

When Change Doesn't Matter: Racial Identity (In)consistency and Adolescent Well-being

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Abstract

Most theories of racial self-identity argue that a racially inconsistent identity indicates emotional distress and internal turmoil. However, empirical research on racial identity and consistency indicates that racial inconsistency is more common than previously believed, and some argue that it can be a positive adaptation for individuals. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health, we explore the degree to which racial identity inconsistency is associated with emotional, social, and academic outcomes. We find that racial inconsistency is not associated with negative outcomes for individuals and, via access to white privilege, may be associated with benefits for some individuals. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for theories of racial identity.

Keywords

multiracial, identity, adolescence, mental health, education

In 2000, the U.S. Census began allowing respondents to identify with more than one racial group. For most of the twentieth century, multiraciality was generally irrelevant to the dichotomous racial hierarchy of society; regardless of racial admixture, the one-drop rule of racial classification, or hypodescent, categorized multiracial individuals into monoracial categories (Davis 1991; López 1996). The historic change in Census 2000 accompanied increasing interest in the multiracial population of the United States, fueled in part by the increasing rates of interracial marriage since the 1960s, increased immigration, the public success of famous multiracial people (e.g., Halle Berry, Mariah Carey, Derek Jeter, President Barack Obama), and advances in survey methods that better capture the reality of multiracial identity. Consequently, multiracial identity now directly challenges traditional understandings of race in society and demonstrates the inadequacy of assuming that race is static and that all individuals can be

categorized easily. Unfortunately, due to the perniciousness of the one-drop rule, social scientists often ignore the multiracial experience; until recently, much of the research on multiracial identity has relied on unproven and undertheorized assumptions (Rockquemore, Brunsma, and Delgado 2009).

Early theories of multiracial identity assumed that multiracials would find themselves on the outskirts of society (Park 1928). Park's "marginal man"—much like the "tragic mulatto" in works of

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popular culture (e.g., in the novels *Passing* and *Quality*, the musical *Show Boat*, and the films *Imitation of Life* and *Pinky*)—is unable to find a home in either the privileged white community or the underprivileged black community. Subsequent theories asserted that the marginalization experienced by multiracial individuals provokes a crisis of identity but that eventually they reach a point of identity consistency (e.g., Erickson 1968; Phinney 1990; Poston 1990; Stonequist 1937), either embracing multiple heritages or becoming consistently monoracial. Implicitly, these theories suggested that an inconsistent racial identity—one that changes across contexts—indicates an identity crisis and that crisis is the source of inner conflict. According to Park (1928:893), the marginal man exhibits an “inner turmoil” that can lead to “spiritual instability, intensified self-consciousness, restlessness, and malaise” however, Park also claimed that marginality can lead to innovation and creativity (Cheng and Lively 2009; Goldberg 2012).

Empirical research has suggested that individuals choose to identify differently across contexts during adolescence and into adulthood, thus destabilizing assumptions of the development and maintenance of a single, stable racial identity (Brown, Hitlin, and Elder 2006; Doyle and Kao 2007; Harris and Sim 2002; Hitlin, Brown, and Elder 2007; Khanna and Johnson 2010; Korgen 1998). Specifically, this research argues that “marginal man” theories unjustifiably privilege identity consistency. Nonetheless, sociological research to this point has not addressed the degree to which racial identity inconsistency matters for individual outcomes (e.g., academic achievement, emotional well-being, social adjustment) as suggested in Park’s (1928) original formulation. Instead, research indicates that inconsistency is quite common for multiracial individuals—but whether and how it affects them is less well understood. In this paper, we examine the degree to which multiracial adolescents with “inconsistent” identities exhibit psychological or academic difficulties relative to their “consistently” identifying multiracial peers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theories of Multiracial Identity

In his theory of the “marginal man,” Robert Park (1928) posited that multiracial individuals are isolated on the margins of society because they do not fit into any monoracial group. To Park, multiracial individuals have a unique, ambivalent social

psychology that leads to mental distress but also to being more socially enterprising and aggressive than monoracial individuals (Cheng and Lively 2009; Goldberg 2012). Stonequist (1935, 1937) extended Park’s theory, positing three stages of identity formation: (1) preparation, during which time multiracial individuals familiarize themselves with their different cultures; (2) crisis, when multiracial individuals feel conflicted about their multiracial heritage, realizing their precarious social status; and finally (3) resolution of the identity crisis, which takes one of three forms: assimilation into the dominant culture (of which multiracial people may never feel a part given their mixed race heritage), assimilation into a minority culture, or forming/joining a new multiracial group. One of two stable identity outcomes is assumed: identifying either with a single racial group or with both or all racial groups for the rest of their lives. No matter which identity one chooses, early theorists agreed that racial identity inconsistency—refusing to permanently settle on a single label or category—is a tension-filled stage on the road to embracing a consistent, and thus fully developed, racial identity (Stonequist 1937). For decades, these theories were the consensus understanding of multiracial identity.

Newer theories have addressed multiracial identity development *without* assuming social marginalization and crisis but maintain the belief that racial identity consistency is a positive (and final) outcome. Rockquemore et al. (2009) identified this as the “variant approach” to multiracial identity, as it argues that multiracial individuals have unique identity development processes. For example, Poston’s (1990:154) theory of biracial identity posits that a multiracial person passes through five stages of identity development, beginning with a “personal identity . . . independent of his or her ethnic background,” and, after progressing through all five stages reaching a point of “integration,” involving “recogni[tion] . . . of their [multiple] ethnic identities”. Indeed, some in this field argue that for mixed individuals identifying solely as “black” is an unhealthy end result compared with identifying consistently as “multiracial” (Gibbs 1989; Khanna and Johnson 2010). These variant theories still assert that the healthiest, most fully formed racial identity of multiracial individuals ends with a consistent identity. Thus, we label both groups of theories as “stability-oriented theories” of multiracial identity as they privilege a stable identity as the logical end point of racial identity development.

