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The Fluidity of Racial Classifications

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Abstract

In this article, I review the social science literature on racial fluidity, the idea that race is flexible and impermanent. I trace the ongoing evolution of racial classifications and boundaries in the United States and Latin America, two regions that share a history of European colonization, slavery, and high levels of race mixing but that have espoused very different racial ideologies. Traditionally, for many groups in the United States, race was seen as unchangeable and determined by ancestry; in contrast, parts of Latin America have lacked strict classification rules and embraced race mixing. However, recent research has shown that race in the United States can change across time and context, particularly for populations socially defined as more ambiguous, while some Latin American racial boundaries are becoming more stringent. I argue that the fluidity of race has redefined our understanding of racial identities, and propose several directions for future political science scholarship that bridges disciplines and methodological approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Early pseudoscientific theories of race posited that racial differences were biological, rigid, and indisputable (Fredrickson 2002). However, today, race is understood to be subjective, a construct in which group membership is based on phenotypical attributes and rooted in a common descent but is also structured by malleable social rules (Cornell & Hartmann 2007).

In this article, I review the broad and interdisciplinary literature on racial fluidity, the idea that race is unsettled and imprecise, as opposed to permanent and exact. Telles & Paschel (2014) identify four types of racial fluidity: temporal fluidity, defined as changes in how individuals identify or are classified over time; contextual fluidity, racial change across contexts or conditions; referential fluidity, inconsistency with respect to who belongs in particular racial categories; and categorical fluidity, uncertainty regarding the location of the boundaries of racial categories. These types of racial fluidity are both distinct and complementary, often working in conjunction (Telles & Paschel 2014).

I examine the extant social science theories and evidence on racial fluidity and assess how the flexibility/inflexibility of racial categories over time and across contexts has redefined our understanding of contemporary social identities and racial boundaries. Research on racial fluidity has focused almost exclusively on the United States and Latin America, two regions that share a common history of European colonization, enslavement, and high levels of race mixing between whites, blacks, and indigenous peoples (Telles & Sue 2009).[1] Thus, I begin by examining the ongoing evolution of racial categories in the United States, where an individual's race has been traditionally considered static, ascribed, and determined by ancestry. For black Americans, race has been particularly stringent, legally codified in hypodescent (the one-drop rule), which categorized individuals with any degree of black heritage as singularly black (Davis 2001). But in recent decades, long-held beliefs about the rigidity of race in the United States have been challenged. Increases in immigration, intermarriage, and the mixed-race population have eroded some racial boundaries, and social science scholarship has repeatedly shown that individual-level race does change. I discuss the extent to which race is seen as unyielding for some groups but more flexible for others and consider the reasons offered for this variation.

I turn then to Latin America, which, in contrast to the United States, has generally lacked firm racial classification rules, viewing race as a continuous trait best captured by skin color, not set racial categories (Harris et al. 1993, Telles 2004). Historically, race mixing was widely seen as a source of pride, and intermediate race-color categories were embraced for their inclusivity. But recent work has suggested that some racial boundaries are becoming firmer. Moreover, Latin America is far from a homogeneous unit; the extent to which racial identification and categorization are fluid varies extensively across the region.

Finally, I highlight gaps in our understanding of racial fluidity, particularly in the field of political science, and suggest several directions for future scholarly work on the topic. I push for greater attention to the multidimensional and contextual nature of race, and encourage the development of measurement approaches that enable scholars to empirically estimate race in a manner that is more continuous and less strictly categorical. Doing so will greatly expand our understanding of how race is constructed in present-day politics and society. It will also reflect a lived reality for millions of people: that racial categories are overlapping and endogenous to historical, cultural, social, and economic factors.

[1]For some examples of racial and ethnic fluidity in other parts of the world, see work by Caron-Malenfant et al. (2014) on Canada, Simonovits & Kézdi (2016) on Hungary, Simpson & Akinwale (2007) on the United Kingdom, and Pettersen & Brustad (2015) on Norway.

RACIAL FLUIDITY IN THE UNITED STATES

Historical Fluidity

In spite of the recent surge in empirical work on the topic, the concept of racial fluidity in the United States is not new. The phenomenon of racial "passing," wherein an individual who can credibly assert membership in multiple racial groups modifies their self-presentation in order to surreptitiously integrate into and become accepted among another (usually more powerful) group, dates back to the antebellum era. Lighter-skinned slaves (the children of enslaved black women and white enslavers) often received more favorable treatment because they were perceived as more intelligent than and superior to darker-skinned slaves (Myrdal 1944, Keith & Herring 1991). Light-skinned, mixed-race blacks were sometimes able to avoid the discrimination and prejudices thrust upon blacks by using their fair appearance to pass as white and access the privileges afforded to whites (Hobbs 2014), though there are also examples of whites who passed as black (Sandweiss 2009). Other scholarship empirically demonstrates that temporal racial fluidity can be traced to at least the late nineteenth century (Saperstein & Gullickson 2013).

More generally, there has been referential and categorical racial fluidity over the course of US history. Racial boundary positions can shift to include and exclude different groups (Wimmer 2008); for example, many European immigrant ethnic groups, including Irish, Italian, and Jewish people, were once categorized as nonwhite but "became" white over time as they intentionally differentiated and distanced themselves from blacks, expanding the category of white (Haney López 2006). It is also possible for individuals and groups to alter their racial position by moving across an otherwise static boundary line (Wimmer 2008): Asian ethnic groups, including Japanese Americans and Chinese Americans in the Mississippi Delta, were once seen as almost black, but could change their status to almost white by achieving economic mobility and distinguishing themselves from blacks (Loewen 1971, Spickard 1989).

