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To Pass or Not to Pass? Constructing and Negotiating Biracial Identity

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to show how biracial people narrate their identities and how people in society influence biracial individuals' constructions of their self. This is significant because this research obtains perspectives from individuals who simultaneously occupy a privileged and underprivileged identity. In highlighting the experiences of biracial people and their constructions of the self, this research answered questions surrounding how they perform their identities in social situations and how they negotiate passing privileges granted to some based on visual perceptions and/or skin tone.

This research was done using qualitative research methodologies, as these give more insights into the lived experiences of participants. Data collection was done through semi-structured interviews with seven black/white biracial participants. Interviews were then transcribed word-for-word and I conducted an incident-by-incident thematic analysis to construct findings.

Findings suggested that biracial individuals articulate and perform their racial identities in multiple ways that represent their lived experiences. Furthermore, passing privileges were interpreted in distinctly different fashions, where light-skinned biracial people view passing as "lying" to oneself and dark-skinned biracial people had no issues with passing. Through these findings, I concluded that the fluidity of biracial identity causes black/white biracial individuals to construct and perform their identities in several ways such as hair texture and code-switching. Additionally, these individuals felt pressured to pass as white, as whiteness ideologies are forced upon them by their families, peers, or other members of society. This perpetuates the idea that biracial people are only allowed to identify with a single racial identity rather than with both of their

identities, and highlights a separation in privileges given to some biracial individuals over others based on the color of their skin.

Chapter 1: Introduction

It was during my third trip to the American Forensic Association (AFA) National Individual Events Tournament that I was first taught an important lesson on the politics of racial identity. The national tournament happened to be located at a college in Oregon in April 2015, and I was excited to spend a week with some of my closest friends I had made through my years in competitive speech. The trials and successes that come with the activity helped form a bond between me and many other competitors, and I built an incredible sense of trust with different people around the country. Everyone gets excited for nationals, and the energy is palpable from the moment we convene for the opening assembly. It feels as if you're at a high school class reunion, where you *truly* enjoyed your years in high school. People from all walks of life have finally been able to come together to share laughter, joy, and even sadness, at the tournament everyone has been training for all year.

This excitement continued throughout the entire tournament, until the final day of competition. At the end of this day, there is a tradition of taking three large group photos: the "AF-Gay" photo, a photo of all Latino competitors, and a photo of all black competitors. This night, the photos began with the black competitors, so I stepped into the group to be a part of the photo, and that is when something happened to me that shook my entire understanding of my own identity. As I walked up to the group and took my place beside my fellow black competitors, Leo—an individual with whom I had great previous experiences—looked at me and said, "You ain't black."

My immediate emotion after this incident was a mixture of shock and defeat. The idea that a member of the black community—a community that I trusted to accept me for

who I am—would say this to me, was something I never would have considered a possibility. Along with that, the defeat I felt about my own skin consumed me. I began to second-guess every black related performance I did in speech. I wondered whether or not I was the laughing stock of all the black friends I had acquired throughout my years in college. I even began to doubt my own identity as a biracial individual. Never before have I been faced with a situation where I actually felt like the blackness that I own is not good enough.

This experience reinforced for me the power society has to dictate the "terms" of my identity. Being told by another black man that I was not black left me wondering what it means to actually be "black," as if there are guidelines or thresholds—degrees of blackness, perhaps—that are imposed on us to visually determine an individual's racial identity. I identify as a biracial man, but I have very light and ambiguous skin to the point that many people mistake me for white, Mexican, or even mixed with multiple identities, causing many people to be genuinely confused about how to visually interpret my identity. However, Leo's comment wasn't the simple confusion that some people initially have about my race. In that moment, he determined my racial identity for me, making me feel like a complete outsider among my own racial minority group.

Leo isn't the only person to have defined my racial identity this way; I have also been subjected to this identity policing by white individuals. The year following my AFA photo experience, I was performing a dramatic piece of literature in which I portrayed a black man who was using the Jena Six to discuss issues surrounding lynching in contemporary society. I enjoyed the piece immensely, as it gave me the opportunity to explore an issue I was passionate about in a fun and dynamic way. However, my team

competed at a tournament in Wisconsin that once again affected how I perceived my own racial identity.

There was a white man who judged my drama during one of my preliminary rounds at this tournament. His expressive facial movements and intent eye contact led me to believe he was engaged throughout my entire performance. However, I was surprised when I did not advance to the final round at the end of the tournament that day, considering how well I felt about each of my performances. My coaches kept me for an individual meeting after our team debriefing in the hotel that night. They showed me a ballot I received from the judge I thought was engaged in my performance, where he stated that he had an issue with a "white man playing a black character," and that my performance was a "Jim Crow era blackface" representation of black individuals.

Once again, I was left feeling devastated and confused about my own racial identity. I began to cry in the presence of my coaches, a group of people I felt actually accepted the existence of my racial identity. Rather than just questioning how I identify, this judge forced a false racial identity on me and used it to justify humiliating me and accusing me of racist actions that I did not commit. I felt as if I didn't have the right to identify with my race, and this reassured that my visual identity will always be in question. I had finally reached a point where I started to feel more comfortable about my racial identity after what had happened to me at the prior national tournament, but this occurrence showed me that I had not escaped those judgments, and may never as long as I am living in my own skin.

These experiences have introduced me to the politics of identity negotiation that biracial people go through in their lives. All biracial individuals must decide how they

will identify, and perform that identity to the world around them. Although all people who occupy a contested identity face this same struggle, biracial identity negotiation is particularly difficult because their visible racial identity is prone to constant misinterpretation. For example, my light skin visibly portrays myself as a white man and my blackness is invisible to society, forcing me to engage in deliberate performative acts to articulate my own identity and challenge societal confusion.

Many biracial individuals cannot escape the influences society has on how their racial identities are portrayed. Biracial people may feel comfortable with the racial identity they have chosen, but others around them may disagree—and enforce different constraints on their identity performances and self-perceptions. These constraints force biracial individuals into a negotiation with outsiders' perceptions of their identity, creating a constant struggle over their racial identity construction.

My experiences also call attention to the act of biracial individuals passing as white. I have the ability to use my skin tone to identify as white. Accessing whiteness means accessing racial privilege, and I am aware that having this ability is a major benefit for every aspect of my life. I do not choose to access whiteness, because I feel doing so would discredit the blackness I am proud to have, however most people mistake me for a white man during our initial interpersonal encounters. So, although I do not willingly access whiteness, privilege is forced upon me because of societal confusion about my visible identity.

Additionally, the impact passing privileges can have on other people of color is something that seems to go unnoticed. This is another reason I do not consciously choose to access white privilege, because I believe many other biracial people may see me as a

fraudulent biracial individual. Removing myself from my biracial identity when many other biracial individuals cannot because of their darker complexion, could cause me to be perceived as a traitor to my own racial minority group.

I don't believe I ever truly understood the implications of passing privileges until my first year in graduate school. I spent many nights at my office studying and catching up on work for the classes I taught. I shared this office with fellow graduate assistants at my university, so people were coming in and out of the office all the time. However, there was one specific night in the office when I had an interaction with a colleague that opened my eyes to the implications of passing.

I was working on homework along with one of my closest friends in the department. This friend, a black man, decided to take a break and stepped out of the building for a quick walk around campus. A little while later, he returned looking distraught, he began pacing around the room, explaining that something had happened to him on his walk. His body was shaking and his voice seemed desperate as he shared his experience with me and the other black individual in the graduate office. He informed us that he was walking outside with his hood up and was seen by a white couple hanging out around campus. The white man saw my friend, pointed him out to his companion, and the two proceeded to abruptly and briskly walk in the other direction.

He exclaimed that he wanted to scream at them, "I am not a fucking monster!" However, he also knew that his black skin would cause an adverse reaction to such a statement. Instead, he could only express his emotions to us, two of the very few people he felt he could trust in all of Minnesota. Upon hearing his experience, I immediately attempted to console my friend. As I tried make him feel better about this blatantly racist

interaction, I verbalized my concern with how someone could possibly do this to him. To this, he turns to me and says, "Peavy, these things don't happen to you very often because you just look safer than I do."

His statement changed my entire outlook on my own racial identity. This was the first time anyone had ever truly urged me to consider the fact that my skin tone makes me look less dangerous than that of my black friends. After this incident, I felt an immense sense of guilt. Basically, I felt like I should stop hanging around black people, because I would always stand out as the "safest" person in the room. I felt that being the white-looking biracial person in a group of black people would make me a joke, and unacceptable by the black community. However, after talking with some folks at the National Communication Association Annual Convention in 2016, I was told to change that feeling of guilt into a chance to advocate for other black people who do not have the same privileges as myself. Through this research, I will explore how other biracial individuals narrate their passing privileges, along with how these privileges have implicated communicative experiences with other black and white individuals.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

These experiences—and many more—have inspired this research project. The racial identity negotiation that black/white biracial individuals undergo forces them to negotiate between owning a racially-privileged identity and a minority identity. However, the issue with this negotiation is that society always dictates the outcome. My experiences at AFA and at the Wisconsin speech tournament highlight this struggle by perpetuating the idea that everyone, including other racial minority groups, always impact the construction of a biracial person's racial identity.

My experience with my black colleague also highlights skin complexion as another struggle faced by biracial people. Having lighter skin as a biracial individual not only provides opportunities to visually identify as white, but also causes some biracial people to be forced into identifying as white, because society does not know their ancestry and mistakes them for white (Kennedy, 2001). Sasson-Levy and Shoshana (2013) argued being perceived as less dangerous than black people by avoiding the stigma attached to blackness is an act that many biracial people must negotiate, while also trying to justify their existence within a certain racial community.

To explore these issues and generate greater understandings about biracial identity, I pull from a wealth of literature from a variety of disciplines. Initially, Berger and Luckmann's (1966) work introduced the idea of social construction as an important theoretical understanding when talking about reality. Every individual has a different reality, and these realities are constructed through social interaction, which adds to the way biracial people construct their identities. Additionally, when talking about race, understandings surrounding social construction also guide how society constructs visible and racial identity (Bucholtz, 1999; Hoffman, 1991). Mead (1934) contributed to understandings about social construction through his work on symbolic interactionism, which I use to discuss the negative symbols society has attached to people of color. Biracial individuals must adjust to the socially constructed symbols that have been attached to different racial groups, adding a layer of difficulty to their construction of identity.

Going further in my discussion about race, identity performance helps in explaining how biracial people negotiate two separate racial identities. Specifically,

Goffman (1973) sets a foundation for other works about the performance of identity by discussing how we consciously narrate our constructed identities. Biracial individuals perform their identities in very unique ways, attempting to negotiate two racial identities to construct their own sense of self. I also use the concept of performativity to discuss how human communicative interactions affect perceptions of self-identity (Butler, 1993). Butler's work also highlights a juxtaposition to that of Goffman, by introducing identity performances as unconscious and unintentional acts. Conceptualizations surrounding the performance of identity and communication as a performative act will help explain how biracial people in this study portray themselves within everyday communication and in interaction with other racial groups.

Using these, and many more, works of literature, concepts, and theoretical understandings, this research will generate an understanding about the issues that many biracial people face when negotiating identity. Here, one major problem faced is how people in society influence how biracial individuals perceive and understand their own racial identities. For example, many biracial people perceive their existence as a contradiction, as society has taught them their racial identities do not properly coexist (Harrison III, Thomas, & Cross, 2015). Additionally, because this study focuses on black/white biracial individuals, balancing a life consisting of an underprivileged identity and a privileged identity is a struggle unique to the experiences of biracial people. When black/white biracial individuals construct their identities, many of them have the option to pass as white, granting them opportunities and successes in social interactions that are more frequently given to whites over blacks.

The purpose of this research is to understand how biracial individuals narrate their

identities and how society influences the construction of their self. This is significant because this research provides a perspective from individuals who simultaneously occupy a privileged and underprivileged identity. These understandings helped in answering questions surrounding how biracial people perform their identities in social situations and how they negotiate passing privileges granted to certain biracial people based on visual perceptions.

For this study, participants were recruited through snowball sampling of a Facebook post. I used a semi-structured interview approach to create an open and fluid discussion with other biracial individuals. Besides allowing for an easier interpersonal relationship with my participants, interviews were held with black/white biracial individuals because I was interested in learning how these people negotiate simultaneously owning a privileged racial identity and a racial identity that has historically been oppressed by people in society.

Once interviews were completed, I conducted a qualitative thematic analysis to help guide my interpretations about biracial identity negotiation. Thematic analysis showed the ways that biracial individuals negotiated and crossed racial boundaries. The themes found in this analysis contribute to understandings of biracial identity by explaining how biracial people narrate the negotiation of passing privileges they or others may have. Finally, the narratives told during interviews were interpreted to answer questions surrounding how biracial people articulate and perform their racial identities, along with how they negotiate their passing privileges. These questions were crucial to this analysis, because they provided a better understanding for how the biracial individuals in this study work to deal with the struggle of articulating and living with dual

racial identities. By addressing their lived experiences, I examine the constructions of the dialogue surrounding how and why certain biracial individuals perform a passing self, and how those who cannot pass negotiate knowing that many others can.

In chapter two, I begin with an explanation of the literature focusing on research in identity performance and performativity, race and racial identity, and racial passing. In chapter three, I focus on the qualitative methodology of interviewing used for data collection to conduct thematic analysis, along with a justification for using these methods for this project. In chapter four, I conduct a thematic analysis of my interviews, pulling excerpts from every narrative to create themes consistent across participants. In chapter five, I recap my findings, introduce the implications for this research, and discuss ideas for future research to be done on biracial individuals.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Reality and Identity

Scholarship surrounding the conceptualizations of identity begin with understandings of reality. Contrary to reigning post-positivist understandings of reality, identity scholars largely argue the material world is not a universally understood phenomenon. For example, Berger and Luckmann (1966) introduced social constructionism, arguing people are born with the *predisposition* toward an objective reality, in which they then *subjectively* interpret in order to become a part of a particular society. Social constructionism posits that knowledge is a social "process" that is continuously molded by the outside world (Kim, 2006, p. 3). Under this paradigm, people are not born with the beliefs and knowledge that make up their realities. Instead, we form a subjective understanding of, and orientation to, the material and symbolic world around us through the process of socialization. Wahl-Jorgensen (2013) furthered that an objective reality is unattainable, because humans express and verbalize what they think they know in naturally subjective ways. When different people discuss their lived experiences with identical objects and people, these interpretations are altered depending on the symbolic resources used by the individual (Matheson, 2000). Various cultures attach different meanings to similar objects, creating signifiers that allow them to react and interact with the material world.

