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Cognitive Distinctions in Multiracial Individuals: **A survey of available research**

Introduction

This paper presents a survey of the research in to multiethnic individuals, and how they relate to the world. An understanding of multiethnic individuals will become increasingly important as the portion multiracial population continues to grow. In the United States, the 2000 Census was the first census which allowed for multiracial reporting, however, the 2000 census report[1] produces numbers going back to 1970 by extrapolating from a number of sources. The approximate numbers of Americans which report themselves as belonging to “two or more races” arrived at by the census bureau are half million in 1970, 2 million in 1990, and 6.8 million in 2000; a roughly exponential upward trend. The authors of this census report note that the reporting methods for multiracial individuals are extremely deficient in all the studies they source, including the 2000 census itself. These problems mostly relate to the issues in consistent self-reporting (and apparently self-association) by multi-racial individuals, which will be discussed later. To provide context for those raw numbers, the 6.8 million respondents on the 2000 census made up approximately 2.4% [2] of the total US population. It provides a striking illustration, shown in Figure 1, to plot the census provided data and extrapolate a trend line. While the legitimacy of extrapolating from three points, as well as the validity of the points themselves, is questionable at best, it is very interesting observe the rough trend, which suggests there will be approximately 15 million multiracial individuals in the United States in 2009.

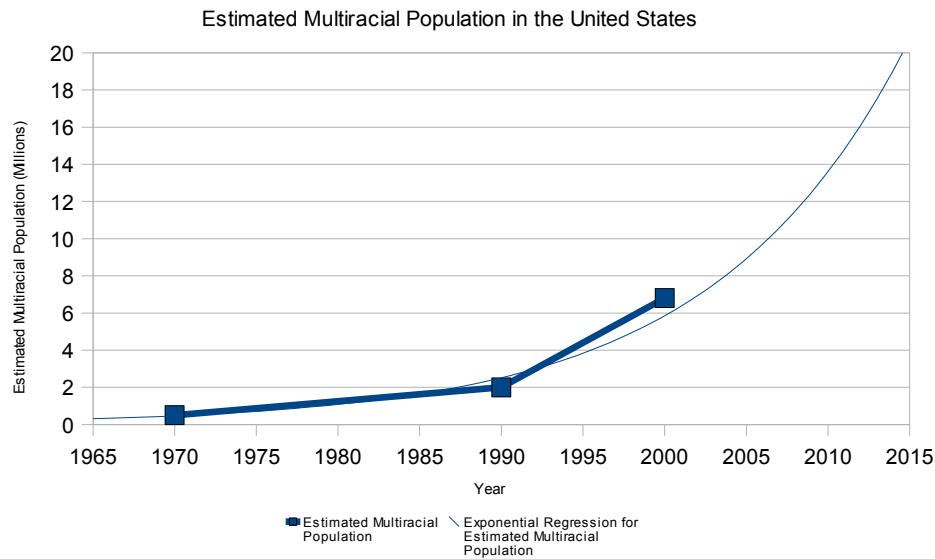


Fig. 1

As is all too common in the social sciences, different groups of psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists use different terms which often overlap confusingly. Therefore, a set of working definitions will be established. For the purposes of this paper, **race** deals with genetically determined characteristics, such as skeletal structure, facial features, skin color, and hair texture. Conversely, **ethnicity** refers only to cultural aspects, which are not generally indicated to be biologically predetermined. **Ethnoracial** will serve as the generic, particularly for features which are not clearly mapped to either race or ethnicity. **Multiracial** individuals are those individuals whose genetic parentage comes from two or more racial groups. **Multiethnic** individuals are those who identify with multiple ethnic/cultural groups, particularly those raised in situations in which they are persistently exposed to multiple ethnic/cultural backgrounds during their formative years. Multiracial individuals will generally be multiethnic as well, but there are cases, such as multiracial children raised by a single monoracial parent, in which multiracial individuals may only strongly associate with one ethnicity. This paper will focus chiefly on multiracial individuals, but many of the issues relating to identity apply to

and have been studied with respect to trans-racial adoptions and similar cases multiethnic but not multiracial individuals.

One of the largest issues in studying multiracial individuals is that any specific mixture of multiracial individuals makes up a vanishingly small portion of the population, and those studying ethnoracial distinctions are likely to be alert for differences between various mixtures. This complicates studies, as finding a sufficient homogeneous population to study is nearly impossible. There have been a number of solutions to this; many studies have assumed that the phenomena they are studying will be consistent across various racial mixtures. Others have been able to skirt the problem by using composites created for the desired racial mixtures [3] rather than actually collecting a sample population. The latter is only an option for a very small number of studies. A small number of studies do attempt to study specific racial mixtures, but the data produced for any particular mixture becomes suspect due to small sample size.

