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All Mixed Up: An Exploration of Multiracial Belonging

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All Mixed Up:

An Exploration of Multiracial Belonging

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This honors thesis by Julia Sant is approved.

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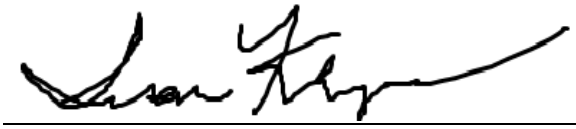

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Abstract

As the number of multiracial people continues to grow in the United States, so too has interest in understanding how they experience the world (Jackson, 2009). Existing research about multiracial individuals has explored the complexities of their racial and ethnic identity development, identity saliency, and mental health. This thesis explores perceptions of belonging among multiracial people. Data was collected through semi-structured Zoom interviews of young adults (n=3) at a large university in the Pacific Northwest. Data was analyzed using thematic coding and findings were triangulated among multiple researchers. The results of this study suggest that multiracial people may experience isolation from those around them and their culture, a need to justify their identities to others, and belonging when in community with other multiracial people.

Keywords: multiracial, belonging, mixed-race, racial identity, qualitative

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Introduction

My family, friends, and community seldom discussed race when I was growing up. It wasn't until I was in high school that I began to reflect on how my experiences may have been racialized, though it wasn't until college that I was able to confidently claim my identity as a multiracial person. That realization has prompted several years of deep reflection on my own identity formation and numerous projects focused on better understanding my experiences with race and ethnicity. Upon deciding to study social work and pursue a career in social service and research, I have realized that my passion is learning and educating about multiracial people and their experiences. Throughout my undergraduate degree, I have spent time attempting to further my own knowledge about current multiracial scholarship. To my surprise, I have found significant gaps in this area of racial studies, particularly in the ways multiracial individuals experience and don't experience belonging in different spaces.

The present study aims to address sense of belonging among multiracial people through exploratory interviews with multiracial young adults. Multiracial individuals are on track to comprise one fifth of the United States population by 2050 and have been increasingly studied to understand their identity development processes over the last several decades (Jackson, 2009). Family dynamics, ethnic involvement, and community are all factors understood to contribute to their identity development, though little has been studied to understand the potential impact multiracial identification may have on an individual's sense of belonging (Mohanty, 2013).

Researchers have found that claiming more than one racial identity and the possibility of denial of entry into identity groups may contribute to multiracial individuals' decreased sense of belonging (Phinney & Alipuria, 2006). Current research into racial identity development and its impact on feelings of belonging or isolation are limited in their inclusion of multiracial

perspectives, often simplifying race into specific, binary categories (Rockquemor et al., 2009). The reasoning for this study is to explore and identify the complex experience of belonging for multiracial people. This study provides exploratory research that may inform further research into the social and developmental needs of multiracial individuals.

Why Belonging?

Belonging as a concept has been a focus of racial studies, specifically because its presence or absence may be a predisposing factor in determining an individual's mental health, a group or community's inclusion of diverse individuals, and larger trends in racial equity. Despite this, multiracial people are not often studied to determine their self-perception of belonging. Often, belonging is described as an aspect of the identity development process for multiracial people but has seldom been studied after multiracial people initially come to terms with their identity as multiracial (Gaither, 2015). This study begins to fill this gap in research by directly exploring the perceptions of belonging among multiracial people.

Literature Review

The objective of this literature review is to recognize current and historical research about multiracial people to better understand the factors that may influence their sense of belonging. Initial research about racial minorities and belonging revealed that the identity development process may be influential in feelings of belonging across the lifespan (Deters, 1997; Newcomb, 2017). The purpose of the first section of the literature review was to identify factors and experiences in the racial and ethnic identity development of multiracial people. The second section identifies the need for further research into multiracial experiences, as it outlines how multiracial people differ from other racial groups in their perceptions, experiences of discrimination, and mental health struggles.

Racial and Ethnic Identity Development

Multiracial people are cohesive in their similar multifaceted identities, yet they are heterogenous in their individual ethnic identification who have experienced a "historic" lack of representation as a racial group (Barnes et al., 2014). Racial scholars have yet to reach a consensus on which terms should be used to identify those who belong to multiple racial groups. Multiracial, mixed race, and biracial have emerged as interchangeable terms, "multiracial" includes more potential racial combinations than biracial and is considered the most progressive of the three terms (Daniel, 2002). Mixed race, though often used, denotes harmful racial identifiers as "mulatto" (Daniel, 2002). All three terms resist binary racialization with their inclusion of prefixes "multi-," "mixed," and "bi-." In this research, the term multiracial will be used to describe individuals who belong to one or more monoracial group.

Previous studies have explored both multiracial and transracial adoptee identity development, with specific attention paid to transracial adoptees feelings of belonging and

inclusion. Transracial adoptees, whose ethnic identity and well-being have been studied, navigate similar experiences with multiracial individuals during adolescent identity development (Kim et al., 2010). Multiracial people and transracial adoptees navigate multigroup membership in their familial and cultural identities, while developing their own identities outside of their assigned racial or ethnic group. While both groups share obstacles to forming their racial and ethnic identities, like lacking a shared racial identity with their parents and extended family, many factors distinguish these groups from one another (Mohanty, 2013). Transracial adoptees experienced increased feelings of belonging when exposed to opportunities for ethnic socialization and cultural activities (Mohanty, 2013). With that information in mind, multiracial people, who similarly experience a difference in identity from their parents, may experience similar cultural alienation as transracial adoptees do.

Multiracial individuals face unique challenges in their ethnic and racial identity formation processes, Gibbs (1987) describes the difficulty of managing ethnic acculturation with multiple racial or ethnic identities, as it has been shown to produce higher rates of victimization and isolation from "parent cultures." Parental awareness of race and racialization, ethnic socialization, and community of origin have been identified as key facets of multiracial identity development (Crawford et al., 2008). These factors, compounded by a lack of representation in media and racial discourse, impact multiracial youth's ability to form their racial identities as easily as their monoracial peers (Wee, 2021). Having multiple identities to negotiate, multiracial people have been found to struggle to form a coherent sense of self (Mohanty, 2015). Erik Erikson's (1968) theory on psychosocial development describes the importance of developing salient identities during adolescence. If youth fail to form salient identities during adolescence, they are more likely to experience "role confusion" in adulthood (Erikson, 1968). Youth who

don't succeed in this task of adolescence are at risk of not thriving by mainstream standards, having lower rates of academic achievement and financial opportunity (Hudley & Wakefield, 2007; Grantham et al., 2003). Minority adolescents face more obstacles than their majority peers in forming racial identities, but multiracial youth experience specific challenges that prevent them from forming salient racial identities (Gullan et al., 2011).

