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Perceptions & Experiences in Higher Education: A National Study of Multiracial Asian American and Latino/a Students in Psychology

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Abstract

Demographic trends suggest increasing numbers of multiple racial heritage students attending US campuses and universities, a change reflected within psychology. However, there is little empirical investigation into the educational experiences and needs of multiracials. The current study (the second in a series of studies to utilize data from a national survey of psychology graduate and undergraduate students) compared two multiracial groups, Asian American/European American and Latino/a/European Americans, to their single heritage counterparts on several variables of interest – academic supports and barriers; linkage between barriers faced and ethnicity; and perceived cultural diversity. Results indicated that multiracial groups reported more of a link between academic barriers experienced and their ethnicity than European American students, but less of a link than their monoracial minority peers. No differences between groups were found related to academic supports, academic barriers, and perceived cultural diversity. Study limitations, future research and implications are discussed.

Keywords

multiracial; higher education; psychology; barriers; supports; cultural diversity

The 2000 US Census allowed multiple-choice options for racial identification for the first time. Approximately 2.4% of the population identified as two races (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2002). Demographic trends suggest that by 2050 over one-fifth of Americans will identify as multiracial (Lee & Bean, 2004). In 2007, multiracials (25%) ranked third in postsecondary degree attainment behind Asian Americans and European Americans (49% and 30%, respectively) (National Center for Education Statistics/NCES, 2009). Psychology has seen growth in the number of multiracial students from 2002 to 2009 entering both masters (0.9% to 3.2) and doctoral (.7% to 1.4%) programs (Kohout, Pate, & Maton, in press). Nevertheless, very little research has examined the educational experiences of multiracials.

The current study addresses this oversight by utilizing pre-collected survey data from a national sample to explore the experiences and perceptions of multiracial undergraduate and

graduate students of mixed Asian American/European American and Latino/a/European American heritage within psychology (two of the most robust sample size multiracial groups in the Maton et al., 2011 dataset).

Prior Theory and Research

Minority educational achievement indicates that Asian Americans either surpass or are on par with European Americans, and exceed other minorities (Bauman & Graf, 2003; NCES, 2009). Typically, Latino/as have lower levels compared to European Americans (Greene, 2002; Llagas & Synder, 2003). Minority student integration research suggests that college diversity, or lack thereof, enables minorities to thrive or flounder (Flowers & Howard-Hamilton, 2002). Furthermore, peer, faculty, staff and administrative relationships can be supports or hindrances (Atkinson, Casas, & Neville, 1994; Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Gurin, 2003; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Smith et al., 1997).

Scholarly work on multiracials and education is virtually nonexistent. Elementary school research primarily involves theoretical musings addressing socialization and the multiracial child (Gibbs 1987; Reid & Henry, 2000; Wardle, 1996). At the secondary level, educational outcomes for Asian American/European American and Latino/a/European American multiracials have received some attention. Findings have been mixed with European American/Asian American outcomes below, on par, or surpassing their monoracial counterparts (Harris & Thomas, 2002; Kao, 1999; Kao & Doyle, 2005). Latino/a/European Americans performed below European Americans, Asian Americans and multiracial Asian American/European Americans, but similarly to Latino/as (Herman, 2009). The scant investigations of multiracials in higher education examine aspects of student integration. Similar to minorities, cultural diversity, peer, faculty and staff/administrative relationships appear important (Chilungau, 2006; Marks, 2002; Sands & Schuh, 2004).

The majority of multiracial research concerns theories and models of racial/ethnic identity development. The earliest was the “marginal man” theory derived from studies of African American/European Americans. The “marginal man” was distinguished by a life of personal conflict. Discord was related to possessing dual heritages of highly dissimilar social statuses. Nonetheless, multiracials had advantages compared to African Americans including more contact with the dominant European American culture, less prejudice, and the crisis of marginality enhancing self-consciousness (Park, 1928, 1931; Stonequist, 1935, 1937).