The constructed, contradictory, and fickle nature of US racial classification is exemplified in the revisions of census categories. Since its inception in 1790, the decennial US census has counted the population by race/color. For much of the census's history, race was assigned to individuals by an enumerator, characterized as unchangeable, and race mixture was ignored entirely. Yet, between 1850 and 1920, racial fluidity was acknowledged, and periodically enumerated with specificity, via fractional mixed-race categories: mulatto (half-black), quadroon (one-quarter black), and octoroon (one-eighth black). By 1930, these categories were removed, and mixed-race blacks, as well as individuals of mixed white-Asian parentage, were subjected to the one-drop rule and categorized with their minority race. Conversely, mixed-race American Indians were often counted as members of white society, at least in the census, in order to reduce the government's obligation to native peoples (Nobles 2000, Hochschild & Powell 2008).

In the latter half of the twentieth century, race continued to evolve from a perceived biological to a social and subjective characteristic; this was formalized in the census format shift from enumerator-based identification to respondent self-identification of race in 1960. Originally intended to exclude blacks, the one-drop rule now became a unifier of black group consciousness; individuals of black heritage committed themselves to the rule as a way of politically mobilizing and strengthening solidarity, irrespective of skin color, beginning during Jim Crow and continuing through the civil rights and Black Power movements (Williamson 1980). The Red Power movement of the 1960s challenged and redefined American Indian identities (Nagel 1995). In 1967, the US Supreme Court unanimously struck down laws banning interracial marriage. This decision led to an increase in mixed-race births, which, in turn, sparked the Multiracial Movement of the 1980s and 1990s, which sought to recognize mixed-race individuals in the census (Williams 2006).

In 1977, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) instituted Directive No. 15, the official race and ethnic standard classifications for all federal record keeping, data collection and presentation, and administrative reporting. The OMB recognized one ethnic category—Hispanic origin, or not of Hispanic origin—and five general racial categories: white, black, Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. In 1997, the OMB revised Directive No. 15 in order to enable people to identify with more than one racial group. This reflected a national shift toward a more continuous approach to race, unbounded by mutually exclusive categories.

Contemporary Fluidity in Racial Identification and Classification

Despite being socially and politically constructed, for the majority of the US population, racial identification and classification are uncontested and highly stable. Examining 162 million individual-level linked responses from the 2000 and 2010 US censuses, Liebler et al. (2017) find that only 6% of people reported a different race and/or Hispanic-origin response from the first to the second recording. However, rates of consistency vary substantially by racial group. Over-time analyses of individual self-identification show that race is extremely steady for whites and blacks (at rates of at least 95%) as well as Asians (at rates of at least 90%) (Doyle & Kao 2007, DeFina & Hannon 2016). For these groups, there is also very high consistency between self-identification and observer-classified race, with match rates of 95% or greater (Saperstein 2006, Herman 2010, Porter et al. 2016). These robust findings demonstrate that racial membership is remarkably unwavering for non-Hispanic whites, blacks, and Asians in the United States.

Racial boundaries are more equivocal for Pacific Islanders, American Indians, and Hispanic/Latinos, populations that have high levels of race mixture and for whom identity is often tied more to language and culture than ancestry and phenotype (Campbell & Troyer 2007, Perez & Hirschman 2009). Race for American Indians is particularly mutable; only one-third of the 3.1 million people who identified as American Indian in either the 2000 or 2010 census maintained consistent identification over both censuses (Liebler et al. 2016). In recent decades, the number of people identifying as American Indian has risen steeply, vastly exceeding the net change of the population and not attributable to changes in census instructions or approaches; this is "ethnic switching," wherein individuals who previously identified as non-Indian changed their race to Indian at a later time (Eschbach 1995, Nagel 1995).

For Hispanic/Latinos, racial identification is particularly complex, because the US government defines Hispanic as an ethnicity that is composed of different races. This definition conflicts with the perception of many Hispanics that theirs is not just an ethnic group but a racial one as well (Taylor et al. 2012).[2] When it comes to Hispanic ethnic labeling, there is high consistency in both self-identification (Liebler et al. 2017) and external classification over time (Porter et al. 2016). However, there is considerable instability in Hispanics' *racial* identification over time—only 41% identified their race and their Hispanic origin the same way in 2000 and 2010 (Liebler et al. 2017). According to 2017 American Community Survey estimates, among the 16.6 million people who marked "some other race," 95% identified as Hispanic; of those who marked Hispanic, 27% identified as "some other race" and 5% identified with multiple races. Together, these observations demonstrate that a large proportion of US Hispanics, whose backgrounds are frequently *mestizo*, or mixed, feel that the standard census racial categories do not suit them. Hispanics' racial self-identification also differs from how they are seen by observers; for instance, over 90% of

[2]There has also been slippage in the categorization of these terms over time; for example, whereas "Mexican" is listed today as a Hispanic ethnic option, in the 1930 census it was denoted a race.

Hispanics who self-classify as racially white feel that others do not perceive them as white (Vargas 2015).

