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# What Is Enough?: Understanding the Ostracization of Mixed People and How They Reaffirm Their Identity

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## **Abstract**

In order to understand how fellow mix-identifying people navigate their identity, I conducted interviews and dialogue-based conversations with several mix-identifying people over the course of eight weeks. In this article, I am defining mixed as having two or more racial or ethnic identities. This includes bi-racial and multi-racial people as well as mixes in what we would typically consider homogeneous identities such as a mixed Latinx or Asian identity. The purpose of this is to escape from the western-centric idea of race and consider other aspects of identity such as nationality and culture. Through this project I gained an understanding of how mixed identifying people come to peace with their own personal identity and the influence family and peers have on the way they connect with their racial identity.

*Keywords:* Mixed Identity, Multiracial Identity, Biracial Identity, Critical Diversity Studies, Qualitative Research, Ethnic Studies, Racial Studies, Ethnicity Studies

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## **Positionality**

My family is extremely diverse. I was raised by my half Filipino and half Black grandfather, my White grandmother, and my mother, their child. Family gatherings were always

a strange occasion because most of us do not look the same, except for a few direct relations. This is why despite the fact that I primarily identify as a Black woman due to the color of my skin I resonate more with my mixed identity because even from a young age I knew that claiming only one aspect of my identity was the same as invalidating my whole identity.

As a mixed-race woman, and a person who has mixed identifying friends, I understand the constant struggle of having your identity being invalidated. Of never feeling acceptable enough of any one identity that I carry. It is due to this understanding why I decided to center my research around mix identity and the question of ‘am I enough’ that I believe is present in mix identifying people; however, this question may change in variation from person to person but regardless it remains at the core issue. In this paper I will discuss how other fellow mixed identifying people come to terms with their identity and work toward understanding the influence of environmental factors in this journey of self-understanding.

### **Introduction to the Research**

In order to understand how fellow mix-identifying people navigate their identity, I plan to hold interviews and dialogue-based conversations with several mix-identifying people over the course of four to six months. In this, I am defining mixed as having two or more racial or ethnic identities. This includes bi-racial and multi-racial people as well as mixes in what we would typically consider homogeneous identities such a mixed Latinx or Asian identity. The purpose of this is to escape from the western-centric idea of race and consider other aspects of identity such as nationality and culture.

Through this study, I have a list of questions that I plan to ask my participants in order to come to a conclusion for the broader issues that I hope to solve. These questions are ‘can we be comfortable accepting our whole identity or does it feel more necessary to confirm to one

identity. This question stems from my own experiences of simplifying my identity for the sake of others; I wonder if mixed identifying people can find pride within their whole identity or if they desire to conform to one identity will overshadow the rest. From this, I also want to try to discover the need for choosing one identity over another as well as the influence representation has within this by encouraging people to embrace certain identities and find solidarity.

### **The Importance of this Research**

Identity based research is a fairly new field that is still struggling to gain traction and credibility within academia due to its large focus on personal narratives instead of cold hard data. Within this field itself there are multiple subcategories such as African American studies, Asian American studies, Gender Studies; however, we rarely ever hear of multiracial classes or studies within this realm of research unless you go looking for it specifically. That isn't to say that there isn't a wide range of papers written on multiracial identity but compared to other identity-based research this category still has a long way to go because it is an identity that is often overlooked and therefore attracts less research. It wasn't until 2000 when citizens of America were able to select multiple races on the census; allowing them to accurately document their identity and give measurable data to multiracialism existence (Schlabach. 2013. *The Importance of Family, Race, and Gender for Multiracial Adolescent Well-being*). On top of this, there are also disparities within the research as it is divided among bi-racial and multi-racial and the various ways of defining this identity which can leave people excluded. For instance, whether or not someone from a mixed Asian heritage is considered multiethnic or simply Asian or in the case of S. Schlabach research in *The Importance of Family, Race, and Gender for Multiracial Adolescent Well-being* research not including Latinx heritage within a multi-racial/ethnic identity; therefore, erasing that identity. This makes it difficult to find consistent information on a group that is

