Invoking Culture: Intercultural Young Adults’ Views of Culture and Their Resulting Personal Identities

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Invoking Culture: Intercultural Young Adults’ Views of Culture and Their Resulting Personal Identities

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Abstract

This paper examines the perspectives of thirteen self-identified “intercultural” young adults’ (ages 19-40) and their views of culture related to their lived experiences. I expand research about intercultural individuals by focusing on intercultural individuals rather than their parents. My study is a qualitative one involving thirteen personally conducted interviews, eleven research articles, and a blog and book by intercultural author(s). I have found that intercultural individuals’ views of culture are influenced by personal Turning Points, out of which identity construction can begin. I came to recognize that identity formation is partly a culmination of both parental influence and outsider interaction(s). Outsider interaction(s) become more important with regard to identity formation after an individual’s formative years.

*Keywords*: Culture, Identity-Construction, Intercultural, Parental Influence, Qualitative Research, Yogurt
When I was younger, as a first-generation Chinese-American, members of my extended family repeatedly told me they thought it would be better if I married someone with a similar cultural background. To them, “It’d just be easier to marry someone Chinese.” However, I’ve often felt that growing up in America has had a greater influence on the formation of my personal identity. With the exception of my Chinese ancestry, I’ve always felt just about “as American as they come.” If cultural differences and similarities are important considerations in identity formation, it would be beneficial to understand how intercultural couples approach raising their offspring. Past research has discovered that intercultural couples face unique challenges when negotiating the types of cultural lenses they pass on to their children. Most studies have primarily focused on the child-rearing experiences of these couples; fewer have sought to understand the perceptions of intercultural children raised by these parents.

The goal of this project, therefore, is to explore how intercultural individuals perceive culture, and to discover whether their personal definitions of culture coincide with their actual life experiences. To do so, we must first reexamine our own pre-conceived notions and assumptions of what culture “is.” Most of us think we “have a culture.” For the purposes of this study however, culture is not assumed to be inherent; I instead suggest that culture is created and recreated within the interactions we have with one another. We often believe culture and identity formation work in tandem – if this is true, then one would expect that intercultural individuals would also face unique
challenges when forming personal identity. These considerations form a framework for this study’s guiding research question,

**RQ:** *How do young adults who claim to come from intercultural families invoke (or “use”) culture to make sense of their upbringing and resulting identities?*

This research begins with a review of relevant literature and past studies surrounding parental influence. As I have come to discover, from research participants’ perspectives, parental influence has bearing on an individual’s identity construction, but mostly during a child’s formative years. Identity construction as related to outsider interactions is examined next; these are what participants looked to when articulating their understandings of personal life experiences. By examining different paradigms, we begin to realize that defining culture is a fluid process, with a broad spectrum of viewpoints amongst both individuals and those within the academic disciplines.

My research consisted analyzing and interpreting thirteen semi-structured participant interviews and various intercultural blogs, books, and eleven research articles. Intercultural participants’ stories and narratives proved to be beneficial in understanding and tracing themes of their life experiences. A discussion of future research opportunities surrounding intercultural individuals, and possible avenues for broadening the scope of this emergent field of study is then explored.

**Literature Review**

**Parental Influence(s)**

A great deal of the existing body of literature and surrounding research relates to how parents of intercultural children seek to raise their children in light of cultural difference(s). One certainly cannot discredit the influence(s) all parents seek to have on
their child’s identity formation and their desire(s) to shape the best possible future for their child. When working through their own cultural differences, however, we note that the parents of intercultural individuals face unique and special challenges when seeking to raise their children.

Moriizumi (2011) noted, “Child rearing is an important topic under which married couples negotiate their cultural and relational identities and their boundaries because each parent may have different cultural backgrounds and expectations toward their children” (p. 91). Bustamante’s (2011) research supports the theory that couples believed their differences in childrearing were rooted in cultural practices and that raising children was one stressor that parents perceived (p. 154-164). Romano (2001) also found that many conflicts were due to divergent values and beliefs, educational and disciplinary styles, and forms of parent-child relationships.

The Edwards et al. (2009) study cited Caballero (2005)’s comments, stating “the language used to talk about and categorically record people from mixed backgrounds is also subject to ideological and political debate” (p. 950). In other words, there are an abundance of terms used to describe individuals from mixed cultural backgrounds. Edwards et al. (2009) utilized the term “mixedness” in referring to people from mixed backgrounds, and their research recognized that this concept of “mixedness” is not the only factor that can directly influence parenting. Conversely, they understood instead that family history, class status, and minority or majority status could also affect a child’s perceptions of the family unit as a whole (Edwards et al., 2009, p. 963-964). While they were the first to recognize how culture can directly influence children, their focus still lay within the larger family system itself. They did not focus on the individual experiences of
the child in terms of reaching an understanding of cultural difference and belonging. This study seeks extend the existing body of literature in discovering if and how the identity formation of intercultural individuals is linked with parental influence, drawing directly from the perspectives of intercultural individuals. Furthermore, discovering which additional factors have links to identity formation outside of the immediate familial unit will also prove interesting. As this is a qualitative study, it will not only utilize themes created from past research, but also emergent themes seen within the narratives of intercultural individuals themselves.

In sum, because culture is defined differently based on multiple contributing factors, we must be sensitive to an individual’s perception of his or her own personal culture. Edwards et al. (2009) suggest that some of these factors involve “...an interplay of issues including individual biography and family history, residential and class location, minority or majority status, and person or cultural beliefs” (p. 964). By allowing individuals to both self-identify and self-define, it allows us not to superimpose or project our own definitions of culture onto an individual’s personal experiences. It further gives intercultural individuals the choice to self-select what they view as most relevant to their own life experiences and subsequent identity construction.

Identity

Across many academic and research disciplines, identity formation has been studied in a number of ways. In reaching a clearer understanding of identity and its numerous facets, we turn to a Communication approach, drawing from Tracy et al.’s (2013) work, *Everyday Talk: Building and Reflecting Identities*. The three types of identity they describe are master identities, interactional identities, and personal
identities. It is important to outline them briefly here in reaching an understanding of the many competing and complementary demands all individuals, regardless of cultural background, face when making sense of the world around them.

Tracy et al. (2013) define master identities as “…aspects of personhood that are presumed to be relatively stable and unchanging: gender, ethnicity, age, national and relational origins” (p. 21). Master identities are significant because they have the greatest bearing on ways individuals view themselves and the ways in which outsiders also view them. Interactional identities are related to “…roles that people take on in a communicative context with regard to specific other people” (p. 22) and are both context specific and situational-based. They allow one to assume different roles (student, volunteer, son, etcetera.) These are tied most closely to final type of identity identified by Tracy et al. (2013): personal identities, or “…the ‘personality’ aspects of self” (p. 22). With this framework, we come to understand that identity creation takes place in the context of aspects of identity that seem stable (master identities), our roles within situations and contexts (interactional identities) and our personalities (personal identities).

