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Running Head: MULTIRACIAL EXPERIENCE IN REDEFINING RACE

## The Multiracial Experience in Redefining Race

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## Abstract

Individuals who possess a mixed racial heritage may choose to self-identify with one or more than one race. Does this affect their concept of race? Using three samples of participants who possessed a monoracial or a multiracial background, it was found that those with a multiracial heritage were more likely than their monoracial peers to view race as a social rather than a biological concept. As America becomes more racially mixed, this facts may have a profound impact on the way Americans view race. We might expect them to view race as more socially constructed, malleable, and effervescent. Yet, change is always slow. In the short run—given that most Americans continue to think of race as a biological fact, and as TV crime shows and forensic psychologists further that notion with demonstrations of “racial profiling,” and as commercial DNA projects advertise for people to “find out what race you really are,” and “track your ancestors to see if you are related to Ghengis Khan—those of mixed race may for the moment find themselves out of step with the vision of their monoracial peers. It is also possible that they may lose some of the benefits that a clear, immutable racial definition provides.

### The Multiracial Experience in Redefining Race

Tiger Woods created his own racial identity, Cablinasian, to embody his Caucasian, Black, Indian, and Asian background (Kamiya, 1997). The independent control over one's racial identity may be spurred by the affordance of a variety of social changes. The 2000 United States Census, reflecting these changes, allowed people of multiracial ancestry to classify themselves in almost any way they chose. In the 2000 United States Census, those of multiracial ancestry could report all their racial influences, as opposed to previous U. S. Census reports which only permitted the choice of a single racial group. While such flexibility is new for mainland United States, people in the Hawaiian Islands have been identifying themselves via numerous and multiple racial labels. These days, it is becoming increasingly acceptable for U. S. citizens of multiracial heritage to identify with a wide variety of racial backgrounds. (For brevity's sake, in this paper we will use "monoracials" to indicate people who report a single racial ancestry, "multiracials" to indicate people who report a more complex ancestry.)

Given these dramatic changes, it is of considerable importance to consider the various consequences of its now being possible to claim a multiracial identity. In a comprehensive report by Shih and Sanchez (2005), little difference in terms of psychological well-being was found between mono- and multiracial youths. However, this is not to aver that there are no differences between mono- and multiracial individuals. The experience of looking like and identifying with

people of more than one racial category has produced a “chameleon” effect for many multiracials. In a qualitative study, multiracials spoke of the ability to identify with more than one racial group depending on their present social circumstances (Miville, Constantine, Baysden, & So-Lloyd, 2005). Hence a multiracial person with (say) a Chinese mother and German father may choose to see herself as Chinese amongst her Asian family, but German amongst her Caucasian family. Crossing such ethnic boundaries seems easier and more commonplace for self-identified multiracials. This finding brings up interesting consequences as to how multiracials might conceive of the concept of race. Considering that many multiracials can easily transgress racial boundaries, we might suspect that their concept of race may be different from those individuals who see their racial identity as immutable and unaffected by social situations.

The concept of race itself is always evolving. Debates about race being either a biologically grounded or a socially constructed concept are ongoing in various fields, including anthropology (Smedley & Smedley, 2005), sociology (Guillaumin, 1980), history (Malik, 1996), and psychology (Helms, Jernigan, & Mascher, 2005). But these debates have only recently reached mainstream audiences and usually through limited forms of media, like America’s Public Broadcasting System (PBS, 2000). However, given that more and more people are embracing a multiracial label and experiencing this “chameleon” effect, changes in how race is construed may be happening very organically—at least for individuals with a multiracial heritage.

### **Race Ascription**

Theorists have observed that people can use a variety of indicators for assessing their own and others’ race. They can employ information about genetic background (Brace, 2000;

Entine, 2000; Nature, 1998; Rushton, 2001), physical appearance (Goffman, 1959; Rockquemore, 1998; Stone, 1962), cultural background (Lopez, 2003), language (Delpit, 1988; Smitherman, 1975), or—if we allow the possibility that a person can “choose” his or her racial identity—even choose not to possess any such identity (Rockquemore, 1998; Rockquemore, 2003; Xie & Goyette, 1997).