Explaining Racial Stability and Fluidity

Racial fluidity, or the lack thereof, can be due to many factors. Sometimes, racial fluidity is an artifact of measurement error or methodological design. As Roth (2016) notes, race is a multidimensional construction and may be assessed in a myriad of ways that do not always overlap; for example, respondents' internal self-identification (identity) can differ from the race they mark on a close-ended survey (self-classification), from how they are classified by others (observed race), from how they appear racially (phenotype), or from the race that their heritage would dictate (ancestry). Given the multidimensionality of race, an individual's race may change as a result of differences in question instructions, wording, options given to respondents, someone else in the household completing the survey, or an outsider assigning the race to a person (Hirschman et al. 2000, Porter et al. 2016, Roth 2018). Racial responses may also be affected by the mode of identification used (e.g., in-person, over the phone, or online) (Perez & Hirschman 2009). And individual racial changes may be the product of intentional misreporting or errors made when marking race (Brubaker 2016, Liebler et al. 2016).

Racial consistency (or inconsistency) can also be the result of true racial stability (or change) in how individuals think of themselves or are perceived by others. Steady identification may reflect a strong, durable attachment to a particular racial group, as evidenced in the case of American Indians; relative to individuals who enter or exit the American Indian category, those who maintain constant identification express closer cultural connections to the Native community—such as by marrying other American Indians, living in an American Indian area, or reporting tribal membership (Nagel 1995, Liebler et al. 2016). A shift in racial identification, in contrast, may be attributed to the emergence of a racial group consciousness (Fitzgerald 2007, Sturm 2011).

In addition, individual racial identities can be made more or less salient as a result of social context and reference group shifts (Kana'iaupuni & Liebler 2005). Harris & Sim (2002) present evidence of contextual and referential fluidity; they find that even when asked comparable race questions, a sizable percentage of adolescents do not report consistent racial identities at home and at school. This suggests that identity can be relational to those surrounding the respondent; for instance, the presence of family members at home may magnify the effect of parents' opinions on the racial identities adolescents choose to express in that context.

Immigration shapes attitudes about race and identity, too. Immigrants bring with them the definitions and meanings of race in their native countries, which interact with and become infused with those of their host country. This cultural exchange can lead to macro-level racial shifts among migrants and those in their home and receiving countries, broadening people's understanding of race and/or producing changes in individual racial identification and categorization. For example, Joseph (2015) finds that the migration of Brazilians to the United States (and back) shapes Brazilians' views on racial formation, race relations, and the social meanings tied to race. In addition, Roth (2012) finds that Dominicans are much more likely to identify their race as black in the United States than in the Dominican Republic—but also that the proportion identifying as black in the United States has declined over time (decreasing from 27% in 1990 to 7% in 2006).

For the descendants of immigrant populations in the United States, intermarriage and assimilation can lead to a change in or diminishing of ethnic identification over generations (Waters 1990). Duncan & Trejo (2011) find that as later-generation Mexican Americans intermarry and/or become incorporated into American society, their identification as Mexican weakens; the result is that, over time, an ever-smaller proportion of people of Mexican descent identify as Mexican.

Duncan & Trejo (2011) show that this "selective ethnic attrition" extends beyond Mexican Americans to other Hispanic and Asian national origin groups in the United States, while Emeka (2019) finds that selective ethnic attrition also occurs among Nigerian Americans.

In some circumstances, racial identities may be induced for instrumental reasons. Economists have shown that individuals weigh the costs and benefits of self-identifying in a particular manner and sometimes select racial labels so as to maximize gains. In particular, the presence of affirmative action policies may encourage reporting certain minority identities. Exploiting variation in state-level affirmative action bans that began in the late 1990s, Antman & Duncan (2015) find that while affirmative action policies are in use, multiracial blacks—who are members of a minority group underrepresented at institutions of higher education—face a greater incentive to identify as black. In contrast, multiracial Asians—who are members of a minority group overrepresented at such institutions—have a disincentive to identify as Asian. But after a state prohibits affirmative action, multiracial blacks are about 30% less likely to identify as black and multiracial Asians are about 20% more likely to identify as Asian on US Census Bureau surveys.

Recent work has studied the effect of social status change on micro-level racial change over time. In one of the most prominent studies on temporal racial fluidity, Saperstein & Penner (2012) analyze the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) to compare individuals' self-reported race and their interviewer-reported race over a span of two decades. They find that a large number of people in their sample—one in five—experienced at least one change in their racial identification or classification. They also find that such changes can be attributed in part to shifts in the individual's social position: Losses in social status racially "darken," whereas gains in social status racially "whiten." For instance, becoming incarcerated increases the chances that one will both self-identify as black and be seen as black by others (and decreases the chances that one will self-identify and be seen as white), regardless of how the individual identified or was perceived before incarceration. By contrast, graduating from college increases the likelihood of self-identifying and being identified by others as white.

These results generated some controversy, with critics expressing skepticism that status shifts can trigger such dramatic racial changes and that race is as fluid as Saperstein & Penner (2012) reported. Examining the same NLSY data, Alba et al. (2016) find racial classifications generally very steady, especially for whites and blacks, and racial inconsistencies mostly limited to Hispanics and mixed-race people—populations that are more racially diverse and ambiguous to begin with. Alba et al. (2016) further contend that because there is so little fluidity for whites and blacks—who together comprise a sizable majority of the US population—changes in their social status have only a minimal effect on racial identification and classification overall. In another reanalysis, Kramer et al. (2016) raise concerns that the racial fluidity that Saperstein & Penner (2012) uncovered is due to measurement error and challenge the claim that status changes influence how interviewers classify respondents. In their reply, Saperstein & Penner (2016) counter these concerns with a series of empirical tests; they report no evidence that the relationship between social status and racial categorization is a consequence of measurement error and demonstrate that racial fluidity exists (to varying degrees) for all racial groups.

