
HOW CULTURES COMBINE IN MIXED-RACE FAMILIES

INVESTIGATING CULTURE IN AMERICA'S FASTEST-GROWING POPULATION

WRITTEN BY

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Abstract

In 1993, Time magazine issued a cover with a digitally created face of a mixed-race woman referred to as “The New Face of America.”¹ Thirty years later, this prediction was correct. Since 1990, the American multiracial population has grown around tenfold.² Multiracial people are the fastest-growing population in the U.S. by far, as shown in the 2010–2020 census comparison in Figure 1. Mixed-race people are also the youngest population, with a third of them under 18 years old.³ This study investigates mixed-race youth to understand how cultures combine in mixed-race families. Since the U.S. has and will become more and more mixed-race, the cultural trends in mixed-race families will help uncover the trajectory of American culture.

The data in this study was collected by surveying mixed-race and single-race youth. By comparing the results, it was found that multiracial children have less of a tie to their parents’ cultures than children of a single culture do. As we have seen with the mixing of European ethnicities, the distinct Italian, Irish, German, and English groups have blurred in cities like New York and Boston, forming an American White identity. The findings of this study suggest that the strength of individual cultures may diminish as mixed people adopt a more uniform American culture. It is important to note that this is a trend but does not hold true for all

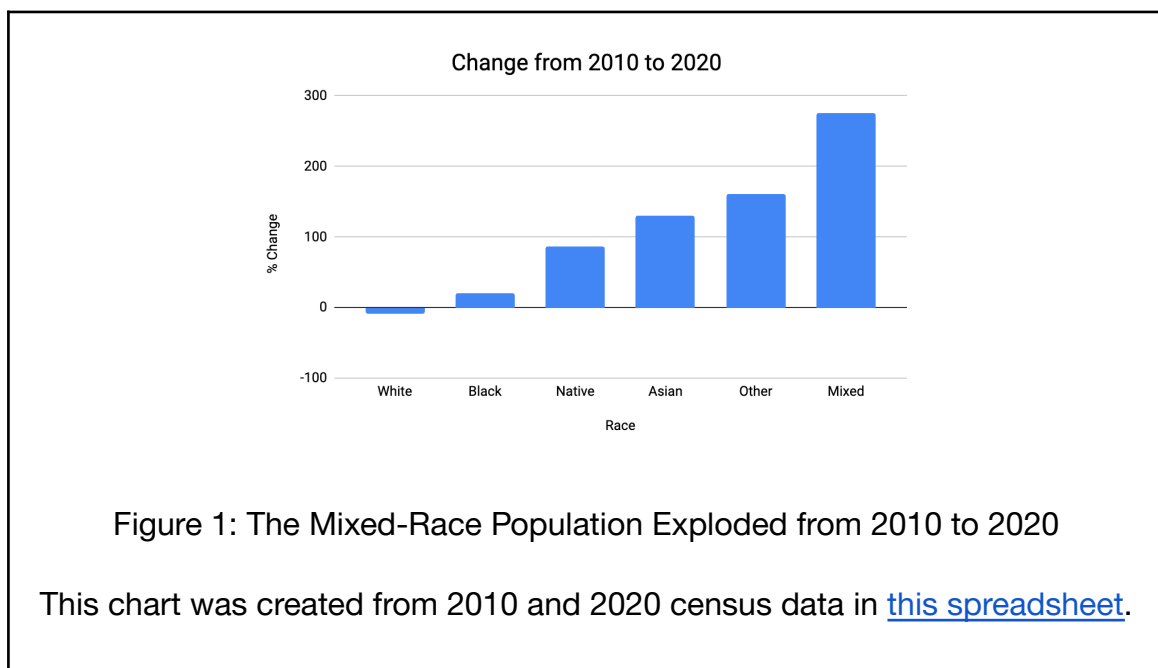
¹ “Time Magazine Cover: The New Face of America - 18 Nov. 1993.” *Time*, Time Inc., content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19931118,00.html.

²  U.S. Mixed Race Population Growth

³ Rico, Brittany. “2020 Census Shows Increase in Multiracial Population in All Age Categories.” *Census.Gov*, 31 May 2023, www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/06/nearly-a-third-reporting-two-or-more-races-under-18-in-2020.html.

assessed families. In some responses, children reported having more of a connection to their heritage than their parents.

