Choosing Colors: Effects of Proxy Reporting on the Identification of Mixed Race Children.[1]

Anthony Daniel Perez

Population Studies Center, University of Michigan

[1] Paper prepared for presentation at the 2006 Population Association of America Annual Meeting (April, Los Angeles). Direct all correspondence to Tony Perez (e-mail: adperez@umich.edu) at the Population Studies Center, Institute for Social Research, 426 Thompson Street, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. The research is supported by a research grant from the National Poverty Center.

INTRODUCTION

During the latter half of the 20th century, racial measurement in the U.S. fully transitioned to a self-identification standard. Census enumerators no longer determine or assign race; rather, individuals respond to race/ethnicity questions for themselves, and are free to identify with whatever categories they see fit. Consistent with this trend toward the privileging of self-identification, recent revisions to federal guidelines on the collection of racial/ethnic data provided individuals with greater flexibility in the reporting of race by allowing, for the first time, multiple race responses (OMB 1997) In spite of the shift toward a broader and more self-determined conceptualization of race, researchers continue to assume that racial identification is largely valid (consistent with the actual racial/ethnic ancestry of the individual) and stable (unchanging across contexts and/or measures). Few would expect individuals to switch identities over time or in different settings, and the racial composition of the population is not expected to vary significantly by the choice of racial measures.

Many of these assumptions proceed from a questionable premise, however. While racial identification is *thought* to reflect an individual's beliefs about his/her own identity, the number of persons who actually respond for themselves may be remarkably small. Though countless surveys, polls, and administrative data sources do utilize true self-reports, large scale data collection efforts such as the decennial census and the Current Population Survey (CPS) rely heavily on proxy reports. In other words, much of the race/ethnicity data on household members are actually supplied by a single respondent referred to as the "household lister." Though the wording of race/ethnicity questions generally ask the listing respondent to indicate "how person X would identify him/herself," it is still the case the *lister* is reporting the characteristics that we as researchers would like to attribute to the individual. In situations where the household lister and the "listed" individual would provide (or be likely to provide) identical responses to race/ethnicity questions (e.g. in monoracial households), proxy reports would replicate the data generated by "true" self-reports. For households in which the racial identities of all or some of the residents are ambiguous, however, the potential for mismatches between the racial identities supplied by the lister and the identities that *would have been supplied* by the individuals themselves is far greater.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Nowhere are these issues more salient than for persons of mixed race decent. Though recent studies find that the relatively small size of the mixed race population does not dramatically alter the overall racial composition of the U.S., the choice of whether and where multiracial individuals are counted, as well as the questionnaire format used to identify mixed race persons, can have moderate impacts on the enumerated size of certain racial groups (Hirschman, Alba, And Farley 2000). Other studies have shown multiracial identification to be anything but straightforward. Evidence from earlier censuses and survey data reveal that parental ancestry plays a very limited role in predicting the identification patterns of multiracial youth (Xie and Goyette 1997; Harris and Sim 2002). Xie and Goyette find that biracial white/Asian youth are equally likely to be classified as either white only or Asian only, suggesting that racial identification for some biracial youth may seem arbitrary. In their study of multiracial adolescents, Harris and Sim (2002) find that children of interracial couples frequently choose to identify with just one

race. Indeed, recent analyses of Census 2000 data find that only 57% of the children of interracial couples are classified as multiracial (Jones and Smith 2003).

Beyond the fluidity and contingency of multiracial reporting in general, recent evidence highlights the importance of observer perspective in determining whether and how multiracial individuals are identified. In a web-survey in which respondents were shown photos of multiracial individuals, Harris (2002) observes large variability in the "accurate" identification of mixed race persons. Importantly, he finds that the race of respondents greatly influences how they identify mixed race individuals, with members of all races (except blacks) being more likely to interpret the individuals in the photographs as sharing the same race as their own (2002). These findings suggest that the characteristics of individuals may condition the ways in which they perceive race, which in turn may influence how they identify persons along racial lines. Specifically, it may be the case that observers "project" their own race onto individuals with racially ambiguous appearances, a finding that bears directly on the household-roster style of race reporting used in the census.