Although there is some scholarly disagreement regarding the extent to which race is mutable, what is not in dispute is that race is most flexible for ambiguous populations, especially people of mixed-race backgrounds (Harris & Sim 2002, Doyle & Kao 2007). Analyzing data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health), Hitlin et al. (2006) find that mixed-race adolescents are four times more likely to change their racial identification over time than to identify consistently. Other work demonstrates that racial change in identification between the 2000 and 2010 censuses is higher for individuals identifying with multiple minority groups than for any other racial population (Liebler et al. 2017).

Mixed-Race Classification and Identification

The highly fluid nature of race for people of mixed-race backgrounds is a relatively recent development. In 1960, most children born to Asian-white and black-white married parents were categorized by their minority race. A half-century later, large majorities of these groups were classified as multiracial (Roth 2005, Liebler 2016). In 2017, 10.7 million people in the United States identified with multiple races—a rise of 57% since 2000 against a 14.7% rise in the single-race population. Roughly half of these multiracial identifiers were under the age of 18. The widespread use of multiracial labels signals a porousness of current racial boundaries. In particular, the surge in multiracial identifiers of black backgrounds indicates an erosion of the one-drop rule's authority to delineate and police the boundaries of blackness (Davenport 2018).

As Roth (2018) notes, when racial self-identification is unsettled, identification is itself an outcome of interest. Because people of mixed race straddle racial categories, examining how they identify and are classified by others provides insight into the extent to which racial boundaries are malleable or intransigent. Today, mixed-race people have more racial options than ever before (Root 1992). Multiracials' identities can be "protean" (Rockquemore & Brunsma 2008), varying in response to interpersonal interactions, life events, socioeconomic status, and social context (Hitlin et al. 2006, Doyle & Kao 2007). Not only are multiracials' identities fluid, their behavior and speech can also change depending on which identity is salient at a given time (Gaither et al. 2013, 2015).

Predictors of mixed-race identification and classification. The racial identities and classification of mixed-race people in the United States are constrained by the distinct historical, social, and cultural experiences specific to their racial populations. Race is most flexible for biracial American Indian–whites, as a result of higher rates of intermarriage among American Indians, lower levels of residential segregation, and the perceived costlessness of an American Indian label (Nagel 1995, Harris & Sim 2002). Identification is less flexible for Asian-whites and black-whites—the latter of whom are more likely than other minority-white groups to be singularly classified with their minority race by their parents (Qian 2004, Brunsma 2005).

Indeed, how mixed-race children are classified by their parents sets a point of reference for how they develop their racial sense of self and understand racial difference (Rockquemore & Arend 2002). Parents are more likely to classify their Asian-white and Hispanic-white young children with their father's race, due to a desire to impart upon children the status of their father and because surname, an external signal of ethnic ancestry, is transmitted patrilineally (Xie & Goyette 1997, Qian 2004). However, other research indicates that how people of mixed race label themselves can be at odds with how their parents classify them, as biracial Asian-whites (Bratter & Heard 2009) and black-whites (Davenport 2016b) tend to self-identify more with or incorporate the race of their mother. Family social class is also important; better-off parents of Hispanic-white and Asian-white biracial children are more likely to move them away from a singular minority identification (Brunsma 2005); similarly, greater affluence has a whitening effect on biracials' self-identification, even after accounting for other characteristics of their family and community (Davenport 2016b). Other notable familial factors that shape biracials' race include parents' education (Townsend et al. 2012), having a multiracial parent (Qian 2004, Bratter 2007), and the presence of extended relatives in the home (Roth 2005).

In addition to family characteristics and socialization, cultural context shapes the identities of mixed-race people. National origin and proximity to the immigrant experience affect the labels that interracial parents assign to their children (Saenz et al. 1995, Lichter & Qian 2018), and biracial non-native English speakers are more likely to label themselves with their minority race

than as white or multiracial, all else being equal (Davenport 2016b). Other contextual predictors of biracials' classification and self-identification include the racial environment of their region, neighborhood, and school, and the racial composition of their social networks (Herman 2004, Brunsma 2005, Roth 2005).

Individual-level characteristics also influence how mixed-race people see themselves. Phenotype can either significantly limit or expand biracials' self-identification choices. Black-white biracials who are fairer in appearance are more likely to identify as multiracial than as their minority race (Rockquemore & Brunsma 2008), whereas those who appear more prototypically minority encounter higher levels of racial discrimination and are more likely to identify with their minority race than as white (Herman 2004). Reflected appraisals—how people of mixed race *think* others perceive their phenotype and cultural knowledge—are further factors in shaping multiracial identity (Khanna 2004, 2011). Moreover, evidence suggests that mixed-race women have greater racial latitude and negotiate their identities differently than men, perhaps because women are less likely to be perceived as singular racial minorities (Rockquemore 2002, Ho et al. 2011, Davenport 2016b).

The fluid nature of racial identity for mixed-race people has consequences for their political attitudes and behavior. Overall, multiracial individuals adopt political ideologies and racial attitudes with the interests of their racial minority group in mind (Masuoka 2008, Davenport 2018). Individuals of mixed-race parentage who self-identify as multiracial often hold different political attitudes than those who self-identify with a single race (Davenport 2016a). In addition, research examining the behavior of multiracial politicians finds that the one-drop rule continues to affect the social and political identities and classification of black multiracial state legislators (Lemi 2018).

