



CHANGING
Families



Multiracial Families

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Contents

Chapter One	4
How American Families Are Changing	
Chapter Two	15
How I See Myself and My Family	
Chapter Three	25
How Others See Me and My Family	
Chapter Four	36
Other People Who Have Families Like Mine	
Chapter Five	46
Exploring Identity	
Source Notes	56
For Further Research	60
Index	62

Other People Who Have Families Like Mine

Many well-known, successful people are members of multiracial families. These individuals include Barack Obama, Meghan Markle, and Bruno Mars, among others. They faced challenges related to being multiracial, embraced who they are, and achieved great things.

The Forty-Fourth President of the United States

Former president Barack Obama is one of the most famous multiethnic individuals in history. He was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, on August 4, 1961, to a white mother, Stanley Ann Dunham (called Ann), and a black Kenyan father, Barack Obama Sr. The couple met while they were students at the University of Hawaii. They soon married and had a son. But the marriage did not last. A year after they married, Obama Sr. left his wife and son in Hawaii to study at Harvard University. After living apart for most of their marriage, the couple divorced in 1964, and Obama Sr. returned to Kenya, abandoning his American son.

A year later Ann married an Indonesian man, and in 1967 she moved with her son to Indonesia. Life there was not easy for the boy. He was stared at and teased because of his multiethnic appearance. Outwardly, Barack did not react to this mistreatment. Knowing that mixed-race people often faced racial slurs and discrimination, his mother raised him to be self-controlled, calm, and seemingly fearless—character traits that she thought would help him cope with the challenges he might face.

When Barack was nine years old, his mother gave birth to his half-sister, Maya. A year later, Ann sent Barack back to Hawaii to live with his maternal grandparents and go to school there.

Life in the United States

Barack got a scholarship to Punahou Academy, a prestigious private school that he attended for eight years. It was during his adolescence that he began wrestling with his ethnic identity. As one of only three students of African descent, he was unsure where he fit in, both in school and in society. He was a multiracial boy with African features, abandoned by his black father, and raised by a white mother and white grandparents. Because of his appearance, most people classified him as African American. As he matured, he came to accept this identity. “I realized that if the world saw me as African-American that was not something I needed to run away from, that was something I needed to embrace,” he explains. “I am less interested in how we label ourselves. I am more interested in how we treat each other. And if we are treating each other right, I can be African-American; I can be multiracial; I can be you name it. What matters is, am I showing people respect, am I caring for other people?”⁴⁰

After graduating from Punahou, Obama attended Columbia University, where he earned a degree in political science in 1983. He then worked as a community organizer in an impoverished area of Chicago. During this time he went to Kenya, where he met his African relatives and visited the graves of his father and grandfather. This trip helped him connect the different aspects of his life and heritage. He recalls, “For a long time I sat between the two graves and wept. I saw that my life in America—the black life,



“I am less interested in how we label ourselves. I am more interested in how we treat each other.”⁴⁰

—Barack Obama, the forty-fourth president of the United States

the white life. . .—all of it was connected with this small plot of earth an ocean away.”⁴¹

Returning from Africa with a new sense of self, and a growing desire to help the less fortunate, Obama enrolled in Harvard Law School, where he was a star student. According to Professor Laurence Tribe, “The better he did at Harvard Law School and the more he impressed people, the more obvious it became that he could have had anything, but it was clear that he wanted to make a difference to people, to communities.”⁴²

Obama has made a difference. In 2008 he became the first multiracial president of the United States and won reelection in 2012. During his time in office, he created and supported laws and policies that fostered tolerance and worked hard toward the goal of equal treatment of all Americans no matter their race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. He also advocated for human rights throughout the world. For his efforts in promoting cooperation between people and nations, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009.

Obama’s legacy has inspired many multiethnic young people. Grace Gibson, a mixed-race teen, says his legacy “embodies change and hope for so many in this country of all generations, genders, races and cultures. His message of bringing us all together as Americans is enhanced by his mixed heritage. . . . So one should feel nothing but pride to be mixed in America.”⁴³

Special, Not Different

Meghan Markle, the American actress, activist, and recent bride of Great Britain’s Prince Harry, is also multiracial. She is the daughter of Doria Ragland, a black clinical therapist, and Thomas Markle, a white television lighting director. Meghan was born on August 4, 1981, in Los Angeles and grew up there. Her parents raised her to feel that she and her family were special, but not different or abnormal. To reinforce the family’s normalcy, one Christmas Meghan’s parents gave her a family of dolls that consisted of

a black mother doll, a white father doll, and two children, one of each color. She recalls,

