



BELONGING, RACIALIZING, AND PLACEMAKING IN STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS FOR MULTIRACIAL COLLEGE STUDENT LEADERS

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This qualitative intersectional narrative inquiry examined how Multiracial college students find sense of belonging in student organizations by negotiating multiple racial identities and locations in traditionally monoracial spaces. Multiracial students sought membership in organizations because they felt invisible at their institutions. To find belonging within student communities, they engaged in a difficult process of placemaking in which they experienced monoracism and other racialized microaggressions within student organizations. In time, they developed a sense of belonging by curating a small cohort of friends connected through their organizational involvement. These findings reveal implications that further inform approaches for student involvement professionals and others who work with Multiracial students to increase their support and engagement across involvement contexts.

Multiraciality involves the self-identification with two or more races and exists across a broad historical narrative that has disallowed authentic representation (Harris, 2016). Multiraciality has previously been legally and structurally made invisible or established as a *limited* identity. Many Multiracial individuals had to choose one race over another, or to check a box labeled *other*, which has led to historical erasure (Renn, 2021; Sasso et al., 2023). Some research suggests that experiences related to identity and development may be a more challenging process for students who identify as Multiracial due to monoracism, whereas college is commonly viewed as a space for young adults to begin establishing an independent sense of identity (Atkin & Yoo, 2019; Buchanan et al., 2009; 2018; Johnston-Guerrero & Renn, 2016; Harris, 2016; Johnston & Nadal, 2010; Nadal et al., 2011). Johnston and Nadal (2010) defined monoracism as “a social system of psychological inequality in which persons who do not fit monoracial categories may be oppressed at the systemic and interpersonal levels due to underlying assumptions and beliefs in unique distinct racial categories” (p. 125). Multiracial students are developing identity and racial salience on college campuses and represent 5-10% of undergraduate students (Johnson-Guerrero & Wijesinghe, 2021). Student-constructed spaces have developed as attempts to provide visibility, identity development, and representation, which promote a sense of belonging among its participants. However, these are focused on monoracial identities and spaces (Sasso et al., 2023).

Multiracial students may find it difficult to navigate both their social and academic lives since higher education is based on the assumption that students are from separate racial groups with unique interests and demands. Multiracial students have expressed a wide variety of difficult racial experiences, such as emotions of devaluation, exclusion, exoticization, fetishization, objectification, tokenization, and sexual and racial harassment (Buchanan et al., 2009; 2018; Harris, 2016; Nadal et al., 2011). There is limited understanding of how Multiracial student leaders negotiate their identities to find belonging within monoracial student organizations (Snider et al., 2023).

Renn (2021) suggested that Multiracial identity development varies greatly from Monoracial identity development, and there is a need for more research to increase professional understanding. This narrative inquiry

study examined how Multiracial undergraduate student leaders negotiate their multiple racial identities and locations to find a sense of belonging in student organizations. In this article, the authors intentionally position the terms monoracial as lowercase because it refers to a generalized collective identity and whiteness because it is a system of oppression in order to “reject the grammatical representation of power” (Perez Huber, 2010, p. 93). We intentionally capitalize racial identities such as Multiracial, White, or Students of Color to acknowledge the importance of race for its salience in college identity development (Sasso et al., 2023; Snider, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Monoracism

Monoracism is the structural oppression perpetuated against Multiracial persons that reproduces the unearned benefits of whiteness (Johnston & Nadal, 2010). Monoracism is responsible for hypodescent (or the one drop rule – meaning if there is as little as one drop of Black blood, a person should be considered as Black) discourses and racism against Multiracial persons as public policies have limited visibility in higher education for Multiracial students through forced monoracial identities such as whiteness (Harris, 2016; Johnston-Guerrero & Renn, 2016; Nadal et al., 2011; Pascoe, 2009). Multiracial students typically encounter racial tensions via colorism and hypodescent discourses (Nadal et al., 2011).

Multiracial students may encounter racial microaggressions as a Person of Color or in relation to their Multiracial identities. Multiracial microaggressions are “daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, enacted by monoracial persons that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights toward Multiracial individuals or groups” (Johnston & Nadal, 2010, p. 126). Multiracial students self-report that the frequency and intensity of these microaggressions increased in college, which leads to dropping courses, leaving student organizations, and avoiding peers (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012)

Other research has created a taxonomy for multiracial microaggressions that categorizes the numerous forms of microaggressions that multiracial individuals are likely to face. The taxonomy comprises the following: (a) exclusion or isolation; (b) exoticization and objectification; (c) assumption of monoracial or incorrect identification; (d) denial of Multiracial reality; and (e) pathologizing of identity and experiences (Johnston & Nadal, 2010; Nadal et al., 2011). Museus et al. (2016) identified parallel domains with seven forms of bias and discrimination experienced by multiracial students, suggesting a shared set of microaggressions faced by Multiracial individuals.

