

## Article

# Chronic Codeswitching: Shaping Black/White Multiracial Student Sense of Belonging

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**Abstract:** Multiracial students grapple with experiences around mixedness which can hinder their sense of belonging among different social groups. Constantly feeling unaccepted and receiving the comment “You are too Black” or “You are too White” capture some of the common microaggressions faced by Black/White multiracial students. Using a phenomenological design, this study examines the ways in which Black/White multiracial students develop their sense of belonging at a predominantly White institution (PWI). While codeswitching has the ability to impact the sense of belonging in racial and ethnic minority groups, our study findings suggest that Black/White multiracial students tend to rely on *chronic* codeswitching as ways of seeking acceptance, balancing “otherness” and carefully minimizing exclusion when interacting with members of different social groups. Chronic codeswitching is particularly relevant as an everyday strategy in how Black/White multiracial students foster their sense of belonging and a sense of community. Research and practice implications are included.

**Keywords:** chronic codeswitching; multiracial; biracial; sense of belonging



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## 1. Chronic Codeswitching: Shaping Multiracial Student Sense of Belonging

Multiracial individuals are one of the fastest growing marginalized populations according to the 2020 U.S. Census (Jones et al. 2021). Between 2010 and 2020, the overall multiracial population increased by 276%, which was reported as the largest recorded population increase in the United States (Jones et al. 2021). The multiracial youth population is also growing, in both married and unmarried households (Bratter et al. 2022). The growing multiracial youth population is likely to impact higher education, as more multiracial students enroll on college campuses, and higher education staff and faculty must be prepared to work with them. Higher education professionals prepare to work with diverse populations, but more education on diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice is critical to better understand how we can best support diverse students and honor their voices (Boss et al. 2021). Graduate preparation programs and professional trainings generally use traditional approaches to teaching, advising, and program planning, using research from White student populations, and neglecting multiracial college students' needs and challenges (Long 2012).

Multiracial students face challenges such as: (a) rejection by own racial groups for not being monoracial enough, (b) interrogation by own racial groups, and (c) grappling with assumptions of a monoracial identity (Harris 2017a). Based on the physical features they may possess, multiracial students encounter these issues when immersed in a new context or environment surrounded by unfamiliar individuals that are ignorant of the students' racial identity. Pursuing a baccalaureate degree is a sensitive time in multiracial students' lives, when foul treatment (e.g., microaggressions, invalidations, isolation, exclusion) can result in vastly different outcomes of persisting successfully, considering leaving the institution

for good, or seriously considering not returning the next semester (Brezinski et al. 2018). Multiracial students not experiencing foul treatment is rare when racism is embedded in higher education, especially in predominantly White institutions (Harris 2017a).

Social categorization influences the racial identity development of multiracial students (Pauker et al. 2018). Harris and Sim (2000) suggest that any measures related to multiracialness cannot be accurately captured, as there are many dimensions and complexities that impact the construction of multiracial identity. Concerning multiracial individuals, Harris and Sim (2002) stated, “Racial classifications can differ not only among nations and historical periods, but also in the day-to-day lives of individuals” (p. 615). Okamoto (2020) researched multiracial student identities and found that in college, multiracial students engage in racial exploration due to experience with resources, racism, and the social context. Racial identity for multiracial students is impacted by the engagement in discussions, in addition to the social context of their upbringing. Because of the impacts of racial exploration and the dynamic context in higher education, fluidity of race for Black/White multiracial students is practiced circumstantially, depending on their interactions. A student’s social and physical environment impacts their feeling of belongingness and development (Rainey et al. 2018). Positive environments and communities provide social and academic support, while negative environments can hinder a sense of social belonging.

Multiracial individuals are becoming a larger part of the college student population, and multiracial research has grown (e.g., Ingram et al. 2014; King 2008, 2011; Renn 2000, 2004, 2008; Johnston-Guerrero and Pecero 2016; Barrett 2022; Clayton 2020; Franco et al. 2019). Our research focuses on belonging experiences in the context of predominantly White institutions (PWI) in the USA for Black/White multiracial students. The context of predominantly White institutions is significant because marginalized student enrollment at these institutions has dramatically increased in the last 20 years (Espinosa et al. 2019). Yet these institutions were originally created to serve elite, White students to create leaders (Axtell 1974).

The purpose of this research is to understand Black/White multiracial students’ experiences of belonging in a predominantly White institution. We interviewed participants about their lived experiences to better understand the extent to which and in the ways they made sense of their identities and shared meanings/differences while describing experiences of belonging on campus. This research focuses on Black/White multiracial individuals because they are the largest multiracial student group in the United States (Saulny 2011) and given the history of anti-Blackness in the United States (Rowell-Cunsolo et al. 2022), the current exploration of their sense of belonging is especially significant. This article reviews literature concerning Black/White multiracial students’ experiences, before describing the method used in this research, followed by the data analysis, findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research. The two research questions that guided this study are found below:

- How do Black/White multiracial college students at a PWI describe their sense of belonging?
- To what extent, and in what ways do Black/White multiracial college students feel that they can be their completely authentic self while enrolled at a PWI?

