The construction and understanding of mixed-race identities at a superdiverse youth football club: Hybridity, confusion and contra-fusion

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Abstract
Using the findings of two years’ ethnographic fieldwork, the article examines the construction and understanding of mixed-race identities at a football club situated in a superdiverse area of London. It describes how the characteristics of superdiversity together with the dynamic between parents/guardians, children, coaches and scouts shape people’s perceptions of the ethnic options available to mixed-race young people. I try to show how assertions relating to these ethnic options are consistent with understandings of hybridity. More specifically, there is a tension between fusion and preservation and in some instances a slippage between discourses of biology and culture. This reflects confusion about mixedness and leads to what I have called ‘contra-fusion’: a way of reasoning that resists the formation of integrated mixed identities by emphasising the preservation of raced and gendered inheritances in the constitution of mixedness.

Keywords
ethnography, hybridity, identity, mixed race, race, sport, superdiversity

The growth of Britain’s mixed-race population has prompted enquiry into the numerous discourses which contribute to the shaping of mixed identities. Existing research on mixedness has encompassed discourses of ‘race’, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexuality and nationhood (Joseph-Salisbury, 2018; Song, 2003; Tyler, 2005) and demonstrated how, in articulating these, mixed-race people show an appreciation of their ethnic options (Song, 2003, 2010; Song & Hashem, 2010; Waters, 1990).

Many scholars have used the concept of hybridity to examine the construction and understanding of mixed identities. Ifekwunigwe (1999), in particular, charts the emergence
of hybridity in the context of nineteenth-century race science (fiction) and its continued influence in thwarting an integrated sense of self for mixed-race people. More recently, Joseph-Salisbury (2018, p. 5) has explored what he calls ‘post-racial’ resilience in the case of Black mixed-race men who use racial symbolism amid ‘a ceaseless process of hybridisation’ in resisting attempts to erase their identities.

In conducting these investigations researchers have opposed the idea that mixed identities and identifications necessarily undermine the fixity of ‘race’ and racial categories (Olumide, 2002). Indeed, many see in the construction and understanding of mixedness the reworking and reinscription of racialised modes of thinking (Aspinall & Song, 2013), or what Gilroy (2000, p. 11) has called ‘raciology, the lore that brings the virtual realities of “race” to dismal and destructive life’.

Using the findings of two years’ ethnographic fieldwork, this article explores how mixed-race identities are constructed and understood at a youth football club situated in a superdiverse (Vertovec, 2007) area of London. It examines how the characteristics of superdiversity together with the dynamic between parents/guardians, children, coaches and scouts informed people’s perceptions of the ethnic options available to mixed-race young people. Mixed identities were shaped by factors such as place and proximity to whiteness while reproducing a number of familiar assertions about racial difference. Indeed, I seek to underline the importance of using the lived realities of mixedness, across a plurality of mixed identities, to challenge the essentialised, romantic notions that have become associated with the category mixed race.

I try to show how, at HFC, the various contingent ways that mixedness is understood are consistent with understandings of hybridity. There is a tension between fusion and preservation and in some instances a slippage between discourses of biology and culture. This reflects confusion about mixedness and leads to what I have called ‘contra-fusion’: a way of reasoning that resists the formation of integrated mixed identities (Ifekwunigwe, 1999) by emphasising the preservation of raced and gendered inheritances in the constitution of mixedness.

**Mixedness in Britain: Ethnic options, discursive intersections and hybridity**

A number of studies have demonstrated that mixed-race individuals exercise choice when it comes to their ethno-racial identities (Song 2003, 2010; Song & Hashem, 2010; Waters, 1990). Thus whereas some mixed-race individuals opt for a single racial identification (i.e. black or white), others choose a hyphenated or mixed identification. Another option entails carving out an identity which seemingly transcends the labels and connotations which have historically attended systems of racial classification (Aspinall, 2003; Mahtani, 2002; Song, 2003).

However, in many instances the identifications of mixed-race individuals are not validated – or ‘passed’ (Ali, 2003) – by others (Campbell & Troyer, 2007). There is therefore a discrepancy – or ‘mismatch’ (Song & Aspinall, 2012) – between expressed (internal) and observed (external) ethno-racial identifications (Aspinall, 2003; Patel, 2009). Harris and Sim (2002) have added a third party to the dynamic, distinguishing between ‘internal identities’ (how the individual perceives herself), ‘expressed identities’ (how the
individual conveys her sense of self) and ‘observed identities’ (how others ascribe labels to the individual on the basis of her phenotype). Mixed people’s awareness of how others see them, what Khanna (2004) has called ‘reflected appraisals’ (inspired by W. E. B. Du Bois’ famous notion of African-American ‘double consciousness’ [1903]), is also influential in shaping their racial identifications.

