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Is There Evidence of “Whitening” For Asian/White Multiracial People in Britain?

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Abstract

Growing rates of interracial unions in multi-ethnic societies such as Britain are notable, and point to significant changes in the blurring and possibly shifting nature of ethnic and racial boundaries. Asian Americans who partner with White Americans are assumed to engage in “whitening” – both in terms of their aspirations and their social consequences. Yet little is still known about the *aftermath* of intermarriage, even in the USA. Drawing on this US literature, this paper considers the whitening thesis in relation to multiracial people in Britain, with a particular focus on Asian/White multiracial people. I draw upon the findings of two British studies – one of multiracial young people in higher education (Aspinall & Song 2013), and another of multiracial people who are parents (Song 2017) – to explore these questions. I argue that conceptualizations of part Asian people (in the USA) as leaning toward their White heritages are often unsubstantiated, and deduced primarily from one key factor: their high rates of intermarriage with White spouses. Little attention has been given to part Asian people who try to maintain ties with their Asian ancestries. In addition to the variable ways in which part Asian people may relate to their minority and White ancestries, we must consider the ambivalence, tensions, and contextually variable identifications and practices adopted by multiracial people.

Keywords: multiracial, Asian/White, intermarriage, Britain, whitening

Introduction

References to growing ethnic and racial diversity over the last few decades in many Western

societies is now commonplace – through population mixing, the emergence of new mixed/multiple identities and affiliations, and streams of migration from an increasing range of countries. The world in which children are now growing up is very different from the one depicted in official statistics (Kasinitz, 2017).

Interracial unions and their multiracial children have been a central part of this growing diversity (Pew 2015; Office for National Statistics 2012; Osanami Törngren et al. 2016). There is little doubt that young multiracial people today more strongly reflect “superdiversity” than does an older cohort of mixed people (Vertovec 2007; Alba & Duyvenduk 2017). While social attitudes toward interracial unions are much more positive in many multi-ethnic societies than in the past, White Europeans clearly find spouses of some ethnic and racial backgrounds more acceptable than others (Osanami Törngren 2016; Childs 2014).

In this article, I discuss the idea of “whitening”, as it is applied to Asian/White multiracial people. The idea of whitening is increasingly widespread in the USA because thus far, most multiracial people are part White, and many multiracial people partner with White individuals (Pew 2015). As such, various analysts have tended to make a number of assumptions about what this bodes for Asian/White multiracials, and for the boundaries of Whiteness.

The discourse of whitening has emerged primarily in the US literature, but it is of relevance to other societies, such as Britain, which witnesses significant rates of interracial unions. Historically, the boundaries of Whiteness expanded so that groups that were previously considered non-white eventually gained membership into this category in the USA (Waters 1990). To be seen as White affords a range of tangible and intangible privileges and benefits, many of which are wholly taken for granted, and invisible, to many White people

(Frankenberg 1993; Bonilla-Silva 2003). As Richard Dyer (1997) has noted, whiteness is a dominant and normative space against which difference is measured.

But the boundaries of Whiteness are not static, and shaped by changing demographics – migration, rates of intermarriage, and changing social norms. In fact, various scholars have suggested that the boundaries of Whiteness are expanding again, to include post-1965 immigrant groups, who, unlike the earlier expansion of Whiteness, are mostly Asian and Latino (Yancey 2003; Lee & Bean 2010; Twine & Gallagher 2008). This paper focuses upon the suggestion that some multiracial people, and in particular, Asian/White multiracial people, are effectively becoming White, or at least honorary Whites. Discourses of “whitening” can refer to self-identification as White, but also a White physical appearance, and a cultural mindset that associates Whiteness with the mainstream, privilege, and the norm, in wider society.

I draw on (and contest) US debates about whitening and consider its relevance in relation to the case of mixed Asian/White people in Britain. I conclude that arguments about whitening (in relation to Asian/White mixed people) are simplistic and often unsubstantiated in some of the prominent North American literature on multiracial people.

Intermarriage and the expanding boundaries of Whiteness

Within the racially stratified USA, “middle groups” like Asians and Latinos have been regarded for some time as closer to Whites than Blacks, in terms of both their socioeconomic profiles and their social attitudes. Many scholars have argued that there is less social distance between Asians and Latinos, vis-à-vis Whites, than the social distance between Black and White Americans (see Lee & Bean 2007; Lee & Bean 2010; Alba et al. 2017). Historically, while they did not usually claim to be White, there is evidence that some Asian immigrants attempted to distance themselves from the stigmatized status of African Americans (Loewen

1971).

