ABSTRACT

While there is some scholarship on multiracial college students’ experiences, most of these studies focus on students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). There is little research on the experiences of multiracials at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Focusing on this gap in the literature, I compare the experiences of black-white biracial students attending HBCUs and PWIs. I explore the ways these students navigate race and negotiate their racial identities within different institutional contexts and how they discuss this racial identity work in relation to class and gender. Drawing upon 55 interviews with biracial students, I show that an ideology privileging lightness pervades colleges with different racial structures and that biracial students’ identity work is often related to attempts to garner the privileges of whiteness or distance themselves from accusations of racial privilege. My analysis highlights the social construction of race and the intersectional nature of race, class, and gender.

INDEX WORDS: mixed-race; identity work; colorism; racism; privilege; HBCU; PWI
BIRACIAL COLLEGE STUDENTS’ RACIAL IDENTITY WORK: HOW BLACK-WHITE
BIRACIAL STUDENTS NAVIGATE RACISM AND PRIVILEGE AT HISTORICALLY
BLACK AND PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

by

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The face of higher education is changing as more multiracial students enter college. On the 2000 Census individuals were allowed to indicate membership in more than one racial category for the first time. 2.4 percent of individuals indicated that they were multiracial; by 2010, this number had grown to 2.9 percent. Importantly for higher education administrators, the number of people identifying as multiracial was higher among America’s youth (Renn 2004). While multiracial students have historically made up a small percentage of the college population, by 2020 they will be about as common as Asian undergraduates were in 2000 (National Center for Education Statistics 2001 as cited in Renn 2004). In light of these changes, it is important to explore the experiences of multiracial college students.

While there is some scholarship on multiracial college students’ experiences, the majority of these studies focus on students attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs) (Banks 2008; Harris 2013; Renn 2004; Twine 1996). There is a paucity of research on the experiences of multiracial students who attend historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Focusing on this gap in the literature, I compare the experiences of black-white biracial students who attend either an HBCU or PWI.

I am particularly interested in how biracial students within these different institutional contexts navigate race and negotiate their racial identities. This study explores three related research questions: first, how do black-white biracial college students navigate race within predominantly white and historically black colleges/universities? Secondly, how do they manage
and negotiate their racial identities within these educational contexts? And, finally, how do they describe these processes of racial identity management and negotiation in relation to their class and gender identities?

In addressing these questions, my research not only seeks to illuminate multiracial students’ experiences, but on a broader level, this study aims to improve understanding of the ways in which racial identities are negotiated. Far from being static and natural categories, racial identities are constructed and revised through human interaction (Bettie 2000; Khanna and Johnson 2010). This study aims to illuminate the processes of identity presentation and negotiation that occur within different institutional contexts.

Additionally, this study adds to the literature on intersectionality by showing how gender and class identities are invoked in the presentation and negotiation of racial identities. While all college students are racial actors within a racialized social system, studying biracials is particularly informative for illuminating these processes of racial identity negotiation because these individuals occupy a unique social location, where racial identity may be less certain and stable and more strongly tied to ideas of class and gender. Thus, studying multiracials provides unique insight into the ways in which racial identities are created and negotiated in relation to other identities (e.g., gender and class identities) within different institutional contexts.

In order to address my research questions, I conducted a qualitative interview-based study involving in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 55 black-white biracial college students. Based on the analysis of these interviews, I show that a similar ideology stressing the value of whiteness and lightness pervades colleges with different racial structures, shaping student dynamics at both HBCUs and PWIs, albeit in different ways. Specifically, biracial PWI students navigate race in a setting where they have less status than their white counterparts due to their
relative blackness. In contrast to the PWI where the racial structure prioritizes white students, leaving biracials near the bottom of the racial hierarchy, biracial HBCU students are privileged compared to many of their black peers due to their relative whiteness. One of the main challenges for biracial students attending PWIs is navigating a racially segregated campus and dealing with racism directed toward them because of their black background. In contrast, biracial HBCU students benefit from their relative whiteness in some ways (e.g. in the campus dating scene), while simultaneously trying to minimize the negative effects (e.g. resentment, dislike) associated with their privilege.

While navigating racism and privilege, biracial students often work to (dis)associate with their whiteness or their blackness. Sometimes this identity work is done with the intent of garnering the benefits of whiteness or lightness. Other times students engage in identity work in order to identify with the oppressed group and/or distance themselves from the idea of white privilege. Students’ racial identity work to this effect is often intertwined with their classed and gendered self-presentations.

In Chapter 2 I contextualize my study by providing an overview of racism and privilege. In this chapter I discuss Bonilla-Silva’s articulation of racism as social structure. I then draw upon prior scholarship to explain the ways in which the widespread ideology of white superiority manifests itself within predominantly white and predominantly black environments. In Chapter 3, I discuss prior theory and scholarship on racial identity work, discussing how racial identity can be performed and how this performance is sometimes related to performances of gender and class. In Chapter 4, I discuss my methods. Chapters 5 and 6 present the findings from analyzing the interviews with biracial college students. Finally, Chapter 7 provides a discussion of the implications of my research and suggestions for future directions.
CHAPTER 2
STRUCTURAL RACISM

This study specifically draws upon Bonilla-Silva and other stratification scholars’ conceptualizations of structural racism. Bonilla-Silva (1997) presented his conceptualization of racism as an alternative to theoretical understandings of race that primarily view racism in terms of ideology. He criticizes these prior conceptual frameworks for viewing racism as a “free-floating ideology” that is not attached to a structure, or a racialized social system; for understanding racism as resting primarily in individuals’ psyches; and, for viewing racism as static, overt, irrational and a relic of the past (Bonilla-Silva 1997).

In contrast to these traditional conceptions, Bonilla-Silva posits that racism has both ideological and structural components. A society’s racial structure refers to its “set of social relations and practices based on racial distinctions” (Bonilla-Silva 1997:474). In a racialized system actors are placed in racial categories based on socially-defined indicators, such as skin color. This placement of actors involves hierarchy. Actors placed in the racial category deemed superior receive economic, social, political, and psychological benefits. Bonilla-Silva (1997) says: “The race placed in the superior position tends to receive greater economic remuneration and access to better occupations and/or prospects in the labor market, occupies a primary position in the political system, is granted higher social estimation (e.g. is yielded as “smarter” or “better looking”), often has license to draw physical (segregation) as well as social (racial etiquette) boundaries between itself and other races, and receives what Du Bois (1939) calls a
‘psychological wage’” (p.470). On the basis of this racial structure, a racial ideology emerges that underpins the structure and guides the social behavior of actors (Bonilla-Silva 1997).

While racism always involves structural and ideological components, the form of racism differs depending on the era. As a result of political, economic, and social changes in the 1960s, the form of racism changed from Jim Crow racism, which was characterized by a racial structure that involved overt discrimination and an ideology that included biological explanations of minorities’ inferior position, to “new racism,” which includes (among other features) covert discrimination and cultural explanations of minorities’ subordinate position (Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, and Embrick 2004). Researchers refer to this new racism with such terms as colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2009), symbolic racism (Kinder and Sanders 1996), and laissez-faire racism (Bobo, Klinegei, and Smith 1997). Racial stratification scholars posit that racism is “the ‘normal’ outcome of the racial structure of a society” (Bonilla-Silva 1997: 475). This framework views racism as rational because it is associated with material benefits for dominant actors in the racialized social system (Bonilla-Silva 1997).

RACISM IN PREDOMINANTLY WHITE EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

Much of the research on racism in educational contexts focuses on how purported race-neutral laws and educational practices have disadvantaged students of color (Ladson-Billings 1998). Other studies focus on how students and faculty of color are discriminated against, marginalized, excluded, or otherwise mistreated within PWIs (Jay 2009; Cerezo et. al 2013; Minikel-Lacocque 2013). Bonilla-Silva poignantly addressed the negative impact historically white colleges and universities (HWCUs) have on minorities, saying: “The demography and symbols in HWCUs create an oppressive racial ecology where just walking on campus is unhealthy; where minority students and faculty feel, as one observer commented, as ‘guests
[who] have no history in the house they occupy. There are no photographs on the wall that reflect their image. Their paraphernalia, paintings, scents, and sounds do not appear in the house’ (Turner 1994, p. 356).” (Bonilla-Silva 2012:184). He goes on to discuss how the businesses in college towns often engage in exclusionary practices, taking on a “turf-defending mentality” that supports the whiteness of the nearby university (Bonilla-Silva 2012).

In the United States for much (but not all) of history, multiracial-blacks have been classified as black in accordance with the one-drop rule which states that any individual with a single drop of “black blood” is to be classified as black (Davis 1991). Because of their classification as “non-white,” biracial PWI students are likely to experience much of the same racism that other students of color face. Studies on multiracial PWI students’ experiences have in fact shown that many students encounter racism on campus (Kellogg and Liddell 2012).

COLORISM AND PRIVILEGE IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY

Racial hegemony and a hierarchy that privileges whiteness have led to colorism within the black community. Colorism is “the allocation of privilege and disadvantage according to the lightness or darkness of one’s skin” (Burke 2008: 17). Colorism in the black community is a direct result of the racism that is and always has been institutionalized in the U.S. social system.

The roots of colorism reach back to the days of slavery. When white slave masters raped black slave women, the children of these unions were often given preferential treatment. For instance, these lighter-skinned “mulattoes” were allowed to serve as house slaves instead of field slaves. After slavery during certain periods multiracial-blacks in New Orleans and Charleston existed as a tier between blacks and whites, separating and “protecting” whites from blacks (Leverette 2009; Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992). Some multiracial-blacks internalized these
ideas of superiority, creating elite groups such as blue vein societies to separate themselves from other blacks (Frazier 1957; Leverette 2009; Okazawa Rey, Robinson, and Ward 1987).

Colorism still exists within the black community. Research has shown that lighter-skinned blacks have more success in educational and occupational attainment (Hughes and Hertel 1990; Keith and Herring 1991) and have higher feelings of self-worth, attractiveness, self-control, self-esteem, and life satisfaction (Bond and Cash 1992; Boyd Franklin 1991; Cash and Duncan 1984; Chambers et. al 1994; Neal and Wilson 1989; Okazawa Rey, Robinson, and Ward 1987; Thompson and Keith 2001). Importantly, the effects of skin color on experiences differ by gender. Rockquemore (2002) states that racist notions of beauty privilege multiracial over black women because they more closely approximate the ideal of white beauty. This has created conflict between multiracial and black women who compete for black men. Rockquemore (2002: 494) states that “biracial men do not compete with Black men for a small pool of mates the way that women do; they are advantaged in a sellers market and therefore do not experience interactional negativity from black men.” Relatedly, Thompson and Keith (2001) found that skin color is positively correlated with self-esteem for black women but not for black men.

The history and structure of racism in the United States have influenced both whites and blacks in all social settings. I am not aware, however, of any research that has explored how biracial students within HBCUs navigate race and how their experiences within these educational contexts are related to colorism and the U.S. racial social structure that positions whites as superior to blacks.
CHAPTER 3

BIRACIAL IDENTITY WORK

Racial identity work refers to the various strategies individuals engage in to present certain racial identities during interaction with others (Khanna and Johnson 2010). Historically, attention to biracial individuals’ racial identity work focused on how these individuals may try to “pass” as white in order to avoid racism and reap the benefits of white privilege. More recently, research has suggested that biracial individuals may alternatively “pass” as black in order to avoid the stigma that is associated with whiteness in some contexts (Khanna and Johnson 2010; Storrs 1999). Khanna and Johnson (2010: 238) define passing as “a deception that enables a person to adopt specific roles or identities from which he or she would otherwise be barred by prevailing social standards.” The idea that biracial individuals may actively engage in identity work to pass as one race or another highlights the idea of race as performance. This idea is influenced by symbolic interactionism (broadly) and Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis of interaction (specifically).

Symbolic interactionists believe that humans act towards things on the basis of the meaning they assign to them; meanings arise out of social interaction and are modified through interaction (Blumer 1969). Symbolic interactionists believe that racial identity is constructed and reconstructed as individuals interact with significant others in various social contexts. The symbolic interactionist emphasis on interaction allows for an understanding of the ways that others influence an individual’s racial identity as well as the ways in which an individual herself...
is actively engaged in the creation and negotiation of racial identities (Khanna and Johnson 2010).

Goffman’s work within classic symbolic interactionism highlights individuals’ active role in identity negotiation. Goffman describes individuals as actors performing roles to an audience during social interaction (1959). Through their role performance, actors engage in self-presentation, attempting to project certain images of themselves to others in an attempt to control others’ perceptions and definitions of the situation (Goffman 1959).

Goffman describes two different types of actors: those who are cynical and those who are sincere. Cynical actors are those who put on a performance but have no belief in their act and who are not truly concerned with others’ belief in their performance; rather, they are only performing in order to affect viewers’ beliefs as a means to some other end (Goffman 1959). In contrast, sincere actors are those who believe in their performance. Sincere actors, however, are no less of performers than are cynical actors. In fact, Goffman sees all interaction in terms of performance, even applying his dramaturgical analysis to such characteristics as gender, class, and nationality. For instance, he says:

When we observe a young American middle-class girl playing dumb for the benefit of her boyfriend, we are ready to point to items of guile and contrivance in her behavior. But like herself and her boyfriend, we accept as an unperformed fact that this performer is a young, American middle-class girl. But surely here we neglect the greater part of the performance.

Here, Goffman describes the portrayal of gender, nationality and SES as a performance. To be middle-class, to be a girl, or to be American involves engaging in patterns of behavior associated with these characteristics. In a similar fashion, one could argue that race is a performance, involving sustaining the behaviors and appearance that members of society attach to being white, black, or another race.
Another of Goffman’s concepts, stigma management, is also directly relevant to the idea of racial identity work. According to Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998: 505) “Stigmatized individuals possess (or are believed to possess) some attribute, or characteristic, that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context” (Crocker, Major, and Steele as cited in Hogg 2006). Goffman (1963) describes how individuals work to prevent their stigmatized status from being discovered. As mentioned above, biracial individuals may actively engage in identity work to conceal their white or black background if one of these racial identifications is stigmatized in their social environment (Khanna and Johnson 2010; Storrs 1999). Additionally, Khanna and Johnson (2010) describe that when concealing part of one’s background is not desirable or feasible, individuals may engage in lesser forms of identity work, such as downplaying or highlighting part of one’s racial background.

Individuals who engage in this sort of racial identity work may be viewed as cynical actors to the extent that they present a racial identity with which they do not internally identify in order to avoid discrimination or to reap benefits. In contrast, a biracial individual may engage in identity work as a sincere actor in an attempt to ensure that others see her racially in the same way that she views herself. Khanna and Johnson (2010) identify various identity work strategies that multiracial may use to present certain racial identities in interaction with others, including verbal identification/disidentification, selective disclosure, manipulation of phenotype, highlighting/downplaying cultural symbols, and selective association. Some of these same strategies have been identified in other studies on identity work and stigma management (see Snow and Anderson 1987).
RACIAL IDENTITY WORK AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Many researchers insist that race and gender intersect in individuals’ daily experiences in such a way that race is inherently gendered and gender is inherently racialized (Davis 2008; Rockquemore 2002; Weber 2001). Additionally, all social actors have a class in addition to having a race and gender. These race, class, and gender identities intersect to influence individuals’ experiences. Thus, when considering racial identity work, it is also important to consider gender and class.

In presenting a specific racial identity individuals may invoke a gender identity; or, alternately individuals may invoke a racial identity when presenting a gendered identity. For instance, Bettie (2000) discusses how high school women’s gendered self-presentations were often used to present their racial self-understandings. For instance, Latina women with light skin sometimes applied their makeup in a specific “Latina” way so as not to be confused as white. In this way, Latina women’s gender and racial identity work intersect.

Additionally, individuals’ presentations of racial identities often carry class connotations, and conversely class presentations may carry racial significance. For instance, many Americans’ ideas of what it means to “act black” or “act white” carry class connotations. “Acting white” is often conflated with presenting a middle-class identity, whereas “acting black” implies the presentation of a lower class or “ghetto” identity (Bettie 2000). This problematic conflation of race and class leads to an association between lower class status and “authentic” black identity (Bettie 2000).

