Racial Fluidity or Ambivalence about Available Survey Options? Controversy in the
Sociological Meaning of Changes in Latino/a Racial Self-identification

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Abstract

A number of studies have shown that, over time, some individuals check a different racial box when filling out surveys. The interpretation of these discrepancies has been the subject of considerable controversy, particularly regarding trends in how Latinas/os racially self-identify on U.S. Census questionnaires. While some argue that such trends mostly reflect racial fluidity and assimilation, others assert that the variation is mainly a product of inadequate questionnaire design. We make use of recent additions to the General Social Survey that allow us to test the degree to which fluctuation in racial category choices by Latinas/os reflects a realignment of racial identity versus ambivalence about available survey options. The results indicate that: (1) self-identification as “White” among Latinas/os is highly unpredictable over time, with significant changes and reversions back to the original designation occurring within just four years, (2) Latinas/os that switch from “Other” to “White” do not report feeling an increased closeness to White people, and (3) when one compares answers to the same race question asked at different times, there is no significant evidence of a whitening trend for Latinas/os during the last Census period. The findings suggest that, on average, the observed racial category switching among Latinas/os is more about survey-item ambivalence than a substantive transformation of racial identity. We argue that much of the change in racial identification on surveys is actually an indicator of constancy in beliefs rather than fluidity in self-conception; respondents may be consistently ambivalent about the available survey options.
Recently, New York Times columnist Nate Cohn (2014a) set off a firestorm of controversy when he mused on new demographic data suggesting that there is an increasing tendency for Latinas/os to racially self-identify as White. Cohn argued that the trend was especially noteworthy because it occurred during a decade marked by heated debate on immigration (which he reasoned could have driven a wedge between Latinas/os and Whites).

Pointing out that Latinas/os that identify as White have higher education and income levels, Cohn implied that Latinas/os will increasingly see themselves as White as they achieve greater social status. It was a provocative story that pitted assimilation against ethnic identity and called into question the oft-discussed/oft-feared notion of a coming “minority-majority nation.”

Interestingly, however, criticism of the story was anything but provocative. Even when coming from popular blogs like “Latinorebels” the response sounded rather technical, like something that one might read in a social science methods textbook. The essence of the critique was that (1) there is considerable evidence that Latinas/os are not comfortable with the standard census survey options regarding race and ethnicity; (2) this widespread discomfort means ambivalence about racial self-identification on survey forms and wavering that (overwhelmingly non-Latino/a) social commentators misinterpret as a shift from one embraced racial identity to another; and, (3) in order to make a valid apples-to-apples comparison between two surveys it is important for the race questions to be asked in the same way on both surveys; otherwise, one cannot reliably discern sociological change from methodological artifact.

We believe that this critique offers important lessons for a burgeoning body of sociological research on racial fluidity. As did Cohn, sociologists have tended to over-theorize shifts in racial identity and have not given appropriate attention to the more mundane but very real possibility of measurement error. At a more conceptual level, we argue that sociologists
interested in fluidity need to grapple with the notion that racial identity can vary both in the
ccontent of one’s stated choice and the degree to which one meaningfully believes in that choice.

In addition to our conceptual critique, we conducted an empirical analysis using recent
data from the General Social Survey (GSS). Importantly, the dataset contains unique
information on racial self-identification for Latinas/os where the questions about race were asked
in the same way across time periods to the same individuals. That consistency in question
wording over time allows us to make the appropriate apples-to-apples comparison.

In line with the notion that racial identity is less clearly defined for Latinas/os than other
groups, analysis of the GSS data revealed that 44% of the Latino/a sample changed their chosen
race (White/Black/Other) at least once within just a 4-year period (compared to only 3% of the
non-Latino/a sample). We argue that the fact that so many Latinas/os changed their answer
within such a short timespan implies that it is highly unlikely that the dynamic is driven by
personal identity transformations associated with changes in social status. Moreover, at the end
of that short timespan about the same proportion of Latinas/os identified as “White” as in the
beginning, since many individuals were simply vacillating back and forth between “Other” and
“White.” Interestingly, despite the significant change in selected racial category over the 4-year
period there was relatively little change in identification as Hispanic/Latino. Additionally,
looking directly at an attitudinal question in the GSS, Latinas/os that switched from “Other” to
“White” were no more likely to report feeling closer to White people than those that switched
from “White” to “Other.” All of these findings call into question claims of a new Latino/a
whitening trend.
Is changing your mind on something that you are ambivalent about really changing your mind?