It is important to center multiraciality and understand that race is embedded in relationships of power (Curington 2016). The United States has a history of racial hierarchy (Daniel et al. 2014), and because of this from an early age, Black/White multiracial individuals are commonly categorized as Black both in a descriptive (Ho et al. 2017) and prescriptive way (Roberts et al. 2017). Society defining multiracial individuals as Black places them in a specific descriptive racial category, and prescriptively categorizes them as Black by placing assumptions. Due to the struggle in identity recognition, multiracial individuals often are either questioned about their ambiguous identities due to not having all of their characteristics in common with one of the racial identities they hold, or assumed as being Black, regardless of their personal preference in which they choose to identify (Törngren et al. 2021). Multiracial students encounter dilemmas with racial identity accep-

tance and validation, as they negotiate home and family dynamics, physical environments, social encounters, and friendships (Franco and O'Brien 2018). These dilemmas are brought upon by the rigid boundaries and racial power differential between whites and non-whites in United States society. Society identifies multiracial individuals as non-White, but not all monoracial Black people accept them (Franco et al. 2019). Due to this power differential, multiracial people experience (a) “forced choice” scenarios where they are pressured or constrained to choose or deny their many racial identities, which is linked to stress and depression (Sanchez 2010), (b) being around friends of only one of their races in search of legitimacy (Renn 2000, 2004; Wallace 2003), and (c) being forced to answer the infamous question “What are you?” (Renn 2004; Wallace 2003). Renn (2000) found these dilemmas influence multiracial students to identify in one of the five patterns: (a) monoracial identity, (b) multiple monoracial identities, (c) multiracial identity, (d) extraracial identity, and (e) situational identity. Multiracial people are constrained to experience these identity patterns depending on environmental influences (Renn 2003).

### 1.1. Critical Mixed Race Studies (CMRS)

Researchers have produced a body of scholarship that focuses on the relationships and experiences of multiracial individuals since the 1980s. This research centers multiraciality and is commonly known as Critical Mixed Race Studies (CMRS) (Daniel et al. 2014). The first Critical Mixed Race Studies academic conference was held in 2009, but Critical Mixed Race Studies (CMRS) was founded prior to the academic conference. In this research, multiraciality is analyzed in the context of social hierarchy and racism in the United States (Daniel et al. 2014). It is important that multiraciality is analyzed in this dynamic and critical way in order to deeply understand the experiences of multiracial individuals. This article contributes to this group of research by focusing on Black/White multiracial students and analyzing the experiences that they have and the techniques that they utilize to navigate their context and find a sense of belonging. Codeswitching is a strategy where multiracial individuals employ agency and at times, negotiate the esteem tier or the safety tier (Maslow 1954) in hopes of truly grasping the third tier of love and belongingness (discussed further below).

### 1.2. History of Multiraciality and Anti-Blackness in the United States

The United States of America has a narrative of anti-Blackness. To accurately depict the topic of Black/White multiracial students, it is important to discuss slavery in the United States. Race is “ascribed, symbolically mediated as status or stigma, socially constructed, and consciously manipulated or performed” (Willie 2003, p. 9). The United States has a history of anti-Blackness throughout the events of slavery, miscegenation laws, hypodescent, and the United State Census, but multiraciality is defined by more than these events. These events over time created the normalization of racism and racial stereotypes in the United States (Harris 2017b). Race was designed to fit into categories, but multiracial individuals do not subscribe to the neat categories, especially when they are racially exploring. Multiraciality is formed throughout time by the linkage of events, within the context of racial hierarchy in the United States (Curington 2016).

### 1.3. Predominantly White Institutions

Higher education in the United States is modeled from the English universities of Cambridge and Oxford that focused on social and academic aspects of life (Thelin and Gasman 2011). These institutions were all considered predominantly White institutions because they served majority, if not all, White students. James Axtell (1974) discussed that college and universities were a “wishful” and “optimistic” attempt to grasp the English undergraduate education, in order to create responsible leaders through the “collegiate way” (1974). Although specific population serving institutions began as early as 1850, predominantly White institutions are still the most abundant.

Predominantly White institutions of today still consist of a majority of White students, but they also serve students of color. Multiracial students are a growing population on these campuses ([National Center for Education Statistics 2015](#)). [Clayton \(2020\)](#) researched biracial identity at historically White colleges/universities (HWCUs), otherwise known as predominantly White institutions, as well as historically Black colleges/universities (HBCUs). In both of these different types of campuses, increased awareness of racism brought biracial students closer to their Black identity, however in HBCUs, students gained racism awareness through coursework, compared to HWCU biracial students who gained racism awareness through personal experiences ([Clayton 2020](#)). Predominantly White institutional context influences students' racial identification.

#### 1.4. Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging is an important factor as it relates to the intention to persist and graduate from college. In a higher education setting, sense of belonging is emphasized in order to ensure that all students are able to experience it. Although sense of belonging is an important factor for all students, it is reportedly overlooked in multiracial students ([Hausmann et al. 2007](#)). In fact, many reports show that multiracial students experience disapproval, lack of social recognition, and exclusion ([Museus et al. 2016](#); [Harris 2017a](#)).

Sense of belonging in higher education is a sense of mattering and acceptance related to academic achievement ([Strayhorn 2012](#)). Belonging is a human need ([Maslow 1954](#)). By having belongingness, the person has love. Students can feel a sense of belonging in a dyad, clique, or group, which is why colleges encourage involvement in academic, co-, and extra-curricular activities. Analyzing higher education through the lens of [Maslow's \(1954\)](#) hierarchy of needs allowed for the identification of factors that hinder or support belongingness for multiracial students at PWIs. A sense of belonging can positively benefit academic success of multiracial students. Multiracial students of the Black and White racial combination are the most common multiracial students at approximately 20% ([Saulny 2011](#)), and their sense of belonging while studying in PWIs needs further exploration.

#### 1.5. Codeswitching

Codeswitching focuses on identity and the ways individuals utilize or negotiate their identity in various contexts and ways they link language to identity ([Elkins and Hanke 2018](#)). For example, [Walker \(2011\)](#), found that individuals, who were multilingual, would speak a different language to increase solidarity among their peers. Yet codeswitching is much more than shifting language; and involves shifting cultures as a way to manage one's identities in relation to their environment ([Elkins and Hanke 2018](#)). Codeswitching occurs frequently when Black people adapt to the mainstream culture and present themselves in a way that is more accepting to their White colleagues. [Martin \(2015\)](#), [Schwartz et al. \(2009\)](#), and [Steinmetz \(2008\)](#) all found that students felt a need to codeswitch and "speak right" to be accepted into the dominant culture and be successful. The need to "speak right" and codeswitch occurs frequently in the professional environment when Black people copy their colleagues' mannerisms, physical features, and behaviors to achieve more desirable outcomes ([McCluney et al. 2021](#)). Codeswitching in the workplace is used to receive more positive results, but also to avoid the repercussions of not codeswitching. The cost of not codeswitching is that individuals are perceived as less valuable and are judged harshly. [McCluney et al. \(2021\)](#) conducted a study with 498 White and Black individuals and found that the main effect was that by codeswitching, the Black individuals are deemed more professional. The need to appear more professional encourages individuals to continue codeswitching as a way to be successful. Black/White multiracial individuals are not the same racial identity as Black individuals, but they still feel a need to codeswitch in search of acceptance.

