

Ticking the *Other* Category: A study into the insufficient categorisation of Mixed-Race Identity

Research: Gabrielle Fullam

Supervisor: Dr Elaine Moriarty

Funded by the Laidlaw Program



Section 1: Introduction:

Parker and Song (2001) have noted that mixed-race identity can evoke incredibly strong reactions in individuals, ranging from harassment to a naïve view of mixed-race individuals as proof of racial harmony. Just by existing, mixed-race people pose a complex problem to political and social ideologies predicated on a separation of “races” (ibid). Historically, mixed-race people were intuitively viewed as problematic, tragic or disruptive to the fabric of society. Despite the fact there is no scientific basis for race (Rondilla et.al), many still appeal to race to make decisions and assumptions. Racism dominates our society. This project critically examines what it means to be mixed-race today. Through intensive reading, analysis, interviews and questionnaires – this project explores the boundaries of racial identities.

Section 2: Methodology:

1. Preliminary Research

First broad reading was conducted within the topic, using a range of academic search tools and guidance from my supervisor, Dr Elaine Moriarty. A detailed research diary was kept and updated throughout this, tracking common themes, methodological tools, and reflexively situating myself as an individual researcher within the wider discourses and processes I was researching. Frequent meetings with my supervisor allowed me to expand my scope of readings and explore new avenues of expanding literature on racial classification and mixed-race identity. Resulting in an incredibly thorough and expansive collection of readings. This was primarily concerned with the identity formation of mixed-race individuals and the concept of mixed-race and terminology surrounding race itself (see James 2001, Mukherjee 2001, Rondilla et. al 2017, p.5).

2. Survey of Racial Classification Methods

I then began to investigate different ways race and ethnicity can be conceptualised socially. I began looking at racial collection data by different countries and comparing similarities and differences. This consisted of analysis of census data, public-bodies data, independent research, and academic literature on the topic. I began to evaluate the constraints faced by and attitudes adopted by institutional structures in racial categorisation. The 1991 British Census became a specific notable case study in which mixed-race was included on the census, and posed various difficulties in categorising (see Owen, 2001).

3. Status of Mixed-Race Individuals within Society

I then began to evaluate the interesting status and power of mixed-race people both within their constituent ethnic groups and within wider society. Mixed-status can, depending on the social context, afford either penalty or privilege. Campion (2019) studies rejection of mixed-race black people in black communities, while Levette (2007) studies how mixed-race people can experience elevation within mixed communities. This is often due to a glorification of whiteness. Studies investigating the conditions might lead to these differing scenarios were analysed. This highlighted the nuanced nature of mixed identity. Related to this was the concept of “passing” as monoracial. This is when a mixed-race or racially ambiguous person cuts ties from their minority background in order to “pass” as white. Considerations into this complex situation were documented, such as in the work of Piper (2001). This related strongly to the performative nature of race. This transcends the simple idea of race as an ideological leaning or as a simple material bodily communicator and accounts for both viewpoints through conceptualising the material body as a result of and communicator of reiterative acts (Warren 2001).

4. Evaluating Completed Research

After studying these three broad strains of mixed-race identity, I began to review my research diary, highlight important contributions to the discourse, I noted reoccurring themes, dominant debates and relevant examples. My own insight and analysis into the field of research also featured. After analysing this large body of research, I separated it into five relevant categories for ease. This was:

1. Mixed-Race Terminology and the Origins of Mixed-Race Studies
2. Considerations into the Diversity of Mixed-Race Identity and Resulting Methodological Questions.
3. Constraints of Institutional Structures in Evaluating Mixed-Race Identity
4. Negotiability of Mixed-Race Identity and Further Elaboration on the Category Mixed Race
5. Burdens and Challenges Faced by Mixed-Race People and Scope for Further Research

I analysed each of these topics, sent it to my supervisor, Dr Moriarty, who provided suggestions for further research, edits and notes. I would then revise these edits and send it back. Completing my Literature Review took four full drafts. The final literature review was 6,000 words long (excluding bibliography) and contained a detailed overview of all these topics (the content of the literature review and it’s use in developing thorough research design is further elaborated below) in Section 3: Research Outputs.

