



# Developing a sense of belonging among biracial individuals: a case study exploring the social context

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## Abstract

Previous research highlights that biracial people may struggle to fit into their racial groups due to their dual identities. However, much of this research focuses on identity development and a sense of belonging within an educational context. This study aimed to explore how biracial individuals experience a sense of belonging to their racial groups within a social context. Six biracial participants aged 18–27 participated in semi-structured online interviews to explore their experiences qualitatively. A thematic analysis was conducted and three themes were identified: immediate family guidance on being biracial, extended family impacts on feeling connected to racial groups, and language shapes feelings of inclusion or exclusion to racial groups. The findings suggest that immediate family can enhance a person’s sense of belonging. However, there were varied experiences regarding how extended family impacts sense of belonging. Language proficiency was an important factor to connect with people from the same racial backgrounds. Further research is needed to explore other factors such as religion and perceptions as they can impact feeling a sense of belonging.

**Keywords** Biracial · Sense of belonging · Experiences · Social context

## Introduction

With interracial marriages on the rise, biracial individuals represent an increasing population of society (Alba and Foner 2015; Harmon 2016). Alba and Foner (2015), in reviewing wider macro sociological data on interracial marriages, highlight that this is an increasing feature of North American and European societies and suggest that such mixed unions in the United States are “changing the societal mainstream” (p. 38). In this paper we define ‘biracial’ as someone who has parents from two different races (Song 2021). In previous research the term ‘mixed race’ is

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also frequently used to refer to those identifying to two or more races (Chaudhari 2016). Therefore, the term ‘mixed race’ will also be used when describing previous research that uses this category. In many countries, mixed race populations are not a new phenomenon. Nonetheless, mixed-race people have been problematised throughout history (Törngren et al. 2021). In the United States, anti-miscegenation laws were implemented to prevent interracial marriages and relationships, which put mixed-race people in a vulnerable position because they were viewed as unlawful until the laws were repealed in 1967 (Rodríguez-García 2015; Törngren et al. 2021). However, to this day, mixed race people are not always accepted within society because being a biracial person is considered outside the social norm (Albuja et al. 2019).

### **The importance of sense of belonging**

The connection between biracial people and their sense of belonging has been well researched, most frequently within educational contexts. Allen (2020) suggested that individuals find meaning, identity, relevance, and satisfaction in life through a sense of belonging to groups. Many people link the phrase “sense of belonging” to feeling accepted, welcomed, included, understood, and appreciated (Allen 2020). According to Bobbitt (2020), biracial people may find it challenging to completely embrace either of their racial heritages. This is because multiracial people are frequently caught between two or more worlds with various cultures and traditions to learn from, making it difficult to develop a sense of belonging and leaving them prone to feeling isolated (Doto and Syed 2019). Feeling a sense of belonging to racial groups was found to be a predictor of mental health outcomes and a key component of maintaining overall well-being (Albuja et al. 2019). Similarly, Harmon (2016) found that having a sense of belonging to racial groups is linked to self-esteem. Despite the importance of a sense of belonging, Skinner et al. (2020) found that biracial people frequently struggle to fit into their racial groups. This can be explained by Mannan (2018), who suggests that biracial people have distinct experiences that shape their sense of belonging to their racial groups.

### **Identity and sense of belonging**

Racial identity is a term that refers to how individuals define themselves in terms of race (Neblett et al. 2016). One of the challenges mixed-race people encounter is identity invalidation, which occurs when others, particularly those from their monoracial counterparts, do not consider biracial people to be fully integrated members of the racial group because they are not monoracial (Albuja et al. 2019). When an individual is experiencing racial invalidation, it is anticipated to be internalised, leading the individual to question their identity and belongingness to both their racial groups (Franco and O’Brian 2018). Therefore, some mixed-race individuals may not identify as biracial or multiracial to increase their likelihood to be accepted by their monoracial counterparts and increase their sense of belonging (Bame 2016). Participants in Hochberger-Vigsittaboot’s (2015) study had a secure identity and refused

to identify as monoracial and embraced their biracial identity instead. As a result, their monoracial communities rejected them, and they experienced a lack of sense of belonging (Hochberger-Vigsittaboot 2015). Current research explores biracial identity development, and it seems that having a sense of belonging affects how a biracial person identifies. However, Hochberger-Vigsittaboot's (2015) findings illustrated that although some biracial people have a secure identity, they lack a sense of belonging, implying that factors besides racial identity can influence forming a sense of belonging to racial groups.