Whereas Blacks, Natives, and Whites have been mixing for 500 years, Whites and Asians are a newer group. Most studies of multiracial Americans focus on children with Black and White parents. This study looks at all mixed-race people. Culture usually decreases from generation to generation of Americans because younger generations are less connected to their forebears' immigrant roots. This study found that culture decreases faster in multiracial people than in single-race youth.



Methods

The data in this study was collected through a survey on paper and [digitally](#). The following survey pictured below was presented to multiracial youth. The respondents wrote their mother and father's cultures and the associated races of each culture. They answered how connected their parent was to their own culture and how connected they were to their parent's culture with a 1–5 indication and text to explain these connections. They bubbled in 1 for not connected at all and 5 for as connected as can be. If they bubbled in that their connection to the culture was more or less than their parent's connection, an additional question showed up asking in what ways they were more or less connected to their parent's culture. People of more than two cultures (because their parent was multicultural) could add additional cultures by clicking "Add Another Culture." For example, one of the respondents put down Japanese and Cuban for their father, and Portuguese for their mother. The survey responses are available [here](#). For single-race youth, the second survey below was used. The survey responses are available [here](#). Analysis was performed using pandas with the [python code here](#) and Google Spreadsheets in [this folder](#).

This survey is part of a study of how cultures combine in multicultural families. Your response is anonymous.

Father's Culture

Culture Name
e.g. Jewish, Italian, Chinese, African American, mixed European

Race ▼
What race does this culture belong to?

How connected is your parent to this culture? 1 2 3 4 5
1 for not connected at all. 5 for very connected.

In what ways is your parent connected to this culture?

How connected are you to this culture? 1 2 3 4 5

In what ways are you connected to this culture?

Mother's Culture

Culture Name

Race ▼

How connected is your parent to this culture? 1 2 3 4 5

In what ways is your parent connected to this culture?


How connected are you to this culture? 1 2 3 4 5

In what ways are you connected to this culture?

If there are 3 cultures in your household because a parent is multicultural, click below to add your third culture:

[+ Add Another Culture](#)

Culture Name
e.g. Jewish, Italian, Chinese, African
American, mixed European

Race 
What race does this culture belong
to?

How connected are your
parents to this culture? 1 2 3 4 5

In what ways is your parent
connected to this culture?
(optional)

How connected are you to
this culture? 1 2 3 4 5

In what ways are you
connected to this culture?
(optional)
e.g. food, language, holidays,
religion, etc.

Submit

Results and Discussion

The survey data includes responses from 21 mixed-race people and 18 single-race people. All respondents were high school and college students. The results indicated general differences between the experiences of mixed-race and single-race children as well as correlations between culture loss and each parent's race and gender.

Mixed-Race vs. Single-Race

	Average Parent Connected to Parent Culture	Average Child Connected to Parent Culture	Change from Parent to Child in Connection to Culture
Mixed-Race	3.32	2.80	-0.52
Single-Race	4.08	3.25	-0.83

Table 1: Connection to Culture

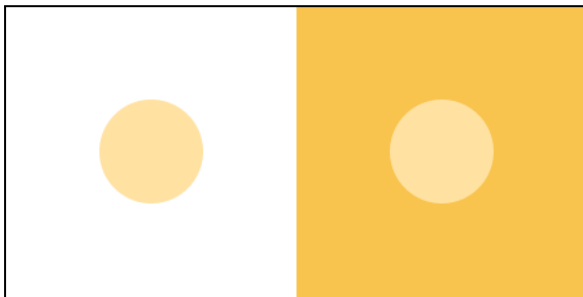
Table 1 shows on average how connected a parent was to their own culture and how connected a child was to that culture. Table 1 suggests that there are two stages of culture loss: in the parents and in the children. In the parent stage, parents of mixed-race children lose culture (3.32) faster than those of single-race children (4.08). In the child stage, mixed-race children retain culture (-0.52) more than single-race children (-0.83). Overall with the losses of these two stages combined, mixed-race children have less culture (2.80) than single-race children (3.25).

In the first stage of culture loss, there are a number of reasons mixed-race parents could be ranked according to their children as less connected to their culture than single-race parents. First, in single-race families, two parents practice the same culture, meaning there is double the cultural connection in the household as compared to only one parent practicing the culture in a mixed-race family. Second, a parent could be more likely to practice their culture at home in front of their child if their spouse also shares that culture. Third, people who are more willing to marry outside of their culture may be less connected to their culture and, therefore, emphasize it less in front of their children.