A key basis for arguing that Asian Americans are becoming (effectively) White is their large scale intermarriage with Whites. However, the Pew survey (2017) on intermarriage found that, unlike White and Black Americans, both of whose intermarriage rates increased, Asian Americans' intermarriage rate actually *decreased* from 33% (1980) to 29% (2015). For many analysts, intermarriage with White people is the ultimate litmus test of integration (see Gordon 1964; Alba & Nee 2003). Large scale intermarriage is said to result, inevitably, in the loss of ethnic distinctiveness and “ethnic attrition” (Duncan & Trejo 2011). Yet, there are actually very few studies that have documented what happens *after* intermarriage, in terms of family lives and the upbringing of mixed children (Kalmijn 2010; Song 2009). One US study of Asian American and Hispanic American students found that having a White parent did *not* result in them having more contact with White people than those with two Asian or two Hispanic parents (see Stephan & Stephan 1989).

As I have argued elsewhere, this theorizing of intermarriage presumes a great deal, such as the assumption that marriage with a White person will result in the minority partner's surrendering of attachments to his or her minority ancestries, and that partnering with a White person will translate into automatic social acceptance. It is as if intermarriage with Whites (which is assumed to signal “having made it”) need not require any further investigation (see Song 2009; Rodríguez-García 2015).

However, this tidy picture is problematic. Recent work by some scholars, such as Jessica Vasquez (2011), challenges the idea that Latinos who partner with White Americans are necessarily “whitening”. Criticizing “assimilation literature”, she argues: ‘In an unrealistically zero-sum game wherein either one does or does not have ethnicity (Spickard 1991:15), natal culture is shed as the host culture is holistically adopted.’ (386).

Rather, Vasquez suggests that there are various forms of “biculturalism” adopted by people in such unions, including the possibility that White spouses can “migrate” into Latino culture. There is also evidence of affiliative ethnicity (Jimenez 2017) on the part of (often White) individuals who attach themselves (whether in terms of identifications and cultural practices) to those of a different and distinctive ethnic group. These studies point to the importance of recognizing that cultural exchanges and processes of identification are not solely one-way, or ones that involve ethnic minorities who inevitably “lose” their ethnic distinctiveness and attachments.

In fact, recent scholarship suggests that there is no uniform significance of intermarriage, and that its effects are context-dependent (Rodríguez-García 2015; Rodríguez-García et al. 2015; Alba & Foner 2016). As observed by Rodríguez-García et al. (2015), whether intermarriage causes integration, or the other way around, is difficult to establish, and the relationship between intermarriage and integration is multidirectional and segmented. We still know very little about what partnering with White people means for how minority spouses think about and value their minority heritage(s) and how this is manifest in their daily lives and practices (Song 2009).

Furthermore, theorizing on intermarriage, as a key indicator of integration, is typically premised upon the union (usually) of a White and non-White individual. We know very little, therefore, about what happens when multiracial people partner and become parents (see Song 2017; Bratter 2007). As most multiracial people in the US and Britain partner with White people (Bradford 2006), we can explore how the discourse of whitening may be extended to this population.

Multiracial people and discourses of whitening

Social and cultural Whiteness is now said to be available for some multiracial people.

Rockquemore and Arend (2002:61) contend that the fact that some multiracial people are identifying as White is evidence of “an expansion of the rules of whiteness that reduce the absolute need for ‘racial purity’, and instead imply socioeconomic standards and cultural assimilation as the price of admission.” Some prominent scholars of race and immigration now argue that the growth of multiracial people in the US is evidence of the expansion of the mainstream (see Alba et al. 2017). They see this expansion as largely continuous with the experiences of post-war mobility and the inclusion of European immigrants to the USA. With the exception of some people with Black ancestries, the authors argue:

For adults who are part white and part American Indian, Asian, or Hispanic, these identities “tilt white”, reflecting a sense of affinity with whites. They do not generally perceive racial barriers to their participation in mainstream settings. They tend to have white friends, live in neighbourhoods with many white neighbours and to marry whites (Alba et al. 2017: 14-15).

It is important that we unpack what “tilting White” could mean, in practice, or the contextual factors which can explain such a proclivity. According to the Pew Survey (2015:15) of multiracial Americans, adults who are Asian/White said they have more in common with Whites than with Asians (60% vs. 33%) and are more likely to feel accepted by whites than by Asians (62% vs. 47%). However, what is missing in such data are the reasons for why Asian/Whites may feel they have more in common with White people (the issue of social acceptance is one clue, but is not elaborated), and it is notable that scholars who argue for the whitening of Asians and Asian/White people seem to ignore the not insignificant proportion of people who feel an affinity with other Asian people, or people who do not marry Whites.

A fundamental reason why assertions of whitening are problematic is that there is a denial and lack of recognition of the forms of racial prejudice that Asian and part Asian people continue to face (Zhou 2004). A number of prominent scholars have argued that Asians are still, at best, honorary Whites, who are seen as perennially foreign, even when they are 4th

generation Californians (see Tuan 1998). Asian Americans, some would argue, have not quite achieved full social citizenship, because even with formal citizenship, Asians are still subject to forms of civic ostracism (C. Kim 1999) and discourses of foreignness (N. Kim 2008). And as I discuss below, many Asian/White people are not seen as phenotypically White.