Multiracial students encounter racism from their monoracial classmates (Jackson, 2009; Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; Root, 1992; 1998, 2003). Research also indicates that Multiracial students have more negative interactions than monoracial Students of Color (Brackett et al., 2006). Due to their unique position in a fixed monoracial culture, Multiracial children may have heightened awareness of racial concerns as they grow up (Binning et al., 2009). Multiracial students also experienced rejection, exclusion, and insecurity from their monoracial classmates (Jourdan, 2006; Rockquemore, 1998; Root, 1998, 2003).

Belonging

Multiracial students often feel empowered to speak out against racism because of the nuanced ways they occupy multiple racial locations (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012). This is often in contrast to consistent negative interactions, which cause them to feel out of place (Chaudhari & Pizzolato, 2008). Due to a lack of social acceptability from peers, social pressures, and a lack of a feeling of belonging, all of these negative interactions may result in lower self-esteem (Ford & Malaney, 2012; Koo, 2021).

Multiracial students may feel alienated by race-focused student programs that reinforce monoracial categories and leave Multiracial students without a feeling of safety and belonging that these services were intended to offer (Literté, 2010, 2021). Multiracial students are then forced to “appropriate space for an identity” in order to find a community against the prevailing racist beliefs that exist against them (Delgado, 2016, p. 685).

Multiracial students participate in selective invisibility or passing if they are unable to establish a feeling of belong-

ing in monoracial contexts (Sasso et al., 2023). Passing is “a deception that enables a person to adopt specific roles or identities from which prevailing social standards would otherwise bar him or her” (Kennedy, 2003, p. 283). Passing permits Multiracial individuals to disguise their race by, for example, anglicizing their name or altering their phenotype in order to control their identity (Khanna & Johnson, 2010). This may have lasting negative effects on students’ academic and social integration on campus (Snider et al., 2023). Therefore, many Multiracial students may seek a sense of belonging within student groups through an individual process of placemaking.

Placemaking

Placemaking considers the individual connections between students and their immediate environmental spaces in their attempts to facilitate belonging within socially constructed spaces such as student organizations (Kyle & Chick, 2007; Sasso et al., 2023). The concept of placemaking is rooted in the campus ecology research of the 1970s, in which campuses were examined using biological and ecological lenses. These approaches were used to better understand the *fit* of students within existing campus systems and how learning environments influenced the student experience (Banning, 1978). The limitations of this research were that it used primarily majority lenses and did not consider how fit presents differently across student communities (Bohl, 2006). Multiracial students receive discrete messages about the implicitly constructed racial borders and areas on campus (Harris, 2016).

Within Communities of Color, placemaking is defined as how those in the community “...create sites of endurance, belonging, and resistance” (Hunter et al., 2016, p. 31). Individual placemaking focuses on using intentionally constructed spaces to facilitate growth and development (Moore & Papadiuk, 2011), expand social capital and community (Cicognani et al., 2008; Ozturgut, 2013), and create safe spaces (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000; Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008). Placemaking is also used to revisit these spaces, a process of destressing and cultural renewal (Korpela & Hartig, 1996; Korpela & Ylen, 2007; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2009). Placemaking is important for many Multiracial communities, such as how Multiracial Native Americans engage in homegoing to reify their cultural connections to Indigeneity (Sasso et al., 2023; Waterman, 2012).

Involvement

While colleges offer multicultural offices or identity-based centers, they are often constructed around monoracial identities and do not consider students who identify as Multiracial. As a result, those identifying as Multiracial may regard these centers as not meeting their social requirements (Narvaez & Kivlighan, 2021; Ozaki & Johnston, 2008). In particular, Multiracial students find it challenging to find student organizations or counseling groups that embrace and recognize their multiple racial identities and locations (Narvaez & Kivlighan, 2021).

When seeking involvement in student organizations, Multiracial students are more inclined to join racially-diverse organizations (Park, 2008; Snider, 2020). Multiracial students are often attracted to monoracial groups whose participation demonstrates a tangible commitment to diversity and inclusion (Snider, 2020). Multiracial students often look to sororities and fraternities, particularly culturally-based organizations. Historically, White sororities have the largest proportion of White members, while the more diverse chapters are considered lower-tier organizations (Park, 2008; Snider, 2020). However, Multiracial sorority women often experience significant cultural taxation, including racial questioning about their identities, colorism, and assumptions about their racial locations (Snider, 2020; Snider et al., 2023). They also experience the *convenient minority friend* role in which they serve as racial buffers. They are expected to translate racial issues, subjected to racial joking, and asked to recruit other Students of Color because they are assumed to be diversity magnets (Sasso et al., 2023).