In the widely-cited National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79), more than a third of individuals identifying as Hispanic/Latino (35%) simply refused to classify their race when faced with standard census protocol requiring separation between racial category and Hispanic ethnicity (overwhelmingly, the remainder selected “White”). Likewise, in the 2010 U.S. Census, 37% of Latinas/os could not find their identity on the form and chose the residual category “Other” rather than one of the official racial categories listed. In what the U.S. Census Bureau has called the “most comprehensive effort in history to study race and ethnic categories,” the Bureau has committed itself to addressing this issue in future surveys (Krogstad and Cohn 2014). In particular, data from a series of experimental versions of the 2010 Census questionnaire given to thousands of respondents suggested that combining race and ethnicity into a single question and offering “Latino/Hispanic” as a response option would dramatically reduce the number of individuals selecting “Other.” Relatedly, the data also suggested that the newly proposed format would significantly reduce the number of individuals changing racial self-identification on follow-up interviews (especially regarding inconsistency in identification as White).

Whether this adjustment in the way the Census asks about race and ethnicity will be implemented in 2020 is unclear, but what is clear is that there is considerable dissatisfaction with the status quo. For example, commenting on a “rush to draw conclusions about Latino/a assimilation into whiteness,” journalist Roque Planas (2014) argues

…[T]he confusion on the U.S. Census has little to do with evolving ideas about race among Latinas/os and a lot to do with the limited options available to Latinas/os…That confusion is demonstrated by the fact that not only did 2.5 million Latinas/os change
from “some other race” in 2000 to “white” in 2010, but another 1.3 million Latinas/os also made the opposite change, from “white” to “some other race.” That fluidity may suggest a lot of things, including a pattern of Hispanic assimilation into whiteness. But it just as likely reveals, once again, the longstanding flaws in the way the Census Bureau asks Hispanics about race. Hopefully the changes they’re working on for 2020 will give us a more accurate picture in the future.

Making a similar argument, but adding that it is crucial for Latino/a voices to be at the center of discussions of changing Latino identity, popular blogger Julio Ricardo Varela (2014) posted comments from Latino readers reacting to the news proclaiming Hispanic assimilation into the White racial category. One such posted reaction, by Susana Orozco, summarizes the problem many Latinas/os face at census time:

You know, when my mom and I were filling out the census form she said, "Wait, why is it asking if I'm white or black?" I told her that's a question of race. We both put down white, not because we suddenly identify with Whites, but because the other options were black or other.

In our assessment, sociologists have been strangely silent about how the high usage of the “Other” category may reflect a failure of measurement (there are exceptions of course, e.g., Hitlin et al. 2007). This relative silence may be due to concerns that arguing for more linguistically accurate categories implies that one believes there is a “true” race for each individual, thus undermining the discipline’s emphasis on race as a social construction.

While, as sociologists, we strongly share the conviction that race is not “fixed,” our view is that the discipline has been too quick to paint the racial-change-as-measurement-error explanation as essentialist. The fact that race is a social construction does not absolve social
scientists of the need to design and utilize questionnaires with options that make sense to the person trying to answer the question. Such a re-envisioning requires appreciation for the argument that survey respondents can vary both in the content of their stated choice and the degree to which that choice indicates a truly meaningful position to them. We believe it is crucially important for sociologists to distinguish between cases where people switch from one strongly embraced identity to another from instances where the term fluidity could easily be replaced with ambivalence.²

Furthermore, rather than simply a technical point, it is possible to recast the issue of racial mismeasurement for Latinas/os as one of sociological ambivalence, where, for example, Latinas/os may be torn between a desire to assert their ethnic identity and recognition of the social meaning of skin tone in a country with the legacy of slavery and a bifurcated racial hierarchy. While the categories “Black” and “White” are social constructions designed to imply distinctions in ancestry, it is important to remember that the terms also refer to observable skin tone differences (the constructed categories are anchored in physical traits that are often easily recognized). As Telles and Paschel (2012) have shown, even in countries where race is very ambiguously defined, skin tone remains one of the most powerful determinants of racial classification, and the tendency to ignore this empirical reality reflects a “a deficiency with social constructivist models” (also see Golash-Boza and Darity (2008) and Vargas (2015) regarding the significant impact of skin tone on racial identification for Latinas/os).

