his own identity:

I don’t think they discouraged any way to identify. But I think they’d always comment, you’re these two races, so whatever you think is best in terms of these two races…. I think they’re both very conscious that I should identify with both. But I don’t think they’d be angry if I checked one box or push me to check both boxes…. I think they think whatever I’m comfortable with is what I should do, so yeah. I feel like they’re supportive in my choices.

In summary, youth felt supported when their parents encouraged them to identify with both cultures or gave them the freedom to choose how to identify.

Intervening Conditions: Parent Characteristics and Family Dynamics

Intervening conditions, or specific situational factors that influenced parent support strategies, that emerged from the analysis included parent characteristics and family dynamics. Parent characteristics, being more stable characteristics such as phenotype, racial–ethnic background, and nativity, affected family dynamics, including family communication, parent understanding of youth, parental racial awareness, and the amount of time youth spent with each parent. These intervening conditions had an impact on parents’ ability to provide support and deployment of support strategies across the three sites. Specifically, the more similar the parents’ characteristics were to the child’s, the more likely they were to be able to relate to and understand the experiences of their child. In addition, spending less time with a parent often meant less communication, which impacted the ability of the parent to serve in a supportive role. The amount of time that youth spent with their parents was largely impacted by having divorced or separated parents but could also occur in families where one parent traveled a lot for work.

Family dynamics influenced whether youth gave parents the opportunity to provide support, because youth who perceived that their parents lacked understanding of their racial/ethnic/cultural experiences felt more disconnected from parents and were less likely to talk to them about their experiences. For instance, when only one culture was emphasized in the family, the Multiracial youth felt disconnected from aspects of their identity. Diego (age 23, Mexican mother, Iranian father) explained that his father’s Iranian heritage was valued more in the family and therefore he was expected to identify with his Iranian side:

Because of my last name, my dad being Iranian, I was often told, you’re primarily Iranian…so in my head, I always thought, like, why isn’t my Mexican side valued if I’m just as Mexican as I am Iranian?….I always felt like that wasn’t fair, and it kind of hurt my feelings a little bit. I thought like, well how come I can’t be Mexican too? So I would often just like, myself, internally, I knew each is very equal. And that I try to stay in touch with both equally.

For Diego, his parents only engaged in support of a monoracial identity by pressuring him to identify with just one group. Ultimately, Diego had to work independently from his parents to embrace his multiraciality. Thus, his feelings of disconnect from his mother’s culture and his Multiracial background made him feel as if his parents did not understand him enough to provide support for the development of his Multiracial identity.

Parent nativity. Parents who immigrated from other countries were less likely to understand the experience of growing up as a racial–ethnic minority in the U.S. context. For example, when asked whether her parents shared any of their experiences of discrimination with her, Amara (age 22, Filipina mother, Chamorro father) said, “No, because they grew up with people who look like them, who talk like them, who eat the same food so, um….no.” In this case, her parents, who grew up in Guam, could not relate to being discriminated against for being minorities in the United States as children due to their different nativity status. This affected their ability to provide her with discrimination support.

Parent phenotype and racial–ethnic background. Racial–ethnic background and phenotype are discussed together here as the examples provided do not distinguish the two. However, it is important to note that racial–ethnic background is not always congruent with phenotype, especially in the case of Multiracial folk, so they may not always overlap (Franco & O’Brien, 2018). This section addresses how Multiracial youth with White parents experienced differences in support coming from their White and racial minority parents, detailing how being White had positive and negative influences on parent support processes. Multiracial youth often discussed how their minority parent(s) who were racially aware were better able to understand their experiences and provide various types of support. For example, when Henry (age 19, French Guianan native mother, White father) told his mother about how a clerk at a gas station asked him to take his hands out of his hoodie, presumably because he viewed him as a “little brown kid stealing,” he noted that his mother “would definitely empathize, she would listen” and “she’d go and tell me her stories too.” He shared,
“I feel like my mom would be the one that would help me with that... more so than my dad, ‘cause I feel like my dad wouldn’t have experience with that type of discrimination.” Thus, parents of color were often perceived by youth as being better equipped to provide discrimination support compared to White parents. However, not all minority parents were racially aware or willing to talk about race and discrimination, as Bernadino (age 19, Vietnamese father, Mexican mother) stated that his Vietnamese father “usually strays away from discrimination talk.”

