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# The Valley in Between: Fostering Biracial Pride and Exploring Community on USD Campus

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**The Valley in Between: Fostering Biracial Pride and Exploring Community on USD  
Campus**

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LEAD 547 Action Research Methods

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May 8th, 2022

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### **Acknowledgements**

This project would not have been possible without the honesty, support, and community around me. Thank you to Sunny, Tiffany, Thea, Danni, and Maddie for challenging me and offering support. Thank you to my family, and most of all to my mother; as I did this research, I realized that I am lucky to have had a parent who understood and prepared me for the challenges this identity would bring and pushed me to celebrate it nonetheless. Thank you to Dr. Cheryl Getz, Erin Lovette-Colyer, and everyone in The Commons for your encouragement and support.

Most importantly, I thank the students who participated in this project. You are the reason this research is here, and I am honored to have had such profound moments and loud laughter with you all. Your pasts show your resilience and strength, and your futures show hope and happiness. Your voices are powerful, and all of you will make a difference in the world.

### **Abstract**

Biracial students face more challenges in higher education than students with one racial identity because universities lack student support services for biracial students, affecting their student development and compromising a student's success. This study aimed to create an identity-based student service for biracial students to support them and provide a way to foster biracial pride.

My guiding questions are: How can I assist bi-racial students in finding a sense of community at USD by centering their stories and needs? How will the concept of biracial pride impact students and their higher education experience?

*Keywords:* biracial students, student development, student support services

## **The Valley in Between: Fostering Biracial Pride and Exploring Community on USD Campus**

People who hold more than one racial identity face developmental hurdles often throughout their lives concerning how they choose to identify and how others identify them. These difficulties are compounded when biracial students enter higher education due to added pressures that the college or university experience brings. These students are entering university with a lack of certainty in what community they will be welcomed into, and many do not have support from groups they racially identify with, which leads to a sense of isolation and shame. These challenges affected my undergraduate experience, as I had to identify myself as only part of my identity to find groups and student services for support. This caused me to isolate myself and view my identity as an inconvenience and something that caused me to be ashamed. Even now, there is a lack of support for students with multiple racial identities, keeping them torn on how to identify and possibly causing a sense of shame in their identity.

Most of the people who make up my support network are women and gender-diverse people who hold multiple racial and/or cultural identities. My mother is biracial and nisei (2nd generation Japanese American), and my closest friends are biracial, many of whom are the children of immigrants. As we speak and listen to our truths and experiences, the experience we have all experienced is that of rejection—rejection from our families, cultural communities, and/or communities based on our racial identities. My own experiences with rejection include all of these groups, putting me on a journey of healing and working toward self-acceptance and self-actualization. However, I have also found community in not having a community. That is to say, my support network was created from not just being othered but finding support and pride in each other in other ways. I would not be where I am in my journey of self-acceptance without

this support network. This is where I see a lack in the current higher education culture and priority in student services; there is little to no recognition, services, and support for biracial students. If there were recognition given and services available explicitly for biracial students, the identity these students hold has the potential to become a source of pride.

The purpose of my study was to collect data to promote a potential race-based student service for biracial students at USD to address the lack of recognition and provide a way for students to find pride in their identity through having a support system on campus. I wanted to provide a student service that could support these students in exploring and embracing their biracial identity, hopefully leading to a sense of biracial pride. Moreover, I hoped to bring awareness to this growing population of students in higher education so that leaders on campus could take the initiative in supporting these students. The research questions I focused on in my action research project were: How could I assist bi-racial students in finding a sense of community at USD by centering their stories and needs? How would the concept of biracial pride impact students and their higher education experience?

## **Background**

### **Biracial Life Development and Community**

Based on various developmental theories and research, biracial students do not develop their racial identity as monoracial people do. This leads to a lack of identity awareness and community, especially when faced with the challenges higher education brings to students. Focusing on the needs of a community of students who may not identify as being part of a community can be difficult. There are many factors to consider, as each biracial student experiences being biracial in different ways and capacities.



### ***Biracial Identity Development***

Sullivan and Ghara (2015) found that biracial people identify based on how others in their communities identify them. This is to say that people who contribute to the in-group by expressing behaviors that the group approves of biracial people are more likely to be accepted into the identity or rejected. Renn (1998) supported the concept of a divide and found five ways students identified: (a) students chose one monoracial identity, (b) students moved between monoracial identities, (c) students created a new “multiracial” identity, (d) students choosing not to identify with any race, and (e) students moved between or among the above options. These findings all show the variety of challenges in how biracial students view not only themselves but also how they view student services in relation to their identity. Later, Renn found that people identified in one of those five categories based on ecological influence: physical appearance, cultural knowledge, and peer culture. Ingram and Chaudhary (2014) found, in relation to how students found “border” identities to be most fitting for them, biracial students desired more inclusion and information about their heritages from their families.

I agreed with the variety and challenges these studies found, but I found the preset concept of categorization limiting. I agreed with the studies regarding how biracial people identify based on a myriad of reasons. However, I believed that the method of directly asking students was just as important as questioning the systems outside of the student’s control. These studies focused on how students identify, but not their individual stories and how they came to hold said identities. I questioned if keeping a sterile, quantitative method truly allows people to explore their identities openly.

### ***Biracial Pride***

The concept of biracial pride was the largest takeaway I gained from my research, as it supplies an opportunity to counter the past measurements of biracial identity, which focused on the lack of belonging. Young (2015) used the method of storytelling to address biracial visibility and exploration with a short glimpse into her students' perspectives on race and historical facts around identity-based laws and events in the United States, which weaves a story of biracial pride. Blustain (1996) also shared glimpses into various biracial people's lives to show how their parent's reactions to their identities help shape how they view the biracial identity. This is to say that allowing biracial children to explore and embrace their various cultures helped build a sense of pride in being themselves. However, if the parents showed nonsupportive attitudes, or even negative ones (e.g., apologizing for marrying someone of a different race in front of their child), children begin to compartmentalize their identity (Blustain, 1996). These narratives helped to recontextualize how race impacts students through the method of storytelling rather than traditional research that focuses on identity-based challenges.

After discussing these critical concepts of identity-based challenges, discrimination, and multiracial pride, a study by Christophe et al. (2022) presented how concepts of discrimination and pride affect biracial students. The focus groups in this study were given questionnaires and the answers were analyzed through the lens of psychological distress (identity-based challenges and discrimination) and protective factors (multiracial pride), and they later concluded that there were average levels of psychological distress and high levels of pride (Christophe et al., 2022). The levels of distress versus pride show how pride can be used to help counteract distress levels when discussing biracial identity development. It is essential to be attentive to what could cause stress regarding identity-based questions and how to have countermeasures in place.

There is little research on the concept of pride in biracial or multiracial identity, most of which relies on the storytelling method. I disagreed with Blustein's (1996) approach that pride, or lack thereof, is due to parent involvement instead of this just being a piece to a larger picture, I do believe that the storytelling approach is very insightful and allows conclusions to be drawn individually in a group of people that have such a variety of developmental needs. I also wondered if Christophe et al.'s (2022) study could be improved by making storytelling a pillar of methodology. Meaning that students' experiences could be the focus rather than containing them to preset expectations of how they perform their biracial identity.

### ***Importance of Dialogues and Community***

Dialogue is a useful tool in facilitating conversations around identity development and storytelling to explore biracial identity and pride. Storytelling plays a role in facilitating race-centered dialogue, which includes the key aspects of responsibility, choice, and discernment. Cooks (2021) argued that storytelling allows people to see how identity is created relationally through interactions. So, even if there are systematic privileges a person may hold, their identity is rooted in the cultural and familial relationships the person has experienced. The use of group dialogues and sharing of individuals' experiences could be useful, but it has its limitations. Using one-on-one interviews and group discussions, Willow (2008) concluded that the presence of other people limited how people reflected on their own experiences, demonstrating how individual interviews allowed people to share their experiences freely and connect their current views to the past. The use of one-on-one interviews is similar to that of near-peer facilitation, which is when dialogues are facilitated by people who are similar in age, economic status, race, and other identities as the participants in the dialogue. Kaplowitz et al.'s (2018) study was completed at a predominantly White high school with primarily White teachers and the focus

was on why these teachers do not allow race-centered dialogue in their classrooms, whether intentional or unintentional. By using near-peer facilitators, there were increases in students' willingness to acknowledge and act on bullying or oppression (due to race, sexuality, or gender) and formed community trust. It is also important to show how near-peer relationships are important for creating safe environments for students to delve into such topics as race and have community conversations, which brings power dynamics into the conversation of facilitation.

