



Coloring Racial Fluidity: How Skin Tone Shapes Multiracial Adolescents' Racial Identity Changes

Robert L. Reece¹

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Abstract

Research on racial fluidity has become increasingly common as researchers seek to understand the ways and reasons people change their racial identifications and/or are perceived differently over time and across contexts. Concurrently, researchers have deepened their investigations of the attitudinal and identity aspects of “color,” that is the ways that people’s racial and political attitudes vary based on skin tone among members of the same racial group, particularly black Americans. This paper attempts to blend research on racial fluidity and color into an exploration of adolescent racial identity formation. I examine the effect skin tone on the likelihood and type of racial identity change among multiracial black adolescents as they transition into adulthood. My results reveal that lighter skinned adolescents are more likely to change their identification to a non-black single race, while darker skinned adolescents are more likely to change their identification to black only.

Keywords Race/ethnicity · Skin tone · Racial fluidity · Multiracial · Colorism

Introduction

The idea that race is a “social construct” has permeated public discourse in recent decades, in apparent acknowledgment that the concept of race is not biological and immutable, but a cultural artifact creation rooted in the intersection of inequality and law and how we map those concepts onto phenotype (Roberts 2011). However, the overwhelming majority of conversations about race, including those among social scientists, treat race, racial categories, and racial identity as inherent, immovable objects, and, through our chosen forms of measurement, we continue to reify the categories we have sought to deconstruct (Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi 2008; Zuberi 2001). Fortunately, in recent years, an increasing number of researchers have accepted the challenges of complicating and interrogating the categories we use to examine race rather than continuing our standard practice of mapping metrics of inequality onto a series of taken-for-granted racial categories. These challenges mostly come in the form of one or more or four broad overlapping

strands of research: first is research examining the layers of multiraciality; second is research examining colorism and skin tone stratification; third is research that examines racial fluidity—how people change their racial self-identification and are perceived as different races over time and in different contexts; and the fourth area of research examines the physical and cognitive cues that people use to racially categorize others. With this manuscript, I attempt to combine the first three strands of research in a unique challenge to the dogma of static racial categories. Specifically, I use regression analysis to investigate the racial identity development of adolescents who were identified as multiracial by testing whether their skin tone and externally perceived race influence changes in their racial self-identification as they enter adulthood.

Because the United States Census—and thus most other official documentation that tends to follow suit—has until recently required that Americans choose only one racial identity and the “one-drop rule” demanded that people with any black ancestry identified as black, the idea that black Americans may change race is relatively recent, save for the prominent historical example of racial passing, which is not exactly changing race as much as it is hiding one’s racial ancestry. Newer research on the contemporary racial landscape suggests that the racial identification of multiracial black Americans can be dynamic, particularly among

✉ Robert L. Reece
Robert.L.Reece@gmail.com

¹ Department of Sociology, The University of Texas at Austin,
305 E 23rd St, A1700, RLP 3.306, Austin, TX 78712-1086,
USA

children and adolescents (Harris and Sim 2002; Liebler et al. 2017). Whether this dynamism has been a historical constant that was difficult to measure (e.g., Saperstein and Gullickson 2013) or if the magnitude of the changes has increased due to phenomena such as the multiracial movement of the 1990s or the election of Barack Obama (e.g., Mason 2017) is debatable, but evidence of the racial shifting is increasingly clear although the reasons have yet to be thoroughly examined.

Similarly, although discussions of skin tone stratification have a longer history in social scientific research and have become much more widespread in recent years, most researchers had concluded that light- and dark-skinned black Americans maintained similar political and racial attitudes despite the divergent social outcomes (Hochschild and Weaver 2007; Seltzer and Smith 1991). Older data seemed to suggest that light- and dark-skinned black people both maintained strong connections to their racial group and embraced similar views on policy matters. Newer research reveals a more complex story, suggesting that light- and dark-skinned black Americans may deviate sharply on a number of policy and racial issues (Hutchings et al. 2016). The emerging evidence of divergent political and racial attitudes between dark- and light-skinned black Americans may offer an explanation for the racial identity changes of multiracial black adolescents.

