You think you’re Black?” Exploring Black mixed-race experiences of Black rejection

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ABSTRACT
Utilizing interview data with thirty-seven British people of Mixed White and Black Caribbean heritage, this paper draws upon the concept of “horizontal hostility” to describe how Black mixed-race experiences of Black rejection impact on self-perceptions and expressed ethnic identities. In demonstrating the effects of being excluded from a relatable collective Black identity, the paper argues that horizontal hostility is critical in the project of theorizing mixed-race. Experiences of horizontal hostility represent significant turning points in mixed-race lives as they can prompt reconsiderations of mixed-race positionings within the broader Black imagined space. Beyond the benefits that horizontal hostility offers to mixed-race studies, it provides insights into conceptualisations of Blackness – as a collective racial identity, community and politics. The article unpacks how, when and why its boundaries are policed, adding to debates relating to the future formation and maintenance of ethnic group identities and categories more generally.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 30 November 2018; Accepted 28 June 2019

KEYWORDS
Black mixed race; critical mixed-race studies; race and gender; horizontal hostility; ethnic identity; Black identity

This paper draws on the concept of “horizontal hostility” to explore and describe the complex ways in which Black mixed-race people can, on occasion, encounter discourses of Black (in)authenticity in interactions with their Black counterparts and as a consequence, feel rejected from a collective Black identity. As a concept, horizontal hostility has been used to describe how divisions and prejudices can emerge within oppressed groups (Kennedy 1970; Lorde 1978). Evoking the notion of sibling rivalry between similarly positioned people, horizontal hostility helps signal the damage that internal conflicts might cause, by distracting away from the collective resistance work against dominant oppressive forces.

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This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
The paper contends that horizontal hostility offers a useful analytical frame through which to explore Black mixed-race experiences of disjuncture from Black collective identities – a topic which is seldom dealt with in contemporary theoretical discussions about mixed-race. Although a great deal of research shows that Black mixed-race subjects tend to be racialized as Black and experience very similar social locations to their Black counterparts (Brunsma and Rockquemore 2001; Song and Aspinall 2012; Joseph-Salisbury 2018), much less is known about the occasions when Black mixed-race people feel rejected from a collective Black identity. Mixed-race experiences of rejection can often come about because they are perceived as unable to fit into discrete, monolithic racial and ethnic categories. Within mixed-race studies, there has been a good attempt to develop terminology to describe these experiences of displacement, such as racial invalidation, multiracial microaggressions and monocentrism (Townsend, Markus, and Bergsieker 2009; Johnston and Nadal 2010; Song and Aspinall 2012; Franco, Katz, and O’Brien 2016). However, what is distinctly lacking is an extensive commentary on how the effect of these forms of prejudice may vary depending on who it is that is doing the rejection.

Utilizing data from a larger study (Campion 2017), this paper aims to expand our understandings of mixed-race experiences by specifically asking how Black mixed-race people negotiate being rejected from a collective Black identity they feel invested in. Building on this, the paper considers the implications of horizontal hostility for identity development and self-perceptions and explores how the experience compares to dominant forms of “rejection” that come about through White systematic structural racisms. Finally, by highlighting some of the issues that Black rejection can throw up for Black mixed-race people – relating to notions of belonging and authenticity – the paper argues for the cultivation of non-essentialist conceptualisations of Black identities to help nurture continued solidarities across heterogenous Black communities.

The paper applies horizontal hostility through an intersectional lens, utilizing gender and social generation as central analytical frameworks. Both emerge as key variables that affect how acutely the experiences of Black rejection are felt. There is a plethora of work that indicates how (mixed) race and gender intersect (Mahtani 2002; Ali 2005; Sims and Joseph-Salisbury 2018; Newman 2019). However, given the tendency for samples in mixed-race studies to be skewed towards women, researchers are restrained in their ability to adopt comparative intersectional analyses. To build a more complicated picture of the differential positionalities of Black mixed-race people, this paper carefully considers how the gender identity of the person experiencing horizontal hostility can have specific effects on how that process takes shape and influence the reactions and responses to it.