Racial and ethnic socialization, as two of the largest influences on racial identity formation, happens at the individual, familial, and communal levels (Mohanty, 2013; Poston, 1990). Several theoretical frameworks emerge as possible processes of racial and ethnic socialization for minority children. Mohanty (2013) describes a three-step socialization process: first, children are socialized to mainstream American society, then, socialization to the child's ethnic culture occurs, and finally, the child is prepared to be aware of racial bias and prejudice. Rosenberg (1981) proposed that if the racial context is similar or dissimilar to the child's racial and ethnic identities, it may affect their self-esteem. Families are considered the "primary institution" for modeling children's identity development, but multiracial children of interracial parents are socialized into two different racial groups. Young 2multiracial people describe feeling "culturally homeless" and a sense of "betweenness" or "otherness" within their families, as they do not see racial or ethnic representation in their parents or extended families (Daniel, 2002; Jackson, 2009; Wee et al., 2021). To promote inclusion and specific comprehension of multiracial experiences, continued research into feelings of self-esteem, belonging, and mental health of multiracial individuals is vital. Centering the experiences of multiracial individuals outside of their proximity to monoracial normativity is important to not generalize monoracial experiences to multiracial individuals.

A Necessity for Further Research

Since the United States Census shifted to include the option to select more than one race in the year 2000, multiracial scholarship has grown tremendously (Johnston & Nadal, 2010). Federal recognition of multiracial people has not only prompted research into the experiences of multiracial people, but also new terms to describe those experiences. Johnston and Nadal (2010) describe the concept of "monoracism", which is used to designate oppression and erasure of people who identify outside of a singular racial group (e.g., Black or White) because of held beliefs in mutually exclusive racial groups. Monoracism encompasses the specific experience of multiracial people and sheds light on the multifaceted forms of racist and microaggressive behaviors they experience.

Multiracial people's experiences of racism are compounded by systemic exclusion from conversations about race, racism, and spaces designed to be welcoming for people of color (Jones & Rogers, 2022). Historic cultural erasure of multiracial people in the form of harmful classifications as *mullato* and deeply racist policies as the "one drop rule" and "blood quantum" continue to influence the inclusion or exclusion of multiracial people (Daniel, 2002). Erasure functions as a means of invalidation, denial, and exclusion of multiracial people and their experiences. While other minority racial groups experience lower rates of mental health for a variety of reasons including racially motivated persecution or discrimination, multiracial people experience increased levels of depression than other racial groups (Fisher et. al., 2014). Multiracial people's wellbeing is perhaps influenced then by the compounding experiences of racism, exclusion, and cultural erasure.

Other factors influencing multiracial wellbeing are proximity to culture, group membership, identity saliency, and perhaps sense of belonging. Previous studies assessing

multiracial individuals found that membership to multiple identity groups complicates the identity development process (Phinney & Alipuria, 1992). Erik Erikson's (1968) understandings on the impact of identity development on socioemotional maturation have informed modern study of the relationship between racial identity and mental health outcomes (Syed & Fish, 2018). As Erikson argues, developing salient identities in adolescence may positively impact the development of self-esteem and intimacy in adulthood (Erikson, 1968). As found in Phinney and Alipuria (1992), multiracial children experience more complex identity development processes because of their membership to multiple groups.

Multiracial people are introduced to their socially ascribed identities as they come to terms with their racial identities, while also coping with feeling different from their referent groups (Wakefield & Hudley, 2007). This is especially relevant to multiracial people who are White passing, as their perceived racial identity may be different than how they personally identify or are perceived by members of majority racial groups. Newcomb (2017) explains this concept of "racial miscategorization" as "being racially categorized in a way that is different from how one identifies racially". Racial miscategorization–whether because of one's status as White passing or otherwise racially ambiguous–may contribute to multiracial exclusion from monoracial spaces and groups.

Being denied membership from multiple racial groups and being unable to commit to a group has been correlated to increased anxiety and feelings of isolation (Albuja et al., 2019; Ellemers et al., 2002). Membership can be thought of as being included and welcomed into a space, community, or group of people. Not only to multiracial people navigate membership to conceptual racial communities, but membership may be complicated in their immediate and extended families. Multiracial children have "shared and distinct" experiences with their parents,

who may identify as a different race than they do (Samuels, 2009). Children of inter-ethnic parents, especially those who do not share the racial identity of their parents, were found to have increased stress relative to children who share the racial identity of their parents (King & Pearce-Morris, 2011).

Research suggests that racial and ethnic socialization, parental awareness of race, and exposure to like-identified people influence the racial identity development process of multiracial people. A multiracial person's sense of belonging may be influenced by these factors, though existing research has yet to focus on perceptions of belonging outside of the identity development process. This study begins to fill this gap by exploring feelings of belonging as perceived by young multiracial adults.

Methods

Research Design

This study explores the experiences of multiracial people using a qualitative approach. In-depth interviews were conducted with multiracial young people (n=3) to determine the influence their racial identities have on their sense of belonging. Participants were interviewed between January and March of 2022 using a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A). This study and its methods were approved by the IRB at Seattle University. In accordance with their guidelines for ethical research, any identifiable information has been altered to maintain participant confidentiality. All participants were given informed consent prior to the start of each interview (see Appendix B). The interviews were conducted and recorded using Zoom and transcribed using talk-to-text software. Interviews were analyzed using thematic coding in Microsoft Word and Excel.

Sampling

Participants in this study were 20 and 22 years old. Their specific demographics, as relevant to the purposes of this study, are listed in the table (A) below.

Table A: ***Participant Demographics***

Name and Pronouns	Age	Race	Ethnicity
Annika (She/Her)	22	Multiracial	White / South Asian
Lily (She/Her)	20	Multiracial	White / Korean
Nico (He/Him)	20	Multiracial	Mexican / Chinese

Table A: Participant names have been changed for confidentiality. Participant ages, racial identities, and ethnic identities were self-reported.

Participants were identified using convenience sampling. To recruit participants, a flyer with information about the study was emailed to multiracial student organizations at several universities in Washington State, California, and Oregon, where the flyer was then distributed to organization members (see Appendix C). Universities were selected to ensure the study would be accessible to multiracial people between 18 and 25 years old. Young adults were centered in this study because they are at a point of transition into identities independent of their caregivers and are beginning to emerge into adulthood. This time of transition potentially gives participants more immediate experiences to draw on in communicating their racial identities and racialized experiences and feelings.

Each participant was given a $15.00 gift card for their time. All participants were aware of any risks, benefits, and compensation involved with their participation in the interviews. Oral consent was obtained prior to the start of each interview and participants were given the option to end the interview at any time, though none did. Interviews lasted between 20 and 45 minutes (Interview Guide, Appendix A).

