

“YOU THINK YOU CUTE”
PERCEIVED ATTRACTIVENESS, INTER-GROUP CONFLICT,
AND THEIR EFFECT ON BLACK/WHITE
BIRACIAL IDENTITY CHOICES

By

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Thesis

Submitted to the faculty of the
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Sociology

December, 2006

Nashville, Tennessee

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In American ideology everyone is a member of one, and only one race (Spickard 1992). Because of this mutual exclusiveness, people born to parents of different races, especially the offspring of Black/White unions, create chaos in an “ordered” society (Nakashima 1992). To restore order, historically the one drop rule of hypodescent has dictated that Black/White biracial individuals were legally and socially Black. Due in large part to the efforts of the recent Multiracial Movement, however, Black/White biracial individuals are now successfully challenging the one drop rule and creating, and demanding recognition of, their own new racial spaces. Some Black/White biracials continue to identify with a single race, be that the traditional Black or the new option of White; others choose to be “mixed” or to not have race be their defining characteristic (Rockquemore 1998).

Who chooses what type of racial identity (and why) is significant for the study of racial identity in America. These questions are important both to the current body of literature on “mono” racial identity and for increasing the literature in the growing sub field of biracial identity. Moreover, the emergence of new racial identities has practical implications. Racial classification on forms like the Census and in school records is being changed to reflect the emergence of these new types of identities.

Who chooses these new identities, however, may be a residual of historically enduring stereotypes. The most enduring stereotype is that persons of mixed heritage are

physically attractive (Nakashima 1992). Whether because they look like “anglicized” versions of colored peoples or are considered “exotic,” there is a perceived beauty about biracial individuals (Nakashima 1992). This paper looks at the role of perceived physical attractiveness in new Black/White biracial identity choice. After reviewing the theory and literature on biracial identity, I conduct multinomial logistic regressions to see whether being considered attractive affects one’s likelihood of choosing one racial identity choice over another.

CHAPTER II

THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity

Working from the symbolic interactionist framework of Blumer (1969) and Goffman (1963), Rockquemore (1998) defines identity as “a validated self-understanding that situates and defines the individual” (198). Extending this to race defines racial identity as a validated self-understanding of what race one is/belongs to. The validation element is key. Racial identity choices are limited to those which are socially agreed upon as choices for one with one’s specific heritage. For people with both Black and White heritage, only one racial identity has historically been socially validated. Due to the infamous “one drop rule,” a person of mixed Black and White heritage has been considered singularly Black.

This view began to be challenged, however, following the 1967 *Loving v Virginia* Supreme Court ruling outlawing bans on interracial marriage. Thereafter, there was a “biracial baby boom” (Root 1992). Between 1970 and 1990, the percentage of births that were multiracial rose from 1% to 3% (Spencer 1997). Previously, the majority of Black/White biracial children were the offspring of rarely consensual unions between Black women and White men; the children of the biracial baby boom, however, were predominantly the offspring of White woman/Black man married couples (Davis 2006). “Multiracial,” “biracial,” and/or “mixed,” are terms that refer to these children who have “two socially and phenotypically distinct racial heritages - one from each parent” (Root

1992: 11). As their children grew, parents became frustrated “regarding the identity and treatment of their mixed children” (Spencer 1997). Specifically, White mothers protested their Black/White biracial children being categorized as Black only. They did not want their children having to “deny” their White heritage due to the one drop rule (Davis 2006). Organizing into today’s Multiracial Movement, these parents advocated to change the cultural understanding of race to a “both/and” construction. The movement’s aim was to give voice and agency to mixed race people to have a bi-/multiracial identity. This type of racial identity is one that encompasses all of one’s racial heritages. The first governmental manifestation of this choice was the Census 2000 option to indicate more than one race to indicate one’s racial identity.

Now, less constrained by the one drop rule, there are more socially validated racial identities for Black/White biracial individuals. Rockquemore (1998) has noted that there are four types of racial identities that Black/White biracial individuals are choosing among. In addition to the traditional Black only identity, there are a border identity, a protean identity, and a transcendent identity. Rockquemore defines border identity as “one which lies between predefined social categories” (200) in this case, between Black and White. Biracial individuals who embraced this type of identity “did not consider themselves to be *either* Black *or* White, but instead had a self-understanding that incorporated both Blackness and Whiteness into a unique category of ‘biracial’” (emphasis in original) (200).