In their own work on multiracial identity, Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002) recognized that multiracial identities may not be consistent over time. Their “protean identity” is one in which individuals move between different racial identities depending on context or mood. Racial identity inconsistency is destigmatized; not only is it common, it is also healthy. Root (1990, 1996, 2003) similarly proposed an ecological model of racial identity development that orients inconsistency as a beneficial, healthy, and adaptively useful identity for the individual. She argued that multiracial self-identification is nonlinear, lacks a single endpoint, and is contextually shifting. Root suggested that these “border” identities are fluid and that fluidity is an unproblematic, elegant solution to not fitting into a single racial category. If these newer theories that embrace inconsistency are correct, racial identity inconsistency among multiracial adolescents should not be associated with higher levels of “inner turmoil” or with unique levels of creativity or innovation, as marginal man theories predict. We label theories asserting that racial identity inconsistency is an unproblematic experience as “context-oriented theories.”

Identity Inconsistency

In short, stability-oriented racial identity theories argue that inconsistent racial identities are in a state of crisis resolved only through the acceptance of a single, consistent identity. Conversely, context-oriented theories assert that multiracial identity is routinely inconsistent and is not indicative of a problematic state of crisis or particularly meaningful for those experiencing inconsistency. Empirical research has demonstrated that a single consistent identity is not necessarily the norm for multiracial individuals. In fact, racial identities remain inconsistent across adolescence and young adulthood for both monoracial and multiracial individuals (Doyle and Kao 2007). Using the National Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), Harris and Sim (2002) showed that change in racial identity across contexts was quite common among non-Hispanic multiracial adolescents (excluding Hispanics, the authors found that roughly half of the multiracial identifiers switched identities across settings). In a follow-up piece, Harris (2002:96) noted that comparisons between inconsistently and consistently self-identifying multiracials “tend to exhibit quite dissimilar characteristics on many sociodemographic indicators”. These differences suggest that

“for multiracial populations, how we measure really does matter” (97).

Further complicating matters, multiracial individuals who choose to identify as single-race (or who are forced to do so in certain surveys) vary in how they report by age, family context, socioeconomic status, and their particular multiracial background (Campbell 2007; Herman 2003). In interviews with multiracial adults, Khanna and Johnson (2010) found that multiracial identifiers asserted a black identity instead of a multiracial identity in some predominantly black contexts to better fit in.

Overall, empirical evidence indicates that racial identity stability is far less common than has been assumed and is influenced by socioeconomic status, ethnic identity, and social context. While the rate of inconsistency is high, its implications are unclear. On one hand, a positive association between socioeconomic status and identity stability could mean that stability is desirable. On the other hand, however, studies have highlighted the activation and utility of inconsistency in order to better fit certain social contexts, providing evidence that inconsistency is desirable for some multiracial individuals and in some contexts.

Multiracial Identity and Adolescent Outcomes

Racial identity inconsistency among multiracials and Hispanics has been fairly well documented in recent social science literature. Nonetheless, the implications of identity inconsistency are less well known. Much of the extant research on multiracials has tended to aggregate them by racial admixture, ignoring and obscuring inconsistency in self-identification, even as theoretical work discusses the importance of identity inconsistency.

As previously discussed, older theories of racial identity formation tended to pathologize multiracial individuals, predicting feelings of societal marginalization (Park 1928, 1931; Stonequist 1935, 1937). Very few studies, however, have examined the degree to which this is actually the case, and even fewer have examined whether emotional well-being is associated with identity inconsistency. Some studies found that self-reported multiracial identity—whether consistent or inconsistent—was associated with negative emotional outcomes, although only for specific multiracial identities (Campbell and Eggerling-Boeck 2006). The authors hypothesized that identity inconsistency may be related to

“unvalidated personal identities” and thus poorer mental health (Campbell and Eggerling-Boeck 2006:167). Cheng and Lively (2009) reported similar findings on depression but also found that multiracial students were highly socially active if negative about that sociality; thus, Cheng and Lively concluded that Park’s (1928) marginal man theory is mostly correct. Their study, however, did not measure racial identity (in)consistency. The researchers admitted that causality is difficult to determine and that multiracial youth in crisis may be more likely to express a multiracial identity in order to attach to more socially recognizable groups. How multiracial youth identify racially may also influence their academic performance. Previous studies exploring the relationship between academic performance and multiracial students’ self-identification were inconclusive, possibly because they lacked measures of racial (in)consistency (Harris and Thomas 2002; Herman 2003; Kao 1999; Kao, Doyle, and Burke 2009). Overall, research has been unable to determine causal ordering between emotional-academic outcomes and multiracial inconsistency.

Two studies, however, speak indirectly to the association between identity (in)consistency and outcomes. Internet surveys of multiracial individuals showed that a “malleable” identity (e.g., Root’s “border” identity) was associated with lower psychological well-being and slightly elevated symptoms of depression (Sanchez, Shih, and Garcia 2009). Alternatively, snowball sampling research found a positive association between emotional health and inconsistent identities (Lusk et al. 2010). In both cases, methodological issues may help explain the disparate findings.

Research on ethnic identity inconsistency among Latinos has found that some students may change their ethnic identity across contexts as part of a cultural understanding connecting school success and ethnicity (Wilkinson 2010). Students who reported non-Latino identities at home but identified as Latino in school were less engaged at school and performed worse in math. Wilkinson posited that these students may identify as Latino because they associate lower academic outcomes with negative cultural assumptions about Latinos. Something similar may be occurring for non-high-achieving Asian students who are identified as “whitewashed” (Jiménez and Horowitz 2013).