While the question of shifting racial self-identification may seem innocuous, much of our ability to understand inequality, particularly across the life course relies on our capacity to consistently and reliably measure racial identification. Researchers increasingly question the reliability of these measures as they find that different measures of race, for example, racial self-identification vs externally identified race, shape social outcomes in sometimes divergent ways (Howell and Emerson 2017; Roth 2016; Saperstein et al. 2016). Some have even gone so far as to suggest we use as many as five different measures of race to try to gain a comprehensive understanding of American's racial experiences (Howell and Emerson 2017; Roth 2016). The consistency of racial measures also poses an ongoing and interrelated problem. If people identify differently at different points in the life course that means our results may differ based on when we choose to measure racial identification. For example, the National Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) is one of the most widely used social scientific studies in the country, in part because it offers multiple waves of data collection, including a measure of racial identification at each wave, that allows us to follow participants over a significant portion of the life course. If racial identification varies significantly over time our results are necessarily biased by the wave from which we choose our measure of racial identification, which calls our research into question. This problem is particularly acute among the multiracial population,

whose racial identifications are particularly slippery, with less than a quarter of multiracial people maintaining their racial self-identification from the 2000 Census to the 2010 Census (Liebler et al. 2017). And as the multiracial population grows our ability to measure their racial identification and interpret changes in their racial identification becomes ever more important. According to the Pew Research Center (2015), 10% of children less than one-year old in 2013 were born to parents of different races, up from only 1% in 1970. That means the problem is urgent and cannot be taken for granted. The solution, however, cannot be to regulate how people identify but to understand when, why, and how people shift their racial identifications with the hopes of developing more consistent ways to measure it. This study seeks to contribute to that understanding by examining the connection between skin tone/color and the instability of racial identifications among multiracial black adolescents.

To investigate these connections, I use multinomial regression and data from Add Health to test whether skin tone predicts changes in the racial self-identification of black multiracial adolescents. I hypothesized that darker skinned multiracial black adolescents would be more likely to adopt a black-only racial identity as they matured into adulthood, and, conversely, lighter skinned multiracial black adolescents would be more likely to maintain their multiracial identity or adopt a single race identity other than black. My results mostly support my hypothesis. Lighter skinned adolescents were more likely to be identified as a non-black single race, and darker skinned adolescents were more likely to be identified as black only. However, skin tone had no effect on adolescents' decisions to maintain their multiracial identity.

Racial Fluidity and Black Americans

Mary Waters (1990) introduced the concept of "ethnic options" to describe Americans with an apparent choice in how they could racially self-identify. She originally focused primarily on white ethnic people as she argued that most people of color would be afforded little choice in how they identify racially. However, more recent research suggests that ethnic options may also be available to people of color under certain circumstances, especially multiracial people of color, Latinos, and Native Americans (Alba et al. 2016; Bratter and O'Connell 2017; Holloway et al. 2009; Liebler et al. 2017; Liebler and Zacher 2016; Mason 2017). People with these options change their racial identity over time and across contexts, and their identities are particularly unstable as they move through adolescence and young adulthood (Harris and Sim 2002; Liebler et al. 2017).

Though some research suggests that status changes, such as a criminal record, contribute to changes in racial

self-identification *and* externally perceived race, the idea of a “looking glass self” continues to govern how many researchers view racial self-identification (Saperstein and Penner 2010, 2014). This theory argues that racial self-identification is primarily a reflection of how that person is viewed by others—or at least how they think they are viewed by others. That means that given options—as is the case with a multiracial person—a person who is perceived by others as black would be identified as black. Sims (2017) expands this idea by discussing how inconsistent reflected appraisals of racial identity—that is, people realizing that others are unsure of their racial identity or offer a range of possible identities—may lead multiracial people to maintain their identity as multiracial. But inconsistent appraisals may come at a cost, particularly for adolescents. Biracial high school students who experienced mismatch between their racial self-identification and their meta-perceived identification—how they *think* other people view them—suffered more depressive symptoms, more physical symptoms, and lower self-worth than students who experienced less mismatch (Nishina et al. 2017). These negative experiences may contribute to the dynamism of racial self-identification among children and adolescents. Multiracial adolescents commonly deploy different racial identifications at home and at school (Harris and Sim 2002), and only 24% of multiracial people, including children, maintained their racial self-identification from the 2000 Census to the 2010 Census (Liebler et al. 2017).

It is particularly notable that black multiracial people also change their racial identifications often, and that warrants deeper investigation. Racial identification of black Americans has typically operated as a system of hypodescent, commonly referred to as the “one-drop rule,” which dictates that a person with any known or visible black heritage should be identified as black. That black people, who, with the exception of “passing,” have generally been assumed to have few options for racial identification, exhibit racial fluidity may offer more robust evidence for the mutability of race than changes among any other group. Indeed, fluidity among black Americans may be increasing, suggesting that racial self-identification is not merely a reaction to a complex system of racial appraisals, inconsistent or otherwise (Mason 2017). People also make independent claims to racial identities that are within their range of options. They do not merely react to how they are perceived, but they try to be active in shaping that perception (Khanna 2011; Rockquemoroe and Arend 2002). Specifically, it seems that multiracial adolescents and young adults deploy strategies to signal that they are multiracial, especially when they are not perceived as such. For example, Rockquemoroe and Arend (2002) tell the story of Michelle, a light-skinned woman with one black parent and one white parent who generally identifies as white but selectively chooses to reveal her black