Later exploration of “marginality” found healthy outcomes for multiracials, resulting in a proliferation of explanatory models (e.g. Collins, 2000; Kich, 1992; Poston, 1990; Renn, 2003, 2004; Root, 1990, 1998). These models can be broken down into linear stage and ecological. The linear stage perspectives postulate a universal, sequential process whereby the individual moves through phases of racial/ethnic development towards an integrated multiracial identity (e.g. Collins, 2000; Kich, 1992; Poston, 1990). The ecological perspectives address the interactions between internal and external factors that shape racial identity development (i.e. gender, class, and social environments). The ecological models also propose that there is no single identity resolution, but various options, including racial/

ethnic identities different from other family members or accepted by others in society (e.g. Renn, 2003, 2004; Root, 1990, 1998).

Implications for the Current Study

Prior multiracial and minority research suggest that campus relationships are critical supports when positive, but function as barriers when negative. Additionally, cultural diversity is vital (Chilungau, 2006; Marks, 2002; Sands & Schuh, 2004).

The marginal man perspective, minority and adolescent multiracial studies suggest that educational experiences may be most problematic for mixed heritages of discordant social status, such as European American and Latino/a heritages. Therefore, Latino/a/European Americans may have poorer educational experiences compared to European Americans. However, even with these difficulties, Latino/a/European Americans have benefits over Latino/as due to dominant culture exposure and self-reflection. The result is that the multiracials' academic experiences may be less challenging than the Latino/as'

The social statuses of European Americans and Asian Americans appear less discordant. Although Asian American/European Americans may face problems negotiating a mixed heritage, compared to Latino/a/European Americans it may be less complicated. Subsequently, Asian American/European Americans educational experiences may not be as adversely affected and compared to Latino/a/European Americans, generally more positive.

The lack of social disparity, as well as the educational success of Asian Americans and European Americans, suggests that exposure to the dominant culture may not be as critical for Asian American/European Americans. Hence, Asian American/European Americans may not fall in between their monoracial counterparts. Rather, Asian American/European Americans may face marginalization due to their non single race experience. This marginality may result in Asian American/European Americans facing more negative educational experiences than both European Americans and Asian Americans.

Although linear and ecological perspectives emphasize healthy outcomes, a monoracial identity is the current norm. Integrating their heritages may present challenges for the multiracial creating disadvantages compared to European Americans. Yet, appreciation of their diverse heritage may enable multiracials to surpass certain minority groups. Therefore, Latino/a/European Americans may perform better than Latino/as. Asian American/European Americans may also identify mixed heritage advantages, but not enough to surpass Asian Americans.

Hypotheses

1. Asian American/European American multiracials in comparison to European Americans will report:
 - Lower levels of academic support;
 - Higher levels of academic barriers;
 - Higher levels of linkage between barriers faced and their ethnicity;

- Lower levels of perceived cultural diversity in the academic environment;
2. Asian American/European American multiracials in comparison to Asian Americans will report:
 - Lower levels of academic support;
 - Higher levels of academic barriers;
 - Higher levels of linkage between barriers faced and their ethnicity;
 - Lower levels of perceived cultural diversity in the academic environment;
 3. Latino/a/European American multiracials in comparison to European Americans will report:
 - Lower levels of academic support;
 - Higher levels of academic barriers;
 - Higher levels of linkage between barriers faced and their ethnicity;
 - Lower levels of perceived cultural diversity in the academic environment;
 4. Latino/a/European American multiracials in comparison to Latino/as will report:
 - Higher levels of academic support;
 - Lower levels of academic barriers;
 - Lower levels of linkage between barriers faced and their ethnicity;
 - Higher levels of perceived cultural diversity in the academic environment;
 5. Asian American/European American multiracials in comparison to Latino/a/European American multiracials will report:
 - Higher levels of academic support;
 - Lower levels of academic barriers;
 - Lower levels of linkage between barriers faced and their ethnicity;
 - Higher levels of perceived cultural diversity in the academic environment;

Methods

A taskforce composed of members from various divisions of the American Psychological Association developed the “Experiences, Perceptions, and Aspirations of Psychology Students Study” in 2004 to examine the educational experiences of psychology students at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The national survey was designed to examine several important areas for students in psychology including experiences, backgrounds, supports, barriers, career goals, perceptions of affirmative action and ethnic/racial group representation. A particular focus of the study was to examine the experiences of minority students and to address issues of diversity (Maton et al., 2011).