already so extremely diverse. As a result, I believed that there should be more research on mixed identity specifically since it includes a wide spectrum of this identity. However, this is not to say that the results from my research and previous ones conducted on mixed identity apply to all who identify because as stated the spectrum is extremely large and just like within any other identity not every single person has the same experience. That is why I built my research on the basis of personal narratives to gain a better understanding of what it is like to be mixed from these individuals and to see the similarities and differences between them. Being able to research specific mixes of identity is just as important to understand the unique circumstances that they face that are relevant to their cultures. However, I chose to focus on the board overarching problem within this group by understanding how they choose to identify and what influence accurate representation has on them. I also want to look into how family dynamics play a role in the construction of a mixed-race person's identity.

### **Lit review**

*Recognizing Selves in Others: Situating Dougla Maneuverability as Shared Mixed-Race Ontology* by S. A Barrett and A. Ranjitsingh

In this article the researcher discusses how people of Dougla heritage navigate their identity in Trinidad, Tobago and the Caribbean diaspora in New York. Dougla is a multiethnic identity consisting of a mixture of Indian and African descent. Unlike other terms used to describe specific types of multiethnic people, Dougla is a term reserved for those originating from the Caribbean. The article mainly focuses on how Douglas maneuver the 'in betweenness' of their identity by altering their outside appearance to better fit into one part of their identity when they choose too. This maneuverability is different within Trinidad and Tobago, and the Caribbean diaspora in America solely due to the fact that race is perceived differently in these

two areas. As a result, the way Douglas assert their in betweenness in the US, where they are more common to be preserved as what they're seen as i.e. Black, is different from what it's like in the Caribbean where they flow between their two identities.

*TEDWomen 2016: Kimberlé Crenshaw*

In this presentation Kimberlé Crenshaw talks about the importance of recognizing and acknowledging the complex, overlapping structure that creates our identity. She calls this intersectionality and describes it as a overlapping of identities; race, gender, sexuality, class, etc. The importance of this is due to people who identify within one group can fall through the cracks when advocating for issues relating to that one 'broader' identity due to another 'narrower' identity that they have. Ignoring these intersections allows for discrimination or lack of acknowledgement to continue because things are examined as a black or white issue and ignores the gray in-between. This speech is important to my research because it highlights the importance of acknowledging each aspect of one's identity, including their multiracial identity.

*THINK PIECE: Political and Social Contexts of Multiracial and Multiethnic Relations and Individuals in Japan and South Korea by Keiko Yamanaka.*

In this article the author talks about the historical impact that led to the rise of multiethnicity and multiracialism within Asia, particularly in Japan and South Korea. She explains the difference between multiethnic and multiracial and the impact these two have in a monoracial society where any slight deviation in characteristics is noticeable and could be scrutinized against. In the article that author also discusses how historical influences impact the negative conditions children of mixed heritage face due to their mixture acting as a reminder of painful moments in history connected to wartimes.

*Arts-Based Inquiry: Performing Revolutionary Pedagogy by Susan Finley*

This article focuses on the important impact that art has in research and its validity. It's a way to gain a deeper understanding on a subject without using difficult language that makes it inaccessible to a large portion of society. This researcher also talks about the positive impact that creative research has on the participants by providing them with a method while at the same time ensuring that their own personal story is heard. Although this article isn't specifically about multiracial identity, I have chosen it because it highlights the importance of counter storytelling.

*Colonize This!: Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism by Daisy Hernandez and Bushra Rehman*

This book is an anthology of stories written by young feminist ranging from a multitude of topics. I have chosen this book for the personal stories written by multiracial women within this anthology. These women through their articles discuss the microaggressions that they faced within their families and how they overcame the discriminations aimed at their minority identity. They also through their stories bring up the issue of fertilization within interracial couples that produce multiracial children and the negative impact it has on that couple's offspring. Through these retellings of these women's lives you are able to get a better sense of the lives of multiracial women and the issues that some face.

