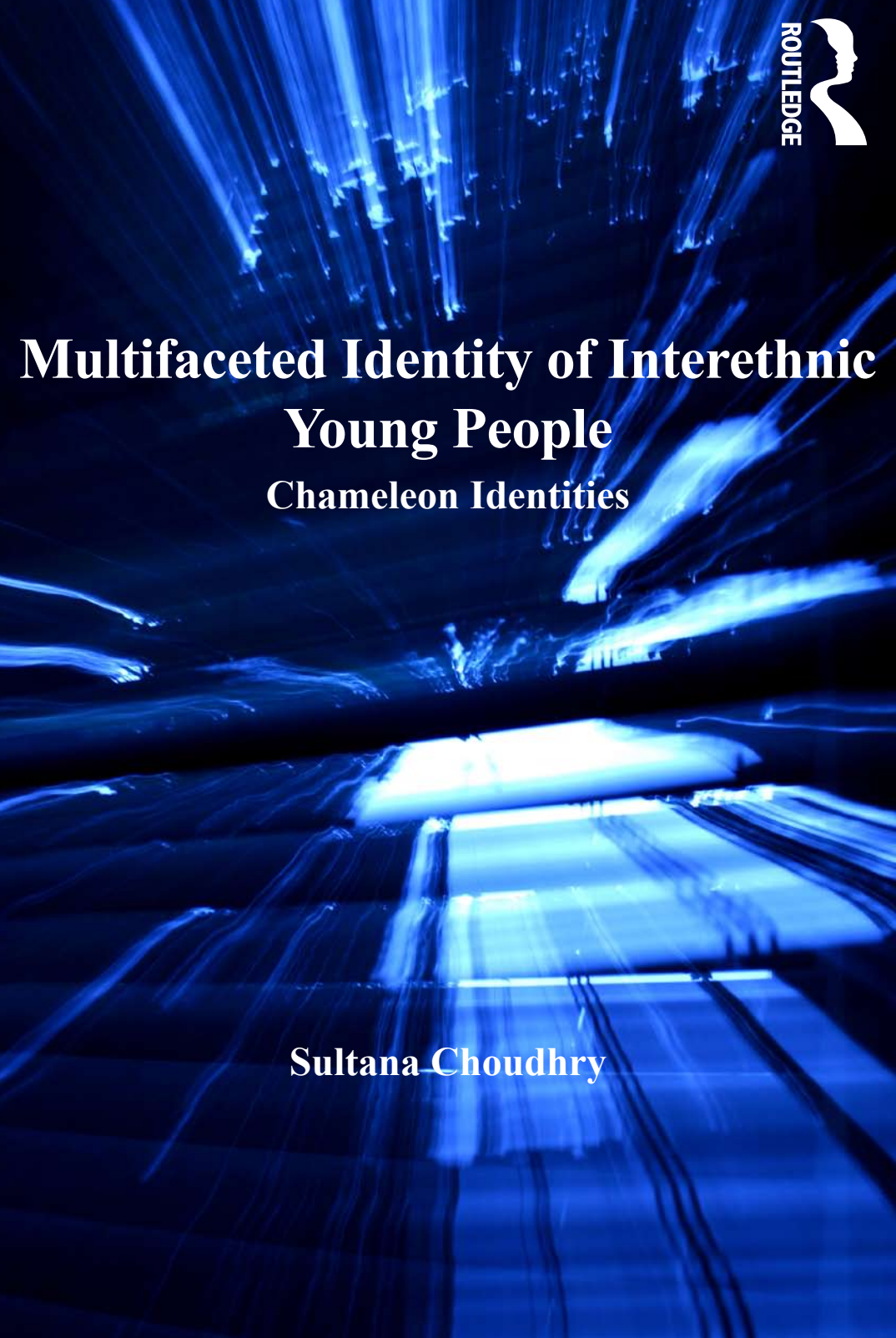

ROUTLEDGE

Multifaceted Identity of Interethnic Young People

Chameleon Identities

Sultana Choudhry

MULTIFACETED IDENTITY OF INTERETHNIC YOUNG PEOPLE

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Multifaceted Identity of Interethnic Young People

Chameleon Identities

SULTANA CHOUDHRY
London Metropolitan University, UK

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Series Editor's Preface A Multi-Faceted Identity of Mixed Race Children: A Masala Mosaic

Human identity is neither static nor singular: it is multiple and constantly evolving. Identity construction begins in childhood, often in the first stages of primary school. The tools that enable us to construct who we are – how we know ourselves and how we are known by others – are selected from both our past and our present. To greater and lesser extents we are influenced by colour, language, place, race and religion, the balance determined by parenthood and community. We identify ourselves by difference, by recognising what we are by what we are not. For the non-white child one of the prime indicators of self-identity is colour; for others it might be religion and/or language. For the progeny of ethnic minorities the process of identity construction will be most strongly influenced by their minority status and 'separateness'; parental and familial background and primary education providing the foundations. However, for the children of interethnic partnerships the construction and maintenance of identity is far more complex and, at times, when external influences conflict, confusing. Although an increasingly significant constituent of contemporary migration and diasporic life, as the author of this pioneering volume points out, in the sphere of social studies the recognition of otherness and the corresponding construction of self-identity by interethnic children is one that has been, at best, under-researched.