### **Language shaping sense of belonging**

The role of culture has played a role in integrating into a minority group (Alba 2023). Acculturation was defined as the process of learning and incorporating cultural values and language to be able to 'function' in society (Alba 2023). Language proficiency is a communication tool used to connect with others and develop social relationships (Rabiah 2012). While language plays an important role in identity development, it also allows biracial people to access the cultural information of their multi-ethnic groups (Brooks and Brooks 2016). Monoracial groups expect multiracial people to be fluent in their native languages (Bobbitt 2020). When a biracial member cannot connect with their racial groups in the same native language, they are vulnerable to microaggressions and feelings of guilt, which negatively impact their sense of belonging (Bobbitt 2020). According to Harmon (2016), not being able to speak the language may make biracial people feel unaccepted, driving them to conform to any group to feel a sense of belonging. Franco and O'Brian (2018) proposed that knowledge of cultural practices and being able to speak the language could contribute to experiences of racial identity validation and a sense of belonging among Latino and Asian biracial people. This theme was also found by Kim (2016) among Korean-Black participants. Learning the Korean language was considered proof of establishing their Korean identity, and as such, Korean members accepted Korean-Black individuals into the Korean community (Kim 2016). However, Kim's participants were already socially accepted by others due to their professions, such as athletes, musicians, or teachers. Thus, it is difficult to distinguish whether their biracial identity played a role in feeling a racial sense of belonging. Nevertheless, the similarity of the findings implies that language is a common factor across various biracial populations that contributes to feeling a sense of belonging to racial groups.

### **Environmental context influences feeling accepted by others**

The experiences multiracial individuals undergo depend on the environmental context (Hubbard and Utsey 2015). Multiracial people are also more likely to have different feelings of belonging depending on the social context (Pesonen 2016). This suggests that one's social setting might influence how those around them accept them. Feeling of exclusion or ostracization can affect future interactions and attempts to belong to groups in other social contexts (Allen 2020). The context was

found to be the main motive for an enhanced or hindered sense of belonging among biracial people who attended college in a study by Chaudhari (2016). The findings showed factors such as monoracial norms and multiracial microaggressions reflected in multiracial students' institutional and contextual sense of belonging. Mclean and Williams (2020) found that Black-White students were labelled as 'other' throughout their educational experiences, implying that they differed from the racial norm and were treated differently, which affected their sense of belonging as they felt alienated by their groups. Biracial people immerse and are exposed to different situations in college, thus the need to belong is a salient aspect of their experiences across these situations (Chaudhari 2016). This may explain why the research focuses on feelings of belonging within an educational context.

### **Parental racial socialisation effect on sense of belonging**

Many young people seek guidance from their parents; however, biracial individuals may not have biracial parents, leading to feelings of isolation and a lack of sense of belonging (Mannan 2018). Racial socialisation is a process in which parents deliver implicit and explicit messages about the meaning of one's race in a broader societal context (Coard and Sellers 2005). Despite having a monoracial mother, Stone and Doblin-MacNab (2017) found that biracial children built a sense of connection to their racial groups due to their mothers sharing their experiences and knowledge about both cultures. Rollins and Hunter (2013) suggest that racial socialisation is more common in the Black community, however, Mannan (2018) emphasises that parental racial socialisation was also a factor that was essential for Pakistani-White women to understand their biracial identity. Their parents passed down their experiences and taught their daughters about cultural norms, which improved their sense of belonging as they learned about their cultures and identities. Robinson-Wood (2021) found that parents invalidated their children's racial identity by considering their child to be monoracial, which may have resulted in the individual feeling they belong to only one racial group despite their biracial identity (Robinson-Wood 2021). Due to the lack of parental racial socialisation, biracial children may seek to understand their racial identity without their parents' guidance (Robinson-Wood 2021). As a result, participants reported feeling lonely and socially isolated from their racial groups.