Far fewer studies have examined the affective components of schooling, such as belonging (or attachment) and engagement. These measures may offer more fertile ground for testing theories

about the effects of racial identity inconsistency on emotional and social well-being, as they more directly measure the marginality and social turmoil and opportunity that stability-oriented theories hypothesize for multiracial individuals (Cheng and Klugman 2010). School attachment and belonging measure the extent to which students feel part of their school communities and may capture the extent of social marginality and peer isolation felt by inconsistent identifiers, as multiracial individuals generally report lower levels of attachment than their monoracial peers (Cheng and Klugman 2010). Conversely, school engagement is a behavioral measure of how much time students spend in school-related activities. Kao et al. (2009) found that mixed Asian/white adolescents did not differ significantly from their monoracial white counterparts in their sense of school belonging, but black/white adolescents reported significantly higher feelings of school belonging compared with monoracial blacks but significantly lower than monoracial white adolescents. Burke and Kao (2010) found that “white” identifying adolescents had significantly lower grade point averages (GPAs) than their multiracial counterparts but no significant differences in levels of school belonging or engagement associated with identity consistency. Returning to Cheng and Lively’s (2009) social psychological interpretation of the marginal man theory, we may expect that individuals who experience identity distress are more likely to engage in school-related activities to try to gain a social foothold, while context-oriented theories would expect no association between school belonging or engagement and identity inconsistency.

In sum, research has suggested that multiracial identity is associated with both positive and negative outcomes in adolescence depending on the reference group, while preliminary evidence links inconsistency with negative psychological outcomes. We find two competing theories with regard to multiracial identity (in)consistency. Stability-oriented theories of multiraciality (Park 1928; Poston 1990; Stonequist 1935) assert that inconsistent racial identity negatively affects the well-being of multiracial adolescents, although some argue that these theories also may predict positive social outcomes (Goldberg 2012; Cheng and Lively 2009). Context-oriented research suggests that inconsistency is a normal part of the multiracial experience; thus, inconsistency should not be associated with positive or negative outcomes (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002; Root 1990,

2003). Our analysis attempts to adjudicate between these theories.

DATA AND METHODS

Like many of the studies of multiracial youth described above, we relied on Add Health data. Add Health is frequently used for studies of multiracials because questions on racial identity are asked in multiple contexts and at different points in time. Add Health is a longitudinal, school-based study of health outcomes for adolescents who are representative of the U.S. population enrolled in secondary school in 1995 (Bearman, Jones, and Udry 1997). The sample is stratified by region, urbanization, school type (i.e., public, private, parochial), ethnic mix, and size, and more than 70 percent of the schools ($N = 132$) agreed to participate. The first wave of data collection, an in-school questionnaire, was conducted in 1994–1995 and included 90,000 students (Bearman et al. 1997). The in-school questionnaire was followed by an in-home interview in 1995. Eighty percent of schools provided a roster of students, from which a sample was randomly selected for a 1.5-hour interview in the home. Approximately 200 students were recruited from each school pair (high school and middle school), resulting in a self-weighted sample of 20,745 adolescents in grades 7 through 12. Survey questions about racial and ethnic identity (unlike those for gender or age) were nearly identical across both contexts (Table 1).

By design, only 23 percent of the students eligible to participate in the in-school survey were selected to participate in the in-home survey. Our base sample consists of the 18,080 respondents who participated in both the in-school and in-home wave 1 surveys. This is necessary to identify which multiracial students identify consistently versus inconsistently at one time.

Quantifying Identity (In)consistency

We identified multiracial individuals via multiple mechanisms. First, any student who identified with multiple racial groups in at least one context (in school or at home) was classified multiracial. If, in both contexts, the person listed the same multiracial identity, that person was included as “racially consistent.” If the multiracial identities included different combinations of racial identity, they were labeled as “racially inconsistent.” Second, if a student identified with one racial group in school and a different racial group at home, that person was

Table 1. Survey Instruments for Racial and Ethnic Identity.

Survey	Question Wording
<i>Racial identity questions</i>	
In home	What is your race? You may give more than one answer.
In school	What is your race? If you are of more than one race, you may choose more than one.
<i>Ethnic identity questions</i>	
In home	Are you of Hispanic or Latino origin?
In school	Are you of Hispanic or Spanish origin?

Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health.

also “racially inconsistent.”¹ Third, a student might give the same monoracial identity in both contexts but, during the at-home survey, report biological parentage of multiple racial backgrounds. These students were “racially consistent.” Finally, if a student reported Hispanic ethnicity in one context but not the other, he or she was included as “ethnically inconsistent.” We excluded ethnically consistent Hispanic individuals who reported inconsistent racial identities, as they may not have been experiencing an inconsistent identity but rather expressing their confusion with the American concept of race, which may also be true for multiracial individuals, but for substantively different social and historical reasons (Frank, Akresh, and Lu 2010; Golash-Boza and Darity 2008).¹

Our total sample of multiracial or multiethnic adolescents was 1,942, roughly 10 percent of the population that participated in both waves. This result is substantially larger than the overall self-identifying U.S. multiracial population (roughly 4 percent of the total population). We attributed this to two factors: First, multiracial identification was most common among younger generations due to increases in interracial marriage rates and its wider social acceptance as an identity, and second, our multiple contextual measures of race included adolescents with inconsistent monoracial identities, those with multiracial parents but a monoracial self-identity, and those who were traditionally identified as multiracial.

Table 2. Racial Self-identification of Multiracial Adolescents ($N = 1,942$).

Racial Identity Measures	Description	Consistent Non-Hispanics	Inconsistent Hispanics
Self-identifying multiracials	Adolescents who selected two or more races in at least one context	73.7%	25.4%
Inconsistent single race identifiers	Adolescents who selected two different single races across contexts (e.g., "Asian" at home and "black" at school)	20.6%	8.2%
Single race, interracial parentage multiracials	Adolescents who selected the same single race identity across contexts but whose biological parents identified with two or more racial groups	5.7%	66.4%

Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health.

Table 2 summarizes how students entered our sample. The majority of students reported a multiracial identity at least once (73.7 percent of the inconsistent racial identifiers), and another 20 percent reported inconsistent monoracial identities.² A small but substantial part of our sample reported a consistent monoracial identity—as compared with a consistent multiracial identity. The majority of inconsistent ethnic identifiers were consistent racial identifiers (66.4 percent of them), although a sizable number were also inconsistent racial identifiers.³

As a racial identity, multiraciality became substantially more visible and accepted in American society after our data were collected in 1995. As such, it is possible that levels of inconsistency and self-identification rates have changed as multiraciality has become more common. During this same period, biological research into the human genome showed the fallacy of biological definitions of racial groups, further strengthening social constructionist theories of race. We believe that, if anything, the age of our data is biased toward showing an association between inconsistency and negative outcomes because the unique racial identities and experiences of multiracial individuals were less understood at the time of data collection.

