

Inside the box: Explaining ethnic choices in Understanding Society

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Introduction

Quantitative UK research has generally assumed that ethnic group data reflects the population, and that ethnicity is a stable characteristic. However, UK survey and Census data suggests that less than half of the people who could conceivably be defined as mixed, choose a 'Mixed' category at all (Nandi & Platt, 2012; Mok, n.d.-a; Mok, n.d.-b). Most of these 'hidden' mixed people choose the 'White' option and a minority choose non-mixed minority group options. Moreover, Census data suggests that only around half of all adult people who have chosen the 'Mixed' box have done so consistently (Fig 1); and they are the group most likely to change their ethnic group between Censuses. The UK's single tick-box ethnic standard (Fig 2), very recent history of official ethnic enumeration, and frequent changes in the ethnic options available, may contribute to this situation. Indeed, to some extent 'counter-intuitive' choices and ethnic fluctuation could be explained by what is conventionally described as measurement error. However, we cannot assume that there are not substantive reasons behind these choices that have implications for analysis of social stratification, inequalities, and theories of integration and assimilation (Emeka & Vallejo, 2011; Saperstein & Penner, 2012; Alba, 2016).

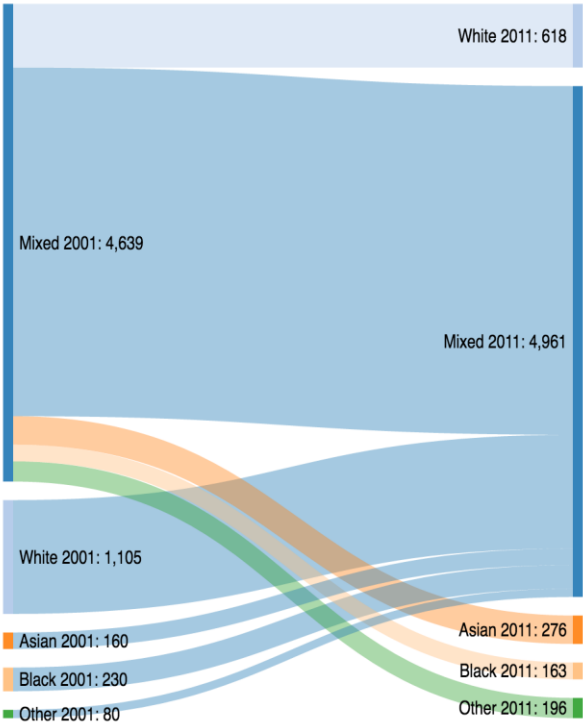
Quantitative analysis of the Census for England and Wales, and of Understanding Society, has showed that certain characteristics are independently associated with ethnic choice and ethnic change for mixed people (Mok, n.d.-a; Mok, n.d.-b). This qualitative study explores potential causal mechanisms behind these associations.

Literature

The conceptual framework for this study broadly characterises ethnic choice and change as acts of horizontal/relational social placement, vertical/hierarchical social placement, and contingent/performative placement respectively.

The 'horizontal' conceptualisation of choice is the choice of a specific ethnic group or race, among or amid other groups (Anderson, 1991; Aspinall & Song, 2013; Aspinall, Song, & Hashem, 2008; Berry, 1997; Eriksen, 1991; Gellner & Breuilly, 2008; Holloway, Wright, Ellis, & East, 2009; Mead, 1934; Park, 1928; Phinney, 1990; Stonequist, 1937; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Figure 1: Churn in and out of the ‘mixed’ categories between the 2001 and 2011 Census for England & Wales



Source: ONS Longitudinal Study, ethnic question data from 2001 and 2011 Census, excluding imputed ethnic

Figure 2: Ethnic group question, 2011 Census for England & Wales

16 What is your ethnic group?

Choose **one** section from A to E, then tick **one** box to best describe your ethnic group or background

A White

☐ English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British

☐ Irish

☐ Gypsy or Irish Traveller

☐ Any other White background, write in

B Mixed/multiple ethnic groups

☐ White and Black Caribbean

☐ White and Black African

☐ White and Asian

☐ Any other Mixed/multiple ethnic background, write in

C Asian/Asian British

☐ Indian

☐ Pakistani

☐ Bangladeshi

☐ Chinese

☐ Any other Asian background, write in

D Black/African/Caribbean/Black British

☐ African

☐ Caribbean

☐ Any other Black/African/Caribbean background, write in

E Other ethnic group

☐ Arab

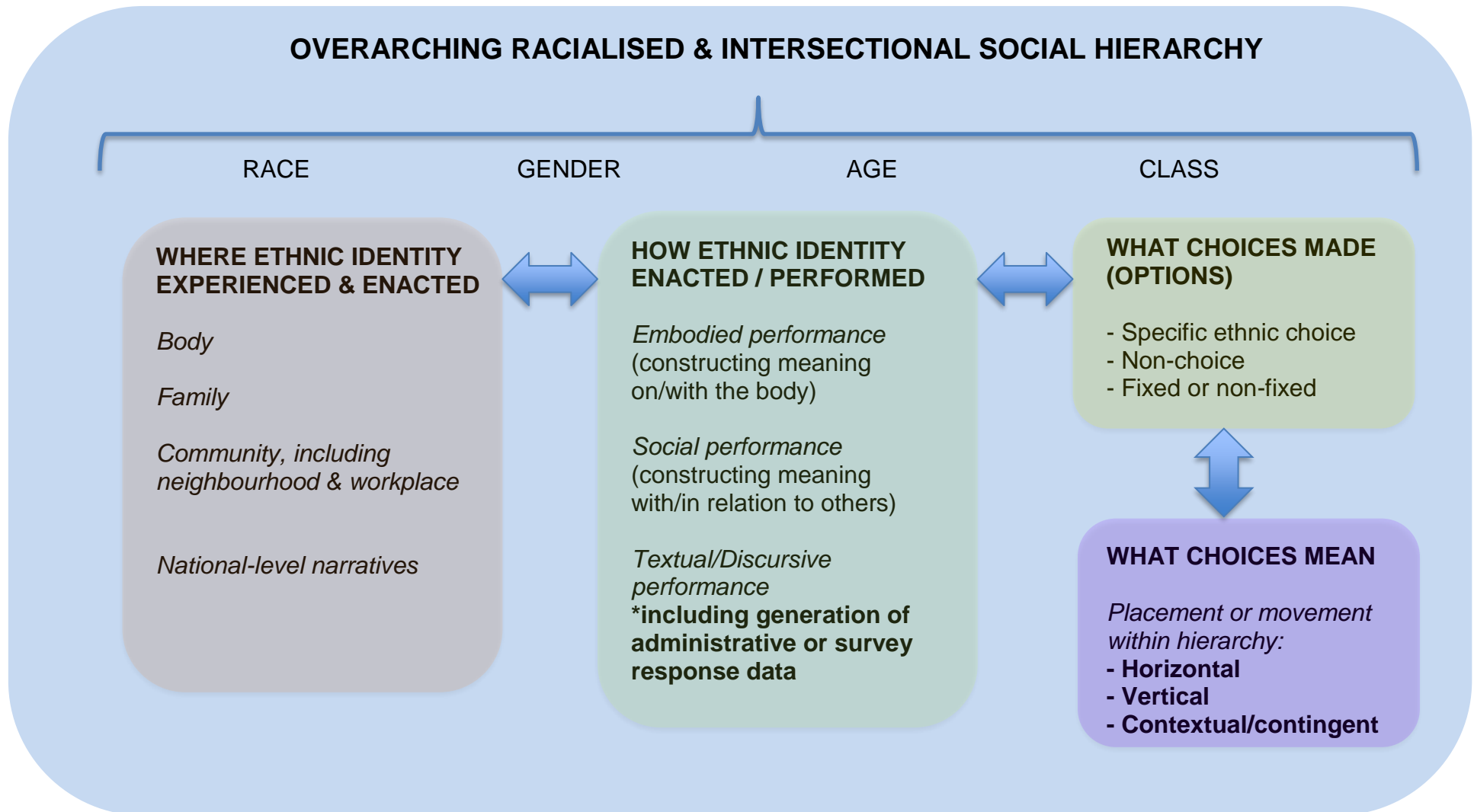
☐ Any other ethnic group, write in

These choices might be to identify as White, to identify as mixed or multiple (variously defined), or to identify as a single minority ethnic group only, within a society constrained by historical, cultural and legal precedent. The social psychological theories in particular, examine how identity forms and solidifies informed by perceptions and relationships with others, and identifies youth as an unstable period leading up to ‘achieved’ ethnic identity after adolescence (Phinney, 1990; Syed, Azmitia, & Phinney, 2007).

