

MIXED-RACE IN AMERICA

Rahul Yates

Advisor: Mr. Johnson

A BRENTWOOD SCHOOL INDEPENDENT STUDY 2020-2021

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Introduction:

Hi everyone. My name is Rahul Yates, and I am a sophomore at Brentwood School. I have been working on an Independent Study under the guidance of Mr. Johnson, Associate Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, as well as in conjunction with the Belldegrün Center for Innovative Leadership. Throughout this study, I focused on the sociological, chronological, and geographical perspectives on the past and present of multiracial people in North America, and through these findings, ideated ways to address the current problems that mixed-race people face today.

I chose to embark on this journey because I am a multiracial and multicultural individual. My father is white-American. His family has been in the United States since the 1600s when they arrived on the early ships that came from Britain to what is now Maine and Massachusetts. My mother, on the other hand, is South Asian, whose parents immigrated from North India in the 1960s after immigration laws were passed that allowed for people from Asia to come to the United States. In our household, we celebrate both American and Indian holidays and engage in these cultures in many different capacities.

Growing up, I knew that I was different. When meeting someone for the first time, I always had to explain myself and my background more than the other kids. When I was younger, I would mostly identify as Indian because I felt more connected to my Indian culture. As I became a teenager and became more aware of myself and society, I began to explore what it meant to be multiracial, both in how I identify and how other multiracial people identify. I started to take mental notes of experiences that I realized I was living through *because* of my racial ambiguity.

When I got to high school, I really started to embrace who I was. I had not honestly answered the “*What are you?*” question in so long that I think I had just run out of energy in pretending to be someone who I was not. I could never truly fit in with Indian people; I could never truly fit in with white people. The only people I could fit in with were fellow multiracial people who could relate to my experiences.

With this independent study, I really wanted to dive deep into the realm of mixedness; what was it like being mixed 80 years ago and today? What are the issues multiracial people experience? Where are multiracial people in America? It was these types of questions that my research was centered on. From November to April, I read multiple books and articles and

conducted numerous interviews with both students and faculty at Brentwood and multiracial people outside of school who are active in this space. I am so grateful to have been able to use this time to not only learn about others' experiences but also to feel more grounded in my own.

In this paper, I start by presenting 3 different historic multiracial communities in America over a 300-year time period. I then move into discussing my main takeaways and findings from my research and outreach that focuses on the multiracial experience today. The paper continues by presenting advice based on these conclusions, discussing briefly the (very) recently released 2020 Census Results, and ending with Maria P.P. Root's Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People.

While there is a lot of information in this paper, it is just the tip of the iceberg of the multiracial past and present. There are many other communities, issues, and people that are not covered in this paper, but I hope this gives the reader a glimpse of the expansive nature of the mixed-race community.

Lastly, I would like to thank everyone who helped me in this journey – Mr. Johnson, my advisor and friend who guided me during this independent study, the BCIL for their continued support and opportunities, the administrators who helped make this project happen, and the people who graciously gave their time and shared their experiences with me – I could not have done this without all of you. Thank you.

Multiracial History

Colonial Mixed-Race Population:

The first historical multiracial population I present is the colonial mixed-race population. Unlike the other communities, this one does not have as much of a happy story. As Europeans came to the U.S., interracial marriage between white men and African and Indigenous women became more frequent. Initially, these children were free because there were fewer strict laws about interracial relationships and mixed-race children. However, over time, many mixed children were oppressed after the creation of a law that said that if one's mother is of color, then the child is treated the same way, even when the child may have looked different (as in mixed-race). This signified the beginning of the "One Drop Rule," where multiracial children with *any* non-white ancestry were treated like full people of color.

Unfortunately, many of these relationships were forced. Oftentimes, the children were products of sexual assault between an enslaver and an enslaved person. For example, Thomas Jefferson had many children with a multiracial slave of his. Similarly, the Melungeons of the Appalachian region of the Eastern United States are a group that descend from the marriages between white European men, African women, and Indigenous people. These intermarriages are also why many African Americans today have European blood in them.

The "One Drop Rule," was created to enslave multiracial African individuals by saying that anyone with a "drop" of African ancestry was considered fully black. This rule is an example of one of the laws that oppressed both people of full African descent as well as those of mixed ancestry. Part of this came from European Americans wanting to reestablish their dominance using a racial hierarchy as the multiracial population in America was growing. Thus, the mixing of white and black individuals has historically been discouraged as seen through this multiracial community and the actions taken towards it.

