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Hapas: Emerging Identity, Emerging Terms and Labels & the Social Constructions of Race

By Adriane E. Gamble

The first time I heard hapa, I went to this club fair [on campus]… I heard this voice, “We’re cool, cause we check the other box!” … I realized, oh my god, there are more people like me.

Originally a Native Hawaiian word, “hapa” is defined as “part” or “mixed,” with no racial or ethnic meaning. The current use of hapa stems from the phrase hapa haole, meaning “half foreigner” or “half White” (Dariotis, 2003). Today, the term is commonly used to describe Asian Pacific Islanders of mixed race heritage.

Conducted in 2004, this research studies how hapa has become a racial identity of its own, distinct from the classically recognized American racial categories of Asian or White. Based on the premise that racial identity is significantly informed by a racial community, and given the historical absence of a hapa community, the question emerges: how does one develop a hapa identity, without a hapa community with which to identify? Trends from the turn of the millennium show the racial landscape has changed, as a community emerged in American society of individuals self-identifying as hapa. Student and community groups have provided communities for hapas, which in turn inform racial identity, leading to an increased population of individuals self-identifying as hapa. The construction of hapa communities and hapa identity as a new racial category offer a contemporary example of the social construction of race.

Emerging Research, Emerging Identity

Dominant models of racial identity development fail to represent the experience of mixed race people. Many models necessitate an experience, specifically the recognition of one’s group
membership, and place in a greater racial community. The community in turn recognizes the individual as a member. Studies suggest that identity is a joint process, in which both the individual and relevant outsiders together agree on ethnic identity (Stephan, 1992). This experience may be confounded for the mixed race person, as consensus may never be reached. Kich (1992) describes ethnic identity development as a process of mutual recognition and acceptance, which consolidates and gives credibility to the person’s ethnicity.

The issue of a lack of community for mixed race individuals is particularly salient in a lack of group consciousness, and role models. Thornton (1996) reflects on the struggle to create an identity out of two normally disparate ethnic heritages, and the simultaneously problematic and enlightening process that results from a lack of role models. Hall (1992) extrapolates these issues, as mixed people are a numerical minority, have few role models, and are usually not totally accepted by either ethnic group with which they share heritage. With scarce role models, reinforcement agents, or support groups, alternative means must be sought for this group (Hall, 1992). Murphy-Shigematsu (1986) also addresses “a lack of role models and visibility in terms of seeing one’s experiences expressed in history or literature” as an issue. Among mixed race people, there has been little development of a group consciousness (Nakashima, 1992). The question arises for the individuals of multiracial heritage in our society: how does one develop a racial identity without a racial community with which to identify?

Mixed race people find themselves continually defined by people other than themselves and always find themselves in dialogue with others who would define them from the outside (Spickard, 1997). Espiritu (2001) argues that America does not allow mixed race individuals to assume multiple identities simultaneously or situationally. Nakashima (1992) claims that society has offered no positive, viable option of being multiracial, thus making it difficult for people of
mixed race to accept and assert a multiracial identity. Murphy-Shigematsu (1986) raises similar concerns, that the option to fully claim an interracial identity has not existed, and that the absence of mixed race groups is institutionalized by the Census. Furthermore, terms used to describe multiracial individuals have often been derogatory in tone. Multiracial individuals continue to lack consistent and positive terms for self-identification, important as “an interracial label validates and fosters the child’s interracial self-concept” (Kich, 1992).

However, since most of the literature on multiracial Asian Americans was published in the 1980s to mid-1990s, this social reality has changed and mixed race people are publicly self-identifying as such. For the first time in the history of the United States, the Census 2000 allowed individuals to check as many racial boxes as they felt applied. In this way, a mixed race identity was recognized by the United States government. Furthermore, mixed race groups have established and become vocal in the past decade. This is partially due to the movement to change the census, which in turn made public a gross underestimate of the U.S. multiracial population, who have sought each other out in solidarity. While past literature sought to determine how an individual developed a racial identity without a racial community with which to identify, the current reality is that mixed race communities are emerging. The growing recognition and acceptance of mixed individuals has resulted in a profound impact on the identity development of both individuals, and a community.