Research has argued that people are perceived differently based on socially constructed interpretations of visible traits. Herman and Reynolds (1994) summarized the theoretical perspective of "symbolic interactionism" as how humans interpret the actions and interactions with others based on the meanings and "symbols" placed upon those

actions (p. 263). According to Mead (1934), these symbols are used to elicit internal reactions, based on our socially constructed perceptions of the signifiers in context. Additionally, this process of meaning-making is an ongoing communicative act, as it is "the language and gestures a person uses in anticipation of the way others will respond," meaning we continuously portray, interpret, and react to signs in every interaction we may have (Griffin, Ledbetter, & Sparks, 2015, p. 54; also see Mead, 1934). The way we interpret portrayed signs helps us construct our reality and perceptions of those around us, reinforcing social constructionism's claims of a subjective reality rooted in our symbolic practices.

Understandings about the nature of reality are rooted in research surrounding how we use communication to construct the world around us. Berger and Luckmann (1966) explained that, because people are born without knowledge of reality, they must interpret the communicative interactions they have with others to create their own subjective understandings of society. In other words, throughout their lives, people are constructing a social world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003), rather than "re-presenting some independent reality" (Walker, 2015, p. 37). Segre (2016) furthered that what people claim to know about their respective realities is comprised of a set of "taken for granted" values that are constructed through "social action" (p. 93). These conclusions are crucial for understanding the way in which we conceptualize our interpretations of ourselves in society. Specifically, once a sense of reality is constructed through communicative interactions with others, individuals are then able to construct *themselves* within that reality.

Perspectives on the nature and construction of reality have a direct influence on

the concept of identity. Markus (1977) discussed identity as a form of cognitive architecture that is made up of human interpretations of the experiences in which we gain information about ourselves. Identity is an individual's understanding of the role they are expected to play while in social interactions (Stryker, 1968). The creation of these roles is based on a multitude of societal and internal influences that work together to generate one's sense of being in the world (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Put simply, identity represents how a person's sense of self influences, and is influenced by, the world around them. What makes identity so prominent is that it is projected by every person in so many different fashions.

Conceptualizations of identity are also grounded within the field of communication studies. Hecht, Jackson, and Ribeau (2003) argued that identity is "inherently a communication process and must be understood as a transaction in which messages and values are exchanged" (p. 230). Similarly, Wagner, Kunkel, and Compton (2016) concluded, "Identity, then, is built upon communicative functions, enactment, relationship development, and community integration," and consists of "individual, social, and communal properties that are both enduring and changing" (p. 254). The interactions we have with people, along with the constantly changing relationships we find ourselves in, all contribute to the formation and performance of our identity.

Performing Identity

Performance perspectives offer useful explanations for how identity portrayals occur. Identity performance refers to "the way in which people express themselves through style, gestures, speech patterns, and language use, allowing other people to read these displays as presentations of our self, an insight into who we are" (Gratch, 2015, p.

71). In other words, people interpret an individual's actions as a representation of that individual's identity. These presentational displays are also fluid. Ciochina (2013) concluded identity performance is a "continuous change of states" (p. 65), meaning it is being continuously rewritten based on the angle of self the performer portrays—and the particular others to whom they perform. An individual's performance is not fixed, but ever-changing, and the ways in which people choose to perform their identity provide an appropriate representation of their sense of self within their social world.

Through repetition and practice, these presentations guide us toward an understanding of our own self, which shapes who we are. Every individual then takes on a set of roles—otherwise known as actions or personalities—that they play to portray their self, however these roles are fluid, and every individual shifts the role they play depending on who is watching or the environment they are in (Goffman, 1973). I use the term "practice" as a term to describe unconscious practices and intentional practices. As Goffman (1973) explained:

> We find performers often foster the impression that they had ideal motives for acquiring the role in which they are performing, that they have ideal qualifications for the role, and that it was not necessary for them to suffer any indignities, insults, and humiliations, or make any tacitly understood "deals," in order to acquire the role. (p. 46)

The belief of one's identity performance as natural, highlights the idea that the identity construction process happens through our previous, contemporary, and soon-to-come interactions with others, because these experiences construct our sense of self (Guichard, 2009). Additionally, when an individual performs an identity, the performer also believes

that he or she has never had to undergo a learning process for the identity they portray to the world, perpetuating the idea that identity construction is a natural process (Goffman, 1973). The construction and performance of identity is done with a belief that all people, including the performer, know and always have known how they best interact and fit in with the world around them.

However, identity performance as an *intentional* act has been contested, particularly as it contrasts with perspectives of subconscious performances. Butler (1993) challenged the reality of the self as fixed and internal, arguing identity "has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (p. 2). According to Butler, our identities are not portrayals of a concrete internal reality, but constructed through our repeated, habitual, and often unconscious performances. "Performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (Butler, 1993, p. 2). Butler's use of citationality is rooted in Derrida's (1988) notion of iterability, arguing that performative practices of identity are subconscious references to previous performances, always in response to those acts that came before. Performative acts are emulated from the interpretations we make of the performances we see every day. This perspective suggests that identity performances are not always deliberate or conscious, but subconsciously produced based on social expectations and previous experiences.

In the context of the communication discipline, performativity is a way to study how we use rhetorical practices to portray identity. Specifically, performativity is a "cultural convention, value, and signifier that is inscribed on the body—performed

through the body—to mark identities" (Madison & Hamera, 2005, p. xviii). In other words, performativity is repetition of everyday habitual acts that constitute an individual's specific and unique identity performance. Drawing from these earlier understandings of performances as conscious and subconscious portrayals constructed from lived experiences, it is now understood that performativity is used as a way for one to "produce alternative modalities," in that individuals shift and construct their identity, through discursive and embodied experiences, to articulate an identity in the process of *doing* that identity (Butler, 1993, p. 341). On the other hand, '"Performance' refers to all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (Goffman, 1973, p. 22). Madison and Hamera (2005) argued that performance and experience go hand-in-hand, as performances are representations of an individual's experiences, while experiences influence an individual's performances. Performance is the multitude of actions an individual does that develop his or her identity, while performativity are the acts used to develop one's self during that performance where self and culture reflexively produce each other.

Performativity outlines the mechanisms by which identity is produced in society, but those productions are far from politically neutral—our identity portrayals can also carry negative implications and place subjects at risk of social sanctions. Goffman (1973) argued that a person's identity, can face "consequences" on three social levels if it does not fit within cultural expectations: (1) "personality," meaning the performer may feel embarrassment in a situation not fit for his or her performative "self;" (2) "interaction," meaning that outsiders see the performer's ability to complete a single act as evidence of

how he or she can complete any act, consistently putting the performer's reputation at stake every time he or she is in an interactive situation; and (3) "social culture," meaning the performer's sense of identity hinges on his or her ability to present the "self" in a manner that does not cause a "disruption" in society (pp. 242-243). Marginalized individuals face the implications of Goffman's three levels when they fail to uphold the expectations put on them by the dominant culture. Representations of Anglo-normativity in contemporary culture continue to highlight the valued forms of identity within today's society (Fujioka & Neuendorf, 2015). When an individual performs his or her constructed identity, the possibility of not upholding societal standards is faced on a consistent basis, leading to othering. This idea of being the other is best understood by examining research on racial identity construction and performance.

Race and Racial Identity

There is an abundance of research surrounding the concept and importance of race. Initially, Giroux (2003) argued, "Race is one of the most powerful ideological and institutional factors for deciding how identities are categorized and how power, material, privileges, and resources are distributed" (p. 200). Hesmondhalgh and Saha (2013) found that race is conceptualized as a branch of ethnicity, in which people are classified based on ancestry and variations in culture. Jackson II (1998) explained that race is a way of dividing humans based on physical differences. In other words, race is utilized as a way of separating people into subdivisions, based on skin color, to assist in perpetuating what we believe we see when we look at others (DiAngelo, 2012). This is also known as racial stereotyping, as society uses perceptions to create mental imagery of the "everyday life" of people of color (Hoffman, 1991, p. 23). These stereotypes create a discursive narrative

of whiteness as normal, which Bucholtz (1999) argued is used to construct people of color as the other, emphasizing the incorrect ideology that there are biological inconsistencies within race that forces people into being the other.

Many people in society argue that race is a biological phenomenon, in that there are genetic differences that contribute to determining the differences between white people and people of color (Sanchez & Garcia, 2009; Tawa, 2016). Andreason (2000) argued that "biological realism," is the belief in race as an objective reality where people use race to divide people of color into sets of "subspecies" (p. 654). However, this ideology has become less widespread in academic practices, with the emergence of the argument from biologists that race has no authority within their field (Morning, 2007). The belief in race as a biological construct helps white individuals justify racial tensions, as being white is perceived as biologically normal.

Using race to separate people based on skin color, carries with it a functionality that creates a white racial norm and for society, leading to a disbelief in racial inequality (Knowles & Lowery, 2012). Fee Jr. (2003) emphasized that if race is a part of conversation or writing on humans, it is implied that the people under discussion are likely non-white. Shome (2000) explainined that being "white" is indeed perceived as the "norm" in society, otherizing those who are perceived as non-white (p. 366). Whiteness asserts that being white is the equivalent to being "raceless," in that being white is normalized and infrequently described or questioned (Putman, 2017, p. 501). Wildman (2005) furthered that whiteness creates invisible benefits, as white privilege keeps the beneficiary oblivious to their assets. Fitting into the societal norm of being white allows one to unknowingly remain virtually unnoticed, avoiding the possibility of being

racialized. This privilege perpetuates the advantages of whiteness in a society that values visual differences.

Theoretical Frameworks of Race

Race scholars have developed theoretical understandings that help describe why white privilege exists (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; Dottolo & Kaschak, 2015; Jackson II, 1998). Delgado and Stefancic (2007) discussed these advantages using Critical Race Theory (CRT), arguing that racism has been engrained in everyday society and is virtually impossible to recognize. Bonilla-Silva (2011) used the phrase "racial grammar" to describe how white normativity has led to society's lack of racial rhetoric when describing white-dominated cultures, while racialized and stereotypical rhetoric is used when describing black cultures (p. 173). Racism and whiteness have become so common sense that people view the treatment of different races as normal in contemporary society. Ladson-Billings (1998) explained that we have even constructed laws and regulations that make whites the primary beneficiaries within society, reinforcing the ideology that people of color do not deserve the same advantages as whites. These ideological advantages lead to another set of unrecognized privileges granted to white individuals.

These privileges are performed through the act of "being White," in which an individual has the privilege of "never having to think about one's racial affiliation" (Brown, 2009, p. 202). Having the privilege to fit the societal norm of whiteness is incredibly advantageous, as it allows white individuals to both seclude themselves from discussions surrounding race, and claim "color-blindness" by denying the existence of race without having the experiences of people of color (Morris & Kahlor, 2014, p. 416). Color-blind ideologies are present as ways for white people to "fulfill their desire to

appear unprejudiced" (Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, & Ariely, 2006, p. 949), however people still recognize race, making color blindness a tool to benefit the perception of the white community (Apfelbaum, Norton, & Sommers, 2012). Hardiman and Keehn (2012) concluded that whites generally lack an understanding of their own white privilege, and are unable to properly understand issues regarding the underrepresentation of marginalized groups in society. White privilege and color-blind ideologies show that white people avoid every aspect of underrepresentation, because they fail to grasp of their own advantages.

Scholars have worked to create theoretical understandings that challenge the contemporary ideologies surrounding the existence of race that lead to the advantages that come with being white. Race is a phenomenon that does not exist with any relation to biological differences, but is rather a notion that has been developed through individuals' past experiences and perspectives (Stebbins, 1987). Lee (2009) argued that race is a phenomenon that exists outside of human biology, and is simply a social construct that is seen differently in any given community. The social construction of race "guides us to delve into the idea that everyone is assigned to an artificial racial category and taught how to enact it, as well as how to perceive members of other racial groups" (Allen, 2007, p. 262). Society has already constructed the ways in which a racial group is supposed to act, and the way we perceive other races has been made common sense in our society. Biological understandings of race must be critiqued to generate contemporary interpretations of race that account for the socially constructed performances that represent racialized populations.

Performing Race

Racial performativity is a branch of identity performance that problematizes the identity negotiation process of people of color. Jackson II (2002) discussed "cultural contracts," arguing every person, without even knowing it, "signs" into a culture, and most follow the unspoken "contract" to maintain stability in their life (p. 48). Once an individual is ascribed into a culture, they then project themselves to the world, through the guise of that culture. Hoggard, Jones, and Sellers (2017) argued the performance of an individual's racial identity can be seen in respect to the level of experienced racial discrimination. In today's society, everyone is supposed to perform whiteness, and everyone's racial self-perception is gained through experiencing whiteness (Pande & Drzewiecka, 2017). This ideology is common sense, as the performance of whiteness is "universal and normative, while the racial other is particular," perpetuating white normativity (Bosse, 2007, p. 19). The performance of racial identities is done through constructed white racial norms.

One issue that comes with the performance of racial identity is found in who society allows to perform specific identities. Mackinlay (2003) argued that society legitimizes the performance of white identities, as these visibly fit a culture in an authentic and comfortable way. This idea brings to light that society values authentic experiences as creators of a performative identity. However, an "authentic" racial identity does not exist, because race itself does not exist outside of the socially constructed symbols we attach skin color (Dubrofsky & Hardy, 2008, p. 375). Balancing these thoughts is a struggle, as we try negotiate only performing the racial identities we have experienced, while also arguing that society should understand biological differences of

race are nonexistent. It is widely known, for example, that those born white do not negotiate performing a black identity, as they have the power and privilege to perform whiteness. However, this idea does not include those who may not identify with a single racial identity.