Section 2: Research Outputs

1. Literature Review

While it is difficult to summarise the Literature Review due to its inherent comprehensive nature, I have provided an overview of some of the key debates and considerations within each category below, along with the key take-aways of the review.

1. Mixed-Race Terminology and the Origins of Mixed-Race Studies

The terms themselves we use to explain and discuss race may implicitly endorse racist notions. James (2001) notes that use of the terms “White” and “Non-White” implicitly privileges the term “White”, while Mukherjee (2001) notes that these terms must be used to explain binary power relationships. Related to this discussion is the concern that a study into “mixed-race” identity implicitly acknowledges an unscientific concept of race as discrete categories which are intergenerational and immutable (see Parker and Song, 2001). This tension, however, can be rectified and both mixed-race literature can both dispute unscientific claims of race science, and recognise the social realities of race. Debates such as these indicate the strength of racial norms and inform our language choice.

2. Considerations into the Diversity of Mixed-Race Identity and Resulting Methodological Questions.

As much of mixed-race research notes the insufficient ways of articulating mixed-race identity and experience (see Section 3), and the rapid diversity within the group itself obvious questions and problems arise in the identification of research participants and the methods as to how respondents are “called into being” participants (Paragg 2014). Caballero (2014) further notes that participants in mixed race studies are extremely vulnerable to self-selection bias. That is to say that they often identify strongly as mixed-race, or are active in or conscious of mixed-race debates, rhetoric and activism. In light of this, Campion (2019) utilises informal networks and selective locations, and avoided using the term mixed-race explicitly in an effort to not alienate those who may not identify with the term “mixed-race”.

3. Constraints of Institutional Structures in Evaluating Mixed-Race Identity

A common theme thus far has been the sets of beliefs implicit in racial terms and the difficulties involved in categorising people within racial groups in such a way as to both reject unscientific notions of race-science and reflect their social realities. Developing questions around ethnic and racial identity for official use (such as in census data, medical data or diversity reports) is particularly difficult. Owen (2001) notes that statisticians have trouble designing questions around ethnic origin as by presenting mutually exclusive boxes. Further to this point, it is clear that classification and categorisation are not value-free process (Bulmer (1986)) Necessary positive identification with mixed-race, goes against social views in which mixed-race people as tragic or “in-between” – a will to reflect mixed-race people’s realities is the first hurdle.

4. Negotiability of Mixed-Race Identity and Further Elaboration on the Category Mixed Race

Movement, confluence and re-invention of ethnic groupings is not just a social project but a geographical one. Cohen (2010, p. 9) notes that the status of “diaspora” is a powerful “narrative construction” which strategically frames experiences of migration and. The diaspora term and identity indicate how identity can transcend racial, cultural and local allegiances. To add to this complexity. Passing” is the concept of a member of one ethnic group commonly being mistaken for another (usually white) or actively seeking to be identified with that group.

5. Burdens and Challenges Faced by Mixed-Race People and Scope for Further Research

Specific and niche types of discrimination, harassment and alienation affect mixed-race people (Paragg, 2014, Piper 2001). However the types of discrimination faced by mixed-race people cannot be seen or recognised by institutional structures until a less prescriptive and malleable form of categorisation become commonplace.

Key take-aways:

This discussion of the malleable and performative nature of race is not intended to reduce race or endorse ideas of a post-racial society. Indeed, much of these findings support a positive approach towards recognising and tackling racial norms and injustices. Recognising mixed-race identity as not just an arbitrary construct but as a social fact, may be pivotal in answering the demands of mixed-race people to be “seen”. This review seeks to acknowledge the plurality of factors influencing and shaping racial identity and acknowledge the boundaries of ethnic experience.

This literature review has provided an overview to some of the more notable aspects of mixed-race identity studies. Though initially it appears diverse and unrelated, it is clear that much of the discourse can be grounded in the theoretical terminology discussions outlined in Section One. Beyond that, it is clear that many strands of analysis can be connected to form an overarching narrative surrounding mixed-race identity and indicates a societal need for restructuring of the defining racialised concepts.