A new kind of group, a mixed race community, is present in the American racial scene. The emerging mixed race community takes form in student and community groups, centered in college campuses and metropolitan areas. Such groups have tremendous implications for the mixed race identity and mixed race community. Student and community groups organized around racial and ethnic similarities can provide community, which may in turn inform identity
development. To explore this concept, mixed race individuals involved with student and community groups across the country were studied. How would these emerging communities inform identity development for mixed race individuals?

Present Study

Sample. The sample was a selected subset of a larger study, the Hapa Identity Project, conducted at Stanford University. 75 subjects participated in the Hapa Identity Project, and constituted a nation-wide sample. The request for participants reached people living in every part of the country, though concentrated in the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, and San Diego. The universities most represented include Stanford University, and the Universities of California at Berkeley, Davis, Los Angeles, and San Diego. In addition, subjects reported growing up in locales across the country, though concentrated on the East and West Coasts, and Hawai‘i. Two subjects had lived in the mid-West.

All subjects indicated their racial heritage to be part White, and part Asian or Pacific Islander. While those who identify as hapa are not limited to individuals with one White parent, the subject pool was limited to such for purposes of this research, given its relatively small scope. All subjects were under age 31, and the sample consisted of two-thirds female respondents. Other demographic features include high parental education levels: 68% had mothers who were college graduates, and 75% had fathers who were college graduates. As well, the subjects reported high socioeconomic status, with over 50% indicating average family income of over $100,000 per year.

From the Hapa Identity Project, follow-up interviews were conducted with eighteen subjects. The sub-sample reflects the demographic distribution of the larger sample mentioned previously, and slightly less than two-thirds of the sub-sample are female (n = 11).
**Methodology.** Participants for the Hapa Identity Project were contacted through email lists for hapa and mixed race groups, including the Hapa Issues Forum, the Stanford Hapa Issues Forum, and the Multiracial Identified Community at Stanford. The last group is not limited to individuals that are part Asian and identify as hapa, and thus is referred to as a “mixed race group.” The email requested individuals of part Asian and part White racial heritage to visit the posted link, and fill out a survey on the web. Over 95% of the participants agreed to be contacted for an interview, and those who indicated residence, or school attendance, in the San Francisco Bay Area were then contacted regarding in-person interviews. Over 50 subjects were contacted, and the first eighteen subjects to respond were chosen to be interviewed in person.

The semi-structured interviews consisted of seventeen questions, and covered aspects of one’s background and history including culture, religion, family, racial groups and tension, names, and interracial dating. However, the current research explores four questions:

**Q1.** What are you?

**Q11.** Did you know any other hapas when you were growing up? Did you have any mixed race role models?

**Q13.** Has your answer to the question “What are you?” changed over the years? How so? What has influenced any changes?

**Q14.** What has been your involvement with hapa (or mixed race) groups?

**Emerging Identity, Emerging Themes**

To begin, the research confirmed that all subjects self-identified as hapa, mixed, or multiracial. That is, when prompted with the question, “What are you?” all subjects responded in one of two manners. Over half spontaneously responded “hapa”; other subjects would
describe their parents’ backgrounds, and conclude that they were “hapa.” This may not be surprising given the biased sample selected from hapa groups. Research on the mixed race population in the United States has been plagued with methodological issues, given the only recent demographic recognition by the Census, and the fact that many people may be of mixed race parentage, but do not identify. Hapas may be targeted through student or community groups and email lists, but one might argue that one must identify to join such groups or email lists. However, it remains significant that this finding is inconsistent with past research on the mixed race Asian or Pacific Islander population, completed in the 1990s (Hall, 1992; Thornton, 1983; Murphy-Shigematsu, 1986; Stephan & Stephan, 1991; Grove, 1991; Mass, 1992; Nakashima, 1992; Kich, 1992), in which a segment of the population continued to identify monoracially. The current research does not seek to describe the experience of every hapa in America, but rather focuses on those who have in some way been involved in hapa or multiracial groups.