In getting to grips with the processes and dynamics of mixed-race identification, researchers have pointed to a number of intersections. Song and Aspinall (2012; Aspinall & Song, 2013) noted a gendered propensity among women to see themselves as mixed, rather than belonging to a single racial group, while in his study of Black mixed-race men (BMRM), Joseph-Salisbury (2018) demonstrates how, ‘at the intersection of race and gender, BMRM occupy very particular positions that cannot be understood through existing explanatory frameworks’ (p. 190). The intersection of racial and national identifications is highlighted by Ifekwunigwe (1997), who demonstrates how dominant discourses of Englishness and, more specifically, their depiction of it as exclusively white, preclude mixed-race children from asserting an English identity. Similar questions have been raised in a historical context, where Bland (2017, p. 432) writes of the mixed-race offspring of African-American GIs and white British women who met during the Second World War: ‘They represented a challenge to national and racial boundaries and to the neat polarity between the white British and the non-white, colonized, racial “other”.’ Extending the matrix of intersection to include social class, Aspinall (2003) contends that those from disadvantaged backgrounds have fewer ethnic options from which to choose.

In her study of the inheritance of interracial identities in Leicester, Tyler (2005) discovered narratives of inheritance which appealed (variously) to discourses of biology, nature, genetic origins, cultural affiliations, religious devotion, upbringing and environment, while for the BMRM studied by Joseph-Salisbury (2018), processes of everyday hybridisation spanned discourses of race, ethnicity, culture, ancestral nationality, class and masculinity. Related studies conducted in the United States (Bratter, 2007; Phillips et al., 2007) concluded that middle-class respondents were more likely to frame their identity using discourses of genetic variation which in their opinion had rendered any affirmation of racial differences untenable. In doing so they satisfied a desire born of their political allegiances to challenge the integrity of biological races. However, Song (2017) found an inconsistency between middle-class parents’ denials of the biological basis of ‘race’ and the invocation of blood quanta and racial fractions to identify their children.

The parent/guardian–child relationship is influential in the wider dynamics of mixed-race identity. Cabellero et al. (2008) have described how ‘mixed-parent’ couples use an individual (no rootedness in mixed identity), mix (all elements of mixedness emphasised) or single (one element of mixedness emphasised) approach to instilling a sense of belonging in their children. Ifekwunigwe (1999) notes how, for a group of ‘one-drop rule “Black”’ daughters, their white mothers were central to the retelling of their life stories. These mothers were instrumental in the transmission of white English culture, with attendant cultural codes ‘refiﬁed at the expense of Black African or Caribbean referents’ (1999, p. 161). Indeed, for some respondents this imbalance was tantamount to malnourishment. In the case of Song’s (2017) multiracial parents, concerns over how mixed they
and their children were weighed on their minds when it came to identities and identifications. One mixed (South Asian/white) parent spoke of his Indian ancestry being ‘diluted’ from one generation to the next, with Song (2017, p. 10) subsequently finding that, for some multiracial parents, there is (or would be) ‘a generational tipping point at which one’s mixedness and/or minority ancestry becomes inconsequential’. However, most multiracial parents felt sadness and concern at such dilution – or in Song’s terms, at the generational locus of mixture being more remote than immediate – and responded by trying to revitalise their minority ancestry. For some this revitalisation involved decisions over whom to partner with, while for others it was more performative.

The performativity of mixed identity is captured nicely in the case of BMRM by Joseph-Salisbury (2018), particularly in his use of Khanna’s (2011) work to frame how dress-styles, speech-styles, hair-styles and music-styles are utilised by his respondents as symbols of race, culture, ethnicity and identity. In an echo of the multiracial parents concerned by ‘dilution’, it was to the ‘Black mixed-race men who were susceptible to being misread as white that the biggest threat was posed’ (Joseph-Salisbury, 2018, p. 189). This could lead to over-compensatory performances in which the repertoire of racial, ethnic, cultural and identity-based symbols outlined above were used to emphasise and insist upon their identification with Blackness.

As noted above, in theorising the processes bound up with the formation of mixed-race identities, many scholars have drawn on the concept of hybridity. Ifekwunigwe (1999) describes how the notion of biological hybridity was added to the monogenesis (shared origins) versus polygenesis (separate origins) debate by the American physician and natural historian Samuel Morton in the nineteenth century. As she argues of the use of hybridity to label intergroup mating and marriages (1999, p. 9), “‘Hybrid’ meaning ‘impure,’ ‘racially contaminated,’ a genetic ‘deviation’ was the zoological term deployed to describe the offspring of ‘mixed race crossings.’” And though in the twentieth century the concept came to denote forms of cultural synthesis (Canclini, 1989), the tension between hybridity’s older (biological) and newer (cultural) discourses and referents remains largely unresolved (Malik, 1996). The inability to reconcile the two corresponds with another contradiction, that between preservation and fusion in the context of cultural hybridity. As Young observes (1994, p. 23):

Today the notion is often proposed of a new cultural hybridity in Britain, a transmutation of British culture into a compounded, composite mode. The condition of that transformation is held out to be the preservation of a degree of cultural and ethnic difference. While hybridity denotes a fusion, it also describes a dialectical articulation.