### 1.6. Codeswitching in Black/White Multiracial Groups

The Black/White combination is a large group of the multiracial population and in the 2020 U.S. Census this group grew by 67.4% from the previous census (Jones et al. 2021). Black/White multiracial people share identities and characteristics common in both White and Black cultures. Although Black/White multiracial is a group within the multiracial population, society continues to pressure these individuals to choose a binary race, Black or White. To understand codeswitching is to understand the embedded assumptions, histories, and understandings of certain races to establish membership in others (Waring 2013). Depending on surroundings, certain identities become more salient. Multiracial individuals codeswitch in their speech to adapt to their surroundings (Gaither et al. 2015) and are primed to sound more White or more Black. The action of adapting to their surroundings is at the intersection of identity and language behavior. Gaither et al. (2015) gathered audio clips of 56 interactions among multiracial participants. They found that codeswitching not only impacted the types of actions, but also the dialect in which multiracial people engaged in conversations. Newman's (2021) research focused on multiracial children of immigrants and although this group is different than Black/White multiracial individuals, they were able to blur the boundaries of monoracial groups and assimilate, even momentarily. Multiracial individuals blurring boundaries and assimilating is the strategy of codeswitching. Codeswitching allows students to navigate cultural environments and manipulate social outcomes. Social outcome is defined by several factors such as race, age, and religion. Codeswitching is commonly used by Black/White multiracial students in higher education to navigate the various groups in a college campus. Campus spaces are designed monoracially. The monoracial design of campus spaces does not always encourage individuals of varying races to occupy space and mingle. The monoracial design at HBCU's were designed specifically for Black students and Predominantly White Institutions were designed specifically for White students. As such, Black/White multiracial students navigate the college campus by possessing cultural knowledge, which allows them to understand where they fit in a monoracial society (Johnston-Guerrero and Pecero 2016). Possessing cultural knowledge allows for the practice of codeswitching for Black/White multiracial students to adjust to their societal surroundings. This act of codeswitching is not isolated to only multiracial individuals, but multiracial individuals apply this skill of passing as Black or White to gain access to areas, situations, and opportunities (Khanna and Johnson 2010). Khanna and Johnson (2010) found that during the Jim Crow era individuals commonly worked to pass as White, but now people commonly work to pass as Black in situations to connect in social settings. Codeswitching is a specific strategy of racial passing. Codeswitching is passing in a way that requires a considerable amount of agency in the individual. This practice of codeswitching by switching verbal and nonverbal patterns, depending on interactions, can be taxing on individuals, but is used to mask their identity in higher education and is used every day (Elkins and Hanke 2018). Although codeswitching can be taxing on the person practicing this, it is used to establish racial capital in their ever-changing context. Racial capital is a way of managing race, language, heritage to identify, and individuals within that race place worth on this (Waring 2013). In the ever-growing diverse higher education climate, Black/White multiracial students codeswitch often in search of acceptance in the diverse higher education environment. Failing to codeswitch between environments can lead to negative remarks and individuals not socially accepting the multiracial individual. The taxing behavior of Black/White multiracial students chronically codeswitching results in constantly changing their identity in higher education spaces.

### 1.7. Microaggressions

Minoritized students battle discrimination and prejudice in higher education (Feagin and Elias 2013; Hurtado 2007). Microaggressions are common oppressive remarks that Black/White multiracial students experience. Microaggressions are intentional or unintentional subtle statements that convey hurtful remarks to People of Color (Nadal et al. 2011).



There are various types of microaggression such as microassault, microinsult, microinvalidation (Sue et al. 2007), and microintimidation (Garcia and Johnston-Guerrero 2016). Garcia and Johnston-Guerrero (2016) describe microintimidation as an extension to the Sue et al. taxonomy and discuss microintimidation as deliberate racist behavioral actions that are focused on threatening the targeted individual. Multiracial individuals are recipients of these microaggressions, and Johnston and Nadal (2010) discuss that even when no physical threat is made, microaggressions are damaging to a person's mental health, especially when they happen often. Microaggressions often occur amongst people that interact with Black/White multiracial individuals by invalidating their experiences, assuming their racial identity, or questioning their identity.

Nadal et al. (2011) found six types of common microaggressions for multiracial people and how they experienced them: isolation, objectification, mistaken identity, denial of reality, pathologizing identity, and microaggressions based on racial stereotypes. The six domains of microaggressions show that multiracial individuals experience the racial oppression and microaggressions of the monoracial identity they have physical characteristics of (Johnston-Guerrero et al. 2020), in addition to the oppression they already experience as multiracial people. Harris (2017a) found that multiracial college students commonly receive microaggressions in three categories: denial of multiracial reality; assumption of a monoracial identity; not being monoracial enough. For multiracial college students it is challenging when peers refuse to acknowledge their racial identities and make assumptions due to exhibiting or not exhibiting physical features. These microaggressions can have an everlasting impact on individuals, especially during a critical point in their lives, when in college.