Monoracial peers often presume that multiracial college students do not experience racism or see their membership in an identity-based student group as inauthentic (Harris, 2016). Members of student groups sometimes question students over their motivations for joining monoracial student organizations if they do not resemble other group members (Garcia, 2019; Snider, 2020). Multiracial students self-disclose internalized emotions about representation and visibility as often they are perceived as fractured or abstracted in joining a culturally-based organization as a result of monoracism (Johnston-Guerrero & Renn, 2016; Malaney & Danowski, 2015; Ozaki & Johnston, 2008; Renn, 2000, 2004). These student groups promote monoracial frameworks and, like sororities

and fraternities, are unnerved by multiraciality and uniformly ignorant about it (Ozaki & Johnston, 2008).

Student organizations provide places for growth and learning, but they may also restrict the expression of their identities (Garcia, 2019; Sasso et al., 2023; Snider et al., 2023). In particular, Multiracial students have developed identity negotiation and navigational capital to facilitate placemaking by locating a small group of monoracial friends who, in turn, become significant advocates (Sasso & Bullington, 2023; Snider et al., 2023). Multiracial students also find significance and seek leadership development experiences such as through Sister Circles, Women's Caucuses, or other leadership organizations providing identity development or racial salience (Croom et al., 2017; Snider, 2020). However, previous research identifies the need for more institutional engagement with Multiracial students (Harris & BrckaLorenz, 2017; Harris et al., 2018). Therefore, by exploring student organizations that offer opportunities as potential sites for placemaking, the current study attempts to understand how these spaces may facilitate a sense of belonging for Multiracial students.

METHODS

Research Design

We followed the qualitative research design of other prior Multiracial identity experience studies that used intersectional approaches for narrative methodologies (Renn, 2000, 2003, 2004; Snider, 2020). Intersectional narrative inquiry, according to Esposito and Evans-Winters (2021), is "an epistemological stance and modus operandi for the examination (and interpretation) of (a) complex relationships, (b) cultural artifacts, (c) social contexts, and (d) researcher reflexivity" (p. 21). Narrative inquiry focuses on narration and aims to record tales in order to get a comprehensive knowledge of lived experiences (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). This was chosen because story research may be used to "defy historical and contemporary racial oppression" (Tyson, 2006, p. 24). Intersectional qualitative research seeks to elucidate "discussions of race, gender, class, and sexuality as part of a larger political and epistemological struggle for a better and just future" by sharing participant realities from the viewpoint of oppressed identities (Tyson, 2006, p. 25).

Further, intersectional narrative inquiry allows for understanding the nuanced ways in which oppressed identities may negotiate their identities as forms of coping or resistance (Boylorn, 2017). Using intersectional approaches with narrative inquiry as a methodological instrument, the study of social identities is seen as individual narratives, with the assumption that individuals build their own identities via storytelling (Museus, 2007). People learn about their identities and how they are positioned within their world (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021; Reissman, 2008). Using intersectional narrative inquiry enabled the conceptualization of participants' lived experiences via storytelling, which cannot be divorced from their own storied lives (Museus, 2007). The following research questions led to this study:

- 1) How do Multiracial student leaders negotiate their multiple racial identities and locations within monoracial student organizations?
- 2) How do Multiracial student leaders engage in placemaking to find a sense of belonging within monoracial student organizations?

Positionality

We followed a reflexive process outlined by Esposito and Evans-Winters (2021) when engaging in research interrogating oppressive systems or racial identities. We used this framework in an examination of monoracism and multiraciality, which is rooted in norms of whiteness when considering our subjectivities and assumptions (Harris, 2016). We considered the sophistication of multiraciality through intersecting identities of race, gender, and social class.

The first author is a mixed-heritage Latino cisgender heterosexual male, and the second and third authors are heterosexual, cisgender Biracial females. All authors have advised diverse student organizations and supported Multiracial student leaders as either faculty or student affairs professionals, which may have initially limited our perspectives. These *a priori* professional experiences required us to continually deconstruct our own internalized monoracialism and oppression. These varied experiences shaped their identities in navigating through

otherness despite their proximity to dominant identities and the responsibility that comes with the privilege and power they hold to advocate for social justice.

