

## **MIXING BLOOD: WHAT DOES “BIRACIALISM” DO TO THE NOTION OF “RACE”?**

### **Book review**

Rockquemore, K A & D L Brunnsma (2002) **Beyond Black: Biracial identity in America**. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. ISBN 0-7619-2322-5 pbk. Pages 256.

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The term and notion of “biracial” confirms a perception of “races”, resting as it does on the acceptance of the existence, in some form, of two distinct “somethings” (races) that give rise to a combination. At the same time, paradoxically, it also adds confusion to the apparent certainty of race existence – what meaning can “race” have if it is so easily undermined through the creation of a totally new racial group or of a person who straddles “races”? Can we then have an infinite number of “races” through the infinitely various combinations of union that are possible?

In America, “biracial” challenges the “one drop of blood rule” that for so long turned the offspring of a dilution of the hegemonic notion “white” into “black”, and not into “biracial”, or into “Coloured” as was the case in South Africa. In the strange world of race thinking, and of racism and “race” or racist power, one drop could not, ever, turn “black” into “white”. This rule came to be accepted and then supported by black Americans as well, for a number of reasons.

In academic research and writing, the area of “race mixing” seems to be gaining in popularity. As Parker and Song note, “Of course racial mixture is nothing new – it has been the history of the world. What stands out as novel are the forms of political contestation gathering around the topic of ‘mixed race’” (2001:1). Paul Spickard (2001) refers to the “boom in biracial biography”. Charmaine Wijeyesinghe (2001:129) writes that “Multiracial identity is the newest chapter in the evolving field of racial identity development. The heightened interest in the experience of Multiracial people is fuelled by changing social demographics, an increasing number of Multiracial people who identify with their racial ancestries, and the emergence of groups advocating the rights of Multiracial people”. Interest in this aspect of social life was also illustrated by the appearance of a second edition, in 2002, of Barbara Tizzard and Ann Phoenix’s **Black, white or mixed race? Race and racism in the lives of young people of mixed parentage**, first published in 1993. In South Africa, too, several contributions in the field of “mixed race” identity include an edited collection by Zimitri Erasmus (2001) and an article by Jane Battersby (2003).

“Bi-racialism”, “hybridity”, “cross-racial”, “mulatto”, “coloured”, and so on, are terms that in different contexts signify an unnatural “mixing of blood” – in other words, moving beyond what is usually socially acceptable. The investigations that are reported on in books on this topic are of cases that need to be examined because of the disturbance it implies to the certainty of “race” categories, ripples on the smooth surface of the pond of race thinking. Of course, earlier, studies of the same social phenomenon set out to prove the horrors that arose from such mixing, the taint and the supposed mental and physical deficiencies that were to be the inevitable destiny of such people, the tragedies that befell them!

As Zimitri Erasmus comments on “mixture”: “There is no such thing as the Black ‘race’. Blackness, whiteness and colouredness exist, but they are cultural, historical and political identities. To talk about ‘race mixture’, ‘miscegenation’, ‘inter-racial’ sex, and ‘mixed descent’ is to use terms and habits of thought inherited from the very ‘race science’ that was used to justify oppression, brutality and the marginalisation of ‘bastard people’” (Erasmus (ed) 2001: Editor’s note).

Link the notion of “race” and “race mixing” with that of “identity” and it becomes a fertile field for research and theorising for sociologists and, especially it seems, for psychologists. Six of the ten contributions to the book edited by Wijeyesinghe and Jackson (2001) are devoted to the development of “racial identity” amongst specific “races” or amongst “multiracial people”, one on “core processes of racial identity development”, and two on counselling in these situations and on conflict resolution. The book abounds with theories and studies of racialised identity development(s): RID (racial identity development), WID (white identity development), BID (black identity development). Each new study introduces variations on the stage models that have been proposed for half a century, in each reflecting a predisposition to find what has already been proposed – even if the results subsequently fail to confirm. It certainly raises the question whether this field deserves such special attention as it closes us to the possibility that “race” identity might not exist at all, or in ways that certainly do not lend themselves to the stage theories that seem to abound, or to the common sense of what such identification signifies. The research seems often to be based on the perception that “race identity” has a “master status” in the formation of the identity of individuals. In South Africa, more than 40 years ago, Hamish Dickie-Clark found that it was much more appropriate and accurate to argue for a “marginal situation” rather than a “marginal personality”, when researching the location and identifications of “coloured” people (1966).