The slippage between biological and cultural modes of discourse and the tension between preservation and fusion continue to mark the discussion and invocation of hybridity. The forms of post-racial resilience exhibited by Joseph-Salisbury’s (2018, p. 5) cohort of BMRM are deployed amidst ‘a ceaseless process of hybridisation (read as culture)’ in which discourses of race are articulated with notions of ethnicity, culture, ancestral nationality, class and masculinity. This post-racial resilience is also signalled by the men’s attempts to refuse the fragmentation of their racial identities and the confusion this entails. As one respondent, Reggie, says of a confrontation between ‘African males’ and ‘regular
black males’ that occurred at his school, ‘I never understood that because I was like on the fence and I had a bunch of different races within me, it was like what was I supposed to be like?’ (quoted in Joseph-Salisbury, 2018, p. 167). For Ifekwunigwe (1999, p. 174), the tension between preservation and fusion frustrates the desire for an integrated sense of self: ‘this psycho-social splitting breeds métisse confusion . . . the more sensible existential project should be that of psychic and social unity’. Rigid, bi-racialised understandings of mixedness – elsewhere labelled black–white binarism (Song, 2017) – that ascribe ‘symbolic and frequently oppositional meanings to perceived or real (i.e. physical) differences’ (Ifekwunigwe, 1999, p. 188) were also to blame here. As noted by Song (2017), despite growing diversity in the constitution of people’s mixedness, the black–white duality remains the archetype of racial difference in the context of racial mixing. This unwarranted focus, one reproduced in commentary on sport, may have obscured other processes of racial formation, i.e. the possibility that people of particular mixes consider themselves a race apart from an unspecified mixed-race population.

Drawing on Omi and Winant’s (1994) notions of racial formation and racial project, Carrington urges us to conduct ‘sporting racial projects’ by studying the way that sport tends to shape, not simply reflect, the racial discourses which circulate within wider society. As he puts it, ‘Sport helps to make race make sense and then sport works to reshape race’ (2010, p. 66 [emphasis in original]). It is surprising that researchers in the sociology of sport have yet to address the relationship between mixedness, superdiversity and sport: Olympic champion heptathlete Jessica Ennis was hailed as ‘the face’ of the 2011 Census; the number of mixed-race players in the England men’s football team has been celebrated as a sign of multicultural harmony (Olusoga, 2018); while Song’s insights with regard to dilution and generational tipping points have played out in debates about the racial identity of high-profile British footballers such as Ross Barkley and Ryan Giggs (Crampton, 2009; Parveen, 2017).

That said, a number of scholars have shown how racism operates within particular sporting subcultures (Back et al., 2001; King, 2004). Others have set out to document how the sporting body is racialised. Fleming (2001) and St Louis (2003), respectively, have analysed assumptions about the hyper-physicality of black athletes, with both pointing to the syllogistic processes through which these assumptions are reproduced. Similar processes are examined through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) by Hylton (2008), while Carrington (2010) shows how discourses of physicality, violence and sexuality figure in the political meanings and global impact of the black athlete. Finally, Burdsey (2006a, 2006b, 2007) has described how British imperial assumptions about the Asian body combine with structural impediments to exclude British Asians from professional football.

Following the call for research into the construction of mixed-race identities in super-diverse areas (Song & Hashem, 2010) and for greater focus on the generational dimension of mixed identities (Song, 2017), here I draw on the findings of two years’ ethnography at a youth football club in describing and analysing the construction and understanding of mixed-race identities.

I try to show how, at the football club in question, understandings of mixedness were not unitary or inherently progressive. They were forged in relation to the perceived expectations of ‘expert’ onlookers and other factors such as place, social class, ethnicity,
age and generation. However, these various understandings seemed to reflect the tensions and contradictions inherent in notions of hybridity. More specifically, confusion about mixed identities promoted a logic of contra-fusion consistent with fragmented identities wherein raced and gendered inheritances were preserved. In some respects people’s confusion was heightened by the superdiverse environment in which they lived, and it is to the characteristics of superdiversity and the methods used at the club that discussion now turns.

Superdiversity at Hanfield FC

In introducing the concept of superdiversity, Vertovec (2007) addressed the relationship between changing population configuration and patterns of global migration. As well as migrants hailing from a wider range of national, ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds, recent decades have seen a diversification of movement flows, legal statuses, levels of human capital, etc. with new patterns of inequality, segregation, cultural mixing and mobility emerging.