Biracial Identity Negotiation and Passing

Poston (1990) argued multiracial and biracial individuals undergo five stages while going through the identity formation process: personal identity, choice of group categorization, confusion and guilt over having to choose one identity over another, appreciation of their chosen identity, and integration. Biracial identity formation is fluid because the time it takes for each individual to maneuver through these steps is different for every individual. Harrison III, Thomas, and Cross (2015) furthered that many multiracial individuals must perform two or more separate identities at any given time, as they have been taught that their different racial identities do not properly blend. This perpetuates the ideology that biracial people cannot perform a blended identity, forcing them to continue through Poston's five-step process. For the purpose of this study, I focus on the existing research on biracial identity, and the racial identity negotiation that comes with being an individual with separate racial identities and backgrounds.

Being biracial gives an individual a variety of identities to choose from, creating a unique identity struggle, as Rockquemore and Brunsma (2004) concluded that biracial individuals either identify as black or white, identify as both black and white, do not identify with race at all, or have a "protean identity," in which people switch between identity as black, white, or both depending on the situation one is in (p. 92). Rockquemore and Brunsma discussed how protean identity highlights an interesting

dynamic that biracial people face, as many of these individuals have the ability to access two different identities, depending on how they best fit within any given situation. Gaither, Remedios, Schultz, and Sommers (2015) argued that biracial individuals may choose to identify with their racially privileged identity within an intellectual setting, because they will be perceived by themselves and their peers as more educated. This is because people of color are perceived as "several miles behind their white counterparts" in a world perceived to be owned by whiteness (Wenger, 2013, pp. 1-2). On the other hand, biracial individuals may identify more with their oppression in a sport environment because they will be perceived by themselves and their peers as more athletically gifted (Stanley & Robbins, 2011). These socially constructed racial roles highlight racism and privilege, arguing that whites and people of color inhabit distinctly different spaces. Washington (2015) studied Tiger Woods' portrayal of two racial identities after a cheating scandal, concluding that perceptions of biracial individuals hold extra weight because they implicate more than one community. Because biracial individuals occupy two racial identities, performing their self to the world is much more difficult, as every social situation presents an opportunity where it is nearly unavoidable for either racial identity to be otherized.

Even in the life of a biracial individual, being negatively labeled as the other is nearly impossible escape. Sanchez and Bonam (2009) studied the disclosure of racial identity, finding biracial people are viewed as less competent and confident than their white counterparts and correlating minority community, because of vulnerability and negative perceptions their perceivers attach to them after racial disclosure. Davis (n.d.) discussed the "one-drop rule," which argued that "one drop of blood makes you black,"

and people of color will always be labeled as the other, as long as they do not hold an identity that is full white, highlighting the importance society puts on visual identity of race (p. 53). The one-drop rule also impacts the self-perception of the biracial individual. Townsend, Fryberg, Wilkins, and Markus (2012) studied tendencies in social class identification of biracial individuals, finding people identify with the social class of their most visual identity. Black/white biracial individuals, for example, live in a world where their own skin condemns them because they can accomplish nothing because of their black identity, yet their privileged identity finds its roots in slavery, putting them in a place where they will never move past the perception of being racist (Walker, 2002). The combination of racial identities found within biracial people creates an interesting paradox: many do not want to be viewed as the other, but will end up being viewed negatively by some, no matter how they racially identify.

Accessing Whiteness

The ability to avoid being otherized is a main reason as to why some biracial individuals identify with the privileged side of their identity, because accessing whiteness provides the most opportunity to avoid the labels placed on their marginalized identity (Sasson-Levy & Shoshana, 2013). Some biracial individuals avoid being the other by society because of their skin color (Liera-Schwichtenberg, 2000), regardless of the fact that passing has been "inscribed in American history as a discourse of radical difference; an assumption of a fraudulent 'white' identity by an individual culturally and legally defined as [black] by virtue of a percentage of African ancestry" (Ginsberg, 1996, pp. 2-3). The foundation for these labels is found within racism, as the identity of white people is that of "freedom, justice, and equality predicated on the politics of exclusion," meaning

that racism is not seen as an issue (Fanon, 1952; Sithole, 2016, p. 26). Because some biracial people are not perceived as having the same identity as whites, many biracial individuals choose an identity that allows them to avoid negative labels and achieve the privileges that come with being white.

Racist representations of equality assist in defining the appropriate culture within our society. There is an "I-Other" language used within society, that influences racial identity negotiation for people of color by describing the ways that people coordinate their cultural identity with that of the dominant racial group to avoid conflict with dominant practices (Jackson, 2009, p. 362). This language perpetuates a visual differentiation between whites and people color. Biracial individuals who choose to identify with the dominant racial group gain the privilege of being the "I" instead of the "Other." Being identified as black is equal to being identified as an underprivileged other, therefore many biracial individuals struggle to negotiate attaining social advantages through an identity that does not "lack positive characteristics and privilege" (Shah, 1990, p. 250). Attaining this privilege means many biracial people choose to perform their white identity, because this is the only possible racial identity that is not negatively labeled by people in society.

Race scholars have contributed to understanding how some biracial individuals are able to fit the norm of society. As Williams-Hawkins (2001) argued he act of passing is done as a "performance technique that allows a person to assume an alternative identity easily accepted by those with whom the 'passer' encounters (p. 49). Robinson (1994) furthered that "passing" is a process that happens between three people: the passer, a member of the passer's racial group that can see the pass unfold, and the "dupe,"

otherwise known as the member of the privileged group who falls for the pass (p. 723). More generally, passing is done as way for certain individuals to "escape attached stigmas" and acquire that which underrepresented people cannot (Khanna & Johnson, 2010, p. 382). In its simplest terms, the existence of passing comes from a lack of representation for underprivileged individuals.

Research examines why some biracial individuals choose to escape their racially stigmatized identity. Passing is an act that can be "accidental, incidental, or a committed lifestyle" (Dawkins, 2005, p. 1). Pinel (1999) studied racial stereotypes by surveying over seven hundred people, and discussed the term "stigma consciousness," as the awareness minority people have about the underrepresentation and discriminatory actions to which their identity generally falls victim (p. 115). Biracial individuals understand the negative perceptions and stereotypes that come with their racial identities. Wilton, Sanchez, and Garcia (2013) argued many biracial people use passing as a coping mechanism, a way to avoid the dangers and threats their underrepresented racial identity may signal to society.

Concealing one's racial identity to avoid negative stigmas makes racial passing prominent in the lives of biracial individuals. However, passing is not always successful, as "effective passing" is described as using a white-presenting identity to persuade others of a biracial individual's whiteness to the point that their identity is welcomed and authenticated (Dawkins, 2005, p. 1; Ehlers, 2004; Mullen, 1994). To gain social acceptance, the passer must practice to construct and perform an identity that is perceived as authentic. The implications behind this social act bring an entirely new set of issues to the biracial community.

Scholars have worked to understand the rhetoric and implications behind the act

of passing. Goffman (1973) defined passing as "the management of undisclosed discrediting information" (p. 42). In other words, passing is an act of "concealment," in that it requires the individual to consciously conceal part of their own identity, because that identity may not be suitable for any given situation (DeJordy, 2008; Kennedy, 2001, p. 1145). Because passing is a performative act done out of free will, some members of the biracial community perceive this as a form of betrayal (Squires & Brouwer, 2002). Additionally, along with shifting perspectives from outsiders, passing as white has implications for the passer. Liera-Schwichtenberg (2000) called this the "death" of oneself, in which the passer must terminate one of their identities to successfully gain what their other identity cannot have (p. 372). Many people have identities that may leave them at a disadvantage when compared to those who identify with societal norms.

Chapter Summary

Identity is perhaps the concept that grounds this entire research project. Conversations with participants will reveal how biracial people use lived experiences to construct their social world. Discussions about these constructions will also lead to an understanding of how biracial individuals perform and disclose their identities. Additionally, I will show how biracial people negotiate living in a body that stores two separate races, and how they interpret the symbols society has attached to both identities.

The social construction of race is another aspect of this study that impacts biracial identity. Much like identity, race is constructed through the symbols that have been attached to skin color throughout history. Biracial people encapsulate not one, but two different races, forcing them to negotiate a much more complex symbolically understood reality. The social construction of race guides us toward an understanding of how biracial

people construct and portray an identity containing two distinctly different backgrounds.

My research dovetails previous literature on biracial identity. I wish to expand on understandings of how biracial individuals understand their identities, by explaining ways in which they project their identities through communication. There has been an abundance of research on biracial identity, but my research will ground these understandings in communication, and how biracial people narrate their identities through communicative practices. This will also lead to an understanding of passing, and how biracial people negotiate knowing they either can or cannot access whiteness. This is important to my study because many biracial individuals cannot access whiteness, and I will provide an understanding of how they feel about others being able to unlock these privileges. On the other hand, many other biracial people can access whiteness, so my research provides an understanding of why these individuals would choose to deny their blackness to gain privilege.

In the following chapter, I detail how I recruited participants, interviewed, and interpreted data for this study on biracial identity and passing. When given an opportunity to access white norms, many underrepresented people take this open door to privilege. How this act of passing affects the biracial community is a complex communicative phenomenon. To help with this understanding, I propose three research questions to guide my inquiry:

RQ 1: How do biracial people understand and articulate their racial identities?

RQ 2: How do biracial people perform their racial identities?

RQ 3: How do biracial people negotiate their ability, or inability, to pass as white?

Chapter 3: Methodology

The goal of this research project is to uncover issues of identity construction and negotiation, self-perception, and passing privileges surrounding the lives of biracial individuals. Because biracial individuals understand that they have two racial identities, every biracial person undergoes a negotiation process, in which they create a "heightened awareness of race as a social construct," because they are directly affected by the construction of different racial groups (Shih, Bonam, Sanchez, & Peck, 2007, p. 126). However, this negotiation process is not the same for every biracial person, because we all have varying skin tones and come from different upbringings. This research project aims to explain this negotiation process along with its outcomes.

This study focused on how biracial people not only perform their socially constructed identities, but also how they negotiate their passing privileges. Additionally, for biracial individuals whose skin tone does not allow them to pass as white, I show how these individuals negotiate their racial identities knowing they do not have the ability to pass, along with their insights on other biracial people utilizing their passing privileges.

In this chapter, I will be discussing the methods and data collection for this study. I start with an explanation and justification of my use of qualitative research methods. Specifically, I will explain how I use qualitative research methods to interact with participants. I then move to reflect on my own positionality as a biracial person, before describing recruitment strategies and the qualitative approach for this study. Finally, I conclude by explaining the use of semi-structured interviews, data analysis, and why this analysis is important for the conclusions on the identity negotiation process of biracial individuals.

Participant Demographics and Recruitment

Generating a broader understanding about the identity negotiation struggles of biracial individuals will be done through interviews with biracial participants. I focused my attention on the lives of people with only two different racial identities because I wish to talk about their racial identity negotiation. While I am certain that the identity negotiation process of multi-racial persons would be an interesting research project, because of a multiplicity of racial identities, I believe that biracial individuals deserve attention because they personify the dynamic of simultaneously owning an oppressed identity and a privileged identity.

Additionally, to collect data that represents these experiences, my participants were born half black and half white, but not required to identify as biracial. I believe this was necessary for this research project for three main reasons: (1) I wanted to understand why some light-skinned people choose to identify with their racially privileged (white) identity, and how dark-skinned biracial persons negotiate knowing they cannot access a privileged identity while others can; (2) I wanted all of my participants to have the same racial make-up so responses reflect the negotiation of a particular racial group; and (3) I was able to engage how my own lived experiences I share with these participants enhance my data collection process. For these reasons, my participant demographic was not only crucial for understanding the experiences of biracial people, but it also allowed for an interesting and possibly unique data collection and analysis.

Recruitment of my participants started through social networking. Specifically, I posted a recruitment letter on Facebook asking if any of my college-aged friends were interested in being a part of this study. Facebook provided excellent access to black/white

biracial individuals because of the amount of people I know who identify as such. This method is also known as "convenience sampling," in which I used a medium, such as Facebook, to collect participants that were more readily available in an ultimately non-random fashion (Wrench, Thomas-Maddox, Richmond, & McCrosky, 2016, p. 317). Facebook also provided an opportunity for me to interview people who are willingly interested in being a part of this study. This enhanced my data collection, as participants truly wanted to openly explain their ideas and tell stories about their identity.

Once people on Facebook started to show interest in being participants in my study, I resorted to snowball sampling, which Sedgwick (2013) described as having your participants recommend your research to other potential participants they may know. Snowball sampling is ideal for further recruitment in this project to help me expand participation. Many of my participants had friends who racially identify the same way they do, maximizing the potential to find numerous participants through snowball sampling. Ultimately, I was able to conduct seven interviews with biracial participants.

Data Collection

I used qualitative methods to privilege the experiences and interpretations made by people in everyday life (Tracy, 2013). Qualitative methodologies also allow researchers the unique opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of participants' interpretations of everyday life, by examining the "social actor's experience, knowledge, and worldviews" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 173). Because these research methodologies also highlight the participants' knowledge, qualitative researchers value the responses and experiences of participants. Furthermore, qualitative researchers understand that these experiences are grounded in the nature of reality and knowledge.

Many scholars who practice outside of qualitative research argue that knowledge and subjectivity are things that people are innately born with, and these biases need to be fully removed from the research process (Claydon, 2015). However, scholars within the realm of qualitative research approach their work from an entirely different set of paradigms. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) discussed the "interpretive paradigm," arguing that understandings of reality are not objectively understood, but interpreted through social interactions (p. 1). This is one of the most important aspects of qualitative research that makes it so unique in nature. The interpretive paradigm was perfect for this study, because it allowed me to collect data about biracial peoples' interpretations of their own identities and how society influences the way they constructed their identities.

Researchers who partake in scientific research believe in "value-free objectivist science," but scholars within the interpretive paradigm incorporate their own subjectivity into their research (Carey, 1989, p. 104). The reason for this lies in the qualitative researcher's belief that an objective reality does not exist. For qualitative researchers, subjectivity drives every part of any particular research study. This is highlighted in Berger and Luckman's (1966) conceptualization of the social construction of reality. Specifically, interpretivists hold true to the idea that reality and knowledge are solely comprised of every individual's personal and subjective understandings of the world. These understandings vary from person-to-person, as there is no object or concept that is universally understood. Because knowledge is socially constructed, each of my participants had different understandings about their racial identity, as a result of different social experiences. I wanted to use these varying understandings to help guide me through the analysis in explaining how biracial people narrate their subjective

experiences.

