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## LEARNING FROM YOUR CHILDREN

### Introduction: Multiracial people as parents Britain

Our historically heightened awareness of multiracial people and relationships is gradually diminishing as they become an increasingly normal part of people's lives and milieus in many contemporary multi-ethnic societies such as Britain (Caballero, Edwards, Puthussery 2008). The start of the twenty-first century signalled a major milestone in Britain, as the provision of the 'Mixed' category in the 2001 England and Wales census marked the official recognition of mixed people as an 'ethnic group' in Britain (Owen 2001). By comparison, the 2000 US Census allowed individuals to choose from multiple racial categories, rather than an overarching mixed designation (DaCosta 2006; Nobles 2000).

In the 2011 British Census, mixed people were estimated to be about 2.2% of the population (ONS 2012), with White and Black Caribbean mixed people comprising the largest sub-group. However, this percentage is an undercount because the census figure is a measure of how people identify themselves, not a measure of how many people are actually the children of interracial unions, such as those between Black and White, or Asian and White individuals (Platt & Nandi 2009; Aspinall & Song 2013). Who is considered to be mixed race or multiracial in the first place is by no means obvious, and depends on the racial classification systems operating in a specific society (Roth 2016; Morning 2008; Telles 2006), as well as wider societal norms.

Despite the growing importance of mixed people and families in Britain, in demographic terms (Bradford 2006; Panico & Nazroo 2011), relatively little is known about the life experiences of multiracial people at disparate stages of their lives, as most studies, as I discuss below, focus on their identifications at one point in time. In fact, we know very little about how multiracial people are influenced by the life changing events of partnering and becoming a parent: How may multiracial people's racial identities be shaped by the experiences of having children (Song 2017)? To date, the extant literature has focused on how parents in interracial unions racially identify their multiracial children, or how multiracial individuals identify themselves, especially in adolescence and young adulthood. However, little is known of what happens when mixed people themselves become parents, or how their own sense of selves may be impacted by their 2nd generation mixed children and their children's own identifications and experiences.

There are no clear conventions in Britain (or the US) for how mixed people identify their 2nd generation mixed children. This uncertainty and lack of conventions engender a set of processes and experiences whereby multiracial people are confronted with decisions about how to identify and raise their children. In doing so, I argue, it is common for these parents to reflect upon their own childhoods and upbringings, and the attitudes and experiences of their own children can have a significant impact on parents' own ethnic and racial identities and their salience in their lives. As such, I investigate the ways in which multiracial people's racial identities may shift in tandem with key life experiences such as partnering and having children.

I use the terms 'mixed race', 'mixed', and 'multiracial' interchangeably throughout this article because there is no one terminology which is agreed upon among scholars. What many scholars do agree about is that these terms, like 'race', are all socially constructed.<sup>1</sup>

## **Multiracial people's identifications**

There is no one conceptualization of identity (see Jenkins 1996 for an excellent overview). Although space limitations do not allow for a comprehensive review of this key concept, measuring identifications (especially if these are quantitative measures with no contextual or qualifying information) at only one point in time inevitably provides a limited understanding of what is often a notoriously slippery concept. Various understandings of identity and identification can overlap with one another (Song 2003). I use the term 'identity' to refer to 'the way we understand ourselves in relation to others and our social environment. Our identities are constructed through a reflexive process involving interaction between ourselves and others in our environment (e.g. families, schools, neighborhoods, and houses of worship' (Rockquemore & Laszloffy 2005:4). A growing number of scholars now argue that the process of identification is multidimensional, so that we can distinguish between internal identities, expressed identities, and observed identities, as they are not necessarily the same (Harris & Sim 2002; Roth 2016; Song & Aspinall 2012).

There is now a very substantial and diverse body of studies about multiracial people's identifications and experiences. Studies of the racial identifications of multiracial people in North America, which are numerous and which have led much of extant sociological research, suggests growing latitude in how mixed people may identify (or are identified by others), including a mixed or 'border' identification which refutes the primacy of one race over another (see Root 1996; Bratter 2007; Mahtani 2002; Roth 2005; Rockquemore & Brunsma 2002; Korgen 2010). The very fact that multiracial people, especially those with Black ancestry, may choose to identify as mixed is significant, given the history of the 'one drop rule' of hypodescent which has prevailed in the USA.

By comparison, while Britain was fundamentally enmeshed in the Atlantic slave trade, Britain has no history of a rule of hypodescent, and there are long histories of interracial unions and families throughout Britain (Caballero & Aspinall 2018). British studies of multiracial people have grown significantly in the last two decades in particular, focusing upon racial identification (Parker & Song 2001; Twine 2010; Aspinall & Song 2013; Tizard & Phoenix 1993; Ali 2003; Katz 1996; Ifekwunigwe 1999; Olumide 2002) and family relationships (Song 2010; Caballero et al. 2008; Twine 2010).