Furthermore, while other research has operationalized inconsistency across waves 1 and 3, we opted to focus on wave 1 alone. Research has shown that, especially during adolescence and young adulthood, racial identity is fluid over time for a substantial portion of the population (Doyle and Kao 2007; Saperstein and Penner 2012). Because we were interested in the impact of *inconsistency* and not *change*, it was important to identify adolescents who reported two different racial

identities within a brief period of time, rather than across multiple years. Additionally, an unknown amount of the change between waves 1 and 3 was due to a change in the wording of the racial identity question and its options (Brown et al. 2006). Overall, we believe that the focus on wave 1 should have led to stronger associations between racial identity inconsistency and emotional, social, and academic outcomes, if such associations exist.

Nearly 70 percent of our sample reported inconsistent racial identities, highlighting the commonality of fluidity during adolescence. Less than 30 percent of the sample reported inconsistent Hispanic ethnicities across both contexts, showing that racial inconsistency was more common than ethnic inconsistency in the sample. These findings support the growing body of research asserting that inconsistent racial reporting is a common part of multiracial identity.

Sociologists have long recognized that all racial identities are not treated equally in society. Historically, some multiracial individuals have "passed" for white in order to avoid discrimination and segregation in the United States (Daniel 1992). With respect to the current analysis, identifying as white might confound any effects of inconsistency on our dependent variables. That is, if inconsistency is negatively associated with emotional and social outcomes while identifying as white is positively associated with those same outcomes, it is important to separate the two effects. We did so with two additional variables in the second panel of Table 3. The "white-only" category included any student who reported a monoracial white identity in at least one context, regardless of ethnicity. Nearly 42 percent of the sample reported a monoracial white identity in at least one context. Our

Table 3. Racial and Ethnic Consistency ($N = 1,942$).

	Description	Percentage
<i>Consistency measures</i>		
Racially consistent	Students who reported the same racial identity (multiracial or single race with parents of different racial identities) in both contexts	32.2%
Ethnically consistent	Students who reported non-Hispanic ethnicity in both contexts	73.6%
<i>Identity measures</i>		
Single race, multiracial parent	Students who reported being of a single race in both contexts but whose biological parents identified as being of different racial identities	21.7%
White only in at least one context	Students who reported a white-only identity in at least one context	41.5%
White and other race	Students who reported white as one of multiple racial identities in at least one context	25.2%

Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health.

second dummy variable included all students who claimed a white racial identity *as part of* a multiracial identity in a single context, and it represented 25.2 percent of the sample. This group, while not identifying only as white, may still benefit from the racialized social system because of their white identities and/or backgrounds compared with multiracial individuals who do not have or do not claim any white identity (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Khanna and Johnson 2010). To help clarify whether it is the act of claiming whiteness (white only) or white privilege regardless of that act (white as part of a multiracial identity) that affects adolescent outcomes, we also included a measure of whether interviewers classified respondents as white. Overall, roughly half of our sample identified as either white or partly white in at least one context.

Outcome Variables

To best capture the effects of identity inconsistency among adolescents, we considered four outcomes: depression, school engagement, school belonging, and GPA. Our scale of depression came from the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale, a 20-item measure of which 18 were included in Add Health. Add Health added an additional question to better mimic the full 20-item measure that we included in our scale (Campbell and Eggerling-Boeck 2006).⁴ To measure school belonging, we combined four 5-item Likert-scaled questions from the in-school survey. Students were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with

the following statements: (1) I feel close to people at this school, (2) I feel a part of this school, (3) I feel happy at school, and (4) I feel socially accepted. We summed the responses to create a scale ranging from 0 to 20 in which higher values reflected greater feelings of school belonging ($\alpha = .80$). Similarly, our measure of school engagement was a summary scale of three 5-item Likert-scaled questions from the in-school survey. Here, students were asked whether they had trouble (1) getting along with teachers, (2) paying attention in school, and (3) getting work done since school started that year. We summed these responses to create a 0–12 scale in which higher values indicated higher levels of school engagement ($\alpha = .80$). Students in the sample reported a high mean level of school belonging (14.11); a lower, but still high sense of school engagement (6.94); and a bimodal distribution of depressive symptoms (mean = 11.64, standard deviation = 7.9), and self-reported GPA was measured on a standard 4.0-point scale, with a mean of 2.7 for our sample.

Independent Covariates

In addition to controlling for basic demographic variables such as gender and age, we included measures of socioeconomic status, family structure, immigrant generation, health, and religiosity. Previous research has suggested that identity change is correlated with family socioeconomic status (Doyle and Kao 2007; Penner and Saperstein 2008). As a result, we controlled for both mother's

education and family income in our models. We also controlled for family structure—whether the adolescents' parents were married, single, or cohabiting, and whether the adolescents lived with both biological parents. The amount of interaction at home with one's biological and racially mixed parents may be related to one's level of inconsistency as well as with one's emotional, social, and academic achievement. Racial and ethnic identification patterns also may be tied to immigrant status, as the social construction of race varies in different areas of the world. We therefore controlled for whether the adolescent was an immigrant (first generation) and whether the adolescent's parents were immigrants (second generation).

Finally, we included controls for health and religiosity, as both are inversely associated with depression (Turney 2011). Our "health" variable was a self-reported measure of respondents' overall healthiness, converted to a binary variable indicating fair/poor health (8.5 percent of the sample) versus good or better health (91.5 percent of the sample). Religiosity was a 4-point scale indicating the importance of religion to students.

DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

Tables 4 and 5 present descriptive statistics for our dependent and independent variables for the total sample by the racial (Table 4) and ethnic (Table 5) consistency of respondents. Reporting a partially white identity is twice as common among racially consistent respondents compared with inconsistent respondents, while the opposite is true of reporting a monoracial white identity, which is twice as likely among inconsistent reporters than consistent reporters. Hispanic respondents (all of whom are ethnically inconsistent due to our sampling procedure) are generally racially consistent, although a little less than one-third of them report both ethnic and racial inconsistencies. How multiracial students incorporate their white racial identity is associated with whether they do so consistently. More than 60 percent of racially inconsistent identifiers report a monoracial white identity, compared with less than one-third of the consistent identifiers. The reverse is true for reporting a "partially white" identity: while only 16.5 percent of the racially inconsistent identifiers choose white as part of a multiracial identity, nearly 36 percent of racially consistent reporters do so. Because very few multiracial students consistently identify as white in both contexts, choosing a "white" identity can be seen as an act of inconsistency in identity.

Similarly, expressing a multiracial identity in which whiteness is one of multiple identities is associated with a consistent multiracial identity. Choosing to identify as white only may be a tenuous identity, one that could be "outed" in certain circumstances or could lead to intrafamilial conflict, while a multiracial identity into which whiteness is incorporated may not have the same level of risk for challenges from others. Similarly, it is possible that identifying as white only is constrained by whether others similarly identify an individual as white phenotypically. In wave 1, there is no measure of respondents' skin tone, but interviewers classified them racially. We use that as a proxy for whether a student's peers may accept or challenge claims of a white identity. There are also small but statistically significant differences in which respondents are classified by interviewers as white—inconsistent racial identifiers were more likely to be classified as such, which possibly explains why they are also more likely to self-report as white only: They are phenotypically better able to "pass" as white to interviewers.

Racial consistency appears largely unrelated to demographic and family backgrounds, contrary to prior research in which consistent identifiers tend to report more traditional family structures and higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Doyle and Kao 2007). This is partially due to the inclusion of ethnically inconsistent individuals who are generally racially consistent but, as Table 5 shows, are more likely to be classified as non-white, to come from nontraditional families, and to report lower family incomes. Results not shown, but available on request, that include consistent Hispanic identifiers (or excluding all Hispanics) confirm that including Hispanic inconsistency accounts for the lack of statistically significant differences in Table 4.

Turning to measures of mental health, social, and academic outcomes, preliminary evidence shown in Table 4 but not in Table 5 supports Root's (1990, 1996, 2003) ecological model of racial inconsistency as unfraught with negative consequences. While racially inconsistent identifiers report higher levels of depression, that difference is not statistically significant. The only significant difference with regard to racial consistency is that inconsistent identifiers report lower levels of school belonging compared with consistent identifiers, while student GPAs for the two groups are indistinguishable. There are, however, statistically significant differences with regard to Hispanic ethnicity consistency and our emotional, social, and academic outcomes, although that may be due to

Table 4. Summary Statistics by Racial Identification (Reported as percentages unless otherwise noted).

	Racially Consistent	Racially Inconsistent	Total
<i>Racial identities</i>			
White only	31.4	62.0	52.6***
White and other identity	35.9	16.5	22.6***
Hispanic	58.0	8.2	23.8***
<i>Interviewer-assessed race</i>			
White	59.6	67.9	64.7*
Non-white	40.4	32.9	35.3*
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>			
Male	52.6	50.3	51.1
Age, (mean)	15.2	15.0	15.1
First generation	6.8	6.2	6.3
Second generation	12.1	12.2	12.2
Health, (mean)	3.9	3.8	3.8
Fair/poor health	8.2	7.3	7.6
Religiosity, (mean)	3.4	3.3	3.3**
<i>Family structure</i>			
Married parents	67.4	70.1	69.9
Single parents	24.5	20.7	21.9
Cohabiting parents	8.1	8.3	8.2
Lives with both biological parents	46.4	40.2	42.2
<i>Family socioeconomic status</i>			
Mother's education			
College	49.9	43.7	45.7*
High school or GED	35.9	42.6	40.5
Less than high school	14.2	13.6	13.8
Family income, (mean)	43.3	42.5	41.6
<i>Outcome variables, (mean)</i>			
Depression scale	11.3	11.7	11.6
School engagement scale	6.6	6.5	6.5
School belonging scale	14.6	13.9	14.1**
Grade point average	2.7	2.8	2.7
<i>n</i>	625	1,317	1,942

Source: National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.

Note: Rows may not sum to 100 due to rounding error.

† $p \leq .1$ * $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$ (two-tailed t tests)

ethnic differences in those outcomes and not ethnic inconsistency.

Multivariate Analysis

Our descriptive findings contradict traditional theories of multiracial identity which assert that an inconsistent racial identity is associated with an internal "crisis" for said individuals. Because consistency is also associated with differences in socioeconomic status, nativity status, and familial

backgrounds, the bivariate results may reflect those differences between respondents instead of an association between identity consistency and socioemotional outcomes. Our analytic strategy consists of four sets of nested regression models, weighted to adjust for differences in selection probabilities, response rates, and data clustering (Chantala 2002; Chantala and Tabor 1999; Tourangeau and Shin 1998). In each set of equations, we begin with baseline models including only our measures of racial and ethnic

Table 5. Summary Statistics by Ethnic Identification of Multiracial Adolescents.

	Inconsistent Hispanic Identifiers	Consistent Non- Hispanic Identifiers	Total
<i>Racial identities</i>			
White only	51.7	52.9	52.6
White + other identity	5.6	27.9	22.6***
<i>Interviewer-assessed race</i>			
White	54.0	68.0	64.7***
Non-white	46.0	31.9	35.3***
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>			
Male	55.6	49.6	51.1
Age, (mean)	15.2	15.0	15.1***
First generation	7.8	5.9	6.4
Second generation	10.4	12.7	12.2
Health, (mean)	3.9	3.8	3.8***
Fair/poor health	8.5	7.3	7.6
Religiosity, (mean)	3.5	3.3	3.3***
<i>Family structure</i>			
Married parents	59.2	73.0	69.9***
Single parents	29.6	19.6	21.9***
Cohabiting parents	11.2	7.3	8.2
Lives with both biological parents	33.7	44.8	42.2**
<i>Family socioeconomic status</i>			
Mother's education			
Less than high school	16.1	13.2	13.8
High school or GED	39.2	40.9	40.5
College	44.8	45.9	45.7
Family income, (mean)	38.3	44.2	41.6***
<i>Outcome variables, (mean)</i>			
Depression scale	12.1	11.4	11.6***
School engagement scale	6.5	6.5	6.5***
School belonging scale	14.4	14.0	14.1***
Grade point average	2.7	2.8	2.7***
<i>n</i>	231	1,472	1,942

Source: National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.