In the hard sciences, scholars generally consider genetic background to be the primary indicator of race. In attempts to map out racial “genomes” and diseases, the distinction between ancestry and racial appearance often becomes obfuscated. Appearance is probably one of the most common and convenient forms of assessing race. Although appearance is malleable (in that one can change his or her hair style and skin color with little inconvenience), it is still used as a form of identity classification. Today, anthropologists and forensic scientists still use color charts and color photographs to identify people’s racial backgrounds. Recently, geneticists have begun to use DNA profiling to learn more about ancestry and “lost cultures.” On the other hand, social scientists tend to argue that cultural background and social environmental factors are the primary determinant of racial identity—both for monoracial and biracial” individuals. Studies have shown that depending on the ethnic composition of their environment, many mixed race individuals will adopt that racial identity that is most congruent with their environment and/or most rewarded. Rockquemore and Brunnsma (2002) speak of the *protean identity*, in which an individual can change his or her racial identification to suit the needs or appropriateness of the situation—thus allowing someone to “choose” his or her identity. Choice can even be used to dismiss the idea of racial identity. Many scholars now discuss the concept of *transcendent identity*, in which an individual does not consider race to be a viable aspect of his or her identity.

These different notions of identity formations stand in sharp contrast to typical theorizing and research concerning of racial identity formation for individuals of a single racial inheritance. Hirschfeld (1996) has shown that current folk ontology considers race to be immutable and inheritable. In theory, the concept of race is a product of innate cognitive construals that help organize the world into discrete and understandable categories. Specifically, he claims that an essentialist mentality ascribes an “essence” to various groups of people. The notion that people possessing a certain “essence.” This helps children and adults sort people into useful and meaningful categories (Medin, 1989). Some “essences” are similar across individuals, and those that share similar “essences” are grouped together to form a racial group. This type of categorizing should be helpful in predicting future behavior or interactions. Hirschfeld’s theorizing as to how, by age four, children are able to learn to make racial distinctions and to ground them in biology is very convincing until one considers that the children making these assignments may or may not be monoracial themselves (since their race is never stipulated) or may or may not identify with a single racial group (Hirschfeld, 1996, pp.83-119).

Other research has documented that multiracial children take longer to develop a concept of race than do their monoracial peers (Johnson, 1992). Consequently, their concept of race may fluctuate dramatically over time and experience. In addition, many multiracial children do not possess a fixed or stable racial identity; it changes as they progress from childhood to adulthood. Although there are many different theories as to how multiracials develop a racial identity (Poston, 1990; Kich, 1992; Kerwin & Ponterotto, 1995), Root’s (1996; 2002) theory points out that, given a diversity of personal experiences, not all multiracials will accept a multiracial identity. Some will experience social interactions that warrant the adoption of a multiracial label, while others will not. This type of reasoning stems from a symbolic interactionist

approach, which contends that an individual's identity may be construed differently depending on their personal interactions with their social environments (Blumer, 1969).

In light of potential developmental and identity disparities between multiracials and monoracials, it is of interest to see if one's personal experience with race can affect one's cognitive conception of race. The implications of possessing either a biological or a social constructivist view of race are not entirely clear. Although it has been posited that the social constructivist view of race tends to produce a less "racist" mentality, this notion has not been formally tested, and no clear evidence exists to demonstrate that (in fact) racism is attenuated by a social constructivist view. It does seem plausible to argue that a social constructivist view of race ought to facilitate a concept of race that is mutable, dynamic, and dependent upon the social situations encountered by individuals. Given this perspective, it seems appropriate to hypothesize that multiracials (who self-assert a multiracial label) would be more likely to adopt a social view of race, while their monoracial peers would be more likely to adopt a biological view of race. In order to test this hypothesis, three university-age samples from diverse parts of the United States and Jamaica were asked about their views of race. Two measures were used to assess the extent to which these individuals supported a biological or social view of race.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 366 students from the University of Texas at Austin (119 women and 87 men), the University of Hawai'i at Manoa (107 women and 33 men), and the University of the West Indies in Jamaica (15 men and 5 women) participated.