*Mixed Resilience: A Study of Multiethnic Mexican American Stress and Coping in Arizona by Kelly F Jackson*

In this study the researchers focused on the 'resilience', or coping strategies, of mixed identified people of Mexican descent living in Arizona. The researcher picked this specific group to conduct their research on due to the various amounts of stressors Mexican identifying living

close to the US/Mexico border face including discrimination around immigration and acculturation. The stressors that they found that these multiracial people of Mexican descent faced were monoracism, cultural distance and pressure to authenticate one's ethnic membership. The coping strategies that they found were divided into three categories: internal strength, interpersonal skills, and external supports. Each of these strategies that they found were ethnic pride, critiquing race, exploring culture, flexing ethnicity, strategic relations, defending self, culturally affirming spaces and creative outlets.

*TEDxConcordCarlisleHighSchool: Taking sides: Being biracial presented by Anna Kitagawa*

In this talker the speaker, Anna, talks us through her journey of being a biracial half White and half Japanese person. She talked about times in her life when she wanted to conform to one part of her identity, beginning with White and switching to Japanese later in life, in order to feel more whole and less confused. She also brought to light a term that explained her experience as a biracial person which is racial imposter syndrome or feeling like you are not enough of any part of your identity. It wasn't until she looked into the numbers provided by the United States 2010 census count when she realized just how many multiracial people there were in America, especially those with the same mix as her. This helped her believe that just knowing that there's others like you helps make your identity feel more legitimized and therefore counteracts the racial imposter syndrome.

*Microaggressions Within Families: Experiences of Multiracial People by Kevin L Nadal*

In this article the researchers decided to take a previous study done on microaggressions that Multiracial people faced and focus solely on the microaggressions that they faced within their families. The results that the recorded from this research was very similar to the original as they stated within the article which goes to show that multiracial people can feel excluded even

within their own families as well as the rest of society. The five main types of microaggressions that these participants collectively experienced were isolation within their family, favoritism within their family, questioning of authenticity, denial of multiracial identity/experience and feeling about not learning about family heritage/culture. In this research they were unable to go into the specifics of how microaggressions from family members can be more detrimental than from strangers, but they did allude to the importance of researching it as well as how these people learn to counteract these microaggressions.

*The Importance of Family, Race, and Gender for Multiracial Adolescent Well-being by S. Schlabach*

In the article the author uses three guiding questions to understand how certain factors impact the well-being of multiracial adolescents. The questions that she used were ‘is there difference in wellbeing in multiracial adolescents in comparison to other monoracials, do multiracials with a white mother far worse off than those with a minority mother and can these effects be explained by family social capital?’. Schlabach approached her research in a more qualitative way, having her participants answer the series of questions she asked of them on a number scale. Due to the vigilance of separating all categories she was able to see trends within certain identities. On top of the answers that the author found to these questions she also determined the importance of studying multiracial people as well as the importance of not lumping them under the general category of multiracial but instead noting the differences in ethnicities.

*Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth by Tara Yosso*

In the article Yosso discusses both Critical Race Theory, or CRT, and community cultural wealth and how these two topics are related. Yosso denies CRT as a framework used to theorize and challenge the ways in which race and racism explicitly and implicitly impact social structures. The purpose of this is to both identify and challenge normative ideology that continues to encourage and support discriminatory practices found within all spheres of social life. Community cultural wealth on the other hand is the accumulation of cultural knowledge, skills and abilities that are passed down within the community you live in. It pertains to knowledge such as how to dress, the languages you speak, how you navigate the world, cultural traditions and knowledge. This importance for these two concepts to work together is due to the fact that there is only one form of community cultural wealth widely accepted in our society being forced upon everyone to adopt. With these working together communities of color are able to fight for the validity of their cultural wealth while using it alongside CRT to challenge discriminatory ideology based on race.

### **Methodology**

Before I began my research for this project and began interviewing people, I made sure that my approach to this whole project would be steeped in a combination of narrative study and grounded theory. Both of these approaches focus on individual/group experiences which is necessary in any form of identity research. The best person to theorize and speak on an identity is the person who holds that same identity. They are able to speak from a place of experience and deeply reflect upon their identity which in turn creates accurate research with a strong understanding of the subject. Therefore, the foundation of my research is qualitative research practices in the form of interviews with people who identify as mixed race and a survey. The interviewing part of my data collection is the basis of the narrative study approach of this

research. By gathering information through personal stories to understand what it is like to be mixed from multiple individuals in order to create a group consensus of a mixed identity. This group consensus in no way applies to each individual who identifies as mixed race, but it does help identify common themes that mixed race people commonly encounter.