Scholars in the US argue that another indicator of the progressive whitening of Asian/White multiracial people is their ability to opt in and out of Whiteness. Studies of multiracial people show that it is rare for Black/White people to identify as White (as opposed to multiracial or Black), given the history of the one-drop rule, and the social convention of identifying someone with any visible Black ancestry as Black (see Davis 1991). By comparison, non-Black multiracials, such as Asian/White people, are said to enjoy a range of ethnic options. Some US studies of how parents (in interracial unions) racially designate their multiracial children suggest that children with one Asian and one White parent can be identified as *either* Asian or White (see Qian 2004; Brunnsma 2005; Xie & Goyette 1997; Harris & Sim 2002). According to Qian (2004:4): “There is no norm for the racial classification of Asian American-white children.”

However, some analysts have cautioned against the view that the growth of Asian/White multiracials can be equated with a form of racial erasure (of one’s Asian ancestry). In a study of how Asian/White couples racially designate their children, using census data, Saenz et al. (1995) argue: “Counter to the most rigid view of assimilationists, children with a majority and minority parent do not automatically gravitate toward the majority parents’ group....” (177). Furthermore, in their volume on mixed Asian Americans, Williams-Leon & Nakashima (2001) challenge the idea that multiracial Asian Americans are characterized by assimilation into a White mainstream and the erasure of their Asianness (7).

While part Black people’s ethnic options are historically more constrained than those of other multiracial people, there is now growing evidence that significant proportions of

Black/White multiracial people are racially identifying as *both* Black and White (see Bratter 2007; Roth 2005; Rockquemore & Brunnsma 2002; Liebler 2016; Khanna 2011). The Pew survey on multiracial Americans (2015:12) also found that while 70% of White and Asian adults identified as multiracial, *only slightly fewer* (61%) of those with a White and Black background said they identified as multiracial. These studies point to a growing *convergence* (not divergence) between Asian/White and Black/White multiracial people in terms of their identification as multiracial, not monoracial, individuals.

In one prominent mixed methods study, Jennifer Lee and Frank Bean (2007) interviewed 46 multiracial Americans of various multiracial ancestries, of which 16 were Asian/White (the other 30 participants had other mixed ancestries, including 8 Latino/White and other “mixes” that didn’t include White ancestry):

For the Asian-white and Latino-white multiracial respondents, claiming a white racial identity does not preclude them from also claiming an Asian or Latino ethnicity; they can be white, yet also be Asian Indian, Japanese, Hispanic or Mexican, signifying that Asian and Latino ethnicities are adopting the symbolic character of European ethnicity for white Americans. (Lee & Bean: 578)

A key problem with such arguments about multiracial Asians (and Latinos) in the USA is the tendency to overstate the ethnic options and flexibility enjoyed by Asian/White multiracials. As discussed below, part Asian people are not always able to claim Whiteness (or identification with an Asian ancestry). Furthermore, such claims about whitening are based on very little empirical evidence, which ignores variation and heterogeneity (for instance in terms of physical appearance), among multiracial people. Lee and Bean’s discussion, upon which their conclusion about whitening is based, draws on a small number of Asian/White multiracials, all of whom claim that their mixed backgrounds are largely inconsequential, and wholly symbolic and optional. There are no examples of Asian/White (or Latino/White) people who claim otherwise, or who even express any ambivalence about the retention of their

minority ancestries. Nor are there any examples of Asian multiracials who report that they are *not* seen as White. I find such a neat, clear-cut picture both partial and unconvincing; such sweeping claims about Asian/White people are thus problematic.

In fact, the empirical evidence is mixed and hardly conclusive. Prior studies (especially qualitative ones) in the USA, for instance, in the pioneering edited volumes by Maria Root (Root 1992; Root 1996; see also Mengel 2001; Standen 1996), contain multiple examples of Asian/White people in the US whose racialized experiences and affiliations point to *not* being accepted as White, or being seen as racially ambiguous. Many of these accounts also refer to a lack of acceptance by ‘single race’ Asians, making claims of Asian identification difficult.