Finally, self-reflexivity is important within a scholarly work using the qualitative approach, because it makes research "a form of inquiry to explore, through writing, your identity as the author of an interpretive or critical essay" (Merrigan & Huston, 2009, p. 18). Non-interpretive paradigms argue that self-reflexivity should not be a part of a scholar's research, because researchers and scientists should be removed from the research process altogether to maintain the objectivity of the research (Goertzen, 2017). On the other hand, the interpretive paradigm argued that self-reflexivity is important in research, because the researcher's subjective nature is always going to have an influence on the research process (Tracy, 2013). In the end, my own positionality enhanced my interpretations of biracial identity by offering up my own perspectives, and how these perspectives help shape my research.

Research Positionality

Because this study used the experiences of people from diverse backgrounds, understanding my positionality in the research allowed for further insights in analysis, as this will help me know what my relationship is to my participants' lived experiences. Vaage (2009) described the importance of expressing one's positionality, arguing that re-experiencing memories can allow a researcher to understand his or her scholarly work from multiple perspectives. My positionality as a biracial person—specifically one who can pass as white—put me in situations where I inadvertently socially accessed my whiteness, because society visually perceives me as white. Instances such as being unjustly labeled as white at the Wisconsin speech tournament have influenced my positionality towards this study, because they have impacted my perspectives on biracial

identity. The incident with my colleague also impacted my positionality, because being viewed as "safer" has influenced how I negotiate trying to perform a biracial identity, while I am generally perceived as white. Additionally, as a biracial individual myself, these participants safely and comfortably narrated their memories with someone who shares similar experiences.

Acknowledging my positionality is important because it influenced my interactions with participants and, in turn, the data collection for this research project. The connection I have with my participants advanced my research tremendously, as I am a researcher that these biracial individuals can relate to, rather than someone who has not been through the same struggles as they have. Because I have shared experiences with each of my participants, my interviews are enhanced because of a shared feeling of comfortability that is brought to every interaction.

Process for Conducting Interviews

Data collection for this research project was done through semi-structured interviews, which Bailey (1987) stated allows questions to be "open-ended to provide flexibility that allows for unanticipated responses," while also allowing "flexibility in terms of the questions asked" (p. 191). I chose this qualitative methodology because interviews are crucial for giving participants a space to share and express their own lived narratives (Jansen, 2013). Not only did interviews provide my participants with an opportunity to share their lived experiences, but they also present an opportunity for me to create a discussion with each participant about those narratives. Semi-structured interviews allow conversation to take many different directions while also remaining conversational in tone, providing the researcher with opportunities to collect large

amounts of data important to the study (Clifford, Cope, Gillespie, & French, 2016). These fluid discussions guided me through filling in the gaps that need to be addressed within my analysis. Because personal narratives can take many directions, the semi-structured approach allows me to address unique ideas in each interview.

Additionally, every interview has been kept confidential, and the identity of each participant has been kept anonymous. In the analysis, the names given to participants are pseudonyms chosen by either the participant or myself. In order to be referenced during the transcription and analysis processes, interviews were also audio-recorded. To maintain confidentiality, recordings were stored on a password protected computer and were deleted immediately following the transcription process.

On average, interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes, and guided me towards answering my research questions proposed in the literature review. Additionally, my interview questions were open-ended to allow participants to express their insights and opinions in a variety of ways. Specifically, I asked my participants about how they racially identify, the experiences that shaped their racial identity, whether or not they have the ability to pass, and the implications that come with their ability or inability to pass. These questions helped to prompt discussion between myself and each participant. Following this process, I word-for-word transcribed every interview, which will then be used to analyze the gathered data.

Data Analysis Process

After completion of the interview process, I found that numerous interesting statements were made by each participant. To ensure that I highlight the participants' responses, the data collected in explaining biracial individuals' experiences are discussed

through a thematic analysis. Charmaz (2006) introduced "incident to incident" coding as a way of creating a small amount of codes out of each answer given by your participants (p. 53). These codes are discussed further in the analysis portion of this research project.

I take an inductive approach to the analysis, in which I start with a large amount of codes and use those codes to create themes based on consistencies and similarities among the codes. This inductive approach is unique to qualitative research, as researchers gather ideas on what the codes will be by examining interview responses (Charmaz, 2006). I allow the interviews and transcriptions to guide the creation of my themes, as this ensures that I incorporate the various lived experiences of biracial individuals within my research.

For this project, incident-to-incident coding allowed me to pull from the most interesting portions of each full statement my participants made, as this provides an interesting set of codes for analysis. These portions are relevant to the topic of biracial identity and passing because these narratives entailed a variety of complex and unique statements about racial identity negotiation. Incident-to-incident coding helps me pull from complete statements about my participants' lived experiences, and describe how I interpret their narratives.

Another reason incident-to-incident coding is ideal for this thematic analysis comes down to my participant demographic. Each participant had numerous narratives they shared to help them answer my questions. To thematically analyze these narratives, I followed a three step process: (1) I coded every transcription looking for themes that described interpretations of lived experiences; (2) I compared the themes across all interviews to find similarities and differences in interpretations through the participants'

stories; and (3) I came up with overarching themes that highlighted how biracial people understand their identity construction, performances, and passing privileges.

Chapter 4: Analysis

This chapter presents an analysis of the questions posed during interviews. After conducting an in-depth thematic analysis of each individual interview, I have constructed three themes to guide my analysis: Fluidity of biracial identity, negotiating racial boundaries, and crossing racial boundaries. In this section, I use excerpts from each interview to discuss each of these themes, and create a dialogue surrounding contemporary understandings of biracial identity negotiation and passing.

Fluidity of Biracial Identity

Fluidity of biracial identity is a theme that highlights how portrayals of biracial identity were fluid across all participants. Specifically, participants used their biracial identity to both, racially identify in a multitude of ways, and to perform their identities in various fashions. Participants showed that there is no single way biracial individuals perform their racial identities. Rather, those performances are accomplished in many ways, depending on how individuals wish to be perceived. For my participants, biracial identity was not a fixed phenomenon, but an ever-changing construct influenced by their social interactions. In this section of the analysis, I deconstruct the idea of identity fluidity for biracial individuals. To further this discussion, I propose three separate points of analysis: (1) biracial identity confusion to describe how fluidity of biracial identity causes some biracial people to be inconsistent with their personal identification; (2) issues of authenticity to describe how participants narrate their experiences that led them to feel "unreal" within their racial identity; (3) and racial consciousness which describes my participants' feeling of having to constantly be aware of their place as a biracial individual in a racialized space.

Questioning Biracial Identity: Uncertainty of Racial Identification

My participants repeatedly spoke to a similar dilemma: an uncertainty of their choice of racial identity. Specifically, the rhetoric used by all interview participants eluded to a constant shift in personal racial identification, a thread interpreted as fluidity in racial identity. One participant who showcased this idea was Chelsea, a twenty-five-year-old mental health therapist from Minnesota. Chelsea graduated with a Master's Degree in 2017, and now lives in Minneapolis where she is a full-time employee. When I sat down with Chelsea I could tell she seemed to be a soft-spoken type of person, and her skin tone easily highlighted her ability to be a part of this study, as she appeared to be a very racially ambiguous person. I started by asking Chelsea how she racially identifies, to which she replied, "Biracial, I guess, if that makes sense? So I'm half African-American, then 25% Irish and 25% English." Chelsea's use of the words, "I guess" led me to question why she showed uncertainty about her own racial identity, but these statements were only the beginning of Chelsea's racial identification uncertainty. When I asked how she would verbally identify her race if asked by a random individual, she responded, "African-American." In a matter of two statements, Chelsea went from identifying as biracial, to identifying as African-American. Later in the interview, Chelsea mentioned that she was "half white," identifying in a way that highlighted her privileged identity, while also identifying in a way that is opposite to that of African-American. Additionally, Chelsea asked if she needed to further clarify her racial identity, highlighting the idea that there is a constructed belief that biracial identity is more confusing and difficult to understand than a mono-racial identity. This sense of uncertainty about her own identity highlights the notion that many biracial individuals struggle with not fully understanding

what it means to negotiate being an individual with two separate racial identities.

Another individual who perpetuated this idea of uncertainty was Violet. Originally from Wisconsin, Violet now lives in Iowa as a graduate student studying student affairs. Additionally, Violet is the social justice coordinator for the Women's Center at her institution, which led me to interpret her as a very straight-forward person, strong in her personal values. She also showed a sense of uncertainty when discussing her biracial identity, by identifying as a "black-biracial woman" at first, then identifying as "black" one statement later. Violet identified first as a "black-biracial woman" to emphasize both her blackness and her second, unidentified, racial identity. However, by identifying as "black" and withholding the other, she discredited her second racial identity. Gillem, Cohn, and Thorne (2001) examined a similar discrediting act by studying a black/white biracial female who refused to identify as black, finding that only identifying as black inhibits her ability to maintain allegiance to her white heritage. Shifting between these two identities caused Violet to be uncertain about her own identity, while also somewhat indifferent towards her white identity. Additionally, she used the fluidity of biracial identity as a tool to diminish her privileged racial identity, by identifying in two fashions that take attention away from the term "white."

In their own ways, these participants showcased *racial identification uncertainty*. Biracial contains the prefix of "bi," insinuating the possession of two racial identities. Therefore, it is conceivable that each individual would simply identify as half black and half white. However, Chelsea's uncertainty showed that she is confused about her own identity, and asking for my reassurance of understanding highlighted her belief that biracial identity is difficult to interpret and prone to uncertainty from the individual.

Additionally, by breaking her white identity into two different ethnicities, Chelsea reaffirmed that biracial identity must be over-explained to be understood.

Violet indirectly expressed her uncertainty in a different fashion, identifying as two separate races in back-to-back statements. Being a "black biracial woman" and "black" are not the same identities, as one claims multiple identities while the other claims a single identity. This perpetuates the idea that biracial people are inconsistent in their racial identification, because they must socially construct a self that encapsulates dual identities. Additionally, Violet's disloyalty towards the white half of her identity contributes to identification uncertainty. Williams (2011) argued many biracial individuals are uncertain as to why and if they should give credit to their racially privileged identity, because of negative repercussions from white normativity and racism. It is possible that Violet feels she must avoid attributing herself to her privileged identity, because she fears her skin tone could cause her identification to be challenged since it does not fit visual understandings of whiteness. However, this potential fear led to an uncertainty of her racial identity, as she was not consistent with her racial identification.

Olivia was another participant who shifted racial identities in a short span of time. I have personally known Olivia for many years from past missions trips. She is originally from Wisconsin, and lived in Norway for most of her college years. She is a very outgoing and talkative person, sharing tons of jokes and laughter with me throughout our interview. When asked how she racially identifies, Olivia responded, "If I have to click one box, I identify as African-American. But, if I have more than one option I click black and white." This statement shows that Olivia prefers to identify as biracial, although seldom allowed to do so because other people disregard this identity. However, when I

asked her how she would verbally identify to others, she stated, “Most of the time I would just say I’m mixed.” Olivia’s shift from identifying as “biracial” to identifying as “mixed” shows an internal switch in biracial identity, and the use of two different words show a sense of racial identification uncertainty.

Lisa is a participant from Iowa whom I have also known for many years. She is a very intelligent person who loves to work with kids, and is currently working towards her Master’s degree in youth development leadership. Working with kids as a preschool teacher at her university, she is also able to articulate her thoughts in a way that is easy to understand. I asked Lisa to explain the difference between identifying as “biracial” and identifying as “mixed,” to which she replied:

> I would say, for biracial, you have the prefix of “bi,” therefore implying you have two. However, I think to say “mixed” has no number to it, so it could mean you are either not sure, or you have multiple racial identities.

Lisa concluded that people who want to highlight they have two identities will identify as biracial. However, if a biracial individual is uncertain about his or her own identity, they may use this idea of racial fluidity to identify as mixed.

Bea is another dark-skinned, biracial, outspoken, twenty-five-year-old woman from Iowa. She graduated college with a degree in psychology, and has had a lot of experience working with underprivileged people as a leader at an early orientation for incoming minority, low-income, or first generation freshmen. She completed her Master’s degree in Colorado, and is now back in Iowa working in a diversity program at a university, so Bea has read about and experienced a variety of cultures at both institutions. She used this knowledge to offer her own take on the fluidity between racial

identifications, arguing:

> When I was younger, people would always ask what I was mixed with, and it just sounds a bit more harsh, as if it's a cookie recipe. You're mixed with a little bit of flour, a little bit of sugar, maybe some cinnamon to give you your brown color. Whereas saying biracial, it allows people to know more that you are specifically talking about your race and that you are two races. I appreciate when people say they are tri-racial or multiracial, because it is showing more of what your racial makeup is, rather than mixing everything together.

Bea's use of the "cookie recipe" brings an entirely new insight to this argument, in that identifying as mixed implies you are a combination of unlabeled and unknown identities. However, having the ability to shift between identifying as biracial or mixed is an opportunity that is strictly limited to those who have two separate racial identities.

There is a consistent ideology that biracial identification causes an internal and external uncertainty for the biracial individual and the outside world. Society struggles to interpret the identities of biracial people, because they do not fit the socially constructed visual races that we think we understand. These thoughts also help construct how biracial individuals perceive themselves, causing an internal sense of uncertainty about the existence of their own racial identity. These uncertainties make it difficult for biracial people to construct an authentic self.

Issues of Authenticity: Performing a "Real" and Comfortable Biracial Identity

The nature of fluidity that comes with biracial identity also led to participants questioning how to be an *authentic* biracial individual. For this study, authenticity is not defined as portraying a real identity. Rather, issues of authenticity resonate in the struggle

biracial people go through to portray an identity that feels "genuine" to them, and "fits" with societal expectations for that identity

Olivia and I spent some time talking about the fluidity she must use when communicating with two separate racial families and friend groups. Specifically, when Olivia is around a group of white people, she is reminded that she needs to speak in a way that doesn't sound "black," which is the manner in which she prefers to communicate. Olivia described being in these situations, stating:

> I feel like I lose a lot of authenticity in those moments, because when I'm with a certain group of friends I change the way I would naturally talk to fit the way they naturally talk. When I am with my friends and coworkers who are people of color, it's closer to my authentic way of communicating.