The addition of a survey was to gather a large pool of participants in order to have a more accurate group consensus by having them answer the main questions I also used in my interviews. I collected these survey responses through a Google Form that clearly states the purpose of this project and collected no personal information to ensure that those participants remained anonymous. However, they did have the option to submit their contact information if they were willing to have a further discussion on the topic.

The questions of both my interviews and the survey were focused on how the participants saw themselves and their identity. I asked guiding questions about their family and school life to see if either of these affected the way they viewed themselves and their identity as well as questions that aimed to gauge how comfortable they were with their own mixed identity.

### **Findings from interviews**

I was able to interview 7 people over the course of five weeks and received three responses from the survey that I had sent out. The ages of my participants ranged from 61 to 19; there were two males and five females, the ones who completed the survey did not indicate their gender. Most of my interviews were held over the phone due to the participants living in a different state or limited availability to meet in person. A few of them also answered my questions by way of email after I had explained to them the purpose of this research. All of the interviews that I had over the phone or in person I took audio recordings of which the participant

was aware of in order to cross check the notes I took down as they spoke to make sure I had accurate responses.

The participants that I interviewed answered thirteen questions. The first two dealt with their racial identity and allowed them to say how they preferred to be identified. All of preferred to identify as mixed regarding their identity. As a collective whole, the racial identities that my participants are a part of are the following: Black, White\*, Filipino, Puerto Rican, Chinese, Laoasian, Iranian, Salvadorian, Cuban, Japanese and Korean. (Of the few who reported White one identified Polish and Newfoundland or British specifically). Four of the participants held a biracial identity while the remaining three had multiracial identities consisting of three different backgrounds.

The bulk questions that I presented to these individuals were centered around understanding the relationship of their family and peers by centering on their schooling experience. The purpose of these questions was to identify if their family or peers had any influence on how they see themselves in their identities. The answers around family varied greatly but for the most four of the participants reported having a good relation with the families. Only two of the participants reported having any sort of conflict within their families; one a straight female and the other a queer male. Both of these participants are multiracial with similar identities of Asian, Latinx and Black and they both have divorced parents. For the female a lot of the conflict came from her father's side of the family which dealt with high expectations placed on her. She also dealt with family members on that side critiquing her Asian-ness, saying that she isn't Asian enough, and her inability to speak the language. She also reported some family members comfort in saying racist comments; however, none of them were directed at her. The male on the other hand reported how his mother had gotten into fights with his aunts on his

father's sides regarding the way she was raising him. His aunts, slightly similar to the other female, said that he wasn't being raised Asian enough and his mother, who is Cuban defended herself and the way she chose to raise her son.

In terms of schooling and their relationship with their peers all of the participants had relative average experiences. Most of them reported that their identity had no effect on their schooling experience and two of them reported that their mixed identity made it easier to befriend various people. However, three of my participants reported incidences that were related to their identity. Two of these incidences were language related where one was placed in ELL despite knowing English because he grew up speaking multiple languages. The other was placed in classes lower than the grade she was supposed to be in while she was living in China because she was learning Chinese with the first graders and English with the third graders; this was resolved after she changed schools. The participant was forcibly enrolled into ELL classes also reported being bullied by his peers of the same identity because they saw him as an 'other' or not fully one of them. The last participant who had a negative experience in school put it down to 'boys being dumb' and didn't see this one experience as a reflection of her over all experience. She explains how one time a boy began calling her a 'mutt' behind her back and making dog whistles which he had admitted was only because he liked her and wanted to gain her attention, he later apologized to her after explaining his reasons for doing it.

