Black, White, and Gray: Biracial Individuals in America

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Published In
The Sloping Halls Review, 5.
A biracial individual is defined as someone who has parents of two different racial groups. One of the primary reasons that I chose this particular group of people is due to the fact that the world is becoming less homogeneous and racial lines are often difficult to distinguish. There has been a 550% increase in interracial marriages between 1960 and 1990 (Pittsburgh Tribune-Review 10/5/97). The National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) tabulates births by race and reports that birthrates of mixed race children have been climbing. The NCHS states that truly accurate numbers cannot be obtained because the father's race is unspecified in a number of births each year. Beyond the year of birth, no demographic data are kept on the total number of biracial children.

One reason for this may be that although racial identities are classified and considered for a myriad of reasons in this country, dividing people along racial lines is widely considered insignificant. No one disputes that the characteristics exist, but they are not considered definitive. The closest that most questionnaires and forms come is “other”—an open-ended throwing-up-of-the-hands by social scientists and bureaucrats. Presently, census forms include only five racial categories—white, black, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Native Alaskan, and other. Biracial and multiracial people do not have a “box” to check on such forms, so they are forced to choose between their parents. These people should have the option of recognizing all of their heritage. The addition of a biracial category is important to insure that these children have an identity and correct terminology for who they are. “Other” is an unsatisfactory category because it does not contribute to an accurate portrayal of the population and it offends many. The number of people who checked the “other” box increased 45% between 1980 and 1990 censuses to 9.8 million people—approximately 1 in 25 Americans (NCHS). “Other” means different, and that is a label that no person should bear.

Confusion surrounding race stems from the illogic used to define it. Our modern concept of race, which underlies the concept of race formed in the United States during the period of black slavery, has its roots in the European seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century colonial expansions. It was believed during the colonial period that racial designations of non-European people were on the basis of biological characteristics, which were inherited by the races in question. The model of racial inheritance was an arithmetic
mechanism that dictated the intergenerational transmission of racial characteristics. Slavery laws and social practices set a precedent which survives to this day among many whites and blacks. For example, during the nineteenth century, southern slaveowners invented the “one drop rule”. This stated that a child with a single drop of black blood was assured membership in the black race. It guaranteed that the illegitimate offspring of a white slavemaster and his black concubine remained a slave. This system of identification became regarded as the “one-drop rule” or “code noir”.

People who do choose to live as white knowing that they have black ancestors are considered to be “passing”. Biracial people have passed or “crossed over” for different reasons over time. When segregation and Jim Crow laws were still on the books, many kept their black roots secret in order to take advantage of economic opportunities. Some would leave their black community in the morning, go to work as a white person, and then come home each night. Others passed to escape the genuine tasks and hardships of being black. To pass entirely into a white world required the severing of community and family ties, and often the most practical way to do this was to move far from home. Families would sometimes cooperate, mourning the passing relative as if he or she had died. Tolerance of passing eventually disappeared, replaced by black pride and calls for unity: passing became synonymous with cowardice.

For as long as blacks, whites, and other races have chosen to settle down and marry one another in this country, they have confronted the question: “What about the children?” More often than not, this is posed in warning rather than out of curiosity. Underneath lies a widely held assumption that the racial divide between white and black is vast and unbridgeable. While two independent adults may be considered free to deal with their choice, they are appealed to on behalf of the undeserving offspring who will supposedly suffer the results. Children of interracial unions are born into a racial netherworld, the conventional wisdom continues, destined to be confused, maladjusted, “tragic mulattos”, the perpetual victims of a racially polarized society.

For all Americans, not just biracial individuals, nothing about life or identity is so clear-cut or guaranteed—and certainly nothing that has to do with the issue of race. Such sweeping generalizations reflect the laziness of a society that, if given the choice, will often oversimplify rather than appreciate complexities and coexisting realities. I set out to write this paper because I have not seen the question “What about the children” asked of the children themselves. At least, the question has not been asked without the assumption that there was some inevitable tragedy to be revealed.

In order to get a answer to this question, I conducted a series of interviews with biracial individuals. In total, I interviewed seven people (3 females and 4 males). Their racial backgrounds are very diverse—Hispanic/
In 85% of the cases, the people identified themselves as the “minority” of the two races, i.e. black or Hispanic. The most popular reason that was cited for this was the fact that they felt more comfortable with that race as opposed to the other. Also, people generally assume that they are a member of that “minority”, so it is easier to identify with them anyway. Historically, only the black community has taken in the offspring of miscegenation, although not always willingly. Some biracial people who identify as black acknowledge the societal pressures at hand. As one female stated, “In this country, saying you’re black is making a political statement: My father is black, I’m black. American society is very concerned with definitions, very concerned. This is a culture that doesn’t do well with ambiguity.”

