

Meeting at the Crossroads

Progress for Multiracial People or Delicate Balance Amid Old Divides?

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Human nature is at least as complex as its outside environment. When it comes to understanding multiracial and multiethnic identity, the gnawing question is, “Who are we, really?” Making sense of this should come with consideration of all forms of social and environmental justice, as one affects the other depending on how deep our understanding goes. How can we understand, accept, and respect our environment if we have not started that process within ourselves and our own colorful species?

The 2000 census spurred a fundamental change in how race is measured in America.¹ Ten years later, the 2010 census gave us more insight, and useful comparisons became possible. The 2010 census and other statistical documents^{2,3} tell us that one in seven marriages is interracial and that a growing number of American families engage in cross-cultural adoptions. Blacks are three times more likely to marry Whites today than they were in 1980.⁴ Our families are changing and the United States population is evolving into a cornucopia of diversity. Conventional wisdom concerning recreational opportunities and park/forest visitation is morphing into something entirely different. Old adages and expectations are a thing of the past. Yet, as is the case with all new and growing social changes, the multiracial and multiethnic experience in relation to parks, recreation, and tourism is a phenomenon we still do not know much about, and research in this area is sparse. The numbers cannot be ignored. Workplaces, social environments, and public spaces are now places where cultural and racial divides become narrower as people coexist and mingle to share in both human and nonhuman creations. Nonetheless, “racial boundaries are not going to disappear any time soon.”⁵

Parks are spaces where environmental and social justice concerns meet at the crossroads and become one under the same sky. What will the new dynamics of interaction be like among a growing diversity of visitors? What will be the future experience of a multicultural workplace? Are we truly ready to break bread, sing, work, play, and study alongside others who no longer fit neatly into one box on government forms? To what truths must we be committed to build healthy multiracial, multiethnic, economically, and socially diverse communities?

Park, recreation, and tourism scholars have explored race relations and cultural diversity since the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission work of the early 1960s.^{6,7} ⁸ However, there is a dearth of literature on multiracial populations. Scholars have looked at race relations through interracial interactions and contact,^{9,10} yet this is only one perspective.

Other research has examined interracial couples.¹¹ However, even this line of inquiry does not acknowledge that biracial/multiracial children must become more visible if we are to embrace a culture of inclusion. Hibbler and Shinew¹² have written about enhancing multiracial families' leisure experiences, and community engagement across cultures has been on the rise, yet organizations continue to struggle with comprehending how to break down barriers that obstruct multiracial families' leisure experiences.¹³

In *"What Are You, Anyway?"* one of the key points Roberts conveyed about her personal and professional multiracial experience is that the social pressure to assimilate into dominant cultural ways of being is still intense.¹⁴ Not "rocking the boat" is easy when we know we should for fear of being criticized, scorned, lectured, or even ostracized. So, Roberts posed two questions: How do we break the cycle and challenge the system, and how do we respect difference, challenge oppression and the status quo, and still be heard? This is an increasingly important topic for our scholarship, teaching, and service. As Root avowed, "Multiracial people blur the boundaries between races ... and [our] existence challenges the rigidity of racial lines ... Oppression always fragments people, as energy and attention are diverted from the experience of wholeness."¹⁵ When we refuse to fragment ourselves or others, we become less fearful and learn to approach differences with respect. This respect gives us courage. We are not mixed up. We are simply mixed race.

Facing the Facts

Between the years 2000 and 2010, over 57% of the 27.3 million increase in the U.S. population was attributed to a rise in the Hispanic population, followed by Asians of various ethnic backgrounds, mostly due to "higher levels of immigration."¹⁶ In the 2000 census, Whites made up 69% of the population, Latinos and African Americans 13%, and Asian Americans 4%.¹⁷ By 2010, 50.5 million of the U.S. population was Hispanic. Although the White population is still considered the largest in the United States, it is also experiencing growth at the slowest rate. The same could be said of the Black population, which is trumped only by Whites when it comes to slow growth. The multiracial group is hard to classify, but "people reporting more than one race was another fast-growing population and made up large portions of the American Indian and Alaska Native population and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander population."¹⁸ The South and West of the United States are home to the largest number of minorities.

