



White-Passing Identity: Socio-Cultural Factors, Socialization, and Self Identification



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Abstract

My research analyzes white-presenting, multiracial, and biracial identities and the ways in which socio-cultural factors such as familial relationships, neighborhood, and socio-economic status impact how those identities manifest. This project also analyzes how mixed identity impacts socialization and interaction with both white people and people from minority backgrounds. Lastly, I analyzed whether white-passing individuals let their bodies speak for them or if they find other ways to assert their identities as multiracial or biracial.

Introduction and Methods

The U.S Census did not allow an individual to mark more than one racial box until 2000 (U.S Census Bureau); thus, being multiracial or biracial was not nationally acknowledged as a valid identity until the Census allowed individuals to mark multiple racial boxes. At that time, 2.9% of the population self-identified as belonging to two or more racial groups. Then, as today, within this demographic category, many individuals exist whose appearances do not reflect their minority background, people who would be categorized as white-passing or white-presenting. A white-presenting person, for purposes of this paper, is defined as “the practice of classifying a child of mixed-race ancestry in the more socially dominant of the parents’ races” (Mixed Race Studies).

- **Method:** semi-structured interviews with 13 multiracial/biracial young people with some white ancestry, aged 13-30
- **Demographic characteristics:**
 - White presenting: n = 7; Non-white presenting: n = 6
 - Female: n = 12; Male: n = 1
 - All respondents live in the United States

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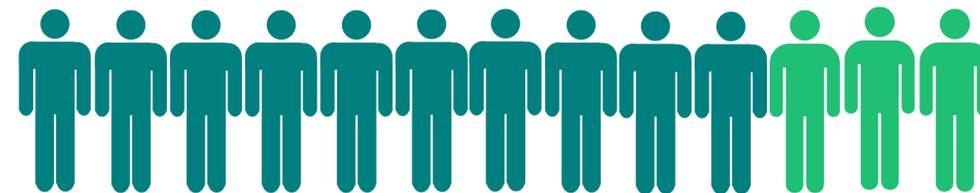
Interview Questions

Both white presenting and non-white presenting respondents were asked a series of questions regarding racial perception and socialization. White presenting respondents were also asked whether they felt any social responsibility as white presenting people.

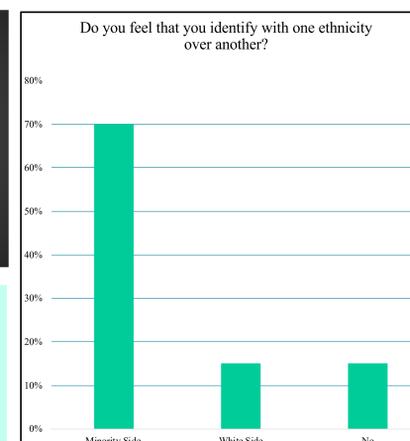
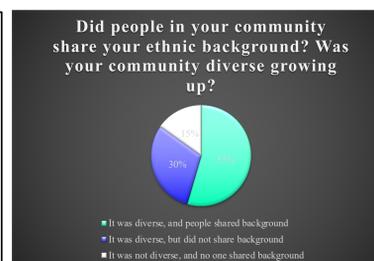
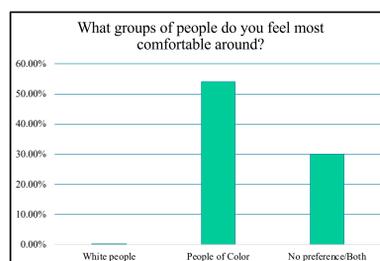
Notable Questions:

- *If you identify as being multiracial or biracial, how does it inform how you move through the world?*
- *Has there been a time when someone found out you weren't white and you had a difficult or eye-opening experience?*
- *“What’s become clear to me through my racial trials and tribulations is that at some point you do make a choice, not between white and black but between silence and speech. Do you let your body talk for you or do you speak for yourself?” (Boudrea, n.d.) Do you have any thoughts about this quote?*

Results



“Being in a community where's there's more people like me made me feel more comfortable with my racial identity and being who I feel like I am.” - Respondent 3



86% of white-presenting individuals feel a social responsibility as multiracial individuals who benefit from white privilege

Discussion

- A majority of biracial/multiracial respondents said that their identity allows them to identify with more people and empathize with a wider range of people.

“As a biracial person, I think you have a wider perspective because you are part of multiple communities, and you identify with more people.” - Respondent 6

- Relationships with parents sometimes also influence how white-passing people identify and with which ethnicity they feel more connected. Respondent 4 (white passing individual) said that since her Indian mom is the working parent in her family, she has grown up viewing “brown women as successful.” However, Respondent 1, who is not white-passing, has grown up spending more time with the white side of her family but identifies more with her black side. This shows the importance of familial relationships in defining the identities of white-passing individuals (though not as much for non-white passing).
- A majority of respondents said that white people are usually the ones who mis-categorize them racially.
- For many respondents, being able to speak the language of their minority side makes them feel a greater right to claim that race, showing the complex cultural aspects of identity associations.

References

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