### 1.8. Mixed-Race Identity Development Theories

In this current modernist society, race is considered a “master social status” that overpowers and overrides judgment, and cannot be ignored, due to race being a physical characteristic in most people (López and Hogan 2021). Race is given much importance throughout U.S. society and higher education, but research into multiracial students was limited at the time of Renn's research. Renn (2004) developed the ecological theory of mixed-race identity development describing the societal impacts on multiracial identity development. Renn (2004) examined societal impacts through ecological influences from the context of microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem is the smallest and describes interpersonal relations (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Mesosystem describes the interactions of various settings or microsystems (Bronfenbrenner 1979). The Exosystem describes interactions taking place with one setting not involving the individual directly, but may influence the individual (Bronfenbrenner 1979). The macrosystem describes the overarching culture and social construct (Bronfenbrenner 1979). The chronosystem focuses on two components of time, which are historical and personal (Renn 2004). Renn claimed that based on societal impacts, the multiracial individual will be in one of five identity patterns: (a) monoracial identity, (b) multiple monoracial identities, (c) multiracial identity, (d) extraracial identity, and (e) situational identity. Renn (2004) described all of these identity patterns are fluid, non-exclusive, and healthy.

Prior to Renn's (2004) research, dominant monoracial minority identity development models had been created by (Atkinson et al. 1979; Cross 1995; Helms 1995), but the only two models for multiracial student development were from Poston (1990) and Root (1990). Both models examined multiracial identity development using the early stages of minority identity development. Poston's model was missing the possibility of multiracial students having multiple healthy identities. Root claimed multiracial students of the Black and White race could not fully reject their White mainstream culture and completely immerse themselves in their Black culture. Both Poston and Root neglected to show the influence societal racism had on the identity development of multiracial individuals.

Our research offers a critique to the previous models surrounding multiracial identity development by focusing on the fluidity of multiracialism as a lived experience and related

coping mechanisms Black/White multiracial students rely on a daily basis when their identities are challenged. Renn's (2004) ecological theory of mixed race identity development addressed the impact of societal pressures in context, but the magnitude of pressures in the environment was not fully recognized. Renn (2004) stated that fluidity of race could be practiced daily, but we assert that it can happen conditionally and momentarily on a college campus, based on interactions. For Black/White multiracial students, college campuses are dynamic places filled with diverse individuals. Black/White multiracial students rapidly change their racial expression in search of acceptance, which we define as chronic codeswitching.

### 1.9. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Abraham Maslow (1954), a behavioral scientist, had the desire to find what motivated people. He depicted a pyramid titled Hierarchy of Needs in *Motivation and Personality* (Maslow 1954). The most basic needs are listed at the bottom and are prepotent: in order to progress up to next tier, the lower need must be met. Maslow (1943) initially said that it was mandatory to meet the lower needs before progressing, but clarified later, stating that it was not absolute and that he may have given "the false impression that a need must be satisfied one hundred percent (100%) before the next need emerges" (Maslow 1987, p. 69). Every individual has the desire to reach the highest level in the hierarchy. Unfortunately, progress will be disrupted throughout life that will force people to go down in levels to satisfy lower needs. The needs from lowest to highest are: Physiological, Safety, Love and Belongingness, Esteem, and Self-Actualization (Maslow 1954). We argue that in our research, we found that Black/White multiracial students negotiate the esteem tier and the safety tier in hopes of reaching the love and belongingness tier.

In this study, the two tiers that are explored are the third tier of love and belongingness and the fifth tier of self-actualization. Love and belongingness describe the feeling of belongingness and acceptance. Maslow (1954), when describing the love and belongingness need, stated that a person "will hunger for affectionate relations with people in general, namely, for a place in his group or family, and he will strive with great intensity to achieve this goal" (p. 43). Social groups, regardless how large or small these are, are ways for a person to feel a sense of belonging. These social groups provide people the opportunity to overcome "alienation, aloneness, strangeness, and loneliness" (Maslow 1954, p. 44). Examples of ways people achieve belongingness is through friendships, intimacy, and family. This is the third tier in Maslow's (1954) Hierarchy of Needs, but the sense of belonging need at times can overcome more basic needs depending on societal pressures. Porter (2022) (re)imagined belonging in their study on Black women and their predominantly White institutions and found that several individuals stated that they did not belong or matter due to social interactions. This feeling of not belonging and unworthiness is common for People of Color at predominantly White institutions, such as multiracial individuals.

Self-actualization is the highest tier in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1954) and is described as fully functioning and living a more enriched life (1962). From the five tiers in this model, self-actualization is the level that is known as a growth or being need (Maslow 1954). Some characteristics of self-actualized people, as described by Maslow (1962), are: accepting of self, highly creative, concerned with the welfare of humanity, and having strong moral/ethical standards. Everyone has this goal to fulfill lower tiers and reach the top tier, but unfortunately disruptions and failure occur in life that delay advancement.

## 2. Method

Phenomenology "describes the lived experiences of several individuals who share a phenomenon of interest: a particular life event, situation or how they perceive themselves in relation to the world" (Creswell and Poth 2018, p. 75), and of the meaning they are able to derive from these experiences. For multiracial individuals, experiences of living out their racialized selves and identities, and how these experiences affect their sense of

belonging is important in the higher education context. The researchers understand the importance of their own positionality and positionality influences our research perspective. The first author is a Black/White multiracial man who graduated from a predominantly White institution and now is a professional in student affairs. The first author's experiences being a Black/White multiracial student allowed him to see first-hand the experiences and challenges of strategically codeswitching in the college environment. The second author is a White woman associate professor in higher education and student affairs and the third author is a Brown woman associate professor in higher education and a first generation immigrant. As an "insider" led study, only the first author interviewed Black/White multiracial students to understand their unexplored sense of belonging (Saulny 2011).

### 2.1. Research Questions

We attempted to understand the extent to which Black/White multiracial students experienced a sense of belonging in a PWI, and the meaning of these experiences in the context of their multiple racialized identities. Renn's (2004) ecological theory of mixed-race identity development influenced our research questions by focusing on the sense of belonging and factors that influence multiracial identity. The factors we examined that impacted belonging and multiracial identity were support systems, critical incidents (Kellogg and Liddell 2012), comfort, and authenticity. The researchers focused on authenticity as participants being genuine or their complete selves with no filters. The following research questions guided our inquiry.

