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How Female BIPOC Students at a Predominantly White Institution
Think About Belonging: A Multiperspective Study

Delirio Juárez

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Educational Specialist

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ABSTRACT

How Female BIPOC Students at a Predominantly White Institution Think About Belonging: A Multiperspective Study

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Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) report decreased sense of belonging compared to White students (Hunn, 2014; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2019). The study aimed to answer, “What are the daily lived experiences of BIPOC students at a PWI?” and “How do BIPOC students at a PWI describe feelings of belonging (if at all)?” The study was conducted at a private, religiously affiliated, PWI, in the Western United States. The University Belonging Questionnaire (Slaten et al., 2018) was used to sort students’ feelings of belonging. Female participants who endorsed high belonging and low belonging were invited to focus group interviews. A total of 10 participants comprised of graduate and undergraduate students of varying ethnicities and races participated. A focused multiperspective interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) design was employed for this study. In total, there are five context-related themes describing how students navigate their experiences: Cultural Worlds, Support System, Religion, Academics, and Classmates. Both focus groups felt similarly about the importance of friends/family as a support system. The high belonging versus low belonging focus groups felt differently about belonging, discrimination, being a spokesperson, being a chameleon, religion, professors, and their classmates. Those in the HBG reported feeling connected to peers and faculty. The LBG reported feelings of isolation related to feeling othered by peers and faculty.

Based on this study’s findings, several recommendations are offered. Educators should strive to create environments where mentor-student relationships are fostered, microaggressions are lessened, and the larger community campus values BIPOC students. These efforts will better support BIPOC female students as they navigate their experiences in higher education settings, particularly in PWIs.

Keywords: Black Indigenous, People of Color, multicultural, female students, race/ethnicity

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Members of the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color community (BIPOC) live different realities than their White upper to middle class counterparts (Hunn, 2014; Museus et al., 2018). These realities have perpetuated because there are systematic forces at work allowing them to do so. This systematic force at work is known as White privilege which alludes to the social advantages given to those of the dominant race. These advantages encompass all aspects of life such as business interactions, socioeconomic status and access to higher paying jobs, and representation in the media (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Manglitz, 2003). The systematic force of White privilege often goes unrecognized, but when acknowledged the differing realities of the BIPOC community can be explored (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

The acknowledgement of such realities can have varying effects. Effects may include a greater understanding of challenges facing BIPOC and subsequent efforts to create a more welcoming environment (Milem et al., 2005; Museus et al., 2018; Sue et al., 2009). On the other hand, when such realities are dismissed, detrimental effects ensue. A denial of their realities can lead to emotional, mental, physical, or psychological pain (Sue et al., 2007). Recently, these differing realities have become more accepted leading to an increase in research seeking to enhance quality of life. However, such research should also be done when BIPOC community members are in areas of major development. One area of major development is when BIPOC community members attend institutions of higher education.

Research has consistently documented that BIPOC students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) are more likely to perceive the campus climate more negatively than their White peers (Ancis et al., 2000; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus et al., 2018; Reid &

Radhakrishnan, 2003). BIPOC students often face a lower sense of belonging, negative campus climates, and microaggressions which lead to higher attrition rates (Franklin, 2019; Hunn, 2014; McClain & Perry, 2017; McDermott et al., 2020).

BIPOC students at PWIs report a diminished sense of belonging compared to White students (Hunn, 2014; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2019). A sense of belonging is how interrelated BIPOC students feel to others on campus (Strayhorn, 2019). A sense of belonging can have positive or negative effects depending on its presence. When BIPOC students feel a sense of community from their campus, they can become better students. More specifically, they can have secure support systems, become more engaged, and have higher academic achievement (Hunn, 2014; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus et al., 2018; Nunn, 2021; Strayhorn, 2019).

It is generally accepted that all students will face stress while attending an institution of higher education (Franklin, 2019; Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017). For the first time many adolescents are expected to completely take on domestic responsibilities, such as cooking, laundering their clothing, and cleaning, responsibilities that in the past were shouldered by a parent or parental figure. Trying to balance these new responsibilities in addition to classwork, employment, and a social life can be distressing.

Researchers have found that BIPOC students experience significantly higher levels of stress than their White counterparts when placed in highly competitive academic environments (Smedley et al., 1993; Solorzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2009). Even after controlling for perceived general stress, the stress associated with having a minoritized status was associated with decreased persistence attitudes (Museus et al., 2018; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Wei et al., 2011). These factors can negatively impact the success and retention of BIPOC students at PWIs.

Research has begun to gather around BIPOC students, but there needs to be more research focused specifically around female BIPOC students. It has been documented that female BIPOC students experience university life differently than male BIPOC students. In addition to racism, female BIPOC students may experience sexism (Esposito, 2011; Hunn, 2014; Jones et al., 2022). Female BIPOC students might be fearful of falling to the stereotypes of their race or ethnicity (Hunn, 2014; Jones et al., 2022; Spencer et al., 2016). This stereotype threat can also apply to their gender and female BIPOC students could exert extra effort to ensure they do not fall to typical stereotypes (Spencer et al., 2016). This can lead to anxiety on the way they are being perceived by those around them and affect their sense of place or belonging (Esposito, 2011; Jones et al., 2022).

The differences BIPOC students face change the way they experience campus life. Due to this, students may seek out resources or support to improve their experience (Dulabaum, 2016; Franklin, 2019; Hurtado et al., 1998). Potential resources could include friends and family. Universities often provide resources to their students as well. Some research has looked at what supports are being provided by universities. The resources PWIs provide to their BIPOC students should be further investigated to explore how well the needs of BIPOC students are being met, however. Research has shown BIPOC students benefit from university support tailored to their particular experiences (Dulabaum, 2016; Hurtado et al., 1998; Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017; Nunn, 2021).

Because of a lower sense of belonging, negative campus climate, and race-related stressors BIPOC students feel, they have expressed a need for resources to help them achieve success (Dulabaum, 2016). The effectiveness of university support currently offered to BIPOC students should be evaluated. This evaluation would inform recommendations for future support.

Statement of the Problem

While many studies have examined the experiences of BIPOC students in higher education (Smedley et al., 1993; Solorzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2009), little is known about the experiences of female BIPOC students at a PWI and how critical a period this may be in their overall university experience. Existing research has called for more examination of the difficulties BIPOC students face when transitioning into college and an exploration into ways that students can successfully navigate these transitions (Cabrera et al., 1999; Greer & Chwalisz, 2007; Hunn, 2014; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). To this end, understanding the lived experience of female BIPOC students may allow universities to provide more effective support to this population.

Statement of the Purpose

It has been documented that female BIPOC students face unique challenges compared to White students. BIPOC students often face physiological, psychological, and emotional consequences due to racially related events (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Dulabaum, 2016; Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017; Sue et al., 2009). All these factors can be exacerbated for incoming freshmen who are also female BIPOC students.

The purpose of this study is to explore what challenges female BIPOC students face at a PWI and examine what areas female BIPOC members feel they are supported and in what areas they lack support. The study will explore themes such as racial campus climate, sense of belonging, and microaggressions.

Research Questions

Aligned with the purpose of the study, the research questions for this thesis will include:

1. What are the daily lived experiences of enrolled female BIPOC students attending a PWI?
2. How do female BIPOC students at a PWI describe feelings of belonging (if at all)?

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks used as a basis for this study includes racial campus climate (Hurtado et al.,1998; Milem et al., 2005), and a sense of belonging and cultural identity theory (Museus et al., 2018). Each of these theoretical frameworks undergird this study because each has been shown effective in exploring the lived experiences of members of the BIPOC community, including BIPOC students at a PWI campus.

Racial Campus Climate

Racial campus climate includes the idea that all universities have a specific racial climate that affects all students, but particularly BIPOC students. Racial campus climate considers concepts such as compositional diversity, institutional historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion, psychological climate, behavioral climate, and structural diversity (see below for expanded discussion on Racial Campus Climate).

Cultural Identity Theory

Museus et al. (2018) suggest that cultural identity theory can help explain a sense of belonging. Cultural identity theory is the idea that people adopt traditions and customs from wherever they are, and these become a part of their self-concept. When BIPOC students begin to attend a PWI they are often coming from families, communities, or cultures that shared similar beliefs. So, when they move to a different place that does not have these same values, they can

experience alienation. This theory can help explain why White students at PWIs usually feel a sense of belonging because the campus culture matches their home culture. Furthermore, BIPOC students attending a PWI may feel they are being asked to cut ties with their cultural heritage. The idea behind this is that cutting ties, or assimilating, will help the student fit in and succeed. However, students who have greater ties to their cultural heritage are seen to adjust better to school than those who cut ties (Museus et al., 2018). Cultural identity theory can help explain why students' diverse backgrounds help shape how close they feel to their universities. Sense of belonging can be a predictor for academic achievement and successful matriculation (Hunn, 2014; Museus et al., 2018).

CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

It has been documented that BIPOC students attending a PWI face unique challenges. BIPOC students often face physiological, psychological, and emotional consequences due to racially related events (Banks & Dohy, 2019; Dulabaum, 2016; Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017; Sue et al., 2009). All of these factors can be exacerbated for students who are managing and navigating a lot of transitions and commitments (Franklin, 2019; Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017).

Role of Higher Education

Institutions of higher education have been around for a long time, but access to these institutions has been limited. This began to change in the 1950s with more people gaining access to higher education (Lange, 2012). Currently, more people than ever can enroll in universities. Institutions of higher learning continue to provide students with the opportunity to better their minds, circumstances, and communities.

White Privilege

An underlying phenomenon that affects society is White privilege. White privilege is an umbrella term relating to the social gains afforded members of the dominant race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). It can act on areas such as employment, housing, and the justice system (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Manglitz, 2003). For example, Manglitz (2003) cites how in the past, White privilege and the changing definition of Whiteness has allowed or disallowed certain groups' citizenship. This not only affects society as a greater whole, but it is also an underlying factor in the way universities operate. White privilege can manifest itself in the curriculum or

class discussion where Whiteness can be viewed as the norm. This norm can ignore the “other” thus enabling a continuance of this system (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Manglitz, 2003).

Role of Higher Education for BIPOC Community

Historically, BIPOC students were barred from attending the same universities that White students attended. To remedy this in the United States, ex-slaves and others created universities for Black students, today called historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). These universities began as places where ex-slaves could learn to read and write. This continued until the 1960s. Today, there are around 100 HBCUs in the United States (Bracey, 2017; Harper, 2019; Knight et al., 2012). Although some debate exists as to the continued need for these institutions, they continue to serve Black students and all other students who choose to attend.

Currently, BIPOC students are attending universities at increasing rates (Hurtado et al., 1999; Quaye et al., 2015). However, many BIPOC students fail to graduate with their bachelor’s in six years (Hunn, 2014; Knight et al., 2012). Furthermore, even though there are more BIPOC students attending PWIs, these students experience higher levels of hostility as compared to their White peers (Quaye et al., 2015).

Predominantly White Institutions

Consequently, universities typically provide some type of aid for students to help them with most areas in their lives. Not all universities are the same, however, and differ in the type of aid they give. Some of the different types of universities are HBCUs and the more common PWIs. Many BIPOC students attend PWIs. When BIPOC students go to a PWI they are seeing fewer people who look like them both the student body and in faculty (Franklin, 2019; Hunn, 2014; McClain & Perry, 2017; McDermott et al., 2020). This is partly due to the fact that historically, Black students and faculty were not permitted to attend nor be hired by these

universities (Franklin, 2019; McClain & Perry, 2017). These factors, along with many others, contribute to feelings of isolation for BIPOC students attending a PWI (Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2018).

Three-fourths of Black students who received graduate degrees did so at an HBCU and HBCUs have higher graduation rates than the national average (Hunn, 2014; Knight et al., 2012). This number is different when Black students attend universities where they are not the majority. Student experiences differ depending on whether they attend a PWI or an HBCU. Black students report higher satisfaction when attending HBCUs and isolation when attending PWIs (Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2018). In Winkle-Wagner and McCoy (2018), the researchers compared BIPOC students in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields at PWIs and HBCUs. As reflected in the article's title, BIPOC students at PWIs expressed feeling like an *alien*, whereas BIPOC students at HBCUs expressed feeling like part of a *family*. BIPOC students' experiences seem to vary depending on the diversity of their campuses.

Racial Campus Climate

In spite of these differences, all universities share a common element, though it may vary in its expression. All universities have a racial campus climate. At PWIs the racial campus climate might be more noticeable to BIPOC students because it is more relevant to their experience (Franklin, 2019; Hurtado et al., 1999). In a study conducted by Moragne-Patterson and Barnett (2017), institutional characteristics seem to be more salient than student characteristics in determining student retention. In fact, a body of research indicates the following five areas influence campus climate: compositional diversity; institutional historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion; psychological climate; behavioral climate; and structural diversity (Franklin, 2019; Hurtado et al., 1998; McClain & Perry, 2017; Milem et al., 2005).

Compositional Diversity

Compositional diversity refers to the actual number of different ethnic groups present on campus. Usually, this aspect will be the one people typically think of when they think of diversity or a racial campus climate. McClain and Perry (2017) hypothesized that the compositional diversity of BIPOC faculty can influence the attrition of BIPOC students. This could be because BIPOC students felt BIPOC faculty were more invested in their well-being. This component is the most visible and can be what the administration focuses on when trying to improve racial campus climate (Hurtado et al., 1998; Milem et al., 2005).

Institutional Historical Legacy of Inclusion or Exclusion

This component has to do with the history of the university. Although current students may be unaware of the history of their institution, this aspect is important. Most PWIs have only admitted BIPOC students for 50 years or less. According to Milem et al. (2005), universities that resisted integration in the past show similar characteristics in their current settings. This can be seen in mascots that imitate racist stereotypes, buildings that are named after slave owners, or school chants that have Confederate wording (McClain & Perry, 2017).

Psychological Climate

Psychological climate has to do with the way those on campus view relationships between culturally different groups. This varies significantly between White students and BIPOC students. It also depends on where people are placed within the university as this will affect the way students experience and see the university operating (Milem et al., 2005). This section will manifest itself in the lives of BIPOC students through their mental and emotional health (Franklin, 2019; McClain & Perry, 2017; Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017; Sue et al., 2009).

On the other hand, it can be ameliorated by the presence and support of peer groups (Hurtado et al., 1998).

Behavioral Climate

Hurtado et al. (1998) describes this as the actual interactions on campus, the inherent features of those interactions, and the quality of those interactions among and across different racial groups. Studies show that students seem to be segregating themselves more on college campuses (McClain & Perry, 2017). However, BIPOC students report spending time with other cultures outside their own, which White students just may not be seeing (Hurtado et al., 1998; Milem et al., 2005).

Structural Diversity

The final component was created by Milem et al. (2005) and expounded on research touched on by Hurtado et al. (1998). This section has to do with the way the university operates. Areas such as chosen curriculum, faculty hiring, and budget allocations are some such parts that would fall under this umbrella. This component can greatly affect BIPOC students. If there is a lack of diversity in administrative affairs, BIPOC students could feel they and their values are not being reflected back to them through this higher institution (McClain & Perry, 2017).

Sense of Belonging

Definition

The racial climate on campus that students are a part of can affect their sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2019) defines a sense of belonging as a basic human need that influences how and why people behave the way they do. In regard to college students, it can be viewed as an assessment of social support on campus, feeling interrelated, or feeling welcomed by peers and faculty. It is a mental assessment that leads to differing behaviors (Strayhorn, 2019).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

A sense of belonging is not a concept that solely relates to students attending a college but is a concept that each individual experiences. Maslow's (1943) five human needs are basic physiological needs, safety and a sense of security, love, personal esteem, and self-actualization. He categorized belonging under the human need for love. He explained this need as a person attempting to find a place in a group and then achieving supportive relationships therein. Before belonging can be achieved, physiological and safety needs must first be met. According to Maslow's theory (1943), these needs are hierarchical (Strayhorn, 2019). For example, if someone is starving then they cannot worry if they belong with those around them. On the other hand, in order for self-actualization to happen, then love or belonging must happen beforehand. Maslow (1943) defined self-actualization as reaching one's maximum potential. Therefore, in order for someone to be the best version they can be of themselves they must first feel interrelated and welcomed by those around them.

Absence of Belonging

Other ways a desire to belong can occur are when BIPOC students are feeling isolation and exclusion from White peers, White faculty, and the campus culture (Museus et al., 2018; Reynolds et al., 2010). Hurtado and Carter (1997) also explain a sense of belonging as an individual's mental evaluation of their relation and role in comparison to the group. One way this self-evaluation can occur is through the curriculum presented in classes. Often the curriculum BIPOC students are learning is Eurocentric and taught as the norm. BIPOC students can feel unseen or ignored when their cultures are not being studied or discussed. Due to this lack of representation BIPOC students can feel that this comes from their university and professors

(Museus et al., 2018; Quaye et al., 2015; Reynolds et al., 2010). BIPOC students can also feel this same invisibility from their peers.

Presence of Belonging

When a sense of belonging is present, positive circumstances can be achieved. Students feel support, understood, and committed (Maslow, 1943; Museus et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2019). Students will perform and function better in an environment where they feel they belong (Jones et al., 2022; Strayhorn, 2019). Strayhorn (2019) also framed this concept in the realm of motivation. Students will perform better and be more engaged when they feel valued and that their efforts really matter to those around them.