One of the questions that I thought was very vital to the interview process was the question 'do you ever feel out of place?'. Only two of my participants said no but the other five were quick to say that they have felt this way, showing no hesitation, and elaborated on this experience. One of the responses that I feel necessary to highlight is one of a 20-year-old female, her answer was "Growing up I always felt out of place, not so much anymore. I was never Asian

enough for the Asian kids, nor white enough for the white kids. Now that being mixed has become more common and I have started to figure out more of who I am as a person, I feel less out of place.”. The concept of ‘not being enough’ is a common theme that a few of my other participants brought up but what I found encouraging about this response was the person's ability to understand her identity better and gain a stronger sense of belonging.

The last few questions of my interview dealt with how my participants saw themselves in the world at large and the ways that they holistically connect with themselves and their identity. I wanted to see how much of themselves they saw represented in the media and to see if there were any ways that they reaffirmed their identity in order to remind themselves that they are enough as they are. Most of my participants reported not having the need to reaffirm their identity but there were a few who mentioned that they found comfort in talking about their identity with others and that it helped them gain a better understanding of themselves as a whole. Another also mentions that it isn't herself that needs to be affirmed but who needed to be reminded and respectful of her identity. As for the questions about representations, all of the responses were different but there was a common vagueness of no but yes. Only one of my participants reported connecting to someone with the same identity as him while the others who said they have found representation also noted that those people don't accurately represent them. One of the participants brought up the issue of the media assigning monoracial identity to people who could be multiracial which makes it even more difficult to find any kind of representation. However, she also mentioned that through TikTok she has been able to come across people similar to her through ‘Blasian check’ and other multiracial check videos which is in itself affirming, especially the app notices that she is interested in these videos and more appear for her to view.

In the end all of my participants reported feeling secure within their identities. Some of them may have faced challenges in the past whether from family members, peers or themselves but none of them allowed any of these incidences to greatly affect the way they see themselves. They all reported defending their identities when needed be and pride towards their identity.

Based on these findings gathered from my interviewees I would conclude that their lives were not negatively impacted in any way due to their multiracial identity. Each of the participants reported being able to find a community among their peers as well as having a clear perception of their own identity.

For the survey I asked a more simplified set of questions that allowed the respondents to indicate if they faced any issues in the main areas that I was focusing on. Below is a chart displaying the questions that were listed on the survey and each individual response to the questions.

## Survey chart:

How do you prefer to identify?	What are your ethnicities/races?	What is your age?	What was your experience being bullied in school?	What is your family dynamic like?	Do you ever feel the need to justify your identity?
Mixed	African American and Cuban	21	Being mis-identified as Black and White, or Dominican. A lot of times I was considered too black for the white kids and too white for the black, because of my complexion and interest	Only know of my African American family, we have a very well connection. Don't know any of my Cuban family ever since my great grandmother died	Yes, I don't like being mis-identified
Mixed	Black and Japanese	21	No	Everyone gets along fairly well for the most part	Yes
Black	White (Irish, Scottish) black (Kenyan) others (Brazilian, French, Native American)	21		My white family and I are very close, and I have a relationship through texts with my distant POC family.	Mostly with myself. I have to be sure to check in with who I am and the way I see myself. Otherwise, I would feel lost. Like a constant need to prove myself to the world which seems counterproductive to my own happiness and sense of self.

These answers that they provided echo similar responses that I received from my interviews. I was unable to talk in depth with any of the survey participants about their responses but one thing that I would like to touch upon that was also a theme among the people that I interviewed is the need to justify their identity to other people. All of the survey respondents and three of my interviewee participants reported the need to ‘prove’ or reaffirm their identity to avoid being misidentified.

### **Analysis**

Based on the information I collected through researching other articles on mixed identity I have found accounts of various different experiences. Directly comparing these accounts to the ones that I have collected from my own research it's clear to see that not all multiracial people have an easy time understanding their intricate identity and finding a place within communities. In the book *Colonize This!* Several of the authors highlighted within the book told the story of what it was like for growing up as a multiracial person. They spoke of the racism they experienced within their families and the marginalization of fellow family members who were of a monoracial minority race. These stories back up the findings of Nadel and his team's regarding microaggressions within multiracial families. These types of microaggressions work towards invalidating the multiracial person's identity and experiences through various ways.