The bulk of this paper will provide a look at the major areas of research into multiracial individuals; Education, Behavior, and Identity. A final section presents studies about the world at large reacts to multiracial individuals. This context is necessary to thoroughly understand the situation, and provides potential explanations for many of the phenomenon discussed in earlier sections.

Education

The bulk of research into multiethnic individuals has been developmental or educational in focus. The apparent reasons for this are twofold; firstly, children are an accessible group, and, as multiracial individuals, especially when considering only particular racial combinations, make up only a relatively small (2.4% [2]) portion of the total population, it requires a very large sample population to amass a

reasonable sample group. Secondly, and far more importantly, educators are faced with visible ramifications of distinctions between ethnoracial groups, such as the various well-publicized achievement gaps. This raises the visibility of ethnoracial distinctions, and hence the acceptability of studying them, ostensibly to allow the education system to better cater to a diverse population. The focus on youth can also be explained by the ever increasing birth rate for multiracial individuals [2], making for a larger, more relevant body to study.

Most educationally themed studies on multiracial education are not specifically aimed at educational goals, but rather understanding the social and behavioral ramifications of being multiracial adequately to integrate them into the classroom. Both papers in the behavioral section ([5],[6]), and the first two sources referred to in the identity section ([4],[2]) below are based on studies of school children in an educational context. Two books have been written to attempt to prepare educators for the unique needs of multiracial individuals; Working with Multiracial Students: Critical perspectives on Research and Practice, from which [2] is excerpted, and Meeting the Needs of Multiethnic and Multiracial Children in Schools (Francis Wardle and Marta I. Cruz-Janzen, Pearson Education, Inc., 2004, Boston ISBN: 0-205-37608-8), which is not referred to in this paper.

Behavior

The dominant finding in studying behavioral details of multiracial individuals is that there is an extreme predisposition for racial individuals to behave in deviant ways. A 2005 study by Choi and Hirachi [5] finds that multiracial individuals are approximately 50% more likely to have engaged in almost all tested measures of violent behavior and substance abuse, relative to their monoracial counterparts. Measures tested included factors such as smoking, drinking, frequency of drug use, incidence of threatening, and incidence of physical violence. As it is interesting that only one

indicator does not show a disparity, it was found that multiracial and monoracial youth are roughly equally likely to carry knives or razors.

Unlike most studies, this paper considers specific results for specific racial mixtures as well as aggregate results across all racial mixtures. The study found that in general the incidence of a behavior were roughly consistent across various mixtures, but did find a significant difference between biracial mixtures containing only European/Asian American decent and those containing and African American/Native American descent; those in the former category are about 70% less likely to have performed approximately one third of the indicators, while remaining consistent on all other studied indicators.

A 2003 paper [6] generally agrees with the conclusions of the above study, but finds that the statistical increases in deviant behavior in the multiracial population are not evenly spread across respondents, but rather are the result of a small number of multiracial individuals exhibiting extremely deviant behavior, while the majority of multiracial individual's studied fall within the range between their constituent races.

The high incidence of deviant very interesting phenomenon which can be construed both as evidence for and a consequence of multiracial/multiethnic individuals forming weak associations with normative groups, a concept explored in depth below.

Identity

One area which has received perhaps the most thorough study is the way in which multiracial individual's racial identity changes over time. Many of the articles employed in this paper mention the phenomena in passing ([5],[6]), typically as an impediment to the collection of reliable data. Several articles go much more in depth on the topic, and study this phenomena in its own right. Here two of

the many texts on the topic will be considered, a 2006 paper by Hitlin [4] and a chapter by Sheets [2]. Both authors find that that respondent's identities tend to change over time, and that the stimulus for these changes is chiefly external factors.

The Hitlin paper studies the differences in the drift of identities of a large (20,745 person) sample of monoracial and multiracial individuals over a period of five years, taking a first sample when the respondents are between 15 and 18 years of age. They then analyzed the results, breaking the respondents in to six categories; (1) individuals who selected the same monoracial category both times, (2) individuals who chose the same multiracial category both times, (3) individuals who began in a monoracial category and diversified into multiracial categories, (4) individuals who began in a multiracial category and consolidated into a monoracial category, (5) individuals who selected different multiracial categories between surveys, and (6) individuals who selected different monoracial categories between surveys.