Female BIPOC Students

Female BIPOC students have reported lower feelings of belonging than their male counterparts (Hunn, 2014). This could be because female BIPOC students have an intersection of identities. Therefore, they might experience racism as well as sexism (Esposito, 2011; Hunn, 2014; Jones et al., 2022). On the one hand, they have their race or identity which can lead to others boxing them into certain stereotypes (Hunn, 2014; Jones et al., 2022). At the same time, they also have the fear of being reduced to their appearance. Female BIPOC students might put forth more effort than White students or male BIPOC students so that their actions are not seen as stereotypical. This is known as stereotype threat and can affect their academics (Spencer et al., 2016). It can lead to anxiety on the way they are being perceived by those around them and is harmful to their mental health (Esposito, 2011; Jones et al., 2022). These two areas can combine to create lower levels of belonging for female BIPOC students on campus.

Race-Related Stress and Microaggressions

College experiences can be rewarding, fulfilling, and also stressful. Stressors for students come from social life, challenging academics, physical health, and trying to balance all three. In addition to these stressors, BIPOC students may face additional stress due to their ethnic and racial identity. These stressors are called race-related stress. Race-related stress can be defined as the daily discomfort BIPOC members experience related to racism in any aspect of their lives (Reynolds et al., 2010). Race-related stress can come from isolation, exclusion, or microaggressions in the class and on campus (Quaye et al., 2015; Reynolds et al., 2010; Sue et al., 2007; Torres-Harding et al., 2020).

Another element that can contribute to the racial campus climate are the microaggressions felt by BIPOC students. Microaggressions are everyday acts that can intentionally or unintentionally communicate harm to BIPOC students (Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017). BIPOC students can feel they are dealing with microaggressions from White students and faculty (Franklin, 2019; Hunn, 2014; McClain & Perry, 2017; Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017). These microaggressions can be overt, like when the Ku Klux Klan holds a rally on campus (McClain & Perry, 2017), to other more covert instances such as professors showing less interest in BIPOC students (Franklin, 2019; Sue et al., 2007). Furthermore, BIPOC students can face microaggressions in the material they are learning in their courses (Sue et al., 2009).

Sue et al. (2007) describe three types of microaggressions. These are microinsults, microassaults, and microinvalidations. Microinsults are often unconscious, rude, or insensitive, and degrade a person's racial identity. The offender might be unaware, but are still delivering a clear message to the BIPOC member. Microassaults are often conscious, intentional, and discriminatory. Sue et al. (2007) has described this type of microaggression as "old fashioned"

racism. It is on the personal level and usually in private. Microinvalidations are often unconscious and negate the thoughts or experiential reality of a BIPOC member. Often these microaggressions are communications. For example, a BIPOC member could be told to stop being so sensitive when they share a racist experience, or they could be complimented on their English. With these comments the reality of a BIPOC member is being rejected.

Whether overt or covert, microaggressions damage BIPOC students' mental health (Franklin, 2019; McClain & Perry, 2017; Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017; Sue et al., 2009). Continuous exposure to microaggressions can lead students to experience racial battle fatigue (RBF; Franklin, 2019). In Sue et al. (2009) when BIPOC students are made to engage in a discussion on race where microaggressions are present it can make them feel uncomfortable. They either have to engage in the discourse which can be painful or ignore it which can leave them feeling like they have sold themselves out. Furthermore, if they choose to not do anything about it by keeping their feelings pent up, the frustration or anger they feel could have a physical toll on them in the long run (Franklin, 2019; Sue et al., 2007). Another feeling these students might face is isolation. Due to microaggressions, they could be left to feel alone and that they have no one else who identifies with them (Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017).

Retention

Consequently, a perceived negative racial campus climate and the microaggressions BIPOC students are subject to affect retention and graduation rates (McDermott et al., 2020; Quaye et al., 2015). Despite an increase in diversity, Black students are the least likely to graduate from four-year universities (45.9%), followed by Hispanic students (55%; Banks & Dohy, 2019; Shapiro et al., 2017). Race-related stressors are aspects of a BIPOC student's university experience that is in addition to an already demanding academic environment.

CHAPTER 3

Methods

Study Design

A focused multiperspective interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) design was employed for this study. IPA allows participants to examine and make sense of circumstances in their lives (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This design allowed the researcher to make sense of the way participants made sense of their time at a PWI. Patterns across the participants answers were looked for as part of an in-depth IPA analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003). To achieve this focus groups (FGs) were conducted to capture participants' experiences. This methodology allowed the research questions to be answered. The focus group answered the questions: "What are the daily lived experiences of enrolled female BIPOC students attending a PWI?" and "How do female BIPOC students at a PWI describe feelings of belonging (if at all)?" The discussion format of the focus group allowed participants to describe their feelings.

Participants and Setting

Participant Recruitment Process

Approval for this study was granted by the university's institutional review board (See Appendix A). Participants were recruited through online flyers and gave written consent. Students were then emailed a survey measuring belonging. In this survey they were also asked demographic information, such as age and race or ethnicity. The *University Belonging Questionnaire* (Slaten et al., 2018) was used as a way to sort students. This is a Likert scale survey in which students rate their agreement on various questions related to belonging. Forty participants were contacted and 10 participants who endorsed high belonging and low belonging were invited to participate in a focus group interview. There were 80 total responses, but 17

responses were deleted for having incomplete responses and six responses were deleted for not meeting selection criteria (i.e., being White or male). This left a total of 57 responses.

Participant Sampling and Demographics

The study took place at a private, religiously affiliated, PWI, in the Western United States. Enrollment is approximately 34,000 students (81% identify as White; 50% identify as female). Participants were contacted through email. Therefore, purposeful and homogenous sampling was used since the study focused on female BIPOC students, in order to understand intersecting identities, attending a PWI. Chain sampling was also used once some participants were contacted and because more participants were needed. It was possible that BIPOC students would be aware of other female BIPOC students interested in participating. Demographics of the participants are included in Table 1.

Data Collection

Data were collected on the campus of a private, religiously affiliated, PWI in the Western United States. Data were collected through focus group interviews. There were two focus groups with one Caucasian facilitator and a BIPOC notetaker and then the other focus group was reversed with a BIPOC facilitator and Caucasian notetaker. This allowed for varying perspectives to be present during the focus groups.

University Belonging Questionnaire

The current study utilized the University Belonging Questionnaire (UBQ), created by Slaten et al. (2018; see Appendix A). Slaten et al. (2018) created this university belonging measure after noting the lack of belonging measures specific to higher education. In order to create this measure, they first interviewed students about their experiences. This measure was normed on 711 students at a Midwestern university in the United States. The UBQ is a 4-point

Likert scale where higher scores indicate feeling more belonging. The internal reliability was a total score of $\alpha = .93$.

Table 1

Participant Descriptions

High/Low Group (HBG) and Participant ID	Description Ethnicity, age in years, and level of educational enrollment
HBG P1	Alaska Native-Yup'ik Eskimo, 22, Undergraduate student
HBG P2	Latina, 19, Undergraduate student
HBG P3	Multiracial, 20, Undergraduate student
HBG P4	Latina, 21, Undergraduate student
HBG P5	Biracial-White and Peruvian, 18, Undergraduate student
HBG P6	Biracial-White and Samoan, 28, Graduate student
LBG P1	Black/Latinx, 40, Graduate student
LBG P2	Latinx, 22, Undergraduate student
LBG P3	Pacific Islander, 36, Graduate student
LBG P4	Asian, 29, Graduate student

The University Belonging Questionnaire has a total of 24 items within three subscales: university affiliation, university support and acceptance, and faculty and staff relations. University affiliation is the pride a student feels about being a member of their university's community and had 12 items. An item from this subscale would be "I take pride in wearing my university's colors." University support and acceptance is how well a student feels the university gives assistance and welcomes them. There were eight items in this subscale. An item from this subscale would be "My cultural customs are accepted at my university." This subscale could be particularly important for BIPOC students in showing if they feel the university values their culture. Last, the faculty and staff relations subscale is the extent to which a student builds relationships with university personnel. There were four items in this subscale. An item from this subscale would be "I feel that a faculty member has valued my contributions in class." The internal reliability for the questionnaire was $\alpha = .93$. Construct validity for the subscales was found through bivariate correlations against two other scales and ranged from .57- -.15 (Slaten et al., 2018).

Pilot and Dress Rehearsal

A pilot test for the focus group questions was done prior to a dress rehearsal. There were four BIPOC members: three female, one male. Of the participants, three had completed their undergraduate degrees in the Western United States and three of the four had completed graduate programs. All of the questions were given to the participants; they answered questions according to their experiences; and then the participants commented on what they might add or change about the questions.

The questions were changed based on the participants' responses. In the first open question a participant suggested general experiences be changed to specify present experiences.