The term “bi-racialism” was not one that I had come across until about four years ago, when I was asked to supervise a doctoral thesis on the topic. This lacuna in my own interest was probably because of earlier concerns had been to come to grips with the relationship of “race” to class in South Africa (the now hardly ever mentioned “race-class debate”), and more recently the persistence of public acceptance of “race” categories. By the time I was asked to review a book by Kerry Ann Rockquemore and David L Brunsma, **Beyond black: biracial identity in America** (2002), it occurred within a new intellectual interest, confirmed as important in examining race thinking in graduate teaching through using “boundary-crossing” to raise questions.

While tough going at times because of the usefully transparent description of research methodology and of the detail in analysis, this study proved to be an interesting read, especially because of the complexity the authors were compelled to introduce through their findings. The central question asked by Rockquemore and Brunnsma is “who is black?” This is the title of their first chapter, while they conclude with a chapter headed “Who is black today?” The answer given to why this is the central question returns me to Parker and Song’s comment quoted above, in which they draw attention to “the [more recent] forms of *political contestation* gathering around the topic of ‘mixed race’” (emphasis added). “Biracial”, rather than “race” it appears, is more often a politically contested concept.

Rockquemore and Brunnsma introduce their study by referring to such political contestation through the 2000 Census in the USA that allowed, for the first time, two race/ethnic identifications to be ticked by the same person (also see Nobles 2000). This dilution or questioning of what would previously have been a relatively unproblematic acceptance of membership to a “black” or “African-American” social category or group (because of the “one drop rule”), was contested by those who self-identify as “black” – in other words, by an already-existing African-American “race”. The “one drop rule”, or “hypodescent”, by which “Americans created a systematized and legally codified answer to the question, Who is black? ... mandates that a mixed-race child shall be relegated to the racial group of the lower-status parent” (in other words “black”) (Rockquemore and Brunnsma 2002:3).

These two authors present a brief but useful summary of the history of the “one drop rule” in their first chapter. They note that the “rule” can be traced to the slave-holding South, where the attitude was that “black blood would taint the purity of the white race” (2002:5). This did not stand in the way of sexual relations between master and slave. Though the benefits of producing more slaves were clear, which meant that these offspring were classified “black” (in effect “slave”), the lighter-skinned children were sometimes taken into homes where they were given “special privileges” compared to the plantation working slaves.

Rockquemore and Brunnsma point out that even those who argued for the alteration of categories for the 2000 Census did not reject the notion of “race”, but basically asked for another racial category to reflect the reality of a growing number of biracial children. “Failing to recognize this emerging group with a separate racial category, advocates argued, was an inaccurate reflection of demographic reality” (2002:107). Similarly the opponents of the change and, hence, by implication supporters of the “one-drop rule”, argued that a biracial person is, in effect, a member of the black “race”. There could be several arguments for the latter position – a strictly political one, where numbers are important in terms of political clout in a society that employs “race” categories in the allocation of resources; another could be based on keeping the number of “races” down to a minimum, for only then can “race” continue to have any value.

