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Is racial mismatch a problem for young ‘mixed race’ people in Britain? The findings of qualitative research

Miri Song and Peter Aspinallⁱ

Abstract

Recent evidence concerning the racial identifications of ‘mixed race’ people suggests growing latitude in how they may identify. In this paper, we examine whether mixed race young people believe that their chosen identifications are validated by others, and how they respond to others’ racial perceptions of them. While existing studies tend to assume that a disjuncture between self-identification and others’ perceptions of them is problematic, this was not necessarily the case among our respondents. While a racial mismatch between expressed and observed identifications was a common experience for these individuals, they varied considerably in terms of how they responded to such occurrences, so that they could feel: a) misrecognized (and there were differential bases and experiences of misrecognition); b) positive about the mismatch; or c) indifferent to how others racially categorized them in their day-to-day interactions. Some differences in responses to such mismatch emerged among disparate types of mixed people. This study also found that we need to consider national identity, and other forms of belonging, in making sense of the diverse and often multilayered identifications and experiences of mixed race young people in Britain.

Keywords

racial mismatch, mixed race, multiracial, misrecognition, British, national identity, phenotype, identification

Introduction

The growth of ‘mixed race’¹ people and relationships and changes in census and other official classification of ethnic and racial groups in countries such as the USA, Canada, and Britain have engendered a recent spate of studies which address the issue of how multiracial people choose their racial identifications. In this paper, we explore the ways in which different types of ‘mixed’² people in Britain (especially those in metropolitan settings such as London) perceive and experience their ‘ethnic options’ (Waters, 1990). In particular, we examine the question of whether mixed young

people believe that their chosen identifications are validated by others; we then investigate how these young people respond to others' racial perceptions of them.

Historically, one race has typically been seen as the primary or dominant race of a mixed person. In the US, people with African ancestry have been subject to the 'one drop' rule of hypodescent, ever since the advent of slavery and its aftermath (Davis, 1991; Spickard, 1989). Despite the legal demise of this 'one drop rule', various studies have shown that many mixed people still feel pressured to identify monoracially, to choose one side over another (Herman 2004; Rockquemore and Laszloffy, 2005; Root, 1996); Roth, 2005.

Various American scholars, and Mary Waters (1990) in particular, have argued that minority people who are not White possess fewer or no ethnic options compared with White Americans, who can exercise choice about whether they are ethnic, or whether they are simply Americans. This thinking can be extended to mixed people, many of whom do not appear White, and who are thus racially assigned in ways which are beyond their control (Song, 2003). Their very mixedness, and the identity options available to them, presents an interesting and yet under-explored area of study, especially in the British context.

Recent evidence concerning the racial identification of Black/White mixed people suggests growing latitude in how they may identify, or be identified by others (see Khanna 2010; Rockquemore and Brunnsma, 2002; Roth, 2005 . For example, Rockquemore and Brunnsma (2002) found that around 3/5 of 'biracial' respondents chose 'border' identities, in which they refused to choose one race over another; however, their border identities were not always validated by others.

Although some common themes about attributions of marginality (and pressures to 'choose sides') can apply to all mixed people, various studies have emphasized different identity options of people with part Black heritage, in comparison with those with Asian (in the US, 'Asian' refers to people with origins in both East Asia, as in China, and South Asia, such as India), Latino, or Native American

heritage. Some US studies of how parents racially designate their mixed children suggest that children with one Asian and one White parent can be identified as *either* Asian or White (see Brunnsma, 2005; Qian, 2004; Xie and Goyette, 1997). However, rather than being subject to a ‘one drop rule’ (as applied to part-Black people), in which they would be seen as Asian, some Asian Americans (as well as other minority groups) may not always acknowledge Asian/White people as ‘one of them’ (Mengel, 2001; Qian, 2004; Spickard, 1989) .

Thus, the main point of comparison which has emerged in the US literature concerns the ethnic options of Black/White versus Asian/White (and to a lesser extent, Latino/White and Native American/White) people (see Harris and Sim, 2002; Herman, 2004; Lopez, 2003). In their analysis of a large data set of adolescents in the US, Harris and Sim (2002) ask respondents (who identify with more than one ‘race’) to choose a single racial category. The authors found that 86 percent of White/American Indian adolescents selected ‘White’, while 75 percent of Black/White adolescents chose ‘Black’ as their best single race, again reflecting the enduring power of the ‘one drop rule’. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that 17.1 percent of Black/White adolescents selected ‘White’ as the race that best describes them (and see Rockquemore and Arend, 2002). A further 8.5 percent of the Black/White respondents were not able (or refused) to choose one single race (Harris and Sim, 2002: 622). Harris and Sim, along with Tashiro (2002) and Herman (2004), suggest that Asian/White people in the US may identify as *either* White or Asian, and may therefore be said to possess more latitude in their identity options than Black/White people.

Why may differential ethnic options across disparate types of multiracial people matter? In the US, the greater variability in how Asian/White individuals racially identify (and are identified) reflects not only the application of the ‘one drop rule’ to anyone with known Black heritage, but also the fact that non-Black mixed groups have had less difficulty in crossing color lines (Lee and Bean, 2004; Twine and Gallagher, 2008). In addition to the issue of individual agency, the ethnic options of disparate mixed groups matter because they tend to reflect racial fault lines (including the social distance

between specific groups), the differential values and meanings associated with disparate ‘races’, and society’s continuing preoccupation with racial difference in everyday life.

The literature on *expressed* and *observed* racial identifications

Some recent work has substantially advanced our understanding of the process of the expressed versus observed (or internal–external) dialectic of identification, extending exploration of the ground where ‘self-image’ meets ‘public image’ in relation to the mixed race population. Harris and Sim (2002) have conceptualised the multiple nature of racial identities in terms of ‘internal identities’ (how we think of ourselves), ‘expressed identities’ (what we say we are), and ‘observed identities’ (what others think we are based on our phenotype). Similarly, Jenkins’ (1996) internal–external dialectic of collective identification describes the interaction between (internal) self-definition and definition by others (external).