Participants

A total of 3,509 graduate and undergraduate students completed the on-line survey from March to May 2005. The multiracial participants included in this study had one parent who was monoracial European or European American, with the other parent monoracial Asian, Asian American or Latino/a (there were not enough multiracial African American students to include). Study participants were born and raised in the United States or if born outside of the U.S. their primary residence since the age of five was in the U.S. Table 1 presents a breakdown of participants.

Recruitment Procedure and Survey Measure

Participants were recruited through flyers, letters and e-mails sent to psychology departments, conferences, organizations, and listservs accessed by individuals across the nation. The recruitment information directed students to a website where the online survey could be accessed. Once the website was accessed students were first prompted to read and complete an IRB approved consent form. Participants who completed the survey could enter a lottery (50 winners; \$25 prize). The on-line survey was composed of 66 items, designed by the taskforce members. The survey contained close-ended and open-ended items. Some of the open-ended items allowed individuals to elaborate upon their close-ended responses; others were survey questions in and of themselves. The primary study variables largely relied on single items. Validity and reliability estimates are not available, but all items have appropriate face validity. Table 2 presents a breakdown of the primary study variables. Unless noted, study items provided Likert-type response options. Additionally, as indicated, in some cases response options were converted into codes for analysis.

Results

Preliminary analyses were conducted to examine missing data and psychometric properties of the measures. Given the desire to retain all multiracial and monoracial minority students of color in the sample, mean replacement was selected to address missing data for the continuous variables. Means and standard deviations for continuous variables (along with missing data), and frequencies for categorical items and measures are reported in Tables 3 and 4.

Correlations among the study variables are presented in Table 5. Gender was not found to be correlated to any of the study variables and therefore was not utilized as a covariate. ANOVAs were performed that indicated significant differences between student status and a number of the study variables, so student status was included as a covariate in the primary analyses.

A one-way between-subjects MANCOVA was performed with the covariate student status. Planned comparisons were conducted to examine each of the main hypotheses. Specifically, Asian American/European American students were compared to European American (hypothesis 1) and Asian American (hypothesis 2) students. Latino/a/European American students were compared to European American (hypothesis 3) and Latino/a (hypothesis 4)

students. Finally, Asian American/European American students were compared to Latino/a/European American students (hypothesis 5).

A significant difference was found between the 5 groups in terms of academic support, $F(7, 2944) = 11.7, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .027$, academic barriers, $F(7, 2944) = 4.4, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .010$, the perception of the relationship between ethnicity and barriers, $F(7, 2944) = 46.4, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .099$, and perceptions of the extent of cultural diversity, $F(7, 2944) = 4.2, p < .000, \eta_p^2 = .010$.

As indicated in Table 6, the planned comparisons provided only partial support for Hypothesis 1. Asian American/European Americans did not differ from European Americans in levels of supports, barriers, or cultural diversity. However, as predicted, Asian American/European Americans did report higher levels of linkage between barriers and their ethnicity than European Americans.

No support was found for Hypothesis 2. Indeed, contrary to hypothesis, Asian American/European Americans reported higher levels of support than Asian Americans, and lower levels of linkage between barriers and their ethnicity. No differences were found between the two groups in terms of barriers or cultural diversity.

Mixed support was found for Hypothesis 3. Consistent with prediction, Latino/a/European Americans reported higher levels of linkage between barriers faced and their ethnicity than European Americans. However, contrary to hypothesis, they reported higher levels of cultural diversity than European Americans. There were no differences between the two groups in terms of supports and barriers.

Hypothesis 4 had only partial support. Latino/a/European Americans did not differ from Latino/as in levels of supports, barriers, or cultural diversity. However, as predicted, Latino/a/European Americans reported lower levels of linkage between barriers and their ethnicity than Latino/as.

