

Not Just Between Black and White: Historical and Modern Biracialism in America

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INTRODUCTION

Historical discourses and records portray a dichotomous view of race in America, which has long obscured the existence and agency of a small but growing demographic, one which occupies a liminal space between Black and White. For the purposes of this paper, “Biracial Americans” shall refer to the individuals and families who chose to identify as both Black and White in the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2011-2013 American Community Survey. This simplistic assignment of meaning to “Biracial” does not do justice to the long history of the people to whom it refers or even the history of the term itself. The following literature review is dedicated to a necessarily incomplete exploration of the historical iterations and conceptualizations of biracialism, from the era of slavery and the first census taken in 1790 to the present day.

Biracial Americans have historically been considered part of the Black community, both by choice and by social perception and state classification. The sentiment of closeness and solidarity has continued to this day: a 2015 Pew Research Center Survey found that 69% of multiracial adults with a black background said most people would view them as Black or African American, and as such reported having a set of experiences, attitudes and social interactions that are much more closely aligned with the black community (Parker et al., 2015).

However, with the acknowledgment that no racial or ethnic group has a singular monolith experience, qualitative and quantitative research has found that Biracial Americans generally benefited from preferential treatment and a distinct advantage over their Black peers (particularly during the eras of slavery and the Antebellum period), seemingly due to their proximity to Whiteness and the dynamics of colorism. Colorism refers to the intraracial stratification within

the African-American community favoring lighter complexions over darker ones (Walker 1982, as cited in Mathews, 2013, p. 2). It remains today a pervasive and insidious form of discrimination: Mathews and Johnson (2015) found that among Black women, those “who self-identified as having a dark complexion reported the highest instances of skin tone discrimination;” furthermore, 73% of their Black female study participants reported that it would be easier to find a job with light skin (p. 268-269). Biracial Americans occupy a unique position in that, due to their affiliation (self-chosen or socially assigned) with the Black community, they are harmed by racism, but to a marginally lesser degree due to their privileged position in the colorism hierarchy.

A great deal of scholarly work has been done in the realms of Biracial identity, educational experience, and peer socialization, often in direct comparison to the experiences of their monoracial peers. There remains a gap in the literature as to how the differential treatment and experiences of Biracial Americans impact their later-in-life socioeconomic outcomes, if at all. To that end, in this paper, I explore if this identity and community affiliation between Biracial and Black Americans, more so than between Biracial and White Americans, is corroborated by the groups’ socioeconomic status indicators relative to one another.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical views of Biracialism in America

Since the era of slavery, the dominant narrative in the biracialism discourse has been the “one-drop” principle, by which any person with a single drop of “Black blood” was considered

to be Black and treated as such. Even a century later, White society held firm to the belief, which had profound and detrimental consequences to those on the other side of it, one example being that, “Any citizen possessing ‘black’ blood is identified as such and any Euro-American marrying same is frequently disowned by not a few family members (Sun, 1995)” (Sun, 1995, as cited in Hall, 2000, p. 87). This is not to mention the violent harms perpetuated by the State on those who it deems Black, in the modern era manifesting as mass incarceration, police brutality, and other systems by which racism is enforced.

The social classification of all Biracials as Black, however, did not equate to identical treatment of the two groups. Though both groups were impacted by racism, colorism contributed to their differential treatment and differential outcomes. Bodenhorn (2002) identifies how this dynamic manifested during the Antebellum era:

Evidence from the population and agricultural censuses show that mixed-race men moved from farm laborers to tenancy earlier and in greater proportions than black men. Similarly, a greater proportion of mulatto men ultimately owned their own farm than did black men. It is not surprising then that mulatto heads of households accumulated significantly more personal property than black-headed households. Using quantile regression methods, this article reports a marked complexion gap in the upper half of the African-American wealth distribution of the antebellum Upper South. Thus, color was as important a determinant of race relations in the rural Upper South as it was in the urban Lower South. Historians failed to recognize this complexion gap because an outspoken, socially visible, and politically active mulatto elite never emerged in rural areas, but the emergence of a visible mulatto elite and the primacy of color were not synonymous in southern society (p. 4).