We bracketed our subjectivities and understanding of systems of oppression that facilitate intersectional marginality for Multiracial college students from a MultiCrit lens (Harris, 2016). Thus, as researchers, we believe it is important to reconstruct new ways of thinking and approach Multiracial identity formation through research as a formative and fluid process of becoming. Therefore, we approached this multiraciality research with intentionality in sharing the research with our participants. We were also aware that, as researchers, multiraciality is nuanced to the specific racial locations and identities of our participants, and their lived experiences are not universal. We also assume that these processes of identity development are interconnected with systems of monoracism and other forms of racism into their socialization. However, the student leader experience offers the potential for Multiracial students to move from spaces of liminality to ones of belonging.

Participants

Snowball sampling for historically marginalized and underrepresented populations was utilized to develop a more authentic sample in which two initial participants were recruited through text message. Then, existing participants recommended additional Multiracial student leaders based on inclusion criteria (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). These inclusion criteria included: (1) undergraduate status; (2) active participation in a recognized campus student organization of any type; (3) holding a leadership position or authority role in a recognized student organization; and (4) self-identification as Multiracial. All participants were active undergraduate students and attended different public Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) in varying regions of the United States. Participants held equivalent leadership positions such as secretary, programming role, or committee chair. Still, none held primary executive board positions because, as noted in the findings, Multiracial student leaders are relegated to administrative positions. All participants selected their own pseudonyms and defined their own multiple identities (Table 1).

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Name	Racial Identities	Academic Level	Gender Identity	Sexual Identity	Institution Type	Student Organization
Sarah	Black/ Korean	Senior	Female	Queer	Midwestern PWI	Student Government
Mandy	Black/ White	Junior	Female	Heterosexual	Southern PWI	Black Student Caucus
Sean	Black/ White	Junior	Male	Heterosexual	Midwestern PWI	College Democrats
Beth	Black/ White	Senior	Female	Heterosexual	Mid-Atlantic PWI	Service Organization
Lauren	Black/ White	Junior	Female	Lesbian	Southern PWI	Social Sorority
Scott	Filipino/ Mexican	Sophomore	Male	Heterosexual	New England PWI	Residence Hall Association
Joseph	Jamaican/ Chinese	First Year	Male	Heterosexual	Western PWI	Business Fraternity
Elizabeth	Latina/ Jewish	Senior	Female	Heterosexual	Southwest PWI	Social Sorority
Jasmine	Black/ Israeli	Junior	Female	Heterosexual	Southern PWI	Hillel
Randall	Latino/ Chinese	Sophomore	Male	Queer	Mid-Atlantic PWI	E-Sports Club

Data Collection

This research included a guide for semi-structured interviews, which included questions such as “In what possible ways, if at all, did your Multiracial identities influence your student leader experiences?” and “What are some challenges and/or benefits that you have due to your Multiracial identity?” The other subjects discussed in the interview guide were informed by earlier research relevant to the Multiracial identities of the participants and their experiences as students (Renn, 2021). We asked probing questions and varied them slightly between participants depending on comfort level and rapport. Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and were held synchronously through an online video platform. Participants were presented with a standard informed consent form and were provided with a gift card as an incentive. Interviews ended once there was data redundancy (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). The interviews were transcribed by a professional third party for data analysis.

Data Analysis

This study used narrative analysis in congruence with intersectional narrative inquiry in which we cannot “make sense of stories outside of the context in which they are situated,” which were located within political, social, and historical contexts (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021, p. 149). Guiding questions by Gubrium and Holstein (2009) were also used for contextualization, which included: (1) who produces particular kinds of stories, (2) where they are likely to be encountered, (3) what are their purposes, (4) who are the listeners, (5) under what circumstances particular narratives are more or less accountable, (5) how do they gain acceptance, and (6) how they are challenged. Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022) also furthered this by asking, “How does this context bear witness and shape the story?” (p. 149). These questions were used to begin data analysis in which we constructed preliminary memos about salient concepts (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021; Saldaña, 2021).

In congruence with intersectional narrative inquiry, each participant was assigned an individual narrative analysis document because of the nuances and complexities of multiraciality.

An initial listing of significant patterns was completed for each participant using these narrative analysis documents. Significant focus was given to participants’ meaning-making of multiraciality, monoracism, and relationships with monoracial peers (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). This initial coding process assisted the researchers in understanding how individual lived experiences amplify the cross-cutting of themes (Josselson & Hammack, 2021).

