ESRC FINAL REPORT (4,917 words)

Background

The 'mixed race' population has increased significantly in size over the last ten to fifteen years, due mainly to the growing number of inter-ethnic unions but also the acceptability of declaring mixed race identities. Over 670,000 people chose to identify with the newly included 'Mixed' categories in the 2001 UK Censuses and the group is now one of the fastest growing. The census enumeration of the group has led to substantial research interest in its demography and how its membership identifies in ethnic/racial terms. However, at the time of the application, relatively little research had focused on how 'mixed race' people perceived their range of identity options and how they made decisions about these options. Even less was known about how the experiences of disparate kinds of 'mixed' people might vary, especially in relation to these identity choices they perceive and make.

Exploration of these racial/ethnic options are of theoretical interest because they challenge long-held conceptualisations of race/ethnicity and official practices based on mutually exclusive single groups with relatively fixed boundaries. However, research on the 'mixed group' has revealed the importance of fluidity, shifting boundaries, and multiplicity with respect to how its members identify. This has challenged official bodies such as census agencies with respect to how they capture this group in the decennial enumerations and, indeed, of the sustainability of using single category options as opposed to multi-ticking across categories. How the 'mixed' group is conceptualised also has relevance for how the different ethnic groups are counted and their growth rates estimated, especially if some members of the group identify with a single ethnicity and others with more than one of their mixed origins. Indeed, research in the UK and USA has increasingly demonstrated that the children of inter-ethnic unions and those with more complex heritages do exercise identity options in terms of their desire to embrace one or more of their origins, thereby creating a complex range of racial/ethnic identifications.

Objectives

The objectives of this research were to address the under-theorisation of the topic and paucity of empirical findings by making significant contributions to the theoretical understandings of racial/ethnic identification choices for 'mixed race' people and adding to the limited empirical evidence base.

In particular, the research aimed to collect a new body of data concerning the identity choices of different groups of 'mixed' people in Britain. In doing so, the aim was to go beyond the limited 2001 Census categorisation by investigating the ways in which 'mixed race' people describe themselves in ethnic and racial terms, both through unprompted free text and a range of classificatory options. While census categorisation is primarily limited to mixes involving two groups encompassing 'White', pilot studies had indicated a more complex picture of allegiance in some cases to multiple groups, the importance of mixed minority groups, and other disparate 'mixed' heritages.

Further, the study aimed to make important theoretical contributions by investigating the different ways in which 'mixed race' people make identity choices with respect to the composition of their mix and the specific contexts and situations in which they are operating, including informal contexts with friends and the form-filling situations required by officialdom.

An additional key objective was to feed findings into the 2011 Census Development Programmes in the UK.

These focuses were articulated in five specific research questions: 1. What choices do mixed race young adults feel they possess in terms of how they describe themselves in ethnic/racial terms; 2. What kinds of strategies do different kinds of mixed race people employ in their efforts to assert their desired identities; 3. What do these choices mean in practice; 4. How may mixed peoples' ethnic options vary according to the specific contexts in which they are operating; 5. To what extent do official data collection practices accurately represent the ways in which young adults choose to describe their mixed origins?

The decision was taken to focus on young adults (aged 18-25) as much of the existing knowledge base regarding 'mixed' people related to adolescents. Additionally, the transition to adulthood is an important one in which young people have to adapt to societal expectations to a greater degree than in adolescence and are exposed to a different peer culture. Young adults may, inconsequence, become more aware of racism and discrimination encountered in everyday interactions.

The aims and objectives of the research did not change in practice. They were met successfully through the approach indicated in the application.

Methods

A cross-sectional study design was used to determine the identity choices of the research subjects and the correlates of these choices. This encompassed (i) use of a semi-structured interview schedule & (ii) in-depth interviews with a subset of these respondents. Emphasis was placed on an *integrated* mixed methods approach.

Much importance was accorded to the choice of study population in the application. Young adults in the chosen age group were recruited from universities and colleges of further education across England. While this sample would, by definition, comprise well-educated young adults, the practical difficulties of systematically recruiting other samples - discussed at length in the application - ruled out such options as 'focused enumeration' and the use of employee samples. However, while not specified in the application, efforts were made to recruit comparison groups, one of young disadvantaged adults in East London through the Connexions organisation (the achieved sample being too small for such purposes) and the other an employee sample in the NHS (where difficulties in accessing ethnic group information in the confidential annual staff censuses were encountered).