Consequently, when biracial people choose to embrace both racial heritages, they are met with confusion and criticism from both sides. When white-appearing biracial people tell white people of their black heritage, sometimes the white person will say, “I never would have known if you hadn’t told me.” Other times, the same phrase suggests absolute disbelief. One biracial male says, “A lot of blacks get upset if they ask you exactly what you are and you come back and say, ‘biracial.’ One response is, ‘What? Are you too good to identify with blacks?’ I say, ‘It’s not that I’m too good at all, but I’m composed of two different races and I choose to value each of those.’ It’s not as though I’m going to write off my mother’s race for the convenience of pleasing somebody else’s view of what I should or should not be doing.”

Still others are forging a self-concept that is deliberately biracial. One female stated that she identified herself as being biracial and that she suffered discrimination from both sides because they did not feel that she fit in with either of them.

Few interracial couples escape all of the land mines that are historically placed in their paths: from being disowned by both sides of the family to the
occasional stare or muttered comments on the street. While some couples would respond to such treatment with bitterness or might even retreat from each other, others remain steadfast in the commitment to one another and to the family they have created.

It was not until 1967, in the U.S. Supreme Court's *Loving vs. Virginia* decision, that remaining antimiscegenation laws (still on the books in seventeen states at the time) were overruled. Richard and Mildred Loving were the appellants in the case. In 1958 the newlywed Lovings were arrested in their Virginia hometown for being married to each other. She was black, he was white. Rather than face incarceration, they moved back in with their respective parents, then moved together to Washington, D.C., where they lived for several years.

Laws against miscegenation existed in America as early as 1661. By and large, they targeted only groups that were not allowed to marry whites, sometimes reflecting regional concerns. In some states, including Maryland and Louisiana, legislators also wrote in provisions against Native Americans and blacks marrying, probably to prevent the formation of a coalition between the two oppressed groups. Laws and the threat of social censure never successfully precluded interracial relationships and the conception of biracial children.

For many, neighborhood was where their emerging self-images were first tested. Their parents might never have spoken of race or of difference, but a little white girl may have asked, "Why is your skin dirty all the time?" As children, many biracial people were picked on for being different neighbors, left behind, threatened, or beaten up. Others were held in high esteem and celebrated for their "exotic look".

Curiously, five of the people that I interviewed grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood and the remaining two grew up in mixed communities. Racial segregation marks a significant portion of American residential life. According to *American Demographics* magazine, a study by the Knight-Ridder newspaper chain analyzed figures from the 1990 U.S. census and showed that approximately 30% of black Americans and 65% of white Americans live in racial isolation.

There are many types of mixed communities. One is the changing neighborhood, usually developing or decaying. Another is the neighborhood that is integrated by intention. The examples of the latter, where the inhabitants truly accept and enjoy the diversity in their community, seem few and far between. They are fragile, easily affected by real estate trends, changing school resources, and the establishment or disintegration of employment opportunities.

At first glance, it seems that a mixed community would be the best place for a biracial child to grow up in. Both of the individuals that grew up in mixed neighborhoods expressed the disappointment that they felt once they began to travel or relocate to other types of communities. They realized that the
communities they came from, which were relatively untroubled on issues of race, were not the norm. Apparently, race seems to be more of an issue on the east coast as opposed to the west coast. The two people that I spoke to from the west coast both lived in mixed neighborhoods and said that racism was not something that they really experienced.

One male that I interviewed is half Chinese and half black. He and his siblings endured quite a bit of racism when they moved into their new neighborhood because they looked different from everyone else. He experienced quite a bit of namecalling and he dealt with it by fighting. This particular method gained him respect in his neighborhood. In addition, he and his siblings also excelled in school, and thereby gained notoriety and additional respect in that aspect. Many biracial people’s most important experience of a neighborhood was to take leave of it. Only after relocating did some of the people that I interviewed realize what they had been missing (or what they had once had).

In choosing a partner or spouse, few people escape their parents’ hopes for them. Often, in the area of love and marriage, typical parental aspirations are for good providers—loving, steady mates who will help build a strong new link in the family chain. In many families, people will assume that their children’s spouses will share the family’s religion, ethnicity, and race. This last concern presents a twist for biracial children. Sometimes the parent will advise their child to avoid their missteps. “Don’t make the mistake I did,” one Chinese mother said to her children. In contrast, there are those parents who do not care about race at all.