The proliferation of mixed-race studies emerged circa 1990 onwards (Root 1992; Tizard and Phoenix 1993; Ifekwunigwe 1999; Parker and Song 2001; Olumide 2002; Aspinall 2003; Twine 2004). An important critique of some
methodological approaches within the field, is that they have tended to adopt “ahistorical” and “present-tense” analyses that focus on the individual day-to-day micro-politics of mixed-race experiences (Mahtani 2014, 46). By drawing a sample from a wide range of adult age groups who have come of age in the 1960s through to the 2010s and using a life-history approach, the paper hopes to respond to these concerns. By tracing the unique historical consciousness of the participants, horizontal hostility is shown to be experienced differently within changing structures. This emphasizes the need to analyse the temporality of mixed-race identity which accounts for how broader social histories are embedded into the personal histories and social identities of mixed-race subjects.

**Multiracial microaggressions, monoracism, misrecognition?**

The literature on mixedness in the US context, compared with the UK, appears to have a more developed language for identifying and describing the specific prejudices that mixed-race people experience because of their mixedness. A significant sub-section of the work produced has appeared in psychology journals, taking influence from psycho-social frameworks that emphasize the negative impact these experiences can have on the identity development, mental health and self-esteem of mixed-race people (Townsend et al. 2009; Johnston and Nadal 2010; Franco et al. 2016). For example, Johnston and Nadal (2010) have critiqued the concept of “microaggressions” – a term that describes the everyday, subtle forms of racism experienced by people of colour (Pérez Huber and Solorzano 2015, 297). The authors suggest that the specific ways that multiracial people of colour experience microaggressions are often unaccounted for and attribute this erasure to the long history of “monoracism” in the US context. This term describes the exclusionary process by which “individuals who do not fit monoracial categories may be oppressed on systemic and inter-personal levels because of underlying assumptions and beliefs in singular, discrete racial categories” (Johnston and Nadal 2010, 125). In response to the perceived absence of mixed-race experiences within the broader debate about microaggressions, Johnston and Nadal (2010, 126) offer an extension on the concept through their conceptualization of multiracial microaggressions;

[Start of quote]

multiracial people may be targets of “traditional” racial microaggressions … in addition to multiracial microaggressions, which are daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, enacted by monoracial persons that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights toward multiracial individuals or groups.

A number of other studies on mixed identity have introduced terminology which could be regarded as part of, and closely related to, the concept of
multiracial microaggressions. “Racial invalidation”, for instance, identifies the unique prejudices mixed people can experience including; “accusations of racial inauthenticity, imposition of racial categories and forced choice dilemmas” (Franco et al. 2016, 96). These themes have been taken up in empirical research in the UK, where phrases such as “racial mismatch” have been utilized to describe how mixed-race subjects can have their expressed identities invalidated by external actors (Song and Aspinall 2012). Despite the significant inroads that have been made, what these debates tend to lack, is a more direct line of questioning that critically asks how mixed-race people perceive “non-mixed” people of colour as engaging in these subtle practices, and how encounters with these can easily slip into forms of rejection. These questions are important because they help advance a more detailed analysis of how emotional responses to “racial mismatch”, for instance, might vary depending on who it is that is doing the “misrecognizing” and invalidating racial claims.

In thinking about Black mixed-race experiences, incidents of Black rejection are seldom discussed in the literature. Instead, research often emphasizes the sameness of Black and Black mixed-race experiences within White hegemonic structures of power, where Black populations can regularly be “undifferentiated” and treated as a homogenous mass (Tate 2005, 85). Research on British mixed-race populations consistently shows that, in comparison to other mixed groups, respondents with Black heritage are the most likely to report being “pigeon-holed into their minority race” (Song and Aspinall 2012, 740). This is a transnational finding in studies on mixed-race identity (Brunsma and Rockquemore 2001; Khanna 2010; Song 2010; Joseph-Salisbury 2018). Without seeking to challenge these valid claims to sameness across the Black and Black mixed-race experience in Britain, this paper seeks to complicate existing understandings by dealing with some of the more nuanced conceptualisations of Black identity that are present within diverse Black communities.