Racial fluidity in person perception. A growing body of scholarship in social psychology examines how appearance and other traits determine how mixed-race or racially ambiguous people are perceived and categorized in the United States (see Pauker et al. 2018 for a review). The literature on categorical fluidity in racial assignment has found that people of minority-white heritage are often classified in a way that incorporates their backgrounds and are labeled as multiracial when that option is available (Peery & Bodenhausen 2008, Chen & Hamilton 2012). But when such individuals are categorized with a single race, it tends to be the minority race—thus illustrating the lingering yet implicit influence of hypodescent in structuring racial classification (Ho et al. 2011, Krosch et al. 2013).

Minor phenotypical changes impact how people are assigned to racial groups; MacLin & Malpass (2001) show that varying a single racial marker (hairstyle) influences how otherwise identical racially ambiguous faces are categorized. Apart from phenotype, mixed-race individuals' socioeconomic context affects how they are racially viewed. Freeman et al. (2011) find that social status cues affect the ascription of ambiguous faces: A low-status cue (a janitor uniform) darkens categorization, while a high-status cue (business attire) whitens categorization. Other work shows that perceptions of economic hardship as signaled via scarcity cues cause whites to be less likely to categorize black-white biracial faces as white than as black, whereas cues of abundance have no such effect on categorization (Rodeheffer et al. 2012).

Moreover, racial bias and prejudice affect perceptions of mixed-race individuals (Ho et al. 2015) and racially ambiguous faces (Hugenberg & Bodenhausen 2004). Both black and white adult perceivers subscribe to a one-drop rule when identifying black-white biracials, categorizing them more as black than as white (Roberts & Gelman 2015); however, blacks' use of the rule is inclusive and associated with a sense of racial group linked fate, whereas whites' use of the rule is associated with anti-egalitarianism (Ho et al. 2017). Perceiver political ideology is important as well: White conservatives are more likely than white liberals to subscribe to the one-drop rule, and they are

more likely to categorize racially ambiguous faces as black than as white—an inclination that is tied to opposition to racial group equality and system justification beliefs (Krosch et al. 2013). But more generally, exposure to racially ambiguous faces leads to less essentialist and immutable views about race, because such faces challenge the idea that racial groups are mutually exclusive (Haslam et al. 2000, Pauker et al. 2016, Gaither et al. 2018).

How multiracial people are perceived has important sociopolitical consequences. Part-white biracials are not perceived as full racial minorities and Asian-white and black-white biracial college applicants are subsequently seen as less deserving of minority scholarships than their monoracial Asian and black peers (Sanchez & Bonam 2009). Moreover, black-white biracials with more white ancestry are perceived as less stereotypical than monoracial blacks, less likely to have experienced discrimination, and less deserving of resources intended for racial minorities, such as affirmative action (Good et al. 2013).

Experiments have also revealed fluidity in how multiracial politicians are perceived by the American public. A candidate's skin color affects how they are evaluated; darker skin amplifies the effect of race, activates and intensifies stereotypes, and affects likelihood of supporting the candidate (Weaver 2012, Messing et al. 2016). Other work has shown that partisans "lighten" the skin tone of biracial candidates they agree with and "darken" the skin tone of candidates they disagree with, and that skin tone representations are systematically related to voting decisions (Caruso et al. 2009). Examining the effects of racial and ethnic cues on a multiethnic black-Latino politician, Adida et al. (2016) find that blacks respond more positively than Latinos to both coethnic and cominority cues, because blacks perceive higher levels of racial discrimination and feel a sense of connection to minority communities more broadly.

Genetic Ancestry DNA Tests and Racial Fluidity

In addition to research on multiracial identity and classification, recent decades have seen a sharp increase in scholarly work on race, ethnicity, and genetics (Phelan et al. 2013). There has also been a rise in the popularity of genealogical DNA tests, which estimate the ethnic breakdown of an individual's ancestry by isolating ancestry markers linked with populations of particular geographic regions. Such tests can be a way for individuals to connect to a perceived native culture, and research has begun to examine whether the information provided in genetic ancestry DNA tests can lead to changes in racial identification. In the first systematic assessment of genetic ancestry test takers from a range of races and ethnicities, Roth & Ivemark (2018) find that rather than embracing the full report of their ancestry, respondents often claim only some components of it; they welcome or disregard particular genetic backgrounds based on the identities they most favor (identity aspirations) or those they believe others will accept (social appraisals). Genetic ancestry DNA tests are particularly likely to bring about individual changes in racial identity for whites, for whom the revelation of multiple ancestries can provide a sense of distinctiveness that they may feel they lack as a member of the racial majority.

Overall, studies on the effects of genetic ancestry tests reveal a paradox. On the one hand, test takers view their results as flexible and optional, thus illustrating the subjective and fluid elements of racial identities (Roth & Ivemark 2018). Such behavior underpins the concept of identity as a construction and has the potential to redefine beliefs about racial group membership. But a danger of genetic ancestry tests is that they can reify the falsehood that race is intrinsic and biological, thus reinforcing racist ideologies, discrimination, and stereotypes (Phelan et al. 2013) and increasing acceptance of racial inequality (Williams & Eberhardt 2008). There are also ethical concerns associated with using racial and ethnic categories—which are sociopolitical formations—in human genetics; genes are not racial, ethnic, or cultural (Lee et al. 2008).

To further complicate matters, ancestry DNA results are themselves fluid, despite their basis in genetics (Roth & Ivemark 2018). Ancestry DNA reports are estimates, based on comparisons to the DNA of other people with known ancestries. Because most test takers thus far have been white and western, ancestry reports are more detailed and precise for people of European descent, and less so for people of African, Asian, and indigenous ancestry, who are underrepresented in the data. As additional users take genetic ancestry tests and companies gather more data on underrepresented DNA groups, ancestry reports gain accuracy and update over time—sometimes leading to significant changes in results, especially for people of mixed and non-European backgrounds.