When I was about seven, I had been fawning over a boxed set of Barbie dolls. It was called The Heart Family and included a mom doll, a dad doll, and two children. This perfect nuclear family was only sold in sets of white dolls or black dolls. I don't remember coveting one over the other, I just wanted one. On Christmas morning, swathed in glitter-flecked wrapping paper, there I found my Heart Family: a black mom doll, a white dad doll, and a child in each color. My dad had taken the sets apart and customized my family.⁴⁴



Multiracial Celebrities

As the multiracial population continues to increase, there are more and more multiracial individuals helping to shape society. Many of these people work in the entertainment industry. These include musical artists such as Zendaya, Mariah Carey, Shakira, and Alicia Keys, among many others. Many actors are also multiracial. Dwayne Johnson, Rashida Jones, Shemar Moore, Hailee Steinfeld, Cameron Diaz, and Yara Shahidi are just a few of many mixed-race actors. Others include Halle Berry, Keanu Reeves, Tracee Ellis Ross, Maya Rudolph, and Olivia Munn.

Other multiracial individuals are champions in sports. Individuals such as former captain of the New York Yankees Derek Jeter, golf great Tiger Woods, tennis star Madison Keys, and Olympic swimming gold medalist Ryan Lochte are all mixed race. So is quarterback and political activist Colin Kaepernick. Other mixed-race people, such as US senators Corey Booker, Kamala Harris, and Tammy Duckworth, are making their mark in government. Still other mixed-race individuals are successful writers, journalists, artists, businesspeople, and scientists. Indeed, multiracial people are changing the face of the United States.

Growing up, Meghan embraced her multiracial heritage—and her family. She says, “I have the most vivid memories of being seven years old and my mom picking me up from my grandmother’s house. There were the three of us, a family tree in an ombré [shades of a color] of mocha next to the caramel complexion of my mom and light-skinned, freckled me. I remember the sense of belonging, having nothing to do with the color of my skin.”⁴⁵

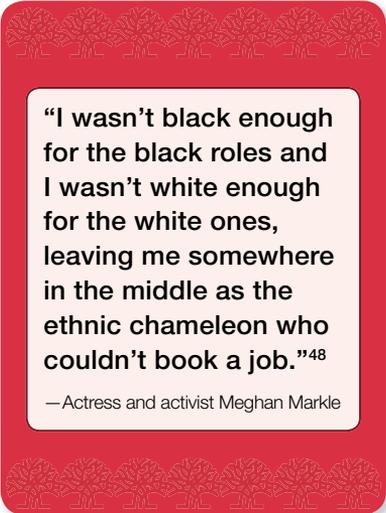
Meghan felt so secure in her multiracial identity that in seventh grade, when she was instructed to complete a section of a survey indicating her ethnicity, she refused to do so because there was no place to designate hers as multiracial. The choices were black, white, Hispanic, or Asian. “You could only choose one, but that



Meghan Markle, now England’s Duchess of Sussex, is the daughter of a mixed-race marriage. Although she was aware of racial differences when she was a child, her loving family raised her to believe her multiracial identity was special, not abnormal.

would be to choose one parent over the other—and one half of myself over the other,” she explains. “My teacher told me to check the box for Caucasian. ‘Because that’s how you look, Meghan,’ she said. I put down my pen. Not as an act of defiance, but rather a symptom of my confusion. I couldn’t bring myself to do that, to picture the pit-in-her-belly sadness my mother would feel if she were to find out. So, I didn’t tick [check] a box. I left my identity blank.”⁴⁶

Although she was never defiant, young Meghan was not afraid of speaking out. She was raised to be compassionate toward the disenfranchised and to stand up for what she thought was right. So, at age eleven, she waged a letter-writing campaign against a dishwashing soap commercial that she felt promoted an unfair stereotype of women. As a result of her efforts alone, the manufacturer changed the commercial. “It was at that moment that I realized the magnitude of my actions,”⁴⁷ she explains. Since that time she has continued to speak up for, and take actions that support, what she thinks is right.