Jackson et al. (2013) extend our understandings of the construction of identity and suggests adding cultural identity, or “…a reflection of how your social and cultural groups influence your thoughts and behaviors” (p. 127). Identity is not created in isolation; its formation is the process of interacting with others, recreating and discovering identities on a situational basis. Yep (2013) notes that due to globalization, “…people’s lives and local communities are increasingly influenced by economic, technological, and cultural forces that operate worldwide” (p. 164). For the purposes of this study, recognizing the impact that cultural forces have on individuals’ identity is
significant. It allows an understanding that when cultures “come together,” new and emergent identity/identities can be formed.

One’s own cultural membership(s) also offer unique resources for and place constraints on the building of identity formation. Put another way, sometimes, who we “appear to be” will let us to participate with certain cultures more fully, and/or either allow or limit what we are able to do. As a Chinese-American, for instance, I will always first be regarded as Asian, no matter how hard I try to appear European. My race places constraints on who I am and what I will be initially perceived as. Nonetheless, one cannot overlook the ways in which globalization has increased the number of those we can come into contact with, and thereby those who can influence and shape us.

Is Defining “Culture” Even Possible?

_Culture_ is a word fraught with an abundance of meanings. Individuals are reminded at various times about their familial “culture,” workplace “culture,” or even perhaps, the “other culture” of a foreign country that they may be visiting. One typically thinks they “have a culture,” rather than adapting to a certain culture and its unique characteristics. The words “culture clash” and “culture shock” are common phrases in our Western, Americanized vocabulary. Yogurt itself is a multiplicity of “cultures,” albeit ones that many outside the scientific paradigm do not acknowledge as important.¹

Kroeber & Kluckohn’s (1963) book, _Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions_, cited one hundred sixty four definitions of culture (p. 291). It is because of these numerous ways of perceiving culture that understanding the many facets of what

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constitutes “culture” can be difficult. To isolate only one aspect of culture as most important can make an individual feel almost as if they are forsaking other parts of their “true identity.” For instance, although I personally self-identify as Chinese-American, there are certain times when my understandings of what it means to “be Chinese” are able to be fully realized. This summer, when I visited China on a business trip, I recall a time our tour guide told me, “I know you’re American, but you strike me as truly Chinese at heart. That’s a good thing. Never lose that.” For my tour guide in particular, the fact that I was “American” was overshadowed by what he believed to be my Chinese culture and heritage residing within me. I, however, did not feel that only being “truly Chinese at heart” told the whole story, but simply a part of my larger story.

These viewpoints all work with a dominant assumption about culture: they treat it as an object, or something an individual has or will inherently “have” within them from birth. Agar (1994) refers to an individual that thinks in this way as an “Intercultural Practitioner,” or “ICP.” For him, “culture is something the ICP creates, a story he or she tells, one that highlights and explains the differences to both sides – the one that created the problem in the first place” (p. 227). In changing the understandings of the way we traditionally view or understand culture, it is more important to recognize that cultural practices are actually seen in the things that we do or participate in doing. We continually switch between different cultural lenses at any given time; becoming completely unbiased to culture is impossible, because culture provides to us frameworks by which we see and act upon the world. Hecht et al. (2005) understood the importance of culture and how it directly shapes how we see the world, how we behave, and who we are (p. 21-42). In addition, Agar implies that the choice to interpret some things in the world as
“cultural” itself is a type of action. We ourselves create the cultures we wish to participate in. Creating a culture allows an individual to cast some aspects of his or her identity as “cultural.” The ways in which my research participants label and negotiate aspects of their identities as “cultural” or “intercultural” is my main research focus.

When I first developed this study, in order to provide myself a basic orientation out of which to work, I decided to use the term *intercultural*. To me, *intercultural* can be used to describe the intersection of two or more cultural worlds coming into contact with one another, such that the exchange of ideas, language, customs, or traditions takes place. This allows me as the researcher not to assume any particular frame of cultural reference, and instead, aligns us in uncovering what individuals view as particularly salient surrounding their personal life experiences. Thus, my study was designed to give each participant opportunities to highlight their own interpretations of culture and cultural lenses they use to orient and ground themselves; this adds research value by offering insights into how they create and attune to culture personally. With our guiding frameworks now in place, we can now cover the method by which this study was conducted.

**Methods**

Tracy (2013) identifies a common research method known as snowball sampling, characterized by “…identifying several participants who fit the study’s criteria and then asking these people to suggest a colleague, a friend, or a family member who also fits the study’s criteria” (p. 136). I selected snowball-sampling methods, as many of my research subjects I knew personally. I believed they would be a good fit because we had talked previously about our cultural experiences before the project had started; other subjects
were acquaintances I met through mutual connections. Regardless of my prior relationship with any individual, I sent each potential interviewee a recruitment email, consisting of a study overview and a consent form. Once they consented, we set up a convenient time (in a setting of their choice) to conduct the approximately 40 minute long interviews. Each participant was informed that they would be part of a research study should they choose to participate, and also, that they would have the freedom to leave the study at any point during or even after the interviews were conducted.

Thirteen participant interviews with individuals from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds and upbringings were conducted\(^2\); seven participants were female and six were male. I also decided to use individual interviews instead of focus groups. Focus groups were considered as one possible data source at the beginning of this study, as they would have provided intercultural individuals a chance to discuss if there were any shared or similar experiences and, in the process, provide important insight into how they view various aspects of their identities as (inter)cultural. However, individual interviews were selected in favor of focus groups, as I personally believed this would allow each individual to take time to relate his or her personal experience(s) without fear of peer judgment and also, simultaneously avoid groupthink. Furthermore, Smithson (2000) notes “moderator bias” can be one challenge to conducting focus groups. She suggests “[Ensuring] the moderator is from a similar background to the participants” and “Having a moderator from the same cultural background…may have facilitated the discussion in putting participants at their ease” (p. 110). Because interviews with different participants from various cultures and backgrounds would be conducted, in

\(^2\) IRB #13-0706, Approved February 4, 2014.
order to bracket moderator bias, I decided to utilize individual interviews as my primary research method. I also discovered establishing rapport with each of the participants based on his or her personal needs was easy. Each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed word-for-word, and examined carefully to trace important themes.

Additionally, I also intentionally chose to make my interviews unstructured. According to Tracy (2013), within an unstructured interview “The interviewer enters the conversation with flexible questions and probes, or maybe even just a list of bullet points” (p. 139). While some researchers might benefit from having a more structured interview, I found that by using an unstructured interview, I was able to ask better follow-up questions. These questions led to the direct discovery of new and significant details.