Protean identity is contextually shifting one’s identity according the present situation, according to whether one is in a Black or White cultural context (201). One of Rockquemore’s protean categorized respondents described his racial identity as

dependent on “what day it is and where I’m going” (201). Finally, biracial individuals with a transcendent identity “discount race as a ‘master status’ altogether” (201). Rockquemore notes, however, that this type of identity was only available to those biracial individuals “whose appearance fit into the common perception of ‘White’ or ‘Caucasian’” (202).

Among social scientists, the standard way to measure racial identity is to examine which racial category or categories a respondent marks on a survey; the validity of this method has thus far not been questioned. Given that advocates for the recognition of biracial identity call for the “check all that apply” option to be added to racial classification questions, it is logical to conclude that individuals who exercise their ability to check multiple boxes thus consider their racial identity to be multiracial. Several researchers have used this method to calculate the percentages of biracial individuals who choose one or another type of identity. Harris and Sim (2002) asked what percentages of Black/White individuals identified as exclusively Black or exclusively White. Using ADD Health data, they calculated that seventy-five percent (75%) of persons with one Black and one White parent identified as the traditional Black only identity, and 17.1% identified as White only. Tafoya et al. (2002) looked at what percentage of citizens with one Black and one White parent actually selected the Black and White racial options on the 2000 Census. Their calculations show that forty-nine percent (49%) identified, or in the case of minors, were identified by the householder as both Black and White.

Factors in Identity Choice

There are many interconnected factors that have been shown to influence choice of identity for biracial individuals. The most straightforward determinant is a person's age. Under the age of seven, biracials are more likely to describe themselves as "both" or in color (e.g. tan) terms (Jones 1992; Kerwin et al. 1993). As they mature, individuals are more likely to identify traditionally as Black (Gillem et al. 2001; Harris and Sim 2002). An unpublished study on biracial experience and identity placed the beginning of this change specifically at the eighth grade, when most students are around 14 years old (author unpublished). Gillem et al.'s (2001) respondents placed it at the sixth/seventh grade.

Less straightforward, but perhaps most obvious, is the influence from one's family. Racial socialization by parents is key. Biracial identity (protean as opposed to transcendent or singular identity with either race) is more likely to emerge if an individual's parents encourage him/her to identify with both races and if they (the parents) call the child by a biracial label (Kerwin et al. 1993). Protean biracial identity may also result from parents' non-purposefully communicated messages. Rockquemore (2002) found that separated/divorced White mothers often racialized their negative feelings toward the child's Black father; daughters, but not sons, internalize this negativity toward blackness and tend to express strong biracial identity. Rockquemore explains that this process only influences daughters' identity because sons' shared gender with the father buffers them from internalizing negativity toward his same image.

In addition to messages from the family, characteristics of the family also play a role in biracials' identity choice. The socioeconomic status of the biracial's family of

origin affects with racial identity choice. Higher socioeconomic status provides more opportunity for interaction in White peer groups (Rockquemore 1998). People in such settings are more likely to label and call people with parents of different races “biracial.” As people often adopt what others call them (Zack 1997), biracial individuals from families of higher socioeconomic status, consequently, are more likely to identify as Biracial than are individuals from lower socioeconomic statuses (Kerwin et al. 1993; Rockquemore 1998).

The Role of Appearance

Brown (1997) and Rockquemore and Brunnsma (2004) found that physical appearance has an important influence on the identity choices of Black/White biracial individuals. One’s physical appearance is the combination of skin color, hair type, eye color, facial dimensions, etc. Brown (1997) found a positive and significant correlation between “looking Black” (according to the researcher’s observations) and choosing a Black identity. Rockquemore and Brunnsma (2004) found much variation in appearance among those who chose a traditional Black identity, but did, like Brown, report that all respondents who could not “pass” for White chose a traditional Black identity. Respondents with “ambiguous” features and skin color in the middle of the spectrum chose a protean identity. Finally, their respondents who appeared White favored the transcendent (race-less) identity, which the authors call the “functional equivalent to presenting a White identity” (114).