Johnson¹⁹ reiterated a 2007 U.S. Census Bureau statement that in the next half century, "the number of Latinos and Asian Americans in the United States will triple, while the White, non-Latino population will increase a mere 7%." In the coming decades, "White non-Latinos will make up only 50% of the population, with Latinos accounting for 24%, African Americans 15%, and Asian Americans 8%."²⁰ The increase in the Asian population in the United States between 2000 and 2050 is expected to rise over 200%, the Latino population will grow by 188%, and the African American population will grow by almost 75%. Whites, according to the 2010 census, will exhibit only a slight increase compared to other races. For the purposes of race classification, the U.S. Census Bureau considered the following to fall under "Some Other Race": multiracial, mixed, interracial, or a Hispanic or Latino group (e.g., Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or Spanish).²¹ Over 9 million people reported themselves as belonging to more than one race in 2010, compared with 6.8 million in 2000. This means the proportion of people identifying themselves as belonging to two or more races has increased by approximately one third. Although the recorded number is not huge, it does make up 2.9% of the population and reflects a fast-growing portion of the population. What does that mean for our nation? How will leadership shift and resources be distributed differently?

In 2010, White and Black had the largest number of multiple-race combinations recorded. The most significant four groups in this context are White and Black (1.8 million), White and Some Other Race (1.7 million), White and Asian (1.6 million), and White and American Indian and Alaska Native (1.4 million).²² This total number makes up just less than three quarters of the multiple-race population in this census. Moreover, 92% of people who self-identify as belonging to more than one race reported exactly two races, 8% reported three races, and less than 1% identified themselves as belonging to four or more races. In the case of Hispanics, the majority of multiple-race combinations included White, but “Some Other Race” also featured broadly in the individual reports. The general outcome of the 2010 census was that many counties across the United States experienced significant to substantial growth in their minority populations from 2000 to 2010.

Nearly 15% of all new marriages were between interracial couples in 2008, doubling from 1980.²³ Price²⁴ also stated 41% of all interracial marriages were between Hispanics and Whites. Ironically, suggestions have been made that by 2050 the United States will be “Whiter” as many of these couples’ children (e.g., Hispanic–White and Asian–White) will probably identify as White.²⁵ Nevertheless, one thing is certain. What we are experiencing now is a break from the past as taboos fade and forbidding behaviors and attitudes slowly change. Some still oppose racial mixing, but the majority, especially young people aged 18 to 32, have expressed approval.²⁶ Yet some prejudices remain. For instance, a 2009 Pew Research survey found that “acceptance of out-marriage to Whites (81%) is somewhat higher than is acceptance of out-marriage to Asians (75%), Hispanics (73%) or Blacks (66%).” The survey also showed that “Black respondents are somewhat more accepting of all forms of intermarriage than are White or Hispanic respondents.”²⁷ Gaps exist in acceptance patterns, which have narrowed in the last 10 years; yet, since 2001, “Whites have grown somewhat more accepting of interracial marriage and Blacks somewhat less.”²⁸ As Kennedy noted, “Malignant racial biases can and do reside in interracial liaisons. But against the tragic backdrop of American history, the flowering of multiracial intimacy is a profoundly moving and encouraging development.”²⁹

Biracial and Multiracial Identity Development: Fluid or Constant?

As a multiracial woman, I cannot separate my identities one from another. I do not stop being any one of my identities because it is convenient for someone else. It is essential for professionals in parks, recreation, and tourism to think about the different ways our identities interact with one another if we are to do a better job of serving mixed-race people in our programs.