### **The role of extended family**

Being within a family setting can challenge biracial people's sense of belonging (Harmon 2016). Child et al. (2021) suggest that extended families influence identity development, but they can also affect biracial individuals' sense of belonging by including or excluding them from the group. They argue that some biracial individuals feel secure about their identity due to the welcoming behaviour of their extended family (Child et al. 2021). However, other biracial individuals experienced negative incidences from their extended family, essentially affecting their identity development and belonging to groups (Child et al. 2021). According to Bettez's (2010)

research, interracial marriages and raising mixed-race children are not acceptable within some extended families. The participants thus experienced estrangement from their extended relatives and were racially prejudiced (Bettez 2010). The study also showed that siblings could mediate feelings of estrangement from relatives and promote feelings of belonging as they share similar experiences. Black-Southeast Asian participants in Castillo et al.'s (2020) study also describe experiencing racial prejudice from their monoracial relatives which hindered their sense of belonging. Some participants encountered exclusion from their family members because their phenotype appearances were different, suggesting that if a biracial individual does not look similar to monoracial individuals, they will be pushed out of the group (Castillo et al. 2020). These findings are also supported by Robinson-Wood et al. (2021) who found that with constant negative comments from extended family regarding their skin tone, hair texture, and ability to speak the language, biracial participants could not embrace their biracial identity and felt they were not a part of their racial group.

### The present study

Much of the research discussed here focusses on identity development within the biracial population, however less research has looked at biracial people's sense of belonging to their racial groups. Existing research offers a framework for understanding how biracial individuals experience belonging and the factors that influence it. In particular we are influenced by Poston's (1990) Biracial Identity Development Model, which was developed based on the experiences of biracial individuals in the United States. This model consists of five factors: personal identity, choice of group categorization, enmeshment/denial, appreciation and integration (Poston 1990). However, much of the existing research on this topic has primarily focused on the experiences of Black-White biracial individuals in comparison to other biracial populations (Jordan 2016). The social aspect of feeling accepted, welcomed and supported in a different social context, whether in a school setting, a family situation, or a neighbourhood community, appears to be a prevalent theme throughout the literature. However, most research on feeling a sense of belonging has focused on the impact of educational context on experiences of sense of belonging, with little research on the impact of social context. This study therefore seeks to address this gap and to help understand biracial individuals' sense of belonging within social contexts that extend beyond the educational context (Pesonen 2016). It therefore seeks to answer the following research question: how do biracial individuals feel a sense of belonging to their racial groups within a social context?

### Methods

This study utilised a qualitative approach to generate rich and in-depth data from each participant (Braun and Clarke 2013), allowing them to express their subjective experiences of being biracial and how their racial identity impacted their sense

of racial group belonging. All participants were biracial individuals over the age of 18 and were recruited through a Research Participation Scheme at the authors' University. Participants were also recruited through word of mouth and the researcher's personal Instagram account. Six participants were recruited, four of whom were female, and two were male. Participants' demographic information is shown in Table 1, including participants' self-defined racial background.

Each participant took part in an in-depth semi-structured interview (average time 40 min). The researchers developed an interview schedule consisting of 17 questions, influenced by Poston's (1990) Biracial Identity Development Model, with follow-up questions to direct the interviews while also allowing for flexibility and for the participant to direct the interview (Braun and Clarke 2013). All interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams. The study was conducted following the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS 2018). Ethical approval to conduct the study was granted by the Psychology Research Ethics Committee at the authors' institution.

## Data analysis

Following the interviews each recording was transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was utilised to analyse the transcripts. Thematic analysis is a method used to identify patterns of meanings and themes within a data set (Braun and Clarke 2013). This study utilised an inductive approach as the analysis was not determined by an existing theoretical framework. It focuses on exploring how participants' experiences affected their sense of belonging to their racial groups within a social context.