Research has also found that appearance affects racial identity choice indirectly by affecting interpersonal interactions within their social networks. Rockquemore’s and

other researchers' qualitative studies with biracial respondents are permeated with accounts of negative reactions to the individuals' appearances. Spencer (1997) describes accounts of verbal harassment such as name calling ("White boy," "Half-White bitch," "Half-White monkey," "Honkey nigger,") and physical harassment such as cutting women's long hair. Rockquemore (2002) terms these experiences inter-group conflict.

While Spencer (1997) describes this process as the same for both sexes, Rockquemore (2002) sees it as more definitive for women. The experiences were often so powerful for women that "they [Black/White biracial women] often introduce the subject on their own when questioned about White racism," (Rockquemore 2002: 491):

The problems I had, truthfully, were with the Black girls...They didn't like me, 'cause they said they thought I was "all that," 'cause I'm light skinned and I've got pretty long hair and the boys like me. (Rockquemore 2002)

It was mainly [Black] girls...And it was just like, some of them didn't want to be my friend because of the way I, that I looked. And they would just be mean. Like, uh, I don't like you yellow girl. (Rockquemore 2002)

[Black women] say I'm "stuck up," "a bitch," you know, I think I'm better than everybody else because I'm light. Or "the only reason people like you is 'cause you're light and got curly hair." (Rockquemore 2002)

Rockquemore (2002) found that the Black/White biracial women who had had these types of negative experiences interacting with Black women were more likely to reject Black identity and identify exclusively as biracial. She believes that these negative experiences are misinterpreted by biracial women as group rejection of their blackness. She calls it misinterpretation because she theorizes that the treatment actually affirms the biracial woman's blackness. Regardless of whether or not Black women actually are rejecting the biracial woman's blackness, the biracial woman feels rejected; further, "not being accepted by Black women yet being routinely categorized as Black by Whites"

leaves biracial women in an awkward position (Rockquemore 2002: 495). This awkwardness is what Rockquemore believes leads the women to adopt exclusively biracial identities.

The problem is not in the biracials' appearance in and of itself, but in how that appearance is interpreted by society. Nakashima (1992) states that "the idea that multiracial people are beautiful and handsome is one of the most persistent and commonly accepted stereotypes, both historically and contemporarily" (169). The benefits of being considered attractive begin as early as infancy. Adults ascribe positive traits (nice, smart) to attractive children and negative traits to less attractive children, (Hesse-Biber 1996: 59). Research has also found that attractiveness to be correlated with positive life outcomes such as increased educational attainment, increased income, and physiological well-being (Umberson and Hughes 1987).

Physical attractiveness is more salient for women than for men because Western women are judged by their physical attractiveness more so than men (Collins 2005). The important dimensions of feminine beauty are skin color, body type, hair texture, and facial features, with white skin, long silky blonde hair, slim figure, and Anglican facial features being considered the most attractive (Collins [1990] 2000). Black feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins (2000) have pointed out that this racialized standard of beauty creates a beauty hierarchy in which society considers White women the most attractive, Black women the least attractive, and mixed race women presumably somewhere in between. This knowledge generates backlash against light skinned women from darker skinned women who realize that the skin color of the former is social capital (Rockquemore 2002; Hunter 2002).

Supporting this theory are the comments from Rockquemore's (2002) self-rated "unattractive" biracial respondents. These women reported less conflict with Black women and attributed this to their not fitting the "pretty biracial girl" typology:

She's [respondent's sister] prettier, in my opinion, than I am and she's small. She really had problems with Black people because she was so typical, you know, mixed-girl-thinks-she's-better-than-everybody-else thing going on. (Rockquemore 2002: 494)

CHAPTER III

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH QUESTION

Can attractiveness, then, be said to affect the likelihood of Black/White biracials choosing a non-traditional racial identity? This paper proceeds along those lines with the following two main research questions. First: Is perceived physical attractiveness a factor in racial identity choice for Black/White biracial individuals? And second: Is this process the same for men and women? Based on the review of the literature, my hypotheses are as follows:

- 1 Physically attractive Black/White biracial men and women will be likely to choose a biracial identity as opposed to Singular Black, White, or Transcendent identity
- 2 Physical attractiveness, or lack thereof, will have a stronger effect on Black/White biracial women's identity choice than on the identity of their male counterparts.