It is worth noting that the Census option of choosing two categories was a compromise reached by the Office of Management and Budget (controlling the US Census) between total opposition to change, and those who wished for a “biracial” block on a status level with other “races”. Rockquemore and Brunnsma locate the motivation for their study in part in the lobbying around this issue, both before the 2000 Census and as is expected

in the future. Their hope is "... that the findings reported in this book will open up the debate about a multiracial category in the 2010 census to a more dynamic, multifaceted understanding of what biracial identity means to members of this population" (2002:viii). In Britain the option of "mixed" was inserted when respondents were asked to indicate their ethnic origin (Parker and Song 2001:1). In South Africa, of course, the Census questionnaire sticks to the "four (race) spokes" of the population wheel, with "coloured" playing a role similar to the "mixed" option, but with less fluidity allowed.

Attached to the acceptance of "races" is the idea that people (or at least those living in racialised societies) *need* a "racial identity", which in some societies could be what Rockquemore and Brunnsma (2002:84) call a "master status". In such cases "race" functions as organising or articulating principle of other identities (and of social life) – gender, class, culture, and even (sometimes especially) political identification are all racialised in different ways. If a "racial identity" was not a requirement, or expected, then the existence of biracial people would not be worth comment as a category separate from others such as "babies" or "teenagers" or "boys" or "Muslims". In an already racialised world, biracial children are thought to be placed in the situation where they have to choose between two "races" in self-definition, or find succour in a new group called "biracial" or "mixed race". Rockquemore and Brunnsma unexpectedly found a fairly large group of young self-identifying "biracial" people, in other words, those choosing a *new* "race" category. These individuals "no longer perform the juggling act that straddling the color line in the United States would seem to necessitate for black/white biracials" (2002:115). The authors found acceptance of biracialism to occur even when such individuals "understand themselves in one way, yet fail to have that classification accepted by others" (2002:116). They found that a "validated" border identity of biracial was experienced by 20% of their total respondents; while 38% were not validated in their self-identification (2002:44).

Rockquemore and Brunnsma "explore the various choices biracial people make about their racial identity and propose an explanatory model of the social factors predicting why these individuals make *drastically different choices* about who they are" (2002:16, emphasis added). Chapter two presents an overview of previous research methodologies and methods in this field of enquiry, and also describes their own consisting of three phases. In summary, phase one consisted of 14 in-depth interviews at a US Midwest university, which provided the data on which a survey was designed for phase two, undertaken at two tertiary educational institutions in the Detroit metropolitan area. Phase two provided 177 usable returns out of 4,532 initial approaches. Phase 3 consisted of further interviewing on a purposive basis of some of the respondents to the survey. The basis for inclusion was self-identification as the child of respectively "white" and "black" parents.

The researchers approached the topic through a symbolic interactionist framework: "... people know things by their meanings, ... meanings are created through social interaction, and ... meanings change through interaction" (2002:40). The framework and the broad findings are discussed in chapter three of their book.

Rockquemore and Brunnsma found that these "black/white multiracial people" understood their "biracialism" under the following categories: a "border identity" located "between two socially distinct races" – that of biracialism mentioned above; a "singular

identity”, which is either white or black; a “Protean identity”, where the individuals are black and white, with shifts depending on the context; and a “transcendent identity”, where the individuals rejected the notion of “race”. The “transcendent” group, which accounted for nearly 13% of the total sample, had a “non-racial self understanding”. The challenge this posed to the authors’ own entrapment in race thinking is illustrated by the following example. One of the authors notes on an interview: “Throughout our interview, I stayed locked in a social world that is perceived through the lens of race, and Rob [the interviewee] consistently and repeatedly questioned my ‘fixation’” (2002:49-50). This last-mentioned group is an example of individuals with “non-racial self-understanding” of a racialised world.