A plethora of studies – both quantitative and qualitative – has identified a number of factors which influence the ways in which mixed people identify and understand themselves, including their socialization, ethnic composition of neighbourhood, gender, socioeconomic status, physical appearance, and their locality and region, among others (see Pew 2015; Rockquemore & Brunsma 2002; Harris & Sim 2002; Tizard & Phoenix 1993). These many variables intersect in both patterned and unpredictable ways.

Older theories of identity formation predicted that individuals arrive, eventually, at a stable racial self-identity (see Erickson 1968). For instance, Poston's (1990) model of identity suggested that biracial individuals eventually reach 'integration' – a stable, multiracial identity. However, this belief – that ethnic and racial identities are relatively stable once individuals have gone through adolescence – is increasingly questioned and/or explored, especially in qualitative (but increasingly, quantitative) studies of mixed people and families. In fact, a growing body of sociological research shows that ethnic and racial identity development is fluid (Harris & Sim 2002; Burke & Kao 2010; Aspinall & Song 2013) and that people can vary in how they report their race over time, according to age, context, region, parental race, and how others see them (see Lee and Bean 2010; Khanna 2004; Tashiro 2002; Renn 2000). For example, Doyle and Kao (2007) show that, over time, some

monoracial individuals choose to identify as multiracial, and some multiracial people identify, later, as monoracial.

Because people's racial identifications can change over time, a reliable measure of racial identification more generally, let alone a multiracial identification, is challenging to obtain (see Harris & Sim 2002; Aspinall & Song 2013; Roth 2016). For instance, the US Census Bureau found that more than 10 million Americans changed their race or Hispanic origin in 2010 from what they had reported in the 2000 census. The Pew survey (2015) of 1,555 multiracial adults in the USA found that some 29% of multiracial adults who now report more than one race for themselves say they used to see themselves in terms of only one race (Pew survey 2015).

Unsurprisingly, after adolescence, key life events, such as moving to another region, for instance, for university, can entail both opportunities to exercise new ethnic options as well as the possibility of being racially assigned in ways which differs from their prior treatment (Song 2003). For instance, in their study of mixed race young people in higher education in Britain, Peter Aspinall and Miri Song (2013) discuss the case of a young man, Leo, who had grown up in an almost entirely White semi-rural setting in England, who reported that after some months in his London university, he had joined a Persian club and had made many Iranian friends. Prior to attending university, Leo had identified almost exclusively with his White British father; in London he reinvented himself as a mixed person who valued his Iranian mother's ancestry and culture.

### **Parents' and children's influence on each other**

A sizeable literature in the US has also investigated the ways in which parents in interracial unions (usually 'single race' individuals of different racial backgrounds) racially identify their children on forms such as the decennial census (see Xie & Goyette 1997; Roth 2005; Bratter 2007; Qian 2004; Brunsma 2005). The choices made by parents in census forms (and pre-2000, census respondents in the USA could only choose one racial category), are understood to reveal not only how parents see their multiracial children, racially, but it is implicit that the chosen designations are indicative of whether, as Richard Alba (et al. 2017) put it, these parents 'tilt White' or 'tilt Black'. That is, how parents racially identify their children is deemed to be a significant indicator of their racial socialization.

In these studies, children are presumably classified by one of their parents, or whoever is the head of household. We do not know how much input older children may have in how their parents identify them, as there is no contextual data to assess the 'accuracy' of how parents capture their children's 'race'. But in most of these studies, children are depicted as the passive recipients of parents' decisions and determinations, and very little is known about why parents see their children in the ways they do. Nor can we know with any confidence what the chosen racial designations may mean on the part of parents.

Thus a key foci of study is the relationship between the modes of ethnic-racial identification and socialization by parents and a variety of youth outcomes (e.g. their identifications and various indicators of wellbeing and achievement). There is a general consensus that parents are one of the most fundamental influences in shaping their children's sense of selves, given the asymmetries in power and authority in the parent-child relationship (Rostad & Whitaker 2016). Various studies by social psychologists and sociologists have focused on the influence of parental communications and practices (see Thomas & Speight 1999; Hughes 2003; Hughes et al. 2006; Rockquemore & Laszloffy 2005).

However, Diane Hughes and her colleagues (2006:765) also acknowledge that: 'ethnic-racial socialization is clearly a bidirectional process shaped by parents and children.... For example, children's experiences and questions may prompt parents to share values and information regarding race, ethnicity and intergroup relations....' (765). This tantalizing suggestion is not, however, investigated in such studies. One can extend this insight and note that children's own emergent identifications and racial leanings may prompt not only the sharing of parental values and information, but also influence their parents to rethink their values, aspirations, and racial identifications.

While clearly a diverse set of studies, what many of the studies discussed above share is that they investigate how parents impact upon their multiracial children, and not the other way around. Even in studies where children and young people's voices are heard, and are the focus of research (see Ali 2003; Tizard & Phoenix 1993, for instance), it is understood that parents in these studies are the agents who fundamentally shape their children's learning and sense of selves, including any emergent sense of identities.