In this fascinating and original study Sultana Choudhry highlights the intricacies of identity formation for the 'mixed race' or 'interethnic' child. While she acknowledges that there has been some work carried out into the progeny of interethnic relationships, she emphasises that these have focused on black (as in African-American or African-Caribbean) and white unions, rarely if at all on Asian and White or Asian and Black. This book sets out to redress the balance. From the author's in-depth interviewing of both parents and children, the stages, confusions and pressures of interethnic identity formulation are identified. There is no doubt that for the offspring of an Asian/White relationship the overriding determinants of identity are religion, colour and language. In the case of the former, whilst for some it is Islam which is the most powerful in the construction of self-identity for others the 'chameleon' role comes into play. As one interviewee explains: '(W)hen I am with Muslim friends I tell them I'm Muslim ... but when I am with white friends I take on my mum's side of things more, you know Christian'. However, it is colour which presents the instant source of identification for the onlooker. Those that can identify both with the mainstream and with a minority ethnic group appear to take

most advantage of, what the author terms, situational or 'chameleon' identity. To paraphrase the words of one interviewee: 'When I am with whites I identify as white, but when I am with my Asian friends I talk and act like an Asian'.

A reading of this book encourages the reader to explore identity formation in a new context, one which incorporates the psychological and physical issues interethnics confront. To this end, insights into the chameleon persona have been facilitated by an individual who, at the present time, is the most well-known 'chameleon' of all – Barack Obama. The author has no doubt that the incumbent President of the United States has carefully weighed up the pros and cons of situational identity and has, as Choudhry concludes, come down on the side of that which has provided him with accession to the most coveted political position in the modern world. At last chameleons have a role model par excellence.

Anne J Kershen
Queen Mary University of London
2010

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PART 1
Placing Identity Theory and Research in Context

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Chapter 1
Introduction

The increase in the number of 'mixed race' or interethnic[1] individuals is one of the most striking demographic changes in Britain over the last decade. They are the fastest growing group in the UK and America. In the UK, the interethnic are now the sixth largest group and form 1.4 per cent of the population (ONS, 2004) and that is widely believed to be an underestimate. Over 80 per cent of these were born in Britain (Parker and Song, 2001). Whilst black and white interethnic individuals have been studied, previous research has not sought to explore how being of interethnic might impact upon children who have one white and one South Asian origin parents. This subject area has suffered from academic neglect and for this reason alone this book is long overdue. Whilst focused on the Asian and white interethnic children and adolescents and their families the book draws on other interethnic groups such as white and Asian, Chinese and white; and non-interethnic individuals. Important questions at the heart of interethnic identity will be addressed.

Historically social psychologists did not view identity formation as a matter of individual choice or negotiation. However, in today's society human beings are confronted with high levels of choice in their lives, including in personal issues. Within this context, this book offers an insight into the processes of forming an identity – with a specific focus on individuals of an interethnic background. It provides an understanding into the processes of identity adoption in society's high level of emphasis on choice. The ideas of Mead, Goffman, Moscovici, Tajfel and Turner have been particularly influential in shaping this book. The model of identity used is a socio-psychological one that seeks to understand the psychological and socio-cultural processes of identity.

The findings of this book are based on a PhD thesis. Research for this was approached in three stages. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three groups: interethnic (Asian/white adolescents), non-interethnic (Asian and white adolescents) and their parents. Factors such as language, culture and physical appearance were central themes that emerged from the analysis. The aim of the second study was to further investigate and develop findings from the first. This follow-up study was based on 16 interethnic participants. They completed retrospective diaries on their experiences of being of interethnic; these were followed up with semi-structured interviews. Analysis revealed a number of interpretative repertoires used in the process of negotiating ethnic identity. The

1 For reasons discussed later the term 'interethnic' will be used through out this book rather than 'mixed race' as commonly used.

third study involved a questionnaire administered to 87 participants of different interethnic background. Many of the findings from the two qualitative studies were supported by the data from this questionnaire, for example, ideas concerning choice and perceptions of being interethnic.