For Olivia, white normativity causes her to communicate in a way she deems inauthentic to her personal identity. When in these situations, she feels like she is not the person she is while around black people—the identity with which she feels most comfortable. Being in a situation where one feels they cannot communicate in his or her most authentic way, causes one to struggle with thoughts of inauthenticity.

Additionally, to construct and perform an authentic self, some biracial individuals' racial identification derives from cultural identities portrayed by others (Renn, 2000). Chelsea, for example, discussed her love for Beyoncé, stating, from a young age, she has always wanted to act and dress as "classy" as the pop star. Additionally, Chelsea argued that she does not perform a true black identity, because she does not perform herself in a "stereotypical" fashion. Chelsea's comments seem to illustrate two related issues surrounding the authenticity of biracial identity: there appears

to be an assumption that performing authentic blackness is also performing stereotypes, but those stereotypes, by definition, are inauthentic—and constructed—representations used by society.

Selena, originally from Syracuse, New York, was the only "white" presenting biracial person I was able to interview. I had a very long and interesting conversation with Selena, because of how talkative and insightful of a person she is, being a successful graduate student in sociology. Selena concluded that she has shaped her biracial identity through research on Logic and Halsey—two well-known rap/pop artists—because they both perform identities that showcase how a light-skinned biracial person should articulate themselves in everyday life. Selena uses Halsey and Logic as visual representations of who she wants to perform: white-passing, biracial individuals proud of the skin they live in. For example, they are unfazed by comments challenging light-skinned biracial people such as, "Can she [Halsey] say the n-word? We know she is black, but she doesn't look black, so can she say the n-word?" Selena's identity construction and performances are partially derived from other individuals' narratives she feels contribute to her authentic self.

Selena also discussed society's questioning of the blackness owned by white-passing biracial individuals. When asked why she feels like she must put extra verbal emphasis on the fact that she is half black, Selena stated,

> Because I feel like I'm lying if I don't tell people that I'm half black. If you look at me you see a pale skinned person with a big nose, big butt, and curly hair. I am very racially ambiguous, so before anyone asks me questions I say, 'Hey, I'm half black."

Selena feels she must verbally assert her racial identity, otherwise she would be lying to herself and those around her. If biracial people who look white, specifically, do not disclose their own racial positionality, they feel an internal loss of biracial authenticity.

In addition to adapting communication styles and deriving racial identity from other peoples' experiences, one of the biggest ways in which my participants performed an authentic identity was through their hair. Violet highlighted this by stating, "I don't see black women any less black if they have chemically relaxed hair or weave. But for myself, and maybe it's because I am lighter-skinned, I feel more authentically black having my natural hair." Violet's struggle illustrates how many light-skinned biracial people must put work and thought into portraying an authentic self, as a result of the skepticism forced onto them because of the complexion of their skin. Many people do not believe light-skinned biracial individuals own a black identity, because they disrupt what is visually understood as black (Good, Sanchez, & Chavez, 2013). However, many black people do not have to put the work in that biracial people do, because they consistently perform a visually authentic racial identity.

Lisa also eluded to hair being a performance of racial identity, because it was always one of the first aspects of her identity to be pointed out by others. She explained, "When I was a kid, I remember a lot of instances where people would treat me different… everyone would want to touch my hair because it was different." To Lisa, her hair was never an intentional performance, but rather a performance pushed onto her by other individuals. Lisa's experience illustrates Butler's (1993) argument that performances are many times subconscious and non-intentional acts. Many biracial individuals do not even realize they are performing blackness. Bea furthered this notion

by saying:

> I think you should just be aware that being brown in America is different than being white. I do have hesitation when I am driving alone at night, especially being in a white city. I feel like whenever I go places, just being black and being alone is enacting blackness, because I will never go anywhere and not be seen as a brown person.

Bea brings up the idea that biracial individuals perform their identity simply by existing. Because biracial people own an underprivileged identity, they are always performing blackness because other individuals are constantly interpreting the symbolic nature of their skin.

Another way biracial people struggle with authenticity is with code-switching. Olivia discussed her struggle with this while working at a call center for Best Buy. She stated that when she talked to customers in what she considers her authentic voice, they would complain to her and her supervisors that she sounded "grumpy." To avoid this, Olivia created a persona that she verbally performs while answering calls at her job. This girl, named "Tiffany," is white, has blonde hair, is college-aged, and performs a happy and stereotypically white identity—in contrast to Olivia's loud, outspoken, and stereotypically black identity. Olivia and I had a short role-playing session, in which she talked to me as Tiffany, and I can personally confirm that Tiffany is a distinctly different person than the Olivia I interviewed. Olivia's creation of some alternate person—specifically to appease others who try to discipline her for her race—is a particularly striking example of the inauthenticity that can accompany biracial identity. Performing an inauthentic identity to please others comes from biracial individuals' "heightened

awareness of race" and the stigmas attached to blackness (Shih, Bonam, Sanchez, & Peck, 2007, p. 125).

Creating an authentic biracial identity is not an easy task, and takes a lot of time and effort. Lisa argued that biracial people find authenticity through a process of self-reflexivity, in which they think about their experiences and interactions with others, and how they feel about their personal identity performances in those situations. Bea furthered this argument saying she was able to construct her biracial identity through a process of "self-discovery," in which a biracial person not only interprets how they act in situations, but also interprets research to learn how they want to perform their biracial identity within future communicative experiences. By reflecting on one's experiences, biracial individuals can interpret their own actions, good or bad, and begin to understand what it means for them to perform a consistently authentic biracial identity.

Racial Consciousness: Being Aware of Outside Perceptions

Another common trend among the biracial participants in this study is the idea that biracial individuals need to be aware of themselves and their surroundings at all times, in order to fit in with any particular environment. However, fluidity of biracial identity can make this difficult, since biracial individuals may not be a consistent race in the eyes of others because of their ambiguous skin tone. Interpretations of biracial individuals are fluid across different environments. For example, in all-minority spaces, biracial people have the potential of being seen as the more privileged person in that environment, which can possibly place negative perceptions on them. Being aware of these interpretations is crucial for biracial people to negotiate maneuvering through various spaces. Lisa coined this notion as "racial consciousness" by arguing:

> If I enter an all-black space, I am aware of how I am perceived by others, but I am also conscious when I enter all-white spaces, because people see me as the black girl. Being perceived as [black] is an important role to consciously play, because black folks are not always given the best interpretations. I am always aware that I am biracial.

Lisa explained that her presence within racially exclusive environments causes uncertainty over whether she connects with other individuals, and being conscious of outside perceptions helps her navigate these spaces. Lisa's experience highlights the notion that many biracial people must have a sense of racial consciousness, to both avoid being seen as too black in an all-white environment, or avoid being seen as the whitest person in an all-black environment.

Violet also discussed how this kind of racial consciousness is pressed upon her, by addressing how that consciousness manifests itself in racially diverse spaces. When asked if she felt more comfortable in an all-white or all-black environment, Violet responded:

> I think it depends, because when I'm at BGS Day (Black Graduate Student Day), I feel completely comfortable talking in that situation. But if I'm with my friends in my cohort who aren't black and I don't code-switch, I'm actually comfortable both ways. I think it's mostly uncomfortable if I'm in a mixed-race room, where there's my black friends and my white friends. I want to talk to people, but if I code-switch to talk to my black friends, my white friends will be like, "Why are you talking like that?"

It is easy to understand how biracial persons must be conscious of their positionality in

groups of black people and in groups of white people, but Violet's argument about biracial consciousness in a mixed group of black and white people presents an entirely different internal struggle for many biracial individuals. When in an environment that contains both black and white people, many biracial individuals must negotiate simultaneously owning both identities, or possibly even alternating between identities to successfully communicate in that social space.

Chelsea also discussed how biracial consciousness manifests itself when biracial people consider how society expects them to act. She explained:

> How are you supposed to act? Because you are being told that, stereotypically, you are supposed to be this way, and then you are supposed to stereotypically be the other way. So, I found that to be a constant struggle in high school."

Chelsea is not alone in this struggle, as many interview participants thought of their years in high school as being an important span of time in shaping their racial identities. However, Chelsea's experience is especially intriguing because it illustrates the struggle that biracial individuals face while not engaging in a social interaction. Biracial consciousness is not limited to being conscious of one's racial positionality during interpersonal communication, but also using intrapersonal communication to be conscious of how society perceives one's biracial identity.

Of course, members of every racial minority group have to remain conscious of their positionality as a person of color, because society generally looks at these individuals as inferior to that of the white majority. Black/white biracial individuals have to negotiate owning a privileged identity that is sometimes invisible, but they also must maneuver through a society that has historically oppressed their black identity. Being a

physical representation of such differentiating dynamics, biracial individuals must be aware of how interpretations of both their black and white identities affect societal perceptions placed upon them.

My participants illustrated how biracial people face a unique struggle with racial consciousness, because they must be conscious of the positionality of two identities rather than one. Performing blackness in an environment that is predominantly white will not always lead to good perceptions being placed on the biracial individual. Specifically, in an all-white environment, many people perceive blacks as a resemblance of danger (Smith, 2006). At the same time, performing a white, or even light-skinned, identity in a predominantly black environment can lead to what Lisa, Chelsea, and Selena all eluded to as "the most privileged person in the room." As a result, many biracial individuals constantly feel the pressure of how their "grey identity," or in-between-ness of their racial identity, makes escaping these negative symbols a nearly unattainable goal because a socially constructed reality causes outside individuals to have their own set of perceptions of biracial identity (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Buates, 2018). It is these societal interpretations that have a profound effect on issues surrounding many biracial peoples' identity confusion, authenticity, and racial self-awareness.

Because perceptions of biracial individuals are so fluid from one individual to another, many of these individuals either feel uncertain about their right to identify as their preferred identity, or tend to switch between their racial identifications because of external influences. Fluidity of biracial identity also causes issues of authenticity with many biracial individuals because outsiders' perceptions of biracial identity forces many individuals to communicate in a way they feel is inauthentic. For example, a biracial

individual may feel more comfortable communicating using their black identity, but fluid perceptions of biracial identity may force that individual to uphold whiteness within an all-white space. Finally, because people have fluid perceptions of biracial identity and expect biracial individuals to behave in fluid fashion—be able to switch between identities in various spaces—many biracial individuals feel that they must always remain conscious of themselves and how they are expected to behave within a racialized space.

Negotiating Racial Boundaries

Interview participants felt uncomfortable with being policed in racialized spaces. Put more specifically, one of the struggles faced by biracial people is trying to negotiate their identity in spaces containing all whites and blacks, or people with mixed-race identities, because they must know how to alter the way they communicate to fit in these different spaces. Negotiating racial boundaries is a theme that highlights what participants described as being accepted as black or white in a racialized space. Therefore, "boundaries" are the unspoken and common sense lines that are drawn which separate blacks and whites on the basis of visual perceptions and privileges. Biracial individuals must negotiate their identity when crossing these racial boundaries to access either racial identity. Although many biracial people can successfully manage the environment around them, they also face consequences such as being racially outed, mistreated, and sometimes dismissed altogether. The following analysis will show how biracial people articulate their experiences of negotiating separate identities within racialized spaces.

I asked participants to provide examples of interpersonal experiences that have shaped their racial identities. Every participant shared stories, with the same premise that

they face the issue of never being "white" or "black" enough in a space. Within minutes of the beginning of our interview, Chelsea discussed this struggle by stating, "When you are in the middle of being black and white, at least when I was in high school, I was the wannabe white girl to the African-Americans, and the whitest black girl in the room with my white friends." Chelsea explained that the interest and curiosity that is created by the presence of a biracial individual turns any general social space into a racialized space. Additionally, the dissonance that Chelsea's experiences have in explaining her sense of identity comes from the inconsistent statements directed toward her from others in racially homogenous spaces, who see her as being the "wannabe white girl" or the "whitest black girl in the room." These responses influence the struggles that she experiences in being biracial and in-between multiple racial identities.

Lisa also took time to reflect on how these experiences shaped her racial identity, stating:

> So many people commented on it [my race]. When I was a kid, I remember a lot of instances when all the kids would treat me differently. Everyone would want to touch my hair because it was so much different than theirs, or people would say things like, "You're an Oreo!" You know? Just stuff that would point out physical differences. Then, when I have been in all black spaces, I also didn't feel like I fit in or that I belong.

Lisa's recollection of these past experiences of being outed as black per se, encapsulates a struggle faced by many biracial individuals. Specifically, the skin tone of biracial individuals is policed when attempting to cross the boundaries of "whiteness" in an all-white space. Certain biracial people look closer to that of white people, allowing them to

enter all-white spaces. However, once admitted into these racialized spaces, many biracial identities are rejected, forcing the individual back into a black identity (Franco & Holmes, 2017). Take, for example, the metaphorical use of "Oreo." An ordinary Oreo does not visually contain the same amount of "white" filling as it does "black" cookie. Rather, an Oreo is predominantly black, with a small amount of white on the inside. When Lisa tries to be accepted within an all-white space, whites immediately assume she does not belong because of differences in skin color, forcing her into an otherized identity by telling her she is black, even though she may feel white on the inside.

Lisa's narrative also highlights that these issues are not limited to that of all-white spaces, but in fact, biracial individuals also have the potential to feel uncomfortable in all-black spaces. For example, Bea stated:

> I think even within the black community, although I may not be white-passing, I have physical features that show people that I'm biracial and not fully black, and there is still some discrimination within the black community itself based on the actual hue of my skin tone.

Bea highlighted the idea of not being "black" enough as another struggle biracial people face when negotiating racialized spaces. This argument is similar to the one made by Augoustinos and Garis (2012) in concluding that representations of mixed-race individuals perceived as "not black enough" leads to criticism and a loss of credibility (p. 564). Although biracial skin tone varies from one individual to another, certain biracial people still maintain a white identity, signaling that they do not completely belong with those around them. Additionally, Bea's use of the term "discrimination" is within a traditionally oppressed group, and describes that some biracial people have the potential

to even be discriminated against by black people because many biracial individuals do not visually match that of the majority race within a space. This proves that biracial persons are consistently otherized to the point that they are even racially outed while in a space with other members of underrepresented groups.