But what happens when multiracial people grow up, partner and have children? These are key life experiences that are likely to influence their own racial and ethnic identities, such that some aspects of their ancestries may become more or less salient, or take on new meanings and significance. As in the majority of studies of racial identification and socialization, the presumption is that parents are the people who do the identifying and socializing of children; parents' own sense of selves are rarely thought to be subject to change themselves.

One exception to this rule is the (now) growing number of books, studies, and media about White mothers of (usually) part Black children.<sup>2</sup> For instance, Jane Lazarre's (1996) 'memoir of a White mother of Black sons' was one of the first books to address this theme (and see Twine 2010; Barn & Harman 2006; Mackenzie 2012). In many of these studies, we learn of how White women's own sense of selves, including their racial identities, can be altered by the experiences of having children who are seen and treated as Black. Through having part Black children, White women can become aware of how their own status as White [and the attendant privileges of Whiteness] is endangered by the stigma of having borne children with Black ancestry; as such, some may no longer feel quite 'White', as before.

Another key basis of this potential changeability is that when multiracial people enter into relationships with others, the specific ethnic and racial backgrounds of their partners (and their wider families and social networks) can influence the ways in which they think of themselves (Joyner & Kao 2006). In a recent study of non-Hispanic White and Latino intermarriage in the USA, Vasquez (2014) found that White spouses, through affiliative ethnicity (Jimenez 2010), could 'migrate into Latino culture'. Furthermore, another possible consequence of such intermarriages is that the (minority) Latino spouse's identification can be shaped by their partnering with a White individual, so that both spouses engage in everyday forms of 'biculturalism'. 'Intermarriage disrupts non-Hispanic whites' white habitus.' (Vasquez:403). This finding can surely extend to cases of interracial unions, including those which involve multiracial individuals.

As discussed earlier, ethnic and racial identities do not necessarily stabilize in young adulthood, and can still undergo change over the life course (Tashiro 2002). In this article, I argue that racial identities can be influenced by key experiences in the life course, such as becoming a parent. This may especially be the case for multiracial people who are seen, and treated (still), as somehow 'in between' the experiences of both White and non-White monoracial groups. The fact that there are no conventions for how multigeneration mixed people should identify themselves (as opposed to

someone who is clearly 'biracial') makes it even more likely that there is change/instability in how they report their racial identities (Song 2017).

Therefore, this focus on multiracial parents continues the story of their own identity development into a later stage of life. This study breaks new ground by looking a further generation down: investigating the ways in which multiracial people, as parents, think about their own identities, in the course of raising their own children. Britain provides an excellent point of comparison with the USA, where the Black/White boundary is still most persistent in terms of interracial unions; by comparison, racial boundaries in Britain are more permeable. As most extant studies of multiracial people and families are carried out in the USA, relatively little is still known about such families in other multi-ethnic societies in the 'West'.

### **The study**

This article is drawn from a wider study of multiracial people as parents in Britain (Song 2017). Most of our sixty-two participants resided in the Greater London area and the Southeast, but a small proportion lived in the Midlands and the North. While participants living in London and other large cities tended to live in ethnically diverse areas (usually with relatively diverse schools), those residing in small towns and cities outside of London and other large metropolitan areas reported predominantly white neighbourhoods and schools for their children. Various routes to finding participants were used. Primary and secondary state schools in the Southeast of England were contacted about the research, whereby school principals agreed to either send home a handout of the research with pupils, or send an email with details of the research to the parents of students. Several British websites (e.g. Intermix and People in Harmony) which were aimed at multiracial people and families were contacted, and two of these agreed to advertise the research on their pages. Lastly, participants were located via snowball sampling, though we limited the number of participants that any one person could refer, to two potential participants. We ultimately recruited sixty-two mixed-race parents, who completed an online survey followed by an in-depth interview. Overall, nineteen participants were recruited through schools, twenty-two through websites, and twenty-one through snowballing.

The online surveys asked participants to provide key background information, such as their age, marital status, their occupation, the number and ages of children, the ethnic backgrounds of each parent, their place of birth, and where they received their primary and secondary education. The survey also functioned as a screening tool, as only participants who had one White parent, and one Black, South Asian, or East Asian parent (or a multiracial parent with one of those ancestries), regardless of how they racially identified, were contacted about an interview. In the interviews, the participants were asked about their experiences of growing up in their families, schools, their own cultural and racial socialization, and their experiences of racism. They were then probed about how they identified and raised their children, their children's appearance and treatment by others, their relationships with their spouses, how their children thought about their identities and minority ancestries, and their hopes for their children and their futures.

Of the 62 multiracial participants in this study, 37 were women and 25 men, and most were aged between 25 and 50, though a small number of participants were in their 50s. While there are no established conventions for who can be said to be multiracial, as such, in this paper we focus upon individuals with the following mixed backgrounds: 32 Black/ White, 19 South Asian/White, 11 East Asian/White, as these are the most common mixed ancestries in Britain. All the participants had a

White parent in common. The age of children in these households varied from a few months old to those in their late-20s.