The way others identify us in the context of everyday life may be determined to a large degree by our physical appearance, which is the identity attribute most readily accessible to others. Most importantly, this process of category identification happens without the consent of the observed. The extent to which the identities held by individuals are validated by others has been comprehensively investigated in the work of Brunsma and Rockquemore (2001), which reveals a strong association between socially mediated appearance and how Black/White Americans construct their identity. In her study of Asian/White adults in the US, Khanna (2004) also found that ‘reflected appraisals’ – individuals’ perceptions of how others see them – were very influential in shaping their racial identifications (see also Roth (2010), on potential mismatch concerning Hispanics in the US).

In the case of mixed individuals, there is evidence of disjuncture between expressed (and/or internal) and observed identifications (see Campbell and Troyer, 2007; Cheryan and Monin, 2005; Rockquemore and Laszloffy, 2005; Shih and Sanchez, 2005). This disjuncture between how one sees oneself, in racial terms, and how others perceive that person, is a form of *misrecognition*. In other

words, how one sees oneself is not validated by others (Appiah, 2005; Campbell and Troyer, 2007; Nagel, 1994).

The issue of validation is, for many, fundamental, because without validation of one's own racial identity by others, one cannot easily assert and 'own' that identity (Rockquemore and Brunnsma, 2002). If mixed people are racially assigned in ways which do not match their own sense of selves, this can take an emotional and psychological toll. Identity denial by others can be not only distressing, but can involve persistent efforts to assert a desired (and validated) identity in the wider society (Cheryan and Monin, 2005).

However, in addition to the possibility that misrecognition by others can be a negative experience, another possibility which has received little attention thus far is that observed identification by others may not always figure that prominently (or may be of variable importance) in how individuals come to see themselves. In fact, there may be no uniform desire or expectation among mixed young people for identity validation. A further possibility is that some mixed people may even enjoy instances of mismatch and others' inability to 'place' them. We argue that misrecognition occurs in a meaningful way if something of value (such as racial identity) in an agent's sense of self is not recognized or validated.

This article thus focuses upon the ways in which disparate types of mixed young people in Britain respond to others' racial perceptions of them. We extend existing US studies in two ways: First, by considering the intersection of racial and national modes of identification for mixed people in the British context. Second, by examining not only the potential disjuncture between expressed and observed identities for mixed individuals, but also *the variable ways in which mixed people may feel about how they are seen by the wider public*. Previous literature on this topic (see Cheryan and Monin, 2005 Shih and Sanchez, 2005; Townsend et al.,2009) has tended to assume that the disjuncture between expressed and observed identification is negative and problematic, but our study of multiracial people in Britain suggests that this may not always be the case for all mixed groups, or all

individuals within a specific mixed group. Those who feel misrecognized may hold certain expectations of recognition (and validation) which others do not, though, as we discuss below, such misrecognition can be experienced in a variety of ways. By comparison, those who feel positive or indifferent to how others see them do not feel misrecognized, as such, despite common instances of racial mismatch between expressed and observed identifications. Second, we extend US studies by exploring the intersection of racial and national (and cultural) modes of identification for mixed people in the British context. As we discuss below, national and cultural modes of identification and belonging may be just as central, and in some cases, more central, to the ways in which mixed young people see themselves.

The study of 'mixed race' young people in Britain

Britain provides an interesting point of comparison with the US, because like the US, it is an increasingly multiethnic society in which race and racial divides have been (albeit differently) at the forefront of many academic and policy concerns. Contemporary Britain is marked by both super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007) in urban areas, as well as 'old' racial and ethnic cleavages which reflect continuing social divides in many parts of the country. As a result, there is considerable flux in the meanings and significance of race across a variety of contexts.

Notably, while only 2 percent of marriages are 'interethnic'³ in Britain (Office for National Statistics, 2005), there are much higher rates of Black/White intermarriage than in the US – the most common form of intermarriage (the direct opposite of the US, where Black/White intermarriage is least common). 48 percent of young Black men born in Britain and in relationships (and around 35 percent of young Black women born in Britain) are in inter-ethnic relationships, usually with White Britons (Office for National Statistics, 2005). And there are now more children with one Black and one White parent (under age 5) than children with two Black parents (Owen, 2007). In Britain, the status of Black/White Britons appears to be more ambiguous and varied than in the US (Song 2009). Generally speaking, the 'social distance' between Black and White Britons (across various domains, such as

marriage and residential neighborhoods) is considerably less marked than that which is said to separate Black and White Americans (Peach, 2005).

For the first time, the growth in multiracial people was officially recognized by the inclusion of a 'Mixed' group (encompassing four mixed sub-categories) in the 2001 England and Wales Census, in which about 661,000 people were identified as mixed, or 1.27 percent of the population of England and Wales (Bradford, 2006). However, this is bound to be an under-count because some mixed people (by ancestry) do not classify themselves as such on the Census (Easton 2011); we also await the results of the 2011 Census. Demographers have identified the mixed group as one of the fastest growing of all ethnic groups, with projections indicating a 30 percent growth during 2010–2020 to achieve a population of 1.2 million (Rees, 2007).

In spite of its growing importance in demographic terms and its entry into official data collection, relatively little is known about the life experiences of mixed people in Britain, or how this diverse population identifies in ethnic and racial terms – information which is crucial for our understandings of cultural diversity and changing beliefs and practices concerning ethnic and racial difference. British studies of mixed people have grown significantly, focusing upon racial identification (Ali, 2003; Aspinall, 2003; Barn and Harman, 2006; Ifekwunigwe, 1999; Olumide, 2002; Tizard and Phoenix, 1993), family relationships (Caballero et al., 2008; Twine, 2010), and child welfare (Barn, 1999; Okitikpi, 2005). But up to now, no study of *different* types of mixed people has been conducted in Britain, and no British study has examined the dynamic of expressed and observed identification for mixed people or how they respond to their racial assignment by others (see Song, 2010).

While not officially codified in Britain, as in the US, a less stringent 'one drop' rule seems to have operated, de facto, in Britain (Tizard and Phoenix, 1993). However, as in the US, some British studies show that Black/White people in Britain are increasingly able to exercise a range of identity options (Ifekwunigwe, 1999; Tizard and Phoenix, 1993), and there is growing evidence of Black/White 'conviviality' (Back, 1995; Gilroy, 2004) in many metropolitan areas.