Then, patterns that interconnected across participants pertaining to the research questions were applied, and sections of the transcripts were organized into thematic clusters (Saldaña, 2021). This process also included identifying additional narrative pieces that did not fall into these themes. Two rounds of participant analysis were conducted using this process, and we met to reconcile any potential incongruencies. Final narrative analysis documents were generated to complete thematic analysis to further refine the themes (Saldaña, 2021).

Trustworthiness

This study employed several strategies in accordance with standards of trustworthiness (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the two rounds of coding and regular co-researcher debriefings, an audit trail was used as part of a critically self-reflexive process. We discussed the research study constructs with each other to remain open to alternative interpretations of the data. Additional strategies included member checking (participants reviewed their interview transcripts) and through an external auditor who was a higher education researcher to interrogate the veracity of the themes.

FINDINGS

Findings from this study reveal the difficulties experienced by Multiracial students in their attempts to develop a sense of belonging through organizational involvement. They also experienced racialized microaggressions and monoracism through their participation in student organizations. To negotiate monoracial student organizations, Multiracial students attempted to engage in intentional placemaking. This process ultimately resulted in curating a small group of friends who became their supports and advocates, providing them with connectedness.

Belonging

Multiracial students in this study suggested that it was disorienting to them when they began college. They experienced racial questioning, colorism, and racial joking. Women experienced exotification and hypersexualization. They suggested they felt alone because there were no others like them on campus, and it was difficult to locate other Multiracial students. This made them experience a lack of visibility, and a lack of intentional engagement by their institutions made them feel embedded into invisibility. Elizabeth shared an experience:

One time my freshman year I was in the dining hall and I saw another light-skinned Black girl. She looked like me and had my same hair texture with curls. I also heard what I thought was like her speaking Spanish too, so I got all excited. I kinda crept on her by the salad bar and then waited until she sat down. I sat near her to try to make eye contact, hoping we would start talking. All I got was a mean mug and a stank eye. Ironically, we both joined the same sorority and she said she was stalking me on Insta [Instagram] and wanted to be my friend too, but she was showing out for her friends. But like, that's all we both wanted...friends like us [Multiracial].

Participants shared many stories like this of awkwardly trying to make friends or fit into monoracial spaces. Despite their best efforts, students were often unable to organically engage in place-making through conventional methods such as meeting at a party or their courses. Joseph clarified this experience by adding, "It's hard to make friends in college when you are Mixed because everyone just assumes you are a fraction of yourself and don't fully represent, and so all you feel is like you don't fit in or that no one likes you. Everyone is White, and not both like me."

In these difficulties with belonging, Multiracial students sought relief and friendships in student organizations. Yet, even this was fraught with challenges as they initially experienced negative transitions into locating a student organization and affiliating with existing members. Sarah had difficulty joining a student organization and eventually found a smaller, less visible service organization. Sarah offered advice:

Make sure that they step into that and find those you know those types of support on PWI campuses that are there, they might just be hidden gems and they can make the biggest differences, so I would definitely encourage people to step into that.

Multiracial students placed significant value on-campus involvement as an opportunity to find a sense of belonging at their institutions. Many participants like Randall or Jasmine noted it was clear there were "places you know don't want you" or that were "unwelcoming to Mixed students." There were unclear spaces for them in student organizations, which they felt might be welcoming and as a place to find solace from monoracism and friendships. Joseph said, "this was not happening for Mixed students outside of student orgs, we have to join them to connect and survive a PWI, or no one knows we exist on campus." So, to the Multiracial college students in this study, student organizations were one of the remaining sites for liberation, leadership, and identity development.

Racializing

Multiracial students experienced various forms of cultural taxation in their attempts to find belonging. Participants were rejected from many other monoracial student organizations because their multiraciality was disorienting or caused disequilibrium among existing organizational members. Some organizations also had hypodescent discourses that preceded participant disinterest in affiliation. Mandy contextualized this:

I don't feel like there's much help or conversations about like Mixed race people are like a taboo topic. Because like you know, like just like what like 56 years ago like interracial couples couldn't even marry, so I feel like it's still like a new like kind of like a merger like obviously there's more and more people who are Mixed race.

To find belonging, participants described that they were welcomed by organizations that already had above-average diversity of membership rather than more racially isolated or homogeneous ones. This diversity was chal-

lenging to Multiracial students because of what Randall styled this “double entrapment” in which he also noted was that “skinfock ain’t your kinfock.” Rather, Multiracial students experienced more racial questions or exotification from White members but unexpected racial microaggressions from other Students of Color. Scott clarified these expectations, “I knew White people would be ignorant and say some dumbass things at a PWI, but I did not expect my own people or other BIPOC to be just as ignorant.”