The data was familiarised by listening to the interview recordings and transcribing them verbatim. Transcripts were read multiple times to be familiar with the data before producing initial codes that were thought to be significant. Examples of codes include both worlds colliding, parents adapt to both cultures and feeling welcomed by the family. Codes were then grouped and sorted into potential themes following discussions with both authors and after the second author had reviewed the initial coding. Both researchers agreed upon the initial codes and the interpretation of the findings, ensuring validity through triangulation. Themes were then further discussed, reviewed and refined by both authors to form a systematic pattern. The

**Table 1** Participant demographic information

Participant pseudonym	Racial background	Gender	Age
Ahmed	Arab English	Male	21
Aisha	Black Indian	Female	21
Joseph	Jamaican Indian	Male	23
Mia	Pakistani Caribbean	Female	27
Emily	Pakistani White	Female	21
Mariam	North African Southeast Asian	Female	18

themes were defined and named once the researchers were satisfied with the thematic map of data. Next, the essence of the theme was defined to understand what each theme was about. Three main themes were identified by the researchers and these are presented in the next section of this article.

### **Researcher positionality**

The first author offered the following reflexive account of the research: As a researcher, I have a personal connection to the research topic as I am biracial and therefore approach this study from an insider perspective (Le Gallais 2008). Being an insider gave me the advantage of developing an interview schedule based on my experiences. Being an insider also helped me understand and relate to my participants' experiences as we shared similar experiences. Despite relating to some of my participants' experiences, I acknowledged my participants have their own subjective experiences. Since I am Arab-Asian, I am considered an outsider because I do not share the same racial background as all of my participants. Some participants had negative experiences with members of society due to their biracial identity. While I never encountered such experiences from others, I learnt how other biracial people's experiences were affected due to their identity. Learning about the two cultures I come from was overwhelming. I occasionally felt as though I belonged to one race over another, and other times I felt as though I did not belong to any race since I always felt different. I was curious to explore if other biracial people went through various experiences of sense of belonging.

### **Findings**

After exploring the data three key themes were identified: immediate family guidance on being biracial, extended family impacts on feeling connected to racial groups, and language shapes feelings of inclusion or exclusion to racial groups. Each of these themes will be discussed throughout the remainder of this paper, with excerpts from the interview transcripts used to support the themes.

#### **Immediate family guidance on being biracial**

The main focus of this theme is how the participants' immediate families played a role in helping them understand their biracial identity, whether it is through conversations regarding cultural values or by giving the individual the freedom to explore their racial identity. In this study, immediate family refers to parents and siblings and whilst in most cases participants talked predominantly about their parents, one participant also talked about how his siblings guided him to understand his identity through their own experiences.

The quote below from Joseph, who identifies as mixed Indian-Jamaican, is indicative of data within the study that demonstrates how immediate family play a role in

helping individuals understand both parts of their culture. He discusses his interactions with his Jamaican father:

“I was learning more about Jamaican food recently as well as my dad did this like huge buffet thing, I was helping him cook there, learnt a lot of stuff there and it’s good to embrace that side more. I also got to embrace it was like more like especially like with hair products as well like ‘cause my hair is more like Black” (Joseph, lines 245–250)

Joseph learnt more about the Jamaican culture, including the cuisine, by spending time with his father. Through this simple, and social act of cooking together with his father he was able to learn more about this part of his culture. He was also able to learn how to take care of his hair which he labels as “Black”. It seems that Joseph was already embracing his Jamaican heritage. However, with the presence of his father, he can embrace his Jamaican culture even more; this could indicate that his father’s involvement plays a crucial role in helping him embrace his culture. It could be said that Joseph’s sense of belonging to his Jamaican culture increases the more he learns about it, and it is maintained by his father being present in Joseph’s life.

Similarly, Ahmed, who identifies as Arab-English, discussed how his father influenced how he racially identifies and his sense of belonging:

“...with my dad he would always just say ‘you’re Arab first’ because culturally and religiously I guess he would say like ‘you take your dad side, you follow your dad’s footsteps and stuff, so I’ve always been Arab first then English. But as I grew up I started to realise that I am just both, I still identify as more Arab personally still but I acknowledge the English side a lot more now” (Ahmed, lines 97–101)

Ahmed’s identity seems to be heavily influenced by his interactions with his father. Ahmed had to choose to identify as Arab due to cultural and religious values. Due to these values, Ahmed internalised that his identity is more Arab than English and followed in his dad’s footsteps. While Ahmed’s identity was not directly invalidated, the requirement to pick a side may imply the need to belong to only one racial group. Although he identifies more as an Arab, Ahmed had grown to appreciate his English heritage more than when he was younger and this has been developed through interactions with family members.

