

Racial Identity Among Mixed Adolescents In Hawaii:

A Research Note

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The islands of Hawaii are well-known for their unique level of racial heterogeneity and admixture, overt norms of racial tolerance and harmony, and temperate climate. Of central interest to the social scientist is the manner in which racial and cultural blending take place in such a complex society, particularly among those of mixed racial origin; Hawaii provides a social laboratory in which to study such processes in depth. This paper, viewing racial identity as an important index of intergroup relations, examines the racial identities and related reasons of forty high school adolescents in Hawaii in order to highlight controlling factors of the social environment.

Racial Mixture and Identity

There are a number of distinct possibilities regarding racial identity among mixed individuals: (1) physical admixture may result in cultural admixture with the development of a distinctly "mixed" group identity (e.g., Michener, 1961); or (2) physical mixture may result in little cultural mingling with the development instead of a distinct sense of marginality as the individual is not accepted fully by any particular race group (Park, 1950; Songequiest, 1937); or (3) physical admixture may result in limited cultural admixture, with adherence to a particular racial identity dependent upon the particular mix involved as well as other physical, social, and demographic factors. Such an approach appears applicable to Hawaii where major race groups vary on a number of basic characteristics: migration rate, length of residence, rate of intermarriage, size, and even more important, level of socioeconomic achievement.

Methods

Forty seniors at a high school on Oahu were interviewed by two

teachers who knew them well. The school was predominantly lower class in social origins, and part-Hawaiian and Samoan in racial composition, with far lower percentages of Caucasians and Orientals. A questionnaire concerning background characteristics and attitudes was used as the basis of the interview.

The racial mixture of the sample was predominantly Caucasian-Oriental, Caucasian-Hawaiian, and Oriental-Hawaiian. Non-mixed Caucasian, Oriental and Hawaiian students were also included for purposes of comparison. For this study, the students' racial identities and reasons for those identities were analyzed by racial background.

Results

The students' identities, analyzed by racial background, are presented in Table 1. It can be seen that unmixed Caucasian, Oriental, and Hawaiian students predictably adhere to their identities without change. On the other hand, racially-mixed students tend to reflect the

Table 1. Racial Identity by Racial Background

Racial Background:	Caucasian-Caucasian	Caucasian-Oriental	Caucasian-Hawaiian	Oriental-Oriental	Oriental-Hawaiian	Hawaiian-Hawaiian
Racial Identity:						
Caucasian	100.00	60.0	12.5	0.0	0.0	0.0
Oriental	0.0	40.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0
Hawaiian	0.0	0.0	75.0	0.0	90.0	100.0
Mixed	0.0	0.0	12.5	0.0	9.1	0.0
Total N:	2	5	8	8	11	2

school's racial composition: Caucasian-Hawaiians and Oriental-Hawaiians are overwhelmingly Hawaiian in identity with few exceptions. Caucasian-Orientals, however, are about evenly split between Caucasian and Oriental identities. In these cases, looks determine Caucasian identities while those who opted for an Oriental identity stated explicitly that there were few Caucasians in the school and they did not want to be considered Caucasian. The relevance of the school's racial composition and hierarchy is evident in the social pressure to be 'local' in identity regardless of mixture except when looks make this impossible. Thus, the importance of physical appearance and social pressure is apparent here, even a society presumed to be free of racial criteria in behavior.

Table 2 presents reasons for identity by racial background. The trends here are as clear as in Table 1: unmixed students explain their

Table 2. Reasons for Racial Identity by Racial Background

Racial Background:	Caucasian-Caucasian	Caucasian-Oriental	Caucasian-Hawaiian	Oriental-Oriental	Oriental-Hawaiian	Hawaiian-Hawaiian
Identity Reasons:						
Am	100.00	0.0	12.5	88.8	14.3	66.6
Looks	0.0	40.0	62.5	0.0	42.8	0.0
Behavior	0.0	0.0	12.5	0.0	7.1	0.0
Rejection	0.0	60.0	12.5	11.2	21.4	33.3
Hwn. residence	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	7.1	0.0
Total N:	3	5	8	9	14	2

identity as being what they are and nothing else, for Caucasian-Hawaiian it is mainly a matter of physical appearance, for Oriental-Hawaiians both looks and racial pride are important, while for Caucasian-Orientials looks and rejection of one of their possible identities is operative. The importance of appearance and racial status is clear here, pointing to the importance of both physical and social criteria to racial identity in a society even as traditionally non-racist as this one. Rather than predominantly ‘mixed’ or ‘marginal’ identities, then, racial alignment based on physical and status characteristics in a particular social setting is evident. Racial attitudes are thus structured by characteristics of the situation in which they operate even in a relatively non-racist society.

Conclusions

The myth of total racial equality, non-racism, and complete and on-going racial blending in Hawaii is obviously fallacious. Although when compared to most other situations, Hawaii is one of the least racist areas in the U.S. This paper shows how physical and social status factors continue to operate even among those who are racially-mixed and supposedly defined in non-racial terms. According to these data, racial identity even among mixed individuals is clearly structured by physical and situational criteria. Thus, clear racial identity and marginality are present in a situation traditionally defined as non-racist highlighting the continued operation of racial and eco-

conomic inequality. Further examination of the operation of these factors among mixed individuals in this unique society should make an important contribution to the understanding of racial attitudes in general.

References Cited

- Michener, J.A. *Hawaii*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1961).
Park, R.E. *Race and Culture*. (Glencoe: Free Press, 1950).
Stonequist, E.V. *The Marginal Man*. (New York: Scribner, 1937).

Critique

This modest research note is on solid ground in recognizing that racial identity prevails in the relatively non-racist, pluralist society of Hawaii. Hawaii's peoples are noted for extending respect and tolerance to the diverse racial and ethnic groups in the State, but pluralism has by no means erased all problems.

Kinloch's sampling is of mixed racial adolescents attending a Honolulu high school with a predominantly lower class student body. Their ethnic identity is connected to their physical attributes or their social situations. So far, so good.

There are two difficulties with Kinloch's study, however. One is that "local" identification is given only passing mention. "Local" is the term applied by Island-born people to themselves if they are of either mixed backgrounds or single racial stock except for Caucasians who are called "haoles." "Local" carries with it a certain pride, and Island-born Caucasians identify themselves this way in order to be distinguished from "haoles" from the mainland. A useful study is Eric Yamamoto's "The Significance of Local," in *Social Process in Hawaii*, Vol. 27 (1979).

The second problem is that the laboratory is too confined. From this admittedly small sampling, the researcher concludes that racial identity and marginality are one and the same and that they are integral to continued racial and economic inequality in Hawaii. This may be so for the people involved in his study but may be as much class as race