

My Choice, Your Categories: The Denial of Multiracial Identities

Sarah S. M. Townsend*

University of California, Santa Barbara

Hazel R. Markus

Stanford University

Hilary B. Bergsieker

Princeton University

Mixed-race individuals often encounter situations in which their identities are a source of tension, particularly when expressions of multiracial and biracial identity are not supported or allowed. Two studies examined the consequences of this identity denial. In Study 1, mixed-race participants reported that their biracial or multiracial identity caused tension in a variety of contexts. Study 2 focused on one often-mentioned situation: completing a demographic questionnaire in which only one racial background can be specified. Relative to mixed-race participants who were permitted to choose multiple races, those compelled to choose only one showed lower subsequent motivation and self-esteem. These studies demonstrate the negative consequences of constraining mixed-race individuals' expression of their chosen racial identity. Policy implications for the collection of racial and ethnic demographic data are discussed.

Each year, more than 2 million students take the SAT. As they register for this test, students complete the “SAT Questionnaire” containing a series of 42 questions about themselves and their interests. For the 2006–2007 academic year, question 35 asked “How do you describe yourself? (Mark only one).” There

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sarah S. M. Townsend, Department of Psychology, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106 [e-mail: townsend@psych.ucsb.edu].

We would like to thank Max Hawkins for his assistance with data collection and Clara L. Wilkins and Bries Deerrose for their help with data coding.

were eight options: (a) American Indian or Alaska Native; (b) Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander; (c) Black or African American; (d) Mexican or Mexican American; (e) Puerto Rican; (f) Other Hispanic, Latino, or Latin American; (g) White; or (h) Other (The College Board, 2006, p. 12). For students who identify with only one of the categories, this question doesn't require a second thought, but for the growing number of mixed-race students who want to identify with more than one racial background, answering such questions can be perplexing or constraining.

Although claiming a biracial or multiracial identity is increasingly desirable and pervasive among mixed-race individuals in the United States (e.g., Rockquemore & Brunσμα, 2002b), the option to choose more than one racial group is often not officially available when registering for school or healthcare or applying for admission or employment. Instead, mixed-race individuals are often forced to "choose one" racial or ethnic identity (Hall, 1992). Situations such as these may be difficult for at least two reasons.

First, although not all mixed-race individuals identify as biracial or multiracial, preventing individuals from choosing more than one racial background effectively denies the identity of those who do. Limited choice is associated with lower self-esteem, reduced motivation, and heightened anxiety, as well as with increased efforts to reassert one's choice (Brehm, 1956; Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Iyengar & Lepper, 2002). For participants in middle-class North American contexts, in which choice is fundamental to self-expression (Kim & Markus, 1999; Snibbe & Markus, 2005), being given or denied a choice regarding one's racial identity may be of particular concern.

Second, compelling multiracial respondents to select a single racial identity requires them to categorize themselves in a way that does not reflect their actual identification. Research on identity denial (e.g., Cheryan & Monin, 2005) and categorization threat (e.g., Barreto & Ellemers, 2002) suggests that having an important social identity misperceived or denied by others leads to increased negative affect and effortful reassertions of the desired identity.

Shih and Sanchez (2005), in reviewing the psychological literature on implications of having multiple racial backgrounds, found that mixed-race individuals mirror their monoracial counterparts on most indices of psychological adjustment. However, as the authors note, a comparison of the psychological adjustment of multiracial and monoracial individuals is inherently complex (see also Binning, Unzueta, Huo, & Monlina, this issue). Developing a more complete understanding of the experience of mixed-race individuals requires considering the multiplicity of factors affecting the development and expression of their racial identities. The current research first uses an open-ended questionnaire to explore whether mixed-race individuals spontaneously mention dissatisfaction with demographic forms that impose limits on their racial identity options. Finding that they do, we then use self-report methods and an experimental paradigm that induces some participants

to identify as monoracial. We examine the consequences of constraining racial identity expression for individuals' self-esteem, motivation, and subsequent racial identification.

Biracial/Multiracial Identification

Historically, people of mixed racial heritage (e.g., Black and White, Latino and White, Asian and White) were assigned monoracial identities, typically those of the minority or lower-status group (e.g., Black, Latino, Asian; Daniel, 1996). Now, however, mixed-race individuals are asserting a variety of racial identities: biracial, multiracial, monoracial, or variable according to the social context (Brunsma, 2005; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002b). Although substantial variation in racial identification persists, biracial and multiracial identities are now the most common among numerous mixed-race populations in the United States (e.g., DeBose & Winters, 2003; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002b; Suzuki-Crumly & Hyers, 2004).

The growing preference that these studies document for biracial or multiracial identities is reflected in and promoted by a wide array of cultural products and social groups, including books, dolls, online communities, and summer camps that foster and support identification as biracial or multiracial. For example, a series of mixed-race dolls called "Real Kidz" come with short autobiographical statements telling their new owners: "My parents are from two different ethnic backgrounds. They created me out of love and I am a perfect mixture of both" (Real Kidz, n.d.). Numerous recent books frame biracial and multiracial identities as a unique and desirable, such as *Hope* (Monk, 2004) and *Trevor's Story: Growing up Biracial* (Kandel, 1997). In addition, the Internet provides a wealth of resources from organizations aiming to scaffold and encourage multiracial identities (e.g., The Mavin Foundation at www.mavinfoundation.org, www.mixedfolks.com).

Thus, expressing the biracial or multiracial identities once thought to lead to conflict, confusion, or maladjustment (Stonequist, 1937) is now increasingly seen as a "right" of mixed-race individuals (Root, 1996). Theorists agree, however, that the process of identity development among mixed-race individuals can present a variety of challenges (Collins, 2000; Gillem, Cohn, & Throne, 2001; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002a; Shih & Sanchez, 2005). One substantial challenge is that institutional practices do not promote or accommodate biracial or multiracial identities (see Renn, this issue). In fact, the current burgeoning of products and resources affirming these identities may be a response to this institutional lag.