Emily defines her identity as Pakistani-White, and she shared how she adapted to both cultures:

“... family are mixed race, they are very westernised. And so like I said they give me more of that freedom of choice so I’ve never had to pick a side between two cultures and my parents have learned to adapt to both cultures and like I said they’re very laid back and that’s because my parents adapt both a White side kind of culture and a more Islamic side kind of culture” (Emily, lines 177–181)

In contrast to Ahmed, Emily’s parents encouraged her not to “pick a side”; giving Emily the option may have aided her in developing a sense of equal belonging to



both cultures. Emily appears to be surrounded by both her White and Pakistani (Islamic) cultures, which may help her understand both. Her parents also adapted to both cultures, indicating that her parents are culturally accepting and willing to know more about the other culture. Being surrounded by this environment may have allowed Emily to embrace both cultures and develop a sense of belonging to both. It seems that parental racial socialisation was essential for Emily as it has been shown to be important within the Pakistani-White population in previous research (Mannan 2018).

Other participants such as Mia, who defines her identity as Pakistani-Caribbean, also highlighted how her parents gave her the option of not choosing one culture over the other:

“yes [...] and that’s due to like my mom and dad [...] they didn’t make it a big deal that I had that I come from these two cultures. Like I said from before I didn’t, it’s not something I really knew as I was growing up I was mixed race, it wasn’t really a thing and I didn’t didn’t probably identify myself as that. Especially not in primary school at the age of year six, that to me it was just normal, I didn’t know I was that this was different really and they yeah they’ve never kind of forced me into one side more than the other they’ve they’ve always let me just kind of be who I am” (Mia, lines 131–138)

Mia describes a sense of belonging to both her racial groups that she attributes to her parents giving her the freedom to explore her identity, and this lack of parental racial socialisation had no negative impact on her sense of belonging. This suggests that parental racial socialisation may not be as important as Robin-Wood (2021) has argued. Instead, she feels a sense of belonging due to her parents allowing her to be herself without obliging her to pick one culture to follow. Mia stated that her parents “*didn’t make it a big deal*”, implying that if her parents discussed her racial background, it might have a different impact on her identity and how she feels a sense of belonging to both her cultures.

Other participants, such as Ahmed, described the importance of older siblings in understanding biracial backgrounds:

“... my siblings definitely impacted me um because a lot of my siblings are older than me so I’m the second youngest so I had a lot of people to help me out and understand to represent myself and my cultures. My family all of them played a part really, one day it would be my sister or one day it would be my brother, it helped massively because they’d been through that, and they each have been harder than I had because of the time difference” (Ahmed, lines 189–193)

While Ahmed recognises the value of his family in understanding his biracial heritage, he specifically emphasises the importance of his siblings for teaching him how to express himself and his biracial identity. This may have positively affected his sense of belonging because he strives to express himself and the cultures from which he originated equally. Ahmed’s older siblings are also biracial, they had

similar experiences and are aware of the potential challenges that Ahmed faces. Ahmed's siblings share mutual experiences with him to support him. His siblings may enhance his sense of belonging by preventing him from feeling isolated in the process.

### **Extended family impacts on feeling connected to racial groups**

This second theme will consider how extended family behaviour toward the participants can enhance or hinder their sense of belonging. In doing so we will show how the welcoming environment of participants' extended families affects their sense of belonging to their racial groups.

In the quote below, Joseph is discussing his relationship with his extended family and how welcoming they are toward him:

"I go see my nan like regularly like she but she's on the Indian side and like I feel always welcome there just like there's no like ill management or anything like nothing bad. [...], I go see my family regularly and just everyone everyone goes to the family regularly, just says good times good chance to experience the culture it's like all the foods and just the foods, language and stuff like that yeah" (Joseph, lines 97–105)

Joseph appears to have a close relationship with his extended family and through them learns about the culture, which helps him feel more connected to his Indian side. Joseph's positive connections with his extended family, particularly his Indian relatives, may help him develop a sense of belonging to the Indian culture. Being surrounded by a positive social context can be one of the factors that contribute to Joseph's eagerness to learn more about his racial heritage.