While some scholars address these relationships between race, class, and gender identities, much sociological work continues to focus on one of these factors without considering the implications of the other two. For instance, much work on race ignores or downplays the
ways in which class and gender moderate racial experiences. I add to the growing body of work on intersectionality by exploring the ways that biracial students’ identity work reflects the intersection of race, class, and gender identities.
CHAPTER 4

METHODS

My design involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 55 black-white biracial students. In this study I defined biracial as students who reported having one black (non-Hispanic) and one white (non-Hispanic) biological parent. Some scholars argue that distinguishing between blacks and biracial blacks is a fallacy as many “blacks” are themselves mixed-race (see Spencer 2004; Spencer 2006). They argue that researchers who make this distinction between the groups are perpetuating this fallacy. I agree that biological race is a fallacy; however, social race is a separate construct (Khanna 2007). I consider biracial any individual who reports having one black and one white biological parent, regardless of either parent’s actual ancestry. I define biracial in this way not because I think these individuals are a distinct group biologically but because individuals who understand their parents as belonging to different racial groups have a unique set of social experiences worthy of study.¹

In addition to reporting that they had one black and one white parent, participants had to attend one of four institutions of higher education. Because I was interested in the experiences of biracial students at schools with drastically different racial compositions, I selected one PWI (approximately 73 percent of students were listed as white) and three HBCUs (over 80 percent of students at each HBCU were listed as black). The PWI was a public research university and the flagship institution of a Southeastern state. It enrolled over 26,000 undergraduates. All three HBCUs were private schools located in the Southeast. They each enrolled between 2,000 and 4,000 students. I chose to focus on Southern institutions because the majority of HBCUs are
located in this region. Since I selected Southern HBCUs, I chose to include a PWI located in the same region.

I recruited the majority of the sample through ads posted on the college campuses and emailed to relevant student mailing lists. I also made research pitches within classrooms. Additionally, eleven students were referred by other participants.

In order to obtain variation in my sample, I avoided using the word biracial in the recruitment ad. Aware that some students who fit my recruitment criteria may not think of themselves as biracial, I indicated that I was seeking individuals with one black and one white biological parent. Additionally, I engaged in some degree of theoretical sampling, meaning that I selected groups to sample from based on my emerging theoretical argument (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Specifically, when analyzing my data I noticed that many of the biracial PWI students in my sample identified more strongly with their white than black background. Among these interviewees many similar themes began to arise. In order to ensure that theoretical saturation was based on the widest possible range of data, I attempted to expand the sample to include biracials who identified more with their black background. To do this I engaged in targeted recruitment; I recruited through student organizations likely to attract members with black identities, such as the African American Greek organizations and other campus organizations geared toward black students. I also continued enrolling subjects in the study until I felt that I had enough variation in terms of gender, social class, and phenotype. Additionally, I focused recruitment on underclassmen because I was interested in how biracial students navigated race on campus as they were adjusting to new college environments.

My recruitment attempts resulted in a sample of 55 respondents. 22 respondents attended HBCUs, and 33 attended the PWI. The majority of respondents were women; however, there
were also men in the sample. The HBCU sample included seven men and 15 women, and the PWI sample included nine men and 24 women. Of the HBCU students, eight were freshmen, 11 were sophomores, two were juniors, and one was a senior. The PWI sample consisted of 19 freshmen, 11 sophomores, and three seniors.

There was variation within both the HBCU sample and the PWI sample in terms of such factors as region of origin, family structure, SES, the race of respondents’ parents (i.e. white mother/black father v. white father/black mother), and the racial composition of respondents’ high schools and hometowns. Since this paper compares the experiences of biracial HBCU students to those of biracial PWI students it is helpful to compare these two groups of students on the above-mentioned demographic factors.

The majority of biracial HBCU and PWI students reported having white mothers and black fathers. Sixty-eight percent of PWI students and 70 percent of HBCU students identified their mother as white and their father as black. This is consistent with interracial marriage and cohabiting trends in the United States, whereby black men are more likely than black women to marry or live with a white partner (Crowder and Tolnay2000). Of the biracial HBCU students, 23 percent were raised by their married, biological parents. Fifty percent reported that their parents were separated, but that they had a relationship with both parents. Eighteen percent were raised by single moms and had a negligible relationship with their father, and nine percent were adopted (one into a white family and one into a black family). In comparison, approximately 45 percent of biracial PWI students grew up with their married biological parents. Twenty four percent had relationships with both parents despite parental separation. Twenty one percent were raised by single moms. Finally, nine percent were adopted or raised by a family member beside their parents; of the students within this category, two were raised by whites and one by blacks.
Among the HBCU sample there was much variation in terms of respondents’ region of origin; 32 percent were raised in the Southeast, 23 percent in the Midwest, 18 percent in the West, 9 percent in the Northeast, and 14 percent within multiple regions of the United States. In contrast, the vast majority of the biracial PWI students were raised in the Southeast. 70 percent of these students spent their whole life in the Southeast. Another 27 percent spent some time in the Southeast but also lived within other regions of the U.S. and/or other countries. Only one biracial PWI student did not live in the South at all prior to college.

There was slightly more social class variation within the HBCU sample; however, both samples included students from different class backgrounds. Of the HBCU respondents, 55 percent were middle class, 25 percent were working class, and seven percent were poor. Of the PWI respondents, 76 percent were middle class and 24 percent were working class; no students within this sample came from poor backgrounds.

Lastly, there were some differences between the samples in terms of the racial compositions of respondents’ pre-college social environments. Specifically, more students in the HBCU sample than the PWI sample reported attending predominantly white high schools and growing up in mostly white neighborhoods. Fifty percent of HBCU respondents reported attending a white high school, and 41 percent said they spent most of their life within predominantly white neighborhoods. By comparison, only 21 percent of PWI interviewees reported spending all of their high school years in a predominantly white school, and 27 percent reported spending most of childhood within predominantly white neighborhoods. Within both samples, the majority of those who did not report growing up in predominantly white environments stated that they were raised in diverse environments or that they spent some time
in both white and black environments. Only a small minority of respondents in both samples reported spending the majority of their life in predominantly black social environments.

Interviews ranged in length from 37 minutes to two hours and forty minutes. During the interview I asked participants about their background and pre-college experiences (e.g. SES, family structure, racial composition of their neighborhood and schools). Interviews also explored participants’ racial identities, their college selection process, and their social and academic experiences during college. After asking broad questions about students’ racial experiences in college, I asked targeted questions specifically designed to assess racial identity work. I conducted two pilot interviews in order to test the effectiveness of interview questions, and I revised some interview questions for clarity during the early phases of the research. Respondents were paid $10 for participation. I transcribed the interviews verbatim.

I used the computer program MAXQDA to assist with data analysis. When analyzing data I first began with a list of codes that I generated from my interview guide; however, I also used the inductive approach emphasized by grounded theorists (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Corbin and Strauss 2008; Charmaz 2011). When using this inductive method, I engaged in open coding. Corbin and Strauss (2008: 195) define open coding as “breaking data apart and delineating concepts to stand for blocks of raw data.” By engaging in inductive, open coding I allowed codes to emerge from the data. I also utilized in-vivo coding, in which I used participants’ exact words as a code. These coding techniques allowed the data to drive analysis. While analyzing my data, I engaged in constant comparisons, looking for similarities and differences across interviews. By comparing interviews from participants within and across institutions I was able to start building my argument about the relationship between institutional context and racial identity work.
Throughout the research process I remained reflexive about the ways in which my positionality may have influenced the study. Many qualitative researchers emphasize the importance of the researcher and participants’ subjective positions on the construction of knowledge and call for reflexivity in the research process (Charmaz 2011; Emirbayer and Desmond 2012; Peshkin 1988). As my study was primarily concerned with race, I was particularly aware of the ways in which my own racial background may have influenced the study.

As a black-white biracial woman, I am a member of the racial group I am studying. My insider status presented a couple of challenges throughout the research process. I had to be conscious of my position relative to the subjects and work to ensure that I did not project my own personal experiences onto the participants. I also had to remind myself to ask participants to expand on questions even when I and/or the participant assumed that I already knew the answer based on my lived experiences.

For the most part, however, I believe my insider status to be an advantage. Root (1992) suggests that much of the research on multiracial identity be conducted by individuals who are “intimately informed of the experience” (Root 1992 as cited in Khanna 2007:71). This allows researchers to “ask questions from a position of knowing” (Khanna 2007: 71). My position as a biracial woman has allowed me insight into the unique experiences of multiracial individuals. I am able to generate questions and hypotheses from my life experience and ask questions from this position of knowing.

My racial background also seems to be an advantage in that many respondents reported feeling more comfortable with me than they would have felt with an interviewer of another race. I told respondents about my racial background at the beginning of the interview and asked at the
end how they thought the interview might have been different if I had been a different race.

Many respondents said that the race of the interviewer would make a difference in how comfortable they felt and the information they revealed, indicating that they felt comfortable with me because of perceived racial similarity and that if the interviewer had been monoracial white or black they might have censored their responses so as not to offend him/her.
CHAPTER 5

BIRACIAL STUDENTS AT A PWI

Biracial students at the PWI navigated race within a campus racial structure characterized by segregation and discrimination. Regardless of biracial students’ internal racial identities, they reported that they were most often categorized and treated as non-white. This “non-white” categorization left them as actual or potential targets of racism and discrimination. In this chapter I first provide a detailed description of the school’s racial structure. I then discuss how biracial students navigated race and racism within this structure. Subsequently, I describe biracial students’ identity work in light of the campus racial structure, and I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the implications of students’ identity work for theories of intersectionality. In an attempt to ensure confidentiality, I will not refer to the name of the school or the name of specific Greek organizations; all Greek names that appear below are pseudonyms.

THE PWI’S RACIAL STRUCTURE

In order to better understand the racial structure of the PWI, it is important to note some basic features of the school. The PWI was the flagship institution of a Southeastern state and enrolled upwards of 26,000 students. The school was located in a college town. Attending college sporting events and cheering for the school’s competitive Division I sports teams was a central part of the student experience. Additionally, over a quarter of the undergraduate student population participated in social sororities and fraternities.

According to the university’s records, approximately 73 percent of undergraduate
students were white, 10 percent were Asian, seven percent were black, five percent were Hispanic, three percent were multiracial, one percent did not specify their race, and one percent were either American Indian or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. It is important, however, to realize that the number of students the college identified as multiracial likely undercounts the mixed-race student population for a couple of reasons. For one, many multiracial students may indicate that they belong to only one race on their college application. For instance, my analysis indicated that black-white biracials may indicate that they are solely black on their college application because of a perceived admissions advantage for African-American students. Secondly, studies have found that some colleges list biracials who have white background (e.g. black-white biracials) as belonging only to their minority group and only consider students biracial if they indicate membership in more than one minority group (e.g. black-Asian biracials) (Herman 2010). Despite the limitations of the university’s information on students’ race, the above statistics clearly indicate that the school is predominantly white.

The school’s racial composition and aspects of the social structure (e.g. the Greek system) influenced the university’s racial structure. Bonilla-Silva (1997:474) defines a society’s racial structure as its “set of social relations and practices based on racial distinctions.” He describes how the racial structure of the United States privileges whiteness. As stated above, whites are considered the “superior” racial group in the United States and thus receive social, economic, and psychological benefits (Bonilla-Silva 1997). Additionally, the white racial group’s superior position gives it the “license to draw physical (segregation) as well as social (racial etiquette) boundaries between itself and other races” (Bonilla-Silva 1997: 470).
Similarly, the racial structure of the PWI I studied privileged whiteness. Consistent with Bonilla-Silva’s description, whites’ superior position in the societal and the campus racial structure allowed them to draw boundaries between themselves and those defined as non-white. This was most evident within the campus social scene where segregation was rampant and blacks were frequently excluded from participating in white Greek life and the white college bar scene.

For instance, several students described how many of the bars surrounding the college had rules in place that seemed geared towards limiting the black presence in the establishment. Alicia, a sophomore, described these racialized rules that worked to exclude blacks, saying:

Some of my friends will go downtown and they’ll be like you know they’re like they have rules that seem to be like aimed towards like black people like not being able to get in. Like you can’t have like braids or anything like that. Of course white people aren’t gonna have braids or anything like that…So it just seems like it’s like directly centered to keep like black people out of the bars downtown in my opinion.

Alicia’s account highlights how whites were privileged and blacks were disadvantaged in the campus racial structure. Whites’ power gave them license to exclude blacks from certain spaces surrounding the campus, virtually marking those spaces as “white.” Relatedly, many students described similar processes of racial discrimination within the Panhellenic (NPC) sororities and IFC fraternities. While these organizations were “officially” race neutral, most students perceived these Greek organizations as white and many believed that they were engaging in discriminatory practices to keep them this way. For instance, Candace described how the Panhellenic sororities were essentially white sororities, saying:

I was asking [my friend] what the difference between Panhellenic and non-Panhellenic sororities were, and I said are the Panhellenic sororities just the white sororities and then non-Panhellenic are like everything else? She was like not necessarily. But I looked around. I said but only white people are really in ‘em. She goes no we have one black girl in our sorority. I was like one? (Laughs). Like what does that mean?

Here, Candace contrasts her friend’s account of what Panhellenic sororities are with her own perception of these organizations. Candace came to the conclusion that although those who were
in the sororities (like her friend) might say that Panhellenic sororities are “not necessarily” white, in essence most of the people who belong to these organizations are white. Emma, like many others, believed that the whiteness of these organizations was more than mere coincidence.

Emma, a sophomore, said:

It’s like not like a boy’s club but it kinda is where you have to be this sort of person, this sort of color, this sort of, you know, background to get into the Greek associations. And for the longest time I did really want to pledge because I was just like oh that seems so cool, and then I realized wait a second, there are no black girls here and there must be a reason for that. And then all that crap happened down at [similar university], and my best friend, one of my best friends, she goes to [similar university]. And she called me on the phone and she was like I don’t want you to be upset and like we really do try to pledge black girls, but, you know, it’s not up to us; it’s just the status quo. We can’t have black people until so and so says so.

In the above excerpt Emma described how she believed the whiteness of the Panhellenic sororities was not related to chance but to discriminatory practices on the part of those organizations. To the extent that Greek organizations are systematically excluding people of color, the school’s racial structure can be described as privileging whiteness over blackness.

The discriminatory practices of bars, clubs, and Greek organizations aided in the formation of distinct and separate white and black social worlds on campus. Breelyn, a freshman, described these two different social worlds, saying:

I think there’s you know the sorority and fraternities. And then you know you have black you have black sororities and fraternities too which is like whole different. I think it’s mostly separated into like whites and blacks. I know that sounds bad, but I mean I’ve been to like black parties like downtown when they host them, their like blackout party or whatever they have at a venue. You know, it’s all black people. There’s no white people. And then like downtown like at bars and stuff it’s all white people and maybe like a sprinkle of black people. So that’s like two different scenes.

While other social processes like homophily likely contributed to the creation of distinct racial social scenes on campus, the racial structure of the university and the associated discrimination undoubtedly contributed to the formation of these separate social communities.
It is important to note that while the black and white social scenes were separate, they were not equal. Specifically, the white Greek organizations were associated with more wealth and resources than were the black Greek organizations. These resource differentials led to differences in status, with the white Greek organizations having more social status than the black ones. Emma described this status differential, saying:

I think a lot of people just see the black Greek organizations as less than the white Greek organizations. I mean like a lot of people are like oh well they don’t even have houses; like they have to have their meetings at the [student center], like meetings in like [the student center] or recruitment drives. And then the white, you know, sororities and fraternities they’ve got the massive houses…and they don’t have to like, you know, actively recruit; they’re doing just fine by themselves. And you see someone wearing a t-shirt that says, you know, [one of the white sororities] and you’re just like oh wow they’re in that sorority. But, you see, you know, the black sororities’ Greek letters and a lot of people can’t even like tell what they are. Same with the Indian fraternities and sororities and that sort of thing.

Emma linked the idea that black Greek organizations are “less than” white Greek organizations with differences in resources. Specifically, black Greek organizations did not have their own houses and were thus forced to hold their events in the student center. In contrast, white Greek organizations owned massive houses on campus. These visible differences in resources likely contributed to differences in social status as Emma suggested.

Relatedly, the few white Greek organizations that were known to let in non-white members were believed by respondents to be lower status than the all-white Greek organizations, further aiding in the development of a racial status hierarchy on campus. For instance, Thomas, a freshman, said:

I mean there were ones where you knew like you weren’t going to get in if you weren’t white. That’s just that’s just the way it is… It’s just Greek life is kind of its own little world and some that’s one of those things that’s probably not gonna change, at least for a long time and it’s just the way it is. And I mean even I wouldn’t be able to afford any of those ones anyway because they’re like your top tier bigger fraternities that are like five thousand dollars a semester to be in.
Thomas’s discussion illustrates the link between whiteness and status on campus. He said the fraternities that do not accept students of color are the “top tier” fraternities. While students of color may be able to join lower tier fraternities, they reported being excluded from the fraternities with the most wealth and status on campus.