In the second question asking about the reasons why a female BIPOC student should attend the university based on their own experiences, participants suggested that there be a neutral option available. In the fourth question where it was asked how participants feel “at home” on campus, participants did not resonate with one of the responses. The response was “Feeling my university values me.” After some discussion we changed this response to better reflect their experiences: “Feeling my university values my norms.” Two more responses were added to that question based on a discussion of a lack of environment/visual options. The responses were, “Seeing others on campus like me” and “Having spaces on campus that I resonate with.” In the fifth question about how to solve a school-related problem, participants answered that they would do it themselves or ask a trusted peer, so those responses were added to the available options.

In the sixth question when talking about friends, some probing sub questions were added. Participants’ questions helped clarify the initially proposed questions. Ultimately, the focus group questions included the following two questions “Are these friends in class or life-long friends? What differences have you experienced making friends at home vs. at this university?”

Next, after discussion from the sixth question it was felt that the next question had already been answered so it was cut. In the present seventh question asking about relationships in majors, responses were added based on the participants’ reactions. These responses were:

“I feel like I can relate to others, but they can’t relate to me; “I feel I have to be a ‘chameleon;” and “I feel pressure to be a spokesperson.” In the eighth question asking about professors, a response about the professor’s gender was added based on a participant’s clarifying question. In the ninth question about university support, because of the previous discussion of an environmental factor a response was added to reflect that which was “I see or hear what I am culturally used to.” In the tenth question asking about academic experiences a response, “I

believe class sizes facilitated my learning” was added. In addition, the probing questions, “Were these resources you sought out or that were given to you?” and “How was your energy level affected by seeking out these resources?” were added based on discussion with the participants and the amount of effort they put in seeking out resources. Finally, in the last question a probing question, “Any experiences where you have felt burdened from being BIPOC at this university?” was added that had seemed to be a theme as the participants gave their responses.

Once the questions had been found to be sufficient, they were later tested in a dress rehearsal. The dress rehearsal allowed facilitators and note-takers to be familiar with the material and practice asking the questions.

Focus Groups

Once participants had been sorted into high or low feelings of belonging, they were invited to participate in focus groups on campus. In each focus group there was the facilitator and notetaker. The facilitator and notetaker were of different racial or cultural backgrounds. Participants were asked open-ended questions and ranking questions. For the ranking questions they used cards with responses on them to physically rank their answers. Conversation ensued on why they ranked their answers a certain way.

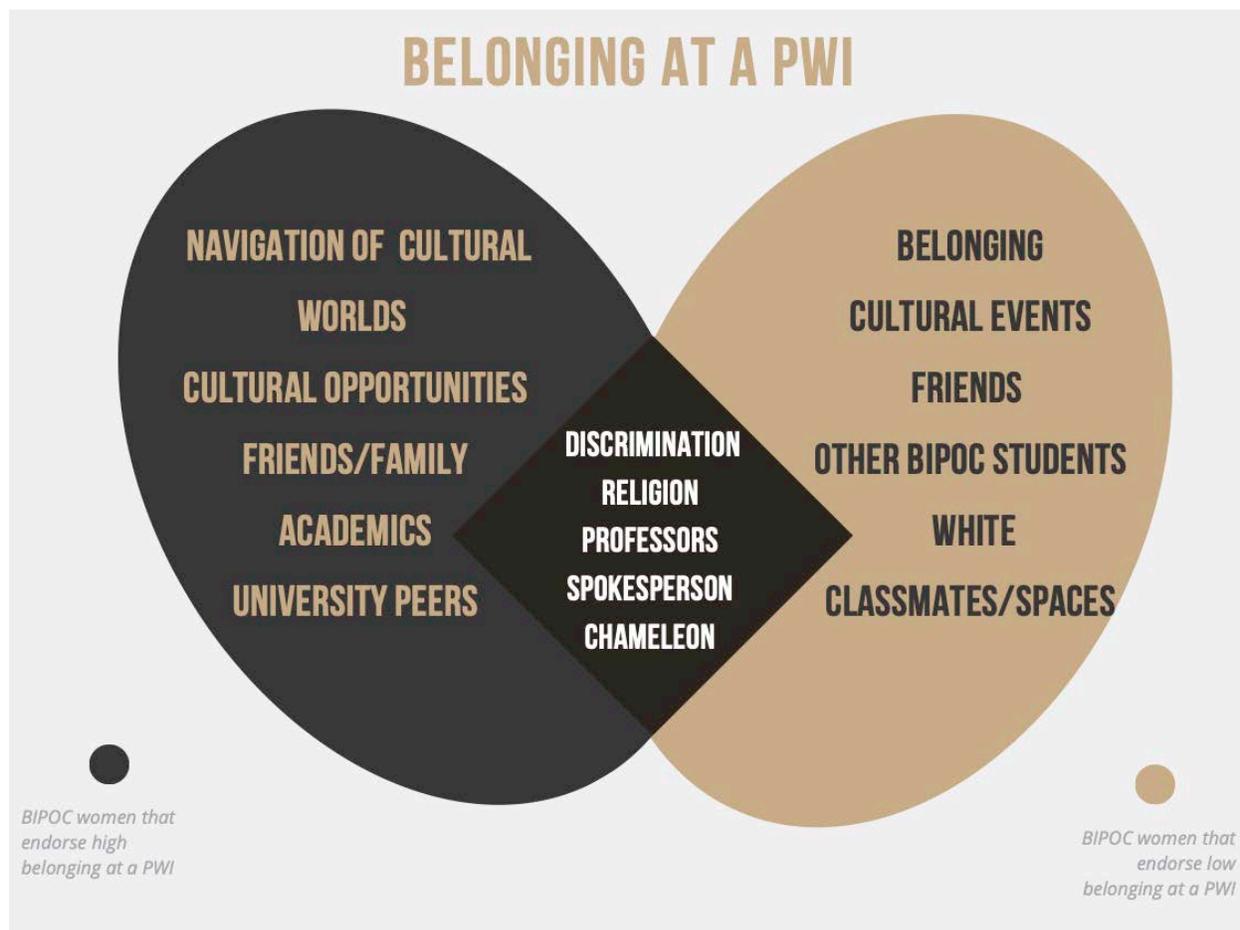
Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The researcher used a qualitative analysis methodology called Sort and Sift, Think and Shift (Maietta, 2006; Maietta et al., 2017). The data analysis plan encompasses several methods to identify the most salient themes emerging from the data from interviews as well as observations. For an in-depth analysis, the researcher reviewed data from the focus group interview transcripts. Data analysis then progressed through the seven fundamental phases of the Sort and Sift, Think and Shift approach which consist of data inventory, diagramming, memoing

as written reflection, episodic profiles, topic monitoring, mining, and bridging (Curry et al., 2006; Maietta, 2006). Codes from this methodology can be found in Figure 1. Participants were also emailed after the focus group interviews to see if the transcribed script accurately portrayed what they remember saying. Two participants emailed back. One recommended a correction and the other participant reported the transcribed script was fine.

Figure 1

Focus Group Codes



In order for qualitative research to be credible and trustworthy, certain actions should be taken (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Lincoln and Guba (1985) define what these actions should be. They proposed that the standards of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability be utilized to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility

To ensure credibility this study employed a variety of strategies. These strategies included triangulation, debriefing, member checking, and expert checking. Analyst triangulation assures the information being obtained is accurate. There were multiple members on the research team gathering and analyzing data (Martella et al., 2013). This permitted for the development of rich, robust data and later discussions. Peer debriefing allowed the research team to explore different assumptions or hypotheses, check in with any bias, and undergo cathartic release, or express any emotions the data caused as it was reviewed. The research team invited professors with expertise related to multicultural issues such as racial/cultural identity, Black/African-American students, and intersectionality to review and comment on preliminary findings. During member checking, the researcher asked other research members for additional feedback on categories, interpretations, and conclusions.

Transferability

A thick description of the variables, observations, and experiences provide context and allow for transferability. When data and participants are described extensively in detail, readers of the research can independently determine the extent to which the data and findings might be applicable to other times, people, populations, or settings.

Dependability

Dependability was reached throughout the research process as the team kept a record of the process and decisions. Record keeping, including memos outlining decisions, thought processes, and questions created a paper trail that can be used to audit the findings of the research.

Confirmability

In this project, record keeping, reflexive journaling, and analyst triangulation allowed for confirmability. Reflexivity is important because researchers come to data with preconceived notions, and it is necessary to disclose that information. Reflexive tools allowed the research team to disclose their positionality and allow a different comprehension of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Included in this thesis is a statement of positionality that discloses the primary researcher's insider status, perceptions of the participants, and any preconceived beliefs about the research questions.

Reflexivity was also developed through journaling. Each member of the research team reflexively journaled as they worked with the data. This journaling allowed for catharsis while also producing an audit trail of thoughts, feelings, and decisions. Additionally, journaling permitted a view of different research members' insider and outsider status. Journaling was important for the focus on discourse analysis. Discourse analysis explores the effects of words and not just what was said. As researchers journal after coming in contact with the data, they create a secondary data set that shows how the researcher is interacting with the data.

