

Extended Abstract Submission for Population Association of America

***Intergenerational Issues in Multiethnic Families:
Evidence from the National Survey of Families & Households***

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In most empirical analyses, the family situation of individuals of mixed ethnic background has not even been considered. The literature on ethnicity often makes the flaw of assuming a single ethnic identity (Spickard & Fong, 1995). In reality, individuals move through the life course based on interaction with extended families and the social world that is situational-based. This study examined differences over time between groups of young adults (aged 5-18 in Wave 1 & 18-34 in Wave 3) from single and multiethnic families. The purposes of the analysis was to explore whether multiethnic adults are: subject to higher rates of marital conflict while growing up; more likely to experience family disruption via divorce or step-parenting; performing worse on measures of psychosocial well-being; or involved more with parents or grandparents than individuals from single ethnic families? Participants were 1,688 adults from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) who have two biological parents that reported ethnicity. Outcomes variables used scales that measure depressive symptoms, self-esteem, life satisfaction, educational aspirations, behavioral outcomes, family conflict, and relationship quality. Bivariate correlations and ANOVAs found significant differences between groups of single (2 black, Hispanic, or White parents) and multi-ethnic individuals. Findings suggest that multiethnic individuals do not experience more household conflict but reported less involvement with parents than in Black & Hispanic families. Compared to all groups, the

multiethnic group had higher educational aspirations and reported psychological well-being similar to Hispanics. There was no difference between groups on measures of intergenerational relationships. As multiethnic groups age in the context of the family, they deserve to be investigated as a separate entity.

Background

The controversial “check-all-that-apply” option on the 2000 Census confirms Americans are quickly becoming an ethnically plural people. Older adults from the biracial baby boom of the 1960s are currently in mid-life, and we know little about their life experiences. As one of the fastest growing demographics in the country, the mixed race population faces many issues unique to personal and collective experiences as people of multi-ethnic and/or multiracial heritage (Stephen & Stephan, 1989). An awareness of ethnic variations is decisive to serving individuals; their life experiences have been deeply shaped by their culture of origin (Spickard & Fong, 1995). Furthermore, the literature on ethnicity often makes the flaw of assuming a single ethnic identity (Spickard & Fong, 1995). In reality, individuals negotiated multiethnic identities based on interaction with extended families and the social world that is situational-based.

Study Considerations

There are five factors to consider when studying multiethnic individuals: 1) family dynamics, 2) family conflict, 3) racial combinations, class, gender, age, & religion, 4) extended family involvement, and 5) self identification versus societal identification. As is the case with all families, the family situation of these individuals is not static. The combination of race and ethnicity in the family may also contribute to unique individual experiences over the life course. Involvement with the extended family is highly likely to influence an individual’s ethnic identity. This includes considering who raised the child, the surname they carry, and what members of the maternal and paternal families take an interest in the child’s life. Self versus society

identification gets at how individuals identify themselves versus how society sees them (i.e. the ability to 'pass').

Theoretical Framework

Family systems theory and a life course approach are useful tools to examine the experience of multiethnic individuals. Life course provides a holistic framework for investigation of development as a life long process through principles such as agency, link lives, historical time and place, and time and temporality (Elder, 1998). Systems theory emphasizes that interdependence of family members and also that families are characterized by wholeness and order, hierarchal structure, and adaptive self-organization (Cox & Paley, 2003). This process helps us to understand the importance of looking at individuals within the framework of their larger family system and assay the mutual influences among family subsystems, such as the subsystem of maternal and paternal extended families. Multiethnic individuals often come from two extended families of divergent backgrounds so their family subsystems are likely to influence them in separate ways. Tensions in the family may result from the strain of mixed unions. These perspectives also consider inequalities of all kinds of resources—health, income, assets, access to social networks—in terms of individual variation, and as resulting from the power relations that structure society (Estes et al, 1982, 1984; Minkler & Estes, 1984).

Select References

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