In taking this multi-method approach this book makes three important contributions. First, it researches and discusses the experiences and ethnic identity construction of south Asian and white interethnic adolescents; a group previously neglected in social sciences literature. Second, it documents the importance that interethnic participants, not just of South Asian and white background, place on exercising choice and autonomy over presentation of ethnic identity. It was found that interethnic individuals feel they have a greater ability to adopt a situational/chameleon identity than other individuals because of their dual ethnic backgrounds.

Excluding the USA, 'The most recent data gave Britain the highest rate of interracial relationships in the world, with a rate ten times that of the European average' (Parker and Song, 2001, p. 2). Fifty per cent of Caribbean men and 30 per cent of women are married or cohabiting with a white partner (Parker and Song, 2001). The increase in such relationships means more interethnic children. The aim of this book is to bring about a greater understanding of the ways these children construct their ethnic identity, with a particular focus on those of Asian and white interethnic. It examines the ways in which individuals, largely of interethnic background, negotiate and assert their ethnic identity with reference to the wider society. There is a potential tension between an individual's ideas and assertion of ethnic identity and the wider society's collective attributions. It is important to understand how individuals negotiate this tension, in doing so they perceive themselves as active agents who shape their ethnic identities. However, the extent to which people really are active agents of their own identity and the amount of choice they have given the constraints and boundaries they faced is debatable.

Increase in Interethnic

According to the Labour Force Survey (ONS, 2004), ethnic minority groups make up 7.6 per cent (4.5 million) of the total population in Great Britain. Out of the 7.6 per cent over half were of South Asian origin. Indians form the largest ethnic minority group, followed by Pakistanis and Black Caribbeans and Africans.

In Britain black mixed groups have increased by 50 per cent and South Asians by over 27 per cent (ONS, 2004). In the United States there are two million interethnic individuals, one in 20 children born are of interethnic (Interracial Voice, 2002). However, actual numbers are probably higher because the 'one drop rule' (Interracial Voice, 2002) has led many black and white interethnic people to label themselves as 'black'.

The increasing number of interethnic children has become the subject of extensive research. But much of the research is now dated and tends to focus

on African Caribbean and white relationships and their children (Dover, 1937, Collins, 1957, Patterson, 1963, Benson, 1981, Wilson, 1987, Alibhai-Brown and Montague, 1992, Tizard and Phoenix, 1993). This is even though statistics show that in Britain there are more interethnic people of Asian-White heritage than African Caribbean white (Phoenix and Own, 1996).

In the USA the focus is also on black and white parentage although Japanese Americans have more relationships with white people (Root, 1992). This concentration on black and white interethnic is despite the fact that the South Asian community is a significant and sizable minority with distinct customs and traditions that may impact on interethnic children's identity. For example, the choice between two distinct religions, languages and communities may impact on the children's identity development. Social scientists have recognised that aspects of the African-Caribbean culture have been infused into some working class Asian youth culture (Back, 1996, Kundnani, 2001). But it is nevertheless acknowledged that Asian culture itself is still distinct to the black and white cultures (Anwar, 1998, Modood et al., 1997, Samad, 1997, Kundnani, 2001, Alexander, 2000).

The Theoretical Position

Identity has been the subject of much research and theorising. However, over the years it has moved away from a notion of a fixed identity to a more postmodernist discourse. The concept of identity deployed here is based upon the belief that a range of personal and social factors influences identities. It is accepted that identities are never unified, and are constantly in the process of flux and transformation. Identity changes over time, but more crucially from moment to moment, from people to people.

The book makes three main theoretical contributions: a) that identity is not a fixed entity but is fluid and multifaceted and; b) that people of an interethnic background do not necessarily experience identity conflict as proposed by some social scientists and in fact c) are more successful than others because of the ways in which they utilise their interethnic backgrounds.

The first theory that identity is not fixed but is fluid is illustrated by proposition of the situational/chameleon like identity that has emerged from three research studies. The fluid identity is discussed in reference to sociologists such as Hall (1992, 1996) and psychological literature such as Goffman (1959, 1964). Furthermore, in the USA and UK there is a growing body of biographical literature on the experience of interethnic individuals. A key theme in this literature is the issue of choice and the right to choose ethnic identities and affiliations. Recent studies in the USA have touched on the possibility of interethnic individuals possessing multiple identities (Root, 1992, 1996, Zack, 1995).

Secondly, it is argued that being of an interethnic background does not mean identity conflict as proposed by theorists such as Park (1928, 1964) who originated the concept of the 'marginal man'. On the contrary, and thirdly, it is

suggested that being of an interethnic background is an asset, in some situations. A fluid, chameleon like identity permits individuals to adopt a particular identity/personality to suit the situation they find themselves in and to negotiate challenges such as racism with a greater degree of success than other ethnic minorities. Use of this chameleon identity can also facilitate high achievement within a cross-cultural groups of people as illustrated by Obama, Tiger Woods, Keanu Reeves, Mariah Carey etc and South Asian and white interethnic successful figures such as Freddie Mercury, Engelbert Humperdinck and Melanie Sykes who are/were all of an Asian and white background.

