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Generational change and how we conceptualise and measure multiracial people and 'mixture'

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Introduction

Until relatively recently, in countries such as the USA and UK, where the enumeration of racial and ethnic groups has been carried out (though in different ways), individuals could only opt for 'single race' categories with which they identified. However, in the 2000 decennial census, respondents in the US were able to choose more than one racial category (DaCosta 2007), while in 2001, a 'Mixed' box (with further subcategories) was provided in the England and Wales census for the first time (Aspinall & Song 2013).

As argued in the theory of racial formation, our understandings of race are created and remade through a variety of sociohistorical processes over time (Omi & Winant 1994). According to this theory, race is both a matter of social structure and cultural representation. In this respect, the emergence of 'mixed race' and 'multiracial' (which will be used interchangeably throughout) as categories and constructs constitute what Omi and Winant call 'racial projects', which are 'simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines' (56). In principle, racial projects can be racist, or entirely benign. Thus it is impossible to make sense of the recognition of 'mixed race' or 'multiracial' people without understanding the political struggles and debates about how such people should be represented and treated in the wider society.

But the very success of this racial project in countries such as the USA and Britain has spawned a number of questions for policymakers and academics who theorize, enumerate and study the experiences of multiracial people (Song 2015a). For instance, one thorny and ongoing issue concerns the reification of race and racial purity (by recognizing mixture), and the practical difficulties around the avoidance of language and concepts which reproduce the seeming naturalness of race and racial distinctions (Morning 2000). Nevertheless, as long as conceptions of 'race' continue to play a fundamental role in structuring and representing our social worlds, we cannot afford the luxury of treating 'race' (or 'mixed race') as a problematic artefact from the unenlightened past (Omi & Winant 1994).

Another significant issue concerns the ethnic and racial heterogeneity contained within the category multiracial or mixed race. In the USA in particular, analysts have argued for the specificity of part-Black multiracial people's experiences, given their usual racial assignment as monoracially Black – in contrast with other non-Black mixed people, who are less consistently racially assigned, or even seen (by some) as White (see Yancey 2006; Lee & Bean 2010). As Black/White mixed people are historically regarded as paradigmatic of 'mixing', or at least the most transgressive form of it, their experiences have garnered the most attention – despite

the fact that individuals with Black and White ancestries are themselves an increasingly heterogeneous population.

The focus of this paper concerns another, yet related, question: With demographic changes such as generational change, who counts as multiracial or mixed race? This question has yet to receive significant attention. Although mixing is becoming more commonplace, the question of who counts as multiracial is far from straightforward, especially as we look down the generational pipeline – when multiracial people have children and grandchildren of their own (Song forthcoming 2017). The resolution of such a question is, of course, bound up in the myriad social conflicts and interests of an ever changing and diversifying set of constituents in contemporary societies.

While some studies have elicited the self-identifications of adolescents with mixed parentage (e.g. Harris & Sim 2002), a larger body of research has focused on how parents (in interracial unions) racially identify their multiracial children (see e.g. Brunson 2005; Qian 2004; Roth 2005). Such studies, however, only look downward, generationally, at multiracial people under 18, and have not explored the possibility of older multiracial people who are parents themselves (see Bratter 2007; Song 2015b; Gullickson & Morning 2011).

Given the growing commonality of 2nd (and even 3rd) generation multiracial people (that is, people who know of their mixed ancestries going several generations back), is there a tipping point at which one's multiracial status (or a distant minority ancestry) is no longer meaningful to people, and how may the salience (or not) of one's multiracial ancestry differ for disparate types of mixed people? This is a crucial question for sociology, because while we may recognize the socially constructed nature of race and racial categories, one's physical appearance as a non-white person, or one's racialized treatment, are fundamentally influenced by one's generational distance (or proximity) to one's minority ancestries.

How do we conceptualize and measure multiracial status when the locus of 'mixing' is generationally distant? A key difficulty for looking forward in terms of the measurement of mixed people is that most measures of multiracial status are premised on the simple binary of (usually) two distinct races – thus first generation mixed. As such, there are no clear conventions for how to classify people who are 'multigeneration' multiracials especially for mixed people *without* Black ancestry (Herman 2011).

Measurement difficulties

Increasingly, scholars of race have turned their attention to how we can improve the accuracy and reliability of race and ethnicity data (see e.g. Roth 2016; Saperstein 2006; Burton, Nandi & Platt 2010). As Wendy Roth (2016) has argued, 'race' is actually experienced in relation to a variety of conflicting dimensions, including self-classification, racial identity, phenotype, and racial ancestry, among others. Getting an accurate count of the multiracial population is important in providing a snapshot of demographic change, and of the declining rigidity of racial boundaries. Furthermore, this is a pressing political issue, since how we measure multiracial status has implications for how we enumerate minority populations (Spencer 2006). Counts of the population by race are important because they are used to enforce a range of race-based public policies, such as the redistricting provisions concerning voting, and equal opportunity laws.

Systems of racial classification have historically been indicative of the racial power hierarchies in societies (Bashi & McDaniel 1996). Racial classification has become more complex as the size of populations not clearly categorized in Black or White terms has grown through immigration and intermarriage (Alba & Foner 2015). Evidence of changing identifications, over the life course, further complicates questions about how we should classify and enumerate multiracial people (Pew Survey 2015).