Given the limitations with the subject population, some interesting themes yet emerge. First, the hapa and mixed race groups have provided communities and reference groups for mixed race individuals. Secondly, the communities have provided hapa and mixed race role models. Lastly, the communities have provided terms and labels for the hapa and mixed race identity. Discussion of the term “hapa” emerged from the question, “Has your answer to the question ‘What are you?’ changed over the years? How so? What has influenced any changes?” to which subjects credited hapa groups for their exposure to, and subsequent identification with, the term hapa. A few subjects acknowledged the role of groups in their introduction to “hapa,” and also expressed recent tendencies to self-identify as mixed race. In sum, hapa and mixed race groups have provided a community, group consciousness, role models, and terms, thus informing the consciousness of mixed race individuals, and influencing self-identification.
Before the late 1990s, few mixed race groups existed, indicative of the absence of a mixed race community entirely. This created a situation in which individuals developed racial identity without the support of a racial community with which to identify. In the past decade, hapa and mixed race groups provided such a community. This research found mixed race community in emerging community groups such as the Association of MultiEthnic Americans (AMEA), Mavin Foundation, and Swirl, Inc. as well as college campus groups like Hapa Issues Forum (HIF) and Multiracial Identified Community at Stanford (MICS), among many others. In addition to a racial/ethnic community, the hapa and mixed race groups provided a reference group, a group consciousness, role models, and terminology for identification. Through these elements, hapa/mixed race groups affect the consciousness of mixed race individuals of partial Asian or Pacific Islander descent to the extent that they begin to self-identify predominantly with mixed heritage labels such as multiracial, mixed, and hapa.

Numerous researchers have studied the importance of community, reference groups, and group consciousness, in the identity development process. The premise of such research is that identity is enhanced with greater proximity to those who are similar (i.e. “like-attracts-like”) (Thornton, 1983). In addition, the importance of a cohesive collective group history is emphasized for identity formation (Berger & Luckman, 1973). The results were consistent with research finding an ethnic group serves to reinforce the development of an ethnic identity through mutual expressions of relatedness and belonging (Kich, 1992). The research found that though aware of their multiracial heritage before exposure to such groups, individuals began to self-identify as multiracial following involvement with the groups. Therefore, hapa groups provided hapa communities, crucial to the formation of self-identification as hapa. Since publication, however, these groups are not so new and many (such as Hapa Issues Forum) have
become inactive. The current piece will focus on the importance of terms and labels in forming hapa identity.

**Emerging Identity, Emerging Terms & Labels**

Past research established that a hapa identity was not a widespread possibility, yet the current research finds that terms and labels have created the possibility of mixed identity through naming. Research on the identity formation and development process consistently proves that terms and labels are necessary for self-identification. The construction of race is inherently affected and effected through the use of language, and whether at an individual level or a group level, speaking one’s name is an act of self-validation (Wiesman, 1996). Racial labels have social and psychological effects, and shape the ways people conceive of themselves. Labels shape identification, and available labels imply available identities (Sundstrom, 2002). Hapa identity has become an enabled identity through terms and labels provided by communities.

However, mixed race individuals do not have consistent terminology to self-identify. Kich (1992) asserts “an interracial label validates and fosters the child’s interracial self-concept,” yet for many years a lack of consistent and positive terms for multiracial self-identification hindered the acceptance of multiracial identity. While the terminology for mixed race individuals has been inconsistent, terms have also been predominantly negative, thus precluding positive and healthy identification as mixed race.