Data Analysis

Researchers interpreted data using grounded theory to examine the interviews for emerging concepts and themes (Gilgun, 2019). This inductive method was selected for several reasons. The main reason for using grounded theory is to generate an understanding, as this is still a concept that is understudied. Given the limited research into multiracial experiences, it is important to let the data speak for itself. Second, both researchers involved in the study are closely positioned to multiracial people. Grounded theory aids in minimizing the introduction of personal bias or presumptions about participant attitudes or beliefs and centers the experiences of those who participated in the study (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The personal experiences of both

researchers will no doubt influence this study, though the process of triangulation in conjunction with grounded theory will work to lessen that influence.

Both the primary researcher and advisor coded each interview independently. During the first round of coding, researchers spent time thematically coding the interviews. Several meetings were held to compare and triangulate initial codes and to eventually develop a preliminary codebook. The second round of coding, each researcher grouped the codes based on theme and commonality. Researchers also met to discuss any interpretive differences until a consensus was reached on meaning and definitions of terms, codes, and themes. The data analysis process produced seven parent codes in total, but due to limited time, the results here will focus on three.

This study is intended to provide preliminary research that will be used in a larger, mixed-methods study into how multiracial people experience belonging. While this sample is limited in size and demographics (age, education level, gender, location), it is an important first step in beginning to understand the experiences of multiracial people. The goal of this study is not to generalize its findings to all multiracial people, rather, it should serve as a preliminary understanding to inform future work. The findings were reached by triangulating between two researchers to enhance their reliability.

Standpoint

As a multiracial person myself, my research questions reflect a personal desire for understanding my own experiences. I don't aim for objectivity in my research, I aim to honor my perspectives and by centering the experiences of the interview participants instead of my own. As an emerging social worker, I found myself challenged by the task of neutrality in each interview. Hearing stories of isolation, belonging, and confusion triggered my own feelings

about my identity and my trained response of validation and affirmation. In this project, I situate myself as a student of the qualitative research process and of compartmentalization. I hope it may function as a source of solidarity and affirmation for other multiracial people.

Findings

Participants “Annika”, “Nico”, and “Lily” were interviewed to ascertain where and how they derive a sense of belonging as multiracial individuals. Though the interview was written and structured to discuss belonging, all participants noted experiences and feelings related to the absence of belonging. Those experiences have been represented by the theme of “isolation and exclusion”. Each participant also demonstrated or explicitly justified how they identify, often following up a proclamation of their racial identities with their ethnic identities. The feeling and experience of explaining “why” they are able to identify as multiracial, people of color, or with certain groups is falls under the theme of “justifying and explaining identity”. The third theme identified in the interviews is “importance of community”, which encompasses how participants felt with other multiracial people, in the multiracial student union at their school, and how they connect with others who share the same “mix” as them.

Isolation and Exclusion

> “I just kind of struggle to feel like I'm one of them.” (Annika, 22)

As Annika summarizes, each participant described ways they felt isolated or excluded from different groups or communities in their lives. Participants experienced isolation by different people including their family, friends, peers, and themselves. Also represented in this theme is the feeling of being isolated from their ethnic culture.

Isolated among Peers

Isolation occurred for some as realizing that they were the only person around them who was not White. Lily, spoke of the spaces she has found herself in throughout her life by describing the racial identities of her peers:

> "There is… like no people of color in the classroom except for… like me I guess and then another Asian girl. It was just interesting to like realize that… for the first time be like… 'Oh my god, everybody around me is White.'
>
> I had this group of male friends that were like mostly White, and I definitely felt kind of… like not a token 'cause they like they're just my friends… but like I felt like an odd one out. I also have another group of friends who were all Asian women and I still feel kind of like an odd one out." (Lily, 20)

Lily's experience of isolation among two racial groups (White and Asian) that represent each "side" of her racial identity reflects an emerging concept of in-group isolation. In her interview, Lily was apprehensive to identify herself as a person of color, but first realized her racial identity in a moment when she was surrounded by White people and realized she was separate in some way from that group. The realization of separate-ness from peers and friends was described by Nico, too:

> "There was once an incident, I was in college my first year trying to meet new people you know trying to make some friends and I was talking to this girl who was Mexican, and she was just like 'Do you speak Spanish?' and I said 'No' and she said 'Oh, so you're barely Mexican' and it's like [makes painful face] ouch." (Nico, 20)

Nico's visually and verbally described pain at being told he is "barely Mexican" from someone who identifies as Mexican is another form of in-group isolation from those around him. Though he was initially perceived by the girl as someone who may see him as a member of her group, he was ultimately excluded from that identity based on him not knowing Spanish.

Being unable to "relate" to their friends made participants feel a sense of betweenness in their identities and communities. Lily discussed at length how being surrounded by monoracial friends–some Asian and some White–made her feel:

> "I feel like I can't relate to my Asian friends at all and then sometimes I can't relate to my white friends at all… I'm stuck in the middle… When I'm with these other Asian people I just feel like a fake Asian... like I never feel like a fake White person. There's definitely that feeling of being… uh not enough, primarily for around Asian people." (Lily, 20)

Lily touches on another aspect of peer-enforced isolation: feeling as if she's "enough" of her identity when in the presence of multiracial people. This implies a connection between how much a multiracial person is perceived to be a member of an ethnic or racial group they belong to and how they feel they belong to that group. Lily, who was not perceived as Asian "enough" in her primarily monoracial Asian communities, felt isolation rather than belonging among her Asian friends. Interestingly, she notes that she doesn't ever feel this way in the presence of White people. Instead, she feels more confident in identifying as Asian among her White friends than she does among other Asian people. This isolation from a perceived group speaks to the ways multiracial people may find themselves belonging or in this case, not belonging to either "side" of their identities.

For Annika, feeling "overlooked" as a multiracial person and South Asian person manifested as a form of isolation in school and community settings.

> "I just remember I think especially in high school feeling kind of overlooked or ignored about that part of my identity of just like people not really realizing or acknowledging that I am multiracial, and that one part of my identity is as significant as the other, um but I didn't really have any like words to talk about it really." (Annika, 22)

Though she demonstrates confidence in claiming each side of her identities as equally "significant", the absence of acknowledgement of her identity isolated her from being recognized for parts of her identity she holds salient. Annika attributed this overlooking of her identity to her being "White passing". She discussed the ways she feels people perceive and understand her identity based upon her phenotype and name:

> "I'm just always being met with surprise and disbelief when I say I'm half Indian. I think almost every single time I'll tell people, or it'll come up because my name is obviously a non-White name and if people are Indian, they normally recognize it as an Indian or South Asian name. And so, then it'll come up in conversation and sometimes it's just a good conversation but there's always yeah there's always an element of surprise which is kind of inevitable." (Annika, 22)

For Annika, feeling a sense of belonging in her identity is diminished by the way she is not perceived as belonging to the Indian community by her peers. Instead of feeling a sense of belonging to her ethnic community, she feels isolated by her perceived identity.