The ‘vertical’ concept introduces the idea of placement in a racialised social hierarchy, including whether to accept or reject the hierarchy altogether. (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991; Bashi & McDaniel, 1997; Bell, 1995; Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Crenshaw, 1991; Davenport, 2016; Fredrickson, 2002; Omi & Winant, 1994; Saperstein & Gullickson, 2013; Saperstein & Penner, 2012; Saperstein, Penner, & Light, 2013; Saperstein, Porter, & Noon, n.d.; Smith, 1999; Song, 2004; Winant, 2000; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). This body of work includes the literature of ‘aspirational Whiteness’ where individuals or families ‘Whiten’ over a lifetime or a generation, seemingly in sync with socioeconomic advancement (Alba, 2016; Carvalho, Wood, & Andrade, 2004; Saperstein & Gullickson, 2013; Saperstein & Penner, 2012; Saperstein et al., n.d.). It also examines evidence that multiracial identity in the US for Black-descended people is associated with class privilege (Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007; Townsend, Fryberg, Wilkins, & Markus, 2012).

The third form of choice is the choice to change ethnic identities (including changing meanings of the same identities) depending on context (Ahmed, 2014; Bhabha, 1984, 1994, Hall, 1996a, 1996b; Mahtani, 2002). From the perspective of social institutions, these choices are matters to be monitored, measured or controlled for a perceived greater good; while from the perspective of mixed people themselves, the choices may be seen as conduits through which agency is exercised.

Figure 3: Conceptual framework



Summary of related quantitative findings

The present qualitative study is a companion piece to two quantitative studies of ethnic choices and ethnic change among mixed people in the UK. These quantitative studies compared the reported ethnic groups for respondents with the ethnic groups they reported for their parents, using the *UK Household Longitudinal Study*: ‘*Understanding Society*’ Wave 1 dataset (Mok, n.d.-a); and analysed ethnic change using two waves of the ONS Longitudinal Study (Mok, n.d.-b). Previously in the UK, there have been only a few broad descriptive studies of this issue using quantitative data (Nandi & Platt, 2012; Simpson, 2014; Simpson, Jivraj, & Warren, 2014).

The two related studies found significant differences between groups of mixed people, that were broadly aligned with theories of racialised social stratification. As suggested by US research into ‘mixed privilege’ however, there was some indication of some pre-existing conditions of socioeconomic advantage for the mixed-identified. The studies also highlighted countervailing cohort and period trends towards a destigmatisation of mixed race and multiculturalism. For example, a broadly descriptive analysis of ‘types’ of people categorised by their reported ethnic group and that of their parents, showed that proximity to whiteness, expressed by both ethnic choice and family context, was associated with better outcomes. The same kind of proximity to non-mixed minority ethnic communities was associated with worse outcomes. However, when looking at ethnic choice for people with the same types of parentage (i.e. one white and one non-white parent), and at ethnic change over time in the Census for England and Wales, there seemed to be a clearer divide between conservative mono-ethnic choices associated with older and more working-class populations, and the embrace of mixed identities associated with younger and more middle-class groups (Mok, n.d.-a).

Several other traits relating to ethnic fluctuation suggested that general life instability or insecurity results in greater reported ethnic instability, and that this phenomenon does not reduce with age, as previous studies of mixed and mono-ethnic youth have assumed (Aspinall & Song, 2013; Hitlin, Brown, & Elder, 2006; Mihoko Doyle & Kao, 2007). Quantitative data available in the Census showed that various forms of cross-sectional deprivation, and change in socioeconomic conditions, was associated

with ethnic fluctuation; and that probability of ethnic fluctuation actually increased for older age groups. However, given data limitations it was not possible to analyse how this might fit with substantive identity change, as opposed to inattentive form-filling.

Women were more likely to identify as mixed, and less likely to have ethnic fluctuation, but we cannot observe in the quantitative data the actual cause of these ‘gender effects’. The ‘sexual marketplace’ is often a focus of why women are more likely to choose ‘mixed’ rather than Black or White in the US (Davenport, 2015). But how much of this is relevant to the wide variety of mixed people in the UK? And what drives British mixed men, who dominate the White-identified mixed population, to identify as White?

Qualitative research sought to further explore, test and explain these and other associations.

Limitations of existing qualitative research

Qualitative research into mixed identity choice has played an important role in highlighting the multi-dimensional, contextual and fluid nature of ethnicity for mixed people, as well as drawing attention to the population in more general terms as one worthy of attention within study of race and ethnic identity (Aspinall & Song, 2013; Aspinall et al., 2008). However, the qualitative UK and international research has largely drawn on individual social psychological theories (‘horizontal placement’), and to some extent cultural studies literature examining hybridity and performative identity (‘contingent/contextual placement’), without much reference to critical literature focused on hierarchical racial stratification (‘vertical placement’). It has tended to lack a systematic examination of the relationships between class and race, or racialized social stratification, in the experiences of mixed people (Aspinall & Song, 2013; Aspinall et al., 2008; Caballero, Edwards, & Puthussery, 2008; Edwards & Caballero, 2008; Song & Hashem, 2010). There are two likely reasons for this. Much contemporary qualitative research by and for mixed people has confronted historical stereotypes of mixed people by emphasising individual agency and

experiences in constituting identity. While justifiable, this tends to exclude, by default, a focus on structural issues as overly deterministic.

The second reason is technical – qualitative research has used self-selective or purposive sampling approaches that seem practical and theory-driven, but result in a narrow or skewed sample. In both the US and the UK qualitative sampling of interviews about adult mixed identity choices has tended to be limited to university students (see critiques in Caballero, 2014; Root, 2002). This has been justified by prevailing theories of the most important period of identity formation in youth or early adulthood (Phinney & Alipuria, 1996) although obviously there is also some practical convenience involved when academics carry out research at universities. In the UK, qualitative sampling has been centred on London, and the respondents skew female (Aspinall & Song, 2013). This has meant an inability to rigorously explore and compare experiences across a range of structural conditions, and has resulted in a number of gaps that affect analytical and theoretical perspectives:

- a) Self-selection of those who identify as mixed or multiracial, excluding the large mixed population that does not.
- b) The key UK study on ethnic options specifically excluded people with multiple ethnicities that are classed as within the same top-level Census category or ‘race’; the explicit justification for this being that researchers sought only to interview people who look racially ambiguous, essentially pre-defining the meaning and experience of being mixed (Aspinall et al., 2008).
- c) Due to the university context most subjects are obviously tertiary educated and more likely to be middle class – limiting the scope for analysing class and social stratification.
- d) Subjects based at UK universities are likely to be living away from their family and ethnic community context (eg in halls of residence).

- e) Subjects based at universities are likely to be young adults with no children and little work experience.¹
- f) Studies do not attempt to construct comparator groups, e.g. with second-generation non-mixed minorities of the same age; or ‘non-ambiguous looking’ people with multiple ethnicity.

These gaps mean that there is very little known about the ethnic choices of overlooked groups, or how their identities or reported choices might change over a lifetime. These include the non-mixed identified, older mixed people, the non tertiary-educated, or simply people living and working in their local communities.

