

## **Abstract**

The number of Americans who identify as multiracial has grown steadily since the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1967 that bans against interracial marriage are unconstitutional, and the 2000 census gave respondents the option to choose more than one race. Louisiana Creole people of color are a multiracial group with long historical and geographic roots. The Creole Heritage Center recognizes Creoles of color as people who represent intergenerational mixtures of French and/or Spanish and/or Native American heritages and African heritage.

Multiracial people face many challenges related to identity and social treatment. The stress caused by racial prejudice and discrimination is associated with health problems, particularly mental illness and psychiatric disability. Some studies on minority identity suggest that a strong ethnic identity may help protect people from mental health problems caused by racial stress. Because of their intergenerational history and geographical proximity to each other, Louisiana Creoles of color are a multiracial people with potentially high ethnic identity. However, past research on multiracial people has focused primarily on Black/White racial identity. There has been relatively little research on Creole people to guide health policy or supports for Creoles with mental health problems.

This dissertation research explored how Creole people of color form their identity and how racial stress affects their mental health. These dynamics were investigated via primarily qualitative methods, specifically a constructivist grounded theory analysis of data from a focus group, a group interview of a Creole family, and 18 individual semi-structured interviews with persons who identified as Creole. Data analysis yielded five major themes focusing on identity development, the place of race in Creole experience, negative social treatment, stress and mental health, and community. The Creoles of color who participated in this research tended to form their racial/ethnic identity differently than other multiracial people do, according to the literature. Additionally, their identity was more salient than the identity of other multiracial people. The meaning and importance of Creole identity to these participants and its relationship to racial stress and mental health is discussed, centering the words of the research participants.