

LONDON SOUTH BANK UNIVERSITY

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## **MIXEDNESS AND MIXING:**

### **Exploring Issues for Research, Practice and Policy**

Conference Report

Although they are often less visible in debates on race and ethnicity, analyses of the 2001 Census reveal that the people who identified themselves as 'Mixed' are the third largest ethnic category in the UK, with some predicting that it will become one of the largest minority groups recognised by the Census by the end of 2020. The voices of 'Mixed' people, couples and families are often marginalised in debates about ethnicity and race equality, yet there are a number of organisations that are developing work with people racialised as mixed to understand their everyday lived experiences. Such initiatives are critical in informing policy developments which impact on the lives of 'Mixed' people, couples and families which would otherwise be based on assumptions rather than evidence and ethnic categorisations that are under challenge.

The Mixedness and Mixing conference thus sought to bring together academics, policymakers and representatives of relevant statutory and voluntary sector bodies to identify and discuss key issues related to 'mixed race' research, policy and practice in the British context. A precursor to the conference was a CRE hosted online conference, or E-Conference, which the public could access regardless of location. Over the three days the E-Conference attracted 600 visitors, and over 200 subscribers from the UK, US and Canada. Featuring papers from the Runnymede Perspectives paper, *Mixed Heritage: Identity, Policy and Practice*, which was later launched at the conference, the E-Conference also included an open call for papers from the public working in areas such as academia, arts, public service delivery, the community sector, and journalists.

The day's panels featured three points of engagement with the topic: academic research, the work of grassroots organisations, and policy making. The first panel, '*Researching mixedness and mixing: concepts and substance*', featured Suki Ali from the London School of Economics, Chamion Caballero from London South Bank University, Raya Mutarak from Oxford University, and Miri Song from the University of Kent.

Opening, Ali highlighted the attractiveness of the term 'mixedness' because of the openness of its meaning, possibly referring to mixed ethnicity, nationality, race or culture, while still reflecting a process of identification rather than purported biological fact. Chamion Caballero's research with mixed families found that whilst parents adopted different strategies; raising their children with 'mixed', 'single' or 'open' identities, they were unanimous in seeing themselves as 'normal' families and did not feel that their experience



was particularly 'exceptional'. Caballero noted the importance of context in shaping families' experiences with mixing and mixedness, such as location, class, and family relations.

Presenting her analysis of data from national surveys, Raya Muttarak indicated that two per cent of all marriages were reported as inter-ethnic, with 80 per cent of those marriages taking place between a white British and a minority ethnic partner. Muttarak examined the quantitative data to consider whether intermarriage leads to greater integration and social mobility. A key marker of social mobility for which data is available is educational success. Muttarak found that mixed Chinese and white and mixed Indian and white pupils have similar educational achievement to white British students, but lower achievement than British-born Chinese and Indian pupils. This suggests that inter-ethnic marriage may not be a straightforward marker in measures of social mobility.

Miri Song argued that official methods that seek to identify mixed people require further interrogation because of the context in which people make choices; one cannot necessarily make generalisations about people from their ethnic option choice. Song's current research explores the options of people to express their mixedness. Interim findings suggest that assumptions cannot be made about the centrality of being mixed to the individual; that choice is shaped by how people relate to their identity, their parentage, and even the way they look.

During the discussion which followed, the use of models from other countries in influencing work in understanding mixedness was suggested. It was suggested that, although the wealth of research emerging from the US can be useful in understanding the British context, it can also be limiting due to the different social patterns and experiences of 'race' in the two countries. As such, it was argued that other countries' experience and history of mixedness should also be drawn upon. It was noted, however, that despite the *meztiso/meztisa* identity being a clearer ethnic identity in many Latin American countries, racism persists.

The topic of 'identity' remained a constant theme throughout the day. The panel of academic researchers discussed its theoretical and empirical construction. Caballero argued that there was not one 'mixed race state' of being, but rather that people engage with their mixedness in different ways. Muttarak further pointed out that while people are constrained by boxes, they choose a category or identity 'of best fit' regardless. Ali indicated that people have identities which are relational and individualised, building on Song's findings that identity is dynamic, fluid and changing dependent on context.

The second panel, '*Perspectives on grassroots provision*', included Tina Attoh from People in Harmony, Sharron Hall from Intermix, Bradley Lincoln from the Multiple Heritage Project and Mado Khan from Sheffield's Multiple Heritage Service.