Nagata (2004) definition of self-reflexivity incorporates “…having an ongoing conversation with one’s whole self about what one is experiencing as one is experiencing it…It is an advanced form of self-knowledge crucial for interculturalists” (p. 141). I attempted to gain a better understanding of strategies used to bracket personal biases, which might have influenced my interpretations of what interviewees said and the resulting data. Pillow (2010) further extends a definition of self-reflexivity to include “Reflexivity as [a] recognition of the other” (p. 184). Citing Trinh (1991), she states, “One validated strategy to approach this [problem] has been to ‘make evident how this Other has participated in the making of his/her own image’ (p. 184). In utilizing self-reflexivity at a tool, I did not take for granted the meaning(s) of “culture” to my research participants. Tracy (2013), citing Kvale (1996) noted the importance of deliberate naïveté, which “…asks interviewers to drop any presuppositions and judgment while maintaining openness to new and unexpected findings” (p. 142). Thus, I examined how
participants personally defined “culture” and which aspects of “culture” they highlighted as important and/or excluded. Each interview began by asking each participant to define what culture meant to them personally – in this way, one “cover-all” definition of culture was avoided and helped guide the discussion led by an individual’s own definition(s).

Lastly, each participant’s definition was not taken at face value, but instead, examined to discover how these definitions directly mapped out into their life experiences.

Qualitative research often brings into play the researcher’s existing experiences and identities. In remaining self-reflexive when writing this thesis, I reflected on my own cultural background and experiences as a Chinese-born-American. I first considered my extended family’s belief of the importance of cultural similarity and difference. I then turned to my dreams of having a family of my own one day, and how I personally hoped to help my own children come to their own understanding of cultural difference as important and valuable. I’ve always held a desire to teach others to avoid cultural naivety, instead learning how the benefits that numerous viewpoints and perspectives have to offer. Discovering what parents of intercultural individuals did to cultivate (or push-back against) their respective cultures I believed would be thought provoking, to see if there might be any strategies I could apply for my future.

When conducting interviews, I informed each participant that I would do my best to maintain confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms and avoiding personal identifiers. I also attempted to avoid what Tracy (2013) citing Sales et al. (2000) calls deductive disclosure, or “…the indirect identification of respondents through the use and piecing together of known data” (p. 91). An interview guide used within this qualitative study is included in the Appendix.
Themes were generated on the basis of repetition. A theme was given special attention if the participant repeated something or echoed similar sentiments to another individual. This was based on Ryan et al.’s (2003) work. Some “scrutiny techniques” or “things to look for” when performing a thematic analysis include looking for repetitions and similarities / differences (p. 88-89, 91). Repetition is simply seeing which topics “occur and reoccur” (p. 89), while similarities / differences explore repetition or disparities within collected data. Also, Tracy (2013)’s iterative analysis is “a method of data analysis that alternates between emic, or emergent, readings of the data and an etic use of existing models, explanations, and theories” (p. 184).

Field research was supplemented by the use of outsider sources, as suggested by Bowen (2009)’s article on document analysis. Citing Denzin (1970), he notes that triangulation, or “the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon” (p. 28) helps bolster a research study because according to Patton (1990) “…it helps the researcher guard against the accusation that the study’s findings are simply the artifact of a single method, a single source, or a single investigator’s bias” (p. 28). These secondary sources included books, blogs, and readings by or about individuals who identified as intercultural. A thorough analysis was then conducted on both the thirteen transcripts and secondary sources, to see how and if they related to one another. This yielded some important insights with regard to the ways in which individuals’ personal definitions of culture map onto one’s own personal sense of self-identity.

Analysis

Primary analysis was based on the coding of interview transcripts. Codes were derived both from a review of pertinent literature, as well as the study’s overall research question
and theoretical orientation. Other codes emerged from within the participants’ stories and
narratives themselves. Secondly, online blogs and books in which individuals shared
narratives about personal bi-ethnic or bicultural experiences were analyzed using the
same codes to discover if the experiences of other outside-of-the-study intercultural
individuals also reinforced these claims. Once these codes were generated, this allowed
for a direct comparison and contrast of broad themes across both personal, interview-
grounded research and multiple, other data sources. Three relevant large-scale themes
revealed individuals’ cultural thinking: Culture as Mapped onto Life Experiences,
Identity Construction, and Insider-Outsider perceptions. A sub-theme within “Culture as
Mapped onto Life Experiences” includes Turning Point(s). “Identity Construction” sub-
themes included Parental Influence(s), Whiteness, and Advantage/Disadvantage, while a
sub-theme within “Insider-Outsider Perceptions” highlighted a Need to Categorize.

Prior to reporting my findings I should note a fascinating and unexpected
observation. Not a single individual in this study used the term “intercultural” when
referring to themselves, but agreed fully when I asked them if they identified with the
meaning of intercultural as laid out at the beginning of this project. As we recall, our
personal understanding of the word intercultural was defined as the intersection of two or
more cultural worlds coming into contact with one another in the experience of the
individual, such that the exchange of ideas, language, customs, or traditions takes place.
Each participant noted (either in the interview or prior to it) that they personally
identified as coming from multiple cultures. It would seem that the term “multicultural”
proved to be more familiar to them. In fact, when talking to my friends about my thesis,
many seemed confused by the term intercultural, and many had never heard it before.
This calls into question the claim Levey (2012) made, stating “The terms ‘interculturalism’ and ‘multiculturalism’ have occupied the same discursive space for a few decades now” (p. 217). If the terms “multicultural” and “intercultural” occupy the same discursive space, it would be important to discover which discursive “spaces” these are – scholarly spaces, or spaces in which everyday talk occurs? This finding perhaps relates to the struggles intercultural individuals have in describing themselves and their life experiences, and suggests that something needs to be done in exploring why and if these struggles could be circumvented with new understandings of who they “are.” It also relates to creation personal identity, as will be discussed later.

**Culture as Mapped Onto Life Experiences**

“I think a lot of my opinions or the way I empathize with people directly relates to my culture…” – N.J. (3/20/2014), a half-Catholic, half-Jewish participant.