“I wasn’t black enough for the black roles and I wasn’t white enough for the white ones, leaving me somewhere in the middle as the ethnic chameleon who couldn’t book a job.”⁴⁸

—Actress and activist Meghan Markle

An Influential Woman

After finishing high school, Markle went on to graduate from Northwestern University with a double major in theater and international studies. She was determined to become an actress but found that her ambiguous appearance and multiethnic background often stood in her way. She explains, “I wasn’t black enough for the black roles and I wasn’t white enough for the white ones, leaving me somewhere in the middle as the ethnic chameleon who couldn’t book a job.”⁴⁸

Eventually Markle began landing small roles. Her big break came in 2011, when she was cast as Rachel Zane in the television series *Suits*. “The show’s producers weren’t looking for someone

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2. Quoted in Susan Saulny, “Census Data Presents Rise in Multiracial Population of Youths,” *New York Times*, March 24, 2011. www.nytimes.com.
3. E. Dolores Johnson, “The Census Always Boxed Us Out,” *Narratively*, October 30, 2017. <http://narrative.ly>.
4. George Yancey and Richard Lewis Jr., *Interracial Families*. New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 5.
5. Quoted in Pew Research Center, “Chapter 5: Race and Social Connections—Friends, Family and Neighborhoods,” *Multiracial in America*, June 11, 2015. www.pewsocialtrends.org.
6. Kathleen Ojo, “Ruminations on Race,” *Mixed Space* (blog), October 8, 2014. www.mixedspace.org.
7. Quoted in Tanya Hutchins, *Born Beautiful Biracial*. Alexandria, VA: TP Rewards, 2014, p. 10.
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9. Allison Bates, “A Sort of Hybrid,” in *Mixed*, ed. Andrew Garrod, Robert Kilkenny, and Christina Gomez. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014, p. 53.
10. Quoted in Gaskins, *What Are You?*, p. 173.
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Organizations and Websites

Loving Day (www.lovingday.org). Loving Day is an organization that fights racism and promotes multicultural diversity. It offers information about *Loving v. Virginia* and sponsors annual Loving Day events that celebrate multiracial families.

Index

Note: **Boldface page numbers indicate illustrations.**

- adoption, transracial, 10, 11
- African Americans
 - bias against multiracial teens who are part, 36
 - defining, 23
 - interracial marriages
 - with Caucasians and median income, 18
 - difference by gender, 12
 - increase in, with Caucasians, 5
 - locations of largest number of, 14
 - percent of, in, 12
 - one-drop law, 50–51
- Afro-Asians, defining, 23
- Alabama, 8
- American Indians. *See* Native Americans
- Amerindians. *See* Native Americans
- anti-miscegenation laws, 6, 8
- Asian Americans
 - defining, 23
 - interracial marriages
 - with Caucasians and median income, 18
 - difference by gender, 12
 - increase in, with Caucasians, 5
 - locations of largest number of, 14
 - percent of, in, 12
- Australia, multiracial families in, 30
- Bates, Allison, 15
- Beckford, Shantania, 42
- Berry, Halle, 39
- bicultural, defining, 23
- biracial, defining, 23
- blacks. *See* African Americans
- blood quantum laws, 50
- Booker, Corey, 39
- Born Beautiful Biracial* (Hutchins), 12
- Braunginn, Matthew, 51
- Brazil, multiracial families in, 30
- British Office for National Statistics, 42
- Brown, Ariana, 22
- Business Insider* (magazine), 14
- Canada, multiracial families in, 30
- Carey, Mariah, 39
- Caribbean, multiracial families in, 30
- Caucasians
 - defining, 23
 - historical view of, as superior, 6, 50
- Chang, Sarah H., 21
- Chapman, Rachele, 14
- children. *See* youth
- Chrzan, Michael, 53
- Chung, Nicole S., 28
- Collado, Chris, 19
- culture
 - changing identification with, over time, 54
 - dating and, 34
 - embracing multiple, 19–20
 - embracing single, 20, 49–52
 - exploring roots, 47–49
- dating, 34–35
- Diaz, Cameron, 39
- Dickerson, Debra, 16
- Dooley, Meghan, 47
- Duckworth, Tammy, 39
- Dunham, Stanley Ann, 36
- education, 18–19
- emotions
 - age and, 15, 17
 - desire to resemble other family members, 17
 - embarrassment and uncomfortableness, 19
 - helpful, to cope with challenges, 36
 - sense of isolation, 21–22
 - sense of specialness, 17, 25, 46–47
 - talking about race and, 21
 - when asked about ethnicity, 28–31
- Europe, multiracial families in, 30
- exotic label, 29
- extended families, reactions of, 31–32