The population of ‘Hanfield’, a district located only a couple of miles outside central London, certainly meets all of Vertovec’s criteria. According to census results, its residents are drawn from over 100 ethnic groups, and the category ‘white’, for example, is fractured into more than 35 sub-groups, including Italian, Albanian, Kosovan, Greek, Chilean, Irish, Iranian and Israeli. Mixed-race people comprise more than 6% of Hanfield’s populace, around three times the national average. As well as reflecting these demographic characteristics, the football club where the ethnographic fieldwork was conducted, Hanfield FC (HFC), also illustrates some of superdiversity’s other facets. Ethnicity was fractured along the lines of human capital and legal status, with families belonging to the same ethnic group also differentiated by levels of wealth and income. Furthermore, different trajectories of migration accounted for their presence in London.

The club had 22 teams, both male and female, ranging from under-8 to under-17 level. After speaking with the club’s owners about the nature and objectives of the study, it was decided that I would take on a coaching position. The parents of children on each of the three teams I was involved with were informed of the purpose of the study, and consented to it taking place. For two seasons I spent around four hours per week in the company of children, parents and other coaches, whether at training sessions, matches or other club functions. I followed the conventions of the ethnographic approach, combining observation, participant observation and in-depth interviews (O’Reilly, 2011) to explore how mixed-race identities were constructed and understood by players, parents and coaches. Because the majority of players I coached were very young (aged between 8 and 11), it was agreed that I would only conduct in-depth interviews with coaches and parents, and 15 of these interviews (averaging 45 minutes in duration and recorded using a digital dictation device) were conducted in the course of the study. Topics discussed included the terms used to describe mixed-race young players, the strengths and weaknesses of these players, how these players made sense of inheritances from their parents, and other issues which arose during the course of the interviews. Thirty-one shorter, unplanned conversations were also written up – and checked with discussants for
fairness and accuracy – while observations I made while standing on the touchline proved valuable.

In reflecting on the possible impact of my being in the field on the research process itself (Davies, 1999), the fact that my role as researcher was coupled with that of coach was crucial in terms of minimising social distance. Indeed, as with others operating as ‘insiders’ within sporting institutions (Campbell, 2015), this status had certain implications. While the length of time I spent in the field reduced the likelihood of subjects acting differently in my presence, allowing me to build close researcher–participant relationships, it could lead to complacency about taking identities at ‘face value’ (Gunaratnam, 2003). As someone who lived in the area and was immersed in the day-to-day operations of the club, I had to guard against documenting what ‘I knew’ at the expense of what was said or observed (Campbell, 2015).

Hybridity, fusion and confusion: Parents as placeholders and guarantors

The issues of context, ethnic choice and possibility of racial mismatch all influenced the construction of mixed-race identities at HFC. More specifically, these related to the processes of identity, identification and ascription which researchers have labelled ‘passing’. As Ali (2003, p. 13) has noted, ‘a person of “mixed-race” may indeed pass as white, or in some way become an “honorary white” if the rest of their social credentials fit in with that of the hegemonic discourses of cultural and national acceptability’. There are many parties to the process of passing, not all of whom, however, participate in the process willingly and/or wittingly. For example, an individual can be mistakenly passed, being incorrectly identified as belonging to a given racial or ethnic group by others without his or her knowledge; as noted above, Song and Aspinall (2012) have called this racial mismatch.

At HFC, various instances relating to passing were illustrative of racial match/mismatch, as well as the wider dynamics of mixed-race identification and recognition. In response to ‘micro-ambiguities’ regarding physical appearance, phenotypical markers (Ifekwunigwe, 1999) and the complex ethno-racial optic they corresponded with, many onlookers used parents as placeholders and guarantors. There are precedents for this in the literature on mixedness and hybridity. In exploring the dynamics of mixed identity in the case of her respondent, Ruby, and her children, Ifekwunigwe (1999, p. 83) notes, ‘As children, in the public sphere, unless they are directly associated with someone Black, it is assumed they are White.’ As we will see, assumptions like this had important implications for the prospects of passing at HFC, together with questions about racial identity which were posed in the private sphere.

Arbim, Kosovan father of 10-year-old Arbnor, told of his difficulty in identifying an opposing player after being sent on an impromptu scouting mission.

Arbim: Arbnor’s coach asked me to look at a player of another team we play the next week, as they [the team] was playing at a park near to us. He says, ‘he is the mixed boy in midfield’. But when I get there I say to myself, ‘How am I going to spot him?’ It’s difficult to see this. And very different
for me. So many different colours . . . [and] my kids weren’t there to help. At half-time I think I know but still not sure. But then I see him going to speak with his parents. Then I’m more sure!

As well as reinforcing the role of parents in clarifying a confusing ethno-racial optic, once again these comments point to the complexities of superdiversity and how they shape understandings of mixedness. Here we have a product of ‘new migration’ (Vertovec, 2007), perhaps habituated to a different way of ‘seeing race’, struggling to get to grips with Hanfield’s welter of ethno-racial markers. Arbim’s words also hinted at generational differences in terms of the ability to identify and interpret these markers. While Song (2017) underlines the importance of a generational perspective in the case of mixed people as parents and their relationship with their children, it is evident that there are generational differences when it comes to ‘seeing’ and detecting mixedness.