Multiple and inconsistent terms have been used to describe the subject population, the most popular being Eurasian, Amerasian, hapa, mixed race, mixed heritage, interracial, biracial, and multiracial. The term Eurasian dates to European colonies in Asia, and the term Amerasian was first coined to describe the offspring of American military men and Asian women during
occupations of Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and the Philippines. The history of imperialism, and perceived illegitimacy of such unions, resulted in extreme negative connotations for the terms.

Though debate over labels has yet to be resolved, terms such as hapa, multiracial, and mixed are becoming more common. Most hapas today come from families that have no connections to the military. Many do not identify with terms such as Amerasian and Eurasian, and in fact would like to distance themselves from the history of American imperialism that such labels connote. In refusing to accept the labels traditionally applied to them, many of these individuals are also refusing to accept marginality as a defining feature of their life experiences (Wiesman, 1996).

New terms emerged, such as hapa, mixed, and multiracial. However, no one term gained popularity over the others and usage differs greatly dependent on geographical region. Furthermore, individuals do not have equal access to the terms. One subject was familiar with the term Eurasian, but it was not universally recognized to be appropriate to use among her hapa friends in the San Francisco Bay Area: “My mom introduced me to the term ‘Eurasian,’ so I might have used that at some point. But there was no term we all used, as a group. And I didn’t even know of the term hapa until my senior year of high school” (Ss8). Most subjects did not know of the term hapa before college: “I use hapa ever since I came to Stanford, because I didn’t know what hapa was before I came to Stanford. But after that, I’ve been using hapa” (Ss10).

However, subjects specifically identify the importance of group identification as a benefit of terms such as hapa: “I go more by hapa now, at Stanford, because people know what it is and it identifies me with a group” (Ss2). Hapas [were] engaged in a process of self-validation and in claiming a mixed identity, many express a feeling of solidarity with other mixed people, thus establishing a reference group and community that transcends traditional boundaries (Weisman,
1996). Commonality is found in such terms: “it’s useful if you don’t know their exact ethnic breakdown” (Ss9).

Hapa and mixed race groups provided venues for discussion, and more importantly, the terms that are necessary for self-identification. Such terms are now available, as hapa, multiracial, and mixed gain popularity with hapa/multiracial groups. Many subjects elucidated this process of discovering and embracing multiracial terminology, in the context of hapa groups: “I got to college and there was actually a hapa club, so [hapa] became more [a part] of [my] vocabulary” (Ss3).

The term “hapa” remains problematic, due in part to the history of the word, and in part because it fails to be widely recognized. Some see the use of the Native Hawaiian word for “part” or “mixed” as a misappropriation of the Hawaiian culture. Though the word is not used for derogatory purposes, the issue builds because few Native Hawaiians are alive to reclaim the language. Some critics liken the use of “hapa” to the use of “Indian” mascots, as another misappropriation of culture.

In addition, many subjects remain hesitant to use “hapa” simply because they doubted it would be recognized by the general population. Mass (1996) argues that the problem of not being recognized and accurately identified by others creates significant personal problems. Though the term hapa serves many well as a self-identifier, its utility is questioned if others do not recognize the group: “If I thought people knew what hapa meant, like, universally, I’d probably say that I was hapa” (Ss2). Subjects did find that knowledge of the term was more prevalent on their campuses, which led to more accepted self-identification. As well, many subjects would often take the opportunity to educate another about the term hapa, effectively spreading its use and acceptance.
Given the problems that arise with the term “hapa,” other labels such as multiracial and mixed race also gained popularity. Though these labels do not identify what one’s racial heritage may be, as they are not limited to Asian or Pacific Islanders, the terms have also served to build bridges between communities and build a sense of the mixed race community: “Since coming to college, I definitely identify as multiracial, mixed, and hapa. I’ve become more aware of, like, a kind of multiracial movement, or like, a general umbrella identity for multiraciality” (Ss8).

“Mixed” is a label quickly gained popularity in the mixed race communities and student groups. Many find it to be a political statement, as a historically negative term reclaimed, much like “queer” was reclaimed by the LGBT community.