- How do Black/White multiracial college students at a PWI describe their sense of belonging?
- To what extent, and in what ways do Black/White multiracial college students feel that they can be their completely authentic self while enrolled at a PWI?

### 2.2. Data Collection

We employed semi structured interviews which lasted approximately 90 min in length via video conference and included the participant and a researcher. We asked the participants to describe how genuine they were on campus and to describe their level of comfort, as these are indicators for their feeling of acceptance and belonging at the institution (Maslow 1954). We gained insights by conducting 90-min interviews with each participant and asking them the following types of study questions to gain insight on our research questions.

- In what ways do you feel connected to the PWI in which you are enrolled?
- To what extent do you feel like you belong at the PWI in which you are enrolled?
- Can you describe your connection with this PWI?
- Is there any people, place, or organization in campus to which you feel a connection?
- Do you feel that you can be your completely authentic self at this PWI?
- What does authenticity mean to you?
- Have you ever felt that you were not your true self at this PWI?
- What makes you feel comfortable or uncomfortable at this PWI?
- What does being multiracial mean to you?

We allowed students to give their own definition of authenticity and asked them if they felt they were always aligning with the definition. We wanted participants to give their own definition of authenticity, to better frame their perceptions of what it meant to be genuine, self-aware, and agentic when it came to notions of mixedness and positioning their racial identities, rather than being constrained by the expectations imposed by others (Abes et al. 2019). The participants received a consent form at the beginning of the meeting and were informed of the protocol, risks, and reasoning for this study. Transcripts were shared with participants to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences.



### 2.3. Research Site

The PWI at which participants were enrolled is located in the east central region of the United States. The PWI is a public, 4-year research institution, and primarily residential that offers both undergraduate and graduate programs. The PWI is a large institution with an enrollment of over 25,000 students. The mission statement emphasizes the importance of diversity, inclusion, and community.

### Procedure

Purposeful sampling was used to reach targeted demographics in participants to align with the phenomenon we attempted to understand. Black/White multiracial students are difficult to identify due to ambiguous visual characteristics (Kellogg and Liddell 2012). Locating participants was challenging at this predominantly White institution due to the undergraduate racial demographic makeup being 70% White, 12% Black, and only 5% of students identifying as two or more races. On this campus there were no organizations or locations targeted only for multiracial individuals, which made locating them challenging. Due to these challenges someone who knew the participant well had to recommend the participant, or the participant needed to disclose their racial demographics to the researchers. The first author was able to identify potential participants who met the study criteria: (a) Enrolled as a college student at the university; and (b) self-identify as a Black/White multiracial student. The primary researcher's Black/White multiracial identity aligned with participants' own notions of multiracialness and encouraged them to feel comfortable and participate. This insider status was central to achieving the study goals.

Once participants were identified, we employed snowball sampling and asked existing participants to identify anyone they knew who would meet the study criteria as a way of gaining targeted participants (Parker et al. 2019). As Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend: "participants in the study need to be carefully chosen to be individuals who have all experienced the phenomena in question" (p. 81). We chose 11 participants who experienced the Black/White multiracialness and notions of mixedness as they navigated their student life at the PWI (Table 1). All participants had the opportunity to self-select pseudonyms to mask their identity.

**Table 1.** Multiracial participants.

Participant	Gender	Maternal Racial Identity	Paternal Racial Identity	Declared Major	First-Generation College Student	Class Status
Leroy	Male	Black	White	Neuroscience	No	Junior
Sage	Male	Black	White	Art & Psychology	No	Sophomore
Hallie Berrie	Female	Black	White	Biology	No	Senior
Tom	Male	White	Black	Sports Administration	No	Senior
Bay	Female	White	Black	Communication	Yes	Junior
Paige	Female	White	Black	Chemistry	No	Senior
Taty	Female	White	Black	Interior Design	Yes	Senior
Jay	Female	White	Black	Communication	Yes	Senior
Jamaal	Male	White	Black	Finance	No	Sophomore
Beyonsay	Female	White	Black	Pan-African Studies	Yes	Senior
Nichole	Female	White	Black	Biology	Yes	Sophomore

### 3. Data Analysis

After collecting and organizing data, we transcribed recordings manually by listening to the recordings repeatedly and typing participants' exact words. Transcribing recordings manually encouraged active reading and encouraged us to look closely at the data (Creswell and Poth 2018). We then read the transcripts line by line several times to immerse ourselves in this data. We participated in memoing to write ideas, analytical meanings, and emergent ideas (Miles et al. 2014). Memoing allowed us to uncover information that led to a stronger

explanation of the context in our study, while bracketing our experience as a researcher (Janesick 2011).

The next step in data analysis is coding, when researchers segment interview data into smaller, similar descriptive texts. Creswell and Poth suggest developing 25–30 codes or categories to make sure a list is not too complex. We assigned a label to each code that described the data. From these codes, we examined the criteria and combined similar codes into broader categories. We counted codes in each theme to find how frequently the code appeared throughout the data (Huberman and Miles 1994). The frequency of the codes did not necessarily describe the magnitude of the impact, but it did quantify the occurrence and helped with initial discussion concerning the data. Codes were organized and grouped to form categories, and which helped in developing descriptions to examine the many ways in which Black/White multiracial identities tested, challenged, and complicated participants' sense of belonging.

The analysis involved two cycles of coding. The first cycle of coding method used in vivo codes, where datum captured participants' exact words (Creswell and Poth 2018). In vivo coding is helpful in centering the study on the voices and perspectives of participants (Saldaña 2016). In second cycle of coding, we remained open minded and used pattern coding by looking for patterns which emerged from first cycle of coding. Pattern coding allowed us to condense codes into categories and also allow for the emergence of meta themes which we believed were significant (Saldaña 2016). We placed labels on themes the data presented.