Collective Self-Verification and Identity Denial

Individuals possess a general motivation for collective self-verification, to perceive and obtain information that is consistent with their social identities (Lemay & Ashmore, 2004). Discrepant group categorization by others, or incongruity

between a person's self-perceptions and others' perceptions of that person, is disconcerting (Barreto & Ellemers, 2002; Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Lemay & Ashmore, 2004). Cheryan and Monin (2005) labeled this general experience of having one's group membership challenged by others as *identity denial*. One specific type of identity denial is *categorization threat*, the experience of (potentially) being miscategorized as a member of an incorrect group. For individuals whose commitment to the group is high, or whose identities as members of the group are relatively certain, perceived exclusion from the group will result in negative emotional responses and increased attempts to assert one's identity as a group member and regain acceptance into the group (see Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002, for a review).

In a series of studies, Cheryan and Monin (2005) examined identity denial among Asian-American participants who were inaccurately categorized as non-U.S. citizens by a White experimenter. Participants reacted with negative emotions (i.e., anger, offense), decreased liking of the experimenter, greater displays of American cultural knowledge, and increased reports of engaging in American practices. The authors argued that these increased references to American knowledge and practices reflected participants' attempts to reassert an American identity.

Barreto and Ellemers (2002) examined the effects of miscategorization on individuals' identification with two groups after test-based versus voluntary assignment to those groups. Similar to Cheryan and Monin's (2005) findings, when participants felt that a test had inaccurately assigned them to a group (i.e., inductive vs. deductive thinkers), they expressed less identification with and loyalty to their assigned group than when they agreed with the categorization. This decrease in identification was attenuated when the experimenter respected and deferred to participants' self-categorizations despite the discrepant categorization ascribed by the test. These results may indicate that although "targets cannot realistically expect perceivers to alter how they categorize them [. . . they] are entitled to expect to be treated in ways that communicate respect for their self-chosen identities" (Barreto & Ellemers, 2002, p. 636).

Lemay and Ashmore (2004) examined the long-term effect of having one's social group memberships (e.g., "jock," "partier," "brain") challenged by others. Specifically, the authors examined transitions into college as a time during which individuals may be less likely to resist miscategorization by others. Incoming students attempted to change both their own self-categorizations and others' perceptions of them so that the two would be more closely aligned. Although this process may appear to challenge the aforementioned findings, Lemay and Ashmore argue that the timing (i.e., a major life transition) and duration (3–4 weeks) of the miscategorization made acceptance of the new identities more likely. Additionally, their results were moderated by the self-rated importance of the social identity. The more important an identity, the more likely participants were to

verify their own desired identities by inducing others' perceptions to match their own.

For mixed-race individuals, many instances of identity denial may be singular instances (e.g., interactions with acquaintances) that may elicit resistance and increased identity assertions in the short term. However, even ongoing and repeated miscategorizations by others (or forced self-miscategorizations, e.g., single-option race demographic forms) may provoke similar opposition, given the importance of race and racial identity in American society.

Biracial/Multiracial Identity Denial

There are a variety of challenges associated with developing and maintaining a biracial or multiracial identity (e.g., Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005; Shih & Sanchez, 2005). Many of these difficulties may reflect some form of identity denial.

First, mixed-race individuals may receive conflicting messages from different contexts or people and interpret this discrepancy as indicating miscategorization or identity denial. For example, an individual may learn from her family to identify herself as biracial, yet she may not be perceived as such in interactions with her peers at school. A mismatch in the messages received from each parent, or from family versus community members, can be a source of tension (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). Second, mixed-race individuals face the difficulty of finding racially similar roles models, as neither of their parents typically has a racial background identical to theirs. In looking to society for images of oneself or one's group and not finding them, individuals may feel that their racial identities are being ignored or made invisible in the larger culture (see Fryberg & Townsend, 2008).

Third, assertions of a biracial or multiracial identity may be directly challenged by others who reject the individual's chosen identity and ascribe a different racial identity to that person (AhnAllen, Suyemoto, & Carter, 2006; Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005; Shih & Sanchez, 2005). Nakashima (1992) argued that this mismatch between individuals' private self-definitions and the public ones ascribed to them is a common source of racial identity conflict for mixed-race individuals. Finally, mixed-race individuals may also experience pressure to conform to the racial classification system that predominates in American society and choose one monoracial identity (Hall, 1992). In these situations, individuals may be unable to assert their preferred identity (i.e., biracial or multiracial) and, instead, feel forced to use the options provided to them, describing themselves exclusively as Asian, Black, Latino, Native American, or White.

Mixed-race individuals may experience these various forms of identity denial in interpersonal interactions and in confronting structural constraints. Specifically, during interpersonal interactions, individuals' own understandings and those of others come into contact, providing the opportunity for a mixed-race individual's

identity to be denied. Structural or institutional variables can lead to identity denial when the option for a particular identity is absent. For example, demographic questions assessing racial background often constrain responses with the instructions to “please choose one” group. For individuals who identify with more than one racial background, this request may lead to self-inflicted identity denial in which individuals must identify outwardly in a way that does not match their desired or chosen identity.

Collins’ (2000) summary of his biracial (Japanese/other) participants’ reactions nicely described the phenomenology of this experience: “All of the participants wanted to be ‘heard’: they wanted to be seen not as marginalized individuals but rather to be acknowledged for their own identities [...] and how it felt to be labeled something they felt they were not” (p. 120). Hall (1992) explored reactions to this situation by asking Black/Japanese participants to racially identify by selecting only one racial group and subsequently asking them to rate their identification with both of their racial groups on Likert-type scales. Although the majority of respondents chose Black when forced to select only one, their answers on the scaled questions revealed high identification with both groups. Hall, however, did not include a comparison group of individuals given the option to select multiple racial backgrounds. The following studies build on this work by exploring the types of identity denial that biracially or multiracially identified individuals report and examining cognitive, affective, and motivational responses to completing a single-choice versus multiple-choice racial background questionnaire.

