BRIEF REPORT

Being Mixed: Who Claims a Biracial Identity?

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What factors determine whether mixed-race individuals claim a biracial identity or a monoracial identity? Two studies examine how two status-related factors—race and social class—influence identity choice. While a majority of mixed-race participants identified as biracial in both studies, those who were members of groups with higher status in American society were more likely than those who were members of groups with lower status to claim a biracial identity. Specifically, (a) Asian/White individuals were more likely than Black/White or Latino/White individuals to identify as biracial and (b) mixed-race people from middle-class backgrounds were more likely than those from working-class backgrounds to identify as biracial. These results suggest that claiming a biracial identity is a choice that is more available to those with higher status.

Keywords: biracial identity, multiracial identity, racial identity, social class, mixed-race

Although having parents of different racial and ethnic backgrounds has a long history in the United States, the 2000 Census was the first "official" opportunity for mixed-race individuals to identify as biracial or multiracial. Despite this opportunity, many mixed-race individuals do not claim biracial or multiracial identities. Instead, they identify as monoracial; they claim only one of their parents' racial backgrounds (Daniel, 1996; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002a). In the present article, we use spontaneous self-description tasks and multiple-choice questions that mirror the format of many demographic forms to examine which mixed-race individuals are more likely to identify as biracial as opposed to monoracial. We suggest that two status-related factors, individuals' racial and social class backgrounds, influence their identity claims.

The Biracial Identity Option

Two factors contributed to the emergence of the biracial identity option in the United States. First, the demographic reality changed.

Since the decriminalization of interracial marriage in 1967, the number of interracial unions and the number of mixed-race individuals grew substantially (Root, 1996). In 2010, over 9 million people selected more than one racial background on the census (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011). Estimates show mixed-race people to be the fastest growing demographic group in the nation (Yen, 2009, May). With this population growth, people are now less likely to worry that biracial identification leads to confusion, conflict, and maladjustment (Erikson, 1968; Park, 1931; Stonequist, 1937) or to difficulty developing positive self-concepts (Brandell, 1988; Brown, 1990; Sebring, 1985). Instead, biracial and multiracial identities are more often viewed as healthy identity options and research suggests they are indeed associated with positive psychological functioning (Binning Unzueta, Huo, & Molina, 2009; Brown, 1995; Field, 1996; Gibbs & Hines, 1992; Hall, 1992; Root, 1992, 1996; Shih & Sanchez, 2005).

Second, the biracial and multiracial identity movement also contributed to the emergence of the biracial identity option in the United States. Supporters of this movement argue that claiming a biracial or multiracial identity is a "right" that mixed-race individuals can, and in some respects should, exercise (e.g., DaCosta, 2003; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002a; Root, 1996). Attesting to the importance of this right, research reveals that denying biracially identified individuals the ability to choose a biracial identity is associated with lower self-esteem and decreased motivational outcomes (Townsend, Markus, & Bergsieker, 2009; see also Sanchez, 2010). The movement also led to an array of cultural products and practices that encourage biracial identification. Children's books such as *Black, White, Just Right!* (Davol, 1993) and t-shirts created by mixed-race organizations (e.g., Mavin Foundation, n.d.; Fusion Program for Mixed Heritage Youth, n.d.) with slogans such

as "Hybrid Vigor," are just two examples. Together, the changing demographic reality and the biracial identity movement created more opportunities for mixed-race individuals to identify as biracial.

The Biracial Identity Option and Racial and Social Class Differences

Given the opportunity to choose a biracial identity, who is likely to claim this identity? Research reveals that appearance and social environment are two important factors shaping identity claims. Specifically, among people who are half-White/half-minority, those who look White and those who are from predominately White environments are more likely to identify as biracial than as monoracial (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 2001; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002a; Stephan, 1992; Williams, 1996). Given the racial hierarchy in the United States in which White Americans are accorded higher status than Americans of color, these findings suggest that claiming a biracial identity, instead of a monoracial-minority identity, is likely to accompany higher social status.

In the current studies, we evaluate this hypothesis by directly examining how two status-related factors—race and social class—shape identity claims. A variety of previous of studies suggest this possibility. For example, some qualitative research suggests that racial background may be related to biracial identification (e.g., Binning et al. 2009; Harris & Sim, 2002; Lee & Bean, 2010; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002a). However, this is the first study to systematically examine whether the status of individuals' racial groups influences their likelihood of identifying as biracial. Class background is also associated with identity claims; however, this association is often reduced to differences in the racial composition of individuals' environments (e.g., Doyle & Kao, 2007; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002a). Additional research is needed to examine whether mixed-race individuals' social class backgrounds are related to their identification as biracial versus monoracial even when statistically controlling for differences in the racial composition of their social environments. By comparing mixed-race individuals from three distinct biracial backgrounds and two social class backgrounds, the present research examines how status may be related to claims of biracial identity.

