

Identifications and cultural practices of mixed-heritage youth¹

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Abstract

This paper summarises findings from a research study which investigated how 11- to 17-year-old mixed-heritage adolescents living in London negotiate the demands of living with multiple cultures. The study also explored how these adolescents construe themselves in terms of race, ethnicity and nationality. It was found that these individuals had multiple identifications which were subjectively salient to them, and that they were very adept at managing their various identities in different situations. There was no evidence of a sense of marginality, or of being ‘caught between two cultures’, and there was no difference in the strength of British identification exhibited by these mixed-heritage adolescents and white English adolescents of the same age. However, the identities and cultural practices of the mixed-heritage adolescents were fluid and context-dependent, and they appreciated the advantages of being able to negotiate and interact with multiple ethnic worlds.

Introduction

In this paper, we report findings from a research project which explored how British Bangladeshi and mixed-heritage adolescents living in London negotiate the demands of living with multiple cultures. In the present paper, we report the findings obtained with the mixed-heritage youth.

Among other goals, the research aimed to examine: (i) how mixed-heritage youth construe themselves in terms of race, ethnicity and nationality; (ii) the cultural practices of

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these individuals; and (iii) how these individuals' identifications and cultural practices relate to levels of perceived discrimination, self-esteem and life satisfaction.

Data were collected from 11- to 17-year-olds in 2005-2006. The research occurred in two phases. In the first phase, qualitative interviews were conducted with 12 British Bangladeshi and 12 black-white mixed-heritage adolescents. The second phase used a quantitative questionnaire, developed on the basis of the findings from the interviews, which was administered to 569 pupils in three London schools. This sample included 126 mixed-heritage individuals², of whom 43 were black-white mixed-heritage (21 being black Caribbean-white heritage, and 22 being black African-white heritage), with the remaining individuals being drawn from a diverse range of different heritage mixes.

Findings from the qualitative phase

The interviews revealed that the mixed-heritage youth preferred 'mixed-race' to other expressions (such as 'mixed-heritage', 'dual-heritage', 'mixed-parentage', etc.), and that they identified with this category. However, for several participants, religious and Caribbean/African identities were also very salient, as was British identity. 'Being English' was not equated with 'being white', and a black identity was not prioritised even if these individuals were often perceived as black. There was no feeling of marginality or of being 'between two cultures' among these individuals. Instead, their identities were fluid and contextually contingent. Indeed, for many, the most positive aspect of being 'mixed-race' was the ability to negotiate and navigate between both black and white social worlds. Examining the relative salience of identities across different contexts, considerable variability was found. Thus, in the domestic sphere, there was no dominant trend, although where parents lived separately, a sense of biculturalism with an ability to navigate between two different social/domestic worlds was expressed. Attachment to a black-dominated peer group did not necessarily involve prioritising an exclusive black identity.

As far as popular culture and tastes were concerned, black codes and hip-hop subcultural styles were important for these mixed-heritage participants (as they currently are for many British youth). Regarding television and cinema, there was relative homogeneity of taste, with most watching popular mainstream genres (e.g., sitcoms, soaps, American

² 'Mixed-heritage' was defined on the basis of participants' reports of parental ethnicities.

blockbusters, etc.). Few read newspapers regularly. Several of the participants supported England in cricket but Jamaica in the Olympics, suggesting bicultural identifications. The participants consumed a diverse range of food at home, but several also consumed Caribbean or 'black' food regularly. Differences in the cooking practices of fathers and mothers were pronounced in the case of separated parents, where food played a role in the construction of a cultural boundary between two different domestic environments. Fast food was the most common food consumed outside the home. Individuals who had a religion tended to define it as 'Christianity'. However, for several participants, religious practice was non-existent.

These mixed-heritage participants acknowledged Britain's cultural diversity and viewed it positively, but the majority thought the police adopted discriminatory practices. Regarding personal experiences of racism, one-third of the participants reported having been verbally abused, but none mentioned having been a victim of a physical racist attack.

Findings from the quantitative phase

The quantitative questionnaires revealed that, in the full mixed-heritage sample of 126 youth, British identification was weaker than both ethnic and religious identification³; ethnic and religious identifications were of equal strength. It is noteworthy that there was no difference in the strength of British identification exhibited by the mixed-heritage and white English participants. When the black Caribbean-white mixed-heritage participants were analysed as separate group, it was found that they had the highest levels of identification with Britishness out of all the minority ethnic groups, and there were no significant differences in the strength of these participants' ethnic, British and religious identifications. However, for the black African-white participants, ethnic identification was stronger than British identification, with religious identification being between the two. Analysed individually, neither of the two black-white mixed-heritage groups differed from white English children in their strength of British identification.

In the full mixed-heritage sample, levels of ethnic, religious and British identification were not related to perceived discrimination, self-esteem or life satisfaction. However, analysis of the data from the two black-white mixed-heritage groups together revealed a positive correlation between British identification and life satisfaction. Analysis of the data

³ Ethnic identification was operationally defined here in terms of participants' identification with their own self-ascribed ethnicity (which in the case of the mixed-heritage participants was almost always their mixed identity).

from the black Caribbean-white participants on their own revealed a negative correlation between perceived discrimination and the strength of ethnic identification. Analysis of the data from the black African-white participants on their own did not reveal any correlations between variables.

There were gender differences in the cultural practices of both groups of black-white mixed-heritage youth. For example, the boys listened to less R&B music but more Rap and UK Garage music, and were more likely to support national sporting teams, than girls. In addition, both groups of black-white mixed-heritage youth were more likely to eat fast food, and less likely to eat Caribbean/African food, when out with their friends than at home. Language use also differed significantly across contexts: where minority/community languages were spoken, these were associated with the home while English was associated with the school and with the peer group. Cultural practices were not generally related to levels of perceived discrimination, self-esteem or life satisfaction, nor to the strength of ethnic, religious or British identification.

Conclusions

The findings reveal that these mixed-heritage participants did not experience a sense of marginality or of being 'between two cultures', and identified with the national community, despite their awareness and experience of racism and discrimination. However, the identities and cultural practices of these individuals were fluid and context-dependent, and they appreciated the advantages of being able to negotiate and interact with multiple ethnic worlds.