NEW DIRECTIONS

The patterns suggested by previous findings introduce an intriguing if not troubling possibility: That the *observed* racial distribution of the U.S. population may not accurately reflect the underlying distribution or even the distribution that *would have been* obtained from the actual self-reports of each individual respondent. While the use of proxy race reports are likely to have a sizeable impact on the classification of all multiracial individuals, the effects should be particularly pronounced among the large concentration of multiracial children, most of which are unlikely to be responding personally to census or CPS questionnaires. To examine these issues, I conduct an analysis of recent CPS data (March 2003) in an attempt to uncover both the character and magnitude of what I deem the "proxy effect" of racial reporting.

Though the decennial Census also uses proxy reports, the Census Bureau does not maintain information about the household lister, rendering it impossible to pin down *which* member of household provided the responses for the other members. The Current Population Survey does allow such information to be obtained from a relatively obscure and rarely used questionnaire item. Once the lister has been identified, we may better determine how the characteristics of lister influence the reported characteristics of the children for whom the lister is providing responses.

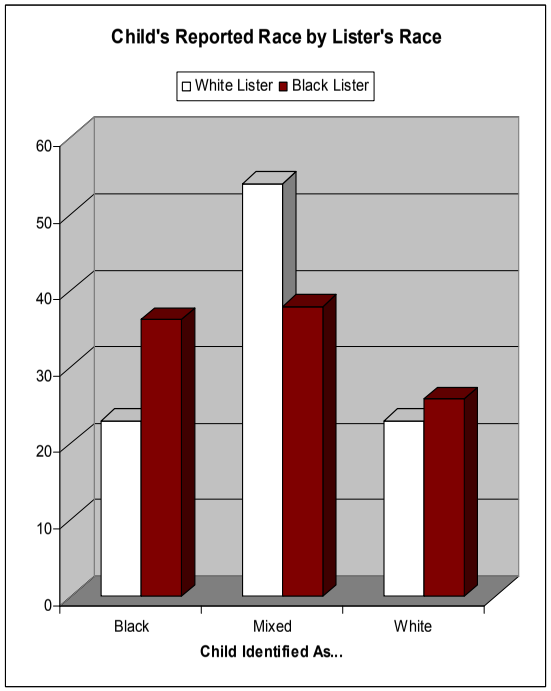
I begin by restricting the CPS data to the biological children of married interracial couples (one white parent, one non-white). Using family identifiers, I then link the children's records to those of each parent, which allows for a direct comparison of child's race, *as reported*, with the *expected* race of the child given the mixed racial ancestry of his/her parents. While previous studies of Census 2000 data have shown the discrepancy between observed and expected race to vary dramatically across parental race combinations (black/white vs. Asian/white, e.g.), these studies cannot account for the listing parent. Put simply, this project represents the first attempt to systematically examine the extent to which the reported race of multiracial children is linked to the characteristics of the parent who *actually responds to the survey.*