Finally, a cyclical effect occurs with communities and terms. As groups created community that in turn provides terms and labels, this informed identity and people increasingly identified as hapa. This burgeoning population of people identifying as hapa then reinforces the hapa community. Thus, community and terms are mutually reinforcing, as the mixed race identity gains legitimacy.

**Hapas and the Social Construction of Race**

*Brought together by similar experiences*

*Collective history we write*

*Silent in the dark I blamed myself*

*Now in the light my community I find*

(Burchill, 2003)

The Census 2000 revealed that approximately 2.1 million Asian or Pacific Islander Americans identify with multiple heritages. This accounts for 16.8 percent of the Asian Pacific
Islander (API) population in the United States today, and as the second largest API sub-group, is receiving increasing attention (Dariotis, 2003). A community has been emerging, as individuals reject traditional monoracial categories and labels, and increasingly identify as “hapa.”

While individuals of mixed race heritage are not a new phenomenon, the mixed race identity and community have only recently developed. Mixed race people have been recognized in the past, with distinct categories based in blood quantum, such as quadroons or octaroons, denoting one Black grandparent, or one Black great-grandparent, respectively. Based in the one-drop rule that distinguished any person of any part Black heritage as socially “Black,” these labels were sources of stigma and social non-acceptance. Exemplifying the racist social hierarchy in the United States, such identities were not positive, and communities did not emerge as a result. In today’s political and social climate, the situation is different and acceptance of mixed race is greater. Yet it remains difficult to determine the growth rate of the hapa population, given that the Census 2000 was the first year for the accounting for people of mixed heritage. Before 2000, the government, represented by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, routinely disregarded the reality of multiracial individuals, and did not reflect the population’s meaningful identities (Espiritu, 2001). Thus, mixed race occurred in, and was represented by, unique individuals, themselves often unaware of other mixed race individuals. DaCosta (2003) argues that the struggle for public recognition of mixed race identity is exemplified by official recognition by the government, the ultimate symbolic authority. Hence, the mixed race identity is one that has only recently been politically recognized and validated, with the option to check more than one box on the Census 2000.

Though hapa identity is now a more prevalent and accepted option for self-identification, the current research does not seek to describe the experience of every hapa in America. No
evidence exists that every person of mixed Asian Pacific Islander heritage self-identifies as hapa, or even knows of the term. Likely a significant portion of the population has yet to ever know another person like themselves, of mixed Asian heritage, and continues to believe their experience to be unique. As well, in contemporary discourse, hapa is used to describe any person of part Asian or Pacific Islander heritage, not limited to part White heritage. Thus, the current research does not take into account the experience of hapas of other backgrounds, such as part Black or Latino hapas. Experiences may differ in these situations, termed “double-minority.”

Furthermore, though the subject population was limited to hapas of part Asian or Pacific Islander and part White heritage, many of the themes may apply to mixed race individuals of other backgrounds. The majority of the student and community groups are not limited to hapas, and on the whole the communities more recently formed are all-inclusive mixed race communities. Individuals identify based on their experiences as being mixed race, not because of the racial groups with which their parents identify. The current findings have broad implications for the entire mixed race community, as indicated by the interchanging use of “hapa” and “mixed race” in the research. The implications of the self-identification and group affiliation of these individuals are far more significant than focusing on a group with a common racial heritage. By focusing on those who have in some way been involved in hapa or multiracial groups, an emerging community and a validated identity are found.

To reiterate, the mixed race community, and the mixed race identity, is one that has only recently begun to be positively recognized. Due to a legacy of anti-miscegenation laws, social stigmas, and stereotypes, the mixed race identity has been historically oppressed. However, prompted in large part by student organizing, the mixed race community has begun to gain
legitimacy in just the past decade. Before the late 1990s, few hapa or mixed race groups existed, indicative of a complete absence of a hapa community. This created a situation in which individuals developed racial identity without the support of a racial community with which to identify.