Candace made a similar point about sororities on campus. When describing the conversation she had with a white friend who belonged to a high status sorority on campus, Candace said:

I was asking her if I should rush. And she like she’s like yeah if you want to. I was like do you think I would get in? She goes yeah, somewhere. And she rushed for Eta Eta Eta, and her sister was an Eta Eta Eta. And I guess they kind of have a reputation of being the ones with the more money and they’re snootier and they’re really pretty girls and like one of the highest if you can rank sororities, whatever. So I said but do you think I could get into the one that you want to get into, which she is in now. She was like if they like you. And I was like well what’s it gonna take for them to like me? And she didn’t she kind of beat around the bush. And so she has no problem with me. But I think she kind of got the sense that they would not be, they would choose a white girl over me.

Candace explained how her friend told her that she would probably get in somewhere if she chose to rush but implied that she likely would not get into the high-status Eta Eta Eta sorority since she was not white. This conversation reflects the relationship between race and status in Greek associations. Candace’s comments imply that while some predominantly white Greek organizations may accept racial minorities, the sororities known to be high status organizations composed of well-off, pretty girls are unlikely to accept non-white members.

As the above interview quotes suggest, biracial students were aware of the racial segregation in the campus social scene and the discriminatory practices of the bars, clubs, and Greek organizations. While some students minimized the importance of racism and segregation to their experiences on campus, many others saw their social life as significantly shaped by the school’s racial structure. Moreover, the majority of these students reported that their “half-black” status marked them as “non-white,” thus making them targets (or potential targets) of racism and
discrimination. Importantly, even those who *internally* identified as both black and white realized that many others on campus perceived them as racial minorities, essentially marking them as “non-white.”

For instance, Candace described how she felt more comfortable with whites and identified more with this part of her background; yet, she acknowledged that white students on campus often saw her as non-white. She said:

> White people here are just cliquey and not very accepting even though we’re in the 21st century, things have changed, and this is an integrated school. But, I don’t know; sometimes it’s just people going with what they know, what they’re comfortable with, which I can’t blame them for because I gravitate towards white people, too. That’s what I’m comfortable with. But other people aren’t comfortable with that so they kind of like put their blinders on and shut me out a little bit.

Here, Candace described how she feels comfortable with whites and gravitates towards whites. Yet, many whites on campus did not identify with her. Despite her biracial background, they did not see her as white. Instead, they “othered” her, seeing her as different and shutting her out of their white cliques.

Similarly, Brooke, a freshman, discussed how she identified more with her white background but realized that within society’s and the university’s racial structure she was seen as black. She said:

> Socially I definitely think I more identify with white. But if you were to like put me in a category, I don’t know, my dad’s always said like if you’re not white then you’re black, so I just kind of like I guess black… I could be mixed, but in the eyes of other people, maybe white people, I’m black. You know what I mean? So it’s like I may not be just black, but in the eyes of others I may be black.

Here, Brooke says she identifies more as white, socially, yet she realizes that in terms of society’s (and the university’s) racial structure, she is black. She says despite her social or internal white identity, categorically she is black because other people (particularly white people) see and treat her as such.
The following excerpt from my interview with Danielle, a freshman, similarly illustrates how many biracial students saw themselves in relation to the campus racial structure. Danielle said:

[My college experience has] made me realize like that racism may still exist cos you know you see it sometimes. Like and you know you’d think it’d be over by now, but I guess not…in my dorms it’s like on my hall specifically they [white students] don’t really talk to us and us meaning I guess people that aren’t white. They don’t like associate with us at all. It’s almost like they look down to us in a way. But I don’t know. And you just hear stuff. Like you hear people calling people names, things like that… I mean I hear the N word pretty regularly…I hear it from black people and white people, but you know I mostly hear it from white people about black people. So I hear it. And then you know you see like I I heard I guess it was a confrontation---I don’t even know--but between a black girl and a white girl, and I heard it used so. It was I mean I was just like I mean what do you do with that?

Danielle’s comments elucidate the school’s racial structure and her perceived position within it. Danielle describes how the whites “looked down” upon non-whites, choosing not to associate with them and sometimes using racial epithets like “nigger.” Moreover, Danielle (like many other biracial PWI students) sees herself as part of the lower status group on campus, describing how whites on campus treat people like “us,” meaning students that are non-white. Danielle’s closing question “what do you do with that?” shows how she is unsure about how to navigate racism on campus.

So what did students “do with that”? What did they do with the knowledge of racism on campus? How did they navigate a campus characterized by segregation and discrimination? I explore these questions in the following section.

NAVIGATING RACISM THROUGH JOINING OR AVOIDING

For many students, the best solution to avoiding racism appeared to be avoiding Greek life altogether, or navigating it with caution, and being very selective about which bars downtown to frequent. For instance, Jada’s knowledge of discrimination within the Greek system prevented her from attempting to join a sorority. Jada, a freshman, said:
And I feel like if I didn’t get into somewhere that [my race] might be one of the reasons I didn’t get in. So and it’s not worth it to me to put myself through something like that that would upset me based on my race because it shouldn’t be an issue period. So why put myself through that?

Jada navigated racism on campus by refusing to put herself in a situation where she could likely experience racial discrimination. She decided that attempting to join a sorority was not worth the risk of experiencing upsetting racial incidents. Similarly, Candace and Emma (described above) decided not to attempt to join a sorority based on fear of racial discrimination.

For Emma this decision was particularly painful as she had initially desired to be part of a Panhellenic organization. Emma describes the painfulness of this situation thus:

For me it was just like I’m just kind of waiting in line for the full treatment, full college experience, whereas like my white counterparts a lot of people from my high school came [here] like seventy of us and all of them got into like the nice sororities, are having a great time. And then for me I know I can’t pledge cos I’d never get a bid because I’m black. So it’s like it’s not really fair, but at the same time I’ve been trying to, you know, get over it, make the most of what I can being independent, like independent as in without Greek.

The above quote from Emma illustrates how for several biracial students racial exclusion from Greek life was not insignificant; rather, it substantially impacted them. Emma describes how her awareness of discrimination within Greek life left her feeling like she was unable to get the full college experience because of her race.

While some biracial students navigated racism on campus by choosing not to attempt to join a Greek organization, others continued to participate in Greek life but did so selectively. These individuals displayed an awareness of which Greek organizations they should avoid and which ones were safe to participate in. For instance, while Candace avoided joining a sorority, she continued to participate in frat parties; yet, she did so selectively, learning to avoid houses with reputations as racist. She described how she learned to navigate the fraternity scene, saying:

I went to the Epsilon Alpha Beta house. And my friend texted me when I one of the friends I went with, a white friend. I went with white people and black people and an Asian. But, one of my friends texted me while I was there and said “I’m sorry; I didn’t
know.” And I went up to her and said “What are you talking about?” And she said “Apparently they’re really racist here.” I was like “Oh, that’s awkward.” And so they were like “Well, you’re fine cos you’re a girl.” Cos the frats don’t care about the girls that come in. But my friend Malcolm who is Jamaican they were like “Just tell him not to talk to the guys.” I was like “That’s really messed up. We should probably not even be here.” They’re like “No, no, no. Let’s stay.” And, so then I called my brother. He’s in college. He’s 22. And I called him and was telling him about my week and how I went to that house. And he was like “What?! Why did you go there?” And, I was like “What do you mean?” He was like “They’re known for being racist and like nationally known for date rape” or something, I don’t know. And I was like “I had no idea.” And he was like “If you go to any other house that’s fine. Just promise me you’ll never go there again.” And I was like “oh, okay.” And so that kind of sparked my mind. Candace said the incident at the fraternity “sparked my mind,” indicating that it made her aware of the possibility of encountering racism at certain fraternity parties. Additionally, she agreed to her brother’s request that she not attend any more parties at that fraternity house. Thus, the experience helped Candace learn how to navigate racism on campus. In the future, when she decides what social functions to attend, she will likely factor in consideration of whether she and her friends of color will experience racism at the event.

Similarly, many biracial students navigated racism on campus by refraining from going to the nearby college bars or selectively choosing which bars to frequent based on knowledge of discriminatory practices. For instance, Katie, a sophomore, was aware of the racialized rules that certain bars had that made it difficult for many blacks (and biracial-blacks) to frequent the establishment. In light of this knowledge, Katie and her friends made a mental list of which bars were safe to go to and which ones to avoid. Katie said: “it is sad because there’s certain bars that we know just to not even try.” While Katie and others cautiously navigated the downtown social scene, some chose to avoid the college bars altogether in order to avoid racism. The following excerpt from my interview with Gabriel, a senior, reflects this idea:

**KC:** Have you ever gone to the bars downtown?
**Gabriel:** Nah
**KC:** No? Never been interested?
**Gabriel:** Nah, I don’t know if I could put up with all those frat guys in a bar.
KC: Why?
Gabriel: I don’t know. It’s just crazy, crazy stuff. Most of them are prejudice or from what I’ve seen they’re kinda prejudice. You know, cos they’re frat guys. Some of them. I don’t want to say most, but some of them

Gabriel navigates racism on campus by choosing to avoid the college bar scene altogether. Additionally, his comments link the college bar scene with the fraternity scene, as he sees the college bars as being populated by racist fraternity members.

The above discussion makes it clear that many biracial students have experienced (or believe they may experience) racism on campus. Moreover, they navigate this racism by avoiding areas where they think they will likely experience discrimination.

In light of discrimination on campus, a minority of students explicitly aligned themselves with the black community. For instance, Alicia discussed becoming involved in black organizations on campus and considering joining a black sorority in response to the racism she witnessed and heard about on campus. Yet, most students did not see aligning themselves with black campus organizations as a desirable or viable option for navigating racism on campus. There are two primary reasons why most students did not choose to align themselves with the black community on campus. For one, some students did not know if they were allowed to do so. And secondly, most respondents did not feel like they would “fit in” with these groups.

An excerpt from my interview with Kia illustrates the idea of biracial students not knowing if they were allowed to be involved with black organizations. The university had a program in place to help African-American freshman adjust to campus life. When asked if she ever attended any of these meetings and programs within her dorm, Kia replied:

I haven’t because I don’t know, I feel like I don’t really belong, you know what I’m saying? Like I don’t really belong there. ‘Cause it’s I don’t know if it’s like just for black people or it’s like if you’re half black you can come. I don’t know. No one really says that.
Here Kia expresses confusion over whether she was allowed to participate in programs designed for African-American students.

Even when students were aware of opportunities for African-Americans and believed they could take advantage of these resources, they often chose not to because they did not think they would fit in. For instance, Brooke said:

I know that they have like a black students’ council. And I actually have a friend who’s involved in one of them. And I know that they have all the fraternities and sororities and things like that that are based around being African-American. And they just really I don’t know. I don’t know. They’re really nice people individually and I kind of I understand their goal, I could just never see myself being a part of anything like that. I’ve never really explored the option, but I do feel like I wouldn’t necessarily fit in with one of them just because I feel like I just I wouldn’t. And I may be making that assumption based on just what I think or like a stereotype that I’ve come up with in my head, but I just feel like I wouldn’t identify for the same reasons why I don’t feel like I identify with the black race in general. I feel like I’m socially I’m more geared towards the white race.

Brooke described how although she was aware of black organizations on campus, she would not join one because she did not think she would fit in. She said she does not identify with the black race and feels more socially white.

The majority of the students in the sample felt similar to Brooke and/or Kia and thus decided that joining a black organization was not a good option for navigating racism on campus. Many of these students continued to navigate racism through avoiding certain areas on and around campus where they believed they may experience discrimination.

NAVIGATING RACISM THROUGH IDENTITY WORK

In the above section I explored how many biracial students navigate racism on campus by avoiding areas where they think they might experience discrimination. Yet, avoidance is not the only potential strategy for navigating racism; students may also engage in identity work to fit in with their white peers and reduce the stigma of blackness. In light of the campus racial structure, it seems reasonable that some biracial students may try to manage racial stigma by “passing” as
white. Yet, most respondents were adamant that they never did such a thing. In this section I first explore the reasons students offered for not passing as white. I then show how despite their opposition to the concept of passing, many students did in fact engage in activities to highlight their white background or downplay their blackness.

There are multiple reasons why students said they did not navigate racism on campus by passing as white. For one, passing as white is difficult for many biracials because of their phenotype. Many students described how attempting to pass as white on campus would be virtually impossible because of their skin color, hair texture, and/or facial features. For instance, Alicia said: “if I tried to identify myself as white I think that would be challenged just because obviously I don’t look white.” Similarly, Danielle said:

If I considered myself white it’d probably be some backlash maybe. Like people would probably be like she’s not white. Like you know things like that…because I look different. And they, like white people most white people all look a certain way and so like I’d look different and they’d be like she’s not white because she doesn’t look white. Alicia and Danielle talk about how their phenotype would prevent them from convincingly passing as white. They expect that if they tried to assert a white identity on campus this would not be accepted since other students would perceive them as looking different from the prototypical white student.

There was phenotypic variation in my sample, however, and some students reported that they thought they could convincingly pass as white if they chose to do so. For instance when I asked Ellie, a sophomore, how she thought her peers would respond if she chose to present herself as white without acknowledging her black background, she replied:

I mean I don’t think they would question it, ‘cause I feel like I look enough of the part that they wouldn’t really question it. Like, ‘cause I feel like a chameleon. Like you can change different colors. I feel like that’s what most likely blends in the background so I wouldn’t be questioned as much. Plus with the whole tanning craze (laughs) recently with like people.
Here Ellie describes how she thinks she could pass for a tan white person on campus and it would not really be questioned by anyone. A few other respondents in the sample similarly reported that they thought they could pass as white, yet these students reported that they did not choose to do so. These students’ cited two primary reasons for their decision not to pass as white. One, they did not recognize passing as white as a socially acceptable thing to do. Secondly, these students identified internally with both their white and black background and felt that passing as white would not be true to themselves and would be disrespectful to their family.

Ellie described both of these ideas. When asked if she ever tried to hide her black background, she said:

No ‘cause I feel like that would be like wrong because they both are a very big part of my life. Like my ethnicity is a really big part of my life. Like I grew up with both sides. I didn’t grow up with just one. Here she explained that even though she could pass as white, she chose to acknowledge both sides of her racial background since she grew up with both her black and white family. She sees passing as white as “wrong” since her family and ethnicity have always been a big part of her life. Thus, she does not try to pass as white in order to be true to herself, her ethnicity, and her family.

Later in the interview Ellie provided additional insight into her decision not to pass, describing the different levels of societal acceptance attached to “passing” as white versus “passing” as black. Ellie, like many others in the sample, believed it was more acceptable to claim your black background and not mention your white background than to say you are white and dismiss your blackness. Relatedly, more individuals both within the PWI and HBCU sample gave examples of times when they have chosen to pass as black compared to times that they have attempted to pass as white. Ellie describes this double standard, thus:
Ellie: I feel like if you’re saying that you’re white even though you’re mixed it’s kind of like you not wanting to admit that to yourself…versus for you to say that you’re black I feel like that’s you kinda accepting your heritage a bit more. Does that make sense? And, I know that’s totally double standard, but I feel like if you’re saying you pick white more then it’s kind of because you want to be white more because of our society which kind of makes it feel like a cop out.

**KC: And it’s not the same with black? Like to say you’re just black is not to say that you want to be black more and you don’t want to be white?**

Ellie: I feel like if you’re doing that then you’re not trying to gain something. Maybe you’re trying to fit in with a group, but you’re not trying to be like better in society because of your race. I feel like when somebody like identifies as white more than something else and you’re like not fully white it’s because you think that’s viewed better as a whole in society, if that makes sense. Once again I feel like that’s sort of a cop out. ‘Cause I feel like by saying you’re white in our society we kind of highlight people that are white as being prettier. I feel like you’re trying to make yourself sound more desirable and like cutting out the other half which is kind of rude.

Here Ellie describes how passing as white is less acceptable than passing as black. This “double standard” is related to the idea that it is not acceptable to deny part of your background in order to gain status. Ellie describes this sort of passing as “rude” and a “cop out.” This common idea that denying your blackness for personal gain is wrong helps explain why most students did not think that passing as white was an acceptable strategy for navigating racism on campus.