This book attempts to describe and understand the factors and experiences of those participants who willingly and kindly gave up their time to participate in this research and spoke openly about their feelings and experiences. The aim of the research projects was not to generalise about the ethnic identity construction processes of interethnic children and adolescents. Apart from the quantitative study, the book will not specifically explore gender differences for two main reasons. First, it was not an issue that generally emerged in the accounts of the participants and, therefore, to discuss gender differences as a separate category would not have been a correct portrayal of the accounts. Second, the aims of the qualitative studies were not specifically to make gender comparisons but to get an insight into the participants' experience of being interethnic as they portrayed it. Nevertheless, gender differences in expressions of ethnic identity are important. Such differences will be highlighted and discussed as they arise.

Terms Used in this Book

The terms 'Asian' and 'South Asian' are used to refer to people whose origin is from the Indian subcontinent such as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. There were some differences that exist within these categories linked to religion and culture. For example there were marked differences between Pakistanis/Bangladeshis, who are largely Muslims and Indians who tend to be Hindus. These differences are discussed in the book as they emerged.

Terminology regarding the 'interethnic' or 'mixed race' remains a sensitive and fluid topic. The participants in this study used a variety of terminology to describe themselves, including mixed race, half-caste and half white and half Asian. Whilst some psychologists such as Weinreich (2003) use the term 'hybrid'; this is seen by others as being pejorative. What is acceptable differs depending on groups and over time. 'Mixed parentage' has now achieved some currency (in place of 'mixed race') largely as a result of the ongoing discourse surrounding 'race' and is the term currently most accepted in academic circles (Own, 2001, Tizard and Phoenix, 2001). But this term is by no means perfect. Participants in the research presented here expressed distaste for names that incorporated the word mixed: 'it implies that we're *mixed* up.' Also it is a term that is ambiguous and can mean a 'mixed' background of religion, culture, social etc. As all of these terms seemed

inappropriate the term 'interethnic' was used because it was felt to be the least 'offensive' and more precise i.e. encompasses ethnic and racial backgrounds.

Research Beyond the Black and White Model

In Britain social science researchers such as Benson (1981), Wilson (1987) and Tizard and Phoenix (1993, 2001) have helped to ensure that the interethnic is now an important group to research. However, their samples were confined to those who are black and white interethnic. There is now a new body of literature, which criticises the lack of research/writing about other forms of interethnic families and individuals. For example, Mahtani and Moreno (2001, in Parker and Song, 2001) recently wrote about the lack of research regarding their experiences as Chinese and Mexican-American and South Asian and Iranian. They related that their experiences were different to 'black and white' interethnic people and needed to be a focus of research. This book is a first step, in Britain, towards studying a group other than the traditional 'black and white'. It is hoped there will be more research in future encompassing other ancestries.

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Chapter 2
Social Science Theories and Research on Identity

This chapter will outline theories and research on interethnic relationships and identity. The literature on the self and identity is so vast, it would be impossible to cover them comprehensively; therefore only directly relevant literature sources will be discussed. It begins by taking a look at social psychological theories of the self and identity, followed by ethnic identity and interethnic identity. The second section examines social science theories and research on identity in general and explores research on ethnicity and identity, interethnic identity and family and peer influence on identity. The chapter ends by taking a look at the debate on terminology.

The Social Psychology of the Self and Identity

Social psychological research on the self is largely driven by the pioneering works of James (1890), Mead (1934) and Cooley (1962). James and Mead's distinctions between the 'I' and the 'Me' have resulted in much discussion and writings on the constructs of self, reflexivity and self concept. Cooley's 'looking glass self' has been the source of writings on self esteem; reflect appraisal and their influence on strategies of self presentation (Baumeister, 1986). The issues addressed in the psychological literature on the self include: What is the relationship between the self 'as the knower' and the self as 'known'? (Gergen, 1986) Can the self be understood in terms of cognitive processes? Others have explored how personal self conceptions are constructed in terms of collective conceptions of identity; Phinney (1990) for example looked at ethnic identity from this viewpoint. From a social psychology perspective researchers have addressed questions about the historical and cultural origins of the self and the ways it is constructed has changed as a result of cultural values and social structures (Baumeister, 1986).

In 1890 James wrote "a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognise him" (1890, p. 281). He argued that an individual shows a different side of himself depending on the people and groups he is with. According to him a personal identity is based on the present and the past "a present self and a self of yesterday" (p. 315). That is, our sense of identity is based on our history, past memories and present experiences and feelings. The self, he argued, was made up of four components; the material self, the spiritual self, the social self and the ego.