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978-0-521-29769-1 - Ambiguous Ethnicity: Interracial Families in London

Susan Benson

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CHANGING CULTURES

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and Fellow of New Hall, Cambridge*

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[More information](#)

Contents

| | | |
|--|-------------|-----|
| List of maps and diagrams | <i>page</i> | vi |
| Preface | | vii |
| 1 Racial intermarriage in England | | 1 |
| 2 The pattern of interracial unions in England today | | 14 |
| 3 Introducing Brixton and the borough of Lambeth | | 23 |
| 4 The social world of Brixton | | 39 |
| 5 The dynamics of interracial marriage choice | | 51 |
| 6 Coping with opposition: the reactions of family and friends | | 70 |
| 7 The construction of a domestic world | | 78 |
| 8 The construction of a social universe | | 95 |
| 9 Living in a divided community | | 116 |
| 10 Parents and children | | 134 |
| 11 Concluding remarks | | 145 |
| Appendix 1 The research project: development and methodology | | 151 |
| Appendix 2 The calculation of births by parental ethnic origin | | 155 |
| References | | 158 |
| Index | | 169 |

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29769-1 - Ambiguous Ethnicity: Interracial Families in London

Susan Benson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Maps and diagrams

Maps

| | | | |
|---|---|-------------|----|
| 1 | The London Borough of Lambeth | <i>page</i> | 26 |
| 2 | The London Borough of Lambeth; distribution of households lacking three basic amenities, 1971 | | 27 |
| 3 | The London Borough of Lambeth: distribution of population born in the countries of the 'New Commonwealth', or with both parents born in the 'New Commonwealth', 1971, by enumeration district | | 32 |
| 4 | Distribution of 'immigrant' children in Lambeth primary schools, September 1970 | | 33 |

Diagrams

| | | | |
|-----|--|--|-----|
| 9.1 | Household with black-oriented social network: the Riches | | 119 |
| 9.2 | Household with white-oriented social network (1): the Ojos | | 120 |
| 9.3 | Household with white-oriented social network (2): the Hendersons | | 121 |
| 9.4 | Household with Janus network: the Kaliphas | | 123 |
| 9.5 | Household with interstitial network: Mr Lowe and Mrs Simmons | | 126 |
| 9.6 | Household with racially composite network: the Rowlandses | | 129 |

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978-0-521-29769-1 - Ambiguous Ethnicity: Interracial Families in London

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

This is a study of a small number of interracial couples and their children, twenty households in all, living in and around Brixton, in south London. It is concerned with four main areas of enquiry: the establishment of the interracial households; the character of these couples' domestic lives and how these were organised; their social world; and the problems faced by their children. On one level, it is an account of the practical difficulties of accommodation and adjustment that must arise when individuals from different cultural backgrounds decide to construct a life together. On a second level, however, it is an exploration of the precise meaning of ethnic identity in contemporary Britain, and of the ways in which this, and other, social identities may be negotiated by the individual.

The fieldwork upon which this study is based was carried out between February 1970 and September 1971, in the course of more extensive research in the Brixton area.¹ It had originally been my intention to carry out a small-scale statistical study of the interracially married in Brixton, concentrating in particular upon Anglo-Caribbean and Anglo-African couples. Difficulties in the field, and an increasing awareness of the inappropriate nature of impersonal survey techniques for work in Brixton and on this subject, led me instead to focus upon an intensive study of a small number of couples. Many of these were recruited through personal introduction; information on the everyday lives and personal histories of each couple was collected through lengthy conversations, formal interviews, and informal participation in household activities. A more detailed discussion of methodology and of the recruitment of the research set may be found in Appendix I, below.

This is not, then, a study which claims to present a methodologically rigorous account of 'interracial marriage in London'. It is an account of a handful of interracial families, and of the impact of racial divisions upon their lives. It is, inevitably, a study of individuals and of individual attitudes, of individual problems and the way in which individuals regard those problems. Both I, and, I believe, the families whose everyday lives are the subject of this book, would reject any analysis which sought to reduce the complexity of human experience to the cruder categories of social science. Nevertheless, it is possible to detect,

¹ Research for a Ph.D. degree in the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge (Benson, 1975).

