

“Mixed” Results: Multiracial Research and Identity Explorations

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Abstract

Multiracial individuals report that the social pressure of having to “choose” one of their racial groups is a primary source of psychological conflict. Yet because of their ability to maneuver among their multiple identities, multiracials also adopt flexible cognitive strategies in dealing with their social environments—demonstrating a benefit to having multiple racial identities. The current article reviews recent research involving multiracial participants to examine the behavioral and cognitive outcomes linked to being multiracial and pinpoints possible moderators that may affect these outcomes. Limitations in applying monoracial identity frameworks to multiracial populations are also discussed.

Keywords

multiracial, biracial, racial identity, cognitive flexibility, multiple identities

According to the U.S. Census, a multiracial person is anyone who identifies with two or more races. This demographic across the globe is rapidly increasing: Nearly 1 in 10 British children are of mixed racial descent (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2010); from 2001 to 2006, the number of multiracials in Canadian Census data increased by 25% (Canada Census, 2006); and from 2000 to 2010, the number of self-identified multiracials in the United States increased by over a third, with multiracials reported in every county (U.S. Census, 2012). Although research about multiracials is limited, we know that multiracial people can—and often do—switch between their racial identities, which suggests that multiracials may be more sensitive to social contexts than their monoracial peers. However, we still know little regarding the conditions that may affect multiracial identification choices and outcomes. The goal of this review is to summarize existing findings about the obstacles and advantages multiracials experience while negotiating the borders between their identities, to pinpoint specific holes within that research that necessitate further exploration, and to highlight how established monoracial identity frameworks may not fully apply to this growing demographic.

multiracials, including social exclusion, disapproval from extended family, increased discrimination, and lower psychological well-being (e.g., Gaskins, 1999; Kerwin, Ponteretto, Jackson, & Harris, 1993). Unlike monoracial minorities, multiracials often have to deal with others questioning their racial background, which causes increased difficulty in forming a social identity (Binning, Unzueta, Huo, & Molina, 2009; Cheng & Lee, 2009; Sanchez, Shih, & Garcia, 2009; Shih & Sanchez, 2009; Townsend, Markus, & Bergsieker, 2009). Some have compared this experience to having an “identity crisis,” because multiracials face difficulty in “choosing sides” when others do not acknowledge their racial identity (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). Therefore, multiracials also report that the constant social pressure of having to “choose” one of their racial groups—whether due to social context or societal pressures to conform to a monoracial category—is a source of tension. Additionally, many multiracials are also racially ambiguous in appearance (i.e., hard to categorize racially), only adding to the identity confusion they face. In fact, the majority of research on multiracials has focused only on how outside perceivers categorize multiracials to learn more about

Obstacles for Multiracials

According to a review by Shih and Sanchez (2005), several studies have pinpointed negative outcomes for

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social perceptions, rather than examining how this racial ambiguity may affect the actual treatment of multiracials.

This ambiguity, combined with a public construal of race in which monoracial categories are the norm, leads to incidents in which multiracial individuals are blatantly asked dehumanizing questions like “What are you?” In fact, disclosure of one’s multiracial identity can be extremely personal, and multiracials actually wish more than monoracials for others to be accurate in judging their racial identity (Remedios & Chasteen, 2013). Moreover, when multiracials disclose their racial identity, that disclosure often makes them more sensitive to and more likely to receive negative feedback (Sanchez & Bonam, 2009). Combined, these are all possible explanations for why multiracials often face higher levels of social exclusion and discrimination than their monoracial minority counterparts (e.g., Sanchez & Bonam, 2009; Shih & Sanchez, 2005).

Advantages for Multiracials

Shih and Sanchez (2005) also reviewed other studies demonstrating that multiracials feel generally positive about their racial identity and that the majority of the negative identification outcomes for multiracials are primarily seen among clinical populations. In fact, multiracials who identify as multiracial have higher levels of psychological well-being, self-esteem, and social engagement than multiracials who identify with only one racial group (Binning et al., 2009). However, these outcomes seem to occur only when individuals who identify as multiracial also feel that their racial identities significantly overlap (Cheng & Lee, 2009). Indeed, multiracials have been shown to adopt flexible cognitive and behavioral strategies that enable them to function effectively within both minority and majority environments (Bonam & Shih, 2009; Gaither, Sommers, & Ambady, 2013). Acknowledging both sides of one’s racial background increases sensitivity and appreciation for not only one’s in-group but also the racial and cultural backgrounds of others (Kerwin et al., 1993; Shih & Sanchez, 2009).

Moreover, because multiracials represent multiple racial groups, they are more likely to reject the conception that race biologically predicts one’s abilities, which may buffer them from the negative effects of prejudice (e.g., Gaskins, 1999; Pauker & Ambady, 2009; Shih & Sanchez, 2009). Although reminding monoracial minorities about their race causes decrements in academic testing outcomes due to fears of confirming the stereotype that minorities are academically inferior (e.g. Steele & Aronson, 1995), reminding multiracials about their multiracial identity does not elicit the same stereotype-threat outcomes (Shih, Bonam, Sanchez, & Peck, 2007). Therefore, either multiracials may be more skilled at dismissing prejudiced

experiences as being due to societal constructions, or they may not believe that stereotypes applied to monoracials apply to them, which would help explain why multiracials who identify as multiracial exhibit better psychological outcomes than those who identify with only one racial group (Binning et al., 2009).