All told, the structure of racial categories and options in the United States has been in many ways distinctive, arising and changing within a society in which race was often characterized as fixed, determined by ancestry, and designated by nonintersecting categories. This is best encapsulated in the one-drop rule, which is found nowhere else in the world (Davis 2001). Although racial boundaries are now widely seen as mutable for some US populations, conclusions about racial fluidity made from the US case should not be extended to other parts of the world, notably Latin America, where race mixing has long been much more common and identification is more flexible across racial categories (Wade 2010).

RACIAL FLUIDITY IN LATIN AMERICA

Like the United States, Latin America has a large African-descendent population and a high degree of race mixture (Marx 1998). In contrast to the United States, historically, many Latin American countries championed black-white race relations; there were no laws enforcing racial segregation or prohibiting intermarriage between blacks and whites.

For a period in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Latin American elites, driven by theories of scientific racism, endeavored to whiten their sizable black, indigenous, and mixed-race populations by promoting immigration from Europe, limiting immigration from Asia and Africa, and encouraging intermarriage with whites (Telles 2004, Paschel 2016). But by the mid-twentieth century, scientific racism had fallen out of favor. Most countries resisted enumerating their populations by race, and citizens were socialized to believe that race was bound up in nationality (Loveman 2014). Many Latin American elites began promoting *mestizaje*, or race mixing, as a way to build national unity, advance colorblindness, and avert racial divisions between whites and nonwhites (Telles 2014). *Mestizaje* ideologies were embraced in Mexico and Brazil, while proving less practical in predominantly white countries, such as Argentina, Uruguay, and Costa Rica (Telles & Flores 2013). Argentina, for example, had been constructed as a homogeneously white country via high Afro-Argentinian mortality, European immigration, and intermarriage, and largely spurned the *mestizaje* ideology (Alberto & Elena 2016).

Beginning in the 1980s, census racial categorization in Latin America was revived. This was the result of extensive democratization efforts throughout the region and appeals by social movements and international organizations seeking the compilation of better racial and ethnic statistics with the goal of abolishing racial and ethnic inequalities and initiating restitution for past injustices. By 2010, 18 of 19 Latin American countries had added new questions about racial and ethnic identification to their censuses (the exception being the Dominican Republic) (Loveman 2014).

Importantly, comparative studies contest the notion of a collective "Latin American racial ideology" (Wade 2010). Latin American governments vary extensively in their particular census race questions and categories. How citizens are ethnoracially perceived and classified is concomitant with the distinct history, demographic profile, cultural environment, and political context of each country.

Brazil

Studies of racial fluidity in Latin America have centered on the case of Brazil, the most populous country in the region and one of the most multicultural and multiracial in the world. Since 1940, the Brazilian census has measured race-color via several categories ranging from very light to very dark: *branco* (white), *amarelo* (yellow or Asian descent), *pardo* (brown or mixed), and *preto* (black); in 1991, a fifth category, *indígena* (indigenous) was added. Racial and ethnic boundaries in Brazil are hazier and individuals can move more freely across them than in the United States (Degler 1986), though there is greater fluidity between black and mixed race than between white and nonwhite (Telles 2002, Carvalho et al. 2004).

As a testament to the variable nature of race-color categorization in the country, the options given to Brazilians can significantly affect how they self-identify. Harris et al. (1993) find that being permitted to identify with an intermediate race-color category dramatically decreases the proportion of people who identify as either white or black. Bailey (2008) shows that the self-classification of mixed-race mulatto individuals changes when given a dichotomous white/black question format, and that the main factor driving this change is skin color: Darker-skinned mulattos are more likely to reclassify as black than as white.

While Brazilian racial categorization is strongly shaped by skin color (Telles & Paschel 2014), it is also shaped by contextual factors, most notably social class. Decades ago, Degler (1986) theorized a "mulatto escape hatch," by which Afro-Brazilians could evade their blackness and "become" mulatto by marrying white or lighter-skinned spouses or by obtaining wealth and education. But contemporary scholarship suggests that the effects of social class on race in Brazil are more complex. The elasticity of race can enable some Brazilians to become "lighter" via upward social mobility; better-educated nonwhite parents are more likely to classify their children as white than are similar, less-educated nonwhite parents (Schwartzman 2007). Other work suggests that this pattern has somewhat reversed more recently, with highly educated Brazilians being disproportionately more likely to classify their children as black than as white or brown (Marteleto 2012). However, relative to whites, black and brown Brazilians share a background of socioeconomic disadvantage (Telles 2004). Work by Monk (2016) indicates that skin color and racial categories in Brazil are empirically and analytically distinct and that skin color is a better predictor of educational attainment and occupational status than are census categories.

There is also a high level of inconsistency between the race-color categories individuals self-identify with and those ascribed to them by others (Bailey 2009). Interviewers tend to rate dark-skinned, higher-status Brazilians as whiter than the individuals rate themselves (Telles 2002). Bailey et al. (2013) demonstrate that Brazil's overall national racial composition—whether it is predominantly white or predominantly nonwhite—is contingent on the particular measure used to operationalize race (e.g., census self-classification, parental race, or interviewer-ascribed race); in turn, the metric has consequences for the magnitude of racial income inequality, as disparities in earnings are wider when an interviewer-ascribed rather than a self-identified measure of race is used.