Yet, while people stopped short of passing as white, they nevertheless reported engaging in identity work in order to *cover* their blackness or *highlight* their whiteness. As noted above, Khanna and Johnson (2010) distinguish between passing, covering, and highlighting. They explain that when passing or concealing one’s whiteness is not desirable or feasible, individuals may downplay their blackness or accentuate their whiteness. Students used several strategies to highlight their whiteness, including manipulating their physical appearance, verbally mentioning their white background, and drawing upon white cultural knowledge.

For instance, while Ellie reported that she did not try to convince others on campus that she was white and that whenever asked she made it a point to mention that she was biracial, she
nevertheless wore her hair in such a way as to blend in with the other white students on campus, thus covering her blackness and highlighting her whiteness. She described this identity work strategy thus:

Sometimes I feel I don’t look like the typical mold of the [PWI] student as well, so I do feel self-conscious like I did in like elementary school that I don’t like have the straight hair. I know it looks straight right now, but it’s ‘cause I have this thing relaxed (laughs) so but yeah. From time to time I do feel like I don’t look like a Southern, sorority girl and I do feel self-conscious sometimes because you see around here everywhere like a bunch of like cowboy boots, blonde hair, like the long waves. And I’m still very self-conscious about my hair; I still don’t know what to do with it. I usually straighten it. I sort of picked up the habit from 9th grade to now where it’s just sort of like I’ll straighten my hair when I remember to. ‘Cause like I don’t like how big my hair is and I think it’s not, I think it’s more of I don’t want people to look at me like for being different. Here Ellie describes how she purposively wears her hair in a way that allows her to blend in more with the white sorority girls on campus. She chooses to straighten her naturally curly hair so that she does not stand out as racially different from her peers. Many of the women in the sample similarly reported straightening their curly hair in order to fit in with their white peers. For many students, straightening their hair had the effect of accentuating their whiteness and covering one of their features (hair texture) that marked them as racially different.

In addition to changing one’s hair, students reported fitting in with the white students on campus through their choice of clothes. For instance, Candace said:

One of my friends Eli is black. He made a comment the other day that all the white girls here dress the same. Which is (chuckles) kind of true. I mean which is the way I dress right now---the running shorts and the over-sized t-shirts and the Nike short---I mean Nike shoes. And, they all have their rain jackets and monogrammed everything. They all dress very similarly to I guess fit in amongst each other. I don’t really know. Here Candace mentions how she dresses like all the white women on campus. Additionally, she offers the idea that all the white women dress this way in order to fit in with each other. This suggests that on some level Candace’s choice of clothing is also an effort to fit in with whites.
In addition to highlighting their whiteness and/or covering their blackness through their physical appearance, some students achieved these aims through verbal identification. Specifically, students pointed out to whites that they were not fully black. For instance, Kia said that when interacting with white men in particular she wanted to let them know that she was biracial (not fully black) in hopes that this would make them feel more comfortable with her and more open to dating her. When asked if she ever tried to make part of her racial background known to others she said:

I do that a lot, especially when I’m dating or when I’m around a guy that I think that I will date because I feel like for some reason they don’t want to date a black girl. So oftentimes like even--I wish I didn’t do that, though---like on first like when I first meet them I’ll make it known in some way, either like usually it’s jokingly but I’ll go ahead like and say it. Usually when skin tone comes up I’ll say something about like a white parent. Or if yeah it really just depends on the situation, but yeah I definitely make it known in some kind of way because like I’m self-conscious about that when I’m dating. For some reason I would like I want them to know that I’m mixed and not fully black, just because of like the guys that were at my high school did not date black girls and I’ve always been attracted mostly to white guys so I always like made it known for some reason.

Kia explained that her experience growing up taught her that white men do not date black women. Thus, when she is around white men who she may want to date she highlights her whiteness by making it known to them that she is mixed, not fully black. Kia discussed how she would use this identity work strategy to navigate the white fraternity scene. When asked if she would feel comfortable going to a white fraternity party she replied:

Yes, but again it would come to the point of like “hey, I’m not all the way black,” like if I were to find somebody that I was attracted to. Like I feel like I’m getting judged. Like I’m paranoid about that still in some sense. But that’s that would be like a thing that I would still do. Like I would be confident, but that would still be in the back of my mind of whether or not like they knew. Like I want them to know exactly what I am. Like some other students, Kia felt that presenting herself as biracial as opposed to fully black would help her navigate the white social scene on campus. While her phenotype prevented her
from being able to successfully pass as white, she highlighted her whiteness by pointing out that
she had a white parent.

Students also attempted to highlight their whiteness by displaying their white cultural
knowledge. This idea is reflected in the following interview excerpt from my interview with
Jamal, a freshman:

Jamal: If I’m around black people I go along with more their culture. If I’m with white
people I stay like I go along with the white culture I have also. Either way I just kind of
like use what I know from my background and just you know identify with that.

KC: Can you describe that a little bit for me? Like, how you would draw upon
your white culture around white people here?

Jamal: The stuff I don’t talk about versus stuff I do talk about. I mean it’s more it’s
more the stuff I don’t talk about actually. Like the stuff, like I don’t know, like in the
black community. Uh like music or sports or just like just cultural stuff, clothing. Like I
would talk about certain clothing with white people versus clothing with black people
or like music or whatever. It’s not so that I feel comfortable. It’s so that they feel
comfortable.

Jamal discussed how he draws upon the white cultural knowledge he has from growing up
with white family in order to identify more with whites on campus and make them feel more
comfortable with him. In this way, Jamal highlights his white background.

Jamal talked about drawing upon his white background somewhat strategically in order to
identify more with whites and increase their comfort. In contrast, other students described how
they thought others were reading their self-presentation as “white” but stated that they were not
trying to present a white identity; rather, they were just being themselves. For instance, Candace
said:

Once I do start talking and they see who I hang out with, they kind of probably
categorize me. Just ‘cause I use proper English or proper grammar or whatever people
some of my friends my white friends the close ones will describe me and say that I’m
basically white. But, when I get it’s like when I get around my black friends I’ll start
using slang more and dancing differently and stuff like that. And it’s just different
people bringing out different sides of me. I identify with it [being black] more when
black people are around. When white people come around I feel like I mean I never
deny it, not anymore like I did when I was little. But, like I said it’s like what people
bring out of you. So when I’m around white people I act white.
Candace explains how her peers interpret her speech patterns as “white.” Moreover, she appears to agree somewhat with this designation, describing herself as “acting white.” Using Goffman’s terminology, Candace can be described as a sincere actor. She sees herself as presenting a white identity but feels that this performance of whiteness is authentic and not being used as a strategy to help her fit in or avoid the stigma of blackness.

The above discussion shows that biracial students’ highlight their whiteness and/or downplay their blackness in various ways. While all students rejected the idea that they tried to pass as white to receive advantages or avoid racism on campus, seeing such racial identity work as problematic if not morally wrong, many students nevertheless described behavior that served to increase their identification with whites and their distance from blacks. It is possible that such identity work helped students manage the stigma of blackness and gain acceptance from white students. For instance, verbally pointing out one’s whiteness, physically presenting oneself as white, and/or “acting white” whether that was through speech patterns, presentation of white cultural knowledge, or other behavior may have helped biracial students to be seen and treated as “basically white,” even if their peers were aware of their mixed racial background. While biracial students’ descriptions of their college experiences show that they were not immune to racism, such identity work may help reduce the discrimination they experience. In the following section I discuss how the racial identity work described in this section helps inform theories of intersectionality.

IDENTITY WORK AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Biracial students’ discussions of identity work reflected the intersectional nature of race, class, and gender identities. In this section, I will first describe the intersection of race and
gendered performances. Then I will discuss the relationship between students’ presentations of racial and class identities.

Women interviewees dedicated a considerable amount of time to discussing their racial identity in relation to their physical appearance. While men also discussed their appearance, they did not spend nearly as much time discussing this topic as women did. This suggests that women may use their appearance as a site of racial identity work to a greater extent than men do.

The intersection between gendered and racial performances was particularly evident in women’s frequent and lengthy discussions of their hair. Women discussed doing their hair as a gender performance in that they chose styles that made them feel pretty and/or that they thought men would like. They also discussed styling their hair as a racial performance in that they were often aware of the racial implications of certain hairstyles and sometimes chose styles accordingly. While many women were acutely aware of the intersection between their gendered and racial self-presentations, others discussed the racial implications of their gendered self-presentations with more ambivalence.

Some students, like Ellie (described above), explicitly discussed the intersection between their gendered and racial identity work. As mentioned above, Ellie discussed how she felt self-conscious about her curly hair because it marked her as racially different from whites on campus. Thus, she relaxed it (i.e. chemically straightened it) and additionally used a flat-iron to keep it straight. Ellie remarked: “It’s weird, I feel like I’m prettier with my hair straight.” In choosing to straighten her hair Ellie was engaging in a gendered presentation, styling her hair in a way that made her feel pretty and presented a certain kind of femininity. This gendered presentation, however, was intricately linked with ideas of race and a privileging of the white beauty aesthetic, which she explicitly acknowledged. Thus straightening her hair was not only a way for her to
feel like an attractive woman, it was also a way for her to appear more white and fit in with her white peers on campus.

Similarly, Elena, a freshman, explicitly acknowledged the relationship between her gendered and racial self-presentation. Unlike Ellie and many others, Elena reported that she did not style her hair in ways that would make her fit in with whites on campus. She said during high school she felt very similar to the way Ellie reported feeling: self-conscious about her thick, curly hair. In college, however, she wore it curly, embracing her racial difference even though it came with challenges. Elena said:

I feel like I tried really hard to look more white in high school. My hair always had to be straight. And then I wore my hair like this a lot in Italy just cos it was too humid to do anything about it. And then I got compliments for being mixed or for being different. So then I kinda continued that here. And I feel like this is this takes the least amount of time, the least amount of effort. So I guess this is me not trying. But I guess I’m also trying to be more mixed. I’m not really trying to be more white or to be more black anymore.

**KC:** And in high school you said you were trying to look more white?
Elena: Yeah

**KC:** Why is that?
Elena: I guess it was easier. I felt like it looked prettier. Oh, my first boyfriend told me he liked my hair better straight or something. And then I got a lot of compliments when I did straighten my hair, ’cause it gets longer I guess.

Like Ellie, Elena’s account of her hair explicitly links her gendered and racial self-presentations. She previously straightened her hair in order to present a certain gendered identity, a type of femininity that made her feel pretty and desired by her boyfriend and other potential dates. However, Elena also realized the racial implications of her self-presentation. She discussed how she had previously straightened her hair within her predominantly white high school in order to look more white. Yet, after getting compliments about her natural hair when on a trip to Italy she decided to embrace her racial difference. She suggests that by wearing her hair in its natural form during college she is trying to put forth a mixed identity as opposed to trying to present herself as either white or black.
Other students presented more contradictory accounts of their choices for hairstyles. For instance, when explicitly asked if they ever changed their hair to look more white, black, or biracial, many students said no. Yet, within the interview the same participants revealed an awareness of the racial implications of their chosen hairstyles. Still, these students maintained that their decisions about their hair had nothing to do with race.

For instance, Jada, a freshman, had white skin, freckles, and long, thick red hair. She was one of the few participants who said she thought she could convincingly pass for white. Near the beginning of the interview when she was discussing how she thought others on campus perceived her race, she said: “when my hair’s curly they’re just like they know that I’m mixed with something.” Through her discussion of reflected appraisals she displayed an awareness that her curly hair alerted others to the fact that she likely was not just white; she was mixed with something. Later on in the interview when asked if she ever changed her physical appearance to try to look more or less white, black, or biracial, Jada replied:

I’m gonna do my hair like I wanna. I don’t like my hair curly, period, not because I’m half black because it’s curly but because I just hate it curly. It’s too much to handle. So I do try to straighten it a lot. But I never thought about it from a point of view as I’m gonna do this to seem more black or I’m gonna do this to seem more white.

Here Jada said she chooses how to wear her hair based on aesthetic preference and practicality (i.e. ease) without consideration of race. Yet, in choosing to regularly straighten her hair she was influencing the way that others perceived her race. In this way, women’s gendered self-presentations (their makeup, clothing, hair styles) often carried racial meanings, even when the women claimed that this was not their objective.

Alicia’s discussion of her hair highlights the way that class is also connected to the presentation of gender and racial identities. Alicia described how she became self-conscious after
deciding to wear her hair in braids because she thought others might read this hairstyle as “ghetto.” She said:

I feel like when I did have my braids, and it’s probably me just being paranoid, I really I did kinda feel like I was being judged like by people. Like they might have thought like I was ghetto or something like that.

Alicia’s comments show that biracial women’s hairstyles did not just send messages about their gender identity or their racial identity but also had implications for how others might read their class. Alicia feared that wearing a hairstyle characteristic of African-Americans might lead others to think she was “ghetto” or lower class.

Alicia’s comments imply a possible conflation between race and class where styles characteristic of blacks become equated with lower class status. This conflation between race and class came up often in the interviews. Students believed that their peers tended to think of “acting black” or performing or presenting a black identity as synonymous with presenting a “ghetto,” “ratchet,” or lower-class identity. In contrast, students believed their peers tended to think of “acting white” as synonymous with acting classy, polished, and cultured.

For instance, Alicia said: “I feel like people think like to act white is to be proper and like to conduct yourself in a sophisticated manner, and to be black is just to be loud and like ghetto and obnoxious.” When asked what she thought people meant by acting white, Caia said: “Like you talk like you’re educated and you don’t act ghetto. Things like that.”

Similarly, Thomas described people’s understanding of acting black and white as follows: “To act white’s to act educated, proper, you know dress nice. To act black is quite the opposite, to be ghetto, to be thuggish, ignorant instead, dress with your pants sagging, you know, loose clothing, that type of thing.” The descriptions these students gave of acting white and black were directly related to class. Acting white was associated with
middle/upper class markers such as being “proper,” “sophisticated,” “educated.” In contrast acting black was associated with being from the ghetto and displaying behaviors characteristic of the less educated.

Thus, when students in the previous section talked about fitting in with whites on campus by “acting white,” (whether they stated that this white presentation was purposeful or “natural”) they were likely acting middle class. Their accounts of acting white and fitting in with whites on campus typically ignored the presence of lower class whites on campus. For instance, Candace talked about how she dressed like all the white women on campus and how this caused some others to read her self-presentation as white. When describing how whites on campus dressed she mentioned relatively-expensive name-brand attire. She said: “The white people, white girls anyway, they’re very materialistic it seems like. Have to have the latest Michael Kors watch and Patagonia everything and Nike everything, name brand stuff.” Thus, when people on campus said she dressed white, they were likely implicitly making judgments about her presentation of social class.

Other students saw their location within a university as reducing their peers’ conflation of race and class. Several students mentioned that their high school peers were more likely than their college peers to conflate race and class due to increased class disparities between blacks and whites in their hometowns compared to at college. These students said that many of the blacks at college were from more privileged backgrounds than were the blacks in their hometowns and that even those who were not from middle class backgrounds were on their way to becoming middle class by virtue of being enrolled in college. Some students saw the more similar class backgrounds of blacks and whites on
campus as taking some of the stigma off of blackness within this particular context. The following excerpt from my interview with Caia reflects this idea:

**KC: Has anyone at [PWI] ever identified you as black without mentioning your white background?**
Caia: I don’t remember if anyone’s done it here, but it’s definitely happened before in my life like a lot.

**KC: Can you tell me more about that, when that happened?**
Caia: I guess it would kind of irritate me because like especially like ‘cause where I come from you know the bad stigma on a lot of black people. It would kind of bother me because I’d be like well I don’t want those things being attached to me, like being ghetto or being like you know whatever poor or like uneducated. And that’s kinda how I feel, especially if like a white person is like you’re black… It bothers me to be seen as like in those stigmas. But like if someone said that I was like a black person at [PWI] like I would not be offended by *that*. But I think it’s more like situational.

Caia explained that she did not like when white people in her hometown called her black without mentioning her white background. Being called black bothered her because in her hometown being black was associated with low SES (being poor, “ghetto,” and uneducated). Caia claims, however, that being specifically called a black student at her university would not offend her in the same way because it would eliminate (or at least reduce) associations between her race and being poor and uneducated.

The discussion in this section shows how class, race, and gender identities intersect and how presentations of one of these identities may have implications for the rest. Specifically, students’ gendered presentations often carried racial meaning, and women’s choice of hairstyles sometimes helped them blend in (or stand out) from whites on campus. Students also discussed how their “white” mannerisms, behavior, and/or style allowed them to fit in culturally with their white peers. This discussion was limited, however, to *middle class* white behavior and style. Thus, some of what likely united biracial students with their white peers was their similar presentation of middle class status.
CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I showed how the racial structure of the PWI privileged whiteness over blackness. Regardless of their personal identity, biracial students reported that most others on campus saw them as “non-white.” Thus, biracial PWI students navigated race in a setting where many others considered them inferior because of their relative blackness.