Multiracial population has acquired several definitions in scholarly research, and these multiple indicators stem from how people identify themselves, how they are identified by others, how their ancestors were identified, and combinations of these criteria.^{30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38} This shift in perception has produced divergent estimates in racial classification schemes, which have the potential of hindering true understanding of the growing multiracial population. Similarly, this creates fluidity, which tampers with our understanding of single-race populations.³⁹ Harris and Sim,⁴⁰ for example, found race is not merely a social construct but also fluid. When statistics depend largely on self-reports, inconsistencies arise. Results have shown that to comprehend racial fluidity patterns, the following two factors are crucial: (1) Patterns of racial classification have been tangibly and vastly influenced by kaleidoscopic racial regimes. For instance, in the current age, diversity is seen as a value to be touted, and the validity of multiracial identity is stressed.^{41, 42, 43} Our self-perception, in addition to how others perceive us, has an impact on race and multiraciality viewpoints. Thus, sometimes there is a mismatch between the race of a parent and that of a child, depending on the circumstances and the individual’s mind-set. When questioned alone, a youth might be more forthcoming about race than when parents are present. In

the case of census race data, more often than not the completed form “reflects the beliefs of the household member who completes the census form.”⁴⁴ (2) Patterns of racial classification are varied because “multiracial groups comprise socially distinct mono-racial groups.”⁴⁵ The most sizable but least committed multiracial group turned out to be White–American Indian youth in Harris and Sim’s⁴⁶ study. This identity is often expressed by Whites who have little ancestral, phenotypical, or cultural connection to American Indians, but who nevertheless wish to appeal to popular norms of multiculturalism by presenting a diverse portrait of themselves.^{47, 48, 49, 50} In the case of White–Black youth, the one-drop rule on racial self-identification prevails, and for White–Asian youth, racial identification is optional and strong social rules are lacking.

Cases exist where multiracial people—“particularly those who are part black—shun a ‘multi’ label in favor of identifying as a single race.”⁵¹ Certain estimates have shown that “two-thirds of those who checked the single box of ‘black’ on the census form are actually mixed, including President Barack Obama, who identified himself as black in the 2010 census, even though his mother was white.”⁵² Harris and Sim⁵³ recognized the need for further study on race fluidity, particularly on how this is affected by factors such as age, time period, and environment. Their general assumption is that the stronger the attention given to multiraciality, the more flexible and fluid racial identity will be among all cohorts, especially in the case of adolescents, because identities are generally less stable within this age group,^{54, 55} adulthood affords greater stability, and older generations grew up in stricter racial environments and regimes.

Yet, the 2010 census clearly shows that Harris and Sim⁵⁶ are correct only to a certain extent because the rate of individual identification with multiple racial groups has increased. In a growing number of cases, the person who filled out the 2010 census form in the multiracial household was clearly of a less restrictive mind-set. This perhaps, more than anything else, sheds light on how the census captures race like the snap of a picture. It gives a representation of things at one point in time, with certain people, within a certain situation, context, and purpose.⁵⁷ The available data on race may not match the ideal data, and if more precise racial measurement tools are not used, racial diversity in the United States will continue to be misunderstood.

How Do We Ensure Justice for Multicultural Families?

The psychological and sociological problems multiracial individuals face, more than anything else, are due to race relations in America and how “society’s preoccupation with race” affects their state of being.⁵⁸ This in turn affects the leisure patterns of interracial couples. The literature has demonstrated, for example, that people of different cultures and races also have different leisure patterns.⁵⁹ Hibbler and Shinew’s study focused mainly on distinctions between African and European Americans. They concluded that despite the headway made in research relating to leisure patterns of different races, little has been done to explore what they refer to as the “other,” namely, the leisure patterns of multiracial families and biracial/multiracial individuals.

In their study, Hibbler and Shinew learned many multiracial families experience a feeling of isolation when it comes to work, family, and leisure. In the latter context, they have had negative experiences of discrimination and racism that impacted their perception of and desire to engage in outdoor recreation. The authors recognized the need for multiracial families to engage in positive leisure activities that fulfill their distinct needs, as well as other basic expectations and needs they share with all other individuals and families. With the rise in multiracial families, there is no doubt that parks and other outdoor recreation areas will be increasingly frequented by a blend of cultures whose needs must be met.