Students talked about their own individualized racialized experiences and their need to find belonging through their campus involvement at a PWI, particularly because they were nervous about racism. Sean shared a personal example that when Donald Trump was president, he noticed a significant increase in racism, racial tensions, and hate on campus, “A Mixed girl I know was walking to an audition, and she was egged and called the N-word after men yelled Trump and she literally went through her entire audition.” Also, another event Sean shared was that the art school at their PWI was graffitied with racial slurs during the most recent election period.

Sean and other participants consistently referenced the importance of the Black Lives Matter protests during the summer of 2020. They felt this movement opened the eyes of several individuals and the racial injustices of the world. They suggest this was an awkward time because it was a reflection time for many White people about their relationships with other Persons of Color. Mandy talks about the hurt they felt even before the summer of 2020:

Back in 2016 you know when Trump was elected, like you see, like all this crazy thing like you know, on Facebook people like saying their opinions and it’s kind of its hurtful you know it’s very hurtful to see that, like people who are supposed to be your family just don’t like you, because of your race, you know so that’s also been a challenge and there’s been challenges with my parents, because they also take the colorblind approach, I feel like sometimes our family can be the most hurtful.

Lauren also explained how many of the experiences Multiracial people face can be rooted to the political stance of their White peers on campus, which Elizabeth clarified, “Just because we are Mixed, White people think we are the ‘safe minorities’ to them and they use this to ask about race because they are afraid to ask other Persons of Color.” Participants expanded that they serve as racial ambassadors and that even their assumptions about cultural differences often place them in disbelief regarding monoracial knowledge about multiraciality. Beth states, “It gets so overwhelming having to teach others about your identity and be the Person of Color in every diversity conversation.” These forms of consistent racialized experiences facilitated exhaustion, and Multiracial students clarified they experienced a *racial ambassador* scenario or questioning across all of their identities and locations. Sean shared a similar perspective and highlighted, “When the faculty and staff are not being taught and trained on etiquette for not targeting Students of Color, but specifically Multiracial students, to lead diversity conversations, then you burn out so quickly.”

Beth shared several examples that other White students purposefully used the “N-word” near her but did not directly speak to her at parties and would stare at her as well. Like Beth, the other Multiracial women shared experiences about exotification in that many White men asked them about the politics of race or just wanted to “hook up” with a Person of Color. These broader racialized experiences in undergraduate student life were similar to their process of placemaking within their student organizations.

Placemaking

The placemaking process for Multiracial students within a student organization was difficult. Those who sought leadership positions were often blocked or impeded from advancing into these positions by their monoracial peers. If they obtained a position, it was more managerial or administrative, such as a committee chair, treasurer, or secretary. Multiracial students suggested this process was traumatizing and shared examples of how they internalized these feelings. Lauren shared, “You don’t understand that it’s okay to be different. You know you just want to be like everybody [White peers] just want to fit in.”

Initially, students discussed trying to fit into their student organization, often conforming to White norms. This included altering or completely changing their self-presentation and identity expression in their attempts to

gain acceptance by others. Participants shared examples, which included straightening their hair, buying new clothes, listening to new music, or code-switching. Beth shared one specific conformity example, “And this one girl talked about how she was ashamed of her curly hair and so she straightened it every day, so people wouldn’t make fun of her, and I was like I did the same thing too.” Similarly, other Multiracial women in this study shared examples regarding their extremely challenging experiences of placemaking within their organizations.

Mandy shared a personal experience of feeling like she did not fit with anyone in her student organizations, which she expressed as “How they [Multiracial students] don’t really necessarily feel like they fit in with one race or the other, so that’s like always been a challenge in my life.” In particular, Multiracial students described this as a racial buffer. Randall noted that this “felt like I am between two worlds, buffering like some 90s internet video between two computers.”

Eventually, Multiracial students engaged in successful placemaking by identifying a small group of monoracial peers within a student organization. Scott noted that he found friends in his student organization by going to meetings:

When I joined RHA [Residence Hall Association], it was difficult to get others to even see me. I had voice and I felt unseen and unheard, it was as if I did not exist. Then, one day I sat next to someone who asked my major and we started talking. We eventually became friends finally after he understood I was more than just Mixed.

Lauren shared that she had to “train” her sorority sisters, and after repeated exposure, they finally understood. Lauren shared: “My sorority sisters finally understood the assignment after an entire semester of me reminding them I am Multiracial and not just Black. Now, they remind everyone else for me. They are my besties, like my ride or die bitches.”