Justification of Racial Experiences

Participants also showed a consistent feeling of having to both exaggerate their identities to be accepted, and to justify their racial experiences. Owning two separate racial identities, biracial people are forced into situations where they must negotiate their identity in certain racialized spaces, while only occupying half of a particular racial identity. Because of this, many biracial people feel a sense of being unwelcomed or underappreciated in certain spaces, because of negative perceptions placed upon them by others within that environment. Therefore, justification of racial experiences is a theme that highlights how participants feel the need to explain and defend their racialized experiences to be accepted within a particular racial group.

I asked Selena how she racially identifies within white and black spaces, to which she replied:

> When I am around white people, I say that I am half black. However, when I am around black people, I *really* say, "Hey guys, I am half black" … I am very racially ambiguous, and I don't want people coming to me and saying, "What are you?" Before anyone asks me questions I say, "I'm half black." Then it's like a lightbulb goes off in peoples' heads like, 'Ah! I knew you weren't just white!"

Selena feels as if she needs to over-exaggerate her racial identity when around black people, because she knows that her skin tone may not be accepted by others if she does

not. This is representative of many biracial individuals, as they must prove their identity in order to cross over the racial boundaries that are set in contemporary society (Ehlers, 2004; Mullen, 1994; Sanchez & Bonam, 2009). In feeling the need to exaggerate her identity, Selena perpetuated the idea that many biracial individuals' ambiguous skin tone forces them to justify their belonging within a racially homogenous space.

Participants felt the need to justify their racialized experiences in order to avoid being discredited by others. Violet shared a story that highlighted how some black individuals verbally discredit the experiences of biracial people. She stated that she knew a black individual at her undergraduate institution who argued she would never understand what it meant to be black, because she was from a small white town.

Furthermore, a while after this incident, this same man called Violet an "abomination" for being biracial, in that she is not a true black person and should never claim to share the same experiences. Violet then shared her thoughts on this incident by stating:

> After this happened, I had a breakdown. It took me a second to figure out, should I be identifying as black? Do I have the right? He is invalidating my experiences as a black person… He also told me that since I can identify as black, then I could also identify as white, since I'm biracial. But how can I identify as white? If I tried to go up to the DMV and mark white on my driver's license, these people would laugh at me.

If Violet is not granted an opportunity to verbally justify and defend her lived experiences, she argued that she has a much more difficult time being accepted into a group of people who have shared experiences. This compliments Hairston's (1999)

argument that if biracial individuals are not perceived as belonging to either of their identities, they are unable to embrace their full identity and experiences. However, the largest issue here is the fact that biracial people must justify their experiences in the first place. Violet explained that being discredited by other black people causes some biracial individuals to feel that identifying as black is difficult to internally justify because of a lack of shared experiences. Furthermore, much like in Violet's DMV example, many biracial people must verbally justify their experiences as a white person to other white people, because their skin tone makes their racial identification imperceptible. Both Selena and Violet struggle with being accepted within a racial group, because they must continuously exaggerate their identity to members of that race. Specifically, Selena does so by verbally exaggerating her racial identity when around black people, and Violet has been taught—because of her darker complexion—that she must exaggerate her actions as a black woman to be accepted. Biracial people are constantly policed for attempting to cross boundaries set between the two racial communities they inhabit.

Biracial Invisibility: Lack of Biracial Communities and Shared Experiences

Participants also discussed the invisibility of biracial individuals with shared racialized experiences. Because of their skin color and racial backgrounds, biracial people disrupt socially understood segregated boundaries. Biracial individuals blur these lines between being white and black by inhabiting these identities within different racial contexts. However, because of segregated boundaries in society, the existence of individuals who police these boundaries is thought to be very uncommon. Within this theme, participants discussed how many people do not believe that biracial people have their own lived experiences. Rather, there seems to be an assumption that biracial people

share the experiences of either their racially privileged or oppressed identity exclusively, not simultaneously. Additionally, participants discussed issues surrounding society's ignorance towards the existence of biracial communities.

Selena eluded to this idea when talking about media portrayals that have influenced her identity by stating:

> As soon as I found out [Logic] has one black parent and one white parent I was like, 'Holy shit! There is someone who looks like me!' All other biracial people I have been around are half black because they have dark skin… I was always torn about if I should just say I am white because I look more white than black, or if I should be truthful to myself and say I'm a black person?

As a light-skinned biracial individual, Selena continuously feels that her identity is discredited because people do not share her lived occurrences. The surprise that Selena felt when she discovered the existence of another biracial person with her complexion, shows that there is an assumption that a community of biracial people with shared experiences is an incredibly scarce commodity.

Selena not only shared feelings of shock, but she also talked about constantly getting pegged as white when she shared a story with me in which she was asked about her race during a job interview (an illegal question to ask in the first place). When Selena told her employers that she is half black and half white, the room went silent, as if this was not something that is shared much at all in that workspace. The existence of biracial individuals is perceived as such a rare phenomenon, that when society is placed in a situation where they must come face-to-face with a biracial person, communicative interactions are either inhibited altogether or made immediately more difficult. This is

unique from Waring's (2017) conclusion that biracial individuals experience easier communication with both blacks and whites, because of shared "knowledge, experiences, meaning, and language" (p. 145).

Bea also took time to talk about the perceived invisibility of biracial individuals in society. She argued:

> You can read the student development theories about biracial identity development, however those things do not do biracial people justice, because there are so many different combinations of identity. You have black identity development, white identity development, there's some for genders and sexual orientations, but I think that we clump together a growing population of multiracial people into one identity development process. So, basically what we are saying is that I, a black and white woman, am supposed to have the same identity development structure as someone that is half Puerto Rican and half Honduran. That does not make sense.

Because there is an assumption that there are very few biracial people, Bea explained that there is also a tendency to believe that all biracial people develop their identities in identical ways, because of a lack of varying experiences. Bea believes that society sets boundaries to determine the identity development of various races, genders, and sexualities. However, biracial individuals live with multiple racial identities and have not been discussed enough by researchers such as Tatum (1992) and Hardiman (1982) who develop understandings of race through the guise of racial identity development.

This idea of the invisibility of biracial experiences and communities is not new

to biracial people. Lisa reflected on having these feelings during her childhood when I asked her how she negotiates the struggle of not feeling like she belongs in black or white spaces. She concluded:

> When I was a child I did struggle, because it was confusing. I think, back in the day as a child, I was left feeling really uneasy. I also didn't have any other biracial friends when I was a kid, so I didn't know anyone else who understood what it [being biracial] was like.

The invisibility of biracial communities in contemporary society is something that needs to be addressed through this analysis. Because there is a perceived invisibility of individuals who are forced to negotiate racial boundaries, many of them feel that there are no people they can communicate with that share similar experiences. Additionally, Lisa's use of the term "confusing" shows that many biracial individuals are internally affected by their perceived invisibility, because they "struggle" with losing understandings of their own identity. Olivia contributed to this idea by stating, "In high school, there was a definite separation of groups and I didn't fit in either of them. I wasn't in the group of white kids that had money, and I didn't have the experiences of the black kids." Olivia struggles to find a sense of inclusion, because of the assumption that biracial individuals need to claim the experiences of their black or white identities exclusively. This highlights that a perceived lack of biracial experiences causes a lost sense of belonging with many biracial individuals. This furthers the finding of Pauker, Weisbuch, Ambady, Sommers, et al. (2009) that racial groups are not likely to label racially ambiguous individuals as an in-group member, ultimately forgetting about these individuals altogether. Granted, much of what black/white biracial persons face can be

experienced through the lives of black individuals. It is the notion of policing racial boundaries that is unique to biracial individuals, and biracial invisibility hinders the creation of positive biracial communicative experiences even further.

Olivia also took a unique route in discussing biracial invisibility. Rather than talking directly about the rare case of biracial individuals maintaining interpersonal relationships, she discussed society's perception of biracial people by stating:

> I was lucky that my neighbor growing up was biracial, because it gave me another person to ally with. However, everyone thought we were siblings. Seriously, everyone! That was profiling in itself, because we didn't even look alike, but every single person thought we were related.

Not only does this statement imply that having a spatially and emotionally close relationship is rare, but Olivia also explains that the existence of these biracial individuals elicits a social response that they must be in the same family. Olivia presumes that society is not accustomed to seeing biracial people together, therefore the existence of more than a single biracial person in a space is unusual. This assumption directly influences how biracial individuals perceive their existence, because it perpetuates the idea that there is not a multitude of biracial identities and experiences. Communication that continuously pushes these ideas perpetuates Perkin's (2014) use of the term "identity see-saw," in which biracial individuals must negotiate trying to justify their own constructed identity and experiences with how society defines racial identity (p. 214).

Habituating Racial Mislabeling

The lack of understanding of biracial identity because of the perceived invisibility of biracial communities leads this analysis to address racial mislabeling of biracial

individuals. Visual perceptions of individuals, who occupy different identities, lead to misinterpretations of the racial backgrounds of biracial people. Because there is an understood invisibility of biracial individuals, some people assume a particular racial identity of biracial people because of their skin tone. This was discussed by most individuals who were interviewed for this research project. For example, I asked Lisa if she has ever been pegged as white, to which she stated that she has never been pegged as white, but, "People have assumed I am something that I'm not. For example, when I was in New York, there were a lot of people who were Dominican, so people would daily think I was Dominican." This introduces the idea that the ambiguous nature of many biracial individuals' skin tone causes them to be constantly labeled as a racial identity they do not own.

One performative act that separated Chelsea from all other participants in this study, is her chosen style of hair. I will talk more about the performative implications behind this choice in later portions of this analysis, but Chelsea prefers straightening her hair, separating her from everyone else choosing to have naturally curly hair. However, this choice has added to Chelsea's struggle of being mislabeled. When asked about racial mislabeling, Chelsea stated, "Everyone I meet thinks I am Latina, Mexican, or Hispanic. I have also been told I am Hawaiian, or an 'Islander' girl, but it's never African-American." Chelsea provides another example of how biracial people are racially and culturally misidentified. In her narrative, Chelsea's use of the word "told" highlights the idea that she is not given the opportunity to express her own racial identity, because an outsider chooses it for her. Chelsea also highlights that being racially mislabeled is an implication of portraying herself as a non-stereotypically black woman with her hair.

Having straight hair is generally connected to white women, so this further implicates the perceived ambiguity of Chelsea's racial identity.

Because biracial individuals are constantly mislabeled by society, one might think this would elicit negative responses from the biracial community. However, not only does racial mislabeling not elicit negative responses, but many participants talked about how it goes virtually unnoticed by the biracial community. I asked Chelsea if being mislabeled makes her feel negatively about her sense of self, to which she responded, "No, and maybe it's because it's been that way since I have been eight. I guess it's a part of our world." Chelsea believes that biracial people are not bothered by being racially mislabeled, because it is a normal part of our lives. However, Lisa seemed a bit more bothered by racial mislabeling, arguing that it is an issue when society labels a biracial person as "something they are not." This terminology shows that being racially mislabeled functions to discredit biracial individuals' construction of their own identity.

I challenged Chelsea on her argument by asking her if there is a difference between mislabeling race and mislabeling gender. Chelsea seemed passionate about this topic, arguing that there is a major difference because, "mislabeling gender is not racial. They have already told you their pronouns and what they want to be called, versus someone who comes up and doesn't say that [their race] right away." The assumption here is that mislabeling someone's racial identity does not carry as much weight as mislabeling someone's gender, because race is a much more difficult phenomenon to interpret.

I also asked Selena what it is like to constantly be questioned about her own racial identity, to which she replied, "Because I have been asked that so many times, I

just forgive them [outsiders] and I say I'm half black. It doesn't faze me anymore. Being pegged as white, it's just been my whole life." Selena stated that she has learned to just "forgive" people who racially mislabel her, perpetuating the ideology that many biracial individuals—because their racial identities are not perceived as collaborative—are consistently losing the battle with society over the construction of a preferred racial identity (Harrison III, Thomas, & Cross, 2015). Furthermore, by stating that this has been a part of her entire life, Selena argued that she has very rarely ever had a positive experience with society regarding the labeling of her racial identity. It is understood that, because racial mislabeling is such a major part of living in the body of a biracial individual, we should be able to forgive and easily move on from these situations.

Racial mislabeling is not limited to misinterpreting a biracial person's racial identity. Violet reflected on her years in elementary school through high school by stating, "Ever since I was a kid, I knew I was black, and people knew that I was mixed. This led to, starting at a very young age, people calling me Oreo, Zebra, and other things." Violet showed that her biracial identity makes it challenging and confusing as many biracial people are forced into situations where they are literally labeled as animals and inanimate objects that appear to represent multiple racial identities. Although Violet highlights a serious issue with society's perceptions of biracial individuals, it is the tone she used when discussing these instances that stands out as the most interesting dynamic, as she discussed these situations in such a nonchalant fashion that led me to believe she didn't view these interactions as a big deal. This compliments Chelsea's perception of racial mislabeling, because both participants eluded to this as a non-issue, because it is

something biracial people should simply be used to. By using terms such as "people knew I was mixed," Violet highlights that there is no use in being fazed by racial mislabeling, because society knows mixed-race individuals are others. This perpetuates the idea that biracial people have developed a common sense ideology towards racial mislabeling.

Crossing Racial Boundaries

The final theme that emerged from my analysis pertains to the act of biracial people crossing over racial boundaries to identify with only one of the two identities they possess. Being a part of the black/white biracial community allows one to fluidly identify as biracial, black, or white, depending on personal choice or environment. Choosing to identify as black or white, or what I refer to as the process of passing, places a biracial individual in a situation where he or she has crossed over outsider individuals' mono-racial boundaries to present to others as another race. All participants had narratives about their experiences with passing, along with their interpretations of other biracial individuals who have chosen to pass.

Many of my participants were insistent in one argument: passing is the equivalent to accessing whiteness. Violet was the first participant to directly address this notion. When asked how she understood passing, she responded, "Passing as white." A simple answer, yet these three words say a lot. For Violet, racial passing has no other meaning than a mixed-racial individual accessing their racially privileged identity. When asked the same question, Selena furthered this notion by concluding:

> I think that's passing as a white person. It's when any minority person with light skin chooses to look and act more like a white person, to the point that

> white people are tricked into thinking that non-white individual is a part of their race.

Selena and Violet both articulated that passing is only interpreted as accessing whiteness and crossing into racially privileged territory.