A more unexpected part of this phenomenon was the perception of some parents that professional scouts who came to watch matches in search of exceptionally talented youngsters were inclined to recruit players who fitted a black–white, ‘balanced binary’ archetype of mixedness.

The use of racial profiling by football’s talent-spotters is nothing new. In his study of British Asians and football, Burdsey (2007) describes how an echoing of anti-racist rhetoric from club representatives is contradicted by forms of institutional racism that see scouts consistently ignore talented young Asian players because of assumptions about culture and physicality. Asian players and their families are also typically excluded from the social relations that have formed the bedrock of professional scouting networks in the UK.

The issue for scouts watching matches at HFC was that, faced with a sea of different phenotypical markers, it was hard to accurately identify players of mixed, black–white backgrounds. Ostensibly this seemed to highlight the ability of mixedness to ‘obstruct whatever purpose race is being put to at a particular time’ (Olumide, 2002, p. 2). But the behaviour of some parents (and of scouts themselves) indicated that this wasn’t actually the case.

I spoke to Danny, cab driver and father of 9-year-old Josh, who explained the logic behind his decision to shave Josh’s head regularly to keep it looking ‘sharp’:

Danny: Three of the last four players taken by professional academies have been mixed [race]. My boy’s mixed race; I’m white – but his mum’s mixed race, part Caribbean. He’s sort of olive-skinned . . . His hair isn’t, like, tight like his mum’s or wavy like some of the other mixed [race] lads, [it’s] just straight like mine. But you can only see that when it’s pretty long. . . . When it’s short you can’t tell, I think he looks more mixed [race]. Specially if his mum isn’t here.

Here Danny spoke about the phenotypical markers of his son in relation to various mixed (black–white) and white inheritances. The authenticity of Josh’s mixedness could be signalled by the presence of his mother, whose appearance was consistent with the ‘balanced binary’ archetype presupposed by scouts. In the context of this perceived preference for mixed, black–white players, Danny worried that his son – because of his straight hair and the presence of his white father on the touchline – would be passed as white.
Aware of the implications of dilution and that Josh did not fit the scouts’ mixed-race archetype, Danny staged an over-compensatory performance (Joseph-Salisbury, 2018). He used hair as a racial symbol (Khanna, 2011) – a familiar strategy of resistance and persecution along racial lines (Ali, 2003; Ifekwunigwe, 1999) – to attract the attention of the professional football scout. In effect, Danny first exercised double consciousness and then chose an ethnic option, in both instances on his son’s behalf.

As well as underlining the normality of mixedness in Hanfield (Cabellero, 2012), the episode involving Danny and Josh showed how sporting spaces are home to concerns and anxieties about mixed-race identity. Danny used an over-compensatory performance to assert that his son’s racial identity should be posited before, rather than after, a racial tipping point (Song, 2017). This reflected an insistence that in Josh’s case the specific locus of mixture was more proximate than might otherwise be perceived (Song, 2017).

For scouts and other interested parties, then, a glance at parents could be enough to confirm or reject the possibility that a youngster’s bodily markers were consistent with the mixed archetype they had in mind. But if parents didn’t provide the desired level of phenotypical clarity or, indeed, only one or neither parent was present, more explicit assurances were sought.

I spoke to Sandra, white mother of 10-year-old Brandon and a teaching assistant at a local secondary school, about her son’s recent selection by a Premier League scout and, more specifically, whether his being mixed race had played a part.

Sandra: . . . the scout did approach Ben [the coach], asking to speak to Brandon’s parents. And with us there’s only me; me and Brandon’s [black] dad are separated. . . . And, when I thought about it, he [the scout] did ask about Brandon’s dad. Where he was from and that. And he didn’t mean Hanfield or Gateford; he was talking about race.

This prompted Sandra to tell an anecdote about one of Brandon’s former teammates.

Sandra: There was this kid on Brandon’s team when they were under-8s, Noah. . . . Hardly ever saw his parents but they were American; his mum was Hispanic I think. Anyway, the same club’s come to look for players – different scout that time – and noticed Noah who played all right that day. He’s seen Noah getting a drink from Nina, the family’s nanny, at half-time – she almost always brought him – and because she was black, Portugese I think, he’s obviously thought Noah was mixed. Anyway, the scout’s approached Nina at the end but hasn’t taken Noah when he found out she was the nanny, not his mum. Priceless!

In speaking to other coaches I ascertained that Noah’s parents were indeed Spanish-American, and that they employed a nanny who had moved to London from São Tomé (via Lisbon). Here, again, the realities of contemporary labour migration to a superdiverse city like London served to complicate the phenotypical picture that confronted scouts.