Culture provides an individual a personalized and unique framework by which they can form interpretations of the world, and thereby act in and upon it. Because each and every individual attunes to different aspects of culture, during the interviews, individuals were first asked to “self-define” culture and what it meant to them personally. I told my interviewees that I did not want to give them a “cover-all” definition of culture, because culture was defined differently for each person. This was alluded to by Kroeber and Kluckohn (1963), who stated,

“The common understandings between men of different cultures are very broad, very general, very easily obscured by language and many other
observable symbols. True universals or near universals are apparently few in number” (p. 352-353)

Despite being made over fifty years ago, this claim still holds relevance today; even amongst the thirteen intercultural individuals used for this study, vastly different definitions of culture were highlighted. For instance, for some individuals, culture was tied directly to the overall functioning of the family unit, (both immediate and extended) which may suggest parental influence as significant for these individuals in particular:

“For me it seems culture…it’s…family…relations. But, it’s not just your family. So it’s the relation of your family to the family of each of your parents’ siblings. So, in my case, my culture is very different when me, my mom, my dad, and my sister are at my Uncle Jason’s house, who is, um…a brother to my [Hispanic] dad. So on my dad’s side of the family, it’s very very different than if we’re going to someone on my mom’s side of the family. The reason behind this I think is because the two sides of the family are actually very very different…in their understandings of the way the world works, so to speak?” – A.H.O. (4/11/2014)

For other individuals, however, culture was linked to traditions, and an individual identifying as half-Taiwanese, half-American remarked,

“Culture for me, is…the multiethnic traditions, beliefs, well, traditions that one upholds. So, to me, it is – culture encompasses, like I said, traditions, beliefs of that culture, upbringing, passing down certain things.”

– M.W.M. (7/13/2014)

Definitions of culture were also tied to language:
“I guess for me, culture is a lot like, language is a big part of it. I think the language you grow up speaking and for me, specifically since I’m Spanish there’s like, a demarcation from other Latin American cultures too, there’s like accent, and you know, and patterns of speech and all that stuff.” – A.M.G. (3/15/2014) 

and also, ethnicity:

“I guess culture to me would be…personally, I think it would be growing up with different ethnicity than what it is norm, so, in this case, it would be, a white person—a white family, so for me I’m half white, half Korean. So I would see diversity and culture especially—I would identify that as your ethnic background.” – A.A.K. (4/1/2014)

Thus, because significant differences amongst participants’ “definitions of culture” were noticed, a universal “common understanding of culture” was not assumed. Rather, participants highlighted elements of their experience they perceived to be cultural and personally important to them. This led to the emergence of stories and themes, which were then examined to see whether or not an individual’s personal definition of culture jived with their actual, lived experiences.

For an intercultural individual, learning to cultivate an understanding of dual culturalism and how it plays out in their everyday life can prove to be a unique challenge, especially since their perceived cultural identities are so intertwined within their whole-person identity. Based on the research I conducted, I suggest that one primary way intercultural individuals negotiate these dual cultural identities is through personal Turning Points. The sub-theme of Turning Points relates to a moment or series of
moments an intercultural individual had that ultimately led to recognition of their intercultural identity/identities as compatible and integrated. Turning Points allow these individuals to come to a greater understanding of who they themselves “are” in light of their own definitions of culture.

**Turning Points**

Almost all participants within this study had reached an operating understanding of how culture was meaningful to them personally. They recognized not only an active intercultural awareness within themselves, but also how each of their perceived cultures played out within their everyday lives. They routinely shared moments when they had first begun to recognize culture as something important to them. However, as it turns out, these were never moments of conscious self-reflection, but rather ones that seemingly occurred “by accident.” For instance, one participant related the following story:

“So when I was little, I was actually teased for being Chinese— for being half-Chinese, because most of my class was white, this is fifth grade [or] sixth grade, and so I was very – I was not comfortable with my cultural upbringing, ’cause I would go to Chinese New Year Celebrations and nobody understood that and I would be made fun of. *laughs*

Unfortunately. But I – there was a time when I actually learned to write my last name in Chinese, and starting writing it on everybody’s hand and everybody loved it and from then on nobody ever made fun of me again. That whole last name thing was a huge piece for me, ’cause I was like, “Oh this is cool, look at me, I can write one Chinese character and people love it.” – N.F.C. (4/10/2014)
For NFC (4/10/2014), her Turning Point became the first time she recognized her two cultures intersecting with one another. While initially she found her intercultural upbringing as a source of embarrassment, it soon became something she proudly embraced. This accidental Turning Point moment actually prompted her to take further action, as illustrated by a story she relates later in the interview,

“It was actually high school when I was told I needed to take a language and I was presented with the general options, Spanish, French, German, Chinese. But it was a pilot program for the Chinese – I would be the first class to ever do that. And it was kinda a deciding factor, “Do I want to continue with French, (which I had studied) in middle school, or do I wanna completely switch and try this Chinese thing?” And I had a moment when I was talking to my grandma on the phone, or trying to, and she wasn’t speaking English and it was very hard to communicate my point. And I decided, “I’m gonna take Chinese”, just so I can talk to her. So I think that was kinda the point where I – it put me on the path of like, you know, really fully acknowledging my Chinese culture and then trying to submerse myself in it as much as I possibly could without actually being in China.”

No individuals within this study related times about trying to sort through their cultural identity as a conscious choice; coming to terms with their intercultural identity was always rooted in an external factor that influenced their perception(s).

“I was eight or nine, and it was really I had really ever experienced “indirect racism.” We were out at Mesa Verde and walking around, it was
hot, obviously we all [had] drunken GALLONS of water. And we all had to use the restroom. So we were all using the “little blue houses” and we’re going into them, and the one that I went into, I wasn’t really paying attention, ‘cause I had to use the bathroom. So as I was finishing up, I was looking around, and all of the graffiti on the inside of this little plastic “house” was…very hateful towards Hispanics. It was things like, “Why are you here other than to mow my lawn?” Uh… “The only good thing you’ve ever brought is cheap work and Mexican food.” And, it was very very hurtful to me, because I saw that, and [thought], “They’re talking about my dad…my dad’s side of the family, my grandma, my grandpa.” And that was one of the first times I was like, “Holy crap…that’s not cool.” And that is when I think culture started becoming really really important…because I started paying attention to what I said, and what other people said…” – A.H.O. (4/11/2014)

Benet-Martinez (2002) remarked, “Little is known about how biculturals manage and negotiate their dual cultural identities” (p. 494). For these authors, a bicultural individual was one who had an experience involving two distinct and different cultural worlds (e.g. an immigrant from Germany moving to the United States for the first time.) Similarly, intercultural individuals experience a merging of two distinct cultural “worlds” within themselves; learning how to best navigate these differences is truly important. From these stories, I suggest that seemingly “accidental” Turning Points will start an intercultural individual down a path of figuring out who they themselves “are,” but it is only the first step in relation to
identity construction. To truly feel as if they are able to construct a holistic identity, an intercultural individual must go beyond this “accidental turning point framework,” and instead, look to the influence(s) of those around them.

Identity Construction

The overarching broad theme of identity construction relates to the factors that lead to an individual’s personal sense of self-identity. Various factors (and sub-themes) which emerged within this study relating to identity construction included Parental Influence(s), Whiteness, and Advantage/Disadvantage.

