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## Article

## Socioemotional wellbeing of mixed race/ethnicity children in the UK and US: Patterns and mechanisms

James Nazroo<sup>a,\*</sup>, Afshin Zilanawala<sup>b</sup>, Meichu Chen<sup>c</sup>, Laia Bécaries<sup>a</sup>, Pamela Davis-Kean<sup>c</sup>, James S. Jackson<sup>c</sup>, Yvonne Kelly<sup>b</sup>, Lidia Panico<sup>d</sup>, Amanda Sacker<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> *Cathie Marsh Institute, University of Manchester, Humanities Bridgeford Street, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK*<sup>b</sup> *University College London, London, UK*<sup>c</sup> *University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA*<sup>d</sup> *Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques, Paris, France*

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## ABSTRACT

Existing literature suggests that mixed race/ethnicity children are more likely to experience poor socioemotional wellbeing in both the US and the UK, although the evidence is stronger in the US. It is suggested that this inequality may be a consequence of struggles with identity formation, more limited connections with racial/ethnic/cultural heritage, and increased risk of exposure to racism.

Using data from the UK Millennium Cohort Study ( $n = 13,734$ ) and the US Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort ( $n \sim 6250$ ), we examine differences in the socioemotional wellbeing of mixed and non-mixed 5/6 year old children in the UK and US and explore heterogeneity in outcomes across different mixed groups in both locations. We estimate a series of linear regressions to examine the contribution of factors that may explain any observed differences, including socio-economic and cultural factors, and examine the extent to which these processes vary across the two nations.

We find no evidence of greater risk for poor socioemotional wellbeing for mixed race/ethnicity children in both national contexts. We find that mixed race/ethnicity children experience socio-economic advantage compared to their non-mixed minority counterparts and that socio-economic advantage is protective for socioemotional wellbeing. Cultural factors do not contribute to differences in socioemotional wellbeing across mixed and non-mixed groups.

Our evidence suggests then that at age 5/6 there is no evidence of poorer socioemotional wellbeing for mixed race/ethnicity children in either the UK or the US. The contrast between our findings and some previous literature, which reports that mixed race/ethnicity children have poorer socioemotional wellbeing, may reflect changes in the meaning of mixed identities across periods and/or the developmental stage of the children we studied.

## Introduction

A striking change in developed countries is the rapidly increasing numbers of mixed race/ethnicity people (McCubbin, McCubbin, Samuels, Zhang, & Sievers, 2013; Rees, Wohland, Norman, & Boden, 2011). Existing literature suggests that mixed race/ethnicity children are more likely to experience emotional, psychological and behavioral (socioemotional) difficulties than their non-mixed minority counterparts. This increased risk is considered to be independent of demographic and economic factors (Udry, Li, & Hendrickson-Smith, 2003) and to be a consequence of struggles with identity formation and more

limited connections with the cultural heritage of parents (Bratter & Eschbach, 2005; Cooney & Radina, 2000; Lorenzo-Blanco, Bares, & Delva, 2013; Root, 1992; Schlabach, 2013; Tizard & Phoenix, 2002; Udry et al., 2003), alongside increased risks of exposure to both overt racism (Alibhai-Brown, 2001; Ifekwunigwe, 2001) and more subtle forms of discrimination (Nadal, Sriken, Davidoff, Wong, & McLean, 2013). Mixed race/ethnicity children may face the experience of being caught between two socially significant categories, being denied one, or the other, or both, so being thought of as having a less than 'authentic' racial/ethnic identity and, consequently, 'cultural homelessness' (Vivero & Jenkins, 1999). Bhui (2002) points to the negative

Abbreviations: UK, United Kingdom; US, United States; MCS, Millennium Cohort Study; ECLS-B, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [james.nazroo@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:james.nazroo@manchester.ac.uk) (J. Nazroo).

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psychological consequences of such challenges to identity and how this might have consequences for educational outcomes, employment and health in adulthood (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). In addition, the multi-race/ethnic family itself may be stigmatized.

Nevertheless, some have argued that mixed race/ethnicity people suffer less racial discrimination than their non-mixed minority counterparts, because they may appear more white (Twine & Gallagher, 2008), perhaps because they have more flexibility in their management of a racialised identity. In addition, there is some evidence that mixed race/ethnicity children have more favorable socio-economic circumstances than their non-mixed minority peers (Bratter & Kimbro, 2013; Panico & Nazroo, 2011). Both more favorable socio-economic circumstances and reduced exposure to racism and racial discrimination are likely to result in improved socioemotional wellbeing (Kelly, Becares, & Nazroo, 2013; Priest et al., 2013).

Indeed, there are some exceptions to the findings on the potential socioemotional difficulties faced by mixed race/ethnicity children (Danko et al., 1997; Platt, 2012). Here it is worth noting that concerns have been expressed about the generalizability of existing findings. As Cooney and Radina (2000) have noted, much of the research, although not all (Bratter & Kimbro, 2013), has been limited to clinical settings, generating the presentation of troubled mixed race/ethnicity children who struggle with identity formation and who have socioemotional problems in their families, schools, and communities. This is aggravated by the failure of some studies to include comparisons between mixed race/ethnicity children and their non-mixed counterparts.