In this paper, we examine how five different types of multiracial people in Britain (Black/White, East or SE Asian/White, South Asian/White, Arab/White, and ‘minority mix’ – such as Black/East or SE Asian)⁴ perceive and experience their range of identity options. This paper draws on the findings of an Economic and Social Research Council funded project on the ethnic options of mixed race young people in Britain⁵, which focused upon how young people (aged 18 to 25 in higher and further education institutions in Britain) perceived and made choices about their ethnic and racial identifications. We adopted a cross-sectional study design, with the use of a semi-structured online survey, followed by in-depth interviews with a sub-set of these survey respondents. Young adults were recruited from universities and colleges of further education across England (but primarily from London, the city with the greatest number of multiracial residents). The fact that the majority of questionnaires (204 of 326 surveys) were returned from the Greater London area may result in a skewed experience of being ‘mixed race’, since this area is particularly diverse and cosmopolitan. In Greater London higher/further education institutions, respondents (especially those who did not grow up in the area) may come into contact with other minority and mixed race individuals in large numbers and may be regarded as more ordinary than in other, less cosmopolitan parts of the country. In fact, some respondents who attended university in London actually grew up in primarily White suburban contexts, and as illustrated below, this could fundamentally shape their awareness and expectations of how others saw them.

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 email advertising our research to its student body, so those who participated in the study self-identified as mixed race. That is, we recruited individuals who recognized their multiracial ancestry (but who did not necessarily identify in any one way, e.g. as ‘mixed race’). Of the 514 surveys returned to us, only 326 were within scope of our specifications (e.g. self-ascribed as mixed race, age, and post- primary school

upbringing in Britain). We would have liked to have obtained a more representative sample, but access was very difficult in this study. We obtained a smaller number of surveys (just above 1/3) from universities in other parts of the country, but the interview subset we employed for this paper was drawn mostly, though not exclusively, from London universities. This was because of both time and budgetary constraints; it was much more difficult and time consuming (and expensive) to travel to the northern regions, for instance, than it was to focus upon London. There is also some justification for focusing primarily upon London; this is because the majority of ‘mixed race’ people in Britain live in the Greater London area and the Southeast.

Most of the respondents were between 18 and 25, with 258 women and 68 men.⁶ As in other such surveys of this population, many more women than men participated in the online survey, perhaps reflecting a gendered willingness to ‘talk’ about identifications, or even a gendered propensity to see themselves as ‘mixed’, as opposed to one ‘race’ (see Lopez, 2003). From these 326 surveys, a sub-sample of 65 was then purposively recruited for an in-depth interview, in part to redress the gender imbalance. The interview sample was also drawn to be representative of the *range* of mixes identified in the survey. This paper draws specifically upon the data from the sub-sample of 65 interviewees. This is because only the interview respondents (a sub-sample of the survey), and not the survey respondents, were probed about how others racially assigned them (and their reactions to others’ perceptions of them).

The 65 interview respondents (27 men, 38 women) comprised:

- (i) Black/White⁷ (Black= e.g. Black Caribbean, Black African): 17 (4 men, 13 women)
- (ii) South Asian/White (South Asian= e.g. Indian, Pakistani): 10 (7 men, 3 women)
- (iii) East or SE Asian/White (East/SE Asian= e.g. Chinese, Filipino): 16 (7 men, 9 women)
- (iv) Arab/White (Arab= e.g. Egyptian, Saudi Arabian): 15 (7 men, 8 women)
- (v) Minority Mix (e.g. Black & East or SE Asian): 7 (2 men, 5 women)

We focus upon how different groups of mixed respondents felt about how they were perceived by others. Were their racial identifications validated by others, and did it matter? Addressing these questions allows us to discern the extent to which different types of mixed people are able to assert their chosen identities, and to understand the degree to which others' validation is, or is not, important to them. While the small number of respondents in each of the five groups does not allow for a systematic analysis of group differences, the in-depth interviews provide important insights into how different types of multiracial people perceive and experience their identity options.

Findings

(Table 1 about here) *How groups respond to others' perceptions of them*

As discussed in a growing number of studies (see Brunnsma and Rockquemore, 2001; Herman, 2004; Herring, et al. 2004; Khanna, 2004, 2010; Rondilla and Spickard, 2007; Roth, 2010), one's physical appearance is central to how one is perceived in ethnic and racial terms. The ways in which our multiracial respondents were seen by others could vary considerably: while some were consistently pigeon-holed into a single racial category (such as 'White', 'Asian' or 'Black'), others were seen in a multitude of ways, as *physically ambiguous* individuals who were not readily assigned to existing racial categories. For this latter group, a common theme reported in studies of mixed people is that many people do not know how to 'place' them in the existing taxonomy of racial categories.

All of the interview respondents reported that there was frequently, or sometimes, a disjuncture between their expressed and their observed identifications. That is, there was a mismatch between how they saw themselves and how others saw them in racial terms, and respondents' phenotype (and how this was perceived by others) was central to this process. Note that self-identification is not necessarily based upon a respondent's *actual* parentage or phenotype; reported mismatch or disjuncture was quite widespread, and could occur whenever others' perceptions clashed with how one *wished to be seen*. Nevertheless, this mismatch did not always result in a sense of misrecognition. We relied upon respondents' own reports of how others saw them. We did so by asking them: a) how

others saw them in racial terms; and b) how they felt about how others perceived them. In the interviews, we asked respondents for specific examples of how they were seen by others, and how this made them feel.

While a mismatch between expressed and observed identifications was widely reported across all the mixed groups, their responses to this mismatch tended to vary according to three possible responses: a) for 17 respondents, the disparity between how others saw them and how they saw themselves posed a regular source of irritation or stress in their day to day lives, resulting in a negative sense of misrecognition; b) for 15 respondents, this mismatch, based upon others' inability to 'place' them, was actually experienced positively, not negatively; c) yet 33 interviewees were reportedly indifferent to how others saw them, and did not pay much attention to, or take seriously, others' perceptions of them.