Parental Influence(s)

The research for this project began with an underlying assumption that parental influences (as linked to upbringing) would have the greatest significance regarding how intercultural individuals perceived themselves. The research provides strong evidence to suggest that this is in fact the case, but especially during an individual’s formative years. The ways in which intercultural parents either embraced or rejected their respective cultures had substantial influence on a particular individual’s personal understanding(s) of themselves and their view(s) of culture.

Rybas (2013) had noted in a previous study that one significant challenge for intercultural parents is not wanting to be “put on display” or appear different to outsiders in a way such that these outsiders would question their parenting choices, cultural identity, or other factors (p. 7). This is supported by numerous stories participants related about one parent (usually the one from the non-dominant culture), shying away from their respective culture. For instance, a participant of half-Mexican, half-American descent, noted,
“…my dad also isn’t that gung-ho about like the whole cultural thing… when we were growing up, my dad… he didn’t teach us Spanish, which he totally could’ve, ‘cause he’s fluent. *laughs* But he just didn’t speak it in the house so we didn’t learn it and like, discussing things with my mom…he kinda abandoned his culture a little bit. Not especially because of her [though.] I think it’s just—he doesn’t like the connotations that come with his culture? He doesn’t like being tan, and he didn’t want to teach us Spanish. He kinda pushed against his culture um, so I think that’s also why the influence on me and my other siblings isn’t that strong, with the Mexican side of us. But yeah, he definitely pushed back.” – A.D. (3/2/2014)

Similarly, an individual who identifies as “half-Irish, half-Sri Lankan,” commented, after I asked, “Do you feel that culture forms a defining part of your identity?”

“Not really. No, like, my parents just raised me like anyone else here; they didn’t bring culture into our family or anything. They kinda just adapted to American culture.” – R.A.K. (7/11/2014)

Similarly, a participant who views herself as half-Uruguayan, half-American, stated,

“…my mom is really savvy with this— she sort of blends in. I think she kinda wanted to really fit into the culture that she’s living in. And we always spoke English for the most part. Although—I dunno…every now and then my mom— I mean, we – I definitely knew a lot of Spanish growing up so I guess she occasionally would speak to us in Spanish when we were younger. But…my dad doesn’t know Spanish at all really, so it
was for his sake that – I’ve actually told her a few times that I wish she had really forced me to learn Spanish at a younger age.” – C.L.O.

(4/18/2014)

These stories support Rybas (2013)’s findings of intercultural parents desire and active avoidance of being “put on display” (p. 7). The strategies above share a common thread in that the parent of the non-dominant culture frequently sought to adapt their cultural background to that of the dominant culture in which both parents lived. In our research, the dominant culture was the Westernized, American culture. Furthermore, if either one or both parents tended to avoid or “shy away from” their respective cultures, the resulting intercultural individual did not come to understand other cultures as important, and instead, generally sought to embrace the dominant culture as well.

As we recall from the beginning of this study, my extended family believed that “it’d just be easier” if I married someone from the same cultural background. However, my research findings also indicated that if both parents tried to incorporate interculturalism within their family structure, their child frequently emerged with a greater understanding and awareness of how to embrace different cultures. These individuals recognized that benefits of being raised intercultural led to new perspectives – a juxtaposition of two worlds that might not otherwise come into contact with one another.

“I think that’s one of the best benefits of having parents from two different cultures, is that yeah, I mean, you immediately – I hope that you immediately to look at other people’s cultures.” – A.C.P (7/31/2014)

Similarly, a participant of both Taiwanese and European heritage, comments:
“…being biracial, or having a multi-ethnic background – I love just engaging different cultures. I think a lot of people that are just strictly one “race”, are more apt to be comfortable where they are and just go with the flow like the lazy river. But me, I wanna engage and understand all different cultures around me. So, yes, “Do I enjoy the Americas? Yes. Beautiful. Awesome.” But I also love going to the Asian market.” – M.W.M (7/13/2014)

Some individuals even created a third, hybridized culture, taking the best elements of each culture and adopting them as their own. Such was the case for an individual of both Korean and American parents, who remarked:

“Because I have the influence of my mother’s Asian culture and I also have influence from the American culture, I feel like, in a way, it’s helped me develop my own sort of culture, if that makes sense? So in a way, I feel my cultural identity is just construed by me. I construct it. I reinforce it, and people can learn off of that. Or [even] identify with that as well.”

– A.A.K (4/1/2014)

Another participant noted,

“…‘cause I’m half Filipino and half white, I kinda have this “dual-cultural identity” that I can kinda switch between when I want and depending on the context. So, I’m gonna choose to be, I’m just gonna “roll with the white” or whatever, and for this [interview], I was like, “I’m somewhat ethnic, so I’m gonna go with my Filipino cultural identity. So it definitely has some form—or some cultural form on my life.” – A.R.D (4/23/2014)
One cannot discredit the influence parents have in shaping their child’s personal identity in a child’s formative years. It is evident that parental influence has significance regarding how an intercultural individual perceives culture (and also, themselves) in their formative years. For many participants, having an intercultural background proved to be advantageous because they felt it 1) added to their own self-awareness 2) affected how they interacted or understood others, and 3) led to a desire to relate and understand others’ perspectives, even if they didn’t agree entirely. It was by not being “fully” a part of one particular culture that some intercultural individuals learned to resonate with another culture.

Interestingly enough, participants did not interpret parental influence or upbringing as the most crucial part of personal identity formation, despite sharing numerous stories about their parents. When relating stories about themselves in the present, intercultural individuals would often look to how outsiders treated them in deciding which current identities to uphold. The two remaining sub-themes within the category of identity construction, “whiteness” and “advantage-disadvantage”, related to these external, outsider-influenced factors. The sub-theme of “whiteness” relates to, despite intercultural parents avoidance to “be put on display”, the older their child becomes, how what their child “appears to be” or looks like to outsiders will pose its own unique set of challenges.

**Whiteness**

Concepts of “whiteness” as explored by Yep (2013), noted that “whiteness is a complex, elusive, and slippery concept” (p. 177) and that one way to understand whiteness is “whiteness as invisible and unmarked” (p. 177). This view was especially
supported by the data gathered, in which participants who appeared externally “white” commented on how this provided and afforded them opportunities to “blend in” or “fit in” with the Westernized, American culture in which they were presently living. For instance, an interfaith participant of Jewish and Catholic background commented,

“…despite the fact that I’m second generation American, there’s a lot of races and ethnicities that are questioned on their status in this country just because they look like they could be from somewhere else, even though they’re fourth, fifth generation. So that’s something that struck me, no one would ever ask me, “Where are your papers?” or “Which country are you from?” because I’m white…I look like I “Belong here.” – N.J. (3/20/2014)

Similarly, a half-Hispanic, half-American, noted,

“I’m a unique case in my entire family, in that I’m not Hispanic colored – I don’t look brown. I am a “white Hispanic”, so I look much like “the norm” and because of that, I find myself not having to adjust the way I act when I deal with different groups of people.” – A.H.O (4/11/2014)

In relation to Yep’s (2013) understanding of “whiteness as invisible and unmarked”, I observed that certain intercultural individuals had the unique experience of being able to pick and choose between two distinct cultures, based on external appearance. This involves a different type of phenomenon all together, which I now refer to as “whiteness as chameleon-ism.” This self-selection for a particular group or preferred identity is directly related to “outside factors”, namely, an individual’s external appearance.