Participants with parents who were White or White passing (i.e., perceived as White based on presumed stereotypical European features) typically perceived their parents to be less helpful in dealing with discrimination because their White parent did not understand what it was like to be discriminated against based on their race, and they were often less racially aware and less adept at communicating about race. For example, Elizabeth (age 19, White mother, Chinese father) shared, “My mom, she doesn’t understand the racist aspects of life quite as well, because you know, White people don’t experience racism in the same way that other people do.” Because her mom did not understand what it was like to be discriminated against due to her race, Elizabeth noted being frustrated with her, and felt her mother could not provide discrimination support.

Participants who felt that one parent did not understand their discrimination experiences or was less aware of racial issues preferred discussing race with the parent who could relate to them more. Thus, family dynamics are shown in the model to directly impact the quality of support, with quality of support received feeding back into family dynamics. For example, Nicole (age 18, White mother with distant Native American ancestry, Black father) said, “My mom... I feel like she’s never really gone through any discrimination [laughter] really just ‘cause she’s White... but my dad has a lot of different stories about being discriminated against.” She also shared that she will only talk to her mom when her dad’s not home, “I feel like my mom for the most part can’t understand. I feel like my dad is more close to understanding even though he’s not Biracial, he still has that experience. So he can help me through it.”

Awareness of racial issues, such as police brutality, also played a factor, as Nicole shared, “my mom tries to comment about [police brutality]... and then my dad is like, you’ve never experienced anything like this.”

Hero (age 22, White mother, Black father) also described how talking to her Black father, who had experienced racial discrimination, was more helpful than seeking advice from her White mother, who did not try to understand her racial experiences. For example, Hero explained how her White mother tried to convince her that her being bullied had nothing to do with race:

She told me... If you show him that he’s getting under your skin, he’s gonna keep doing it. So what you gotta do is you gotta make it seem like you don’t care. And I tried that, and that didn’t work. So I was like what now mom? And what I should’ve done was come to my father, and say, what do I do about him?... Whenever my mother would give me advice on being bullied, I would always think to myself, Mom you don’t get it.

Thus, parents’ racial experiences affected the parent support strategies they employed, with White parents having more difficulty trying to relate to experiences of racial discrimination.

Amount of time spent with parents also played a role in how parents supported children, in that youth struggled more with finding support for racial experiences their parent could not relate to when parents were divorced. In Hero’s case, she was being raised by her White mother and had little contact with her Black father, making it harder to find support when her mother was unable to help. Thus, Hero’s example demonstrates how the school context presented risks of discrimination for Hero, while her mother’s characteristics of having a White racial-ethnic background and phenotype coupled with not being able to spend as much time with her Black father influenced family dynamics, which affected the support she received.

However, the privileges of whiteness were also used to support youth. For example, Megan (age 21, White mother, Black father) said about her mother, “Although she can’t understand the discrimination, she is the first to come to our rescue if we’re being discriminated racially, which is very helpful in school situations... sometimes my dad sends my mom to talk to school officials.” Megan also noted that she felt supported by her mom trying to increase her racial awareness and understanding of her and her father’s experiences of discrimination,

She also had to take the time to educate herself on, why is it that my dad feels like this, why is it that we feel so passionate. And she gets as heated as we do now, when different racial things happen. Which is cool for me to see because she doesn’t come from that background at all but she’s taken the time to learn what it takes to be a Biracial parent.

Megan noted that this made her feel really good, and she liked her Biracial family dynamic.

In summary, parents having similar racial characteristics as their children and growing up in the U.S. predisposed them to better understanding their child’s experiences and being more racially aware. In particular, White parents were perceived as less understanding, racially aware, and supportive, needing to do more work to educate themselves to know how to help their Multiracial child, but parents who made an effort to overcome differences and educate themselves about race and listen to their children were also able to engage in effective support strategies. Regardless, participants generally expressed appreciating both parents being involved with handling discrimination, even if one parent could not relate to their experience. Knowing that their White parent was making an effort, even if their advice wasn’t very helpful, was perceived as supportive. Furthermore, White parents were also able to use their privilege to help their children navigate discriminatory systems, such as schools, by talking to authority figures on their child’s behalf.