I bring this up to show the importance of not generalizing the results of research conducted on multiracial people. Just like with any other race their experiences vary depending on numerous factors such as gender, sexuality, specific genetic makeup, location and so on. That is why when engaging in identity research it's important to keep the method of counter storytelling in mind in order to recognize and acknowledge the intersectionality, or the overlapping identities that one person holds, within the participants. Counter storytelling is a

practice proposed by Tara Yosso that allows a person of a particular identity to speak on and theorize about their own lives and experiences versus letting an outsider tell their story for them. This ensures that the information that's gathered is authentic and free of any outsider bias that may be approaching it with a lens of comparison or othering. It is also a way for them to share their community cultural wealth which is another thing that Yosso places a high importance on. According to Yosso, every community has cultural wealth specific to them; however. There's only a high importance placed on a certain type of community cultural wealth leaving the rest to be ignored or devalued.

Another aspect of this research that needs to be pointed out is its regional relevance. The issue of mixed identities is not the same here in the United States which is a heterogeneous country than it is in other countries just as Japan which is homogeneous. In these homogeneous countries any deviance in appearance can easily result in othering or ostracization as Yamanaka points out in her article because these subtle differences are easy to detect. The same does not apply in places in America where it is more common for people of mixed identities to be placed into a category that phenotypically makes sense to the onlooker. Both of these circumstances can leave a negative impact on the multiracial person because their full identity is seen as obsolete in places like America or they could be systematically deprived of resources in places like Japan due to various reasons such as them not being considered a citizen.

On top of geographically, Yamanaka also suggests that the issue of mixed identity should be researched historically too. From her article, the need to do this is shown through the migration patterns and wars that occurred on the Continent of Asia. These two factors both displaced people within the Continent and brought in foreigners which both resulted in increased cases of multiethnic children of either a mixed Asian descent of Asian and American descent.

Another article that explains how mixed identity is seen in other regions is Barratt's article on Dougla identity. A Dougla is a person of Indian and African descent born in the Caribbean; all of these factors are extremely important and needed to complete this identity because a person can be of Indian and African descent but not be a Dougla if they do not also have ties to the Caribbean. That is because of the historical factors that created this mixing of identities when colonizers brought Indian and African slaves to the Caribbean and there in turn promoting the creation of the Dougla identity. In this article Barrett goes on to explain how Douglas manages their identity by maneuvering between the two for specific reasons. For example, straightening their hair when attending cultural Indian activities or vice versa letting their hair remain curly when attending cultural African activities. They also similarly stitch between their identities in their everyday life when it's beneficial to them. This is a concept that some mixed identifying people struggle with because it is seen as taking sides instead of individually honoring specific sides of their heritage. Therefore, some mixed identifying people, from the United States, will see the Douglas maneuverability as a sort of confusion or denial to their identity instead of as a unique ability that theoretically all mixed identifying people possess.

### **Summary**

In the end from the information that I gathered from my research I have concluded that mixed race identifying people have no issue finding communities to belong despite whatever issues they may or may not face due to their identity. The need to justify their identity to others in order to not be misidentified does not show to affect their ability to find a space of belonging but instead an assertion of their true, complete identity. Another thing I found was a need to legitimize or better represent this identity and continue doing research for these people. It has only been ten years since the American Census, a national based program that records the

identity of each citizen, has allowed for people to select multiple races when filling out the form. On top of this mixed-race people still face being lumped into one category by others and therefore have to advocate for the authenticity of their identity. The best way that I believe that an individual's mixed racial identity can be acknowledged is by increasing their representation in the media so not only are they able to see themselves but others who do not identify can too. We also need to continue to do further research to learn more about people who hold a mixed identity because like I have mentioned previously the experience of one mixed race individual does not account for all mixed-race individuals. Mixed race is a broad term that covers a variety of intersecting identities such as Black and White, Latinx and Asian, Korean and Chinese, Mexican and Cuban, multiracial, and biracial. To better understand these intricate identities, I propose that research must be done on both specific mixed-race people and mixed-race people as a whole.

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