There are limitations to utilizing storytelling, and I agreed with Willow that large groups may become restrictive. However, by taking the near-peer approach of Kaplowitz et al. (2018), a community could begin to be developed- if the support of peers is present. This is where I questioned what support I, as the researcher, offer compared to that of a peer. Meaning that I wondered if there is value in a smaller group and pair sharing during the cycles rather than my own presence when facilitating large group discussions. There is also the aspect of how peer story sharing can develop a sense of community and support. As the researcher, I questioned whether my presence could add or take away from a sense of community in the group.

### ***Biracial Experience in a Higher Education Setting***

As the number of students who identify as biracial or multiracial increases at college campuses, the question of how higher education administrators can support them is an increasingly imperative conversation. Because of this, a study by Ingram, Chaudhary and Jones (2014) focused on how often students were engaged with campus services and how administrators could improve upon these resources to be more welcoming to biracial and multiracial students. One of the more intriguing results from this study was how about half of the 201 participants in their study supported the creation of resources for biracial and multiracial students while the other half were against the formation of these services as it would bring

unwanted attention (Ingram et al., 2014). This distinction was found in a study by Literte (2010) as well, who found that students who disclosed experiences with racialized conflict and discrimination in their childhoods did not participate in race-based student services and initiatives. The methods used in the Literte study included in-depth interviews, focus groups, collection of content from race-based student services, and observation of students, which all of these methods allowed students to express their own desires and needs regarding their biracial identity. West and Maffini (2019) found that various perspectives on how counseling biracial students comes with shifting and sometimes contradictory views can help guide counselor-client relationships by processing four key dimensions: cognitions, behaviors, emotions, and relationships. Perkins (2014) used narratives from biracial students to show how they navigate the multiple identities they display depending on the situation. Through this narrative, Perkins called for action by academic institutions and administrators for initiatives based on supporting biracial students. Kellogg and Niskodé (2008) supported this call for initiatives as well; however, students needed to be involved with policy changes. Once again, the use of students' stories in this study goes back to the storytelling component as, without the stories of biracial students, changes would not reflect the needs of students.

This last point is one I strongly agree with, as it ties in with the need for student involvement and storytelling for initiatives to take root and thrive. I wondered how this research into biracial student development in the higher education sphere would reflect (or not) on the students at USD.

### **Context**

The setting for this project was the University of San Diego (USD) campus in the United Front Multicultural Commons (UFMC), as it is a physical space for students to explore their

racial and cultural identities and build community. The UFMC is part of a collective of identity spaces on the USD campus called The Commons, which includes the UFMC, LGBTQ+ and Allies Commons, Black Student Resource Commons, and Women's Commons. They also hold events for various identity-based groups, making it an excellent choice to host dialogue groups and other events for biracial students. This space is open to multiple student populations, but there is no set event or service for biracial students. Because of this, I used email lists from the Gender Identity Resources from past events where students were allowed to share their racial identities to collect participants. As I am biracial and have faced many challenges regarding my racial identity, especially in higher education, being aware of my role in this project was crucial. I was a facilitator and researcher. This brought power dynamics into play due to my age (29 years old), my education level (currently in a Master's program), my biracial identity being perceived as solely White, and my role as a Graduate Assistant with the Women's Commons and LGBTQ+ and Allies Commons. As a member of the biracial student population, being aware of personal biases was necessary regarding how I experience my own identity, how I engage with other biracial identities, and how others experience me.

The importance of this project came from how many biracial people have been given a sense of not belonging to any singular community, which allows the population to shift between communities and, at the same time, not have a community. This project focused on allowing students to find support among other biracial people while holding space for the students to find pride in their biracial identities. Data from Renn (1998) pointed to students who might have yet to consider their racial identity important due to a lack of support in their formative years. However, after building rapport with students in the precycle, this data were in contrast to students who reported being biracial might not be a salient identity, but it heavily impacts them.

They are very aware of how they navigate identity spaces because of being biracial. Regardless of data and observations, an important piece to note in this project is that there isn't a singular physical place or programs (e.g., affinity groups, peer mentor program) for biracial students to meet on campus, so building rapport with students I worked with as a graduate assistant in The Commons that self-identified as biracial was crucial to bringing students together for this project.

### **Project Rationale**

The need for this project came from observing and experiencing the exclusion that biracial students face on the USD campus. At the beginning of the Fall 2021 semester, as a Graduate Assistant in the Gender Identity Resources (which shares space with other identity-based Commons), it came to my attention that there was an undergraduate biracial student who was told that they were not allowed in the Black Student Resource Commons by another student because they weren't Black enough. This use of "not enough" stood out to me as a fellow biracial student, as it was a moment where a student's identity was being taken away from them because they did not meet unknown "qualifications" by another student. Soon after, I, a biracial graduate student, felt that I wasn't supposed to be in an Asian, Pacific Islander, and Desi-American meeting due to a few students looking at me before they spoke about experiences they had faced due to racism. This left me very aware of my identity and how people tend to focus on one part of my identity but not the other. I felt that my White part was all that people saw, and thus I no longer attended so that they may feel more comfortable. However, as the student mentioned, I also thought I was "not enough" Asian to be in that space. From these experiences, I noticed that students do not feel a sense of belonging in race-based student services and organizations.

From this, I began to research biracial student development and found Perkins (2014) and West and Maffini (2019), both of whom researched the higher education experience of biracial students. Perkins (2014) in particular calls for improvements in student affairs to support biracial students. Also, the topic of biracial pride furthered my research question through the work of Christophe et al. (2022) and Young (2015). Christophe et al. (2022) uses biracial pride as a way to help students balance their negative experiences with their identity development, and Young uses her own story and narrative to show how this concept of biracial pride is something that most biracial people do not discover if not given the opportunity to explore their identity as a whole rather than pieces of the whole. Despite the research, questions still need to be answered: How does biracial pride play a role in the development of students' biracial identities? How do biracial students develop community and a sense of belonging? To answer these questions along with my research question, doing my project with the biracial students who attend the University of San Diego is my focus.

I was interested in using the UFMC to host focus groups and other activities related to my cycles to find a place for this project. Dr. Mayté Franco-Perez, the Director of the UFMC, permitted me to use the space, as we reasoned and agreed that if any identity space could be used to support biracial students, the UFMC's missions and goals aligned best. I worked closely with the UFMC and the students who worked there, so we built rapport which helped find participants. Participants were informed about the project through an email that was sent out, flyers that were posted, and snowballing (see Appendices A and B).

### **Research Design**

I used McNiff's and Whitehead's (2006) method of reflect-plan-act-observe-reflect (RPAOR), because I believed that reflection is key to identity-based work, including in my own



project. Also, I believed that all outcomes could be considered data, and this method allows for modifications of the cycles by way of reflection. The steps include “reflect,” “plan,” “act,” and “observe,” which repeat in the same order (Figure 1). This method uses reflection before action, which allows for adjustments to be made and for observations from the previous action to be considered before continuing. In each cycle, I used this method twice as there were two focus groups per cycle. This allowed me to reflect and adjust as needed between each meeting.

**Figure 1**

*RPAOR Graphic*



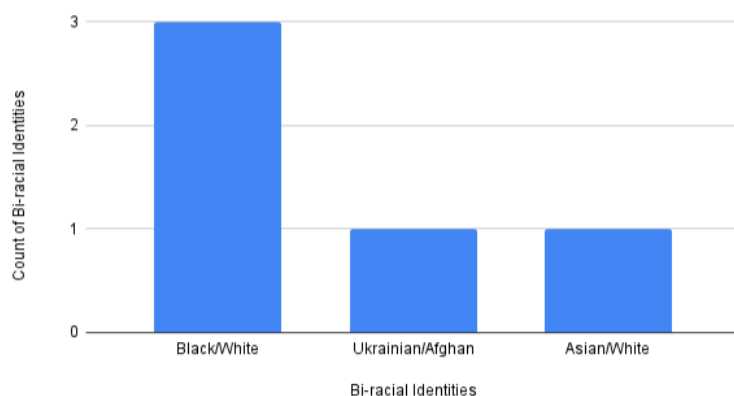
McNiff, J., & Whitehead, J. (2006). *All you need to know about action research*. SAGE.