While most (54 of 62) participants were 'first-generation' mixed, with one white and one non-white minority parent, 7 participants were 'second-generation' mixed (meaning they had at least one parent who was multiracial themselves), and 1 participant was unsure of their mother's ancestry (thus unsure whether she was first- or second-generation mixed). The majority of participants (46 of 62) had white British (38) or white other (8 non-British) partners with whom they had children. By comparison, 11 participants had partners with a (monoracial) minority background (5 British and 6 non-British), and 5 had multiracial partners (2 British and 3 non-British). Most participants were middle class, meaning that they had either a first degree in higher education and/or professional forms of employment, while 10 of the 62 participants had not been university educated and had relatively low-skilled and/or clerical, or skilled but manual, forms of employment.

## Findings

For parents with different racial backgrounds, having children could engender a more explicitly conscious evaluation of what their mixed ancestries meant to them. This was because while many participants reported growing up (like many adolescents) with 'issues' about how to identify, becoming parents to their own children effectively forced them to have to talk about, explain, and make some decisions about how they would identify and raise their own children. In other words, having the responsibility of becoming parents, and having to navigate myriad ethnic monitoring forms (and the often endless questions which can assail parents) made many of them realize that there had to be (some) coherence to their family narratives about their relatedness to their children (Song 2017). While this relatedness may seem obvious and largely taken for granted for families in which all members are of the same race, the burden of establishing or demonstrating relatedness was not always in the case of multiracial people and their children.

For many participants, becoming parents involved a retrospective assessment of their childhoods and their own racial socialization, growing up. In many cases, what this racial socialization entailed had been a virtual lack of discussion and communication with their parents about the meanings of their racial and ethnic backgrounds or how they should identify, as multiracial individuals. The identity politics which pervades much of contemporary social life was something our participants' parents were unfamiliar with, in their 'time'. Nor was the wide-ranging vocabulary around multiplicity, cultural hybridity and melange present then, as it is now.

Not surprisingly, the multiracial participants in this study differed in terms of how their racial identifications were shaped by becoming parents. In many cases, their minority ancestries were reported to be meaningful, albeit to differing degrees and in different ways. Becoming parents made all participants reflect upon what their own minority ancestries and status as a multiracial person meant to them. For some, this could involve shifts in how they saw themselves, or in how they described themselves to others, engaged in specific cultural practices, or social networks. In parents' accounts, these changes were described as typically gradual. However, some participants reported changes in their sense of selves which were not manifest through any concrete changes in their behaviors or routines; indeed, such reports were largely described as internal, based on how they felt about the relative salience of their racial identities, their sense of what race and minority ancestry meant to their spouses, their children, and their family lives more generally.

Most of the research on how interracial couples identify their children conceive of parents' actions in very clear, purposeful ways (e.g. see Qian 2004). 'Intermarried couples can instill a certain racial identity into their children by choosing a place to live, a school, and a culture in which to raise their children. Racial identities instilled by parents provide a solid foundation that shapes the future identities of multiracial individuals.' (p?) While some parents may evidence clear plans to 'instill a certain racial identity', my research found that many of the multiracial parents (who are multiracial) were uncertain and/or ambivalent about how to identify their children, or how their minority ancestries could or should be passed down to their children. In fact, my research shows that what is as important as the concerted decisions and actions made by these parents are the acts of omission, the 'drifting' into things that is very common in families, who are typically busy juggling home and work lives.

By the same token, in their retrospective accounts, parents' own sense of who they were, and the ways they identified in a variety of contexts, were not always stable or clearly marked at specific points in time; instead, their identities took shape, as the layers of family experiences and milestones built up over time. Few people talked about consciously adopting changes in behaviour or identifications, though some were explicit about saying that they had made a concerted decision to partner with someone of a particular racial background; more commonly, participants spoke of transitions in their lives, such as moving to new places, which opened up possibilities of meeting and connecting with others with whom they shared a minority ancestry. In the remainder of the article, I discuss three different ways in which multiracial parents' identities, and their attitudes toward their racial ancestries could be influenced by their experiences of parenting and family formation. These three modes of change include the revaluating of minority ancestries; the further 'dilution' of minority ancestries; and a reinforcement of a mixed identity.