Research question: What factors drive ethnic choice and change for mixed people of all ages and class backgrounds, including those who do not identify as mixed?

Further exploring the quantitative findings discussed above, this qualitative study seeks to answer the following subquestions:

1. To what extent do cognitive and ‘measurement’ issues with the survey instrument affect reported ethnic choice and change?
2. Is there evidence of ‘aspirational’ socioeconomic Whitening as suggested by research in the Americas?
3. What explains the ‘mixed privilege’ effect? E.g. are White and non-mixed Minority-identification associated with seeking safety in numbers for working-class people, as opposed to individualism for middle-class people?
4. What intersectional roles do the appearance, gender, the family, the community, and national political factors play in the experienced ascription and enactment of identity?
5. What are the qualitative characteristics and traits behind identity ‘fluctuation’ compared with substantive identity ‘change’?

¹ Research on interracial couples and parenting mixed children (Caballero, Edwards, etc), is usually in the context of parenting young children rather than looking at relationships between adults and their parents.

Methods

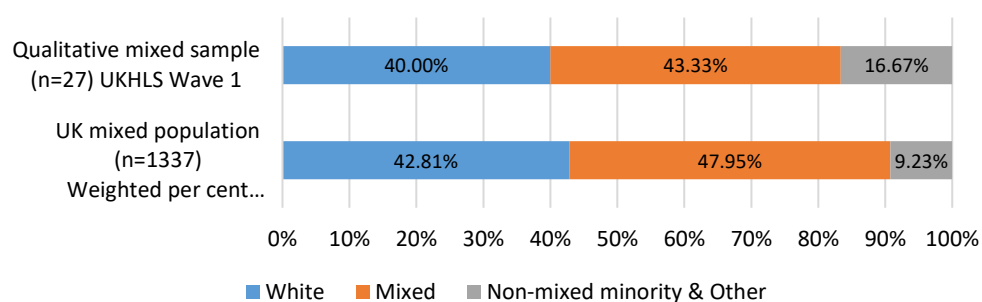
This study uses *Understanding Society: The UK Household Longitudinal Study* (UKHLS) as a sample frame. Understanding Society is a large-scale, high quality, stratified national probability sample survey with multi-dimensional ethnicity questions that include reported respondent ethnic group and reported parental ethnic group. In a first for the UK, this means previously ‘hidden’ and under-researched mixed populations were estimated in the full survey data, then appropriately targeted for qualitative interview recruitment using the same sample.

As mentioned above, qualitative research on mixed people in the UK have tended to exclude:

- White-identified people with mixed parentage.
- Non-mixed minority-identified people with mixed parentage.
- Older mixed people.
- Non tertiary-educated mixed people.
- Migrants, especially older migrants who completed their education overseas.

The present study was able to include all of these groups. Using the weighted population proportions estimated from Understanding Society data, the study successfully recruited a good sample of the White-identified group, and an oversample of the non-mixed minority or ‘Other Ethnic Group’-identified (see Figure 4). Thirty semi-structured in-depth phone interviews were completed, involving questions on life history and identity, elements of cognitive questionnaire testing (the use of cognitive probes), and discussion of appearance and ethnic ‘identifiability’.

Figure 4: Reported ethnic group of 'Main mixed sample' compared with population estimate



Sample selection

472 Understanding Society participants were sent recruitment materials. This recruitment sample was selected on criteria based on respondent answers to the ethnic group and parental ethnic group question at Wave 1 of Understanding Society (see Figures 5 & 6 below). Eligible participants had parents from different ethnic groups, or had selected a 'mixed' category despite reporting parents from the same ethnic group, or had reported an ethnic group that otherwise contradicted the ethnic group reported for their parents. They also needed to have a current address and phone number and to be still participating in Understanding Society.

Response rates to the initial mailout were good, with nearly 11% returning a consent form. Overall, the successful completion rate from the initial mailout was 5.51%, with a high positive response following phone-contact. All interview respondents gave permission to link their Understanding Society data to their transcripts for the purposes of the study, allowing for case studies to be generated based on both qualitative and quantitative data.

Three respondents were ineligible for interview upon screening, apparently due to obvious miscodes or errors in survey input/answers, which are keyed in by Understanding Society survey workers (e.g. a parent being coded as Turkish ('11') instead of White British ('1')). However, some cognitive implications of miscodes are considered in the overall study.

The Understanding Society sample of 26 interviews was topped up with a purposive sample of two further interviews with male respondents to even the gender imbalance. These respondents were purposively sampled through social networks in the London area. Two purposively sampled pilot interviews are also included in the analysis as the interview schedule did not change in any substantive way following these interviews.

Figure 5: Respondent ethnic group questions showcard used at Wave 1 & sent to study respondents

(Understanding Society Wave 1)
"What is your ethnic group?"

SHOWCARD G2

White

1. British/English/Scottish/Welsh/Northern Irish
2. Irish
3. Gypsy or Irish Traveller
4. Any other white background

Mixed

5. White and Black Caribbean
6. White and Black African
7. White and Asian
8. Any other mixed background

Asian or Asian British

9. Indian
10. Pakistani
11. Bangladeshi
12. Chinese
13. Any other Asian background

Black / African / Caribbean / Black British

14. Caribbean
15. African
16. Any other Black background

Other ethnic group

17. Arab
97. Any other ethnic group

Figure 6: Parental ethnic group questions showcard used at Wave 1 & sent to study respondents

(Understanding Society Wave 1)
"To what ethnic group does your mother/father belong?"

SHOWCARD G3

- 1 White – British/English/Scottish/Welsh/Northern Irish**
- 2 Irish**
- 3 Gypsy or Irish Traveller**
- 4 European, other than British**
- 5 Other white group**
- 6 Indian**
- 7 Pakistani**
- 8 Bangladeshi**
- 9 Sri Lankan**
- 10 Chinese**
- 11 Turkish**
- 12 Middle Eastern or Iranian**
- 13 Caribbean**
- 14 North African**
- 15 Black African**
- 16 African Asian**
- 97 Other ethnic group**

Table 1: Response rates

Recruitment rates	Total	F	M	Rate from mailout	Rate from contact attempts	Rate after successful contact
Posted recruitment materials	472					
Total consent forms received	51	37	14	10.81%		
Included in error, not contacted	3	3	0	0.64%		
Not contacted (gender quota full)	5	5	0	1.06%		
Attempted phone contact	43	29	14	9.11%		
No contact after multiple attempts	8	6	2	1.69%	18.60%	
Successful phone contact	35	23	12	7.42%	81.40%	
Declined interview	1	1	0	0.21%	2.33%	2.86%
Ineligible at screening (coding errors)	3	3	0	0.64%	6.98%	8.57%
Appointments with eligible respondents	31	19	12	6.57%	72.09%	88.57%
No-shows & unresponsive to follow-up	5	3	2	1.06%	11.63%	14.29%
Interviews completed from sample	26	16	10	5.51%	60.47%	74.29%
<i>Additional interviews</i>		F	M			
Purposive - pilots	2	2	0			
Purposive – male top-up	2	0	2			

The corpus is separated into two categories:

- Main mixed sample (n=27): Those with mixed parentage, whether or not reporting as mixed at Wave 1 or identifying as such at interview.
- Comparator sample (n=3): Those who reported a White ethnic group at Wave 1, or at interview, but who have two minority parents of the same ethnic category.

Interview method

Semi-structured in-depth qualitative telephone interviews were conducted. There were several advantages of using telephone rather than face-to-face interviews:

- Reducing ‘interviewer effects’, which have particular impact on interviews about race (Cotter, Cohen, Coulter, 1982).
- Using respondent description of their own physical appearance and how people racially identify them over their lifetime in various contexts, may be relatively more valid and less problematic over the whole corpus than relying on a single interviewer’s subjective perceptions of skin colour and phenotype.
- Ability for one researcher to easily interview respondents across the country, for a full geographical spread.