Because the growing number of biracial students dictates that there is a need for support, researching biracial students and their communities was more accessible through dialogues on identity-based experiences, community building, and pride in identities. This method allowed me to observe students’ needs and note how the next step could be modified or not as I moved through the cycles. However, this method assumed that I would have consistent and active

participation from students. Because of this, in focus groups where some students were absent, the data would only be based on those in attendance. However, students were open to communication about what they had missed and each focus group session focused on different aspects of their experiences, so consistent attendance was not necessary for subsequent focus groups.

### **Participants, Data Collection, and Ethical Considerations**

This project consisted of three cycles, each comprised of two focus group meetings that focused on individual identity development and how community or support networks have impacted the students' sense of belonging and pride in their biracial identity, if at all. The project was open to any students who self-identified as biracial at USD, but the participants included five undergraduate students who identified as women. The racial identities were all Minority-White biracial, with three identifying as Black-White, one as Asian-White, and one as Ukrainian-Afghan (Figure 2). These students expressed interest in participating by directly speaking to me due to prior rapport, emailed me expressing interest from flyers, or joined because an existing participant invited them.

**Figure 2***Count of Biracial Identities*

Data were collected from semi-structured focus groups that included storytelling, discussion questions, journal entries from guiding questions, a community playlist, individual character creation, and a collective painting. Analysis of all activities came from quotes, collective themes, outlying differences, and observation of reactions of the participants. It was important to me that every student be given the opportunity for verbal consent after each discussion to have data collected on what they shared, as storytelling as a method can be activating. In addition, all participants signed consent forms to have data collected during the project (see Appendix C). All data recorded for this project came after the students gave permission and was collected, synthesized, and coded.

Following McNiff's method, I began reflecting on my assumptions and expectations. My experiences with being biracial gave me preconceived notions of the biracial student experience, which I had to reflect on and separate my observations from as much as possible to plan each focus group and activity more effectively. This design also served me well as students delved

into experiences revolving around experiences around racism, sexism, and lack of community. This method also helped within a focus group session to create a container for these difficult discussions. This allowed us to use time for affirmations, for offering support through accessible services such as the counseling center on campus, for participants to offer support to those that shared such experiences, and for moments of reflection for all participants.

Using multiple cycles with opportunities to observe and reflect before taking the following action, taking into account the participants' perspectives through journals and allowing them to reflect, students expressed comfort with each other and a sense of support.

### **Cycle Overview and Results**

#### **Precycle**

Before beginning my cycles, I met with students and community partners who self-identify as biracial, with whom I had previously built rapport, to observe any interest they might have in this project. I observed interest in the topic but a lack of commitment to joining this project. In hopes of encouraging more students to join and for participants to build rapport with each other, I invited students to a social event to meet other potential participants and myself. Three students participated in the social, but only two of them returned to join the focus groups.

Participants conversed with each other focusing on academics, hobbies, and other social identities. The participating students had very few questions, but one that stood out was a concern about how this data would be used and if it would be anonymous. I shared my intentions and questions guiding my research with them and expressed that they could choose to have anything they share not be used in the research, and all collected data would be coded, to which they visibly relaxed. This concern caught my attention, and I began my first reflection before beginning the first focus group discussion. Creating community guidelines during the first focus

group would be helpful for the participants to have a sense of comfort in having a say in the parameters of our sessions.

## **Cycle 1: Present- Identities and Community**

### ***The Starting Point***

The first focus group, which included 3 participants, took place at the beginning of the semester. I was intentional about having the focus group sessions on participants' calendars before other commitments filled up their calendars. During the initial focus group, there were three participants who all knew each other before the focus groups. This led to a quick level of comfortability among the participants, and they were quick to share experiences. As previously mentioned, they quickly agreed on using community guidelines that they were all familiar with, which focused on honoring stories and the people telling them.

This focus group explored where students were currently in their identity development. Students focused mainly on identities such as "first-generation student," "woman," and "athlete," for example. However, there were other identities they individually expressed such as "product of divorce," "refugee family," and "child of a single mother." Naomi and Amira, who are Black/White biracial, emphasized that they identify as Black. In contrast, Kyla emphasized that her ethnic identities as Afghan and Ukrainian were more critical than her racial identity. When asked about this pride in ethnicity or a singular racial identity, Naomi commented: "There isn't much to be proud of being White." Which was later echoed by the other participants. After the discussion, students were asked to answer a couple of questions in their journals.

In these journals, all participants expressed not truly feeling Biracial due to different factors, including appearance, perception, and ethnicity. Naomi and Amira expressed opposite experiences with being biracial but shared the theme of being perceived as monoracial due to

their appearances (see Table 1). It is crucial to note Kyla's observations about her Afghan identity not conforming to U.S. racial categories (see Table 1). Students could be categorized as biracial, yet they each expressed feelings of not being fully represented by this term. They also expressed pride in their minority identity or ethnic identities rather than being biracial.

**Table 1**

*Journaling 1*

Participant	Sample from Journal
Naomi	"The way I view myself is similar to how I am viewed by the world in the sense that if a stranger saw me walking on the street they wouldn't be like 'oh that's a white/mixed girl', they would be like 'that's a Black girl'."
Kyla	"Afghanistan exists in a categorical limbo since it's not really in the geographical Middle East, it's more like in Central/South Asia. So, I don't really relate to my biracial identity. I feel like I am because saying I'm only White feels incorrect, but I couldn't tell you what the other race is."
Amira	"I relate to my Bi-racial identity from a place of happiness because I am proud to be mixed, but I also feel sad about it because I want to present more Bi-racial rather than my hair because I feel like I'm always having to prove my 'Blackness'."

The comment "There isn't much to be proud of being White" resonated in both the discussion and the journal sections, which called to the five categories of Renn's (2008) theory of multiracial development. Naomi and Amira would be categorized as Monoracial due to expressing peer relationships (such as the racial makeup of family members) and physical appearance, which impacts how they engage with society. On the other hand, as I analyzed

Kyla's journal responses, I was conflicted if she could be categorized into any of the options in this theory. It could be argued that she can be categorized as extraracial due to not identifying with any race and seeing that she cannot be categorized into any race. However, Kyla may not fit into any of Renn's (2008) categories based on her identity as a child of refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine, her explanation of how Afghan doesn't fit within U.S. racial categories, and her close ties to her ethnic heritage rather than a connection to racial categories. Identifying as extraracial would come from an understanding that race is "socially constructed by the dominant, monoracial, White majority" (Renn, 2008, p.17). However, Kyla didn't express this, but rather that her close connections to heritage language and traditions, along with support from close and extended family, developed this identity.

### ***Individual and Community Identities***

This focus group was centered on beginning to explore how community impacts identity development and how students view their own identities. All five participants joined- one new participant was invited by another participant, and the final participant joined after seeing a recruitment flyer. To introduce the participants to think of how they express their identities, we started the focus group by creating a community playlist.

Participants were invited to contribute to a community playlist where they chose two or three songs that describe themselves. Two of 3 students chose songs quickly, while the other three students took more time to think about their choices, which brought up the observation that each student has a different sense of self-reflection in how these songs would portray them. Some participants expressed pressure to condense themselves into two or three songs, while others were quick to pick songs that gave them a sense of joy. When asked to share why they chose their songs, students expressed that they were fans of the artists and some shared how each

song meant something sentimental to them, supporting the observation (see Table 2). However, upon listening to the songs and reading the lyrics, different themes started to emerge from the playlist. This playlist has various themes, including women empowerment, emotional connection, longing, and multicultural (see Table 2). One interesting note from this playlist is that all the artists chosen, save for The Neighborhood, are people of color and that most of the participants chose artists with similar gender and/or racial identities as their own.

**Table 2**

*Community Playlist Analysis*

Participant	Artists	Theme(s) in the songs	Reasons given for choosing
Naomi	The Roots, Prince, Frank Ocean, Lil Wayne	Longing, Pushing Forward	Sentimental
Kyla	Rihanna, Nicki Minaj, Beyonce	Women empowerment, Independence	Fan of the artists, Fun to dance to
Amira	Cuco, Megan Thee Stallion, Ice Spice	Longing, Women empowerment	Fan
Jordan	BLACKPINK, UPSAHL, RADWHIMPS	Self-realization of negative traits, Denial, Relationships, Cynicism	Fan
Valerie	Miguel, H.E.R., The Neighbourhood	Loss, Longing, Self-realization of negative traits, Relationships	Sentimental

As we listened to the playlist together, students quickly began talking to each other about the artists, sharing stories, and building connections. When asked if participants related to any songs other people chose, the majority shared that they related to the idea of not being familiar



with each other's selections. However, during the listening section of the focus group, participants responded similarly to each other. I observed that they would dance in their seats when more upbeat songs were played or laughed about crying for more somber songs. The participants had communal responses over the shared emotional response rather than any themes present in the songs chosen. This led to a conversation about how identities are shaped and grow through interactions with others.