Current Research

In Study 1, we focused on the types of situations that individuals perceive as threatening to biracial or multiracial identities. Specifically, we asked mixed-race participants of Black and White, Asian and White, or Latino and White backgrounds to describe a situation in which their biracial identity had been a source of tension. We hypothesized (a) that mixed-race individuals would experience a wide variety of situations as involving some form of identity denial, and (b) that the completion of demographic forms, with instructions to “check only one” box, would be a frequently reported episode.

Study 2 then used one of the most frequently mentioned situations from Study 1 to examine the impact of denying mixed-race individuals the option of claiming a biracial or multiracial identity by varying the number of identity options available to mixed-race participants. Specifically, self-identified biracial and multiracial participants completed an online survey that began with a demographic questionnaire. Some participants were given the option of selecting multiple racial backgrounds, whereas others were forced to choose one. We hypothesized that, relative to multiple-choice, forced-choice of only one of their racial backgrounds

would lead to decreased state self-esteem and motivation, as indexed by fewer efficacious possible selves and poorer performance on a word search task. In addition, we predicted that participants' subsequent racial identification would also be affected, even after these constraints were removed.

Study 1

Method

Participants. Fifty-nine mixed-race undergraduate students (36 females) participated. Sixteen participants were mixed Black/White, 23 were mixed Asian/White, and 20 were mixed Latino/White.

Procedure. Participants were recruited on student e-mail lists (i.e., campus dormitories, monoracial minority student groups, and one multiracial student group). The e-mail specifically asked for participants who were "biracial" or "mixed race" or had parents of two different racial/ethnic backgrounds. Participants who agreed to participate were told that the purpose of the questionnaire was to assess their life experiences.

Materials. An open-ended "Life Experiences" questionnaire was used to explore the types of situations that caused mixed-race individuals to feel tension regarding their racial identity and/or pressure to identify monoracially. Participants were instructed to "think about a situation in which your biracial identity was brought into focus, causing tension, and making you feel pressure to identify with only one of your racial/ethnic heritages." Participants then gave open-ended descriptions of that situation. After completing the questionnaire, participants were asked to report their gender and parents' races/ethnicities.

Response coding. A simple coding scheme was developed to reflect the most frequently generated responses. In particular, we were interested in the types of situations or problems in which participants reported feeling unable to identify as biracial and/or pressured to identify as monoracial. The following six categories emerged: (a) appearance; (b) demographic forms; (c) racial/ethnic activities; (d) cultural, religious, or language differences; (e) racism, prejudice, or stereotypes; and (f) racially charged conversations.

Two research assistants, who were blind to the ethnicity of the respondents and to the hypotheses being tested, coded the open-ended responses for the presence ("1") or absence ("0") of each category. A single situation could be coded in multiple categories. Interrater reliability was high, with 88% agreement between the two coders. Disagreements were resolved in discussions between the two coders and a principal investigator.

Table 1. Examples and Frequency of Responses in Each Coding Category

Coding Category	Examples	Frequency
Appearance	[When people] say that because I do not look “very” Asian [...] that I must not really identify with that race.	28.8%
Demographic forms	When I applied to college—the forms included boxes for Caucasian and Latina/Chicana, but none for multiracial individuals.	23.7%
Racial/ethnic activities	I often feel like I am ignoring my “Mexican side” when I don’t participate in certain events.	22.0%
Cultural, religious, language differences	Since I do not speak Spanish, I am not very Catholic, and I never participated with the Chicano community traditional events before [...] I do not feel I can relate with people that share my heritage.	22.0%
Racism, prejudice, racial stereotyping	[When one of my Korean cousins] came to visit us, she said she wanted to stay with our other aunt and uncle because our house was too “White” for her.	16.9%
Racially charged conversations or issues	[...] when people are talking about Black people’s problems with respect to White people.	16.9%

Note. Percentages sum to over 100 because responses could be coded in multiple categories.

Results and Discussion

As predicted, participants mentioned a variety of situations in which they had experienced identity denial. Only four participants (6.8%) were unable to recall such an episode. In describing this situation, participants mentioned one ($n = 27$), two ($n = 8$), or three ($n = 4$) of the factors for which we coded. There were no differences by racial background in the overall number of categories mentioned, $\chi^2(6, N = 59) = 2.94, p = .82$. Table 1 presents percentages for each of the categories.

The most commonly mentioned category was appearance. Individuals reporting this cause often recounted situations in which they had been misperceived by others. For example, a mixed Black/White participant stated: “My dad’s side of the family and my sister all have a dark skin tone, and I do not, which sometimes makes me feel like I am not Black, but I certainly do not feel like I am White either.” Given the primacy of race—along with gender and age—in person perception (Fiske, 1998), the prevalence of appearance-related episodes is unsurprising.

Supporting our prediction, the second most frequently reported category was completing demographic forms on which only one racial/ethnic group could be selected. One mixed Asian/White participant cited the experience of “filling out

applications for college [that] often included the ‘check one’ ethnicity box.” Another participant, with a Latino/White background, wrote that she felt tension “when filling out college applications, or essentially anything else that asks me to check a box next to my ethnicity.” Finally, a mixed Asian/White participant wrote simply, “those damn college applications and national surveys.”

Use of the six categories did not vary across mixed-race participants of different racial backgrounds. A marginally significant difference emerged only for demographic forms, $\chi^2(2, N = 59) = 5.68, p = .06$. Specifically, mixed Black/White participants were least likely to report this experience ($n = 1, 6\%$), followed by mixed Asian/White participants ($n = 5, 22\%$), and mixed Latino/White participants ($n = 8, 40\%$).