The Understanding Society Wave 1 showcards used for the ethnic group questions were either posted or sent via email/Google Docs, and used as elicitation devices. Elements of the showcards were cognitively tested in some cases (Collins, 2014).

Findings

Summary fieldnotes were written following each interview, then full transcripts were generated, anonymised, and redacted for disclosive information. What follows is a summary of initial findings, resulting from high-level thematic and framework analysis of transcripts and field notes.

Further analysis of the rich qualitative data will lead to more in-depth findings in due course. Planned analysis will include comparative case studies that examine causal mechanisms of explanatory variables using a ‘most-similar case’ and ‘pathway case’ comparative approach what range of factors appear to be ‘sufficient but not necessary’ to make particular ethnic choices (Gerring, 2006).

1. To what extent do cognitive and measurement issues with the survey instrument affect ethnic choice and change?

There were a number of recurrent themes relating to the process of understanding, mentally processing, and choosing an ethnic group from the showcard. Overall, the nature of the survey instrument was found to persistently affect ethnic choice, but in inconsistent ways. The qualitative evidence is that we largely cannot view this impact as trivial or simple ‘error’; and we should not view the survey instrument’s idiosyncracies as somehow separate from a racialised social system rooted in a specific colonial history, to which interviewees respond as a whole.

It was clear that reporting ethnic group is a process of communicating an identity that is as much an attitudinal characteristic as an ‘objective’ static measure for mixed people. The act of reporting ethnic group is a contextual one, and context – like the ethnic group list itself – is subject to change. It should not be assumed that asking an ethnic question is an act of measuring a static, objective, ‘time invariant’ or highly stable characteristic.

Some of the main themes relating to cognitive issues are discussed below.

1.1. Automatic picking

Respondents often appeared to rely on memory of ethnic option lists that they had viewed before in order to ‘automatically’ go to the point on the list that they were used to. This was particularly clear for the White-identified, as for White British people, their intended option has never moved from its top position on any list generally used in the UK. This kind of automatic response was also common among younger mixed-identified respondents who went ‘straight to mixed’.

The Census standard ethnic group list used in the UK has changed over time (indeed, it has changed every time it has been included in the Census, which is three times). There have been varying degrees of consistency in how the ethnic list has been implemented across administrative data collection. As a result, respondents sometimes made an ‘automatic choice’, but then when asked to consider the list more slowly and in-depth, did consider other choices open to them that they had not

previously considered. There were also contrasts between their ethnic choice at interview and their choice at Wave 1 of Understanding Society, though arguably they had been ‘primed’ by discussion of identity, and having been sent the showcard beforehand to examine.

In common British vernacular, ‘Asian’ tends only to mean South Asian. Respondents with Chinese ancestry seemed slow to respond to the fairly recent recategorisation of ‘Chinese’ as within the ‘Asian’ top-level category, as in Wave 1 of Understanding Society and the 2011 Census. In the 2001 Census Standard, which is still often used in various administrative contexts, Chinese remains under ‘Other’.

Gary, Chinese and White parents, 40s:

Resp: I go straight there, and then tick number 8, any other mixed background.

[...]

Intvr: So again looking at the list, you said, you’re confronted with the form and you go straight to mixed, you tick your box which is any other mixed background.

Resp: Yeah.

Intvr: If you look down to the next section, which is Asian or Asian British.

Resp: Chinese!

Intvr: Ah, Chinese is in there.

[...]

Resp: Yeah, well I was looking at this last night with my 15 year old daughter, who said ‘well why aren’t you White/Asian, ‘cos look, Chinese is in the Asian bit’, and I was like, ‘well I don’t feel Asian’, and um if feeling is uh, is good enough – maybe I’ll have to change my outlook now and go for number 7. But it never was an option.

Due to the extent of automatic picking, the impact of new or changed categories can have a ‘lagged’ effect, and this may provide a partial explanation for the significantly higher level of ethnic fluctuation for older mixed people as found in my related data analysis of the ONS Longitudinal Study (Mok, n.d.-b). Older people may have taken

longer to notice that the new ‘Mixed’ options were available to them at the time of the 2001 Census due to reliance on automatic picking, but then became accustomed to the new ‘Mixed’ options in the decade leading up to the 2011 Census (although this does not explain the flows *out* of the Mixed categories).

By comparison, younger people were more likely to be consistently mixed-identified in the data, which was supported by the ‘automatic picking’ habits of younger White/Black or White/South Asian respondents in the present study who have experienced mixed options for most of their adult life, and tend to quickly answer with their ‘usual’ Mixed option.

It was noted that there is a cognitive burden of reading down the list, and that the list has gotten longer and longer over time. Preferring to avoid having to deal with this cognitive burden, and to think as little about it as possible, seemed at times associated with a respondent view of ‘thinking about’ or ‘having to define’ their ethnicity as also being a cognitive burden in their daily social interactions. Not thinking too hard about the ethnic question, and habituating oneself to automatically pick the first option, appeared to be a function of generally evading or avoiding the experience of being ‘Othered’. This habituation of behaviour to avoid ‘Othering’ was a notable marker of the White-identified.

1.2. Discomfort with the process of having to fit identity into one ‘box’

The perceived reductiveness of available ethnic options was a recurring theme. The options were often described as unable to represent the complexity of the respondent’s ethnic or personal identity. This presented cognitive obstacles to making a selection. In a sense, this was the opposite of evasion or ‘not wanting to think’ about the ethnic question as per the phenomenon discussed above – rather, respondents with this view had an urge towards *greater* explanation. This theme emerged most clearly among the ‘mixed Other’ respondents, which is a substantial group that includes those with a minority parent from a non-Black or non South-Asian ethnic group, mixed people with no White ancestry, or those with mixed parents. This type of respondent preferred to make full use of the ‘write-in’ spaces. One stated that they would refuse to fill in the question “in a fit of pique” if a ‘Please specify’ write-in space was not

available (Fatima, Egyptian and White parents, 30s). This reaction aligns closely with comments from the ‘named’ mixed category respondents about their experience of being relegated to ‘Other’ on ethnic forms before the introduction of any mixed categories.

Britney, Black Caribbean and White parents, 30s.

Resp: [... T]hey just used to be like – White, Black, Other? For a while? Yeah, so it’s changed quite a bit.

Intvr: Yeah, what did you do at that time?

Resp: Well, I just, I used to write my own one in, because it used to really piss me off. Because I’m not ‘Other’, I’m a fuckin’ human being.

This urge among the ‘Others’ to make their ancestry specifically legible in survey response is the opposite of the ‘avoidance’ of legibility of the White-choosers. However, both are rooted in resistance against being Othered.

Restrictiveness of mixed options to four pre-defined categories rather than permitting multi-ticking for multiple ethnicity is currently an anomaly among the Census standards of Anglophone Western countries that measure ethnicity. A few respondents with particularly strong personalities and beliefs stated that they persisted in picking multiple options, including when told directly and in person not to do this by administrative data collectors. But by and large there was acquiescence to the single-ticking system, as other methods of ethnic data collection had not been experienced.²

It was fairly common for respondents to have an understanding of ethnic group that leaned heavily on personally-felt cultural identity rather than ancestry, parentage and ‘expected’ understandings of which socially or politically salient groups were being counted. For the White-identified with their strongly ‘mainstream’ identities, and other respondents with a reasonable level of comfort in their mixed identities, this ‘personally felt’ approach to ethnicity made their choice uncomplicated and automatic

² Carrying out cognitive testing on multi-ticking was beyond the scope of this project, although it is an area that requires further study and testing in the UK.

as discussed above. For those with unsettled cultural identity, this approach to ethnicity made the choice more difficult. This difficulty was apparent even among respondents with what could be considered the ‘clearest’ named options (e.g. White and Black Caribbean; White and Indian).

Arjun, Indian and White parents, 40s:

Resp: *I don't – don't think these really describe me still. 'Cos it still said White/Asian. [...] I don't necessarily feel at home in India, and I don't feel at home in England, and so, it was sort of British/Asian doesn't cut it. For me. Yeah. Does that make sense.*

[...]

