Why Developmental Researchers Should Care About Biracial, Multiracial, and Multiethnic Youth

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Abstract

The population of multiracial youth in the United States is expected to grow in the coming decades (exceeding 11% by 2060). In this article, we aim to convince child development researchers who do not usually examine race and ethnicity in their work to consider multiracial youth. We describe ways in which youth from more than one racial background might have common developmental experiences. First, we present rationale for considering multiracial youth as their own numerical minority group. Then, we provide several illustrative examples demonstrating how studying multiracial youth might provide added insight about three interrelated areas: ethnic/racial identity development, social-cognitive development, and peer interactions. We also offer guidance on collecting information about children and adolescents' multiracial status. We conclude by offering suggestions for researchers who seek to include multiracial youth in their work.

How might the experiences of biracial/multiracial and multiethnic youth in the United States and elsewhere differ from those of their monoracial counterparts? How might those differences shape their development across domains? In this article, we seek to increase the focus on multiracial youth in developmental research. Although our focus is on multiracial youth in the United States, the issues are relevant more broadly. Considering multiracial youth can help developmental researchers who study race/ethnicity as their main variable of interest, as well as researchers whose primary questions relate to issues other than race/ethnicity but who have diverse samples (see also Dunham & Olson, 2016).

Because both race and ethnicity are social constructions, definitions vary across studies. In this article, we refer to multiracial youth as youth with parents from different racial backgrounds (Root, 1992). In the United States, these racial categories may include Asian, Black/African American, Latinx, Native American/Alaskan Native, and White (see Charmaraman, Woo, Quach, & Erkut, 2014; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014, for further rationale for adding Latinx alongside historical racial groups). Each of these broad groups are panethnic themselves (as are multiracial youth, if treated as a group), comprising individuals from different national origins and cultures. Furthermore, important distinctions may exist among biracial, multiracial, and multiethnic youth, an issue we revisit later.

In the United States, multiracial individuals are the fastest-growing demographic (expected to increase more than 200% between 2016 and 2060); by 2060, multiracial *youth* (those under age 18) are projected to comprise 11.3% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), up from U.S. Census estimates of 8.9% just a few years earlier. As a comparison, the Asian panethnic racial category, which is the second-fastest-growing group in the United States, is expected to reflect 8.4% of the youth population by 2060 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). This

growth in the population of multiracial youth is not confined to the United States. Mixed unions (i.e., partnerships between members of two different ethnic/racial groups) in Canada have doubled in the last 20 years, with the largest share of couples reflecting childbearing age groups (Statistics Canada, 2014). In the following sections, we provide a rationale for considering multiracial youth as their own group based on experiences they may share. Then, we offer examples of applications that span three varied developmental domains (racial/ethnic identity, social cognitive, peer interactions) to demonstrate what studying multiracial youth can add to researchers' understanding of developmental processes. Finally, we conclude by providing practical recommendations on identifying these youth and suggestions for research.

Multiracial Youth May Constitute Their Own Group

We propose that multiracial youth's experiences and unique developmental trajectories cannot be captured simply by understanding the components of their heritage. Like other monoracial groups (e.g., Asian, Black/African American, Latinx), *multiracial* is a panethnic category, so we expect it to feature some heterogeneity (Garrod, Kilkenny, & Gómez, 2014; Harris & Sim, 2002). However, similar to each monoracial group, multiracial youth may have developmental experiences in common (and different from those of other groups), regardless of their specific backgrounds (see also Jackson, 2009; Shih & Sanchez, 2005).

First, many multiracial youth have had experiences with parents from different backgrounds (e.g., one parent may be Asian and another Latinx) and have navigated interactions with extended family from those different backgrounds (Gaither et al., 2014). These experiences can include aspects such as language, customs, viewpoints, and stories about life experiences. To this end, multiracial youth may learn early on how to navigate a wider range of diverse

individuals than do their monoracial counterparts, and may even have served as liaisons between groups.