Of these three possible responses, only the first type of response actually constitutes a sense of misrecognition. This is because individuals who felt primarily positive or indifferent did not expect others to be able to 'place' them or validate their desired identifications, and they were more able to deflect or disregard other people's perceptions of them. By comparison, those who felt misrecognized felt that a lack of validation of their asserted identity (which was of importance to them) was difficult and distressing. Rather than attempt to discern whether our respondents were actually accurate about how other people racially assigned them or not (which would not be possible, retrospectively), we wanted to see *the ways in which respondents felt about others' perceptions of them, and how this made them feel.*

Negative experiences of misrecognition

For 17 respondents (8 Black/White, 3 Arab/White, 4 East or SE Asian/White, 1 South Asian/White, and 1 Minority Mix), others' racial perceptions of them were experienced as misrecognition. How others racially assigned them jarred with how they saw themselves, and this was a recurring concern in their day-to-day lives. The nature and basis of such misrecognition, however, was variable.

Racially assigned into a minority 'race'

Significantly, 8 Black/White respondents (of 17 Black/White respondents) and 1 Black/East or SE Asian respondent objected to the fact that they were usually seen as (monoracially) Black, as opposed to mixed. One of these respondents, Carrie, had a Black African mother and White English father, and saw herself as being mixed race. Yet she felt that her mixed identity was rarely validated, by either Black or White people:

It annoys me, because I can't control it. Black people want me to say I'm Black and if I don't, I'm supposedly ashamed to be Black. Some White people will just say I'm Black, without thinking also. I hate being generalized, and it gets harder I think as you get older.

In another excerpt, Carrie was asked how she would describe herself:

Carrie: *I think it's easier to say Black than it is to say White. I couldn't say I am White, but it's perfectly ok to say that I'm Black, which is a bit strange. I'm not so comfortable with that.*

Int: *Why is it ok to say that you're Black but not White?*

Carrie: *White is seen as you have to be completely White to be White, but Black, it's as if, if you're anything in particular, you're Black. That's the way I see it. I don't like it, but that's my experience of it anyway.*

Without being aware of the historical legacy of the 'one drop rule' in the US, Carrie reported that a de facto rule was in operation in Britain for Black/White people such as her. Few people validated her mixed identity, and Carrie felt highly annoyed and constrained by other peoples' insistence that she was 'only' Black. And although she did not see herself as White, she was bothered by the fact that being White was off limits to her. The reported inaccessibility of either a White or a 'mixed' identity for Black/White individuals like Carrie was pronounced. Carrie's reported upset about how others racially assigned her clearly stemmed from the fact that her multiracial parentage was important to her; thus, she wanted legitimization of her mixed status. Because her mixed identity was rarely validated, and it was of personal importance to her, she experienced this mismatch as misrecognition.

In another case, Keith, who was Black Caribbean and White English (and who grew up in a primarily White town in the Midlands), reported that, while he considered himself to be 'mixed race', he did not

feel able to claim a mixed identification, because in many contexts he was solely seen as Black. In addition to being pigeon-holed in this way, he had to contend with the negative social value attached to being Black and male. Despite his mixed parentage, Keith clearly experienced the world as a Black person (Rockquemore and Brunnsma, 2002; Waters, 1999). As Keith put it:

If you are treated like this [as a Black man] all your life it will affect the way you see yourself, how you see and feel about the people that see you in that way, and for me, who you choose to identify with.

Like Carrie, Keith's sense of misrecognition stemmed from others' placement of him as Black (as opposed to mixed race), but over time, he had come to terms with the idea of being *both* mixed and Black. Furthermore, his sense of misrecognition was based upon the fact that while the wider public attributed negative imagery and meanings to him, on the basis of his perceived Blackness, he saw himself as an ordinary mixed (and Black) young man in higher education.

Unlike Keith, Tara, one of our 'minority mix' respondents, objected to others' perception of her as Black, and the expected script of behaviour this racial assignment entailed. Tara had a Sierra Leonian father and a Malaysian mother, and she considered herself to be 'mixed race' *and* 'Afro-Asian' – a hybrid identification recognizing both sides of her heritage. Because she grew up in a middle-class, predominantly White suburb of London, she reported that she was very comfortable around White people, and that she did not think about being 'different' in most contexts. Yet Tara was aware that most White people saw her as Black, and she felt constrained by other peoples' expectations that she behave in a particular way: '*My [White] friends say I'm the Whitest Black person they know*'. Although she was simply being herself, her White friends at university perceived her as acting against type – since she was seen primarily as a Black person. Tara was also upset by some Black peoples' expectations that she act more 'Black'. All of these respondents objected to what they perceived as a negation of their individuality – they were simply perceived as racial types. And in Tara's case, the specificity of her parental heritage also mattered to her, as she was attached to and proud of both her Sierra Leonian and Malaysian ancestries.

Misrecognized as White

Problematic experiences of misrecognition also arose for a minority of respondents who were seen as White. In comparison to those who were only seen in relation to their non-White ancestries, 4 of the 17 respondents who reported that they were consistently misrecognized complained of being seen as White, though they did not identify in this way. For instance, two Black/White women said that they were almost always seen as White, though they identified as mixed race. An Arab/White woman and an East or SE Asian/White woman identified as Palestinian, and Burmese, respectively, but were usually seen as White. For instance, Miriam, who had a Palestinian mother and White Belgian father, was blonde and blue-eyed, and this made her assertion of Arab identity very difficult, not only in relation to the public, but also with her Arab relatives:

... It's also very difficult in a family to not look the same [as others], to not be seen as an Arab fully... it does play a big role in how I identify myself and why I choose to call myself an Arab. It's more to say, well, I am here too, you know, I do count.

As in the case of Miriam, all four of these respondents reported that such misrecognition was especially difficult because their ties to their non-White side of the family were stronger than those with their White family members. These respondents encountered outright incredulity (and sometimes hostility) when they claimed their minority ancestries (see Mengel, 2001). Because they felt a very strong attachment to their minority backgrounds, scepticism about their minority ancestry was often painful. Thus although they were not insensitive to the privileges they enjoyed as a result of a White appearance, others' placement of them as White was distressing to these respondents.