In addition to the idea of social and cultural whitening (via assimilation and intermarriage), whitening is also suggested in corporeal terms, in that some multiracial people, such as Asian/White people, are said to be “flexible” in how they are identified or identify themselves – which presumes that their desired identifications are validated by others. Yet, as discussed above, the survey studies that presume that Asian/White people freely identify as White do not investigate variations in phenotype or their experiences of racial prejudice or unwanted “othering” (Fulbeck 2006; Rondilla & Spickard 2007). A perusal of Kip Fulbeck’s (2006) “Hapa” photographs of Asian/White individuals shows just how much phenotypical variation among Asian/White people. Many factors, such as cultural exposure to minority heritages and phenotype, are important in influencing Asian/White people’s identifications and life experiences (Khanna 2004; Song 2017; see also in this volume the Introduction by Osanami Törnngren, Irastorza and Rodríguez-García 2019, and the contributions by Rodríguez-García et al 2019, Chito Childs et.al 2019, King-O’Riain 2019, Osanami Törnngren & Sato 2019, and Rocha & Yeoh 2019).

Khanna’s (2004) survey of 110 Asian/White multiracial Americans (which employed many open-ended responses) asked respondents about their racial identifications.

Interestingly, Khanna found an almost even number of respondents identifying most strongly as white (50.9%) and as Asian (49.1%); yet when asked how they would identify themselves on the 1990 census form (in which one could nominate only one race) these respondents were more likely to declare themselves Asian (34%) than White (16%). Khanna concludes that Asian/White people thus have “some predilection towards labelling as Asian.” (p.120) These findings, drawn from a study specifically on Asian/White multiracials, clearly presents a very different picture.

Two British studies: the higher education study and the study of multiracial parents

In this paper, I draw on examples from two British studies about multiracial people I carried out in the last 12 years: a mixed methods study of mixed race young people in higher education (see Aspinall & Song 2013 – henceforth the “higher education study”) and a study of multiracial people who were parents (see Song 2017 – henceforth the “parenting study”). In both studies, participants were interviewed face to face in either their homes, or public places such as cafes. The interviews were recorded on digital voice recorders and subsequently transcribed.

In the higher education study (Aspinall & Song 2013), 326 young people (258 women, 68 men, aged 18-25) in higher education were surveyed about their identifications and life experiences from 36 higher education institutions in various parts of England. A stratified sample was drawn from a sampling frame that integrated ethnically coded data for students in universities supplied by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and the Learning Skills Council. These young people could be mixed in a variety of ways; Black/White, South Asian/White, East Asian/White, Middle Eastern/White, or minority mix (e.g. Asian & Black). Of these survey respondents, 65 young people (27 men, 38 women) were interviewed about their upbringing, and what their mixed backgrounds meant to them.

In the more recent parenting study, I wanted to know what happened when multiracial people grew up, partnered, and became parents: how did they raise their children? How important was it to pass down their minority heritage? This study utilized first an online survey, followed by in-depth interviews with 62 parents (37 women, 25 men, most aged 25 to 50) who were Black/White, South Asian/White, and East Asian/White. Overall, 19 participants were recruited through schools, 22 through websites, and 21 through snowballing.

All the participants had a White parent in common, and their children ranged in age between a few months old to children in their late 20s. Most, though not all, of these participants had either a university degree and/or were in professional forms of employment. Both of these studies drew on samples that were primarily based in the Greater London region and the Southeast of England, though smaller numbers of people were also drawn from the Midlands and Northern parts of England. A key limitation of both of these studies is the gender imbalance, with more female than male respondents. Furthermore, the participants in both studies were drawn from relatively privileged backgrounds; mixed people who had not experienced higher education or who were from more deprived family backgrounds are not well represented in these studies. It is possible that mixed people from more privileged class backgrounds feel more able to assert their desired ethnic and racial identities (Fhagen-Smith 2010).

Asians in the British context

I draw upon the case of Asian/White multiracial people in Britain to question some of the assumptions made by American analysts about the identities and racial proclivities of part Asian people in the USA. Britain is, of course, a different country, with its own distinctive history, demographics and norms, but I argue that the high rates of intermarriage between White and Asian individuals (especially the British Chinese), and the growth of Asian

multiracial people in Britain provides some important insights into the limitations of the whitening thesis which is growing in prominence in the USA.

Britain, and in particular London, has been characterized by “super-diversity” (Vertovec 2007). Much has been written about the ordinary multicultures of large metropolitan areas of England, though analysts have also cautioned against an overly celebratory view of all this diversity, since not all the people within this diverse panoply are necessarily valued or even recognized (Yeh 2014).

Data from the 2011 England and Wales census found that 9% of people were living as part of what the data defines as an “inter-ethnic” relationship (ONS 2014). In comparison with the USA, Black/White unions are much more common (and in some large cities, largely unremarkable), with many young Black Britons in relationships with White Britons (about 62%) (ONS 2014). About 30% of British Chinese women, and 20% of British Chinese men were also in inter-ethnic relationships (most of these with White Britons). By comparison with Black Britons, and the British Chinese, Britons of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian origins are much less likely to be in inter-ethnic relationships (ONS 2014; Muttarak & Heath 2010).

