



History, place, and racial self-representation in 21st century America



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ABSTRACT

How is a person's racial self-representation related to the race history of the place in which he or she lives? We use Census Bureau data about race and ancestry to address this research question for two groups of people with mixed racial heritage: those reporting white and American Indian heritages, or reporting black and American Indian heritages. Links between history, place, and self-representation can be seen in geographic clustering for each race/ancestry response combination. We use multinomial logistic regression models to predict individuals' race/ancestry responses (e.g., white with American Indian ancestry versus white and American Indian races) using measures of local race history and the area's contemporary racial composition. Multivariate results highlight the relationship between a person's identity claims and the history of the area, net of contemporary area composition. Future research should attend to the history of the place as a potential contributor to contemporary patterns.

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1. Introduction

How is a person's own story – his biography – related to the history of the society in which he lives? In his famous description of the “sociological imagination,” C. Wright Mills (1959) described the great promise of sociology as its ability to find links between biography and history. William H. Sewell Jr. (2005) amplified Mills' proposition, saying that to fully understand an element of our current society one must know its historical context. Relatedly, geographers Agnew and Duncan (1989) draw on Foucault (1980:70) to call for increased inclusion of geographical place as an important concept in social science studies. In this research, we apply these ideas to draw connections between a place's race relations history and the racial self-identifications of those living within that place.²

Life course sociologists have fruitfully explored ways in which individuals' life stories are impacted not only by their age, but also by period and cohort membership, which determine the historical context in which they enter each stage of life (e.g., Elder, 1998). However, sociologists often fail to consider implications of place-specific history as an additional piece of sociohistorical context shaping life stories. Each community has its own history of cooperative and competitive relationships between groups and individuals (e.g., Crowe, 2012; Lowery, 2010). Place-specific history influences the social structures and

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² See Section 4.3. for a discussion of “place” and details about its operationalization in this research.

normative interactions that develop in the place (Macintyre et al., 2002; Messner et al., 2005). Structural symbolic interactionists (e.g., Stryker, 2002, 2008) and ecological systems theorists (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1977) see social structures and interactions as important to a person's sense of self. Thus place-specific history is likely to influence identity.

Racial identification of people with mixed racial heritage is relatively open to influence by nuanced patterns in interactions (Khanna and Johnson, 2010; Rockquemore and Brunnsma, 2002; Song, 2003), and the content of these interactions is likely to vary across places with differing racial histories (Brunnsma, 2006; Cornell and Hartmann, 2007; Kana'iaupuni and Liebler, 2005; Liebler, 2010b; Lowery, 2010). Yet previous research on racial identity and self-representation has neglected to include substantial measures of place *history*, instead using a few (if any) broad measures of the *current* racial context of the place. In this research, we conceptualize local race history as a structural framework in which people develop, maintain, and present their identities. We promote the idea that a consideration of local history can help researchers understand the personal identities that develop in the area.

For any person, the race(s) he or she ends up identifying with has real implications. A person's race can impact their interaction experiences, interests, opportunities, health, and wealth, among other things. A person of white and American Indian heritage, for example, might identify as racially white, as racially American Indian, or as a person of two races. If he identifies as white, he is likely to experience the social world as a member of the white majority and he may be relatively unlikely to join an American Indian activist organization or social group, to know details of an American Indian culture or language, or to ever racially identify as American Indian (Liebler, 2010a; Liebler, Bhaskar, and Rastogi, 2014; Snipp, 1989; Waters, 1990). Conversely, a very different biography would unfold if he identified as a minority group member and were treated as such by society.

We leverage modern data with unprecedented race detail to explore the potential power of place in influencing how a person sees him or herself. We focus on people whose heritage includes groups that have been in the U.S. the longest – American Indians or Alaska Natives (“American Indians” here), whites, and blacks.³ More specifically, to study whether individuals' racial self-identification choices reflect the local history of race, we select two groups of people with mixed racial heritage from the nationally representative Census 2000 and 2006–2008 American Community Survey (ACS) data. One group reports both white and American Indian background, either by marking one race and the other ancestry⁴ or by marking both races; we use the term “white-American Indians” to describe people in this group. The second group parallels the first and reports black and American Indian heritage; we label this group “black-American Indians.” The centuries of interactions between whites, blacks, and American Indians – some amicable and some much less so – have created deep and varied place-specific race-related histories that could influence local area patterns in personal identification decisions.

This study thus represents a step toward understanding how place-specific history affects personal identity formation, though our aim is to identify patterned associations rather than advance strong causal claims. We begin by introducing our conceptual model, discussing some historical race-specific policies and practices in the U.S., and describing two locales to illustrate the types of social histories that might influence patterns in race/ancestry identities developed in these places. Then, we present our data, analyses, and results. These include population pyramids and national residential patterns for each group of people in the study. We also present multinomial logistic regression analyses modeling whether a person of mixed heritage will be reported⁵ to the government as American Indian race, white race, black race, or multiple races.

2. Conceptual model and prior research

2.1. Conceptual model

What role do past and current race-related policies and practices play in helping people of mixed heritage decide (consciously or unconsciously) which race or races they will claim for themselves? As our conceptual model in Fig. 1 shows, we see the race history of an area as an important contributor to the formation and maintenance of personal racial identity, which is reflected in answers to survey questions about race. In other words, racial self-representation is heavily influenced by components of a person's life story (their biography), which is shaped by the places in which this story develops (and, in turn, shapes the next layer of place history).⁶ All aspects of our conceptual model can change over a person's life course (Carter et al., 2007; Doyle and Kao, 2007; Harris and Sim, 2002; Hitlin et al., 2006; Penner and Saperstein, 2008; Price, 2012). Thus the conceptual model shown in Fig. 1 should be seen as a snapshot of a fluid situation.

In this study, we measure racial self-representation through responses to the Census Bureau's race question and ancestry question (both are shown in Appendix A). Reporting group affiliation through the race question has been shown to be quite different from identifying only an ancestral link (Snipp, 1989). Race responses are often a sign of relatively deep attachments

³ Although the measures used in this study are not directly related to other minority groups such as Asians and Latinos, we expect that parallel research focused on these groups would give similar results.

⁴ The race and ancestry questions are shown in Appendix A.

⁵ Census and ACS responses are not necessarily self-reports; anyone in the household may fill out the form. We use the phrase “self-presentation” to highlight the ability of mixed-heritage people to choose how they identify, with the caveat that the survey response may have been affected by the interpretation of the respondent.

⁶ Place-specific history probably affects many aspects of the social world and the conceptual model could be applied to other areas of social research; see Gieryn (2000), for example.

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