Attributions of foreignness and indeterminate physical appearance

While part-Black respondents were most likely to report that they were pigeon-holed into their minority race (racialized as Black), other types of mixed respondents tended to emphasize misrecognition stemming from attributions of foreignness, often due to their indeterminate physical appearance. Some of our East or SE Asian/White respondents reported this to be the case. George, who was Chinese and White English, complained of being seen 'only' as a Chinese or a foreign person, because he saw himself as very British. He had had hardly any exposure to Chinese culture and people, and had grown up in a mostly White northern city, where he had 'stuck out like a sore thumb'. Based

upon his appearance (though his name was wholly Anglo), he had encountered a lot of racial taunting at school, and was highly aware of the fact that the ‘public’ saw him as a non-White foreigner. This treatment of him angered and depressed him. His experiences of racism had made him all the more determined to assert his White British side:

You will probably not find anyone more patriotic than me or my brother.... We're super patriotic..... It's a repeated bitterness actually to be honest, because it's that thing of trying as hard as you can to be British and never having done anything else, and then realising that that life is always going to be beyond your control.

Thus, while many East or SE Asian/White respondents like George saw themselves as British (though not necessarily ‘White’ in racial terms), this was not always validated by others, given his ‘Chinese’ physical appearance. As another Chinese and White English respondent, Alison, noted, ‘I’m often asked where I’m from – this implicitly denies me the right to be British because of the way I look’. Many of the respondents who described themselves as being British associated membership in the British mainstream with being primarily ‘White’ in *cultural* terms – though for most respondents, this did not mean they regarded themselves as White in *racial* terms. Like George, Alison did not feel that she could call herself Chinese when she had grown up with so little exposure to Chinese culture, and did not speak a Chinese dialect. But neither did she feel (or was seen as) White. She reported that she considered herself to be both ‘mixed’ *and* British – a term which she considered to be race-neutral – more than anything else. Her identification as British eschewed a racial emphasis, and was based upon her sense of *national and cultural belonging*.

Therefore, the basis of misrecognition for East or SE Asian/White respondents who reported this was that they were denied membership in the nation, as British people. Such attributions of foreignness resonate with studies of the perceived foreignness of Asian Americans in the US (; Kim, 1999; Tuan, 1998). Variability in the phenotype of East or SE Asian/White respondents was therefore significant in shaping how others saw them, so that while some individuals could be seen as White, more commonly, these respondents were seen as physically ambiguous, ‘foreign’ and/or ‘Chinese’. In other words,

misrecognition occurs in these cases because they are seen by others as somehow ‘different’, when they do not feel, or wish to be seen, as different – the opposite basis of misrecognition from that experienced by those respondents who were seen as White (when they wished to be seen as something more, or other, than simply White).

For example, Chris (Saudi Arabian and White Scottish) was often assumed to be ‘different’, based upon his reportedly ambiguous appearance. This curiosity about his background was problematic for Chris, who identified, simply, as ‘British’:

Int: *How do others respond to the knowledge that you’re part Arab?*

Chris: *I think in this day and age it’s not really an issue. I do wish sometimes that I could erase it and be British, British, British.*

Int: *Why’s that?*

Chris: *I just think it’s type casting me. It’s labelling me as something that I feel sometimes I’m not....I don’t think my race really makes too much difference.*

These individuals strongly objected to the ways in which they were misrecognized, and the lack of validation of their desired identities. As illustrated above, the basis for a sense of misrecognition could vary: some (especially Black/White respondents) felt consistently pigeon-holed into one race (usually Black, but in some cases, White), while others (such as some East or SE Asian/White respondents) were seen as physically indeterminate and ‘different’, and thus regarded as foreign and not British. Furthermore, while some respondents felt forcibly *assigned* into racial categories, others (such as the respondents who were only seen as White) felt *denied* membership in minority communities. Despite these disparate dynamics, all of these respondents were often upset or irritated by the fact that they were objectified and reduced to a racial type.

Positive about how they were seen by others

In comparison with the 17 respondents who found other peoples’ perceptions of them to be very problematic, 15 of the 65 interviewees articulated primarily positive experiences about how they were seen by others. Seven of these 15 were East or SE Asian/White, 3 South Asian/White, 2 ‘minority

mix', 2 Black/White, and 1 Arab/White. These respondents, most of whom were seen as physically indeterminate, reported that they enjoyed instances of mismatch and the fact that people were unable to discern their ethnic and racial heritage.

Many of these respondents, and in particular female respondents, said that they enjoyed the attention they received from others *because* of their physical ambiguity – they were considered 'exotic'. The guessing game involved in people's reactions to them was often a good 'conversation starter'. As one male respondent put it, '*The girls love it!*'. Hari (Indian and White English) said that his physical appearance aroused curiosity:

I quite like it because... it's like it makes me a bit more, I suppose, mysterious. It's sort of quite glamorous... Yeah, from my point of view it's quite nice, that sort of uniqueness...

Although some male respondents, such as Hari, reported that they liked being seen as exotic, the awareness that being mixed, and thus physically alluring, appeared to be gendered.

Like Hari, looking physically ambiguous also made Jenny (Chinese and White English), feel special and attractive: '

To be honest, my sister and I look quite similar and were quite cute when were kids, and it was often, "Aren't you pretty", it was never negative...'

Crucially, the curiosity they encountered was experienced positively, in contrast to the respondents (who were seen as physically indeterminate) who reported negative attributions of being foreign or odd looking. Some of the respondents who felt positive about how they were seen by others articulated thoughts which were reminiscent of those expressed in Waters' (1990) study of White Americans, in which many White Americans tried to highlight an ethnic ancestry (e.g. Irish, Italian, Polish) in order to feel more distinctive, and not 'just' American.

Although most of these respondents were unable to control how others saw them, and could not effectively invoke specific identifications at will, they enjoyed the fact that they were not easily categorized – in stark contrast with the Black/White respondents who identified as mixed, but felt pigeon-holed into the Black category. For these respondents, others' curiosity and/or inability to place

them could be a source of fun or amusement because: a) their sense of belonging in Britain was primary and secure, and not challenged by others; and b) how others racially assigned them was not considered to be stigmatizing – rather, the fact that others found it difficult to ‘place them’ made them feel special and distinctive.

In comparison with some of the Black/White respondents who objected to the often denigrating meanings and imagery associated with Blackness, these non-Black mixed individuals highlighted the positive aspects of their racial and ethnic ambiguity – though as we saw in the previous section, some non-Black mixed individuals also experienced negative attributions from others, and could feel misrecognized. Nevertheless, it seems that part East or SE Asian/White respondents (7 of 15) were especially prominent among those reporting positive experiences resulting from instances of mismatched identifications. While not within the scope of this article, a variety of positive and negative meanings (albeit potentially double-edged) could apply in relation to different types of ‘mixture’.