Multiracial Identity Flexibility

Research has also shown that multiracials have *identity flexibility*, or the ability to freely and easily switch between or identify with their multiple racial identities at a given moment (e.g., Binning et al., 2009; Gaither et al., 2013; Shih & Sanchez, 2005). For example, starting in childhood, biracial Black/White children report easily identifying with more than one racial in-group (Chiong, 1998). Furthermore, an interview study with mothers of biracial children showed that family discussions about race aided biracial Black/White children in flexibly choosing different racial identities (Morrison, 1995). And in adult populations, research has shown that multiracials more often report that they have changed their racial identification than that their racial identity has remained constant (Hitlin, Brown, & Elder, 2006).

Although qualitative work has shown that contexts such as one’s home environment can sway how multiracials self-report their racial identity (e.g., Renn, 2000; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002), very few quantitative studies have investigated identity flexibility (see Shih & Sanchez, 2005). Similar to findings involving monoracial populations, results from empirical studies have suggested that identification among multiracials may vary either as a result of explicit priming or based on the racial diversity of a social context (e.g., Chiao, Heck, Nakayama, & Ambady, 2006; Gaither et al., 2013; Hitlin et al., 2006; Rockquemore, Brunsma, & Delgado, 2009). A few studies have empirically demonstrated that making multiracials think specifically about one of their racial identities (i.e., through social priming) affects how they see faces from that racial in-group. Priming a biracial Black/White person’s Black identity affects that person’s Black face perception and memory accuracy, and priming that person’s White identity affects his or her White face perception in the same ways—an effect unique to people with multiple racial identities (Chiao et al., 2006; Pauker, Ambady, & Freeman, 2013). Relatedly, other work has demonstrated that multiracials have better memory for racially ambiguous faces compared to monoracials (Pauker & Ambady, 2009) and that biracial infants scan frequently encountered faces less than monoracial infants, suggesting that they use a distinct approach to distinguishing faces (Gaither, Pauker, & Johnson, 2012) because of their flexibility regarding their racial group memberships and exposure in their home environments, respectively.

Furthermore, racial priming has also been shown to affect social behavior for biracial Black/White individuals. Recent work (Gaither et al., 2013) has demonstrated that priming a biracial Black/White person's White identity and having him or her interact with a White person (or priming a biracial Black/White person's Black identity and having him or her talk to a Black person) leads to positive interaction outcomes, such as decreased anxiety, because the racial mind-set of both interaction participants is assumed to be the same. Priming a racial identity different from that of one's interaction partner (i.e., priming a biracial Black/White person's White identity while he or she talks to a Black partner) leads to the more negative outcomes typically seen in interracial interactions, such as increased anxiety and lack of eye contact (Gaither et al., 2013). More recently, this work has been extended to biracial children: Priming one racial identity over the other caused biracial Black/White and Asian/White children to prefer to learn from teachers from those respective racial backgrounds more often, highlighting a flexibility in learning preferences not seen with monoracial children (Gaither et al., 2014). And relatedly, priming a biracial Black/White person's White identity over his or her Black identity has also been shown to boost standardized-test performance by activating positive academic stereotypes linked with a White identity (Gaither, Remedios, Schultz, & Sommers, in press).

However, the above studies all explicitly primed one racial identity. Therefore, future work should investigate if multiracials can knowingly activate one racial identity over another, if multiracial identity flexibility operates subliminally, and how priming a multiracial identity specifically may affect these outcomes. Furthermore, this capacity to flexibly think from multiple racial perspectives is unique to the multiracial population, but the boundaries regarding when and how multiracial individuals switch between their multiple racial identities has yet to be defined. Social context affects multiracial identification, but other possible moderators are outlined in the sections that follow.

Moderators of Multiracial Identification

Racial background

To date, multiracial research has largely grouped all multiracials into one pan-racial demographic group or has chosen to focus only on one subgroup within the multiracial population (i.e., Black/White or Asian/White) without comparing these groups to each other or to their monoracial counterparts. This is why we know so little about how individual differences within the multiracial demographic, such as racial identification, can sway

these identification outcomes. For example, irrespective of their racial background, multiracials may identify with just one of their races, such as their minority (e.g., Black, Asian) or their majority (i.e., White) racial in-group (Rockquemore et al., 2009; Townsend, Fryberg, Wilkins, & Markus, 2012); as multiracial (Kerwin, Ponterotto, Jackson, & Harris, 1993); or, in some cases in which multiracials ignore racial labels, as human (Rockquemore & Brunnsma, 2002). Additionally, because of recruitment advertising, research has primarily included multiracials who identify as multiracial, which means we know even less about multiracials who identify as monoracial (Townsend et al., 2012). In fact, multiracials who identify as multiracial actually experience decreased self-esteem when asked to choose only one racial identity (Townsend et al., 2009), pinpointing one primary difference within the multiracial population. Other work has shown that multiracials in higher-status groups are more likely to claim a multiracial identity than multiracials from lower-status groups (Townsend et al., 2012). Future work is therefore needed to clarify the relationship between how variations in multiracial identification may affect identity-flexibility outcomes.