Despite experiencing welcoming behaviour from his extended family, in the quote below Ahmed suggests that his perceptions prevent him from feeling a sense of belonging:

"it's weird the two sides are the complete opposite, so they're both welcoming and fine with it. It's just personally in the back of my head I always have that I am also Arab I am also English so when I am with them I don't always feel I can fully integrate and that's just purely me personally cuz I know I can't do some of the things they are doing" (Ahmed, lines 80–83)

In Ahmed's situation, being in a positive social context is not enough to gain a sense of belonging because his inner conflicts prevent him from fully integrating into the White side of his culture. This is despite his extended family being welcoming and accepting of his biracial identity. Interestingly, it is when he is with White family members that he feels he is unable to blend in fully, unable to perform certain traditions with them, which could be due to cultural or religious differences. The inability to share moments with his White family may impact Ahmed's sense of belonging to his White culture.

Aisha, on the other hand, describes being able to integrate into her Indian culture while being surrounded primarily by her Black culture:

“I have mostly been surrounded by my blackness rather than the Asian side. So when it comes to meeting extended family I think the most of it would go is kind of like oh okay this relative is Indian then all we’re gonna watch an Indian movie and we can eat Indian food or maybe some of them will speak Hindi and then we’ll laugh about it well it’s never caused me to say or hang on a second I’m not Indian enough or maybe I’m too Black like it again it’s kind of just something that you acknowledge and move on from” (Aisha, lines 42–48)

In this quote, Aisha implies that despite being surrounded by her Black culture more than her Asian culture, her interaction with her Indian relatives is unaffected. When her Indian family came to visit, Aisha could spend meaningful time with them without questioning if she belonged to the Indian community or not. This also implies that being surrounded by her Indian culture does not make her believe she is not Indian enough to be with her Indian relatives. Aisha can participate in her Indian culture as her Indian extended family seems to be unconditionally welcoming toward her. She understands that although the Black culture mainly surrounds her, she can pick up on parts of her Indian culture with her Indian family.

The quote below from Mariam, who defines her identity as North African-South-east Asian, focuses on how her extended family makes her feel a sense of belonging:

“both of my family they like they ask about each other so for example my family from Indonesia would ask about my family in Egypt and otherwise as well, so it strengthens the connection and it’s just nice to know that they are willing to learn more” (Mariam, lines 113–116)

Mariam’s extended family shows an active interest in learning about each other and her racial identity, suggesting that her extended families validate who she is. These simple social acts and being surrounded by a non-judgemental environment interested in her racial backgrounds led Mariam to build a stronger sense of connection with her extended families. Therefore, it acts as a factor that increases her sense of belonging to both racial groups.

Mia, on the other hand, explained how both sides of her extended family had negative views of her other culture:

“the wider family and their own beliefs and whatever I don’t really like erm allow that to influence me much again, that’s just me from a younger age seeing that sometimes you know these cultures have clashed and sometimes people have these like crazy opinions about a culture and now I’m at that age where that’s don’t I don’t let it bother me anymore, I don’t let them influence my identity. I’m, you know I’m happy with what my identity is now and yeah quite frankly I don’t I don’t take on what like opinions especially from wider family like it’s just not important to me so” (Mia, lines 122–129)

Mia’s Caribbean and Pakistani cultures clashed when she was younger. As a result, her relatives would have negative opinions about her other culture. Since negative opinions from her extended families surrounded her, this may have compromised her sense of belonging to her racial groups. Those negative opinions may have influenced Mia’s feeling of feeling welcomed by her extended family as it could indicate

that they do not accept her for being a biracial individual. Furthermore, those perspectives demonstrate the significance of extended family in understanding her mixed identity because it impacted her identity development when she was younger.

### **Language shapes feelings of inclusion or exclusion to racial groups**

In the final theme, we show how the participants interviewed for this study emphasised the necessity of speaking their native languages. Language proficiency shaped participants' ability to connect and communicate with others from their racial groups, which influenced their sense of belonging to their racial groups.