As for the second stage of culture loss, there are several differences between the experience of mixed-race and single-race children that could explain why mixed-race children lose culture to the point of being less connected to their parents' cultures than single-race children. Half of the respondents wrote that language was a reason they were less connected to their parents. This makes sense because babies learn from listening to their parents speak, and a parent would not talk in their native tongue to the other parent in a mixed family because they would not understand. In my personal experience, my dad has asked that we speak English at the dinner table so that all of us can understand, which results in less Chinese practice.

A third of respondents wrote that looks are important in their connection with culture. For example, a Black Asian wrote that they "identify most with this (Black) culture because of appearance," and a White Hispanic Asian wrote, "I identify as Asian because I look Asian and people see me as Asian." How people are perceived

from their looks is key to how they integrate into a culture. Since many mixed-race people do not look like people from any culture, they could be less accepted by members of both of their cultures, leading them to feel less connected. The illustration below explains my experience as a White Asian. The left side depicts my experience when surrounded by predominantly White people, such as sometimes at Riverdale: I am too yellow to fit into the white community. I on occasion have the feeling of not entirely fitting into a White group because of my looks. Whereas, on my visits to China, people stare at me on the streets because I look Whiter than normal, as depicted on the right.



Finally, culture languishes in mixed people because it is hard for two cultures to exist simultaneously in a person. Before listing examples of cultures with opposite values, Geertz explains that the consensus gentium does not exist and “to make the generalization” between cultures, “one has to define it in most general terms, indeed—so general, in fact, that whatever force it seems to have virtually evaporates” (22). To a mixed-race child, Geertz’s message means it is hard to make meaningful connections between parents’ cultures. Because of the lack of overlap, cultures have trouble combining, meaning mixed-race children either live with both cultures separately, one culture more than the other, or neither. Geertz points out that in the worst-case scenario, cultures are incompatible by having opposite

values. In these scenarios, it is impossible for the child to fully follow both cultures. Additionally, Geertz claims that culture and humans evolved in tandem (27). Since humans and culture have helped each other evolve, humans may not have had enough time to evolve to follow two cultures. That being said, the success of Creole culture in combining French, Spanish, Indigenous, and African cultures demonstrates that cultures can combine.

Race and Gender

Even though mixed-race people are all mixed-race, each racial combination has vastly different experiences. Not all races combine equally in terms of cultural dominance. Figure 2, excerpted from a 2015 Pew Research report, found that Black culture prevails over White culture in Black Whites, and White culture prevails in White Asians.⁴

⁴ Parker, Kim. "Multiracial in America." *Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project*, Pew Research Center, 11 June 2015, www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2015/06/11/multiracial-in-america.

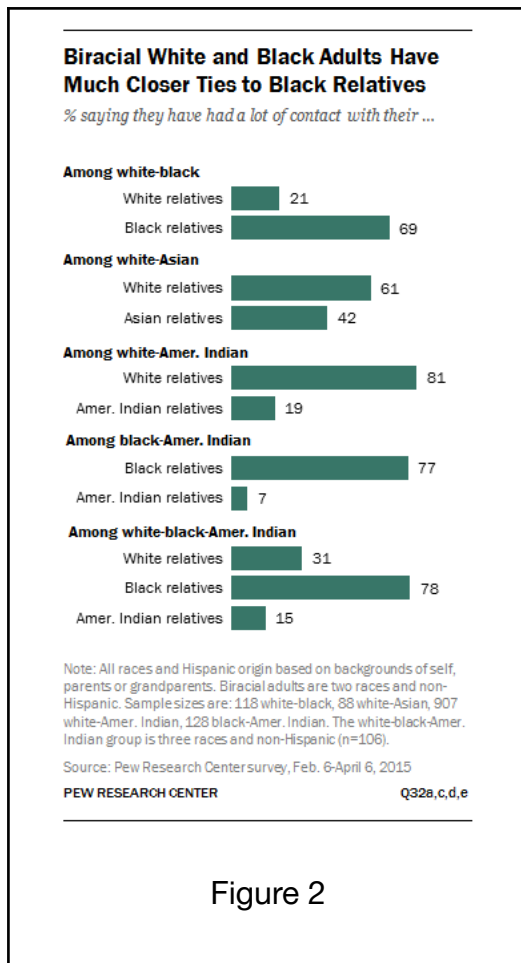


Figure 2

A study in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* found that White Asians are more distrusted by Asians than Black Whites are distrusted by Blacks.⁵ This exclusion can help explain why White Asians associate more with their White identity in Figure 2. The survey data supports these conclusions too. In Table 1, Asian culture decreases much more than White culture does.

