Multiracial Identity Invalidation in the Workplace

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy under the Executive Committee of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2023
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Abstract

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Racial identity invalidation is a social identity threat that occurs when a person’s racial or ethnic group membership is denied by others. While this phenomenon can be experienced by people of all backgrounds, it is particularly prevalent among multiracial people, whose mixed-race identities do not neatly fit the categories typically used to define race. Racial identity invalidation has been associated with several negative effects on mental health, social relations, and physical and emotional well-being; yet, because multiracial issues and experiences often go unnoticed in our largely monoracial society, this form of multiracial microaggression has been overlooked in discussions of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Moreover, little research has explored how identity invalidation plays out specifically in the workplace setting—an important context tied to one’s livelihood—making it unclear what downstream effects invalidation may have on work outcomes such as job satisfaction, engagement, and team cohesion.

The present study expands on prior research by exploring how multiracial identity invalidation unfolds in various work contexts, with a focus on how multiracial people respond to instances of invalidation at work and what consequences these events might have for their professional relationships and career advancement. Qualitative data were collected through an online questionnaire and one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with multiracial people of diverse backgrounds and industries. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, the study aimed to better understand the experiences, responses, outcomes, and contextual factors related
to this phenomenon, with the ultimate aim of inductively developing a comprehensive model of multiracial identity invalidation in the workplace.

Findings from this study suggest that multiracial people experience similar types of invalidation incidents (e.g., being asked to prove one’s heritage) in the workplace as they do in other arenas of life, yielding similarly negative intrapersonal responses (e.g., hurt, resentment, self-doubt). However, due to the power dynamics at play in most workplaces, their options for how to outwardly respond to these invalidation incidents are often limited, with responses ranging from passive (e.g., laughing it off) to more active approaches (e.g., trying to create a learning opportunity), depending on the perceived risk and likelihood of change. Although repeated invalidation experiences can lead to several negative work outcomes (e.g., strained coworker relationships, disengagement, self-silencing), some of the study participants also made changes for the better, by seeking new work opportunities at organizations that embraced their full and complex identities, aligned with their personal values, and recognized the strengths of having a mixed-race perspective. Finally, this study noted several contextual factors that appeared to influence the process of invalidation, with a particular emphasis on the need for social support systems and inclusive organizational practices. These study findings and the resultant comprehensive model offer practical insights for individuals, teams, and organizations, and suggest avenues for future research into the topic of multiracial identity invalidation in the workplace.
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Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank the 21 multiracial interviewees whose experiences and observations formed the heart of this research. Without their generosity and candor, this dissertation would not have been possible. Thank you for trusting me with your stories—I hope I have done them justice! To the mixed-race researchers, writers, and activists who paved the way, thank you for building a foundation on which the rest of us could find our voices.

To my wonderful dissertation committee—Dr. Debra Noumair, Dr. Caryn Block, Dr. Terrence Maltbia, Dr. Cindy Huang, and Dr. Flora Taylor—thank you for engaging in our research discussions with such enthusiasm and curiosity. It was an honor and a joy to work with you all, and I am grateful for your insightful feedback and guidance. My advisor, Debra, deserves special thanks for her endless patience, wisdom, empathy, and support of both this research and my own development as a scholar-practitioner. Thank you for our partnership and for demonstrating first-hand what it means to embrace the value of someone’s full, complex self.

To the wider Social-Organizational Psychology (SOP) program at TC—what a gift it has been to be part of this brilliant and caring community. I have learned so much from all of the SOP faculty, both through formal coursework and informal daily interactions. In particular, I would like to thank my first workgroup advisor, Dr. Elissa Perry, for her guidance and advice early on in my doctoral journey, and to Dr. Sarah Brazaitis, whom I’ve had the pleasure of working with in multiple capacities over the years, for her mentorship, kind spirit, and commitment to improving the experiences of others. To the GRC and XMA communities, thank you for creating such unique opportunities to learn, grow, and explore. To our amazing SOP staff—Ambar, John, Lebab, and Ome—thank you for all that you do to keep our program
running smoothly. We are so lucky to have you on our team, and I cannot thank you enough for all the ways, big and small, that you have helped to nudge me along all these years.

To my fellow doctoral students, it has truly been a privilege to learn alongside you all. I am grateful to the students who came before me—especially DeMarcus, Duoc, Danielle, Joe, Asha, Lauren, and Dave—for sharing your wisdom, offering advice, and illuminating the many paths forward through the doctoral program. To my fabulous cohort—Chris, DaHee, Jenny, and Shana—I am so glad to have gone through the program with such an inspiring, passionate, and fun group of women. To the newer cohorts who are still moving along on their own doctoral paths, I am rooting for you! Thank you for keeping up the spirit of curiosity and reminding me of why we all joined this program in the first place. Over the years, I feel fortunate to have had many thought-provoking and motivating conversations with so many of my fellow students, and I would like to specifically thank Aimee, Aitong, Allegra, Diego, Jean, Josh, Julian, and Zoë, among others, for providing encouragement, sparking ideas, and contributing to my current research in other ways. (To anyone I neglected to mention here, please know that I appreciate you too!)

I am grateful to the Loft crew and the virtual writing group for adding enjoyment and camaraderie to my ABD years, and to my dear colleague and writing partner, Joe Dillard, for his positive energy, encouragement, and friendship as we waded through these last stages. Finally, to Shana Yearwood, my absolute rock in the program—I could not have done this without you! Thank you for being a wonderful friend, confidant, cheerleader, thought partner, late-night study buddy, cookie sharer, and fellow “incubator.” You were right there with me through all the ups and downs, and I’m thrilled that we made it to the other side together.
Beyond the walls of TC, I am filled with gratitude for my loved ones and supporters who continue to propel me forward. To my parents, Betsy and Steve, and to my brother, Patrick—thank you for creating a loving and joyful home base throughout my life and for helping me to become the person I am today. You three have always believed in me and pushed me to try my best—this dissertation is for you! To my extended family in Indonesia, England, and other parts of the globe, thank you for your love and support, no matter the distance or years between visits. I am so proud to be part of this family and delighted to share this accomplishment with you.

Thank you also to my family-in-law for your friendly check-ins and words of encouragement over the years. To my friends, old and new—thank you for adding joy, humor, and connection to my life. Finally, to my husband, Dan—thank you for your endless encouragement and love throughout this entire process. You’ve always found ways to put a smile on my face and to remind me of the value of my work, even when my own confidence faltered. Thank you for getting me across this finish line—I’m so grateful to have you by my side.

To all the people who helped me reach this point, thank you. I look forward to seeing where the story takes us next!

- SvN
Chapter 1: Introduction

Imagine the following scenario. You have just landed the perfect job. You walk through the doors on your first day, head to Human Resources to start the onboarding process, and are handed a stack of new-employee paperwork to fill out. On page two, you hesitate: the form asks you to provide your race, but none of the options adequately describes you. As a multiracial person, being asked to choose just one option from a preset list of racial categories feels both simple and challenging. Do you select the racial group that most people tend to assume when they see you? Or the racial group that you identify with most strongly? Or the one that matches your last name? What if none of these boxes feels quite like you? Not wanting to choose one part of your identity at the exclusion of another, you instead check the box marked “Other”—then wonder who your fellow “others” might be.

For many multiracial people, the above scenario is a common occurrence. What is typically considered the easy part of an intake form at the doctor’s office can raise questions about how one should best present oneself to a world that does not automatically consider the possibility of having a mixed ethnic heritage. Expressing the fullness of one’s multiracial background is generally easier in conversation with another human being, compared to a faceless paper form. Yet even interpersonal interactions can result in the denial of a person’s multiracial identity. Consider, for example, a biracial Haitian-Chinese woman who is excluded from both the Black and Asian networking groups at work because both groups had assumed that she would prefer to join the other one. Or consider the case of a White-presenting multiracial man who feels deeply tied to his German, Dutch, and Lakota ancestry, but whose coworkers joke that he only “pretends” to be Native American to take advantage of affirmative action benefits.

Identity denial is a type of social identity threat that occurs when one aspect of a person’s sense of self (e.g., social group membership) goes unrecognized by others (Huynh, 2013; Wang et al., 2012). A subset of identity denial, racial identity invalidation, occurs when a person’s race or ethnicity is miscategorized, questioned, or otherwise contested. When committed against multiracial people, such invalidation can take the form of challenging one part of a person’s heritage, denying them membership to a particular group based on their appearance, or
questioning the legitimacy of a “multiracial” identity. As in the opening scenario, even a simple question on a form can trigger feelings of invalidation if it forces a self-identified multiracial person to choose just one monoracial category (Townsend et al., 2009).

Although mislabeling someone’s race may seem innocuous compared to more blatant and hostile forms of discrimination, racial identity invalidation is one of the more prevalent and distressing microaggressions against multiracial people (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2004). When compounded over time, repeated experiences of identity invalidation can be detrimental to a person’s sense of self and their psychological and physical well-being. Research suggests that experiencing identity denial can lead to several negative outcomes, including stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, reduced self-esteem, and even suicidal thoughts (Albuja, Sanchez, & Gaither, 2019, 2020; Campbell & Troyer, 2007; Franco et al., 2016; Townsend et al., 2009). These outcomes likely result from internal identity conflict, reduced feelings of social belonging, and a loss of agency (Albuja, Sanchez, & Gaither, 2019; Franco & O’Brien, 2018; Vargas & Stainback, 2016). Past studies have identified some moderating factors that can exacerbate the negative experience of identity invalidation, as well as protective factors that can mitigate the experience (Campbell & Troyer, 2007; Franco et al., 2016; Stepanikova, 2010; Trujillo et al., 2015).

While scholars are increasingly investigating the phenomenon of racial identity invalidation, less is currently known about how it shows up in the context of work. To my knowledge, only a handful of studies (Harris, 2017, 2019, 2020; Harris et al., 2021) have explored how invalidation experiences affect the performance of multiracial employees. These studies focused specifically on academic work settings (for related research in higher education, see Johnston-Guerrero & Wijeyesinghe, 2021), while other industries have yet to be explored.
Similarly, little is known about the strategies that multiracial people employ to manage invalidation experiences at work.

To better understand the complexities of multiracial identity invalidation in the workplace, the current study leveraged qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with multiracial workers in the United States. The interview questions delved into the following themes: how multiracial participants experience their multiracial identities at work, what happens when those identities are invalidated by coworkers, how multiracial people respond to invalidation incidents, and what effect these incidents and their associated responses might have on work outcomes. By seeking a broad range of experiences and perspectives, the interviews provided rich data from which to inductively build a theory of workplace invalidation, following a constructivist grounded theory approach. The end goal was to develop a more comprehensive theory of multiracial identity invalidation in the workplace, including its contextual factors, response strategies, and outcomes.

The present study contributed to existing research in three ways. First, it centered the voices of multiracial people, a population that has historically been understudied, misrepresented, or willfully omitted from the dominant narrative. Second, it emphasized the workplace as a specific context in which multiracial identity invalidation is likely to occur, with potential consequences for one’s career and professional relationships. Third, taking a qualitative methodological approach allowed for a greater depth of understanding of this phenomenon, using the participants’ own words about how they interpreted and made meaning of the experience of identity invalidation. Having an open-ended, exploratory mindset was important when trying to understand a complex process and population.
In addition to formulating a comprehensive model of workplace multiracial identity invalidation, the findings from this study also offer practical insights for individuals and organizations. At the individual level, readers may benefit from hearing other people’s stories and learning their strategies for responding to identity invalidation at work. At the organizational and team levels, greater understanding of multiracial perspectives and the unique forms of workplace discrimination that multiracial people face can contribute to the larger discourse on racial microaggressions and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter will first present the theoretical frameworks guiding this study, followed by a comprehensive overview of the current research on identity invalidation and the multiracial lens through which it might be experienced. The chapter will end with a discussion of two less-studied aspects of racial identity invalidation—its occurrence in the workplace and possible ways of responding to it—which this study aimed to explore.

Conceptual Framework

The current study is situated at the intersection of identity theory, multiracial research, and workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts. As such, it is framed by key theories and principles from these three overlapping areas.

Identity Theories

Central to this study is an understanding of the important role that identity plays in one’s sense of meaning and self-worth. *Social identity theory*, originally developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s and 1980s, asserts that people define themselves in terms of the social categories (e.g., nationality, religion) to which they belong (Hogg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000). People derive value and self-esteem from these ingroup identities, taking on the defining characteristics of the group (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Burke & Stets, 2009; Hogg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000, 2014). However, the strength and stability of a self-ascribed social identity depends on the extent to which that categorization is corroborated by other people. A *categorization threat* occurs when the legitimacy of one’s self-identified social identity is called into question (Townsend et al., 2009, p.187-88).

*Self-verification theory* (Swann, 2012; Swann & Ely, 1984) highlights the innate desire to be identified “correctly” by others. People prefer to be perceived by others in the same way that
they view themselves because that congruence offers a sense of coherence, predictability, and greater ease in social interactions (Swann, 2012). When a personally held identity is not validated by others, the incongruence creates stress for the invalidated person (Burke, 1991; Burke & Stets, 2009). To relieve that dissonance, the person will seek ways to either correct the other person’s perceptions or to modify their own behaviors and thoughts (Burke & Stets, 2009).

The idea that identities are constantly negotiated through daily interactions with other people plays an important role in our understanding of identity invalidation experiences, as it highlights the power that other people have in shaping the way a person views their own personal identity. Even when it comes to race, a demographic variable that has traditionally been viewed as stable, fixed, and apparent (Davenport, 2020), discrepancies between one’s actual racial heritage and how one is perceived can lead to conflict around how one is “allowed” to self-identify in any given context. For multiracial people, many of whom have ambiguous phenotypes or hidden aspects of their heritage, such discrepancies between self- and other perceptions can lead to recurring racial identity conflict over time.

**Multiracial Research**

As multiracial people are the focal population in this dissertation, I have grounded my study in existing multiracial research and approaches to understanding multiracial experiences. The past three decades of multiracial research focused primarily on racial-ethnic identity development, changing definitions of “mixedness,” and the cultural practices, socialization approaches, and patterns of cognition associated with being multiracial (Charmaraman et al., 2014; Gaither, 2015; Osanami Törngren et al., 2021). Much of this research has centered on children, adolescents, and young adults in developmental stages of growth (Charmaraman et al., 2014). Less is known about the evolving influence that a multiracial identity may have through
adulthood, particularly in the context of everyday experiences like work life. Even in studies exploring marginalized identities in the workplace, the perspectives of multiracial people have typically been subsumed within the broader narrative around employees of color. While many of their experiences certainly overlap (Nadal et al., 2011), combining multiracial experiences with those of a larger monoracial group may fail to highlight experiences and forms of discrimination that people with mixed backgrounds uniquely face (Harris, 2020).

Some researchers have begun to focus on specific microaggressions experienced by multiracial people (Johnston & Nadal, 2010; Johnston-Guerrero et al., 2020; Nadal et al., 2011). For example, Johnston and Nadal (2010) identified five common types of multiracial microaggressions: exclusion and isolation, exoticization and objectification, assumption of a monoracial identity, denial of a multiracial identity, and the pathologizing of multiracial identity and experiences. Nadal and colleagues (2011) added a sixth type: microaggressions based on racial stereotypes of one of their racial ingroups or their phenotype (i.e., perceived race). These subtle forms of discrimination are largely influenced by the dominant system of monoracism, by which the default is to categorize people into one of only a few distinct racial categories, without the possibility of spanning multiple categories or belonging to an alternative one (Atkin, 2021).

Gaither (2018) emphasizes the need to think beyond an “either-or,” singular-identity framework and instead allow the possibility that some people hold two or more identities within the same domain (i.e., intracategory intersectionality). As Rockquemore et al. (2009) explain,

the study of mixed-race people is deeply fragmented and inconsistent, not because it is an emergent body of work, but because the work of theory building suffers from the limits of the prevailing racial ideology that social scientists are embedded within. (p.15)

To counter this norm, multiracial scholars have begun to promote critical mixed-race theory and studies (Daniel et al., 2014; Harris, 2016), which center the experiences and perspectives of
multiracial people and expand the notion of racism to also include monoracism. The present study followed this line of scholarship, aiming to broaden our understanding of race and ethnicity in society and the workplace by shining a light on the lesser-studied experiences of people whose multiracial identity does not fit neatly into society’s traditional structures.

**Authenticity and Inclusion at Work**

Finally, the third component of my theoretical framework is grounded in DEI research, particularly around the importance of allowing people to bring their full, authentic selves to work. *Authenticity* is defined as living in accordance with one’s core values, beliefs, and complete self (Hewlin et al., 2020). Being authentic at work has been associated with several positive outcomes, including greater work engagement, job satisfaction, motivation, perceived performance, and person-job fit; improved coworker relationships; and lower levels of cynicism, burnout, and turnover intentions (Berg, 2002; Cable et al., 2013; Glavas, 2016; Hewlin et al., 2020; Kuntz & Abbott, 2017; Tang et al., 2021; van den Bosch & Taris, 2014, 2018).

Even at critical moments (e.g., job interviews, sales pitches) when a natural impulse is to make a good impression by catering to the other person’s interests or expectations, Gino and colleagues (2020) found that behaving authentically was more effective than tailoring one’s behavior for others. They found that catering to others led to increased anxiety, discomfort, and feelings of instrumentality (i.e., behaving as a means to an end), which then resulted in poorer performance. They argued, thus, that a more effective and lower-stress approach would be to simply stay true to one’s authentic self (Gino et al., 2020).

To foster such authenticity, organizations must work toward developing *climates of inclusion*—organizational cultures and practices that not only seek to increase representation of diverse groups but also commit to ensuring the active integration of those diverse cultural
identities and the inclusion of diverse perspectives in decision-making (Nishii, 2013). Inclusive organizational climates emphasize the value of cultural differences and encourage employees to engage all aspects of their unique backgrounds at work. In turn, inclusion can lead to greater creativity and innovation (Jin et al., 2017), lower levels of conflict and increased job satisfaction (Nishii, 2013), and higher levels of affective commitment to the organization (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015; Li et al., 2019).

**Summary of Theoretical Frameworks**

Figure 1 on the next page depicts the relationships among these three broad themes and highlights three premises relevant to the present study: (1) social identities and group memberships are important sources of self-esteem, belonging, and self-worth; (2) multiracial people experience their racial identities in ways unique from their monoracial peers; and (3) inclusive organizations that encourage employees to bring their full, authentic selves to work yield improved work outcomes including increased engagement, creativity, and job satisfaction.

The question at the center of these three premises, then, is: what happens when a person’s multiracial identity is not recognized or accepted in the workplace? What effect does multiracial identity invalidation have on individual well-being, interpersonal relationships, and resulting work outcomes? To answer these questions, it is important to first discuss what is currently known about multiracial identities and the process of racial identity invalidation.
Defining a Multiracial Identity

Current U.S. society tends to categorize people into five distinct racial groups: American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Black or African American; Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; and White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). The term *multiracial* is used to describe anyone whose racial heritage comprises two or more of these racial categories (Charmaraman et al., 2011). Although widely used, these categories do not adequately capture how some people self-identify. For example, the U.S. Census Bureau treats Latino/a heritage as an ethnicity rather than a race, despite many people from that population viewing it as their sole racial identity (Schuster, 2021). Similarly, the U.S. Census Bureau officially classifies people of Middle Eastern or North African (MENA) descent as White, despite many MENA people not self-identifying that way (Schuster, 2021). The racial classifications used in other countries also vary from those used in the United States (Osanamí Törngren et al., 2021).

The language used to describe racial categories continues to change over time, and members of a given racial group do not always agree on the preferred terminology. Whenever possible, I will refer to a person’s racial/ethnic identity using their own words and will maintain the original terminology used in any prior studies referenced in this dissertation. In accordance with the American Psychological Association’s (2022) current guidance on bias-free language, specific racial and ethnic groups (including “Black” and “White”) are capitalized, but terms like “multiracial” or “mixed-heritage” are not.

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2014; Gaither, 2015). Often, a multiracial person has biological parents from two different racial backgrounds; other times, one or both parents may be multiracial themselves.

According to a 2015 report by the Pew Research Center, the rate of growth of the U.S. multiracial population was three times that of the population as a whole (Parker et al., 2015). More recently, the U.S. Census Bureau reported a steep increase in the number of people identifying as multiracial, jumping from 9 million people in 2010 to 33.8 million in 2020 (Jones et al., 2021). This trend can be explained in part by changing attitudes toward interracial marriage and increasing globalization and cross-cultural interactions (Osanami Törngren et al., 2021), but it is also due to changes in how race and ethnicity are officially measured. Only in recent decades has the option to select more than one race on a demographic form become popular. The first U.S. Census to allow multiple racial selections was in 2000 (Kunkle, 2015). Similarly, it was not until 2011 that the National Center of Education Statistics first provided an option to indicate two or more races (Harris, 2020); prior to that year, data about multiracial faculty, staff, and students were missing or misrepresented. Thus, the overall rise in people identifying as multiracial can be explained by both increased interracial mixing and increased acknowledgement that a “multiracial” group even exists.

Despite the growing visibility of multiracial people, however, they are still often overlooked in research. While it is becoming common practice for demographic forms to include a multiracial option or the ability to select more than one race, reporting the results of this data collection can be complicated. Many reports choose to simplify the data by focusing only on single-race groups, which results in misleading conclusions about overall population trends (Schuster, 2021). The difficulty in accurately representing the racial complexity of a population
speaks to the socially constructed nature of “race” (Davenport, 2020). The diversity in self-identification within the multiracial community itself adds yet another layer of complexity.

**Types of Multiracial Identity**

Multiracial identities are fluid and changeable. Because multiracial people do not belong to just one racial category within the dominant monoracial structure, they have a choice in how to self-identify and how to present that identity to others. Rockquemore and Brunsma (2004) identified four types of multiracial identity: *singular* (i.e., exclusively monoracial, identifying with just one of their racial heritages), *border* (i.e., exclusively multiracial), *protean* (i.e., shifting between multiple identities, including “multiracial” and each of the monoracial groups to which the person belongs), and *transcendent* (i.e., choosing an identity beyond race, such as simply being “human”). A person’s choice of multiracial identification can evolve over time and has implications for their self-concept and how they interact with others (Parker et al., 2015). For example, a protean identity may reduce interpersonal conflict, as the person adjusts their identification based on the needs of a given context, but it also lessens internal identity integration (Lou et al., 2011). Conversely, a person may feel internal coherence by holding an unwavering border identity, but they may face greater discrimination from others who devalue or reject the notion of a multiracial identity.

Another important dimension of multiracial identity is the degree to which a person’s chosen identity is socially validated by others (Lou et al., 2011; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2004). Validation is largely informed by racial stereotypes and expectations about phenotype, appearances, and behavior. Based on ethnic or cultural differences, the propensity to claim different types of multiracial identity can vary by subgroup. For example, research suggests that multiracial people with Asian heritage may approach their self-identity with greater fluidity (e.g.,
adopting a context-dependent protean identity; Lou & Lalonde, 2015). This malleability may be
influenced by East Asian cultural norms that both “tolerat[e] ambiguities and contradictions in
self and in behaviors” (Franco & O’Brien, 2018, p.122) and emphasize interdependence and
“contextual responsiveness” (Lou et al., 2011, p.82). Shaped by these cultural norms, Asian
multiracial people may also be more likely to adopt whichever racial identity matches the
perceptions of others, perhaps as way of maintaining harmony with those around them (Vargas
& Stainback, 2016, p.446). People of other ethnicities may have more limited options for how
they are “allowed” to self-identify, due to the historically racist policies and structures on which
the United States was built. For example, lingering effects of hypodescent (i.e., the “one-drop
rule”) continue to impose a Black identity on anyone with some African heritage (Cooley et al.,
2018; Spencer, 2004). A history of eradicating Native American culture has created the opposite
rule for those with Native heritage, making it more difficult for one to claim an American Indian
identity (Campbell & Troyer, 2007).

Multiracial identification may also differ by gender. For example, Rockquemore and
Brunsma (2004) found that Black-White biracial women faced greater hostility and challenges to
their identity than did biracial men, as women’s racial identification was complicated by gender
norms emphasizing appearances and beauty ideals. Gillem (2000) described these compounding
layers of racism, sexism, and monoracism as a “triple jeopardy” that biracial Black-White
进一步 speculated that multiracial women may experience invalidation more frequently or more
intensely than multiracial men do because women are generally perceived as less threatening and
are thus easier targets (p.122). Finally, research by Johnson and colleagues (2012) suggested that
racial categories may also be gendered (e.g., “Asian” is stereotyped as female, while “Black” is
stereotyped as male), which could influence how readily a person’s identification with certain racial groups is accepted by others. Additional intersecting identities beyond gender and ethnicity are also likely to play a role in how a person experiences their multiracial identity and whether that identity is validated by others.

Racial Identity Invalidation

*Identity invalidation* is a “social identity threat that occurs when an individual is not recognized as a member of a group to which he or she belongs” (Huynh, 2013, p.1). Racial identity invalidation\(^3\) can involve having one’s racial identity directly questioned or denied by others (Franco & Franco, 2016) or any incident “when a person’s self-identified racial group does not align with how they are perceived racially by others” (Vargas & Kingsbury, 2016, p.718).

Inherent in this definition is the idea that there are multiple ways of identifying a person’s race that may not always coincide with one another, namely how one views oneself versus how one is perceived by others. For example, Harris & Sim (2002) describe the difference between three kinds of racial identity: *internal* (how we think about ourselves), *expressed* (what we say we are), and *observed* (what others assume based on appearance). Similarly, Rockquemore and colleagues (2009) differentiate between *racial identity* (one’s private self-understanding) versus *racial identification* (public categorization by other people), as well as the *racial categories*

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\(^3\) Although several authors have used the term “identity invalidation” (Franco & Franco, 2016; Franco et al., 2016; Franco & O’Brien, 2018; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2004), this phenomenon has also been referred to as “identity denial” (Albuja et al., 2020; Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Huynh, 2013; Wang et al., 2012), “identity contestation” (Vargas & Kingsbury, 2016; Vargas & Stainback, 2016), or simply “racial misclassification” (Campbell & Troyer, 2007) or “ethnic miscategorization” (Trujillo et al., 2015). Others have provided valid reasons for their choice of terminology (see Vargas & Kingsbury, 2016, p.719, for example). However, I have chosen to use the term “identity invalidation” in this dissertation because it prioritizes a person’s own self-identity over the perceptions of others (i.e., compared to the more neutrally worded “contestation”) and more precisely implies the direction of the invalidation (i.e., compared to “identity denial,” which may be misperceived as a person denying their own identity). When referencing prior studies, I will use the original phrasing of that study.
available in a given context. When these different perspectives on a person’s identity are aligned, the person feels secure and consistent in their identity; however, if there is a mismatch, it creates dissonance in how they view their identity. Thus, racial identity invalidation can be seen as a threat to the coherence of one’s racial identity (Franco et al., 2016).

