

Mixed Race Identities
by Peter J. Aspinall and Miri Song

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013
(ISBN: 978-0-230-27504-1). 218 pp.

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As the fastest growing population in Britain, the mixed race group has received increasing attention from academics in social sciences disciplines. The book *Mixed Race Identities* is one of the latest sociological contributions to mixed race studies, engaging in the ongoing debate on ‘race’, ethnicity and identities. This book succeeds in bringing attention to the British context of mixed race studies, a field that has been long dominated by research in the US. The two authors, Peter Aspinall and Miri Song, are leading researchers of mixed race studies in the UK, who published extensively on identities and identity politics of mixed race populations. Based on their ESRC-funded project ‘The ethnic options of mixed race people in Britain’, this book presents the analytical results derived from questionnaire surveys and follow-up, in-depth interviews with over three hundred mixed race participants from higher education institutions in England. The results depict the unique identity dilemmas faced by mixed race youths. Findings specifically identify how different types of mixed race people understand and articulate their identifications, and eventually question the salience of ‘race’ in shaping individuals’ lived experiences.

The book is structured in eight chapters and it addresses several key dimensions of the mixed race identity inquiries. Starting off by exploring the way in which mixed race youths define themselves, the

authors identify a diverse yet detailed set of identity indicators, such as region (e.g. Londoner), nation (e.g. British) or faith (e.g. Muslim), employed by the participants. Building upon this finding, the participants are further asked to choose one prioritised ethnic group. In this case, identity markers such as physical appearance, connection to one particular heritage (e.g. language skills, involvement in the ethnic community and emotional attachment to the culture) and personal experiences of racism are usually referred to by participants when determining their ‘ethnic camps’.

According to the authors, perceived identities and asserted identities are equally pertinent when mixed race people come to define themselves. Having examined the fluid and complex nature of self-expressed mixed race identities, in the third and fourth chapters the authors go on to explore how mixed race people are perceived by strangers. They note that for many mixed race people, self-claimed racial identities are not often accepted by others. This racial misrecognition is particularly salient for individuals with both black and white heritages, who are always treated as black persons whilst their white side is rarely acknowledged. Interestingly, these mismatch experiences are treated differently by each participant: while some perceive such racial mismatch as traumatising, others regard these incidents as amusing or at least insignificant.

To explain the reasons behind the disparate reactions, the authors use the fifth and sixth chapters arguing that ‘race’ is not entirely central to all mixed race people. They point out that due to different upbringings and social circumstances, mixed race people have developed individual agency to cope with differential treatments by drawing on a variety of discursive resources to negotiate their positions in society. Building on this fact, in the seventh and eighth

chapter the authors argue that both individual agency and social structure should be taken into consideration when investigating mixed race identities. They conclude that a growing recognition of being mixed race will challenge the current racial classification in Britain and potentially signpost a sense of collectivity among mixed race people.

Interestingly, while ‘mixed race’ is employed as a central concept throughout the book, no clear definition of the term is offered by the authors. One main reason for such vague use is that the meanings of mixed race are highly subjective, so it is theoretically challenging to provide a generalised definition applicable to every case. Consequently, researchers ‘need to be careful about making assumptions about what being mixed means’ (p.189). The authors also highlight that the socially constructed nature of ‘race’ gives contextualised interpretations of mixed race. For instance, while in Britain the term is usually employed when referring to the offspring of two socially perceived ‘racially disparate’ parents, e.g. Black/White or South Asian/White, mixed race in the Australian context might mainly be used to describe descendants of intimate unions between indigenous, racialised population and white settlers. In this sense, discussions of mixedness are deeply associated with the historical and social differences in societies. All things considered, the choice of using ‘mixed race’ is based on the assumption that this term is most recognised by both individuals of mixed heritages and members of society, although other terms such as ‘multiracial’ and ‘mixed’ are used interchangeably in the book.

Mixed race studies have seen the development of arguments from an early pathological perspective that viewed mixed race people as biologically inferior and socially marginalised, to a more recent

argument that emphasises the significance of physical appearance and social environment in shaping mixed race experiences. Demonstrating a critical engagement in the on-going debate, this book comprehensively evaluates the possible factors affecting mixed race experiences and analyses the role of mixedness in shaping identities. The main findings suggest that young mixed people experience different types of identification, and many of them are indifferent to how others perceive them racially. These results allude to the politics of recognition, shedding light on the future debates on racial hierarchy, classifications and racial ideologies. Apart from its contribution to theory developments, the book is also methodologically enlightening. An innovative mixed-method approach enhances the validity of the arguments and overcomes the disadvantage of relying on one single method.

In spite of all merits, the narrow geographical focus of the book (Greater London) inevitably restrains the representativeness of the study, lessening its potential to become a comprehensive description of British mixed race identities. Nevertheless, the limit of samples should not obscure observations made about British society in terms of social exclusions and inequalities. The recorded social attitudes towards mixed race people are also worth referencing in future mixed race research conducted in Britain.

Considering the depth of discussions and the use of sociological terminologies, this book might not intend to be an introductory reader for everyone. With frequent references to existing mixed race literature, the book is undeniably most beneficial for those who have an interest in mixed race studies, or at least a broader sociological focus on 'race' and social identity. Given my own research interest in

mixed race people in Scotland, I consider this book as one of essential reads in the field.