When considering the generalizability of findings, it is also important to consider the socially constructed nature of race and ethnic categories. This means that the identified associations between race/ethnic categories and outcomes are a consequence of how these categories are constructed, understood and acted upon. However, the social and personal significance of race/ethnic categories will vary across periods, contexts and nations, meaning cohorts that grow up in different circumstances will potentially have different experiences. Importantly, most research on mixed race/ethnicity comes from the US, so it is possible that prior findings are specific to that context. For example, in the US levels of segregation are particularly marked in demographic, social and economic terms. It was only in 1967 that the Supreme Court ruled that anti-miscegenation laws were unconstitutional, reflecting the ongoing significance of the ‘one drop’ rule (a historical, but still prominent, social and legal framework whereby someone with any African ancestry, however distant, is considered to be Black). Such a context might lead to mixed identities being experienced as particularly problematic in the US, and indeed not identified as such, something that might be present to a lesser extent in other nations such as the UK, perhaps because the presence of large numbers of non-white people is a relatively new phenomenon in the UK, following migration from Commonwealth countries in the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, patterns of settlement and migration are very different in the US and UK, with the potential for marked differences in the processes of identifying and attributing meaning to race/ethnic categories. This provides a very different context for ‘mixing’ across socially significant race/ethnic boundaries in the two countries, making it important to extend research in this field beyond the US. In addition, the socially constructed meaning of ethnic/race identities makes it important to examine the heterogeneity of circumstances and outcomes across different types of mixed identity. Finally, much of the research on this topic has been conducted during adolescence, a particularly vulnerable developmental period, so there is limited understanding of how poor socioemotional wellbeing might develop earlier in childhood.

This paper uses data from the UK Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) and the US Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) to examine differences in the socioemotional wellbeing of mixed and non-mixed children during early childhood in the UK and US, and the factors that might underlie any differences. We have two core hypotheses: that mixed race/ethnicity children will experience poorer

socioemotional wellbeing than their non-mixed minority counterparts, as well as their White counterparts; and that the risk for this will be greater in the US than in the UK. In addition, we explore heterogeneity across mixed race/ethnicity groups, and hypothesized mechanisms related to socio-economic position and cultural identity.

## Methods

### Data source

We use data from the MCS and the ECLS-B, which are comparable birth cohort studies that follow children from infancy. Both are nationally representative and contain relevant information on children and their families.

The MCS sampled children born between 2000 and 2002, who were identified through Child Benefit records (Plewis, Calderwood, Hawkes, Hughes, & Joshi, 2007). The sample is clustered at the electoral ward level (an administrative unit), with oversampling of ethnic minority populations, disadvantaged residential areas, and the three smaller UK countries (Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales). The ECLS-B sampled children who were born in 2001, using birth certificate data from the National Center for Health Statistics vital statistics registry (Nord et al., 2004). Twin and low and very low birth weight babies were over-sampled, in addition to American Indian, Chinese, and Other Asian/Pacific Islander children.

This study uses data collected from the MCS children at the age 5 wave and collected at the kindergarten wave of the ECLS-B children (age 5–6), which involved a random subsample of about 85% of the children (Snow et al., 2007). All analyses were weighted to adjust for nonresponse and included sample design factors. All sample sizes reported from the ECLS-B data are rounded to the nearest 50 in accordance with Institute of Education Sciences (IES) reporting rules, which are designed to minimize the risk of disclosure.

Our analytic sample includes singleton and twin births in both datasets. We excluded children who were reported to have attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, autism, or Asperger’s syndrome. The sample was exclusive to children for whom a caregiver’s report of socioemotional wellbeing was available and for whom race/ethnicity was reported. Two further sample exclusions were made for the ECLS-B: the very small number of children who had missing observations for more than two-thirds of the items comprising externalizing and internalizing behavior; and, following IES rules on small cell sizes, those who had missing data on family structure, equalized household income, housing tenure, or maternal employment. The analytic sample was 13,734 in the MCS and approximately 6250 in the ECLS-B.

### Measures

In MCS, children’s socioemotional wellbeing was assessed with the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997), completed by the main caregiver (usually the mother). This is a 25-item instrument asking questions about five domains of social and emotional wellbeing: conduct problems, hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, peer problems, and prosocial behavior. Consistent with existing practice, which is based on both theoretical propositions and analysis of the measurement properties of items included in the SDQ measure (Goodman, Lamping, & Ploubidis, 2010), scores from the conduct problems and hyperactivity domains were summed to construct an externalizing behavior score, and scores from the emotional symptoms and peer problems domains were summed to construct an internalizing behavior score. Each score was analyzed as a continuous variable with higher scores indicating a tendency toward poorer behavior.

In the ECLS-B, mothers reported on their children’s socioemotional wellbeing. An externalizing behavior score was constructed by taking the mean of seven items that asked about children’s temper tantrums, aggressive, annoying, destructive, angry, impulsive, and overly active

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