In fact, there are no studies of mixed families which specifically explore the multifaceted and generationally specific locus of 'mixture'. For instance, not only may interracial couples have mixed children, but, if we look a further generation down, mixed individuals have children of their own (Song 2017 forthcoming), or may have a parent or even grandparent who is (or was) known to be mixed (Pew survey 2015). Once one goes beyond first generation 'mixing', the meanings and significance of mixedness are likely to be variable within and across a familial generation, rendering traditional understandings of mixedness as a straightforward 'crossing' or 'merging' of monoracial categories unhelpful. We therefore need new ways to recognize and explain the diversity of mixedness today, especially in terms of the specific generational locus of mixture.

'Mixed' and the British Census

If someone ticks 'Mixed' in the England & Wales Census, we don't know a) where, generationally, that 'mixing' has occurred; or b) on what basis they make their choice – whether it is on the basis of known racial ancestries for each of their parents, and/or because they identify as such. Most measures of mixed race identity and status presume 1st generation mixed status. For instance, many studies of Black/White multiracials in the US refer to 'biracial' individuals (that is, half White and half Black), based upon the assumption that their parents are non-mixed (monoracial) individuals who are solely Black or solely White. But as various scholars have pointed out, racial mixing is nothing new, historically, even in the face of laws and practices which forbade such unions. Rainier Spencer (2006) has argued against Black/White Americans as being meaningfully different from other African Americans, since many African Americans have (whether known or not) White ancestry through slavery. Thus, while most studies about multiracial people begin with a conceptual starting point involving two (implicitly) 'pure' monoracial individuals, and look generationally downward, they do not capture the possibility that the multiracial person of interest (especially given current demographic trends) may already have parents or grandparents who also are somehow racially mixed.

In the USA, the Pew Research Center's survey of multiracial Americans is one of the few to conceive of multiracial status in generational terms: someone is considered to be multiracial if their background included two or more races (not including Hispanic) when their own, their parents' and their grandparents' races were taken into account. This resulted in their estimate that 6.9% of American adults are multiracial. Had the races of great-grandparents and earlier ancestors been taken into account, that estimate would have risen to 13.1%. (Pew Survey 2015).

While the Pew survey sets an important precedent in terms of recognizing the generational dimension of multiracial status, there has been no widely accepted convention for establishing who 'counts' as multiracial in the social sciences. For instance, someone who has a great-great grandparent who was Japanese (and all other known parent ancestors are

White) could *identify* as multiracial, just as someone who has one African American grandparent, may do so. Thus the Pew measure, while inclusive, is arguably one which may obscure the specificities of multiracial status and experiences.

A key difficulty with the measurement of multiracial people is that decennial censuses such as the England and Wales census, administered by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), is that it (like the US census) asks what is effectively an ambiguous question: 'What is your ethnic group?' In posing this question, the ONS elicits responses about how individuals identify. There is no question about parents' ethnic and racial ancestries (though there is an open-ended ancestry question in the American Community Survey). It is possible that some individuals will report their ethnic and/or racial ancestries based upon what they know of their parents' (and even grandparents') ancestries.

However, how individuals 'tick' boxes on census (and other) forms may not correspond with their actual parental ancestries (Berthoud 1998). Leaving aside the potential disjuncture between actual ethnic and racial ancestries and the variable ways in which they can be reported, we must remember that many individuals will possess quite limited (or perhaps partial and/or inaccurate) information about their mother's and father's ethnic and racial lineages. This lack of knowledge is typically heightened in the case of individuals whose mixed ancestry goes back several generations (Morning 2000; Philipps et al. 2007; Song 2015b).

Reflecting these increasingly complex scenarios, a growing academic literature is now addressing the importance of using terms which better capture what is meant when people use terms like 'multiracial'. For instance, in her study of how the children of interracial unions have been categorised in the USA, Carolyn Liebler (2016) distinguishes between 'mixed heritage', 'mixed ancestry', and 'multiracial' (and see Roth 2015). Increasingly, whenever possible, we need to differentiate people who acknowledge a mixed heritage and ancestors, but who do not identify as multiracial as such, from those who do identify themselves (and possibly their children) as multiracial. It will also be important to distinguish between multiracial status (and identity) as denoting "more than one race" rather than "a race" per se (McKibbin 2014).

Conclusion

We will need a more refined vocabulary to capture the not insignificant diversification among the multiracial population, especially in terms of the generational locus of mixture. Given the lack of conventions for determining who is multiracial for individuals whose minority ancestry is increasingly distant, assertions of being mixed will be increasingly contested, especially if they look White. A number of questions require further investigation: At what generational juncture is there a tipping point at which multiracial status will no longer matter, and does this tipping point differ for those of disparate mixed ancestries? And how should the state and policymakers recognize and enumerate multiracial status in terms of equal opportunity and anti-discrimination policies, given the growing diversity of mixed people (both in terms of generational locus and their specific ethnic and racial ancestries)?

And as generational remove from one or more minority ancestors continues, at least for a significant portion of people with mixed ancestry, we must not assume the automatic primacy or salience of their mixedness, for the meanings of their mixedness must be considered in relation to factors including class, gender, region, family upbringing, and the racial and ethnic backgrounds of their partners (among other factors). Although 'Mixed' people are now officially recognized in the British census (and other official forms), they do not constitute a

coherent ethnic or racial group as such. With the increasing heterogeneity of multiracial people across a number of Western societies, such as Britain and the USA, it crucial that we engage in studies with concepts and measures of mixedness which reflect this growing diversity.

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