Recent years have seen a steady rise in the relative size of Brazil's black population (Telles & Paschel 2014). Social movements have been credited, in part, for this growth: Just prior to the 1990 Brazilian census, the Brazilian Black Movement initiated a campaign emphasizing contemporary black racial consciousness to encourage Brazilians of African heritage to mark their race not as brown or white, but as black (Loveman 2014). Race-targeted programs explicitly aimed at benefiting blacks have also contributed to a rise in the black population; Bailey (2008) finds that when a university quota policy for *negros* is mentioned, the number of survey respondents who classify themselves as such doubles. Similarly, Francis & Tannuri-Pianto (2012) found that

the instituting of quotas for self-identified *negro* students at the University of Brasilia in 2004 prompted some university applicants to misrepresent their racial identity and motivated dark-skinned individuals to identify as black. Consistent with these findings is evidence that higher education has a "darkening" effect on identification for recent Brazilian cohorts (Marteleto 2012).

Other Latin American Countries

Although much of the work on Latin American racial fluidity centers on Brazil, the legacies of colonization and slavery, as well as the effects of ideologies of *mestizaje*, whitening, and multiculturalism, on ethnoracial identification differ by country (Telles 2014). As a result, the degree to which race is flexible and unsettled diverges extensively across the region.

For example, while Brazilian elites prized race mixture and embraced African culture as essential to national identity, in Colombia, Afro-descendants were omitted from the national discussion, and elites advanced a regionalized *mestizaje* wherein "Colombian" was connoted by European-indigenous mixture (Paschel 2016). Focusing on "color elasticity," or how well skin color predicts racial identification, Telles & Paschel (2014) show that categorical fluidity varies widely in Latin America; their findings suggest that skin color is a more powerful predictor of racial identification in Panama than in Brazil but that skin color is weakly associated with identification in the Dominican Republic, a result of the greater fluidity of race there. In contrast, Golash-Boza (2010) finds blackness to be fixed for Afro-Peruvians, as their race is seen as firmly established by skin color and ancestry. And in Mexico, racial distinctions are based principally on cultural and linguistic differences, not skin color. Generations of race mixing between descendants of Spanish settlers and indigenous peoples created a *mestizo* Mexican race (Knight 1990), and the primary ethnic categorical boundary—while highly fluid—is between the indigenous and *mestizo* populations. Nevertheless, Villarreal (2010) finds substantial social stratification by skin color in Mexico.

Moreover, research on whiteness demonstrates that who is considered white in Latin America depends not only on skin color but also on national context and cultural dynamics. Loveman & Muniz (2007) empirically evaluate temporal fluidity in Puerto Rico, finding that individuals were reclassified as whiter between 1910 and 1920 as a result of social boundary shifts, or a broadening of the sociocultural definition of whiteness. Other work shows that the same people who identify as white in some Latin American countries would identify as nonwhite elsewhere (Hoetink 1967, Telles & Flores 2013). Telles & Flores (2013) find that, among Latin Americans with the same light brown skin color rating, nearly 70% of Argentines and Uruguayans identify as white, while less than 10% of Peruvians, Dominicans, Ecuadorians, and Bolivians do so. Thus, even after accounting for skin color and other factors, Latin Americans from countries of mostly European origin are more likely to identify as white than those from countries where indigenous-white race mixture is more common. These findings buttress the idea that, in Latin American countries with predominantly white populations, whiteness is tied to a shared national identity that supersedes skin color differences.

The relationship between skin color, racial categorization, and inequality also differs across the region. Examining AmericasBarometer surveys, Bailey et al. (2016) find that while lighter skin color is associated with higher income in 15 of 18 Latin American countries, the suitability of skin color over racial category in predicting income inequality varies by country; for example, color maps onto inequality very well in Argentina and Mexico, but not in Costa Rica or Honduras.

RACIAL CONVERGENCE BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND LATIN AMERICA

Racial boundaries and categorization in both the United States and Latin America continue to be in flux. In contrast to decades of disjoint racial categories, the United States now recognizes

overlapping racial identities in its national census. Two of the groups for whom race is most fluid—Hispanic/Latinos and multiracials—are also among the fastest-growing populations in the nation. Increased intermarriage, race mixing, and adoption of multiracial categories in the United States may be weakening some racial group boundaries but leading to more color-based stratification along socioeconomic lines, as is apparent in parts of Latin America (Bonilla-Silva 2002, 2004). In comparison, whereas most Latin American countries did not collect racial data half a century ago, today nearly every country formally enumerates its population with standardized and distinct racial categories. In some areas of Latin America, the ideology of *mestizaje* has been supplanted by a new multiculturalism that values minority identities for people of indigenous and African descent (Telles 2014, Paschel 2016).

There is thus evidence that the United States and Latin America are converging in their approach to racial classification. Yet, historically, the bulk of the research on racial fluidity has focused on the United States and/or Brazil. As this review has shown, racial fluidity operates very differently in countries across Latin America. Thus, there is a gap in our understanding as to precisely how and why race is fluid in some countries but firm in others. Racial boundaries and categories, and the meanings attached to them, are shaped by politics and power relations and imposed by states (Omi & Winant 1994). The degree to which race is unsettled is context dependent, a product of past national events, contemporary dynamics, and cultural environment. Additional studies are needed to disentangle the reasons for intercountry variation in racial fluidity. Studies might ask: How much of the variation in racial fluidity in Latin America is the result of variation in colonial heritages, legacies of slavery, the advancement of *mestizaje* ideologies, or the diffusion of social movements from other countries? How much of the variation in fluidity is due to foreign involvement after independence, cultural exchange that results from immigration, or proximity to the United States? Further comparative research will enhance and deepen our understanding of racial fluidity beyond the US and Brazilian cases.