Mariam explained how her ability to communicate Arabic and Indonesian affected her sense of belonging in the following quote:

“...language I think uh makes me have that sense of belonging because I can speak Arabic and it's also my first and native language and I can also speak Indonesian only because I looked up to my Indonesian family members [...] whenever I go to Indonesia I speak the language to everyone and I love being able to connect with other people and I'm glad I'm able to understand them” (Mariam, lines 74–82)

Here, Mariam states that language contributes to her sense of belonging. Mariam speaks Arabic and Indonesian fluently, which allows her to communicate with others of similar ethnic background. Mariam also mentions that she learnt Indonesian from her family because she values and respects them; this could imply she has a meaningful relationship with them. Communicating in the same language helps her connect easily with them and develop a sense of belonging to her Indonesian heritage.

In contrast, Mia is unable to communicate in Urdu, which was a factor that played a role in her sense of belonging to her Pakistani heritage:

“... I don't speak fluent Urdu or anything like that. I did I did go to classes when I was when I was young but again I didn't didn't really enjoy it much and therefore communicating with like older older members of my family on that side is difficult, because I can't understand necessarily everything they're saying so someone has to be there to translate and the other way around. So yes I'd say because I can't necessarily speak the language just that mean I'm not part or do I do I feel like I don't belong as much to that culture I would yeah I would think that it has had has affected me in that way um” (Mia, lines 213–219)

Mia's decision to stop learning Urdu caused communication barriers with her elder Pakistani relatives because she needed someone to translate. This prevented her from building a connection with this side of her family. Unlike Robinsoon-Wood et al.'s (2021) findings, Mia did not experience negative comments due to her inability to speak in Urdu. Nonetheless, her inability to communicate in Urdu has negatively affected her sense of belonging, as she cannot integrate or fully participate in Pakistani events.

In the quotation below, Joseph explained how people would react to the fact he does not know how to speak in Punjabi:

“people could probably be a bit more judgey towards that because because of the fact that there’s usually it’s usually it’s quite normal for people to learn at a younger age but I wasn’t really taught at a younger age because maybe just ‘cause I wasn’t in a fully like Indian household so like probably people was a bit more disappointed because I don’t know it which makes sometimes feel a bit more like an outsider at times because I’m not fully immersed in it even though I am half of that” (Joseph, lines 280–285)

Although Joseph acknowledges he is part-Indian, his sense of belonging is impacted because he is unable to immerse within the Indian culture due to his inability to speak Punjabi. He experienced judgemental attitudes from the people around him when they knew he could not speak Punjabi, indicating that they expected him to know how to speak in Punjabi (Bobbit 2020). Joseph feels like an outsider because of language barriers; while he embraces his Indian identity, he may not fully immerse within the Indian community and feel excluded by them.

Emily discusses how her ability to speak Hindko contributes to her sense of belonging:

“...it plays a big impact because if I speak know a specific language, suddenly every Pakistani person will immediately know where I’m from in Pakistan, it’s that they all know where I’m from in Pakistan [...] immediately everyone will know where I’m from Pakistan so it’s like it does affect my sense of belonging because everyone’s kind of categorised differently based on the language they speak” (Emily, lines 311–317)

Emily’s communication ability in Hindko is important to her sense of belonging. When she speaks in Hindko, other Pakistanis will recognise her as a Pakistani person which may indicate that she is validated by her Pakistani group, enhancing her sense of belonging. This quote therefore reinforces the importance of language for developing (or not developing) sense of belonging for the biracial participants in this study.

## Discussion

The present research aimed to explore how biracial individuals experience a sense of belonging to their racial groups within the social context. The interviews showed that participants’ social experiences could impact how they feel a sense of belonging to their racial groups. A thematic analysis of the interview data identified three main themes: immediate family guidance on being biracial, extended family impacts on feeling connected to racial groups, and language shapes feelings of inclusion or exclusion to racial groups.