### **Revaluating minority ancestries**

For some, becoming parents, and having children of their own, resulted in a reevaluation of their minority ancestries, and a desire to revitalize connections with those minority ancestries; doing so also meant that they conceived of their racial identities with a greater emphasis on their non-White heritage. Such participants, who were in the minority, usually had coethnic minority partners with whom they shared a minority ancestry, in contrast with the 46 (of 62) participants who had White British or White European/N. American partners. For instance, Victor (39, 2nd gen. Black/White) married a Black African woman. Because Victor had grown up with a White Irish mother and a (1st gen.) mixed Black/White father whom he reported was disconnected from his own Black Caribbean heritage, Victor said that it was important to him that he try to recover his Black ancestry. He had grown up feeling unsure about how to identify, racially, especially since he was very fair. By partnering with his wife, and having a child with (more recent) African ancestry, Victor was able to assert his own Black heritage with what he saw as more legitimacy. As part of a family in which Black ancestry constituted the overarching 'glue' and identity, Victor's own sense of being Black was enhanced by his becoming a parent to a visibly Black child. Victor reported that he actually felt more Black as a result of having a Black African wife and a Black looking son. Participants like Victor were rather exceptional in that most participants said that they had not planned to partner with someone of any particular background (though it is of course possible that they did not feel comfortable about admitting this).



Though not consciously planned, Tara (50, Black/White) spoke of how watching her daughters grow up engendered a change in how she valued and thought about her Black background, and what that meant to her:

*I thought back and ... when [her elder daughter] was fourteen/fifteen I didn't know anything about myself. You know.... I didn't really understand, I mean I called myself half-caste at that time. And, I knew I was different, you know, but I couldn't place it, I hadn't given it enough thought.... No, I wasn't invested in myself. I was literally trying to hold on to my children and hold on to any form of life really basically.*

As a single parent, Tara had struggled with work and raising her daughters, both of whom had White fathers. By the time her younger daughter (who looked White) reached adolescence, Tara grew concerned that her younger daughter felt little connection with her Black ancestry. As such, Tara reported that she made a concerted effort to talk with her daughter about being a mixed person, and about the importance of valuing her Black ancestry, even though she was several generations removed from her Black grandfather. In doing so, Tara grew increasingly interested in not only her Black ancestry, but also the idea of being a multiracial person. In this sense, Tara 'discovered' and embraced her mixed identity rather late in life.

Allan (South Asian/White, 53) spoke of a major shift in how he related to his father's Indian heritage, when he was in his early 30s. When he grew up in the Midlands region, he reported that his father had completely neglected his Indian heritage and that Allan had not identified as a mixed or part-South Asian person. During his teen and young adult years, he encountered a significant amount of racial abuse, as a 'Paki', because of his appearance. However, in his 30s, Allan asked his father to take him to India, and he met his father's relatives for the first time. This visit proved to be a major turning point for Allan, who then decided that he really wanted to learn more about his Indian ancestry and extended family. But upon his return to Britain, Allan realized that he wasn't able to manufacture or adopt Indian practices or languages in any meaningful way, especially since his father died a few years later:

*And I thought, 'this is a bit frustrating...can't play the instruments, can't learn the language...what am I going to do?' So I had to let it be really. I just accepted it really. I couldn't immerse myself in it, so I just said 'I'll just accept it, that's part of me now'. But it filled up this massive gap, in me. And I've never looked back.*

Nevertheless, soon after that pivotal trip to India, Allan became a father. He wanted his children to learn about, and be interested in, both his Indian ancestry, as well as their mother's Polish ancestry. While he had no cultural repertoire or resources with which to assert an Indian identity, Allan now 'owned' his Indianness in a way which had not been possible for him, when he was growing up in Britain. Allan wanted to ensure that his children 'knew who they [were].' Becoming a parent meant that he felt compelled to excavate what he could about his father's Indian heritage – he made significant efforts to introduce his children to their Indian relatives, and taught himself (and them) about various Indian religious festivals and cultural practices. And in doing so, Allan was more able to embrace that part of himself. He now proudly marked 'Indian' (as well as English) on official forms, and hoped that his children, as they grew older, would feel a meaningful affiliation with their Indian ancestry and relatives. Furthermore, Allan and his Polish wife made a point of teaching their children Polish, and fostering a sense of attachment to his wife's Polish relatives, food, and customs.

### Further distancing from minority ancestry

In contrast with those whose minority ancestries were revitalized in the course of becoming parents, a number of parents reported that while they valued their minority ancestries, they felt that their links with their minority ancestries were attenuated in the course of having children – if the other parent of their children was White. As articulated by many participants with White partners, having partners who did not share a minority ancestry or culture made it difficult to pass down culturally distinctive practices or sensibilities – even when their partners were, in principle, interested in doing so. This theme was particularly prominent among South Asian/White and East Asian/White participants (with White partners) who felt self-conscious about not possessing sufficient knowledge of a culturally distinctive language or repertoire associated with a minority heritage. Yet other people could expect them to be able to demonstrate culturally distinctive knowledges and practices (Song 2017). They could also feel judged and marginalized by other ‘full’ Asian people for not being ‘truly’ Asian (Spickard 1989; Mengel 2001). Such perceptions and experiences could make these participants unable to assert and/or embrace their Asian ancestries, and made it difficult for them to ‘pass on’ their minority ancestries in ways which were validated by others.

