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Signs of transcendence? A changing landscape of multiraciality in the 21st century

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ABSTRACT

The relation between multiracial identity selection and psychological outcomes related to the self and well-being was explored among minority/White biracials spanning four different mixed-race groups ($n = 201$): Black/Whites, East Asian/Whites, Latino/Whites, and South Asian/Whites. The mixed-race groups showed considerable variability in their selection of multiracial identity categories and different patterns of identity selection, as well as a higher overall representation of transcendent identity (i.e., identity that challenges traditional notions of race) than reported in previously published studies. Our findings demonstrated that biracial identity selection, especially when differentiating between identities that are socially validated or not socially validated by others, was related to a person's level of multiracial identity integration, identification with Whites, perceived discrimination from Whites and non-Whites, and psychological well-being. Identity selection groups did not significantly differ from each other in levels of self-concept clarity or identification with their non-White racial group. Theoretical implications for extending a multidimensional model to other mixed-race groups and redefining race as a social and cultural construction are discussed.

1. Introduction

The rapidly growing multiracial population has instigated many questions on what it means to be multiracial, how multiracial individuals understand themselves, and how they are understood by others. We use the term *multiracial* to refer to people who identify with two or more racial heritages based on their lived experience and upon common racial classification (e.g., U.S. Census categories). Given that racial identity is often an important aspect of one's social identity and self-concept, belonging to multiple racial groups may lead to unique and complex ways of self-understanding (Harris & Sim, 2002; Rockquemore, 1999). The existing literature on this topic has focused largely on Black/White biracials (Khanna, 2004; Root, 1990; Suyemoto, 2004), but members of different racial groups are increasingly engaging in interracial marriages and there is an increasing number of multiracial children in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2008) and the United States (Denton, 2013). It is important to consider different mixed-race groups because the processes by which individuals choose and manage their identities can be powerfully shaped by the racial and cultural groups to which they belong (Lou, Lalonde, & Wilson, 2011). For example, an important difference between Eastern and Western cultures is in how the self is defined (i.e., self-construal). Westerners tend to see themselves as individual beings, whereas Easterners tend to view themselves as belonging to a social

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group and look to their social environment to construct their identity (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Biracials from different mixed-raced groups (e.g., Asian Whites, Black/Whites) then may perceive and organize aspects of themselves in ways that are influenced by their mixed-race background.

1.1. The concept of race in Canada

Much of the literature on multiracial individuals has come out of the United States (see Shih & Sanchez, 2005), yet Canada also has a sizeable and growing multiracial population. Cross-national differences in the historical and political landscape (e.g., multiculturalism policy in Canada, history of slavery in the U.S.) and understanding of race (e.g., focus on ethnicity rather than race), however, may render it inaccurate to simply apply American understanding of race and multiracialism to the Canadian context. From a governmental perspective, race has not been used in formal documents, and for much of the 20th century, the political discourse in Canada has focused on ethnicity when references were made to group membership. As of the 1996 Census, however, Statistics Canada started to collect information on "visible minorities." Statistics Canada has used the standard "visible minority" to refer to "persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour," as defined by the Employment Equity Act (Statistics Canada, 2013). In national population surveys (where questions on race are avoided), respondents are instructed to indicate if they are White, South Asian (e.g., East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan), Chinese, Black, Filipino, Latin American, Arab, Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese, Cambodian, Malaysian, Laotian), West Asian (e.g., Iranian, Afghan), Korean, Japanese, Other—specify. Individuals who choose White are categorized as non-visible and all other individuals are classified as visible minorities. It can be seen that Canadians are ambivalent about racial categorization and that they have combined categories based on colour, nationality, and geography (Fleras & Elliott, 1999).

Individuals who select multiple groups from the above question are considered to be "biracial" or "multiracial," and as the case in the U.S., this number is rapidly increasing. This increase has been recognized and as of 2006 the Canadian Census Guide provided the following instruction: "For persons who belong to more than one population group, mark all the circles that apply. Do not report 'bi-racial' or 'mixed' in the box provided." Data from the National Household Survey in 2011 indicate that couples in mixed unions accounted for 4.6% of all married or common-law coupons in Canada; this proportion is up from 2.6% in 1991 and 3.1% in 2001. Mixed unions are found to be more common among Canadians from certain visible minority groups, with Japanese, Black, and Latino groups boasting the highest numbers (Hamplová & le Bourdais, 2010; Statistics Canada, 2013). Although Chinese and South Asians have relatively low proportions of mixed unions, the fact that they are the two largest visible minority populations in Canada suggest that the number of mixed race children resulting from these unions would be still substantial.

Despite the ambiguity associated with its definition, race is omnipresent in the lives of non-Whites in the Canadian context (Fleras & Elliott, 1999). This current study uses the language of race that people use in everyday life because that is how race is often experienced. The purpose of the present study was to explore whether the multiracial experience varies across different mixed-race groups in Canada and examine how this experience may be related to psychological and social outcomes, such as self-understanding and well-being[1].

1.2. A multidimensional framework

Rockquemore and colleagues (e.g., Rockquemore, 1999; Rockquemore & Arend, 2002; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002; Rockquemore, Brunsma, & Delgado, 2009) proposed a multidimensional model that captures the wide variation in the ways individuals understand and respond to their multiracialism. This framework rests on the assumption that racial identities are socially constructed, and racial group boundaries are subjective. Moreover, racial identities can be fluid and dynamic according to the immediate context rather than adhering to fixed immutable categories (Harris & Sim, 2002; Shih & Sanchez, 2009). Rockquemore's (1999) model acknowledges that biracials may experience contextual shifting of their identities, hold multiple simultaneous identities, or adopt no racial identity at all. Respondents to a measure of her taxonomy are able to choose one of the following identity options:

1.2.1. Singular identity: Exclusively monoracial

Individuals who choose to racially self-identify with the race of only one rather than both parents is referred to as holding an exclusively monoracial identity. For example, some multiracials may consider themselves "exclusively Asian," "exclusively Black," or "exclusively White."

1.2.2. Border identity: Exclusively biracial

Some individuals understand themselves to be part of both races. Biracial identity is the most common category of self-understanding among Black/White biracials (Lou et al., 2011; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). Individuals understand

[1] We focus on Nonwhite/White biracials in this research because they represent the largest multiracial groups in the U.S. (Brittingham & de la Cruz, 2004) and Canada (Statistics Canada, 2008) and refer to the minority background first for the sake of convenience. While we recognize the variety and complexity of different heritages and ethnicities within racial populations, participants were not subdivided into separate ethnic groups due to sample size limitations.