**Gender, colourism and Black mixed-race**

One significant marker of differentiation within Black communities is skin tone. A great body of work has traced how this distinction has historically been enforced upon, rather than willingly chosen and upheld by Black communities themselves (Gabriel 2007; Hunter 2013). Such was the case in patriarchal racist Caribbean plantation societies, governed by wealthy White male “masters” who would engage in violent sexual unions with enslaved women. The brown-skinned “mulatto”2 descendants that these exploitative relations produced, were regarded as “potential allies for the whites” (Heuman 1981, 47) in societies like Jamaica where, “by the early eighteenth century slaves outnumbered their masters by a factor of eight to one” (Hall 2017, 68). This desire to maintain White control through strength in numbers produced a
situation whereby, after Whites, the most privileged of the mulatto class came to be “the primary inheritors of the plantation legacies of their European grandparents and forefathers” across the British Caribbean (Hope 2011, 167).

Within these patriarchal plantation societies, gender complicated how mixed populations accumulated their wealth. In these contexts, mulatto women were perceived as less threatening “to the superiority of the white male”, in comparison to their male counterparts (Mohammad 2000, 30). Mulatto women were much more likely to be taken as partners and mistresses by Whites than mulatto men (Livesay 2018). Although these relations were often achieved through violence and coercion, they nevertheless enhanced the chances of elevated societal positions. Evidence also indicates that mulatto women tended to have higher manumission rates than men and made up a large proportion of the “free coloured” population (Higman 1976). Subsequently, after Abolition, mixed women generally occupied a higher status in gender relations with Black men (Hall 2017). Therefore, in societies like Jamaica, brown skin has come to denote an inherited colour-class position from the country’s historical plantation society and overtime, has become a distinctly female “Jamaican beauty ideal” (Tate 2013, 220).

The fallout of these hierarchical structures is observable in our more contemporary histories, where “brown” light skinned women can still come to be regarded as “prizes” for some Black men (Mohammed 2000, 36). This process of ascribing economic, social and cultural value to lighter skinned people of colour is described in the current context as colourism and/or shadeism (Gabriel 2007; Henry 2013; Hunter 2013).

In contemporary racist, heterosexist, patriarchal societies, women of colour continue to be implicated by interlocking systems of oppression that are legacies of these colonial histories. As a consequence, feelings of self-worth can often be determined by women of colour’s physical appearance and sexual attractiveness to men (Thompson and Keith 2001). In light of this they can, unwillingly, find themselves pitted against other women in competition for male approval. In a world in which Whiteness is a yardstick for beauty, Black mixed-race women who tend to be lighter skinned are the likely winners of this competition, over their darker skinned Black female counterparts (Hunter 2013). Understandably, the systematic racism, sexism and colourism experienced by darker skinned Black women can create frustrations which, in some cases, can result in “interpersonal conflict” with Black mixed race women (Sims and Joseph-Salisbury 2018, 3). In contrast, Black mixed-race men, who are more likely to identify as Black and be racialized as such, are less likely to report experiencing gender-specific tensions with their same-sex Black peers (Joseph-Salisbury 2018). Furthermore, skin shade appears to operate differently within the social schemas of Black male friendship groups, where darker skin can constitute a form of capital (Joseph-Salisbury 2018).
Methods

This paper uses data from a study based upon thirty-seven semi-structured interviews with Black mixed-race men and women living in Birmingham, UK (Campion 2017). The study received ethical approval from the research ethics committee at the University of Manchester. It has been noted that participants in studies on mixed-race “are generally ‘self-selecting’ in the sense that they tend to identify strongly as ‘mixed race’ and are often actively involved in or conscious of debates around mixed race identities/families” (Caballero 2013, 3). In light of this, I actively avoided recruiting respondents from groups, forums or online websites that provide services specifically for mixed-race people and their families, to reduce the likelihood of obtaining a biased sample. A “fixed purposive sampling strategy” was used to recruit participants (Bryman 2016, 414). Informal networks were utilized and recruitment posters were distributed on neighbourhood Facebook pages, in Black hairdressers, leisure centres, libraries, community centres and colleges across the city. The term “mixed-race” was not used on the poster. I did not want to discourage the participation of people who had mixed backgrounds but did not identify themselves as such. Instead, “White and Black Caribbean heritage” was chosen as an appropriate catch-all term that would appeal to a broad mixed-race audience.

A balanced sample by social class was achieved to some degree. This was a desirable outcome given that samples in mixed-race research tend to comprise of mostly middle class participants (Small 2001; Caballero 2004; Mahtani 2014). Taking parents’ occupations as a proxy for class, the majority of participants came from traditional working-class backgrounds. Just over half had university degrees, mostly the younger participants. For clarity on the final spread of the sample by age cohort and gender see Table 1. The sample was split relatively equally by gender but was slightly skewed with regards to age because the oldest participants were hardest to recruit. Snowball sampling was used to help achieve the participation of hard to reach groups (Bryman 2016).