Much of the existing research on race-related identity invalidation has focused on Asian Americans and Latino/a Americans, who are often stereotyped as “perpetual foreigners” and thus have their American identity denied by others who assume them to be non-native English speakers or immigrants from another country (Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Vargas & Kingsbury, 2016; Vargas & Vargas & Stainback, 2016; Wang et al., 2012). Research has also shown that American Indians experience high rates of misclassification, especially in areas with very small American Indian populations (Campbell & Troyer, 2007; Vargas & Kingsbury, 2016).

One reason for the prevalence of racial identity invalidation among these groups is the concept of nonprototypicality. As Huynh (2013) explains, “individuals are denied ingroup status because they do not resemble a prototypical group member, so their common ingroup identity is called into question or unrecognized by fellow group members” (p.1). People who do not neatly fit the “prototype” of what someone from this group should look or act like would be more difficult to categorize correctly and would thus be more likely to experience misclassification or invalidation. In the case of multiracial people, Albuja and colleagues (2020) assert that the “within-category intersectionality” of mixed-race people makes it more difficult for them to represent any of their individual racial heritages: “biracial people are …. nonprototypical members of each racial group with which they identify, leading to greater identity denial and questioning” (p.394).
Albuja, Sanchez, and Gaither (2019) also highlight the element of choice as another contributing factor in identity invalidation. They explain that biracial and bicultural people who are familiar with both sides of their heritage can choose how to self-identify in any given context; in comparison, the default for many other people (e.g., monoracial) is to simply fall under one category automatically, without any choice in the matter. When a multiracial person chooses to self-identify in more fluid ways, others may distrust that flexibility and question the legitimacy of their self-proclaimed identity (Albuja, Sanchez, & Gaither, 2019).

**Multiracial Experiences with Identity Invalidation**

Past research suggests that multiracial people might be prone to having one or more of their multiple group memberships—as well as their multiraciality as a whole—denied by others. In a daily diary study, Trujillo and colleagues (2015) found that 53.8 percent of their multiracial participants reported being miscategorized at least once during the 21-day period; this percentage was over twice the average (23.5 percent) for all participants in their study. Data from a nationwide survey found the average rates of racial identity contestation across monoracial groups to be much lower, between 6 and 14 percent (Vargas & Kingsbury, 2016).

Given their multiple group memberships and “often ambiguous phenotype,” it is not surprising that multiracial people would experience identity invalidation more frequently than would monoracial groups (Albuja, Gaither, et al., 2019, p.1183). Even the reality of being multiracial is sometimes questioned, as if the existence of mixed ancestry were not possible nor legitimate. Within monoracial systems that acknowledge only a handful of distinct racial categories, “individuals and institutions often view ‘Multiracial’ as nonexistent, void of identity and identity signifiers, and thus, an inauthentic identity” (Harris, 2019, p.94). Atkin (2021) explains that this monoracist default makes the cognitive process of categorizing multiracial
faces difficult for many people, and they thus resort to forcing monoracial categorizations instead of considering a multiracial possibility.

Multiracial identity invalidation often occurs when a multiracial person does not conform to the stereotypical expectations of what someone of their multiple racial identities should look, sound, and act like. Franco and colleagues (2016) highlight two variations of invalidation: *negating* versus *imposing*. In other words, a multiracial person could have their self-identity negated (e.g., “you’re not really Black”) or they could have an other-ascribed identity imposed on them (e.g., "you should identify as Black"; Franco et al., 2016, p.100). Due to their complex and potentially fluid racial identities, multiracial people can have one aspect of their heritage negated or their entire identity as “multiracial” dismissed. The imposition of a monoracial category denies them the possibility of identifying fully with their mixed heritage.

Franco and O’Brien (2018) further describe three types of invalidation: *behavior invalidation* (i.e., the multiracial person’s racial identity is invalidated because they behave in ways that differ from the stereotypical norms of their racial group), appearance-based *phenotype invalidation* (i.e., “the multiracial person’s phenotype leads others to assume they are a different race than that which they personally identify”), and the lesser-studied *identity incongruent discrimination* (i.e., being discriminated against for a race with which the person does not actually identify; p.120). The authors found that all three of these invalidation experiences were associated with challenges to racial identity, feelings of racial homelessness, loneliness, and racial discrimination; all except phenotype invalidation were associated with depressive symptoms (Franco & O’Brien, 2018, p.121).

In work settings, multiracial individuals may face “racial authenticity tests” from coworkers who challenge them to prove their heritage by changing the way they speak, dress, or
decorate to better match the stereotypes of their invalidated racial group (Harris, 2019). One of Harris’s (2019) multiracial interviewees described being harassed with questions about her family in order to “legitimately prove” her Native heritage (p.99). In other cases, people’s multiracial identities may be invalidated through exclusion, such as not being invited to join a social group that caters to one side of their ethnic heritage (Harris, 2017).

The above examples make clear that multiracial identity invalidation often occurs interpersonally, through direct behaviors and statements that exclude or invalidate the person. Yet multiracial identity invalidation can also occur in more passive ways at the institutional level, as seen by policies and rules that enforce monoracial structures and leave no room for a multiracial reality to exist. For example, race-based affinity groups, social clubs, professional development opportunities, and identity-specific conferences or events often cater to monoracial groups at the exclusion of multiracial ones. Facing limited choices, multiracial people may feel forced to choose only one monoracial group—likely based on their appearance and thus their probability of being accepted by the group—or to not participate at all, either because they do not feel “enough” to join or because they are actively excluded by other members of the group (Harris, 2017).

Another common example of institutional multiracial identity invalidation are demographic forms on which only one monoracial category can be selected. When presented with a single-choice option, self-identified multiracial people are forced to choose a category that does not match their authentic selves (Townsend et al., 2009). Non-inclusive demographic questions can lead to misleading data (e.g., population counts, employee racial distributions), inaccurate health information (e.g., in medical care contexts), and the general feeling of misrepresenting oneself. Moreover, because this type of demographic question can occur in so
many contexts—schools, standardized testing, driver’s license applications, medical offices, human resources—the feeling of inauthenticity can spread to all aspects of one’s life.

Harris (2017) describes the mutually reinforcing nature of institutional and interpersonal levels of monoracism that can persist within an organization:

individuals are not only influenced by institutional monoracism, but also (re)create institutional structures, such as conference sessions and dialogues, that uphold monoracism.” (p.1065)

Thus, it is important to consider both levels when assessing how best to confront and minimize multiracial identity invalidation in the workplace.

**Racial Identity Invalidation as a Process: Outcomes, Mediators, and Moderators**

The previous section described the phenomenon of racial identity invalidation and how it may be experienced by multiracial people specifically. The following sections will expand on this description by explaining the processes that surround invalidation. Thus far, much of the research on racial identity invalidation has explored its effects on the target’s well-being, the mechanisms that contribute to these outcomes, and moderating factors that can exacerbate or mitigate the negative effects. Each of these factors will be discussed in turn (see Figure 2 below).

**Figure 2**

*Outcomes, Mediators, and Moderators of Racial Identity Invalidation*
Outcomes of Racial Identity Invalidation

While the occasional, isolated invalidation incident is not likely to leave lasting effects on a person’s life, it is the pervasiveness of being repeatedly misclassified, questioned, or invalidated that certain nonprototypical group members (e.g., multiracials) experience that can lead to negative psychological outcomes (Campbell & Troyer, 2007; Franco et al., 2016). As with other forms of microinvalidation,

repeated exposure to microaggressions is detrimental to minority mental health because they represent a clash of racial realities between the perpetrator and target, and they create situations in which targets of microaggressions are unsure of whether and how to respond to the incident. (Huynh, 2013, p.1)

Racial identity invalidation has been associated with several negative outcomes for mental health and well-being, including reduced self-esteem and motivation (Franco & O’Brien, 2018; Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011; Sanchez, 2010; Townsend et al., 2009); increased loneliness, depressive symptoms, anxiety, and stress (Albuja, Sanchez, & Gaither, 2019, 2020; Campbell & Troyer, 2007; Franco et al., 2016; Franco & O’Brien, 2018; Salahuddin & O’Brien, 2011; Sanchez, 2010; Townsend et al., 2009); and increased fatalism, suicidal thoughts and attempts (Campbell & Troyer, 2007). These symptoms are not just psychological but can also manifest in physical ways. In a study of bicultural people, Albuja, Gaither, and colleagues (2019) found that identity denial led to physiological stress responses, as measured by a slower return to baseline levels of the stress hormone cortisol, compared to those in the control condition. These intrapersonal outcomes, in turn, are likely to influence other aspects of a person’s life, including how they behave, perform, and interact with others at work. Racial identity invalidation also leads to greater dislike and resentment toward the perpetrator (Trujillo et al., 2015), which may inhibit future intergroup dynamics.
What explains these negative outcomes? Campbell and Troyer (2007) identified three threat mechanisms that occur simultaneously when a person experiences racial identity invalidation: a threat to one’s sense of self, a threat to group identification and social support, and a threat to social status—although this last threat was only partially supported by their findings (p.762). The specific processes related to these threats are described next.

**Mediators**

Researchers posit the following processes as potential mediators in the relationship between multiracial identity invalidation and negative health outcomes: reduced autonomy, increased identity conflict (i.e., reduced identity integration), loss of social belonging, and cultural homelessness.

**Reduced Autonomy.** For multiracial people and others holding dual or multiple identities within the same domain (e.g., bicultural), the forcing of a single monoracial choice or cultural affiliation decreases their sense of autonomy, agency, and freedom in choosing how to self-identify and how they present that identity to others (Albuja, Sanchez, & Gaither, 2019; Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Sanchez, 2010; Townsend et al., 2009). Multiracial people who adopt a malleable racial identity have been found to experience greater life satisfaction and less stress; however, those positive effects are negated when others question, restrict, or invalidate their choice of a fluid identity (Smith, 2014, as cited in Albuja, Sanchez, & Gaither, 2019, p.418). Thus, limiting a person’s sense of agency in how they self-identify can lead to negative health outcomes.

**Identity Integration Conflict.** Invalidation experiences cause people to question their internal self-identity and can disrupt their sense of identity integration, or the extent to which
their multiple identities are seen as compatible instead of conflicting (Albuja et al., 2020; Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Lou et al., 2011). As Albuja, Sanchez, and Gaither (2019) explain:

Because identity denial and questioning experiences often undermine the harmonious dual existence of two cultural or racial identities by forcing people to choose only one or defend their membership, these may lead to fragmented, seemingly oppositional identities. … [Multiracial] people may come to perceive their identities as poorly integrated and highly conflicting if others often treat them as unable to coexist. (p.418)

Among multicultural populations, identity integration has been linked to several positive benefits like increased self-esteem, life satisfaction, psychological adjustment, and creative performance (Cheng et al., 2008; Viki & Williams, 2014; Yampolsky et al., 2013). Reduced identity integration thus means a decrease in those benefits, as well as internal unease from having a less coherent sense of self.

**Reduced Social Belonging.** As a result of the internal questioning and coherence disruptions caused by invalidation experiences, people may feel like they no longer belong to a group, or groups, of which they once believed themselves to be a member (Albuja, Sanchez, & Gaither, 2019; Franco & O’Brien, 2018; Wang et al., 2012). This loss of social belonging can be an internal perception or an overt rejection from a member of the group. Feeling excluded from a group one identifies with can lead to negative psychological, physical, and emotional outcomes (Albuja, Sanchez, & Gaither, 2019; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Wang et al., 2012). Vargas and Stainback (2016) found that racial contestation was associated with significantly lower perceived racial group closeness and racial identity salience. In other words, having one’s racial identity externally invalidated led people to develop:

“thinner” or less personally meaningful racial identities, and lower levels of ethnoracial unity, perhaps as a subconscious strategy to alleviate the stresses of identity incongruence. (Vargas & Stainback, 2016, p.459)
**Cultural Homelessness.** In line with this fragile sense of self, invalidation experiences can also lead to feelings of cultural homelessness. Franco and Franco (2016) define a *cultural home* as a place of belonging, consistency, and acceptance within a community that provides social support, emotional attachment, and meaning (p.534). Absent this sense of a “home,” people may feel alienated and question their identity. Indeed, “[a] culturally homeless individual may identify with multiple groups but experience rejection from all of them” (Franco & Franco, 2016, p.534), leading to a lack of attachment or withdrawal from identifying with *any* group. As social categorization theory would suggest, humans seek group membership as a means of validating their self-worth, image, and connectedness; cultural homelessness robs people of this meaningful belonging. Research suggests that multiracial people experience greater levels of cultural homelessness than do other racial groups (Franco et al., 2016, p.106), and the recurrence of racial identity invalidation within the multiracial population may be partly to blame.

**Moderators**

Past studies have identified moderating factors that can influence racial identity invalidation outcomes. For example, the degree of self-identification with or centrality of the denied identity makes the effects of identity invalidation stronger (Franco et al., 2016; Trujillo et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2012). However, having a strong sense of self and social support from others who affirm the invalidated identity can help to mitigate the effects of invalidation (Campbell & Troyer, 2007; Franco et al., 2016). Factors that can exacerbate the harm caused by invalidation include pre-existing insecurity about one’s identity, having multiple invalidation experiences at once, or being invalidated by an ingroup member (Franco et al., 2016). Beliefs about race being biological rather than socially constructed can also lead to more negative outcomes (Sanchez & Garcia, 2009).
**Social Context.** Campbell and Troyer (2007) suggest that the racial composition of the area in which one lives will influence the probability of invalidation experiences. They explained that American Indian people living in areas with very small American Indian populations would likely be misclassified more often, and thus experience problematic repeated invalidation experiences (Campbell & Troyer, 2007). The same could be expected if an organization is racially homogenous or if there are few other multiracial people represented in the leadership, workforce, or client base. In addition to increasing multiracial visibility within an organization, the presence of racially similar others can also be protective for an individual’s psychological well-being (Sanchez & Garcia, 2009).

**Perpetrator Race.** Researchers have hypothesized that the race of the perpetrator may influence how invalidation is felt by the target. Branscombe and colleagues (1999) suggested that people who are highly identified with their group may feel especially threatened by rejection from ingroup members. Consistent with this suggestion, Franco and colleagues (2016) found that Black multiracial people felt more hurt when their Black identity was invalidated by someone who was also Black. This makes sense, given that part of the pain of invalidation is the feeling of rejection from a social group to which one believes they should belong. Unfortunately, ingroup members—and even family members (Nadal et al., 2013)—are often the perpetrators of racial identity invalidation, which can intensify feelings of cultural homelessness (Franco & Franco, 2016).

**Status Gain or Loss.** Stepanikova (2010) looked at shifts in racial/ethnic status as a possible moderator of the effects of racial miscategorization among monoracial participants. She found that those who were misclassified as a lower-status racial group (i.e., experienced a “status loss” as a result of the miscategorization) were more likely to report physical (e.g., upset
stomach, muscle tension) and emotional symptoms (e.g., anger, frustration); there was no significant difference between those who were correctly classified and those who were misclassified as a higher-status group (Stepanikova, 2010). Franco and O’Brien (2018) also support exploring status-based nuances when considering racial invalidation of multiracial people. They encourage researchers to “incorporate the direction of the invalidation, that is, whether a more privileged or stigmatized identity is being imposed on the Multiracial individual” (Franco & O’Brien, 2018, p.122). The authors explain that a multiracial person who is perceived as White would benefit from that mistaken identity, whereas a multiracial person who is perceived as a person of color would face greater discrimination.

Nevertheless, findings from Campbell and Troyer (2011) do not fully support this assumption. In their study, self-identified American Indians who believed they were perceived as White (i.e., a “high-status” racial group) were more likely to experience poor mental health compared to those who were accurately perceived as American Indian, even though the misclassified group was theoretically experiencing a “status gain” for being seen as White (p.361). Similarly, White respondents who were misclassified as Black (i.e., a “status loss”) showed no significant drops in mental health (Campbell & Troyer, 2011, p.361). In a separate set of studies, Albuja, Sanchez, & Gaither (2019, 2020) found equally negative invalidation effects (e.g., decreased sense of belonging, reduced agency, and resultant depressive symptoms) for both White-biracial people and dual-minority biracial people, suggesting that threats to the self and to group belonging may be more of a factor than perceived racial status loss.

Summary

The existing research on racial identity invalidation provides a helpful understanding of the experience of invalidation itself, its effects on the target’s well-being and sense of self, the
mediating processes through which these effects occur, and potential moderating factors. The present study built on this knowledge by investigating how the process of racial identity invalidation plays out in a workplace context.

Figure 3 presents two newer areas that were of particular interest for this study: work outcomes and responses to invalidation. First, although the proximal effects of identity invalidation on a person’s well-being are now well-documented, more distal work outcomes have yet to be studied. Second, some existing studies have touched on how targets respond to having their identities invalidated, but it is not yet clear what kinds of responses are possible or favored within a workplace setting, which approaches have been found to be most effective, and how a person’s choice of reaction may influence work outcomes. The qualitative data collected in this study will help to fill these gaps. As a starting point, however, I will first review the limited research that exists regarding workplace invalidation and responses to invalidation.

Figure 3

Less-Studied Areas of Invalidation Research: Work Outcomes and Responses

Racial Identity Invalidation in the Workplace

Few studies have focused on multiracial identity invalidation in the workplace context specifically. Yet understanding how and when these microaggressions take place is important for
multiple reasons. Although most coworker relationships are less intimate than family or close friendships, they are also more stable and consequential than interactions with strangers or passing acquaintances, thus making them a prime context for miscategorization and identity invalidation to occur (and stick). The possibility of recurring invalidation experiences is especially likely at work, due to the high frequency of interactions among coworkers who know one another on a less personal basis, and the mere fact that people spend a large portion of their waking hours at work. Negative experiences at work can hinder performance and affect a person’s overall wellbeing, which can then spill over into other areas of life and vice versa.

Given that work is a source of livelihood, it is not always feasible or advisable for a person to escape harmful microaggressions by simply quitting. Instead, it would be helpful to identify productive ways of managing one’s multiracial identity at work and responding to workplace invalidation experiences in ways that reaffirm the person’s identity—and in doing so, perhaps even shifting the workplace culture for the better. To reach that point, further research is needed that explores specifically how and when racial identity invalidation occurs in the workplace, what effects it has on the person and their working relationships, and what strategies exist for dealing with such incidents.

**Multiracial Identity Invalidation in Academia**

A notable exception to the lack of research on workplace multiracial identity invalidation is the work of Jessica C. Harris and her colleagues (Harris, 2017, 2019, 2020; Harris et al., 2021), who interviewed multiracial faculty and campus professionals at non-profit U.S. colleges and universities about how their multiracial identities—and multiracial microaggressions—have influenced their experiences at work. Their findings are summarized below.
**Faculty.** Multiracial faculty spoke of their multiraciality as a double-edged sword that provided knowledge, awareness, and access, yet exposed them to multiracial microaggressions (Harris, 2020; Harris et al., 2021). Several participants noted benefits like bringing openness and a “multiracial consciousness” to their classroom teaching (Harris, 2020, p.233). Lighter-skinned multiracial faculty members shared impressions that their students felt more comfortable with them teaching diversity courses than they did with darker-skinned faculty of color, and many reported being chosen as the “token minority” member on predominantly White department committees (Harris, 2020, p.234). Other times, multiracial faculty reported being denied their racial-minority status (Harris et al., 2021). While some faculty members felt that their multiracial research was celebrated within their departments, others felt that their research endeavors were looked down upon by colleagues who considered their multiracial focus to be “suspicious,” not a valid or legitimate subject to study, and potentially even misaligned with true antiracist work (Harris, 2020, p.233).

**Staff.** Multiracial campus professionals (i.e., employees from various campus offices such as academic affairs, external relations, or financial aid) described experiencing racial authenticity tests, “a form of hazing that aims to assess, through arbitrary understandings, Multiracial peoples’ racial authenticity within monoracial groups” (Harris, 2019, p.96). They recounted times when coworkers challenged the legitimacy of their ancestry or made them feel like inauthentic members of an ethnic group simply because they did not adhere to stereotypes of how a member of that group should look, speak, or behave (Harris, 2019, p.99). To avoid facing such tests, some respondents chose to split their racial identities by life realm (e.g., Black in public, Latina in private), while others took the opposite approach, playing into stereotypes by displaying cultural artifacts (e.g., flags, family photos) in their office or wearing jewelry or attire
that matched the ethnicity they were trying to reassert. Both of these approaches, while serving to buffer against the negative impact of racial identity invalidation, also led the person to present themselves in ways they would not ordinarily choose, which could end up making them feel inauthentic even as they try to protect their true self-identity (Harris, 2019).

In some cases, multiracial campus professionals felt an obligation to confront monoracial structures and provide extra guidance for their multiracial students (Harris, 2017). Yet they also indicated feelings of imposter syndrome and uncertainty over how to engage in racial justice movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM). Not feeling “enough of a POC” led some employees to withdraw from groups and support spaces so as not to “take away space” from communities of color (Harris, 2019, p.101). For campus professionals—whose responsibilities often include creating inclusive environments for students, serving as community leaders, and promoting equity and social justice—it seems that feelings of inauthenticity and invalidation could directly inhibit how well they performed their duties. The absence of multiracial staff and faculty participating in monoracially designed events and spaces might also deter multiracial students from participating, thus perpetuating the cycle of monoracial exclusion.

Overall, for both faculty and campus professionals, the exposure to invalidation and multiracial microaggressions hindered their full engagement and effectiveness at work, due to feelings of self-isolation, inauthenticity, and exhaustion. Harris’s interviews provide insight into the specific ways that multiracial perspectives, knowledge, and physical appearances—along with the prevalence of microaggressions and monoracist structures—can influence a person’s interpersonal and professional experiences within a higher-education academic work setting. The same level of detailed exploration is needed within other industries and organization types to further expand our understanding of multiracial identity invalidation in the workplace.
Responses to Identity Invalidation

Given the potentially undermining effects that invalidation can have, it is important to also consider how people respond to invalidation experiences. The way a person chooses to react to invalidation from coworkers could have consequences for that relationship, one’s self-image and reputation at work, and other career implications. As previously explained, racial identity invalidation creates dissonance between one’s internal sense of identity and how one is perceived. To alleviate this discomfort, people may seek to create alignment, either by trying to change the other person’s perspectives or by adjusting their own (Burke, 1991). The following are response patterns that have previously been noted in studies of identity invalidation.

Avoidance-Oriented Responses

A common response to racial identity invalidation is simply to ignore, deflect, or passively let it go. People who do not react in the moment sometimes do so because they are surprised and do not know how to respond. Or they may choose to do nothing because they believe confronting the perpetrator would either be ineffective or might even lead to negative consequences (Franco et al., 2016). Deflecting an invalidation experience does not mean that the person agrees with what the perpetrator said—they just choose not to respond to it.

To avoid the discomfort associated with having part of one’s identity invalidated, some people may respond by avoiding situations in which invalidation experiences are more likely to occur. This could involve distancing themselves from people of their racial ingroup for fear of rejection (Vargas & Stainback, 2016). Others may respond to invalidation by minimizing the importance they place on their contested racial identity, making it less threatening to their core sense of self. While these avoidant approaches may be protective in the short-term, they come at
the long-term cost of potentially losing out on social connections, belongingness, and a once-meaningful part of their identity.

Finally, a person might respond by “accepting” the invalidation to varying degrees. In some cases, people may internalize the invalidation, questioning their self-identity and adjusting their beliefs in favor of how others see them. This can result in the “thinning” or devaluation of one’s racial identity (Vargas & Stainback, 2016). In other cases, people may bow to the invalidation at surface level only. For example, a multiracial person might outwardly “accept” racial identity invalidation by adopting the monoracial identity that others have imposed on them. This tactic can resolve the external incongruence between one’s self-identity and others’ perceptions, but it does not necessarily resolve the internal conflict one may feel, especially if the adopted identity feels inauthentic.

Harris (2019) describes the irony facing many multiracial people whose mixed heritage goes unvalidated: because multiracial identities are seen as illegitimate, in an effort to appear authentic, they are forced to take on an imposed monoracial identity which is “fundamentally inauthentic” for them (p.94). In some cases, adopting an other-ascribed monoracial identity does not even increase acceptance. For example, Albuja et al. (2018) found that biracial students were perceived as less trustworthy when they presented themselves as monoracial instead of biracial. Code-switching behaviors may also be misinterpreted as attempts at “passing” when in fact, for many multiracial people, this fluidity is just a natural aspect of their multifaceted identity (Clair et al., 2005).

**Approach-Oriented Responses**

In contrast to these avoidant approaches, past research has identified approach-oriented responses that people have taken in the face of identity invalidation. Rather than ignoring or
“accepting” the invalidation, some choose to stand strong, reassert their identity, or seek validation from supportive others.

**Identity Reassertion.** To avoid minimizing the centrality or importance of their multiracial identity, some people combat the threat by reasserting the identity instead (Townsend et al., 2009; Trujillo et al., 2015). People reassert their invalidated identities by standing firm about their choice of identity, providing “evidence” of their family heritage, and challenging stereotypical thinking about what constitutes a race or ethnicity (Franco et al., 2016, p.102). Some forms of identity reassertion involve behaving in ways more consistent with (yet often stereotypical of) their invalidated group, such as by altering their appearance, shopping, and eating habits, or by seeking out ethnicity-focused groups (Harris, 2019; Trujillo et al., 2015).