Current Studies

In two studies, we examined which mixed-race individuals' are more likely to claim biracial identities. In both studies, we recruited mixed-race individuals who had one White parent and one racial minority parent (i.e., Black, Asian, or Latino). Study 1 examined which racial backgrounds (i.e., Black/White, Asian/White, or Latino/White) and Study 2 examined which social class backgrounds, were associated with a greater likelihood of claiming a biracial versus a monoracial-minority identity. We focus on biracial versus monoracial-minority identification because prior research reveals that White/Nonwhite mixed-race people rarely identify monoracially as White (Rockquemore, 1999).

We anticipated that the status of racial and social class backgrounds in American society would determine which identity option individuals claimed. Asians are higher status than Blacks and Latinos (Sidanius & Pratto, 1993), and people from middle-class contexts are higher status than people from working-class

contexts (Browne, 2005). Research shows that high-status people are more likely to identify as White, and less likely to identify as Black, than low-status people (e.g., those who have been unemployed or impoverished; Penner & Saperstein, 2008). Given this, we hypothesized that Asian/White individuals would be more likely to identify as biracial than Black/White and Latino/White individuals (Study 1), and that middle-class individuals would be more likely to identify as biracial than working-class individuals (Study 2). In addition, we predicted that the social class difference in Study 2 would persist even after we statistically controlled for the racial composition of participants' environments.

Study 1

Mixed-race individuals completed a survey containing both closed- and open-ended identity questions. We predicted that participants' identification as biracial versus monoracial-minority would be associated with their particular combination of racial backgrounds. Specifically, we predicted that Asian/White participants would be more likely to identify as biracial than Latino/White and Black/White participants.

Method

Participants. Participants included 90 mixed-race undergraduates (68 women) at a Northern California university. Racial backgrounds were determined by the races/ethnicities of participants' parents (Rockquemore, Brunsma, & Delgado, 2009). Forty participants had one parent who was Asian/Asian American and one who was White/European American (25 women), 23 had parents who were Black/African American and White/European American (16 women), and 27 had parents who were Latino and White/European American (17 women). Gender did not differ by ethnic group, $\chi^2(2, N = 90) = 0.36$, $p = .84$.

Procedure. Participants were recruited via campus email lists by asking students who had parents that were members of different racial groups to complete a questionnaire about their college experiences and relationships with others. We advertised based on parents' race, instead of racial identification, as a way to minimize potential self-selection of only biracially identified mixed-race people.

Materials. Participants completed the measures in the following order.

Twenty statements test (TST). A 10-statement version of the TST (Hartley, 1970; Rhee, Uleman, Lee, & Roman, 1995) was used to assess the strength and salience of racial identification. Specifically, participants provided 10 answers to the question, "Who are you?"

Racial identity question. Using a multiple-choice format, participants were asked to indicate how they racially identify by selecting one identity from the following list: Asian/Asian American, biracial/multiracial, Black/African American, Latino/Chicano, Native American/American Indian, White/European American, and Other.

Demographic information. Participants reported their own gender and both of their parents' races.

Results and Discussion

Notably, no participants mentioned a monoracial White identity in their 10 statements, and only six (7%) selected White on the

multiple-choice question (four were Asian/White and two were Black/White). Due to their limited number, these participants were not included in our analyses. The final data set ($N = 84$) consisted of 36 Asian/White, 21 Black/White, and 27 Latino/White.

Ten statements test. To examine participants' likelihood of claiming biracial versus monoracial identities, we coded race-related responses as either biracial or monoracial-minority. Responses such as "mixed," "biracial," "multiracial," and mentioning both racial backgrounds on the same line or different lines were coded as "biracial." Responses such as "Black/African American," "Japanese," "Latino" and "Chicano," in the absence of a second identity, were coded as "monoracial-minority." Nearly three fourths of all participants listed race or ethnicity in their self-descriptions ($N = 59$, 70.2%) and this was not related to their racial background, $\chi^2(2, N = 84) = 3.97, p = .14$.