I designed and conducted the interviews which, for the most part, focused upon the participants’ coming of age stories. A number of empirical research studies on mixed-race and ethnic identity more generally highlight the significance this stage of the life course has on identity development (Tizard and Phoenix 1993; Alexander 1996; Song and Aspinall 2012). The intention was

| Birth cohorts | Male | Female | Total |
|---------------|------|--------|-------|
| 1955–1969     | 4    | 6      | 10    |
| 1970–1979     | 7    | 4      | 11    |
| 1980–1995     | 7    | 9      | 16    |
| Total         | 18   | 19     | 37    |

Table 1. Sample by age and gender.
to unearth some of the fundamental processes and relationships that occurred during participants’ youth. All interview recordings were transcribed and recurrent themes were coded using QSR International’s NVivo 10 Software.

**Findings: negotiating Black rejection**

**A note on social generation**

Many of the upcoming examples that participants draw on are rooted in their childhood and young adulthood. These life-points are situated across different socio-political British contexts which allows us to trace how mixed-race has been experienced not only as a personal identity but as a social category through time. For those coming of age through the 1960s–1980s, mixed-race populations were mostly off the “racial agenda” (Ali 2012a, 171). They would become subsumed in other debates to do with racial relations and difference that took priority during these periods. They comprised part of the changing racialized problem categories, such as the “immigrant child” in schools through the 1960s (Ydesen and Myers 2016). In the 1980s, they were folded into a broader Black category within arguments against “transracial adoption” which strongly asserted mixed-race children be regarded as Black (Small 1984). Tests for a new census ethnicity question in the 1980s also revealed that Black mixed-race people themselves tended to align with a Black identity (Office for National Statistics 2003). Given this context, it is unsurprising that the impact of horizontal hostility appeared to be most acute for the older participants, who often had very strong identifications with their Black identity and came of age when “mixed-race” as a standalone ethnic category did not have the same legitimacy as it does now.

For the younger cohorts, the fact that horizontal hostility featured in their lives at all when growing up in the 1990s and 2000s raises some interesting questions. Insofar as it highlights an important counter-narrative to the foundational arguments that characterized the nascent collection of mixed-race studies produced during this period that foreground the “fluidity” of mixed-race identity (Root 1992; Tizard and Phoenix 1993; Olumide 2002). Emerging during the “tail end of the identity politics era” (Thompson 2010, 32), when ethnic identities were increasingly conceptualized as always in process and never quite finished, mixed-race was able to demand its turn in the “spotlight” as a potential counter-hegemonic concept and identification that ruptured binary discourses of race (Caballero 2004, 17). Whilst recognizing fluidity as a central and defining aspect of mixed-race identity, horizontal hostility adds to the discussion by highlighting some of the conditions under which mixed-race movement within and between ethnic categories is not easily negotiable.
Naming and understanding the experience of horizontal hostility

The term horizontal hostility was chosen to describe the processes of boundary making that could place participants outside of the imagined Black space. It was a lengthy point of discussion across the majority of interviews. Experiences of horizontal hostility had profound effects on respondents’ feelings of belonging. It is important to note that the respondents did not choose this term themselves to describe their memories of these interactions with Black friends, family or strangers. Rather, many of the participants had difficulties in conceptualizing what the interactions meant. Memories of these moments tended to be “felt rather than known”, in that they could recall and recognize their feelings of discomfort but were unable to name what it was that had happened (Ali 2012b, 97). Many simply described these encounters as examples of “bad vibes”, “bullyish behaviour” or “aggression”, to name a few. There seemed to be absence at the level of language and understanding of Black rejection, which horizontal hostility attempts to capture.

In addition to this general finding, there were a number of participants who were quite direct in articulating their experiences of horizontal hostility as enactments of “racism” by their Black counterparts, including Malcolm (42) below, who was born in the early 1970s. As a teenager, in the mid-to-late 1980s, he was a big fan of the American hip-hop group Public Enemy. The references in their lyrics to Black power, Malcolm X and the urban specific problems of the inner-city, had pedagogical value in his life and he considered himself to be an Afro-centric teenager (Gilroy 1991). He displayed his love for the hip-hop group, and their messages, through his stylistic choices, which he felt could sometimes fall under suspicion by other Black peers because he was mixed-race.