Married to a White British woman, and the father of two children, Drew (South Asian/White, 47) reported that he had grown up feeling proud of being half Indian, even though his Indian father had not been nationalistic about it:

*Probably perversely, you know, I’m... I’m more kind of proud of that [his Indian heritage], if you like, because it is... You know, the British bit is a kind of default that I grew up with, you know, in [a northern English city]. So the Indian bit was always the, you know, the sort of... the interesting bit that I could tell people I’m half Indian rather than saying I’m half British.*

However, he was now philosophical about the likelihood that his father’s Indian heritage would gradually diminish in importance over time, especially in relation to his children, who looked entirely White. Drew reported that while he had grown up without a strong emphasis upon his Indian ancestry, his father’s very presence and their contact with his many Indian relatives and friends had established an important link for Drew to his Indian family and his sense of (part) Indian identity. But his father’s death, and Drew’s marriage and the birth of his children, marked several important transitions for him. Watching his children grow up, with a White British spouse, Drew realized that he could not assume the salience of his Indian background for his children – although they were planning a trip to India to introduce his young children to his father’s relatives, and they stayed in touch with a number of Indian uncles and cousins. Thus Drew gradually altered his expectations of what his Indian heritage would mean, in practice, as he became a parent, and realized how far removed his children’s worlds and everyday lives were from their relatively genealogically distant Indian ancestry. This realization, over time, was associated with a kind of letting go of one part of his past and ancestry. But for Drew, this was not an active rejection – rather, it was more a resigned sense of inevitability to his Indianness ebbing away.

When Rose (East Asian/White, 45) had her sons with her White British husband, it jolted her into realizing that her ties to her Chinese ancestry were tenuous. In comparison with Drew’s philosophical attitude toward ethnic dilution, Rose expressed much more sadness and a strong sense of loss about her Chinese ancestry. At the time of interview, Rose was still mourning her father’s recent death. For much of her life, Rose had felt self-conscious about not possessing the ethnic authenticity (like speaking a Chinese dialect) to assert her Chineseness, and that she had often felt uneasy around Chinese people:

*No. I think it's interesting because I think my insecurities lie with when I'm in a Chinese community... Well it's that classic, you know, I can't speak Chinese properly. You know, don't know the rules properly. Just... just that general awkwardness.*

For some participants, like Rose, giving birth to White looking children (who did not look like their multiracial parent) reinforced her realization that she was part Chinese, and looked racially ambiguous to others (and had a Chinese surname), while her children looked entirely White to others (and had their father's Anglo surname). In other words, Rose's children bore no trace of their mother's Chinese ancestry on their bodies or their names. Before she had her children, she had taken her mixedness for granted, but with generational change, she felt that her children were unlikely to keep their Chinese heritage alive. As such, her children's Whiteness marked, for Rose, a further and seemingly irrevocable distancing from her Chinese father's ancestry. Such scenarios could be tinged with a sense of loss and sadness about the 'dilution' and loss of a minority heritage that would not be generationally extended – at least in a way that was visible and validated by others (Song & Gutierrez 2015).

### **The reinforcement of being a mixed person**

While there was no one, uniform route in this process, for most of the parents in this study, having children resulted in the reinforcement of their sense of being mixed. For many of these parents, their sense of being mixed took on meaning and significance in terms of being a member of a mixed family. Such a sense of being mixed, and part of a mixed family, did not mean that everyone in the family had to share the exact same ethnic and racial ancestries.

For some, like Edward (East Asian/White, 33), a new way of feeling and identifying as mixed occurred when he partnered and became a father. Edward was married to a Black Jamaican woman, and they had recently had a baby boy at the time of interview. Edward talked of how his marriage to a Black woman, and their life in a very ethnically diverse part of London, strongly imbued his sense of self, as a Londoner with cosmopolitan and multiple ties. Having a baby whose own ancestral roots and affiliations were so varied, and not defined by Whiteness, also excited Edward with what he saw as the possibilities that were open, not only for his son, but for himself and his wife:

*Yeah, I think...I think he's [infant son] going to fit right in to where we are now, I think in the world I think...I think, I hope anyway that, you know, he can adapt to...because he's got a very strong Jamaican family and he's got a very strong Filipino family and a very strong British family as well and we all identify with our British-ness as well. So I think, I think that's going to be great for him really anyway, to have that variety is amazing.*

Prior to his marriage with his wife, and his parenthood, Edward had seen himself as Filipino and British, but these key milestones now led him to identify himself as a truly mixed person; such 'mixture' transcended neat binaries and racial fractions, and Edward enjoyed this sense of being part of an increasingly multiracial and cosmopolitan family, within an urban context in which he felt he very much belonged.