Confronting identity invalidation instead of deflecting it may help protect a person’s self-esteem by maintaining autonomy and a sense of internal cohesion (Albuja, Gaither, et al., 2019; Franco et al., 2016; Trujillo et al., 2015). Trujillo and colleagues (2015) suspect that repeated identity reassertion may lead to increased identity centrality over time (i.e., behaving in group-relevant ways results in that group membership becoming more central to one’s sense of self), which can help prevent the dilution of one’s racial identity. They also posit that reasserting one’s racial identity may help to reduce the likelihood of future miscategorizations because of the increased transparency about one’s background and authentic self-presentation (Trujillo et al., 2015). Confronting identity invalidation may also have the constructive benefits of educating other people, presenting mixed heritage as an asset rather than a stigma (Clair et al., 2005, p.84), and broadening the conversation around race and diversity, all of which can contribute to the inclusiveness of a team or community (Harris, 2019).
Social Support. Past research on monoracial groups found that people whose identities were invalidated or miscategorized were more likely to seek out identity-affirming social groups or engage in behaviors related to the invalidated culture as a way of reinforcing their connection that identity (Campbell & Troyer, 2007; Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Trujillo et al., 2015). Seeking affirmation from racial ingroup members and others who acknowledge and embrace the person’s self-described multiracial identity can help the person maintain their sense of self in the face of questioning from deniers. In fact, some research suggests that, for multiracial people, the need for social belonging may outweigh other factors (e.g., identity integration) in determining the extent to which invalidation experiences affect their mental health (Albuja, Sanchez, & Gaither, 2019, p.426). Affirmation from members of the denied ingroup are especially important for keeping cultural homelessness and internal identity conflict at bay (Franco & Franco, 2016), as the opinions and validation of ingroup members carry more weight in one’s sense of belonging to that group.

Toward a Model of Multiracial Identity Invalidation at Work

Taken together, the existing literature on racial identity invalidation provides a strong base for thinking about how invalidation may occur for the specific context (workplace) and target population (multiracial workers) of interest for this dissertation. Figure 4 on the next page presents a general structure for conceptualizing the full process: from the initial invalidation incident to its effects on the individual target, their responses, and subsequent work outcomes, with contextual factors kept in mind throughout the process. The current study aimed to build on what is currently known about racial identity invalidation, expanding the model beyond the proximal, intrapersonal outcomes that have been studied to also include more distal, work-related outcomes, such as job satisfaction and coworker relationship quality. Finally, the study
investigated possible responses to workplace invalidation and how those reactions might influence work outcomes, addressing these gaps by learning how the process has unfolded in participants’ lived experiences of workplace multiracial identity invalidation.

Figure 4

A General Model of Multiracial Identity Invalidation in the Workplace

The Present Study

The purpose of this study was to add to our understanding of racial identity invalidation by investigating how it occurs in a workplace context for multiracial people of diverse backgrounds. Through one-on-one interviews with multiracial people working in the United States, this study explored the personal and work-related outcomes of racial identity invalidation experiences, as well as the strategies that people have used in response to invalidation of their multiracial identities. Recruitment for this study aimed to engage participants from different ethnicities and intersecting identities, as well as varied industries, in order to include a range of perspectives beyond those presented in the existing literature.
Research Questions

Specifically, this study aimed to address the following research questions:

1. How do multiracial people experience racial identity invalidation at work?
2. How do multiracial people respond to incidents of racial identity invalidation at work?
3. How does racial identity invalidation affect multiracial employees’ workplace outcomes (e.g., work performance, job satisfaction, coworker relationships, overall well-being)?

While these three original research questions were the main focus of the study, one additional research question (and two related sub-questions) emerged over the course of data collection:

4. What contextual factors (e.g., environmental, personal) influence the process of identity invalidation in the workplace?
   a. What is the role of social support in mitigating the negative effects of identity invalidation on work outcomes?
   b. What can organizations do to better support multiracial employees?
Chapter 3: Method

To explore these research questions, I conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with multiracial participants of diverse backgrounds to understand how they have experienced identity invalidation in their own work lives. This chapter will describe the methods used in this study, including: (a) an overview of the qualitative approach, (b) a researcher-as-instrument reflexivity statement, (c) a description of the participants, (d) the data collection procedure, (e) the data analysis process, and (f) a discussion of research quality and trustworthiness.

First, I will start by acknowledging the theoretical underpinnings and assumptions that informed my qualitative research design and methods. Understanding these perspectives will provide context for how I chose to engage with participants and their narratives and will help to frame the interpretative strategies I used to make meaning out of the resulting data.

Rationale for Qualitative Approach

A qualitative research approach aligned with the aims of this study because it sought an in-depth understanding of people’s experiences, contexts, interpretations, and reactions to the phenomenon of multiracial identity invalidation at work. Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) stated that inductive methods of investigation are especially suitable for studying less-familiar topics or minoritized populations as they allow researchers to explore new possible directions from the ground up, without the need for abundant preexisting knowledge which can sometimes constrain deductive methods. Historically, quantitative data about multiracial individuals has often been obscured (e.g., grouped together into a composite category of “other”) or erased (e.g., dropped from analysis for being too complicated to interpret). Even when studying a topic like racial identity invalidation, some prior studies (e.g., Campbell & Troyer, 2007; Vargas & Stainback, 2016) opted to focus solely on monoracial groups, despite the authors’ acknowledgement that
rates of invalidation may be especially high among the multiracial respondents that were
excluded from their samples. Similarly, much of the existing racial theory and knowledge of
racial microaggressions tends to default to monoracial structures that do not necessarily reflect
the multiracial experience. In contrast, an open-ended, exploratory qualitative design such as the
one used in this study allowed multiracial participants to speak to their lived experiences using
their own words and to their full complexity—rather than forcing them to fit a monoracial
mold—thus enabling new perspectives to expand our understanding of microaggressions and the
role of racial identity in the workplace.

Research Paradigms

Given the complexity of the mixed-race experience—and, in fact, all human
experience—this study adopted a research paradigm blend of constructivism and critical inquiry.
Constructivism presents a worldview in which no single, objective truth exists; instead, reality is
socially constructed by individuals, groups, and cultures, and we come to understand this reality
through interpretation and assigning meaning to events, objects, and interactions (Creswell,
2007, p.20-1). This perspective of reality allows for multiple, complex interpretations and
suggests that, rather than “discovering” the truth, the researcher seeks to co-construct an
understanding of reality based on the participants’ and her own collective interpretations of the
phenomenon in question. This paradigm served my study aims and informed my research design
in the following ways: starting with the need to hear from many diverse perspectives about their
lived experiences and subjective meaning-making (i.e., their truths, not a universal, objective
truth); using open-ended questioning to hear these perspectives in participants’ own words; then
seeking patterns across stories, incidents, and interpretations to highlight the underlying factors
and mechanisms that appear to influence these lived experiences. My intent was to strike a
balance between honoring each person’s unique story and circumstances, while also developing an overarching structure for understanding the broader phenomenon as a whole, which could then allow us to uncover strategies or practical solutions for people to employ in their own lives.

In addition to constructivism, this study also leaned in the direction of critical inquiry, as it attempted to uncover issues facing an underrepresented group, with an eye toward encouraging social change and “empowering human beings to transcend the constraints placed on them” (Creswell, 2007, p.27). This study drew on several elements of critical race theory (CRT) and its offshoot, critical mixed race theory. As outlined by Stefancic and Delgado (2010), below are some of the key tenets of CRT that informed this study. First, the “ordinariness” of racism (and mono-racism) makes it difficult for race-related issues to be acknowledged, understood, and addressed, especially when those in the dominant group have little incentive to assist in enacting changes that would reduce their own power (p.7-8). Second, the concept of race is socially constructed, which makes the division between multiracial and monoracial groups equally constructed, yet nevertheless meaningful. As Stefancic and Delgado (2010) explain,

race and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient. (p.8)

Mixed-race identities draw attention to this social construction, as the mismatch in physical traits typically used as markers of a racial group (e.g., skin tone, hair texture, facial features, etc.) calls into question the legitimacy of these informally held boundary conditions for who does or does not belong to one’s ingroup. Third, CRT emphasizes two points related to specific racial-ethnic groups: the intersectionality of multiple “potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances” (Stefancic & Delgado, p.10), as well as the ways in which certain groups have been differentially racialized, stereotyped, and used to meet
societal needs. Finally, CRT promotes the “voice-of-color thesis” (Stefancic & Delgado, p.10). That is, people of color—and by extension, multiracial people—bring a unique voice to the conversation based on their lived experiences and the histories of their groups: “Minority status, in other words, brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism” (Stefancic & Delgado, p.10).

**Constructivist Grounded Theory**

Informed by these theoretical perspectives, the study followed a *grounded theory* approach to achieve its goal of better understanding the process of identity invalidation at work. The grounded theory methodology offers “a systematic approach to analyzing qualitative data and using them to inductively generate useful theory” (Belgrave & Seide, 2019, p.2). Compared to other qualitative methods that primarily seek to describe the phenomenon of interest, grounded theory takes it one step further by aiming to construct a mid-level theory that explains the interconnected processes or interactions surrounding a core topic (Charmaz, 2017a; Charmaz & Keller, 2016). Thus, a grounded theory method was appropriate for this study because it focused on process (i.e., the “how” or “why” of invalidation experiences in the workplace) and identified possible causal relationships among emergent themes, which could then be empirically tested in future studies (Maxwell, 2013).

Specifically, this study followed Charmaz’s (2014) guidance for a *constructivist* grounded theory (CGT) approach. CGT differs from more classic, objectivist grounded theory perspectives in that it emphasizes the inherent subjectivity and reflexivity of research, viewing the research findings and emergent theory as co-constructed by the participants and researcher. In this way, CGT acknowledges that qualitative data is complex and shaped by both the researcher’s and the participants’ multiple viewpoints, values, roles, relationships, cultures,
personal histories, and the social context in which the research is situated (Charmaz, 2017a; Charmaz & Belgrave, 2019). This acceptance of multiple voices and the value of lived experiences was an important perspective to hold when dealing with the complexities of a multiracial reality. Charmaz (2017b) further suggested that CGT is a helpful method for conducting critical inquiry research on issues of social justice, power dynamics, and inequality to foster social awareness and change (p.40). Moreover, Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) pointed out that CGT methods have been used “for a variety of worthy purposes instead of or in conjunction with theory construction… [including] explicating and understanding a major process,” “illuminating the situations of people denied a public voice,” and identifying “implications for professional practice” (p.306).

Thus, CGT aligned with the underlying paradigms and purpose of this study. The ultimate goal was to consolidate participants’ varied experiences and interpretations into a model of multiracial identity invalidation as it plays out in the workplace, in order to better understand the interacting elements of this process and to identify potential levers that could help to improve outcomes. The choice of a CGT research design then informed my data collection method and data analysis techniques. As will be described later in this chapter, some key elements of the CGT methodology include simultaneous data collection and analysis, use of theoretical sampling and saturation, analytical memo-writing, and coding of the data. Before detailing the specific procedures used in this study, I will first note how my own reflexivity as a researcher influenced the design and implementation of this study.

**Reflexivity: Researcher-as-Instrument Statement**

Unlike experimental studies and quantitative designs that rely on high levels of control, qualitative research embraces subjectivity as an inevitable and potentially useful characteristic to
be acknowledged rather than denied (Maxwell, 2013). Reflexivity requires qualitative researchers to examine how their own backgrounds and positionality may be influencing the study design, data collection, and analysis—a continuous self-reflection process that Charmaz (2017b) calls methodological self-consciousness. Rather than seeking to maintain a false sense of objectivity, Creswell (2007) encourages embracing the subjective, “human” side of qualitative research that invites open, honest, and divergent perspectives to come through—including that of the researcher (p.179). While it would not be possible—nor desirable—to entirely eliminate my influence on this study, what I can do is pay attention to how my personal goals, biases, and assumptions might have affected the overall research design, my interactions with participants, and my subsequent interpretation of the data. To maintain my own authenticity without unduly biasing participants, disclosing my positionality as the researcher was key.

Role of the Researcher

My interest and motivation for studying the topic of identity invalidation is largely influenced by my own experiences as a mixed-race person. I am a first-generation American of Indonesian, Chinese, and Swedish-Finnish heritage. Yet, due to my predominantly European phenotype, the Asian side of my identity has often remained hidden and, once revealed, been met with surprise, disbelief, or denial by others. My apparent whiteness has afforded me many privileges, and by that same token, I have not personally faced the same kinds of discrimination that my Indonesian mother or other monoracial Asian relatives or peers have. Nevertheless, a recurring theme in my personal narrative has been that of racial identity invalidation—the unsettling incongruence between my self-view and how others perceive and treat me. My multiracial identity has variably been embraced, ignored, and disputed at different points in my professional and academic life. While I have felt the most engaged and authentic when those
around me acknowledge and honor my multiracial perspective, I have also experienced exhaustion and doubt from being repeatedly told by others—including those in authority positions—that how I self-identify is somehow “wrong.”

Assumptions

These experiences and my ever-evolving racial identity development led me to this topic of study. My personal background offered some benefits as a researcher: it gave me empathy for and curiosity about other people’s multiracial identity stories, and having shared experiences helped me build rapport and trust with interviewees. However, my vested interest in the subject also introduced bias in the way that I approached the topic in this study. In particular, my personal experience has led me to hold the following assumptions:

1. Discrepancies in how one self-identifies and how one is perceived by others can cause discomfort and unease.

2. Holding a hidden identity can be cognitively distracting, especially when that identity is relevant yet not recognized by others in a social interaction.

3. It does not always feel safe or acceptable to claim a multiracial identity in this society, as doing so may lead to judgment, distrust, or being labeled as a fraud.

4. Invalidation of one’s identity often leads to self-silencing or having one’s voice silenced by others.

5. When a person’s full, authentic self is recognized and accepted by others, they have the freedom, agency, and openness to share their full range of perspectives, knowledge, and expertise.

6. This sense of completeness is beneficial to both the individual, their team, and their wider organization.
Although several of these assumptions are supported by the literature, they do not necessarily reflect the reality experienced by all people with unvalidated multiracial identities. Laying out these personal assumptions at the start of the research process kept me aware of how I was entering into conversations with participants and encouraged me to stay open and curious about narratives that diverged from these initial assumptions.

**Researcher Relationship to Participants**

At the start of each interview, I disclosed my own cultural background and acknowledged that others tend to perceive me as White based on my appearance and last name. As part of this disclosure, I emphasized that while I myself had first-hand experience with this topic, I also knew that everyone’s story would be different, and I expressed gratitude and excitement to hear their own perspectives on the matter. During the conversations, I generally tried to refrain from sharing my own experiences so that participants could freely express their own. Some exceptions included moments when I felt that sharing would help to increase comfort or rapport, or instances where raising our conflicting perspectives allowed us to dig deeper into a subject with curiosity around what might account for those differences.

Throughout the research process, I kept memos about my internal thoughts, reactions, feelings, and interpretations, so that I could remain vigilant about how my own assumptions may have been coloring how I interacted with participants or how I viewed the data. I also engaged in various member checks with participants and consulted with my dissertation advisor and trusted peers throughout the analysis process, as a way of inviting alternative perspectives to keep my own biases in check. These steps will be further elaborated later in the chapter.

Having acknowledged my reflexivity as a biracial researcher, I will now turn to describing my “co-contributors” in this research—that is, the multiracial study participants.
Participants

Rather than seeking representativeness of the entire population, this study employed \textit{purposive sampling} to target the specific kinds of people (i.e., multiracial adults who have experienced racial identity invalidation while at work) who would be best able to speak to and contribute to my research questions (Maxwell, 2013; Seidman, 2006). Furthermore, instead of focusing my research on just one subset of the multiracial population (e.g., specific ethnicities, or only biracial people) or one specific industry, I invited participants of diverse backgrounds with the intent of including a wide range of perspectives from which to draw similarities and comparisons. In other words, this sampling technique sought \textit{maximum variation} in order to “produce information-rich cases” (Morrow, 2005, p.255).

Determining how much data is “enough” in a qualitative study is notoriously challenging to assess. Williams and Morrow (2009) argued that the commonly cited goals of \textit{redundancy} (i.e., no new insights gleaned with each additional interview) or \textit{theoretical saturation} (i.e., “themes or categories that are fully fleshed out and that reflect the depth and complexity of human life,” p.578) are unlikely to ever be achieved in \textit{any} study, given the complexity and diversity of the human experience. Similarly, Morrow (2005) explained that striving for a particular sample size does not make sense for most qualitative research—although she herself often aims for around 20 to 30 participants (p.255)—and said that such goals are typically used as a way of appeasing quantitative and post-positivist norms. Instead, she asserted that “what is far more important than sample size are sampling procedures; quality, length, and depth of interview data, and variety of evidence” (Morrow, 2005, p.255). Thus, for my sample, I aimed to collect as much rich data from as diverse perspectives as possible, with the goal of theoretical saturation as a guide.
**Eligibility Criteria**

All participants met the following inclusion criteria. First, they all self-identified as multiracial, mixed-race, or biracial. Second, all participants were adults (i.e., at least 18 years old) with at least two years of experience working in the United States. The purpose of this requirement was twofold: first, participants must have accumulated ample experience interacting with others in a workplace setting to be able to speak to unique incidents; second, it was helpful for all participants to have had exposure to a similar racial context, at least on a national level, even though regional differences and variability in individual perspectives were expected.

Finally, participants were asked to indicate, from a short list of items, which invalidation experiences (e.g., being racially miscategorized by coworkers) they had experienced while in the context of work. The lived experiences of multiracial people vary greatly, and not every mixed-race person is expected to have had their racial identity challenged; however, because the phenomenon of identity invalidation was of central focus to this study, respondents were only considered eligible if they indicated that they had some experience with invalidation at work and that they were willing to speak about those experiences. For a complete list of the questionnaire items used to determine participant eligibility, see Appendix A.

**Recruitment**

Multiple channels were used to recruit participants. First, I shared the study information and flyer (see Appendix B) with several online groups and organizations centered around multiracial issues and community; for confidentiality, the names of these organizations are not included here. Members of such groups were expected to be both aware of and passionate about their own racial identities, to have thought about their experiences as multiracial people, and to thus be more able—and willing—to provide detailed examples and insights from their own lives.
The hope was that participating in these interviews would be both interesting and self-reflective for the participants, while also yielding richer data for the study.

A second round of recruitment was performed through social media platforms (e.g., LinkedIn, Facebook) and an online message board for my college community. In addition to posting the study information to my own social media, I also asked peers in my doctoral program to share the information with their networks. Finally, I used snowball sampling to reach a wider audience by asking past interviewees to refer other mixed-race connections who might be interested in participating in the study.

According to participant self-reports of how they found out about the study, the most common source was direct referral (n = 8), followed by messages from mixed-race organizations or groups (n = 7), then social media (Facebook, n = 2; LinkedIn, n = 2) and the college message board (n = 2).

**Participant Demographics**

In total, 21 multiracial people participated in this study, representing diverse backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, geographic region, and industry. To preserve participant confidentiality, the demographic characteristics of these 21 people are presented in aggregate (see Table 1 on page 48), rather than individually. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 73 years (\( M = 36.6, SD = 11.9 \)), with about half of the participants being in their 30s (n = 12, 57.1%). Over half of the participants identified as female (n = 13, 61.9%), while 28.6% identified as male (n = 6) and 9.5% identified as non-binary (n = 2). Notably, nearly all of the participants indicated having some White lineage as part of their mixed-race identity (n = 19; 90.5%), although this did not always translate into White-presenting phenotypes or the ability to pass for White. Based on each person’s description of their parents’ racial identities, two thirds of the participants (n = 14)
could be classified as biracial, while one third of the participants (n = 7) described coming from a multigenerational mixed-race family and/or having three or more racial heritages represented within their own racial identity.

In addition to the demographic characteristics listed in Table 1, participants were also invited to share other identities of importance to them, which ten participants opted to do. Of the identities mentioned, some related to: sexual orientation (n = 7); family or caregiving roles (n = 5); religion (n = 4); chronic illness, disability, or neurodiversity (n = 3); student status (n = 2); and socio-economic status (n = 1).

In terms of occupation, the majority of participants worked in urban areas (n = 16, 76.2%) and had at least ten years of experience working in the U.S. (n = 14, 66.7%). Participants described current and past work roles across a variety of fields and industries including the areas of education, healthcare, research, and retail (see Table 1 for a more complete list). Most participants described at least one current or past work role that related directly (n = 12) or indirectly (n = 7) to social justice and DEI. Possible implications related to these trends within the sample are discussed in Chapter 5.
Table 1

Summary of Participant Demographics

Racial Categories Represented
- Asian or Asian American (n = 12)
- Black or African American (n = 11)
- Hispanic or Latino/a/x (n = 5)
- Native American, American Indian, or Indigenous (n = 5)
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (n = 2)
- Southwest Asian, North African, or Middle Eastern (n = 2)
- White, European, or European American (n = 19)

Ethnicities Represented
- Mixed European American (n = 6), African American (n = 3), Chinese (n = 3), Italian (n = 3), Japanese (n = 3), Mexican (n = 3), Afro-Caribbean (origin not specified; n = 2), Filipino (n = 2), Guyanese (n = 2), Indian (n = 2), Native American (origin not specified; n = 2); the following were indicated by one participant each: Amerindian, Arab, Ashkenazi Jewish, Basque, Cherokee, English, French, German, Haitian, Hawaiian, Indo-Caribbean, Indonesian, Iranian, Irish American, Jamaican, Korean, Malaysian Chinese, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Puerto Rican, Slovakian, Spanish, Trinidadian, Welsh

Gender
- Female (n = 13), Male (n = 6), Non-binary (n = 2)

Age
- Range: 22 to 73 years (M = 36.6, SD = 11.9)
- 20-29 years (n = 4), 30-39 years (n = 12), 40-49 years (n = 2), 50 and above (n = 3)

Languages Spoken
- Primary: English (n = 21), Spanish (n = 2)
- Secondary: Spanish (n = 5), French (n = 3); the following were indicated by one person each: Bahasa Indonesia, Chinese, Danish, Farsi, German, Korean

Nationality
- U.S.A. (n = 19), including one person with dual citizenship
- British (n = 1), Guyanese (n = 1), Iranian (n = 1)

Geographic Region
- Northeast (n = 8), West Coast (n = 7), Midwest (n = 2), Mid-Atlantic (n = 1), Southwest (n = 1), South (n = 1); Northern Europe (n = 1)

Workplace Setting
- Urban (n = 16), Suburban (n = 3)
- Other: suburban coastal (n = 1), combination rural/suburban and urban settings (n = 1)

Work Experience in the U.S.
- 2-5 years (n = 2), 6-9 years (n = 5), Over 10 years (n = 14)

Work Industry
- Administration, community development, DEI, design, healthcare, higher education, hospitality, language education, mental health, outdoor education, philanthropy, publishing, research, retail, spirituality, teaching, technology, writing, youth services

Notes. N = 21 total participants. All participants self-identified as multiracial and thus represented more than one race and ethnicity. Unless otherwise noted, the geographic regions listed above refer to areas of the United States. Several participants mentioned more than one overlapping job type or industry, so they are listed here without frequencies.
Data Collection Procedure

Data collection occurred from July to December 2022. The two main sources of data were: (a) an online questionnaire requesting demographic and work-history information, and (b) individual, semi-structured interviews with participants about their lived experiences being multiracial in the workplace. Each step of the data collection process is described in greater detail below.

Pilot Testing of Materials

Prior to the start of data collection, an informal pilot test of the study materials was conducted to ensure the clarity, logic, and flow of the questions asked in both the online questionnaire and the interview protocol.

Questionnaire. Two people outside of the study assisted me with testing multiple iterations of the questionnaire to help determine the optimal length, formatting, and language, and to identify possible points of confusion. The questionnaire was tested on both computers and mobile devices, as well as on multiple internet browsers.

Interview Protocol. The interview protocol was reviewed by two faculty advisors and one advanced doctoral student with background in organizational psychology and social identity research. To further refine the interview protocol, I posed the questions to myself (a biracial person) to see how they would land, how I might choose to respond if I were a participant, and which questions would feel difficult to answer. Then, to ensure that my initial set of questions was not solely informed by my own anecdotal experience and assumptions, I also conducted a pilot interview with a mixed-race family member. Charmaz (2015) recommends such pre-testing, particularly when the subject matter might be considered sensitive.
The aim of this pilot interview was to learn from the tester’s experience of being interviewed, to gain additional perspectives on the interview protocol, and to evaluate both the wording and flow of the interview questions as well as the ideal length of the interview. Although the pilot tester had initially perceived 90 minutes to be quite long, he noted that the experience went by more quickly than anticipated, and he suspected that other participants might actually want a longer time to discuss their experiences. To balance this initial perception of length with the potential subsequent desire for more time, I used a range of “60 to 90 minutes” when describing the time commitment required for interview participation. As will be discussed in a later section (see page 52), many of the interviews ended up lasting the full 90 minutes or even longer. Interview questions were added, removed, reordered, or rephrased based on feedback from this pilot test and the earlier rounds of review.

**Pre-Study Questionnaire**

Prospective participants first completed a brief online questionnaire to determine their eligibility for participating in the study. After completing the five eligibility items, respondents received an automatic message indicating whether or not they met the criteria for participation (i.e., identified as multiracial, were at least 18 years old, had at least 2 years of work experience in the United States, had experienced multiracial identity invalidation while at work, and were willing to discuss these personal experiences in an interview). Respondents who did not meet these criteria—and were thus not eligible to participate—were thanked for their time and invited to contact me if they had any questions or believed they were incorrectly rejected.

Eligible respondents received additional information about what participation would entail and were asked to review and sign a digital copy of the informed consent (see Appendix C), which they could also download for their records. Interested participants were then asked to
respond to an additional set of 19 open-ended items, which included demographic and work-related items (e.g., gender, nationality, current industry, and work setting), contact information (i.e., full name and email address), and their preferred alias or pseudonym. Finally, participants were prompted to schedule an interview time. See Appendix A for a full list of questionnaire items and messaging. The questionnaire was distributed through the online survey tool Qualtrics.

A total of 39 people responded to the online questionnaire during the data collection period. Four of those respondents did not qualify for the study because they had fewer than two years of work experience in the U.S. or were younger than 18 years old; none of these four respondents contested their eligibility. Eleven other respondents, who did qualify for the study, failed to complete the full questionnaire and/or did not sign the informed consent, and thus were not included in the study. Finally, three of the remaining 24 eligible respondents did not ultimately complete the interview portion of the study. Thus, the final sample size for this study (i.e., people who completed both the full questionnaire and the individual interview) was 21 participants.

**Interviews**

I conducted an individual interview with each participant using an open-ended, semi-structured, and responsive approach (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This method of interviewing allowed me to stay flexible and adjust my questions in response to what a participant has said, thus fostering an open, conversational style of interviewing that allowed us to explore areas of interest and importance to the participants that may not have been covered in the original interview guide (Charmaz, 2015; Gioia et al., 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The purpose of the interviews was to understand the experiences, contextual circumstances, and inner thought
processes of diverse multiracial people as they navigated their multiracial identities and invalidation experiences in the workplace.