Next, to examine whether racial background was related to the identity option that participants claimed, we conducted an omnibus chi-square, $\chi^2(2, N = 59) = 10.18, p = .003$. See Figure 1 for proportions. Racial groups differed significantly in the racial identity mentioned. We then conducted partial χ^2 analyses to examine the specific differences. Consistent with our hypothesis, Asian/White participants were more likely to mention biracial than Latino/White participants, $\chi^2(1, N = 41) = 10.49, p = .001$. However, contrary to our predictions, Asian/White participants were not significantly more likely to mention biracial than Black/White participants, $\chi^2(1, N = 43) = 1.72, p = .18$. In addition, Black/White participants were more likely to mention biracial than Latino/White participants, $\chi^2(1, N = 34) = 4.14, p = .04$.

Racial identification. Overall, on the multiple-choice racial identification question, the majority of mixed-race individuals identified as biracial/multiracial (70%) with a substantial number identifying with their minority heritage (30%). To examine whether these identity claims differed by racial background, we conducted a nonparametric chi-square analysis, $\chi^2(2, N = 84) = 7.82, p = .02$. See Figure 2 for proportions. First, contrary to our TST results, Black/White and Latino/White participants did not differ in their identity choices, $\chi^2(1, N = 48) = 0.20, p = .66$, which hints at potential changes in the status of Black and Latino Americans. Importantly, as we predicted, Asian/White participants
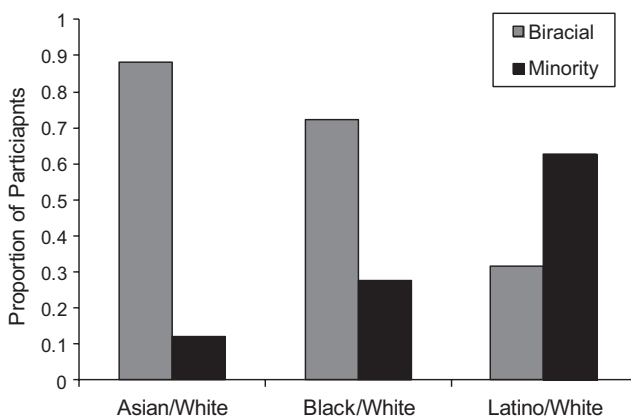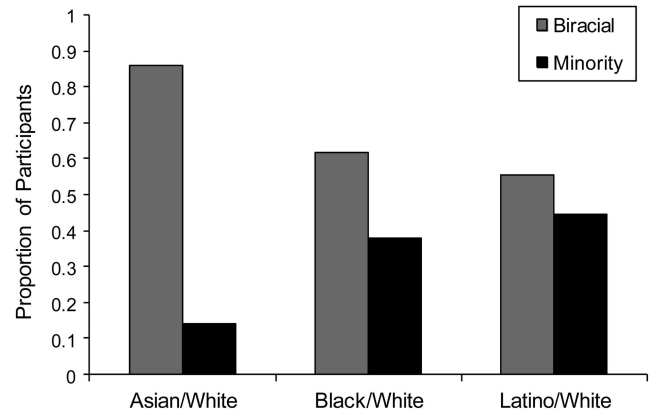

Figure 2. Proportion of participants within each racial group that identified as biracial versus monoracial-minority on the multiple-choice question (Study 1).

were more likely to identify as biracial than Black/White participants, $\chi^2(1, N = 57) = 4.41, p = .04$, and Latino/White participants, $\chi^2(1, N = 63) = 7.31, p = .007$. Overall, these results confirm our hypothesis that mixed-race individuals who are members of groups with higher status in society are more likely than those who are members of groups with lower status to identify as biracial.

Study 2

In Study 2, we aimed to test our hypothesis with mixed-race participants who varied by in status as a function of social class.[1] We predicted that mixed-race individuals from middle-class backgrounds (the higher status group) would be more likely to identify as biracial than those from working-class backgrounds. It is important to note that we predicted that this would persist even when statistically controlling for the racial composition of participants' neighborhoods.

Method

Participants. Participants included mixed-race, Black/White ($N = 62$; 40 females) students from several universities across the country. As in Study 1, racial backgrounds were determined by the races/ethnicities of parents. Consistent with prior research (Bowman, Kitayama, & Nisbett, 2009; Grossmann & Varnum, 2011; Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007), social class background was determined by parents' educational attainment. Specifically, participants were considered middle-class ($n = 36$) if at least one parent had a 4-year college degree and working-class ($n = 26$) if neither parent had a 4-year college degree. Research reveals that parental education is better than parental income or occupation for predicting engagement with the values, ideas, and practices most

Figure 1. Proportion of participants within each racial group that mentioned being biracial versus monoracial-minority in their spontaneous self-descriptions (Study 1).