Like Edward, other participants who had non-White spouses evidenced a very different experience of their family lives, especially in relation to their children. Bina (South Asian/White, 47) grew up with a French mother and Indian father, and had her now-grown children with a mixed Japanese/American man. As such, Bina celebrated her children's mixed backgrounds (which were

even more multiple than her own) which were not easily captured by existing categories. In the course of having children, Bina's own sense of identity underwent a change:

*So no boundaries determine me, in that sense. So even though it might have been problematic before, in my growing up days, my teenage days, my youth, later on in life, now, I see it, well, I'm actually quite happy not to have these boundaries determining who I am. But it's taken a long time to get to where I am (she laughs). I wish I had all of this when I was younger!*

Her children, while interested in and proud of their parents' respective ancestries, were reported to be culturally omnivorous and exploratory. They did not feel obliged to specifically mine their parents' ancestries; in fact, they had made a point of learning a variety of languages and traveling to places that had no known ancestors. Prior to having children, Bina had seen herself as both French and Indian; but having her children with her mixed husband reinforced Bina's sense of being mixed as part of a hybrid and international family, and one that was not pivotally based on any one primary ethnic or racial background, even though she strongly valued both her French and Indian sides. As in Edwards' case, it was multiplicity and mixture, and a cultural openness, per se, that became central to her sense of self, and this was realized through her stated identifications, and her encouragement of her children to be as culturally inquisitive as they wished.

Changes in how these multiracial parents racially identified could arise via a number of key experiences in the life course, including parenthood. But changing socioeconomic fortunes (and societal norms) could also influence participants' understandings of what it meant to be 'mixed'. Clare (43, Black/White) grew up relatively poor at a time when she said that being Black or Black and White was associated with the stigma of being a poor, working class person. As such, she had been quite ambivalent about seeing herself in explicitly racial terms, or feeling proud of the idea of being a mixed person; she had not described herself as a mixed person in her adolescence or young adulthood. But Clare said that she now proudly asserted her identity as a mixed Jamaican and English person. While there was no one point in time when she could point to a shift in her racial identification, Clare reported that since she had had her children with her White British husband, and they lived in a comfortable, middle class and ethnically diverse town in Southeast England, she identified much more fully and positively about being a mixed person. Clare understood this shift within the context of wider societal and generational changes:

*So my kids are growing up in an environment where there is no norm... And because of class I mean this is quite a middle class area they are [in]. I think they've grown up with a sort of sense of self that I didn't necessarily have because to be honest we were probably considered to be the lowest of the low when we were growing up. [later] ...I hope they [her children] feel positive [about being mixed] and the reason I think they do is because, because so many of their friends are mixed and... these mixed race kids are in strong, are part of strong positive families... When I was a kid you'd hardly get any...basically, the women were white trash if they went with black men.*

Interestingly, Clare re-valued her understandings of being 'mixed', and remarked on how many middle class Black/White mixed people were now seen as respectable. Thus Clare was now able to refer to herself (and her children) as 'mixed', without any pejorative overtones. With the normalization of being mixed through their children, some parents like Clare were able to take pride in seeing themselves as mainstream, middle class mixed people – an ethnic option that had not been available to them when they were growing up, especially if they had grown up in disadvantaged households such as hers. Thus for Clare, the meanings and social values associated with being 'mixed' was mediated by generational change and upward mobility in a gentrified, diverse part of Britain.

## Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study point to the wider set of changes which British society is undergoing. Not only is it not uncommon to be in an interracial union, or have mixed children, in many urban and suburban settings, but the idea of being mixed, and part of a mixed family, is increasingly regarded as normal (Song 2017). This is particularly striking in comparison with the USA, where the Black/White divide continues to be seen as a bright and persistent racial boundary. Within the British context, many multiracial people in this study reported changes in how they racially identified, over the life course, and especially when they partnered and became parents. These individuals also reflected upon how different their children's understandings and experiences of race and multiracial status are, or will be, from their own.

Given the difficulties in obtaining participants in qualitative research of this kind, there are a number of limitations with this study. For one, these findings are not generalizable to the multiracial population in Britain, as most of the participants were from the Greater London and Southeast regions of England. The participants who were recruited could have been predisposed to be interested in and informed about issues concerning ethnic and racial diversity and mixed identifications. Related to this point, the sample was skewed and toward an educated, middle class sample – though this is often typical of such studies, both in Britain and North America.

Like other scholars, I have argued that our understanding of racial identity needs to recognize the contextual and fluid nature of identities. It is unsafe to assume that cross-sectional survey data on how parents identify their children can reliably capture something as contextually variable and nuanced as racial identities and identifications, especially among multiracial people, who are more likely to be variable in their identifications than monoracial people.

This article has explored how becoming a parent can result in new experiences and perspectives that can engender shifts in how multiracial people identify, racially. The fact that there are no clear conventions for how first or second-generation mixed people should identify themselves (or their children) makes it even more likely that there is some instability in how they experience, and report, their racial identities. For many, having children precipitated questions and probing about their own identities and ethnic and racial affiliations, and how these could or could not extend to their children. All the parents engaged in retrospective comparisons of their own upbringings, and the relative dearth of racial options that had been available to them (and the vocabulary and social awareness to even articulate those options).