This account is confirmed by Reece (2018), who recorded the well-documented dynamic in which Whites preferred Biracials during the slavery and Antebellum eras, and as such awarded them occupational prestige, greater freedoms, and a literacy advantage. (Reece uses the

terminology of “Mulattoes,” but is addressing the same mixed-race population.) To establish the exact degree to which the two groups were favored differently, Reece notes, “In 1860, Mulatto wealth was 50% of White wealth while Black wealth was only 20% of that of Whites (Bodenhorn & Ruebeck, 2007)” (p. 8). The socioeconomic advantages accrued during slavery persisted through reconstruction and the Jim Crow era, with Biracials experiencing “greater occupational prestige, lower mortality rates, and lower child mortality rates” (Reece, 2018, p. 8).

Bodenhorn’s analysis draws upon a selection of county-level records from the 1860 Census, while Reece’s draws from the literature analyzing the 1850-1930 Census records. This becomes noteworthy because, since 1850, the classifications by Census takers relied on phenotypical characteristics as indicators of racial category without accounting for familial history (Reese, 2018, p. 4-5). As such, light-skinned Black individuals without a genealogical connection to Whiteness and light-skinned Biracial individuals were categorized the same, which limits generalizations that can be made about the Biracial population alone using early Census data. It is difficult to distinguish whether it was solely or primarily the familial or phenotypical proximity to Whiteness that provided the primary advantages for Biracials and the general intra-group stratification.

Contemporary views of Biracialism in America

In the contemporary discourse around Biracialism, the process of racial identification has been reappropriated by Biracials themselves. The active, agentive nature of this process marks a

drastic shift from the passive adoption of Black identity associated with the consensus one-drop principle.

Rockquemore and Brunnsma (2002) present a model that moves beyond assuming Biracial individuals all adopt the mutually exclusive dichotomous way of understanding and constructing their identity. Instead, they argue that there are four racial identity options available to them: singular identity, border identity, protean identity, and transcendent identity. The option chosen is influenced by the individual's socially perceived appearances and social networks, which still incorporate a degree of dependence on others' perception of phenotypical traits.

Shepherd McClain (2004) argues that the construction of a border/protean or singular (Black) identity by Biracials is not based on passive acceptance of how one's appearance is socially perceived and treated. Through qualitative interviews with Black-White Biracial Americans, she discovered a considerable portion self-identified as Biracial, and a roughly third of the group self-identified as Black. Two reasons are posited for the latter: Shepherd McClain acknowledges the possible continuing influence of the 'one drop' rule, and but emphasizes her interviewees disclose that they view their identification as Black as a choice -- a form of revolution and rejection of white supremacy -- rather than the acceptance of an identity imposed upon them: "That a substantial number of them identified as black within a national context of acceptance, and in some cases, even celebration, of interracial marriage and family formation, may seem to suggest that the historical pattern of including partly-black persons within the African American population - the notorious one-drop rule - is alive, if not well. But there is a critical difference between being assigned as black by legal and social convention, and choosing

freely to regard oneself as black” (p. 45). Shepherd McClain contends that although broad societal treatment of Biracials maintains some semblance of the phenotype-based judgement heuristic, Black-White Biracials themselves have rejected such archaic classifications and claimed agency over their own identification.

The racial politics of the Census have both mirrored and reinforced the social treatment of Biracial Americans. For the first 170 years the Census existed, each person’s race was assigned by the Census taker rather than the individual themselves. It was only in 1960 that individuals finally had the agency to demarcate the race they understood themselves to be, rather than the one assigned based on another’s phenotypical judgements; however, the only two options to choose from were “White” and “Negro.” The 2000 Census was the first to allow individuals to identify as more than one racial or ethnic option (Brown, 2020), reflective of the social shift Rockquemore and Brunisma and Shepherd McClain observed in which Biracials take agency (previously held by [White] observers) in their own formal racial identification process.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The data I am using is derived from the 2011-2013 American Community Survey executed by the U.S. Census Bureau. (2011-2013 was the timespan in which the data was collected, not an indication of a longitudinal study.)