I haven't felt part of my uh, Anglo-Saxon Christian culture. Because I've felt different. So, so, um. What does that look like. So I can't tell what the, the, I don't know the story, stories to tell, and which, if I went to a a Hindu temple, I wouldn't know what to do, I definitely, and-

I remember pleading with my dad to say, you know, will you teach me Hindi, will you teach me Hindi, and he said no, you've got to learn to be a White boy. So, you know, so, and I'm not. So where does that leave me?

You know, and um, so, uh. Yeah, so. But it's not a, it's not something that I end up having to deal with on a day to day. Because I am who I am. But when you try to put me into a box, then suddenly I've gotta deal with it, and it doesn't come up, I don't come out with an answer, because I just kinda go 'wrong question'.

1.4. Elision between ethnic group, 'race', nationality and national identity

There were also cognitive obstacles to choice-making resulting from confusion about what the ethnic group questions and options were actually referring to. The source of this confusion is that the options given include 'racial' terms as the top-level categories, and a mixture of 'racial', national, regional/geographic and ethnic terms as the sub-categories. These categories refer to groups that have social or political salience in the UK, but their definitions are not necessarily logically consistent. For example, 'Indian', 'Pakistani' and 'Bangladeshi' are country-based nationalities, and are not considered ethnic groups in their respective countries. 'Black' is racial term, not an ethnic group; 'African' is also not an ethnic group but a broadly regional term, within which there are 51 countries and thousands of ethnic groups and language communities.

Among the ‘residual other’ groups overlooked in the list of ‘salient groups’, some respondents had difficulties with their choices due to a lack of mutual exclusivity of options. This is detailed further at the subsection below: ‘Measurement error relating to category logic’. At times it was clear that respondents were grappling with the complex task of matching their personal experience or identity with trying to predict what was expected or wanted by surveyors according to knowledge of what was politically or socially salient.

The use of the word ‘British’ in the first White category, but not elsewhere in the list, appeared to often present a point of confusion. The term ‘British’ occupied a central position in the thinking behind ‘White British’ choices for our mixed respondents. In common national parlance, ‘British’ is commonly understood to refer to citizenship and to a *specifically non-ethnic and race-blind national identity*. It is generally a term that is embraced by immigrant communities and their children. As noted in descriptive analysis of Understanding Society data, ethnic minorities in Britain have a far stronger allegiance to the term ‘British’ than do white people, who have stronger affiliations to constituent nation identities such as English, Scottish and Welsh (Nandi & Platt, 2013).

Therefore, for mixed people and other minority groups, the use of the term ‘British’ on a form as a catchall for constituent nation *White* English identities appears to be a key cognitive stumbling block in the ethnic question.

1.5. Recognition of the racial hierarchy inherent in the list

There was evidence that ethnic choices are informed by an engagement with a racially stratified social structure. Again, this made the choices easier for those who tended towards White-identification, but more difficult for those who were not.

For a number of the non-White identified, there was a persistent awareness of the racial hierarchy inherent in the ordering and choices in the list, including in the placement of ‘White’ at the top of the list, and in front of the minority ethnic group in the Mixed group categories. Some noted that the ‘White and- ’ mixed options were less acceptable (or simply unacceptable) for them due to the suggestion of one

identity being more important than the other, both in society, and to their personal identity and life experience.

Calliope, Pakistani and White parents, 50s.

Resp: I might have said White and Asian but that's – I wouldn't have thought I would have. I don't think I've ever said that. Maybe I have but I don't think I've ever said that.

Intvr: That's interesting. Can you tell me why you think you've never picked that? [...]

Resp: I think it's because it's 'White' and 'Asian' as if 'White' is somehow better than being 'Asian' – White is sort of better than Asian. [...] I probably would have thought, oh, that's a bit loaded. It's not even done in alphabetical order, it should be Asian and White.

For the consistently White-identified, who tended to be strongly 'British' in their identity, there was a latent satisfaction with the fact that the hierarchy enabled a low cognitive burden, in that White British was the first choice and they didn't have to look any further.

Slim, (comparator group) both parents Turkish, 50s.

Resp: [...T]here's no colour with Turkish. It's like there's no colour with British, is there? As such. You can still be be British and Black, can't ya?

Intvr: Yeah, yeah. Absolutely. So yeah, that's an interesting question, they've got these numbered headings and then they've got the subcategories. When you look at it, what do you see first? The British first or the White first?

Resp: One.

Intvr: You see the One first.

Resp: Yeah, number One, White British. Yeah. That's me.

Most comments about the category or idea of being 'White British' by the White-identified, and by a number of the Mixed and Minority-identified, describes it as the most attractive possible choice in society, even if respondents do not reflect on the order of the list as a hierarchy. As discussed further below in discussion of the 'White choice', there are obvious advantages to aligning with a ranking that places you first, at the forefront of a discourse or at the centre of your own subjectivity.

1.6. Evasive thinking and hostility to the ethnic question

There were sometimes elements of evasion and resistance to the question being asked, particularly resistance to the Othering inherent in the question. This was present across the range of respondents, and resulted in various choices and fluctuation of response. For White-identified respondents, their choice appeared to be a rejection of being Othered or identified as not ‘mainstream’.

Dwayne, Black Caribbean and White parents, 50s:

Intvr: It sounds like you're not convinced necessarily about the purpose of those questions, right? So why do you think you would choose White British as a way of expressing that, that it doesn't matter.

Resp: Um – probably because – it's probably bound to the fact that, now that I'm actually thinking about it, it's probably down to the fact that you're only asking the question to identify people that are non-White British. Do you know what I mean? So they're only looking for something, for somebody that's different? Because if they weren't looking for somebody that's different, they wouldn't ask a question about differences. Do you know what I mean? Because you wouldn't need to ask the question would you. So obviously asking the question in the first place, it's trying to identify something that's – that – that's kind of not mainstream or what you'd expect.

1.7. Measurement error relating to category logic

Ideally, lists used as categorical survey responses should be mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive. The respondent and parental ethnic group lists used in Understanding Society may be seen as collectively exhaustive given the use of residual ‘other’ categories; but they are not mutually exclusive. The residual ‘other’ categories are also often seen as inadequate, and thus the list does not ‘feel’ collectively exhaustive to the increasing numbers of unspecified ‘others’. This results in particular cognitive problems for those respondents who are residual ‘others’ of various kinds. The re-categorisation of certain ‘others’ into different categories between the 2001 and 2011 Census Standard has not helped; nor does the use of a different ethnic group list for parental ethnicity compared with respondent ethnicity in Understanding Society.

For example, mixed white/Chinese respondents mostly chose ‘Any other mixed’ for themselves, as they did not view Chinese as a group covered by the Asian category, due to common vernacular understandings of what ‘Asian’ means in the UK, and ongoing use of the 2001 Census standard in some administrative data collection (which specifies Chinese as the largest ‘Other ethnic group’ category). As discussed above, there are indications that putting Chinese under the ‘Asian’ category further down the list in Wave 1 of Understanding Society, as per the eventual 2011 Census standard, has had limited cognitive impact on mixed people who simply did not look that far down the list. Some respondents with South Asian heritage stated on reflection they thought Chinese should count as ‘Asian’; while those with Chinese ancestry were more cautious in that they largely predicted that they would be excluded from this category.

There were also category problems with the ‘African’ category, and the parental showcard categories that referred to Africa and the Middle East. Problems here with the lack of mutual exclusivity of categories stemmed from the use of both generic regional and racial categories in the ethnic group lists. For example, a respondent with an Egyptian father considered Egyptians to be both North African and Middle Eastern in the parental ethnic group list, which is geographically accurate. There was cognitive confusion among other respondents about why the categories skipped between regional terms (e.g. North African) and racial terms (e.g. Black African). It was also pointed out that East Africans and people from Arab-influenced African communities (that were nonetheless not ‘North African’), identified as African but had problems with identifying as Black African. A number of these issues have already been identified by ONS Census consultations (Williams, 2017).