Participants were recruited from these three geographical areas in the hopes of recruiting mono- and multiracial individuals from various cultural contexts. The racial breakdown of

individuals from each area was as follows. The University of Texas at Austin: 37% White, 19% Hispanic, 11% Multiracial (belonging to three or more racial groups), 7% Black, 7% Asian, 7% Hispanic-White, 7% Asian-White, and 5% Black-White; The University of Hawai'i at Manoa: 61% Asian, 17% White, 11% Asian-White, 7% Multiracial (belonging to three or more racial groups), 2% Black, 1% Hispanic-White, and 1% Black-White; The University of West Indies: 35% Black-White, 30% Black, 20% Multiracial (belonging to three or more racial groups), 10% Asian, and 5% White. The combined samples contained: 72% Monoracials (38% Asian, 38% White, 15% Hispanic, and 9% Black) and 28% Multiracials (36% Multiracial with three or more races, 30% Bi-Asian, 18% Bi-Black, and 16% Bi-Hispanic). Multiracial participants were heavily recruited either through pre-testing or advertisements around campus to take part in this study, so these racial demographics are not indicative of the usual racial makeup of each campus.

### *Measures*

The RACE (Racial Assessment Construct Evaluation) was an eight-item scale designed to assess the extent to which participants endorsed a social or a biological view of race. Two direct questions were also asked to assess participants' views: "Do you believe race is a biological construct?" and "Do you believe race is a social construct?" Answers were indicated on a Likert-scale, which ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

RACE: The RACE was developed after two focus groups (10 people each) of various racial backgrounds shared what they believed race meant as a biological and a social construct. After 40 questions were developed from these focus groups, 30 participants took the measure, and the questionnaire was reduced to the 10 and then eight items that were voted to be the most comprehensible by the focus groups. The items in the RACE are shown in Table 1 as well as the



factor it was hypothesized to load on; once again Likert-scale answers ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Participants also completed a variety of other personality measures, including Singelis' (1994) self-construal measure (1994), but those results will not be reported here.

### *Procedure*

Participants (regardless of their ethnicity) were invited to come into a lab where they could complete take a survey on a computer, or they could choose to stay at home and take the survey on a computer with an active Internet connection. Since monoracial participants were in the majority, they did not need to be recruited. To increase the participation of multiracials, in addition to interviewing those secured in the normal course of events, additional participants were recruited in the following way: posters advertising "Do you consider yourself multiracial? Then please take this survey" were posted around the campuses involved in the study. Additionally, the University of Texas at Austin utilized a pre-testing method in which participants who "agreed" or "strongly agreed" to the phrase "Do you consider yourself multiracial?" were asked via email to participate. No monetary compensation was provided to participants; only class credit or extra credit was provided. All participants were treated in accordance with American Psychological Association ethical standards.

## Results

### *Scale Structure*

RACE items were subjected to a principal-components factor analysis with varimax rotation (all factors solution specifying an Eigenvalue greater than one). As predicted, two factors—Biological and Social—were extracted. Both factors accounted for 56% of the total variance. Table 2 illustrates the loadings.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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### *Multiracial and Monoracial Differences*

A within-subjects design was used for both the RACE and the two questions as to beliefs about race. Figure 1 shows a significant within-subjects interaction ( $F(1,363) = 4.10, p=.03$ ), confirming our hypothesis that that multiracial individuals were more likely to agree that race is a social construct than were their monoracial peers.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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Concerning the two general questions (“Do you believe race is a biological construct?” and “Do you believe race is a social construct?”), a slightly stronger result appears. Figure 2 shows the same significant within-subjects interaction ( $F(1,363) = 5.60, p=.01$ ); however, not only were multiracials more likely to endorse the belief that race was a social construct than were their monoracial peers, but they were also more likely to see race as a social rather than a biological concept.

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Insert Figure 2 about here

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*Intra-racial differences*

Although there were no specific hypotheses concerning intra-racial differences in how race could be construed, it is important to consider that there is significant variety in both the multiracial and monoracial groups. To discover if any differences in the concept of race existed within multiracial and monoracial groups, *post hoc* tests were conducted for the RACE scale (shown in Figure 3) and the two direct questions as to beliefs (shown in Figure 4). For the RACE questionnaire, no significant intra-racial differences were secured. However, for the face-valid questions, it is important to note that Biracial Hispanics (half Hispanic and half European-American) were more likely to see race as a social construct than any of the other multiracial individuals. Biracial Blacks (half Black and half White) were the least likely to see race as a social construct, and more likely to see race as a biological construct than their multiracial peers. Amongst monoracials, European-Americans were more likely to see race as a social construct than their monoracial peers.