Statement of Positionality. The researcher comes to the current study with insider status as the researcher identifies as a female Mexican-American. Other potential influential identities the researcher self-identifies as are a child of immigrants and a first-generation college student.

The researcher has been associated with and communicating about BIPOC members and issues for a lifetime. These conversations have come from personal situations the researcher experienced, saw, or heard. Some of these experiences have been stereotyping and microaggressions.

These associations, conversations, and experiences led to the researcher seeking out opportunities for the researcher to do more research on and with BIPOC members once in post-secondary education. Additionally, the researcher was a part of a club at the university specifically for female BIPOC members both as a regular club member and then as a club officer. Due to this, the researcher has had experience with the research population for years. Therefore, part of the researcher's positionality is that female BIPOC members are sharing a narrative that is different from their White counterparts that needs to be shared.

The researcher's prolonged exposure to this population is both a benefit and a liability in this research project. This prolonged exposure will allow for the development of trust. The researcher's professional and personal experience with BIPOC members will also allow the researcher to provide contextual factors and provide relevance to conversations and interactions that may not make sense to one unfamiliar with the population group. On the other hand, these personal experiences may hinder unbiased analysis of the data.

The research team utilized the following strategies to decrease the influence of personal bias in the analysis. Members of the research team unfamiliar with the participants de-identified the data sets. Multiple researchers participated in analyst triangulation, reflexive journaling, and peer debriefing. Member checking facilitated a discussion of theories and analysis. Each researcher practiced bracketing techniques to increase awareness of any personal bias in the research process.

Expert Reviewers. After the initial data analysis initial findings were sent to three expert reviewers. All three expert reviewers were BIPOC female faculty at a PWI. They each had experience with multicultural populations in their individual fields. The initial findings were sent to four reviewers, three female and one male, but only three returned feedback. All of the reviewers agreed that the findings seemed plausible based on research they had done, experiences with BIPOC students at PWIs, and personal experiences. While all of the findings seemed plausible, the expert reviewers mentioned there were aspects not present that they would have expected. The expert reviewers would have expected more about socioeconomic status (SES), mental health, and tokenization.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

The purpose of this study is to explore what challenges female BIPOC students face at a PWI. The research questions for this thesis include:

1. What are the daily lived experiences of enrolled female BIPOC students attending a PWI?
2. How do female BIPOC students at a PWI describe feelings of belonging (if at all)?

These research questions were examined through two different focus groups. The high belonging group (HBG) was composed of those that endorse feelings of high belonging at a PWI and the low belonging group (LBG) was composed of those that endorse feelings of low belonging at a PWI. Neither the facilitators nor the focus group members knew of these categorizations for their groups. Five themes from the focus groups will be explored.

Focus Group Themes

There were 15 total categories with some overlap between the two focus groups and these categories were divided into five themes in total: Navigation of Cultural Worlds, Support System, Religion, Academics, and Classmates which can be found in Table 2. In Table 3 there are quotes from the participants that capture each theme. There were 47 pages of quotes from which Table 3 was created to exemplify a few of the participants' representative quotations.

Navigation of Cultural Worlds

The findings include theme one which is Navigation of Cultural Worlds. All of the participants discussed the need to traverse within their own minoritized cultural sphere along with the cultural sphere of the PWI and the effects from doing so. Within this theme there were

seven categories: Navigation of Cultural Worlds, Belonging, Discrimination, Cultural Opportunities, Cultural Events, Spokesperson, and Chameleon.

Table 2

Themes and Categories of Focus Groups

Themes	Focus Group One Categories	Focus Group Two Categories
Navigation of Cultural Worlds	Navigation of Cultural Worlds	Belonging
	Discrimination	Discrimination
	Cultural Opportunities	Cultural Events
	Spokesperson	Spokesperson
	Chameleon	Chameleon
Support System	Friends/Family	Friends
Religion	Religion	Religion
Academics	Professors	Professors
	Academics	
Classmates	University Peers	Other BIPOC Students
		White
		Classmates/Spaces

Table 3*Thematic Table of Quotations*

Themes	Quotes	
	High Belonging	Low Belonging
Navigation of Cultural Worlds	“Visually I'm not considered, I don't know, like just looking at me you wouldn't probably consider me part of the, how do you say it, like the BIPOC community, but like culturally where I come from it makes sense.”	“I know for me, when I go to those events it's like I can finally breathe because typically, they're in the evening when I'm done with my classes, so it's all day I've had to be in this predominantly white campus and finally, I can kind of be me again with me friends.”
Support System	“I also put having a supportive group of friends and family at the top because I felt very blessed, I heard all the roommate horror stories but then I love my roommates so much.”	“If you have a strong support system here or at home, you may be able to navigate the nuances of this type of discrimination.”
Religion	“Religion is a huge part of my family, it's very important to so just coming to a university that practices it the same way that I do at home just makes me feel so much better.”	“When you come to [this university] and when you thought of [this university] from the outside it's like, this is the Christlike space, you're supposed to feel the love of Christ as you enter, but it doesn't feel like that. I just think that there needs to be a significant change in the way that we treat people of color here and the knowledge that they bring and the contributions that they bring and I think that needs to be an honored in a way better way than it has been in my experience.”
Academics	“I haven't noticed professors being overly supportive to any community, either regular white people or the BIPOC community which I think is really important.”	“It's been really hard for me to get some of the teachers on board with what I'm doing. But these the couple, the two that I feel are close in a relationship that get it, but the rest don't.”
Classmates	“And I feel like I can talk to my peers, I feel like anything that's gone wrong has mainly been me being like overthinking stuff.”	“I feel like if the university values and the way they act changes, then we would see more people like us and then also we'd really be able to make a change of the culture here.”

Navigation of Cultural Worlds and Belonging. All of the participants in the HBG talked about Navigation of Cultural Worlds as important to belonging. Many in the HBG described being BIPOC and reconciling that with the PWI's culture. Most described this as a balancing act. Some described it as being hard to balance with their culture and others as okay. One participant said:

I mean I'm Mexican but I wasn't raised in that 'Mexico Mexico' culture. But I also wasn't raised, because my family is Mexican, in that 'White' culture either so it's kind of like a mix of both. So, coming here not having my family to share that with it's like, in the middle. I don't feel like I'm far from home but I don't feel at home. So, I'm just trying to find the middle ground of what is home to me.

Similarly, other participants described being BIPOC while not looking BIPOC or making the effort to incorporate more familiar cultures into their lives.

On the other hand, the LBG discussed not feeling as if they belong because of the PWI culture and their being BIPOC. One participant explained:

I think one of my challenges has been just assumptions that are made, you know, every now and then I'll hear a comment, maybe not even me but just people of color on campus and it's really isolating, you know. It makes you feel isolated. There have been plenty of times where I felt lonely. There have been a bazillion times where I've been questioning whether or not I should be here. Like, I'm 40 years old, why am I putting myself in a situation where I feel like I don't belong?

This is similar to what almost all of the participants said about belonging. They mentioned feeling like they do not belong and questioning their attendance at the PWI. They mentioned that

this came from being one of the few BIPOC students in their programs, being different in age from other classmates, or from being socially different from their classmates.

Discrimination. Even though there were mixed ways students in the HBG felt about navigating being BIPOC most agreed they did not feel discrimination because of it. One participant from the HBG said, “It doesn't feel like home to me because it's so far, not because of any negative comments or discrimination or anything it's just like how far away it is.” Many of the participants spoke about discrimination this way. Another participant from the HBG talked about it as:

I've had a pretty positive experience. I think if I've faced any discrimination, it's because I did it, like ‘Oh, why can't I have blonde hair like her, or I wish I had blue eyes,’ so, it's nothing like them making me feel like I'm being discriminated.

Other participants also described potential discrimination as something they were doing to themselves or self-discrimination. A couple participants did mention hearing discrimination in regard to affirmative action.

The LBG also talked about discrimination. Each person in this group did say they had experienced discrimination. One participant said:

The way people talk to me, as if I'm stupid and don't have experience and all that. I've spent some time crying about it and I just remind myself that I made my place here, I put in the work, I'm helping my community, that's why I'm here... I need to constantly remind myself and you just feel like you are othered.

All participants shared experiences like this where they felt discrimination or heard disparaging remarks from others. Participants in the LBG have experienced feelings of homesickness,

loneliness, shock, or have had meltdowns because of the discrimination they have faced at a PWI.

Cultural Opportunities and Cultural Events. All participants discussed the cultural events the PWI puts on for BIPOC students. The HBG felt that the PWI did a good job of incorporating cultural events for the campus community. The participant who did not feel that way recognized that her ethnic community is very small for a campus to take note of. Everyone else felt like the PWI values culture, even if most of them do not attend the cultural events put on. One participant said:

My first week at [this university] they had the clubs that you could learn about, like the Hispanic club. I didn't join any of them, but I personally feel like [this university] does a good job at trying to incorporate different cultures and identities.