The paper produces a number of very interesting results; first, the hypothesis that multiracial individual's racial identity is considerably more fluid than that of monoracial individuals is confirmed; in fact the study indicates roughly four fifths of respondents who identify as multiracial on either survey altered their response between surveys. Secondly, they find that among multiracial children, those from well educated and/or affluent families present a much more consistent racial identity than their peers from less affluent and/or well educated families. They also discovered that two other dominating factors in changes in racial identity; cognitive development, as measured by a picture vocabulary test, which substantially increases odds of changing, and self-reported self-esteem, which substantially lowers the odds of changing. They also make a number of detailed and specific observations on the specific behaviors of each the six categories of respondents, which are of less interest in a general scope.

The Sheets chapter concentrates more on the effect of peer groups on the self-identification of multiracial children. Using a much smaller sample, Sheets finds that the primary indicator in multiracial student's choice of racial identity is the racial identity of the friends with which they associate. However, the paper concentrates more on the opposite effect; the effect of children's race and racial identity on their socialization, indicating causality points the other way. An unsurprising primary finding is that the effect of multiracial children's race increases with age; generally, mixed-race children are able to reasonably fluidly move between groups dominated by any of their racial components until around middle school/junior high, at which point most students reported being forced by their peers to identify with a single racial group. The final step found in the paper is that generally as the studied students transitioned into adulthood they formed individual multiracial identities, while still continuing to associate primarily with the monoracial group they associated with in their junior high/middle school years. Another significant finding was that the largest perceived distinction in race among the multiracial respondents was between white and nonwhite. Based on appearance, individuals were either able to associate with whites, or were rejected, while there is more, longer lasting fluidity between minority groups. A final interesting finding is that many multiracial children who are able to pass as any particular monoracial group choose to, and tend to be offended when people suggest that they do not belong to the

Even the Census bureau faces difficulties with the fluidity of multiracial individual's racial identity. In the 2003 quality analysis for multi-racial respondents to the 2000 census [1], it was found that only 40 percent of individuals who reported multiracial on either the initial contact or the census itself did so in the both surveys. This is in contrast to the approximately 97-98 percent of monoracial respondents who reported consistently between the two surveys. An additional interesting result found in the same report is that 85% of those who reported more than one race on both surveys

reported the same collection of races. This fact is especially interesting in that it implies that even those individuals who have formed a long term multiracial identity do not maintain a consistent identity.

The collective implication of the above data is that the drift in identity is largely because there is not a sufficient population to form a strong peer group in most locales. In Hawaii, where multiracial individuals are almost the norm, the local creole language has developed a special nomenclature by which multiracial individuals are identified. *Hapa Haoli* refers to individuals who are of mixed race. Strictly, *hapa* means “half” and *haoli* means “Caucasian not of Portuguese origin” but the term has come to be a generic for all multiracial individuals. There are also more specific terms, such as *hapa kanaka* (part Hawaiian), *hapa popolo* (part African) and *hapa pukiki* (part Portuguese). There are specific phrases for all the commonly encountered (in Hawaii) mixtures. This suggests that where there is an adequate concentration of persons of similar racial mixture, there is an opportunity for static, labeled groups to form, creating an identity structure similar to the one which exists for traditional racial groups.

Outside-In

The other significant portion in considering multiethnic and multiracial individuals is considering how society reacts to them. There is little consistency in findings on this point. Both of the studies ([5],[6]) considered in the behavioral section above, and two of the studies in the identity section ([4],[2]) find that there is considerable discrimination aimed at multiracial individuals. This discrimination is considered in both behavioral studies to be more stress inducing than that experienced by monoracial individuals, and both studies suggest that the additional stress is because the discrimination occurs in all monoracial peer groups with which the individuals may associate. In

staunch opposition to the above findings, a study [3] in 2005 which compared the reactions of monoracial Japanese and Caucasian Americans to composited images of variously multiracial individuals. The respondents consistently rated multiracial (“Eurasian” in the paper's terminology) composites as appearing both healthier and more attractive than either set of monoracial composites. This phenomenon can be observed anecdotally as well; there is a surprising preponderance (far more frequent than the 2.4% of the population who are multiracial would indicate) of multiracial individuals in acting (Ex. Keanu Reeves, Halle Berry) and modeling (Ex. Naomi Campbell, Miranda Kerr). A number of listings of notable multiracial individuals have cropped up since the advent of the Internet, such as <http://www.mixedfolks.com/>. It is an interesting exercise to attempt, and watch others attempt, to determine individuals racial background from pictures, and check for accuracy. It would be especially interesting to correlate variables such as the respondent's own ethnoracial background and exposure to various cultures (places of residence, etc.) with the accuracy of their responses to different ethnicities.