I can remember very clearly a girl who did it […] I can remember running past her in the school and she shouted it to me; “you think you’re Black?” […] it kind of made me feel […] stupid at that point, right there and then as I was running to do what I was doing, I felt stupid […] and she’d put me there […] because her colour now gave her power over me and that’s true racism right there because yes racism is power and it is about collective numbers – we get that – but you had power that day because you thought that you were in a position of strength because you were a full blooded Black person, and you can pop at me for only having a little bit of what you enjoy so much […] it was never nice and I used to get it a lot […] what we had in Birmingham here was a very big thing around afro-centricity […] that was just for me another word for Black Nationalism. So, you would get that same stuff with those people and the fact that we were afro-centric and I’m very afro-centric, I mean I really am, I love it so much but we were almost made to feel like we shouldn’t be wearing African pendants.

Although “Black”, would continuously be formulated as a racialized problem category through the 1980s, it was simultaneously being rearticulated as a
positive identity, in quite politicized ways (Mercer 1994). Malcolm’s reference to the Afro-centric “movement” in Birmingham speaks to this moment. However, his suggestion that his displays of an Afro-centric identity were sometimes subtly rejected by Black peers, hints that he perceived himself to be precariously positioned within this collective, as a mixed-race young person.

Malcolm’s specific example of the playground experience is perhaps most indicative of his emotive response to horizontal hostility. He applies a traditional understanding of what constitutes racism – unequal relations of power – to articulate the meaning of the interaction. He also draws on reductionist biological conceptualisations of race to argue his point that the comment he received was an expression of “racism”, on the part of his Black peer. Interestingly, Malcolm’s references to racism and race, contradict the aforementioned racialized social histories of “mixedness” and “Blackness”. As noted, mixed populations in the Caribbean context have historically tended to experience varying degrees of advantage over their Black counterparts, in terms of how cultural, economic and social capital has been distributed through time (Heuman 1981; Mohammed 2000; Tate 2013). Black heritage, therefore, has served to disadvantage populations, rather than offer up privileges. Nevertheless, he suggests that it is his lack of Black blood which determined his perceived weaker position vis-à-vis his Black peer. His conceptualization almost functions as a re-working of the one-drop rule of hypodescent which perceived Black blood as a contaminant of Whiteness and thus sought to designate all people with any Black ancestry as Black (Khanna 2010). Instead, his White blood is seen as the salient factor that determines, what he considers to be, unfavourable outcomes on his part.

The perception that horizontal hostility amounted to “racism”, was not unique to one age cohort or gender group. However, other participants who made this claim did not tend to try and conceptualize their experiences through a “structural” analysis as Malcolm did. Below, Matthew (26) describes his experience of moving from Harborne to the more ethnically diverse and deprived area of Newtown, as a young teenager. His description of the pejorative phrase aimed at him, suggests a more interpersonal conceptualization of “racism”; “in Newtown I experienced a different type of racism, what I would consider to be explicit racism […] the irony […] this was coming from Black people, [one example was] half breed”. He concludes that these experiences in Newtown were “explicit” forms of “racism”, by juxtaposing them to other experiences of White racism in Harborne; “I’d say it’s been far more prominent implicitly […] in Harborne […] nothing like ‘oh look at that guy over there’ but … I’d always get a sense of, he’s not one of us you know?”

Comparative analyses of Black versus White “racisms” similar to this featured in some other interviews, especially with the women. These comparisons presented contradictions and tensions which speak to “the thorny
question of what exactly constitutes racism, and who or what can (or cannot) be racist” (Song 2014, 109). Danielle (29) told me, “I suppose I’ve felt more racism from black girls than white girls”, and Cassandra (34) explained, “I’ve had a bit of racism from like … you know … council estate white guys but the majority of the racism I’ve had has been from black girls”. These findings were particularly surprising given that moments of horizontal hostility were infrequent and much less severe, compared to the systemic structural White racisms which presented multiple disadvantages in their lives. Nevertheless, the allegations of “Black racism” are revealing, insofar as they give insight into how experiences of Black rejection are understood among some Black mixed-race people. Precisely because “racism” is such a loaded term, it hints at the weight that is given to these encounters. The fact that White racism was seen by some as more “implicit” or less “frequent”, is not indicative of its pernicious effects in reality. Rather, these perceptions speak to the normalization of White racism in Black mixed-race lives. The ubiquitous nature of Whiteness and its quiet pervasiveness, can make it less perceivable and allow it to go unnamed (Dyer 1997).