The different groups chosen for comparison consisted of the population who identified as White alone, Black alone, or both Black and White but no other race (Biracial). The data provided is a summary of socioeconomic characteristics of the different racial demographics on

which my research focuses. The categories I have chosen to analyze and compare for each demographic are: educational attainment (% of 25+ with high school degree or greater), employment status (% of 16+ employed in civilian labor force), median family income, median income per capita, poverty rates, percentage of housing units that are owner-occupied, and median value of owner-occupied housing units.

Before beginning an analysis of the data, I want to briefly recognize the limitations inherent therein. The complications in classifying Biracial Americans persist in contemporary data collection, as it is estimated “...only 33% of children from interracial married households are classified with multiple races... The implication is that such children are grouped into single race categories” (Lee and Edmonston, 2005, as cited in Bratter and Kimbro, 2013, p. 176). Parker et al. at Pew Research (2015) estimate that 6.9% of Americans could be classified as multiracial based on familial background, a percentage far higher than the only 1.9% who selected two or more races on their survey. Additionally, the American Community Survey is methodologically less rigorous than the full census; however, the ACS data is more accessible and more recently collected. Keeping in mind these limitations, the following results tentatively confirm the hypothesis enumerated above, that Biracial Americans’ average socioeconomic status profile is more similar to Black Americans’ than Whites’.

RESULTS

	White	Biracial (Black+White)	Black
# of individuals	231,887,804	2,277,291	39,528,206
# of families	59,101,574	190,060	8,741,878
Avg. family size	3.14	3.48	3.47
Median family income	68,543	42,644	41,556
Median income per capita	30,682	8,548	18,575
% of housing units owner-occupied	69.3	33.0	42.7
Median value of OO housing units	174,600	169,600	123,000
% of families in poverty	9.1	25.1	23.9
% of 25+ with \geq high school degree	88.3	85.1	83.1
% of 16+ employed in civilian labor force	58.2	54.7	51.4

The comparative analysis I am able to do with this data is relatively rudimentary. I was hoping to be able to run independent samples t-tests to determine if each group's average values are or are not significantly different from one another. However, given that I am only provided access to the pre-calculated means/medians and not the entire disaggregated data set, I can only draw the following conclusions from the numerical differences between each group's average values:

1. In median family income and family poverty rate, the disparity between White and Black families is profound, and Biracial families fall much closer to black families than to

white. Black families and Biracial families have nearly identical average family size values.

2. In the metrics used for educational attainment and employment, Biracial families fall roughly in between White families and Black families, though closer to Black families than to White.
3. Curiously, in regards to home ownership, Biracial families have a much lower likelihood than their counterparts of living in a housing unit they own, but the value of those homes tend to be very near the value of White family-owned homes.

CONCLUSION

Under the conditions of oppression White America has imposed on Black Americans, Biracial Americans experienced some preferential treatment, whether due to a closer phenotypical/light-skin resemblance or familiar proximity (likely both to varying degrees). The historical differential allocation of resources and opportunities resonates today in the socioeconomic profiles of the three groups. White Americans, in almost every metric, far exceed the other two groups. The Biracial population fell in between their monoracial counterparts in most metrics, but their profile was numerically closer to that of the Black population. The data that will emerge from the 2020 Census currently underway will reveal if this trend has continued over the past decade, though it may not provide much in the way of causality.

Shepherd McClain identified a trend in which a substantial portion of Biracial study participants consciously chose to identify as Black for reasons of racial solidarity. In light of the

data showing the similarities between the two groups' economic profiles, another motivation for Biracial Americans to choose to identify as Black or with the Black community may be due to a sense of class and economic solidarity. Qualitative research (more precisely, interviews) would be useful in determining the degree to which this motivator influences Biracials' identity process, particularly within the Black-identifying subgroup, if at all.

Finally, given that home ownership and equity are quintessential building blocks of wealth in American society, the dynamic found in the Biracial population of low ownership rates but high home values -- both the cause of it and the impacts it has on wealth building within that demographic -- must be explored further. I would be curious to see the geographic distribution of Biracial-owned homes, more specifically the profiles of the neighborhoods they occupy, as well as how long those homes have belonged to that family and accrued wealth for them.

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