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## Pacific Sociological Association

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Sociological Perspectives*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (Summer 2010), pp. 287-292

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/sop.2010.53.2.287>

Accessed: 21/02/2012 05:37

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# WHAT DOES "WHITE" MEAN? INTERPRETING THE CHOICE OF "RACE" BY MIXED RACE YOUNG PEOPLE IN BRITAIN

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**ABSTRACT:** *Despite the often cited idea that racial identities are socially constructed, and potentially fluid, much public policy is still based on surveys that elicit only one measure of racial identity. A number of U.S. studies have employed "best single race" questions on racial identification, in which multiracial respondents are asked to choose only one race to describe themselves. We extend some American studies by examining responses to a "best single race" survey question posed to a small sample of multiracial young people in Britain. In-depth interviews with British multiracial respondents are employed to investigate the extent to which a "best single race" (BSR) question captures someone's sense of attachment and belonging to a particular ethnic or racial group. In particular, we focus on how we should interpret East Asian/white respondents' choice of "white" as their BSR.*

*Keywords:* multiracial, race, identification, white, Britain, East Asian/white

The population of the U.K. is becoming increasingly diverse in terms of ethnicity, race, religion, and national identity. Of the 4.6 million (7.9 percent) nonwhite Britons enumerated in the 2001 U.K. Census, people of a "mixed" background comprised 15 percent of this nonwhite population (Office of National Statistics 2001). As in the U.S., the provision of a "mixed" category in the U.K. 2001 Census represented a major event, making this previously (officially) invisible population one accorded state recognition (DaCosta 2007).

While various studies have shown that many multiracial people, especially those with black heritage, feel pressure to identify in relation to only one race (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002; Root 1992; Spickard 1989), there is now growing evidence that a significant proportion of black/white mixed people may be asserting multiracial identities (in the U.S., see DaCosta 2007; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002; Roth 2005; in Britain, see Song 2010; Tizard and Phoenix 1993;

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*Sociological Perspectives*, Vol. 53, Issue 2, pp. 287–292, ISSN 0731-1214, electronic ISSN 1533-8673.

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Twine 2004). Yet relatively little is known about the ethnic options of other types of mixed people, such as East Asian and white individuals, especially in Britain, where there are significant rates of intermarriage not only for black and white Britons but also Chinese and white Britons (Song 2009).

Despite the often cited idea that racial identities are socially constructed (Nagel 1994; Song 2003), and potentially changeable across contexts (Harris and Sim 2002), much public policy is still based on surveys that elicit only one measure of racial identity (Perlmann and Waters 2002). A number of U.S. studies have employed "best single race" questions on racial identification, in which mixed respondents are asked to choose only one race to describe themselves (see Harris and Sim 2002; Herman 2004). Respondents' choice of a single race is then interpreted as the group in which he or she feels the strongest sense of membership. But as Harris and Sim (2002) point out, racial identification is highly fluid, and the available data on race are not always reliable.

We extend the American studies above by examining responses to a similar survey question posed to a small sample of multiracial young people in Britain. To what extent does a "best single race" question capture someone's sense of attachment and belonging to a particular ethnic or racial group? In particular, how should we interpret East Asian/white respondents' choice of "white" as their "best single race"?

### STUDY OF "MIXED RACE" YOUNG PEOPLE IN BRITAIN

This research note draws on an Economic and Social Research Council-funded project on the "ethnic options of mixed race young people in Britain",<sup>1</sup> which focused on different types of multiracial young people in higher education institutions in Britain. In exploring the ways in which mixed young people chose and thought about their ethnic and racial identities, we were especially interested in studying a range of different types of mixed people, given the usual focus on black/white mixture.<sup>2</sup> We adopted a cross-sectional study design, with the use of a semi-structured online survey, followed by in-depth interviews with a subset of these survey respondents.

Young adults between 18 and 25 were recruited from universities and colleges across England (but primarily from five institutions in London). A stratified sample (based on location and size of the mixed race student population) was drawn from a sampling frame that integrated ethnically coded data for students in universities and colleges supplied by the Higher Education Statistics Agency and the Learning and Skills Council. Participating institutions hosted a web link to the online survey, and these institutions sent out an e-mail advertising our research to its student body. Our letter asked students who considered themselves to be "mixed race", and who had (at a minimum) been raised in Britain since the age of 11 (the typical age at which children commence secondary school), to participate in the study.