In an effort to avoid racial mismatch (Aspinall & Song, 2013), in some instances these complications led scouts to seek parental guarantees from coaches:
Fabian (coach of an under-12 team): For them to ask about parents is normal. . . . Whether they’re reliable. . . . But over the last two or three years I noticed they tend to go for mixed-race boys and, if the parents aren’t around, ask me about their [the parents’] background. . . . I remember a particular guy [scout] asking about where this lad John’s parents were from. His dad’s black and mum’s Asian – she’s from Sri Lanka – I had to ask John! You couldn’t tell from looking at him whether he was black, Asian or mixed race. So I guess the guy wanted to know for sure.

Dave (coach of an under-13 team): Yep, I’ve had them check with me whether a player’s mixed. . . . Almost always by asking about parents. Where they’re from, what they’re like. . . . You can’t tell by just looking.

Parents evidently played an important role in scouts’ attempts to fix the racial identity of players. To dispel any confusion, scouts looked for parental evidence of the black–white, ‘balanced binary’ archetype which they identified with mixedness. In these terms, a youngster wouldn’t be passed as (archetypally) ‘mixed’ until the terms of the process had got past mum and/or dad. As we will see now, in moving beyond phenotype to perceived credentials and characteristics, the tension between fusion and preservation inherent in hybrid framings of mixedness was influential.

The other side of hybridity: Contra-fusion or the preservation of raced and gendered inheritances

The tension between fusion and preservation was settled in favour of the latter when it came to young people’s attributes and inheritances as players. Here any confusion over phenotypical appearances was set aside, as people reasserted a familiar set of assumptions about ‘race’ and gender and brought this to bear on the constitution of mixed identities. This reasoning, or ‘contra-fusion’, hindered the formation of integrated mixed identities and again took place partly in the context of scouts’ perceived preference for mixed, black–white players.

Thirty-one-year-old Carl coached an under-14s boys’ team, but also worked as a development coach at a local professional academy. I asked him about the scouts’ supposed criteria for selecting players.

Carl: I think there’s definitely something in it. There’s an idea that mixed-race players will have pace, strength and power and mental strength . . . discipline and all that.

JRT: So it’s the best of both worlds in terms of racial characteristics?

Carl: Yeah.
Carl’s comments again presupposed a binary, black–white archetype for mixedness. Furthermore, his remarks seemed to hark back to old racial polarities and the ascription of mind and body to black and white races, respectively (Fleming, 2001; Gilroy, 2000). It wasn’t that young players were fixed by a white gaze that was unwilling or unable to see their mixedness because of dominant tropes like the ‘Black monster’ (Joseph-Salisbury, 2018), an ‘indistinguishable, amorphous, black seething mass, a token of danger, a threat, a criminal, a burden, a rapacious animal incapable of delayed gratification’ (Yancy, 2017, p. 19). Rather, in the fragmented identity imputed to mixed, black–white players, elements of this stereotype relating to physicality were combined with stereotypically white traits like discipline and mental strength. This logic chimes with bi-racialised understandings of mixedness in ascribing ‘symbolic and frequently oppositional meanings to perceived or real (i.e. physical) differences’ (Ifekwunigwe, 1999, p. 188). It is interesting to note that the perceived benefits afforded by proximity to whiteness (Joseph-Salisbury, 2018) at HFC were cognitive and temperamental, whereas in other contexts professional scouts have claimed that this proximity can reduce the significance of supposed cultural difficulties (e.g. for mixed white-Asian young players; see Burdsey, 2007).

When it came to the youngsters themselves, they appeared to look to their parents in an attempt to rationalise their inherited attributes. A collision between discourses of ‘race’ and gender was important here. This was unsurprising given these discourses are inextricably entangled in processes concerning hybrid and mixed identities, in particular (Ali, 2003; Joseph-Salisbury, 2018). Youngsters (both boys and girls) spoke of players being more physically powerful if they had more in the way of black genetic inheritance, thereby reinscribing assumptions about black male hyper-physicality (Carrington, 2010; Fleming, 2001; St Louis, 2003). However, another assumption held that if the ‘black’ component of a player’s genetic inheritance had been provided by his/her father, rather than his/her mother, he/she would be faster and/or stronger. This seemed to imply that black male physicality, even when embodied in a mixed-race individual, possessed an elemental force lacking in black female physicality. This was a reiteration of black–white binarism which also coded inheritances along gender lines, with the archetypal role of mother as purveyor of culture (Hernandez-Ramdwar, 1994; Ifekwunigwe, 1999) matched by that of a father identified with biological inheritances.

The father of 10-year-old Shay, Martin, said that the issue of his son’s ethno-racial identity had only recently become an issue:

Martin: He asked about it. ‘Where are you from? Where’s mum from?’ I’m white and his mum’s from the Far East. He asked whether he was mixed race. So I said, ‘yes’. He’s obviously always known where we’re from but we hadn’t said ‘mixed race’ or ‘how mixed’ when talking about it. He then asked whether he might be better at football because he was mixed. I said I doubt it, ‘cos though I see that loads of professionals these days are mixed, he’s not the same mix as them.

