How social status shapes race

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Edited by Michael Hout, University of California, Berkeley, CA, and approved October 24, 2008 (received for review June 16, 2008)

We show that racial perceptions are fluid; how individuals perceive their own race and how they are perceived by others depends in part on their social position. Using longitudinal data from a representative sample of Americans, we find that individuals who are unemployed, incarcerated, or impoverished are more likely to be seen and identify as black and less likely to be seen and identify as white, regardless of how they were classified or identified previously. This is consistent with the view that race is not a fixed individual attribute, but rather a changeable marker of status.

Since at least the 19th century, the dominant understanding of race has been that racial divisions are rooted in biological differences between human populations (1). For the past 50 years or more, social scientists have challenged that notion, claiming that races are instead created through social processes and subject to economic and political calculation (2). However, even in disciplines where race is viewed as socially defined, most empirical studies continue to treat race as a fixed attribute of a particular individual (3). We examine two conceptions of race—how individuals are racially classified by others and how they identify themselves—and find that both change over time. Further, we show that this temporal variation is related to the individuals' social position: People who are unemployed, incarcerated, or impoverished are more likely to be classified and identify as black, and less likely to be classified and identify as white, regardless of how they were classified or identified previously. This study is the first to examine changes in racial classification using a representative longitudinal sample, and our findings suggest that race is not a fixed characteristic, but rather a flexible marker of social status.

To examine changes over time in racial classification and self-identification, we analyze data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), which contains multiple measures of interviewer-classified and self-identified race over a twenty-year period. In each survey year between 1979 and 1998, NLSY interviewers were instructed to record their assessment of whether respondents were "White," "Black," or "Other" at the end of the interview. Respondents also self-reported their race in 2 years: In 1979 they were asked for their 'origin or descent,' and in 2002 they were asked whether they were of Hispanic origin and the 'race or races' they considered themselves to be.

Results

We begin by examining changes in racial classification, an often overlooked aspect of race that is nevertheless important because discrimination presumably rests on how people are perceived by others (4). Twenty percent of the 12,686 individuals in the sample experienced at least one change in how they were racially classified by interviewers over the 19-year period. This degree of fluidity is surprising because the United States is typically characterized as having uniquely rigid racial boundaries (5). Yet, the variation is clearly illustrated by the respondents' racial classification histories: If we represent being classified as white, black or other in a given year by the letters w, b, and o respectively, we see that some people are consistently classified over time (wwwwwwwwwwwwwwww) or have only one discrepant classification (wwwwwwwwwwbwwww), whereas other people vary considerably over time (wwooooowbbobobwo) or experience a shift in their racial classification at some point

(bbbbbbwwbwwwwwwww). It is possible that these changes could be the result of coding mistakes made by the interviewers; for example, where interviewers meant to record "White" but mistakenly recorded "Black." However, we find that changes in respondents' gender classification, which was also recorded by interviewers at the end of the survey, occur in just 0.27% of the cases. The much higher percentage of changes in racial classification from year-to-year (6%) suggests that the variation cannot be attributed to coding mistakes alone.

To assess whether these changes in racial classification are related to differences in social status, we focus our analysis on the likelihood of being classified by an interviewer as white (Fig. 1*A*) or black (Fig. 1*B*). Fig. 1*A* reports the percentage of individuals who were classified as white in the previous year who are perceived to be white in the current year for three indicators of socioeconomic status: incarceration, unemployment, and poverty. Fig. 1*B* shows the same comparison for individuals who were classified as black. We find that individuals who were classified as white in the previous year are less likely to be seen as white if they are currently incarcerated, unemployed, or have household incomes below the poverty line. For example, among respondents who were classified as white in the previous year (Fig. 1*A*), 96% of nonincarcerated respondents are classified as white the following year, whereas only 90% of incarcerated respondents are still seen as white.

In contrast, respondents who were classified as black in the previous year are more likely to be seen as black in the current year if they are incarcerated, unemployed, or have incomes below the poverty line (Fig. 1*B*). Although the differences in the likelihood of being classified as black are not as large as they are for being classified as white, all of the differences in racial classification between high- and low-status individuals are statistically significant ($P < 0.05$, two-tailed test) and robust to several multivariate model specifications, including the addition of person fixed effects (See [supporting information \(SI\) Table S1 and SI Text](#)).