Isolated among Family

For all participants, schisms between "sides" of their families were discussed at length. The differences in culture, language, and atmosphere of visiting each side of their extended family contributed to feelings of isolation instead of belonging. Annika discussed language as a way she felt disconnected from her family. Both of her parents are immigrants to the United States, her mother from Switzerland and her father from India. In her interview, she says

> "I speak French, so on that side of the family I can speak the language, but I remember the last time we visited I think my aunt pointed out that I had an accent… but that was

> devastating to me like the idea that I could have an accent in one of my native languages is–was really upsetting." (Annika, 22)

Annika's identification of French, the national language of Switzerland, as one of her "native languages" shows the significance of linguistic connection to identity belonging. As it was "devastating" for her to hear that she had an accent in her native language, that devastation may indicate a barrier to truly belonging to that side of her family and culture. Isolation among family members also exists in how Lily views each "side" of her family, she writes that her *"*family feels like two separate parts… it's definitely, like, this huge divide between like 'We're gonna go see dad's' and 'We're gonna go see mom's side of the family.'" Isolation is similarly a feeling of division and separation between the two extended families, as Lily articulates.

Annika similarly struggled to describe her extended family feeling cohesive, saying, "I definitely remember as a kid kind of feeling like I didn't really belong anywhere." Her interview focused much on her relationship and closeness to both sides of her family. Her feelings surrounding her cultural upbringing and racial socialization relate back to feelings of disconnection with aspects of her family and relatedly, what she views as her culture. Her previously mentioned "devastation" for having an accent in her native language (French) may be another indication that cultural disconnections from extended family lead to feelings of isolation among multiracial people.

Self-Isolating

Annika and Nico described ways in which they exclude themselves from situations where they may be isolated or excluded by members of their ethnic or racial groups for a variety of reasons. Nico said that he has "not even looked into the Chinese Student Association or like the

Hispanic Student Association" because he doesn't "know that I'd fit in as well there." Annika similarly has not investigated identity-based clubs that she could potentially join, saying

> "A lot of things can be a little more in my head or just out how I perceive myself and also that I think when there would be a situation where I would feel kind of more out of place, I tend to just avoid it so something I'm personally not super proud of is I haven't joined any of the cultural clubs on campus that would be more for Indian students because I just personally felt like I wasn't I wouldn't belong." (Annika, 22)

Perhaps self-isolating serves as a means of protection from being misinterpreted or not perceived correctly for Annika and Nico. There appeared to be a disconnect between how Annika describes her confidence in her racial identity. Though previously she mentioned feeling confident in both sides of her identity being "as significant as the other", in this quote, she does not feel that she would belong in Indian student cultural clubs. This may be attributable to the ways she's experienced exclusion from similar spaces in the past, which would indicate a long-term effect of in-group exclusion on multiracial peoples' sense of belonging to that group. Nico's lack of inquiry into the Chinese Student Association and Hispanic Student Association at his university similarly symbolizes a disconnection between his identity saliency and feeling a sense of belonging to either side of his racial/ethnic identity. Regardless of their reasons, both participants exclude themselves from joining cultural groups that they could identify with.

Culturally Isolated

Not having a strong connection to their ethnic culture was one of the most discussed factors in feeling isolated for participants. Annika described herself as a "cultural hodgepodge",

that her feeling that the lack of cultural socialization from her Indian father and Swiss mother contributed to her feeling isolated within both of her identities as a Swiss and Indian woman.

> "I'm a little bit culturally isolated from that part of my… I was very much kind of a cultural hodgepodge. Um, and but not super familiar with cultural traditions from either with my parents so then I felt even more isolated from that part of my identity… There's cultural touchstones that you don't have like I'm not familiar with any popular culture, I didn't go to school so I don't have the history, I don't… so there's that sense of isolation. And then in India it's a step further because we also don't see them as often and I haven't visited India since I was much younger. Um, and so they'll come over occasionally, but I don't speak Hindi. They can speak English so we can communicate but there's that language that I don't have. So, if my dad is on the phone talking to the family then I won't necessarily understand what they're saying. Um, and again just like the cultural things I don't have much experience of, I don't have knowledge, um neither of my parents really brought many traditions with them. I think they were very much of the mindset that "we're in America so we'll do American things" but at the same time because now neither of them had grown up here I was also culturally isolated from my peers. So, I kind of felt like I wasn't much a part of a lot of different things… I just kind of struggle to feel like I'm one of them." (Annika, 22)

She later describes feeling isolated because she wasn't familiarized with American popular culture. Along with this, she felt isolated from her family in India because she doesn't see them as often nor does she speak their language, once again relating a distant proximity to culture to feelings of isolation. Reinforcing this isolation from her culture is Lily similarly linked

language to isolation, but went further to describe specific aspects of Korean culture that she feels disconnected from in her identity:

> "I'm really horrible at eating spicy food and like I really, I don't know how to speak Korean and I don't do all these Korean like trend things. I feel like maybe I haven't been doing enough as a Korean person. I should be more interested in my culture." (Lily, 20)

Lily's feeling of not "doing enough" to be connected to her culture indicates a lack of belonging to that culture. Her isolation from the linguistic aspects of being Korean, the ways she is not able to connect to Korean trends, and how she does not enjoy spicy foods the way she indicates is common among Korean people position her similarly to Annika in her cultural isolation. Those who culturally isolate the multiracial participants likely did not intend to isolate their family members, or friends, but the isolation is rather a result of behaviors, conversations, or indications that the multiracial person was not fully a part of the group based on their lack of cultural connection.

> "Feeling like I'm not kind of an imposter I think especially on the Indian side of the family um and just really wanting to have more of like be more grounded in the culture but not really being sure how to go about doing that." (Annika, 22)

Annika's cultural isolation also emerged in her feelings of feeling like an "imposter" among the Indian side of her family. She attributes this isolation directly to not being as connected to her culture as she would like to be, but her isolation also limits her in knowing how to connect.

> "I'm experiencing these negative aspects of my cultures, but I don't…I don't ever really feel a big part of either side… Getting a lot of negative aspects not just from monoracial

> people, but you know from people within my cultures and the places I'm supposed to belong." (Nico, 20)

Nico contextualized his feelings of cultural isolation by who he felt was isolating him. Noting that he felt isolated from "places I'm supposed to belong" indicates a desire to belong to his culture, to people who identify similarly, all while acknowledging the absence of belonging in these spaces.