The interviews ranged in length from 62 to 144 minutes ($M = 93.1; SD = 22.4$). All interviews were conducted virtually using the online video conferencing platform Zoom. The interviews were audio and video recorded for ease of transcription. Although most people had their video cameras on during the interviews, three participants opted to conduct the interview without video (i.e., audio only) for personal or technological reasons. When scheduling an interview time slot, I recommended that participants choose a quiet location where they could be alone and free of interruptions, both for their own privacy and comfort, as well as to avoid picking up any background voices in the recording.

**Interview Protocol.** The interview sessions were structured with an opening script at the start to frame the discussion and a close-out script at the end to wrap it up (Charmaz, 2015).

*Opening.* After the initial greetings, I began each interview by briefly explaining the research topic, then introducing myself in terms of academic and cultural background. I felt that it was important to disclose my own mixed-race identity, both for transparency around my own interest in the subject and to instill a sense of baseline understanding around the shared mixed experience. Next, I reiterated key information from the informed consent (e.g., confidentiality, recording, ability to withdraw from the study at any time, deidentification and aliases, how the data will be used) and answered any questions that the participant had about the study.

*Interview Questions.* Initially, the interview questions were sequenced in a way that started with general questions about the person’s self-identity (e.g., “Please share a bit about your cultural or ethnic background”) and their current work context (e.g., “What is your organization like? Do you work closely with other people?”) as a way of easing them into the
conversation while also covering essential elements of their context. I then asked the participant to talk about how they have noticed their multiracial identity showing up in their work life (e.g., “How does being multiracial contribute to your work?”) This question was intentionally left open-ended so that participants could feel free to take it in multiple directions.

As part of this discussion around their experiences with being mixed-race at work, I asked participants to share specific examples of interactions with coworkers that stood out to them, such as times when they had disclosed their mixed-race identity to others, instances of being racially miscategorized at work, or moments when their cultural or ethnic identity was called into question. Through these specific examples, we explored how the encounters affected their emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and relationships with those involved in each incident. I asked the participant to share as many different examples as they felt comfortable sharing and prompted them to consider patterns across these incidents and their own responses. In addition, I asked the participant to describe some elements of the context (e.g., demographic composition of their organization or team) as factors that may have contributed to how the interactions unfolded. Participants were also invited to share their own suggestions for how organizations could better support multiracial employees.

Appendix D contains the complete interview guide used at the outset of the study. It should be noted, however, that the responsive nature of the interview style meant that this guide was not always followed in its entirety, and I instead allowed the conversations to flow more organically based on the narrative of each participant. Moreover, I adjusted the order of questions and changed the phrasing of some of the individual questions in subsequent interviews, based on what seemed to resonate best with earlier participants. For example, after the first few interviews, I noticed that some of the initial questions about the person’s current work
environment did not prove as useful as originally thought; they were intended to set the context for examples that participants would share, but in many cases, the participants instead spoke of earlier jobs or experiences within other work contexts. Moreover, participants seemed to have energy and enthusiasm for diving straight into the identity-related content, so my initial concern over the need to establish comfort first was unfounded. At the same time, certain questions that came up organically in earlier interviews (e.g., "What are some of the advantages of being multiracial at work?") were added as essential questions in subsequent ones.

I adjusted the flow of questions accordingly in later interviews, starting with general questions about the person’s self-identity and their perceptions of how being mixed-race has influenced their approach to work, then following up with more specific questions about: their stance on identity disclosure; memorable identity-related interactions with coworkers; aspects of their personal history and work context (e.g., power dynamics, tokenism, relevance of identity to the work) that may have influenced their experiences; and any recommendations they had for how organizations could better support multiracial employees. Thus, rather than adhering closely to the initial interview guide, I simply made sure to ask about these few main areas of inquiry in whatever way felt natural to the flow of the interview conversation, then used follow-up probes—either new or from the original guide—to glean further information about those topics. This process matched the advice of Charmaz (2014) and Morrow (2005), who explained that fewer, broader, open-ended interview questions tend to yield more meaningful, deeper stories, as compared to asking a series of several pre-set interview questions.

**Closing.** Toward the end of the 90-minute period—or after the participant had answered all of my pre-set questions, if that occurred sooner—I made space for the participant to ask or share anything else that had been on their mind related to the topic of being multiracial in the
workplace. In most cases, I ended the interview by asking participants how they now felt about their multiracial identities, given our conversation. I then shared what they could expect in terms of next steps (e.g., how soon the transcription would be available for their optional review) and asked the participant if they had any other questions or final thoughts. To close, I thanked them for their time and encouraged them to reach out by email if anything else came to mind after the interview. I sent a follow-up email to each participant reiterating information from the closing and attached a brief list of support resources.

**Transcription.** The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. First, I used the Otter.ai automated voice-to-text software to create an initial transcription. Then, I reviewed and edited the transcription myself while listening to the audio recordings and referring back to moments in the video recording when needed (e.g., when it appeared that participants were making gestures that did not translate into sound). For each transcript, I completed two rounds of review. This process helped me to catch earlier errors and to fill in gaps in speech that may have previously been difficult to discern but became clearer after repeated listening. It also provided the added benefit of familiarizing myself more deeply with the data—what Morrow (2005) called *immersion*.

All names and other identifying information were removed from the transcripts or replaced with more general descriptors (e.g., “Person A,” “large northeastern city”), and the participants’ own names were replaced with their chosen aliases. For transparency and participant validation, each person was given the opportunity to review their own deidentified transcript. Of the 21 participants, 11 opted to view their transcripts, and three of them provided comments.
**Narrative Summaries.** Finally, while each interview was still fresh in my mind, I wrote a brief summary of the conversation as a way to recall the major points, key insights, and context of that person’s particular narrative (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Maxwell (2013) cautioned that relying only on coded fragments of a transcript could lead a researcher to miss out on certain insights that are only apparent when viewing the interview as a whole (p.112-113). Thus, interview summary memos were written to help me maintain the overall narrative and coherence of each interview prior to breaking them down as part of the process of coding the transcripts.

**Data Analysis Strategy**

The following sections outline the steps taken to analyze the interview data. As is typical with grounded theory and the constant comparative method, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously and iteratively, rather than sequentially or linearly (Belgrave & Seide, 2019; Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). As such, initial findings and “hunches” sometimes informed changes to my subsequent data collection (e.g., adding, dropping, or modifying interview questions), and earlier transcripts were revisited whenever newly added codes were deemed important to the model. Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) explained that this “iterative process of data collection and analysis” allows researchers to “sequentially focus on the most significant issues in the field of study [and] steadily focus on developing concepts about the data and to gather further data that flesh out their nascent concepts” (p.306-7), thus aiding in the development of an emergent theory or model.

Although the data collection and analysis steps occurred in an organic, cyclical, and overlapping fashion, for the purpose of clarity, each step will be described below as distinct phases. The data analysis procedure involved three main activities: (a) analytic memo writing, (b) coding of the interview data, and (c) consultation with participants and outside experts.
Analytic Memo Writing

Throughout the research process, I engaged in reflective journaling and analytic memo-writing to document my thoughts, reactions, questions, and decisions regarding the study design, data collection, and ongoing analysis. Some examples of topics that I wrote about in these memos included: reflections on specific stories or statements from participants that surprised or confounded me; thoughts on specific terminology used by participants; patterns and contradictions across interviews or even within the same interview; considerations for how I might approach future interviewees differently; and emerging hunches about what elements might be most important in influencing the process of identity invalidation in the workplace, as well as how or why that process might look different for different people.

In such examples, the process of memo writing served both to maintain a written record of interesting incidents, concepts, and questions, as well as to help me begin to unravel those paradoxes or questions to make sense of how they fit into the overall picture. Given my own personal connection to the topic of this study, journaling also offered me the opportunity to work through some of my own emotional reactions to different interview experiences, such as noting when (and with whom) I felt deep resonance with what a participant had said and other times when their statements might have felt uncomfortable or challenged my own understanding of invalidation. Making note of these discrepancies was important for maintaining reflexivity and reminding me to take all perspectives into account as valid and important, even those that might differ from my own.

Although they were not formally coded like the interview transcripts, these memos—and the narrative profiles mentioned earlier—were also considered part of the overall body of data and were revisited throughout the study as a way of catalyzing thought (Morrow, 2005). These
memos were helpful not only as a way of getting some of my own ideas and preliminary notions out of my head and down on paper, but also served as an “intermediate step between coding and writing the first draft of a paper, including provisional analysis” (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021, p.307). Memos later in the analysis process allowed me to note where certain codes or categories did not quite “fit” and to reconsider how they might relate to the whole. They also acted as a reference for questions that I wanted to consult with my peers and advisor about when asking for their feedback along the way.

Coding of the Interview Data

In addition to memo-writing, the bulk of the data analysis occurred through coding, which Charmaz describes as a “heuristic device for engaging with the data and beginning to take them apart analytically” (Charmaz & Keller, 2016, p.15). Written interview transcripts were coded using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software. Although researchers (e.g., Belgrave & Seide, 2019; Saldaña, 2021) have written about the merits and drawbacks of both manual versus computer-assisted qualitative data analysis, I chose to use NVivo for its ease of managing, organizing, and rearranging data and codes in relation to one another, especially since the iterative nature of concurrent data collection and analysis meant that codes, categories, and the hierarchical groupings of my data changed as I went along in the process.

The data analysis procedure involved three main coding phases: initial, focused, and theoretical (Belgrave & Seide, 2019). First, I performed initial coding of the transcripts, drawing out key phrases and themes in the participants’ own words. Second, I performed focused coding on these initial codes by highlighting the most important, central categories around which other themes could be organized. Third, I employed theoretical coding to emphasize the interrelationships of these key categories, then created a comprehensive model to visually display
the findings. The coding techniques I used in each of these phases were informed by guidance from the texts of Charmaz (2014) and Saldaña (2021).

**Initial Coding.** In this initial first phase of coding, which is also sometimes referred to as *open coding* or *first-cycle coding*, the aim was to break down the transcript into smaller excerpts of data that could be labeled and subsequently compared to other coded units of data (Saldaña, 2021). Fragmenting the data in this way made it easier to notice patterns and recurring themes across all interviews. The goal of initial coding was to closely examine the data, remaining open to whatever directions they might indicate, which would then inform subsequent data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2014, p.114). As Charmaz (2015) explained, “Coding provides a way of recognizing participants’ tacit knowledge, meanings, and actions to explore in further data collection,” thereby providing “the skeleton of an analysis” (p.1615).

For the first two interview transcripts, I followed several researchers’ advice to engage in line-by-line coding of early data, in order to “open up” the data and think about each piece analytically from the very beginning (Belgrave & Seide, 2019; Charmaz, 2014, 2015; Charmaz & Keller, 2016; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). This step was helpful for getting a sense of how participants spoke of their own experiences, so as not to impose my own language too early on in the process. However, this detailed, line-by-line coding process quickly made my list of codes difficult to manage, yielding more than 150 initial codes and nearly 300 individual references, all from just two transcripts. Thus, after coding these first two interviews, I began organizing the long list of codes (e.g., merging similar codes and collapsing them under higher-level categories) to simplify the list and make it more useable. Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) agreed that line-by-line coding is helpful at the start of a study but could be stopped “[a]fter seeing how your codes coalesce and identifying which are the most important” (p.308).
From there, I coded the rest of the interview transcripts using a more flexible approach, breaking the transcripts into fragments of varying lengths depending on what made intuitive sense as a unit; sometimes this was a phrase, sometimes a sentence, sometimes a whole paragraph or incident (e.g., a story about one incident of workplace invalidation). I allowed myself to assign multiple codes to the same piece of text when needed. I used a combination of applying existing codes from previous interviews and creating new codes to match the new data. After finishing each transcript, I reviewed the list of new initial codes to see if they could be combined or subsumed into any of the existing codes or categories. This served to keep the list manageable and to highlight on an ongoing basis which codes were emerging as the most common and possibly the most important ones, which helped in developing the emergent theory as I continued with data collection.

At this stage, I coded everything regardless of how tangential the information appeared to be (e.g., “childhood friendships,” “family upbringing,” “dating preferences”), to remain open to the possibility that they may emerge as important later in the analysis process after collecting more data. When possible, I used *in vivo* codes (i.e., phrases or words taken directly from what a participant said) and *gerund phrases* (i.e., the noun form of verbs ending in “-ing”) to maintain the meaning held by action words, which can sometimes get lost when using other more static noun forms (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2021). Other times, for simplicity and to aid in quickly being able to find, code, and sort the data, I used shorter overarching terms (e.g., “invalidation incident,” “name,” “skin tone”) to capture the essence of the piece of data, which could then be further broken down into specific sub-codes later, as needed. For example, one emergent theme that recurred across interviews was the topic of affinity groups or employee resource groups (ERGs). To capture participants’ experiences with this topic, I coded participants’ statements...
under an umbrella category called “ERG.” However, the list of sub-codes within that category (e.g., “being in a mixed group or community space,” “being careful when joining a Black ERG,” “joining all the groups,” “being rejected from groups,” “desire for a mixed group”) provided greater nuance about the differing perspectives and experiences that participants shared within the overarching topic of ERGs.

**Focused Coding.** As patterns in the data began to appear through rounds of initial coding and comparisons between data points, incidents, and codes, I noted which codes appeared to be the most central to the emerging storyline in the data. As Charmaz and Thornberg (2021) described, these focused codes “account for more data than other codes, subsume related codes” and “help to generate tentative analytic categories, which you then pursue” in future data collection to see if they “hold up” or if something else might better explain what is going on (p.308). Identifying these focused codes around which to group other codes enabled me to see how the related concepts compared to one another and how they might fit together. This process also prompted me to consider what additional data might be helpful to collect (i.e., theoretical sampling) to get a clearer understanding of those emergent categories and what they entail.

**Theoretical Coding and Model Development.** This final phase of coding—which other authors have described more specifically by the component parts of *axial coding* and *selective coding*—involved determining how these important categories (i.e., focused codes) related to one another, then developing a model to visually represent this interconnectedness. The end result was a comprehensive theoretical model of the phenomenon of interest (i.e., multiracial identity invalidation in workplace) that was developed inductively from the data collected in the study. In answering the research questions, this model outlined the various dimensions of identity invalidation experiences, responses, and related work outcomes, while also incorporating other
themes that emerged from the data that were not originally conceptualized at the start of the study. To ensure that the model had resonance with other people, I then shared this working model with a few select peers and participants, making adjustments based on their feedback.

**Peer and Participant Validation**

Given that I had completed all of the transcription, coding, and synthesis of the data on my own, based on my in-depth familiarity with the interview content, it was important for me to then invite outside perspectives on my findings. I sought feedback from a handful of trusted individuals in order to challenge my initial interpretations and attempt to counter any biases or blind spots that could have affected my resultant model. To do so, I employed a combination of member checks with select participants and collaboration with certain program colleagues, thus inviting feedback from both “insiders” (i.e., participants) and “outsiders” (i.e., faculty committee and a knowledgeable peer).

**Peer Feedback.** In addition to working closely with my faculty advisor, I also consulted with a trusted peer from my doctoral program who has expertise in organizational psychology, DEI, and social identity work. I shared my key findings, model, and an overview of my coding structure, requesting her feedback on aspects such as: the language used to describe categories and their dimensions; whether the proposed structure and interrelationships among themes made logical sense; what gaps or alternative interpretations might exist; and any questions, surprises, or points of confusion that stood out to her. Through these discussions, we were able to streamline certain relationships, incorporate elements that had previously been missing in the model, and present the diagram in a more logical and visually understandable way.

**Member Checks.** Although member checking is not an essential component of the constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014), I chose to share my initial
findings and model with a small number of study participants to gauge whether the collective findings resonated with their own personal experiences. Birt and colleagues (2016) suggested that member checking of the final, synthesized data from the entire sample—rather than individual participant data—could be helpful in grounded theory research as a way “to validate results by seeking disconfirming voices (objectivism), yet it also provides opportunity for reflection on personal experiences and creates opportunities to add data (constructivism)” (p.1805). As such, I shared the comprehensive model with three study participants and asked them to reflect on these questions:

1. Where do you see yourself in this model? Which parts resonate the most with your personal story?
2. What surprises you about these findings?
3. What, if anything, is missing from this model?

The purpose of sharing at this stage was to check for resonance (i.e., could they see their own story in the model?) rather than for accuracy, as it would not be realistic to expect any one person’s experience to completely align with every piece of the composite model, given that it combines aspects of several people’s divergent experiences and responses. At the end of the study, I shared a final summary of findings with all 21 participants, again inviting them to reach out with any questions, feedback, or additional stories.

**Quality and Trustworthiness**

Finally, to conclude this chapter, I will discuss how the methodological choices and steps described above contributed to the overall quality and trustworthiness of the study. Although a consistent set of best practices around standards of quality (also referred to as validity, credibility, rigor, or trustworthiness; Morrow, 2005) in qualitative research have yet to be
established (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021, p.312), Williams and Morrow (2009) highlighted three main areas of trustworthiness that all qualitative researchers should strive to address: integrity or adequacy of the data, the balance between participant and researcher perspective, and the clear articulation of findings (p.577).

**Adequacy of the Data**

First, it is important for researchers to collect “sufficient quality and quantity of data” (Williams & Morrow, 2009, p.578) and to interpret that data using the appropriate analytical approach (Morrow, 2005). I aimed to achieve this level of sufficiency by seeking to gather “rich data” through in-depth interviews and maximum-variation sampling, which helped to ensure that a “diversity of demographics or viewpoints” were included and honored (Williams & Morrow, 2009, p.578). In addition, to the best of my ability, I have tried to clearly outline my data collection and analysis procedures so that others can understand how I came to my findings and could potentially replicate my process in future studies. I have also sought to achieve adequacy of interpretation through “immersion in the data” (Morrow, 2005, p.256), such as by repeated readings of the interview transcripts and reviewing my own notes and analytic memos, as well as by using “thick description” in relaying participants’ quotes in support of findings. The use of theoretical sampling and the constant comparison method also added to the quality of my findings, as this iterative process helped to keep my data relevant and increasingly analytical as I progressed through the research (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021, p.309).

**Balance of Perspectives**

Given the co-constructive nature of this study, it was important for me to strike a balance between participant meaning (i.e., their stories, interpretations, and ways of understanding) and researcher interpretation (i.e., how I have interpreted their words and synthesized meaning

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across interviews). To achieve this balance, I used a combination of approaches. First, I engaged in self-reflective memo-writing to make my thought processes, reactions, and assumptions explicit, and to help me “stay attuned to [my] own perspectives in ways that help [me] recognize [my] own experiences as separate from the participants’ stories” (Williams & Morrow, 2009, p.579). Second, as previously described, I included multiple member checks and consulted with “external auditors” (i.e., peers and advisors) at various points in the research. Third, when describing the study findings in the next chapter, I aimed to represent perspectives from the entire sample of participants, including quotes and paraphrased statements that highlighted their individual interpretations, while also tying together their diverging narratives with the overarching model.

**Clear Communication and Application of Findings**

Finally, researchers must be able to “clearly communicate what [they] have found and why it matters” (Williams & Morrow, 2009, p.580), which I have attempted to do in Chapters 4 and 5, respectively. In Chapter 4, I break down my findings into digestible pieces that answer my research questions in a logical order, accompanied by a visual model to help readers follow along. I also incorporate direct quotations and examples from the participant interviews to illustrate these findings. In Chapter 5, I contextualize these findings within existing literature and theory, placing particular emphasis on the implications of these findings for future research and practice. This latter component of *social or consequential validity* (Morrow, 2005) is especially important because it drives why this research was conducted in the first place: to elucidate unspoken issues facing an underrepresented group (i.e., multiracial people) in order to learn how to improve those circumstances moving forward.
Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter summarizes themes that emerged from in-depth interview conversations with 21 mixed-race participants regarding their experiences with identity invalidation at their current or past places of employment. The stories that these participants shared came from a variety of work contexts (e.g., retail settings, healthcare, youth services, academia), and the participants themselves differed from one another in terms of phenotype, cultural upbringing, intersecting identities, and their approach to managing their multiracial identities at work. Despite these nuances, certain overarching patterns emerged across participants’ unique stories that help shed light on how multiracial identity invalidation may manifest within organizations.

The chapter is structured by research question (RQ), with findings related to each question reported in order and then linked together in the form of an identity invalidation process model. As a reminder, the original research questions were:

1. How do multiracial people experience racial identity invalidation at work?
2. How do multiracial people respond to incidents of racial identity invalidation at work?
3. How does identity invalidation affect multiracial employees’ workplace outcomes?

Over the course of data collection, a fourth research question (and two sub-questions) were added to account for recurring context-related themes that emerged across interviews:

4. What contextual factors (e.g., environmental, personal) influence the process of identity invalidation in the workplace?
   a. What is the role of social support in mitigating the negative effects of identity invalidation on work outcomes?
   b. What can organizations do to better support multiracial employees?
Key findings related to each of these questions will be discussed then combined into one comprehensive model of multiracial identity invalidation in the workplace. First, RQ1 lays the groundwork by describing the types of identity invalidation incidents that multiracial participants reported experiencing in their past and current workplaces.

**RQ1: How Have Multiracial Participants Experienced Identity Invalidation at Work?**

Before delving into what participants said during their interviews, it would be helpful to first look at one item from the pre-interview questionnaire that addresses this first research question. The item asked participants to indicate whether they had experienced any of six common forms of multiracial identity invalidation while in a workplace context (see Table 2 on the next page). These general types of invalidation were drawn from the literature on multiracial microaggressions (Johnston & Nadal, 2010; Nadal et al., 2011) and multiracial identity denial (Albuja, Sanchez, & Gaither, 2019; Franco & O’Brien, 2018).

Of the 21 participants, a majority (n = 15) reported experiencing at least four of the six listed forms of multiracial identity invalidation while at work ($M = 4.29, SD = 1.15$), with three people indicating that they had experienced all six types. Certain forms of invalidation were experienced more than others. For example, all 21 participants indicated that someone had questioned their racial identity at work, and nearly everyone (n = 20) said they had been mistaken for a different race or ethnicity at work. However, far fewer people (n = 5) reported being denied membership to a racial or ethnic group to which they belonged.
Table 2

*Frequency of Types of Multiracial Identity Invalidation Experienced by Participants at Work*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Identity Invalidation Experience</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Someone questioned your racial identity.</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You were mistaken for a different race/ethnicity.</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You were forced to choose one racial group instead of multiple (e.g., on a form).</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone challenged or denied your multiracial heritage.</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You were asked to “prove” your ethnicity.</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You were denied membership to a racial/ethnic group to which you actually belong.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While these quantitative results serve as an initial guide to understanding which forms of multiracial identity invalidation might take place in a work context, the interview discussions with participants yielded much more detailed accounts of what those experiences were like in their own lives. In particular, the following sections describe incidents of (a) getting boxed into a monoracial category by other people, (b) being forced to choose a side, (c) being asked to prove one’s heritage, (d) being denied ingroup membership, (e) having the concept of multiraciality denied, (f) having one’s competence, observations, and multiracial strengths ignored, and (g) other invalidating microaggressions aimed at people of color.

*Getting Boxed into a Monoracial Category*

Several people reported being mis-labeled a monoracial identity by coworkers, sometimes by mistake, other times intentionally. Reflective of the dominant Black-and-White racial discourse in the U.S., most of the examples that participants gave were of people assigning either a “White” or a “Black” label to them based on assumptions around their appearance. Joaquim,⁴ for example, self-identified as a multiracial man with ethnic roots stemming from

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⁴ All participants will be referred to by pseudonyms instead of their real names.
various parts of the world. Despite having vocalized this multiracial identification countless times, however, many of his colleagues continued to refer to him as Black based on their own monoracial assumptions. Charlene, who identified as Black, White, and Mexican, shared a similar experience. She explained that despite feeling close to all parts of her family’s heritage and culture, “I’m just Black to most people, right? They don’t know. You can’t see Mexican. You can’t see White. Until I tell you that.”

Tina felt that her Iranian heritage often got erased and overshadowed by the White American part of her identity. She quoted her colleagues frequently saying things like, “‘I know you’re mixed, but…’ and then there would be this, like, boxing into whiteness.” Three participants (Amy, Jenny, and Kayla), who all identified as mixed Asian and White women, recalled times when their input was also dismissed as “White” in the context of DEI discussions. On two separate occasions, and in two different workplaces, Amy found herself raising questions to her coworkers about how they might go about addressing anti-Asian bias within their organizations. In both cases, her questions were shut down with hurtful responses like “Why do you care? You’re not Asian” or “You’re just a White girl, so you don’t really understand how this works.” Jenny shared a related story of joining an Asian employee resource group (ERG) at her organization and having the organizers assume that she was there as “an ally” rather than a fellow Asian community member seeking support.

Other participants recalled examples in which their actions were attributed to being those of a monoracial White person. Manny, a biracial Black and White man whose work involved promoting youth mental health and wellness, described a troubling incident in which he had intervened to protect the safety of a child during an altercation with staff members; when things
got out of hand, Manny’s colleagues seemed to accuse him of perpetuating the cycle of violence against youth of color. He described his coworkers’ perceptions:

[H]ere is this recasting of what is all too often seen of, you know, a perceived White person coming in, telling the people of color what to do, taking over, apparently mishandling the situation. […] this, for me, was the most palpable experience I’ve had regarding my own race and perception of not being multiracial, but of being seen as… I don’t know if oppressor is too strong of a word, but kind of the, the “White guy” stepping over the person of color and being, in a sense, viewed as a cause of a negative and aggressive police interaction with a person of color. (Manny)

Deborah, who identified as half-White and half-Chinese, also described a situation in which the persuasiveness of her comments was attributed to her being “White.” After a group discussion in which she had called out racism on behalf of her Black male colleague, he said, “Well, it’s just a shame that it took the White woman to raise the issue.” In this and the previously mentioned incidents, participants described being taken aback by their coworkers’ assumptions about them, realizing that their full multiracial selves were not being taken in and that their words and actions were instead being viewed through a monoracial lens.

Ironically, despite feeling that her coworkers perceived and treated her exclusively as a White person, Amy noticed that she was listed as “Asian” on an official diversity report at her previous organization. She laughed that they had only acknowledged her Asian side when it was convenient for the organization’s reputation and recalled feeling used and tokenized. Three other participants also noted feeling seen as “a soft face of color” (Aliyah) for their respective organizations.