#### 4. Findings

We analyzed our findings using a Critical Mixed Race Studies (CMRS) perspective. Critical Mixed Race Studies (CMRS) place multiraciality in the center of the focus. Our research is not just about analyzing Black/White multiracial students but is about analyzing the social processes multiracial individuals experience in the context of a predominantly White institution amidst racism. By interviewing individuals, we engaged them to critically think about their identities as multiracial individuals. We then focused on the multiracial student's actions in the context of United States history. Conducting research in this way allowed the researchers to effectively utilize Critical Mixed Race Studies (CMRS) as we view race, racism, and racial hierarchy (Daniel et al. 2014).

##### 4.1. Emerging Themes

Key emerging themes are presented below. We integrated Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs theory with Renn's (2004) ecological theory of mixed-race identity development to make sense of the data and emergent themes.

##### 4.1.1. "Where You Needed To Go"

Surprisingly, the majority of Black/White multiracial students in this study did feel connected to the university where they were enrolled. Black/White multiracial students who felt connected at this university did so primarily through close friends and students in the campus community. When asked about their feeling of connectedness to the institution, one participant, Nichole, stated:

I would say that I feel connected to the community and the university through other people. Getting involved with the community, getting involved with anyone on campus and meeting new people is really the biggest chance you are ever going to get to step out and get used to the atmosphere. Specifically, the (PWI's) diversity allows me to go out on campus, whichever part of campus I am at, and I can see different colored people. I really can see different colored people.

Black/White multiracial participants in this study felt a sense of belonging at the university through social integration and through their interactions with other students in the campus community. Black/White multiracial participants' experiences aligned with

Tinto (1993) when discussing their everyday interactions as having the biggest impact on sense of belonging.

Most Black/White multiracial students who felt a sense of belonging and connectedness did so through involvement in predominantly Black organizations and campus resources (e.g., Cultural Center, Student Activities Center, Writing Center). Multiple students stated their minority scholarship program, National Panhellenic Council Greek organization, diversity mentoring program, and the Cultural Center allowed them to become involved with other People of Color at the university. Black/White multiracial students gained access and navigated these racialized environments using cultural knowledge, even when their multiracial identity could not be fully present or recognized (Johnston-Guerrero and Pecero 2016). When asked about the extent the participant felt they belong at the PWI where they enrolled, the first participant, Leroy, stated:

The cultural center was where you needed to go, regardless if you were a minority. They could hook you up. Within the day they would send emails, get emails back to you, include you in those emails, and that's where I felt like included. Where I can talk to someone and rely on someone, in the cultural center cuz I always felt like if I needed something done within the hour they would be like, "Okay I got you, I will include you in the email."

Cultural centers are designated as safe spaces and are designed to be welcoming locations for Black and marginalized students in predominantly White institutions as a way to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion (Clauson and McKnight 2018; Patton 2010). According to Black/White multiracial students in this study, the cultural center at this institution had a positive impact on sense of belonging for marginalized students. The physical facility allowed for comradery with Black peers, which strengthens the Black identity and sense of belonging for multiracial students at predominantly White institutions (Clayton 2020).

#### 4.1.2. "A lot of People Just Don't Get It"

I (primary author) gave participants the opportunity to form their own definition of what the term authenticity meant. Black/White multiracial students at this university defined authenticity as being their "real, true, genuine self." Nearly all the Black/White multiracial students at the institution we interviewed do not feel like they can be their completely authentic selves at all times. Black/White Multiracial students generally felt comfortable being completely authentic around close intimate friends. Hallie Berrie mentioned she could not be her completely authentic self at all times, but she affirmed:

The only people that I am authentic around are my two best friends who are also, who are more lighter skin people who grew up in all white areas. We are kind of the only people that get our struggle of like, I don't really know as much as these other Black people do about the Black struggle and the Black culture, but at the same time I grew up in an all-White area, so I face that feeling of being ostracized and that White discrimination.

Hallie Berrie mentioned not knowing as much as other Black people, meaning she does not have the same cultural knowledge (Renn 2000). When multiracial individuals lack cultural knowledge surrounding Blackness they can be seen as ingenuine and not fit socially. Cultural knowledge can dictate how a multiracial person navigates space in a college campus (Renn 2004). This participant does not have the same cultural knowledge as other Black people, but just as in Renn's (2000) findings, she is still authentic in her private space. Hallie Berrie is completely authentic around her close intimate friends who are racially identical to her. These students have a shared experience and understand the discrimination that each other encounters. Multiracial students being authentic with close intimate friends allows them to have increased confidence and comfort (Renn 2000, 2004; Wallace 2003). Being authentic with close intimate friends confirms Renn's (2000, 2004)

and Wallace's (2003) notion of space, whether it be public in social groups or private with intimate friends.

Maslow (1954) discussed that people who have reached self-actualization—the top tier in the hierarchy of needs—can accept themselves and other people as they are. Several participants accept themselves and others, yet they still feel a need to change depending on the people they are around. Black/White multiracial students in this study admitted they were not their authentic selves at all times due to constantly codeswitching in search of acceptance. Participants disclosed they felt forced to wear a mask and not be their genuine selves to receive approval from social groups. Feeling pressure to wear a mask and not be authentic is an example of chronic codeswitching operationalized. Participants viewed codeswitching as constantly feeling a need to change masks to better adapt to their surroundings. If participants move too quickly between environments, they may forget to take off one mask for another, potentially causing negative feedback and harsh comments from people. Chronic codeswitching is an emergent theme in this study. Situationally choosing racial characteristics can appear as inauthentic, but race is fluid, especially for multiracial students (Johnston-Guerrero 2021). Students feel obligated to have a “toned down” identity and feel “too Black” around White peers and “too White” around Black peers. Tom said he feels completely authentic around intimate friends and stated many people do not understand him:

It has its own uphill battles, and a lot of people just don't get it. There are times that you are told that you are too White around your Black friends, and you are too Black around your White friends. That's happened.