Justifying and Explaining Identity

> "…there wasn't a mixed option or to be able to select two." (Lily, 20)

During the interviews, a pattern emerged of participants describing their ethnic identities immediately after sharing their racial identities. This was an unprompted description, which was connected to a larger theme of justifying and explaining their racial identities. The subcodes of explaining and rationalizing racial identities, appearance, cultural differences, and needing to explain the relationship to your family.

Explaining and Rationalizing Racial Identities

Participants' unprompted description of "why" they identify as multiracial was a universal feature of their interviews. Nico explained how his identity feels "complicated" and that he has struggled in the past with knowing how to identify himself.

> "I would describe myself… it's all complicated but I would describe myself as half Chinese half Mexican. I think it gets complicat– complicated sometimes because, you know with Mexican and Hispanic there's always lots of different definitions like what race am I? Am I– you know–White? Am I Asian? Usually, I just kind of checked Hispanic Latino, check the Asian box– I don't usually check you know White or Native

> American. None those really feel right with me, but I would personally identify as half Chinese and half Mexican." (Nico, 20)

On top of his described confusion–is he White? Asian? Hispanic Latino? His personal identity has not been reflected in measures of his racial and ethnic identity, which has contributed to his complicated feelings about his identity. This may be why he felt the need to explain his ethnic identity when asked about his racial identity. Similarly, Lily described how she "always" discloses her ethnicity to people, especially multiracial people, when asked about her racial identity:

> "I identify as a mixed person. Um, I'm half Korean and I'm half White. I don't really know. I always like after I say that to people especially people who are also mixed. I'm always like "Yeah, but my mom is the white one" so it's like you know like… I don't speak Korean, so I just thought so um… I always thought that was like a difference you know many people and so, yes, mixed." (Lily, 20)

Her perceived difference in parentage–that her mom is White, and her father is Korean–in her life has contributed to her lack of understanding of Korean cultural traditions, but also that she feels different from those who may also identify as White and Korean. Her rationalization of why she doesn't speak Korean, but also why she is multiracial may influence how she belongs in her identity. Despite her justification, she clearly states her identity as a "mixed person".

Annika also explained her ethnicity after describing her racial identity, though for her, not knowing that "mixed race" or "multiracial" were terms she was able to identify with was a barrier to identifying as multiracial at a younger age. She said:

> "I would say multiracial. I've used mixed race as well, but it wasn't really a word I was aware of growing up. I'm half white half South Asian." (Annika, 22)

Participants identified the times they have been asked to identify their racial identities as moments of needing to rationalize their racial identities. Lily expressed confusion when describing an experience in a high school club that was asking for demographic information.

> "I remember having to take a survey at the end of the year for like the engineering club to figure out what your ethnicity is… and you're like–like your identity. And there wasn't a mixed option or to be able to select two." (Lily, 20)

Nico, similarly, questioned how he should be counted when he helped his dad fill out a census form, asking himself, "what box do I check?" Relating to belonging, a feeling of confusion in explaining one's identity may limit their ability to claim their identity and feel a sense of belonging to who they perceive themselves to be. Not feeling represented in survey and census information made both Lily and Nico feel confused or conflicted in their identities and limited them in their ability to identify authentically and truthfully in these circumstances.

Appearance

Participants also identified needing to justify their racial identities in situations where they may not be perceived as their true identities. Annika described a specific experience of being told she doesn't look Indian and how she reminds herself of her identity.

> "I've been told more than once "oh you don't look Indian" as a result as a like a response and that that kind of hurts honestly because it's like I know that that's a fact, but I don't necessarily need you to tell me that… and also just the disbelief of like and so just–just because I don't necessarily look it doesn't mean it's not a part of my identity." (Annika, 22)

Feeling disbelief yet sharing that this is a repeated experience reflects the consistency of her feeling misperceived in her racial identity. She demonstrates resilience and a sense of

internal belonging, however, by noting that "just because I don't look necessarily look it doesn't mean it's not a part of my identity." Annika struggles with rationalizing her identity as a multiracial person, which for her involves wrestling with her ability to claim an identity as a person of color.

> "I feel like so on the racial side I feel like I can't really call myself really Indian or a person of color because I'm so white passing um and it feels just very wrong to try to claim that identity… and then–but on the other hand it also feels wrong to just call myself white because I'm not it's–I'm just as much Indian as I am white." (Annika, 22)

Again, Annika demonstrates her sense of belonging internally to her identity as both a person of color and a perceivably White person, though it may be her repeatedly being questioned in her racial identity and needing to justify her identity has contributed to her complicated feelings.

Lily, who first realized her racial identity when she noticed she didn't resemble those around her, also experienced tension in identifying as a White passing person of color.

> "I didn't identify as like a person of color especially at that moment and I still like kind of don't because just saying I'm mixed feels a lot better than being like oh it's…I don't know. I feel like because I can definitely pass as white I don't wanna say that I'm a person of color and like in the literal sense so yeah, I think that's where I noticed it. And I was like 'everybody around me here is white'." (Lily, 20).

Though she doesn't want to identify as a "literal" person of color, she notices her physical differences to White people around her. While claiming an identity as a person of color may not feel like the right identity for Lily, she describes identifying as "mixed" as feeling "better" to her. This indicates a sense of belonging to her mixed identity, where she may not

need to explain herself in the way she feels she would if she were to identify as a person of color.

Annika discussed a memory of her father saying that he "liked making this joke that he was always so grateful that, like I shared features with him because otherwise he was worried that people would think he like kidnapped a little White girl." Annika describes herself as a White passing person, though she "shares features" with her Indian father. While there are larger cultural implications of her father's concern that people would see them together and think "he kidnapped a little White girl", her features (unspecified) that she shares with him link them enough that this concern was mitigated. In this case, they feel she belongs to the same group as her father, despite being White passing.

Cultural Differences

Relating to perceived differences from how people who identify similarly "should" appear, participants also discussed justifying their identities, be it to themselves or to other people, based on cultural differences.

> "When I'm with these other Asian people I just feel like a fake Asian... like I never feel like a fake white person… There's definitely a feeling of being uh not enough, primarily for around Asian people… When I'm with other white people I definitely like I feel more empowered in my identity because nobody else relates. I feel more OK with being like out there and loud when I'm not gonna be judged about 'Oh, she's not Asian enough' or like 'She's not fitting in with being Korean'… I think it's honestly–it's harder when I'm in a group of other Asian people because, like, it's weird to say that I'm more OK being the odd one out when I'm the Asian one because I can be like confident in that identity." (Lily, 20)

Lily notes several instances of feeling excluded and needing to justify her identity as an Asian person when she's among other Asian people and White people. This relates to her sense of belonging because it shows how she feels she fits in with monoracial groups of people from both sides of her identity. Her confidence in being the only Asian person in a space because she won't have her identity questioned based on not being "Asian enough" or "fitting in with being Korean" implies experiences of feeling isolated for those very reasons by other Asian people. It also implies that she may have needed to either justify her Asian identity or omit her Asian identity when in those spaces.