Our results show that mixed-race individuals, when asked about experiences of identity constraint or denial, report a variety of situations. In terms of appearance, individuals are miscategorized by others based on discrepancies between their appearance and their racial identity. With respect to single-choice demographic forms, individuals are forced to racially miscategorize themselves. The frequency with which this latter category was mentioned supports our hypothesis and underscores the prevalence of such experiences in the lives of mixed-race individuals. Given these results, Study 2 was designed to enable us to observe the responses of mixed-race individuals to the experience of identity denial when they either are or are not forced to miscategorize themselves on a demographic questionnaire.

Study 2

Building on Study 1, we sought to better understand the experiences of biracially or multiracially identified individuals by exploring the consequences of situations that do not support their preferred expressions of the self. Specifically, we examined the impact of denying mixed-race individuals the chance to express biracial/multiracial identities on their state self-esteem, affect, motivation (i.e., possible selves and task performance), and racial identity. We predicted that preventing, as opposed to permitting, participants’ expression of their biracial or multiracial identities would lead to short-term decreases in self-esteem and motivation as well as increases in negative affect. Additionally, we hypothesized that even when this constraint was no longer present, the participants previously required to categorize themselves as monoracial would report greater conflict between their chosen identity and their social experiences.

Method

Participants. Fifty-two mixed-race undergraduate students (32 females) participated in an online study. All participants had identified themselves as having

more than one racial background on a prescreening questionnaire used in recruiting participants for a variety of studies. Most participants (49) were mixed White and minority. Specifically, 19 participants were mixed (East) Asian/White, 16 were mixed Latino/White, 10 were mixed American Indian/White, and 4 were mixed South Asian/White. The remaining participants had two minority racial backgrounds: 2 were mixed American Indian/(East) Asian and 1 was mixed American Indian/Latino.

Procedure. Initial recruitment to participate in paid research was done through paper and e-mail announcements distributed very broadly on a college campus in California. Prospective participants were directed to an online preselection survey collecting a wide array of demographic information. Only those individuals who reported having more than one racial background were later invited to participate in this study. Importantly, participants were not aware that they were selected based on their racial backgrounds. Participants were contacted via e-mail (at least 4 weeks later) and given a password for an online study about “identity and attitudes.” After logging in and consenting to participate, participants reported their birth months to enable quasi-random assignment to condition. Participants born in odd versus even months were assigned to the check one versus check all conditions, respectively.

Participants in both conditions then completed a short questionnaire assessing age, gender, social class (i.e., their own and their parents’ educational attainment), and racial background. The identity expression manipulation concerned the number of options participants could select in reporting their racial background. These options included White/European American, Black/African American, East Asian/East Asian American, South Asian/South Asian American, Latino/Hispanic American, Native/American Indian, Middle Eastern/Arab American, and Other. Participants in the check one condition were asked to “check one only” and the online form allowed only one selection, whereas participants in the check all condition, were told to “check all that apply” and the form allowed multiple selections. All other instructions and questions were identical across conditions. After responding to the racial identity question, participants completed several measures assessing affect, possible selves, state self-esteem, performance on a word search, and racial identity.

Materials. Participants completed the dependent measures in the following order. First, we assessed participants’ emotional reactions using a modified version of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), including two additional words intended to capture whether participants felt agentic. Specifically, we used the positive words *pleased*, *excited*, *proud*, *calm*, and *satisfied* ($\alpha = .79$); the negative words *anxious*, *hostile*, *irritated*, *resentful*, *upset*, *disappointed*, *constrained*, and *troubled* ($\alpha = .83$); and the agentic words

powerful and confident ($r = .64$). Participants responded on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*).

Next, participants completed a possible selves assessment. Possible selves are selves that people hope to become or fear becoming. Likely possible selves motivate sustained goal-directed behavior and facilitate goal attainment (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Using a closed-ended measure, we focused explicitly on efficacy-related possible selves because they are related to motivation and achievement in academic tasks (e.g., Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002). For each of 14 self-descriptions participants rated “how likely is this possible self?” from 1 (*extremely unlikely*) to 7 (*extremely likely*). The descriptions included both positive (e.g., *creative, good looking*) and negative (e.g., *depressed, lonely*) possible selves. Our interest was in the five efficacy selves (i.e., *feared, independent, respected, able to fix things, and able to manipulate people*; $\alpha = .63$).

Participants then completed the State Self-Esteem Scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991), reporting their feelings about themselves while completing the questionnaire. This “Current Thoughts” scale asked participants to rate statements with respect to how they felt at that moment from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). The measure included three subscales: social (five items, $\alpha = .82$; e.g., “Right now I am worried about what other people think of me”), appearance (four items, $\alpha = .78$; e.g., “I feel satisfied with the way my body looks right now”), and performance (three items, $\alpha = .73$; e.g., “I feel confident about my abilities at this moment”).

Next, participants completed a word search task. Adapting a method used in previous studies (e.g., Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001), we reasoned that the content of words identified in a word search puzzle can be seen as an implicit index of current motivation. Participants were shown a 20×20 letter matrix. Within this matrix were 13 achievement words (*accomplish, achieve, attain, best, champion, overcome, prevail, score, success, triumph, can, victory, and winner/win*), as well as several simpler, incidental words not related to achievement (e.g., *on, his, nook, it, tag*). Participants were instructed to find as many words as possible vertically, horizontally, or diagonally and to type the words in the text box provided.