**Being Forced to Choose a Side**

In addition to being placed into monoracial categories by others, participants also said they were often put into situations where they were forced to choose one single category themselves. As illustrated in the opening vignette of this dissertation, one of the most common
and widespread examples of being forced to “choose one” occurs on demographic forms. Many participants shared frustration with the lack of appropriate choices on forms and believed that they might be racially misclassified by their organizations due to such limitations in human resources (HR) paperwork. As an Indonesian and Trinidadian woman, Sandra lamented having to choose just one racial category when registering for her employee ID card. She opted to select “Black” in this situation, thinking that it would be more easily accepted by others, but in doing so, she also felt that this choice negated her Asian identity.

Moreover, four participants discussed feeling uncomfortable and unsure of where to go in situations where employees were divided into breakout groups by race. Part of this discomfort came from not feeling authentic in spaces that catered to only one piece of their full identities; only in rare cases did participants recall there being a mixed-specific group available in such scenarios. The other concern was a fear of not being “enough” to join a monoracial group.

Hannah, who identified as White, Mexican, and Filipino, said, “It is hard to pick one. I’m like, where do I want to go?” She described her hesitation at joining any cultural clubs or identity-based social groups:

   It is still a little intimidating to go without speaking the language, without growing up with the culture. I feel like sometimes I do kind of wonder, am I Latina enough? Am I Asian enough? You know? [That] is the main thing I’d say that stops me from going is, I get there and everyone […] has a very different experience, has expectations for what my experience is like, and it’s usually different. (Hannah)

**Being Asked to Prove One’s Heritage**

As in the example from Hannah above, participants pointed to a variety of “signals” (e.g., speaking a language, the origins of one’s name, having certain hair textures or facial features) as indicators of one’s belonging to a racial or ethnic ingroup. While multiracial people can sometimes leverage these signals to enhance one side of their identity (e.g., listening to music
associated with a cultural group), failing to meet those expectations can also result in questioning or skepticism around one’s heritage—in other words, identity invalidation.

Nine participants described feeling anxious about claiming their mixed identities at work, worrying that others would challenge them to “prove” their heritage. Four participants stated that they had been asked to show a photo of their family, and two participants even spoke of moments when having their parents physically present helped others to connect the dots about their backgrounds. Other participants described having their appearance scrutinized in other ways. Jenny, a mixed Korean American, and Rochelle, who is of Filipino and European American descent, both recounted stories of customers and coworkers asking them, “What are you?” in ways that felt inappropriate and exoticizing.

For Zaraah, a Guyanese woman with mixed Afro-Caribbean, Indo-Caribbean, and Amerindian roots, the pervasive questioning of her racial composition sometimes went to an extreme. She explained that the combination of her hair texture, skin tone, and name often elicited questions from all sides. She described one incident in which a store customer had inquired about her ethnic background and then physically pulled on Zaraah’s hair to confirm whether it was real. Shocked by the interaction, Zaraah described her internal thoughts:

For what? What was the point? What was the point? So, if the ponytail came off, [if] it was like a clip-in ponytail, what would it have done for this lady? Why did it matter so much? <pause> So like I said, it doesn’t matter which side... I always know I’m gonna be treated differently. You know? So that’s just how I—that’s just how I live my life. Like, I’m not surprised, after somebody assaulting me <laugh>, I’m not surprised [by] anything. (Zaraah)

She and other participants noted their exhaustion around having to constantly explain their heritage to others. Sam, whose mixed-race identity included Japanese, Native Hawaiian, and Portuguese heritage, described it as a constant pull to defend parts of his identity and justify the racial position from which he spoke, “like proving my whiteness to hold space where I felt
like this conversation had to happen, or proving that I’m brown enough to have a conversation too.” He and others described feeling like pieces of their identity were always up for scrutiny and that they needed to scan their environments for clues about where they happened to fall on the “spectrum” of others’ perceptions in any given context.

**Being Denied Ingroup Membership**

In line with the questionnaire results reported at the start of this chapter (see Table 2 on page 68), fewer participant stories involved being *explicitly* denied membership into a cultural or heritage group by coworkers of that same ingroup. One exception was an example shared by Amy, in which she recalled having an Asian supervisor who resented Amy’s claims of mixed-race identity and told her, “You’re just White. You’re literally just White,” thus rejecting the legitimacy of her Asian side. Five people described other painful experiences of ingroup rejection within their social circles or during their college years, but such incidents appeared to be less common in the workplace itself. Nevertheless, non-work experiences of ingroup rejection can carry over into the world of work as well, leading people to tread more carefully when attempting to claim the rejected part(s) of their identity.

One important visual marker that came up in most of the interviews was skin tone and its related themes of colorism and hypodescent (i.e., the one-drop rule). Three mixed-race Black and White participants (Augustus, Ernest, and JJ), who all identified strongly with their Black heritage, noted that their lighter skin tone required them to navigate Black spaces with more sensitivity and care. Before joining any BIPOC-focused workspaces, JJ said he now approaches the group leader first to explain his positionality and assess whether his presence would be acceptable to the existing group members:
Hey, I understand my phenotype. And I understand that it may be triggering to folks who are looking for their spaces. And the degree of whiteness in [...] the way that I look may be triggering for folks, and they may not feel safe. Am I welcome to join? (JJ)

Out of respect for Black spaces, as well as to protect herself, Augustus said she would never attempt to join a Black ERG, sensing from experience that it would only invite rejection and discomfort on all sides. Conversely, Sandra (Asian and Black) sometimes wondered if her Black identity would preclude her from being seen as an Asian ingroup member. While speaking about a “secret chat” texting group that had formed among her Black colleagues, it occurred to her that an Asian chat group might also exist that she was unaware of because nobody had thought to invite her.

While the concept of colorism was especially salient for those with Black heritage, other non-Black multiracial participants also noted complexities around their skin tone and others’ willingness to see them as ingroup members. For example, Rochelle (Filipino and White) and Hannah (White, Mexican, and Filipino) both noted that people’s perceptions of their racial identities changed depending on how light or dark their skin happened to be in any given moment (e.g., tanner in the summertime).

**Denial of the Existence or Importance of Multiraciality**

While many of the previous examples related to the experience of being boxed into one category and thus negating the other sides of one’s identity, another form of invalidation that participants highlighted was the criticism of a “mixed” reality altogether. This denial of multiraciality was especially salient for academics who studied mixed-race issues as part of their careers. Joaquim described times when other faculty members in his department treated his multiracial research with confusion, suspicion, and even contempt. He recalled two particularly incendiary interactions in which colleagues had suggested that what he was teaching was
unimportant or that students should drop his courses, even though those same courses proved to be popular among students. Aliyah, a mixed person of European White and Guyanese Black descent, similarly described the uphill battle of having to convince fellow researchers that including mixed-race participants in their samples was important. In both cases, Joaquim and Aliyah indicated that being able to draw on terms like “monoracism” was helpful in legitimizing their concerns and providing a language they could use to communicate their colleagues’ blind spots around which populations and perspectives were missing from their respective fields.

**Dismissal of Cultural Understanding and the Strengths of a Mixed-Race Perspective**

Several participants described feeling that their cultural knowledge and the unique skillsets and perspectives that they had as multiracial people were ignored, overlooked, or overtly dismissed by others. Even when participants tried to share their cultural influences as a way of connecting with colleagues or promoting mutual understanding, these efforts were sometimes met with indifference. For instance, Tina recounted a discussion she had with colleagues who disagreed about the best way to approach their collective work. When Tina explained to them that her communication style was heavily influenced by her Iranian culture, her colleagues were quick to dismiss that explanation and instead questioned whether their differences might be due to other factors like gender or age. Tina wondered whether other interpersonal conflicts, which were often explained away as “differences in working style,” could have been resolved by recognizing one another’s cultural perspectives, but she often found that her coworkers seemed disinterested in giving her background that same level of curiosity.

Sam also alluded to his cultural knowledge and influence being discounted by coworkers. While working at a nonprofit organization that served immigrant and refugee small business owners, Sam often found himself alone in pushing to preserve the traditions of his clients’
cultures of origin instead of taking the seemingly easier path of assimilation. While Sam’s clients appeared to appreciate his insights and support, he felt that his suggestions were often ignored or brushed aside by his own teammates. As the only staff member of color on his team, Sam’s multiracial perspective could have been useful in this international and culture-focused line of work. However, instead of seeking his input and content knowledge, his colleagues often overlooked this expertise:

It was an afterthought to ask me what my opinion was about it, because people seem to have forgotten about my identity, and how mixed I am. (Sam)

Aliyah and Marie shared examples of times when their own mixed-race backgrounds were undervalued in decisions that would impact other multiracial people. Marie, who identified as multiracial with Black, Italian, Mexican, and Native American heritage, described a time when she was working as a student activities administrator at a university and felt that her recommendations for increasing the visibility and inclusivity of their multicultural office were not considered. In Aliyah’s case, she recalled times when her monoracial colleagues discounted her real, lived experiences as a mixed-race person in favor of their own assumptions and second-hand anecdotes about what multiracial people might think, do, or say.

In these and other examples, participants noted that their own multicultural backgrounds led them to develop certain strengths (e.g., creativity, problem-solving, adaptability, empathy, curiosity about others, and being especially perceptive around differences and inequity), which they themselves could see as advantageous, but which their monoracial peers failed to recognize as valuable assets. “We do have advantages, because [we] see things from different eyes,” Charlene explained. “The challenge is getting into positions where those advantages are actually respected.” When organizations fail to recognize such viewpoints as strengths, the multiracial identities behind those viewpoints also feel undervalued and overlooked.
Microaggressions Against People of Color

Finally, several participants mentioned experiencing other racial microaggressions that mirror those faced by ethnic minority groups, regardless of whether they are multi- or monoracial. Although these incidents did not quite fit the definition of “identity invalidation,” they nevertheless felt invalidating to the participants, and because so many people shared stories about such microaggressions as salient parts of their identity-related workplace narratives, it felt important to include them here.

Several participants shared their struggles with a societal pressure that is all too familiar across many communities of color: the need to constantly prove their competence and fend off negative stereotypes. Sandra (Black and Asian) and Dominic, a Puerto Rican man of mixed Black, White, and Indigenous origin, both described their need to always work their hardest, never showing weakness, because of the unfair expectations placed on Black and Brown people. Ernest, who identified as Black and White mixed-race, spoke of this “twice as good for same amount of pay” situation [where you have] to be perfect to get the same amount of recognition and trust as all the White people at the organization. (Ernest)

Charlene similarly spoke of her desire to “break stereotypes” that people might have about the multiple cultural groups that she represents. Luzmi, a multiracial woman with Japanese, Spanish, Basque, and French heritage, noted that mixed-race people sometimes face projections of incompetence simply for looking different: “you catch attention visually […] but then there [is] an assumption of, ‘Well, there’s not going to be much substance behind that.’” Racial stereotypes are always at play, even in the workplace, and for multiracial people those projections can go multiple ways depending on how they are perceived, and which aspects of their identities are most salient in any given moment.
Fifteen participants reported having faced racist remarks or behaviors at one or more points in their lives, suggesting that many mixed-race people must contend with discrimination aimed at both their minority and mixed racial identities. For this reason, several participants expressed frustration at being miscategorized as “White” because the label negated the racism, slurs, and other discrimination they had experienced in other parts of their lives.

**Summary of RQ1: Experiences of Identity Invalidation at Work**

Taken together, these examples of multiracial identity invalidation highlight the pervasiveness of both racial prejudice and monoracism, whether it be in the form of denying one or all aspects of a mixed-race person’s identity or rejecting the overall existence of a multiracial reality. Figure 5 summarizes the types of identity invalidation that participants reported experiencing at work.

**Figure 5**

*Examples of Multiracial Identity Invalidation Incidents that Occur in the Workplace*

While it is helpful to know the range of incidents that multiracial participants have experienced at work, equally important is understanding the impact these interactions had on
each person. The next section explores the intrapersonal effects (i.e., emotional reactions and thought processes) of such incidents, along with how participants chose to respond to them (i.e., behavioral responses).

**RQ2: How Did Multiracial Participants Respond to Incidents of Invalidation?**

To draw out themes that emerged across participants’ multiple stories, their responses will be broken out into two main categories: internal and external responses.

**Internal Responses: Emotions and Thought Processes**

Internal responses include (a) **affective or emotional responses** (e.g., confusion and shock, hurt and anger), and (b) **cognitive responses or thought processes** (e.g., internalization, avoiding attention, and assessing risks).

**Affective Responses.** Many participants described feeling immediate, visceral reactions to identity invalidation experiences. Generally, these emotions followed the pattern of an initial sense of shock and confusion, followed by lingering feelings of hurt and anger.

**Confusion, Shock, and Feeling “Shut Down.”** Several people remembered feeling surprised and taken aback by instances of identity invalidation. Zaraah said she “just froze,” and Luzmi similarly shared, “I was stunned. You know, I was so stunned. I couldn't speak at that point.” Reflecting on that moment of initial shock, Kayla explained,

> I didn’t say anything because [...] I felt really confused also. It was a very confusing moment for me. This was many years ago, so it was a little bit like, “Wait, what?” <laugh> And is that how you see me? Like, what is going on there? (Kayla)

Amy described one incident in which she had spoken from the perspective of a mixed Asian person, but her input was dismissed by others in the room who perceived her as White. Recalling how she interpreted the situation, she shared:

> I just… I shut down. I kind of took it as like, okay, wait. No, it's not my place. I can't speak on it. And I’m not enough to [...] have an opinion on it, or to feel hurt by it. (Amy)
After having her Japanese identity erased many times in the past by others who rejected her mixed ethnicity, Amy expressed discouragement at not being able to speak up about these experiences, instead having to quietly hold onto the conflicting projections she has received as a biracial person:

It’s things like that happening, and then I can’t talk about it because […] on the other hand, then I’m just White to them. But I’m not White enough <laugh> and get called names and have people be really rude about [my Asian-ness] and like really call it out. So, it’s highlighted on one hand but then completely ignored and erased on the other. And, like, how do you... How do you even marry the two experiences? It’s kind of impossible. So, it ends up being silenced, I think. (Amy)

**Hurt, Frustration, and Anger.** After the initial shock, the predominant feeling that participants expressed in response to being invalidated was *hurt*. Continuing with Amy’s story, she recalled thinking,

Wow, that really stings. […] That hurts. And I can’t even pretend it hurts in the moment, right? You have to, like... shut that down. You’re like, “It’s fine.” Just laugh it off. Like, “Oh, you’re right.” Because I’m going to sound selfish or racist if I fight it. (Amy)

Tina also described her colleagues’ dismissal of her Iranian perspective as being hurtful. She recalled it being “personally hard to experience that redirection, because […] for me, it still feels pretty vulnerable to talk to someone about those aspects of my identity around being mixed.” For Tina and Amy, their coworkers’ invalidation of their multiracial experiences reinforced fears that publicly claiming a multiracial identity might elicit negative reactions from others.

Joaquim shared his own invalidation experiences with a sense of exhaustion at other people’s lack of self-awareness around how their comments might harm other people:

What I’ve learned [is] you need to be *ultra-sensitive* in everything you do and say about and around people. And one area that you need to be careful is in terms of their racial identity. And because mine is *always* erased, constantly, I try to find ways of responding to that. (Joaquim)
Although he acknowledged that oftentimes people make invalidating comments out of ignorance rather than malice, the experience of having his multiracial identity denied was “very hurtful” nonetheless.

In addition to the pain and frustration caused by these incidents, some participants also felt anger and resentment toward the perpetrators of the invalidation. Aliyah described her colleagues’ dismissal of multiracial perspectives in their field as “infuriating.” In response to a coworker’s invalidating comment, Kayla said she “became very awkward in the moment, and then really, really activated and angry.” She noted feeling “really upset about it for a while afterwards.” Indeed, multiple participants reported that their negative feelings around an invalidation incident lingered beyond the immediate interaction, with some people harboring resentment or feelings of dejection for weeks or even years beyond the initial incident.

**Cognitive Responses.** Amid these negative emotions, several participants noted that it was difficult for them to know how they should react in the moment. Some of the first thoughts to come to mind were questions around what was occurring: *Why is this happening? Did they really say that? Is that how people see me? Did I not explain myself well enough?* In retelling stories from the past, some participants noted that at the time they did not have the language to be able to articulate what they were experiencing and why it was problematic. Reflecting on those experiences now, a few themes emerged around how they cognitively processed the situation: (a) self-doubt and internalization of the invalidation, (b) not wanting to cause disruption, and (c) assessing the situation (e.g., risk of retaliation, receptiveness of the other person, weighing the costs of speaking up).

**Internalization and Self-Doubt.** One of the more harmful cognitive processes that resulted from invalidation incidents was a sense of doubt about one’s identity. Some participants
described feeling confused after receiving contradicting feedback from outsiders about their multiracial identities. For example, Kayla shared the following thoughts:

I think being mis-racialized, I guess, has made me question my own identity […] because I think I’m also in the process of trying to figure out where I fall in race, especially in America. So, it can be confusing getting so many different signals, either being told like “we’re all white” or being told, like, the emoji color I’m using is wrong <laugh> or things like that. I’m a little bit like, “Wait, what should I be using? Like, you tell me, I’m confused here about where I fit in.” (Kayla)

Likewise, Zaraah shared how difficult it can be to shake off someone else’s comments:

I think I just felt like I took it too personally. Like, I would get on the train and think about it. And certain things still, like, it still bothers me. And then I think back, like, that’s pitiful on [the perpetrator]. Like, don’t take that in. Please don’t take that in. Don’t internalize that. But it’s so hard! It’s so hard. Because it’s just like, why are they—Why is it such a big deal, like, how I look, about my features? Why is it so important to them? That’s the hardest part. Why? Because […] I don’t fit into the phenotype that they believe I should be. But [then], okay, that’s on them. But it’s just like, I always have to be the target of their experiment. You know? (Zaraah)

She further described the constant struggle to fend off those projections without internalizing them:

… in the moment, being like, “Nope. I’m putting on a bulletproof vest. I’m not letting your ignorance and, you know, biases and your whatever it is, I’m not even going to accept that to internalize it. I’m not even going to acknowledge that as being towards me, a part of me, or my experience.” That is the hardest part. Because once it resonates with you, you just can’t—I can’t just stop it, until I resolve it in my brain. […] But if you always feel that you’re rejected in your own community, outside of your community, like how can you allow yourself to be supported? (Zaraah)

**Avoiding Attention or Disruption.** In addition to this internal processing and discomfort, participants cited not wanting to stand out or cause conflict as further deterrents to speaking up.

It’s hard because you don’t want to make people feel uncomfortable or bad, you know, where it’s like, “Oh, you’re mean!” You know? And then they feel bad, and then it’s awkward. (Jenny)

Aspects of the workplace context (e.g., norms of professionalism) certainly contributed to this hesitation to rock the boat. Joaquim, for example, commented that, “In academia, it’s really dangerous to be seen as a troublemaker in any way.” However, some participants also noted that
their hesitation to “take up space” or speak up was also ingrained in their mentality as mixed-race people—a trait that appeared to be especially prevalent among women with Asian heritage.

For the majority of my life, I was the peacemaker, looking for harmony, building bridges. Really knew when to bite my tongue. And oftentimes wouldn’t even think anything needed to be challenged. “Oh, well, that’s their perspective.” And, you know, like really accepting of protecting people’s comfort. And almost seeing that as my role, as well, in like, empathizing with and then protecting people’s comfort in challenging situations. (Deborah)

Amy and Kayla even described feeling a sense of guilt for wanting to ask others to recognize their mixed-race identities, worrying that it would appear “self-indulgent” or would take away space from more deserving marginalized groups. Amy admitted,

I was really scared of being labeled as, like, a wannabe <laugh> diverse person or... not diverse enough. So I was like, “Oh, yeah, you’re right. You’re right. I don’t have the—I’m not the one to speak on this. Sorry.” Like apologizing, I guess, for it, so... Which I feel like is a theme of apologizing <laugh> when you feel like you’re trying to claim [your identity] and people don’t like that. (Amy)

Assessing the Costs and Benefits of Confronting. Many participants noted trying to assess the situation, weighing the costs and benefits of confronting the perpetrator of the invalidation. Several participants zeroed in on the risks of speaking up at work, especially if the person they were confronting had more power than them. “I couldn’t be completely transparent and blunt,” Ernest explained, “because that could cause problems for my employment. […] I am arguing with the person who signs my paychecks.” Jenny agreed, saying, “It’s your place of work. It’s so risky. You know? You don’t want to […] put yourself on the line at work because that’s your livelihood.” Despite feeling frustrated and hurt by the invalidation experiences that occurred at work, in many of the examples that participants shared, workplace dynamics and power imbalances deterred people from speaking up. This tendency was especially strong for people who had recently joined new teams or organizations:
In work settings, it’s so hard to step on people’s toes because it’s work. Especially if you’re new, right? Like, especially if you’re a new hire, so you don’t want to be... I don’t know, you don’t wanna make yourself too visible. <laugh> Early on, you want to just kind of blend in and do your job. (Jenny)

Also factoring into this risk assessment was a concern for how speaking up might affect one’s coworkers:

I would say it’s less about risk for me, and it’s more understanding where the other person or the audience is. Because... Like, if I believe it is productive to speak the full, ugly truth, [I’m] more than happy to do it at this point. […] But I think it’s more of that, like, understanding, “Okay, where is the other person or the audience at?” If it’s counterproductive, then maybe it doesn’t make sense to rock the boat as much. […] I do definitely get impatient to just tell it like it is, but I’m trying to be more cognizant of when it makes sense and when it doesn’t. Because, you know, I’m not the only one who receives repercussions […] So, yeah. Like, time and a place. (Deborah)

Furthermore, some people considered whether speaking up would even have any effect.

Joaquim described his thought process around sensing whether the other person would be receptive to feedback, while also gauging whether he had enough energy and time to devote to educating someone else: “Sometimes I kind of let it go. Because it requires so much effort. If they’re not already there, […] what difference am I going to make?” Elliot described a similar line of thinking:

It’s like, I can probably change your mind, but it will take a lot of effort and energy, and like, why is it that that’s my responsibility to make you a less racist person? (Elliot)

Most participants decided it was not worth the effort to try to defend themselves or correct the other person, finding it easier to just “roll with it.” They described picking their battles and saving their energy for another moment when speaking up might be more important.

Taking a long view of their career, Aliyah explained:

Well, you know, jobs are weird, right? Did I stand up for myself? No. For sure, not. <laugh> I capitulated so I could [continue working toward my goals]. (Aliyah)
Ernest described this finite amount of energy in the context of a job where he often used his “White-adjacent” mixed-race privilege to defend a Black direct report, being two of only a few employees of color at their organization at the time:

There were moments where I’m like, I really spent my laugh maybe like my white argument chits for the week, like, this might be a conversation where I have to let this go. Because if I’m fucking gone, then [...] my direct report has nothing, like has nobody defending him. (Ernest)

Augustus described picking her battles in terms of which intersecting identity to speak up for in any given moment. In her case, she almost always gave priority to her invisible disability over her mixed-race identity, as finding support and accommodations for that part of her identity felt far more immediate, urgent, and consequential than the longer-term goal of seeking belonging in her racial identity.

*External Responses: Behavior*

While processing the emotions, thoughts, and feelings triggered by an identity invalidation incident, a person must also decide how best to outwardly respond to the situation, keeping in mind their context at work. The actions (or inaction) that participants chose to take are detailed below, in order from passive to active approaches: (a) silence and deflection, (b) using humor, (c) creating a learning opportunity, and (d) seeking support (e.g., reporting the incident).

*Silence and Deflection.* One of the more common responses I got when I asked participants, “How did you respond to that?” was simply, “I didn’t.” As previously mentioned, sometimes the shock of the situation made participants unsure of what to say, and thus they said nothing. Other times, participants described being so stunned by the interaction that they did not have time to react before the moment had passed. As a result, many people noted that they did
not outwardly respond to the invalidation, choosing instead to shrug off the comment and remain quiet while hiding their internal distress.

Jenny explained that when invalidating or offensive interactions occurred among coworkers, she often tried to ignore what happened but made mental notes to avoid future interactions with the person who had invalidated her identity:

I think I was able to not feel bad about it because [...] they were not the only people who I worked with. There [are] other people who I like better and [...] can connect with better, who didn't ask me weird questions... (Jenny)

**Using Humor.** Five participants said they often used humor to soften the situation. In the past, Amy remembered “laughing it off” when others would make offensive remarks at her expense, simply to avoid uncomfortable confrontations. Zaraah, meanwhile, found that the easiest ways to get out of an invalidating situation were simply to “play dumb,” give “a witty reply and move on,” or attempt to “change the topic really quick.”