Second, multiracial youth often must navigate a society that does not always accept people who do not fit neatly within traditional racial/ethnic categories. For example, multiracial youth with parents of different backgrounds may differ in appearance from their parents (e.g., Garrod et al., 2014). Additionally, when interacting outside the family, many multiracial youth encounter others who express confusion about their race/ethnicity (i.e., racial ambiguity). As part of this ambiguity from the *observer's* perspective, multiracial youth may feel pressured internally or externally to choose one part of their background with which to identify (Herman, 2004; Shih & Sanchez, 2005). Thus, unlike for monoracial youth, identity integration may be an important task, reflecting the degree to which any potential tension between multiple identities is resolved positively (e.g., Jackson, 2009; Parra, 2019). The notion of integrating or resolving tension is a common component across many multiracial perspectives (Shih & Sanchez, 2005).

Third, multiracial youth may also have to contend with others' expectations of negative experiences as a function of their multiracial status (Johnson, 1992). This concern has likely driven research focused on negative aspects of multiracial youth's adjustment and well-being (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). In one extensive review (Shih & Sanchez, 2005), researchers did not find significant evidence for multiracial youth's maladjustment relative to their monoracial ethnic-minority peers. However, for some dimensions (e.g., depression, school performance), multiracial youth, similar to monoracial minority youth, fared less optimally than their monoracial White counterparts (Shih & Sanchez, 2005).

Finally, multiracial youth rarely find themselves in situations in which they are in the numerical majority. At a minimum, monoracial minority youth generally are in the numerical

majority in their own family interactions. Additionally, no officially recognized U.S. cultural events or holidays celebrate multiracial individuals. Even multiracial public figures are usually subsumed into a monoracial group, which results in a lack of multiracial role models for these youth (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). These experiences reflect the fact that multiracial youth are not necessarily regarded as a distinct group, but rather the sum of multiple parts. Thus, to participate in cultural customs or holidays, they are expected to focus on only one aspect of their racial/ethnic background, while potentially suppressing the others.

Multiracial Status and Developmental Tasks: Three Examples of Possible Applications

Given the developmental experiences that multiracial youth may share, multiracial youth could constitute an independent ethnic/racial group in research. Next, we relate these common experiences to three developmental topics: ethnic/racial identity, social cognitive, and peer interactions. In each section, to spark interest in studying multiracial youth across childhood and adolescence, we provide brief examples of research applications. These examples are not meant to be comprehensive or exhaustive reviews of what is known about multiracial youth, but instead to suggest how studies of multiracial youth can provide insight about development more generally.

Ethnic/Racial Identity Development

Not surprisingly, much of the research on multiracial youth has focused on the development of ethnic/racial identity (e.g., Brittian, Umaña-Taylor, & Derlan, 2013; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Rockquemore, Brunsma, & Delgado, 2009; Root, 1992; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Considering multiracial youth's common experiences may present interesting areas of

inquiry. In particular, multiracial youth's ethnic/racial identity may be both accelerated developmentally and more nuanced. For example, because of their earlier exposure to family members from different ethnic backgrounds, multiracial youth may be more likely to develop an earlier understanding of social hierarchies and awareness of bias (see Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014), which may affect their ability to engage in social comparisons and perspective taking (see the following section on social-cognitive development). This is an important consideration because much research on ethnic/racial identity focuses on adolescence. Additionally, because the ethnic composition of a particular context can affect ethnic/racial identification (i.e., the racial group to which an individual asserts to belong; e.g., Echols, Ivanich, & Graham, 2017; Harris & Sim, 2002; Nishina, Bellmore, Witkow, & Nylund-Gibson, 2010), multiracial youth may gain early practice with flexibility in their ethnic/racial identification (e.g., identifying as multiracial versus one of their monoracial groups at any given time).

Anticipation of tensions about racial/ethnic background internally and from others, as well as concerns about multiracial youth's adjustment, may prompt parents to use additional socialization practices (e.g., Brittian et al., 2013; Rollins & Hunter, 2013) that vary from those for monoracial minority youth. For example, because of the importance of identity integration (Jackson, 2009), parents may attempt to provide balance in cultural practices so many cultures are valued overtly and equally. Researchers could examine the strategies multiracial parents' use to help their children navigate aspects of race/ethnicity.