One innovation to the intended methodology was the use of a web-based (online) survey, operationalised through the University of Kent's subscription to Bristol Online Surveys (BOS). While hard copy surveys were initially used, the invitation to selected institutions to host a web-link to the BOS survey on their websites proved successful and became the standard method of data accrual.

With respect to analysis of results, it was proposed that multinomial logistic regression modelling would be used to examine the correlates of the racial self-identification choices of the mixed race subjects, for the purposes of analysis the dependent variable being a coded measure of ethnic/racial self-ascription based on the work of Root (1996), Rockquemore & Brunsma (2002), and Renn (2000). In practice, this proved impractical because of the sheer multiplicity and complexity of the responses to this question (on which multi-ticking was allowed across the five options): in all 17 different combinations of responses were received that were not amenable to collapsing into fewer sets, demonstrating the complexity and nuanced nature of 'mixed race'

identifications with respect to the exercise of those options and the fluidity and situational nature of the choices made.

Results

A total of 326 questionnaire responses were received that were in scope (258 women and 68 men). In excess of a further one hundred were excluded as the respondents were out of scope with respect to age or the length of time they had been resident in the UK (those born in Britain and migrant respondents who had been resident here for their secondary education were included as question sets related to this period). The female bias (comprising 79% of the sample) has been widely reported in other mixed race research and is a reflection of response bias in answering questionnaires on this topic, around three-quarters of the responses being obtained from the online survey available to *all* students. A good coverage by single years of age (in the range n=14, aged 25, to n=66, aged 22) was obtained.

With respect to the in-depth interviews, these were achieved with a total of 65 respondents (27 men and 38 women). The composition of these groups was: Black/White: 17 (4 men, 13 women); Asian/White: 10 (7 men, 3 women); Chinese/White: 16 (7 men, 9 women); Minority Mixed (including some Black mixes) (2 men, 5 women), & Arab/White: 15 (7 men, 8 women).

Self-ascribed racial identification

Respondents were invited to give a 'top of head' (unprompted) description of their ethnic/racial identity at the start of the schedule. The substantial majority of respondents gave a description rather than a generic term only, like 'mixed race' (n=17) or just 'mixed' (n=5). Overall, 60% of respondents named two groups and 20% three or more groups. 24% of respondents used the term 'half' (as in 'half Japanese half English' or 'half White British, half Jamaican') in their descriptions. A small number of respondents fractionated their identities in more complex ways, as in the constructions of: 'three-quarters British, quarter Chinese'. 'English' (n=75) was as accessible as 'British' (n=65) in the descriptions. What is distinctive about the open responses is their heterogeneity and frequent complexity, some combining racial/pan-ethnic terms like 'black', 'white', and 'Asian' with ethnic terms such as 'Somali', 'Polish', etc., and national identity/group terms (such as 'English' or 'British') in the same description. While some respondents used Census terms (like 'White British') that included colour terms, only 4% (n=14) of respondents referred explicitly to skin colour in their descriptions.

When asked why they identified in this way, most respondents (70%) chose the option 'my parents are from different racial/ethnic groups' and somewhat fewer (43%) 'it is my own sense of personal identity'. More explicitly 'social factors' – 'the way society sees me', 'the group I feel I belong to', & 'friends/peers identify me in this way' - attracted few responses (15-16% each). The importance of the race/ethnicity of one's ancestors as a factor shaping respondents' own racial/ethnic identity appears to diminish the further back one goes: whilst almost two-thirds (64%) of respondents thought the race/ethnicity of their parents was a very important influence, this fell to 39% in the case of grandparents, and just 17% in the case of more distant ancestors.