Taking a more strategic approach with their usage of humor, Augustus and Aliyah both described using small, self-deprecating jokes to disarm their communication partners and make them more receptive to hearing their perspectives. When trying to get their viewpoint across, especially to older White audiences, Aliyah described:

I treat old White men [...] the same as I treated my [White] grandpa when I wanted something from him for Christmas. [...] I tilt my head a little bit. I smile *a lot.* [...] I remind them that I don’t think they’re a bad guy. [...] I give them one or two, like, low-ball microaggressions, just like, “ha ha!” *<fake laugh>* You know, give them a little bit. And then I come in with what I actually need. “I need you to not do this to my classmates.” “I *need* you to vote this way.” (Aliyah)

The goal, as Aliyah explained, was to use approachability and some level of self-deprecation to meet these audiences in “their ignorance,” and from there, attempt to educate them around why their actions had been harmful.
Augustus, on the other hand, sometimes used humor to build ingroup acceptance and to carve out a place for her mixed identity within the Black community. She described using “self-acknowledging” jokes around Black colleagues as a way of conceding her whiteness (e.g., “Oh, sorry, you saw my major White girl [come out]!”), thus “giving them permission to judge” that part of her identity in a friendly rather than rejecting way, while also signaling that she understands the role and access tied to her mixed White and Black identity:

Long-term, what that does, if I do it right, it lets them see when I’m kind of code-switching. It lets them see where I’m comfortable saying, like, here’s this Black part of me and Black part of my identity that I’m going to share with you […] but then also sometimes, I’m gonna turn over here and be very White and, like, navigate this space over here. And if I do it really well, […] I can ideally create more avenues of allyship and actually do this bridging. But at the very least, […] they feel more comfortable with me because I’m self-acknowledging, ideally, of where I might be infringing on their turf, and of where I can maybe actually create more space for them, and that they don’t have to hold judgments of me by themselves. I’m self-aware enough [that] if you’re nice about it, we can laugh about the fact that, like, I know I live in this weird hybrid space. And I can make space for you to judge me in a way that I’m consenting to. That’s typically how I’ll try and deal with it. But that takes time. (Augustus)

Creating a Learning Opportunity. After considering the power dynamics of those involved in the interaction (e.g., does the perpetrator have more or less power and status than me in this organization?) and assessing the other person’s receptivity to being educated, some participants indicated that they tried to create learning opportunities out of the invalidation experiences. Elliot, a biracial person of Indian and Slovakian descent, faced this decision a lot in their past roles working with youth. They described moments when lower-level coworkers or the children they worked with would question what it meant to be Indian or multiracial, and Elliot would use those conversations as teaching opportunities around race, culture, and stereotypes. Manny also described sharing elements of his own background to connect with coworkers and youth at his organization. In these teaching moments, Elliot explained,
I try to kind of give them the benefit of the doubt and, you know, do a little bit of education, or like, “Why do you think that?” or like, probing some more. And kind of give them that opportunity. Because obviously, you know, you don’t know something until you know it. I definitely did a lot of learning and growing myself about issues of race and class and all that stuff. You know? (Elliot)

However, Elliot was quick to note that they were only willing to spend time creating such learning opportunities for people who were either at the same level (e.g., peers) or lower (e.g., subordinates, students, youth) in the power hierarchy. As previously discussed, confronting someone with higher status or power in the organization felt more challenging:

It’s not going to further a positive working environment for me. And I just feel uncomfortable. Like, this is the person who hired me, who could fire me. (Elliot)

**Reporting the Incident and Seeking Support.** When it came to speaking out against invalidation perpetrators who were higher up in the power hierarchy, only a few people mentioned attempting to speak up, usually with little result. In one case, Elliot did report an offensive incident to their direct supervisor but felt that their concerns were brushed aside with the comment of, “Well, I don’t think she knows you’re biracial.” Similarly, when Luzmi pointed out to her colleagues what she perceived to be identity-related inequities in the organization, they told her, “You’re reading into this,” and tried to minimize her concerns without considering their possible truth. Joaquim also recalled a time when he had reported an invalidation incident to someone higher up, while simultaneously seeking to rally support from his colleagues, but ended up feeling dismissed and told to simply “grin and bear it.”

Thus, even when people chose to speak up (i.e., confronting the perpetrator’s assumptions or reporting the incident to someone higher up), it appeared that the same workplace power dynamics that had led other people to stay silent continued to play a restricting role. After all, voicing one’s concerns is only as effective as the systems the organization has in place for
addressing those concerns. In most cases, the power imbalance and risk of retaliation were stronger motivators for people to simply remain quiet.

**Summary of RQ2: Responses to Identity Invalidation**

Figure 6 adds these internal (affective and cognitive) and external (behavioral) responses to the emerging model of identity invalidation while highlighting the important role that power dynamics plays in limiting the range of possible responses while at work.

**Figure 6**

*Responses to Multiracial Identity Invalidation Incidents at Work*

It is important to understand how people inwardly and outwardly react to incidents of racial identity invalidation because those responses can have lasting effects on a person’s self-concept, their relationship with the coworker(s) who performed the invalidation, and even their assessment of organizational fit and what value they bring to their role at work. To explore how repeated invalidation experiences might have larger implications for a person’s work life, the
next research question covers what effect these incidents and resulting responses appear to have had on participants’ work outcomes.

**RQ3: What Effect Did Invalidation Experiences Have on Participants’ Work Outcomes?**

To investigate this final step of the workplace invalidation process model, participants were asked to consider ways in which these invalidation experiences may have had longer-lasting effects on their work lives. Although the connections between these incidents and work outcomes were likely to be indirect and influenced by additional factors, participants noted the following effects: (a) strained coworker relationships; (b) disengagement, withdrawal, and reduced satisfaction with their jobs; (c) intentions to quit or being “pushed out” of the organization; and (d) seeking new workplaces that better aligned with their values.

**Strained Coworker Relationships**

The most direct outcome of identity invalidation incidents appeared to be relationship strain with the people who perpetrated the invalidation. Kayla said she felt anger and dislike toward the coworkers who had dismissed her half-Chinese identity as “White,” and no longer enjoyed working on projects with them. Although she never brought up the incident and continued to interact with her coworkers respectfully, she noted that the negativity she felt from that interaction lingered. Another participant also pointed to relationship conflict as one of the main reasons why she ultimately quit her job. She explained that it was hurtful to feel dismissed and not listened to by monoracial colleagues, especially after she had shown vulnerability in trying to connect with them about her background. Elliot and Joaquim both described losing respect for the bosses and colleagues who had made offensive remarks about their cultures and multiracial identities. Joaquim admitted that he had “vacillated for years” about whether to confront one of those people and sometimes regretted not doing so.
Although Deborah maintains a close and amicable relationship with the person who had referred to her as “the White woman,” she never confronted him about it. Instead, she reflected on her own reactions to his statement and what it meant to be “50% Caucasian” in a world where race is socially constructed. “I don’t know if it matters if I ever have that conversation with him,” she explained. “Because [what he said] was true as well. Like, my truth and his truth are both true.” Nevertheless, years later she continued to wonder whether her colleague was in fact aware of her mixed identity or not. She joked that she may be more inclined now to drop hints about her cultural background, in case it turns out that he never did know about her Asian side.

Three participants (Elliot, Zaraah, and Jenny) described distancing themselves from certain coworkers who had invalidated them. They remained professional but limited their interactions to only the bare minimum required from the job. Elliot explained how they felt about a supervisor who had made insulting comments: “I have no respect for you […] I’m not putting a lot of stock into your perspective anymore.” After going through repeated racialized incidents in the past, Zaraah and Jenny both described how they have now become “cagey” around acquaintances and coworkers, choosing not to disclose information about their personal lives or identities until a certain level of respect and trust has been built. Thus, the interpersonal effects of invalidation experiences can sometimes extend beyond the incident itself, making people wary about being subjected to other microaggressions in future interactions.

**Disengagement, Withdrawal, and Job Dissatisfaction**

In addition to distancing themselves from coworkers, participants noted other ways in which they found themselves “holding back” after invalidation incidents. After realizing that his coworkers did not value his multiracial perspective, Sam sometimes found himself quietly sitting
on questions or ideas instead of sharing them, as he predicted that his input would just get overlooked anyway. He mentioned tokenism as another barrier to speaking up:

Especially when it came to difficult conversations about ethnicity and race, where I don’t think that that lens of DEI was being taken into account, it was a lot more uncomfortable for me to bring that up, because I worried about my authority to speak on the matter, whether it would be received well, because I was the only staff member of color on my team. (Sam)

Similarly, Kayla and Amy felt compelled to “stay quiet” in discussions around race, as they were no longer sure how others would interpret their words or whether they were allowed to “take up space” as Asian-White multiracial women. They described a feeling of “imposter syndrome”—an experience shared by many other mixed-race participants—and questioned whether their perspectives and needs as mixed-race people were “legitimate” or worthy enough to be discussed in the larger realm of DEI issues.

Tina and Luzmi both described an element of doubt that crept into their minds after repeatedly trying to explain their views and having those assertions dismissed by others at work. Luzmi said she started to question whether she was really in the right role when others repeatedly implied that she was not fitting in. Over time, that doubt led her to wonder if her efforts were futile:

[T]he end result was I didn’t really feel invested in being part of this […] or growing into something, and it felt, in a strange way, almost like there’s just no future here, you know? (Luzmi)

A similar sense of futility was expressed by other people in equity-focused lines of work. Dominic, Ernest, and Tina all described feelings of exhaustion, burnout, and a lack of support in their roles. While each of them felt passionate about the importance and urgency of their work, the day-to-day demands of trying to promote equity in environments that did not seem prepared for change—all while managing their own marginalized identities in those spaces—often felt overwhelming and stressful.
Leaving the Organization

As a result of the doubt, disengagement, and dissatisfaction people felt at their jobs, some of them ultimately decided to leave and find more fulfilling jobs elsewhere. Marie and Ernest described pressing for important changes at their previous jobs and eventually felt “pushed out” when those efforts were never realized. In Tina’s case, difficult interpersonal conflicts created a psychologically unsafe environment that made it challenging for her to do her best work. Four participants (Charlene, Ernest, JJ, Luzmi) described how racial bias against people of color, and especially anti-Black bias, led to fewer opportunities for promotion and growth at their places of work. For example, Charlene and JJ both described jobs in which they had consistently produced stellar work but were repeatedly passed up for promotion or raises, all the while watching their White colleagues continue to advance into positions that they themselves deserved. Feeling undervalued and disrespected, they quit their jobs and sought out roles where they could more authentically and freely engage their talents.

Seeking Alignment in Future Workplaces

Despite going through these difficult experiences, five participants expressed that they now feel happier in their current roles because they have found organizations that match their personal values and embrace their input as multiracial people. Luzmi described her current work as rewarding because she was able to carve out a space where her unique talents, interests, values, and personality could be leveraged to meet her goals. She said,

If I were to go back, you know, 20 years, I actually would stand more clearly about what are the things that I really think are important, rather than trying to match my competencies to what were being asked for [by the organization]. (Luzmi)

Similarly, Rochelle said she has “found a way to merge education and outdoors in a way that makes sense to me, and also trying to find orgs that are aligned […] with my values.” She
noted finding comfort in the diverse demographics of her most recent organization, where her coworkers and the youth they taught represented many backgrounds and intersecting identities, including one coworker who shared the same mixed Filipino and White identity as Rochelle.

Looking back at his career trajectory, Ernest noted that ever since one particularly traumatic racialized work incident, he had been subconsciously trying to protect himself from future racial harm by working for himself or selectively choosing jobs that were either autonomous, or at the heads of organizations. Or I was able to be very upfront, right at the beginning, and very transparent about my mixed background. (Ernest)

He described one organization that he had applied to specifically because “my mixed ethnicity was an asset going in.” Ernest also said that he planned to draw on the mistakes he had witnessed in past workplaces as examples of what not to do and made it a priority to uphold his own DEI values wherever he ends up working next.

Taking a similar stance, Deborah explained the lessons that she has learned from past negative work experiences:

[I]t’s not worth it to work for an organization where I can’t be authentically myself, or I can’t talk about what I feel a responsibility to talk about that might be relevant to the work. Where I can’t talk about race, where I can’t talk about inequity, where I can’t talk about, you know, discrimination. Not worth it at all. So that played a big part in choosing [my current organizations] as safe spaces that I felt like, one, I don’t have to filter myself for other people’s comfort, and two, I will actually be actively pushing forward these […] really important conversations that need to happen in this industry. (Deborah)

These examples signal the importance of finding alignment between one’s own values and those of the organization, as well as having one’s identity affirmed by an organization that views a complex, multiracial perspective as a value-add, not an aberration or inconvenience.

**Summary of RQ3: Work Outcomes Affected by Invalidation Experiences**

The connection between one isolated incident and the decision to leave a job years later may seem like a tenuous one, and admittedly, most of the work outcomes described above were
the result of multiple incidents and other contributing factors. Nevertheless, as interview participants reflected on their work histories, highlighting salient stories along the way, the patterns of how they have come to understand experiences of identity invalidation and the subsequent effects these interpretations had on their work lives became apparent. Figure 7 highlights the broader work outcomes that participants noted as possible distal results of having their multiracial identities invalidated by coworkers.

**Figure 7**

*Work Outcomes Resulting from Repeated Feelings of Invalidation*

Having now covered the three main components of the process model (i.e., invalidation incidents, responses, and work outcomes), it appears that identity invalidation can be just as distressing when it occurs in a workplace setting versus any other social arena. Invalidation events triggered negative emotions and thoughts, which often led people to shut down or deflect the situation out of self-protection. Other times, people tried to speak up but in ways that were constrained by the power dynamics inherent to organizational life. As a result, many of the multiracial participants experienced diminished satisfaction in one or more areas of their work, with some ultimately choosing to leave their organizations to seek other opportunities.
Exploring the Context: An Introduction to RQ4 and Its Sub-Questions

While discussing these interactions with participants, it became clear that elements of the context, whether personal factors (e.g., intersecting identities) or environmental ones (e.g., industry or organizational culture) also mattered. While the general process model introduced in Chapter 2 (see Figure 4) and revisited throughout this chapter (see Figures 5-7) already contained a box called “Contextual Factors,” this box was initially included merely as an acknowledgement that social processes are always influenced by external factors. The topic of context did not rise to the level of a formal research question until data collection was underway and differences across participants’ stories began to reveal various factors worthy of attention.

In the following sections, findings related to the additional research question and sub-questions are discussed. First, RQ4 will briefly touch on several contextual factors that appear to have influenced participants’ experiences with workplace identity invalidation. Then, the sub-questions will delve deeper into two areas of interest that emerged from the interviews: the importance of social support (RQ4a) and multiracial-affirming organizational practices (RQ4b).

**RQ4: What Contextual Factors Influence the Process of Identity Invalidation at Work?**

*Environmental Factors*

Certain contextual elements may have affected the likelihood that identity invalidation incidents would occur. For example, the demographics of the organization, its leadership team, its client base, and the surrounding area affected whether participants felt tokenized or alone in their identities. At least six participants noted regional differences across the U.S. in terms of the relative salience of race and mixedness. Others who had lived or worked abroad also noted that perceptions of their multiracial identities differed based on each country’s construction of race.
One might expect *industry type* to also play a role, as racial identity is seen to be more directly relevant to certain professions (e.g., equity work, language education, international affairs) than others (e.g., technology, clothing retail). However, participants shared invalidation experiences across a wide range of workplaces and job types, with little discernable pattern in which ones were more prone to or “safe” from invalidation. In fact, even DEI-related professions did not necessarily make it easier for people to speak up when invalidation did occur, especially when those incidents occurred early in someone’s tenure at the organization. It is possible that certain types of microaggressions were more prevalent in some industries than others. For example, some participants expressed that exoticization of their racially ambiguous appearance made them especially appealing hires for certain job types (e.g., hospitality, acting), while others indicated that the homogeneity of their fields (e.g., tech being dominated by White men) led to increased tokenism and stereotyping. Within this sample, though, the occurrence of multiracial identity invalidation appeared to be more closely tied to the demographics of the organization, team, or wider field (i.e., more likely to occur in homogenous, predominantly White groups than in racially diverse ones) than to any one industry.

**Personal Factors**

On an individual level, participants’ responses to identity invalidation appear to have also been influenced by factors such as: family upbringing (e.g., cultural stance on conflict and speaking up, guidance and preparation around discussing race); past racialized experiences; the centrality of their racial identity; and their attitudes toward labels and categories more broadly.

Although the concept of a “multiracial identity” has been mentioned numerous times throughout this paper, it is important to reiterate that the specific racial combinations that make up those multiracial identities can lead to very different lived experiences. Likewise, the ethnic
composition of a person’s heritage also matters immensely. For example, the social histories of Afro-Caribbean versus African American communities resulted in distinct perspectives on multiraciality and colorism, just as the varied groups (e.g., Indian, Filipino, Indonesian, Korean) often lumped together under the umbrella term “Asian” represent vastly different cultures and associated norms around who is considered “one of us.” Multiple participants emphasized additional layers of complexity in their ethnic identities (e.g., Malaysian Chinese, Hawaiian Japanese, Guyanese Black).

In addition to race and ethnicity, several participants mentioned intersecting identities (e.g., gender, LGBTQ+, disability, neurodivergence) being influential in how they have chosen to take up their multiracial identities. Likewise, aspects of participants’ phenotypes or physical appearance (e.g., skin tone, hair, facial features), as well as other indicators of identity (e.g., family names, languages spoken, tastes in music or food) were often used as “signals” of their cultural belonging. Although these characteristics could sometimes be leveraged to enhance one’s perceived belonging (e.g., by frequently cooking Mexican food), failure to meet any of these expectations (e.g., not speaking Spanish, or one’s skin being “too light” or “too dark”) often contributed to the invalidation examples discussed in this chapter.

Finally, participants also noted individual aspects of the perpetrator of the invalidation that influenced their responses to such incidents. In several of the examples shared by participants, the race of the perpetrator appeared to be a salient characteristic that may have affected the type of emotional response participants experienced. Feeling misperceived, doubted, or rejected by an ingroup member or a monoracial person of color tended to produce hurtful feelings, whereas invalidation perpetrated by a monoracial White person seemed to elicit more
anger and resentment. Likewise, the perpetrator’s status in the power hierarchy also affected how they chose to react to the invalidation (i.e., whether to speak up about it or keep quiet).

The above-mentioned factors only scratch the surface of how personal and contextual variables may play a role in identity-related actions at work. Differences in these factors were noted across participants, but determining patterns in the direction of their influence would require further study, which was beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, two aspects of the environmental context stood out as particularly important in this investigation of invalidation in the workplace. These two factors—social support and organizational practices—are described next.

**RQ4a: What is the Role of Social Support Systems?**

One surprising pattern that showed up over the course of the interviews was the varying levels of social support that participants felt. Although some participants had developed community around their cultural identities over time, many reported feeling isolated at different points in their lives. Some participants (Marie, Luzmi, Zaraah) indicated that, ever since childhood, they had always felt the need to navigate the world independently—partly based on personality, but also partly due to never feeling like they truly fit in anywhere. Despite this tendency, however, Zaraah admitted that she now wishes for greater social support:

> I think I’m reaching the part of my life where it’s like, I feel like I battled everything on my own, and I figured things out on my own, and you do the best you can... struggling with things that maybe other people you feel like can’t relate to. But at the end of the day, you just have to learn to feel safe enough to be vulnerable and just say, “This is something I struggle with.” (Zaraah)

When asked about their current social support systems, some participants pointed to *family* as the first people they would turn to for affirmation. This familial support sometimes came in the form of one’s core family (e.g., parents and siblings), extended family, or chosen
family (e.g., spouses). Three people mentioned that it was particularly helpful having a multiracial parent or sibling to talk to, as their shared mixedness allowed them to help one another navigate the unique issues faced by multiracial people. However, other participants did not find that same level of support from their families. Some people indicated that the issue of race rarely, if ever, came up as a topic of discussion within their families. Other times, participants’ attempts at finding familial support fell short because of differing views on race (e.g., preferring assimilation or monoracial self-categorizing) or because different phenotypes among family members made it hard for them to relate to one another’s experiences.

Outside of family, some participants sought support through close friendships. In some cases, those friendships were with other mixed-race people or with friends who held other “in-between” identities that allowed them to understand what the mixed experience might be like. Some participants also sought out friendships within specific ethnic or cultural groups to feel closer to those pieces of their identity. Hannah, for example, was able to learn more about the Mexican, Filipino, German, and American cultures that made up her multiracial background by developing friendships with individuals from each of those groups. In a similar vein, other people sought ways to engage with their heritage by learning or continuing cultural practices (e.g., languages, cooking, music, and dance) that offered them the cultural validation that may have been lacking in other parts of their lives.

Although several participants were fortunate to have found social support in the form of family, friends, and community circles, there was an apparent dearth of support systems in place at many of their workplaces. Some participants mentioned feeling isolated at work, both in their multiracial identities and in their professional roles. To escape feelings of tokenism, Sam and Dominic said they found camaraderie with colleagues of color outside of their own
predominantly monoracial White departments. At one job, Sam felt more affirmed in his interactions with culturally diverse clients than with his fellow coworkers, stating that “the client-facing side of things is where my identity felt like it was most held in its entirety.” Joaquim similarly mentioned that “some of my best support has come from [multiracial identified] graduate students, or undergraduates even.” Reflecting on times when he most needed emotional support in the face of identity-invalidating experiences, he admitted,

I don’t feel I’ve had the kind of support from faculty, at least, in those moments of angst when I feel like I’m alone, and I don’t know what to do. It’s actually come from students. (Joaquim)

In the opposite direction, Dominic emphasized the value of having mentors with similar backgrounds to validate a person’s multifaceted identity and to help them navigate the social and professional hurdles they may face in relation to those identities. Kayla echoed this sentiment, saying that discovering mixed-race role models—albeit outside of work—helped her to feel more grounded in her multiracial identity.

Although organizations have increasingly started offering ERGs and support spaces for employees of minoritized identities, participants said the monoracial groups they joined often felt inauthentic—or even invalidating—and most participants indicated a desire for spaces dedicated specifically to discussing mixed-race issues. Elliot, for example, explained that although they have found mutual solidarity and support among other coworkers of color, “there is this kind of weird gap where, especially because I am White-passing, I don’t always feel like [there are] ‘more of me.’” They went on to explain that “it can still feel kind of lonesome” to not have other people to talk to about racialized experiences that are unique to multiracial people.

Further elaborating on the need for mixed identity conversations, Amy described her perception that other people do not typically seem interested to learn more about her multiracial
perspective. She expressed her desire to be invited into conversation by others, “but no one asks that because […] to them, it’s just not as important as someone who is fully Asian or fully Black or fully XYZ.” Not wanting to demand attention, however, she further stated,

I think it’s really helpful when I go into a space and they’re like, ‘Okay, let's talk about it, if you want to share about it.’ Like, it’s invited, instead of just me having to do it solo. (Amy)

Zaraah agreed that the topic of mixed-race identity and interracial dynamics continues to be taboo in the U.S., which then buries the potential trauma that can result from those realities. While these experiences remain hidden from much of mainstream monoracial society, having spaces to process thoughts and emotions with other multiracial people is crucial. In fact, nine participants expressed that taking part in this research study itself was a therapeutic and validating experience, with some even describing it as “a healing space” or akin to a “therapy session.” As Sam said, “just knowing that there are other experiences out there like mine is just honestly really nice.” Elliot agreed that “it was nice to feel that sense of community,” especially since opportunities to reflect on and talk about multiracial experiences with another mixed person who “gets it” are often few and far between.

Finally, some participants also expressed their wish for multiracial allies at work: monoracial people who are willing to speak up on behalf of their multiracial peers, endorsing the reality of mixed-race identities and providing backup and a voice during times when it might feel too risky for multiracial people to defend themselves (e.g., when the perpetrator of identity invalidation is a supervisor or someone in a position of power).

Social Support and Confronting Invalidation

Building a stronger social support system through each of the channels mentioned above could be helpful for mixed-race people when facing invalidation experiences at work. First,
having a support system could help to alleviate some of the negative affect that results from invalidation, by reaffirming the invalidated identity and allowing space for the person to acknowledge and process their feelings. Second, being able to “vent” to others and gain an outsider’s perspective on the situation could help the person gain clarity about what occurred and what options are available to them for addressing the situation if they choose to do so. Finally, having supportive peers or allies means that the invalidated person no longer needs to manage the situation alone. As evidenced by participants’ tendency toward passivity in cases of invalidation at work, it can often feel uncomfortable, intimidating, or risky for a multiracial person to speak up when coworkers do or say things that negate their identity. However, if other people are available to support, encourage, and defend the person who speaks up, it is possible that more people will choose to confront and correct invalidation rather than allowing it to continue unchecked.

In many cases, invalidating remarks are said unintentionally by people who do not realize they are behaving in monoracist ways. After all, society’s default way of conceptualizing race has always been to draw lines between a small set of monoracial categories that appear to be distinct to one other. Most people do not notice that this structure is problematic unless they themselves do not fit the structure. Thus, the more that multiracial individuals (and their allies) can voice their concerns and speak up when multiracial identity invalidation occurs, the greater the collective awareness will be about the flaws in our constructed thinking around race.

**RQ4b: What Can Organizations Do to Better Support Multiracial Employees?**

Participants were asked to consider what changes organizations could make to foster greater feelings of inclusion and belonging for multiracial employees. Many of their recommendations overlapped with elements of the previously mentioned social support systems.
Table 3 provides a high-level overview of the most cited recommendations, which will each be discussed in greater detail below. Additional recommendations for researchers and practitioners will be discussed in Chapter 5, but first I will share the suggestions that came directly from participants about what, in their view, would be helpful for organizations to do to help improve the work experiences of multiracial employees.

Table 3

Recommendations for Organizations, Ranked by Number of Times Mentioned by Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Frequency of Mention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Embracing Multiracial Identities and Perspectives</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Acknowledging that multiraciality exists</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Multiracial allyship</td>
<td>(7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Creating mixed-race spaces</td>
<td>(7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Valuing multiracial perspectives</td>
<td>(8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using the Correct Labels</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening, Sharing, and Learning</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staying Accountable to DEI Goals</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving HR Practices</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Embracing Multiracial Identities and Perspectives**

Many participants offered recommendations that revolved around the central notion that multiracial identities are valid, important, and worth supporting. Specifically, they recommended that organizations acknowledge mixed-race identities, encourage allyship, create multiracial spaces, and value the unique perspectives and skillsets that multiracial employees bring.

**Acknowledgement of Multiraciality.** At its most basic form, inclusion of mixed-race folks starts by simply acknowledging that biracial and multiracial identities exist in the first place. Amy noted the complete absence of any mention of mixed identities in the organizations where she had worked previously. She said that when she saw diversity event flyers and
educational newsletters go out, she wondered what it would be like to see mixed-race issues included in such messaging. Jenny and Joaquim both pointed to the rapidly growing numbers of multiracial-identified people in the U.S. as an indicator that “we should be having these conversations, but […] we’re not” (Jenny). To Joaquim, the issue is that our monoracially structured society makes it so that most people do not notice the absence of multiracial voices unless somebody points it out, which often means that it rests on multiracial people themselves to speak up—which, as previously noted, does not always feel easy. Until awareness of multiraciality reaches enough people, the presence of mixed-race perspectives often goes unnoticed.

**Allyship.** For this reason, some participants (n = 7) noted the importance of having multiracial allies, or people who acknowledge the harm that monoracism can cause mixed-race people and who are willing to speak up on their behalf. Allyship could look like correcting others when they mislabel a multiracial-identifying person (Joaquim), or simply being open to having conversations about the multiracial person’s perspective and seeking to understand (JJ). Ernest described feeling validated when others acknowledged both his Black and mixed-race identities. Thinking back on experiences where their Asian and Black identities (respectively) were not acknowledged by others, Kayla and Augustus both agreed that they would have found it helpful if allies in the room had spoken up and corrected others’ assumptions about them, as they themselves felt too uncomfortable to assert their own identities. Drawing on his activist background, JJ explained,

> There’s a common fear that the nail that sticks out is gonna get hammered into place. And that is true. However, if there’s a whole bunch of nails that stick out, then you wonder why they’re all sticking out. Right? That elicits a conversation. (JJ)
Just as allyship has been important to other marginalized groups, participants suggested that having multiracial allies could help to bring more mixed-race voices to the forefront.