Finally, multiracial youth's identity processes may inform other areas of research that focus on youth's multiple identities (e.g., religious, language, culture, immigrant status; e.g., Verkuyten, Thijs, & Stevens, 2012). Multiracial youth's experiences have some similarities to immigrant youth who must learn to navigate between their home culture and the majority culture

in which they live. We also see parallels to bilingualism in that multiracial youth may learn to shift back and forth between multiple groups, similar to switching between languages (e.g., code switching; Yow & Markman, 2016). In addition, multiracial youth's development may be relevant for intersectionality frameworks that suggest that aspects of individuals' multiple identities should be considered in conjunction with one another rather than as additive (e.g., sum of parts) or multiplicative (i.e., statistical interactions between several parts) approaches (Parra, 2019).

Social-Cognitive Development

The diverse social settings in which many multiracial youth are raised may present opportunities to understand more fully how youth understand social categories and process social information (Dunham & Olson, 2016). Diverse settings may benefit social-cognitive development and are expected to be more common from an early age for multiracial than for monoracial youth (Dunham & Olson, 2016). For example, in a study of monoracial infants, those who were raised in mostly homogenous communities processed and attended differently to faces of the same race than to facies of a different race than did monoracial infants from more diverse communities (e.g., Ellis, Xiao, Lee, & Oakes, 2016; Singarajah et al., 2017). These findings suggest that even from an early age, exposure to different others outside the home can shape monoracial infants' development. Researchers should determine whether these findings are stronger when they occur in the home (i.e., for multiracial infants; cf. Gaither, Pauker, & Johnson, 2012). Similarly, young children exposed to many languages early in life can engage more successfully in perspective-taking (Fan, Liberman, Keysar, & Kinzler, 2015). However, to

our knowledge, no work has explicitly examined social-cognitive development from this framework, comparing multiracial to monoracial status.

Contact theory (Allport, 1954) also provides ideas on how consistently being in the numerical minority and being exposed to diverse groups may shape multiracial youth's more nuanced perspective taking and cognitive flexibility over time. Exposure to different others is expected to challenge existing schemas and ultimately require reconciliation of discrepancies. As noted earlier, parents may also facilitate this practice during ethnic/racial socialization. The timing and context of these experiences (i.e., happening early and in the family) may mean that multiracial youth have smoother transitions to school because they have already practiced some social-cognitive tasks needed in the classroom. It may also mean that multiracial youth develop the capacity to think about racial/ethnic identity earlier than monoracial youth (cf. Krettenauer, 2005).

Processes related to racial ambiguity, diverse interactions, and numerical representation may shape perspective-taking abilities. In one study (Gaither et al., 2014), biracial (Asian/White or Black/White) children were more flexible than monoracial children in how and from whom they learned. When primed with the racial-minority component of their background, biracial youth were *more* amenable than their monoracial minority counterparts to learning from someone of a minority background (i.e., Asian, Black, respectively), suggesting that multiracial youth may not merely be a sum of their parts. These results may not be surprising given that multiracial youth might have prior experience navigating racial ambiguity, as well as shifting their attention between parents or relatives who do not share their multiracial background. Researchers could explore whether multiracial youth can more flexibly use *other* aspects of their identity (i.e., beyond their ethnic/racial background) throughout development.

The Development of Peer Interactions

Studying multiracial youth's peer relationships can also help developmental researchers understand more general processes of racial/ethnic homophily (the tendency to form friendships with similar others) and friendship affiliation (the ways friends interact with one another). Racial/ethnic homophily is a typical characteristic of friendship during childhood and adolescence (e.g., Hallinan & Williams, 1989). However, it is not clear which peers should be considered homophilous for multiracial youth (e.g., multiracial youth in general, multiracial youth who reflect an exact match of backgrounds, or monoracial youth who reflect one component of their background). Studies of peers have considered multiracial youth in different ways (e.g., Brown, Herman, Hamm, & Heck, 2008; Doyle & Kao, 2007; Echols & Graham, 2018).