Mixed-race women and horizontal hostility

Women tended to experience horizontal hostility in its most acute forms and more frequently throughout the life course. Although there were countless examples of strong, loving and healthy relationships with Black women, over half of the women reported experiencing varying degrees of tension throughout their lives. Female respondents born in the 1950s and 1960s described the most extreme examples of horizontal hostility, which are likely to be a generational effect of coming of age in the tense racial climate of 1970s Britain (Fryer 1984). Isabelle (49) recalled a memory of being spat at by Black girls on her walk to secondary school. And Audrey (56) below, talked about her trips out to Black “club” nights in Handsworth in the late 1970s, early 1980s, with her group of mixed-race female friends. Audrey frequented shebeens and blues parties across the city, like other similarly aged participants. These unlicensed establishments and private house parties were a direct response to racist policies in public clubs and pubs that excluded Black people and Black music. They offered safe refuge from the anti-Black sentiment that characterized the external macro-politics of Britain’s race relations. Nevertheless, within the confines of these racialized spaces, other significant micro-politics related to colour, race and gender could sometimes arise and create precarious positions for mixed-race subjects.

The Black girls used to give us a terrible time. They used to wanna fight us and everything and that went on for years […] they hated us with a passion […] in them days you could smoke in clubs and they’d try and burn us with the cigarettes […] you still get some bad vibes off Black women to this day sometimes. They still like look down their nose.
Most examples of horizontal hostility were not at all physically violent. Instead, many women explained that they sometimes felt that they were “disliked” by Black women. In a number of cases, these feelings appeared to be heightened when they were in romantic relationships with Black men. Below, Maya (27) describes her experience of attending a Black political event.

There was quite a few people with like locks […] African symbols and stuff […] people into their culture […] and there was just one girl that was just giving me and the (Black) guy I was with like … every time I put my hand up to say something or contribute or he did, she was just giving us funny looks […] when we spoke about it afterwards, we both felt that was about the fact that she […] didn’t like that he was with a mixed-race person.

Similarly, Janice (33) below contemplates over whether some of her historical negative encounters with Black women were related to the fact she was married to a Black Jamaican man.

I used to go to […] dancehall clubs […] with the kid’s dad […] there I could feel pretty uncomfortable […] almost felt like I shouldn’t be in there […] that’s a feeling off the [Black] women. Erm … I think they just have a way of making me feel … I don’t know (laughs) it’s hard because I’ve got a Black sister […] it’s like … I don’t … I can’t explain it. Because they’ve definitely given me a bit of a complex. Erm […] you know when you can just feel that … like an atmosphere … like a vibe … I don’t know if it’s because I was with my husband at the time …. you know “oh, she’s with him”.

The earlier argument, that colourism is a gendered phenomenon with some roots in Caribbean colonial plantation societies upheld by racist heteronormative structures that positioned White men at the top and Black women at the bottom, provides the necessary context to understand how these relations take shape. Against the backdrop of these histories, it becomes easier to trace how and why horizontal hostility could often arise out of Black mixed-race and Black women’s competing sexualities in relation to men. And in many cases, Black men. These historical structural positionings of mixed-race bleed into the present and inform how horizontal hostility materializes differently in the lives of Black mixed-race men and women.

**Mixed-race men and horizontal hostility**

Horizontal hostility appeared to have more transformative effects on self-perceptions for men in comparison to women. This is likely due to the fact that the men were more likely to both self-identify and be identified by others as Black at points throughout their lives, echoing findings from existing literature (Long and Joseph-Salisbury 2018; Sims and Joseph-Salisbury 2018). It was also clear that they wanted, and expected, their claim to a Black identity to be accepted, especially during their youth. This seemed particularly true for participants like Malcolm (42) below, who perceived his coming of age experiences as distinct from his younger counterparts. He felt that his youth was
uniquely shaped by the explicitly racist context of the 1980s, a period when representations and moral panics around “Black youth” justified the routine enforcement of draconian policing tactics in urban areas of major cities like Birmingham (Solomos 1988).