Johnston-Guerrero et al. (2020) examined multiracial oppression and found most of their participants discussing oppression targeting monoracial communities of color, but this quote from Tom targeted both the dominant and marginalized racial identities they had connections with. This also confirms Renn's (2000) findings on discrimination coming from both White and Black monoracial peers. Discrimination from both White and Black peers is detrimental because this is a form of racial microaggression and an increase in this form of discrimination correlates to lower self-esteem, which negatively impacts student development (Nadal et al. 2014).

#### 4.2. Chronic Codeswitching Operationalized

All participants *constantly* felt they needed to adjust their personality or appearance based on the dominant racial identity of the people they were around. Maria Root (1996) first discovered this adjustment in multiracial students and used the term “border crossing,” describing it as “the active and habitual situational manipulation of race between foreground and background” (p. xx). The term chronic codeswitching is more appropriate because it accomplishes the complicated goal of capturing how participants navigated broader intersectional ties stemming from their multiracial identities. Sometimes participants were willing actors as they navigated their environment and social/academic interactions. Other times, participants felt imposed to act, talk, or navigate in ways that did not feel authentic. Multiracial students utilize this strategic move of codeswitching to navigate their environments and through agency, negotiate their identity. The strategy of chronic codeswitching would be unnecessary if it were not for the baseline of racism and anti-Blackness that exists in the United States.

Chronic codeswitching occurred among participants consistently in a variety of groups. Chronic codeswitching is primarily a behavioral (and or cognitive) adjustment that can be visible (adjusting words they use, or as one participant describes, having more or less swagger) to optimize others' comfort in exchange for acceptance, feeling included within social groups. Negotiating authenticity and working through one's self-expressions daily can spiral into a continual stream of effects that are detrimental to overall well-being. Chronic codeswitching contributed to Black/White multiracial students not being able to be their completely authentic selves at all times while at the university. Hallie Berrie explained:

I would say no, definitely not. I'm constantly codeswitching, I'm constantly having to change who I am based on who I am around. That goes for when I'm around White people or Black people. Like I said, I really struggle with that, from growing up in an all-White area and being one of those people of color girls that, you know I have my White voice and then I have my Black voice. It's just kind of frustrating to me because when I'm around White people, I have to talk in a certain way that this person is receptive too. Talking about my White coworkers, you won't necessarily see me being very relaxed. I always work really hard to articulate myself very well. That could also be because it's a job. Even when I have White people in my class, I feel like I have to put on a veil to get them to be receptive to my personality in a way. On the other flip side of the coin, I feel like sometimes with Black people I codeswitch to where I can be more in that African American way but at the same time, I feel like I can be judged because I'm still kind of like that White girl of the group. On one hand I feel like I'm the Black person around all the White people who has to work harder to articulate themselves and then around the Black people I feel like I'm too proper, I feel like I have no swagger. I have to navigate that a little bit on words to use, what words not to use because I'm still being a little bit judged.

Hallie Berrie was *constantly* altering herself based on which friend group she was around. Hallie Berrie experienced several incidents of microinvalidations growing up in an all-White area, which negatively affected her sense of belonging. She, like many Black/White multiracial students in this study, had a fear of judgment. To avoid this judgement, students felt they must put on a veil to get others to be more receptive. People repeatedly judged the Black/White multiracial student, which pressured the student into chronic codeswitching as a way to negotiate their mixedness. Paige described chronic codeswitching as the *perpetual* act of putting on and removing *different* masks:

I think it is just coming back to where I was talking about acceptance and how everyone paints this picture in their head about how you should act or what you are going to bring. I just always felt like I need to wear one mask for some people, another mask for other people, and another mask for others. Of course, I am getting better with that. I know that's bad, but I felt like when I first set foot on campus, they have that welcome week and you are trying to figure out where you belong, but you also want people to take you in as well. That's where I felt like it really began, was with how am I going to fit in campus, but also how am I going to get these people to bring me into their group. I think that's really where it started.

Changing masks happened abundantly in search of acceptance. At times, Black/White multiracial students exercise chronic codeswitching to positively navigate their environments and other times, they use chronic codeswitching as a defense mechanism; the exchange occurs because there is a lack of freedom, and the very act is to make them feel comfortable. Chronic codeswitching for Paige occurred in the PWI during her first week on campus when she was trying to find where she belonged. Chronic codeswitching made it extremely difficult for Black/White multiracial students to be their authentic selves. When asked if she can be her authentic self, Bay stated:

No, but I also feel like that's kind of the way I am in everyday life. Not really knowing how to present myself to other people. I have heard everything from, "you're being too White" to "you're not Black enough." It really depends on who you are presenting yourself in front of. I kind of base how I alter my perception to them.

Bay frequently altered her appearance and perception based on the people she was around. Chronic codeswitching appeared throughout the transcripts and data analysis. Black/White multiracial students often receive the remarks that they were "too Black" in some situations and "too White" in others. Black/White multiracial students' peers



made these remarks due to beliefs about singular racial categories and these remarks are founded on monoracism (Johnston and Nadal 2010). Multiracial participants in this study shared similar feelings of oppression as the participants in Johnston-Guerrero et al. (2020) study and this is evidenced by the way oppression influences their sense of identity. We believe students in this study have internalized monoracism (Johnston-Guerrero et al. 2020), which dictates how they act and racially identify in certain social situations, in fear of receiving discrimination from monoracial peers. Root (1996) described people who make such comments as border patrols or people who are determined to deny entrance to anyone outside of their racial group. Hearing remarks such as these discourage authenticity and encourage the Black/White multiracial student into chronic codeswitching as a way to negotiate their identity. Repeatedly hearing “too Black” or “too White,” and internalizing monoracism forces the Black/White multiracial students into chronic codeswitching in search of acceptance. Individuals and the environment trigger which identity shines and this is the sense of “chronic” in the term “chronic codeswitching.” Codeswitching is taxing and it leads to inauthenticity which hurts a sense of belonging but using it strategically in search of acceptance is how students use this technique to reap benefits. Chronic codeswitching requires labor to adapt and is a consequence of the racism in multiracial students’ environment. Chronic codeswitching is a way for multiracial individuals to exercise agency in their environment.