Once again this underlined the dominance of a balanced, black–white binary norm that mixed players were measured against. However, while Martin narrated and positioned
his son’s mixedness partly in relation to this binary norm, his words indicated that no single, unitary notion of mixedness circulated at the club.

Danny spoke to me about a conversation he had had with his son, Josh, after the latter had been ‘marked out of the game’ by a black player on an opposing team:

Danny: This kid on the other side had his number from the start. Muscling him off the ball. On the way home we had this weird chat about why Josh wasn’t as big and fast as the other lad . . . [Josh] asked if the other kid was bigger and stronger because he was ‘blacker’. He talked about him only being a bit black – because his mum’s only half-and-half – and I’m white. He also asked if he’d be stronger if things were the other way round; if I was the mixed [race] one, and his mum was white.

Conversations like this between parent and child illustrate the importance of a generational perspective on mixedness and how identities designated by parents – particularly in the context of concerns about belonging, dilution and tipping points – are not straightforwardly adopted by children (Cabellero et al., 2008; Song, 2017). There are many factors which could shape young Josh’s understanding of his racial identity. Given that his white father normally accompanied him to football rather than his mixed (black–white) mother, there was the possibility he would veer towards a white identity, particularly in a societal context where this identity afforded distinct advantages. However, this would create a familial rupture between Josh and his mum in terms of their respective racial identities (Song, 2017), while also complicating the dynamic was the advantage that conforming to a mixed, black–white archetype conferred in the eyes of his dad (vis-a-vis scouts). He may therefore choose an identity which benefited from proximity to whiteness as opposed to absolute identification with it (Joseph-Salisbury, 2018). Josh’s remarks indicate that it was too soon to determine which option he favoured. What was clear, however, was that to counter his confusion about his racial identity and how black he really was, he reasoned in terms of ‘contra-fusion’, or the preservation of raced and gendered inheritances.

In another exchange which endorsed Ifekwunigwe’s (1999, p. 182) claim that ‘for mixed families, public racial politics govern private family relations’, Sally, white British mother of 14-year-old Jess, recalled chatting with her daughter about raced and gendered inheritances:

Sally: She’d been playing so well . . . [She] told me that other kids in the team had said that she’s quicker because she’s mixed – and not just that, because her dad [African-American sports coach, Rod] is black . . . . She said they’d even compared her to another mixed-race girl on her team, Naomi, saying Naomi wasn’t as quick because her dad was white and mum was mixed.

JRT: Do you think there’s anything in it?
Sally: I don’t know . . . perhaps. I mean Rod has talked about him doing well at sports at university in the States because of his background. So maybe that shows in Jess . . . she certainly doesn’t get it from me!
As in other research settings (Joseph-Salisbury, 2018; Mac an Ghaill, 1994), the relationship between racial identity and the formation of peer groups seemed to become important as children got older. I spoke with Andrew and Grace, parents of 7-year-old Simon and his elder sister, 13-year-old Lorraine, about the evolution of Lorraine’s racial identity. The conversation illustrated how upholding the preservation of ethnic and racial inheritances was used to combat uncertainty about racial identity while also exhibiting a slippage between discourses of biology and culture in the context of these ‘Asian’ and ‘white’ inheritances.

Grace: Lorraine has asked about it over the past few years. Roughly began when she started secondary school. You wouldn’t pick up on the fact she’s mixed [race]. She could just be white. I’m Anglo-Indian and Andrew’s white, so it’s never really been a thing for her – though we’ve obviously chatted about what the kids have inherited from each of us in terms of ethnicity. But she asks now. More about my background. About how Asian and mixed she is.

Andrew: Yeah. Apparently some of the girls she plays with – who she’s also at school with – have spoken about it. One of the best players on their team, Suzie, is mixed race . . . so maybe that has something to do with it.

A minority of middle-class parents, like a number of respondents in US studies of mixed-race identity (Bratter, 2007; Philips et al., 2007), rejected the idea that racial differences existed, premising this rejection on expert knowledge of genetics and/or an ongoing commitment to anti-racism. Nevertheless, in making sense of a mixed-race youngster’s inheritances these parents’ reasoning still signalled a separation of groups, though the groups they identified might be labelled according to the vocabulary of genetic populations, rather than ‘race’. These groupings were more numerous and the differences between them less stark, but the idea that genetic differences might be insignificant in determining attributes such as athleticism was laughed off as ‘silly’. It was simply that, as noted in other studies of mixed-race identity (Aspinall, 2003; Song, 2017), class differences afforded more or less refined ways to talk about mixedness and human variation. It also seemed that involvement in sport – and the discussions about things like athleticism which it prompted – teased out the significance of ‘race’ to people’s identities (both adults and children) (Campbell, 2015; Joseph-Salisbury, 2018). It was here, as in Campbell’s (2015) research as an ‘insider’ at a football club, that the benefits of the ethnographic approach were felt.