All participants identified they experienced imposter syndrome, which made them critically reflect on their racial identities. Figuring out how to fit in a space of whiteness or other monoracial identities was further magnified in their process of discovering a place in a student organization. Participants each shared a time when they felt like an imposter and as though they did not belong in the specific space. Once they gained confidence in their racial locations within the university system, they were able to engage in placemaking. However, other monoracial peers responded with disorientation or confusion to their racial identities. Through a process of educating or training their monoracial peers, a small group of friends developed who eventually became their primary social support network.

Randall clarified that he still has to educate his friends on the nuances of being Multiracial or has to explain certain aspects of his cultures but does not have to validate himself. He suggested,

...eventually finding close friends through getting involved on campus gave me more confidence to express who I was, rather than just trying to pass as straight or Latino. I feel visible and present, and now I feel like I matter.

Participants believe their campus involvement took a significant time to develop because their institutions lack clear pathways. Mandy confirmed that: “I feel like it’s kind of like I still feel like it’s kind of taboo, like I haven’t seen any programming for like Multiracial people at either of my institutions.” Multiracial college students experienced greater cultural taxation in their attempts to facilitate placemaking, eventually identifying a small support network of close monoracial friends.

DISCUSSION

This research provides evidence that more racially diverse student organizations are open as potential sites of belonging for Multiracial students who actively seek campus involvement, but that Multiracial students must engage in this placemaking at the expense of racialized microaggressions and monoracism. Multiracial students

were subjected to severe cultural taxation, prompting them to engage in deliberate placemaking to uncover their feelings of belonging. They served as racial buffers or racial ambassadors, and occupied a liminal “safe minority” status, which also led to coping strategies of passing and code-switching to avoid these forms of cultural taxation. These findings complement and extend the boundaries of the limited existing research about Multiracial student organization involvement by contextualizing these as spaces of potential placemaking.

In *belonging*, Multiracial students attempted to discover a sense of belonging on campus. They centered student organizations as their potential space to discover community to seek refuge from monoracism experiences that are unfortunately common for them (Johnson & Nadal, 2010). They felt that these spaces were one of their singular opportunities because they described their institutions as lacking intentional engagement due to their limited visibility to others (Harris & BrckaLorenz, 2017). To them, student organizations offered opportunities for connectedness for one or more of their racial locations or identities (Malaney & Danowski, 2015; Ozaki & Johnston, 2008). Student organizations offered leadership opportunities that would give them visibility (Harris & BrckaLorenz, 2017; Ozaki & Johnston, 2008). However, the belonging found in student organizations was coupled with experiences of racial microaggressions (Harris, 2017; Ozaki & Parson, 2017).

In *racializing*, Multiracial students experienced significant cultural taxation and various forms of monoracism in student organizations. They acted as racial buffers across numerous racial and cultural contexts, especially within monoracial contexts or in closer proximity to whiteness (Harris et al., 2019). They experienced monoracism from White peers as the “safe minority friend” (Snider et al., 2023). These students felt they were racial ambassadors for all their racial identities to White peers or used to demonstrate racial diversity within student organizations (Johnston-Guerrero & Chaudhari, 2016; Literté, 2021).

Unexpectedly, they also experienced similar monoracism as racial questioning from other monoracial Students of Color, particularly related to colorism (Hunter, 2016; Museus et al., 2015; Ozaki & Parson, 2017). This hypodescence compelled them to fit into or pick a monoracial or dominant racial category (Hunter, 2016; Khanna & Johnson, 2010; Rockquemore & Brunnsma, 2004). Other participants, particularly Multiracial women, were also hypersexualized via exotification processes and positioned into racial binaries or monoracial categories, which validates previous studies (Harris, 2017; 2019).

In *placemaking*, Multiracial students did not feel their institutions offered any programming for them and felt like they were invisible to others (Guillermo-Wann & Johnston, 2012). They attempted to initially engage in placemaking by unsuccessfully obtaining leadership positions that were stymied or limited to administrative roles. They also attempted to conform to whiteness or other monoracial norms through passing or other coping strategies (Harris et al., 2019; 2021; Sasso et al., 2023).

However, Multiracial students eventually developed a close circle of monoracial friends who became their advocates and community. Multiracial students also used a number of strategies to educate their monoracial peers about their multiple racial identities and locations. They sought to be authentically recognized beyond an abstracted identity of *Mixed* (Johnston-Guerrero & Chaudhari, 2016; Rockquemore & Brunnsma, 2004). This process of placemaking within institutions was difficult but allowed them to ultimately assume confidence within their racial locations within their student organization and, eventually, their institution.