When asked about their experiences on USD campus in how other people have impacted their identities, many participants expressed how attending USD made them more aware of their low-income status and family background. Some also expressed that they felt "not enough" to identify as BIPOC or with their minority identities. Amira shared: "I was told that I could join the Black Student Union, even if I *wasn't* Black." This was said to her despite her identity as a biracial Black person. However, some participants expressed how coming to USD gave them a sense of accepting their BIPOC identities and helped them find confidence in their communities.

When delving into how their communities on USD campus and off of USD campus have influenced how they view themselves, most participants shared that they experienced the feeling of not being enough due to growing up in communities where they were a minority. However, Naomi shared, "Coming from a community of mostly Brown and Black people helped me know I am Black." I observed that she was the only one that shared a sense of belonging in her community before coming to USD. This is of interest as this indicates that biracial students can develop a strong sense of community within their racial community. However, it led to a follow-up question for the other participants that expressed the opposite of Naomi's experience. When asked about how the participants found a community on or off campus, most participants shared they felt their connections on USD campus weakened due to economic class differences and their

off-campus communities weakened due to racial differences. Jordan and Valerie expressed that finding community was challenging for them, and they still felt as though they were “not enough.” Still, Kyla shared they found a community on campus through participation in extracurricular activities. This became a keynote for all the participants, as they resonated with this sense of finding community through hobbies. However, participants also expressed a sense of lack of belonging and needing to keep their friend groups small and authentic, expressing a lack of trust in people they used to be friends with.

These sentiments around their communities continued into the journals. This round of journaling showed a great sense of introspection from each participant, speaking more in-depth about their own support networks and communities. During the group discussion, participants who expressed a feeling of “not enough” since coming to USD focused more on how their racial identities impact their experience, while those who felt a sense of being “enough” focused on identities outside of race (socioeconomic backgrounds and hobbies). However, in the journals, participants expressed themes different from their input in the discussion, with even those who expressed feeling supported in the discussion also expressing feelings of isolation and a need to be very selective of those they include in their support network (see Table 3). This was an interesting analysis point, as it shows the duality that biracial students often hold due to their interactions with community or lack thereof. Cooks (2021) argued that identity is created relationally through interactions, and this was seen in how participants showed different sides of themselves when discussing topics with each other (in the moment) versus when reflecting on their own (in the past or future). The one theme all the participants expressed in this round of journaling was the need to be protective of themselves. When asked to reflect and journal,

participants were shown to have strong senses of social judgment and isolation, despite most expressing that they have found community (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Journaling 2*

Participant	Sample from Journal
Naomi	“With the few people who have stuck with me, I found by accident but have since been strengthening those relationships. I now try to focus on and give effort to those who reciprocate... If I catch myself acting out of my normal personality, I will analyze those relationships and see if I still need them.”
Kyla	“I used to try to be friends with all the women in my classes, but at USD I realized that I am extremely alienated from White women... However, my friends at USD are mostly East or Southeast Asian, so I still feel alienated at the end of the day. I feel like I minimize my culture sometimes because I do not blend in with them and instead appreciate their cultures...”
Amira	“I randomly met my friends. I do feel authentic with my friends. They do not seem to judge me.”
Jordan	“I don’t think I’ve found my community in USD yet, but I’m still looking... I feel like last semester I was trying too hard to assimilate into ASA (Asian Student Association). This semester I think I’ll focus more on other clubs outside that community.”
Valerie	“I feel like I can be authentic to my small community only because I trust those people. However, I do feel alone in the space and community that I’ve made.”

***Reflections***

As Cycle 1 ended, the main point of reflection was on how the focus group discussions and the journals yielded data that showed various sides and levels of identity development in the participants. Willow's (2008) findings of the limitations group dialogues can cause in how participants express themselves and their reflections were prevalent with each type of data collection. The group's dialogue allowed participants to find support in each other and hear each other's stories and insights, the journaling allowed participants to debrief and reflect on their experiences during the discussions and outside of the focus groups. This also speaks to the fluidity of Renn's (2008) categorizations of biracial identity development as participants began to reflect on what it means to them to be biracial and what community looks like to each participant.

Being conscious of my role as the researcher and facilitator of these focus groups, and as a biracial person myself, I joined the participants in journaling as well. My own journaling brought up various emotions and memories and I found myself reflecting on the various theories I researched for this project. Looking at myself through the lens of biracial development and biracial pride, I felt a mixed sense of hope and hopelessness for myself—both hope for my future but also hopelessness from my past experiences around my identity. However, I also felt grateful for my support network and the community I have surrounded myself with.

## **Cycle 2: Past- Have You Been Able to Thrive?**

### ***Lack of Support in Being Authentic***

As students explored their biracial identity and how their community has impacted them, there was a tendency in the group to focus on the negative experiences of being biracial. This came to a head when we started to explore being authentic and embracing one's whole self, as

participants shared that they felt like they had been unable to do so, or if they had, it was not consistent.

For this focus group, four participants joined. Participants were invited to think about a place or a group of people that made them feel like they could be their authentic self where they could embody all of their identities equally and fully. Participants shared that they felt like they could be authentic with a small group of people or authentic in some identities with one group and other identities with another. However, when asked if they had experienced a sense of belonging- of being wholly themselves- participants each expressed differing views and experiences with this concept. A few participants shared that they had never thought about this. After some thought, participants all shared different views on the topic.

For Kyla and Jordan, it was about being selective about what they share with other people. Kyla expressed: “I think I choose to share pieces of myself with different people . . . like there are moments with my roommates where I feel like myself, but that took time.” Jordan agreed and shared that her short time at USD had not let her find a group whom she could be herself with. This idea of using “time” to create a sense of belonging was interesting, as Naomi and Amira expressed using “authenticity” instead. Amira shared that “feeling truly authentic comes in waves,” but she always tries to be authentic. Naomi shared that she is “authentic and vulnerable with everyone” but is more comfortable with people from her hometown—both shared experiences where being authentic helped them decide who to befriend based on who accepted them and who did not.

This topic of authenticity and being accepted or not led to a conversation around belonging and self-care. That is to say that participants expressed a lack of experience in these areas. Participants all expressed that to be authentic is to be unrestricted and not need to

compartmentalize parts of themselves. However, as they expressed this definition, they also all shared a longing to experience this and a frustration with a lack of experience. Naomi shared her experience attending a high school with primarily White students: “I was living a life that wasn’t mine . . . . It’s really heavy to carry that.” Jordan and Amira expressed similar experiences and how bullying caused them to hide parts of themselves. The group supported each other as they all shared experiences with racism, lack of community support, and estrangement from family. The participants supported each other’s stories of these experiences, yet I observed that the group needed to acknowledge the hurt and offer support through affirmations. They all offered encouragement and understanding, creating a moment of community care between them. We took some time to give final affirmations and a moment of shared silence for the topics discussed before using art as a method of expression.

Utilizing an outline of a doll from Christchurch City Libraries (2021; see Appendix D) participants were invited to design a character that embodies all of their identities. As participants shared their characters, themes of duality, masking, and ethnic (rather than racial) identities started to appear. Each participant had their reasonings for designing their characters the way that they did, and one comment that every participant made was: “I’m not sure why I drew [aspect of the drawing].” This was of interest as the participants began to reflect on what identities they chose to portray and the ones they didn’t or couldn’t. Amira shared that the character “shows that I don’t really know myself,” which was echoed by Naomi and Kyla regarding what aspects to show or how to draw hidden identities. However, Jordan expressed, “I know myself too well” regarding her character, which had different cultural symbols from her ethnicities. Kyla also used cultural markers, such as flags and religious symbols in her design (see Appendix E). The participants expressed some confusion and a need for reflection after

creating these characters because there was an element of humor that they used when asked what they would say to their characters to encourage them to be more authentic. Naomi offered, “Do what makes you happy” and after a pause, “and get some clothes. My character is naked for some reason.” This comment pulled the group into laughter and out of their introspective hesitation, to which they all offered similar encouragement to their characters.