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Insert Figures 3 and 4 about here

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### Discussion

From the data, it is clear that people who possess a multiracial background differ from their monoracial peers in their conceptions of race. This finding is consistent with recent findings by Rockquemore (1998), Rockquemore and Arend (2003), and Milville et al. (2005) who have found that multiracials possess protean identities and/or display a “chameleon” effect, which allows their racial identity to fluctuate depending on the social situation and

circumstances. It also suggests that the popular view of race as an immutable and inheritable trait may not be as deeply ingrained in multiracials as in monoracials. The *consequences* of these differing views (i.e., believing race is a social *versus* a biological construct) cannot be guessed at from the research presented here.

These differences in the conception of race may have profound practical effects, however. In the future, as America continues to become increasingly multiracial, it will also come to be comprised of increasing numbers of citizens who possess a multicultural identity. As a consequence, American's definitions of race may begin to broaden and deepen.

There are certainly benefits to be gained if Americans do come to think of race as a more complex, socially defined construct. Yet, in the short run, there may be disadvantages too—especially for those who possess a complex heritage. Given that most Americans are likely to continue to conceive of race as a biological construct,—and with TV crime shows and forensic psychologists furthering this notion with discussions of “racial profiling,” and with commercial DNA projects advertising for customers who wish to “find out what race you really are,” and “track your ancestors to see if you are related to Ghengis Khan”—people with a multi-racial heritage may find themselves increasingly out of step with the assumptions of their monoracial peers.

There might be practical disadvantages, too. For example, Native American scholarships and grants are currently based on ancestry, land-ownership, and classifications dictated by blood quantum (Wilson, 1992). The notion that race is a “choice” may make it difficult for politicians, citizens, and those who possess a complex identity to decide who is entitled to such benefits and set-asides. Thus, those who chose to “make up” their own race

(e.g., Tiger Woods) or who endorse a protean identity, may be at a risk of losing certain monetary and land-ownership benefits

Although it is clear that multiracials and monoracials differ in how they construe the concept of race (with multiracials more willing to endorse race as a social construct than their monoracials peers), the strength of these differences is dependent on the how the question is asked. The RACE measure illuminated such differences, but the more face-valid two-item questions found strikingly stronger differences between multiracial and monoracials individuals: multiracial individuals were not only more likely to see race as a social construct than their monoracials peers, but also more likely to see race as a social construct in general. This may be due to the fact that the items on the social factor of the RACE were not as clear as the face-valid question concerning race as a social construct. The items loading on the social factor may have seemed more implausible or confusing compared to the question which simply asked participants about their view of race being a social construct. It also could indicate that, given the nature of social-constructivism, what is meant by a “social construct” could be ever-changing. In fact, people may differ in what they mean by the concept of “social construct.” For example, two people may agree that race is a “social construct.” However, by this, Person #1 may mean that race is a construct that can only be understood within a given social or cultural framework. Person #2, on the other hand, may mean that race is just a fictitious concept created by certain historical and social influences. Although both of these people may “strongly agree” to the question: “Do you believe race is a social construct?”, when it came to the RACE items, their answers may have greatly differed. On the other hand, the question: “Is race is a “biological construct?” may have been easier to understand, as the folk concept of biology is

generally agreed upon. Given this reasoning, future researchers may wish to explore the meaning participants ascribe to “Race is a social construct.”

Finally, the intra-racial differences found using the face-valid measures demonstrates that not all multiracials and monoracials view the concept of race in exactly the same way. For example, Biracial Hispanics endorse a more social view of race—which could be due to fact that Mexican citizens often view race very differently than do U. S. citizens. In Mexico, “mestizo” (meaning “mixed”) is the most common racial term in Mexico. There the concept of race may not be as important in indentifying and differentiating “human kinds” (c.f., Hirschfeld 1996) may as is information about caste or economic status. In contrast, Biracial Blacks were the least likely to endorse race as a social construct and more likely to endorse race as a biological construct when compared to their multiracial peers. This could be due to the fact that Blacks in the U. S. are recipients of a history of hypodescent—the “one-drop” rule—which stipulates that anyone with just one ancestor who is Black (or who possesses one-drop of Black blood) should be considered completely Black (Harris, 1964). This archaic rule is still popular in parts of the Americas and may explain the preference for many, mono- and multiracial African-Americans to consider race as a biological concept.

On the other hand, why European-American monoracials endorse a more social view of race than their monoracial peers is not entirely clear. Perhaps mainland European-Americans remember a time when their “Occidental” ancestors (being Western or Eastern European, Irish, Italian, or French) were considered very stratified and divergent racial groups, as opposed to the current melting pot of their new “White” identity (c.f., Alba, 1992). Considering this new “melting pot” of European-American identity, race for monoracials Whites may be seen as both a biological and social construct that possesses both immutable and mutable properties.