In this decade, hapa and mixed race groups provided such a community. Current research finds evidence of a hapa community, provided by student and community groups. In addition to a racial or ethnic community, the hapa and mixed race groups provided a reference group, a group consciousness, role models, and terminology for identification. For the first time, mixed race terms, labels, and role models are positive and encourage identification as mixed race. Through these elements, hapa and mixed race groups affected the consciousness of mixed race individuals of partial Asian or Pacific Islander descent to the extent that they begin to self-identify predominantly with mixed heritage labels such as multiracial, mixed, and hapa.

The implications of this process of self-identification are significant, as a community has formed of individuals who essentially grew up without a community. With many theories of identity formation implicating the importance of community, identity formation in a community of one presents a unique phenomenon. Identity can no longer assume a community presence, and focus on a moment of realization. Instead, the research finds a phenomenon where the encounter of one’s community prompts identity formation. However, this is not to propose that individuals have no concept of their mixed heritage before self-identification as such. A similar situation may be explored in queer identification, as both are historically oppressed and unrecognized identities and communities, and individuals may assume that they are alone in their feelings of identity. The point is accentuated in that both communities have terms, queer and mixed, that are being reclaimed from a history of derogatory use. Ultimately, the study of mixed
race individuals and communities speaks to the crucial role of community in asserting and
supporting non-traditional self-identification.

The question of how the hapa population, defined as those of mixed Asian heritage, identifies may never be conclusively answered, but it is important to be cognizant of the shifts of this growing segment. The hapa population in the United States is growing, and is already larger than many might imagine. More and more individuals are embracing a mixed race identity, an identity which may not have been available, viable, or positive, in the past. The former institutionalized exclusion of mixed race people in the Census has been deconstructed. The barriers to self-identification are slowly dissolving for mixed race people, providing a new venue for all Americans: ultimately, the very existence of mixed race people defies biological definitions and mutually exclusive categorizations of race, and by studying mixed race people, we can gain further insight into the social construction of race and identity in our society today. The study of the emerging mixed race community and identity is at its core a study of the social construction of race. For years, scholars have agreed that race is not biologically determined, and that different groups may become racialized, or deracialized, in different contexts and eras. Williams-León (2003) describes the emergence of the multiracial identity as an example of racial formation, or the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed. The current emergence of the mixed race individual is evidence of this process.

Within the individual, race is proven to be a social construction. Numerous researchers have found mixed race individuals to have multiple, fluid identities, irrespective of race. Hall (1992), Thornton (1983), Murphy-Shigematsu (1986), Stephan and Stephan (1991), Grove (1991), Mass (1992), Nakashima (1992), and Kich (1992), all conducted studies in which
multiple racial/ethnic identification was not found to be unhealthy. Most recently, Maria Root (1992, 1995) proposes a multidimensional model that allows the possibility that an individual can have simultaneous membership and multiple, fluid identities with different groups. Furthermore, racial/ethnic identity may be temporally and contextually fluid. Sundstrom (2001) argues that a mixed race consciousness, born from responsible mixed race politics, challenges widespread and false conceptions of race held uncritically by the public.

Beyond the individual, the emergence of the mixed race community also serves to demonstrate the social construction of race. To term race a social construction is not to imply that the concept of race is irrelevant. By identifying as mixed, people acknowledge the relevance of race in their everyday lives. However, the mixed race identity is fairly novel, and a mixed race community has not previously been identified. The current research suggests that student and community groups have created a mixed race community. Furthermore, this reality has been recognized by the racial classifications of the U.S. Census. Past research on mixed race individuals could not account for the mixed race community, because the mixed race community did not previously exist. The advent of hapa and mixed race groups has created the mixed race communities that were absent in the past, and has led to the development of a group consciousness. As new racial labels are used and a community is recognized, we witness the emergence of a new American racial group.
References