Virtually all the 65 interview respondents used 2 or more ethnic/national/racial terms to describe their heritage – thus this tendency to be specific, as opposed to generic, was pronounced in this subset. However, the in-depth interviews revealed that the descriptions provided in this open-ended question (e.g. 'Indian and English') did not always fully capture how respondents in interviews declared they actually felt, or saw themselves, in ethnic and racial terms. For instance, a respondent may write that they are 'Indian and English', but in the interview, may articulate a strong view that he or she does not identify along racial lines at all (n=6, of 65). Or a respondent

may, in the course of the interview, reveal that he or she feels 'British', without a particular attachment to a sense of being either Indian or English. Therefore, the qualitative analysis points to the benefits of relying on *both* survey questions and in-depth interviews in capturing something as complex as racial identification. While the various measures of identification and heritage captured by the survey provided responses relevant to the particular context and question, frequently the full complexity and nuanced nature of respondents' actual sense of self only emerged in the in-depth interviews.

Choosing ethnic options

Given the deficiencies of the 2001 Census classification (4 'mixed' options), an extended classification, developed at the pilot stage, encompassed 12 options of which 5 were free text, to which respondents were invited to self-assign (and which was used as a reference classification in the analysis). Again, the key finding relating to respondents' assignments in this extended classification is the heterogeneity of responses. While the Census category 'Black Caribbean and White' was the most frequently selected single category (n=95), significant numbers selected the non-census categories of 'Chinese and White' 'Other E or SE Asian & White', 'Arab (or Middle Eastern or N African) & White', and 'a mix of two groups other than White' (in the range of around 4-8%), all concealed in official data collection. With little evidence of misclassification, this extended classification is recommended where more detailed information is needed in government surveys.

Given that ethnic identity is dynamic and fluid and responsive to situation and context, respondents were asked about their patterns of identification with respect to both time and context. A typology was developed, drawing on research undertaken in the UK and USA on 'mixed race' in an endeavour to capture this fluidity, respondents being invited to multi-tick across five options. No simple picture emerges from respondents' choices. Most respondents (33%) identified as '"mixed race", that is, two or more groups *in combination'*. Around 9-10% of respondents each selected that they identified with 'a single group at all times' or that they identified with 'more than one single group, depending on situation'. However, almost 15% of respondents reported that they 'moved between "mixed race" and the other options listed, depending on the situation'. A further 13% of respondents indicated in this question that they did not identify at all along race/ethnic group lines. A final 20% multi-ticked across the five options. In this unexpected picture of substantial complexity, involving 17 different outcomes, almost half the sample (45%) utilised some kind of switching strategy in which they exercised more than one option and up to three or more.

When context/situation was considered, the fluidity of racial identifications emerged as even more pronounced in the interviews: only 26 of 65 respondents did *not* report some degree of fluidity in their racial identifications, shifts typically occurring between 'public' and 'private' settings (e.g. school versus family home). For instance, Carl[1] had a Filipino mother and a White father, and was raised by his Filipino mother and Filipino stepfather (his father left home when Carl was about 6, and has had very little contact with him since). Carl said that he felt White most of the time. However, when he was at home, Carl could not help but feel more Filipino, with his mother and stepfather, and their Filipino food and customs. Our respondents were highly aware of how they were differently perceived in different contexts, by different sets of people (e.g. university/college peers, versus the 'general public').

An attempt was made to establish whether respondents could prioritise just one group amongst those that contributed to their racial/ethnic identity. Significantly, almost a third of respondents

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[1] All respondent names have been changed.

(n=103, 32%) indicated that they could not prioritise just *one* racial/ethnic group that contributes most strongly to their identity: some transcended or refuted racial categorization, while others persisted in indicating that they were mixed, confirming the pattern revealed in responses to the typology question. The proportion was highest (40%) in the 'Black Caribbean and White' group. This tendency was confirmed in the interview subset, in which over half of the 17 Black/White respondents insisted that they were 'mixed', and neither Black nor White. This refusal to choose just one 'race' was also articulated forcefully by one respondent, Susan, who claimed: 'I'm 100% Iranian and 100% Irish!'. Yet others, like Robert (Pakistani and Portuguese), refused to choose one 'race' because he did not identify along racial lines: 'I'm just me'. Significantly, 6 of the 7 'minority mix' respondents (of 65) reported a strong 'mixed' identity, which suggests that neither non-White 'race' necessarily took precedence over the other (and differs from the more common binary of White/non-White 'mixture').

