



Mixed emotions: Reflections on researching racial mixing and mixedness



Chamion Caballero*

Families & Social Capital Research Group, London South Bank University, 103 Borough Road, London SE1 0AA, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 January 2013
Received in revised form
17 July 2013
Accepted 23 July 2013

Keywords:

Racial mixing
Mixedness
Mixed race
Emotions
Terminology
Methodology

ABSTRACT

Researching racial and ethnic issues can involve entering a highly emotive terrain and the subject of 'mixed race' is no exception. The growing collection of both historical and contemporary accounts of those who are perceived to be mixing or of mixed race highlight the often intense emotions involved in crossing perceived boundaries of colour and culture. Yet, whilst discussions of the sensitivities and politics facing those mixing or of mixed race form the backbone of much research into the subject, much less is said about these issues in relation to the research process. Such reflections, however, are important not only for making sense of the frequent intensity of emotion that emerges from such research but also as regards constructing, conducting and disseminating it. Drawing in particular on a number of research projects conducted by the author and colleagues, this paper will discuss some of the emotive issues involved in researching the notion of 'mixedness' and their methodological implications for researchers as well as the research field itself.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

In the late 1920s, the Liverpool Association for the Welfare of Half-Caste Children funded research into the condition of children from mixed racial backgrounds in Liverpool and other ports in Britain. In the report, published in 1930, the author, Muriel Fletcher, makes the following observations about the 'half-caste' children and their families:

There is little harmony between the parents, the coloured men in general despise the women with whom they consort, while the majority of women have little affection for the men. They regret their union with a coloured man but stay with him for the sake of the children. The mothers are generally good to the children, while they are small, but later resent the fact that they cannot get work. They grudge having to keep them when there is no money coming in, and are continually telling them so. The children find their lives full of conflict both within themselves and within the family, and all the circumstances of their lives tend to give undue prominence to sex. These families have a low standard of life, morally and economically, and there appears to be little future for the children'.

(in Christian, 2008: 230).

While such damning views on racially mixed families have a long history in British thought, the findings of Fletcher and other early twentieth century social scientists have had a particularly significant influence on social conceptualisations of racial mixing and mixedness (Caballero, 2012). Indeed, as Christian (2008: 214) so expertly discusses, reports such as Fletcher's gave credence to the emotionally charged stereotypes and emotions surrounding racial mixing and mixedness by presenting such longstanding assumptions as 'objective' and unbiased analysis'. The heady cocktail of emotions that Fletcher describes in her report as a 'factual' part of mixed race family life – anger, scorn, disgust, regret, resentment, shame, confusion and rejection – have formed a persistent emotive legacy. A letter to the 'Moral Muse' section of the *Observer* newspaper at the turn of the 21st century illustrates the ongoing pervasive perception of mixedness as a problematic emotive and social state of being:

*My fiancé and I plan to marry next May. We have been together for three years. He is Afro-Caribbean and I am white. My father, who is 72, is opposed to our marriage. He feels it would be unfair to bring up a child of mixed-race. I love my fiancé, but does my father have a point? Is it unfair to bring a mixed-race child into the world?*¹

Of course, though racial mixing and mixedness have long been posited as problematic states, the dominance of this pathological

* Tel.: +44 020 7815 5811; fax: +44 020 7815 5893.
E-mail address: c.caballero@lsbu.ac.uk.

¹ The *Observer*, December 17, 2000.

framework also has an equally long history of being challenged, not least by those who perceive or experience their racial mixing or mixedness as an 'ordinary' part of everyday life (Bland, 2005; Caballero, 2012; McNeil, 2010; Tabili, 1996). There are also, however, challenges made to this pathological framework in which mixedness is framed as 'extraordinary'; in recent years there has been a distinct public discourse in which racial mixing and mixedness is celebrated, even lauded as preferable to 'monoracialism'. Here, the argument is that to cross racial boundaries is not only a desirable state, but actually a more advantageous one; interracial couples are posited as the fore-bringers of 'racial utopia' and people from racially mixed backgrounds are put forward as being more attractive, healthier, successful or just 'better' than those from monoracial backgrounds.² Such conceptualisations, as spelled out in accounts such as Ziv's (2006) *Breeding Between The Lines: Why Interracial People Are Healthier And More Attractive*, echo the nineteenth century idea of the 'vigorous hybrid' where, in opposition to the 'degenerate hybrid' who was the 'worst' of both races, 'cross-breeding' of different races could produce an improved or superior offspring from either – or both – of the parent races (Stepan, 1982; Young, 1995).

The notion of racial mixing and mixedness has thus long been encompassed by an emotive racial framework dominated by extremes of feeling around the binary of 'either/or' – or 'neither/nor' – a position often assumed to play the central role in the story of crossing racial boundaries (e.g. 'neither white nor black'). Within this framework, public discourses have simultaneously and contrarily cast racial mixing and mixedness as mainly existing within emotionally provocative spaces – mixed race couples as either 'race traitors' or 'race utopians', mixed race people as 'degenerative hybrids' or 'vigorous hybrids'. Regardless of which side of the 'either/or' scale they are presumed to inhabit, their assumed states – and the reactions of others to these – are usually highly charged.