While “Asian” in the British context refers primarily to people with ancestry from the Indian subcontinent, and less commonly to people from East Asia, such as people in Hong Kong and Japan, I focus specifically upon the case of East Asian/White mixed people in Britain, such as the Chinese, who constitute the largest East Asian origin group. This is because the discourse of whitening in the US centers primarily upon racially mixed East Asian and White people (and Latino/White people). There are significant cultural and religious differences, as well as phenotypical differences, between Britons of South Asian, as opposed to East Asian, origins. Furthermore, especially post-9/11, a ‘bright’ boundary has been drawn between South Asian Britons (many of whom are Muslims) and “mainstream” society, as they are often depicted in media outlets as radical extremists (Neer 2008). As such, I draw

specifically upon the examples of East Asian/White participants (from both the higher education and multiracial parenting studies) as a counterpoint to debates about the whitening of Asian/White and Latino/White mixed people in the USA.

In comparison with the US context, most Britons of East Asian origin are Chinese, given Britain's colonial history in Hong Kong. Like the US, the British Chinese have tended to be characterized as a hardworking and (quiescent) model minority of sorts – a population who is not assumed to have suffered racial prejudice or marginalization. However, studies of the British Chinese second generation have pointed to the ways in which they have been racially stigmatized and targeted, especially in relation to their parents' ownership of take-away food businesses or more recently, depicted as members of criminal triads (see Parker 1995; Song 1999; Yeh 2014).

So while the British Chinese (and Vietnamese) are not (usually) seen as problematic minorities, in the ways that Black and South Asian Britons have been, they do not escape negative forms of racialization (Back 1996). All too cognizant of such stereotypes, younger generations of British Chinese people have sought to redefine themselves against this discourse by actively participating in forms of local and global popular culture, especially music (Yeh 2014).

My research on multiracial people in Britain [in both studies] does find *some* Asian/White people who reported that their Asian ancestries were largely inconsequential or not very meaningful; some also reported that they were seen as White by others, and effectively lived their lives as White people (especially if they had “White”, and not Asian, surnames). However, my research *also* found a significant number of Asian/White people who said that they cared deeply about their Asian backgrounds, and that they made efforts to cultivate a connection to their Asian ancestries – for example, in relation to the transmission of their Asian backgrounds to their children.

Can Asian/White people in Britain “pass” as White?

As discussed above, various studies have argued that Asian/White people enjoy an array of ethnic options, including the choice to identify as White, which is not usually possible for Black/White multiracials. While I agree that people with Black ancestry are more consistently racialized as Black than other multiracial people, this does not then mean that Asian/White people are necessarily (or consistently) seen as White.

In fact, there is a great deal of physical variability in how Asian/White people look, according to prevailing norms of White and Asian appearances (see Rondilla & Spickard 2007; Chang 2016; Fulbeck 2006; Murphy-Shigematsu 2012). In both the research studies on multiracial people in Britain, I found many instances of Asian/White people who reported being seen as non-White or somehow racially ambiguous. While a minority of these participants experienced this kind of racial ambiguity in a positive way, others experienced their racialization (as non-White and/or racially ambiguous) in a more negative and stigmatizing way.

In both the higher education study (Aspinall & Song 2013), and the study of multiracial parents in Britain (Song 2017), it is clear that unless one looks (by conventional norms in Britain) entirely White European, one’s membership in the category White was not likely to be secure – and thus one’s desired ethnic option (as White) could not be exercised (Song 2003). In Britain, as in the US, one main reason why many Asian and part Asian people are not seen as White is that in many contexts, they are still regarded as foreigners (Parker 1995; Barber 2015).

In the higher education study in Britain, one participant, George, had a Chinese mother and White English father. George reported, ruefully, that because of his “Chinese” appearance, he could never be seen as truly British; in fact, he was regularly assumed to be foreign:

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.

Another participant in the higher education study, Lori, had a Filipina mother and an English father. When Lori was asked how other people saw her, she responded:

Well, I would hope most people wouldn't really notice my race. I don't really notice it in people. Some people are sort of dubious of my background or they don't really know where I'm from ...some people have been a bit ignorant and they will just say [that she is] Asian.

Lori reported that she was assumed to be Asian or somehow foreign; she was uncomfortable with the curiosity that others exhibited about her ethnic origins, as she was often asked about her background by "ignorant" people, who did not seem able to accept the idea that she was mixed, *and* also British. Lori disliked feeling physically scrutinized and objectified, as somehow foreign, and "different".

George did not aspire to be White, and he knew that his physical appearance precluded such a possibility. However, he did identify as a British person, having been born and raised in Britain. Thus, being consistently seen as foreign, and not British, was upsetting for George. By comparison, his sister was consistently seen as White British, and George reported that others were often surprised to discover that they were siblings, given their disparate racial appearances (Song 2010).