**Creating Mixed-Race Spaces.** Beyond having others’ support, several participants (n = 7) also noted their desire for a dedicated space (e.g., an ERG or discussion space) in which to have meaningful conversations about the mixed experience with other people who share a multiracial identity.

Right now, [monoracial groups] are getting spaces [...] in these organizations, just safer spaces and community. And we're still having to choose. And that's our whole lives. Our whole lives, people have forced us to choose and go in one box or the other. And I think if organizations [...] acknowledge that we exist and give us our own space, I think that would be a huge benefit to our community. (Ernest)

Sam and Kayla remembered times when they had to choose between a White or POC discussion group at work, and both reported feeling somewhat inauthentic in either group. Joaquim had also been in situations where the room was divided into various racial groups, and others expected him to choose one. Instead, he opted for a different approach:

When I come into that room, if you don’t have a group for multiracial people, I'm not going anywhere. I’m gonna sit right at the center of the room. (Joaquim)

Given such a scenario, six participants said with certainty that they would opt to join a mixed-race group if one was offered.

**Valuing Multiracial Perspectives.** Instead of relegating multiracial perspectives only to mixed-race groups, however, participants emphasized the need for these viewpoints to be included in decision-making, strategy, and other important conversations across the organization. Several participants described their multiracial identities as assets, allowing them to see multiple perspectives and form connections that others may not have noticed. In describing these multiracial benefits, participants reflected on how growing up between cultures and being perceived as “other” in different communities led them to become especially attuned to how
multiple perspectives could coexist, while also encouraging them to think outside the box. Leveraging the unique strengths of multiracial people would be both motivating to those individuals and beneficial to the organization.

**Using the Correct Labels**

Given the pervasiveness of monoracism and the default to categorize people by their appearance, many of the participants’ stories involved others racially misclassifying them. Eight participants emphasized the importance of calling someone “multiracial,” “biracial,” “mixed,” or “mixed-race” if that is how they choose to self-identify, rather than defaulting to one of their racial heritages. Sandra further pointed out that we should avoid making assumptions about other people’s backgrounds—a practice she has found to be especially important in the field of medicine—and should instead ask respectfully if unsure. Kayla noted similarities to the increased sensitivity around gender identity:

> I was thinking about how much care and education there is about not misgendering people. And I feel like mis-racializing people just isn't talked about as much, but... it’s a thing! (Kayla)

In the same vein of being boxed into monoracial categories, multiracial people have also long been forced to choose one option on demographic forms. While many participants were pleased to see that forms have been changing to become more inclusive of multiple identities—and in fact, four participants had even been involved in efforts to update the form options at their respective institutions—some still felt that the newer options did not quite capture their true identity. For example, Amy said she disliked the “multiracial” option because “that’s clumping us all together into one” so the nuance of different ethnicities gets lost, whereas the term “other” also felt wrong to her because it has connotations of being “alien.” Aliyah similarly took issue with the term “two or more races,” which is often used to describe the multiracial population in
reports. She explained her frustration:

*I’m not two or more races.* Like, that’s a weird thing. That’s not how I see myself … I’m one person. And so having to fill out this form, that the data isn’t actually used, because it’s complicated data… So, like, I’m just doing harm to myself, for data that doesn’t mean anything, for categories that aren’t relevant to anything. And it’s not helping me. (Aliyah)

Nevertheless, participants agreed that having these “mixed” options was preferable to having to choose only one race. One form that a participant (Amy) noted felt particularly validating was a version that listed “multiracial” at the top of the list, instead of at the bottom where it has traditionally been positioned, while also allowing people to select from multiple other racial categories. Another participant (Aliyah) noted that doing away with checkboxes and instead letting people self-report their race could be an inclusive option.

**Listening, Sharing, & Learning**

In addition to wanting a space to talk about multiracial experiences specifically, participants also expressed the need for all people within organizations to recognize the complexity inherent in everyone’s lives. They explained that while it may be unreasonable to expect people to completely bring their “whole selves” to work (Augustus), sharing aspects of one’s background, interests, and lifestyle can still contribute to building connections and reducing stereotypes (Manny, Luzmi). Tina also mentioned feeling most empowered when working for bosses who listened and showed genuine care for their employees’ perspectives. Most participants (n = 14) recommended that organizations encourage their employees to talk to one another and listen to different perspectives.

Luzmi especially recommended creating space for informal social interactions, such as at lunchtime or while traveling, as these can open up conversations that humanize and reveal other sides of a person. As people have different learning and communication styles, Sandra also recommended incorporating different types of environments (e.g., small groups, virtual settings)
that might allow for certain individuals to feel more comfortable speaking up. Overall, the message from these recommendations is simply, “To be heard” (Dominic). That is, to genuinely listen to one another’s viewpoints, concerns, and difficulties and make honest attempts to find solutions that address them.

**Staying Accountable to DEI Goals**

Related to this idea of increased communication and interpersonal understanding, participants also recommended developing an organizational culture that embraces continuous growth and encourages people at all levels to acknowledge and try to improve on their blind spots. Rochelle said that organizations need to be willing to “do their homework” by challenging their assumptions and educating themselves on issues that affect their employees. JJ emphasized that the values of anti-racism and DEI must be expressed and embraced at all levels of the organization, including leadership, for the culture to stick. Participants also called for increased transparency around DEI efforts, which some had criticized for often being overly performative with few tangible results. Dominic, Sandra, and Tina spoke of the burden that many employees take on when they fill an equity-focused role at work, whether in an official capacity or as a volunteer (e.g., organizing ERGs). They encouraged organizations to give people in such roles more power and agency, as well as enough resources, to be able to effect change. Finally, Charlene and Sandra emphasized the need for data and metrics to help quantify progress on DEI goals and keep the organization accountable.

**Improving HR Practices**

Finally, eight participants gave HR-related recommendations around developing better practices for recruiting, hiring, promoting, and retaining diverse employees. Augustus and Jenny said that even seemingly “bare minimum” things like “following the law” and paying adequate
wages are important basic steps that some organizations still sometimes miss, which can cause employees to feel undervalued. Ernest and Charlene also underscored the importance of representation and having more leaders of color. For multiracial people in particular, Elliot and Zaraah suggested the addition of workshops, trainings, or focus groups related to multiracial issues as a way of increasing awareness and understanding.

While many of these suggestions would require significant time, energy, and resources—and participants acknowledged that institutional change often occurs slowly—the collective hope is that implementing one or more of these recommendations could help to make workplaces more inclusive, and by that token, also more effective. After all, “it builds on the bottom line, the needs of the company” (JJ) to listen to and leverage the diverse perspectives of employees.

**Summary of Participant Recommendations for Organizations**

Overall, these recommendations convey two overarching themes. First is a desire for organizations to recognize and honor the realities, needs, desires, concerns, and expertise of mixed-race individuals through the specific practices outlined above (i.e., allyship, mixed-race spaces, using correct labels, and embracing multiraciality). Second, participants recommended organizational practices (i.e., a culture of listening and sharing, accountability around DEI goals, and improved HR practices) that would improve the work experience of all diverse employees, not just the multiracial employees themselves. This combined set of recommendations underscores two key points that are fundamental to this research: (a) it is essential for organizations to make space for multiracial experiences, and (b) doing so will ultimately benefit the whole organization.
A Workplace Model of Multiracial Identity Invalidation

Altogether, the themes discussed in this chapter combine to create a more nuanced understanding of how multiracial identity invalidation plays out in the workplace. These interconnected findings are summarized in a comprehensive model (Figure 8) on the next page.

To create this visual depiction, highlights from across all 21 interviews were compiled into one model that includes information about the forms of identity invalidation that multiracial participants had experienced while at work (RQ1), how they chose to respond in those moments (RQ2), and what indirect work outcomes seemed to result from repeated invalidation experiences (RQ3). Also included in this model are contextual factors (RQ4) that might influence the overall process, with special emphasis given to the presence (or absence) of social support (RQ4a) as an important factor that could help buffer individuals from the negative effects of invalidation. Participants’ recommendations for organizations (RQ4b) were also included as a final component of the overall context, as improving the inclusiveness of work environments could also help to mitigate the negative effects of invalidation experiences for mixed-race employees.

I chose to display the study findings as a comprehensive model for two reasons. First, seeing these elements mapped out in Figure 8 serves to demonstrate the complexity of this form of microaggression and the potentially detrimental effects that even an innocuous comment (e.g., mislabeling a person’s mixed-race identity) can have in a multiracial person’s life. Second, visualizing how these components interact is useful for understanding how the process might unfold and, importantly, where that process could be interrupted to help prevent some of the longer-lasting negative outcomes.

Implications of these findings will be discussed in the following chapter, along with practical recommendations, future directions, and a closing reflection on the research process.
Figure 8

A Comprehensive Model of Multiracial Identity Invalidation in the Workplace

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Invalidation Incidents</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Work Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Getting boxed into a monoracial category (by others)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Strained coworker relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Being forced to choose a side</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Disengagement or withdrawal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Being asked to prove one’s heritage</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Job dissatisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Being denied ingroup membership</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Leaving the organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Denial of the existence or importance of multiraciality</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Seeking alignment in future workplaces (authenticity, values, leveraging multiracial strengths)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Having one’s cultural understanding or mixed-race perspectives and strengths dismissed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Microaggressions against people of color</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Environmental Factors</th>
<th>Social Support Systems</th>
<th>Recommendations for Organizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Demographics of the organization</td>
<td>• Multiracial support spaces, ERGs</td>
<td>• Acknowledgment of multiraciality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Regional and international differences</td>
<td>• Multiracial allies at work</td>
<td>• Valuing mixed-race perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Industry and organizational culture</td>
<td>• Representation, role models, mentors</td>
<td>• Using the correct labels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Direct reports, clients, students</td>
<td>• Listening, sharing, and learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Cultural affiliation and engagement</td>
<td>• Staying accountable to DEI goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Factors</td>
<td>• Family, friends, partners</td>
<td>• Improving HR practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Family upbringing and racial preparation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Past racialized experiences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Self-identification and identity centrality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Intersectionality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Identity signals (e.g., appearance, name)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Race and status of the perpetrator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contextual Factors
Chapter 5: Discussion

In this final chapter, I will address how these study findings contribute to the larger bodies of research on multiraciality, identity invalidation and microaggressions, and workplace inclusion by (a) interpreting the study findings in context of the existing literature, (b) presenting the theoretical and practical implications of the findings, (c) addressing limitations of the study and directions for future research, and (d) providing some closing reflections on the challenges and parallel processes that occurred while conducting this research.

Summary of Findings

The multiracial participants in this study experienced many of the same types of identity invalidation while at work as have previously been noted in the literature, with similar negative intrapersonal effects (e.g., hurt, resentment, confusion, self-doubt). However, due to the power dynamics at play in most workplaces, their options for how to outwardly respond to these invalidation incidents were often limited. Some leaned on humor to deflect the messages, while others passively tried to hide their internal upset. Those who opted for a more active approach (e.g., speaking to a supervisor or HR) were often disappointed by a lack of support. As a result, repeated invalidation led some participants to experience negative work outcomes down the line, such as strained coworker relationships, disengagement or self-silencing, job dissatisfaction, and intentions to quit.

Several contextual factors emerged that appeared to influence this overall process, starting with environmental factors (e.g., the demographics of the team or organization) and personal factors (e.g., one’s name or physical appearance) that increased the likelihood of a person experiencing multiracial identity invalidation while at work. Other aspects of a person’s background (e.g., intersecting identities, family upbringing, and history of racialized incidents)
could then affect how they reacted to invalidation incidents and what actions they chose to take. Access to social support (e.g., allies, mentors, mixed-race ERGs) can help to mitigate the negative effects of invalidation on the person (i.e., intrapersonal effects) and their work outcomes. Finally, given the restrictive yet consequential nature of workplace contexts specifically, several recommendations for improving organizational practices were explored.

**Interpretation of Findings**

The following section will discuss how the present study findings relate to the existing literature on identity invalidation, multiracial microaggressions, and workplace DEI.

**Multiracial Identity Invalidation and Microaggressions (RQ1)**

The stories shared by participants in this study matched previously identified types of identity invalidation, such as the behavior and phenotype invalidation examples presented by Franco & O’Brien (2018) and the examples related to demographic forms, ethnic activities, and cultural differences that were referenced in the study by Townsend and colleagues (2009). When compared to Johnston and Nadal’s (2010) taxonomy of multiracial microaggressions, the invalidation experiences highlighted in the current study related most closely to the domains of exclusion and isolation (e.g., being denied ingroup membership, being asked to prove one’s heritage), assumption of a monoracial or mistaken identity, (e.g., being boxed into a monoracial identity, being forced to choose a side), and denial of a multiracial reality. Participants in the current study also spoke of microaggressions they faced as people of color, which aligns with another domain, microaggressions based on stereotypes, added by Nadal and colleagues (2011).

One additional type of invalidation raised by the current study’s participants was having their cultural understanding or the strengths of a mixed-race identity dismissed by others. They described having unique skillsets (e.g., innovative problem-solving, ability to communicate or
“translate” to different audiences, etc.) and knowledge (e.g., understanding cultural nuances) as a result of their multiracial identities, but noted that their colleagues tended to downplay or reject these assets instead of leveraging them. It is possible that, because the current study focused on work-specific examples, participants were prompted to think of ways in which they had felt unheard or undermined in professional settings, which made these overlooked strengths and skillsets more salient than they would have been if considering other social contexts.

Responses to Identity Invalidation (RQ2)

Internal Responses. Much of the existing research on identity invalidation has focused on its harmful psychological effects on the invalidated person, such as anxiety and stress (Albuja, Gaither, et al., 2019), reduced self-esteem and motivation (Townsend et al., 2009), and depressive symptoms (Albuja, Sanchez, & Gaither, 2019), all of which were reflected in the various examples that participants shared. Albuja, Sanchez, and Gaither (2019, 2020) indicated that identity invalidation could lead to diminished identity autonomy (i.e., agency in choosing one’s self-identity) and greater identity conflict (i.e., the perceived incompatibility of their multiple identities), which was reflected in some of the current study participants’ feelings of self-doubt and internalization. Moreover, participants’ negative emotions of anger, resentment, confusion, anxiety, and shame were ones that Wang and colleagues (2011) had previously identified as common emotional responses to race-related microaggressions.

The moment of initial surprise and shock that participants described feeling after having their multiracial identity invalidated involved the simultaneous processing of other emotions and thoughts (e.g., “What is happening?”), which caused uncertainty over how to react. This hesitation around whether and how to respond can be explained by what Sue and colleagues (2007) described as the “the Catch-22 of responding to microaggressions.” The authors explain
that responding to microaggressions involves layers of decisions, including first determining whether the incident was in fact a microaggression, and then deciding how best to react. For many people of color, doing nothing is often seen as the best option, as “responding with anger and striking back […] is likely to engender negative consequences” (Sue et al., 2007, p.279). This risk assessment is similar to the one described by several participants when faced with the decision of whether to speak up about an invalidation incident.

**External Responses.** The passive responses (e.g., deflection, silence) that some participants chose to employ were predicted by past research on invalidation (Franco et al., 2016; Vargas & Stainback, 2016), while the more proactive responses (e.g., using humor, creating a teaching moment) matched some of the racial identity impression management strategies outlined by Roberts and colleagues (2014). For example, the current study’s participants described employing what Roberts et al. (2014) refer to as “racial humor,” which can either be used passively as a form of ingratiation (i.e., to reduce conflict) or actively “as a tool for minorities to subtly challenge racism” (p.530). Participants in the current study shared examples of both versions of using humor to respond to identity invalidation. Furthermore, some participants described trying to build trust with their coworkers or clients by finding commonalities (i.e., the tactic of “affiliation”) and sharing pieces of their cultural backgrounds with others (i.e., “enhancement”; Roberts et al., 2014).

**Effects of Identity Invalidation on Work Outcomes (RQ3)**

In Chapter 2 (see page 8), I summarized the many positive outcomes that past researchers have found to be associated with authenticity at work. Interestingly, the negative work outcomes that current participants described after having their multiracial identities invalidated seemed to parallel these positive effects of authenticity, just in the opposite direction. For example,
participants reported feeling lower engagement and motivation, had worsened relationships with the coworkers who had invalidated them, perceived less fit with their organizations, and experienced higher levels of burnout and intentions to quit—the direct opposite of what authenticity is purported to bring. These mirrored results make sense, given that identity invalidation prevents people from feeling like their full, authentic selves at work.

Participants’ dislike and resentment toward invalidation perpetrators was predicted by existing invalidation research (Trujillo et al., 2015), and some of the isolation, exhaustion, and withdrawal behaviors (e.g., holding back, staying quiet) that current participants described were also referenced in Harris’s (2017, 2019) interviews with campus professionals and in the broader literature on workplace microaggressions (Kim et al., 2018).

One new outcome that emerged in this study was the idea of leaving one’s organization in search of a better opportunity, one where they could feel more authentic in role. By recounting stories from multiple points in their professional timelines (i.e., instead of only considering their current jobs), participants were better able to notice long-term patterns in their career trajectories that may have led them to ultimately make these choices around quitting and seeking alignment in future work.

**Contextual Factors (RQ4, 4a, and 4b)**

Many of the contextual factors raised in this study overlapped with variables identified in prior studies. For example, the surrounding demographics of the region (i.e., level of exposure and familiarity with multiraciality) and the experience of tokenism within a team or organization both affected the likelihood that racial miscategorization or other invalidation experiences would occur (Campbell & Troyer, 2007; Does et al., 2021; Sanchez & Garcia, 2009). Some of the gender differences proposed in prior research (e.g., Franco & O’Brien, 2018; Rockquemore &
Brunsma, 2004) also appeared to ring true for some of the current participants, with women and femme-presenting people more frequently describing experiences with exoticization and appearance-based racial gatekeeping. The race of the perpetrator also appeared to matter in how the invalidation was interpreted (Franco & Franco, 2016; Franco et al., 2016).

The emergent theme of social support was supported by past research indicating that people often engage in identity-affirming behaviors or seek emotional support from ingroup members when their identities are invalidated (Campbell & Troyer, 2007; Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Trujillo et al., 2015), as the reinforcement of social belonging is important for mitigating the negative effects of invalidation (Albuja, Sanchez, & Gaither, 2019; Franco & Franco, 2016). The present study elaborates on what forms that social support tends to take (e.g., family members, close friends, cultural community) and which additional workplace support systems multiracial people would find most helpful (e.g., allies, mentors and role models, multiracial spaces or ERGs).

Finally, many of the participants’ recommendations for organizations overlapped with suggestions outlined in the literature, such as inclusive data collection and reporting practices around employee demographics (Sanchez et al., 2020) and diversity trainings for multicultural sensitivity and microaggressions (Kim et al., 2018; Sue et al., 2007). Although multiracial researchers agree on the need for increased awareness around the experiences, issues, and needs of multiracial people, little has been published around how best to achieve that improved understanding within organizations. Kawaii-Bogue and colleagues (2018) offer some suggestions through the lens of social work and counseling, such as creating opportunities for mixed-race people to process their experiences and proactively inviting them to participate in racial discussions where they may otherwise feel silenced.
Altogether, this comparison of current study findings to the existing literature suggests that multiracial identity invalidation is both an important workplace issue to address, and one that has received little attention thus far among DEI practitioners and academics. The following section summarizes key contributions of the present study for this area of research.

Theoretical Implications

As indicated in Chapter 2 (see Figure 1 on page 10), the present study was contextualized within three areas of research: (1) identity theory and the related concept of identity invalidation, (2) multiracial theory and the experiences of mixed-race people, and (3) DEI research, with a focus on fostering inclusion, authenticity, and belonging in the workplace. The present study contributes to these three areas of research by bringing the three together, drawing on elements from each area to inform the other two.

First, the study expands our understanding of identity invalidation—and relatedly, the importance of maintaining one's sense of identity—by investigating its effects on a specific population (multiracial adults) in a specific context (the workplace). Second, it adds to the growing body of multiracial research by highlighting a pervasive multiracial microaggression (multiracial identity invalidation) that permeates all areas of life, including at work. Third, it raises this overlooked issue to the attention of DEI practitioners and academics so that they may work toward reducing monoracist practices within organizations. Thus, the findings from this study bridge the gaps between these related and highly important areas of study, all with the aim of highlighting an important yet understudied issue faced by many multiracial people in the world of work.

Practical Implications

The findings from this study provide guidance for how people can recognize, address,
and reduce multiracial identity invalidation in their own work lives. The following sections present recommendations for organizations, teams, and individuals, based on the findings from this study and best practices from the literature.

**Recommendations for Organizations**

*Collect and maintain accurate records of employee demographics.* This starts with making space for people to self-identify, such as by allowing multiracial employees to report multiple racial identities on demographic forms, and then honoring those mixed identities when it comes time to report the data. As the workforce becomes ever more diverse and multiracial, finding ways to reflect that complexity in the data will be important for getting an accurate picture of an organization’s employee and client base. Accurate and respectful reporting is especially important in industries like health care, where mis-racializing someone can have life-impacting effects for diagnosis and treatment. It also matters in DEI-focused fields, where invalidating a person’s identity can undermine their self-efficacy, contributions, and motivation to continue this important work.

*Be transparent about the organization’s current demographics and DEI goals.* As multiple participants noted, transparency around recruitment, hiring, and promotion practices can help build trust in the fairness of these practices. Likewise, communication and accountability around DEI goals (e.g., sharing metrics around representation in upper management over time) can demonstrate that the organization is making real efforts to improve equity and access for underrepresented groups. At the same time, organizations should ensure that the employees who are leading these DEI efforts have enough authority, resources, and support to be effective.

*Create spaces for multiracial individuals.* If identity-based ERGs are available, allow employees to join multiple groups and consider creating one specifically for mixed-race people.
Even if only a few people show up, having that space available signals that the organization recognizes and supports its multiracial employees.

*Leverage the strengths of a multiracial workforce.* Participants shared several advantages of bringing a multiracial perspective to work. These strengths include creative problem-solving abilities, communication skills, empathy, a tolerance for ambiguity, outside-the-box thinking, and general cognitive complexity. Organizations would be wise to recognize and value these strengths, giving employees the opportunity to use their diverse skillsets and share new ideas.

**Recommendations for Teams**

*Encourage openness, sharing, and social interaction.* As noted by several study participants, genuine curiosity (and mutual sharing) about someone’s heritage and viewpoint can be a meaningful way to connect with colleagues and foster support and understanding. This can look like: sharing informal bios with incoming new hires, allowing members to “check in” about their lives at the start of a meeting, creating informal spaces to get to know one another outside of the immediate task, or inviting team members to share about their personal hobbies, interests, cultural backgrounds, or preferences. Such efforts can help to highlight each team member’s unique characteristics and shared humanity, without singling out specific individuals. Keep in mind, however, that some people prefer to maintain stronger boundaries between their personal and professional lives, which should also be respected. The goal is to build interpersonal trust, understanding, and respect for the diversity of perspectives within the team.

*Develop a culture of learning and growth.* As with all efforts toward improving DEI and belonging, learning alongside diverse colleagues means sometimes making a mistake (e.g., mislabeling someone or using the wrong terminology). Acknowledging one’s mistakes with humility and a growth mindset—instead of responding with defensiveness or avoidance—
reinforces mutual respect, helps to maintain interpersonal relationships and communication, and encourages the team to continue striving for improvement.

*Be an ally.* If a microaggression does occur, it is helpful for others in the group to point it out and suggest a correction, so that the burden of speaking up does not always fall on the target of the microaggression. If you witness a person’s identity being invalidated, offer to talk through the incident with them.

**Strategies for Multiracial Individuals**

The following suggestions are intended for multiracial people who may be experiencing feelings of self-doubt or invalidation around their multiracial identities.

*Remember that your multiracial identity and experiences are valid.* Although identity invalidation is painful to experience, it can be helpful to remember two things. First, remind yourself that microaggressions reflect the perpetrator’s biased perspective, not a truth about yourself. In many cases, invalidating remarks are made by (often monoracial) people who do not realize that their comments or actions may have been offensive. Second, remember that you are not alone in this experience. Many other multiracial people have faced similar forms of identity invalidation as a result of the monoracial systems and structures on which our society is based. While not a solution, these reminders can help to make invalidation feel less personal and more a byproduct of the social environment.

*Talk about your experiences.* Talking to a trusted friend, colleague, or family member who knows and supports your full multiracial identity can also make invalidation experiences feel less isolating. Processing the incident together helps to prevent rumination and internalization, and the other person can also offer advice or suggestions for how to respond to future invalidation incidents. Although the burden of educating others should never rest solely on
those who are marginalized, speaking up in the moment to correct someone’s mistake—if it feels safe and comfortable to do so—could serve to protect your self-identity and sense of agency, while also informing others about the overlooked experiences of multiracial people.

Seek outside enrichment that affirms your multiracial identity. Especially if there is little mixed-race representation in your workplace, it can be helpful to find role models outside of work to help reinforce your multiracial identity and provide strategies for managing identity-related incidents in the workplace. This can involve learning about the experiences of other multiracial people through books, articles, podcasts, videos, or even academic studies. If one aspect of your identity tends to be “hidden,” engaging in activities related to that identity (e.g., joining a cultural group, learning a language, practicing dance, attending religious events) can be helpful in reaffirming that side and thus your full multiracial identity.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although the qualitative methods employed in this study were useful for gathering rich data to inform the findings and recommendations described above, this study was not without limitations. These limitations are discussed below, along with recommendations for how future research might build on this topic.

Single Data Source

First, data collection for this study was limited to only two types—online questionnaire and individual interviews—using the same sample of participants for both. Other data sources did not readily lend themselves to this study. For example, observation of workplace invalidation would not have been feasible nor ethical, and archival data about such interactions does not publicly exist. The most realistic course of action was to speak to participants directly, asking them to think back on past events in as much detail as possible. Interviews allowed for the in-
depth exploration of each person’s narrative, understanding the influences of their unique context, as well as tapping into the internal thought processes that guided their actions and interpretations. Interviews also provided a more private setting for sharing these accounts and encouraged deeper reflection than a focus group would. Thus, collecting rich, in-depth interview data from diverse participants helped to offset the lack of additional data sources by giving ample details from which to develop a grounded theory. Future research can then use this grounded theory as a starting point from which to study additional populations or specific contexts, or to empirically test the relationships among variables represented in the model.