Biracial students used a number of strategies to navigate race and racism on campus. While some students navigated racism on campus by aligning themselves with the black campus community, most students did not feel comfortable doing so because it was inconsistent with their racial identity. These students preferred to avoid situations on campus that were particularly racially-charged and to try to fit in with whites in other situations. While no students discussed intentionally passing as white to avoid racism, most students described at least some situations where they covered their blackness or highlighted their whiteness. Doing such likely facilitated interaction with their white peers. This chapter also highlights the intersection between race, class, and gendered identities, showing how presentations of one of these identities may have implications for the others.

In the following chapter I show how biracial students attending HBCUs had markedly different experiences than those who attended PWIs. I link these differences to the schools’ differing racial structures.
CHAPTER 6

BIRACIAL STUDENTS AT HBCUS

The U.S. racial structure’s privileging of whiteness influenced the organization of the PWI and the HBCUs, but in different ways. At the PWI, biracial students occupied a lower status position because of their relative blackness compared to most of their peers. In contrast, biracial HBCU students occupied a higher position in their school’s racial structure due to their relative whiteness. Within their HBCU environment, biracial students sometimes benefited from their relative whiteness while simultaneously trying to reduce the negative consequences (e.g. resentment, dislike) tied to these benefits.

In this chapter I first provide a detailed description of the HBCUs’ racial structure. I then discuss how biracial students navigated race within this structure, focusing on how students engaged in identity work to navigate privilege. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the implications of students’ identity work for theories of intersectionality. While I sampled from three HBCUs, students’ descriptions of the school environments and their attempts to navigate race were very similar. Thus, in the majority of this chapter, I do not differentiate between students who attended the different institutions. In an attempt to ensure confidentiality, I will not refer to the name of the schools or the name of specific Greek organizations; all Greek names that appear below are pseudonyms.

THE HBCUS’ RACIAL STRUCTURE

As discussed in the section on the PWI’s racial structure, understanding a school’s basic features allows for better understanding of the racial structure. All of the HBCUs were private
institutions located in large Southern cities. Each enrolled between 2,000 and 4,000 students. Compared to the PWI, sports were less central to the student experience. Additionally, in comparison to the PWI, Greek life was a less central component of student life. Greek participation rates varied between the three HBCUs, ranging from about a five percent to 19 percent participation rate.

The HBCUs did not contain many monoracial white, Asian, Latino(a), American Indian, or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students. While there was a handful of students from these racial backgrounds at each of the schools, they did not make up a noticeable minority community. At each HBCU, none of these racial categories consisted of more than 1 percent of the student population. Most of the HBCU students were black or multiracial-black. The HBCUs classified multiracial students differently. For instance, one school had a category that combined students who identified as multiracial with those who listed that their race was “other” and those who did not list a race. In contrast, another school had separate categories for those who identified as multiracial and for those who did not list a race. This makes cross-institutional comparisons of the multiracial population size difficult. However, at all of the institutions, the majority of students (between 80 and 95 percent) identified as black. Importantly, students (both “multiracial” and “monoracial”) differed markedly in terms of skin color and phenotype, ranging from white-appearing to very dark.

In this chapter, I describe the schools’ racial structure in terms of the set of social relations and practices based on racial and color distinctions. I use the term racial structure to include distinctions based on color because these distinctions are intricately tied to ideas of race. As discussed above, colorism in the black community is directly tied to structural racism and the idea that lighter-skinned blacks’ relative whiteness affords them more opportunities and privilege
in society. Thus, while most HBCU students likely consider blacks with light, medium, and dark skin to be African-American, distinctions based on skin color continue to reference the idea that students differ in their relative whiteness. Biracial HBCU students’ descriptions of their college experiences suggest that the HBCU racial structure was characterized by social relations that sometimes privileged whiteness and lightness while at other times condemning biracial and light-skinned individuals for their believed sense of self-superiority.

Students reported that their peers frequently discussed colorism and the benefits tied to light skin. For instance, Rebecca, a sophomore, described how she frequently heard her peers discussing skin color and light skin privilege. She said:

Some of my friends talked about like light skin privilege and how like you know people treat you better or something… I was like in the dorm with one of the girls, the girl who was talking about it. She’s extremely light skinned. So she was talking about it, and this other guy who’s also extremely light skin. And they’re both black, like both parents are black. But they’re lighter than me by far. So anyway. But yeah so they were talking about it, and just like how it I guess how it benefited them. They get treated better. Like especially probably in the black community, but in the general, like by everybody, they’re just not as stigmatized or whatever as like a darker skinned black person.

Here, Rebecca discussed the concept of light-skin privilege that was salient among students on campus. She described the idea that light-skinned people are not as stigmatized as their darker-skinned counterparts and that they occupy a higher position in black communities’ racial structure.

Many other students similarly reported that their peers discussed colorism and the benefits associated with whiteness and/or light skin color. Students said these topics came up within their friendships, in academic settings, and in club meetings. Moreover, for many biracial students who grew up in predominantly white environments where they were often treated as inferior based on their relative blackness, this idea of a different racial structure where they occupied a privileged position was a new and surprising concept. For instance, Omar, a sophomore, said:
It was really shocking to me that African-Americans and I think [my college] is sort of emblematic of the sort of general thoughts about race in the African-American community, with this idea that certain African-Americans are looked down upon by other African-Americans because they might be able to pass or might have different opportunities solely because of their skin color. I hear it all the time. It could be in classes. It could be in dorms. I’ve heard it from alums. So, I really get it everywhere.

In the above excerpt Omar discusses the pervasiveness of the idea of light-skin privilege on campus. He mentions how he has heard discussion of the topic “everywhere,” from within the dorms to within academic settings. He also mentions how this concept was “shocking” to him.

Having grown up in a majority white neighborhood, Omar, like many other biracial students, was unaware that black communities viewed lighter-skinned blacks as privileged. Importantly, Omar’s comments also illuminate the relationship between color preferences and structural racism; specifically, he describes how light skin is seen as a privilege because lighter individuals may be able to pass as white and thus take advantage of the many privileges associated with whiteness in U.S. society.

Importantly, students reported that their peers believed this privileging of lightness influenced campus dynamics, such as which students were selected to represent the school and who received the most interest within the campus dating scene. For instance, Omar said:

This happens a lot of times in classes, this discussion of privilege and light-skinned African-Americans being able to pass as either whites or Latinos for examples and thus they’re going to have better opportunities for internships, [the college] is going to pay for them to go places. You know, whether for example there’s a South African leadership trip which is happening in May, end of May, beginning of June. And there are I think six students chosen to represent the school. So people think oh you know the school is going to pick all the light-skinned students because the light-skinned students are going to be more societally acceptable. You know, it’s easier for them to integrate.

Here, Omar discussed how he heard his peers speculate that the school would select light-skinned students to represent them abroad since their light skin color made them more societally acceptable. This discussion suggests that some students believed that the ideology of light-skin and white superiority was manifest in the school’s racial structure.
Relatedly, many students discussed the perception on campus that lighter skin was more valued within the dating market. For instance, Isaac, a sophomore, said: “they’ll say like oh she likes you because you’re light-skinned.” Similarly, Tyler, a sophomore, said: “people used to say like oh you get girls easier ‘cause you’re light-skinned.” Tyler and Isaac’s comments suggest that their peers believed that the campus racial structure privileged lighter-skinned men over darker-skinned men when it came to the dating scene. The women in this sample expressed similar views.

Biracial HBCU students’ accounts of their college experiences suggest that they did sometimes benefit from their relative whiteness and/or lightness within the campus dating scene. This seemed particularly evident for biracial women. For instance, the majority of the women believed that black men preferred light-skinned and/or biracial women over darker-skinned women. Moreover, some women reported instances when men specifically cited women’s skin color or mixed racial background as a reason for their romantic interest in them.

Grace, a freshman, described how she believed black men on campus treated her differently than they treated her darker-skinned peers. She said:

I feel like being a female and being light skin people look at you differently than if you were dark skin. And I don’t really know how to explain it. But I feel there’s like a there’s a difference in the way that like males treat you in a way. I feel like a lot of males are attracted to light skin women opposed to being attracted to dark skin women. This idea that black men on campus were more attracted to lighter women was common among respondents.

While Grace linked her increased attention from black men to skin color, other respondents attributed it specifically to their mixed-race background. For instance, Leah, a freshman, said:

I’ve been called a unicorn. Because…I just don’t look like anyone else here, and basically like they’ve never seen someone look like me. So [the guys] call me a unicorn
because all the boys are like oh my God like you look like exotic…I feel like they when you’re mixed it’s kinda like oh like I don’t know it’s not like oh you’re exotic but like you’re not you’re a little bit different. Like you’re not the same as like all these other black girls. And like I think when girls are--- I don’t know, guys just have this thing about mixed girls---well black boys anyway have this thing about mixed girls.

Here, Leah discusses how black men on campus called her a unicorn and told her that she was exotic and different from the rest of the girls on campus. Leah states that she thinks black men in general prefer mixed women to black women.

Several other women reported the same idea. For instance, Tiana, a sophomore, discussed how her boyfriend stated that he liked her in part because she was biracial. She said:

Since I’ve been at [this college], my very first day I met my boyfriend now. So I really didn’t get to date a lot of people. It’s only been one person. But, he has mentioned before that he always wanted to be with a mixed girl. I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean or what kind of thoughts he has about mixed girls versus black girls or white girls. But I mean he’s mentioned that me being mixed is something that he wanted.

Tiana’s comments indicate that her boyfriend preferred biracial women to monoracial black women. Taken together, Leah and Tiana’s comments and the similar comments made by other respondents suggest that being biracial was associated with some degree of privilege in the campus racial structure, somewhat independent from the privilege associated with light skin color.

Many biracial men also reported that they think black men tend to prefer light-skinned or biracial women. For instance, Nicholas, a junior, said:

A lot of women who are light more lighter skinned they are put on a pedestal, and they say that they’re more attractive than dark skinned women. And that happens a lot [at my college]. I remember my friends and I we were talking one time about this issue, and we do all agree that like we like so we think that we a lot of men just look over like dark skinned women. I feel like it also might have been the way that we grew up because everybody’s like oh that red bone or yellow bone, all that stuff. I feel like that’s just because we grew up that way and it’s we weren’t always we didn’t talk about like oh
the dark chocolate woman or the brown-skin woman. It was never really kinda that way. It was always about the red bones or the yellow bones.

Here, Nicholas mentions how he and his black friends agree that light skinned women are valued over dark skinned women in the campus dating scene. He speculates that this preference for light skin is a product of their socialization; specifically, he reports that while he was growing up he always heard discussion of the value of “red bones” and “yellow bones,” terms that describe women with light skin.

Quinton, a freshman, specifically described how biracial women fit into this racial structure that privileges lightness. He said:

For hundred years the white stand---the white beauty standard has been upheld. So, anything that looks closer to that espec—I mean especially in women. I don’t think it matters in men anywhere near as much if at all. But I think it for the women standard it just I mean they wear weave to look not to look more white consciously but to fit into the standard of beauty that is, that’s upheld. And then light skin girls if they have one parent who’s white they already have the like beautiful hair and they and whiter features and stuff like that.

Quinton like Nicholas describes how light-skinned women are viewed as more desirable than women with darker skin. He attributes this to the U.S. racial structure and its privileging of the white beauty aesthetic. Moreover, he says that because biracial women have one white parent, they more closely approximate the white beauty standard than their monoracial black counterparts do. This approximation of white beauty makes them more desirable within the dating scene. Importantly, Quinton’s comments point to a distinction between how relative whiteness influences women compared to men, a topic that I will explore further in the section on intersectionality.

While many students described benefits tied to their light skin or biracial background (specifically with regards to the college dating scene and attributions of attractiveness), they also mentioned some negative effects of their privileged position within the campus racial structure. Specifically, students (mostly women) reported that their peers
sometimes accused them of internalizing the value of their color and thinking themselves superior to darker blacks. Biracial students described negative interactions where their peers insinuated that they were stuck-up or elitist because of their skin color. Moreover, some biracial students’ unfamiliarity with the concept of colorism left them unprepared for such interactions. An excerpt from my interview with Tanisha illustrates these ideas. Tanisha said:

This one girl came up to me and was like “Do you think you’re better than everybody else ‘cause you’re light skin?” I was like what do you mean? I didn’t even know that it was even a light skin, dark skin thing til I even was here... But, I couldn’t believe she could just ask me something like that. Tanisha expressed her astonishment that someone had accused her of thinking herself better than others because of her skin color. Like Omar, she had not been aware of the history of colorism within the black community, and was thus unprepared for the encounter.

Sasha, a freshman, similarly discussed how the idea of light-skin privilege influenced her experiences, saying:

I’ve heard people say things like she acts like that because she’s light skinned or she thinks she’s better than me because she’s light skin, she doesn’t speak to me because she’s light skin. It makes me upset because people don’t know me as a person so I don’t feel like they should judge me as a person until, until they get to know me. Sasha’s comments suggest that skin color was highly salient on campus and that students saw color distinctions affecting patterns of relationships on campus. Specifically, Sasha’s account suggests that her peers thought she was stuck up because of her light skin and that she chose not to speak to darker-skinned individuals. Additionally, Sasha and Tanisha’s comments reflect how students found such accusations of elitism and internalized privilege unsettling.

While many biracial students described situations where their peers thought they were stuck-up because of their color, some biracial students reported situations where their peers thought they were elitist because of their racial background, independent of their color. For instance,
Rebecca discussed an incident where another student accused her of being a white supremacist because her dad was white. Rebecca said:

There’s a girl who is very, very light skin…And you know she--- like I said, she’s black but she’s very, very light skin, lighter than me, whatever. But she once called me a white supremacist which made no sense because if anything people would be calling me like pro-black. So, but I she said it because my dad was white basically. So I think I don’t know if that’s a personal problem, but I think for her because I have a white parent it’s like if I say anything negative about black people at all it’s like I get attacked and from her. So she started calling me a white supremacist.

In this incident, Rebecca’s peer did not call her a white supremacist because of her skin color. In fact, Rebecca had darker skin than the other girl involved in the argument. Rebecca explains how she thinks the accusation of white supremacy was directly related to her white racial background. Similarly, other students reported that their peers might think they were stuck-up or that they thought they were racially superior because of their biracial background, independent of their skin color.

Overall, the above discussion suggests that many monoracial HBCU students believed that biracials occupied a higher position within the campus racial structure because of their light skin color and biracial background. Biracial students’ descriptions of their own experiences indicate that this is true to some extent, particularly within the dating scene. While distinctions based on skin color, racial ancestry, and associated privilege may characterize the structure of many predominantly black environments, these ideas were likely particularly salient within the HBCUs because of the sustained academic focus on race and because of the colorism that historically characterized black Greek organizations.

Every student reported that at least some of their classes discussed race. Frequently this discussion of race focused on the history of racism and the continuance of white privilege. Lindsay, a sophomore, described how these topics frequently came up in one of her classes, saying:
Reading the course description…it was very like we’re gonna talk about the African diaspora and how it relates to the world today. But actually getting into the class somehow whatever the topic is it gets back to how the white man is trying to keep you down or how white people in general are trying to mess things up for you or how hard it is to be a black woman and nobody else will ever understand the struggle of being a black woman

Here Lindsay described how black oppression at the hands of whites was a frequent topic of discussion in one of her classes. Importantly, this was a required class for all students. Other students described how classes sometimes discussed how biracial people fit into this picture of white privilege and black oppression. For instance, Tanisha, a freshman, said:

We were learning about like the Caribbean right now, about how about mulattos and how even mixed people were being I guess tattle-tells when people were trying to escape from slavery and in the Caribbeans and how even some mixed people had their own slaves and they thought they were better. And she [the teacher] kinda when she said it she sounded so angry when she talked about your our own race was even having us as slaves. And I’m like hello, over here, you know I’m mixed. And so I just kind of the things come out of her mouth were kind of offensive.

Tanisha mentioned that her teacher discussed that at certain points in history mixed-race people thought themselves superior to blacks. Tanisha had difficulty hearing and receiving this message. Latoya discussed similar topics coming up in class, saying:

We were talking about slavery, and they were talking about the different like colors of the skin, like the darker people would be the slaves. And then I got singled out, and then they were like not to single you out but you wouldn’t be a slave. You’d be in the house because of your skin color. You’re a lighter color so they’d be more favored to you.