Many other participants expressed similar sentiments about not being able to go to the events put on by the Multicultural Student Services office or cultural clubs on campus. Some recognized those as opportunities they could take to be more involved or to better their college experience.

In the LBG, they similarly noted that the PWI puts on cultural events or has clubs specific to their race/ethnicity. They described it as being a place where they are happy to see their culture or feel relief being around other BIPOC students. One participant noted the type of events put on by the PWI and said:

I do see cultural events for my community... Oftentimes it's usually dance and that's such a small part of our culture, you know what I mean and not everyone's dancers, but for some reason everyone believes that all Polynesians are dancers, ... the larger campus acknowledges Pacific peoples as sports players, like on the football team and stuff like that, and dancers, but, like I said, those are small, little aspects of our culture, I don't

really hear much other than those two and yeah, I don't see or hear what I'm culturally used to. Like, I said, there's a whole lot I don't think our cultural community is that valued on campus, besides sports and dance.

For this participant more important than the cultural event, was the type of cultural event being put on to represent her culture. The other participants felt like the cultural events or clubs were representative of the culture of which they were familiar.

Spokesperson. Both groups examined whether or not they feel called to be a spokesperson for their race/ethnicity and whether they mind taking on that role. In the HBG someone said, "I don't feel pressure to be a spokesperson, I love to be a spokesperson, especially for my culture, specifically women in STEM." Most participants either did not feel like they were called on to be a spokesperson or if they were called to be a spokesperson they did not mind being one. In the LBG, however, they felt pressure to be a spokesperson. One participant said, "I just feel, these guys are going to go out and harm other communities, you know? So, I feel that pressure to have to correct them and have to stand up and say something before someone gets hurt." Other participants agreed with this sentiment or expressed how they felt they had to be a spokesperson when the situation had to do with experiences they themselves had gone through.

Chameleon. Of the participants in the HBG only one participant felt she needed to be a chameleon or that she had to change aspects of herself depending on the situation. This participant described being a chameleon as a pressure to conform. All other participants felt that they did not have to act like a chameleon. One participant said, "I would say that I'm the only person of color in my lab, but I don't feel like I have to be a chameleon because I can relate to them in some ways." Even though they might be one of the few BIPOC, they feel like they can

still relate to their classmates. In the LBG, some did describe feeling as if they had to be a chameleon at times. One participant said:

I speak so much, I add Māori and Pacific words often in the way that I talk and that's just a normal way, you know in work and school and everything like that and I have to, kind of, code switch, you know, to speak the way that everyone wants to speak.

Other participants similarly felt they had to edit the way they spoke in certain situations. Other participants recognized that they do not feel this way or were working on being less like this in an attempt to be more accepting of themselves.

Support System

The findings include a second theme, which is Support System. The participants discussed how important it is to have understanding and encouraging people around them as they were at the PWI. Within this theme there were two categories: friends/family and friends.

Friends and Family. In the HBG participants described how helpful it is to have friends and family around them. Most also mention how it has been easy to make friends in their majors or programs because they felt they can relate to each other. Others mention how these school relationships are only confined to the classroom or until the semester is up. In the HBG there were more references to their families and how they are of benefit. One participant in the HBG said:

Having the support of your friends like family is huge. I have two sisters here which makes it like a party. I feel like really having friends and if you have family here, finding people that you can do things that are related to school, because that's good. But also, things that are like outside of school, like just getting away from it, but it does feel a lot

sometimes, I don't know about you guys but school's kind of depressing sometimes especially here at [this university].

For this participant, family in addition to friends help make life joyful and give a reprieve to the daily school schedule. Other participants also shared how friends/family make a difference as they attend a PWI.

Friends. In the LBG, there were a couple mentions of family, but friends were the major topic of those who form their support system. One participant described her friend group as:

So, having like, really firm friendship is great. We also speak a lot of Spanglish, it's just easier to communicate that way. How they said, like someone who is a safe space, you can say whatever and there's been times where we've kind of been sick of discrimination and we just laugh about it, like I can't believe this person said this or blah blah blah. So, we've made the tough times also good ones, like while we're crying, we're still laughing and things like that. So, it's great because it's like the light at the end of the tunnel.

For participants in the LBG, those who are in their support system are those who are understanding. They did make mention of other BIPOC students being in their friend group, however, one participant noted that it did not matter if their friends were BIPOC or not as long as they understood experiences that were different from their own. For most in this group making friends with those in their major was easy because like those in the HBG they feel they can relate to them.

Religion

Religion is the third theme identified from the focus groups. Almost all of the participants in the HBG mentioned how religion plays an important part in their feeling belonging at the

PWI. Participants shared how it is important for them to be at a university that shares their values. One participant said it this way:

It's really cool because despite our background, a lot of us are members of [this religion] and even if all of us are, there really is a different spirit to this institution. So, having that spirituality, religion, beliefs, having that in common is really cool to have here.

All of the HBG participants, save one, shared similar sentiments. They mentioned how being at a university that has similar norms to them made them feel connected to other students or helped lift them up.

The LBG talked about religion in a different way. For them they discussed religion as something that should have been a protective factor, however, it ended up not being one. One participant said:

I would want people to know that discrimination is not Christlike, it's not, and this is a place where everyone should feel like they belong, whether they're members of the Church or not, and it does not feel that way and something has to change internally in order for that to happen and it's really sad that it doesn't happen.

When the other participants referenced religion, they all spoke of it in the same way. They spoke about how religion should connect them to other students or lessen discrimination to the point of improving their feelings of belongingness, yet it failed to do so.

Academics

The fourth theme is academics. In this theme participants explored what makes a professor better over others, their relationships with professors, and resources available to them through the PWI. Both focus groups discussed professors and only the HBG talked about different resources they have encountered.

Professors. All participants examined the roles professors play in their feelings of belonging. Participants in the HBG talked about feeling close to professors when they feel the professors are invested in them. In addition to this for some they feel close to a professor when a professor is female or shares a similar background to them. A few participants also shared how they appreciate the way professors respond to students. One the HBG participant said, “I’ve had one professor in specific that he is just really supportive to anybody who came to him and it didn’t matter what color or what you were doing with your life.” These participants value professors who seem to treat everyone the same regardless of their backgrounds.

In the LBG, most participants also mentioned feeling closer to professors when they were female or shared a similar background. However, most of the participants put a qualifier around “feeling close” to a professor. One participant said:

I wouldn't say close, I still get myself, it's still a protective, it's strategic, right? What I share and what I don't share..., I do feel closer to my female professor and also the one professor who, so, I grew up very poor and he lived in a trailer and so he sort of gets that vibe and gets what it's like to come from nothing. So, I do feel closer to those, probably not close, but just in the student teacher relationship.

Most of the participants defined “feeling close” to their professors this way. They explained that it was a natural consequence of the power dynamic that ensues from a teacher-student relationship. Other participants did share feeling close and support from professors who have varying life experiences. Both focus groups mentioned that having smaller class sizes and ratios helps them feel better connected.

Academics. The HBG participants explained how difficult navigating the PWI's resources felt to them. They all said that they felt the PWI had resources, but someone just had to go and look for them. One participant said:

That was just really hard because I didn't know where to go and I ended up having two Bs on my transcript the first semester and like, [this university] is a really tough school, but for me, a straight A student, it was really hard because if I had just known where to go, maybe it could have been different.

Participants shared that wading through resources required a good deal of effort on their part, especially for those who were first generation college students. The participants shared how they wanted to be sure they exerted all of the effort they could first before asking for help from others. When participants described the difficulty of looking through the PWI's resources they also brought up the emotional toll that not knowing of resources then finding out about them later created.

Classmates

The final theme that emerged from the focus groups was the theme of classmates. All participants mentioned their classmates and how they either help or do not help them feel belonging on campus. The HBG spoke generally about their classmates with a few instances of distinction between race while the LBG specified between BIPOC and White classmates.

University Peers. In the HBG participants mentioned how they felt accepted by their peers, but in the LBG some voiced the opposite sentiment. A participant in the HBG said, "Something cool that I've noticed about [this university] is that because of the [religious] culture here, a lot of people have gone on missions and so they kind of do know about your culture but

at the same time, they don't." Participants feel that the knowledge peers have of their culture helps them in a way relate to them.

BIPOC and White Classmates. The LBG participants feel that their White peers need more exposure to others' diverse experiences. Some participants shared that this lack of experience made them as BIPOC students feel uncomfortable in their spaces. One participant said:

I feel like people here need to be open-minded. Everyone is very diverse, some people have served missions and had to serve around people they aren't used to, other people it's their first time, some of them lived in Utah or just the US, so it's really hard for them to understand, but I feel like the biggest thing is just to get involved.