heritage to make herself seem more interesting. Conversely, Khanna (2011) tells the story of a dark-skinned young man with one black parent and one white parent who attempts to signal his multiraciality by emphasizing his Italian heritage through symbols such as Italian flags and cooking Italian food. But it is important to note that even though people may make claims to identities that *they* perceive as part of their options, their claims are not always accepted. While dark-skinned people are rarely affirmed if they attempt to be identified as white only, a multiracial identification is generally available to them (Stockhill 2017). And while lighter skinned people are typically accepted if they assert a black or multiracial identity, their identity assertions are not *always* accepted, and racial identity invalidation can have negative mental health consequences (Franco and Franco 2015). The aforementioned limitations of racial identity affirmations demonstrate why color may predict racial identity changes, and the negative consequence for racial identity invalidation and racial identity mismatch underscore the need to understand why and when racial identity may be dynamic.

Although researchers have a growing understanding of the factors that influence whether people are identified as monoracial or multiracial (Bratter and O’Connell 2017; Liebler and Zacher 2016), our understanding of the factors that influence whether people, particularly black people, change from multiracial to single race remains limited. Currently, research shows that income, educational attainment, and employment status do not predict changes in racial self-identification (DeFina and Hannon 2016), and that a majority of changes from multiracial to single race may involve people matching their racial identity to their perceived racial identification (Saperstein and Penner 2014). However, these studies do not focus on the racial identity development of black adolescents, which because of its potential to break with the one-drop rule and traditional ways of navigating race is a unique and important topic of analysis. Whether and why black multiracial youth shift their racial identifications offers insight into the future of racial categorization in the United States and ongoing pushback against older conceptions of race.

I argue that shifting racial identifications among multiracial black adolescents stands at least partially apart from ideas about the looking glass self and reflected appraisals of race. It may be more about the claims people desire to make on their racial identity (Khanna 2011; Rockquemoroe and Arend 2002), and it is important to explore the reasons behind that claim-making. Historically, the one-drop rule has meant that people with black ancestry would be identified as black regardless of their physical appearance (Bynum 1998). This means that the looking glass self may be limited in its ability to predict identity changes for black Americans. Instead, even though skin tone predicts external racial perceptions (Foy et al. 2017), I contend that when

presented with broader options due to recent shifts in the racial structure, *skin tone*—or color—may lead to divergent racial attitudes that result in divergent racial identifications.

Skin Tone, Racial Fluidity, and Attitudinal Differences

“Color” describes the variations in skin tone and other phenotypic characteristics—such as hair texture, nose shape, and lip shape—among people of color, and prominently among black Americans. Discrimination based on color is generally called “colorism” and describes the process of privileging people with more “white-like” features—lighter skin, straighter hair, and thinner noses and lips—at the expense of those with more “ethnic” features—darker skin, curlier hair, and thicker noses and lips. The effects of color on the social outcomes of black Americans are widespread. Lighter skinned black people benefit from higher wages (Goldsmith et al. 2007), more education (Branigan et al. 2013; Monk 2014), better mental and physical health (Monk 2015), higher occupational status (Hill 2000), and lower conviction rates and shorter prison sentences (Blair et al. 2004; Viglione et al. 2011) are considered more attractive (Reece 2016), and are disciplined less and less harshly in school (Hannon et al. 2013). The differences between dark-skinned and light-skinned black people are sometimes so divergent that the gap between light-skinned black people and white people is occasionally smaller than the gap between light-skinned black people and dark-skinned black people (Goldsmith et al. 2007). Importantly for this study, these differences in social outcomes seem to facilitate differences in racial and political attitudes (Hutchings et al. 2016; Reece and Upton 2017).

Hutchings et al. (2016) reveal wide gulfs in the political and racial attitudes of lighter skinned and darker skinned black Americans.¹ Dark-skinned black people were more likely than light-skinned black people to say welfare benefits should be increased, government should provide more service, government should increase spending on education, government should make more efforts to reduce income inequality, and they were more likely to support workplace affirmative action. Moreover, and perhaps more damning, when asked to rate whether black people were hardworking vs lazy and intelligent vs unintelligent, dark-skinned black

people were more likely to reject racial stereotypes of black people while light-skinned black people were more likely to *embrace* racial stereotypes of black people. That means that light-skinned black people considered black people lazier and more unintelligent than their dark-skinned counterparts. In a series of experiments designed to supplement their survey analysis, Hutchings et al. (2016) also revealed that when primed to think about skin tone, dark-skinned black people also found their blackness more important relative to a control group, and light-skinned black people found their blackness less important relative to a control group.