**Apple-to-orange comparisons practically ensure that you’ll find something different.**

Perhaps the most prominent critique of Cohn’s (2014a) initial story on Latinas/os identifying as White was that Cohn failed to consider how changes in question wording matter
for the results. Two weeks after his first column, Cohn (2014b) wrote another piece that acknowledged the general controversy surrounding his earlier interpretation of the data and specifically addressed one critic, Manuel Pastor. Pastor (2014) pointed out that an important phrase was added to the race question in the 2010 Census making it not directly comparable with earlier questionnaires. According to Pastor, that additional phrase, “For this census, Hispanic origins are not races," likely explains the increased proportion of Latinas/os choosing “White” rather than “Other.” Cohn (2014b) admitted that the change in question phrasing may have played a significant role, but estimated that it only accounted for half of the variation he suggested earlier was evidence of a new assimilation trend.

Like Cohn, sociologists interested in studying changes in racial self-identification are often hampered by data limitations. In the rare cases where longitudinal social science surveys include multiple measures of racial self-identification, the race questions are often quite different. Consider, for example, the widely used NLSY79 data. While the data allow researchers to explore potential racial fluidity for individuals across two decades, there are only two racial self-identification questions asked and they are extremely dissimilar. In 1979 respondents chose from a list of 28 ethnicities/nationalities, but in 2002 they chose from only 5 racial groups and had a separate question about Hispanic ethnicity (Saperstein and Penner 2010). Such a dramatic change in survey procedure could obviously introduce significant random and/or systematic error in longitudinal social science models. Using recent GSS data where the racial identification questions were asked the same way across different years removes this methodological obstacle from the path of examining changes in racial identification among Latinas/os.
Data and Variables

Administered every other year by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), the GSS is arguably the most frequently examined social survey in the United States. The GSS has provided information from representative cross-sections of the U.S. adult population since 1972 (detailed information about sampling methodology can be found at www.norc.org). We make use of a relatively new feature of the GSS that allows for longitudinal analysis for some respondents. More specifically, we utilize three waves of panel data for individuals interviewed across the 2008, 2010, and 2012 surveys. For the sake of parsimony, we focus on examining aggregate and within-individual changes in just three variables: ethnic self-identification, racial self-identification, and an item that asks all respondents to rate how close they feel to Whites.

Results

How often do individuals change their Latino/a ethnic self-identification?

From 2008 to 2012 only 2% of individuals in the complete 3-panel sample (25 out of 1,285) switched from a Hispanic ethnicity to a non-Hispanic ethnicity or vice versa at any point in time. Consistent with results from other studies, Latino/a ethnic self-identification appears relatively stable.4

How often do Latinas/os change their racial self-identification?

From 2008 to 2012, 44% of Latinas/os (49 out of 112 with consistent longitudinal data for the 3 panels) switched their White-Black-Other racial choice at least once. In contrast, only 3% of non-Latinas/os (35 out of 1,144) switched racial categories (see Figure 1).5 While many
analyses have reported similarly high levels of racial identity changing for Latinas/os (e.g. Liebler et al. 2014), to our knowledge the current study is the first to show that multiple changes occur within just a few years (for the same race questions). Of those individuals that changed racial identification from 2010 to 2012, more than half were changing back to the race they listed on the 2008 survey. Thus, while it remains possible that status changes in an individual’s life and/or social epiphanies are significantly influencing which racial box Latinas/os check on a survey form, the fact that individuals change multiple times within such a short time span (just 4 years) is more suggestive of something else: wavering due to a mismatch between what the respondent wants to say and the available survey options. In this case, the overwhelming majority selecting “Other” wrote in a Hispanic origin as their race when prompted for additional information and all but one of the respondents that changed their racial self-identification from “White” to “Other” or “Other” to “White” specified their race as Hispanic at some point.

*Was there a significant increase in Latino/a identification as White over the last Census period?*

In 2002,6 53% of Latinas/os in the GSS (weighted n=225) listed “White” as their first race. In 2010, 53% of Latinas/os in the GSS (weighted n=248) selected “White” as their first race. In contrast to results using Census data (where the race question is different in 2000 than in 2010), results from the GSS (where the race question is the same) do not suggest a clear trend toward whitening among Latinas/os over the decade.