Despite the differences in the way focus group participants feel about their White classmates in both focus groups participants indicated that they would like to see more students that look like them on campus. The HBG participants indicated it would be helpful and the LBG participants shared how important that is especially for their mental health.

Summary

There were varying similarities and differences between the two focus groups. Both focus groups felt similarly that the PWI puts on cultural events that had meaning for them, and they felt similarly about the importance of friends/family as a support system. On the other hand, the focus groups felt differently about belonging, discrimination, being a spokesperson, being a chameleon, religion, professors, and their classmates.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

In this study many different aspects of BIPOC student's college experiences were explored. Many of these findings overlap with findings from current research and literature. However, there are several findings that are unique to this study. These similarities and differences will be explored in this section along with findings not covered in the literature.

Comparison of Literature and Current Findings

There were several findings from both the literature and current findings which can be found in Table 4. Major findings from the literature are: Whiteness as the norm, microaggressions, and student performance. These will be compared to the themes found from the findings of the focus groups.

Whiteness as the Norm

From the review of the literature, research has found that White privilege affects every aspect of daily life. This also includes the daily lives of BIPOC students. One aspect of White privilege is the concept that Whiteness is the norm. When Whiteness is viewed as the norm it becomes the focus subsequently leading other races and ethnicities to be labeled and viewed as "other." This lack of representation makes BIPOC students feel unseen or experience depressive symptoms (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Jones et al., 2022; Manglitz, 2003).

White privilege was more salient for those in the LBG. It was present for these students within the themes of Navigation of Cultural Worlds and Classmates. BIPOC students reported hearing White classmates say they were going to go save BIPOC communities. What participants specified as particularly hard to hear was how their White classmates posited themselves as

experts of these BIPOC lives and experiences. For example, participants made such comments as:

It's just hard when you're in classes and people are telling you when racist stuff is brought up and they try to tell you that they know better... 'I'm going to save Africa or go to Latin America or go to the islands.'

Table 4

Comparison of Literature and Findings

Review of Literature	Findings of this Study
When Whiteness is the norm there is stereotyping and a lack of representation which leads to BIPOC students feeling unseen or ignored (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Hunn, 2014; Jones et al., 2022; Manglitz, 2003).	Those in LBG heard White classmates say disparaging remarks about BIPOC communities. For both groups BIPOC faculty makes a difference and they reported wanting to see more BIPOC students.
Isolation and exclusion from White peers and faculty occurs when microaggressions (racism, sexism) are present because it causes an “othering” (Jones et al., 2022; Quaye et al., 2015; Reynolds et al., 2010; Sue et al., 2007; Torres-Harding et al., 2020).	The HBG shared experiences of microaggressions, but they didn't feel they were a big deal. They feel fine with other classmates and can mostly relate to them. The LBG shared feelings of isolation from microaggressions.
Students who feel valued will be engaged and perform better if they (Museus et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2019).	BIPOC students are happier and more engaged when they have friends and faculty support.

Other participants said, “He's doing work in Africa and he was going on about how and why you shouldn't just get a person of color to come into your team;” and “There are sometimes

when in conversations in classrooms, someone will allude to the fact that racism and prejudice doesn't exist." These participants felt their classmates put themselves and their experiences as over those of BIPOC people's lives. One participant stated to her classmates, "People of color are experts on their own culture and community." This is in line with findings from the literature.

However, these findings are distinct to the LBG which is different than what the literature expected. For BIPOC students who endorse feelings of high belonging they do not report their White classmates behaving this way. The only allusion to something similar is when a participant mentioned how classmates serve missions. She said, "They kind of do know about your culture but at the same time, they don't." This participant felt her classmates' moderate knowledge about her culture was a point of connection even when she presented something different about her culture than what this classmate expected.

Microaggressions

Microaggressions are a significant contribution to the racial campus climate. They can be seemingly commonplace acts that ultimately damage BIPOC students' mental health. Due to microaggressions students can feel isolation and exclusion from White peers and faculty (Franklin, 2019; McClain & Perry, 2017; Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017; Sue et al., 2009). Essentially, for BIPOC students' microaggressions are an "othering" of the student's identity. What might rectify these microaggressions and othering are having BIPOC faculty who because of similarities might be more invested in BIPOC students (McClain & Perry, 2017). Navigation of Cultural Worlds and Classmates are the themes that envelop microaggressions.

Both groups shared experiences of microaggressions, however, both groups explained the situations differently. For the group that endorsed high belonging they recounted experiences where microaggressions happened, but for the most part they didn't label them as

microaggressions or feel they were meaningful. The HBG participants were more likely to feel discrimination as self-discrimination where they were the ones comparing their looks to others. This is in line with the literature where biracial individuals and their looks combine to have varying psychological effects (Allen et al., 2013). After sharing such experiences participants said comments such as, “So that was like kind of funny but it was like kind of random,” “Occasionally they make jokes, but I don't know, it doesn't bother me,” and “It's nothing like them making me feel like I'm being discriminated.” This is inconsistent with the review of the literature that states microaggressions will cause race-related stress (Quaye et al., 2015; Reynolds et al., 2010; Sue et al., 2007; Torres-Harding et al., 2020).

When those in the HBG recounted experiences that bothered them, the only type they mentioned were experiences having to do with affirmative action. Participants heard classmates saying someone got into school because they were BIPOC and female. Such comments were directed both at the participants and other students. The participants described these comments as “mean” and “undermining.” Despite the HBG having feelings of high belonging, they all still experienced microaggressions even if their feelings on the situation varied.

For those in the LBG, microaggressions were also present for the participants. Participants described hearing other classmates use belittling remarks to describe BIPOC groups. One participant shared about a freshman roommate, “She complained a lot about the food that I cooked, and I cooked a lot of Filipino food because I felt really homesick, and she called my food weird.” Participants in the second focus group labeled instances like this and others as microaggressions, racism, or sexism. When a student has multiple minoritized statuses like age, race, gender, etc. this can cause race-related stress such as those felt by the participants. They also shared the emotional toll these events had on them. They shared feeling these situations left

them feeling lonely, not good enough, sad, out of place, like they did not belong, and disrespected. They shared feeling that these situations were isolating and hard. For these students, microaggressions led to race-related stress that damaged their mental health (Franklin, 2019; Jones et al., 2022; McClain & Perry, 2017; Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017; Sue et al., 2009). This is in line with research about RBF where consistent exposure to microaggressions over time leads to BIPOC students' exerting more energy in order to prepare for the microaggressions they will be dealing with. This long-term exposure leads to mental and emotional harm (Franklin, 2019; Sue et al., 2007).

Student Performance

Student performance can be impacted by the level of belonging that students feel at their universities (Strayhorn, 2019). The themes that fall within student performance are Navigation of Cultural Worlds, Support System, Academics, and Classmates. Students in the focus groups commented on how feeling like they belonged or were valued impacted their academic work. One participant in the HBG said:

I felt a connection with my professors, kind of like a parent figure or like a mentor, that's when I was like, 'I'm going to work hard in this class, I'm going to do good, I want to make them proud, I want to do it for me.'

For this participant, feeling close to her professors motivated her to do better in school. Most participants mentioned feel closer to professors who share their background, although in this group a few participants noted it was not essential. Other participants in the focus group similarly describe what an impact supportive professors play in their academics. Some words used to describe how they feel regarding this are: "a huge boost," "so helpful," "really nice," "felt really happy," "a great experience," "feel protected and safe," and "rewarding overall and

felt really encouraging overall.” For these students, a connection with their professors made their academics feel more fulfilling because they felt understood (Maslow, 1943; Museus et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2019).

For those in the LBG, they describe their professors vastly different from those in the HBG. They felt more distance from their professors no matter what. However, similarly to those in the HBG having professors who shared similar backgrounds made a bigger difference. One participant described it as:

I don't feel particularly close to any professor on campus, I'm kind of just there to fulfill whatever I need to, so yeah, I don't feel a friendship, but I like them. Then, I do feel closer though when it comes to a professor that has my background.

For participants in this group although they qualified “feeling close” to a professor they all agreed it made a difference when there were similarities they could draw on. One participant commented on this within the framework of the university, “It would be so nice to see more professors of color and there are some that are here, but they don't feel supported and they leave and that leaves no support for us and that's really really sad.” Aligned with the literature, participants felt that BIPOC professors made a difference and they might feel closer to those with similar backgrounds (McClain & Perry, 2017).

Both focus groups reflected on the importance of family and friends in increasing their happiness while at the university. From the HBG someone said, “Having your group that you can rely on, even if it's just two people, I think it's really pertinent, it really does impact your college experience.” From the LBG someone said, “When you have that support it really makes such a big difference.” Participants in the HBG shared how difficult it was before family was present and the change they felt when they had family close by. Similarly, those in the LBG related that

close friends helped them deal with the subtleties of being a BIPOC student at a PWI. These findings are in line with the literature (Hurtado et al., 1998; Michel & Durdella, 2019).