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

in the ways in which each of these households sought to organise their lives and confront their problems, the close interrelationship between individual choices and wider social forces, and to explore, through an analysis of personal attitudes and strategies, the character of the system of race relations in which these households are located.

Much has changed in Brixton in the years since this study was completed. The casual visitor, walking around central Brixton in 1981, will find many immediate and striking differences between the physical landscape described in this book and Brixton today: here, much new building, there, signs of accelerating decay. Streets, pubs and cafés once important as the centres of social life have vanished and been replaced; sections of what used to be the focus of black Brixton street life, Railton and Mayall Roads, were destroyed in the April riots. The social landscape too has altered over the past decade. In 1971, the black world of Brixton was still dominated by the 'first generation' of migrants, mostly from the Caribbean. Economically disadvantaged and politically inarticulate, their attitudes towards the white world that encompassed and excluded them were inevitably shaped by their divided experience; they were prepared, on the whole, to live in uneasy co-existence with that white world, sustained by the growth of a local West Indian community which had learned to look inwards, to fellow-members, for friendship, solidarity and support. Today, it is the children of those first-generation migrants, many of them Brixton born and bred, who form the core of a very different black Brixton world, facing increasing levels of economic hardship and less willing to compromise in the face of discrimination and racism. In many senses, then, the 'Brixton' that provided the framework for this study no longer exists, and the social landscape I describe is a part of historical, not contemporary, reality.

In another sense, however, nothing very much has changed in the decade since this study was begun. Brixton remains an area of poverty, poor resources and high unemployment. The social forces that found expression in the problems of the early 1970s – the first skinhead craze, a significant increase in the number of racist assaults, the firebombing of black shops and houses, a rise in the level of street crime in the area, complaints of 'harassment' made against the police – have only been accentuated by the serious economic recession of 1979–81. To anyone who had spent any time in Brixton previously, the events of April 1981 were entirely predictable.

My research in Brixton was funded by a Social Science Research Council studentship; further financial support was provided by my parents, who were, as always, both generous and understanding. My debts to them are considerable. I profited greatly, at all stages of fieldwork and of writing up, from the advice and comments of my doctoral supervisor, Professor Meyer Fortes, as well as from the unfailing interest and support of Dr Esther Goody. It is thanks to her, as well as to Professor Jack Goody, that this research has finally reached

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

the point of publication. I am also indebted to Dr Nicky Hart, for her stimulating criticisms of some of my material on marriage and conjugal roles; to Ms Lynn Garrett, for sharing with me her knowledge of sources relating to the history of West Africans in England; to Robert Buckler and Ms Linda Hunt who, at different times, gave considerable help in the compiling and processing of statistical material; and to Robert Kessler, Principal Planning Officer for the London Borough of Lambeth, for making available to me unpublished material from the 1971 census. I owe special thanks to Dr Thomas McCaskie, without whose practical and intellectual support, generously given in often trying circumstances, this manuscript would never have been completed.

My greatest debt, however, is to the people of Brixton themselves; to the staff of the local community organisations, churches, and youth clubs who patiently answered my questions and allowed me to share in their activities, as well as to many private individuals, some of whose views and comments on the area in which they live are reproduced below. Many were generous both with their time and hospitality. In particular, I remember with gratitude the kindness of Betty and Adedotun Adeseye, Marjorie and Charles Buckler, Charles Howe, Birdie Howe, Rosie and Rudolph Ricketts and A. K. Tejumola. Above all, I owe thanks to the twenty families whose everyday lives form the basis for this study, and who must, of course, remain anonymous. They spent many hours in what must, at times, have seemed like a never-ending and intrusive study. This book would not have been possible without their tolerance, patience and generosity, and I dedicate it to them.