In sum: this current research has demonstrated that one does not have to be a celebrity like Tiger Woods to harness control over one's own concept of race and racial identity. Instead, in the United States, many young, college-aged multiracials now gravitate towards a social understanding of race despite the unpopularity this concept may have amongst many monoracials. It is important to see how these differing concepts of race affect the welfare and well-being of both mono- and multiracials. Considering current advances in sequencing the human genome, the growing accessibility of ancestry blood analyses (Crow, 2002), and the enduring need for people to better understand "who" they are and "where" they are from becomes more answerable, it is of great importance to see how multiracials and monoracials react and adapt to these social changes.

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Table 1  
Hypothesized Factors and Items in RACE

<b><i>Hypothesized Factors</i></b>	<b><i>Items in RACE</i></b>
Biological	<i>Everyone has a race</i> <i>Every racial group has their own unique genetic makeup.</i> <i>One can only genetically inherit his/her racial background.</i> <i>Race is determined by one's genes.</i>
Social	<i>If someone lives amongst a group of people long enough, he/she can adopt their racial background.</i> <i>One's race can be determined by his/her adoptive parents.</i> <i>One can choose his/her racial identification.</i> <i>Depending on the context, one's race can change.</i>

Table 2  
Factor loadings (Varimax Rotation) of RACE items

Items in RACE	Factors	
	Biological	Social
1. <i>Everyone has a race</i>	<b>.85</b>	.11
2. <i>Every racial group has their own unique genetic makeup.</i>	<b>.82</b>	-.06
10. <i>One can only genetically inherit his/her racial background.</i>	<b>.69</b>	-.27
4. <i>Race is determined by one's genes.</i>	<b>.61</b>	-.23
12. <i>If someone lives amongst a group of people long enough, he/she can adopt their racial background.</i>	.03	<b>.82</b>
6. <i>One's race can be determined by his/her adoptive parents.</i>	-.05	<b>.71</b>
8. <i>One can choose his/her racial identification.</i>	-.30	<b>.64</b>
9. <i>Depending on the context, one's race can change.</i>	-.26	<b>.52</b>

Note: only values  $\geq .50$  are in bold.

### Figure Captions

*Figure 1.* Average scores on the RACE factors: biological and social for both monoracial and multiracial individuals.

*Figure 2.* Average scores on the face valid questions of race being a biological and social construct for both monoracial and multiracial individuals.

*Figure 3.* Average scores on the RACE factors: biological and social broken down by specific racial groups.

*Figure 4.* Average scores on the face valid questions of race being a biological and social broken down by specific racial group.