2. Research Instrument Design

My literature review provided me with a firm grounding, providing a comprehensive overview of many of the key debates and important themes within the developing and evolving field of mixed-race research. I was able to identify a narrower field of research within mixed-race research that I was particularly interested in, warranted further research, and was a situation somewhat unique to mixed-race experience. The experience of mixed-race people within the home, particularly white mixed-race people encountering difficulties with white family members. Section 2 of my literature review was used in particular to identify methodological issues involved in mixed-race researcher (such as how mixed-race participants were called into being participants and how mixed-race people were identified) was also used in my design. I plan to find research participants using informal networks within migrant groups, educational facilities (such as colleges) and ethnic communities. Analysing previous interview questionnaires allowed me to form detailed draft detailed and clear questionnaires and interview questions. I took a triangulation approach, planning to use both questionnaires and interviews as two sources of data to enhance the credibility of this research design. I also resolved to present my findings from these interviews in the form of a documentary project and academic research paper to improve accessibility and scope.

Sources

- Parker, D., & Song, M. (2001) “Introduction: Rethinking ‘Mixed Race.’” In Parker D. & Song M. (Eds.), *Rethinking ‘Mixed Race’* (pp. 1-22) London: Pluto Press
- Spickard, P., & Guevarra, R.P., & Rondilla, J.L. (2017) *Red and Yellow, Black and Brown: Decentering Whiteness in Mixed Race Studies* Rutgers
- Cohen, P. (2010) “Rethinking the Diasporama” *Patterns of Prejudice* 33:1, 3-22
- Alba, R., & Beck, B., & Sahin, D.B. (2018) *The Rise of Mixed Parentage: A Sociological and Demographic Phenomenon to Be Reckoned With* *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 677 (1) pp. 26-38
- Caballero, C. (2014). *Mixed emotions: Reflections on researching racial mixing and mixedness*. *Emotion, Space and Society* (11), 79-88.
- Campion, K. (2019) “You think you’re Black?” Exploring Black mixed-race experiences of Black rejection *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (42)16 pp. 191-213
- Cohen, P. (2010) “Rethinking the Diasporama” *Patterns of Prejudice* 33:1, 3-22
- James, C.E. (2001). “Introduction: encounters in race, ethnicity, and language.” In C.E. James & A Shadd (Eds.), *Talking about identity: Encounters in race, ethnicity, and language*. Toronto: *Between the Lines*
- Leverette, T. (2007) *Speaking Up: Mixed Race Identity in Black Communities* *Journal of Black Studies* 39(3) pp. 434-445
- Mukherjee, A. (2001). “The ‘race consciousness’ of a South Asian (Canadian, of course) female academic” In C. E. James, & A. Shadd (Eds.), *Talking about identity: Encounters in race, ethnicity, and language* (pp. 212–218). Toronto: *Between the Lines*.
- Owen, C. (2001). ‘Mixed Race’ in *Official Statistics*. In Parker D. & Song M. (Eds.), *Rethinking ‘Mixed Race’* (pp. 134-153). LONDON: Pluto Press
- Paragg, J. (2014). *Studying “Mixed Race”: Reflections on Methodological Practice* *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*.
- Parker, D., & Song, M. (2001) “Introduction: Rethinking ‘Mixed Race.’” In Parker D. & Song M. (Eds.), *Rethinking ‘Mixed Race’* (pp. 1-22) London: Pluto Press
- Piper, A. (1992). “Passing for White, Passing for Black” *Transition* (58), pp. 4-32.
- Spickard, P., & Guevarra, R.P., & Rondilla, J.L. (2017) *Red and Yellow, Black and Brown: Decentering Whiteness in Mixed Race Studies* Rutgers
- Warren, J.T. (2001) “Doing Whiteness: On the Performative Dimensions of Race in the Classroom” *Communication Education* 50 (2) pp. 91-108