Following the word search, participants in both conditions were given the opportunity to list all (up to four) of their racial backgrounds. Subsequently, participants completed a racial identity scale based on Rockquemore’s (1999) taxonomy of racial identity options. Respondents listed two of their racial/ethnic background groups in separate text boxes, labeled Group A and Group B. Participants then selected the statement that best reflected their racial identities with reference to these two groups: (a) and (b) “I consider myself exclusively [Group A/Group B]”; (c) “I consider myself exclusively biracial/multiracial”; (d) and (e) “I consider myself biracial/multiracial, but experience the world as a member of [Group A/Group B]”; (f) “I sometimes consider myself Group A, sometimes Group B, and sometimes biracial/multiracial, depending on the circumstances”;

(g) “Race is meaningless”; or (h) “Other (please specify below)” followed by a space for elaboration. Given that participants in both conditions had the opportunity to list their racial backgrounds, this measure was intended to assess whether constraining mixed-race individuals’ choices at one point in time can influence their subsequent racial identification even when those constraints are removed.

Finally, participants completed a manipulation check. Specifically, they indicated whether the initial demographic question had asked them to “check one only” or “check all that apply,” or indicated that they did not remember.

Results

Manipulation check and social class. All but three participants accurately recalled the number of options provided on the initial demographic question and were included in analyses.

Significant social class differences exist in the meaning and importance of choice (Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007), as well as in the racial identification of multiracial individuals (e.g., Daniel, 2002; Rockquemore & Brunson, 2002a; Townsend, Fryberg, Markus, & Wilkins, 2009; Yancey, 2003). Therefore, we classified our participants as middle class ($n = 43$) or working class ($n = 7$) on the basis of parental education (see Stephens et al., 2007). However, because the significance and direction of our results do not change when including working-class participants,¹ we present results including all participants.

Our remaining 50 mixed-race participants had the following racial backgrounds: 19 (East) Asian/White, 15 Latino/White, 10 American Indian/White, and 3 South Asian/White. The three participants of dual minority backgrounds were still included. Notably, participants of differing backgrounds were distributed evenly across conditions, $\chi^2(5, N = 50) = 4.82, p = .44$.

Emotional state. We first examined whether participants’ reported emotional states differed by condition. Although we predicted differences between participants in the check one versus check all condition on positive, negative, and agentic feelings, we only found marginal support for agentic feelings. Thus, participants in the check one condition reported levels of positive ($M = 2.66, SD = .84$) and negative ($M = 1.89, SD = .56$) emotions that did not significantly differ from the levels of positive ($M = 2.81, SD = .76$) and negative ($M = 2.10, SD = .68$) feelings reported by participants in the check all condition, $t(48) = -.63, p = .53$, and $t(48) = -1.17, p = .25$, respectively. In partial support of our hypotheses, however, participants in the check one condition did report marginally lower levels of agentic feelings ($M = 2.46, SD = .84$) relative to those in the check all condition ($M = 2.93, SD = .99$), $t(48) = -1.81, p = .08$.

¹We would expect social class differences and believe that the lack thereof reflects the small number of working-class participants in our sample.

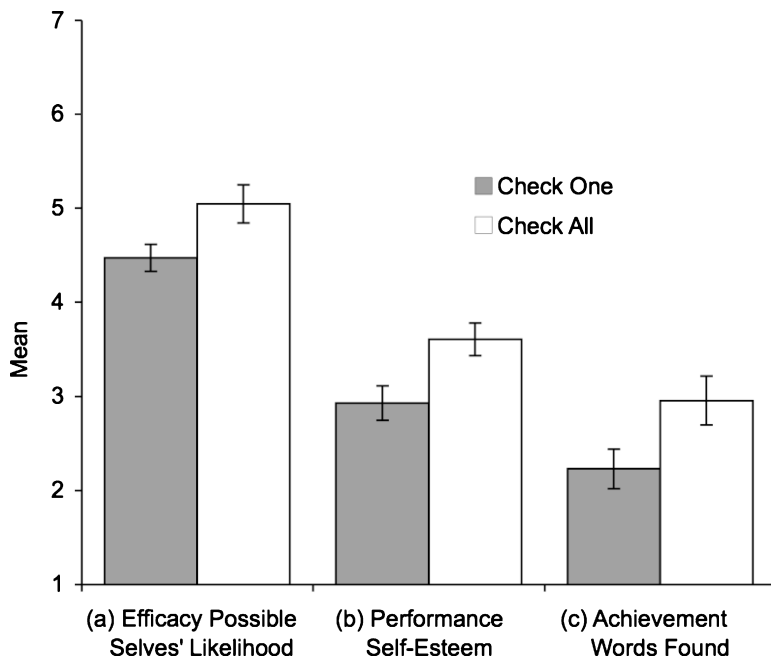


Fig. 1. Agency-related dependent measures by condition: (a) possible selves' efficacy likelihood, (b) performance self-esteem, and (c) word search performance. Ratings were made on a scale from 1 to 7, and error bars indicate standard error of mean.

Possible selves. Next we examined participants' reported likelihood of various possible selves. Our prediction that participants in the check one, relative to the check all, condition would rate high-efficacy possible selves as less likely for themselves was confirmed. As shown in Figure 1a, participants in the check one condition ($M = 4.47, SD = .75$), compared to the check all condition ($M = 5.04, SD = .95$), rated the efficacy self-statements as less likely to be true of them in the future, $t(48) = -2.39, p = .02$.

State self-esteem. We predicted that participants in the check one condition would report lower levels of state self-esteem than those in the check all condition. As hypothesized, we found a significant difference on the state self-esteem scale's performance subscale, $t(48) = -2.67, p = .01$. Participants in the check one condition had significantly lower performance self-esteem ($M = 2.93, SD = .96$) than participants in the check all condition ($M = 3.61, SD = .79$; see Figure 1b). There were no significant differences by condition on the appearance, $t(48) = -.84, p = .41$ (check one $M = 3.01, SD = .96$, check all $M = 3.22, SD = .82$), or social, $t(48) = -.33, p = .74$ (check one $M = 3.48, SD = .89$, check all $M = 3.57, SD = .99$), subscales.