Finally, no support was found for Hypothesis 5. There were no differences between Asian American/European Americans and Latino/a/European Americans in terms of supports, barriers, and perceived linkage between barriers and their ethnicity. Furthermore, contrary to hypothesis, Asian American/European Americans reported lower levels of cultural diversity than Latino/a/European Americans.

Discussion

Contrary to hypothesis 1, Asian American/European Americans and European Americans perceived similar levels of supports and barriers. However, consistent with hypothesis, Asian American/European Americans were more likely than European Americans to associate their race/ethnicity with barriers.

The ecological models denote that internal and external factors filter the meaning of experiences. The American ideal is still a European American, upper middle class standard, emphasizing educational attainment. Consequently, parents of multiracials, one of whom is

European American, may align with European American standards and raise their children to do the same. Even without direct discussion, multiracials may absorb and integrate these standards.

Entrance into European American dominant higher education institutions may present these multiracials with familiar values and norms. Nevertheless, not being monoracial European American, there will remain a “difference” attributed to their non-singular racial/ethnic heritage setting them apart (Gibbs, 1987; Nakashima, 1992). Thus, Asian American/European Americans may ascribe difficulties to their race/ethnicity.

Contrary to hypothesis 2, Asian American/European Americans perceived higher levels of support, no differences in barriers, and were less likely than Asian Americans to associate their race/ethnicity with barriers. Asian American/European Americans appear advantaged by their combined heritage compared to Asian Americans. Multiracials may have greater comfort with, and seeking support from, European American campus relationships, and/or greater ease on the part of those relationships to reach out and provide support.

That Asian American/European Americans are less likely to link barriers to their ethnicity than Asian Americans suggests lessened sensitivity to issues of ethnicity. The European American facet of their heritage, reflected in the university setting, may be familiar, tempering multiracial perceptions of challenge. For Asian Americans this European American experience may be elusive, producing discord attributed to one's race/ethnicity when confronted with difficulties (Lee, 1996; Nagasawa & Espinosa, 1992).

Hypothesis 3 and 4 received only very limited support. Specifically, no differences were found in levels of supports or barriers between Latino/a/European Americans and their monoracial counterparts. It is not fully clear why their mixed heritage resulted in neither advantages (compared to Latino/as) nor disadvantages (compared to European Americans).

One possible explanation is that the breadth of cultures of the Latino/a parents, the nature of the specific university environments, or the strong academic capacity of this sample of students, or some combination of these or related factors, reduced the expected influence of racial/ethnic heritage in terms of supports and barriers.

As hypothesized, Latino/a/European Americans were more likely than European Americans , but less likely than Latino/as, to associate their race/ethnicity with barriers. Asian American/European Americans and their monoracial counterparts had similar findings. Mixed heritage “difference”, while not directly negative, may affect the perception that problems are due to race/ethnicity for multiracials compared to European Americans. Simultaneously, a mixed heritage provides multiracials with benefits over minority peers.

Cultural diversity yielded no differences, or differences in unexpected directions. The linear and ecological perspectives emphasize self reflection, whereby the multiracial appreciates their diverse heritage. Such reflection may make one cognizant of cultural differences in one's environment. While attuned to such diversity, it may not be sufficient to consistently significantly impact the multiracial's experience. This may be especially true for multiracials possessing a degree of majority culture familiarity.

Finally, hypothesis 5 was not supported. The current study yielded much more support for homogeneity in multiracial experiences than heterogeneity. The mutual majority parental heritage of the multiracials may be significant. It is feasible that having a parent of European American heritage influenced participants' educational experiences more than their varying minority heritage, and possibly differing minority status.

Limitations, Future Research and Implications

Limitations in the current study include the unknown reliability and validity of largely single item survey measures, the cross-sectional nature of the study, the small effect sizes for some of the findings, the relatively small number of multiracial individuals in the sample, and the inclusion in the study of only two groups of multiracial individuals.

Future research ideally should utilize multi-item measures of established reliability and validity. In addition, future studies should have a larger sample of multiracial individuals of multiple mixed heritages and various minority-minority heritages. Furthermore, exploration longitudinally, beginning with earlier levels of education and extending beyond college and graduate school may provide the researcher with an opportunity to explore the educational process more directly and extensively.