## 5. Implications for Practice

This study on Black/White multiracial students and their sense of belonging in a PWI can be used to increase sense of belonging for Black/White multiracial students. An increase in sense of belonging leads to an increase in persistence and graduation rates (Hausmann et al. 2007). The implications are courses on the multiracial experience and the creation of multiracial organizations. These implications will allow PWIs to increase sense of belonging for Black/White multiracial students and increase diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice education.

### 5.1. Multiracial Experience Courses

Courses designed around the multiracial experience are another needed practice. These courses could be used as a general education requirement to educate all students at the university. Multiracial experience courses would fit appropriately in the Pan-African Studies department or other various disciplinary perspectives. Black/White multiracial students at the university felt their experiences were overlooked. Multiracial experience courses will allow individuals at the PWI to have an opportunity to gain knowledge surrounding multiracial experiences. Black/White multiracial students discussed that their peers inquired about their experiences and point of view at times. At the same time, Sage stated:

I also tend to feel more comfortable when my personal life doesn’t have to be used as an example for how I think in the class. I like having other examples that are in books or things that I can relate to but aren’t me.

Black/White multiracial students want people to receive education on the Black/White multiracial experience, but do not want to feel like the experiment. These courses would educate students on multiracial individuals, which could reduce ignorant racial remarks to these individuals, increasing their sense of belonging. Multiracial experience courses would be beneficial for the general campus population but would be especially beneficial for Black/White multiracial students at the institution.

Black/White multiracial students discussed that our interview with them was one of the first times they were able to truly think about their multiracial experience and identity development. Black/White multiracial participants desire to learn more about their identity because learning, reflecting, and writing about their multiracial identity help them feel comfortable. Multiracial experience courses will also give Black/White multiracial students the opportunity to learn various strategies to cope with discrimination

they face. Coping is an important tool for multiracial students to learn to overcome discrimination (Okamoto 2020). Having multiracial experience courses at the institution will allow Black/White multiracial students opportunities to learn, write, and reflect on their multiracial experience and multiracial identity development.

### 5.2. Multiracial Organizations

PWIs are just that—predominantly White. Black/White multiracial students can feel extremely uncomfortable when they are the only person of color in the academic setting. Organizations provide opportunities for student involvement, yet for multiracial students, they can provide another obstacle to finding a sense of belonging at the university. The main reason organizations can be obstacles is because it can be difficult for multiracial students to find peers they can connect to and discuss their struggles with. Multiracial students report monoracial support groups do not accept them completely (Jones and Jones 2010). In these monoracial support groups, multiracial students felt a denial of a multiracial reality and felt that they were not monoracial enough to “fit in” (Harris 2017a). Having only monoracial organizations contributes to the denial of the existence of multiracial individuals (Harris 2017a). Many institutions lack support catered specifically towards multiracial individuals. Black/White multiracial individuals seek places where they can share experiences with other multiracial people, while educating the general population about the Black/White multiracial college experience. To counter marginality and promote productivity, understanding, and motivation in multiracial students, institutions can create and support multiracial organizations that advocate for multiracial students and their needs (Palmer et al. 2012).

Black/White multiracial students help other multiracial students at the university feel comforted and that they belong. Black/White multiracial students are constantly codeswitching, based on who they are around. Black/White multiracial students cannot be their authentic selves at all times and cater to the individuals around them so they will be accepted. Paige announced:

I am always just nervous about being the person that is not following the identity that other people give me. I know it sounds really bad, but it feels like I am always being compared. It's like “you are too this” or “you are too that” and I feel like I can never please people in their own mind about what I should be.

Being around multiracial individuals will allow Black/White multiracial students to let their guards down and finally be their authentic selves. Multiracial students will not all be the same, but they will be able to share relatable struggles and experiences. Black/White multiracial students connecting with each other will find comfort in the multiracial organization, which will increase their sense of belonging. Increased sense of belonging leads to higher academic outcomes and positive adjustments, such as increased self-esteem, self-worth, and overall wellbeing (Van Ryzin et al. 2009).

## 6. Recommendations for Future Research

Black/White multiracial students' sense of belonging was better understood through this research. Even with this added information, there are several gaps in knowledge surrounding Black/White multiracial students. We encourage future research on exploring the long-term effects of chronic codeswitching for Black/White multiracial individuals. We also encourage research on multiracial college students in a global context.

Chronic codeswitching was expected, but not to this intense degree. Codeswitching constantly and never being authentic can have severe consequences, especially on mental health, for Black/White multiracial students (Sanchez et al. 2009). Further research is needed on the long-term effects of chronic codeswitching. This topic could be researched in a longitudinal study and finding this information will give insight into the impact attending a PWI has on Black/White multiracial students and their mental health. Multiracial identity development is an ongoing process (Renn 2004), which will continue long after Black/White multiracial students depart from the institution.

## 7. Conclusions

Black/White multiracial students face an array of challenges such as rejection by own racial groups, assumption of racial identity, and discrimination from both Black and White individuals. These challenges can diminish Black/White multiracial students' sense of belonging at PWIs in the USA. Potential implications and the current racial climate brought the need to examine Black/White multiracial students' sense of belonging at these institutions to the forefront. Currently, Black/White multiracial students do feel a sense of belonging at this university but not primarily from institutional climate or initiatives. Black/White multiracial students feel a sense of belonging with their close friends of color and diverse organizations in which they were involved. Black/White multiracial students in a PWI described the phenomenon of often feeling uncomfortable throughout their time at the university and not feeling they could be their completely authentic selves at all times. Black/White multiracial students not being their authentic selves leads them to chronic codeswitching in search of acceptance. Employing these implications for practice, based on this study's findings, will likely increase their sense of belonging. Using this research, higher education professionals can ensure Black/White multiracial students have a better chance at PWIs of not feeling like "the minority of the minorities" (Leroy), and instead, experience "the best of both worlds" (Taty).

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