Of the roughly 500 surveys we received, only 326 met our sample specifications (258 women and 68 men). This self-selected sample privileges not only the views and experiences of middle-class young people in higher education, but also those of female respondents, who far outnumbered their male counterparts. Out of the survey respondents, we recruited a subsample of 65 respondents (27 men, 38 women) for the in-depth interviews. In this article we analyzed the responses to the following

**TABLE 1**  
How Groups Chose a BSR

	<i>Refused to Choose</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>British / European</i>	<i>Minority Race</i>
Black/white ( <i>n</i> = 17)	9	1	1	6
East Asian/white ( <i>n</i> = 16)	0	11	4	1

open-ended survey question: “If you had to name just one racial/ethnic group—the one that contributes most strongly to your identity—which group would that be?” Respondents were also given the option to tick “can’t say.” Respondents (*n* = 65) were then interviewed about their chosen identifications in more detail—usually within 1 to 2 months after the completion of the online survey. Due to space limitations, we focus primarily on the choices of East Asian/white respondents and, to a lesser extent, black/white respondents in our British sample. Most of the East Asian/white respondents had Chinese and, to a lesser extent, Filipino and Malaysian heritages. Furthermore, the majority of the sixteen East Asian/white respondents discussed in this article had East Asian mothers and white fathers, reflecting the gendered pattern of East Asian/white intermarriage in Britain.

Table 1 reveals that six part-black respondents identified as black, one as white, one as British/European, and nine refused to choose a “best single race,” with interviews revealing that most of those who refused to choose saw themselves as mixed or rejected racial categorization altogether. Most part-East Asian respondents, by comparison, chose white or British. On the basis of these choices, one might confidently conclude that most East Asian/white respondents see themselves as white or British, while most black/white respondents see themselves as either mixed race or black—end of story. Unlike the historical racial assignment of part-black people in the U.S. as black (Davis 1991), there is no social convention that stipulates that East Asian/white individuals identify as either white or Asian.

The in-depth interviews with East Asian/white respondents who chose white revealed a degree of complexity and tension in respondents’ answers, which were not discernible in the survey responses on their own. These interviews suggest that in many cases, we should not accept the chosen terms at face value, and that it is difficult to *interpret* the “best single race” choices made by these respondents.

We found that most of the respondents who chose white distanced themselves from the idea of being *racially* white. For most of these respondents, choosing white or white British as the group that contributes most strongly to their identity meant that they were first and foremost British in *cultural terms*. Mai (who was Chinese/English) chose “white British” in the survey but said this in her interview:

I wouldn’t put it into . . . what colour you are, in a categorising system. I put it more into your culture. My friends who are of Chinese origin . . . are from the same background as me, so they view themselves, not as being White but as British.

Given that these young people had typically had limited exposure to their minority backgrounds, and had grown up in Britain, the primacy of their white British background was overdetermined, particularly if they had grown up in a primarily white area. This understanding of white differs from the more delimited understanding of white (as a racial identity) in most U.S. studies.

Mai reported that she did not look white (and had a conspicuously Chinese first name), but she understood the term British in a race-neutral way—though it is telling that the term white was the dominant, mainstream image and meaning associated with being British (and whiteness was perceived as off-limits to many of the black/white respondents). In isolation, without the interview, one could mistakenly interpret Mai's "best single race" in the starkest possible way: that she considered herself to be a white person (as is interpreted in many U.S. surveys).

Paul (Chinese/Irish) chose "Irish or European" but revealed in his interview that he was very invested in *both* his Chinese background and his mixedness. Although he had grown up immersed in European cultures and settings, what came across in the interview was a very strong sense of being Eurasian and mixed race: "Eurasiannation [a website] saved my life! For the first time I felt like I connected with a lot of other people like me—that there was actually a Eurasian identity." Not only had Paul spent several years living in China, learning Mandarin, but his closest friends were also Eurasian.

Nor does a "best single race" response tell us if an identification as white or British is validated by others, especially if one does not look white by prevailing social norms. One respondent, George, who was Chinese and English, chose "white British," explaining that he was extremely patriotic and had had very little exposure to his Chinese heritage. But because he was always *seen* as Chinese, he was constantly faced with the fact that other people saw him as a foreigner. Growing up, George had experienced numerous experiences of racism, in which he had been taunted for looking Chinese. This disjuncture between who he felt he was—British—and how he was seen—as Chinese—was an ongoing source of frustration for him.