I think that colour isn’t as relevant today […] we are probably the generations to know how it was to be really singled out just for your colour […] before you’re raw being pulled up here just for being Black […] I don’t know if young people still feel that today.

Many of the men had predominantly Black friendship groups as young people. Incidents of horizontal hostility often came through subtle “reminders” from their Black male peers that they were not in fact Black. These encounters were often described as “banter” or harmless jokes that could easily be shrugged off (Joseph-Salisbury 2018). Malcolm (42) explained, “the black guys … I suppose when they said it to you, it was more like a piss take. Like, you dickhead, who you trying to call a coconut?” Similar examples of “banter” featured in the narratives of the younger cohorts, such as Matthew’s (26), “[it] would always be posed as a joke […] I’d always be you know […] the undiluted drink”.

The function of “verbal interplay” in Black male friendship groups as a method to play out tensions and deal with in-group divisions has been noted in existing literature (Alexander 1996, 145). Joseph-Salisbury (2018) describes how these divisions can sometimes be formed along skin tone in Black male peer groups, and finds that darker skin can often emerge as a form of capital. In Anthony’s (36) excerpt, these two characteristics of the Black friendship group are evident. Divisions along colour are playfully acknowledged through verbal sparring with his friends and the underlying tensions within the banter are clear.

Growing up as a teen, banter […] dissing … was a big way of formulating your position in a group […] it was about how well you was able to defend it. So, it could be about anything […] if your trainers were bruk down, from if […] your dad slapped up your mom, how many years ago. We’d cuss anybody about anything […] But […] the racial aspect for me was always […] a bit like hold on, like I don’t like that and it was like little things like […] my Black friends used to tell me like … that my mom cooks egg and chips […] you know … it’s considered a […] diss basically […] it weren’t done in malice […] formulating your masculinity was about how hard you are […] and how hard you are could often be determined by how Black you were.

In this excerpt, Anthony identifies the “banter” between the boys as a performance of “hardness”. He perceives the banter as harmless until it is asserted through racialized means. When the Whiteness of his mother is evoked through a cultural reference to eggs and chips, which he suggests is devalued in the social schema of the group, Anthony regards it as foul play in their
“dissing” game. He considers this type of dissing as distinctive from the other non-race-related topics that were often used as ammunition in back and forth banter with friends. Below he elaborates on why this particular “dissing” emerges as a source of upset.

I always shied away from it […] because […] I was always fearing that […] backlash, the light skin thing, yeah the dissing about my race […] on the outside I would just laugh it off but internally I knew that, nah that hurts […] this was a group I felt a part of for so many years and now it was almost like they was ostracising me or they was separating me outside the group, saying, “no, you’re not one of us”.

Through careful impression management, Anthony chooses to conceal, rather than reveal his real feelings to his friends. He negotiates the scenario by “laughing it off” and avoiding the interactions to reduce experiencing further feelings of rejection from the group, and a Black collective identity more generally.

**Horizontal hostility and changing self-perceptions**

Horizontal hostility gives critical insight into mixed-race self-perceptions and building on this, it also indicates what might inform decisions about expressed ethnic identities and allegiances throughout the life course. Even when experienced through banter, it evidently, can easily slip over into forms of rejection. For many participants, this had a detrimental effect on feelings of belonging. Subsequent to these encounters, participants could feel that their membership in the Black community was conditional which left them in a state of uncertainty. In some cases, these anxieties even had negative impacts on their relationships with Black peers, especially during their coming of age years. Rhian (37) explained; “I wouldn’t get comments off the girls […] more just be like dirty looks […] I think I internalised it […] it made me not like Black girls growing up”. Others, like Anthony (36), tried to resist further exclusion and achieve unconditional membership in a broader Black community by performing his Black identity through dating; “when I was going through all of this with my peers […] I said to myself consciously, you know what that’s it, from now on I’m only going out with Black or mixed girls – simple as that”. For others, like Chris (40) below, an experience of horizontal hostility during a trip to Handsworth Carnival in the late 1980s, urged him to reconsider his position within a collective Black ethnic group identity.