Leisure activities are important because they enhance the quality of life and life satisfaction.⁶⁰ From past studies, we know leisure experiences provide interracial couples with a sense of joy, satisfaction, and happiness. These feelings are expressed as “companionship, integration, rest and relaxation, family relationships, etc.”⁶¹ Leisure activities are chosen by people to sustain or improve their lives, but an interesting question to consider is, “Do interracial couples and multiracial families have to adjust their attitudes and behavior to fit into a particular Black or White model of leisure behavior?” Stated differently, how do leisure choices for interracial couples or multiracial families imply or bring about a racial identity shift? Perhaps the harshest product of an interracial relationship is the social isolation that often results from negative societal reactions to the relationship.⁶² Park, recreation, and tourism professionals have their work cut out for them when it comes to a discussion of how best to address the needs of interracial couples and multiracial families in a satisfactory way.

Leisure participation among ethnic minority groups continues to be discussed in a growing body of literature touching on experiences of people of color in parks. A main goal over the last several decades has been to understand the constraints and barriers that some underrepresented minorities experience when they visit outdoor recreational areas.^{63, 64, 65, 66, 67} Federal agencies such as the National Park Service and national nonprofit organizations including the National Parks and Conservation Association are forthcoming in the implementation of programs aimed at encouraging minority use of parks, as well as environmental advocacy and stewardship. At the same time, studies have also shed light on the subtle racism that is to blame for feelings of isolation and exclusion in parks.^{68, 69} One way to counter this is to encourage more aggressive hiring of a new generation of outdoor leaders and park managers with biracial and multiracial backgrounds. This would require extensive organization and preparation and would entail a shift in agency culture and general way of thinking vis-à-vis the community. By hiring a diverse workforce and encouraging full participation of employees, the organization would be affected in positive and worthy ways.⁷⁰ If the demographic changes are recognized but not reflected in the workforce, an organization cannot question poor feedback and performance prompted by its lack of commitment to diversity. Such commitment, in fact, can be instrumental⁷¹ to the nurturing of a socially and environmentally just world.⁷²

The way to achieve success in the future is to transcend the limitations of tradition. Organizations and individuals must find new ways to tap into shared beliefs and to create better working, living, and recreational environments. It is certainly possible and desirable to engage more diverse communities in initiating these changes. Moreover, park, recreation, and tourism professionals should be called upon to implement these measures with enthusiasm and determination so that access, opportunities, and information are provided to all, thereby creating a more sustainable future for all.⁷³

As our nation grows more diverse, the need to reach out to all segments of society becomes more pronounced.⁷⁴ However, the first item on the agenda is for leisure professionals to establish trust and good communication with the communities they wish to serve.⁷⁵ The conservation of resources must be strongly connected to recreational programs devised and offered to diverse constituents. Effective and adaptable communication that is culturally relevant is crucial,^{76, 77} and relationship building is imperative.⁷⁸ The community should always be involved, and the citizenry must understand resources are at their disposal. How can people come to a cross-cultural understanding if there is no attempt made at building rapport? How can differences be celebrated and respected if the community does not express its expectations? Awareness on all fronts lends itself to transparency in intentions, and then those intentions become a real commitment, which ultimately solidifies trust. This is how progress is made over time.

Recommendations for Continued Progress

Hibbler and Shinen⁷⁹ provided several practical recommendations for creating connections with biracial and multiracial families and facilitating their leisure activities in parks and outdoor recreational areas. These include the following:

1. Implement a diversity management system at the agency policy level, which fosters respect of individual and group differences and values equality of people and cultures. With a top-down approach such as this, park attendees will be guaranteed a comfortable recreational experience. Several institutions can assist in the creation of a diversity management system, including relevant university faculty who may be involved. This said, one element here cannot be discounted: the safety of interracial couples and their families. Park administrators, through such a diversity management system, need to ensure no physical or emotional harm or threats are experienced.
2. Develop new and improved programs that cater to the needs of a wider range of multiracial families and biracial individuals. Although our views have expanded in recent years in relation to single-parent and same-race blended families, a feeling of exclusion in some environments still exists when it comes to less traditional families, such as same-sex couples and families, and multiracial families. One of the expressed needs of multiracial families is “improved family relationships and cultural understanding.”⁸⁰ Marketing efforts should include a broader definition of a family. Moreover, the depiction of multiracial families on printed materials such as brochures could foster feelings of inclusion. Multiracial families want to understand themselves and learn about all aspects of their heritage, as well as have others view them with an open mind and heart. Innovative marketing strategies, more competent staff, and culture-centric educational programs, as well as further involvement of local leaders in the community would enable better access to this shared resource and allow community members to preserve national treasures.^{81, 82} When people know they are valued and accepted within a holistic and inclusionary model created for their benefit, their comfort level is heightened when visiting parks and participating in other leisure experiences, and they feel encouraged to champion the protection of shared green spaces.
3. Practitioners should employ current theory in their work, and a line of communication should be open between practitioners and academicians. If both are aware of the others’ needs and knowledge, and if information is shared in an accurate and timely manner, this would enhance policy formation and ensure that more effective services will be delivered to the evolving multiracial population of America. Harris and Sim characterized the challenge:

...Analysts must think critically about what they mean by race, design surveys that more precisely measure race, and be aware of the implications of mismatches between available and ideal racial data. Failing to do so will ensure that as the racial diversity of the United States grows, so too will our inability to understand that diversity.⁸³

To carry out these recommendations successfully, park managers and policy makers must open their minds and look beyond stereotypes. Cultural competency is not just an academic notion. To be culturally competent is a way of life. In talking about the national parks, Gwaltney said,

Cultural competence represents the willingness and ability of the national park system to value the importance of culture in the delivery of services to all segments of the population. It is the use of a systems perspective which values differences and is responsive to diversity at all levels of an organization (i.e., policy, governance, administrative, workforce, provider, and consumer/client).⁸⁴

Cultural competence is about constant improvement and learning. According to Gorski,⁸⁵ a culturally competent person rejects deficit ideology and understands the problems many minorities face in disenfranchised communities are a symptom of contrary educational and social conditions. Such a person would spread his wealth of knowledge by teaching about sensitive multicultural issues, including racism, sexism, poverty, and heterosexism. There are dangers in being clueless or ignorant. The reality is harsh; although social policies and institutional practices remain in place for the benefit of only a few, and although resources, power, and wealth are disproportionately channeled, there will never be true equality.⁸⁶

Conclusion

It is stunning to think that as much as one third of the U.S. population is composed of racial and ethnic minorities. Biracial people have existed for centuries, yet they have largely been rendered invisible until the 20th century. Increases in interracial marriages mean that more multiracial families are being created, and these families may have unique leisure needs.⁸⁷ It is also widely understood that access to parks and open space affords a type of leisure that can be extremely beneficial to individuals on many levels.⁸⁸ Yet, barriers to participation for multiracial people continue to exist in the form of social isolation, inadequate facilities, and subtle discrimination. Managers must consider these groups in the planning process and encourage research that provides a deeper understanding of outdoor recreation patterns and preferences of mixed-race people.⁸⁹ This knowledge is crucial for both enhancing the mechanisms of social and environmental justice and encouraging the citizenry to be good stewards of the natural world.

All people, regardless of race, should have the right to experience the benefits afforded by green spaces, and protecting this right is the responsibility of park, recreation, and tourism professionals.⁹⁰ The more inclusive we are, the bigger the contribution we will make to achieve social and environmental justice through the work we do.⁹¹ The way to make things better is through the continuing education of the citizenry we serve. As long as labels such as *underrepresented* or *underserved* are in existence, social and environmental justice remain elusive ideals.

Discussion Questions

1. Nina discusses how rapidly changing demographics can alter the kinds of leisure activities citizens may be interested in pursuing. What examples can you give of new or different leisure activities that relate to demographic changes?
2. Nina also points out how rapidly changing demographics can lead to personal and social stressors for those in interracial marriages, blended families, and other nontraditional domestic arrangements. How might these transitions present challenges to traditional leisure programming? How would you address them?
3. If social and environmental injustices imply power differentials between the dominant culture and new and emerging cultures, what might be the social and environmental justice implications for a future when today's minorities become tomorrow's majorities?

4. When it comes to checking boxes on government forms, how do you see yourself? Do you fit into one box, or do you have trouble fitting into any of the boxes? How does this kind of categorization feel to you?

5. In general, do you see the increasingly diverse social, cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity of the U.S. citizenry as a good or bad thing? What particular challenges or opportunities do you envision regarding achieving social and environmental justice in an increasingly diverse society?