There are also a number of documented situations in which society at large reacts poorly to multiracial individuals, or the situations from which they spring. Historically there is a long history of disapproval, both individual and institutional of interracial . The canonical example for discrimination here is the sordid history of American anti-miscegenation laws. In the United States, , and 17 states still had anti-miscegenation laws in place in 1967 when they were overturned by the supreme court in the *Loving v. Virginia* decision. There is still clear evidence of a stigma associated with multiracial relationships, particularly marriage. There is a 2005 paper by Joyner and Kao studying the progression of interracial relationships over multiple timescales[7]. This paper which finds that interracial relationships are statistically significantly less likely to be successful in the long term. Interestingly, Joyner and Kao also complain that the existing systems for classifying individual's race

and ethnicity are inadequate, specifically noting in their closing that the data and facilities for handling multiracial/multiethnic individuals are particularly lacking.

While the above cases of objection to multiethnic/multiracial situations are basically familiar to most socialized Americans, there is some opposition to the recognition of multiracial individuals from surprising places. The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) has frequently campaigned to prevent the recognition of multiracial groups. The most highly visible instance of this was the addition of the “Check all that apply” rule for race in the 2000 census[8], which approximately seven million respondents elected to use. The apparent reason for this opposition is that the recognition of multiracial groups makes the apparent size of traditional racial groups smaller, thus eroding their power base and resource allocation, and threatening the system by which anti-discrimination laws are currently enforced.

A finding which is little remarked on in the literature, but appears quite striking is that in general, society reacts positively to multiracial people on an individual level, but on an aggregate/process level, perception sours. That is, while on an individual to individual basis, a given individual will find multiethnic individuals unobjectionable, or even attractive, there is consistent, widespread distaste both for the recognition of multiracial groups as distinct, and for integrating multiracial individuals into predominantly multiracial groups.

Obama Example

A recent very high-profile case illustrates nearly all the points covered in this paper. This case is U.S. President Barack Obama, who is multiracial; his father is a Kenyan black, and his mother a Caucasian American, making him clearly multiracial and multiethnic. President Obama also grew up in a further multiethnic environment; his stepfather is Indonesian, and he lived in Indonesia for several

formative years. Furthermore, the majority of his childhood was spent in Hawaii, which boasts a huge variety of ethnicities and a large concentration of multiracial and/or multiethnic individuals. With this in mind, the casting of President Obama as “America's First Black President” is a clear illustration of the racial pigeonholing found in the Sheets study [9].

President Obama also openly reports[10] that he “experimented with marijuana and occasionally cocaine”, as well as alcohol in his teen years, and attributes those behaviors to stress and confusion related to his identity. He also has publicly described [10] physically lashing out at a peer who called him a “coon.” These behaviors are deeply in line with those anticipated by the studies explored in the behavioral section.

Addressing educational ramifications, there is a fascinating study, which is still pending review, that found the well documented black performance gap eliminated with rise in Pres. Obama's success[11]. While this is not dealing directly with a multiracial population, it provides a stunning example of the importance of racial identification and image in society. The authors speculate that the presence of a role model who is accepted for exhibiting behavior associated with being well-educated makes such a difference in sense of competence that it is able to effectively close the performance gap.

Closing

While there is a reasonable body of research into the experience of multiracial individuals, there are significant lapses in rigorous understanding of this rapidly growing demographic. The sources explored above cover the majority of areas of study and conclusions currently found in the study of multiethnic individuals, and suggest a variety of additional areas which would be valuable to understand. In particular, there is little study into intrinsic cognitive distinctions between individuals

of different races of any kind, as the social and political climate do not allow for them. Especially interesting would be imaging studies or behavioral studies attempting to locate intrinsic differences in cognition in various racial and ethnic groups, and how those differences translate into multiracial and multiethnic individuals.

An additional direction which is suggested by the findings above is to attempt to correlate the experience of multiethnic and multiracial individuals. There are separate studies outside the scope of this paper looking at multiethnic individuals who are not multiracial, such as trans-racial adoptions. Such research would likely help to clarify which constructs are cultural and which are genetic. Particularly valuable would be comparing the ways in which multiethnic and multiracial people interact with monoracial individuals, to detail social response to physical and cultural characteristics.

Another area which has apparently not been studied is multiracial individuals who are not biracial; papers, including Sheets [9] have respondents with three or more significant racial contributions, but treat them in the same way as biracial individuals. It would be highly interesting to see what, if any, difference the addition of more racial groups would be to the individual's experiences.

Sources

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