† $p \leq .1$ * $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$ (two-tailed *t* tests)

identification as described in Table 2. The second model includes our specific identity measures. The third model includes additional controls for student backgrounds shown in Table 3. We correct for missing data by using multiple imputation ($n = 10$). Because inconsistency was by far the most likely identity, it is treated as our reference group. In other words, model I tests the relationship between consistency and our various outcomes; model II examines how that association is affected by specific types of racial/ethnic identities; and model III explores the degree to which those relationships are mitigated by social background characteristics.

Saperstein and Penner (2012) argued that racial identity inconsistency and social status may be a feedback loop whereby individuals' racial identities can lead to a social outcome and also change in response to that outcome. As such, our ordinary least squares regression models should be considered only as tests of associations rather than as making causal arguments. For our purposes, marginal man theories do not necessarily imply a causal order—emotional, social, or academic difficulties may lead to changes in racial self-identification or may be caused by an unstable racial identity. Irrespective of causality, stability-oriented theories assume that

identity inconsistency has noticeable consequences, while context-oriented theories instead assume either no association at all or at best a slight positive association when inconsistency is used to emphasize a valued racial identity in a given context.

Table 6 summarizes the impact of inconsistency on our socioemotional outcomes (depression, school engagement, and school acceptance). We turn first to our first set of nested models that tests the association between identity consistency and depression. Model I in Table 6 is a baseline that includes only our measures of racial and ethnic identity consistency and shows no significant association between racial identity consistency and depressive symptoms among multiracial students. Model II adds the additional indicators of specific racial identities (white only, white as part of a multiracial identity, Hispanic identifier, etc.). Results indicate that some racial and ethnic identities may be protective for students. Most notably, reporting a white-only identity is associated with reporting lower levels of depression for students ($-1.52, p < .05$). This result lends partial support to the argument that a multiracial identity may be associated with internal stress and poorer mental health, since a white-only identity is not a multiracial identity. Bear in mind, however, that a white-only identity among our sample is generally part of an inconsistent identity, as shown in Table 3. That is, the association between a white-only identity and better mental health suggests that inconsistency is, if anything, beneficial to individuals' mental health, not detrimental as posited by stability-oriented theories. Model III tests whether this finding persists after controlling for social background characteristics. Overall, results from model III in Table 6 run counter to stability-oriented theories: Inconsistent racial identities not only are quite common but also do not appear to be detrimental to emotional well-being. Identifying only as white no longer was statistically significant, because of the inclusion of interviewer classification.⁵ We believe that this finding highlights the importance of external social constructions of race and racial identity: Being perceivable as white is behind the association between white identity and mental health among our sample. In other words, claiming whiteness appears to be associated with positive outcomes because individuals are treated as white, not because they can claim it and its privileges and benefits by themselves.

Turning to ethnicity, however, we find consistent evidence that Hispanic ethnic inconsistency is associated with increased levels of depression across all of our models. However, because the

only Hispanic identifiers in our sample are those who do so inconsistently, it is unclear whether this association is due to their ethnic inconsistency or to being Hispanic, as earlier research indicated that depression was higher among Hispanics compared with other racial-ethnic groups (Wright et al. 2005). Whatever the reason, these results lend support to Wilkinson's (2010) assertion that ethnic inconsistency may be related to cultural assumptions about Hispanics in the United States.

It may be, as earlier theories argue, that inconsistent identifiers are burdened by a crisis of confusion and thus might feel out of place or unattached to monoracial and/or consistently identifying multiracial peers. Conversely, it may be, as Cheng and Lively (2009) asserted, that the marginal multiracial person will be highly social as she or he associates with multiple racial groups, unlike his or her monoracial peers. Thus, if we problematize inconsistency, we would predict that inconsistency is associated with differences in school belonging and engagement. In contrast, if context-oriented theories are correct, then inconsistent identifiers might instead simply be expressing the identity that provides the most comfort in the different social environments of their schools and homes. In that scenario, inconsistency would be expected to have no effect on social outcomes. In the right two panels of Table 6 we test these hypotheses for our school belonging and engagement outcomes.

Again, model I in each of the nested models summarizes the results of a multiple regression that controls only for consistency in racial and ethnic identities. Racial identity consistency is significantly associated with higher levels of school belonging for belonging but not for engagement, lending initial support to stability-oriented theories that inconsistency is associated with social marginality. The addition of our identity measures (model II), however, eliminates that statistically significant association, and these results hold with the addition of control variables. Thus, net of demographic differences, identifying inconsistently with regard to race has no significant effect on any of our emotional and social outcomes. In sum, baseline models offer no evidence to support notions that racial consistency is either harmful or beneficial for individuals. There is evidence, however, that ethnic inconsistency may be associated with depressive symptoms, but our sampling strategy means those results may be due to confounding Hispanic ethnicity and ethnic inconsistency.

Even when multiracial identification decisions do affect outcomes, effects are both substantively

Table 6. Regression of Depression, Belonging, and Engagement on Racial Self-identification (N = 1,942) in Models I, II, and III.