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[1] Although the ideal design would include working-class and middle-class participants from the three mixed-race groups included in Study 1, we were only able to recruit sufficient numbers of working-class participants who were Black/White. Thus, this study compares working-class and middle-class Black/White participants.

pervasive in each social class context (Davis, 1994; Kohn & Schooler, 1983; Meyer, 1990).

Although gender did not differ by social class, $\chi^2(1, N = 62) = 2.23$, $p = .14$, the racial composition of participants' environments did. Middle-class participants reported living in neighborhoods with slightly more White residents than working-class participants ($M_{middle-class} = 2.81$, $SD = 1.69$ vs. $M_{working-class} = 3.65$, $SD = 1.96$), $t(60) = 1.83$, $p = .07$, and attending high schools with significantly more White students than working-class participants ($M_{middle-class} = 2.83$, $SD = 1.38$ vs. $M_{working-class} = 3.65$, $SD = 1.60$), $t(60) = 2.16$, $p = .04$. Given this, and to test whether social class differences in identification are reducible to racial differences in individuals' environments, we controlled for the racial composition of participants' environments in our analyses.

Procedure. Black/White mixed-race participants were identified from larger participant pools for which they had completed eligibility surveys. They were then recruited to participate in a brief questionnaire study exploring how people think about themselves and others around them. Participants were unaware that they were recruited because of their mixed-race background.

Materials. Participants completed the questionnaire packet in the following order.

Open-ended racial identification. Participants indicated their racial identification by completing the statement: "I racially identify as . . ." This prompt was followed by a blank line.

Degree of identification. Participants reported the degree to which they identified as White, Black, and biracial. Using a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*strongly*), they answered the question: "How *much* do you identify as a member of the following groups?" with respect to European Americans ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.75$), African Americans ($M = 5.63$, $SD = 1.36$), and biracial/multiracial individuals ($M = 6.44$, $SD = 1.34$).

Consistent with prior research (Rockquemore, 1999) and Study 1, mixed-race participants did not identify monoracially as White. Specifically, no participants responded to the open-ended identification question by claiming a monoracial White identity, and the degree to which participants identified as White was significantly lower than both Black and biracial, $Fs > 9.00$, $ps < .01$. Therefore, we focused on participants' identification as Black or biracial.

Demographics. Participants reported their own gender, their parents' races, and their parents' levels of educational attainment. Participants also reported the racial composition of their environments, separately rating their childhood neighborhoods and their high schools on a scale from 1 (*almost all are White*) to 7 (*almost all are Black*). We used this range given that previous work has focused on the role of exposure to Blacks, relative to Whites (e.g., Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002b).

Results and Discussion

Open-ended racial identification. Participants' responses on the open-ended racial identification question were coded into two categories: Black and biracial. The Black category included, "Black," "African American," and "Afro-American." The biracial category included all responses indicating a dual identity as Black and White or as biracial (e.g., "Black/White" "African American and Caucasian," "biracial," "multiracial," and "mixed"). Five respondents were dropped because they did not claim a racial iden-

tity, instead claiming, for example, "human" or "myself." The final sample included 57 participants (23 working-class, 34 middle-class).

To test whether participants' racial identifications differed by social class, we conducted a stepwise logistic regression with social class as the sole predictor on the first step, racial composition of participants' neighborhoods and high schools as predictors on the second step, and racial identification as the dependent measure. At Step 1, participants from middle-class contexts were more likely to claim a biracial identity than those from working-class contexts ($\beta = -1.50$), Wald, $\chi^2(1, N = 57) = 5.44$, $p = .02$. Next, consistent with previous research (Rockquemore, 1999), participants whose neighborhoods and high schools had larger numbers of Whites, relative to Blacks, were more likely to claim a biracial identity ($\beta_{neighborhood} = .859$, Wald, $\chi^2(1, N = 57) = 5.81$, $p = .02$, and $\beta_{high\ school} = -.783$, Wald, $\chi^2(1, N = 57) = 4.31$, $p = .04$). Importantly, the effect of social class on participants' racial identification remained significant after controlling for the racial composition of their environments ($\beta = -1.82$), Wald, $\chi^2(1, N = 57) = 5.70$, $p = .02$ (Figure 3).

Degree of racial identification. Next, we examined social class differences in degree of racial identification. Participants indicated their level of identification with each group separately. We hypothesized social class differences in identification as biracial relative to Black, so we created a difference score by subtracting degree of identification as Black from degree of identification as biracial. Higher difference scores indicate greater identification as biracial relative to Black.