The current project suggests that multiracials have unique, as well as, similar experiences to the greater university population. Greater campus dialog, via workshops, panels or trainings/discussions to address the educational experiences of multiracials is greatly needed. While multiracials in the current study shared some common experiences, this may not be the case for all types of mixed heritage individuals. University initiatives that acknowledge the homogeneity and heterogeneity for multiracials would be essential.

Even with its limitations, the current research addresses, in apparently the first national study to date, an overlooked and important population in American society: the multiracial individual and their educational experiences in higher education. This study, rather than providing definitive answers is foundational step that hopefully will point to critical and exciting areas for further investigation.

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Table 1**Participant Demographics (Percentages)**

Program Type	Men	Women	Total
Doctoral			
Asian American/European American	6 (3.0%)	11 (1.2%)	17 (1.5%)
Latino/a/European American	7 (3.5%)	32 (3.4%)	39 (3.4%)
European American	174 (86.5%)	824 (87.2%)	998 (87.1%)
Asian American	6 (3.0%)	50 (5.3%)	56 (5.0%)
Latino/a	8 (4.0%)	28 (3.0%)	36 (3.1%)
Total	201	945	1,146
Masters			
Asian American/European American	0 (0%)	8 (2.2%)	8 (1.8%)
Latino/a/European American	4 (5.6%)	8 (2.2%)	12 (2.8%)
European American	60 (83.3%)	328 (90.4%)	388 (89.2%)
Asian American	4 (5.6%)	3 (.8%)	7 (1.6%)
Latino/a	4 (5.6%)	16 (4.4%)	20 (4.6%)
Total	72	363	435
Upperclassman			
Asian American/European American	2 (1.4%)	15 (1.6%)	17 (1.6%)
Latino/a/European American	5 (3.6%)	31 (3.4%)	36 (3.4%)
European American	119 (85.6%)	794 (86.2%)	913 (86.1%)
Asian American	8 (5.8%)	34 (3.7%)	42 (4.0%)
Latino/a	5 (3.6%)	47 (5.1%)	52 (4.9%)
Total	139	921	1,060
Underclassman			
Asian American/European American	1 (2.4%)	2 (.7%)	3 (1.0%)
Latino/a/European American	1 (2.4%)	12 (4.4%)	13 (4.2%)
European American	32 (78.1%)	219 (81.1%)	251 (80.7%)
Asian American	3 (7.3%)	15 (5.6%)	18 (5.8%)
Latino/a	4 (9.8%)	22 (8.2%)	26 (8.4%)
Total	41	270	311

Table 2

Breakdown of primary study variables

Variable Name	Survey item(s) utilized to derive variable	Response options	Codes (if applicable)
Parental racial and/or ethnic group	What is the race/ethnicity of your mother? What is the race/ethnicity of your father?	Open ended	African American American Indian/ Native Alaskan Asian American Latino European American Multiracial International of Color International White (e.g. Canadian) Non-responsive (e.g. I do not believe in race/ethnicity) ^a
Participant racial and/or ethnic self-identification	What is the race/ethnicity of your mother? What is the race/ethnicity of your father?	Open ended	African American American Indian/ Native Alaskan Asian American Latino European American Multiracial International of Color International White (e.g. Canadian) Non-responsive (e.g. I do not believe in race/ethnicity) ^a
Gender	Indicate your gender.	Open ended	Male Female
Student status	If you are an undergraduate what is your current status? If you are a graduate student what degree are you currently pursuing?	Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior Masters Ph.D. Psy.D. Ed.D. ^b	Underclassman (freshman or sophomore) Upperclassman (junior or senior) Masters student Doctoral student (Ph.D. or Psy.D.) ^c
Academic supports	Have you encountered encouragement and special assistance? From peers? Professors? Advisor? School staff or administration?	Yes/No Yes/No Yes/No Yes/No	Sum of "Yes" responses
Academic barriers	Have you encountered special negative challenges, barriers, or unpleasant reactions in relation to your undergraduate or graduate education from"? From peers? Professors? Advisor? School staff or administration?	Yes/No Yes/No Yes/No Yes/No	Sum of "Yes" responses
Relationship between barriers and race and/or ethnicity	Do you associate any of these with your ethnicity (being a person of color; being White/European-American)?	1. Very much 2.A good deal 3.Somewhat 4.Not at all	
Extent of cultural diversity	How extensive is the cultural diversity in your current academic environment?	1.Very 2.Moderately 3.A little 4.Not at all	