	Depression			Belonging			Engagement		
	I	II	III	I	II	III	I	II	III
<i>Racial and ethnic consistency</i>									
Racially inconsistent (reference)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Racially consistent	-1.03 (0.65)	-0.64 (0.96)	-0.80 (1.14)	0.85 (0.33)**	0.45 (0.53)	0.49 (0.52)	0.28 (0.37)	-0.51 (0.49)	0.49 (0.52)
Inconsistent Hispanic	1.42 (0.66)*	2.24 (0.64)**	1.85 (0.65)**	-0.09 (0.35)	-0.25 (0.42)	-0.25 (0.42)	-0.30 (0.34)	-0.41 (0.39)	-0.25 (0.42)
<i>Racial identities</i>									
Single race, multiracial parent	—	-1.67 (0.91) [†]	-1.1 (1.11)	—	0.70 (0.60)	0.63 (0.61)	—	1.01 (0.54) [†]	0.63 (0.61)
White only in at least one context	—	-1.52 (0.62)*	-1.14 (1.18)	—	0.27 (0.34)	0.45 (0.51)	—	-0.12 (0.32)	0.45 (0.51)
White and other race	—	-0.34 (0.71)	-0.11 (0.94)	—	0.33 (0.41)	0.44 (0.47)	—	0.46 (0.37)	0.44 (0.47)
Interviewer-assessed race	—	-0.64 (0.96)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
White	—	-0.25 (1.15)	—	—	—	-0.08 (0.40)	—	—	-0.08 (0.40)
Non-white (reference)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>									
Male	—	-2.39 (0.5)**	-2.39 (0.5)**	—	—	0.29 (0.25)	—	—	0.29 (0.25)
Age	—	0.57 (0.14)**	0.57 (0.14)**	—	—	-0.25 (0.08)**	—	—	-0.25 (0.08)**
First generation	—	-1.39 (0.88)	-1.39 (0.88)	—	—	0.57 (0.59)	—	—	0.57 (0.59)
Second generation	—	0.30 (1.26)	0.30 (1.26)	—	—	0.41 (0.46)	—	—	0.41 (0.46)
Fair/poor health (1 = yes)	—	5.26 (1.21)**	5.26 (1.21)**	—	—	-1.78 (0.54)**	—	—	-1.78 (0.54)**
Religiosity (4-point scale)	—	-0.49 (0.38)	-0.49 (0.38)	—	—	0.36 (0.17)*	—	—	0.36 (0.17)*
<i>Family structure</i>									
Married parents (reference)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Single parents	—	0.7 (-0.83)	0.7 (-0.83)	—	—	-0.05 (-0.41)	—	—	-0.05 (-0.41)
Cohabiting parents	—	0.36 (-1.01)	0.36 (-1.01)	—	—	1.22 (-0.60)*	—	—	1.22 (-0.60)*
Lives with both biological parents (1 = yes)	—	-0.14 (-0.58)	-0.14 (-0.58)	—	—	0.35 (-0.31)	—	—	0.35 (-0.31)
<i>Family socioeconomic status</i>									
Mother's education	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
College (reference)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
High school or GED	—	0.22 (-0.58)	0.22 (-0.58)	—	—	-0.03 (-0.28)	—	—	-0.03 (-0.28)
Less than high school	—	0.38 (-0.90)	0.38 (-0.90)	—	—	-0.83 (-0.63)	—	—	-0.83 (-0.63)
Family income	—	-0.01 (-0.01)	-0.01 (-0.01)	—	—	0.00 (0.00)	—	—	0.00 (0.00)
R ²	.005	.014	.999	.005	.006	.067	.003	.010	.049

Source: National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.

[†]p ≤ .1 *p ≤ .05 **p ≤ .01 ***p ≤ .001

small and statistically weak. Identifying with a single race and including white in one's multiracial identity are each associated with lower levels of depressive symptoms, suggesting that claiming a privileged white identity may be beneficial for respondents. Those associations become nonsignificant when we include interviewer assessment (the significant association returns if we remove that variable from the model III), indicating that it is not the person's claiming of whiteness that provides the benefit but rather the fact that others see and interact with that person as white in their daily routine. We believe this supports the assertion that white privilege, in this case, is not taken by the self-identifying individual but rather granted via interactions with the outside world.

In Table 7, we continue the analytic strategy of Table 6 but turn to academic achievement as our outcome. The baseline model yields no significant association between identity consistency and GPA. Accounting for racial identity types shows marginal associations between reporting a white-only identity at least once and GPA (0.13, $p < .10$) and between a multiracial identity that includes white and a higher GPA (0.17, $p < .05$). Model III adds the same controls for social background characteristics as in Table 6, in addition to the socioemotional outcomes, which are significantly associated with academic achievement. The evidence of an association between identity consistency and academic achievement once again becomes statistically insignificant with the inclusion of social background variables.

Overall, across all four outcomes, results support the argument that racial and ethnic identity inconsistency has no meaningful impact on emotional, social, or academic outcomes. While a single racial identity appears to have a positive effect on mental health, that effect is substantially mediated after accounting for social background characteristics. Single-race identity is also only weakly associated with school engagement. It does not appear that identity consistency is advantageous for multiracial students. Indeed, there is some evidence that inconsistency—specifically via the ability and willingness to claim a white identity at times (and/or be classified as such by others)—is associated with better mental health. Similarly, inconsistency is also associated, albeit weakly, with higher GPAs for multiracial students net of background characteristics. Thus, inconsistency is not marginal: It is common and insignificant.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Survey researchers generally take racial and ethnic identity consistency across multiple contexts for granted. Recently, however, both qualitative (Brunsma and Rockquemore 2001) and quantitative (Doyle and Kao 2007; Harris and Sim 2002) work has shown that expressing an inconsistent racial identity is common for multiracial individuals, and scholars have cautioned that researchers should more carefully consider how context affects racial identification. In this paper, we extend that research, exploring whether and how racial and ethnic identity consistency affects both social and educational outcomes. We find that, in general, it does not.

The good news is that our findings do not affect commonly studied outcomes in adolescence. Thus, the rich empirical literature on multiracials' attitudes, behaviors, and experiences has not ignored an important aspect of their racial-ethnic identity by not directly considering identity inconsistency. Nonetheless, we believe that the more important conclusion is the need for researchers to incorporate newer, more accurate theories of multiracial identity development into their empirical work (for one effort with regard to health, see Woo et al. 2011).