Indifferent to how they were seen by others

In comparison to respondents who reported either negative or positive experiences in terms of how others perceived them, 33 of the 65 interview respondents (comprised 7 of 17 Black/White, 11 of 15 Arab/White, 6 of 10 South Asian/White, 5 of 16 East or SE Asian/White, and 4 of 7 ‘minority mix’) claimed to be indifferent to how they were seen by other people. A large number of these respondents talked about the fact that although there was often a mismatch between their expressed and observed identifications, they were not terribly concerned about instances of mismatch or of how others viewed them in racial terms.

This lack of concern derived from the fact that their ‘race’ was not particularly central to their sense of selves and/or the fact that their race was less salient than their overriding sense of Britishness, or their religion, studies, or regional identification (e.g. as a Londoner). This derogation of racial difference was typically mentioned in terms of everyday life in large urban centres like London. As one South

Asian/White respondent, Ben, put it, ‘*You don’t really expect people to be White in London!*’. Or as Kareem (Pakistani and Arab) observed, ‘*I am what I am...I’m just technically another person just walking*’. Nor did they think that their peers necessarily paid much attention to their exact parental heritage, given their common upbringing as British.

Some of these respondents also explicitly disavowed the concept of race or racial difference. Beth (Black African and English) refused to identify racially, claiming that she transcended categorization. She also reported that she was seen in many different ways, ranging from ‘mixed race’, to Mediterranean and Middle Eastern, but that she was not worried about how other people saw her:

I personally forget most of the time that I have an ethnicity, but I am lucky to have been successful academically and study in a world where I don’t feel that such things are important.... as I say, it’s not an issue that even occurs to me unless someone raises it.

As a child, she had grown up in a Northern town, and had lived in a predominantly White neighborhood, in which she had felt consciously different, being part Black. But in London, where she has lived the last 10 years, she reported that she felt very ordinary.

Peter (Vietnamese and White English) identified as a ‘mixed’ person, but had grown accustomed to the varied ways in which he was seen by others. He said that he was usually seen as ambiguous – sometimes South American, ‘Oriental’, or Mexican, but how others saw him did not matter very much to him. Although he had felt different and ‘vulnerable’ (in terms of being racially targeted) in primary school, he did not pay much attention to how others now saw him, even though he could encounter occasional racial prejudice: ‘*When I think of me, I don’t think.... The first thing is not race. It’s not an issue.*’ While he would readily note his parental heritage on official forms, his racial and ethnic heritage did not figure centrally to how he saw himself.

Of course, claimed indifference to how they were seen in racial terms should not necessarily be taken at face value. In comparison to those Black/White respondents who were consistently seen as ‘Black’ (and who experienced this racial assignment as misrecognition), it is relatively easy for respondents who are not consistently pigeonholed (or who may ‘pass’) to claim that race is not an issue (Song,

2003; Waters, 1990). Nevertheless, there were a significant number of respondents across all the mixed groups (most of whom did not appear White), including some who were consistently seen as Black (but who saw themselves as being ‘mixed’), who reported that they were indifferent to how they were seen by others.

Such a claimed indifference to how others racially assigned them did not necessarily mean that these respondents had not experienced forms of racism (especially in school, during their childhoods and adolescence), but they were able to contain and minimize the significance of such negative experiences. Those who grew up in primarily White, non-urban locations (like George) were less likely to report indifference to mismatch than those who had grown up in more cosmopolitan settings. Yet the move to a more ethnically diverse university setting afforded such individuals an opportunity to re-evaluate their ‘mixedness’, and the relative importance (or not) of others’ perceptions. Some respondents who reported indifference, like Beth, articulated the view that they had transcended race and racial thinking and identification, but only after a childhood and adolescence in which she had felt negatively racially marked in a mostly White town. So for some reporting indifference, this could entail a process of change, whereby they gradually achieved indifference toward the myriad numbers of people who would see them in particular ways. Even so, most of these ‘indifferent’ respondents recognized the contextually specific ways in which being ‘different’ could still matter, especially in settings outside of multiethnic London, where one could, as one respondent put it, be vulnerable and outside of one’s ‘comfort zone’.

Discussion

A growing body of research in the US and Britain has investigated the racial identifications of mixed race people. While large scale surveys in the US have provided valuable overviews of how different types of ‘mixed’ people racially identify themselves, previous studies of mixed race people in Britain have not investigated the variation of experiences across disparate multiracial groups. Through the use of in-depth interviews with 65 British respondents, we explored how different types of mixed people in Britain (primarily drawn from London universities) perceived and experienced their identity options.

In particular, we focused upon how they responded to their racial assignment by others. Below are our four main findings:

1) **Indifference to others' perceptions:** This paper extends existing studies by examining not only the potential disjuncture between expressed and observed identities for mixed individuals, but also *the variable ways in which mixed people may feel about how they are seen by the wider public*. Previous literature on this topic has tended to assume that the mismatch between expressed and observed identification is usually problematic, but our study of mixed race people in metropolitan Britain suggests that such mismatch was not problematic for all our respondents. While some people experienced this mismatch very negatively, as a form of misrecognition, others experienced this mismatch mostly positively, and yet others, with indifference. Crucially, such variation in responses was found *both* across and within all the mixed groups.

Although such a disjuncture between expressed and observed identifications was commonly reported by the 65 interview respondents, not all of them particularly cared about their racial assignment by others (especially if these were superficial social encounters). More than half the Arab/White, South Asian/White, and 'minority mix' respondents claimed to be indifferent to how others saw them, and played down the importance of race for their sense of selves and their everyday lives, while 40 percent of Black/White and 30 percent of East or SE Asian/White respondents claimed indifference.

How should we interpret this reported indifference to misrecognition? In addition to the fact that they did not *expect* the wider public to validate their expressed identifications, these respondents tended to note: a) the fact that they were British, regardless of 'color', thus emphasizing the growing importance of national belonging over membership in a 'race'; and b) the relative unimportance of race in cosmopolitan, metropolitan settings such as London, where degrees of conviviality and mixing were high, and where being of any hue or mixture was regarded as unremarkable – at least in many situations. Importantly, claims to indifference were not devoid of a recognition of continuing forms of racial prejudice and disadvantage, especially in certain institutional contexts; so these claims should

not be interpreted as naïve denials of the existence of racism. Rather, these respondents tended to articulate the view that they refused to take racial thinking and ideologies seriously and/or that they were able to deflect such thinking and prejudice in their everyday lives.