This theme of differences in the physical appearance of siblings among Asian/White multiracial people was commonly reported. In the parenting study, Jonathon (who had a Chinese father and White European mother), spoke of how different his and his brother's experiences were, growing up, due to their different appearances:

... and it's a very weird thing. He [brother] kind of...is more white looking than I was, or I am. Especially when we were younger, I looked, people used to say that I looked more Chinese, actually like a Chinese boy, my brother had red hair, very pale complexion, whereas I had the darker complexion, like my dad. So he's never had that racism thing, people have always assumed, or seen him as white, and then when he says his name [a Chinese surname] people say "that's a funny name, what's all that?" But he's never experienced racism...

Like George, discussed above, Jonathon could not have been seen as White, and found being negatively racialized very difficult as a child:

...yeah, I think initially I didn't deal with it very well, especially when I was really young. I didn't want to be different, I didn't want to have all that attention of having the piss taken out of me for being Chinese, so I used to react against it.

Both George and Jonathon were highly educated English/Chinese men with professional jobs. Yet being educated and privileged in terms of high socioeconomic indicators did not guarantee social acceptance and real social inclusion in their day to day interactions in Britain (Lee 2015; Kibria 2002; Kim 2008).

Thus, these claims about the flexible ethnic options of part Asian people, including the option to be seen as White, are partial and do not consider the evidence from other studies. First, claims about the ethnic options of Asian/White people do not acknowledge how much variation there is in the physical appearance of such individuals, as it is not uncommon for part Asian people to report that they are either seen as non-White and/or racially ambiguous. Second, arguments about the (social) whitening of Asian/White people completely disregard the possibility that they continue to experience forms of racial prejudice, ridicule, and assertions of foreignness.

Do Asian/White multiracial people *want* to be white?

Another basis for the argument about Asian/White people becoming White is the implication

that, if given the opportunity, Asian/White people *want* to be White. For instance, in survey studies in which multiracial children are racially classified as White by their parents (in interracial unions), how are we to interpret these choices (see Xie & Goyette 1990)? The answer is that we can only speculate about the meanings of these survey responses. Do such responses mean that they see their children as White – or want to identify their children in this way? The issues of intent and meaning, and the constraints underlying such choices, matter – yet they are rarely addressed.

Such survey choices require interpretation, and cannot simply be taken at face value. The problem with interpreting such survey data is that there is no contextual information about how people make their choices. Factors such as physical appearance, socialization by parents (including exposure to relatives, distinctive ethnic practices, language, etc.), the ethnic and racial composition of where people grow up and live, the wider social networks within which they and their families are embedded, are all fundamental in shaping choices about racial identification, and its salience.

While they do not explicitly say so, there is often the implication that Asian and Asian/White people *want* to be White. This is undoubtedly true for some Asian/White people, as may also be true for other types of multiracial (or even monoracial minority) people. But there is no acknowledgement of the possibility that some Asian/White people (and many multiracial people more generally) do *not* want to be seen as White (N. Kim 2008).

In Britain, it is also critical to distinguish between wanting to be (accepted as) British, and belonging within the nation, as opposed to wanting to be White per se. In the higher education study, Mai (who was Chinese and White British) explained that choosing “White” on a survey stood as a proxy for Britishness – and that since she grew up in Britain, Britishness was the primary point of identification for her, even though she did not look White to others: “I wouldn’t put it into . . . what colour you are, in a categorising system. I put it

more into your culture. My friends who are of Chinese origin . . . are from the same background as me, so they view themselves, *not as being White but as British.*”

In fact, multiracial people, such as Asian/White people in Britain, may feel, and want to identify themselves (and be seen), as mixed, and to have their Asian ancestry recognized. In the higher education study, the following examples of responses to an open-ended question about how they would describe their racial/ethnic identities point to the importance of asserting mixedness, as opposed to Whiteness per se: “*Half British, three-eighths Vietnamese, one eighth French*”; “*English, Welsh, Swiss, Kiwi, Indian, Singaporean. I am of mixed parentage - this is a good thing*”. In these cases, the reporting of their Asian ancestries meshed with a stated attachment to their various Asian ancestries – though to differing degrees and in different ways.

In the higher education study, Amelia spoke of the importance of her Burmese ancestry to her sense of self, despite the fact that she was usually seen as White by other people:

So the whole extended family is the Burmese. So the amount of contact I had with the Burmese was far greater than with my dad’s [English] side. And her [grandmother’s] two sisters married Burmese men. And so all my cousins are Burmese, whereas...[long pause], my grandmother didn’t [marry a Burmese man], and so there’s a dilution. (Aspinall & Song 2013).

Amelia’s own mother was mixed (Burmese and Maltese), and Amelia hinted at a concern about a gradual dilution of her Burmese “bloodline”. Her maternal grandmother was the lynchpin in Amelia’s sense of Burmese identity, because Amelia felt a strong attachment to not only her grandmother, but also her grandmothers’ sisters, all of whom married Burmese men, and her “fully” Burmese cousins. Yet because of her White appearance, Amelia struggled to assert her Asian heritage and identification.