Meanwhile, there were ambiguities over whether some groups were considered to be White or not, given contrasts between respondent ethnic category list and the parental ethnic category list. A Jewish-identified respondent was included in the study sample because he had selected ‘Other Ethnic Group’ for his Jewish mother at Wave 1 (as opposed to an ‘Other white group’). A respondent with two Turkish parents defined Turks as White, which is not what is implied by the parental ethnic group list, which lists Turkish separately (and some distance down the list) from ‘Other white group’.

1.8. Inconsistency between the respondent and parental ethnic group showcard

The parental ethnic group list used at Understanding Society Wave 1 is different from the respondent ethnic group list (see Figures 5 & 6). Unlike the respondent list, which hews closely to what would become the 2011 Census standard, parental ethnic options were not categorised into top-level ‘racial’ categories, and had no mixed categories. The list also included some specific options not present in the respondent ethnic group list such as Turkish, African Asian (referring, in the context of the UK, to South Asian populations from former British colonies such as Uganda and Kenya), ‘Middle Eastern or Iranian’ as opposed to ‘Arab’, and generic ‘Caribbean’ with no mention of being ‘Black’ per se.

There were some cognitive obstacles reported by respondents, who were confused as to why the list was different. There were also problems with the lack of mixed categories for the several respondents with mixed parents. The parental ethnic group list appears to reflect problematic assumptions that mixedness is a phenomenon confined to the British second generation. A quantitative analysis of the Understanding Society data shows that a substantial proportion of mixed people in the UK are foreign-born (Mok, n.d.-a). Mixed parents of the present study’s respondents had been born in the Caribbean, Africa, Asia and Britain.

2. Is there evidence of ‘aspirational’ socioeconomic Whitening?

As already found in related quantitative analysis, White-identified mixed people tended to be older and more working class. The phenomenon of ‘aspirational Whitening’ discussed in US literature was not found in cases that ‘Whitened’ with success over time. Reflecting the related quantitative analysis, there was little that was consciously ‘aspirational’ on an individual level about the White choice in terms of individuals becoming ‘Whiter’ as their social status improved. Rather, White choices reflected a combination of physical appearance, cultural assimilation/upbringing in White communities, and distance from minority culture and communities, which were on the whole, pre-existing characteristics.

While not straightforward expressions of socioeconomic ‘aspiration’, the White choices were embedded in a wider cultural context privileging the status of the White

British identity as emblematic of the mainstream, and as a protected and protective identity, as touched on in the cognitive sections above. Where the White choice represented a desire to ‘get away from’ anything, it was not lower socioeconomic status, but racialization, discrimination and Othering. Cultural assimilation into the idea of a British ‘mainstream’ was associated with reporting White British identity even when respondents were visible minorities.

2.1. Whiteness as physical appearance

Skin colour and phenotype had a substantial effect on ethnic self-labeling overall, and this was very clear for the White-identified. The White-identified described themselves as looking White, and thus having been largely ascribed and socialized as White. Rather than identify ‘White’ as a being a biological ‘race’ or cultural identity group, respondents spoke of being white-coloured, i.e. ‘White’ meaning simply, pale-skinned – a lower-case white, perhaps. This lower case choice has been used in the quotes below, as an example.

Larry, Mixed White and Bangladeshi mother and White father, 40s:

Resp: To look at me they wouldn’t know, because I’m white. I’m white. I just look English.

Dwayne, Black Caribbean and White parents, 50s:

Resp: If you tell them you’re White British they’ll just believe you. It’s just thinking I’ve a slight tan. [...] I’m kind of, probably - white.

2.2. Whiteness and British national identity

In a cognitive sense, the fact that the top-level category is ‘White’ appeared to be sometimes overlooked by the White-identified respondents, whose focus was more drawn to the ‘British’ at the end of the line of options naming constituent nation identities (English, Scottish, etc) (see Figure 2 & 5). This group of respondents who had at some point reported being White British, included visible minorities. They described the feeling of affinity to the White British category as about being ‘mainstream’ and not different from others around them. This group overall had less experience of racialization and discrimination. For them, the ‘White British’ category

signifies mainstream cultural integration and national belonging, rather than ‘full’ White British ancestry. If it is an ‘aspirational’ identity, it is an aspiration to be included on a national cultural level, rather than excluded.

Edward, Chinese and White parents, 30s:

Resp: The wording makes it feel like: Where did you grow up? What is your mainstream cultural background? I would definitely put British.’

Jagadish / ‘Jack’, Indian and White parents, 70s:

Resp: ‘I’d just put English, and they looked at me. And I said ‘Well, that’s what I am, I am English’ ...I was born in England ...As far as I’m concerned I’m English. I speak English, I don’t speak Indian’.

I interviewed two Understanding Society participants who selected White British at Wave 1, but with parents from the same minority category, as comparator cases. I also purposively sampled another comparator case with the same profile. These respondents were of Indian, Black and Turkish heritage.

Interviews with the two Understanding Society participants, who happened to be the eldest and youngest interviewees in the sample, suggested some level of cognitive error over understanding categories at Wave 1. When discussing the ethnic showcard during the interview they chose the options that matched their parents’ ethnicity. It appeared that their Wave 1 choices were influenced by their strong attraction to the concept of ‘Britishness’, and in one case, overt rejection of the importance of ethnic identity, which may have caused them to overlook the meaning of the question being asked. One of these cases also felt strong affinities to Northern Ireland, meaning that the first option on the list had two markers of identity for him.

‘Moe’, Indian parents, ‘White British’ at Wave 1, late 70s:

Resp: [Begins talking spontaneously about how the ethnic group question is not relevant to him before the recorder starts]

[...]

Intvr: So which one would you pick?

Resp: It's Indian, 9.

Intvr: Would you ever pick the box at the top? The one that says White British?

Resp: The top one, I always regard [myself] British Indian Irish [chuckles] Northern Irish.

The purposively sampled respondent was a White-identified British-born Turkish-Cypriot. He explained his view that Turks were white, and also discussed at length his strong British identity and emphatic rejection of the cultural and religious practices that he viewed as characterising the Turkish community in the UK.

Interviewing this small number of 'monoracial' minorities who made the 'White' choice at one point, was a fruitful exploration of how the attractions of the White British category have commonalities across all minority groups and pervade the overall social structure – i.e. this is not a unique phenomenon that only affects mixed people.

2.3. Whiteness as distance from minority culture or minority parent

For the most part, the White-identified had not grown up with their minority parent, and/or had experienced barriers in connecting with their minority culture, including cases where that culture was explicitly rejected by the respondent in favour of what was seen as British values and culture. This is discussed further in the section below on family effects.

2.4. Instrumental choice: 'Aspirational Whiteness' & 'passing' on paper

Some respondents spoke of selecting whiter categories than their actual lived identity when reporting ethnic group on forms, out of fear of previously-experienced discrimination, or out of hope that they would gain advantages. This kind of thinking was most pronounced in the context of administrative data gathering and equalities monitoring, and less pronounced when the context was more neutral, such as for the Census or social surveys. However, these respondents also did report taking a blanket approach.

Terrence, Mixed White and Indian, and White parents, 50s:

Resp: I think about it now, whereas in the past it was just automatic, I just ticked White British. Now I think about it. Uh. [Pause] And I guess there was always a suspicion of me that, I know they're doing this to say they're equal- they're doing equality, but – would I be better off just ticking White British? Probably [small chuckle].

[...]

'cos nobody can tell lookin' at you - you can be White British. Just tick White British everywhere. And I did.

Priscilla, Mixed Black African and White father, Black African mother, 30s:

Resp: [W]hen it came to job applications, when it came to housing forms and things that I deem to be extremely important for an overall end, I would put mixed race[...]to get something decent. Rather than just putting maybe Black African.