In Britain, it appears that, at least for this predominantly middle-class, metropolitan sample, an increasingly inclusive and race-neutral nationality, as British, is a central part of the experiences of many (though not all) younger mixed Britons day. If race is not always regarded as an important dimension of self-identity, then racial assignment by others may be divested of some of its potency and consequences. It may be that, in certain urban areas of Britain, the constitution of racial identities is interwoven with other dimensions of identification and belonging that are important, such as a national or regional identity, and other modes of belonging – though these modes of belonging can be highly contested and by no means automatic.

2) **Group differences and racial mismatch:** Despite the fact that a substantial proportion of respondents across all the groups reported indifference to how others saw them, we found some differences between groups in terms of how they responded to other peoples' perceptions of them. In comparison with the other mixed groups, a higher proportion of part Black respondents (47 percent) felt misrecognized than any other group (the second highest was 25 percent of East and SE Asian/White respondents). Although the majority of the Black/White interviewees saw themselves as 'mixed race', many of them were pigeonholed as Black (as found in the US). Their feelings of misrecognition were based upon a lack of validation of their mixed heritage, and upon the perceived negative social values attributed to their Blackness. As reported in studies in the US, we found that many of our Black/White British respondents were conscious of being subject to an unwritten 'one drop rule'; the degree to which this was found in Britain is interesting, given the absence of such a convention in Britain. Clearly, the British 'public' recognizes someone with some African heritage as a 'Black' person, even if they note variations in skin tone and other physical features (see Khanna, 2010). Certainly no such rule applied to the other types of mixes in our study, so that they were less likely to be consistently pigeon-holed into a single category, such as 'Black'.

By comparison, non-Black mixed respondents were often seen to be physically indeterminate, and racially assigned in a wide variety of ways. This was experienced negatively by some, as misrecognition, by some with indifference, and for others, with positive social values and encounters. What some Black/White respondents found to be problematic (pigeon-holed into Black category, attribution of negative values associated with Blackness) differed from what non-Black mixed respondents found to be problematic about their misrecognition by others (being seen as ‘foreign’ and thus not really British, being seen as physically odd). Thus a key distinction between respondents who experienced instances of mismatch positively, as opposed to negatively, is that the former: a) did not expect others to validate their expressed identifications; and b) did not perceive their racial assignment by others to entail racial prejudice or negative social value. Respondents who were reportedly indifferent did not expect others to validate their expressed identities; furthermore, they may have been less invested in their ethnic and racial ancestries than those who felt misrecognized, or positive (though clearly, more research is needed on the dynamics differentiating these different kinds of responses).

3) National identification and Britishness: In addition to the categories of multiracial identification found by Rockquemore and Brunnsma (2002), based upon Black/White individuals in the US, we would add a national mode of identification (e.g. British), in which one’s sense of national belonging can take precedence over ethnic or racial identifications in certain social situations – though the meanings associated with national and racial (and ethnic) identifications are not mutually exclusive, and can shade into each other. Many of our respondents, especially non-Black mixed respondents (many of whom were not consistently racially assigned), described themselves in terms of nationality and cultural belonging in Britain, and saw their nationality as being more salient than their racial or ethnic identities. Furthermore, a British (or White British) identity could take precedence, since they grew up in Britain, surrounded by British norms and cultural practises. Most of these young people did not feel that they could claim an ethnically authentic affiliation with some distant ancestral culture, for instance, in Hong Kong or Pakistan. Yet, as discussed above, their assertions of Britishness were not

always validated by others, especially if they looked ‘foreign’, and not White. This discourse of national belonging may also be gaining currency at a time when growing numbers of young people may question the legitimacy of racial ideologies and categories in their everyday lives.

While their sense of belonging in Britain seemed no less strong for part-Black respondents, their consistent and persistent racial assignment as Black by the wider public meant that they were regularly reminded of their ‘race’ (though some Black/White respondents managed to deflect or disregard this). Black/White respondents tended to differentiate their racial and national identifications more clearly than the other groups. For most part Black respondents, being British sat alongside their racial identifications as mixed or Black, with no necessary tension between the two (though in a few cases, experiences of racism attenuated feelings of Britishness). Therefore, it is important not to overstate group differences in expressed identification between part-Black (who could identify themselves, e.g., as ‘mixed race’) and non-Black groups (who identify themselves, e.g., as ‘British’ or ‘White British’) – because despite differences in their expressed identifications or how they experienced instances of mismatch, a shared sense of being British was a strong undercurrent across all the mixed groups, and served to dilute the force of differently expressed racial identifications. Thus, special care is needed in the *interpretation* of racial terms, as they are used by a variety of mixed respondents. Expressed racial identifications do not necessarily reveal the *strength* of such identifications, or the potentially multifaceted layers of belonging (national, regional, faith communities) which can accompany a racial sense of self.

4) **Differential ethnic options:** In their studies of how various multiracial adolescents in the US racially identify, various analysts found that, in comparison with Black/White young people, Asian/White respondents effectively possessed a wider range of identity options. Based on our findings, the identity options of Black/White respondents in Britain also appear to be more constrained than those for other mixed groups. However, we need to qualify a stark comparison between part-Black versus non-Black mixed people in Britain.

The fact that one was *not* consistently pigeon-holed into a category (as in the case of East or SE Asian/White individuals) did not automatically translate into an ability to assert a racial, ethnic, or national identification which was *validated* by others. For instance, some East or SE Asian/White respondents such as George identified as British, but were consistently misrecognized as ‘Chinese’ or ‘foreign’. About 40 percent of those reporting misrecognition were people who said that they were seen as physically ambiguous – individuals who were made to feel that their physical appearance was odd, and potentially ‘foreign’. Misrecognition could therefore entail not only a negative experience of mismatch, but also an *unwanted* ethnic or racial attribution in the case of respondents who identified primarily as British, in cultural and national terms. Therefore, the apparent range of ethnic options seen to be held by non-Black mixed individuals may obscure the fact that their Britishness may not be validated, and that they can be attributed racial, ethnic, and cultural qualities which hold little or no resonance for the respondent.