Note:

^a A graduate research assistant and two undergraduate assistants reviewed each description and assigned the respondent's self-designations into one of 9 codes. In cases where the coding decision was unclear, the three-member team discussed the response and a designation was assigned upon consensus. In the rare instances where the three-member team could not reach consensus, the response was reviewed by the six-member faculty taskforce and a designation assigned by consensus.

^b Since there were only ten Ed.D. students in the sample and all ten were in the European American comparison group, this program type was excluded from the current study.

^c For use as a potential covariate, student status was assessed with four discrete categories

Table 3

Means (Standard Deviations), Ranges, and Missing Data for Continuous Variables

Variable Name	Mean (SD)	Range	Missing Data
Sum of Academic Supports	2.6 (1.2)	0-4	0 (0%)
Sum of Academic Barriers	0.6 (0.9)	0-4	0 (0%)
Relationship between barriers and race and/or ethnicity.	1.2 (0.6)	1-4	34 (1.2%)
Extent of Cultural Diversity	2.8 (0.9)	1-4	9 (.3%)

Table 4

Frequencies for Specific Subdomains for Academic Supports and Academic Barriers

Supports related to:	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Peers	Yes	2,101	71.2
	No	796	27.0
	Missing	55	1.9
Professors	Yes	2,442	82.7
	No	484	16.4
	Missing	26	.9
School administration	Yes	1,189	40.3
	No	1,651	55.9
	Missing	112	3.8
Advisors:	Yes	2,003	67.9
	No	881	29.8
	Missing	68	2.3

Barriers related to:	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Peers	Yes	588	19.9
	No	2,320	78.6
	Missing	44	1.5
Professors	Yes	464	15.7
	No	2,437	82.6
	Missing	51	1.7
School administration	Yes	289	9.8
	No	2,599	88.0
	Missing	64	2.2
Advisors:	Yes	306	10.4
	No	2,587	87.6
	Missing	59	2.0

Table 5

Correlations among Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Gender (Men)		-.02	.02	-.02	-.03
2. Academic supports			-.02	-.03	-.05**
3. Academic barriers				.11**	-.05**
4. Relationship between barriers and ethnicity					.04
5. Extent of cultural diversity					

*p .05.

N=2,952

**
p .01.

Table 6

Ethnic Group Differences in Supports, Barriers, Relationship between Barriers and Ethnicity, and Cultural Diversity: Observed Means (and Standard Deviations)

Ethnic Groups	Supports	Barriers	Relationship between Barriers and Ethnicity	Diversity
Asian American/European American (N=45)	.25 ^a (0.9)	-2.6 (2.4)	-4.3 ^a (2.6)	-.15 ^m (0.9)
Latino/a/European American (N=100)	.07 (1.0)	-2.3 (2.4)	-4.5 ^x (2.4)	.37 ^{n,x} (1.1)
European American (N=2,550)	-.00 (1.0)	-2.6 (2.3)	-5.0 ^{b,y} (1.9)	-.02 ^y (1.0)
Asian American (N=123)	-.21 ^b (1.0)	-2.2 (2.4)	-2.1 ^b (3.3)	-.56 (1.1)
Latino/a (N=134)	.08 (1.1)	-2.5 (2.3)	-3.5 ^y (3.1)	.18 (1.0)

Note. N = 2,952. Different adjacent superscripts indicate significant differences between means, as revealed by the planned contrasts (mean with superscript a is significantly different than the one with b; mean with m is significantly different than that with n; mean with x is significantly different than that with y).