Another layer to Selena's response is that passing is "tricking" white people into believing that a biracial individual is actually a part of "their" race. This argument implies that biracial individuals never belong to the white race in the first place. Lisa expanded on this idea, arguing:

> I think passing is the ability to be perceived as something you are not. The way I am interpreting it in this sense is skin tone, so being someone who is biracial and passing as someone who is not biracial.

Lisa is also arguing that biracial individuals passing as white is the equivalent to taking on an identity that they do not own by positioning themselves within the white race and accessing privilege. However, if biracial means to be a part of two racial identities, these individuals occupy and have the rights to positioning themselves within either of their racial identities.

In contrast, two of my participants suggested that passing is not always a simple matter of accessing whiteness. When asked how she interprets the idea of passing, Olivia stated, "I feel like passing is somebody, on a visual spectrum, either passing as full black or passing as full white." Olivia was the only participant who directly stated that a biracial individual has the opportunity to pass as black, because black/white biracial people occupy both a black and white racial identity. In other words, the racial makeup of biracial people gives them an equal opportunity to decide to access whiteness and

privilege, or to access blackness and underrepresentation.

Relatedly, Bea discussed passing as "discrediting" either of one's racial identities, arguing:

> I think it's very important for me to understand that I am half white and half black, because that's where I come from, and I think it's important to recognize the people that helped grow me. I would never be a biracial person who would discredit that I am half-white, because I know some people that would call themselves a black man or black woman, even though they are biracial. I think, for me, it's very important to acknowledge both halves of my cultural and ethnic background.

Although Bea does not directly talk about passing in terms of accessing blackness, she does discuss certain implications that come with a biracial individual choosing to identify as black. If a biracial person decides to access blackness, they are then discrediting half of their racial identity, even though that racial identity is privileged in nature.

With so few participants recognizing the existence of passing as black, I am still left wondering why this idea is overlooked. Participants tended to view crossing racial boundaries as biracial individuals using their identities to identify with their privileged identity, rather than their underprivileged identity. It could possibly be because of the negative stigma attached to dismissing one's underprivileged identity, or maybe even the idea that passing as black doesn't exist because one should not want to be subject to the experiences of being a black individual in society. For the remainder of this analysis, and with the amount of data I have that interprets passing as accessing whiteness, passing will hereby be equated to passing as white. However, whatever the reason may be that so

many biracial individuals do not acknowledge passing as black, this analysis still begs for a broader understanding of the concept of passing. Specifically, examining how these individuals, along with outside individuals, interpret the biracial privilege to cross racial boundaries is best examined through a discussion about forced racial passing and the awareness and acceptance of passing.

Forced Racial Passing

The majority of my participants concluded that they do not have the ability to cross the racial boundary into privilege and pass as white. In fact, Selena happened to be the only participant who argued that she could visually pass as a white individual. This makes sense considering all other participants had a skin tone that would easily cause them to be perceived as a race other than white. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, Olivia's portrayal of her created white girl named Tiffany is an example of auditory passing. However, this was the only other example I was given of any participant, other than Selena, being able to pass as white in any situation.

Regardless of the fact that the majority of participants did not have the ability to visually pass as white, many of them have had experiences when they have been socialized to believe that passing is a necessity, because accessing whiteness is the only way to survive in society. Because of this, my participants often felt forced into accessing whiteness. Selena, for example, felt pressure by her mother to pass. Selena was originally from Syracuse, where she lived near a very diverse population. However, she then moved to Stafford, VA, a more homogenous and predominantly white community. Selena stated:

> Stafford was pure white. You would get maybe one or two Mexican families, or a lot of really rich Pakistani people who worked for the government. However, my

> family lived on the poor side of Stafford, but my mom wanted a better education for myself, so she lied to the school system and said that I lived in this [white] area of Stafford so that I could go to the best elementary school that they had.

In order to be given the highest opportunity for educational success, Selena's mother forced her to pass as white. Selena's narrative highlights an issue within the biracial community, in that acknowledging one's own blackness inhibits biracial individuals from reaching goals that white people are capable of reaching every day. These barriers become a powerful coercive force that can pressure biracial individuals into passing as white.

When I asked Violet about how she finds herself performing her biracial identity, like almost every other participant, she talked about her hair. However, a major struggle she faced throughout her life with her hair, is her mother's former dismay towards her racial identity performative act. Violet voiced her memories of this struggle stating:

> My mom has Multiple Sclerosis, so she used to do my hair until I was five, but then she couldn't do my hair anymore so I asked if I could cut it. When I got my hair cut, I also got it chemically relaxed. So, from six until eighteen I had my hair chemically relaxed, but when I became a freshman in college, I shaved my head. While it was growing back, I knew I wanted it to be natural, but my mom would say, 'But, your hair is so pretty when it's straight.' So, it was always a juggle between trying to be natural, then relaxing my hair. Finally, I just cut off my hair and yelled at my mom, 'If you say one negative thing about my natural hair, I am never talking to you again!' I just gave her that ultimatum, because I didn't need

> that in my life where I felt ugly being myself.

Violet brings to light familial issues that biracial individuals must struggle with in everyday life. When a biracial individual is brought up by a white family who lives in a white community, that family generally sees whiteness as something a biracial individual can, and should, access. In Violet's case, familial pressure to perform whiteness was through a white normative hair style. However, Violet also highlights the self-discovery that many biracial people undergo when forced to cross a racial boundary, as this act allows biracial people to develop an understanding of how they most comfortably portray themselves in society. This shows that continuous forced passing situations can also lead to biracial individuals learning more about themselves in the process.

Chelsea was another participant influenced by her family forcing her to racially pass as white. Chelsea's experiences also revolve around her hair: her grandmother did not let her have an afro when she was younger, even though that was her natural hair. When I asked why she was kept from portraying her natural identity, Chelsea replied, "I don't think she [Grandma] wanted me to look that way." Biracial people face familial struggles with their natural body, because parental figures tend to enforce the notion of keeping them hidden and safe from the dangers of being black.

Besides bodily performances, such as hair style, participants also face the struggle of being forced to behave in white normative fashions. I asked Chelsea what it was like when she first figured out that she did not look like the white kids around her. She explained:

> Looking back, it all felt very confusing. I wanted to be myself, which was normal for me. But then, in middle school, I was constantly getting in trouble because I

> was always talking back, trying to do what the African-American people were doing. But, that got smacked out of me. My grandma was like, "You will not act that way." So, in high school I stopped acting like that.

For Chelsea, what felt "normal" was to behave in a way that performed her blackness. However, familial influences caused her to be "confused" about her own identity because they did not perceive her blackness as an acceptable role to play. When trying to perform a communicative identity in which a biracial individual feels most comfortable, he or she must face the struggle of being forced out of that identity and into an identity that portrays whiteness. Although Chelsea may have been trying to perform a stereotypical identity, her narrative still perpetuates the idea that white identity performance will keep biracial people out of the trouble they would face when choosing to cross the racial boundary into their underprivileged racial identity.

Participants highlighted that forced racial passing is a way for outside individuals to make biracial individuals cross racial boundaries into whiteness or blackness, without the passer's input. For my participants, this was accomplished by outsiders forcing them to "become" white—the act of crossing racial boundaries into whiteness—by either behaving or physically portraying themselves in a white normative way. Most participants concluded that forced racial passing also influenced their self-discovery, in that they were either able to figure out their preferred identity performance or they began to question their own racial identification.

Passing Awareness: Understanding Racial Passing

Another theme that was consistent among participants was the awareness and interviewed showed a lack of awareness of the ways that they racially pass. Generally,

participants showed that they have never considered passing as an act, let alone something that carries implications, because their skin color has never allowed them to visually access whiteness. For all but one participant, crossing racial boundaries was only possible when performing a black identity.

During the interviews, I asked Chelsea how she understood the concept of passing. Chelsea, perhaps, is the one person who portrayed the most obvious form of passing unawareness when she interpreted it as, "I'm going past someone." We took some time to laugh at this comment, however, Chelsea's lack of understanding in regard to the concept of racial passing highlights the fact that some biracial people are unaware of the passing privilege that light-skinned biracial individuals maintain. Racial passing is a visual act because, in order for a biracial individual to successfully pass as white, they must be able to convince other people of their whiteness. However, dark-skinned biracial individuals would be policed for attempting to cross into whiteness, because they do not visually fit our socially constructed perceptions of a white person.

Chelsea's statement really had me thinking about why some dark-skinned biracial people are unaware of crossing the racial boundary into whiteness. However, when I asked Violet about her interpretations of the act of passing, she responded, "I don't know, because I don't think I have ever dealt with that situation before." Violet has not thought about passing, because she has not been placed in situations where she had to pass as white. Whiteness ideologies contribute to Violet's lack of passing experience, because many people perpetuate the idea that biracial individuals' identities do not properly blend, therefore they must identify with one race over the other (Harrison III, Thomas, & Cross, 2015). Because of this, visual interpretations are made to determine whether or not

an individual is white, and having darker skin inhibits some biracial individuals from gaining passing experience. Dark-skinned biracial people will never pass as white, or even consider this act as relevant. Dark-skinned biracial individuals' lack of experience with accessing whiteness is a direct cause for passing unawareness.

This notion about racial passing was also discussed by Selena, who is the only biracial person I interviewed with the ability to pass as white. I did not have to explain passing to Selena, because she has been personally impacted by experiences with passing. When asked how she interpreted passing Selena responded, "It's when any minority person with light skin tries to look and act more like a white person." Immediately, Selena had an understanding and interpretation of passing. She has a heightened sense of awareness because of her ability to pass using her own "light-skinned" complexion. For most darker-skinned participants, there was less awareness about using their biracial identity to cross racial boundaries into whiteness. Adversely, Selena showed more awareness and experiences with crossing racial boundaries because she has been placed in situations where she must racially pass throughout her life.

Passing Acceptance: Is it *Really* Okay to Pass?

For many biracial individuals, opportunities to pass arise on a daily basis. However, these opportunities are derived from visual interpretations of a biracial person's whiteness, inhibiting many other biracial individuals from sharing these experiences. Passing acceptance is a theme that works to show how dark and light-skinned biracial people perceive and accept the act of passing.

So far, this analysis shows that dark-skinned biracial people and light-skinned biracial people do not have the same perceptions toward the act of passing. Initially, I

asked every dark-skinned biracial participant how they negotiate knowing that some biracial people have the ability to access whiteness. Bea responded by arguing:

> There are times when passing is for safety, so I think that's okay. For me, it all comes down to privilege- understanding the privilege that you have being a white-passing person of color. It's about being self-aware of when you are using your privilege, and not forgetting about where you came from.

Basically, what Bea shows is that some dark-skinned biracial people accept other biracial individuals who can pass as white, as long as the passers are also willing to acknowledge that they own that privilege, refrain from perpetuating the "I-Other" mentality brought on by white normativity, and not discredit their black identity altogether when passing to gain privileges (Jackson II, 2002, p. 362; Sasson-Levy & Shoshana, 2013).

In talking to Olivia, I explained that I identify as a biracial man, however, I also acknowledge that I do have the privilege to pass as white. I asked Olivia how she negotiates knowing that I can pass while she can't, to which she replied, "It does not really bother me, because I don't necessarily want to identify that way most of the time." I posed the same question to Violet, and she agreed with Olivia by stating:

> I don't really care about passing as white, because I have no desire to be white. I'm not jealous of people who pass, because I have enough identity crises as it is. Having to balance being black and white as an individual, as opposed to being black, white, and passing, I really can't imagine that type of struggle.

These responses show that many dark-skinned biracial people have no desire to pass as white because they don't want to be a part of the racial group that has caused them emotional harm throughout their lives. Olivia and Violet are using their past experiences

to determine their preferred racial identification. However, although neither of them have a desire to pass as white, Violet and Olivia stated they were not "bothered" or "jealous" of people that pass as white, showing that they are accepting of biracial individuals who cross racial boundaries into whiteness.

Chelsea offered another perspective on biracial people who choose to access whiteness. She stated, "I don't really think that matters, because it's a part of their identity. For example, I think I'm fine knowing that someone like you could pass, because it's part of your identity." For Chelsea, passing is an acceptable act because biracial individuals own the rights to their privileged identity. Some biracial people do not perceive passing as a negative act, because they have the right to access their white identity just as much as their black identity.

Selena offered a very different opinion than that of any other participant. She stated:

> Oh man, you got me heated! It is honestly such a terrible thing! It is the worst thing ever, which is why I am still mad at my mom for trying to make me pass as white. I feel like that [passing] is just saying the black side of you is just terrible, which it's not! So, why are you trying to lie to yourself? Why are you trying to hide from yourself that you are also part of another race?

Selena is the only participant with the ability to pass as white. She believes light-skinned biracial individuals have a distaste towards accessing whiteness, because their experiences with passing should lead to an understanding that passing is a "terrible thing," and that they should feel angry at those who have influenced them to "lie" to themselves and "hide" themselves from a part of their identity. When a biracial person is

constantly being pegged as white and treated as though he or she only owns a single identity, this impacts their willingness to accept racial passing.

On the other hand, when asked about passing as an act of survival, Selena agreed with other participants when she stated, "I have always thought of this. I know that if I was in the 1950s and the Ku Klux Klan showed up at my door, I would say, 'Sir, I am white! Look at me!' Yeah, if my life depended on it, I would pass as a white person." It is consistent among biracial individuals in this study that passing in a situation where one may be able to avoid danger, is always an acceptable form of accessing whiteness.

Crossing racial boundaries is a theme that encompasses forced racial passing, the awareness of racial passing, and acceptance of racial passing. In talking about accessing whiteness, participants shared many experiences in which they were forced to pass as white. There were times in which participants were forced to pass because of misinterpretations of their racial identification. However, forced racial passing was generally done as a way for individuals—many of whom had a close relationship with my participants—to remove the stigmas attached to their black identity (Khanna & Johnson, 2010; Pinel, 1999). Furthermore, dark-skinned participants showed less awareness toward passing, because their skin color and whiteness ideologies inhibit them from having the experiences to help them understand accessing privilege. On the other hand, my light-skinned participant showed a heightened awareness toward passing, because her experiences with accessing whiteness have impacted her perceptions of passing. Finally, dark-skinned participants showed that they do not feel negatively toward passing because they are not affected by it, while the light-skinned participant showed much less acceptance toward passing because they were uncomfortable with "hiding" their identity.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Through my analysis, I found that participants narrated their experiences through three themes: fluidity of biracial identity, negotiating racial boundaries, and crossing racial boundaries. Fluidity of biracial identity was used to describe how biracial individuals construct and perform their identities in a multitude of fashions. In this theme, participants showed that there was no single way in which biracial individuals narrate their identities. Participants discussed that their identity performances are ever-changing, because their skin color causes their identity construction to be fluid from one environment to another. Furthermore, participants articulated that their identities are both a representation of how they have been perceived by others, and how they have internally struggled to negotiate occupying separate racial backgrounds. Negotiating racial boundaries is a theme that describes how participants narrate their experiences of being black or white enough in racialized spaces. Because biracial individuals have multiple racial identities, interviews proved that these participants often struggle to gain acceptance within either a racially homogenous or racially diverse environment. Finally, crossing racial boundaries is a theme that highlights how and why participants utilize their passing privileges or how they negotiate knowing that certain biracial individuals have a skin tone that allows them to pass as white while others do not.