Word search performance. We also predicted motivation and performance decrements for participants in the check one condition, relative to the check all condition, on the word search task. Performance was measured by counting the number of achievement words participants found. We hypothesized that participants in the check one condition would find fewer of the achievement-related words than would participants in the check all condition. Words were not “double counted” (i.e., a participant could receive credit for finding “winner” or “winners” but not both, as the two did not appear separately in the letter matrix). We also counted the simpler, incidental nonachievement words that participants listed after verifying that they occurred in both Merriam-Webster online dictionary (n.d.) and the letter matrix. Acronyms (e.g., *CEO*) and one-letter words (e.g., *a*) were not counted. Importantly, the average length of the achievement words ($M = 6.08$, $SD = 2.06$) was significantly greater than the incidental words ($M = 2.88$, $SD = .74$), $t(12.80) = -5.50$ (equal variances not assumed), $p = .0001$.

When including the incidental words, the total number of words found by participants did not significantly differ between the check one ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 2.16$) and check all ($M = 5.91$, $SD = 2.04$) conditions, $t(46) = -.61$, $p = .55$. As predicted, however, there was a significant difference in the number of achievement words found, $t(46) = -2.20$, $p = .03$. As shown in Figure 1c, participants in the check one condition ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.07$) found significantly fewer achievement words than those in the check all condition ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 1.21$). A univariate analysis of covariance with total number of words found included as a covariate confirmed these results, $F(1, 45) = 5.72$, $p = .04$.

Racial identity. Finally, we examined participants’ responses on the racial identity scale. We consolidated and labeled the various racial identification options as follows: (a) Monoracial; (b) Biracial; (c) Biracial, but monoracial experience; (d) Variable identification; and (e) Race is meaningless or Other. We grouped these final two categories together because only two participants selected Other. Additionally, no participants reported identifying as monoracial. As mentioned above, prior to completing this form, participants in both conditions were given the opportunity to list all of their racial backgrounds. We view responses on this item as gauging the impact of a recent, and potentially salient, experience of identity denial on participants’ conceptualizations of their racial identity.

The omnibus chi-square revealed a significant difference in the racial identification chosen by condition, $\chi^2(3, N = 48) = 9.74$, $p = .02$ (see Figure 2 for percentages). Partitioned chi-square analyses showed that participants in the check all condition were equally as likely to select each of these four racial categories, $\chi^2(3, N = 20) = 3.60$, $p = .31$, while those in the check one condition were most likely to report identifying as mixed, but experiencing the world as monoracial, $\chi^2(3, N = 28) = 24.57$, $p < .001$. These results suggest that for our mixed-race participants, being forced to select a monoracial identity at the beginning of our

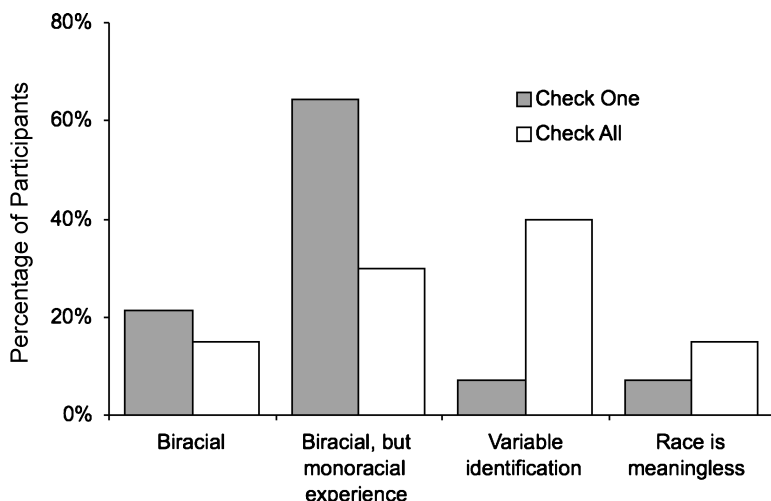


Fig. 2. Preferred identification.

study—followed by an opportunity to identify with multiple backgrounds—may have reinforced their experiences of being seen and treated as monoracial.

Discussion

As mixed-race individuals assert their racial identities, they must inevitably do so in negotiation with their sociocultural environments. The results of Study 2 provide initial support for the claim that compelling a biracially or multiracially identified individual to choose a single, monoracial identity rather than allowing multiple selections leads to decreases in performance self-esteem and motivation. Specifically, relative to participants permitted to select more than one race, those forced to choose only one showed marginally lower levels of agentic feelings, lower state performance self-esteem, lower likelihood for efficacy possible selves, and lower motivation on a word search task. Thus, relative to when biracial or multiracial identities are allowed or supported, the experience of being forced to racially miscategorize oneself may lead mixed-race individuals to feel as though they have less control and power to affect their social environments. In turn, this shift may be reflected in both decreased estimates of future selves’ efficacy as well as lower motivation and actual performance.

Additionally, our results indicate that whether individuals are allowed to accurately report their racial identities affect how they appraise them on a subsequent questionnaire. Compared with individuals permitted to select more than one racial group, those forced to choose only one were subsequently more likely to report

that although they identify as biracial, they experience the world as monoracial. These participants appear to be acknowledging the discrepancy between their self-chosen racial identity and the one afforded by their social world.

General Discussion

The two studies reported here show that mixed-race individuals in the United States who identify as biracial or multiracial can encounter difficulty in asserting their identities, and that such constraints can lead to negative psychological consequences. In Study 1 we found that when discussing instances in which their biracial or multiracial identity caused them to feel tension, mixed-race individuals spontaneously mentioned demographic questionnaires that forced them to select only one racial group. Using this real-world experience as a model, Study 2 found that compared with those who were able to choose multiple racial groups, those who were constrained to only one racial group showed lower performance self-esteem and motivation. Additionally, this constraint, even after it was removed, influenced participants' subsequent report of their racial identities. Those who had been forced to choose only one racial group were more likely to report a discrepancy between their chosen identity and their social experience.