Bengali Harlem:

On a more positive note, the second historical mixed-race population I present is coined the "Bengali Harlem " by MIT Professor Vivek Bald. This community came about in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Muslim men who were working as merchants, traders, or on ships came to the U.S. for work related purposes and then stayed here illegally. They were mostly on the East Coast, with a small community being in Louisiana as well.

As New York City's boroughs were very divided by race and class, these men integrated into the existing Puerto Rican and African American communities. There, they married the local African American and Puerto Rican women and started multiracial families. Because most of the women they married were Christian, the families were interfaith. The mothers raised their children as Christian, but the fathers remained mostly Muslim.

As many of these families were working-class, some started fusion restaurants with names like the "Bengal Garden." Upon entering these restaurants, oftentimes the first person seen would be a Puerto Rican woman as the hostess, not necessarily a South Asian person. Similarly, in the Pakistan League of America, there are pictures of these men bringing their Puerto Rican and African American wives with them to meetings.

All of these interracial relationships "built partnerships that reached across language, religion, ethnicity, and other differences." However, as the South Asian community in the United States grew, partly due to the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act that made it easier for Asian immigrants to come to America, there was less of a "need" to marry outside of one's race. The children of these relationships went on to integrate within the Black and/or Hispanic communities in New York City and New Orleans, but some still remember their South Asian ancestry today.

Punjabi-Sikh Mexican Community:

The third historical multiracial population I present is the Punjabi-Sikh Mexican community of California. This community began in the early 1900s when Punjabi Sikh men immigrated from India to various cities in California. Because of their extensive knowledge of agriculture from India, they mostly worked on farms after their arrival in the U.S.

Strict American immigration laws prevented these men from going back to India to bring Indian women as wives; instead, they married the Mexican women they worked with on the farms. Because both the Indian men and Mexican women would select "Brown" on the census reports, they were not barred from marrying each other as it was technically not considered an interracial marriage. In addition, the Punjabi Sikh men were comfortable marrying the Mexican women due to the similarities in both cultures such as coming from rural backgrounds, similar cuisines, and their resemblance to Punjabi women.

As this community grew, they also branched out and created restaurants that would serve Indian, Mexican, and fusion cuisines. A great example is the Chicken Curry Enchilada, which incorporated both traditional Mexican and Indian foods and spices. The children of these relationships often grew up speaking Spanish and practicing Catholicism with their mothers, while their fathers went to Sikh temples, or gurdwaras.

However, once again, when the Immigration Act of 1965 passed and more Indians from India began immigrating to the U.S., this community began to fade. It is interesting to note that the Indians who came from India did not consider these Punjab-Mexican families a part of their community and refused to integrate with them. Overtime, the children of these interracial relationships either married into the local Hispanic community or local Indian community, bringing an end to this historical community. The former mayor of El Centro, California, David Singh Dhillon, was a 3rd generation Punjabi-Mexican.

Summary:

Each community has a different origin story and different experience. While first-hand accounts from members of these communities are difficult to come by, it is easy to imagine that their members faced similar, if not worse treatment by being in interracial relationships or being multiracial and multicultural during very racially and ethnically divided times. However, they do teach us that when two completely different types of people come together, there is the potential for something beautiful to form. They also illustrate resilience, fighting societal norms at their times to be together. Overall, these historical communities certainly exemplify the delicate intricacies of being mixed-race.

The Multiracial Experience Today

So what is the multiracial experience today? This question can have infinitely different answers based on who you ask. For my research, I interviewed members of the Brentwood community as well as those outside of our community who either identify as multiracial or are in interracial relationships. We covered several topics, including how they are perceived by others, how they answer the notorious “what are you?” question, what their general experience being mixed is/has been like, and ending by their offering advice for multiracial individuals.

Experience:

One of the biggest issues multiracial people face is how they are perceived by others. Because multiracial people can look monoracial, racially ambiguous, or have unique features, they are often perceived in many ways by different people. Some interviewees expressed times when colleagues said discriminatory things about one of their races because they did not know or think that they were mixed with that race/ethnicity. In addition to how others perceive them, the interviewees also discussed their experiences being multiracial. Some enjoyed being part of multiple cultures and practicing different religions and holidays.

However, they also shared many negative experiences they have had with being mixed. For example, the different sides of their families may not understand each other, which can make communication difficult and often require the person to **code-switch**, defined as changing how one acts to adapt to their surroundings. While everyone code-switches in some way, multiracial people often code-switch much more often as they may engage with different types of people more frequently.