I approached the parents of 12-year-old Jane, Gerry and Vicky, to ask if their daughter had spoken to them about her white British background.

Vicky: . . . she has spoken to us about race and her football. We try to explain that it’s all a bit of a myth.

Gerry: Yeah, I work in medicine, so I tell her that it’s much more complicated than her mates make out. . . . That it’s not about something as simple as race, but more about lots and lots of groups of people, with small differences between them in terms of, you know, strengths and weaknesses in sport or whatever. I think she’s a bit conflicted about it.
Another set of parents on Jane’s team was John and Rebecca. Their child, Sarah, was also white, and they had strong views on the possible physical advantages held by mixed, black–white players:

Rebecca: . . . we don’t believe in race. Of course, there are differences between these kids – groups that do exist with differences between them – but, no. We met at university and studied this kind of thing, so we still hold the view that there are no racial differences.

John: Yes, exactly. It’d be silly to deny when watching the girls play that differences aren’t there. But we have both learned about the damage race has done. [In response to a question about which groups do exist]: Well, depends on region – you know, west African or east African or whatever – culture, loads of factors, but nothing like, you know, four or five races.

Here we see the kind of shift in register between discourses of biology and culture that has long marked the formation of hybrid, mixed identities, this time in the context of a rejection of so-called racial differences.

Conclusion

The findings presented above strengthen many of the claims made by scholars of mixed-race identity. The assertions and ways of reasoning regarding mixedness found at HFC demonstrate the ongoing influence of binarism together with an awareness of the dynamics of passing (Ali, 2003) and the possibility of racial mismatch (Song & Aspinall, 2012). Amid these dynamics was an attentiveness to issues of dilution, tipping points and generational differences (Song, 2017). Relatedly, elements of double consciousness led to displays of over-compensation (Joseph-Salisbury, 2018), with such performances and associated discussions pointing up intersections between gender and ‘race’ (Aspinall & Song, 2013; Joseph-Salisbury, 2018; Song & Aspinall, 2012).

This set of findings strongly endorses Song’s (2017) non-normative, non-celebratory stance towards mixedness, providing further evidence that assertions of mixed-race identity do not necessarily reject the underlying premise of racial difference (Aspinall & Song, 2013). Indeed, what came across clearly at HFC was that mixed-race identities are constructed and understood against a backdrop of existing ideas about human variation. The fact this occurred in a superdiverse area stresses the importance of extending a critical and non-celebratory approach to the study of superdiversity (Back, 2015; Rosbrook-Thompson, 2018).

In analysing the interplay between mixed identities and the backdrop against which they are formed, I hope the article has been consistent in ‘de-naturalising’ notions of ‘race’ and ethnicity as things possessing a singular truth (Gunaratnam, 2003). Indeed, the article stresses the importance of extending the ‘de-essentialising’ project to mixedness by pointing to the contingencies which surround the construction of mixed identities in particular contexts. I hope, also, to have demonstrated how, to paraphrase Carrington (2010, p. 66) on sporting racial projects, sport helps to make mixed-race identities make sense and then sport works to reshape notions of mixed-race identity.
As well as demonstrating the continued influence of both binarism and a familiar clutch of assertions about ‘race’ and gender, this particular sporting racial project underlined the wider significance of discourses of hybridity (and their attendant tensions and contradictions) in shaping mixed identities. Amid a plurality of mixed identities constructed on the basis of factors including the ethno-racial composition and social class background of families, the specificities of place and (relatedly) a set of perceived ‘ethnic options’, hybrid framings of mixedness were common at HFC.

In the language of hybridity, the prospect of fusion in the case of mixed identities generated confusion which, in turn, fed a logic of contra-fusion through which raced and gendered differences were preserved. For visiting scouts, confusion was countered by identifying parents as symbols of certainty and ‘what came before’. Young players also looked back to their parents to combat uncertainty about mixed identity, including questions as to their credentials and aptitudes. Parents addressed these questions, drawing on discourses of hybridity and the dynamics of fusion and preservation, with some of their responses exhibiting slippages between notions of biology and culture.

Looking back yielded certainty about racial identity via a familiar set of assertions regarding raced and gendered inheritances. Forms of reasoning characterised by contra-fusion preserved these ideas and reproduced the contradictory dynamics of hybridity. That said, there were signs that the normalisation of mixedness was experienced differently across generations and, more specifically, that young players may read racial markers in more nuanced ways than their parents. Whether this will lead to more subtlety and a greater sense of integration in their evolving understandings of mixed identities, it’s too early in the game to tell.

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Note
1. I have changed the names of places (besides London), clubs and people to ensure anonymity.

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