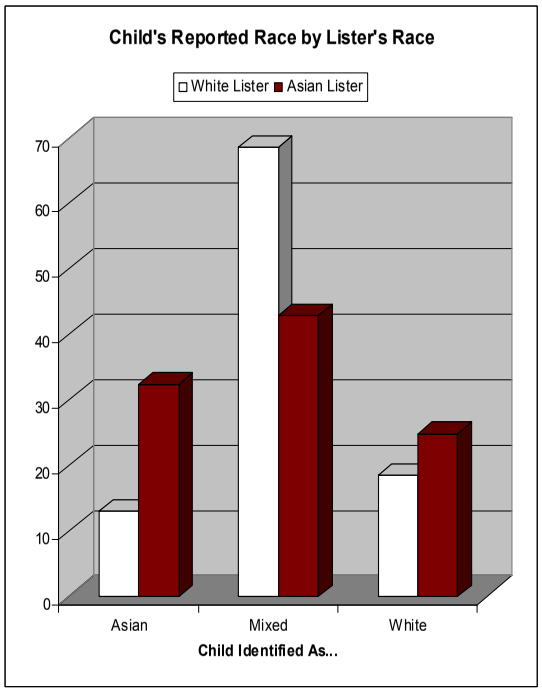
PRELIMINARY RESULTS

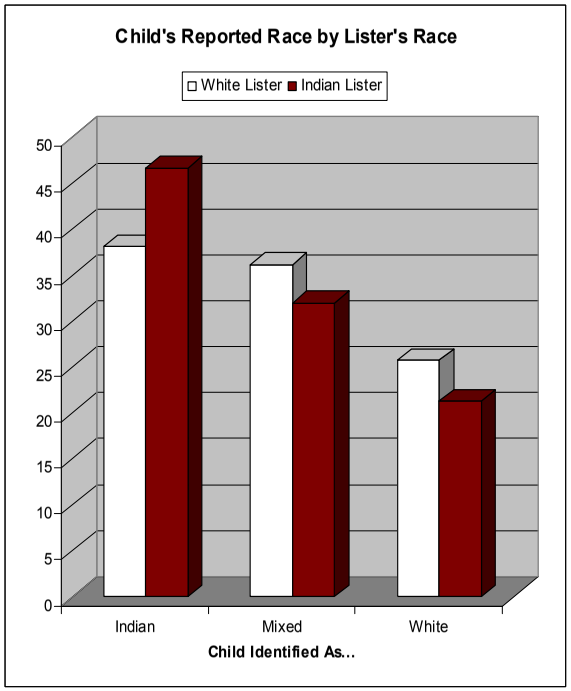
The first, and in large part, most relevant characteristic is the race of the listing parent. All else being equal, it is reasonable to expect parents to project *their own race* onto their children more so than the race of their spouses, though the magnitude of these proxy effects is likely to vary considerably across race/gender combinations. Though upcoming analyses will examine a wide range of lister characteristics, for now I present preliminary findings on the race of the listing parent and the extent to which his/her race is associated with differential reporting of the child's race. The outcome is a three category indicator of the child's reported race, coded 0 if the child is identified as non-white, 1 if the child is identified as biracial, and 2 if the child is identified simply as white. The attached charts detail results for biracial black/white, Asian/white, and American Indian/white children.

Several preliminary conclusions may be drawn from the figures. First, the results confirm that the race of the listing parent is highly associated with the reported identities of mixed race children. For all racial groups examined, non-white parents seem much more likely to identify their children exclusively with their non-white race, and far less likely to identify their children as mixed. Conversely, white parents, while no more likely (and perhaps even slightly less likely) to identify their children exclusively as white, are much more likely to report their children as being of mixed race ancestry. Second, the character and magnitude of these "proxy effects" vary across racial combinations. While all groups exhibit a positive non-white projection effect, the influence is particularly telling among biracial Asian children, who are nearly three times more likely to be identified solely as Asian if their Asian parent responds to the questionnaire. Regarding the proportion of children who are actually reported as multiracial, we see that the race of the reporting parent has little impact on biracial American Indian children, whereas mixed race black and Asian children are substantially more likely to identify as mixed if their white parent is supplying their race responses.

More detailed analyses (and additional months of CPS data) are forthcoming…


Child's Reported Race by Lister's Race
White Lister
Black Lister
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
Black
Mixed
White
Child Identified As...


Child's Reported Race by Lister's Race
White Lister
Asian Lister
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
Asian
Mixed
White
Child Identified As...


Child's Reported Race by Lister's Race
White Lister
Indian Lister
50
45
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
Indian
Mixed
White
Child Identified As...

References

Harris, David R. 2002. "In the Eye of the Beholder: Observed Race and Observer Characteristics." Population Studies Center Research Report 02-522, University of Michigan.

Harris, David R. and Jeremiah Joseph Sim. 2002 "Who is Multiracial? Assessing the Complexity of Lived Race." *American Sociological Review* 67(4): 614-627.

Hirschman, Charles, Richard Alba, and Reynolds Farley. 2000. "The Meaning and Measurement of Race in the U.S. Census: Glimpses in the Future." *Demography* 37: 381-393.

Jones, Nicholas A. and Amy Symens Smith. 2003. "Who Is Multiracial?" Exploring the Complexities and Challenges Associated With Identifying the Two or More Races Population in Census 2000. Unpublished paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America, Minneapolis MN. May 2003.

Office of Management and Budget. 1997. "Revision to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity." *Federal Register* (October 30). URL: http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/fedreg/ombdir15.html

Xie, Yu and Kim Goyette. 1997. "The Racial Identification of Biracial Children with One Asian Parent: Evidence from the 1990 Census." *Social Forces* 76: 547-570.