The Landscape of Multiracial Experiences

The landscape of multiracial experiences is a collection of articles in the Journal of Social Issues (JSI), published in 2009. Editors Margaret Shih and Diana T. Sanchez bring together cutting-edge science on how multi-racial Americans perceive their social environment, how they interact with other groups in society, and what consequences these research findings present for public policy.

The authors explore three policy-relevant themes of multiracial experiences:

- Expressing one’s multiracial identity
- How other Americans perceive multiracial persons
- The changing color line in the United States

### Expressing one’s multiracial identity

The psychological health of multiracial Americans is affected by how they make sense of their racial identity, in particular when prompted to publicly identify themselves in racial terms.

While mixed-race individuals in the United States are increasingly likely to embrace their multiracial identity, it is often the case that demographic forms assessing racial group membership still do not permit the selection of multiple groups.

Recent research suggests that multiracial students who feel free to express their multiracial background on an official form tend to experience better mental well-being, higher self-efficacy, and lower stereotype threat than those who can only identify with one racial category.

Conversely, when multiracial people are denied the option to choose racial classifications that adequately reflect their multifaceted racial heritage, they tend to experience lower self-esteem, motivation, and subsequently reach lower achievement levels on intellectual tasks.

### How other Americans perceive multiracial persons

Historically, individuals of mixed racial heritage have been assigned monoracial identities, and the chosen categorization tended to imply a lower social status or identity.

Today, many multiracial individuals experience a double-dose of the disadvantages of minority status. First, the full privileges associated with
belonging to, say, the White racial group, are not conferred to them. Yet on the other side they are also excluded from special support systems typically granted to monoracial minority group members.

For instance, multiracial people are seen as comparatively less deserving of minority scholarships than individuals who exclusively belong to one minority racial group.\(^8\)

Of particular concern is the research finding that White newspapers in the United States tend to interpret the emergence of a multiracial America as evidence for a new, color-blind America. In contrast, the discourse in Black newspapers suggests that Black mixed-race individuals seek to distance themselves from being Black, in order to escape from the prejudice and discrimination associated with Blackness.\(^9\)

The changing color line in the United States

When discussing multiraciality, one needs to bear in mind that relations between different races are not static. An important consideration in this debate is whether the salience of race is changing in the same way across all racial groups. If the social boundaries between Asian Americans and White Americans are equivalent to those between Black and White Americans, then different subgroups of multiracial individuals need not be treated differently from a public policy perspective.

However, several recent research studies point to a pattern of “African American exceptionalism”\(^10\) in today’s shift in America’s racial hierarchy. While a large proportion of White Americans perceive people of Asian and Latino descent as increasingly similar in culture to themselves, the same shift is not occurring for how Blacks are viewed in mainstream (White) society.\(^11\)

This evidence suggests that multiraciality involving Black ancestry may not carry the same meaning across all mixed-race groups in the United States, and that multiracial Americans with Black ancestry may experience more persistent disparities. It would hence be erroneous to conclude that race is declining in significance across the whole spectrum of the American color line.

Policy recommendations

A color-blind social policy approach to multiraciality in the United States would not only fail to acknowledge that race is likely to confer different consequences for different minorities,\(^12\) it may also heighten the potential for increased social
tension because of an increased polarization of minorities with Black heritage in the future.

An appropriate public policy response to this growing yet understudied phenomenon would include the following:

1. The funding and evaluation of behavioral science studies that compare different aspects of multiraciality, especially those involving Black heritage to the dynamics of other mixed-race individuals in their relationships to America’s racial majority.
2. Systematic racial identity assessments that adequately reflect the increasingly multiracial landscape in the United States. Multiracial individuals need to be able to express the full extent of their racial heritage by choosing more than one racial group on all official forms they fill in.
3. Specific public policy assistance should be given to multiracial individuals in their quest to negotiate the space they occupy in society, in order to minimize the risk of multiracial individuals becoming a new and increasingly complex disparity group, with adverse consequences for society as a whole.

A more nuanced understanding of the experiences and consequences of multiracial Americans is needed, through comprehensive data collection coupled with careful analysis and evaluation. This would enable policy-makers to accurately inform critical policy decisions such as school desegregation and work or healthcare admission procedures with racial implications. It would also permit more effective resource allocation and funding for programs designed to promote equal opportunity and support systems at schools and universities for underrepresented groups, as well as for other institutions serving particularly high proportions of multiracial individuals.

The emergence of a more complex and integrated multiracial society presents a host of new opportunities for positive interethnic relations. Improved intergroup relations between various racial groups consequently become a genuine possibility.

About JSI
This is one in a series of executive summaries of published issues of the Journal of Social Issues (JSI). JSI, SPSSI’s flagship journal has been published quarterly since 1945, with every issue devoted to an in-depth examination of a single topic from an empirically-sound, peer-reviewed, social science perspective.

About SPSSI
The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) is an international group of approximately 3000 psychologists, allied scientists, students, and others who share a common interest in research on the
psychological aspects of important social issues. In various ways, the Society seeks to bring theory and practice into focus on human problems of the group, the community, and nations, as well as the increasingly important problems that have no national boundaries.

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Fact sheet created by Jutta Tobias; June 2009.

2 For the purposes of this document, the term “multiracial” includes categories that the federal government refers to as “ethnicities” in the U.S. American context, i.e. Hispanic or Latino/Latina. This is because at least younger generations of Hispanic origin self-identify as “multiracial when the federal government might define them as multiethnic” (Renn, K. A. (2009). Educational Policy, Politics, and Mixed Heritage Students in the United States. In M. Shih & D. T. Sanchez (Eds). The landscape of multiracial experiences. Journal of Social Issues, 65(1), p. 166, Note 2).