Furthermore, these individuals also had more traumatic experiences because of their mixed identity. As American society has historically focused on the people of color/white binary, multiracial people often find themselves being forced to choose which side they identify with. The problem with this “choosing” is that the multiracial identity is extremely fluid and can change over time based on the person’s surroundings and other personal factors. By forcing people to just choose one of their races, monoracial individuals inevitably cause long-term damage to mixed-race people. Multiracial people are not meant to fit in any box; that is literally what the term “multiracial” means.

In addition, because of their appearance, multiracial individuals often do not look like one of their races, which only makes this “box” problem worse. Being expected to identify with only one race or ethnicity can also make mixed people feel like they will never be able to identify with the other side of them that they have been forced to set aside. Many of my interviewees expressed how they felt like they were unable to identify with other sides of themselves because they did not physically resemble that side. This phenotypic difference makes them feel like they are and will never be welcome in those spaces, thus suppressing an entire part of themselves.

Similarly, because many multiracial people are racially ambiguous, they often do not feel like they fit in with any of their groups, and when in spaces with one of their groups, they feel as though the “other” part of them is seen more clearly. This ambiguity can also lead to more trauma as it feels like they will never be fully welcomed in those spaces. This lack of belonging links to the **impostor syndrome** that multiracial people experience, which is defined as a feeling of not belonging in a certain place. For multiracial people who may appear monoracial, they may feel an even greater sense of impostor syndrome because society bases experiences from perception, and if they are unable to truly ever fit the “criteria” of their other racial/ethnic groups, then they may never be able to fully engage with that side of themselves.

“What Are You?” question:

In many ways, the question, “What are you?” is the multiracial experience condensed into 3 seemingly harmless words. However, this question can bring up many kinds of feelings in mixed-race people. Depending on the person, they may just choose to identify as the side they feel like they look more like. Some of the interviewees who responded in this way choose to do so because it is easier, and it avoids questions about identity that have grown to become undesirable and awkward for them as multiracial people.

Multiracial people may also have a different experience with this question; if they appear to be monoracial, people may never assume they are multiracial and therefore not ask them this question.

With racially ambiguous people, their reaction to the question vastly differs. Some like the question because they feel being mixed-race is interesting and are proud of their mixed heritage; others respond with “you first” or “how much time do you have” to see how committed

the person asking is to truly understanding the person's unique background. Some find the question rude; others change how in-depth they answer based on the person asking. Some even have nicknames for their mixes; for example, an interviewee who identifies as white/Jewish and Filipinx calls themselves "Jewipino."

While the reaction and answer to the question, "What are you?" can change with each multiracial individual, the overarching theme is that it brings the mixed identity into question, and signifies that multiracial people are seen as outsiders because they may be "different."

Advice:

As proven, the multiracial identity can be a difficult one to endure. The following is advice collected from the interviewees regarding what they would recommend to other mixed-race people.

The first piece of advice, and arguably most important, is *“We can’t let others define us.”* As multiracial people are constantly being perceived differently and forced into unfair boxes, it can become difficult to remember how they truly identify. By remembering that only they are the ones who can say how they identify, multiracial people can avoid some of the issues of feeling like impostors or not belonging.

Other individuals stated, *“Do not be ashamed of your mixed identity. Be proud that you are the product of the love of people of different ethnicities/races/identities,”* and *“find out what makes you who you are.”* By centering oneself and fully taking in the idea of what it means to be mixed-race, it becomes much easier to fully embrace such an identity.

To the multiracial people who only identify as one race or ethnicity, some interviewees said, *“People who choose one over the other have reasons to do so, but ask why they do so,”* and *“no one else can pick someone else’s identity; identity starts with an ‘i’.”*

The main takeaway of the various pieces of advice is that it is important for multiracial people not to bend to other people’s perception of them and be fortified in their identity that feels the most comfortable.

Rhetoric:

The rhetoric surrounding the mixed-race identity is also very important. Multiracial and mixed-race are used interchangeably, meaning someone of two or more races. Multiethnic is similar, meaning someone of two or more ethnicities.

However, there are some examples of helpful and harmful rhetoric when it comes to self-identifying. For example, harmful rhetoric could be something along the lines of *“I am x % this and x % that”* or *“I am half this and half that.”* These kinds of statements essentially force multiracial people to only be a part of their identities, which is incorrect; as one of the interviewees put it, *“Multiracial people are whole members of each of the things they are mixed with.”* Instead, better rhetoric could be along the lines of *“I am this and that.”* While a very

subtle change, it takes out any delineation or percentages; instead, it accepts that multiracial people can be 100% of multiple ethnicities or races.