More important, unlike the Census, the GSS is a social survey designed to record shifts in values and thus it offers the opportunity to actually measure Latino/a attitudes about whiteness (so that one does not have to simply assume that racial category selection indicates affinity and assimilation). Of particular interest, the GSS includes a question that asks respondents to rate
their closeness to Whites on a 9-point scale with 1 indicating “Not close at all” and 9 indicating “Very close.” This item has been used in dozens of social science studies on trends in racial integration (e.g., Bobo et al. 2009). In 2000, the average score for the closeness-to-Whites variable among Latinas/os was 6.64 (weighted n=152). In 2010, the average score was 6.03 (weighted n=151). Alternatively described, 61% of Latinas/os indicated a value on the “close” side of the scale (above 5) in 2000, while only 49% of Latinas/os did so in 2010. Therefore, these results do not support the conclusion that there has been a trend toward assimilation into whiteness among Latinas/os for the 2000 to 2010 period. Indeed, if anything, there appears to have been a decline in closeness to Whites up to the 2008 presidential election year (see Figure 2).

Do Latinas/os that switch to the “White” category report feeling closer to Whites as a group?

The analyses above are limited in that they do not account for the fact that different Latinas/os are sampled at different times. However, using the panel data and focusing on within-individual variation over time leads to the same conclusion: Latinas/os that switch to “White” are no more likely to report feeling an increased closeness to White people than those that switch from “White” to a non-White classification or those that do not switch their racial category at all. This finding is consistent with research in political science indicating that Latino/a racial identification as White is unrelated to perceived commonality with Whites once skin tone is held constant (Wilkinson and Earle 2012). In short, we find no evidence that racial category switching among Latinas/os is associated with meaningful changes in racial attitudes.7
Conclusion

The results of our analysis of recent GSS data indicate that: (1) self-identification as “White” among Latinas/os is highly unstable over time, with significant changes and reversions back to the original designation occurring within just a few years, (2) Latinas/os that switch from “Other” to “White” do not report feeling an increased closeness to White people, and (3) when one compares answers to the same race question asked at different times, there is no evidence of a whitening trend for Latinas/os between 2000 and 2010. These results have implications for a growing body of sociological research on racial fluidity that has tended to conflate changes due to limited survey options with those driven by substantive processes of identity transformation.

We believe that sociologists interested in documenting racial fluidity need to spend more time addressing the limits of the phenomenon and respecting the possibility of measurement error in survey data. In this sense, we echo the general argument made by Telles and Paschel (2012) that the literature needs to move “beyond fixed or fluid” to tackle more meaningful questions about the factors that should logically condition the likelihood of racial category switching. For example, while it could be that “money whitens” in the U.S., the amount of money it should take for someone who already looks phenotypically White to switch from a Non-White to a White self-conception should be significantly less than what it takes for someone with much darker skin. Indeed, one might expect that no influx of money would make a person with extremely dark skin who identifies as Black, suddenly identify as White. Few studies alleging social status driven racial identity changes empirically test for this logically expected interaction, even though its presence is crucial for demonstrating face validity. As Telles and Paschel (2012:36) have argued, there is a tendency in the relevant sociological literature to
“ignore the importance of physical features such as color,” even though there is clear evidence that phenotype is one of the strongest predictors of racial self-identity (although certainly not the only predictor, e.g., geographic context matters too). We agree, and believe it is especially important for sociologists interested in racial fluidity to avoid reactionary dismissals of all things biological, an inclination that may stem from our discipline’s proud history of fervently dismantling eugenics research (Frost 2014).

In addition to giving more attention to the role of physical features in changes and non-changes in racial identification, we also believe that sociologists interested in racial fluidity need to give greater attention to the fundamentals of survey research. In particular, measuring change in a variable requires that you have *that same variable* at different points in time. Furthermore, it is important to remember that “Other” is not a socially recognized racial identity but rather the absence of measured identity. Given this fact, those selecting “Other” are less likely to feel connected to the label and more likely to arbitrarily select another category on future surveys. Without appropriate attention to this methodological issue instances where individuals shift from one strongly embraced identity to another will be lumped together with cases where individuals are consistently ambivalent about the available survey options. While an inflated estimate of racial fluidity serves to promote the discipline’s traditional emphasis on race as a social construction, it also leads to a significant underestimation of the degree to which Latinas/os experience marginalization and a significant overestimation of the degree to which White privilege is widely accessible.
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Figure 1. Percentage changing racial category choice in a four-year period

Note: Data are from the 2008-2012 GSS panel subset (n=1,256).
Figure 2. Percentage of Latinas/os reporting that they “Feel Close to Whites”

Note: Data are from the General Social Survey (weighted n=937).
ENDNOTES

1 Others have also noted the problematic lack of attention to the role of limited survey options in driving racial fluidity. For example, Vargas (2015:131-132) concludes: “With restricted options, many Latina/os appear to recognize that they may be arbitrarily choosing to identify with one inaccurate racial label over another by appealing to phenotypic or political similarities with other racial groups. In this way, social researchers who believe that White identification on social surveys is a useful indicator of societal Whitening may be giving undue credence to such choices.”