Fig. 2 reports changes in racial self-identification by comparing data from 1979 and 2002 only. The results mirror the findings for interviewer-classified race in both substance and magnitude. Among respondents who identified as white in 1979 (Fig. 2*A*), we find 97% of never-impoorished respondents identified as white in 2002, whereas just 93% of respondents who experienced poverty (between 1979 and 2002) still identified as white. These results underscore not only that racial self-identification can be fluid (6), but also that changes in identification are related to the respondents' social position.

Discussion

The variation over time in racial classification and identification is at odds with the view that race is an attribute of individuals that

Author contributions: A.M.P. and A.S. designed research, performed research, analyzed data, and wrote the paper.

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

This article is a PNAS Direct Submission.

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This article contains supporting information online at www.pnas.org/cgi/content/full/0805762105/DCSupplemental.

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the only categories available to them were: "Black," "White," and "Other." NLSY interviewers are predominantly female, white and highly educated (i.e., 92% of respondents were interviewed by women, 84% by interviewers who self-identified as white, and 39% by college graduates), characteristics typical among survey interviewers in general.

Racial Self-Identification. In 1979, respondents were handed a card with 28 possible origin or descent responses, including categories such as "Black, Afro-American or Negro," "English," "Cuban," and "Vietnamese." NLSY coded up to six responses. In 2002, following the updated federal standards for collecting data on race/ethnicity (10), respondents were asked two separate questions: one about Hispanic origin and one about race; the latter allowed for multiple mentions among the six categories (White, Black or African American, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska native, some other race). We use these responses to create binary variables for reporting as "White," "Black," and "Other." Respondents who offered multiple mentions may have "yeses" on more than one of these variables. Although simplified, this coding scheme allows for comparisons both over time and to the interviewer's racial classification.

It is important to note that in 1979 "White" is not on the list of accepted self-identified origin or descent responses. Instead, respondents selected from European ethnic/national categories, such as "Irish," "French," "Portuguese," and "Russian." To examine changes in self-identification over time, we collapse these 1979 responses into a single "European" category that is then compared with self-identified "Whites" in 2002. Thus, our analyses do not count reporting "Greek" in 1979 and "White" in 2002 as a change in identification over time. In other analyses, we distinguished between Europeans from northwestern and southeastern countries (e.g., English, French, German vs. Italian, Russian, and Greek) because of research suggesting Southeastern Europeans were racialized differently in the United States until the mid-20th century (8), but we found little difference in the likelihood of change in racial/ethnic identification between these two European-origin groups.

In both 1979 and 2002, the residual "Other" category includes American Indian, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Hispanic/Latino responses. In 2002, people who reported they were Hispanic on the Hispanic origin question and gave an answer to the race question are included in more than one category (e.g., respondents who answered "yes" to the Hispanic origin question and "White" to the race question are coded in our data as "Other" and "White"). We argue that this coding more accurately reflects their responses than creating separate mutually exclusive categories, particularly given that a significant number of respondents refused to respond to the race question after identifying themselves as Hispanic. It is also important to note that Fig. 2 examines only respondents who identified as white or black in 1979. Thus, a respondent who answered only "Mexican" in 1979 and "Hispanic" and "White" in 2002 is not included in Fig. 2A, whereas a respondent who answered "Mexican" and "Irish" in 1979 and "Hispanic" and "White" in 2002 is included in the Fig. and is coded in both years as "White" (and "Other").

Analytic Approach. Given the different time spans covered by our dependent variables we take two approaches to examining the effects of these factors on changes in racial classification and identification. For the racial classification analyses we have information from each survey year, so Fig. 1 depicts the relationship between one's current social position and one's current racial classification. For the racial identification analyses, because we have measures of self-reported race at just two time points 23 years apart, Fig. 2 depicts whether respondents have ever experienced a loss of status in these areas.

As one might expect, characteristics of the respondents, such as whether they identify as Hispanic or with multiple origins, and characteristics of the interviewers, such as their own racial self-identification, affect the racial classification and identification process. To take this into account, we introduce a host of such controls in our multivariate models (see *SI Text*). The effects of social status discussed above remain significant net of these other factors, suggesting that social position plays an important role in the racial classification and self-identification of all Americans.

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