Social Desirability and Reactivity

Given that all the data came from open-ended questionnaire and interview questions, issues related to these methods may have influenced what participants shared in the study. As with all data collection methods that rely on participants self-reporting their own attitudes, behaviors, and experiences, social desirability bias may have occurred because people naturally want to present themselves in a positive light. Likewise, the interactive nature of interviews means that reactivity (i.e., the researcher’s influence on study participants) may also have been a concern. To minimize the inclination toward social desirability, participants were reminded of a few things at the start of the interview: that the study was exploratory and aimed to include diverse perspectives that may not all agree; that participants could skip any questions they did not feel comfortable answering; and that they could end the interview at any time. To reduce reactivity, I also tried to limit how much I shared about my own background and experiences, so that the participant would not feel compelled to agree with or support my perspective, nor conversely feel the need to counter or correct my perspective.

Future research can counter these limitations by supplementing interviews with other
kinds of data (e.g., focus group discussions, anonymous quantitative surveys). Future research should also consider alternative ways of measuring work outcomes, such as by using objective measures like turnover rates or employee engagement survey data. As an example, Berg and Allen (2020) measured rates of employee absenteeism and found that rates were higher among multiracial employees compared to monoracial groups. A mix of quantitative measures in real-life organizations and qualitative descriptions of lived experiences could help to create a more robust understanding of the topic. Furthermore, experimental studies could test the shorter-term effects of different types of invalidation or the effectiveness of different responses to invalidation. However, ethical concerns over inducing invalidation in an experimental design would need to be considered. As an example, see Albuja, Gaither, et al. (2019), who used an experimental design to study the effects of identity denial on physiological and psychological stress among bicultural and biracial people.

**Self-Selection Bias**

Due to the voluntary nature of this study, the *self-selection bias* was of concern because only those people who were highly interested and motivated to participate were willing to follow through with the full study procedure. As such, the study may disproportionately represent certain types of multiracial perspectives while missing others. Based on the way the study was presented in the call for participation, it is possible that the following types of people may have chosen *not* to participate: people with parents of mixed heritage who do not personally identify as multiracial (e.g., those identifying as solely monoracial, or a “singular” identity; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2004); mixed-race people who have not experienced identity invalidation while at work; or those who *have* experienced invalidation but may feel embarrassed, ashamed, or otherwise unwilling to discuss the matter with others. It is possible that these types of people
would have responded differently to invalidation incidents.

Perhaps due to this self-selection bias, certain demographic characteristics were also overrepresented in the study sample. For example, the participants were largely female, urban, and coastal (i.e., mainly from the West Coast or Northeastern regions of the U.S.). Although the following tendencies were not formally measured, the sample also appeared to lean politically liberal, to have attained high levels of education, and to represent greater LGBTQ+, gender-fluid, and neurodivergent identification than would be expected of the overall U.S. population. These trends likely resulted from the recruitment approaches used (i.e., outreach to my own social network, which mirrors many of these characteristics; snowball sampling from prior participants whose networks likely also reflected these characteristics; and outreach to groups specifically focused on multiracial issues). The study also drew in people with occupational backgrounds for which this topic could be considered “relevant,” such as education, academia, DEI, international affairs, spirituality, and healthcare. Future research might seek to represent a more balanced set of intersecting identities and regional backgrounds. Furthermore, the current sample was limited to those with two or more years of work experience in the United States; international comparisons would be helpful for identifying how cultural differences (e.g., power distance, saving face, honor cultures) might influence how identity invalidation occurs across countries.

Finally, it is worth reflecting on the study sample’s over-representation of people with some White lineage. Many—though not all—of these participants described themselves as “light-skinned” or “white passing,” or indicated that other people often mistook them for being monoracial White. Given the distress that these participants reported at having the non-White side(s) of their identity challenged or erased, it is likely that part of their motivation for joining the study may have been to validate and defend those “hidden” aspects of their mixed heritage.
In fact, one participant wondered whether people with closer proximity to whiteness might have been more inclined to participate in this study. It would be interesting and important to see how responses would differ with a larger sample of non-White or “dual-minority” multiracial people—a subset of the mixed-race population that some researchers (e.g., Albuja et al., 2020) are starting to give specific attention. It is also likely that participants with intersecting marginalized identities, as described above, might also have been more inclined to participate in this study as a way of voicing their unique perspectives, especially if they have become accustomed to feeling silenced and othered for those multiple facets of their identity.

**Future Research Directions**

In addition to the recommendations listed above, the interview conversations from this study yielded an abundance of new questions to pursue in future research. For example, how does privilege and choice (e.g., the ability to pass for White) relate to the type, degree, and frequency of identity invalidation incidents? How do multiracial identity invalidation experiences differ by ethnicity or combination of ethnicities? In what ways does having a name that is reflective of one or more ethnic identities help or hinder the validation of a multiracial identity? Relatedly, what gender differences exist in terms of which identity signals (e.g., names, appearance, language) are most effective at signaling mixed-race identity? For example, does the signaling power of a last name hold less weight for women because of gender stereotypes around marriage (e.g., taking their spouse’s name)? How might one’s interpretations of invalidation, and corresponding strategies, evolve over time—both in terms of chronological age and one’s tenure (and status) at the organization? What generational and cultural differences might exist? How can multiracial leaders leverage their mixed-race identities to lift up employees of color within White-dominated organizations? What if those multiracial leaders are not seen as “one of us” due
to their mixed identities?

During the interviews, participants themselves raised intriguing questions that could be investigated in future research. For example, does being in a position of power lead to greater perceptions of Whiteness? Could increased multiraciality eventually lead to feelings of superiority and perhaps complacency around issues of racial inequity? Conversely, what accounts for the feelings of guilt and self-indulgence that some multiracial people feel around claiming their mixed-race identities? How might the multiracial experience and interpersonal dynamics differ in remote versus in-person settings?

Finally, collaboration across disciplines and with other liminal identity groups could benefit future research on mixed-race identities and (in)validation. While comparisons are sometimes drawn between multiraciality and other “in-between” identities like biculturalism, transracial adoption, or bisexuality, it may also be helpful to draw inspiration from other groups that are currently working to reject or dismantle restrictive social structures, shifting the goal from simply “fitting in” to freedom from constraint. For example, participants recommended “queering” the concept of race, taking lessons from the disability community (e.g., the social model of disability), and exploring neurodivergent ways of thinking as fruitful areas to consider as we attempt to push back against monoracism. While there is still much to learn about how mixed-race identities play out in the context of organizational life, the present study offers a rich starting point from which to continue exploring these important and exciting avenues of research.

**Reflections on the Research Process**

As a final note on reflexivity, I want to share a few observations that I had as a mixed-race researcher engaging in this work. Specifically, I noted several parallel processes occurring in my interactions with participants and in conducting the research itself.
**Imposter syndrome.** A common sentiment among multiracial people is the feeling of not being “enough.” Just as participants shared their experiences with insecurity and self-doubt, I too felt a sense of imposter syndrome at various points in the research process, worrying whether this topic would be taken seriously or whether I, as the researcher, was “too White” or “not Asian enough” to be able to speak to these issues on behalf of the larger multiracial community.

**Not wanting to invalidate participants.** At the same time, one theme that permeated the entire research process was an awareness of how easy yet harmful it can be to unintentionally invalidate someone else’s experiences. I found myself feeling protective of the study participants, wanting to honor all of their stories and lived experiences, and make sure that I was accurately presenting their perspectives.

**Complexity and contradiction.** Part of the challenge of analyzing the data was the sheer number of interesting, insightful, sometimes contradictory yet equally valid perspectives that participants shared, highlighting the complexity of the multiracial experience. During the interviews, some participants laughed about how difficult it can be to convey their cultural backgrounds in a short sentence or two, given how complicated the full story is. I found it equally challenging to distill the research findings into a few key themes, feeling that everything participants shared was interconnected and relevant in some way to the overall picture.

**Voice and space.** A fourth theme that emerged in both the interviews and my own research process was a sense of anxiety around taking up space, speaking up, or asserting one’s multiracial identity. While I felt honored to present the study findings from these 21 interviews, knowing how important the participants’ contributions had been, I also felt uneasy realizing that by amplifying the interests and needs of the multiracial community, I was also voicing my own.
Being the bridge. Nevertheless, this boundary-spanning role as a researcher and mixed-race insider was yet another opportunity to serve as a “bridge”—a familiar metaphor for many multiracial individuals who have spent their lives code-switching, translating, and holding onto multiple viewpoints. While bridging gaps can feel exhausting at times, it also offers a powerful path for connection and unification. With this study, I hope to create a bridge between the participants’ lived experiences and the organizational scholars and practitioners who are working to address such issues in the workplace.

I share these reflections both to demonstrate how certain multiracial mindsets can infiltrate one’s work, and to acknowledge the challenges of engaging in scientific research about complex—and deeply personal—identity issues. My hope is that future researchers feel encouraged to embrace such challenges as they continue pursuing this meaningful work.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to learn from the lived experiences of diverse multiracial people—representing wide-ranging industries and intersecting identities—to better understand how racial identity invalidation has impacted their work lives. The study aimed to give voice to a multiracial population that is often forgotten, erased, or overshadowed in discussions of workplace microaggressions and diversity, equity, and inclusion. By developing a comprehensive model of the multiracial identity invalidation process, grounded in participants’ real workplace experiences, the goal of this study was to promote a more nuanced understanding of the challenges mixed-race people face at work, while also uncovering potential individual strategies and organizational remedies that could help to mitigate the negative effects of invalidation and promote greater inclusion of a diverse and complex workforce.
References


Gino, F., Sezer, O., & Huang, L. (2020). To be or not to be your authentic self? Catering to other’s preferences hinders performance. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 158*(1), 83-100. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2020.01.003


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Appendix A

Pre-Study Questionnaire

Interested participants first filled out an online questionnaire that asked for demographic and work-history information. The five items marked with an asterisk (*) below were used to automatically approve eligible participants and reject those who did not meet the criteria.

Introduction

Thank you for your interest in the study, “Multiracial Identity Invalidation in the Workplace.”

The purpose of this study is to better understand how multiracial people experience their racial identities in the workplace. In particular, the study will explore what it is like to have one’s multiracial identity challenged, misrepresented, or denied by other people in the workplace; how multiracial people respond to these incidents of identity invalidation; and how these experiences may affect coworker relationships, job satisfaction, and other work outcomes.

Participation in the study involves two steps:
1) An online questionnaire (10-15 minutes)
2) A one-on-one interview with the primary researcher (60-90 minutes, virtually via Zoom)

This study is being conducted as part of the dissertation of the primary researcher, Stephanie von Numers, who is a doctoral student in the social-organizational psychology program at Teachers College, Columbia University. If you have any questions, please email Stephanie at sv2462@tc.columbia.edu.

Please answer the following questions to determine your eligibility for participating in the study.

1. Are you at least 18 years old? *
   o Yes
   o No

2. Do you self-identify as multiracial, mixed-race, or of two or more races? *
   o Yes
   o No

3. How many years have you worked in the United States? *
   o None – I have never worked in the U.S.
   o Less than 2 years
   o 2-5 years
   o 6-9 years
   o 10+ years

4. Which of the following have you personally experienced while at work? (Check all that apply.) *
   □ Someone questioned your racial identity.
   □ Someone challenged or denied your multiracial heritage.
   □ You were asked to “prove” your ethnicity.
   □ You were mistaken for a different race/ethnicity.
   □ You were forced to choose one racial group instead of multiple (e.g., on a form).
   □ You were denied membership to a racial/ethnic group to which you actually belong.

5. Would you be willing to talk about these experiences in an interview? *
   o Yes
   o No
Message if not eligible:

Unfortunately, based on your responses, you are not eligible to participate in this study.

To participate, you must meet the following criteria:
- You are at least 18 years old
- You self-identify as multiracial, mixed-race, or of two or more races
- You have at least 2 years of work experience in the United States
- You have had your multiracial identity questioned, denied, and/or have been racially miscategorized by other people at work
- You are interested and willing to discuss these experiences in an interview

If you believe there has been an error and you do meet all of the criteria above, please feel free to email the primary researcher, Stephanie von Numers, at sv2462@tc.columbia.edu, so that we can include you in the study. Thank you!

Message if eligible:

Good news! Based on your responses, you are eligible to participate in this study.

If you would like to participate, please read the following information and indicate your consent by digitally signing the space marked below.

You may download a PDF copy of this form for your records:

[Informed Consent – see Appendix C]

Message after signing informed consent:

Thank you! Here are your next steps:

1) Complete the rest of this 10-minute questionnaire (19 items).

2) Then, on a future date/time of your choosing, meet with the primary researcher over Zoom for an individual interview.

Please continue to the next page.
**Demographic Items**

Please provide the following information about yourself. Feel free to include multiple answers, as needed.

1. Race
2. Ethnicity
3. Primary language(s)
4. Secondary language(s)
5. Nationality
6. Gender
7. Pronouns (e.g., she/her, he/him, they/them)
8. Age
9. Current occupation / job title
10. Current field or work industry
11. Are there any other important aspects of your identity (e.g., religion, sexual orientation, caretaker role, etc.) that you would like to share?

**Workplace Location Items**

To help us understand the geographic spread of our participants, please answer the following questions about the location of your current workplace.

12. Location of workplace
   City: ______________
   State (if applicable): ______________
   Country: ______________

13. Community setting
   o Rural
   o Suburban
   o Urban
   o Other: ______________

*If you have a unique work situation (e.g., gig worker, remote employee for a company in a different location, not currently employed, etc.), please use the box below to describe your “work location” in whatever way makes the most sense for your situation.*

14. Please share how you found out about this study. *(Check all that apply.)*
   □ LinkedIn
   □ Facebook
   □ TC Message Center (myTC)
   □ Online message board (please indicate which organization): ______________
   □ Referred by a friend
   □ Other: ______________
Contact Information

The following information will be used for contact purposes only.

15. First Name
16. Last Name
17. Email Address (please double-check that it is typed correctly)

Confidentiality

Your name and contact information will be kept confidential and will be separated from your previous survey responses. Any identifying information that you share during the interview will also be masked to protect your identity.

In the final written report, we will replace your name with a **pseudonym** (i.e., alias or false name) of your choosing. Please indicate the name you wish to use below. We recommend choosing a name that is **not** a known nickname or similar to any part of your full name. (Note: You will have a chance to confirm or change your pseudonym at the end of the interview.)

18. Preferred Pseudonym (i.e., the name we will use for you in our study write-up)

Interview Scheduling

19. Finally, please select a time slot for your interview using the calendar below.

   - We ask that you set aside 90 minutes for the session, even though the interview may not end up requiring the full 90 minutes. (That said, if you are time-constrained and can only allot one hour to the interview, please indicate that in the comment box.)
   - We recommend choosing a date and time when you will likely be free from interruptions and can find a quiet, private location to take the video call.
   - As a reminder, the interview will be conducted virtually using the Zoom videoconferencing platform.

   [Embedded calendar using Calendly, a scheduling automation platform]

   *Note: If none of the available times work for you, or if you’d like to schedule a weekend time slot, please write your availability in the comment box below and we will coordinate by email.*

   □ Done! I have scheduled an interview using the calendar above.
   □ Not yet – I would like to schedule by email instead.

Comments?

Please feel free to share any additional comments in the box below. You may also email the researcher, Stephanie von Numers (sv2462@tc.columbia.edu), at any time if you have questions or concerns about the study.

When you are finished, please click the arrow button below to submit your response.

**Thank you for your time!**
Appendix B

Study Flyer

Research Study: Seeking Multiracial Interview Participants

Do you identify as biracial, multiracial, or mixed-race? Has the topic of your ethnic heritage come up at work? Have you had any memorable encounters with coworkers, bosses, or clients who did not realize that you were mixed-race? Share your perspective on what it is like to be multiracial in the workplace!

The purpose of this study is to better understand how multiracial people experience their racial identities in the workplace. In particular, the study will explore what it is like to have one’s multiracial identity challenged, misrepresented, or denied by other people at work; how multiracial people respond to these instances of identity invalidation; and how these experiences may affect coworker relationships, job satisfaction, and other work outcomes. This study is being conducted as part of the primary researcher’s doctoral dissertation.

Who can participate?
To participate, you must meet the following criteria:
• Self-identify as biracial, multiracial, or mixed-race
• 18+ years old
• 2+ years of work experience in the U.S.
• Willing to discuss experiences of racial identity invalidation (e.g., being racially miscategorized or having your multiracial identity questioned or denied) in an interview

What will I be asked to do?
Participation involves two steps:
1. A brief online questionnaire (10-15 minutes)
2. A one-on-one interview with the primary researcher (60-90 minutes, virtually via Zoom)

Participation is confidential, and you can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. There are no direct benefits and minimal risk.

If you are interested in participating, complete this brief survey to get started!

Study Link: https://tccolumbia.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_beyoJ6EaBK5pVKm

Contact:
Stephanie von Numers (sv2462@tc.columbia.edu)
Social-Organizational Psychology Program
Teachers College, Columbia University

TC IRB Protocol # 22-346
Appendix C

Informed Consent

Protocol Title: Multiracial Identity Invalidation in the Workplace
Principal Researcher: Stephanie von Numers, PhD Candidate
Teachers College, Columbia University, sv2462@tc.columbia.edu

INTRODUCTION
You are invited to participate in this research study called “Multiracial Identity Invalidation in the Workplace.” You may qualify to take part in this research study because you self-identify as multiracial, are over 18 years old, and have worked in the United States for at least two years. Approximately twenty-five people will participate in this study, and it will take about 1 hour and 45 minutes of your time to complete.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?
This study is being done to explore how multiracial people respond to having their racial identities questioned, challenged, denied, or miscategorized by others in the workplace. The study will also investigate how these incidents affect work outcomes.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO IF I AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?
If you decide to participate, you will first complete an online survey about your demographics (e.g., race, gender, age, etc.) and work experience. The survey will take about 10-15 minutes to complete.

Then, on a scheduled date and time of your choosing, the primary researcher will interview you individually for up to 90 minutes. The interview will take place virtually, using an online video conferencing platform (e.g., Zoom).

During the interview, you will be asked to discuss your identity as a multiracial or mixed-race person and how this identity shows up in your work life. You will be asked to describe how coworkers typically perceive you and to share examples of how they have reacted in the past to learning about your multiracial identity. You will also be asked to reflect on how these interactions have affected your work relationships, how you think and behave at work, and how your thoughts about your own multiracial identity may have changed over time.

The interview will be audio- and video-recorded. The primary researcher is the only person who will have access to the recording. After the audio recording is transcribed (i.e., written down), you will have the opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy. The recording will be deleted after transcription and data analysis are complete.

Finally, you will have the option to review a summary of findings after all interviews and analysis for this study are complete. This step may occur several months after your original interview date.
WHAT POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY? This is a minimal risk study, which means the harms or discomforts that you may experience are not greater than what you would ordinarily encounter in daily life. However, for some people, revisiting past experiences may be uncomfortable and could bring up painful or embarrassing memories. You do not have to answer any questions or share anything that you do not want to talk about. You can stop participating in the study at any time without penalty.

The primary researcher is taking precautions to keep your information confidential and to prevent anyone from discovering or guessing your identity. You will be given a pseudonym (i.e., false name), and other identifying information (e.g., company names) will be replaced with more general descriptions. All information will be kept on a password-protected computer and stored in a locked room.

WHAT POSSIBLE BENEFITS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY? There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study. Participation may benefit the field of organizational psychology in better understanding workplace inclusion of multiracial employees.

WILL I BE PAID FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY? You will not be paid to participate. There are no costs to you for taking part in this study.

WHEN IS THE STUDY OVER? CAN I LEAVE THE STUDY BEFORE IT ENDS? The study is over when you have completed the online survey and the individual interview. However, you can leave the study at any time, even if you have not finished.

PROTECTION OF YOUR CONFIDENTIALITY The primary researcher will keep all written materials in a locked office. All electronic information (including audio/video recordings) will be stored on a computer that is password-protected. The file matching your real name with your pseudonym will be password-protected and kept separately from all other data.

For quality assurance, the study team, the study sponsor (grant agency), and/or members of the Teachers College Institutional Review Board (IRB) may review the data collected from you as part of this study. Otherwise, all information obtained from your participation in this study will be held strictly confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by U.S. or State law.

HOW WILL THE RESULTS BE USED? This study is being conducted as part of the doctoral dissertation of the primary researcher. The study results may also be published in journals and/or presented at academic conferences. Your name or any identifying information about you will not be published.
CONSENT FOR AUDIO AND/OR VIDEO RECORDING
The interview will be recorded (audio and video) for transcription purposes only. If you do not wish to be recorded, you will not be able to participate in this research study.

_____ I give my consent to be recorded ____________________________________________

Signature

_____ I do not consent to be recorded ____________________________________________

Signature

WHO MAY VIEW MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY

_____ I consent to allow written materials to be viewed at an educational setting or at a conference outside of Teachers College, Columbia University

________________________________

Signature

_____ I do not consent to allow written materials to be viewed outside of Teachers College, Columbia University

________________________________

Signature

OPTIONAL CONSENT FOR FUTURE CONTACT

The primary researcher may wish to contact you in the future. Please initial below to indicate whether or not you give permission for future contact.

The researcher may contact me in the future for other research opportunities:

Yes ________________________  No_______________________

Initial  Initial

The researcher may contact me in the future for information relating to this current study:

Yes ________________________  No_______________________

Initial  Initial
WHO CAN ANSWER MY QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?

If you have any questions about taking part in this research study, you should contact the primary researcher, Stephanie von Numers, at sv2462@tc.columbia.edu. You can also contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Debra Noumair, at dn28@tc.columbia.edu.

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you should contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (the human research ethics committee) at 212-678-4105 or email IRB@tc.edu or you can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th Street, New York, NY 10027, Box 151. The IRB is the committee that oversees human research protection for Teachers College, Columbia University.

PARTICIPANT’S RIGHTS

- I have read the Informed Consent Form and have been offered the opportunity to discuss the form with the researcher.
- I have had ample opportunity to ask questions about the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits regarding this research study.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw participation at any time without penalty.
- The researcher may withdraw me from the research at the researcher’s professional discretion (e.g., in cases of undue distress).
- If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue my participation, the researcher will provide this information to me.
- Any information derived from the research study that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
- Identifiers will be removed from the data. De-identified data may be used for future research studies or distributed to another researcher for future research without additional informed consent from me (the research participant).
- I should receive a copy of the Informed Consent Form document.

My signature means that I agree to participate in this study:

Print name: _____________________________________________ Date: ______________

Signature: _____________________________________________
Appendix D

Interview Guide

Opening
- Introduce myself and explain the research topic
- Go over informed consent, recording, how data will be used, interview length, etc.
- Answer participant questions
- Start recording

Interview Questions

[1] To start us off, I’d like to ask a few basic questions to get to know you.
- First, please share a bit about your own cultural or ethnic background. Then, when it comes to this term “race,” how do you typically choose to self-identify?
- Are there any other identities (e.g., gender, family role) that you feel are important to who you are that you’d like to share?
- Tell me a bit about your work life.
  - What is your current role(s)?
  - What is your organization like? What is the culture/vibe?
  - What kinds of things do you do on a typical workday?
  - Do you work closely with other people? What is the team structure like? How would you describe your work relationships? Collaborative vs competitive?
  - How long have you worked there? (Is it similar/different to other places you’ve worked in the past?)

[2] How does your (multiracial) identity play a role in your current work?
- In what ways does it show up? How does it influence your work (e.g., how you think, your relationships at work)?
- What benefits do you see of being multiracial? How does it contribute to your work?
- What are the drawbacks or challenges of being multiracial? How has this affected your work?
- Has your multiracial identity ever come up explicitly in conversations with coworkers? Describe.

[3] Sharing identity at work
- Do the people you work with know you are multiracial? (Coworkers, bosses, clients, HR, etc.)
  - [If no] How do they typically perceive you? Do you ever correct their perceptions?
  - [If yes] How did they find out about your heritage?
- In what ways have you revealed your multiracial identity to others at work? Does it come up organically?

[4] Identity invalidation
- How do people typically react when they find out you are multiracial?
- What was the most memorable reaction from a coworker?
- Describe a time when a coworker responded favorably (in a positive way) to your identity.
  - What did they say?
  - How did it make you feel?
  - How did it affect your relationship?
● Describe a time when a coworker did not respond well (or not how you would have liked) to learning about your multiracial identity.
  ○ What happened? What did they say?
  ○ How did it make you feel?
  ○ What thoughts went through your mind while this was happening?
  ○ How did you respond? (In the moment and after.) What did you say to the person, if anything?
  ○ Did you talk to anyone about this incident? Describe.
  ○ How did this experience affect your relationship with this coworker?
  ○ Did your behavior at work change in any way after this experience?

● Current reflection on experience
  ○ How long ago did this happen?
  ○ Looking back now, how do you feel about it? Has your thinking changed? How do you make sense of what happened?
  ○ If you could go back and approach the situation differently, what would you change? What would have been helpful to you?
  ○ How might you handle a similar situation in the future?

[5] Additional experiences
● Do any other examples come to mind of times when your multiracial identity was questioned at work? Describe what happened.
● How was this experience different from the one(s) you told me about earlier?
  ○ Workplace context
  ○ Relationship to coworkers
  ○ Outcomes
  ○ Support
  ○ Self (e.g., age, tenure, status)
● Any other examples you’d like to share?

[6] What is one thing organizations could do to support multiracial individuals?

[7] Closing
● Given our conversation today, what thoughts or feelings do you have about your multiracial identity now?
● Is there anything you were hoping to discuss that I didn’t ask about?
● Any final thoughts?

End of Interview
● Thank the interviewee and stop the recording
● Describe next steps:
  ○ Interview recording will be transcribed within one week
  ○ Participant may review the transcript for accuracy and share additional thoughts
  ○ All participants will receive a summary of findings once data collection and analysis are complete
  ○ Explain treatment of the data (removal of identifying information, use of direct quotations, etc.)
  ○ Confirm participant’s desired alias