Speaking from personal experience, I identify as a biracial man, but I have spent the majority of my life being mislabeled by society. I am generally seen as white, Mexican, or Italian, but I am very rarely assumed to be black, let alone biracial. In the rare case that people are able to determine that I am in fact biracial, I, too, have been put in situations where I have been called Oreo and Zebra, and it has always been made

apparent to me that I am the other to those around me. Reflecting on these experiences, I have also been able to brush off these instances, simply because it has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. However, gaining a better understanding of what these experiences mean for the biracial community as a whole, in that ultimately our voice is taken away and opportunities to express ourselves are limited, I see it very important that this issue be brought to the forefront of research surrounding racial identity and racial boundaries in society. In this final chapter, I hope to problematize these interactions, and highlight the need for more discussions and research on biracial identity, in a way that does not police these individuals for blurring our socially-constructed racial boundaries. To do so, I begin by reviewing the key findings from my study of biracial identity.

Implications of the study

My findings suggest that perceptions of biracial individuals' identities are fluid from one individual to the next, and these interpretations influence how biracial people construct and perform their identities. These identities are representations of the consciousness biracial individuals have about their skin, and how these representations influence their communication with other people. Additionally, using this identity fluidity to pass as white to get ahead is acceptable to some biracial people—as long as the passer recognizes their privilege and remembers they also occupy blackness—but seen as terrible to other biracial individuals. Findings indicate that these viewpoints on passing could be influenced by skin tone, in that dark-skinned biracial people are not affected by passing while light-skinned biracial people think otherwise. To discuss this further, this chapter begins with implications of my research, the limitations I faced while conducting this study, and recommendations for how future researchers can expand on my study.

Social and theoretical interpretations of biracial identity contribute to understandings about the construction and performance of identity. Every individual has distinctly different experiences that shape their identities, and those identities in turn influence how they experience the social and material world around them. For biracial people, these negotiations are particularly difficult, because they draw on the experiences of seemingly dichotomous racial identities to construct a sense of self that occupies a contested racial terrain. For this reason, my findings pose several implications for the study of biracial identity.

Initially, my findings support Berger and Luckmann's (1966) discussion about a socially constructed reality, as all participants shared that their individual experiences have developed their racial identity. Additionally, each participant displayed their racial identity fluidity through a multitude of performance practices, contributing to perspectives about how performative practices are representations of identity (Goffman, 1973; Butler, 1993). I found that many participants were urged by societal and familial influences to perform their white identity, perpetuating Fujioka and Neuendorf's (2015) conclusion that Anglo-normative identity performances are most valued in contemporary society. My findings show that biracial identity is influenced by white-normativity, because visual interpretations of the whiteness of biracial individuals is used to determine if their experiences are valued in society. These whiteness ideologies also contribute to visual identity politics, specifically biracial individuals are forced to practice acts of "concealment" of an identity and "reveal-ment" of another identity because of stigmatization (Brouwer, 1998, p. 114). Many biracial people feel pressured to hide their black identity, because many people could view them as less-than and not as capable as

whites (Wenger, 2013). This implicates biracial identity, as many individuals are inhibited from gaining positive racialized experiences. My findings suggest that biracial individuals are affected by visual identity politics, because their skin color is subject to various interpretations. Generally, dark-skinned biracial individuals are policed for their skin tone and blocked from social advantages, while visual interpretations of many light-skinned biracial people allow them to access privileges others cannot.

Second, attempting to negotiate racial boundaries, many participants highlighted Rockquemore and Brunsma's (2004) notion of the "protean identity," as outsider perceptions of their skin tone perpetuated the fluidity of their identity (p. 92). Specifically, participants shared that performing a black identity in black spaces felt comfortable, but they must code-switch and perform whiteness to fit with other friend groups or their families. These identity shifts highlight the fluidity of biracial identity. This notion of code-switching was prominent in most interviews, highlighting that many biracial individuals must use their protean identity fluidly to present whiteness when in all-white spaces. Communication research on race and whiteness supports the implication that the construction and performance of biracial identity is directly influenced by the perceptions placed on them through communication with one's peers, family, and/or racially homogenous and diverse spaces (Shih, Bonam, Sanchez, & Peck, 2007). These findings about the interpretations of biracial individuals contribute to communication research on racial identity, because participants showed that their racial identities were formed based on their lived experiences. Specifically, white normativity tended to impact biracial identity, which is the idea that people should uphold cultural practices, values, and beliefs that perpetuate whiteness as the norm in society (Ferguson, 2004; Munoz,

1999; Ward, 2008). My findings suggest that biracial individuals feel pressured by outside influences to perform whiteness, because many people expect that they would want to escape their blackness and the social stigmas and stereotypes that come with it. These influences affect biracial individuals' communication, as many feel that they cannot portray their most comfortable performances because they will not be accepted by society.

Third, participants contradicted the claim that biracial people choose to switch between races, because they only performed such an identity when forced to by outside influences. These influences tended to come from the idea that biracial individuals want to avoid stigmas attached to either of their identities. This idea emphasizes "stigma consciousness," making participants remain aware of the negative stereotypes attached to their minority identity (Pinel, 1999, p. 115). For example, familial influences forced some of my participants to be conscious of the stigmas attached to their natural hair, because they were perceived as the other unless they straightened it like their families wanted them to. Their hair was a performance of blackness and was prone to racial stereotypes. Participants who preferred to perform blackness were also conscious of their stigmas in all-white spaces, because individuals within these spaces contested participants' identities by questioning why they talk "black." This idea also is explained by the "one-drop rule" which constantly attributes to biracial individuals being perceived as the other (Davis, n.d., p. 53). My findings show that participants felt pressured to perform an identity closest to that of the racial majority within a space, and when this racial majority was white, they were reminded that performing blackness should not be preferred. This is perpetuated by whiteness, because many white people feel that they have the power and

privilege to construct a minority individual's racial identity, if that individual has an ambiguous skin tone. Additionally, many white people assume that biracial individuals would want to access whiteness, because white privilege is understood as necessary for survival.

Forth, the fluidity of some participants' identities caused them to be othered, because many of them had experiences of their black identity being highlighted as different. For example, many participants shared that people have played with their hair, called them Oreos, and forced them out of black identities, experiences that perpetuate the otherness of their blackness. Because of these "I-Other" mentalities, participants were very aware of the privileges that come with and from accessing whiteness (Jackson II, 2009, p. 362). Findings in this study show that dark-skinned participants do not feel negatively towards the act of passing, while the light-skinned participant feels that passing is a betrayal to one's identity and to those who share one's identity. Furthermore, I found that passing is a way of hoaxing people into believing one is a certain race, supporting Robinson's (1994) claim that the "dupe" must fall for the passer's performance of whiteness (p. 723). For example, Selena argued that passing is a way for light-skinned biracial individuals to "trick" white people into believing they are white. Additionally, participants argued that passing is always acceptable if the individual is in a survival situation in which he or she must protect themselves from the negative responses society has towards their race (Khanna & Johnson, 2010). These perceptions are grounded in Mead's (1934) arguments about symbolic interactionism, as my participants seemed to intentionally perform whiteness out of anticipation of unfavorable interpretations attached to their blackness. Because these interpretations elicit negative

reactions from many white individuals, biracial people justify the intentional act of passing. Based on these findings, it is apparent that perceptions of biracial individuals' identities are fluid from one individual to the next, and these interpretations influence how biracial people construct and perform their identities. These identities are representations of the consciousness biracial individuals have about their skin, and how these representations influence their communication with other people.

Finally, the research questions in this study propose that biracial individuals articulate and perform their identities in different ways. The findings suggest that biracial individuals articulate their racial identities in a way that reflects how they negotiate simultaneously occupying two races with distinctly different historical backgrounds and values. Participants showed that biracial identity is constructed both internally and externally. External influences, such as family and peer pressures to usually perform whiteness, lead to many biracial individuals first understanding their identity as white. However, these external influences lead to an internal struggle, as they eventually begin to use their experiences to gain an understanding of their preferred identity through self-reflection. Much like their identity articulation, biracial identity performances are also representations of their lived experiences, as their internal and external influences determine the sense of self they wish to portray.

Furthermore, the negotiation of passing most commonly exists in the lives of light-skinned biracial individuals, because they have the experiences to be opinionated on this action. Light-skinned biracial people feel an emotional connection to passing because they have had experiences with intentional and unintentional passing, whereas dark-skinned biracial people do not feel connected to passing negotiations because their life

experiences have always reflected being othered as a racial minority. Because dark-skinned and light-skinned biracial individuals have such different racialized experiences, my findings suggest that their opinions on passing are very adverse to each other.

Limitations

As with my research study, the weight of my findings and conclusions should be understood within the constraints of the project itself. My first limitation is highlighted through Tracy's (2013) discussion about rigor, in that researchers must be diligent with their studies rather than timely, making sure that data is collected in a way that properly reflects a well-prepared research project. The biggest issue I ran into regarding rigor was the time constraints that limited the number of participants I was able to recruit. Despite my effort, I was only able to interview seven—only six of which I was further permitted to using—biracial people, which tempers the strength of my findings. Interviewing more participants might have allowed for more narratives and interpretations of biracial individuals' experiences with racial identity construction, performance, and passing negotiations, enabling me to produce a more rigorous study.

Second, the diversity of my participants should affect how you read the findings. Arcury and Quandt (1999) stated that obtaining a "representative sample" is important for qualitative research, as it allows for a wider range of subjective data collection (p. 128). The amount of participants who were unable to benefit from passing as white because of their darker complexion limited my interpretations. Had I been able to interview more white-presenting biracial individuals, I might have been able to highlight more consistencies or contradictions in ideologies towards accessing whiteness. Instead, I found that dark-skinned biracial individuals view passing as an acceptable act, while

light-skinned biracial people—the likes of whom have the ability to pass—perceive passing in a much more negative light.

Third, the makeup of my sample affected my ability to connect with my participants. This limitation also affected the outcomes of my research, because I was unable to fully connect with the darker-skinned participants because I am a biracial individual with passing privileges. Jacob and Furgerson (2012) discussed the importance of researchers showing genuine care and connection to their participants, and that participants are more likely to share in-depth experiences when they feel understood. However, because I do not share common experiences as most of my participants, it is difficult for me to truly understand their lives. This may well have limited my findings, as many participants may not have felt as comfortable going in-depth with me as they would have if I had a darker complexion. Having more participants with whom I could have a higher interpersonal connection might have allowed for more in-depth interviews with a wider variety of responses because of comfortability.

Future Research

My hope is that further understandings of a wider range of biracial individuals can be made utilizing this study. Initially, this study focuses on the lives of black/white biracial people, however the growing population of mixed-race individuals calls for more research on how they perform their identities and utilize their passing privileges. Furthermore, future research could focus on how biracial individuals negotiate spaces that are not exclusively racialized. This study mainly focuses on narratives about how biracial individuals portray themselves in all-black or all-white spaces, but a single narrative about the struggles they face in environments with both black and white people

introduces another perspective that should be expanded on in the future.

Second, research should investigate the fetishization of biracial individuals. To explain this, Violet stated that biracial individuals are tokenized as living examples of a movement towards a post-racial society, because of a larger amount of interracial couples. Similarly, Selena mentioned that more research must be done to understand how black/white biracial women are fetishized as a black sex object, while asked to "tone down their blackness" in public. Future research should be done to understand how biracial women negotiate being sexualized as black by white men or white by black men, while also expected to act differently in public. Additionally, future research should explore biracial identity in relation to the idea of a "post-racial" society. This would speak to the idea of biracial people being a physical representation of a society that has moved from racialized ideologies to an all-inclusive space with a higher number of interracial couples. Moving forward, research can be done to study how biracial individuals negotiate their personal racial identity, while also being tokenized as a living example of "post-racism."

Third, research should also examine the implications for biracial identity in the larger conversation of identity politics. Specifically, some biracial individuals are granted more privileges than others, based solely on the color of their skin. This creates a divide in biracial identity, as biracial individuals' visual identity causes members of society to force them into either one of their racial identities, rather than allowing them to simultaneously inhabit both. Research should create a dialogue about how biracial individuals discuss their interpretations of the politics of their racial identity, along with the implications that have come with their lived experiences.

Forth, research should also focus on the importance of upbringing in terms of the socialization of biracial individuals. This research would place more emphasis on the childhood influences on the racial identity construction of biracial individuals, along with how these constructions have developed their sense of self through their adult years. Further research should focus on aspects of biracial individuals' upbringings such as environmental and familial influences that have shaped how they interpret and perform their own biracial identities.

Finally, I believe this research could be expanded by focusing on accessing blackness. This study assumes that passing equates to accessing whiteness and privilege. However, because biracial individuals simultaneously occupy whiteness and blackness, they have to rights to obtaining either of these identities. Moving forward, research should discuss how and for what reasons some biracial individuals use their skin tone to identify as black and access an underprivileged identity.

* * *

My time spent with this study has given me an entirely new set of experiences to take with me in further research. Now that you are equipped with an understanding of how other biracial individuals articulate and perform their identities, along with how they negotiate passing privileges, I hope this research begins a new discussion surrounding biracial identity construction, performance, and negotiation. Reflecting on my experiences as a "safer" minority individual than my dark-skinned peers, I now have a greater understanding of my own passing privilege affects myself and those around me. My experiences as a light-skinned biracial individual have shaped my identity, and all other biracial people have their own lived experiences that deserve to be discussed.

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