> "I'm not like culturally fluent I guess I don't have a lot of those traditions. I'm not very aware of the culture so then I feel like that's another element where I can't really claim it. And then I don't speak the language. So, I think yeah it feels like I–if I had to prove myself, I wouldn't be able to because I don't have any of those pieces." (Annika, 22)

Annika's lack of cultural fluency has brought her to an emotional place of feeling that she can't "claim" that side of her identity. She directly addresses feeling the need to justify her identity by describing her inability to "prove" herself should she need to. This may limit her ability to belong in cultural spaces, despite still identifying with the identity of those in the space herself.

Importance of Community

> "I started like realizing that like–like opposite of feeling in the middle I can just be like right at home with all of these people." (Lily, 20)

The importance of community in participants' belonging was described in the ways certain communities, like collegiate Multiracial Student Unions, made participants feel belonging. It was also apparent in the ways participants felt their communities around them made

them feel included and represented, such as the communities they grew up in and their friends around them. Three subcodes emerged: Multiracial Student Union as a place of immediate belonging, being around other multiracial people, and being around people who share the same "mix".

Multiracial Student Union as a Place of Immediate Belonging

For all three participants, the community they found in the Multiracial Student Union at their university served as a place of immediate belonging. They discussed its position as a place to find commonality with other multiracial people, to not feel that they need to justify their identities, and to learn more about themselves and their identities.

Nico and Lily similarly describe the connection they feel to those around them at Multiracial Student Union.

> "It's really nice because it just kind of gives us a group to belong to. I can fit in and relate to the people there even though we have lots of completely different cultures we still all have that shared perspective of being mixed and all the things that come with that." (Nico, 20)

> "I can just be like right at home with all of these people even though you know they're not all Korean or they're not all half white or you know I could still say hey we're mixed we can relate on that circumstance which is really cool." (Lily, 20)

Despite not sharing their precise identities, they still feel a sense of belonging and connection to that community of other multiracial people because they're multiracial. Lily's description of feeling "right at home" with the people in the MSU indicates her feeling a strong sense of belonging to the group.

Annika and Lily spoke to the importance of being able to talk with other multiracial people in forming their own racial identities. Annika, who had little exposure to the language needed to articulate a multiracial identity, described being a part of Multiracial Student union as a catalyst for formulating her identity.

> "Immediately being part of MSU [multiracial student union] was a big one of actually being able to feel like I could formulate my own identity a little bit and had like any kind of a word or perception for my identity 'cause like it really wasn't something… like I thought about it when I was younger but it wasn't really something that I had any kind of a framework to think about and it wasn't really something I talked about with my parents." (Annika, 22)

> "And then when I started college in my second year, they started the mixed student union, and I was able to join that… It was kind of the first time I'd been able to have that conversation with other mixed people which was really cool." (Lily, 20)

Their experiences demonstrate how exposure to similarly identified people may help multiracial people learn about and develop their identities through conversation and shared experiences. Lily's experience in the multiracial student union she belongs to also identifies how MSUs represent places of immediate belonging:

> "I think being able to talk to people and know that they'll understand. Um, and have these conversations without feeling like there's any pressure to… I don't know I guess prove yourself or um I think one of the things that we try to do at mixed student union is really try to emphasize that you don't need to justify yourself that everyone is welcome and that if you're there we assume you belong there. And I think that has been really nice. And being able to see other people who have… like everyone has different experiences there's

> also experiences in common, and it's been really validating to talk to people and realize "oh this is something I also experienced." So overall it's been it's been really good." (Lily, 20)

Lily's connection to the multiracial student union connects back to her experience of feeling a need to "prove" or justify her identity to others. She feels that the space created in the MSU is welcoming because it "assumes you belong there." Not only is that experience "validating" and "really good" for Lily, but she confirms her feelings of belonging to the space by using "we assume" to discuss MSU happenings. This indicates membership to the group in a way that is not present when talking about monoracial spaces she occupies.

Being around other Multiracial People

Outside of spaces designated for multiracial people, like a Multiracial Student Union, participants identified the significance of being around other multiracial people in their feelings of belonging and inclusion. Nico said that "Having other people that are more or less like you I think it can help a lot… gives you a lot of perspective and gives you other viewpoints to consider." He describes the benefit to being multiracial and being around multiracial people in his life: that it has given him a unique "perspective" and "viewpoints". He did not elaborate on what those specific perspectives and viewpoints are but mentioned that being around people who are like him "can help a lot."

Lily spoke about her feeling connected to other multiracial people, specifically her partner.

> "We definitely connected over that and it's like it's super nice it makes me feel it makes me feel uh, it makes me feel really good to have somebody to talk about these things and have a very similar sort of like, huh. I feel like as I mention it his experience is definitely

> different than mine, being not half White. But just being not white but just being able to talk about like 'Oh yeah, my Asian side of the family, right?' [laughter] Um, so that's definitely really cool. That's a good feeling being connected to other people." (Lily, 20)

Though they share different ethnicities, she can find connection with him through their identities as multiracial people. Like being in a space designated for multiracial people, as an MSU is, being around other multiracial people creates a sense of connection and belonging based on shared experiences.

Annika's family, who moved when she was younger, previously lived in a neighborhood that had many more multiracial families in it. She describes her family's decision to move and the demographic differences of her old and new homes:

> "According to my parents most families we knew were in some kind of a multiracial mix and there were lots of other kind of mixed families and multiracial children including a lot of the friends I grew up with. And I know my dad has said it's something he kind of regrets is moving us to the Northwest because I think that experience would have been different." (Annika, 22)

Her father's "regret" at moving their family from this neighborhood because her "experience would have been different" also indicates the importance of being around other multiracial people. As Annika noted several times throughout her interview, she did not have the language to describe her identity or a space to talk about her identity before college and the Multiracial Student Union she now belongs to.

Being around People who are the Same "Mix"

While in the context of the Multiracial Student Union, the specific ethnic "mix" of the community members did not impact belonging to the group, participants relayed experiences

where the "mix" mattered to their connection to others. In his experience, one of the only people Nico has met who shares a close (though not the same) identity as he does was a person he met in high school.