## CONCLUSION

In this research, we illustrate the complexity involved in interpreting the racial identifications of East Asian/white multiracial young people, when they have chosen white as their "best single race." Based on the in-depth interviews, we found that their responses to this question, in isolation, could be misleading. Such a question is potentially distorting because it may give the impression that people possess a more unified and singular racial identification than is actually the case. Though space limitations do not allow for elaboration, this limitation could also apply to the interpretation of "black" or "white," chosen by black/white respondents. Since such a question is employed in large-scale surveys in the U.S., one can draw some rather stark conclusions about the nature of multiracial people's racial identifications.

- While our findings appear to mesh, in part, with some U.S. studies (e.g., Harris and Sim 2002) that report that black/white respondents more consistently choose black, and East Asian/white respondents choose white, our interviews revealed that East Asian/white respondents did not see themselves as racially

white; furthermore, many black/white respondents also refused to choose a "best single race," pointing to critical rejections of racial categorization, an emergent mixed identification, and/or the need to provide multiple and contextually fluid measures of race.

- Some analysts in the U.S. argue that Eurasian people (and Asian Americans more generally) may come to be regarded as honorary whites (see Twine and Gallagher 2008). Care needs to be taken in how researchers interpret the choice of the term "white." In this study, most respondents who chose white distanced themselves from the idea of being *racially* white (and most of these respondents claimed they were not seen as white by others). Rather, the emphasis was on relating more to the culture of their (usually) white British parent, and being a part of a (still) predominantly white British mainstream—though this mainstream was increasingly infused with multicultural elements. Though most respondents reported that they were proud of their Asian heritage, they did not feel able to assert an ethnically authentic identification as Asian, because, typically, they possessed little or no language facility or the cultural trappings of "being" Asian. U.S. surveys may overstate the degree to which Eurasian individuals can exercise their ethnic options (Waters 1990), as surveys eliciting a "best single race" do not reveal information about whether or not their chosen identifications as white or Asian are validated by others, particularly if they appear to be "Chinese" or Eurasian to others.

- U.S. surveys tend to provide only ethnic or racial categories to choose from—our findings suggest that many respondents eschew racial categories altogether, opting for seemingly race neutral national and regional terms such as "British"; like "white," it is clear that this term is usually meant to convey an emphasis on British cultural upbringing. Moreover, surveys asking for a "best single race" cannot account for the blurred meanings and inter-changeability emerging around the use of racial, ethnic, national, and even regional terms.

- A key reason why a "forced choice" question may be less effective and reliable in capturing racial identification is that racial and ethnic terms are moving targets and need to be treated as such by scholars of race. The interviews revealed that there is no automatic correspondence between the choice of specific groups or terms with particular meanings, modes of behaviour, thinking, or overall social experiences. The chosen terms do not speak for themselves, and they require careful interpretation.

- Furthermore, it is by no means obvious that race consistently remains a master identity for multiracial respondents, in comparison with other aspects of their identification, whether it be regional identity (e.g., "Londoner"), religion, or love of a specific musical instrument. One's racial heritage did not obviously trump all other modes of identification, and in many situations, being mixed could be absolutely ordinary. Thus, the salience of race will vary according to a multitude of variables, including class, phenotype, gender, and region.

In an increasingly multiethnic society in which being mixed is likely to be less and less uncommon, and where "super-diversity" is evident (Vertovec 2007), it is important that public policy is informed by research that captures the complexity and variability among multiracial individuals who may use a variety of ethnic, national, and racial terms to describe themselves. Ethnic and racial labels in common usage still

carry a lot of weight in many contexts, but the heretofore dominant meanings that are associated with particular terms and categories are not impervious to change.

**Acknowledgments:** I would like to thank Minelle Mahtani and Paul Spickard for comments on older versions of the article, and also the editors and reviewers of the journal.

## NOTES

1. This project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, RES-000-23-1507, was conducted by Peter Aspinall, Miri Song, and Ferhana Hashem, between March 2006 and May 2008.
2. We compared the identifications and experiences of black/white, East Asian/white, South Asian/white ("Asian" in Britain refers primarily to people originating from the Indian subcontinent), Arab/white, and "minority mix" (such as Chinese and Indian).

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