Additionally, the impact of control variables are predicted along the lines of previous research:

- 3 Lighter skinned respondents will be more likely than darker skinned respondents to choose a non-Black identity.
- 4 Respondents whose parents had higher income will be more likely to choose a non-Black identity than respondents whose parents had lower income.

Age is not included as a control variable because, as will be described in the following section, the data used in this study contain a tight age spectrum. Conversely, the data contain no measure of family socialization about race, racial composition of the respondent's neighborhood, or frequency and/or degree of negative experiences with mono racial peer groups. These factors were not measured in the ADD Health Study;

the implications of the absence of these variables are discussed in the conclusion of the paper.

CHAPTER IV

DATA AND METHODS

This project uses secondary survey data. The data are from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health, Waves I, II, and III (hereafter ADD Health). The ADD Health study collected data on the general health and well-being of adolescents in America. Wave I was conducted between 1994 and 1996 when the respondents were in grade seven (7) through twelve (12). Wave II was a follow up one year later (Udry 1998). Wave III was conducted between 2001 and 2002 when the respondents were age 18 to 26 years old (Udry 2003).

The sample was drawn via multistage, stratified random sampling of high schools in the United States with an over-sample of racial minority adolescents with a parent who had a college degree (Udry 1998). The Public Use Data set, which is used in this project, contains one-half of the main (nationally representative) sample and one-half of the supplementary African American over-sample. The sample used here contains N=37 individuals with one Black and one White parent; 21 are female and 16 are male. The sample size is admittedly small, and the implications of this are discussed in the conclusion. However, ADD Health is currently the only nationally representative data set to include measures of skin color. There is a strong correlation between skin color and perceived attractiveness (Herring and Hughes 2005; Hunter 2002; Collins 2000[1990]) and between skin color and identity (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2004; Hunter 1997). Therefore, it is important to be able to hold skin color constant, despite having to use a

smaller sample to do so, in order to examine the unmediated relationship between attractiveness and identity.

The respondents' racial identity choice is the dependent variable in this study. The ADD Health survey measured race by asking the respondents to choose from a list of possible racial identities. Respondents were allowed to select "all that apply." I employ Rockquemore's typologies to operationalize identity choice. Traditional Black identity is presumed if the respondent only selected the "Black" box for race. White identity is presumed if the respondent only selected the "White" box for race. Protean (hereafter Biracial) identity is presumed if the respondent selected both Black and White boxes. Finally, Transcendent identity is presumed if the respondent did not indicate a race yet answered every other question of interest in this study. The distribution respondents over the different identity options is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Tabulation of Identity Choices

Choice	Frequency	Percent
Black	19	51.4
White	8	21.6
Protean	10	27.0
Transcendent	0	0
Total	37	100.00

The first independent variable is the respondents' physical attractiveness. It was measured in the ADD Health survey in Wave III by the interviewer according to the

following five-point scale: 1 very unattractive, 2 unattractive, 3 about average, 4 attractive, 5 very attractive. I created a dummy variable with very attractive and attractive coded 1. The frequency tabulation of the dummy variable appears in Table 2. The arithmetic average rating before condensing the categories was 3.6.

Table 2: Tabulation of Attractiveness

Attractive	Frequency	Percent
Yes	19	51.4
No	18	48.6
Total	37	100.00

Skin color of the respondent was included as a control variable. It was visually assessed by the interviewers based on the following five-point Likert scale: 1 black, 2 dark brown, 3 medium brown, 4 light brown, 5 white. The literature does not say what shade of “light skinned” is most problematic; therefore white and light brown were coded 1 to represent light skinned and all other colors were coded 0 to represent other shades not considered light. The modal color before condensing the categories was light brown. Table 3 presents the frequency tabulation of the dummy variable.

Table 3: Tabulation of Skin Color

Light skin	Frequency	Percent
Yes	25	67.6
No	12	32.4
Total	37	100.00

Household income of the respondent's family of origin was also included as a control variable. Household income was asked on the parent questionnaire in Wave I. The family of origin income was used rather than the respondent's income as reported in Wave III because it is context in which the respondent was reared that is important for identity development. The variable was measured as a continuous variable ranging from \$1,000 to \$999,000. The minimum in this sample was \$5,000, the maximum was \$102,000, and the mean was \$46,000 (see Figure 1).