Although each of the participants had monoracial parents, this study showed that participants do not exhibit a reduced sense of belonging, contradicting Mannan’s

(2018) claims. Participants' parents passed down their knowledge about their culture, which helped participants gain a sense of belonging to both of their racial groups. The findings by Robinson-Wood (2021) demonstrated that participant's parents invalidated their racial identification and believed them to be monoracial. However, our findings generally showed otherwise, as participants did not experience identity invalidation from their parents, with the exception of one participant who was required to choose a side to follow religious and cultural values. Adding to the findings of Stone and Doblin-MacNab (2017), paternal racial socialisation was a fundamental factor that played a role in how participants understood their racial identity and their racial backgrounds. Our findings also support the conclusions of Mannan (2018) who showed that parental racial socialisation appears to be a lasting influence in the participants' lives, as they feel more connected to their heritages when they learn more about it from their parents. Interestingly, the lack of parental racial socialisation did not play a role in hindering participants' sense of belonging. Instead, it benefitted the participants because it allowed them to explore their races and cultures freely without feeling obliged to learn or pick one culture to belong to. Supporting Bettez's (2010) findings, the role of siblings was emphasised by one participant. In this case, siblings supported each other as they encounter similar experiences due to their dual identity and we would suggest that this would benefit from further investigation in future studies.

Throughout the interviews, participants highlighted the important role of their extended family impacting their sense of belonging to their racial groups. The majority of the participants were able to embrace one or both of their heritages with the assistance of their extended family. In accordance with Child et al. (2021), participants in this study either had positive or negative experiences with their extended family. Furthermore, most participants had a secure identity due to the unconditionally welcoming behaviour exhibited by their extended family. The current findings showed that extended family enhanced feeling of belonging by embracing the individual and welcoming the individual to the group. It was suggested by Bettez (2010) that extended families tend to be racially prejudiced towards biracial people. However, in this study, participants did not experience racial prejudice from their relatives, with one exception. One participant in this study experienced negative messages from her extended family, which affected her sense of belonging when she was younger. This finding is similar to Castillo et al. (2020), as their participants were also subjected to negative messages regarding their belonging to their racial groups. Castillo et al. (2020) showed that biracial individuals were pushed out of the racial group if they did not look like monoracial individuals. Surprisingly, phenotype appearances were not a factor impacting the sense of belonging among the participants in this research.

We also showed that language is a factor that contributes to how an individual has a sense of belonging to their racial groups. In this study, not being able to speak the language was a communication barrier that affected the participants' sense of belong to their racial groups. When a biracial individual is unable to speak the language, a sense of not belonging emerges because they feel they are judged by monoracial members. This supports Franco and O'Brian's (2018) findings that practising cultural traditions and speaking the language helped the participants build a sense of

belonging to their racial groups. Language proficiency is a factor that helped participants to fit to their racial groups and connect with them. The ability to speak the language led their racial groups to welcome them and therefore they felt a sense of belonging to the group (e.g. Kim 2016).

Research into biracial identities has tended to focus primarily on Black-White biracial individuals, while research on other biracial population has featured less in the literature. Hochberger-Vigsittaboot (2015) suggests that the Arab population, including biracial Arabs, are understudied whilst Daga and Raval (2018) also suggest that biracial Pakistani-White populations are under researched. Our research therefore goes some way to addressing this current lacuna. However, it should be noted that the sample size was relatively small in the current study and future research from a qualitative perspective could focus on a greater range of biracial identities.

Previous research (e.g. Schiro 2020) has also shown how religion impacts the identity development of a biracial individual. However, there is still a lack of research demonstrating whether religion could be a factor impacting sense of belonging for biracial individuals. Some participants in the current study highlighted how religion played a role in their lives—for example, going to worship areas to pray and meet other people or following religious values that define their feeling of belonging and therefore it would be of benefit for future research to address this aspect further.

## Conclusion

This study provides a novel contribution, using a qualitative approach to explore how experiences within the social context can impact how a biracial individual has a sense of belonging to their racial groups. Six biracial individuals narrated their unique experiences, providing more knowledge about the phenomenology of biracial groups. Based on the current study and previous research, it is evident that various factors affect development of a sense of belonging among biracial people. It was highlighted that more research is required to understand how other factors such as religion can affect a biracial individual's sense of belonging.

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**Data availability** The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

## Declarations

**Competing interests** The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.



**Ethical approval** The study was conducted following the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct. Ethical approval to conduct the study was granted by the Psychology Research Ethics Committee at the authors' institution.

**Informed consent** All participants gave their fully informed consent before participating in this research.

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