For instance, one participant, an individual of half-Korean, half-American descent stated:
“I guess because I don’t look as Asian, I identify more with American-folk…American people, my American friends…” – M.L.G. (3/26/2014)

Similarly, an individual of half-Spanish, half-American decent, affirmed:

“…’cause I don’t look like—I’m white, you know, so I don’t look Hispanic. So I can kind of pick and choose when I want to be and when I don’t want to be.” – A.M.G. (3/15/2014)

Therefore, for individuals who were fortunate enough to be able to “blend into” the surrounding dominant culture(s) in which they were living, choosing and self-selecting their preferred personal identity was advantageous in different circumstances. It led to little to no scrutiny or immediate, first-impression judgments unless the intercultural individual themselves chose to highlight any non-apparent aspects of their personal identity. For instance, a participant recalls later in her interview:

“It was kinda in elementary school I would always be like, ‘Oh yeah, I’m half Korean, I was born in Naples, Italy and I’ve got natural auburn hair.’ It was great saying that—I think it was most prevalent in middle school though, because you start choosing your peer groups and so a lot of my friends that were Asian were like, ‘Oh, M.L.G…you’re half Korean…you can hang out with us.” – M.L.G. (3/26/2014)

“Whiteness as chameleon-ism,” implied inYep (2013)’s “whiteness as invisible and unmarked” (p. 177), is significant because it is both a direct and indirect identity construction method. Intercultural individuals that are “lucky” to be afforded this opportunity are able to choose to highlight aspects of themselves they view as most important and/or prove most fitting to the situations/circumstances. Despite the many
identity challenges intercultural individuals may feel internally to behave a certain way, those that could “pick and choose” seemed to be able to comfortably acclimate to their cultural environment easier than those that did not have that option. In the words of one individual:

“[In South Dakota], there’s not a lot of pick and choose from other cultures, it’s very much ONE thing. And definitely when you come from – and this is the other thing that’s really weird, it didn’t really bother me, because I look like a lot of my cousins from there, you know, blonde or brown haired. But when my sister was there it’d be so different, because she’d be there amongst a sea of white cousins and stuff like that and she’d just stick out so much and it always made me – it was always just weird to me, and they never treated her like an outsider or anything, but it was almost like an unspoken thing. And it was noticeable. And it was noticeable at a young age, and obviously you know, at that point, that’s all you go off of, your image, you don’t go off of “Oh, there’s a lot of different workings to this, you go off of, and “This REALLY stands out.”

– A.C.P. (7/31/2014)

Another participant made similar observations with regard to his own sister and father, stating,

“…this is a more recurring theme, however, because the entirety of my family, with the exception of my sister when she’s been outside a lot, and my dad, on a good day, we look white. Most of us look white. And then my dad doesn’t, and my sister doesn’t (when she’s really tan) she’s lucky
and got those genes, (she never burns, ever) but we would be—we’d be going places, and again, one of the first times I noticed this, but it has become a recurring theme lately, is profiling. It’s a HUGE problem.


The findings above from my own research participants proved beneficial in understanding the experiences many of my own immediate peers who identify intercultural face. However, I was curious to determine if others of mixed heritage outside of my immediate research group also supported these phenomena. In doing some online queries, I came across a student group at San Francisco State University called Variations, who claim to be “San Francisco State University’s only student organization that is dedicated to mixed heritage.” In a blog post written in April 2013, Variations writes,

“Assimilation & “Passing” versus “Accepting Mixed Heritage” often occurs when a mixed person’s phenotype, or observable characteristics, cause them to appear mono-racial. Mixed people often use this as an advantage to blend in, especially when one only appears to be Caucasian. “Incognegro” and other such terms used to describe people who pass as white, although they are half black, sometimes voluntarily and sometimes not…”

I found it fascinating that this quote not only related to Yep (2013)’s notions of “whiteness as invisible and unmarked” (p. 177), but also, supported my observations on chameleon-ism. It was also noteworthy that while this topic has been discussed within mainstream media and societies, little research within academic disciplines
has actually explored or researched these phenomena. Furthermore, the “advantage to blend in”, formed a direct link back and creates a natural segue into our final sub-theme within Identity Construction: Advantage/Disadvantage.

**Advantage/Disadvantage**

Yep (2013) also theorized that “whiteness [exists] as structural privilege” (p. 177) This was supported for many of the intercultural individuals in this study; there was generally a direct link between their “white appearance” and how they saw others interact with them. This held true even if the individual themselves recognized a secondary cultural identity that might not have been apparent from the initial onset of an interaction. A half-Hispanic, half-American noted,

“I would say, in 90% of what I do [appearing white] is neither an advantage nor a disadvantage. However, when it comes to that last 10%, I would say…that it’s an advantage. Because when I go into interviews, and I go in to speak with individuals, they will treat me as an equal, or a superior in a lot of cases. And so when I go in and say I’m going to an interview with an individual in my hometown, where a lot of the population is Hispanic, I will show up for interview, I will be dressed nicely, and I will look white. And because of that, when I walk into the interview, they immediately think “educated, has money, has power, and has influence.” And because of that, I get treated very very differently, until the end of the interview, when they’re like, “Thank you Mr. [Hispanic Last Name.]” And I leave, and I can kinda feel the…”Is he Hispanic?” after I’m leaving. And the other 2% of the time it’s a
disadvantage in a lot of the jobs that I’ve worked—I’ve been dealing very closely with Hispanic people, and 90% of them—I’d actually go higher—98% of them have literally years more experience than I do in what-all jobs we’re doing. And they won’t share that experience with me because I look like a superior. And I don’t enjoy that at all—and its something that I try to get over constantly. It’s one of the first things that I usually say when I introduce myself. “Hi, I’m the new guy. What do I need to know right now to keep things from going wrong the rest of the day? I don’t know everything.” – A.H.O. (4/11/2014)

A.H.O.’s quote suggests that one’s ethnic appearance can lend itself to interactional advantages/disadvantages based on the situation. This was supported for another interviewee, who observing the emergence of “whiteness as structural privilege” on her recent trip overseas, where found:

“…when I was in Nepal and India, they have kind of—they assume that Westerners know better…which is, I dunno, I was kinda surprised by that. I mean, I wouldn’t have – if people hadn’t told me themselves, like, I wouldn’t have really believed it. But they assume that we have – we know about the world. I mean, I started teaching a class, when I was there, without having to show any of my credentials or anything like that. They just kinda assumed that I’d be able to do it. So it was helpful for doing research, for sure, I found. It made me wonder about people that went other places – I almost did a program in Jordan, I feel like it would have been a lot more difficult. But yeah, there was a lot of respect there, also in
Nepal and India um, I mean, there’s whole historical context for this and everything, but people that are lighter skinned, are considered a higher class. So that’s why there are all these skin whitening creams and things like that, so…it was really different there.” – C.L.O. (4/18/2014)

In an interesting flip on “whiteness as structural privilege” (Yep, 2013, p. 177), one participant noted that his Hispanic father believed the present time (in a Westernized, American society) favored diversity (especially for Hispanics.) For this intercultural individual, however, his “white appearance” made more of a difference to him surrounding his own identity. What’s more, he noted how he believed “whiteness as structural privilege” (Yep, 2013, p. 177) was still predominant in society today, especially surrounding his own sister, who looked Hispanic.

“…that’s the thing about my dad, he is – he’s from Texas, he grew up in Texas but his parents ARE from Mexico and has a huge family, in Mexico, and he speaks Spanish fluently. But he would always tell me, “You really have to play up your last name.” Because my last name is [Hispanic Last Name], and I never – ‘cause I don’t LOOK for the record, I don’t look Mexican or Hispanic or any type of um…Hispanic descent, but my last name is [Hispanic last name] and 50% of my family identifies as Hispanic. So…it’s always been really difficult for me and I’ve also kinda wondered that about my sister, ‘cause she looks Hispanic. She has dark brown skin and stuff, and I look like the whitest person you’ve ever met in your life…” – A.C.P. (7/31/2014)
From these quotes, one can see how perceived advantages/disadvantages of appearance weighs into individuals’ understandings of personal identity.

**Insider-Outsider Perceptions**

Participants within this study frequently related stories about times when outsiders treated them incorrectly, typically based on a set of presupposed assumptions or incorrectly perceived identification. Since these did not jive with the intercultural individuals’ perceptions, it often led to frustration and/or irritation with the naivety and ignorance of others. Within Insider-Outsider Perceptions, the sub-theme of Need to Categorize became important in understanding the interactions these individuals had with others that are not under their immediate control. In others’ attempts to make sense of intercultural individuals, what proved to be offensive seemed wrapped up primarily in assumptions, rather than being willing to ask for more information.

**Need to Categorize**

The sub-theme of Need to Categorize related to moments when “outside others” would attempt to identify an aspect of the individual, assumedly in order to create a reference point out of which to work. This was sometimes rooted in ethnic origin, as noted by, a half-Irish, half-Sri Lankan individual,

“Yeah, I mean, people ask my ethnicity, which usually is because of my name, even though it’s Irish, which is like, I feel pretty normal, but, it just sounds weird and I don’t look totally white so they just assume it’s something else. So I tell them I’m Sri Lankan, but…yeah…People are just like, “What are you?” ‘cause they can’t tell what I am. ‘cause I’m mixed,
so I mean, some people just think I’m like a tan white person, others think
I’m Mexican. Some think I’m Asian. I get a lot of different things.”


Similar observations were made by a participant who identifies as half-Chinese, half-
American:

“…in terms of appearance, when people first meet me, they’re more
intrigued, about my cultural background, or my ethnic background and
what race I am. Yeah…it just seems to me a lot of people – or I’ve gotten
people guessing all sorts of things about me. You know, “Oh, are you
Polynesian?” or, “Are you half-Mexican?” And they’re like, “Are you
Japanese?” Yeah, and so I think people after they find out I’m half-
Chinese and half-white, they ask me which generation I am – [if] I’m first,
second, or third, what’s really interesting to me is a lot of people assume
that I’m like first generation, which doesn’t [make sense]…they’re—I
think they also assume that my mother is the Chinese one, and my dad is
white.” – K.A.Q. (7/13/2014)

Intercultural individuals noticed that often the interactions surrounding outsiders treated
them was based on a Need to Categorize. For these outsiders, instead of being willing to
directly ask the person themselves how they identified, assumptions would often be made
about “what” the individual was. A individual who recognizes his half-Filipino and half-
American background states it best, commenting,

“Yeah, so a lot of people will just assume—I’ve heard from friends
in high school and stuff, people will just be like, “Oh, so-and-so wanted to
know if you were Latino, or what your ethnicity is…” or whatever.
And…there were always a lot of assumptions, people wouldn’t really ask me, so that’s how I felt like I was being treated differently because people wouldn’t have the decency to be like, “Oh, what ethnicity are you?” Or they would just assume that I was “something.” – A.R.D. (4/23/2014)

It would appear for many of these individuals, it proved more frustrating to be “assumed to be something”, than to have others outright ask them about their ethnic origin. These challenges prove to be unique however, only with regard to the experiences of individuals who are not able to use our extended concept of “whiteness as chameleon-ism.” We can now see that for intercultural individuals with varying ethnic background in particular, identity is largely shaped by a multiplicity of factors, including how one appears to outsiders (whether correctly assumed or not), and furthermore, how outsiders treat them based on their underlying presumptions. San Francisco State University’s student group Variations article entitled, “Identity,” offers a unique set of insights for intercultural individuals:

“Our society is obsessed with classification…Chances are, you’ve been asked about your race or cultural background frequently. Growing up as a biracial means that being able to see the world as it truly is—multiracial. “Race” divides us into categories. Unfortunately, racial differences cause people to judge others unfairly. Some people wrongly believe that if they know someone’s race, they know everything about that person. Another way in which people can be classified is by ethnicity, which classifies people on the basis of their physical characteristics and cultural traditions.
It includes racial traits and national, religious, and language traits. A person’s culture has to do with his or her beliefs, social forms, and material traits of an ethnic, racial, religious, national, or social group. As a multiracial or multiethnic person, there is the opportunity to learn what it is like to experience separate races and cultures.”

Cultural Sifting

Intercultural individuals in this study related one strategy they used to understand which of their cultural values proved most important to them and their life experience(s). Once they had come to accept interculturalism as an important part of their personal identity, the next step was to isolate which aspects of each were most important. The primary way intercultural individuals did this was through “Cultural Sifting.” Cultural Sifting relates to moments when an individual would, based on situational demands, consciously select particular cultural elements that they felt were important for them personally, regardless of outsider opinions. I believe that the term “Cultural Sifting” provides a well-grounded understanding of intercultural individuals’ concious choice to self-select the parts of identity they believe are most important or useful, while straining out those that do not prove beneficial to their life experience(s). By engaging in this Cultural Sifting, a self-reflexive individual would have an easier time relating to others, and/or making important life-choices and decisions.