Figure 1

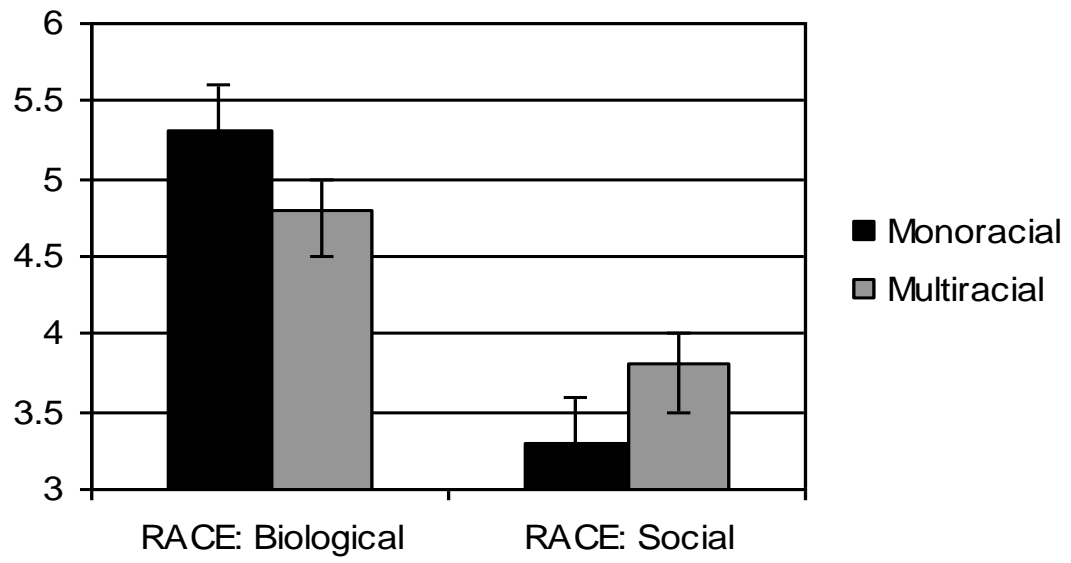


Figure 2

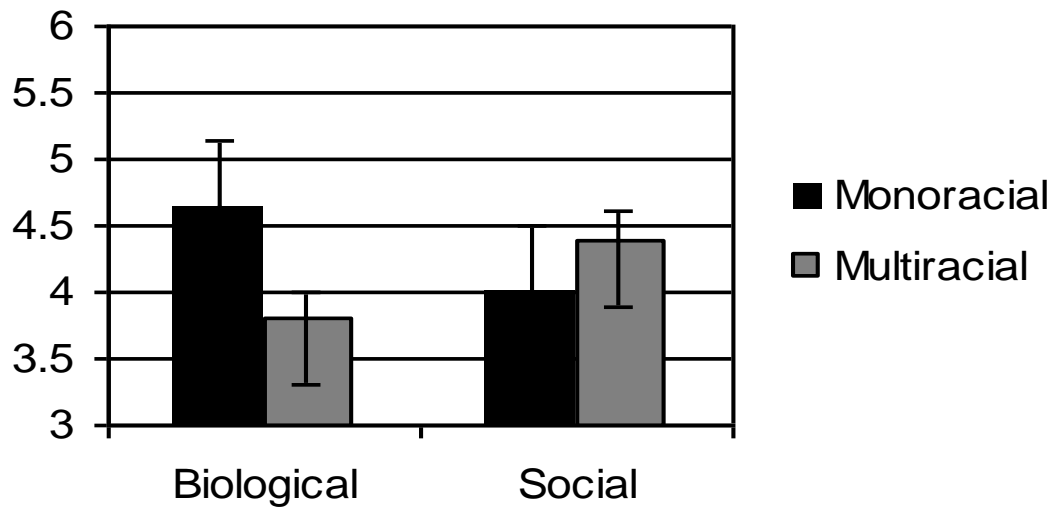


Figure 3

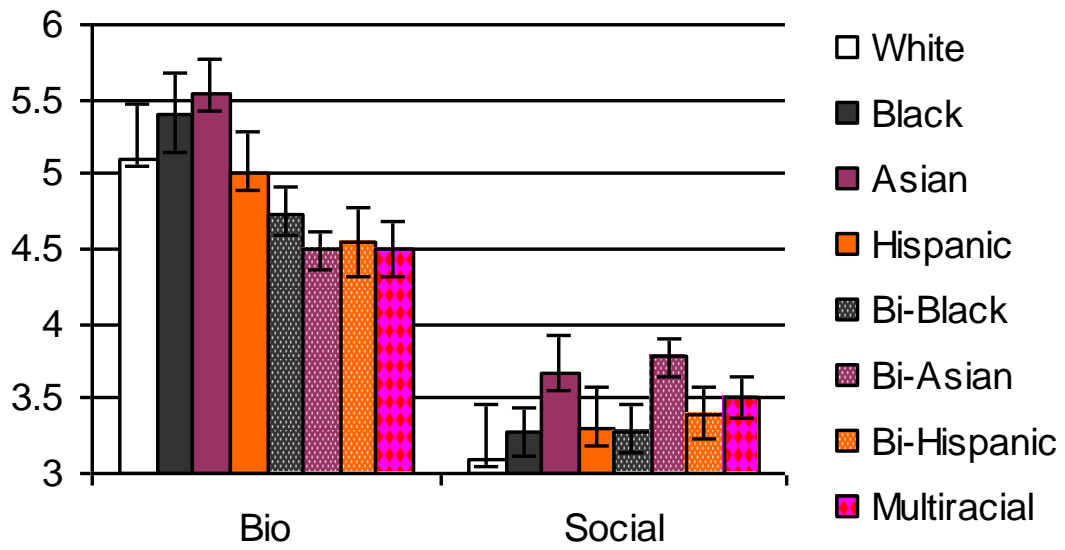




Figure 4