Investigating how these results may concern multiracials who are not half majority race (i.e., White) is also a question for future research. Do multiracials who are considered dual-minority multiracials (i.e., Black/Hispanic, Asian/Hispanic) experience different outcomes than multiracials who are half White? Since there is a hierarchy of racial groups in our society (Axt, Ebersole, & Nosek, 2014), it seems likely that multiracials who are Black/White and those who are Asian/White would be perceived differently by society and therefore may identify differently with their respective minority racial in-group.

Racial phenotypicality

Research with monoracial populations has documented that having a more prototypical "minority" appearance leads to increased discrimination (e.g., Maddox & Gray, 2002) and that people whose appearance is more prototypically "minority" are perceived as identifying more strongly with their racial in-group (Wilkins, Kaiser, & Rieck, 2010). Survey data suggest that multiracials who look more White also identify as more White (Brunnsma & Rockquemore, 2001), but another study has also demonstrated that racial phenotypicality does not affect how biracial Black/White individuals interact with other White and Black people (at least after a racial-priming task; Gaither et al., 2013). Relatedly, social-perception research has shown that biracial Asian/White individuals are categorized as White more easily than biracial Black/White individuals are (Ho, Sidanius, Levin, & Banaji, 2011), yet multiracials in both groups still report experiencing more

exclusion than monoracial minorities (e.g., Sanchez & Bonam, 2009; Shih & Sanchez, 2005). Therefore, additional work is needed to examine the role that racial phenotype plays in multiracial experiences and whether it hinders or promotes identity flexibility.

Gender

To my knowledge, there have been no published empirical studies examining identification or treatment differences between multiracial men and women. Two qualitative studies (one with biracial Black/White women and one with African American women who moved to a predominantly White environment) have highlighted a need for new theories regarding how context and gender shapes racial identity for minority women (Rockquemore, 2002; Twine, 1996). Relatedly, recent work has presented evidence that race is “gendered,” meaning that some racial categories are more directly associated with one gender than the other (i.e., Black with men; Johnson, Freeman, & Pauker, 2012), which can significantly affect how people are treated and identify. For example, might biracial Asian/Black women be seen as or identify more as Asian but biracial Asian/Black men be seen as or identify more as Black?

Conclusions: Establishing a Framework

These studies show that there are some differences between multiracial and monoracial populations. Therefore, monoracial identity models may not always apply to multiracials. One of the most cited identification models, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), states that discrimination toward out-group members drives in-group identification; however, multiracials do not have just one in-group—not all multiracials identify as multiracial, and their in-group identification may fluctuate over time. Furthermore, interracial-interaction research also uses this in-group/out-group distinction to study social behavior, but multiracials complicate this research for the same reason. Finally, developmental models also may differ, since one study has shown that multiracial children worry about racially identifying with only one of their racial groups out of fear of offending one of their parents (Sebring, 1984), which is an identification experience unique to multiracial youth.

However, under specific circumstances, such as when multiracials identify as monoracial, these types of identification models could still apply. Therefore, there are elements to these models that may help with the development of a framework to study the multiracial demographic. I propose that existing identity models rely too much on having distinct in-group and out-groups and should instead include social context as a variable, since it is

clear that not only for the multiracial population but for anyone with multiple social identities (e.g., race, gender, age, occupation; see Lickel et al., 2000), context can greatly sway how a person chooses to identify, which in turn significantly affects the distinction between “we” and “they.” Roccas and Brewer (2002) proposed four main strategies for managing multiple social identities, and there is some theoretical evidence that multiracials may use similar strategies, such as merging their racial identities while navigating between them (Binning et al., 2009; Renn, 2000). Therefore, the multiracial population may actually provide race and identity researchers with an innovative way to expand our current understanding of identity formation, intergroup relations, and social behavior more broadly. But trying to force multiracial research into monoracial research boxes is not the path that will allow that innovation. It is time for research to adapt to changing demographics—much like multiracials continually adapt to their surroundings.

Recommended Reading

- Cheng, C. Y., & Lee, F. (2009). (See References). This article discusses identity conflict within the multiracial demographic while also proposing a new construct, the Multiracial Identity Integration Scale, to measure individual differences regarding racial identification.
- Gaither, S. E., Sommers, S. R., & Ambady, N. (2013). (See References). This article is the first experimental work to demonstrate how priming one racial identity over the other with biracial populations affects how they socially interact and behave in different interracial settings.
- Rockquemore, K. A., Brunsma, D. L., & Delgado, D. J. (2009). (See References). This article is a comprehensive, highly accessible overview of what is known about the difficulty of constructing one theory for all multiracial identity options.
- Shih, M., & Sanchez, D. T. (2005). (See References). This article reviews previous literature regarding psychological and well-being outcomes for multiracial populations by highlighting the positive and negative outcomes of having multiple racial identities.

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