Findings Not in the Literature

Religion. Despite there being many findings from this study that were also found within the literature, there were also some that were unique to the present study. Due to the religious nature of the PWI students attended in this study, almost all participants commented on the capacity of religion to serve as a protective factor. While a review of the literature showed professors, peers, and friends as possible protective factors, religion was not one of those mentioned. The two groups did differentiate between the protectiveness of religion, however. Generally, for the HBG religion led to feelings of more belonging, but for the LBG participants felt it should have been protective when in reality it was not. Despite this, religion still seems to have the potential to be a protective factor for BIPOC students.

Chameleon. Participants explored the idea of feeling the need to change or share only certain parts of themselves based on who they were with. All but one participant in the HBG felt they did not have to be a chameleon. In the LBG some participants also said they do not feel the need to be chameleons. One participant said, "I've become more accepting of myself and my thoughts and I've been very vocal about my feelings." For this participant she might have felt in the past she had to be a chameleon, however, she has worked on changing that need, participants shared feeling the need to edit themselves and doing so. However, other participants said they do need to be chameleons. Their reasoning was because they were one of the few BIPOC students in their program. As part of this a participant mentioned needing to code switch, or alter oneself, to fit in with how others speak. Code switching shows more evidence for the extra effort female BIPOC students need to put in to fit into various groups. Code switching and being a chameleon

puts an extra load on female BIPOC students as they must constantly evaluate what part of themselves to show or change in different circumstances (Johnson et al., 2022).

Comparison of Focus Group One and Focus Group Two

There were pertinent differences between the two focus groups that might have contributed to the differences in responses. The HBG was comprised of younger participants and more multiracial participants. This might have contributed to comments of not feeling any discrimination, not feeling pressure to be a spokesperson, and more comments on trying to navigate differences in culture. This could be because the HBG participants had more experience due to their multiracial upbringing in navigating their own different cultures. In the LBG participants were older, most were graduate students, and most identified with one race or ethnicity. These differences might have led to more opportunities at the PWI to be exposed to discrimination or have other universities to compare it to. This might also explain why the LBG participants felt more pressure to be a spokesperson as this could be a role that they were previously unaccustomed to fulfilling.

Limitations and Future Research

The inclusion of undergraduate and graduate students in this study could be considered a limitation in this study due to the differences in age and life experiences. Another limitation in the study could be not accounting for biracial or multiracial participants which mainly affected the HBG and could have impacted their responses about navigating cultural worlds.

Future research should continue to explore the experiences of BIPOC women at PWI universities and race-related stress they may be feeling. Looking at areas such as where the PWI is located, city demographics, PWI size, and nonreligious PWIs would all be areas to consider when studying BIPOC women at other universities. Additionally, differences between

undergraduate and graduate BIPOC women should be explored. Future analysis should also investigate the nuances in being multiracial versus being monoracial for BIPOC students and how that impacts the belonging they feel at a PWI. One area to look at specifically could be how multiracial participants know how to better navigate being a spokesperson compared to monoracial participants. This could be explored with higher numbers of participants from both groups.

Implications for Educators

The differences in age between the participants, while a potential limitation, is still an important difference to consider. Most of those in the HBG who endorsed feelings of high belonging were younger and those in the LBG who endorsed feelings of low belonging were older. This could mean that it is possible many female BIPOC students come to a PWI open to feeling belonging and the longer they are at a PWI the more discriminatory experiences they undergo which lowers the belonging they feel. This can lead to distress for these BIPOC women and potential drop-outs (Franklin, 2019; Hunn, 2014; McClain & Perry, 2017; McDermott et al., 2020; Smedley et al., 1993; Solorzano et al., 2000; Yosso et al., 2009). Educators should work towards examining potential discriminatory practices at their universities and working with BIPOC students to make them feel welcomed. If educator administrators, professors, and other faculty work to create a racial campus climate that is inviting to all then student engagement and overall wellness will be better for all (Hunn, 2014; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus et al., 2018; Nunn, 2021; Strayhorn, 2019).

Conclusion

BIPOC female students at PWIs face varying nuances while attending PWIs that their White counterparts do not have to face (Hunn, 2014; Museus et al., 2018). Daily experiences of

race-related stress can decrease feelings of belonging (Franklin, 2019; Hunn, 2014; McClain & Perry, 2017; McDermott et al., 2020). On the other hand, when BIPOC female students feel interconnected with the campus community they are led to better engagement and higher feelings of belonging (Hunn, 2014; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus et al., 2018; Nunn, 2021; Strayhorn, 2019).

The current study explored the way BIPOC female students described their experiences and feelings of belonging at a PWI. Students were separated into two groups: one that endorsed high feelings of belonging and one that endorsed feelings of low belonging based on a survey all the participants were emailed. Responses were more nuanced than what is currently out in the literature. For those in the HBG they generally reported feeling connected to peers and faculty. They also were aware of microaggressions but did not label them as especially detrimental to their health. The LBG reported feelings of isolation from feeling othered by peers and faculty. Similarities for both groups were the importance of a support system and faculty support. Educators should continue to strive to create environments where mentor-student relationships are fostered, microaggressions are lessened, and the larger community campus values BIPOC students so BIPOC female students can continue in their higher education.

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APPENDIX A

Consent/Institutional Review Board Approval Letter**Memorandum**

To: Beth Cutrer

Department: [University] - EDUC - Counseling, Psychology, & Special Education

From: Sandee Aina, MPA, HRPP Associate Director

Wayne Larsen, MAcc, IRB Administrator

Bob Ridge, Ph.D., IRB Chair

Date: November 22, 2021

IRB#: IRB2021-315

Title: Transition, Support and Belonging for Female BIPOC Students at a Predominantly White Institution: An Ethnographic Case Study

[University]'s IRB has approved the research study referenced in the subject heading as expedited level, Categories 6 and 7. This study does not require an annual continuing review. Each year near the anniversary of the approval date, you will receive an email reminding you of your obligations as a researcher. The email will also request the status of the study. You will receive this email each year until you close the study.

The IRB may re-evaluate its continuing review decision for this decision depending on the type of change(s) proposed in an amendment (e.g., protocol change the increases subject risk), or as an outcome of the IRB's review of adverse events or problems.

The study is approved as of 11/22/2021. Please reference your assigned IRB identification number in any correspondence with the IRB.

Continued approval is conditional upon your compliance with the following requirements:

1. A copy of the approved informed consent statement and associated recruiting documents (if applicable) can be accessed in iRIS. No other consent statement should be used. Each research subject must be provided with a copy or a way to access the consent statement.
2. Any modifications to the approved protocol must be submitted, reviewed, and approved by the IRB before modifications are incorporated in the study.
3. All recruiting tools must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to use.
4. In addition, serious adverse events must be reported to the IRB immediately, with a written report by the PI within 24 hours of the PI's becoming aware of the event.

Serious adverse events are (1) death of a research participant; or (2) serious injury to a research participant.

5. All other non-serious unanticipated problems should be reported to the IRB within 2 weeks of the first awareness of the problem by the PI. Prompt reporting is important, as unanticipated problems often require some modification of study procedures, protocols, and/or informed consent processes. Such modifications require the review and approval of the IRB.

APPENDIX B

Instruments**University Belonging Questionnaire**

Items

Factor 1: University affiliation

- 22. I take pride in wearing my university's colors.
- 4. I tend to associate myself with my school.
- 8. One of the things I like to tell people is about my college.
- 18. I feel a sense of pride when I meet someone from my university off campus.
- 5. I would be proud to support my university in any way I can in the future.
- 3. I have university-branded material that others can see (pens, notebooks, bumper sticker, etc.).
- 20. I am proud to be a student at my university
- 13. I attend university sporting events to support my university.
- 12. I feel "at home" on campus.
- 24. I feel like I belong to my university when I represent my school off campus.
- 10. I have found it easy to establish relationships at my university.
- 15. I feel similar to other people in my major.

Factor 2: University support and acceptance

- 14. My university provides opportunities to engage in meaningful activities.
 - 6. I believe there are supportive resources available to me on campus.
 - 2. My university environment provides me an opportunity to grow.
 - 7. My university provides opportunities to have diverse experiences.
 - 19. My cultural customs are accepted at my university.
 - 16. I believe I have enough academic support to get me through college.
 - 9. I am satisfied with the academic opportunities at my university.
 - 11. The university I attend values individual differences.
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Factor 3: Faculty and staff relations

- 21. I believe that a faculty/staff member at my university cares about me.
 - 17. I feel connected to a faculty/staff member at my university.
 - 23. I feel that a faculty/staff member has appreciated me.
 - 1. I feel that a faculty member has valued my contributions in class.
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