Chapter four analyses the reasons why such markedly different choices are made by significant proportions of those who participated in the study. Two important points emerge early in the discussion. The first is that “racial identity researchers assume without question that choice simply does not exist” (which, in effect, closes off sections of social reality that are potentially there); and, second, choice is certainly not unlimited – “real structural constraints” continue to exist even within a situation where possibly unacknowledged choice is possible (2002:55). The choices that individuals make are influenced by: “appearance”, *but* “skin colour did not predict identity choice” (2002:56-57); “social networks”, *but* as “identity is an ongoing interactional process, the racial composition of an actor’s social networks provides only a broad description for understanding racial identity choices” (2002:58); “socialization factors: childhood and adult socialization”; and “familial context”, where “socio-economic status [class] of an individual’s family is especially important to racial identity formation” (2002:60). The authors conclude this chapter as follows: first, they note that while the factors (mentioned above) explained the choices “those factors work differently in each of the four racial identity models presented ...”; second, their findings “support our reliance on interactional validation as the key mechanism underlying identity construction and maintenance. It is the validation process that unifies the respondents. *What differentiates them is from whom and for what they seek validation*” (2002:73-74, emphases added).

In chapter five they tackle the supposed centrality of the “color complex”, or the accepted link between appearance and identity, a link indicating connections that “appear straightforward”. However, they write that a “moment’s thought provides clear evidence that this assumed close link trinity of color-race-identity (a relationship legally and culturally codified through the one-drop rule) is fallible, is not deterministic, and is unreliable and unstable as it changes over time” (2002:75). They note that “race (as a concept) is constructed and fundamentally fallible, racial categorization is full of pitfalls, and racial identity is a phenomenon as nebulous as the previous two” (2002:76). The Happy Sindane case in South Africa serves as a tragic reminder of the appositeness of this warning, and yet we continue with the practices of “race” categorisation with hardly a question raised, and certainly no open debate taking place on the continuation of extensive race classification.

What the South African reader could also take from the discussion on appearance and classification is the comment by Rockquemore and Brunisma on “appearance and border identity”: “It must be recognized immediately that this type of identification has only recently become available to individuals and still exists only in selected contexts

within American society" (2002:92). While such a category has been "available" in South Africa for many decades, there is a more general point that is indirectly made. What it indicates is that researchers have a responsibility, not only to describe what is obviously there, but also to explore the changes, the new forms of identification and of community that are being created in any society, and importantly in the transitional one in which we live. What does a new generation of young people, exposed to a very different world-context from that within which apartheid South Africa existed, free from the legally defined forms of race classification, make of the choices that confront them? How do they respond to continuing and pervasive race classification by an older generation who have been shaped by their experiences before 1994, carrying the common sense of a largely rejected social world, namely that of apartheid?

I started this article by noting that the notion of "biracial" ambivalently both confirms and undermines the notion of "race". Rockquemore and Brunnsma conclude their book with two sub-sections in the final chapter, headed respectively "Who will be black tomorrow?" and "Who will be black in 2010?" Here they note such ambivalence: "Clearly, when we consider the politics underlying the debate over the potential addition of a multiracial category, we see the various interest groups whose support for a multiracial category and opposition to it ultimately reify the fallacy of racial categorization" (2002:112). But the category also undermines the certainty of "race" thinking because "the logic of racial classification implies the existence of mutually exclusive, biologically identifiable groups" (2002:112).

The ambivalence, and the existence of "races" as a "social delusion", therefore "requires an elaborate set of rules and regulations to maintain" (2002:113). Here lies the direct relevance of this study for South African researchers sensitive to "the delusion", *and* the manner in which "the biologically unreal becomes socially real in the context of daily interactions and institutional structure" (2002:113). The dimensions of "delusion", of "maintenance", and also of the effects of the "delusion", have to be studied, but in such a manner that the processes involved in research in themselves do not serve to fix "race". The challenge is to act "against race", in the manner proposed by Paul Gilroy (2001), and in ways appropriate to local contexts, while remaining committed also to addressing the gross inequalities (of material existence and human values) based on that biological unreality. Rockquemore and Brunnsma note in conclusion to this thought-provoking study, that "... although movement has taken place, we continue to stand still as prisoners of the man-made concept of race and the group inequities it has created. Thus, we remain captives of cruel delusion we are as yet unable to escape, acknowledging that our society remains unready for such a move" (2002:118). The challenge for us is to open a debate on how to make it ready, how to imagine that social world without camps.

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