Books & Media:

I also read books that discussed the multiracial experience. For example, in Pearl Fuyo Gaskins' book published in 1999, she collects short written pieces by multiracial teenagers and young adults. The perspective offered from the book is interesting as it focuses on the experience of young people with multiracial identities, before people were even allowed to choose more than one race on the national census. The way the interviewees engaged with their identity was similar but also different than how a multiracial teenager discusses their identity today because at that time, there were even fewer multiracial people and thus even less representation of this identity.

In addition to books, I also examined the way mixed-race people are portrayed in the media. Because mixed-race people can be monoracial or racially ambiguous, they often end up playing many different roles. For example, Rashida Jones who is of African and European ancestry is quite racially ambiguous, and has played "tanner" white women, Italian, and African American roles. Another actor, Avan Jogia, who is white and Indian, played an ambiguous-white person in his role in the hit show *Victorious*. In 2019 a new TV show, *Mixed-ish*, featured a multiracial family, with a white father and African American mother. The premise of this show centered around the mixed race/ multicultural experience of the family, in a 1980's aesthetic. While the show received favorable reviews from multiracial individuals, who were thrilled to see their representation on TV, the show was not renewed past the second season. However, we continue to see multiracial representation in TV commercials, usually with an interracial couple and racially ambiguous children. This signifies that Hollywood is aware of the multiracial community and is experimenting with different ways to incorporate these individuals in the media.

How can people support multiracial people today & in a school setting? (+ answer to Central Questions)

For those who do not identify as multiracial or multiethnic, there are many ways to support multiracial and multiethnic people in their communities.

First, be cognizant of interactions with multiracial and multicultural people. It is easy to accidentally say a microaggression to someone who might be racially ambiguous or who may have a background that does not necessarily align with how they appear. Avoid abruptly asking questions like “*What are you?*” or being shocked/not believing them when they give their response. In a cultural activity with monoracial and multiracial people, it is important not to ostracize them and treat them as others, even if they do not necessarily look like the other monoracial people in the room.

In a school setting, it is necessary to not group multiracial students with their monoracial peers during discussions on race and ethnicity. The multiracial experience is often very different from those of monoracial people, meaning oftentimes multiracial people will not have the same contributions as other students. Recognizing this difference and giving time for everyone to share their thoughts will help foster a more inclusive classroom environment.

In addition, to help multiracial students feel more comfortable in their identity, schools should host more spaces for dialogue where students can feel safe in discussing their experiences with their identity with others. Increasing the representation of mixed-race in the curriculum can also help these students feel heard and see a reflection of themselves in a more academic setting.

Lastly, special coaching to teachers and other adults on campus on how to engage with a mixed-race student could be very helpful because these students can often be racially ambiguous. Having adults who can respect this identity and accurately engage with the students could make all the difference to someone who is navigating their identity during the teenage years.

2020 Census Results

Although delayed, the 2020 census data was finally released in August 2021. The most noteworthy takeaway from all of the data is that **America is more multiracial than ever**. The reported multiracial population grew 276% since the 2010 census, from 9 million to 33.8 million people. Much of this population is young because many are products of recent interracial relationships.

The multiracial population grew in almost every county as well, with the most notable increases in the Southwestern United States and Puerto Rico. These results reaffirm that the multiracial population is the fastest growing underrepresented group in the United States. We are entering a new age where multiracial people will soon be as common as monoracial individuals, ideally leading to a society that is more inclusive of all identities. As a result, representation for those who identify as mixed-race will increase because there will be a greater number of mixed people telling our stories in television, schools, literature, etc.

Maria P.P Root's Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People

Below is a "Bill of Rights" for mixed-race individuals written by author and psychologist Maria P.P. Root. Many of these "rights" exemplify experiences that multiracial people have faced, and they should help multiracial individuals reaffirm their identity.

I HAVE THE RIGHT...

Not to justify my existence in this world.

Not to keep the races separate within me.

Not to justify my ethnic legitimacy.

Not to be responsible for people's discomfort with my physical or ethnic ambiguity.

I HAVE THE RIGHT...

To identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify.

To identify myself differently than how my parents identify me.

To identify myself differently than my brothers and sisters.

To identify myself differently in different situations.

I HAVE THE RIGHT...

To create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial or multiethnic.

To change my identity over my lifetime--and more than once.

To have loyalties and identification with more than one group of people.

To freely choose whom I befriend and love.

Conclusion

While the multiracial identity has infinite layers, it all comes down to a few main ideas, and arguably, the biggest and most common one is the feeling of not belonging. In a world where mixed-race people are small in terms of numbers and lack an identifying “look,” growing up multiracial is certainly no easy feat. It is imperative to understand that as the mixed community grows, more issues will arise, but so will more opportunities for awareness and positive experiences.