Some Asian/White people identify as White, not because they wish to be seen as White, but because they may not be accepted as truly (or “fully”) Asian. Strict membership rules can make it difficult for Asian/White people to claim an Asian identity (see Kibria 2002 ; Qian 2004). Thus, one significant factor that limits the ethnic options of Asian/White people is that, historically, “full” Asian groups and communities have rejected part Asian people as truly Asian. According to Paul Spickard (1989), because Asians tend to come from traditionally homogeneous societies, they often do not consider biracial individuals as part of their communities.

Various studies have shown that, even when they wish to identify (and be seen as) Asian or part Asian, this may not be possible. For instance, Mengel (2001) recounts a harrowing story of a Japanese/White man who was denied membership as Japanese by “full” Asian peers, because his peers knew of his White parent; yet he was not seen as White either – he was called “Mexican” by some. This young man was seen as a racially ambiguous person who was racially assigned in ways beyond his control; such encounters often involved rejection, misrecognition, or challenges to his asserted sense of self. Although this young man persisted in his identification as both Japanese and White American, for others, rejection of one’s identification (and assertion) as Asian (especially by other Asian people) could result in an unwillingness to identify as Asian, and the assertion of a less contested form of ethnic identification (Song 2003; see also the contribution by Osanami Törngren & Sato 2019).

Highly general assertions about the whitening of Asians and Asian/White multiracial people characterizes their attitudes and experiences in terms of an all or nothing depiction of such people’s allegiances, identities, and attachments. There is no sense of how, in “real life”, people are often ambivalent and uncertain about their various senses of selves and/or their ties with others. In fact, a key finding in the parenting study was that multiracial people could feel conflicted and/or ambivalent about how to identify their children, and about how to assert

their children's Asian heritage, especially if the multiracial parent had had limited cultural exposure to her/his minority parent's background and/or relatives, or if the other parent was White (Song 2017).

For instance, one common response on the part of Asian/White parents in the parenting study (who had had their children with White partners) was that they were anxious about whether they should or could identify their children as mixed. Such uncertainty was pronounced in cases where the Asian/White parent reported that their child looked White to others – but where the parent still felt a strong attachment to their Asian ancestry. For instance, Jonathon (who was Chinese and White, and had a White partner), spoke of his and his wife's uncertainty about how they should identify their children on forms.

At the doctors' ... we said to each other "well, what do we tick for [his son]?" And I couldn't actually...I didn't know, and I felt awful about it, because you think about the visual markers that obviously don't define people's identity, but he looks very Caucasian, very white, and in the end [my wife] said "well, he's mixed race, of course he's mixed race, it's diluted but he's mixed race". So we ticked mixed race.

But as illustrated in this excerpt, Jonathon was highly aware of the fact that other people may not validate their identification of their son as mixed, given his White appearance. Jonathon spoke of how friends and family would ask about the "problem" of his sons looking White (and quite unlike Jonathon, who did not look White), but having a Chinese surname, and the disjunctures this posed:

So they say "well, how are you going to...what do you think is going to happen with [his son]? In terms of, it's going to be weird isn't it, him growing up with the name?" You know, it's one of the things that a few of my family have said, "you shouldn't give him a Chinese name, because it's just going to cause problems for him when he's older".

Without such explorations of the context in which people make their choices about their (or their children's) racial identifications, it is all too easy to interpret such data

(especially data from close ended surveys) as definitive choices that neatly reflect the lives of those who have made them. So when some participants choose “White” in surveys, it is often interpreted as just that – that they see themselves as White (or wish to see themselves as White) – end of story.

Another reason why some Asian/White multiracial people in Britain may report a White race or identity on surveys is that it is not uncommon in Britain to report relatively little cultural exposure to their Asian cultural backgrounds. A limited knowledge of, or a superficial familiarity with, Asian languages and customs, can make it difficult for such individuals to feel able to claim a ‘legitimate’ claim to be Asian (see Parker 1995; Barber 2015). One participant, Pauline, spoke regretfully about being unable to talk, and interact fully, with the Chinese people she encountered. Because her Chinese mother had never taught her a Chinese dialect (though she did cook Chinese food and expose the children to various Chinese customs), Pauline reported that she did not feel “authentically” Chinese:

And because I can’t speak Chinese... then you know there’s no relevance there, so I think that’s...I know I’m sort of drawn to Chinese people and I want to engage with them but I find afterward there’s just so far you can go because you can’t communicate with them. It’s very difficult.