> "The closest person I've met I think I met a guy in high school who was half Mexican half Japanese."
>
> (Julia: "Yeah and you're kind of like (gesturing back and forth), 'Hey!'")
>
> "[laughter] Yeah it was a really cool moment like, yeah… it's like my name is Nico… are you Mexican? And he was like oh no way I'm Mexican and Japanese! It was really cool!" (Nico, 20)

Despite not knowing each other personally, meeting someone who closely shares his identity was "really cool" for Nico to experience and may have led to a closer connection to the person than other people.

The significance of realizing commonality among other mixed people came up in Annika's interview, when she described how "cool" it was to see someone who shares an aspect of her physical appearance.

> "I remember meeting up with one of our old friends that you know we kept in touch a little bit because our parents kept in touch and I remember talking to her when we were both looking at schools for college and realizing that she has the same hair as I do because she's also half white half Indian and that was such a that was such a cool thing to see: this is someone who has this feature in common with me." (Annika, 22)

Recognizing a shared feature, like hair, with someone and connecting over a shared ethnicity was a point of belonging for Annika. It may be that this experience was more meaningful for her, as she had previously discussed feeling isolated from others based on her not

fitting their perception of how Indian people "should" look. This may make it even more significant for her to recognize someone who has the same mix as her, because it provides another level of connection and belonging to her own identity.

Lily felt that her experiences were different from others who may share her same mix (White and Korean), because her mother is White, and father is Korean.

> "I feel like I've actually met like very few people that have had the… in–in the Asian community especially who have a white mom and Asian dad because like so often it's the Asian woman marrying a white man and then like in my experience then they like grow up with this like Asian mother and they get taught like the Asian language because she's a stay-at-home mom and all those things. So, I feel like it's a little bit different if you're raised by an Asian father because like in my case, he was the one that worked at home so–or worked–and was not at home as much." (Lily, 20)

Her description of this difference represents its importance to her, as she attributes her parents' identities to her not knowing as much about Korean culture and language. Her experience may indicate that even though the "mix" of the multiracial people around you can make you feel that you belong, there are still aspects to her experience that differentiate her from others who identify similarly.

Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of sense of belonging among multiracial people. From the interviews, three initial themes emerged in connection to a sense of belonging among multiracial people: isolation and exclusion, justifying and explaining racial identity, and the importance of community. These themes suggest that multiracial people feel a sense of belonging the strongest when in the presence of other multiracial people, whether in a Multiracial Student Union or other spaces with multiracial people. They also suggest that multiracial people do not feel belonging and instead feel isolated from groups they believe they should belong in. The participants described feeling excluded or isolated from members of either side of their identity. Additionally, the findings indicate that multiracial people feel a need to prove themselves and their identities among different groups of monoracial people, and struggle to label themselves when asked to do so.

Further, these findings support what was found in the literature, that in-group exclusion acts as a barrier to belonging as members of a monoracial group may reject multiracial people as being similarly identified (Phinney & Alipuria, 2006; Oware, 2008). They also suggest that proximity to culture and adoption of cultural norms influence belonging to ethnic groups (Mohanty, 2013). Annika and Lily's struggles with knowing where to begin learning more about their culture supports Gibbs' (1987) findings that balancing many several types of ethnic acculturation may lead to isolation from those same cultures. Each participant described being isolated or choosing to isolate themselves from certain racial groups. These findings did not challenge the literature, though the literature indicated the potential for poorer mental health among multiracial people, an outcome that was not assessed in this study.

Implications

As this study specifically analyzed the experiences of multiracial young people the implications of the findings apply directly to their experiences. To increase belonging among multiracial young people, there is a strong need for options in socializing and identification. When demographic information is being collected, individuals should be given the option to self-select or input their own racial identity. This would allow multiracial people to use the terminology that best represents their identity and promote autonomy by giving people the option to select multiple identities.

This study focused on young adults and sampled directly from a collegiate Multiracial Student Union. For these participants, the space created in the MSU brought them connection, community, and solidarity with others who identified similarly to them. Perhaps similar groups could be formed in educational and industrial settings that offer race-based affinity clubs for students and employees. Multiracial affinity groups may help combat social exclusion in the workplace as Multiracial Student Unions on college campuses do. Increasing awareness of how multiracial people may be included or excluded based on language and behaviors of monoracial people could in turn increase belonging in the workplace and community.

As all participants noted feelings of isolation within their families, more therapeutic support for interracial families should be provided by social service agencies and counseling practices, perhaps building from those that offer support for families of transracial adoptees. Helping parents understand their children's identities, how they can support them in developing confidence in their identities and helping build skills for all members of the family to communicate about race and ethnicity may aid in helping multiracial people feel less isolated and more belonging to their identity.

Finally, further research to ascertain the specific ways multiracial people seek out spaces where they feel belonging and where they experience isolation should be conducted to include a more intersectional and comprehensive sample. There are many intersecting identities to examine among multiracial young people. Specifically, queer, aging, and differently abled multiracial people may experience belonging differently than the multiracial young people did in this study. An examination of intersectional experiences would help to further reduce disparities in racial studies and include multiracial voices in social science discussions.

Strengths and Limitations

This study intended to explore multiracial people's perceptions of their sense of belonging. Interview data was separately coded by multiple researchers and triangulated to increase validity. The research team also worked to practice reflexivity and mitigate biases through the incorporation of grounded theory. It is important to understand that despite the powerful themes found from the data, this study is limited by its sample and data analysis. The participants were sampled from Multiracial Student Unions on college campuses in the United States. They entered the study as members of a group meant for multiracial people and therefore may be more likely to talk about the group in the context of belonging and inclusion. Participation in this study was restricted to multiracial people between 18 and 25 years old, which limits the findings' generalizability to older and younger multiracial people. Also, due to the timing and scope of this project, the process of coding and triangulation was limited. More time could have been spent including the additional four themes identified during the data analysis process.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that the concept of belonging is complicated and nuanced for multiracial individuals. While the findings confirm previous research's discussions of the barriers to belonging that multiracial people may experience, they also further understanding of how multiracial young adults discover belonging together and how they sometimes experience isolation with monoracial people. Further research is required to better understand the social needs of multiracial people and best practices for addressing those needs in social work practice.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Research Question: How do multiracial people feel their racial identities influence their sense of belonging?

Interview duration: Approximately one hour

- Preferred Pronouns
- Pseudonym usage
- Before recording, get gift card info

Begin Recording

Informed Consent

1. Confirm that they have received and reviewed the informed consent speech
2. Review main points
    a. Data use and confidentiality
    b. Risks (confirm they have the resource sheet) and ability to end interview
    Any questions?
3. Oral Consent
    a. "Having reviewed the research participant consent information, do you consent to participate in this research study"

Introduction

1. My name / qualifications
2. How I identify: Multiracial, South Asian-White person
3. Purpose of the study: to explore the perceptions multiracial people have about their sense of belonging.