Latoya’s comments illustrate how class discussions of race sometimes incorporated ideas and assessments of students’ racial backgrounds and the relative privilege or disadvantage associated with them. Such frequent discussions within academic contexts likely contributed to the saliency of color distinctions between students on campus. These discussions of biracial and/or light-skin privilege can also help explain the resentment and condemnation sometimes directed at biracial respondents.
Some students specifically discussed the way they saw class discussions shaping peer relations. For instance, Aurora, a freshman, said:

So the things that people take out of this class is okay white people slaughtered us. We don’t like white people. Majority of the girls I talk to that’s what they feel. They’re like this class has made me totally racist.

Similarly, Lindsay speculated that academic discussions of racism contributed to her peers’ attitudes about white people and what it means to “act white.” She said:

Here it’s like I don’t know if it’s the [African-American history] class or if it’s just people talking in general, but here like acting white is so like it’s so much deeper. Like it’s like you’re bourgie and you’re uppity but you’re also selfish. And you also like take what you think is yours without you know asking or with no consideration as to how it’s gonna affect you know the next person. You don’t think about others when you do things. You just do them to benefit you because all you care about is yourself.

In the above quote, Lindsay described what she thought the term “acting white” meant to people on campus. Lindsay said “acting white” took on a very negative connotation when used among students, and she speculated that the meaning students attached to whiteness was related to the messages they received in class about racism and white privilege. Such ideas about whiteness, to the extent that they reflect the general student body’s beliefs, may help explain why biracial students reported that they were sometimes treated with disdain. While their relative whiteness afforded them some status, particularly within the campus dating scene, it was also associated with negative attributes, such as the idea that they were bourgie, uppity, greedy, or selfish.

The presence of Greek life on campus and its historical association with skin color distinctions can also help explain the campus racial structure’s fixation on skin lightness. Many students discussed cultural understandings and stereotypes about what members of different Greek organizations looked like. There were certain organizations where the prototypical member was assumed to be light-skinned and others where the prototypical member was thought of as darker. Additionally, these skin color distinctions carried status value. Specifically, high-
status sororities where the girls were thought to be pretty were also associated with light skin color. Similarly, respondents reported that the prototypical member of the “attractive fraternity” on campus was light-skinned. In contrast, sororities and fraternities where the prototypical member was dark-skinned were also stereotyped as less attractive and lower status organizations.

Wendy, a sophomore, described these ideas saying:

In like Louisiana the like southern university it’s very big on their Beta Gamma Betas and their Alpha Alpha Alphas. Like it’s a very big deal to be like you know part of either one. And so for me growing up I you know heard that light skin girls are part of the Beta Gamma Betas, the pretty girls are part of the Beta Gamma Betas, you know the you know everything like you want to be is to be a Beta Gamma Beta and stuff. And it was Alpha Alpha Alphas were the ones like average kind of like women and stuff. And so it was kind of always put into my head that it’s better to be a Beta Gamma Beta than it is to be an Alpha Alpha Alpha. Wendy’s comments highlight the association between light skin color, attractiveness and status.

She described how she was taught that the high-status sorority that everyone should want to be in was composed primarily of light-skinned, attractive women.

Tyler connected this association between skin color and membership in Greek organizations to a long history of colorism. He explained that these stereotypes reflect historical practices that barred darker-skinned individuals from certain organizations. He said:

It goes back to like in the, they first were started in like early 1900s like there was like brown paper bag tests. And if you didn’t pass it then you couldn’t get in. And Mu Beta Betas were specifically founded for darker-completed men because you know they couldn’t join like they couldn’t be Theta Beta Alphas or Nu Tau Alphas because they were darker than a brown paper bag. Tyler said that historically the Theta Beta Alpha and Nu Tau Alpha fraternities were restricted to individuals who were lighter than a brown paper bag. He said the Mu Beta Beta fraternity was created later for darker-skinned individuals. Thus, Tyler sees the skin color stereotypes associated with Greek organizations as having their roots in historical truths.

While almost all respondents could describe the stereotypical association between skin color and sorority/fraternity membership, many students claimed that these ideas were just
stereotypes that had no bearing on the actual structure of Greek organizations on campus today. Others noted that these stereotypes did have some bearing on Greek membership. Regardless of the extent to which stereotypes about skin color played out in the sororities and fraternities, students’ shared cultural knowledge about the relationship between skin color and ideas of Greek membership likely heightened the salience of skin color distinctions on campus. This cultural knowledge of status, skin color, and membership in Greek organizations can also help explain the social relations that existed between light and dark-skinned students, with light-skinned individuals being simultaneously privileged and resented.

Overall the discussion in this section shows how the HBCU racial structure was characterized by skin color distinctions. Biracial students sometimes received benefits tied to their relative whiteness, in terms of their perceived status, attractiveness, and the romantic interest they received. However, the campus peer culture was also characterized by the idea that biracial and/or light-skinned people were undesirable because they were stuck-up, self-centered, and believed themselves to be racially superior to others. How did biracial students navigate race in a setting where whiteness and lightness were both privileged and resented? It is this question that I turn to in the following sections.

NAVIGATING PRIVILEGE THROUGH JOINING OR AVOIDING

As mentioned in the previous chapter, biracial students at PWIs sometimes navigated racism on campus by choosing to avoid situations and places where they felt they were likely to experience discrimination. This often involved strategic involvement (or noninvolvement) with Greek life. Along the same vein, some biracial HBCU students navigated privilege by seeking out or avoiding certain Greek organizations on campus.
For instance, biracial HBCU women may try to maximize the benefits of their skin color by joining the high-status sorority stereotyped as beautiful. Their conformity to the cultural image of a beautiful woman (i.e. a light-skinned woman with long hair) will likely facilitate their acceptance into this sorority. At the time of the interview no women had become official members of the sorority; however, a few planned to go this route. Most women who mentioned an initial or continued desire to become a Beta Gamma Beta specifically cited the status of the sorority and its association with beauty and femininity as their motivations for joining the group. For instance, when I asked Aurora, a freshman, if there was a specific sorority that she was more interested in than the others, she replied: “At first I was like Beta Gamma Beta because they’re pretty.” As described above, this association between the Beta Gamma Beta sorority and beauty was intertwined with ideas privileging light skin. Students like Aurora were aware that Beta Gama Betas were thought of as light-skin, beautiful women. These students were also aware that they fit this image because of their phenotype. Joining such a high-status sorority would serve to increase these students’ status on campus by further aligning them with the image of a beautiful woman.

The Beta Gamma Betas, however, were also stereotyped as stuck-up and elitist. Thus in joining this sorority, biracial students would also likely increase their association with these negative stereotypes, stereotypes that were already sometimes directed toward them because of their phenotype or racial background alone. Aware of this possibility, some students discussed avoiding this sorority in order to distance themselves from the image of a privileged snob. For instance, Nyesha, a sophomore, discussed how she decided to pursue the Alpha Alpha Alpha sorority because she took issue with the assumption that one sorority should be exclusively for
light-skin, beautiful women and because she wanted to distance herself from the image of
privilege and superiority. The following excerpt illustrates these ideas:

Nyesha: For the longest I thought Beta Gamma Beta, but initially when I when I said I
wanted to be a Beta Gamma Beta I said that because people was like oh you so pretty,
you should be a Beta Gamma Beta. But, then I was like what, Alpha Alpha Alphas can’t
be pretty? I know plenty of pretty Alpha Alpha Alphas. But they’re I feel like when you
see an Alpha Alpha Alpha you don’t get that stuck up aura. You don’t get that oh I think
I’m better than people. You get that I’m here to help you become a better you.

KC: Yeah. Can you tell me more about the stereotypes of those two sororities?
Nyesha: They say that Alpha Alpha Alphas are like the hard girls so to speak. Like
they’re more down to earth girls. Like they really don’t care. Like the Beta Gamma Betas
are the pretty girls, prissy girls, stuck up like mmm sit at little tea parties, pretty much
stereotypes like that.

KC: Are there like skin…
Nyesha: Light skin, dark skin

KC: Which one for which?
Nyesha: Beta Gamma Beta would be like your light skin girls. Alpha Alpha Alpha would
be probably your dark skin girls.

Nyesha shows an awareness of the cultural stereotypes about Beta Gamma Betas and
Alpha Alpha Alphas. She explains that the prototypical Beta Gamma Beta sorority member is
light-skinned while the prototypical Alpha Alpha Alpha is dark-skinned. Additionally, Beta
Gamma Betas are thought of as pretty and feminine; they are “pretty girls,” “prissy girls,” who
“sit at little tea parties.” In contrast Alpha Alpha Alphas are stereotyped as more masculine or
“hard.” These stereotypes suggest a cultural association between light skin and femininity and
between dark skin and masculinity. Nyesha’s comments suggest that she takes issue with the
ideology surrounding the Beta Gamma Beta organization. Relatedly, she sees the association
between club membership and attractiveness as problematic, remarking: “What, Alpha Alpha
Alphas can’t be pretty?” Her comments suggest that she could have used her light skin to gain
entry into a high status sorority; her peers suggested that she should be a Beta Gamma Beta
because she was pretty. However, she ultimately decided to pursue the Alpha Alpha Alpha
sorority instead in order to distance herself from the image of a stuck-up woman who thinks she is superior to others.

The above discussion shows how biracial HBCU students could use membership in different Greek organizations to either maximize the privilege connected to their phenotype or distance themselves from the image of a stuck-up, light-skinned person. Additionally, many students talked about accomplishing these same motives by highlighting or concealing parts of their racial background. I turn to this subject in the subsequent section.

NAVIGATING PRIVILEGE THROUGH IDENTITY WORK

Students sometimes discussed highlighting their mixed-race background in order to maximize their privilege. For instance, Leah, a freshman, talked about how she made her mixed background known to black men because she felt this made her more desirable to them. The following excerpt illustrates these ideas:

Leah: I think like uh I definitely tried to emphasize the fact that I was mixed, especially around like black people. I don’t know, I feel like they when you’re mixed it’s kinda like oh like I don’t know it’s not like oh you’re exotic but like you’re not you’re a little bit different. Like you’re not the same as like all these other black girls. And like I think when girls are I don’t know guys just have this thing about mixed girls--well black boys anyway have this thing about mixed girls. So I feel like I really tried to emphasize the fact that I was mixed.

KC: Okay. And how do you do that? How do you emphasize that you’re mixed?
Leah: I feel like I’d just be like I mean I’d just say it.

Leah discussed how she used verbal identification to highlight her mixed background, taking pride in telling others that she is biracial because of her perception that this will make her more desirable to black men on campus. Realizing the privilege attached to her status as a biracial woman she highlighted her background through verbally identifying as mixed.

While students like Leah sometimes discussed highlighting their relative whiteness in order to maximize their privilege, most students’ identity work centered on avoiding the resentment tied to whiteness and/or distancing themselves from the idea of privilege. For
instance, some students reported concealing their whiteness so that the resentment they perceived their peers having towards whites was not directed at them. Camryn, a sophomore, discussed this idea. She described how the negative comments she heard about whites during a movie she and her peers were required to watch about race relations made her wary of revealing her white background. She said:

The people behind me were basically just like you know like shouting “oh that’s ‘cause you’re white. You’re privileged because you’re white” and all this stuff and you know almost like they were just saying it very like hatefully... So a lot of the comments that I heard about this girl who was in the video were just so negative and they were like cursing at her and everything and I was just taken aback cos I had never experienced that before. And you know I’m like I know they see me right now. I feel their eyes on me because I’m the lightest person in there, blonde hair like, so I’m just felt really uncomfortable...Sometimes I just assumed or I’d rather they assume I was Hispanic or just something else almost.

Here, Camryn described how her peers’ negative feelings about privileged white people made her uncomfortable. In this situation she did not want her peers to know about her white background. She said she would prefer that they think she was Hispanic or some other race.

Her desire to conceal her whiteness in this setting is related to an attempt to distance herself from the idea of privilege and thus minimize the chances that her peers’ resentment of white privilege would negatively affect her. When asked how she tried to conceal her whiteness, she said:

I was like trying to straighten my hair because you know because my hair texture is like obviously biracial...On the one hand I didn’t want people to know what race I was. But on the other hand I wanted to be accepted. So it’s like if I had to be a race I would want them to think I was their race (laughs). So like sometimes I’d go to the store and be like hey I think my [HBCU] sisters might like this one, if it was some kind of African print. And I would get that one just so you know they would kind of think I was accepting of their culture.
Camryn discussed using her physical appearance as a site of identity work. She changed her hairstyle in an attempt to make her race more ambiguous and sometimes chose clothing that she thought signaled a black identity.

The majority of respondents who reported the desire to conceal their whiteness in some situations did so by simply keeping quiet about their racial background. Because of the variation in skin tone within the black population, many respondents believed that if they did not bring up their white background, their peers may just assume that they were a light-skinned African American who had two black parents. Additionally, many reported that if they did not explicitly mention their white background their peers may think they were Hispanic. Several respondents, like Camryn, reported that they would rather be mistaken for Hispanic than seen as white or biracial (black and white) when ideas of white privilege were salient. Lindsay discussed her motives for not bringing up her white background in light of class conversations about white privilege and black oppression. She said:

Part of it was I still had to be in the class. And not necessarily that I care about how the other girls in the class looked at me, but it was more so you have such a strong feeling towards white people, and I’m half white, and I don’t know how that’s going to affect our relationship. And like we still have to work together in this class. So for me it was easier to just not say anything and for them to like let them make their own assumptions about like what my race was then for me to like at the very beginning say I’m half white, knowing that they had a strong feeling toward white people and then make that difficult to do work and group projects or presentations and stuff like that. Lindsay did not reveal her racial background until the end of the semester because she feared her peers’ dislike of whites (rooted in a resentment of white privilege) would affect their attitudes toward her, making group work difficult. Her identity work strategy of keeping quiet about her whiteness and letting others come to their own conclusions about her race was characteristic of the strategies of many in the sample.
While the above excerpts illustrate students’ desire to keep quiet about their whiteness, students also discussed a related, but slightly different concern; namely, students sometimes feared presenting a biracial identity because they thought others would see this statement of mixed-race identity as an attempt to distance themselves from blacks and claim racial superiority. Similar to the discussion above, some students engaged in selective disclosure, telling their close friends about their racial background or revealing it when specifically asked, but not going out of their way to advertise their mixed-race background. Other students reported identifying as biracial, but doing so in a way that made it clear to others that they were not doing so in an attempt to claim racial superiority. Wendy discussed this first strategy of selective disclosure, saying:

Like I will still say that I’m like mixed. Like I don’t have a problem with it. But like when like we’re in like I guess a class setting or we’re in a group setting… if like I was just like oh well I’m Creole and I’m African American all this stuff, I would feel weird about that ‘cause at the same time I would feel like that’s kind of like a gloating thing. Like I would feel like I’d you know be trying to like make myself like higher, better than others by saying all that stuff. So unless like someone would really ask me what I was or like someone would ask me to describe racially like how I see myself then I would feel more comfortable doing it. But if I was just to go out and be like well I’m African-American but I’m also mixed with this and that I feel like people look at that as like you’re trying to be better than.

Wendy stated that she sometimes identifies as mixed, especially if someone directly asks her what her background is or how she sees herself racially; however, she states that she does not like to bring up her mixed-race background unsolicited because she feels like it would be interpreted as a statement of racial superiority. Other students similarly described the idea that identifying as biracial might be seen as claiming a higher status than blacks. While some students like Wendy situationally concealed their mixed-race background in light of this idea, others reported identifying as biracial, but explaining their identity in a way that they hoped would
convince others that they were not trying to obtain racial privilege. The following excerpt from my interview with Aurora reflects this idea:

**KC:** Do you think [the other students] would care if you identified as mixed and saw that as a separate racial category like you do. Do you think that bothers anyone?
**Aurora:** I think that would bother some people.

**KC:** Why?
**Aurora:** Because they might think I think I’m better than them. But it’s like, I don’t know, that’s their problem, not mine. Like why is there if somebody got upset because I said that I’d be like okay well what’s the difference between being black and being Asian? Like why do we have categories for that? I would love to see what they’d have to say about that. I’d be like okay well look, like I don’t I can’t identify with either one of these two. I’m in my own world.