In contrast with the suggestion that Asian/White people in the US are keen to be seen as White, many multiracial people in Britain saw the loss of minority practices and ancestries as a loss – in fact, Song (2017) found that many multiracial people who were parents (and who had White partners) expressed (sometimes sheepishly) a wish for *their* children to have coethnic or non-white partners.

By growing up in a country such as England, one’s first language and primary cultural references are almost inevitably English. As one Japanese and British participant in the higher education study put it, “It [Japanese ancestry] is my blood but not necessarily me, I consider

myself British/Japanese because I grew up in the UK.” (Aspinall & Song 2013). So when analysts suggest (implicitly) that Asian/white people (who grow up in the USA or Britain) are *equally* able to lean toward either their White or Asian ancestries, this is a simplistic depiction – given that identifying more with an Asian ancestry will almost certainly have required a degree of cultural exposure and parental socialization that is not always possible, especially in areas with few other Asian people or new flows of Asian immigration.

Conclusion

While the notion of the societal mainstream has historically been associated with a dominant Whiteness, newer understandings of the “mainstream” point to how it is now much more diverse (Kasintiz et al. 2008; Jimenez 2017). In other words, just as theorists of segmented assimilation famously pointed to the disparate ways in which especially Asian and Latino second generation migrants to the USA could be incorporated into American society (Portes & Zhou 1993), we need to consider how multiracial people may identify and ally themselves simultaneously in relation to multiple ethnic and racial ancestries, and not just conceive of their allegiances in a binary, White or non-White manner.

The consequences of intermarriage, especially people’s identifications and life choices, are still little researched, and require much more investigation which extends beyond a Black/non-Black binary, as this frame obscures the significant variation among non-Black multiracial people, such as Asian/White individuals. While the two research studies I draw upon are not based upon representative samples of mixed people in the wider population, they provide important insights into how multiracial people think about, and make life choices, such as questions about who they are, how they feel able to identify, and how and why they identify and raise their children in particular ways.

Part of the difficulty with the whitening thesis is that there is a tendency to lump together socioeconomic gains and progress, vis-à-vis Whites, with social and cultural assimilation into Whiteness. While there is ample evidence of the socioeconomic success of many Asian Americans (though of course, this is a large and heterogeneous category), there is much less empirical research that demonstrates the cultural attributes and social inclusion of Asians in the USA (Song 2003; N. Kim 2008). As discussed above, Asian origin people in the British context, such as the British Chinese, and Asian/White people, are still subject to negative forms of racialization and marginalization.

Significant growth in intermarriage with White people has resulted in growing numbers of multiracial people, such as Asian/White mixed people who are seen as expanding the boundaries of Whiteness. However, I have argued that studies that point to how Asian/White multiracial people are expanding the boundaries of Whiteness are far too simplistic, and characterize Asian/White people and experiences with sweeping generalizations, thus ignoring the different kinds of identifications and experiences reported by individuals with a diverse range of phenotypes and cultural exposure to their Asian backgrounds.

I have questioned the empirical basis of arguments that Asian/White individuals are effectively joining the White category. Generalized arguments about “whitening” on the part of Asian multiracials are problematic in two respects: First, not all Asian/White multiracial people *can* tilt White even if they wish to; the fact that some Asian/White people are seen as White doesn’t consider the fact that there are many Asian/White people who look “Asian” or racially ambiguous to others. Without an entirely White appearance, Asian/White people’s belonging within Britain is often questioned. Second, it is not the case that all Asian/White multiracial people wish to “whiten”, as is often implied. Furthermore, it is critical that we do

not conflate a wish to be White with a wish to be accepted as bona fide Britons (or Americans).

Two areas of research are needed. First, much more research is needed on the life choice and practices of Asian/White (and other non-Black mixed people) people who have White partners, as existing research tends to assume that they are effectively incorporated into their 'White' spouses' networks and practices. Second, we still know very little about Asian/White people who choose Asian, multiracial and other non-White partners.

Whiteness and its attendant social privileges have historically gone together, and in many ways, still do. But we need to unpack what we mean by "White", as this category now includes a significant degree of diversity (even among "fully" White people). Debates about "whitening" are not likely to diminish, if many Asian/White multiracial people (like multiracial people of various backgrounds) continue to partner with White individuals, resulting in the growth of 2nd generation mixed people who have one White and one mixed parent. But this is still an empirically open question, and we must be careful not to overlook significant variations among multiracial people's experiences.

Just as we need to unpack "White", there are also many ways of being Asian these days, particularly among young adults (Kasintiz 2018). "Asian" today can include mixed race Asians, Asian people who have "fully" Asian parents who are highly acculturated 4th and 5th generation Americans, Asian kids in recent immigrant families, Asian young people with two different "Asian" backgrounds (Korean-Chinese, for example) and Asian adoptees. In other words, there are numerous ways of being Asian, particularly among young adults, but much of existing research tends to treat this hugely diverse category in a very homogeneous way.

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