



Multiracialism and its discontents: a comparative analysis of Asian-White and Black-White multiracials

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To cite this article: Peter J. Aspinall (2017): Multiracialism and its discontents: a comparative analysis of Asian-White and Black-White multiracials, Ethnic and Racial Studies, DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2017.1392031](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1392031)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1392031>



Published online: 27 Oct 2017.



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BOOK REVIEW

Multiracialism and its discontents: a comparative analysis of Asian-White and Black-White multiracials, by Hephzibah V. Strmic-Pawl, Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2016, xi+165 pp., £52.95(hardback), ISBN 978-1-4985-0975-6

Strmic-Pawl's book makes a novel and substantive contribution to the literature on multiracialism. Firstly, it explores particular types of mix and thereby reveals the heterogeneity of this population, claiming to be the first to directly compare qualitatively the experience of Asian-whites and black-whites using the same interview guide and controlling for age, education, and location. These two mixed-race groups were chosen as being on opposing ends of the racial hierarchy. The study is based on seventy participants, significantly more than other qualitative studies on multiracials. In evaluating the relationship between racism and multiracial identity, it is one of the first books on multiracialism to put the analysis of racism in the forefront. Finally, the study uses a diversity of methodological approaches, including an interview guide, a set of race-related vignettes, and an epilogue on "multiracials giving advice" presenting the voices of participants verbatim. The analysis brings to bear on its findings a rich body of theoretical constructs relating to the racial hierarchy, the racialization process, and intersectional analysis.

The participants aged 18–30, living in Chicago or New York City, and enrolled in college or with a college degree were selected on the basis of identifying their biological parents as either Asian and white or black and white, that is, using the operational definition of biological lineage and not on the grounds of having a multiracial identity. However, sixty-seven of the seventy participants actively chose to identify as multiracial: in contrast the recent Pew Survey (Pew Research Center, *Multiracial in America: Proud, Diverse and Growing in Numbers*, Washington DC, 2015) found that among adult Americans with a background including two or more races, only thirty-nine per cent identified as multiracial. Later we are informed that around two-thirds of the black-whites also identified as black or a person of colour. Perhaps more could have been said about the particular situations and contexts in which these participants chose to identify as either multiracial or black, linking to the multiracial identity models of Renn (Renn K. A. 2000. "Patterns of Situational Identity among Biracial and Multiracial College Students." *The Review of Higher Education* 23 (4), 399–420) and others. Such analysis might have thrown light on the substantial churn in the two or more races population that census validation surveys and record linkage studies have revealed and whether this reflects identity change or is related to the survey context.

The study begins with a comparison of how Asian-whites and black-whites identify with multiracialism, revealing underlying commonalities. Strmic-Pawl suggests that the characteristics of what it means to be multiracial could be forming: "Mixed Whites perceive themselves as having an affiliation with others

who are mixed and identify as multiracial; this kindred like tie indicates that a group with a shared identity and meaning may be form(ing)" (43). While the Pew Survey found that few multiracial adults thought they had much in common with other mixed-race Americans, this interesting finding of a developing collective identity of multiracialism regardless of specific racial mix has implications for the racial labels we use. When the mid-1990s Current Population Survey Supplement asked respondents about reasons for choosing the multiracial category, around half indicated that it was "the specific group they belong to", substantially fewer than those who selected that their parents or more distant ancestors were from different racial groups. The suggested emergence of this connectedness – or increasing level of "groupness" – amongst multiracials requires us to revisit Brubaker's [Brubaker R. *Ethnicity without groups*. Cambridge, MASS, Harvard University Press, 2004] distinction between tangible, bounded, and enduring "groups" and practical "categories" with respect to the location of multiracials.

The rest of the book proceeds as an analysis of how multiracial identity is distinctively shaped by being part-Asian or part-black. The research theorized that those of Asian-white descent would have racial experiences distinct from those of black-whites because of the way that Asianness and blackness are socially constructed in contemporary U.S. society. Indeed, for Asian-whites the study shows that experiencing racial discrimination is not central to their multiracial identity, that they do not have a high racial consciousness, and are most likely to interpret the vignettes with ambivalence or sensitivity. Asian-whites adopt the "racial logics" (a set of values and beliefs adhered to by a group and used to make sense of a group's racial positionings) of feeling normal, describing self-segregation with whites as natural, and aligning with post-racialism, reflecting those of whites with whom they have an increasingly permeable boundary. They have what Strmic-Pawl terms a "White Enough" status. However, black-whites are intimately tied to their blackness, both by choice and through racial discrimination. They perceive and experience racial discrimination as a significant issue in their lives and are more likely to exhibit sensitivity and consciousness raising in response to the vignettes. Black-whites adopt black racial logics, have a "Salient Blackness" status, and are located near blacks on the racial hierarchy.

Similar findings have been reported in other studies. In the Pew Survey, for example, mixed Asian and white adults said that they had more in common with whites than with Asians (60% vs. 33%). Mixed black and white adults were three times as likely to say that they had more in common with people who are black than with whites (58% vs. 19%). Bonilla-Silva (Bonilla-Silva E. 2004. "From bi-racial to tri-racial: Towards a new system of racial stratification in the USA." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 27 (6): 931–950) suggests the category of "honorary whites" for Asians and Asian multiracials who experience some of the benefits of whiteness. Strmic-Pawl's scholarly and wide-ranging study provides a particularly robust and incisive analysis of these matters. In a carefully considered and evidence-based set of conclusions, she exposes the falsity of a post-racial America and the idea that multiracialism dismantles the racial hierarchy, finding that "persistent institutional racism and the reigning power of the racial hierarchy constrain

the options for multiracialism to deconstruct race" (127). Moreover, given the vast differences in the experiences of Asian–whites and black–whites, she considers that it is perhaps more appropriate to speak of multiracialisms, plural.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1392031>