Father	Mother	Δ Connection to Father Culture	Δ Connection to Mother Culture
Asian	White	-1	-0.33
White	Asian	-0.25	-1

Table 1: Race and Gender's Effects on Connection to Culture in White Asians

⁵ Chen, JM; Kteily, Nour; Ho, AK. "Whose Side Are You On? Asian Americans' Mistrust of Asian-White Biracials Predicts More Exclusion From the Ingroup." *Personality & social psychology bulletin* vol. 45,6 (2019): 827-841. [doi:10.1177/0146167218798032](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167218798032)

Table 1 also reveals the gender imbalance in the decrease of cultural connection. The White culture decreased more when the White parent was the mother than the father. This trend continues in the data for other races. When looking at all races, on average, the mother's culture decreased at a faster rate (-0.64) than the father's culture (-0.41). Part of this is because the mothers tended to be more Asian and Hispanic, groups that lost cultural affiliation, and the fathers tended to be more White, a group that tended to retain cultural affiliation.

Race	Mixed-Race Average Connected to Parent Culture	Single-Race Connected to Parents' Culture
Asian	2.81	3.25
Black	2.75	2.75
Hispanic	3	4
White	2.8	3.39
Native	2	No data

Table 2: Race's Effect on Cultural Connection in Mixed vs. Single-Race Children

Table 2 shows the difference between how connected mixed and single-race children are grouped by race. For every race, mixed people were less connected, except for the Black race. Perhaps the Black race's connection is the same between single-race and multiracial children because the White community considers Blacks Whites "other" and the Asian community perceives Black Asians as "other," leaving Blacks and mixed Blacks as one group. Unfortunately, the "one drop rule" line of

thinking still continues.⁶ Since much of the Black community is already mixed, a Black White or Black Asian could fit into the Black culture.

Implications

According to Geertz, “the neocortex—grew up in great part in interaction with culture... is incapable of directing our behavior or organizing our experience without the guidance provided by systems of significant symbols” (30). Culture gives systems and instructions for humans to live through. If, as Geertz believes, culture is necessary for the parts of the brain that control behavior to function, the lack of clear cultural instructions for mixed-race people could contribute to the finding in Udry et al. that mixed-race youth are at a higher risk of behavior risks.⁷ On the flip side, with the presence of multiple cultures to follow, mixed-race people have more flexibility in figuring out how they live their lives. Consequently, a Pew Research report indicated that mixed-race people tend to rate themselves as “something else” in political affiliation more often than single-race people even when looking at the same age groups.⁸

⁶ Kteily, Nour, et al. “How Are Black–White Biracial People Perceived in Terms of Race?” *Kellogg Insight*, 19 Apr. 2022, insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/how-are-black-white-biracial-people-are-perceived-in-terms-of-race.

⁷ Udry, J Richard, et al. “Health and Behavior Risks of Adolescents with Mixed-Race Identity.” *American Journal of Public Health*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, Nov. 2003, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1448064.

⁸ “Chapter 6: Partisanship, Policy Views and Social Values.” *Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends Project*, Pew Research Center, 11 June 2015, www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2015/06/11/chapter-6-partisanship-policy-views-and-social-values.

For me, the lack of a uniform culture to follow meant there was a blank slate for me to fill. There was no uniform tradition in the way to stop me from developing atheist beliefs, dressing unusually (I wore a vertical loch and then hats), and espousing political views off of the typical spectrum (such as nuclear energy). Without a clear set of instructions from my parents on what to be, I was more free to define myself.

Disclaimers

For the purposes of keeping the survey and data analysis simple, Hispanic was listed as a race. It is important to acknowledge that Hispanic is an ethnicity, and Hispanics can be of any race. It is also worth acknowledging that the distribution of parents' races among the respondents differed from that of the United States, as shown in Table 3. The respondents of this survey were predominantly White and Asian, whereas the 2000 census had more Black Whites than Asian Whites.