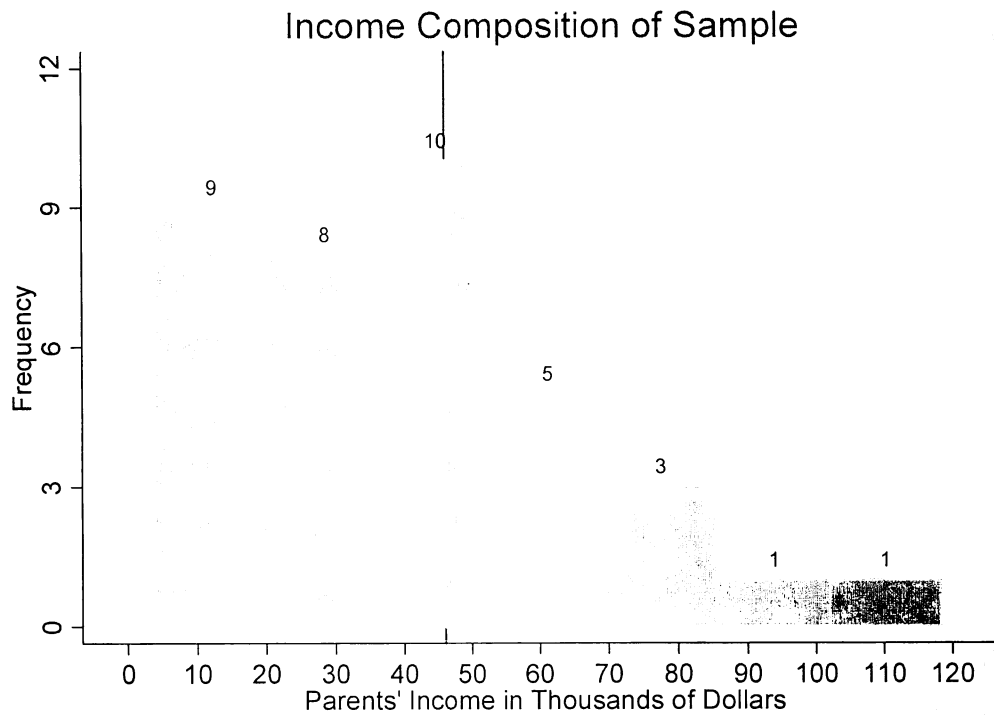


Figure 1: Parental Income Distribution

Two interaction variables were created from the above independent variables. The first combined the attractiveness and gender measures due to the fact that physical attractiveness is more salient in the lives of women than men (Collins 2005). This measure was constructed by multiplying the attractiveness measure by the gender measure. The second combined skin color and gender measures due to the fact that light skin color has a stronger positive impact on the lives of women than men (Hunter 2002). This measure, too, was the product of the skin color variable multiplied by the gender variable. Both interaction terms were included in the model to test the moderating influences of gender on the effects of attractiveness and skin color on identity choice.

Because my dependent variable is non-ordered and categorical, my analytic method was multinomial logistic regression. This procedure is used to discover which independent variable(s) better predicts, if it predicts at all, the odds of being in one outcome category of the dependent variable relative to being in another outcome category (Hoffmann 2004.). Choosing a Black identity was set as the comparative outcome category. This decision was made because this is the identity that the respondents would have had by default under the one drop rule system.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS

Three regression models were run. The first contained all of the independent variables. The second and third each contained the independent variables and one interaction term. Regression results for the variables are presented in relative risk ratios; this is the expected change in the risk ratio for comparing the risk of one group to another for being in a given category of the dependent variable relative to the comparison category given that the other variables in the model are held constant. Table 4 presents the regression results; relative risk ratios that are significant at the .10 level or better are in bold and the corresponding p-value notated to show level of significance.