This is of note throughout this focus group, as the resiliency that biracial students have cultivated was fully present. For these participants to share activating experiences such as racist harm, to be able to question themselves and their identities, to finally be able to quickly move away from heavy topics and memories and laugh together. However, by reading their journals, it was clear that the difficult topic of finding a way to be authentic was still prevalent.

This round of journaling held a clear theme of frustration and a desire to explore new ways to be authentic. For most of the participants, when asked if there was a part of themselves that they would like to be more authentic in and how they could embrace their whole identity, addressing the way they express themselves to others was the focus (see Table 4). This calls back to earlier in the discussion part of the focus group. As the participants reflected on what authenticity looks like for them, there is this realization that being fully authentic is not always what is expected or accepted by society, their communities, or even their support networks. An interesting point of this focus group was that the journaling was more aligned with what participants were expressing in the discussion.

**Table 4***Journaling 3*

Participant	Sample from Journal
Naomi	“Be more confrontational and not be afraid to hurt other people’s feelings”
Kyla	“I want to be more of myself around the people I love and am comfortable around. They are honest with me so I should be honest with them.”
Amira	“No. Because I feel that since I have entered adulthood I have been authentic during my discovery period.”
Jordan	“Yes, I would like to be more authentic with my anger... I want to be more open about myself, I tend to be everyone’s therapist but forget myself.”

Compared to previous focus groups, this was the first time there was consistency between the discussion and journaling parts of the focus group. This could be due to the storytelling that happened during the focus group. This is similar to Kaplowitz et al.’s (2018) study that showed that near-peer mentoring and storytelling created an environment where complex topics such as race can be discussed, and participants can build community conversations. This shows how having a space for these students to share their experiences and support each other created an environment where they felt they could share activating stories and not be questioned or judged for their experiences. This focus group was initially rooted in exploring authenticity and community, something they all expressed a lack of when reflecting, but the participants instead



experienced how community support can look while being authentic in one's identities and stories.

### ***How to Thrive***

With participants starting to explore how their identities and communities intersect and how this shapes their experiences with authenticity, it was essential to explore how students care for themselves and how they can thrive. For this focus group, 4 of 5 participants participated and were invited to think about the support network they each have, listing the names of those people in their journals. Participants expressed how they met some of the people they listed, and there was a strong sentimental connection across the group. Naomi shared that her support network made her feel “authentic, happy, and loved.” Participants all expressed that most people on their lists were either members of their family or found family. This was interesting as every participant kept their list to less than 10 people, meaning that their support networks are small and close-knit. This correlates with what the participants shared about community and authenticity, as they continued to express a need to be selective in who they allow into their lives.

Participants also expressed how their support networks allow them to feel a sense of safety, which helped them feel more connected with their identities. However, when asked if their support network helps them to thrive, participants were hesitant. For Amira, she explained that: “I think so, but I think to thrive is to be authentic, and I don't need them to do that because only I can be authentically me.” The rest of the participants echoed this sentiment of thriving being a personal experience rather than a community one. There was also a sense that the participants had yet to find a way to thrive and were rather on journeys to thrive (e.g., living on my own terms” or “growing”). This came from various motivations, but there was a theme to all

their reasons: yearning. Participants shared that they were motivated to seek their own sense of thriving due to not being in situations where self-actualization would not be possible. Factors such as unstable environments, trauma, and being the only person with their identities (whether in their families and/or in their communities) inhibited them from being able to feel like they could thrive. This was interesting as they showed how community is linked to struggling to thrive rather than supporting.

When looking at their time at USD, students also expressed a lack of support in finding ways to thrive. Naomi shared she is “an embodiment of [her] ancestors’ dreams” (referring to her Black ancestors), but the monetary strain of higher education has caused her a lot of stress. There was also a shared resentment toward USD’s recent push to become a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), as the participants expressed that they felt like there wasn’t any focus on supporting their minority identities of Black and Asian. However, it is essential to note that none of the participants held a Hispanic identity. When asked how USD could better support them in thriving, there was a clear need to advocate for people of lower economic status. Amira expressed that “there aren’t enough scholarships for students of color” and how the few that do exist only make students compete with each other rather than support them. This aligns with previous focus groups where the participants would often express how salient their economic status was to them. Also, as students at USD, it was a clear observation that they focused on areas of support that would impact people like them, both in financial and personal needs. Valerie brought up the point that USD “needs better counselors- and not just POC counselors,” which became a focus of the group. Once again, the need to find support through identities not based on race became evident as participants expressed the need for support in navigating childhood trauma, family history, and financial concerns. All of these points echo past data and

observations from previous focus groups, especially the need for nonrace-based identity support and financial support.

Connecting back to the earlier point of how participants all expressed a lack of stability and support to thrive, the journals from this focus group continued reflecting on how each participant imagines thriving and if they have felt like they have been able to experience such environments before. After reading the journal entries, it became clear that everyone focused on a moment or moments where they felt like they were thriving, but those moments were short-lived (see Table 5). This inconsistency that each participant experienced is parallel to the inconsistencies in their lived experiences that they have shared in past focus groups. These varied experiences support West and Maffini's (2019) study that showed how biracial students often have shifting and even contradictory views on their experiences, needing flexible support. This type of support would help with these varied experiences and needs, but it is especially needed due to one of the shared experiences of biracial students. All participants shared in their journals that their ideal setting to thrive is to be in a place where they can be themselves without concerns about judgment from other people (see Table 5). This concentration of concern over judgment from other people shines a light on one of the few realities biracial students share—a lack of acceptance.

**Table 5***Journaling 4*

Participant	Sample from Journal
Naomi	“Having the space to be my truest self and work towards my goal(s)... I think I have experienced that before, but it is not constant”
Amira	“Dancing with my closest friends... I have experienced it before, and it feels nice not having to worry if those people are judging you.”
Jordan	“Enjoying me and myself without worrying about others. Maybe viewing the sunset... Yes, briefly.”
Valerie	“Being able to be as blunt as possible with how I need help. Let me be me... nature and other out door distractions would help too. I have experienced it for a small moment.”

***Reflections***

It was evident that Cycle 2 brought up a lot for participants and, while providing insight and data, needed quick and flexible support at the moment. This cycle was critical in my own beliefs around community support and values in honoring each person’s experience. I found the stories the participants shared to be insightful into their motivations and needs, and I also felt a sense of melancholy and empathy with each story. Moments of reflection caused me to make connections to the stories shared and my own- which caused an influx of emotions. This was admittedly challenging for me to navigate, so I focused on leaning into those feelings and expressing affirmations and support from a place of empathy.

Being part of the community, I was studying made the separation between researcher and member of said community a bit murky. However, this connection also gave me insight into the types of experiences biracial students may share. It allowed me to share my own story with the participants, which created a less sterile environment. That is to say that the participants seemed to open up a bit more the more we exchanged stories and shared affirmations. Their stories also challenged me to re-evaluate my experiences and how I envision thriving for myself. Going forward, I made the decision to encourage students to find their version of thriving, community, and pride as connections to each other rather than separate pieces and focus on what support they need to reach those goals.

### **Cycle 3: Future- Manifesting Belonging**

#### ***Envisioning Authenticity and Thriving***

The previous cycles were centered around the past and then present experiences of the participants; this cycle was focused on the potential of the future. Due to how participants expressed a lack of experiences regarding acceptance, authenticity, and thriving, the necessary shift in focus became on envisioning what their ideal environment for expressions of authenticity. For this focus group, four participants came together with various ideals but with a similar goal of creating community. Everyone also shared a sense of self-compassion when envisioning the future, which was echoed later in their journals.

When asked what each participant envisioned as an ideal environment to thrive, there was a myriad of descriptors, but there were key themes of belonging, community, and social engagement. Also, there was a connection between darkness and safety that some of the participants shared when describing their ideals. The participants also expressed interest in each other's descriptions, affirming each person's ideal environment by asking questions and asking if

they could visit each other in the future. However, there was also a sense of discouragement, viewing these ideals as dreams that would be difficult to achieve. Kyla expressed that her environment would be difficult because “it wouldn’t be permanent- I have to get a job and make money to survive because, you know, capitalism.” This was said as a joke, but the group expressed how reality and needing to survive made envisioning a place where they could thrive difficult. This was interesting because it showed a glimpse of the pressure higher education students are under to succeed.