In conclusion, three strategies of parental support were identified: connection support, discrimination support, and
Multiracial identity expression support. Context played an important role, as the monocentric society of the United States set the stage for the experiences Multiracial youth encountered in the predominantly monoracial contexts of the home, school, neighborhood/community, and extended family. The support provided to youth helped them to address risks they experienced as a result of their Multiracial heritage and marginalized status (i.e., mono/racism and racial/ethnic/cultural disconnect). The quality of support youth received was influenced by intervening conditions including the parent’s characteristics (i.e., phenotype, racial–ethnic background, and nativity) and family dynamics (i.e., family communication, parent understanding, parent racial awareness, and amount of time spent with each parent). While risks experienced by youth reduced their sense of belonging and (multi)racial/ethnic/cultural pride, parental support appeared to help counteract these negative experiences by providing a sense of belonging to their racial–ethnic groups while increasing pride. Well-being and positive feelings about their racial–ethnic identity also seemed to be related to receiving parental support in response to risks. Entering college as Multiracial emerging adults, those with more parental support described feeling confident in their identity and better prepared to handle discrimination and questions about their racial–ethnic background.

General Discussion

The present study contributes to the small body of literature addressing processes of parental support occurring in diverse Multiracial families. This study expands upon the existing literature in several ways. First, this study takes a critical approach by applying MultiCrit (Harris, 2016) and constructivist grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2017) to interpret the experiences of youth in the context of the monoracial paradigm. Second, this study includes the experiences of Multiracial youth from diverse backgrounds, building on the body of Multiracial literature which typically focuses on Black and White Biracial youth (Rollins & Hunter, 2013). Third, findings from the study contribute to the literature by informing an understanding of what the phenomenon of parental support looks like in Multiracial families.

Through this study, an operationalized definition of parental support emerged in the context of Multiracial families. Parental support was defined as how parents listen, understand, validate, and accept their child’s experiences and offer informed advice or take action to help youth navigate racial issues and develop their racial–ethnic identity. Finally, the conceptual model is the first to delineate specific types of parental support for Multiracial youth (i.e., connection support, discrimination support, and Multiracial identity expression support) as well as show how these factors relating to context, parent characteristics, family dynamics, and outcomes are interconnected through complex relationships with one another within the larger context of a monocentric society.

The study not only highlighted effective strategies of parental support but also identified patterns regarding how context and parent characteristics presented barriers to providing high-quality support. In general, being embedded in a monocentric society limited parents’ ability to recognize their children as Multiracial, as evidenced by participants’ reports that their parents did not use language such as “Biracial” or “Multiracial” when talking to them about their identity. In addition, Multiracial youth with White parents noted that their White parent was unable to understand their experiences of discrimination. Furthermore, youth who spent less time with one parent typically felt disconnected from that parents’ culture because the parent they lived with did not emphasize their other heritage(s). Thus, Multiracial emerging adults’ reports highlighted the importance of parent understanding and racial awareness as well as how critical it is to establish open communication about race in the family. These findings build on Crawford and Alaggia’s (2008) study, which also featured these themes, by adding context to the necessity of these family qualities. Multiracial emerging adults who perceived their parents as supportive shared that they felt comfortable talking about race with their family, demonstrating that parents had established open communication. These participants also felt their parents understood their experiences or at least tried to, with parents sharing racial minority status with the child perceived as more understanding of their experiences and therefore more supportive in addressing the challenges they were facing.

The study’s findings regarding the significance of parental support of Multiracial experiences have important implications for Multiracial identity development, introducing new depth to our understanding of the role of parents and the nuanced interactions between parents and youth that affect how youth understand their Multiracial identity. This study also adds to the small body of literature addressing parental support of Multiracial experiences, which is significant because Multiracial youth are not likely to have access to the same social support systems as monoracial youth in a monocentric society (Crawford & Alaggia, 2008). Furthermore, the construct of parental support fills a gap in the literature by showing one way parents can still contribute to their child’s Multiracial identity development when they do not have knowledge from their own lived racial experiences in relation to multiraciality. The present study’s findings emphasize the importance of understanding how parents of Multiracial youth provide support throughout their child’s process of Multiracial identity development. By affirming their child’s multiraciality as the child negotiates the development of their racial–ethnic identity in the face of discrimination, support from parents may be able to help youth challenge monocentrism, potentially fostering resilience that helps to mitigate negative outcomes and promote positive development for Multiracial emerging adults.

Limitations and Future Directions

First, this study is an SDA of qualitative data, therefore participants in the original study were not directly asked questions regarding parental support. Additionally, this supplementary
analysis is based on autobiographical reports from a small purposive sample. The findings from this study reflect those familial experiences the emerging adult participants identified as salient to their Multiracial identity development at the time of data collection. We acknowledge the fluidity of Multiracial identity and the fact that personal salience can and does change over time (McAdams, 2008). Although one strength of having emerging adult participants was their ability to articulate and critically interpret their experiences, a limitation was that they were often recalling experiences from the past. Considering the exploratory nature of this study, findings are not meant to be generalizable but rather to provide new knowledge about a relatively unexamined phenomenon within Multiracial families: parental support.