Although these 'Whitening' choices were aspirational, there were no respondents who 'whitened with success'. In fact, the two examples above both turned away from their 'Whiter' choices as they gained life experience, education, confidence and career advancement.

There was a widespread awareness of how identifying as 'whiter' was associated with social advantage. The respondents with the most explicit awareness of this tended to be mixed or minority identified on a personal level, and highlighted barriers to identifying as White British even if they wanted to. The main barriers were:

- Having recognisably Black or South Asian features
- Experience of racialization, discrimination and exclusion from White communities, reinforcing feelings that they would never be accepted as White.
- Strong connection to/good relationship with minority culture and family, and thus wanting to honour that part of their identity.

2.5. Instrumental choice: 'Passing' on paper as 'hiding'

Rather than instrumentally seeking advantage, a recurring theme among the White-identified and also the non-White identified, was the idea of 'hiding' or seeking protection and safety in the White tick-box, or under the cover of White privilege. This was markedly more present among the older generation.

Arjun, Indian and White parents, 40s.

Resp: I really first started seeing [the Mixed categories in forms] in about 19-late 90s, early noughties.

Intvr: And what did you think when you saw that.

Resp: I thought [sighs], hmph, I can't hide!

Calliope, Pakistani and White parents, 50s:

Resp: I think I probably would have put Asian back then. Or Asian British. Because it was a face to face interview so I know that I couldn't have lied [laughed] and said British, because they would have looked at me and said 'No, there's no way you're White'.

[...]

So like the day they started the Iran-Iraq war [respondent means one of the two Iraq wars], I was on my way to work, and I was spat on. [...] I kind of tailors things to what's going on in the world. [...] I would almost deny being Asian at that point because you're in fear.

[...]

Intvr: What would you lie about anyway, what would you put if you could lie?

Resp: If I could lie, I would just say I was British, but then I'd have to get some sort of dye, and paint myself White or someth- I don't know how I'd do it, but I'd get away with it. I'd have to be- or if I put a burka or niqab on [to hide her face] I'd look Asian, I couldn't get away with it.

3. What explains the 'mixed privilege' effect?

Among younger respondents there was a clear cohort or period effect on those who grew up in a more liberal and multicultural period of British history. For those under 30 from major urban metropolitan areas, having mixed or multiple ethnic groups

simply did not seem like a big deal, as it was perceived to be reasonably common and not something for which they received negative attention during crucial periods of childhood. The ‘mixed’ option would have been available in ethnic forms since the youngest respondents could remember.

In the context of the corpus, the ‘happy mixed’ identity was characterised by a lack of fear or need to hide or protect oneself from being Othered, enabled by security of cultural identity within themselves, their family, the wider community and the national discourse. These conditions of security could include socioeconomic security. However, it makes sense to view the socioeconomic protections of the ‘mixed privilege’ theory as being only one strand of what can enable personal security – one of the pathways that might be sufficient, but is not always necessary. The experience of being mixed appeared more comfortable for those who grew up in regular contact with ‘both sides’ of their culture, generally via their minority parent, or even a grandparent, and this was commonly the case in more middle-class families, but occurred whether or not parents were in the same household or middle-class.

One tangible impact of middle-class privilege on security of identity that emerged in the interviews, was that among the mixed men who had grown up in white areas, those who were in the most deprived neighbourhoods as children experienced more overt racism and violence from peers and the public in their formative years. This seemed to be connected to a reluctance to be openly ‘different’. The gendered nature of these experiences is discussed further below.

4. What roles do appearance, gender, the family, the community, and national political factors play?

4.1. Skin colour and phenotype

As discussed, being White-passing was a key factor in White-identification for mixed respondents. A combination of being mostly White-passing with occasionally ‘ambiguous’ features (often described as ‘Mediterranean’), appeared to allow for protection from racial targeting and Othering to the degree that such respondents had

no instinctive tendency to hide the details of their mixed background or identity from those who asked.

Having a recognizably Black appearance, with regard to hair texture and facial features, was framed as key to being racialised as Black, and thus as a crucial barrier to White identification. Two mixed respondents with a Black parent, but who lack typically Black hair or facial features despite having brown skin-tone, also happened to describe a more racially diverse social network than recognizably Black respondents and were less embedded in Black communities and Black identity.

4.2. Gender

As discussed, the White-identified were mostly men who for whom ‘fitting in’ was a recurrent theme. A concern with ‘fitting in’ appeared to be at times informed by formative early experiences of isolation, bullying and violence, especially for those who grew up in White working-class neighbourhoods.

By contrast, there were signs of specific social capital gained by visibly mixed women, who spoke of being ‘special’ or ‘unique’ more often than mixed men. As noted in other research, women’s experiences of being mixed can be accompanied by positive sexual attention. This was a marked phenomenon for women with Black ancestry moving in Black circles, although one that some found problematic and a barrier to simple acceptance by the community. Some Black-descended female respondents viewed shade-ism within Black communities as intrinsically tied to colonial history and the history of slavery.

Attention received by mixed women with no Black heritage, who usually had majority-White social circles, tended to be less overtly or intrusively sexualised, and more framed as a point of ‘interest’ and ‘uniqueness’. Exceptions were cases of offensive sexualisation of women with East Asian heritage.

4.3. The family

The White-identified commonly had little minority cultural influence, or had become estranged from their minority parent. As discussed above, positive contact with minority culture via a parent, was a good predictor of having a more settled mixed identity. In some cases, there was a sequential relationship between estrangement/deterioration in relationships with a minority parent, and then moving along the ethnic spectrum away from that ethnic identity (e.g. from mixed/other to White, or from non-mixed minority to mixed). One case went in the opposite direction: a strong desire for a White identity was established early on for one respondent who had a very abusive ethnic minority father; but establishing warm relationship with ‘good men’ from that minority ethnic group later in life led to an embrace of a fully minority identity.

4.4. The community - area ethnic density, class

As discussed previously, growing up around only white people reinforced ideas about the ‘mainstream’, as well as introducing social anxieties about being singled out – especially for men from white working class neighbourhoods who were more likely to experience physical bullying based on race, or any other thing that marked them out as different.

4.5. Intersectional effects of physical racialization and cultural competence

The lack of minority language ability and cultural competency was a far greater obstacle to achieving a sense of belonging or cultural integration into a minority parent’s ethnic community for mixed people with Asian descent, than it was for mixed people with Black descent. For those with Middle Eastern heritage, language and religion seemed to be more central as either barriers or integrative pathways to minority identity.

This is not to say that barriers to cultural Blackness did not play a role in ethnic choices and identity for mixed people. However, interviewee experiences of embodied racialization appeared to be far more crucial to building Black identities than Asian or Middle Eastern ones. In several cases, there was a phenomenon of mixed women with recognisably Black features identifying ‘as Black’ and ‘as mixed’ simultaneously – with

‘mixed’ framed as a subset of Black, and with racialization by society based on appearance being key to their understanding of Black identity.

4.5. The national discourse

The impacts of national and international political or geopolitical events on people were a recurring theme, and likely mirrored the overall effect on non-mixed minority communities. For example, respondents with South Asian and Middle Eastern parentage mentioned the 9/11 and 7/11 terrorist attacks, and various Middle East wars, as reasons for obscuring or denying their non-White background, including on forms and in the way they dressed and presented.

For those with Black parentage of a certain age, the national context of the anti-police riots of the early 1980s, and Black Pride movements, were described as the source of politicisation of a generation of Black and mixed race youth with Caribbean heritage, and a foundation of community-based renewal efforts.

The overall shift in the national discourse towards acceptance of minority and mixed identities was made clear in generational contrasts. More extreme experiences of racism, and greater stigma associated specifically with being Mixed among older generations seemed associated with a greater likelihood of ‘picking a side’ rather than identifying as Mixed.

5. What are the qualitative characteristics and traits behind identity ‘fluctuation’ compared with substantive identity ‘change’?