As we moved forward into envisioning their future selves, there was more in common between the participants than when we discussed ideal environments. There were clear themes of creating community and stability, along with a strong sense of melancholy. This was interesting as each participant seemed to come to their conclusions about the future based on their past experiences, which were supported by stories they shared in previous focus groups. Amira, who had shared her identity as a child of a single mother in the first focus group, expressed that she wants to “be like [her] mom” but then followed up by stating she wanted to “be creative and be more social than [her] mom.” Drawing on past experiences to shape potential future goals was an interesting take between the participants. It also made sense due to their previous stories expressing a lack of support and acceptance, and traumatic experiences such as racism and isolation. These experiences shaped how each participant viewed not only their futures but also their definitions of thriving and what environments could help them to thrive. That being said, the topic of reality and struggling to create a place where they could thrive came up once again.

When trying to picture their future selves being authentic and thriving, the participants expressed difficulty because of the reality that they need to survive. Naomi shared that she was struggling to select a major because “I want to be authentic, but I can’t be in a lot of fields” and

later expressed that she might need to settle for a field to get a job that pays well so she can afford hobbies and be authentic through those hobbies. To counterbalance the participants' focus on the difficulties of the future (calling back to how affirmations were shared in previous focus groups), I asked the participants if they could affirm their future selves just like they had affirmed each other. It took the group a moment, but they eventually shared various affirmations such as "I'm proud of you" and "Just because it's bad right now, it won't be bad forever . . . . Pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and keep going." I observed how closing the discussion with affirmations, especially focused on themselves, not only created a sense of peace but also impacted how participants answered questions on what it feels like to be biracial and if their future selves would be proud of being biracial.

Unlike previous data collected from the journals, this final round of reflective journaling yielded insights that shared themes similar to the ones that had been found in the discussion part of this (and prior) focus groups. This is to say that the feelings the participants shared in their individual journals were aligned with their words and sentiments in the group. Participants shared parts of their stories regarding being biracial in previous focus groups that had shaped how they identify. For example, in the first focus group, Naomi identified as a Black woman, and Kyla identified with her multiethnic heritage rather than identifying as biracial. In the third focus group, Amira and Valerie shared part of their stories around the challenges of being biracial in their communities and sometimes being the only person of color, which impacted how they shaped their biracial identity. All of these sentiments around being biracial were expressed in these journal entries (see Table 6). This was interesting to me, especially after sharing affirmations to their future selves, I also believe this may be due to continued discussions and

reflections on their biracial identities throughout all the previous focus groups.

**Table 6**

*Journaling 5 (final)*

Participant	Sample from Journal
Naomi	“Being biracial feels like there’s a part of me that isn’t what I want to be... my future self would be proud of how far I had come in accepting myself and embracing my identity (specifically being Black).”
Kyla	“It feels alienating but also prideful... I think future me would be proud but still more so for my cultures rather than my races.”
Amira	“It feels unifying and excluding at the same time... Yes, future me would be proud because I have better control about who I want in my community.”
Valerie	“Being biracial feels like trying to balance on a tight rope while holding two different sized weights on shoulders each side... Feeling like you have to keep up an act to please everyone except yourself... I f-ing hope so!”

***Manifesting Belonging Through Community***

For the final focus group, the participants worked together to paint their collective place of belonging on canvas. For the planning of this painting, which took place in the prior focus group, I left the room to allow the participants to develop the painting, ensuring it was fully their collective vision. Once I returned, I helped them sketch the painting on the canvas, taking in their instructions. This painting used pieces of each person’s ideal place from the previous focus group, such as the candles from Valerie’s ideal place and plants from Kyla’s ideal place. It was



important to the participants that each person's place be represented. The group even recalled Jordan's comment about "viewing the sunset" and made a point to include it (see Table 5). This was an important observation, showing that the group cared deeply about representing each person- even if someone was not physically present.

That being said, when it came to the actual painting, only two participants and I attended the session. The low participation also meant that the colors were chosen by the participants in attendance and me. However, I observed there was a level of comradery between the two participants, and a type of mentorship began to develop as one participant helped the other in different ways to paint, such as blending colors, how to use foreground and background, and how to use brush strokes for details. That being said, we could have conversations freely, and both participants shared that it was relaxing to "just paint and talk," expressing that they wanted to continue to paint on their own. After the painting was finished, the overall picture carried various symbols and meanings and was the final artifact of my analysis.

This painting is of a room with blue walls, a white ceiling, grey flooring, and a large, ceiling-to-floor opening with a brown frame. In the foreground is a monstera in a tall brown pot to the left, a small table with a purple and yellow candle (both lit) in the middle, and a reddish-brown bean bag chair to the right. Through the opening the background can be seen, outlined by the brown frame. There is a sunset, a hill, and six silhouettes of people on the top of the hill, standing together. The base of the hill is green and, as it gets closer to the sunset, turns black in shadows. The ridge of the hill is encompassed with a yellow light that changes to orange, then red, then purplish black with stars as it moves further up, away from the hill, with stars and a comet sprinkled across the sky (see Appendix F).

This painting is an interesting artifact because it was a collective piece with various people's input and ideas. When looking at the painting as a whole, representing a group of people- a community, this painting takes on many different shapes and meanings. The concept of the painting taking place in a room that looks outside, where all the people are, shows how empty the room is. The room is untouched, welcoming, tranquil, yet void of human interaction. However, that isn't the focus of the painting, the focus is the background, the framed image of the people on the hill looking into the evening sky. This indicates that the group created a physical space comprising all of their wants and needs to thrive, and the reality is a desire for community. There is a desire to stand together and venture out into the world beyond their comfort space. This also carries the symbolism of artificial comfort versus natural comfort, as the viewer is able to leave a place that is not only isolated but also filled with artificial life (the potted plant) and artificial smells and light (the candles). There is the opportunity to experience natural life (grass), smells (wind), and light (the setting sun) once outside in nature.

Originally, it was planned that the opening would be a closed window. However, the participants that helped paint it expressed that it "felt wrong" to make it a window. This was of note because the inclusion of a window could have expressed the viewer looking through the window at the community but blocked from joining the people on the hill. Without the window, the viewer could join the community on the hill by just crossing over the frame. This is symbolic of potential futures and leans back on the desire for community. Instead of staying in isolation, even if it is in a comfortable space, the group is expressing the desire to welcome the viewer into their community. The viewer is given a choice on where they would like to go, which might be symbolic of each participant's desire to have a choice in their community, authenticity, and how to thrive.

## **Postcycle**

To conclude this research, I invited the participants, their friends, my community partners, and campus partners that work in the identity spaces (The Commons) on USD campus to come together for a meal. This was an essential and intentional decision, as I firmly believe that food is central to the creation and health of a community. Also, after studying the participants and their stories around the community, I found it important to extend the invitation to their own communities, encouraging them to invite a few friends to join them. I observed how participants sat together, along with their friends, and engaged in conversation and laughter.

This was a big moment, as I witnessed how the participants could easily create a larger and more diverse community by bringing together each of their communities. Momentarily, this larger community was able to show the potential “bridge building” that biracial students can create between themselves and their communities. A couple of people who joined this event shared that they were also biracial but could not participate in the focus groups for personal reasons but joined because they were invited by a participant. They were also interested in discussing the research with me. This observation of interest that biracial students had in the research and in participating in such social gatherings speaks to the themes that participants expressed around a desire for community, engagement in their identities, and authenticity.

## **Findings and Key Themes**

From precycle to postcycle, the students who participated in this project were honest and open, and I am honored to have experienced their thoughts, feelings, and experiences of existing as biracial people. Because of their willingness to participate, the data collected came from varied perspectives and experiences and highlighted various key themes from this student demographic. These themes led to the ultimate takeaway that due to the varied experiences,

communities, and support networks of biracial students, there is no set way to support this demographic, meaning *flexibility*, *compassion*, and *acceptance* are crucial to *developing support* for this growing population of students.

Looking at past experiences, themes of *isolation*, *rejection*, and *community* (either because of support or rejection) were very significant and shaped how biracial students view their biracial identity. These students also usually carry a heavy amount of *trauma*. Because of these experiences, biracial students *identify with their identities in various ways*, which impacts how this demographic shows up in different settings. Some students will more closely identify with their Minority identity or as biracial but *will not identify as White*.