Future studies should use other research methods, such as observation studies and dyad interviews, to validate and build upon the current study’s findings. Future research might also examine the role of intersectional identities (e.g., being LGBTQ and Multiracial) in parental support processes, family dynamics, and Multiracial youth experiences. In addition, future research might examine not only the intersectional identities of youth but the role of unique intersectional identities of both parents and children in their interactions to better understand how other social identities (i.e., gender) affect youths’ perceptions of their parents’ ability to support them. Future samples should attempt to capture the experiences of Multiracial youth and families, including extended family members and siblings, throughout the child developmental period. In particular, longitudinal research is needed which relates experiences of parental support throughout childhood to developmental outcomes of emerging adults.

Implications

Study findings identified three sites of parental support that have important implications for practitioners working with Multiracial families. For instance, practitioners may suggest connection support strategies to parents such as pointing out similarities and praising differences related to child characteristics (e.g., phenotypic, personality); teaching children to be proud of all aspects of their identity while ensuring youth are equally exposed to persons who represent their multiple cultural heritages, and making efforts to learn about and engage in the child’s culture and heritage that the parent does not share (e.g., cooking foods or participating in cultural activities). To improve parents’ ability to provide discrimination support, practitioners might also emphasize educating the family about the monoracial paradigm, including how racial essentialism and “the one-drop rule” operate both externally and internally as risks within Multiracial families who are seen and often perceive themselves as not normal. Another approach might be role-playing with families about how to address monoracism in different environments in a way that does not other their Multiracial children. Considering this study’s finding that being unable to spend equal amounts of time with parents who represent all aspects of youths’ racial heritages may complicate parental support strategies, practitioners working with youth from alternative family structures should make effort to include all potentially influential family members in the therapeutic process.

Regarding Multiracial identity expression support, practitioners may guide parents in how to have proactive age-appropriate discussions with Multiracial children starting at a young age, offering choices for how children can identify while also emphasizing that children are free to identify however they want and change how they identify as often as they choose. It is also helpful for parents to teach children how to fill out their race on forms and respond to people asking about their racial identity. Furthermore, practitioners might work with parents to identify additional resources such as Multiracial counterspaces for families and youth (e.g., groups online or in-person that support one’s Multiracial identity development). Practitioners could utilize narrative therapy strategies to allow the family to reconstruct a Multiracial family identity inclusive of their Multiracial children (see Jackson & Samuels, 2011). For practitioners working with emerging adults in the college context, they might discuss whether their parents engaged in these strategies of support, identify barriers parents might have faced to providing support, and discuss how emerging adults can help their parents understand their needs for support as they continue to explore their Multiracial identity.

In summary, there is a need to build understanding on how families create environments that incorporate multiraciality into the family identity and value multiplicity while being sensitive to the lack of belonging and rejection Multiracial children might feel. It is crucial for the literature on Multiracial youth development to address the roles of parental support, given the complex racial dynamics of Multiracial families and the lack of literature regarding what is perceived as helpful parental support.

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Author Contributions

Annabelle L. Atkin contributed to conception, design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation; drafted the manuscript; critically revised the manuscript; gave final approval; and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy. Kelly F. Jackson contributed to data analysis and interpretation; drafted the manuscript; critically revised the manuscript; gave final approval; and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy.

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Open Practices
Data and materials for this study have not been made publicly available. The design and analysis plans were not preregistered. The raw data (i.e., interview transcripts) is not openly available in order to protect the privacy of the participants in accordance with the protocol approved by the institutional review board. The interview question list and coding manuals for this study are not openly available for download but are available upon request to the corresponding author. The study did not include a pre-registration plan for data collection or analysis.

Note
1. We recognize the following distinctly racialized groups as races: White, Asian, Black, Pacific Islander, American Indian, Latinx, and Middle Eastern/North African (Wang, 2018). In addition, Multiracial is capitalized as a proper noun to recognize Multiracial individuals as a distinct, though not exclusive, group of people who share unique racialized experiences and to directly challenge the limiting monoracial structure of existing racial categories. We also acknowledge that the system of identifying, using, and capitalizing labels of race perpetuate racial essentialism and ultimately white supremacy (Matias et al., 2014; Murphy, 1991).

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