Questions

1. How would you describe your racial identity?
2. When did you first learn about your racial identity?
3. Who or what influenced your racial identity?
4. POC
5. What role does your ethnic identity or identities play in your life?
6. How do you feel interacting with each side of your family?
7. How do you feel when you find yourself in spaces of only monoracial people?
8. How do you feel when you interact with other mixed people?
9. How do you feel your racial identity has influenced your sense of belonging?
    a. Follow up on larger themes they discuss
        i. (Community, upbringing, family identities, school, etc.)
        ii. Passing, conversations about race
10. How did it feel to talk about being multiracial?

Conclusion

1. Thank participant for their time and answers, remind them of timeline to receive findings of the study.
2. Ask if they prefer Starbucks or Amazon gift card. Will email them the gift card immediately after the interview.

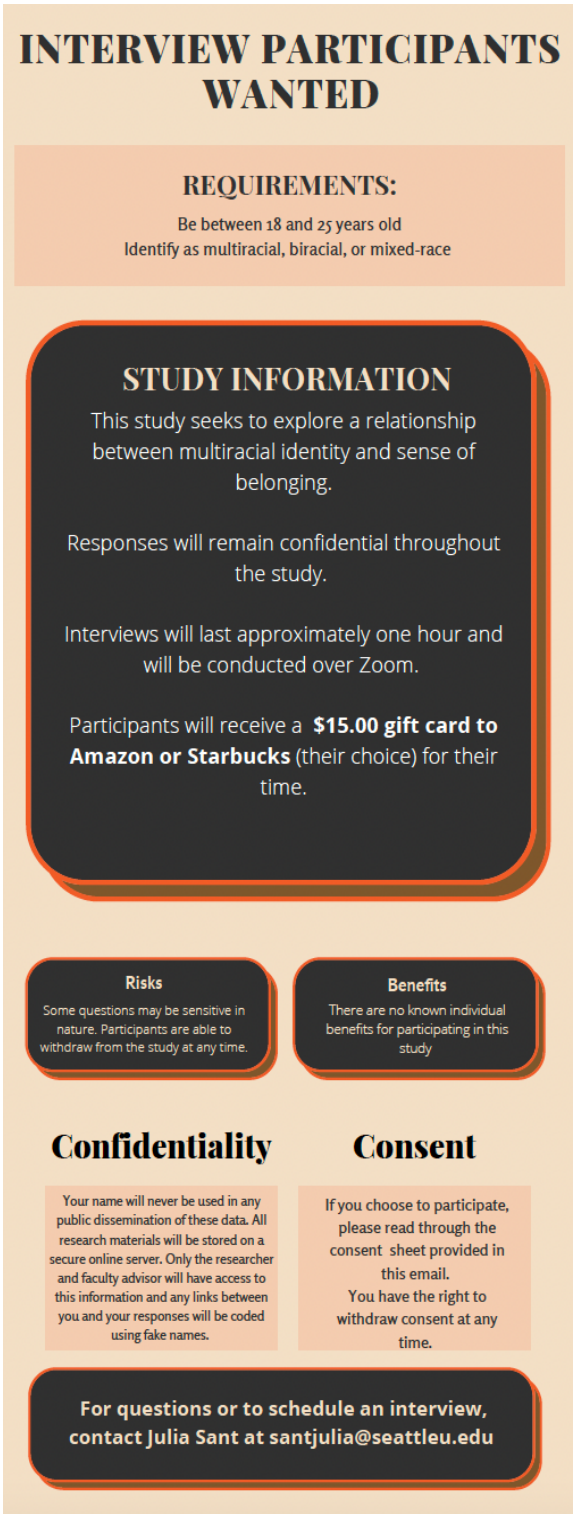
Appendix B: Informed Consent

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT CONSENT INFORMATION

TITLE:	Sense of belonging and inclusion among multiracial individuals: An exploratory sequential mixed methods study
INVESTIGATOR:	Julia Sant, Social Work, College of Arts and Sciences, Seattle University (630)-962-4632
ADVISOR:	Dr. Anne Farina, Social Work, College of Arts and Sciences, Seattle University (206)-296-5441
PURPOSE:	You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to explore a possible relationship between multiracial people and sense of belonging. You will be asked to complete an interview with the investigator, answering questions about your racial identity and feelings of belonging and inclusion. The interview will last approximately one hour.
SOURCE OF SUPPORT:	This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the bachelor's degree in social work with departmental honors at Seattle University.
RISKS:	There are no known risks associated with this study. However, the questions may be personal or sensitive in nature. By agreeing to be interviewed, you are not obligated to answer all questions and may ask to move on from a question at any time.
BENEFITS:	Responses to this study have the potential to inform further research into service delivery and further understanding of multiracial people.
INCENTIVES:	You will receive a $15.00 gift card to Amazon or Starbucks selected at time of interview for your participation. Participation in the project will require no monetary cost to you.
CONFIDENTIALITY:	Your name, email, ethnic, and racial identity will be collected as part of this study. Your name will never be used in any public dissemination of these data (publications, presentations, etc.). All research materials and consent forms will be stored on a password protected OneDrive folder. Only the researcher and faculty advisor will have access to this information and any links between you and your responses will be coded using a study ID. Human subjects research regulations require that data be kept for a minimum of three (3) years. Any potential use of interview or survey responses in the future will be done anonymously, using only pseudonyms or fake names. All the information you provide will be kept confidential. However, if we learn you intend to harm yourself or others, we must notify the authorities.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:	Your participation in this study is *voluntary*. You may withdraw your consent to participate at any time without penalty. Your withdrawal will not influence any other services to which you may be otherwise entitled.
SUMMARY OF RESULTS:	A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request. Results from this research will be sent on or before June 10th, 2021 and will be sent from santjulia@seattleu.edu.

Appendix C: Recruitment Materials



My name is Julia Sant and I'm a senior at Seattle University completing my departmental honors thesis in social work. **I'm looking to recruit interview participants who identify as multiracial, biracial, or mixed race and am wondering if you would reach out to your club roster on my behalf?**

Participants would receive a $15.00 gift card to Amazon or Starbucks (their choice). The interviews would last about an hour and would be conducted via Zoom. No identifying information will be used in the study and any links between them and their responses will be destroyed upon the completion of the study. I personally identify as multiracial and am looking to explore the relationship between identifying as multiracial and feelings of belonging and inclusion.

I've included some flyers with more information as well as the informational consent sheet. Anyone interested can feel free to email me to schedule an interview at santjulia@seattleu.edu or call me at (630) 962-4632.

Thanks so much and feel free to reach out with any questions or concerns!

Sincerely,

Julia Sant | Seattle University
Pronouns | She/Her/Hers
Bachelors of Social Work with Departmental Honors