Stability-oriented theories of multiracial identity in the United States often pathologize multiracial individuals as experiencing a "crisis" of identity and societal marginality because they do not fit into a single racial box. Only recently have theorists and researchers considered the possibility that multiracial identity provides flexibility and an ability to straddle and/or cross "borders" and that this could prove beneficial. In an even more recent advance, scholars have extended that idea to consider the *normalcy* of identity fluidity, its causes, and why it may matter for the person in question. Where earlier theories argue that multiracial individuals are best served by a stable racial identity, newer research posits that stability is overrated. Until this study, however, no scholar has attempted empirical analysis to adjudicate between those two positions. Our results indicate that the context-oriented theories of racial identity are more accurate: Identity stability appears to be highly overrated for multiracial individuals.

We believe that the quantitative data show that such inconsistent identification is an example of normal fluidity of racial identity for multiracial

Table 7. Regression of GPA on Racial Self-identification, Socioeconomic Status, Gender, Age, Religiosity, and General Health (N = 1,942).

	Model I	Model II	Model III
	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)
<i>Racial and ethnic consistency</i>			
Racially inconsistent (reference)	—	—	—
Racially consistent	-0.03 (0.07)	-0.14 (0.10)	-0.16 (0.11)
Inconsistent Hispanic	-0.06 (0.08)	-0.08 (0.09)	0.05 (0.08)
<i>Racial identities</i>			
Single race, multiracial parent		0.19 (0.15)	0.08 (0.15)
White only in at least one context		0.13 (0.07) [†]	0.10 (0.11)
White and other race		0.17 (0.08)*	0.13 (0.09)
<i>Interviewer-assessed race</i>			
White			0.00 (0.09)
Non-white	—	—	—
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>			
Male			-0.22 (0.05)***
Age			-0.02 (0.02)
First generation			0.27 (0.11)**
Second generation			-0.03 (0.10)
Fair/poor health (1 = yes)			-0.21 (0.11) [†]
Religiosity (4-point scale)			-0.03 (0.04)
<i>Family structure</i>			
Married parents (reference)	—	—	—
Single parents			-0.03 (0.08)
Cohabiting parents			-0.03 (0.11)
Lives with both biological parents (1 = yes)			0.17 (0.06)**
<i>Family socioeconomic status</i>			
Mother's education			
College (reference)	—	—	—
High school or GED			-0.06 (0.06)
Less than high school			-0.29 (0.08)***
Family income			0.00 (0.00)*
<i>Scales</i>			
Acceptance scale			0.02 (0.01)**
Engagement scale			0.01 (0.01) [†]
Depression scale			-0.01 (0.00)***
R ²	.001	.004	.131

Source: National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.

[†]p ≤ .1 *p ≤ .05 ***p ≤ .01 **p ≤ .001

individuals. Our models expand previous work on multiracial identity inconsistency in another important direction. While we find that racial identity consistency does not significantly affect any outcomes, we demonstrate that it is possible to include Hispanic ethnic identity and ethnic inconsistency in studies of identity inconsistency. This is important because

students from Hispanic backgrounds may experience racial identity formation differently because of the unique histories of racial admixture and racial classification in the United States vis-à-vis Latin America, which may explain the association between ethnic inconsistency and depression, although that could also be an artifact of Hispanics

reporting higher levels of depressive symptoms than other racial-ethnic groups in surveys. Further study focused on the experience of identity inconsistency for Hispanics compared with non-Hispanics would help us understand whether and how ethnic inconsistency differs from racial inconsistency.

While the plethora of identity options can be daunting and sample sizes are small, research on multiracial identity can and should examine who inconsistently identifies and whether that matters. Our lack of significant associations between inconsistency and outcomes may be because, regardless of racial background, adolescence is a time of identity change and development. A changing identity may be more acceptable and less stigmatizing during adolescence than at other stages of the life course. Future research looking outside of adolescence is warranted.

In general, we find that even some recent theories of racial identity incorrectly assume that inconsistency is a measure not of the salience of one's identity in a given moment but rather an internal struggle to find one's "true" identity. Instead, more nuanced work on racial identity points to a multidimensionality and fluidity of race depending on the context and individual background of the person in question (Root 2003; Sellers et al. 1998). We find that (in)consistency does not affect emotional well-being, and future research should examine other outcomes, such as friendship patterns or participating in risk behaviors. Finally, our sample is limited in its ability to fully identify a third type of multiracial student: the consistently monoracial student who is from two different racial backgrounds but identifies solely with one (included as consistent, multiracial). Survey methods restrict our ability to identify all such students, and their particular identity might actually be linked to emotional well-being even while inconsistency is not.

It is taken as fact among sociologists that race is a social construct. As such, inconsistency in racial identity, as many qualitative and some quantitative scholars have already argued, should be viewed as a natural part of individuals' experience of that social construct. This study further demonstrates that consistency of identity may be neither an important nor necessary part of living as a multiracial person in today's society. Race is real in its effects, but inconsistent identity is not.

NOTES

1. In results available upon request, their inclusion does not change the substantive findings in our

models, nor does excluding the Hispanic population entirely.

2. While there is a possibility that inconsistent monoracial identifiers were not born to interracial parents, we include them for two reasons. First, it is impossible to know their "true" racial identity and there is little reason to suspect that adolescents would be more likely to consciously lie about their racial identity as opposed to other questions on a survey. Second, although many of the theories of racial inconsistency discussed above were created for multiracial individuals, these theories should also apply to monoracial adolescents with inconsistent racial identities. Theories relating identity inconsistency and outcomes do not presume a biological explanation for those relations—rather, it is the experience of feeling betwixt and between multiple racial-ethnic groups. Results excluding inconsistent monoracial identities are largely the same (included in online data supplement) and are largely similar. For school belonging, inconsistency has a small but significant negative association. Future research should explore the mechanism behind those results.
3. In results available on request, interaction terms for ethnic and racial inconsistency were nonsignificant.
4. The original Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale included a question asking the respondent how often "you felt depressed." Add Health added a question asking how often the respondent "felt life was not worth living."
5. In models not shown, we excluded interviewer-assessed race, and the white-only category remained statistically significant even after the inclusion of every other control variable.

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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

The online data supplements are available at <http://sre.sagepub.com/supplemental>.

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