For those that *were* able to identify a single group, responses were examined against the extended classification question. These findings are interesting as - in the cases of mixes involving the 'White' group - they give some measure of the extent to which such respondents feel able to claim a 'White' identity (but excluding national identity terms like 'English' and 'British' which may not necessarily imply 'White'). The proportions naming 'White' were lowest in the 'Black Caribbean and White' and 'Black African and White' groups, 33% and 38%, respectively, significantly lower than in the other categories involving White: 44% in 'Arab and White', 59% in the 'Other E or SE Asian & White' group, and 63% in the 'Chinese and White' groups. This provides *indicative* evidence that a 'White' racial/ethnic group is somewhat less accessible amongst the 'Black and White' groups (Black Caribbean/African & White vs. Chinese/Other E/SE Asian & White, Odds Ratio (OR) 0.39, 95% CI, 0.16-0.94), but still notable at a third or more. The reasons given in free text as to why respondents identified with a particular group reveal very strongly that the context of a person's upbringing was very important to those selecting White or British/English, whatever their minority identity. Somewhat different reasons were offered by those whose mix included White but identified as Black, a number of which focused on societal perceptions, for example, 'Viewed in that way by society' (Black African & White) & 'My colour & looks are more obvious than the white side of my identity' (Black Caribbean & White).

The in-depth interviews revealed, too, that East Asian & White respondents were most likely to claim a predominantly White racial identification (and also over half South Asian/White and Arab/White), especially in comparison with Black/White respondents. For instance, Mike (Chinese/English) had grown up in a White suburb in Surrey, and had had little exposure to other Chinese people. He chose 'British' as his single best 'race', and in doing so, explained that all of his cultural references were British. However, in the interview, Mike revealed that at university (in London), he was feeling 'more Chinese', and that he had 'discovered' more of this Chinese side, having made a number of Chinese friends for the first time. His sense of racial identity was clearly in process, at a key transitional moment in his life, pointing to the centrality of contextual forces. Thus, once again, the interview material shows that, in interpreting the 'race' choices in the survey, further significant value is added by this method. In the interviews, many of the East Asian/White respondents who had nominated 'White' or 'British' as their single best race revealed that this referred to a cultural affiliation (in that what was considered 'White' culture was still the mainstream culture of Britain), as opposed to a claim to being 'White' in racial terms. Nevertheless, appearance could be important, as respondents who were seen as 'White' by others seemed to 'feel' more White as well.

'Race' and 'ethnicity' are sometimes described as 'master' or 'primary' identities. To locate these questions in a broader context of identity, respondents were invited to select and prioritise 17 identity descriptions. The most frequently selected description was 'the kind of study or work you do or did', followed by 'your age or life-stage', 'your family', 'your level of education', and 'your ethnic group or cultural background', 'Your gender' also being amongst those things selected by more than half of the respondents. 'Regional identity' was also important (32%), but 'your nationality', 'Your religion', and country of family origins were selected by only a quarter to a third of respondents. 'The colour of your skin' was mentioned by just 17% of respondents,

almost two-thirds of whom, however, were Black Caribbean/Black African/Other Black and White. The *most important* thing selected by respondents as saying something important about themselves was 'family', followed by 'age or life-stage' and 'kind of study or work' done, just 9% selecting 'ethnic group or cultural background' and 4% 'the colour of your skin', questioning the saliency and status frequently attributed to race/ethnicity. This finding was supported by the in-depth interviews, in which the majority of respondents, while symbolically valuing their 'mixed' heritage, did not experience their *mixedness* as being that central to their day to day lives. While being 'mixed' was fundamental to a minority of interviewees, most respondents noted, as in the survey findings, the importance of their families, their studies, and their wider interests.