I’ll never forget it – it was carnival time, I must have been about fourteen, right? And some of my friends were going up to Handsworth […] and the one boys turned around to me and goes, “nah, nah, you can’t come because you’re not Black,” yeah? And I remember sitting there at the time thinking yooo, is this geezer for real? […] it stuck with me until this day, you know. And I always remember thinking, I’m not Black? But I’d took this Black identity on for all these years […] and now you’re telling me […] on my Black side … […]
you’re now saying actually you can’t come there because you’re not Black […] and I started to question then […] when I was fourteen, fifteen, that’s when I started to realise actually, I’m not Black.

It is precisely these transformative impacts and emotive reactions towards horizontal hostility that reveal how important the concept is for theorizing mixed-race. In this excerpt, Chris is rendered outside the boundaries of the Black peer group. Perhaps more significantly for him, his membership within a Black ethnic group he had felt part of throughout his youth, is unexpectedly closed off to him. Although only a brief interaction, it had a lasting effect on his racialized sense of self. It provided him an important lesson on the instability and uncertainty of ethnic identity (Hall 1990).

**Conclusion**

This paper brings horizontal hostility into the conceptual frameworks of Critical Mixed Race Studies in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of mixed-race subjectivity. The experiences of horizontal hostility, and the reactions to it, differed along lines of gender and across social generations. These findings signal the continued need for intersectional, historical analyses of mixed-race identities that critically explore how mixed-race subjects locate themselves in the social worlds they inhabit and how this can impact on their future identity choices. Building on the literature that shows how White hegemonic discourses of race emerge as an oppressive force in the lives of Black mixed-race populations, horizontal hostility identifies the complex ways that binary discourses of race are, at times, made to work by Black counterparts. Although language has been developed to describe the unique prejudice that mixed-race people might experience because they are perceived as unable to fit neatly into discrete ethnic and racial categories, there is less exploration of how the implications of such prejudice might vary dependent on who it is that is expressing these views.

Horizontal hostility identifies this absence by tracing how these types of prejudice, when expressed by Black counterparts, can prompt Black mixed-race people to feel (ostensibly and momentarily) inferior but most importantly, position them as *inauthentic* Black people. Unlike everyday experiences of White racisms which many participants were able to comprehend, horizontal hostility emerges as a phenomenon that is not as easily described or knowable. It tended to be articulated as epiphanies in their lives, unlike White structural racisms which most were able to recognize and go on to find methods to negotiate relatively early on. However, many participants lacked the ability to make sense of and reconcile Black rejection. Prejudice from their Black counterparts was often unexpected, especially given their perceived shared racial location. Therefore, in many ways, it was this experience that seemed to have the most transformative impact on *identification*.
processes, especially in relation to mixedness. Although many identified themselves as Black throughout the life-course, and were acutely aware of their minority positions as people of colour, it was encounters with horizontal hostility when participants’ mixed identities were often properly realized.

By tracing some of the intra-ethnic tensions within heterogeneous Black communities this paper also has relevance for debates about race and racism beyond the realm of mixed-race studies. The tendency for some participants to articulate horizontal hostility as a form of “racist” expression, indicates the pressing need to “discern the … back stories to social phenomena [like horizontal hostility] which are said to be racist”, to explore how and why they might come to be seen as such within intra-ethnic relations (Song 2014, 126). The accounts also raise important questions about Black identity; how its boundaries have been defined through time and who it is that polices, and has ownership over them. It is hoped that this will add to critical debates relating to the future formation and maintenance of ethnic group identities and categories. More specifically, the paper has evidenced some of the issues that can arise from essentialist and ultimately fragmented conceptualisations of Black identity. In light of this, it shows the need for a conceptualization of Blackness that recognizes the ever-growing diversity of the Black experience, to maintain the strength of Black political struggles and empower the Black community long into the future.

Notes

1. “Black mixed race” is mostly used to refer to the research population, to signal and recognize the centrality of “Blackness” as a determining factor in participants lives and “race” as a salient discourse that they encounter.
2. The term is derived from the Spanish and Portuguese fifteenth century word “mula”, meaning mule; the offspring of a donkey and a horse. Used historically throughout the Americas, generally in reference to persons with one White European descended, and one Black African descended parent.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Remi Joseph-Salisbury and Claire Alexander for their insightful comments on the draft of this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/J500094/1].
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