The undergraduate students who joined this study showed *resilience* to a lack of belonging when in discussions. They also expressed a *desire for community* and *authenticity* in their journals. This duality of how biracial students express themselves in group settings versus individual private settings comes from a *survival tactic of compartmentalization* of their personality, feelings, and experiences.

That all being said, when thinking about the future, biracial students also have a strong sense of the *realities and expectations of society*. This demographic expresses a sense of *hope*, but due to past experiences with *instability*, they quickly give themselves a reality check to *protect* themselves. This also gives them a strong sense of *social issues and justice*, meaning they think of how others can benefit and only show interest in supporting significant efforts that *support marginalized groups*.

Biracial students often come to higher education settings with varied and heavy histories, yet their desire to *create change* is strong, whether it be just for those they consider family or for large communities of marginalized people. Having experienced difficult situations around their

identities and how they fit into their communities (or even families), they are very *empathetic* and committed to creating and supporting the communities they identify with. This leads to biracial students creating diverse communities based on identities besides race, giving them a sense of belonging.

### **Limitations**

For this research, the most prevalent limitations were rooted in difficulties in recruiting participants to have multiple biracial identities and experiences represented. Not having a physical location that directly supports biracial students made it difficult to recruit. Thankfully, I had previous connections with three participants, which helped launch my research, and one of the participants joined due to being friends with an existing participant. Once recruitment was done, some other limitations came to light regarding the identities being represented in the group. The participants I worked with were all Minority-White biracial, with the majority being Black-White biracial, and all identified as women. Because of this, many participants shared a sentiment of “how can I be proud of being biracial when there isn’t anything to be proud of being White?” Which was spoken during the first focus group and carried throughout each following group. This shaped a lot of the data collected- which could have been different if there were Minority-Minority biracial participants. On top of this, when I asked biracial students who identified as men or nonbinary if they would like to join, the fact that the current participants were all women seemed to deter them.

The latter point around identity could also be attributed to my identity as a Minority-White biracial woman, specifically Asian-White biracial. The participants and I were able to create an environment where we felt comfortable and supported by each other, yet it may have been off-putting for others. Due to the themes that arose around lack of acceptance and being the

only representative of their identities in their communities, the identities represented in the group could have impacted how comfortable/uncomfortable people who held identities not represented felt.

### **Recommendations**

It is important to understand that biracial students are a growing population in higher education. So as we look to how to support these students, we also need to understand their experiences and how they navigate the current support systems offered at the USD. It is important to note that these recommendations are also made with the fact that the students who participated in the research were all Minority-White biracial, and thus impacts the recommendations made. I make these recommendations based on what the students shared with me during this project, and I hold their stories with honor. It is only through them being vulnerable with their stories that I am able to make these recommendations.

### **Holding Space for Biracial Students**

Biracial students tend to identify with their Minority identity rather than their White identity; however, their White identity can impact how they experience programming, events, and dialogues within current identity spaces. This means that students will gravitate to identity spaces that align with their Minority identity but may express a lack of belonging due to their White identity. Because of this, I recommend creating dialogue events or programs that allow the experiences of biracial people in their communities to be centered. This could come in the form of a panel of biracial people, a biracial staff member hosting a circle around their experiences, or even biracial student led programming. These types of conversations need to happen in existing race-focused identity spaces to allow the communities they serve to come together to learn and support their biracial community members.

### **Research and Training on Trauma Informed Student Support**

My second recommendation comes from the theme of trauma that was evident in this study. Students shared experiences around trauma concerning their biracial identity, including racism, isolation from community and/or family, and instability. Because of this, trauma-informed support and leadership are crucial to supporting this demographic and understanding the nuance of their varied experiences. As higher education professionals, we cannot change the past, but we can meet students where they are when they come to campus. This means that initiatives to educate professionals in understanding trauma and how to support students to succeed and thrive that have experienced trauma are key to this demographic's success.

### **Further Conversations on the Social Construction of Race**

My final recommendation is to deconstruct our understanding of race to make room for biracial people to find community and support in their various racial identities. Currently, conversations around how to support different racial communities are often focused on how Whiteness has impacted Minority populations and usually come from a deficit lens. During these conversations, just as they do in any other setting, biracial students will identify with their Minority identity, but the community of said impacted Minority identity might view the biracial student as White, separating the biracial student from the community. As the concept of race is based in White supremacy ideology and colonization, it is important that we begin to focus on dismantling these constructs as we also work on addressing past and current harm to impacted communities. This is to say that we need to start asking and reflecting on questions such as *What is "Asian" or Is that person Black "enough."* The concept of race creates a type of valley that biracial students often fall into, as race is often based on physical attributes that biracial people may or may not express.

As the name of this project implies, imagine that each racial category is its own mountain. When a biracial person starts to explore their identity, our societal understanding and expectation of race mean that the biracial person must pick a mountain to live on. However, based on attributes such as physical appearance, language, hometown, family, and nationality, the biracial person may not even be accepted on either mountain (stuck in the valley in between) or might be restricted to one mountain and not allowed to explore their other mountain. Suppose we can create conversations and encourage reflection on why we have these mountains, to begin with, and who is allowed on said mountains. In that case, we can start to deconstruct the colonial and White supremacist lens through which our society views race.

### **Conclusion**

The biracial student population in higher education is a growing community that will only continue to diversify college campuses. Because of this it is essential that student support is implemented for this demographic. However, it is important to understand that this demographic is fluid, and each person has different needs. I found myself in a place of reflection of my own experiences as a biracial student and how I found community. As I spoke to the students who participated in this research, I found that we all built community in different ways, as we all had different needs from our communities. The diversity in the community we created during this project was a wonder to witness and to be a part of, even if the community was temporary. Because of this I found it important to focus on the various communities we are all a part of and how we find ways to be authentic in them.

As I heard the participants' stories, I saw glimpses of similarities not just in themes, but in the emotions and empathy every student had for each other. Even as I shared my own stories with them, I found myself in a place of honesty and transparency, not needing to be selective



with my words. Most importantly though, I was able to embrace my past self, all of her good and not-so-good qualities and look forward to my future self with a sense of hope. For me, that is what authenticity looks like. We all carry different types of traumas and struggles, and we often give compassion to other's experiences that we would not give ourselves. To be able to have a community that affirms us and gives us a sense of pride in who we are, even with all the challenges we have faced- that is the environment I envision students, biracial and beyond, to thrive.

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## Appendix A

### Recruitment Email

Dear [Name]:

I am conducting a research study on Biracial students and their sense of pride in their identity and community at the University of San Diego, titled: *The Valley In Between: Fostering Biracial Pride and Visibility on USD Campus*. The purpose of this qualitative study is to utilize a storytelling methodology to explore how biracial students persist and identify on USD campus. This study also seeks to identify what impact, if any, biracial pride will have on how students identify at USD. The following research questions will guide this study: 1) How can I assist biracial students in finding a sense of community at USD through centering their stories and needs? 2) How will the concept of biracial pride impact students and their higher education experience?

To address these questions, participants will be asked to join 6 focus groups, each 1.5 hours long (9 hours total). During these meetings participants will collaborate to create community guidelines, a playlist, and an art piece. Individually, participants will be asked to create a character using all of your identities to design them. Participants will also be asked to journal and participate in focus group discussion (which is a research method that brings together a small group of people to answer questions in a moderated setting). All activities will be used to collect data for this action research project.

Food and drinks will be offered at 2 social events, one event before the first focus group and one after the last focus group. The activities will be held in the United Front Multicultural Commons.

If you are interested, please respond to this email and I am happy to answer any questions you might have.

If you have any questions, please let me know.

Pauline Herring  
Graduate Student  
[pherring@san Diego.edu](mailto:pherring@san Diego.edu)

Faculty Advisor:  
Dr. Cheryl Getz  
[cgetz@san Diego.edu](mailto:cgetz@san Diego.edu)

## Appendix B

### Recruitment Flyer

# The Valley In Between

FOSTERING BIRACIAL PRIDE AND VISIBILITY  
ON USD CAMPUS

**Looking for students who identify  
as biracial to share their  
experiences as a student at USD  
and to be in community with other  
biracial students.**

During these meetings participants will collaborate to create community guidelines, a playlist, and an art piece. Individually, participants will be asked to create a character using all of your identities to design them. Participants will be asked to journal and participate in focus group discussion. These meetings will be 1.5 hours each, a total of 9 hours total. All activities will be used to collect data for this action research project.