Though these studies take an important step toward a fuller understanding of mixed-race experiences, several notable questions concerning the generalizability of this phenomenon remain unexamined. First, we designed both the questionnaire used in Study 1 as well as the online instrument used in Study 2 for this research. Although the scales used in Study 2 were adapted from existing instruments, the agency-related measures were relatively novel. Future research should address the replicability of our results and the validity of our methods.

Second, Study 1 participants were aware of being recruited based on their multiple racial backgrounds. This may have led to an oversampling of individuals who were strongly identified as multiracial and may limit the generalizability of these results to mixed-race individuals who do not self-define in this way. The results of Study 2, however, conducted with participants initially unaware of racial selection criteria, support the relevance and potency of identity denial via single-choice demographic forms in the lives of mixed-race individuals. Nonetheless, both studies examined the types and experiences of identity denial only among mixed-race individuals who identify with more than one racial group (e.g., Black and White, biracial). As demonstrated by Binning and colleagues (this issue), monoracially identified mixed-race individuals may have psychological experiences that diverge from their multiracially identified counterparts. Future work should explore the experience of identity denial among monoracially identified individuals.

In addition, Study 1 showed that mixed Black/White individuals were marginally less likely to mention difficulty with completing demographic forms

than those who were mixed Latino/White or Asian/White. In Study 2, we did not have any part-Black participants with which we could further explore this difference.² One possible reason for this discrepancy may be the differing historical circumstances surrounding individuals of partial Black heritage relative to the other groups. For example, the legacy of the hypodescent law (or the “one drop rule”) asserting that a person with any Black heritage was considered Black, may lead fewer part-Black individuals to feel conflicted when selecting a single race (i.e., Black) on demographic forms. Future research should examine this and other possibilities.

Finally, though individuals from working class, relative to middle class contexts, attach a lower level of importance to choice and self-expression (Kim & Markus, 1999; Snibbe & Markus, 2005), in Study 2, we found no difference between working- and middle-class participants’ responses to identity denial. Given our small number of working-class participants (7), the origin of this null result is difficult to determine definitively. Future research using a larger sample of mixed-race working class individuals should investigate the impact of being granted or denied a choice regarding one’s racial identity.

Conclusions

Our findings carry important implications for the collection of demographic data in the United States. The experience of completing one of these forms, whether as a part of registering for the SAT or in applying for employment, is a prime example of how all individuals must negotiate their identities within their social environments. An identity, then, is not just a personal or private project; it is a group project. It includes how individuals identify themselves, but also how others in their social worlds identify them. Research on the functioning of multiracial identities casts the social nature of identity formation and maintenance in particularly high relief.

Moreover, our results demonstrate the negative consequences of discrepancies between a person’s chosen identity and the identities supported or allowed in a given context. Based on these findings, we contend that demographic forms on which racial group membership is assessed should permit respondents to choose multiple groups. Such forms are part of a growing list of institutional policies and practices that can afford identity safety and allow people to flourish in a racially and ethnically diverse society (see also Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002).

Certainly, we are not suggesting that groups and organizations cease gathering racial data. Because race continues to structure both society and individual experience in the United States, we consider such data collection essential.

²Part-Black participants were not included in Study 2 due to an artifact of our participant pool at the time the study was conducted.

Returning to our initial example of registering for the SAT, testing organizations need to compile and examine racial and other demographic data as a means to ensure testing equity. We argue that the methods used for acquiring such data must accommodate, and not deny, the racial identities of all respondents. In addition, because the precise wording of demographic questions can significantly influence mixed-race individuals' subsequent performance, collecting such information at the conclusion rather than start of a test could provide a more neutral or identity safe testing environment for students with diverse racial backgrounds.

Although our present interest was in the expression of biracial and multiracial identities, our data are relevant to the pervasive need for congruence between how you see yourself and how the world sees you. Our studies exemplify the consequences of the more general situation in which individuals are not seen in the way in which they see themselves, or are not seen at all.

References

- AhnAllen, J. M., Suyemoto, K. L., & Carter, A. S. (2006). Relationship between physical appearance, sense of belonging and exclusion, and racial/ethnic self-identification among multiracial Japanese European Americans. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 12*, 673–686.
- Barreto, M., & Ellemers, N. (2002). The impact of respect versus neglect of self-identities on identification and group loyalty. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 28*, 629–639.
- Binning, K. R., Unzueta, M. M., Huo, Y. J., & Molina, L. E. (2009). The interpretation of multiracial identity and its relation to social engagement and psychological well-being. *Journal of Social Issues, 65*(1), 35–50.
- Brehm, J. W. (1956). Postdecision changes in the desirability of alternatives. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 52*, 284–289.
- Brehm, J. W., & Brehm, S. S. (1981). *Psychological reactance: A theory of freedom and control*. New York: Academic Press.
- Brunsmma, D. L. (2005). Interracial families and the racial identification of mixed-race children: Evidence from the early childhood longitudinal study. *Social Forces, 84*, 1131–1157.
- Chen, S., Lee-Chai, A. Y., & Bargh, J. A. (2001). Relationship orientation as a moderator of the effects of social power. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 80*, 173–187.
- Cheryan, S., & Monin, B. (2005). Where are you really from? Asian Americans and identity denial. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 89*, 717–730.
- Collins, J. F. (2000). Biracial Japanese American identity: An evolving process. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 6*, 115–133.
- Daniel, G. R. (1996). Black and White identity in the new millennium: Unsevering the ties that bind. In M. P. P. Root (Ed.), *The multiracial experience: Racial borders as the new frontier* (pp. 121–139). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Daniel, G. R. (2002). *More than Black? Multiracial identity and the new racial order*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- DeBose, H. L., & Winters, L. I. (2003). The dilemma of biracial people of African American descent. In L. I. Winters & H. L. DeBose (Eds.), *New faces in a changing America: Multiracial identity in the 21st century* (pp. 127–157). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ellemers, N., Spears, R., & Doosje, B. (2002). Self and social identity. *Annual Review of Psychology, 53*, 161–186.
- Fiske, S. T. (1998). Stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination. In D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology* (Vol. 2, 4th ed., pp. 357–411). New York: McGraw-Hill.