The growing body of work in the social sciences on mixed race couples, families and people in the UK – and, influentially, the USA – contains extensive and thoughtful analyses of this emotive racial framework, particularly accounts of the lived experiences and emotions of those cast as 'either/or' and 'neither/nor' (e.g. Alibhai-Brown, 2001; Ali, 2003; Camper, 1994; Dewan, 2008; Edwards et al., 2012; Funderburg, 1994; Gaskins, 1995; Harman, 2010; Ifekwunigwe, 1998; Katz, 1996; Korgen, 1999; Mckenzie, 2010; Okitiki, 2009; Olumide, 2002; Parker and Song, 2001; Root, 1992a; 1996; Tizard and Phoenix, 2002; Twine, 2010; Williams, 2011; Wilson, 1987; Zack, 1995). Such a focus on the emotionality of what Olumide calls 'the mixed race condition' – those 'common experiences over time and space of those who have been socially defined as mixed or mixing race' (2002, p4) – is, of course, not surprising; as Zembylas and others have noted, emotions play a critical part in 'challenging or reinforcing prevailing practices and discourses about race and ethnicity' (Zembylas, 2011: 151). Certainly, the ways in which emotions – and negative emotions in particular, such as anger, disgust, shame, fear, etc. – frame and shape conceptualisations of and reactions to understandings of race and ethnicity generally have been well-documented (e.g. Ahmed, 2004; Essed, 1991; Fanon, 1952; Hill Collins, 1990; Jackson, 2005; Nayak, 2010, 2011; Sibley, 1995; Srivastava, 2005; Zembylas, 2011). There is also an increasing body of work, particularly within the discipline of anthropology, which highlights the ways in which emotions can affect and shape the direct experiences of researchers working in the racial and ethnicity field and, consequently, the research field itself

(e.g. Egharevba, 2001; Henderson, 2009; Henry, 2003; Jackson, 2005; Loftsdóttir, 2002; Palmer, 2006; Townsend-Bell, 2009; Twine, 2000). Certainly, as Twine notes, there is an important need to generate discussion around the 'potential ethical, emotional, analytical and methodological dilemmas generated by racial subjectivities, racial ideologies, and racial disparities' (Twine, 2000: 5). While such discussions on the 'emotional dilemmas' generated by the research process are increasing in the race and ethnicity field generally, to date, however, there has been a limited focus by scholars researching racial mixing and mixedness (see, however, Mahtani, 2012). Consequently, such is the focus of this paper. Drawing in particular on a number of research projects conducted by the author and colleagues, this paper will look at the legacy of the historical emotive framework of racial mixing and mixing with a particular focus on the implications for researchers and the research field itself.

2. Racial mixing and mixedness in Britain: an emotive racial history

Over the last two decades, the increasing visibility of people, couples and families from mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds in the public eye has often seen their presence heralded as part of a new late 20th century multicultural phenomenon – what has been dubbed the rise of 'Beige' or 'Brown Britain'.³ Yet such populations have a longstanding and widespread presence in Britain, one which runs parallel with the equally extensive history of minority ethnic settlement in the country. British port cities in particular have long hosted communities which experienced a great deal of racial mixing and mixedness, with some areas renowned locally and even nationally for their multiracial neighbourhoods, such as 'Draught-board Alley' in London's Canning Town, the Liverpool 8 district or Cardiff's 'Tiger Bay' (Caballero, 2012; Little, 1972; Small, 1991). Moreover, despite the assumption that racial mixing is an inner-city phenomenon, mixed racial and ethnic relationships and people are not – and have not been – simply a preserve of city life (Caballero et al., 2008; Caballero, 2012). Indeed, there are fascinating detailed accounts of mixedness to be found in the suburbs, towns and rural communities of Britain, not just from the turn of the 20th century but also much earlier (Caballero and Aspinall, 2013; Livesay, 2010). Indeed, Livesay gives an incredibly absorbing account of mixed race people in Britain at the end of the long 18th century, who, he argues, may often have turned heads but – even in rural Scotland – 'would not have been a wholly unfamiliar sight' (Livesay, 2010: 2).

Yet as longstanding and widespread as the mixedness in Britain has been, so too has been a sense of problematisation. Indeed, mixedness has long been represented as a troubling and unwelcome state, where undesirable relationships result in tell-tale and damaging illegitimacy, as exemplified by reactions to the offspring of the 'Moor' Aaron and Tamora, his white mistress and Queen of the Goths in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1594), 'a joyless, dismal, black and sorrowful issue'. Although extreme, the portrayal of Aaron and Tamora's child, as well as their relationship in Shakespeare's play, encapsulate many of the emotional themes to racial mixing and mixedness to be found in British public discourse: curiosity, titillation, confusion, concern, contempt, anger, fear and disgust. Such emotional reactions can be glimpsed time and time again in the public debates and commentaries that increasingly appeared regarding racially mixed couples and their children during the progressive growth of Empire. For example, in 1772, Edward Long, the British colonial administrator and historian complained about

² See, for example, "Meet the World's Most Perfect Mutant", *The Telegraph*, 19 May 2005; "Brits believe mixed-race people are the most attractive and successful", *The Daily Mail*, 15 April 2010; "Is it Better to be Mixed Race?" Channel 4, broadcast 2 November 2009.

³ *The Mail on Sunday*, December 8 2002; *The Guardian*, May 22, 2007.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/946673>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/946673>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)