

Research explores why people are more likely to change ethnicity

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Changing your ethnicity multiple times throughout your life: that's not all that absurd for millions of people worldwide. For them, ethnicity is not a

congenital, rigid notion, but something that changes to correspond with how your place in society changes. This was revealed in research by economist Robbert Rademakers, who will receive his doctorate from Radboud University on 16 June.

Most people, when asked, will say that ethnicity is a pretty rigid notion. It's congenital, it's in your DNA and you can't change it. But at an individual level, it turns out that people treat it significantly differently. Rademakers studied data from the United States, India and Indonesia and saw that a relatively large proportion of those populations takes a flexible attitude towards ethnicity. "The data suggests that people constantly weigh up the costs and benefits of various ethnicities and are not afraid to take on a different one if it's worthwhile to them," says Rademakers.

Shifting identity

Certainly in recent years, the attitude towards ethnicity has become more flexible. "If you, a third-generation Chinese American man, marry a [white woman](#) and find yourself in social circles that are predominantly white, the identity you identify with will also shift. In the 1980s, we saw that less than 0.1% of all non-white Americans identified as white later in life. That number has risen to 2% now. That means millions of people," says Rademakers.

Ethnicity is determined differently all over the world. In the United States, people associate ethnicity with race while in the Middle East, it's often associated with religion and in India, it's determined by your caste. Social, financial and personal reasons can cause people to embrace a different ethnicity. "Sometimes, people approach it in a very opportunistic way, consciously or unconsciously. For example, there are regions in Indonesia where the inheritance of family members is passed down through the wife. You then see that men in such a relationship will

take on the wife's ethnicity so they can lay claim to the inheritance."

Positive discrimination

According to Rademakers, it's above all important that this knowledge sinks in with government bodies, economists and other researchers.

"Because data on ethnicity is often used as a source for research into inequality. Which often results in policy."

Ethnicity is usually something that people can indicate themselves, to authorities and on forms from organizations. "But at the same time, we often use that information as a source for research into inequality. Money turns you white, you might say, in the United States, many African-Americans and Hispanic people identify as white, later in life, as soon as their income rises. That means that the poorest members of these groups, in particular, are left, which gives a skewed image of income inequality. And that leads to prejudice and discrimination, for example."

"At the same time, positive discrimination can be important to help some groups get ahead. But then you have to make sure that it reaches the right people, and my research suggests that it's difficult if you base your conclusions on [ethnicity](#) data. It's better to make policy based on people's socio-economic status. Look at income, look at education, look at parents who are on [social security benefits](#): that gives a much more concrete image."

Provided by Radboud University

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