**Food and drinks will be provided  
for the first and last meeting. All  
meetings will be held in the United  
Front Multicultural Commons.**

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT  
PAULINE HERRING AT: [PHERRING@SANDIEGO.EDU](mailto:PHERRING@SANDIEGO.EDU)  
OR DR. CHERYL GETZ AT: [CGETZ@SANDIEGO.EDU](mailto:CGETZ@SANDIEGO.EDU)

## **Appendix C**

Participant Informed Consent

**University of San Diego**

**Institutional Review Board**

### **Research Participant Adult Consent Form**

For the research study entitled:

*The Valley In Between:*

Fostering Biracial Pride and Visibility on USD Campus

#### **I. Purpose of the research study**

Pauline Herring is a student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study he/she is conducting. The purpose of this research study is: To explore how biracial students persist and identify on USD campus.

#### **II. What you will be asked to do**

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to:

Participate in 6 focus group discussions about biracial identity and how it has shaped your college experience- if at all. Each focus group will be 1.5 hours long. Create community guidelines, a collaborative playlist of music, and an art piece with other participants.

Create a character using all of your identities to design them.

Participate in journaling and participate in focus group discussion (which is a research method that brings together a small group of people to answer questions in a moderated

setting).

Your participation in this study will take a total of 9 hours.

### **III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts**

**a) Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day:**

**San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-800-479-3339**

**To seek counseling on USD campus, the USD Counseling Center can be contacted at 1-619-260-4655**

### **IV. Benefits**

Although there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand how biracial students embrace their identities and find community while attending the University of San Diego.

### **V. Confidentiality**

Any information provided and/or identifying records, including this consent form, will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file for a minimum of 5 years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings. Information from this study will be reported as a group and individually. I will use pseudonyms when collecting data,

but I cannot guarantee student confidentiality in the focus group as the participants will be peers on the same campus.

The information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and may be used in future research.

## **VI. Compensation**

**a) If you participate in the study, the researcher will give you food and a drink at the first and last meetings.**

**You will receive this compensation even if you decide not to complete the entire focus group.**

## **VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research**

**Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this,** and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to, like your health care, or your employment or grades. **You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.**

## **VIII. Contact Information**

**If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:**

**1) Pauline Herring**

**USD Email:**



**pherring@sandiego.edu**

**2) Cheryl Getz**

**USD Email:**

**cgetz@sandiego.edu**

**I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.**

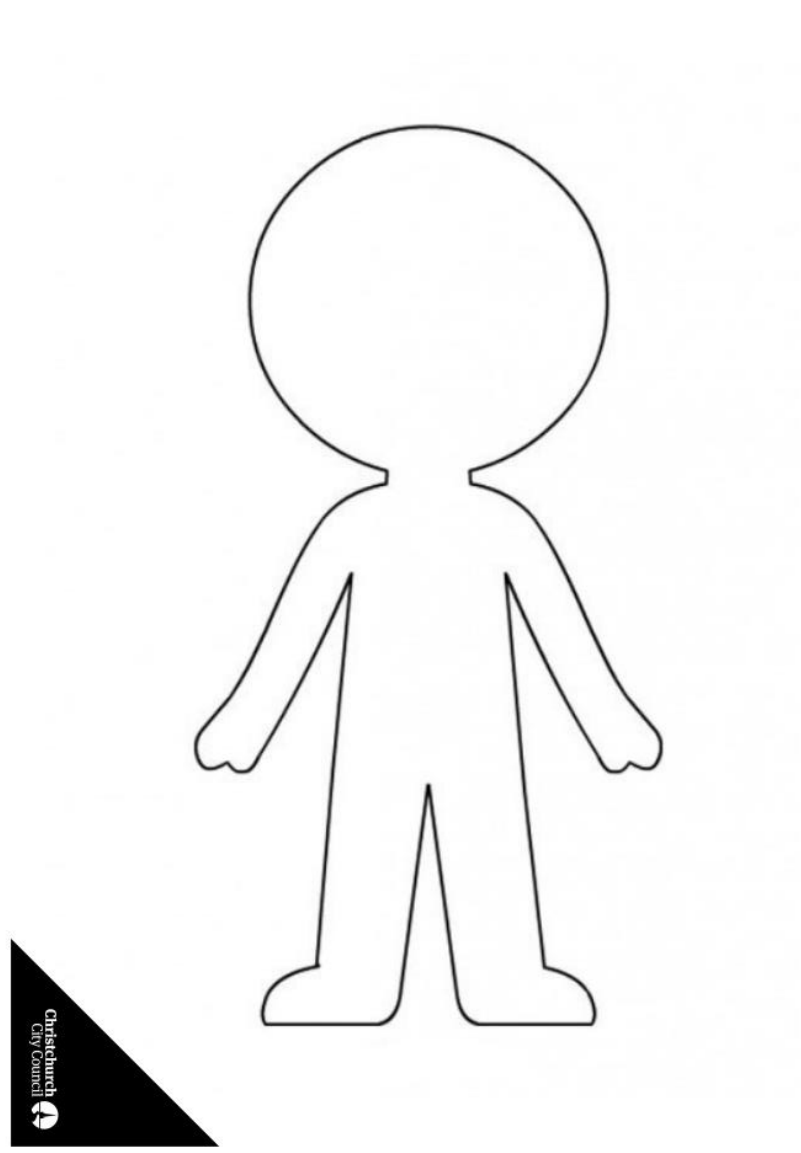
Signature of Participant Date

Name of Participant (**Printed**)

Signature of Investigator Date

## Appendix D

### Blank Character Template

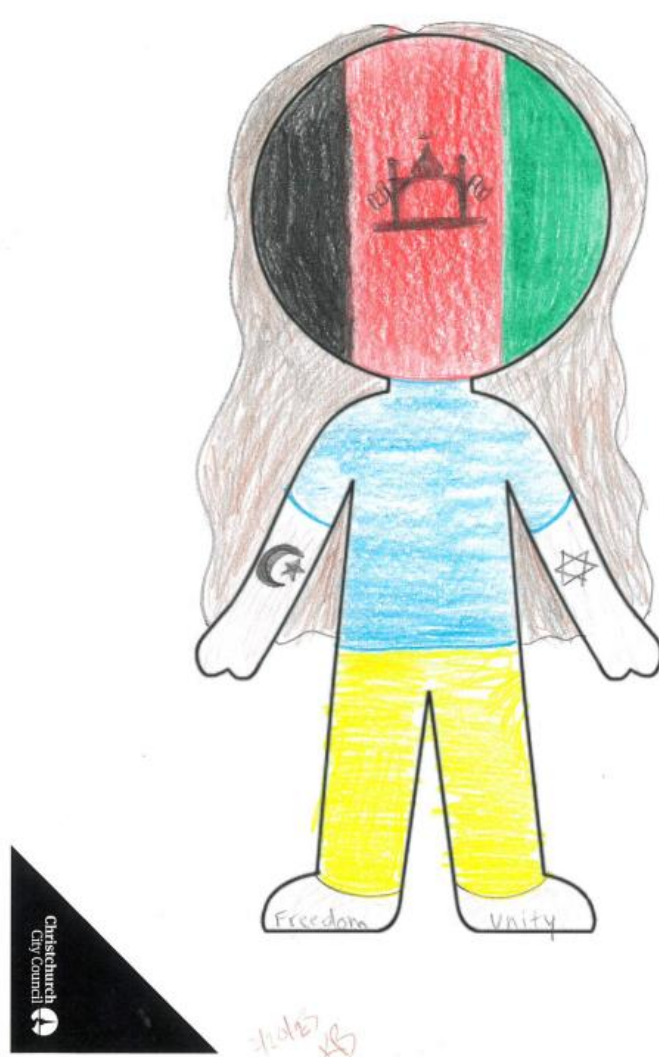


Source: Cclstaff. October 22. (2021, October 22). Diversity Awareness Month Paper Doll

Craft: Scotland. Christchurch City Libraries Ng Kete Wnanga o tautahi. Retrieved January 30, 2023, from <https://my.christchurchcitylibraries.com/blogs/post/diversity-awareness-month-paper-doll-craft-scotland/>

## Appendix E

### Participant's Finished Character Design



## Appendix F

### Community Painting