Contextual factors affecting ethnic options

The questionnaire asked about a number of contextual factors affecting the choices respondents make about their racial/ethnic identities, including their parents and family life and how others see them in racial/ethnic terms. How a person was brought up in their family, that is, how they were socialised in racial/ethnic terms, is clearly important. Respondents were asked which of five statements best described this. Around two in every five respondents (39%) were brought up as 'mixed race', around 28% 'neither as 'mixed race' nor as a member of a single racial/ethnic group', and around just 12% as a member of a single racial/ethnic group. Respondents were then asked who lived in their household in their teenage years and who had an important influence (on a 5-point Likert scale) on the way they developed their ethnic/racial identity at this time. Parents were the household figures who were most influential. Respondents indicated that 57% of co-resident mothers were 'very influential', as were 59% of fathers. Fewer brothers (33%) and sisters (31%) were 'very influential'. 33% of grandparents were also described as 'very influential' but somewhat fewer aunts and uncles (20%). Amongst this predominantly female sample, mothers were selected more frequently than fathers as the co-resident household member who had the strongest influence (54% vs. 34%) (fathers vs. mothers, OR 0.43, 95% CI 0.30-0.62) and sisters more frequently (but non-significantly) than brothers (9% vs. 5%) (brothers vs. sisters: OR 0.50, 95% CI, 0.21-1.21). The wide range of reasons given regarding how that person influenced the way the respondent developed their racial/ethnic identity in their teenage years included: the fact that the parent was the minority ethnic parent, being introduced by the parent to the culture of that parent or, indeed, of both parents, and brothers and sisters were sometimes influential as role models. In a small number of cases language of communication was important, English being the predominant language amongst siblings but other languages being more important amongst parents and other relatives such as grandparents.

Structural/contextual factors were also investigated. An important factor that may shape racial/ethnic identity is a person's physical appearance and how the wider society perceives this. Such societal perceptions may determine how a person identifies or the extent to which the identity options exercised by people are validated by society. The largest proportion of respondents (over a third, 36%) thought they were seen by the general public/wider society as belonging to a single group. Equal proportions (28% each) thought the public saw them as mixed race or as having an ambiguous racial identity. Just 8% did not know. Amongst those selecting a single group, the most frequently mentioned groups were 'black' (n=46) and 'white' (n=16). When asked if the way the general public saw them had had an effect on the way they, personally, identified in racial/ethnic terms, a third (33%) indicated that it had, a half (50%) that it had not, and 17% of respondents did not know. Some respondents had adopted the societal perception of their race/ethnicity or indicated that this had had a major influence on their identity, while other respondents had resisted societal perceptions that were not congruent with their ethnic/racial identity and reported that these had strengthened their own view.

Phenotype was also found to be a key structuring variable in how other people ('the public') saw our interview respondents, and not surprisingly, how others saw them could then have a feed-back effect on how respondents saw themselves (e.g. a Black and White person being consistently seen as Black). Most of the respondents who reported being seen as physically ambiguous seemed impartial about others peoples' reactions to them, though some respondents could be irritated by others' curiosity, as revealed in questions such as 'What are you?'. In fact, some respondents actually experienced their physical ambiguity in a positive way. Many of these respondents said that they enjoyed the guessing game involved in people's reactions to them. There may also be a gender effect: female respondents reported the positive sexual attention they received, because they were seen as 'exotic'.

By comparison, part-Black respondents were most likely to be racially assigned in ways which they found objectionable. These respondents most often complained of being seen as 'Black', as opposed to 'mixed race'. Clearly, this was problematic because they felt that they were seen in a way that clashed with how they saw themselves. As one respondent, Tina, put it: 'For instance one of my friend's friends that I met, he was like, "oh where do you come from?" I was like, "Oh, I'm mixed race." He was like, "Oh, so you're Black?" I was like, "No, I'm mixed race." And it was like you're kind of just telling me what race I am….. Yeah, and I've found a lot of people have done that but it doesn't , it doesn't define for me who I am…' By comparison, a few respondents complained of being seen as *White*, even though they did not identify in this way. For instance, Sara, who was blonde and blue-eyed, and of Palestinian and Belgian heritage, reported that while she asserted her Arab identity, she was never taken seriously, either by other Arabs or White people. In another case, Errol, who was Chinese and English, reported that because everyone thought he looked Chinese, he was always treated like a foreigner – something which had made him very bitter. Our findings in the interviews suggest that the 'public' often perceive a Black/White person to be 'Black', but are much more likely to attribute racial ambiguity to non-Black 'mixed' individuals.

While the groups most frequently mentioned (by three-quarters or more of respondents) as being subject to a lot/some racial prejudice were black and Asian people, Muslims, and asylum seekers/refugees, only 44% mentioned 'mixed race people' and fewer (36%) reported being a member of a group that is discriminated against in this country, the most frequently mentioned grounds being colour or race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality.