Here, Aurora speculates that her mixed-race identity may offend her black peers who may see her biracial identity as a claim to racial superiority. Aurora prepares a response that she would give if this situation were to arise. She said she would explain to her peer that she identifies as biracial because she sees that category as being qualitatively different from being black, just as being black is different than being Asian. She hopes her explanation would show that she identifies as biracial because she does not see herself fitting into the black or white categories, not because she thinks herself superior.

While the most common identity work strategies related to the perception that a mixed-race identity may be perceived as a statement of superiority were to situationally conceal one’s biracial background or to explain (or be prepared to explain) why one’s biracial identity is not an attempt to garner status or racial privilege, a minority of respondents went as far as stating that they were in fact not biracial. These individuals reported attempts to convince others that they were not biracial, they were black. An excerpt from my interview with Tiana illustrates this idea:

**KC:** Has anyone ever identified you as biracial?
**Tiana:** Um no. Well yeah they do, but then I correct them. So it’s like then they’ll be like okay wait you’re black. But sometimes yeah depending on what they’re talking about yeah.

**KC:** And when you say you correct them...
Tiana: Because I’d rather be seen as black then to be mixed because I don’t want them to think that oh I think I’m superior because I’m mixed or oh I’m better than anybody else because I’m mixed. Like I’d rather just be like I’m black.

Here, Tiana describes how she actively “corrects” people who identify her as biracial, stating that actually she is black. She says she would rather be identified as black partly because she does not want others to think she perceives herself as being superior to blacks. Nyesha similarly discussed her attempts to explicitly reject identification as biracial and identify instead as black. While Nyesha’s presentation of a black identity is similarly related to the idea of biracial privilege, her stated motivations are different from Tiana’s. While Tiana discusses identifying as black so that she is not seen as thinking herself superior, Nyesha identifies as black because she does not want preferential treatment based on her race. The following excerpt illustrates this idea:

Nyesha: I feel like the first things anything any dude says to me is “you mixed? Oh you gotta be mixed with something because…” I was like why? Why do I have to be mixed with something? I have to be mixed to be cute? Like even when dudes ask me like are you mixed? I’ll say no, I’m black. And they’ll be like nah you gotta be mixed; you gotta be mixed. And I’m like I have to be mixed to be cute? Or I have to be mixed to look like me? Like I can’t just be a black girl, a black pretty girl. Like I feel like a lot of dudes be like you gotta be mixed or you can’t be that cute and not be mixed like and I just I don’t understand that.

KC: And can you tell me why you respond with no I’m black when they ask you?

Nyesha: Because I feel like okay me being mixed is you want to talk to me, but I’m not in my head; it’s like no I’m black. Do you still have that same pursuance to want to talk to me because I’m just black? Or was that because you thought I was mixed? Was basically my whole thing.

Nyesha’s comments indicate that she is aware of the status attached to being biracial within the campus dating scene. She takes issue with this ideology of white or light-skinned privilege and wants to make sure that men are not expressing interest in her because of the status attached to her racial background. Thus, she denies that she is mixed when asked, stating that no, she is black.
The discussion in this section shows how biracial HBCU students engage in identity work, highlighting or concealing parts of their racial background in order to navigate privilege on campus. While students sometimes highlighted being biracial in order to maximize benefits tied to their racial background, more often students engaged in identity work to distance themselves from the idea of privilege or convince others that they did not think they were racially superior. In the following section I discuss how students’ attempts to navigate privilege were related to their presentation of class and gender identities.

IDENTITY WORK AND INTERSECTIONALITY

As stated above, race and class are frequently conflated in American culture such that an authentic black identity is assumed to be a lower-class identity and whiteness is often used synonymously with middle class. Students’ discussions of navigating privilege often reflected such a conflation. Specifically, students reported that the idea of racial privilege on campus was highly intertwined with ideas of financial privilege. This led to the assumption that biracials were privileged partly because their white background meant that they were well-off financially.

Camryn discussed the stereotype that biracial people have money. In listing stereotypes about biracial people, she said: “I’ve heard this one that you know we must have money or you know we have more money than the average black person.” Similarly, when listing stereotypes about biracials, Christy, a freshman, said: “rich parents because one of your parents is white. Yeah… he’s gonna have money because one of his parents is white.” Camryn and Christy’s discussion of stereotypes reflects the cultural conflation of race and class, in which white people are assumed to have money and black people are assumed to be poor.

While many of the biracial HBCU students were from well-off families, some were from working class or poor backgrounds. These students sometimes presented their lower class
backgrounds as part of their attempt to distance themselves from accusations of privilege or racial superiority. For instance, when trying to argue against the accusation that she was a white supremacist, Rebecca brought up her mother’s poor background. She described this incident thus:

So she started calling me a white supremacist... And I was like what are you talking about? And we just got into an argument. And like both of her parents are like doctors. I’m like you know honestly. And I was telling her how my mother grew up very poor and like worked in the fields. My mom did work in the fields for a time. And she’s like well I don’t care. You know, your dad’s white. You’re a white supremacist. I was like okay, well clearly it doesn’t matter what my black side is, no matter how black I identify, you’re just always gonna see me like that cos I have a white parent.

In trying to convince her peer that she was not a white supremacist, Rebecca brought up her family’s class background. Her comments suggest that she thought it was ironic that a woman from a well-off family was accusing her of white supremacy. Relatedly, Rebecca discussed how her mother grew up poor and worked in the fields, using this presentation of class in an attempt to counter the accusation of racial supremacy. Rebecca’s argument shows how students sometimes engaged in racial and class-related identity work simultaneously in order to distance themselves from accusations of privilege or racial supremacy.

Tory, a sophomore, similarly discussed the relationship between race and class in relation to privilege. She said she thought her professor disliked her because she was biracial.

Specifically, she believed her professor’s dislike of biracial people stemmed from the assumption that biracials lived privileged lives. Tory believed that when she revealed the difficulty of her life to her professor, thus shattering her professor’s idea that she was a privileged little mixed girl, her teacher gained respect for her and began giving her better grades on her assignments. Tory explained the situation thus:

I did have a teacher last year that I felt like she didn’t like me because I was mixed. Because she was very like activist type. And she like was grading me really well on my papers before she realized who I was and then I wrote a paper about being mixed and it
just seems like she had so much to say about like my opinions on things... But yea, sometimes I just feel like oh another thing is I feel like people think that because I’m mixed that like I grew up I don’t know. Maybe I’m just over thinking things. But like sometimes I think that like people think that because I’m mixed and my mom was white that my like life was like so privileged or something. Like I don’t know. Like I think people that like had to struggle a lot or maybe struggle financially and stuff like I think it’s like I think they think it’s weird when they find out that I actually didn’t have a lot of money. Just because my mom’s white doesn’t mean that I had money. Like my mom was on welfare for a lot of my life and stuff like that... But then I did for my final project I talked about like not the judicial system but I basically like talked about my brother and I talked about like how he went to, the person that killed him only got fifteen years in prison. And then I talked about like honestly I don’t even remember what my project was about. But like anyways it kinda like threw in my own experiences, and she saw I mean I guess I am getting this from nowhere. But like she saw that like my life wasn’t as like you know perfect as maybe she thought it was and then I got an A on that. And like all of the sudden she like changed her attitude towards me I feel like because I think that she thought you know that I was like oh yeah like I’m just this mixed girl and I don’t know so but I just feel like she respected me more after that.

Tory’s story suggests that she felt disliked and resented by her black teacher and that she attributed this dislike to ideas of racial privilege. Specifically, Tory believed that some blacks may resent her because they believe her relative whiteness means that she has lived a sheltered and privileged life. In this sense, privilege is directly connected to ideas of class, specifically the idea that white people have money and thus biracial people are better off financially than are blacks. Tory’s essay can be seen as a form of identity work, in which she presented her class background by discussing her personal experiences with murder and other phenomenon frequently believed to be associated with the black urban lower class. Tory felt that this depiction of her life distanced her from the stereotypical idea of a privileged little mixed girl and served to increase her teacher’s identification with and affection for her. In this way, Tory’s racial and class-related identity work can be seen as intersecting in an attempt to distance herself from the idea of privilege and the resentment that often accompanies this impression of privilege.

Nyesha also discussed her racial identity work in relation to class. As discussed above, Nyesha frequently asserted a black identity on campus and denied her biracial background when
specifically asked if she was mixed. When explaining her motives for concealing her white background, Nyesha discussed distancing herself from the idea of financial privilege. Specifically, she worried that if people knew her dad was white they may befriend her because they would assume that she had money and that they may be able to indirectly benefit from her financial situation. Additionally, her comments indicate that she worried that her peers may resent her because of her family’s money. The following interview excerpt reflects these ideas:

Nyesha: I don’t mind telling people, but sometimes people inquire for the wrong reasons. You get what I’m sayin? Like sometimes their inquiries ain’t genuine which is why I would rather tell people who I already know have befriended me for me as opposed to what they think my experience would be or oh what they think they can get out of me because my dad’s white and they don’t mind sending me whatever I want, or if I ask for something they’ll do it.

KC: Can you tell me a little more about people who might not have genuine intentions for wanting to know your background, like what you feel like they might be trying to get?

Nyesha: I don’t really know what they’re trying to get. But I feel like I have a (sigh) I don’t really under---like okay. I know people like I could probably use high school as an example because that’s when I did experience the most because majority of people knew just because my mom and the community was so small. But, they really just wanted to know so they could have something to talk about or oh her momma didn’t get her that; her daddy probably sent it to her. Oh she can do all this cos her daddy and them send her money. You get what I’m saying? Like comparing my life to the things they couldn’t afford or they couldn’t do and making it seem like it was bad that I could. Nyesha said she didn’t mind telling people about her mixed-race background once she was sure they had befriended her for genuine reasons. Yet, she was hesitant to tell new people because she thought they might befriend her to take advantage of the fact that her white father and his family would send her whatever she wanted. Moreover, her comments indicate that her decision not to tell her college peers about her white background was related to her experiences in high school. In high school her peers knew she was biracial, associated her financial privilege with her white father, and “made it seem bad” that her family had money. Thus, in concealing
her white background she was also attempting to distance herself from the idea that her family was financially privileged and from the resentment that may follow from this idea.

The above discussion shows how students’ racial and class-related identity work often intersected as students attempted to navigate privilege on campus. Students’ descriptions of their identity work also speak to the intersection of race and gender. Specifically, women reported worrying more than men about whether their peers might think they were stuck-up or elitist. This increased worry among women resulted in more attempts by women than by men to distance themselves from ideas of privilege or believed racial superiority.

These issues may be more salient for women than for men because biracial women were more privileged than men within the campus racial structure. As described above, one of the main areas in which biracial and/or light-skinned students were privileged was in regards to ideas of beauty and increased interest in the dating scene. Biracial women appeared to benefit more in these areas of campus life than did men. This can be partly explained by the way in which stereotypes and cultural ideas about the meaning of lightness and whiteness differently affected women compared to men.

Specifically, lightness was associated with femininity and prettiness, while darkness was associated with masculinity. Thus, light skin stereotypes clearly advantage biracial women by heightening their association with the feminine ideal. In contrast, while biracial men benefit from some positive stereotypes about light-skin, they are not as clearly advantaged by light skin stereotypes as many serve to heighten their association with femininity.

The following excerpt from my interview with Latoya reflects the association between light skin and femininity for women:

Latoya: I’d like I’d prefer to be a Beta Gamma Beta.

KC: Okay. Can you tell me about why you would choose that one?
Latoya: The colors pink and green. I’m not really a big fan of pink. Pink is actually a very ugly color. I think it’s very girly. But majority of my aunts are all Beta Gamma Betas, and I’ve just always been like a Beta Gamma Beta, the hair shaking and the girly girl. They just seem more girly girl, and I’m a girly girl person, just not the color pink.

KC: I know sometimes sororities have different images and stereotypes associated with them. Are you familiar with like any stereotypes, the image of the Beta Gamma Betas?

Latoya: Well the image and the stereotype of a Beta Gamma Beta is I guess the light skin, cocky girls who think they’re better than everyone else, which I know is kinda ironic since I want to be a part of them. But that’s their image and stereotype. My mom’s always like why do you want to be a Beta Gamma Beta? Why do you want to be one of a part of the cocky girl club? I’m like mom that’s they’re not a cocky girl club. Chill.

KC: Okay. What are the--- what other sororities are there on campus?

Latoya: There’s Alpha Alpha Alphas, I’m sure. There’s the---I think that’s what they’re called, the Alpha Alpha Alphas. And they just crossed last week, too. And there’s they’re majority dark skin. They have some few light skins in there, but they’re majority dark skin.

KC: Okay. What’s the Alpha Alpha Alpha’s stereotype on campus?

Latoya: Dark skin, not cocky girls.

KC: And you didn’t want to be part of that one?

Latoya: No I just the Alpha Alpha Alphas I’m not a fan of the color red and black. That seems a little boyish to me. And I’m more girly girl. So I just crossed over to the Beta Gamma Beta side.

In the preceding quote, Latoya discussed how the two main sororities on campus are divided along color lines, with the Alpha Alpha Alphas consisting mostly of dark-skinned women and the Beta Gamma Betas having a reputation as being a sorority for light-skinned women. Her discussion highlights the association between light skin and femininity. She describes the light-skinned Beta Gamma Betas as girly, while she thinks of the dark-skinned Alpha Alpha Alpha sorority as being more “boyish.” Similarly, Nyesha’s discussion of these two sororities, described earlier in this chapter, reflects this same association between lightness and femininity and darkness and masculinity. As described above, Nyesha explained that the Beta Gamma Beta sorority composed mostly of light-skin girls was thought of as a sorority full of “pretty girls,”
“prissy girls,” who “sit at little tea parties.” In contrast, she described how the prototypical Alpha Alpha Alpha girl was dark-skinned and more masculine or “hard.”

Students’ description of the stereotypes for men based on skin color or race (biracial v. monoracial) show that this same association between light skin and femininity held for men as well. For instance, Quinton said: “The stereotype of a light skin is they’re soft, pretty boys kinda. I mean I’ve gotten that. There’s another side of that too about dark skin people being savage, being like hard.” Similarly, when describing stereotypes, Joshua, a senior, said: “light skin guys they try to be just as pretty as the girls.” Tyler described stereotypes based on skin color thus: “You know, like oh like we’re pretty boys and we’re sensitive and it’s just like okay. And, they say oh dark skinned boys are dirty and they’re angry.” These descriptions of stereotypes show that light-skinned men were frequently described in more feminine ways than dark-skinned men. Specifically, light skin was associated with being “pretty,” sensitive, and soft. Dark-skin in contrast was associated with being “savage,” “hard,” “angry,” and “dirty,” all of which carry more masculine connotations. While biracial and light-skinned men did benefit from the idea that they were more attractive than darker men and that they were perhaps cleaner and more respectable (i.e. less “savage” and wild), the femininity associated with many of these attributes meant that the relative benefits of skin color stereotypes were not as clearly advantageous for biracial men as they were for women.

While some of the gender differences in privilege experienced by biracial men and women can be explained through the ways that stereotypes about light skin and femininity differently affected men and women, there are also other explanations that help advance understanding of this topic. For instance, the difference in the relative importance of physical appearance for men and women’s status can help explain the increased importance of skin color
for women. Specifically, students’ comments suggest that women’s status is more tied to their sexuality and physical appearance whereas men can derive status in other ways (e.g. excellence in sports, financial success, etc.).

Nicholas described the idea that appearance may be more important for women than for men, saying:

Women do think that lighter skin men are more promiscuous than dark skin men because they say that they’re pretty um prettier so they are they go around. That is that is a stereotype of light skin men. However, I think a lot of women believe that a man is a man, if he treats me well, if he treats me like a woman, if he treats me like an equal. That’s basically all like if he can support me, if and this is like when we are older and we get into the stage if he can support a family. And, yeah. I think for women it’s easier to accept the man is a man if he’s lighter-skinned or not.

Nicholas explains his view that light skinned men are seen as being prettier or more attractive than dark-skinned men but that at the end of the day if a man can financially support a woman and treat her properly, this outweighs the significance of his skin color. This description highlights the cultural value attached to men being able to provide financially. Additionally, Nicholas’s last statement suggests differences in men’s and women’s ability to accept a dark-skinned partner. He says “I think for men it’s easier to accept the man is a man if he’s lighter-skinned or not.” This reflects the idea that it is easier for women than for men to accept a dark-skinned partner who is culturally viewed as being less attractive. It is easier for women to do so because there are other things besides appearance that carry weight for men: namely, the ability to provide financially for a family. Nicholas’s comments suggest that appearance may be more important for women’s status than for men’s.