In research on adults, multiracial individuals are more likely than monoracial individuals to marry a multiracial romantic partner, which points to possible signs of multiracial group homophily (Pew Research Center, 2015). However, they are also generally more open to cross-group relationships with monoracial partners than are monoracial individuals (Pew Research Center, 2015). In part, this openness may be driven by prior experiences with diversity or modeling from parents who were in a cross-group relationship (de Guzman & Nishina, 2017), and because multiracial youth rarely find themselves in the numerical majority.

Openness may also shed light on research findings that multiracial youth serve as bridges (i.e., individuals who are simultaneous members of multiple cliques and connect the cliques to one another) between cross-group members within peer networks (Echols & Graham, 2018; Quillian & Redd, 2009). In a study that used data from the National Longitudinal Study of

Adolescent to Adult Health (Quillian & Redd, 2009), multiracial youth with Black backgrounds were more likely to serve as bridges between peers from different monoracial backgrounds than their monoracial Black and monoracial White counterparts, even after controlling for school-level diversity. What is less clear is why these bridging roles emerge over time and how early they emerge. One possibility is that this is a natural social role for multiracial youth who have bridged family members from different backgrounds. Another possibility is that bridging addresses issues of racial ambiguity by allowing the person doing the bridging to identify with more than one social group. The idea that multiracial youth can serve as key social actors in peer networks is an exciting area of research that also has implications for the monoracial youth they befriend. For example, if multiracial youth act as brokers of language and culture or emissaries between social groups, do monoracial youth also benefit via improved facility in code switching, perspective taking, and cross-group attitudes? If so, such improvements might enhance the ethnic/racial climate of the various social contexts they inhabit.

Next Steps: Including Multiracial Youth in Developmental Research More Intentionally

As a first step in including multiracial youth in developmental research, we recommend that developmental researchers report multiracial youth within their sample demographics. In general, racial/ethnic-minority youth are understudied (Syed, Santos, Yoo, & Juang, 2018), as are multiracial youth (Seaton et al., 2017). In examining 63 *Child Development* articles between 2008 and 2018 that focused on ethnicity (excluding those focused on a single group or a subset of groups when the larger sample was not described), multiracial youth were often grouped with *other* either explicitly or implicitly (24%) or not mentioned at all (30%). Given the nontrivial, growing representation of multiracial youth, at least within the United States, it seems unlikely

that many samples would include zero multiracial participants. Moving forward, research should include (and reviewers should ask for) a multiracial category when reporting on participants' characterstics, rather than lumping multiracial youth into a catch-all *other* category or classifying them into a monoracial group, which ignores other aspects of multiracial youth's background.

Additionally, almost a third of the articles we looked at did not state explicitly who identified participants as multiracial (i.e., whether the participants self-reported a multiracial background or whether it was observer-inferred). Thus, another step is for developmental researchers to provide clear operationalizations of multiracial measurement in method sections (see Charmaraman et al., 2014; Schwartz et al., 2014). Because many researchers already use a checklist approach to measuring race/ethnicity, adding a multiracial category option should be feasible. We have done so in some of our work (e.g., Nishina, Bellmore, Witkow, Nylund-Gibson, & Graham, 2018; Nishina et al., 2010), while asking youth subsequently to write in the specific groups that reflect their ethnic or racial background if they chose a response such as *multiethnic*, *mixed*, or *more than one* option. This coupled approach allows researchers to further examine specific racial/ethnic combinations, and benefits from the fact that participants' reported groups are self-generated. Such an approach also provides insight into how youth themselves (or their parents) view multiracial/multiethnic status by examining the listed groups (i.e., whether they are across or within the larger panethnic racial categories).