Terminology and classifications

Finally a question set was asked on terminology and classifications to inform the content of the ethnicity questions in the 2011 Census. The salient general term of choice amongst respondents in the pilot and main studies was 'mixed race' (selected by over half respondents). Other terms that attracted significant support were 'mixed heritage', 'mixed origins', and 'mixed parentage'. 'Mixed heritage' (favoured in some government departments) was chosen by under a fifth of respondents. The most frequently mentioned offensive terms were 'half-caste', 'biracial', 'coloured', 'half breed', and 'dual heritage'. 65% of respondents thought the term 'mixed race' should apply to 'people who are mixes of white and any minority racial/ethnic group' but significant proportions (40% each) selected 'People who are mixes of minority racial/ethnic groups' and 'People of disparate ethnic origins' suggesting a somewhat different (and wider) conceptualisation to that in the USA. Three different classifications for 'mixed' were tested. The question used in the 2001 Census was regarded as the easiest of the options to complete, multi-ticking the most difficult, but an entirely open response for the 'mixed' group the one that best allowed them to describe their ethnic/racial identity. On respondents' understanding of the

question, the 2001 Census question scored best, with virtually no misinterpretations or blank responses, and the open response question also scored highly. However, the tick all option incurred significant quality problems. A final question that invited respondents to multi-tick across categories for the ethnic origins of their mother's family and their father's family undoubtedly gave the highest information content but – by yielding numerous combinations impervious to categorisation – lacked utility.

Activities

Findings from the pilot and main studies on terminology and classifications were reported to ONS's Ethnicity & Identity Branch in July 2006 and in a meeting of the Department of Communities and Local Government held on 8th December 2006. They have also been submitted in responses to public consultations by all the UK census agencies and discussed in ONS's Academic Advisory Committee on Ethnicity, Identity, Language and Religion Topic Group meetings on the 2011 Census.

Outputs

- St Catherine's College, Oxford: AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programme, 9-11 July 2008. 'Mixed race people and the choices of faith' (to be submitted to a journal).

- 'The Future of Ethnicity Classifications', at 'Segregation or Integration: What's going on', University of Manchester, 16-18 May 2007 (in press, *Journal of Ethnic & Migration Studies*)

- 'The measurement of ethnicity in the decennial census and government social surveys: issues of conceptual basis, identity production, and utilisation of the data', at ESRC Conference, 'Ethnicity or Race? The present use of ethnicity as a marker in public life', EGENIS, University of Exeter, 13-14 March 2008

- A paper on 'Mixed race, mixed origins, or what?: generic terminology for the multiple racial/ethnic group population' is ready for submission to *Anthropology Today*.

- 'Do 'mixed race' young people have ethnic options?', ESRC 'Encounters and Intersections' conference, 9-11 July 2008, St. Catherine's College, Oxford [hopefully to be worked up into a proper article]

- 'Siblings in mixed race families', Symposium: Putting Sibling Relationships on the Map: a Multi-disciplinary Perspective', Family and Parenting Institute, London, April 30, 2008 [a chapter forthcoming in a book about siblings by the Family and Parenting Institute]

- 'The ethnic options of mixed race people in Britain', INED, Paris, June 21st 2007

- 'Identity, young people and integration: looking for future directions in public policy', Commission for Racial Equality and the ESRC, March 21st 2007, South Bank University, London

Impacts

The findings of the research have been cited in detail by the UK census agencies as evidence against multi-ticking to capture the 'mixed' group in the upcoming 2011 Census, most recently in

the report on Scotland's New Official Ethnicity Classification[2]. This research has also informed discussions/debate in forums with the Runnymede Trust and the Commission for Racial Equality.

Future Research Priorities

Given the heterogeneity, fluidity, and situational nature of 'mixed race' identities, further research needs to focus on the capture of this group in survey settings. The UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS) might provide a vehicle for testing the extended classification.

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[2] GRO(S) & Scottish Government. *Scotland's New Official Ethnicity Classification.* Edinburgh: GRO(s) & Scottish Government, 2008 (July): p. 63, paras. 32-33.