Beginning the panel's presentations, Tina Attoh from People in Harmony spoke on the changing attitudes towards mixed relationships and people, and the different issues the younger and older generations of mixed people face. She noted that issues surrounding

identity among those racialised as mixed were not widely discussed in the past. She argued that because of this experience, it is often difficult for these issues to be discussed in a balanced way. While Attoh focused more on the differences among people who are mixed, Sharron Hall advocated for the term 'mixed race' to describe people's common experience of mixedness. Stating that mixed race people are not confused about their identity, Hall stressed the importance for positive images to balance the negative, such as acknowledging the mixed backgrounds of many current black role models, such as Mary Seacole and Lewis Hamilton.

Bradley Lincoln and Mado Khan both work with young people in order to give them the resources to express their identity and build their self-esteem; or as Lincoln described it; moving young people from a place of 'nowhereness' to 'somewhereness'. The Multiple Heritage Project holds conferences in different cities for young people to meet and share their experiences of being mixed and create and discuss policy recommendations in order to relate their experiences to their peers, schools and local communities. Mado Khan's work involves workshops and support for young people who have been referred to the service. In the workshops in Sheffield, they explore the stereotypes of being mixed, discuss racism and anti-racism, and share aspirations.

The most discussed point was terminology. Although stating that there were issues with the term 'mixed race', Hall felt it was the most acceptable because it incorporates mixes across generations and is specific to race. Although many present, like Khan, agreed with Hall that it is the term with which many young people self-identify, others disliked the term's emphasis on race and questioned the need for racial terminology at all. Lincoln argued that there is a role for community workers to help young people navigate through identity formation and advocated leaving the choice up to the young people rather than choosing one for them. The panellists agreed that there was a need for grassroots support for those in mixed relationships and/or mixed backgrounds.

During the final panel, Patrice Lawrence from the National Children's Bureau, Maxine Shervington from MA Consultancy, Learning and Development Agency, and Mike Vance from the Learning Trust discussed '*Policy, practice and future directions*'.

Speaking about her pilot framework for trans-racial adoption and fostering, Maxine Shervington provided some recommendations for practitioners in this area. She stressed the need for both practitioners and placement families to ask the right questions which recognise the particular needs of the child so that, for example, fostering or adoption placements are not prescriptive, but take account of the different experiences of mixedness. Stressing the need for participation from children when at all possible, Patrice Lawrence's presentation on early year's education focused on how to create positive environments for children. This may be as simple as asking what makes them feel like they belong, and then responding appropriately.

Mike Vance from the Learning Trust talked about mixed young people in Hackney. Although mixed students account for 5.4 per cent of the school population in Hackney, 40 per cent of mixed students are in just nine schools. In this inner-London borough there are specific achievement concerns; data shows that mixed pupils are outperforming black pupils, but have lower average achievement levels than white pupils. The Learning Trust's response has been to look for opportunities to make the curriculum more inclusive, provide positive images and role models to young people, and to support parents' and children's groups.

During the discussion it was asked what initiatives exist for young people who are, for example, mixed white and Asian. Vance and Khan admitted the majority of their work deals with mixed white and black young people, while Shervington commented that the focus should be on the experience and commonality of being mixed and not necessarily the focus on particular mixes. Participants also discussed the impact of class, noting the experience of mixed young people who are members of more affluent families. Shervington speculated that perhaps there are greater expectations placed on mixed young people from affluent areas, but that racism remains an issue that influences young people's identity and achievement.

Responding to the presentations from the day, Jennifer Ashby of the Department of Communities and Local Government, Race Equality Unit, noted that government was keen to learn more about the experiences and needs of people racialised as mixed in order to develop policy which ensured that they were enabled to reach their full potential. The conference was closed with a call for participants to maintain the dialogue established through these two events. All of the organising partners expressed a commitment to continuing work to illuminate key issues for people racialised as mixed and remain interested in developing new projects and approaches focused on achieving equality for all.

Both the E-Conference and conference at LSBU highlighted the participants' growing personal and professional interest in gaining greater understanding of the dynamics of mixedness in Britain. Hearing from people working in early years, adoption and fostering, education, and community outreach, meant that the needs and desires of young people became a focus of the conference. Regardless of age, issues of acceptance and recognition also appeared prominently in discussions. Both were seen as important for normalising mixedness, and also for resolving possible discriminatory behaviour in service delivery.

The discussions generated from the conferences presented some interesting challenges for policy. For example, all public authorities should practice greater inclusiveness by considering the needs of those who do not neatly fall into preset ethnic categories when developing policies and services. In terms of service delivery, public authorities should review the way that they record and monitor ethnicity for people of mixed backgrounds and make sure that their staff are trained in a way that complies with both the law and best practice. The way ethnicity is monitored can have important implications, as Shervington pointed out, such as in finding placements for children. Keeping this in mind, assumptions as to what option people will choose should be avoided because choice is often contextualised, as Song discovered in her own research.