Only about 5% of African Americans marry whites, but each year the number increases. In addition, one-fourth of Hispanics now marry outside of their group and one-third of Asians living in the United States are married to non-Asians. Also, 95% of white Americans have African heritage while 85% of black people have European heritage. In a matter of years, few people will be able to identify with one particular race.

In a certain aspect, biracial people can never re-create their family of origin, that intersection of two separate groups. They are a one-time-only generation, and so necessarily have to break new ground in their own relationships. In addition, they cannot look to public images—media, literature, films—for models, since they remain virtually invisible.

In general, most of the individuals stated that their parents did not have a preference as to whom they dated, “as long as they treated them well.” One male said that his mother would prefer that he date a Chinese female. In contrast, his black father expressed an interest in him dating “any minority, as long as they were not white”. Another female experienced bias from her extended family, particularly from her father’s side, which is Hispanic. They told her that she should date and marry someone that “was her skin color or lighter for the benefit of her children . . . so they don’t turn out too dark”.

Some biracial people choose a spouse or partner who reflects their
primary racial affiliation, just as most monoracial people have always done. One of the reasons that this occurs is because it is easier to identify with someone who is of the same racial affiliation due to the fact that they experience some of the same trials and tribulations as one’s own. What also crops up for some biracial people in all life choices is an attraction to dualism and to people “who straddle bridges”: biracially, biculturally, politically, religiously, or in some other fundamental experience.

In the book, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Iris Young examines the definition of a social group. She states that a social group is a collective of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, or way of life. Members of a group have a specific affinity with one another because of their similar experience or way of life, which prompts them to associate with one another more than with those not identified with the group, or in a different way. Based upon this definition, biracial individuals can be defined as a group. In addition, not only can others believe that they are a group, but they often refer to themselves as a group. They are not merely an aggregate, because that is any classification of persons according to some attribute which is often arbitrary. It is through this group membership that biracial individuals experience oppression, namely cultural imperialism. In its traditional usage, oppression means “the exercise of tyranny by a ruling group”. This is often used to describe the situation of black South Africans under apartheid or black Americans throughout history. In its new usage, oppression designates the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because of a tyrannical power coerces them, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentional liberal society.

To experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one’s own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one’s group and mark it out as the “Other”. Biracial individuals are the epitome of this definition because they have been specifically referred to as “other”. The culturally dominated undergo a paradoxical oppression in that they are both marked out by stereotypes and at the same time, rendered invisible. The invisibility that biracial individuals experience presents itself in their inability to be recognized with a “biracial” category. In addition, this invisibility extends itself into the public realm where biracial actors, singers, sports stars, etc. are few and far between.

Cultural imperialism involves the paradox of “experiencing oneself as invisible at the same time that one is marked out as different”. The invisibility arises when dominant groups fail to recognize the perspective embodied in their cultural expressions as a perspective. Those living under cultural imperialism find themselves defined from the outside, positioned, placed, by a network of dominant meaning they experience as arising from elsewhere, from those with whom they do not identify and who do not identify with them. The dominant culture’s inferiorized images of the group must be
internalized by group members at least to the extent that they are forced to react to behavior of others influenced by those images.

Despite growing numbers, public images of mixed-race people—who have been part of America's landscape since the first Africans reached America's shores—remain scarce. To become a part of the media landscape, to be recognized in images that are used to promote and illustrate, is to be conferred a certain legitimacy. In my interviews, I asked each person to name all the biracial people they'd seen in film, literature, entertainment, or the news. These lists, invariably, were short. Most people cited actors Lisa Bonet, Halle Berry, and Jasmine Guy, and musician Lenny Kravitz. Often, though, other names were listed with the same assurance, such as singers Vanessa Williams and Lena Horne, who both have two black-identifying parents.

The confusion is understandable, exemplified by the lack of accurate, specific, non-derogatory language for this experience and background. *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* defines mulatto both as someone who is the "first generation offspring of a Negro and a white", and as "a person of mixed Caucasian and Negro ancestry". Although use of the word has been noted as early as 1593, according to *Webster's*, the group was generally thought of as a subset of blacks—at times afforded more rights and privileges than people with pure African ancestry, but never given equal footing with whites.

There seems to be a culture of silence about prejudice in this country—not applied to identifying prejudice in others, but in terms of admitting to one's own prejudices, especially racial ones. Even though discussions of race have become trendy, the talk is generally kept theoretical, or, if at all personal, will center on how the race-based prejudgments of other have affected the person speaking out.