Limitations

We have extensive *a priori* knowledge supporting multiracial college student leaders in student organizations and academic advising contexts. This may have influenced participants to provide socially desirable responses during their interviews or filter their responses due to fear of negative reprisal. There is no universality to Multiraciality as individual identity experiences may not apply to others, and there was significant variation across participant narratives (Johnston-Guerrero & Chaudhari, 2016). These individual Multiracial differences can affect the purpose of racialized narratives, experiences, and perspectives.

The transferability of this study is limited to the participants' membership in student organizations at PWIs. However, we believe the findings can provide insight into the experiences of Multiracial student leaders in organizations. We also recognize that this research does include some, but not a significant representation of all identities in light of historically marginalized communities. Although this research has participants who identify as Queer, only heteronormative perspectives and experiences were shared by participants. Therefore, future research should continue exploring specific forms of monoracism, such as colorism or how Multiracial students negotiate whiteness.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The most salient finding in this study beyond monoracism is how Multiracial student leaders persisted in finding belonging within their chapters. They engaged in intentional placemaking to disrupt the safe minority friend status, racial buffering, or racial ambassador role by surrounding themselves with monoracial advocates. These monoracial peers enveloped them despite the forms of cultural taxation they experienced to develop this community. There are a number of recommendations for practice for student organization advisors and student involvement professionals that may facilitate increased inclusion and involvement of Multiracial student leaders in organizations.

Student Organization Advisors

This growing awareness of Multiracial persons, according to Knaus (2006), should motivate educators to examine racial classifications and racial discourse in the United States. Mohajeri and Lou (2021) suggested a four-stage process of critical praxis that can be used by student organization advisors to promote Multiraciality as a space of counterstorytelling to acknowledge powerblindness. They suggested exploring the ways in which student organization advisors' postracial ideologies about Multiraciality may influence increased pressures of "responsibility for healing labor on Multiracial individuals, thereby absolving others of involvement" (p. 185). These approaches should also consider that Multiracial students inhabit co-located, multiple identities so that other students can move toward awareness and acceptance of their identities. Student affairs professionals are crucial in motivating and teaching Multiracial students enrolled in colleges and universities to take an active role in campus life. Power relations between students, staff, and professors are always omnipotent in postsecondary educational institutions. It is critical for advisors to understand the purpose of their participation in the institution (Mohajeri & Lou, 2021).

Advisors personally connect with a student's growth of racial identity as part of their role responsibilities, and other times it might be informal learning as part of a conversation of happenstance (Lou, 2011). Advisors become pivotal characters in students' identity formation during their collegiate years. Working closely with an organization can be rewarding because advisors can observe and experience student leadership development (Malaney & Danowski, 2015; Ozaki & Johnston, 2008). Working closely with an organization can be rewarding because of these reasons (Mohajeri & Lou, 2021). This means increasing the training that student involvement professionals or student organization advisors receive to understand how to improve assessment chances for Multiracial students (Hamako, 2005; Herring, 1995; Wilson, 1999).

Student Involvement Professionals

As elucidated in this study, Multiracial students will independently create these spaces even within monoracial environments into which they opt in. Greater support from institutional leaders is needed to ensure Multiracial students have various outlets; their actions to create such spaces illustrate the importance of creating physical and emotional spaces to empower, develop, and build community as Multiracial students at a PWI (Allen, 2019). For example, Women of Color caucuses or Sister Circles significantly contribute to the retention and persistence of Students of Color in higher education (Allen, 2019; Commodore et al., 2018; Croom et al., 2017). Snider (2020) found that the same benefits are critical for Multiracial women even if Women of Color spaces were not their goal or intention. Student involvement professionals and advisors should support and encourage the infrastructure for Students of Color to hold positions in these powerful counter spaces.

Multiracial students within organizations should be engaged in leadership opportunities with full participation, which acknowledges the deleterious impacts of erasure. These spaces should also authentically recognize students as not monoracial and allow them to distinctively identify (Townsend et al., 2009). Racial nomenclature and colloquial language can be harmful to identity development, especially to multiracial students (Ford & Malaney, 2012).

CONCLUSION

Multiracial identities should be recognized and considered across institutional policies and decision-making, and student involvement professionals and advisors should educate themselves about the sophistication of multiraciality represented in their student organizations. Increased consciousness through greater education can provide the language and tools necessary to acknowledge and encourage greater dialogue among members across all organizations about monoracism and reveal the colorblindness pervasive in student organizations. Increased understanding may allow clearer pathways for campus involvement and leadership for Multiracial college students. Future research should further examine the experiences of Multiracial student leaders in different categories or formats of student organizations.

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