- Fryberg, S. A., & Townsend, S. S. M. (2008). The psychology of invisibility. In G. Adams, M. Biernat, N. Branscombe, C. S. Crandall, & L. W. Wrightsman (Eds.), *Commemorating Brown: The social psychology of racism and discrimination* (pp. 173–193). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Gillem, A. R., Cohn, L. R., & Throne, C. (2001). Black identity in biracial Black/White people: A comparison of Jacqueline who refuses to be exclusively Black and Adolphus who wishes he were. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 7*, 182–196.
- Hall, C. C. I. (1992). Please choose one: Ethnic identity choices for biracial individuals. In M. P. P. Root (Ed.), *Racially mixed people in America* (pp. 250–264). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Heatherington, T. F., & Polivy, J. (1991). Development and validation of a scale for measuring state self-esteem. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 60*, 895–910.
- Iyengar, S. S., & Lepper, M. R. (2002). Choice and its consequences: On the costs and benefits of self-determination. In A. Tesser, D. A. Stapel, & J. V. Wood (Eds.), *Self and motivation: Emerging psychological perspectives* (pp. 71–96). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Kandel, B. (1997). *Trevor's story: Growing up biracial*. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publishing Group.
- Kim, H., & Markus, H. R. (1999). Deviance or uniqueness, harmony or conformity: A cultural analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 77*, 785–800.
- Lemay, E. P., Jr., & Ashmore, R. D. (2004). Reactions to perceived categorization by other during the transition to college: Internalization and self-verification processes. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 7*, 173–187.
- Markus, H., & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. *American Psychologist, 41*, 954–969.
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Retrieved May 24, 2007, from <http://www.m-w.com>
- Monk, I. (2004). *Hope*. Minneapolis, MN: First Avenue Editions.
- Nakashima, C. L. (1992). An invisible monster: The creation and denial of mixed-race people in America. In M. P. P. Root (Ed.), *Racially mixed people in America* (pp. 162–178). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Oyserman, D., Terry, K., & Bybee, D. (2002). A possible selves intervention to enhance school involvement. *Journal of Adolescence, 25*, 313–326.
- RealKidz. (n.d.). Retrieved March 16, 2007, from http://www.molloytoy.com/new_goodwin.html
- Renn, K. A. (2009). Educational policy, politics, and mixed heritage students in the United States. *Journal of Social Issues, 65*(1), 163–181.
- Rockquemore, K. A. (1999). Between Black and White: Exploring the biracial experience. *Race and Society, 1*, 197–212.
- Rockquemore, K. A., & Brunsma, D. L. (2002a). *Beyond Black: Biracial identity in America*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rockquemore, K. A., & Brunsma, D. L. (2002b). Socially embedded identities: Theories, typologies, and processes of racial identity among Black/White biracials. *Sociological Quarterly, 43*, 335–356.
- Rockquemore, K. A., & Laszloffy, T. (2005). *Raising biracial children*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.
- Root, M. P. P. (1996). A bill of rights. In M. P. P. Root (Ed.), *The multiracial experience: Racial borders as the new frontier* (pp. xiii–xxviii). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Shih, M., & Sanchez, D. T. (2005). Perspectives and research on the positive and negative implications of having multiple racial identities. *Psychological Bulletin, 131*, 569–591.
- Snibbe, A. C., & Markus, H. R. (2005). You can't always get what you want: Educational attainment, agency, and choice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 88*, 703–720.
- Steele, C. M., Spencer, S. J., & Aronson, J. (2002). Contending with group image: The psychology of stereotype and social identity threat. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 34, pp. 379–440). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Stephens, N. M., Markus, H. R., & Townsend, S. S. M. (2007). Choice as an act of meaning: The case of social class. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 93*, 814–830.
- Stonequist, E. H. (1937). *The marginal man*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Suzuki-Crumly, J., & Hyers, L. I. (2004). The relationship between ethnic identity, psychological well-being, and intergroup competence: An investigation of two biracial groups. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 10*, 137–150.

- The College Board. (2006). *SAT registration booklet* (pp. 1–40). Retrieved June 15, 2007, from www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/about.html
- Townsend, S. S. M., Fryberg, S. A., Markus, H. R., & Wilkins, C. L. (2009). *Being mixed: Who claims a biracial identity and why?* Manuscript in preparation.
- Watson, D., Clark, L. A., & Tellegen, A. (1988). Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: The PANAS Scales. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *54*, 1063–1070.
- Yancey, G. (2003). *Who is White? Latinos, Asians, and the new Black/NonBlack divide*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

SARAH S. M. TOWNSEND is a doctoral student in social psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her research interests focus on intergroup interactions. She has conducted studies examining the moderating role that ideological beliefs play in psychological and physiological reactions to prejudice, the cultural patterning of psychological processes, and the experience of mixed-race individuals in the United States.

HAZEL R. MARKUS, the Davis-Brack Professor in the Behavioral Sciences, is the Director of the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity (CCSRE). Her research interests focus on the sociocultural shaping of mind and self. She has conducted research and published in a variety of areas examining how gender, race, ethnicity, religion, social class, cohort, region, and country of national origin may influence thought and feeling, particularly self-relevant thought and feeling.

HILARY B. BERGSIEKER is a graduate student in psychology at Princeton University. Her research interests primarily relate to intergroup relations, with a focus on stereotyping, identity, and authenticity in interracial contexts. Her current work examines the behavioral dynamics of interracial interactions, specifically self-presentation goals, evaluative concerns, and trust.