Depending on the theoretical framework of the processes being examined, collecting information on participants' phenotypes may also be informative. Phenotypes—one's racial/ethnic group as perceived by outside observers—are the basis on which individuals are treated by broader society (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 2001; Dunham & Olson, 2016). Both multiracial adults (Franco & Franco, 2015) and youth (Nishina, Bellmore, Witkow, Nylund-

Gibson, & Graham, 2018; Roberts & Gelman, 2015) can be misperceived by peers and adults. Widespread misperceptions can contribute to experiences of identity invalidation and detract from identity integration (Franco & Franco, 2015). One methodological approach used by some researchers is to ask participants to indicate not only their race/ethnicity, but what race/ethnicity others perceive them to be (e.g., Nishina et al., 2018); this approach could also be used in parents' reports of younger children. Asking about perceived phenotype is more feasible than asking a broad range of the youth's peers or independent observers to report on each participant's race/ethnicity. Moreover, participants' reports of others' perceptions are likely based on prior interpersonal experiences and are therefore ecologically valid.

Some researchers ask multiracial youth to identify the single group with which they identify most strongly. While this approach is sometimes used for analytic ease, we strongly caution against ease as the driving factor. Strongest identification may not accurately reflect youth's experiences as multiracial individuals, especially if they identify primarily as multiracial (e.g., Gaither, 2015; Renn, 2008). For example, some multiracial youth may not feel as though one or the other of their monoracial groups is the one with which they *always* identify most strongly. If this is the case, such items could be confusing, off-putting, or even offensive to multiracial youth who may feel that having to choose one implies that they are rejecting other parts of their identity (see Johnson et al., 1997). Asking parents to choose one monoracial category for their multiracial child could also be perceived as asking them to ignore either their partner's background or their own.

Furthermore, although we have focused on multiracial status at the racial (plus Latinx) level, the same general processes may operate for multiple backgrounds *within* panethnic groups (e.g., Puerto Rican and Dominican, Vietnamese and Laotian), depending on the individual and

the broader context. For example, when considering interactions with family members from different backgrounds, cultural differences between each ethnic background within the same racial group may still exist. Ethnic differences may be more salient if youth live in an ethnic community represented by one of their ethnic backgrounds. For example, multiethnic Korean/Japanese youth may encounter different experiences based on their multiple ethnic backgrounds depending on whether they live in a majority-Korean, majority-Japanese, majority-other race, or diverse community. Such multiethnic (but *mono*racial) youth may still experience some of the same internal conflict and need for identity integration as multiracial youth, as well as the lack of numerical representation in their communities. However, multiethnic youth may not experience the same level of racial ambiguity from outside observers as do youth from multiple *racial* backgrounds (de Guzman & Nishina, 2017), though *ethnic* ambiguity could still be experienced depending on the youth's neighborhood or school context. Thus, how to consider multiethnic youth from a single racial background remains an empirical question. Determining how the youth themselves identify (e.g., as *multiethnic/mixed* or as part of a broader panethnic racial group) may be enough to gain insight into their experiences with ethnicity.

Finally, our descriptions in this article may imply that the term *multiracial* reflects only two different racial backgrounds. In fact, in recent U.S. Census data (Jones & Bullock, 2012) and in our own research with adolescents in California (Nishina et al., 2018), most multiracial/multiethnic individuals indicate two groups. However, given the growing numbers of multiracial youth projected in the United States in the next 40 years, researchers should consider whether youth from three or more backgrounds differ conceptually from youth who have *mono*racial parents from different backgrounds, and what unique insight their experiences may provide developmental science. While we present projections about multiracial youth from the

United States, research in any country with multiracial youth will likely also have participants from three or more backgrounds.

Concluding Thoughts

Multiracial youth are a fast-growing population in the United States and elsewhere that will soon (if they have not already) reflect large proportions of developmental researchers' samples. Despite the complexity of studying multiracial youth, or because of it, a more deliberate examination offers the exciting possibility of new discoveries related to race/ethnicity and child development more broadly. We encourage an ongoing discussion in developmental research, including perspectives on measurement and conceptual frameworks. By starting now, child development researchers can more successfully inform the field's understanding of identity processes across the lifespan.

Authors' Note

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