Hypothesis 1 was that physically attractive biologically biracial individuals would be more likely than their less attractive counterparts to choose a Biracial identity relative to a Black identity. No statistically significant relationship exists between attractiveness and choosing a Biracial identity (see Table 4). Attractive individuals are no more likely than less attractive individuals to choose a Biracial identity; hypothesis 1, therefore, must be rejected. Being attractive, however, was found to be statistically significant for choosing a White identity. The relative risk ratio for attractive respondents to choose a White identity, rather than the traditional Black identity, is 0.095 and is significant at the 0.05 level (see Table 4). Because this coefficient is less than 1, it means that being attractive lowers the odds that one will choose a White identity. Thus, less attractive individuals are more likely to choose the White category. This finding is statistically

significant; however, as the difference of the coefficient from one is not large, the odds reducing effect of attractiveness is slight.

No statistically significant relationship exists between gender and identity choice in the singular or full model. Females are no more likely than males to choose either a White or Mixed identity instead of the traditional Black identity. To test hypothesis 2, that attractiveness would have a stronger effect on women's identity choice, an interaction variable of gender and attractiveness was added to the model. As can be seen in Table 4, however, this too was statistically insignificant. Gender and attractiveness do not combine to affect identity choice. Attractive women, then, are no more likely to choose non-Black identities than are other biracial individuals. Consequently, hypothesis 2 must also be rejected.

As predicted in hypothesis 3, skin color is a statistically significant predictor of identity choice. For light skinned, relative to darker skinned individuals, the relative risk for choosing a White identity can be expected to increase by a factor of 21.8 (see Table 4). Lighter skinned biracials, then, are 21.8 times more likely than their darker peers to identify as White relative to Black holding all other variables constant. This estimation is significant at the 0.05 level and has a standard error of 30.37. The risk for lighter skinned individuals relative to their darker peers to identify as Mixed instead of Black is 7.3; however, this is only statistically significant at the .10 level and has a standard error of 8.7. Still, it means that lighter skinned biracials have seven times greater odds of identifying as Biracial relative to Black than darker skinned biracials.

the traditional Black identity, holding all other variables constant, is 1.04. As a relative risk ratio of 1 would indicate no effect, this means that adolescents of wealthier parents have just slightly higher odds of choosing a Biracial identity than do peers with less wealthy parents.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

My research questions asked if perceived physical attractiveness affected the odds of Black/White biracial individuals choosing a Biracial identity over a Black identity and whether or not such a process was the same for women and men. The results suggest that attractiveness is *not* a statistically significant factor in choosing a Biracial identity, for women or men. Parental income, however, does appear to significantly affect one choosing a Biracial identity over a Black identity.

However, there are several limitations of this study which may explain why my main hypotheses were not supported. On a methodological level, while technically the use of multinomial logistic regression in this study is appropriate because the sample size is larger than 30, the method is nonetheless based on asymptotic principles that yield more accurate results when there are more than 37 cases. This is the main shortcoming of the study. The low number of cases also contributed to the high standard errors.

Also, the data set's lack of important control variables is a significant disadvantage of the study. First, racial socialization by parents, particularly the types of labels they give the child, has been shown to affect development of a Biracial identity (Kerwin et al. 1993). Similarly, racial composition of neighborhood facilitates or impedes choosing a Biracial identity. Rockquemore (1998) states that Black/White individuals who live in more White communities are more likely to develop a non-traditional racial identity. Lastly, the inter-group conflict that Rockquemore discusses in

her 2002 study was also not measured in the ADD Health data; and that work clearly states that such conflict is a strong motivating factor in rejecting the traditional Black identity and embracing a Biracial identity.

Finally, having the interviewer assess the physical characteristics of the respondents is problematic. Hill (2002a) found this method of measurement to be biased. He found that White interviewers rated Black respondents as darker than Black interviewers rated those same respondents; and conversely, Black interviewers rated White respondents as lighter than did White interviewers. The ADD Health data had no measurement of interviewer characteristics. Future data collected on respondents' characteristics should standardize interviewers' demographics or include them as a variable in the model.

This study gives future research on biracial identity many angles to ponder. For example, is physical attractiveness *really* the component of appearance that catalyzes inter-group conflict? If beauty standards are Anglican, why did the *less* attractive respondents have a *higher* relative risk of identifying as White? Could perhaps less attractive respondents be compensating by claiming a higher status racial identity? This study and the questions it raises show that when it comes to Biracial individuals, there is more to a pretty face than just a pretty face.

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