Studied Race Combinations	2000 Census Race Combinations
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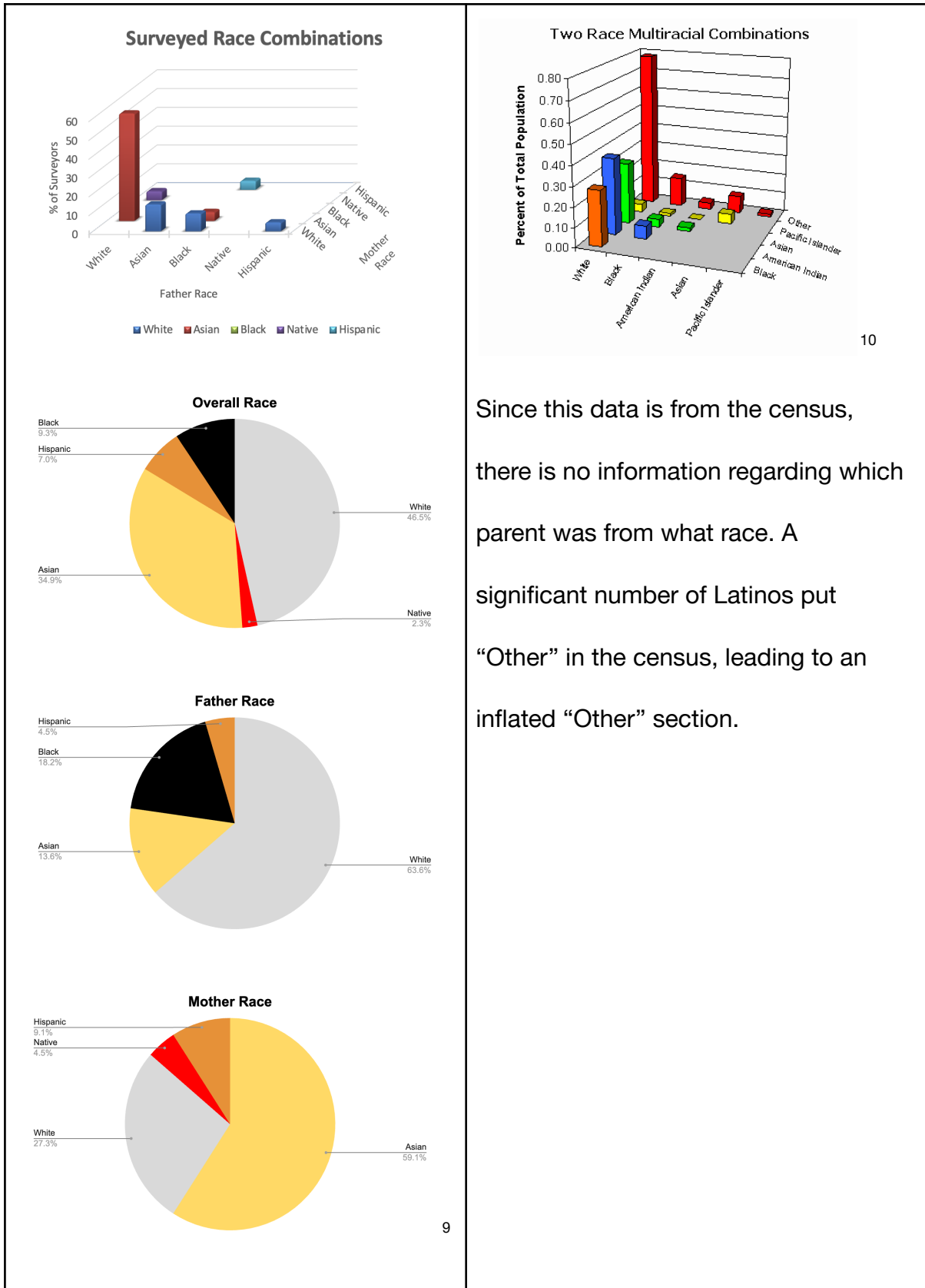


Table 3: Race Combinations

⁹ Multicultural Survey Responses

¹⁰ "Multiracial Population Statistics." *CensusScope*, censuscope.org/us/chart_multi.html.

Conclusion

On average, mixed-race children have less of a connection to their parents' cultures than single-race children. The loss of culture in mixed-race children is due to their parents expressing the culture less to them, their inability to speak both parents' languages fluently, their exclusion from cultures because they look different, and the incompatibility of some cultures. Not all cultures are lost at the same rates in mixed-race children: Black cultures are preserved the most, White cultures are in the middle, and Asian cultures are lost the most. Also, the mother's culture is typically lost at a faster rate than the father's culture.

Comparing whether culture was lost faster if it was from the mother or father's side was only possible in White Asians because there were sufficient White fathers with Asian mothers and Asian fathers with White mothers. Further studies can sample more mixed-race children with native, Hispanic, and black parents to analyze the effect of gender on these groups. Further research can also investigate to what extent both cultures of a biracial person are preserved in their children. Perhaps after another generation, the culture is more thoroughly lost because it is harder for a parent to teach their child two cultures.

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