Variation in physical appearance within groups (e.g. East or SE Asian/White) could be considerable. Some in the South Asian/White and East or SE Asian/White categories can look mostly White, while others look much more South Asian or East or SE Asian by prevailing social norms. The fact that there are no widespread social conventions in Britain about how to classify these part-Asian (or part-Arab) groups does not necessarily mean that such individuals are able to assert their desired identifications. Thus, variability in individuals’ phenotype, while noted as being of importance, especially in relation to the skin color variations among Black people, has not been emphasized enough in studies of other types of multiracial people (see Khanna 2004; Rondilla and Spickard, 2007; Roth, 2010).

Theorizing on the dynamics of ethnic options also needs to consider the experiences of mixed race people who are consistently misrecognized as White, as opposed to a minority race. Although they benefited from their White skin privilege more generally, such misrecognition could be upsetting if their minority heritage was meaningful to them (and especially if they had been raised primarily by their minority parent and extended family). Thus, one’s ethnic options can be constrained in a variety

of ways, and can involve a lack of acceptance and validation in relation to minority group membership (Campbell and Troyer, 2007; Mengel, 2001).

Conclusion

In this paper we have focused on the interaction between expressed identities and observed (assigned) identities based primarily on phenotype. How respondents felt about others' perceptions of them tended to vary according to group membership, and was not just due to differences in individual predisposition (though of course, this, along with other factors, clearly influenced how these young people reacted to others' perceptions of them).

Our findings support a conclusion that there is a plurality of ways in which racial mismatch can be experienced, as opposed to the prevailing view that any disjuncture between expressed and observed identifications is somehow problematic – indeed, there were disparate bases upon which interviewees felt misrecognized. There was no uniform desire among mixed people for identity validation, and this may also apply for other monoracial minorities more generally. Nor can we always assume the primacy of racial identifications over national and more localized modes of belonging – forms of belonging which are perceived to be more race-neutral, even though some mixed individuals' claims to national belonging could be rejected.

While we did not discuss in detail other influences on identity choices, such as social class and contextual factors like the ethnic composition of respondents' neighbourhoods and the schools they attended, future studies of mixed race people need to probe the role of social class and these other factors in shaping how mixed race individuals perceive and negotiate their identity options (Caballero et al., 2008). Coming from a relatively privileged background by virtue of being in higher or further education, many of our respondents may have been insulated from the harshest manifestations of racism and the full force of negative racial assignments by others.

Even if growing numbers of mixed people report that they are indifferent to others' racial perceptions of them, it is clear that assertions of belonging within a society (and validation of belonging) remains very important – whether that be recognition of belonging within the nation, or membership within a minority group. Those who are 'indifferent' are, for whatever reasons, already secure in their sense of belonging in Britain (or at least in their day-to-day locality), and it is clear that such a secure sense of belonging, especially on their own terms, is far from widespread (or is contextually variable). Because this study focused upon the experiences of young adults, it is of course possible that their attitudes toward instances of mismatch (or their own racial identities) may also change in their life course.

If there are no uniform expectations that others validate or recognize mixed people's specific, individual identities, it does not then mean that mixed people do not care about the *public* recognition of being mixed per se (Taylor, 1994) – as indicated in the provision of a 'mixed' category in officialdom, or the political mobilization of mixed people and families (DaCosta, 2007). Increasingly, as evidenced through their visibility in popular culture and in 'serious' discussions of change in contemporary society (e.g. as evidenced in the growth of websites addressing mixed young people or mixed couples and families), mixed people are achieving a degree of recognition as a part of the British population, and not just as an outlier group. But what will be politically contested in the coming years are the terms of this recognition, including debates about what, if anything, mixed people's interests may be.

Interestingly, a growing public recognition of mixed people in Britain may not necessarily or automatically correspond with an enhanced set of individual ethnic options. Based on this study, it seems that the public's racial imaginary is still pretty limited, if we consider the ways in which Black/White people continue to be seen, or people's narrow understandings of what someone of a particular ancestry is supposed to look like. Since there is growing evidence of the highly diverse experiences of mixed people, especially in metropolitan areas such as London, analysts and policymakers need to be careful about making assumptions about what being mixed means (Song, 2010).

Notes

1. While it is acknowledged that no one term is accepted by all mixed race persons, the term ‘mixed race’ or ‘mixed’ is used in this paper as it was the most common term of choice identified by respondents in this British study. The term ‘multiracial’ is more commonly used in studies of the US.
2. In the England and Wales 2001 Census the term ‘Mixed’ is the overarching term used for the four ethnic background mixed categories: ‘White and Black Caribbean’, ‘White and Black African’, ‘White and Asian’, and a free text ‘Any other mixed background’.
3. Inter-ethnic marriages are defined in Britain (by the Office of National Statistics) as marriages between people from different aggregate ethnic groups, where the ethnic group categories are: White, Mixed, Asian, Black, Chinese, Other ethnic group. For example, a White British person married to someone from a non-White ethnic group or a Pakistani person married to someone from a non-Asian ethnic group.
4. In Britain, the East or SE Asian group encompasses people with ancestors from East Asian countries, such as China and Japan, as well as from Southeast Asian countries, such as the Philippines and Malaysia. The South Asian group comprises people with ancestors from countries such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.
5. ‘The ethnic options of mixed race young people in Britain’, 2006–08, Economic and Social Research Council grant RES-000-23-1507 – Peter Aspinall and Miri Song.
6. A few respondents up to the age of 29 were included in these interviews.
7. ‘White’ included primarily White English, but also White Scottish, White Irish, and White Welsh. Though rare, ‘White’ also included other White European backgrounds such as White Belgian.

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Is racial mismatch a problem for young 'mixed race' people in Britain? The findings of qualitative research

Table 1. How mixed race groups respond to others' perceptions of them ($n=65$)

	Misrecognized	Positive	Indifferent
Black/White	8	2	7
East or SE Asian/White	4	7	5
Arab/White	3	1	11
South Asian/White	1	3	6
Minority mix	1	2	4
Total = 65	17	15	33

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