Within the HBCU environments, the value of light skin appeared to be most important with regard to dating, physical appearance, and sexuality. Since appearance was more central to women’s status than to men’s, it seems logical that women would benefit more than men from their mixed-race background and/or light skin color.
In light of the increased saliency of light-skin privilege for biracial women, they reported engaging in more identity work related to navigating privilege than men did. Many of their identity work strategies were described in the previous section. In this section I focus specifically on how women’s racial identity work sometimes interacted with their gendered presentations. Specifically, HBCU women like their PWI counterparts spent a lot of time talking about their hair. Some students reported styling their hair in ways that maximized their privilege by making them stand out amidst their peers. Specifically, some students reported wearing their hair in ways that signaled their biracial (as opposed to monoracial black) background.

For instance, Sasha talked about how she decided to wear her hair curly because she felt that her unique curl pattern signaled that she was biracial, saying:

I realized that like my hair is kind of what makes me like biracial, like you know not a lot of people have curly hair like I do. So, then I would stop getting relaxers and I grew my hair all the way out so that I could have my curls back again. Sasha sees her hair as an indication that she is biracial and thus decided to stop relaxing (i.e. chemically straightening) her hair.

Similarly, Aurora talked about how she thought her curly hair signaled her biracial identity and resulted in increased attention from men on campus. When describing how her hair style influenced the way she thought people perceived her race, she said:

I think people can pretty much look at me and tell that I’m mixed. Because yeah. Because my hair and my like complexion. People yeah. People just know (laughs). Like, they’re like she’s mixed (laughs). When my hair’s straight I get Hispanic. I get Hispanic left and right when my hair is straight, or Dominican or something. Like people can’t people can’t--- I think my hair tells all. Because when my hair is straight people can’t tell what I am.

Here, Aurora talked about how her curly hair signaled her biracial identity. She went on to describe how she believed her hair was linked to increased attention from men on campus, saying:
I think the only thing that gives me extra attention is my hair. Because that’s the only thing I can think of. Yeah, so there won’t be a day that I can’t walk out of this campus and a guy won’t approach me. Whereas when my hair was straight for that week and a half, nobody approached me at all. And I was like that’s really weird. Like why did nobody approach me? (Laughs). And then like my hair’s back to being curly and I’ve already had like three guys approach me. I’m like okay. This is really weird. And I can’t I can’t think of anything else except the hair, cos I didn’t change anything else about me except the hair.

Here, Aurora described how she thought wearing her hair curly resulted in increased attention from men on campus. Taken together, her comments suggest that part of the reason that her curly hair leads to more attention is its association with a biracial identity, an identity that (as described in previous sections) was desired and privileged on campus. Aurora subsequently described how she preferred her hair curly, saying: “And then I had so many people ask me like so your hair looked really pretty straight and everything. Which one did you like better, straight or curly? And I was like oh I like my hair curly.” Aurora’s decision to wear her hair curly can be seen as an attempt to signal her biracial identity and gain attention from men.

Biracial women’s decisions about how to wear their hair reflected their gender identities as well as their racial identities. They chose styles based on their aesthetic preferences and based on their desire to attract romantic attention. However, their choices of hairstyles also sent signals about their racial identities. Students were often aware of this and chose hairstyles that would help them navigate privilege, usually by signaling their biracial identity to gain increased positive attention from men.

The discussion in this section shows how biracial HBCU students’ identity work was related to their class and gender identities. Due to the intersectional nature of race, class, and gender identities, students’ attempts to navigate racial privilege on campus differed by class and gender. Specifically, students with lower class identities sometimes drew upon these class identities to distance themselves from the idea of white or light-skinned privilege. Conversely,
students from middle class backgrounds may try to downplay or conceal their class background in order to distance themselves from ideas of privilege. In terms of gender, biracial women engaged in more identity work related to navigating privilege than did biracial men. This is partly due to the fact that biracial women occupied a higher position in the campus racial structure than did biracial men, making navigating privilege a more salient issue for them. In navigating racial privilege, biracial women engaged in many different identity work strategies described throughout the chapter. Some of these strategies intersected with women’s gendered self-presentations.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I showed how the racial structure of the school privileged biracial students over many of their peers. Much of their privilege was related to their light skin color and the status this carried within the black campus community. While there was variation within the HBCU sample in terms of skin color, all of the biracial students reported that they were at least sometimes considered light-skinned by their peers. While much of the privilege they experienced was related to their skin color, interview analysis suggests that there was some privilege attached to biracial status in itself. For instance, several women reported the belief that men preferred mixed-race women to monoracial women in addition to the belief that men preferred light to dark women.

While the school’s racial structure privileged biracial students, biracials also reported that they were sometimes the targets of resentment and dislike. Biracial students’ descriptions indicate that some of this dislike stemmed from their peers’ resentment of light-skin privilege and colorism in the black community. The dislike and negative encounters biracials reported also
stemmed from another related source: their peers’ resentment of white people for the long history of white privilege and black oppression.

Biracial students used various strategies to navigate race and privilege on campus. Some students maximized the benefits tied to their biracial identity and light skin by joining high-status Greek organizations, highlighting their mixed-race identity in conversations with potential romantic partners, and/or accentuating aspects of their phenotype that signaled their biracial identity. However, more often, students reported engaging in identity work to distance themselves from the idea of white or light-skin privilege and the resentment that came along with this privileged status. They generally did so by concealing their mixed racial background.

Finally the discussion in this chapter highlights the intersectional nature of race, class, and gender identities. I showed how students’ attempts to navigate privilege sometimes differed depending on their class and gender. Moreover, I showed how students may use gendered or class-related self-presentations in order to maximize the benefits tied to their racial status or distance themselves from ideas of privilege.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

The United States is characterized by a racial structure that privileges whiteness over blackness. While the organization of various types of colleges and universities is influenced by this societal structure, the racial structure of independent institutions of higher education depends in large part on the racial composition of the school. In this paper, I compared the ways in which black-white biracial students navigated race at historically black compared to predominantly white institutions. At the PWI, the racial structure privileged whiteness, and biracial students reported occupying a relatively low position in the campus racial structure due to their relative blackness. Relatedly, a large portion of their identity work centered on navigating racism. In contrast, biracial HBCU students described a campus racial structure in which they occupied a high status position due to their relative whiteness and lightness. A large amount of their identity work focused on navigating privilege. In this chapter I describe the sociological and practical value of my findings and suggest directions for future research.

SOCIOLOGICAL AND PRACTICAL VALUE

My findings have both sociological and practical value. From a sociological perspective, these findings highlight the contextual nature of racial meanings, the connection between social structure and personal agency in the creation of racial identities, and the intersectional nature of race, class, and gender identities. From a practical perspective, these findings have implications for higher education administration policies.
While all of my respondents had similar racial ancestry (all but two reported having one black and one white parent), this ancestry carried different meaning depending on the racial composition of their social environment. This finding highlights the importance of understanding context when studying race and suggests that any analysis of the racial experiences and/or identities of a group of people should include consideration of the individuals’ social location.

Additionally, my findings highlight the connection between structure and agency in the creation of racial identities. While biracial individuals’ identities are shaped in part by societal definitions of blackness and whiteness, biracials do not simply have racial identities attributed to them. They also engage in active identity work to present specific racial identities and to shape the way that others see them. This interplay between structure and agency in the creation of racial identities illustrates the socially constructed nature of racial identities. While all racial identities are socially constructed, this is likely particularly salient to biracial individuals because of their unique position in the racial hierarchy. In fact, many discussed the idea that they could choose to identify as white, biracial, or black and that they could use various strategies in an attempt to influence how others viewed them racially. This discussion also supports a symbolic interactionist view of the world, in which people act towards things based on the meaning they assign to them and in which meanings are created and negotiated during interaction. Specifically, my study draws upon Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis of interaction to explain racial identity as a performance.

Finally, my study has sociological value in that it highlights the intersectional nature of race, class, and gender identities. No one solely has a race or a gender or a class. Everyone occupies at least one racial, gender, and class category simultaneously, and these identities interact to influence people’s experiences. Despite this reality much research continues to talk
about race without considering the influence of class and gender on racial experiences. My findings demonstrate how biracials’ identity work sometimes differed depending on their gender or class and how students often invoked class or gender identities in their presentation of racial identities.

The study also has practical value. My findings suggest that institutional policies could help improve the experiences of biracial students at PWIs and HBCUs. One way to reduce racism, segregation and discrimination at PWIs would be to dismantle Greek life. Greek life is divided along color lines, and not all organizations have equal resources. At the PWI I studied, the “top-tier” Greek organizations were wealthy and white. The more diverse organizations had fewer financial resources. And, the black Greek organizations had fewer financial resources than the predominantly white organizations. Greek organizations’ financial resources are directly tied to their social power and visibility on campus. Thus, Greek life creates an institutionally-supported race/class social hierarchy on campus, where wealthy whites maintain the most social power and visibility. The division of Greek life along color lines also heightens segregation on campus and poses unique challenges for biracial students who are unsure if they will fit in on either side. Dismantling Greek life would surely help improve campus race relations generally and the experiences of biracial students specifically. A less extreme alternative would be to provide better education to leaders in Greek life about how to be inclusive and to provide oversight of these organizations to ensure that they are not discriminating against students of color in their admissions policies.

While many biracial students experienced racism within Greek life and other areas on campus, they tended to be isolated from the black campus community and had few institutional resources to aid them in these challenges. Some biracial students who could benefit from
programs geared toward African-American students fell through the cracks because they did not know whether they were allowed to participate in these programs. In light of this finding, campus administrators should clearly indicate that minority and African-American campus programs are open to multiracial students.

Additionally, multiracial affinity groups could help these students navigate racism on campus. While multiracials experienced discrimination on campus, many did not participate in programs geared toward helping African-Americans adjust to campus life because they did not feel culturally black. Thus, the existence of multiracial student organizations on campus could provide these students with a group to identify with and a group that could help them discuss and cope with some of the challenges of being a racial minority on a predominantly white campus.

Institutional policies may also help decrease colorism and improve the experiences of biracial students at HBCUs. Dismantling or closely monitoring Greek life may reduce conflicts between light and dark-skinned students on campus, much in the same way that it would reduce racial divisions at PWIs. Biracial HBCU students may also benefit from having minority student advisors available in the dorms to discuss any challenges these students (and other racial minorities on campus) experience at HBCUs.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While this study increases understanding of race in the United States and provides policy suggestions for improving mixed-race college students’ experiences, it is not without its limitations. Moreover, the study suggests many areas that could benefit from further exploration.

While I was able to gain rich information about students’ perspectives of their college experiences and detailed descriptions of how they navigated race in this setting, I was unable to see this identity work in action. Future studies should incorporate observational analysis in order
to compare what students say they do to what they actually do. Another limitation of the study is that the majority of the students in the sample were heterosexual. Future studies should explore the ways in which sexual orientation intersects with race and gender to create a unique set of social experiences for some biracial college students.

My findings also suggest that future studies should investigate the ways in which others perceive biracial individuals. While biracials described their attempts to influence others’ perceptions of their race, I was unable to explore the extent to which these attempts were successful. Exploring the effects of biracials’ identity work would help elucidate the picture of how racial identities are socially constructed.

Finally, due to the vastly different experiences of biracials in predominantly black compared to predominantly white environments, there are likely significant correlations between the racial composition of biracials’ networks and factors such as their internal racial identity, self-esteem, and other aspects of their psychological well-being. Specifically, biracials who grew up in predominantly black settings may have higher self-esteem and better mental health than those who grew up in predominantly white contexts. Future studies should examine these relationships using quantitative designs.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A:

INTERVIEW GUIDE

College Experiences as They Relate to Race

1) How did you go about deciding where to go to college? How did you end up at X College?
   • *Probes: Did you consider going to an HBCU/PWI (whichever the respondent did not attend)?*

2) In what ways has your experience here made you think about race?

3) Can you tell me about any times that race has come up in your classes?

4) Can you tell me about any times race has come up within your friendships?

5) How do you think your race has affected your dating life since you’ve been at X College?

6) Can you tell me about your involvement in extracurricular activities on campus?
   • *Probes: what is the racial composition of the groups you’re involved in? Does your race ever come into play in these activities?*

7) What do you think about campus organizations that are exclusively or predominantly one race?
   • *Probes: Are you aware of/involved in any black organizations on campus? White organizations? Why/why not?*

8) What do you think about clubs specifically for multiracial students?

Available and Desirable Identity Options on Campus

9) Have you ever experienced any negative treatment or hostility from anyone on campus because of your race, racial identity or skin color/phenotype?
   • *Probes: Have you ever experienced/witnessed racism on campus? Colorism?*

10) How are race, ethnicity, and skin color related to social status or popularity at X College?

11) Do you feel pressure to identify in a certain way here because of your racial background or do you think you can identify however you want?
   • *Probes: Do you think other students would find it acceptable if you identified yourself as black? As white? As biracial/mixed?*

12) Can you tell me about any expectations you think people have about you based on your race or skin color?

13) How do you think most people at X College view you in terms of race?

Managing and Negotiating Race in Interactions with Others

14) Can you tell me about any times that people here have asked you about your race and describe what those interactions are like?

15) Since you’ve been at X College, have you ever tried to highlight or bring attention to part of your racial background? If so, how?
• Probes: Have you ever purposefully changed your appearance or your behavior so that you would be perceived by people here as looking or acting more black or more white or more biracial?

16) Have you ever tried to downplay or hide that you had a black parent or a white parent?

17) Pretend you’re at a party on campus with someone named Megan. You know Megan has one black and one white parent. Someone says Megan is black.
   a. She goes along with this and does not mention that she has a white parent. What do you think about that response?
   b. What if she says “I’m not black; I’m biracial”? Thoughts?
   c. What if she says “I’m not black; I’m white”? Thoughts?

18) Can you tell me about any times that someone at X College identified you as black without mentioning your white background?

19) Can you tell me about any times that someone at X College identified you as white without mentioning your black background?

20) Pretend that you know a student named Allison. Allison has one black and one white (Italian) parent. When she got to college, she joined the Italian student group and a predominantly white sorority. In these groups, she doesn’t mention her black background. She says she’s white, and nobody in these clubs knows that Allison has a black parent.
   • What do you think about this?
   • Have you ever done anything like this?

21) What if instead Allison got to college and joined the black student association and a black sorority? In these groups, she doesn’t mention her white background. She says she’s black and nobody knows that Allison has a white parent.
   • Is this situation any different?
   • Have you ever done anything like this?

Racial Identity

22) How strongly do you identify with being black compared to how strongly you identify with being white?

23) Would you feel more comfortable in a room of all white people or all black people?

24) Imagine that you’re at a multicultural retreat. The leaders of the retreat ask everyone to split into groups with other people who are your same race. What would you do?

25) Does how you identify racially depend on the context? (I.e. where you are and/or who you are with?)

26) What do you write on forms that ask you about your race?
   • What did you write on your college application?
   • Does what racial category you select depend on the form?

Background/Life before College

27) Can you describe what life was like for you growing up?
   • Probes: Where are you from? What is it like there? What were your neighborhoods/schools like racially? What are your relationships with family members like? How would you describe your social class?

Reflections on the Interview
28) Do you think the interview would have been different if I were a different race?
   • Probes: *Would you feel equally comfortable answering the questions if the interviewer were white or black?*
While all recruitment materials emphasized that I was seeking individuals with one black and one white biological parent, two respondents requested to participate in the study even though they had different racial backgrounds. One of these students had a white father and a black/Korean mother. The other had a black father and a Creole mother. One participant told me about her background prior to the interview. The other did not reveal her background until after the interview had begun. I chose to keep both of these participants in the sample; however, I was cognizant of their different racial backgrounds during data analysis, looking for ways that their background may differentiate them from others in the sample. Notably, these two students retained a great deal in common with the other biracial students when it came to navigating race on campus and negotiating racial identities, suggesting that the processes described in this paper may be applicable to students who understand themselves as having white and black ancestry, even if they do not report having one black and one white parent.

Percentages do not sum to 100 due to missing data.

I used the same definitions of middle class, working class, and poor that Lareau (2011) used in Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life. Middle-class students are “those who lived[d] in households in which at least one parent is employed in a position that either entails substantial managerial authority or that centrally draws upon highly complex, educationally certified (i.e college-level skills)” (Lareau 2011:365). Working class students lived “in households in which neither parent is employed in a middle-class position and at least one parent is employed in a position with little or no managerial authority and that does not draw on highly complex, educationally certified skills. This category includes lower-level white collar workers” (Lareau 2011:365). Poor students are those who live in a household in which neither parent is in the labor force.