By drawing upon a small number of cases to illustrate the various ways in which multiracial people's racial identifications (and their attitudes toward their multiracial backgrounds) can shift, over time, as they experience parenthood, I found three main ways in which their racial identities were subject to change: a revitalization of minority ancestry, a further distancing from minority ancestry, and most commonly, a reinforcement of a mixed identity (though there was no one meaning of 'mixed'). While a minority of participants reported that their affiliations with their minority ancestries were revitalized when they became parents, this almost always involved a partner who shared a (non-White) racial overlap, for instance a shared Black or Asian ancestry with the other parent. Yet other participants reported a dilution of their minority affiliations and identities, following their unions with (usually) White spouses and the birth of their (usually) White looking children. In this respect, the ethnic and racial backgrounds of spouses was a critical element in shaping the possibilities for enhanced ties with a minority heritage, as well as physical appearance of their children. However, the presence of White spouses did not automatically point to ethnic and racial dilution for the multiracial parents in this study.

For most participants, having children reinforced their sense of being mixed. Many of these participants described an enhanced sense of being mixed, which was based upon their membership in a mixed family, where the parents and children did not have to 'have' the exact same racial ancestries. Most of these participants had White spouses, and this did not prevent them from asserting a sense of membership within a wider mixed family; indeed, some of these White spouses were committed to fostering ties with their children's minority ancestries.

In fact, in the wider study, 40 of the 62 participants reported that they identified their children as 'mixed' – and this included many parents whose spouses were White, and whose children looked White (Song 2017). Participants whose spouses were also multiracial (such as Edward and Bina, discussed above) experienced an opening up of what they understood as 'mixed', given the multiple and hybrid backgrounds and cultural affiliations that infused their lives. By identifying their own children as mixed, many multiracial parents stressed their genealogical link to their children, even when their children were 2nd generation (or in a few cases, even 3rd generation) mixed. For many participants, becoming parents involved the development of a wider and inclusive familial identity that emphasized the idea of the entire family, including children, as mixed, and in which these families constituted 'mixture' in increasingly cosmopolitan neighborhoods and regions.

This finding points to the importance of future research which is attentive to the generational locus of mixing when studying multiracial people and families (Song 2017), as there is a very real difference between the experiences of first generation mixed people (the offspring of an interracial couple) from those of second generation mixed people, who are a further generation removed from the 'original' locus of mixing in one's genealogy. Furthermore, my findings point to the importance of distinguishing between multiracial people with White partners and non-White partners, for this distinction is likely to have very significant (albeit not always predictable) consequences for not only their children, but also for the varying ways in which 'mixed' status can be experienced and understood. While traditional understandings of multiracial status have relied upon fractional understandings of being 'half' or a 'quarter' mixed, echoing the historical rules of hypodescent in the USA, there is emerging evidence that contemporary understandings of mixture in the British context are not tied to such neat, fractional understandings. Nor will mixed unions always involve a White partner.

Future research on multiracial people and families need to consider the ways in which parents can learn, and be influenced, by their children. Researchers have observed that parents with a greater attachment to their ethnic group are more likely to emphasize aspects of cultural socialization (Hughes et al. 2006: 760). When children of multiracial parents form ethnic or racial attachments to their minority ancestries (or other ethnic affiliations), they can lead parents to revalue their own minority ancestries, or gain an interest in affiliations to which they may have no ancestral ties – this is a kind of generational, parent-child parallel to what Jimenez (2010) has described as affiliative ethnicity (which has been theorized primarily across rather than up or down the generations). Thus there can be upward generational flow/movement whereby children's own interests and activities create bridges to ethnic affiliations, networks, and practices that did not exist (or were very weak) prior to their children's involvement. For example, parents of children who attend language immersion schools can end up learning from their children, especially if the parents are neither ethnically nor culturally conversant in that particular language or culture.

We need to conceptualize racial identities and identifications as linked with key life course events such as finding a life partner, or becoming a parent, and how people's sense of selves can be influenced by the responsibilities and normative pressures of parenting, especially for mothers, who are often expected to act as cultural gatekeepers and transmitters. Furthermore, in addition to

recognizing the changeable nature of racial identifications, we must remember not to assume the a priori salience of racial identities and identifications, vis-à-vis other aspects of people's status, whereby gender, religion, class, sexual and regional identities all combine so that research increasingly needs to focus on the contextually specific ways in which race and racial identities may or may not matter.

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<sup>1</sup>Although I use these terms to distinguish those who are seen (or see themselves) as (racially) mixed from those who are (do) not, I recognize that population mixing has characterised the history of our species and is evident in our genetic make-up (Spencer 2004).

<sup>2</sup> See for instance: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/experiencing-racism-as-a-white-mom-who-adopted-black\\_us\\_5782449ce4b0f06648f517de](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/experiencing-racism-as-a-white-mom-who-adopted-black_us_5782449ce4b0f06648f517de)