For instance, one participant remarks later in his interview:

“I’m definitely more polite. I feel when I meet an Asian person – or Korean person because it’s just the norm you know…respect. Because I feel that culture is a very—respectful culture, I’d like to honor that.”
For A.A.K., despite feeling the pressures of two cultural worlds, being able to consciously separate what was important culturally thus shaped the actions he personally chose to take when relating to other Koreans. Cultural Sifting also provided a way to make important decisions, despite numerous other strong cultural influences that vied for one’s attention. Despite her partially Spanish background, when selecting a college, this individual chose America over Spain because:

“My work ethic is very American—Spaniards, the way they approach conversations and the way they approach the workplace is pretty different…So I would definitely say I’m more comfortable here…”

– A.M.G. (3/15/2014)

The importance of Cultural Sifting as a way to manage self-identity and outsider expectations, and as an aid for the decision-making process, is directly tied to individuals’ own self-reflexivity. Once a situation would place a demand, they were able to self-select what proved best, as opposed to those who might only have one framework out of which to work. In her book, book Mexican Enough, author Stephanie Elizondo Griest refers to this feeling of being torn “between worlds” as “cultural schizophrenia.” However, she views this not as negative, but instead a benefit, stating,

“It goes without saying that I will never be truly Mexican, not even if I moved there for the rest of my life and acquired the requisite customs and traditions…Something surprising occurs to me: the schizophrenia of being biracial, of straddling both world but belonging to neither, might give me my deepest understanding of what it means to be Mexican” (p. 287).
It was because of being “neither fully something” that these individuals formed a greater sense of the world around them and how to interact within it. The benefits arising from intercultural individuals experience(s) and the perspectives they offer are truly valuable. While they will certainly face a truly unique set of challenges from a non-intercultural individual, I am confident in suggesting that this body of research offers new and exciting opportunities for both academic researchers and society alike.

**Discussion**

This paper seeks to continue the ongoing discussion surrounding identity formation, parental influence, and definitions of culture, by examining the narratives and stories of intercultural individuals. Definitions of culture have a great deal of variance even between individuals, perhaps more so for intercultural individuals in particular, who find themselves sorting through multiple lenses of “cultural” reference. Kroeber & Kluckohn (1963) stated, “…as of yet, we have no full theory of culture. We have a fairly well-delineated concept, and it is possible to enumerate conceptual elements embraced within that master concept. But a concept, even an important one, does not constitute a theory” (p. 357). “Theorizing culture” or its “conceptual elements” will continue to be a source of debate, especially as we move forward within the 21st century. Globalization and technological advances are ever increasing cultural spaces and places for interaction(s), in addition to those with whom we are able to interact. Though certainly not a new field of study, this discussion is far from over – it merely will shift in meanings and understandings as the times themselves do.

This study sought to discover how young adults who claim to come from intercultural families invoke (or “use”) culture to make sense of their upbringing and
resulting identities. I note that identity construction is partly linked back to parental influence, and many prior studies have considered how parental influence might affect a child (Moriizumi, 2011; Bustamante, 2011; Romano, 2001; & Edwards, 2009). We now recognize that in addition to parental influence, outsider interaction(s) can also be linked to identity formation, especially after an individual’s formative years. This study supports theories surrounding identity formation as outlined by Yep (2013). Furthermore, for individuals who appear as “the norm,” the potential challenges they face from outsiders are diminished, unless they themselves choose to highlight the less apparent aspects of their personal identity or self.

Cultural Sifting provides the intercultural individual a way by which to negotiate their own perspectives and worldview. I note that the term “intercultural” has yet to enter the conversational space outside of academia, despite Levey (2012) suggesting the terms intercultural and multicultural as remotely similar. While many individuals readily recognize the term multicultural as important to their life experience(s), they do not yet use the term “intercultural” personally when referring to themselves. To be perceived as multicultural is good; to be perceived as intercultural proved to be confusing (though “intercultural” they agree fits better when introduced to the term itself.) It raises the question, “Why has the term multicultural become so pervasive in the discourse of our society, if the term “intercultural” describes these individuals’ personal experiences more holistically?” I suggest that the term intercultural has taken a backseat to the term multicultural, which sounds pleasant and carries much discursive weight within our Westernized American society.
The participants I interviewed were young, unmarried, and presently, have yet to have families of their own. Future studies might direct their attention intercultural individuals’ who are older and have families. While an individual may stress the importance to them of continuing cultural traditions within their own future family, it is impossible to know presently whether or not this will ring true for their future. Prospective studies would benefit from a longitudinal approach, tracking intercultural individuals across a longer period of time, to see what factors, (such as a spouse) may influence which cultural factors are enacted on the home front. Families themselves are not autonomous, and will certainly have influence regarding how a child perceives identity.

Furthermore, this study was conducted within the context of a Westernized, American society, where the idea of mixed marriages are certainly more freely understood, accepted, and perhaps, more commonplace than other, cross-cultural societies. Many of the individuals in this study appeared “white,” they could only be identified once they themselves self-identified. Because of the nature of “whiteness as chameleon-ism”, it was difficult to locate subjects simply by “looking at them.” In much the same way, this study may missed examining individuals that look “ethnically other,” as they might be assumed to be 100% something, when in fact they might identify as half-Latino, half-Caucasian. As a result, the experiences of individuals who cannot utilize “whiteness as Chameleon-ism” are voices that need to be brought to the table in this discussion. Much like the sisters of A.H.O. (4/11/2014) and A.C.P. (7/31/2014) though, these subjects would need to self-identify in order to be studied or their respective
perspectives examined. Learning from their perspectives will prove just as valuable in understanding more holistically the experiences of the intercultural individual.

Lastly, with regard to my own extended family – I am happy to report that I have discovered that what matters most to who I end up marrying may not only be rooted in cultural difference(s). Rather, it may become a combination of both how I instill what I see as cultural values in my own children, in addition to how they “appear” to outsiders. While I can certainly in no way be responsible for how my genetics will influence the physical appearance of my children, I can most certainly encourage them to embrace and discover for themselves the valuable perspectives participating within a culture (or cultures) provides. I am comfortable with suggesting that, as a Chinese-American, if I so desire, can marry someone with a different culture, and while it might present unique challenges, also, can very well be a point of growth and learning for the both myself, my significant other, and also, my future children.

And that, perhaps, is the greatest finding of all.
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Appendix

Interview Guide

1) What is culture to you? How would you define culture?

2) Is culture an important (or focal or salient or relevant) part of your life experience? Do you personally believe culture forms a defining part of your identity?

3) Briefly describe your cultural background.

4) Can you recall an event or time when your identity (or culture or both) became clear to you, or an important part of who you are?