ADDITIONAL AVENUES FOR FUTURE WORK

A plethora of studies on racial fluidity have been conducted in the fields of sociology and social psychology, but less attention has been given to the relationship between racial fluidity and politics. This leaves a significant void in our understanding of the political antecedents and ramifications of racial fluidity, opening many fruitful areas for political science inquiry.

First, scholars should incorporate political measures into social psychology research on person perception. The US public is extremely polarized along partisan and racial lines (Iyengar & Westwood 2015, Tesler 2016), yet we have relatively little understanding of the role politics plays in the assignment of racially ambiguous people into racial categories. Researchers could employ lab and survey experiments to manipulate an ambiguous target's political traits, including their party identification (Democrat or Republican), ideology (liberal or conservative), or opinions on racialized issues (e.g., border security, nondiscrimination laws, affirmative action), in order to assess how such traits condition the way individuals are externally classified. Such research would add clarity to our knowledge of bias in racial perception and enrich our understanding of how racial group boundaries intersect with politics in modern US society.

Another topic ripe for analysis concerns the effect of political context on micro-level racial change. To what extent is individual racial identification endogenous to political moments and behaviors? Can a single pivotal political event—such as the passage of a major policy, a high-profile case of racial injustice, or the outcome of a presidential election—activate a change in self-identification? Does an individual's racial identity fluctuate with shifts in their political attitudes? Such big questions could be tackled with longitudinal survey data and survey experiments. This work would shed new light on the deeply political aspects of racial categorization, while

also supplementing existing scholarship that has scrutinized the relationship between social status shifts and temporal racial fluidity (Saperstein & Penner 2012, Alba et al. 2016) and shown how racial meanings and identities are affected by social movements and political initiatives (Williams 2006, Paschel 2016).

Along with the political precursors to racial fluidity, the public opinion and policy repercussions surrounding the dynamic essence of race are fertile ground for academic inquiry. Individuals sometimes employ race strategically; they may report belonging to a higher-status racial group in order to benefit from the privileges (social, economic, political) afforded to that group, or they may present themselves as a member of a disadvantaged group in an attempt to obtain resources earmarked for underprivileged or underrepresented minorities. Research in political science can build upon scholarship in economics (Francis & Tannuri-Pianto 2012, Antman & Duncan 2015) and sociology (Rockquemore & Arend 2002, Bailey 2008) showing that multiracial individuals are more likely to respond to racial policy incentives, such as those involving affirmative action, because they have greater latitude in their racial identities. When faced with a policy that rewards a particular racial identity, what percentage of people will change their race in direct response? What predicts such racial change (or stability)? Beyond examining how individuals respond to racial inducements, political scientists should assess the public's views toward the use of instrumental identities. In the context of social programs intended for traditionally underrepresented minority groups, people of mixed race fall into an indistinct category. Do public perceptions of racial policy deservingness in the United States vary by a target individual's self-identification, racial ancestry, or phenotype, as Bailey (2008) finds in Brazil? Survey, field, and natural experiments can help clarify the impact of political and economic incentives on contextual fluidity, and how multiracialism affects opinions on racialized policies.

Another area with great research potential for political scientists concerns genetic ancestry tests, which have the potential to challenge people's racial assumptions (Hochschild et al. 2012). Whether the disclosure of new racial and ethnic ancestry information alters individuals' political opinions or beliefs is an open topic. For example, if someone who self-identifies as singularly white learns that they have some sub-Saharan African ancestry, does their self-identity substantively change, such that politically they start to see themselves as black or a racial minority? Does the strength of their minority identity vary by the percentage of their ancestry that is reported as sub-Saharan African? Does knowledge of this ancestry stimulate a shift in their racial worldview, such that they become more sympathetic to issues affecting African Americans and more inclined to support policies aimed at assisting them? Confronting such questions empirically will help elucidate how micro-level identities and political sentiments are shaped by racial fluidity, adding to a growing literature in political science that examines how genetic variation affects political ideologies, attitudes, and behavior (e.g., Alford et al. 2005, Dawes et al. 2014).

Disentangling how race is constructed and the degree to which it is flexible is critical for understanding the shape of the color line. How race is measured affects population estimates (Goldstein & Morning 2000, Telles 2014, Roth 2018) as well as the conclusions drawn in studies of behavior, political attitudes, and income inequality (Duncan & Trejo 2011, Bailey et al. 2014, Davenport 2016a). The fluidity of race for some populations means that it is not always best captured in one close-ended categorical question at a single point in time. Scholars seeking to understand the sociopolitical implications of race should assess more than one dimension (e.g., racial self-classification, ancestry, reflected race, phenotype), employ different measurement approaches (experiment, close-ended survey, forced-choice survey, open-ended survey), and consider asking questions at different time periods and in different contexts.

At the heart of contemporary social science research on race is the premise that race is constructed, moderated by historical and cultural context, political forces, status, and external

judgments about authenticity and belonging. Yet in practice, empirical social science research often treats racial categories as stationary, operationalized as mutually exclusive variables in models of identity, behavior, or opinion. Social scientists need to be more conscious that racial categories are constructs that often fail to capture the diversity and fluidity of individual race. In our increasingly multicultural and multiracial world, scholars of race and ethnicity must be more attentive to the elasticity of racial group boundaries and the often continuous nature of race, and work to develop measures that better account for this continuity.

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Errata

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