Everyone knows that prejudice is unfair and insensitive and very, very unpopular. To hold sweeping, irrational attitudes about an entire group of people goes against basic ideas of justice—against the idea that we are all individuals. Still, when asked if they had any prejudices, some biracial people came back with a swift, "Oh yes!" followed by their target groups. One of the people who is black-identifying stated that black people cannot be prejudiced and that they only reflect the prejudice of whites. A few were reluctant to talk about their own propensity to stereotype, embarrassed that they could have such feelings, having been the victims and believing that they should know better.

One of the worst cases of prejudice that one of the people told me came from a male friend of mine. He was adopted as an infant and never knew his birth parents. All that he did know was that his biological mother was white and that his biological father was black. His complexion is very fair and his hair is very curly, so he could easily be mistaken for white or Hispanic. He was later adopted by a black couple and he was raised as a black male. One day, the family was in a restaurant and a stranger approached my friend to make sure that he was all right and had not been kidnapped by these black
individuals. It is appalling to believe that this sort of ignorance still lingers in
the 20 century and that people still have a preconceived notion about what
a particular race or people should look like. Racism is a burden for all
Americans. It continues to stigmatize, oppress, and isolate. To transcend it
requires that we recognize true cultural and individual strengths, values, and
experiences. The path is a difficult one; it demands the courage to speak
unpopular truths and wrestle with unpopular feelings.

In my interviews, I asked all of the participants to explain the stereo­
types that surrounded them as a biracial individual. Most people cited the
fact that biracial children are “confused and they have a difficult time dealing
with their identity.” One example of this is in the movie, “Imitation of Life”,
where the main character’s mother is a black housekeeper and her father is
white. This movie seems to tie in with the “tragic mulatto” stereotype that
lingers when one is describing biracial individuals. In addition, some people
believe that biracial children are trying “to fool someone”. This statement
stems from the fact that some biracial individuals seem to identify with a
particular race; therefore, others perceive this as passing or trying to be
someone they are not.

In addition to the negative stereotyping that surrounds biracial indi­
viduals, there are stereotypes that others perceive as beneficial. I termed these
statements “the benefits of being biracial”. As I asked this question, the
answer I received from everyone was that being biracial is having the best of
both worlds. When I ponder on this answer, it seems pretty trite because it is
so general and it does not really tell anything. Some people spoke about the
contrast of the cultures that they have been exposed to throughout their lives
and how this has enriched their lives. One female who is half Hispanic and
half white stated that since her mother is of Irish ancestry that they celebrate
St. Patrick’s Day. This was slightly awkward for her as a child because she
lived in a predominantly black and Hispanic area of Brooklyn; she looked
Hispanic, yet she was celebrating St. Patrick’s Day. As she got older, she
learned to appreciate the fact that her mother was passing on, as well as
sharing, a bit of her culture with her. In addition, a male who is half Chinese
and half black told me that he wanted to find out more about his mother’s
Chinese heritage and that he wanted to learn her native language of Mandar­
in. His mother refused to teach him for reasons that were unknown to him,
so his father proceeded to teach him the slang that he knew. This incensed his
mother and he no longer learned any Mandarin. It was not until he came to
Carnegie Mellon University that he took a class in Mandarin, but it was
extremely difficult for him since most of his classmates were “brushing up”
on their Mandarin grammar.

There are no racial essences that give meaning to the concept of race,
there are no necessary and sufficient conditions for racial membership, and
races are not natural categories. The existence of individuals who appear to
be racially pure does not rescue the concept of race, because this concept
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requires that the majority of humans be forever racially pure. The slippery slope of mixed race is more than an unusual exception to a statistical norm or paradigm of racial purity. Biracial children are special people with needs in a society that is more obsessed with race than its members care to admit. In some less enlightened circles, biracial individuals find themselves envied and ostracized, exalted, and defiled, all because of something that they had no control over. The future analysis of race in America will ask the question “what is black?”, “what is white?”, etc. These questions have always nagged at the underpinnings of American’s racial order, but never more urgently than today. We are on the brink of a new century in which the standards of a new generation pose the greatest challenge yet to the curse of the color line. Ralph Ellison stated, “When I discover who I am, I’ll be free.” I am convinced that the pressures in our country to separate black and white and make biracial people choose one over the other are epidemic. If Americans of whatever color cannot be freed to be appreciated as individuals, what is freedom worth when it is limited by the tyranny of small community minds dressed up in the trappings of cultural nationalism?

Bibliography

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