More than half of all interviewees in the ‘mixed’ sample reported forms of ethnic change, i.e.

- changed their actual lived ethnic identity over time;
- said during the interview that they changed their stated ethnic group on paper, depending on context;
- had changed their reported ethnic group between Wave 1 of Understanding Society and the interview.

As suggested by international survey research (Parker, Morin, Menasce Horowitz, Lopez, 2015), much of the ethnic ‘churn’ encountered among UK respondents occurred for substantive sociological reasons, such as concerns with fitting in, standing out, protection, advantage, community representation, and variable or contextual racial salience due to external factors (such as geopolitics). This shows that ethnic change is not ‘just’ measurement error or basic coding errors, but is part of a performance and enactment of personal identity that is embedded within racialized social hierarchies.

There were multiple and complex reasons for ethnic choice and change, rather than being simplistically driven by ‘aspirations’ to ascend racial hierarchies per se. But these changes should still be seen as structural and not simply a matter of ‘free choice’ and post-racial times. The qualitative interviews allowed me to explore mechanisms behind some theories that emerged from related quantitative findings from about ethnic change (Mok, n.d.-b).

5.1. Contextual fluctuators

There was some indication that unstable identity was related to ethnic fluctuation, as supported by some of the relevant literature. Although Understanding Society has yet to take a repeated measure of ethnicity, respondents openly discussed changing their ethnic tick-box from moment to moment or in different contexts, depending on how they felt. The motivations of some respondents seemed related to a psychological sensitivity to context and survival, as discussed in a previous section. For others, there were deep concerns about a lack of belonging in either White or minority culture. This merits further case study analysis that takes advantage of permissions for data linkage to the full Understanding Society dataset.

One of the key quantitative findings in related research was that higher deprivation was associated with greater ethnic fluctuation (Mok, n.d.-b). One potential explanation was that there was lower attention paid to form-filling under conditions of socioeconomic stress. However, this was difficult to explore at interview as subjects were all primed, and were voluntarily participating in the study; and those with levels of stress that would have reduced their likelihood in engaging in ethnic measurement

activities (such as this research) likely self-selected out of the study by not returning consent forms in the first place.

5.1. Changers over time

A range of respondents had previously consistently identified or reported themselves as one ethnic group or category, and now consistently identified or reported themselves as another.

In some cases these changes were made for instrumental reasons, even if their lived identity had not changed, for example in the case of a respondent with Bangladeshi heritage whose sister had died for want of a suitable donor match. The respondent now felt it was important to list Mixed White/Asian heritage on public health system forms, due to perceptions of the relative rareness of blood-types associated with South Asians. However, his personal identity as White British remained unchanged.

There were also cases where a respondents shifted from consistently reporting one ethnic group for instrumental purposes, to consistently reporting a different group now, to more accurately reflect their lived identity. These tended to be cases of ‘de-Whitening’, where age and experience had taught the respondents that there was likely little to be gained by reporting as White British on anonymous equalities monitoring forms, or cases where they had grown in confidence and now felt ashamed of having denied their minority background. These cases were in some ways difficult to distinguish from cases of ‘substantive’ identity change over time. Clearer cases of ‘substantive’ identity change were related to changes in relationships with people from their minority ethnic side, usually a parent, partner, or child; or related to either acceptance or rejection by a minority community.

One of the key findings of the related analysis of the ONS Longitudinal Study (Mok, n.d.-b) was that the older the age, the greater the likelihood of ethnic change between the 2001 and 2011 Censuses. This was considered a counterintuitive finding, as ethnic identity is meant to stabilise for individuals over time, according to established social psychological research. There was some qualitative evidence for cognitive obstacles being greater for the older generation, due to their taking a longer time to become

accustomed to new ethnic options on a form. However, there was also evidence that this process was not independent from a more substantive personal changes or contextual re-evaluations. For mixed people, particularly those from older generations, the journey towards a ‘achieved identity’ (Phinney, 1990) appears to be more lengthy and complex than has been assumed.

Contextual and contingent ‘fluctuation’ is substantive and meaningful. So is identity change over time. We need to accept that ethnic change is not necessarily a challenge to ‘reliability’ of a measure, but is indeed a phenomenon with its own meaning.

Conclusions

For mixed people in the UK, ethnic form-filling is often not perceived as a neutral or straightforward description of immutable characteristics. It is frequently seen as a political, social and economic site of surveillance, discourse, and performative representation; as well as an expression of personally evolving and fluctuating identity.

To start with, the nature of the survey instrument – i.e. the question wording and options presented – was found to persistently affect ethnic choice, in a range of ways. The survey instrument’s idiosyncracies were not separate from a racialised social system rooted in a specific colonial history, to which respondents were reacting as a whole. The evidence was that reporting ethnic group is a process of communicating an identity, and this identity is as much an attitudinal characteristic as an ‘objective’ static measure.

The study was able to explore the experiences of White-identified mixed people, which is an under-researched area. The present study did not find evidence to support the phenomenon of ‘aspirational Whitening’ discussed in US literature (Saperstein & Penner, 2012; Saperstein et al., n.d.), in that respondents were not becoming aspirationally ‘Whiter’ as their social status improved. There were a few cases of respondents at times reporting ethnicity on forms as ‘whiter’ than their actual lived identity, due to concerns about discrimination, though this behaviour tended actually

to reduce with age, life experience and career advancement in a ‘de-Whitening’ effect.

White choices largely reflected a combination of physical appearance, cultural assimilation/upbringing in White communities, and distance from minority culture and communities, which were on the whole, pre-existing characteristics. Rather than straightforward expressions of socioeconomic ‘aspiration’, the White choices were often embedded in a wider cultural context privileging the status of the White British identity as emblematic of the mainstream, and as a protected and protective identity. Respondents who made White choices were not specifically trying to ‘get away’ from lower socioeconomic status, but were trying to escape racialization and Othering. Meanwhile, those who were content in their mixed identities were typically lacking a fear or need to hide or protect oneself from being Othered. This was generally enabled by a reasonable level of security of cultural identity within themselves, their family, the wider community and the national discourse. For example, for those under 30 from major urban metropolitan areas, having mixed or multiple ethnic groups simply did not seem like a big deal, as it was perceived to be reasonably common and part of the national culture.

It makes sense to view the socioeconomic protections of the ‘mixed privilege’ theory as being only one strand of what can enable personal security – one of the pathways that might be sufficient, but is not always necessary. The experience of being mixed appeared more comfortable for those who grew up in regular contact with ‘both sides’ of their culture. This was commonly the case for the more middle-class respondents interviewed, who also often grew up in two-parent households. However, these conditions of cultural and personal security occurred across cases whether or not parents lived in the same household or were middle-class. A tangible impact of middle-class privilege on security of identity that did emerge in the interviews, was that among the male respondents who grew up in white areas, those who were in poorer white areas as children more often spoke of being the victims of harsher racism and violence from peers and adults at a young age, which seemed to be connected to a reluctance to be openly ‘different’.

More than half of all interviewees in the ‘mixed’ sample reported forms of ethnic change, and much of this occurred for substantive sociological reasons – particularly concern for self-protection or changing power relations. Ethnic change is not ‘just’ measurement error or basic coding errors, but is part of a performance and enactment of personal identity that is embedded within racialized social hierarchies.

There were multiple and complex reasons for ethnic choice and change. Rather than being simply driven by ‘aspirations’ to ascend racial hierarchies per se, respondent strategies emphasized evasion, avoidance, self-protection, refusal, negotiation, and solidarity within the context of a racialised social hierarchy.

Overall, this research underlines the increasing need for multi-dimensional ethnicity and identity measures, such as the range currently used in Understanding Society (Burton, Nandi & Platt, 2010). It also points to the need for further evaluation of the adequacy of the UK Census ethnic question standard (Aspinall, 2017), and the importance of using repeated measures of ethnicity in longitudinal studies.

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