

Complexities in Researching Mixed-Ancestry Adolescents: A Preliminary Study

Contemporary events highlight the need for a better understanding of political, social, and psychological ramifications of mixed ancestry. For example, a lawsuit was filed in the U.S. District court in Honolulu on behalf of an anonymous non-native Hawaiian applicant to the prestigious Kamehameha schools, challenging the rule that only students who can prove at least a trace of native Hawaiian ancestry can attend these schools (Honolulu Star-Bulletin, 2003). The current Administration's No Child Left Behind legislation mandates a closing of the achievement gap between White and minority students (identified as African American, Hispanic, and Native American). The question of whether mixed-ancestry students should be included in these concerns has not been established in this legislation, although tabulating mixed-ancestry students is certainly a critical methodological and practical issue with regard to schools' allocation of resources and accountability (Lopez, 2003). Thus, the conundrum of determining whether schools are succeeding in closing this gap is exacerbated by the difficulty of procuring accurate race/ethnicity information from students, especially from students of mixed ancestry (Lopez, 2003; Vaishnav, 2003). To be able to monitor and serve the needs of mixed ancestry youth, we need to first be able to identify who is and is not a mixed-ancestry individual. Subsequently, we need to examine particular risk and protective factors relevant to mixed ancestry youth.

In this paper we review some of the recent literature on mixed-ancestry adolescents' social adjustment and the assessment of mixed-ancestry and present theories of mixed-ancestry identity formation. Then, the results of a preliminary qualitative study of mixed ancestry college students that *illustrate* some of the

empirical findings and theoretical suppositions are presented.

Review of the Literature

Mixed-Ancestry Adolescent Adjustment

Whether adolescents of mixed racial and ethnic ancestry experience more psychological and social adjustment problems than their single-race peers has been a source of controversy. A deficiency lens has been prominent in studies of mixed-ancestry youth; their strengths have not been the focus of research. Researchers who have studied clinical populations or community-based small samples have tended to characterize mixed-ancestry youth as having difficulties (e.g., Brandell, 1988; Gibbs, 1987; Gibbs, & Moskowitz-Sweet, 1991; Gordon, 1964; Ladner, 1977; Root, 1992, 1998). However, researchers who have studied non-clinical samples have challenged this view (e.g., Johnson & Nagoshi, 1986; Phinney & Alipuria, 1996). The contradictions in this body of research have been attributed to differences in research design and sampling (Gibbs & Hines, 1992; Udry, Li, & Hendrickson-Smith, 2003).

More recently, since the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) data from a large nationally representative sample of youth have become available, methodological problems associated with the small size and non-representative nature of the samples of previous studies have been overcome. Three recent studies of the Add Health data have shown that some adolescents of mixed ancestry have lower scores on indicators of health and social adjustment in some but not all areas of functioning (Erkut & Tracy, 2003; Cooney & Radina, 2000; Udry et al., 2003). Erkut and Tracy (2003) and Udry and his colleagues (2003) have shown that behavioral correlates of mixed-race identification can vary by specific racial/ethnic combinations. Erkut and Tracy (2003) found that mixed-ancestry adolescents whose mixture contained Asian or

White races were more likely to report abusing drugs and being depressed than either their mono-racial peers or adolescents of other mixed-ancestry combinations. Thus, having identified pockets of mixed-ancestry youth who report adjustment problems it becomes important to identify who they are in order to be able to provide them with services they might benefit from.

Assessing Mixed Ancestry

In order to identify mixed-ancestry adolescents who may benefit from services, one needs a valid and reliable assessment tool. There are a number of factors that can influence a person's self-identification as mixed-ancestry. These include immediate contexts such as the type of questions asked to elicit racial/ethnic identification and the audience for the response (Harris, 2002; Harris & Sim, 2002; Hirschman, Alba, & Farley, 2000). How the question is asked appears to influence whether the same individual identifies with one ethnic/racial group or multiple groups. For example, Hirschman et al. (2000) found that broadening the response options (e.g., "mark one or more" or the inclusion of a multiracial category) increased the number of people identifying as being of mixed race; this was especially true for Native Americans and Hawaiians. Similarly, Johnson and colleagues (1999) found that multiracial women were more likely to identify as multiracial on a questionnaire if a "multiracial" rather than "other" category was available. Other studies have shown how wording and ordering of ethnic and racial identification questions can influence the likelihood of respondents' identifying with more than one racial category — this is especially the case with Latinos (see Hirschman et al., 2000). However, these previous studies have been carried out with adults. The generalizability of their results to adolescents remains unexamined.

Fluidity and Diversity. Just like any racial identification, mixed racial/ethnic identity is fluid (Harris & Sim, 2002; Phinney & Alipuria, 1996), which further complicates the assessment of mixed-ancestry identity. The same question asked at home or in school can yield different answers; moreover, an adolescent's answer given at home or in school may or may not correspond to a parent's identification of the adolescent's racial/ethnic identity. Some adolescents consistently answer the same way in different venues while others give different answers. The fluidity in mixed-ancestry identification may be a product of the adolescent identity formation phase of experimentation (Demo, 1992) or it may be a conscious choice in response to perceived external cues.

Not all adolescents whose parents come from different racial and ethnic backgrounds view themselves to be of mixed ancestry. As Root (1998) has noted, siblings in the same family where parents are from different heritages do not all have the same racial/ethnic identity. Phenotype and other external markers such as an ethnic name or language play a role in racial/ethnic identification but they do not determine it. Also, there can be differences in externally reported and internally held beliefs about one's racial/ethnic identification. Individuals can choose to declare themselves mono-racial or biracial depending on whether they have privacy when reporting their identification (Harris & Sim, 2002) and also depending on the race/ethnicity of their immediate company (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002).

Moreover, all mixes are not "equal" in their propensity for eliciting identification as mixed ancestry (Davis, 1991; Nagel, 1995; Snipp, 1997). Different racial/ethnic mixtures are associated with different likelihoods of self-identifying as mixed ancestry. Harris and Sim report that when