2 As Telles and Paschel (2014:869) note, the literature has tended to use the terms “ambiguity” and “fluidity” interchangeably.

3 Given the large scale of the 2010 U.S. Census, this new wording could have effects lasting significantly beyond that particular survey. That is, even if post-2010 questionnaires omit the phrase asking respondents to not consider Hispanic origins races, the instruction could still partially inform how Latinas/os answer the race question.

4 For example, Liebler et al. (2014:5-6) note: “People are relatively consistent in their Hispanic responses in the census and reinterviews — in 1990, only 2 percent changed their answer to whether or not they have Hispanic origins (U.S. Census Bureau 1993), 3 percent changed responses in 2000 (Singer and Ennis 2003), and 1 percent changed responses in 2010 (Dusch and Meier 2012). Comparing Census 2000 to CPS revealed that 3 percent of respondents reported being Hispanic in one of these data sets but not in the other (del Pinal and Schmidley 2005), though differences in response mode and question format play a part in this comparison” (also see page 39 for conclusions about their own data). Liebler et al.’s (2014:54) comprehensive within-individual analysis of Census data indicated that, if anything, there was actually a slight increase in the proportion of the population declaring a Hispanic ethnicity between 2000 and 2010 (consistent with logically expected questionnaire design effects). More important, especially in light of Cohn’s (2014a) article, there was no evidence in the data presented to support the notion that people previously defining themselves as Hispanic were significantly re-defining themselves as non-Hispanic White.

5 The variable referenced here is RACECEN1 (recoded to White-Black-Other). The exact question asked is “What is your race? Indicate one or more races that you consider yourself to be.” The response options were: 1) WHITE, (2) BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN, (3) AMERICAN INDIAN OR ALASKA NATIVE, (4) ASIAN INDIAN, (5) CHINESE, (6) FILIPINO, (7) JAPANESE, (8) KOREAN, (9) VIETNAMESE, (10) OTHER ASIAN, (11) NATIVE HAWAIIAN, (12) GUAMANIAN OR CHAMORRO, (13) SAMOAN, (14) OTHER PACIFIC ISLANDER, OR (15) SOME OTHER RACE. About 90 percent of respondents chose only one of the fifteen options for this question and so for ease of presentation we use the respondent’s first-mentioned race. However, the sharp difference between Latinas/os and non-Latinas/os in the short-term longitudinal inconsistency of racial self-identification was clearly evident regardless of the specific GSS race measure employed as well as the inclusion or exclusion of multiracial individuals (for example, the 4-year rate of racial change was still 40% for non-multi-racial Latinas/os and the imputed/recoded variable RACE produced nearly identical results). Indeed, none of the substantive conclusions in this paper are contingent on the specific racial self-identification variable used or the type of recoding. Of crucial importance, all across-time comparisons are made using the same variables that have been recoded the same way.

6 Beginning in 2002, the GSS changed the way it recorded race to be more in line with U.S. Census procedures.

7 Similarly, we also examined whether changes in a Latino/a respondent’s educational attainment or family income affected the likelihood of switching from a non-White to a White racial self-identification (controlling for fixed effects that include things like skin tone). The results clearly indicated that more money and more education do not matter for changes (or non-changes) in answers to the race question. This was true even though a simple cross-sectional analysis would suggest that Latinas/os who had more money and education were more likely to identify as White. As Pulido and Pastor (2013) have argued, cross-sectional analyses in this area produce results that might simply reflect a spurious association with skin tone. More specifically, Pulido and Pastor (2013:326) note: “For example, living above the poverty line is associated with a lower probability of identifying as SOR [Some Other Race]—that is, a higher probability of identifying as White. While this could result from class position, it may be, conversely, that Latinas/os with lighter skin (and who think of themselves as white) may experience less discrimination and hence garner more income.” Consistent with this statement, the observed skin darkness measure in the GSS (RATETONE) was significantly negatively associated with the likelihood of Latino/a racial identification as White (P<.001) and education and income were no longer significant predictors of White self-identification (for Latinas/os) after controlling for observed skin darkness (see the Appendix).