Next, we conducted a stepwise hierarchical regression with social class as the predictor on the first step, the racial composition of participants' neighborhoods and high schools as predictors on the second step, and identification difference score as the dependent measure. At Step 1, we found that middle-class participants had a greater preference for identifying as biracial than working-class participants, $\beta = .321$, $p = .02$. At Step 2, participants whose high schools had larger numbers of White people, relative to Black people, reported a higher degree of identification as biracial relative to Black, $\beta_{high\ school} = -.311$, $p = .05$. Neighborhood composition did not have a significant effect, $\beta_{neighborhood} = .069$,
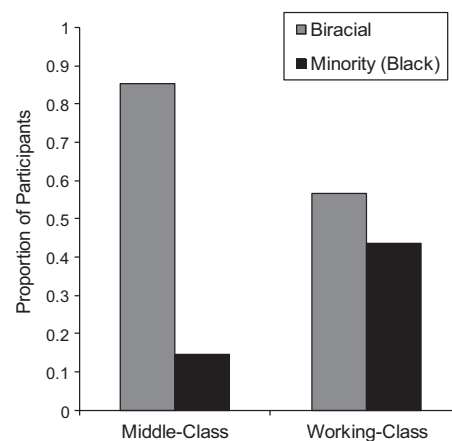

Figure 3. Proportion of middle- and working-class participants that identified as biracial versus Black on the open-ended question (Study 2).

$p = .70$. Finally, confirming our prediction, the effect of social class on degree of racial identification remained significant at Step 2, that is, even after controlling for the racial composition of individuals' environments, $\beta = .266$, $p = .05$.

General Discussion

Among mixed-race individuals, who claims a biracial identity? Our research reveals that two status-related factors matter—racial and social class background. In both cases, individuals associated with higher status groups are more likely than those associated with lower status groups to claim a biracial identity.

Study 1 revealed that Asian/White individuals were more likely to identify as biracial than Latino/White individuals in both spontaneous self-descriptions and multiple-choice questions and more likely to identify as biracial than Black/White individuals on multiple-choice questions. Additionally, Black/White participants were more likely than Latino/White participants to mention biracial in their spontaneous self-descriptions, but the two groups were equally likely to identify as biracial on the multiple-choice measure. One potential explanation for these findings is the changing status of Blacks and Latinos in American society. In recent years, the number and visibility of high status Blacks in American society (e.g., Barack Obama, Collin Powell) have increased. Meanwhile, a recent Gallop poll (Jones, 2011) reveals that public perceptions of Latinos continue to decline.

Beyond racial background, Study 2 demonstrated that, on both open- and closed-ended questions, social class was also associated with who claims a biracial identity. Middle-class participants were more likely than working-class participants to identify as biracial than monoracial-minority. This finding held even after controlling for differences in the racial composition of participants' social environments.

Limitations and Future Directions

All identities are influenced by a variety of factors and biracial identity is no exception. One limitation of the current research is that we were unable to control for some additional factors that also influence racial identification. Research finds, for instance, that social class is associated with skin tone among Black Americans (Keith & Herring, 1991) such that middle class Black Americans have lighter skin tones than their working-class counterparts. Future research is needed to determine whether appearance moderates our social class findings for mixed-race individuals.

Additional research is also needed to examine the process through which our two status-related factors influence racial identification. For example, with respect to the role of racial background, this effect may be driven by attempts to enforce strict racial boundaries between White Americans and lower status people of color, in this case, Black and Latino Americans. To preserve these boundaries, Black/White or Latino/White people may often be categorized monoracially as minority and not afforded the choice to identify as biracial. In comparison, there may be fewer efforts to preserve the boundary between White Americans and Asian Americans, leading Asian/White people to be categorized as monoracial minorities less often and given the option to identify as biracial more often. Second, with respect to the role of social class background, future work might consider whether this effect is

mediated by a desire for uniqueness. Middle-class individuals use choices to demonstrate individuality and uniqueness more than working-class individuals (Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Stephens et al., 2007). Consequently, mixed-race middle-class individuals may prefer to identify as biracial because the option enhances feelings of distinctiveness and uniqueness.

In contemporary American society, mixed-race individuals encounter a variety of racial identity options. While, the identity claims they make may feel very private and personal, these claims are, in fact, collective products that individuals must negotiate with their environments. With the 2000 Census, the opportunity to claim a biracial identity was made "officially" available to all mixed-race people. However, as our findings suggest, this option may represent yet another of the many choices to express one's self and to exert control over one's identity that are more available to those with higher status.

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