These attitudinal differences offer a mechanism for the color-based racial changes among black multiracial adolescents. It is evident that lighter skinned black people feel a weaker connection to their black identity than darker skinned black people. Their embrace of racial stereotypes about black people may be evidence that they do not feel that the stereotypes apply to them so when offered racial options due to their phenotype and a society that may be more accepting of shifting racial identities among black people, lighter skinned black multiracial adolescents may be more likely to abandon their blackness altogether as they grow into adulthood by breaking with the one-drop rule and selecting a non-black single race category. Or they may attempt to present themselves as “more than just black” by maintaining their identification as multiracial. Conversely, darker skinned adolescents who feel a stronger connection to their black identity may be more likely to conform to one-drop rule ideas and select “black only” as their racial identification as they mature.

To test this premise, I used multinomial logistic regression to examine if skin tone predicted changes in racial self-identification among multiracial emerging adults with black ancestry.

Data and Methods

My data for this study come from Add Health, a nationally representative survey administered by the Carolina Population Center at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. The survey follows a sample of over 90,000 adolescents across four waves² of data collection over 20+ years beginning in 1994. Add Health is an optimal data set for analyzing changes in racial identification because it collects a number of measures of race, including racial self-identification at multiple time points, interviewer identified race, and skin tone, and it includes large samples of people of color, including an oversample of affluent black people.

¹ Hutchings et al. (2016) offer a direct challenge to conventional wisdom on black political attitude differences based on color, which has typically revealed that light- and dark-skinned black people harbored the same political and racial attitudes, a phenomenon dubbed the “skin color paradox” (Hochschild and Weaver 2007; Seltzer and Smith 1991). For a review of the skin color paradox and its challenges, see Reece and Upton (2017).

² Wave 5 was being collected at the time of this writing.

I use data from Wave 1 in 1994–1995, when the study participants were between 7th and 12th grade, Wave 3 in 2001–2002, when the participants were between 18 and 26 years old, and Wave 4 in 2008, when they were between 24 and 32 years old. I narrowed my sample to respondents who selected black and another race—black multiracials—in Wave 1. I excluded respondents who were missing core variables. I was left with a sample of 185 respondents.

Dependent Variables

My dependent variable is racial identity change, which is a measure of whether and in what direction a black multiracial person changed their racial identification. I operationalized “black multiracial” as a respondent who selected black and at least one other race on the Wave 1 in home survey. I then created a categorical variable for respondents’ racial identity change status in Wave 4: whether they maintained their multiracial identity, changed to black single race, or changed to a non-black single race. About 49% of respondents maintained their multiracial identification; about 38% changed their identification to black only; and about 12% changed their identification to a single race other than black. I elected to measure racial identity change in Wave 4 because I wanted to capture presumably more settled identities rather than identities that may still be shifting in Wave 2 or Wave 3 when respondents are younger.

Independent Variables

My focal independent variable is skin tone. Add Health measures skin tone using a five-point scale recorded by the interviewer at the conclusion of the Wave 3 interview. Because of my small sample size, I recoded it to a three-point scale where dark skinned is “3,” medium skinned is “2,” and light skinned is “1.”

In addition to the primary independent variable, I use a number of control variables. First, a dummy variable for whether the respondent was perceived as black by the interviewer in Wave 3. This offers a measure for how the respondent is viewed by others, which provides a test for whether respondents changed their race in response to the race they are externally identified as, which would be consistent with the idea of a “looking glass self.” Next, measures of status: income, education, and parents’ education. Income is a continuous variable for self-reported annual income in Wave 4. Education is a measure of the number of years of education a respondent had achieved based on their report of their educational level in wave 4. For example, I coded a high school education as “12,” a bachelor’s degree as “16,” and a master’s degree as “18.” Parents’ education is the sum of the number of years of education the respondent’s parents received. For example, if R’s mother received a bachelor’s

Table 1 Descriptive statistics

	Mean	SD
Stayed mixed	.49	–
Switched to non-black	.12	–
Switched to black	.38	–
Skin tone	1.82	.07
Perceived black	.80	–
Income	30801	2695.69
Education	13.99	.24
Parents education	19.18	.77
Age	28.77	.23
Woman	.49	.05
<i>n</i>	185	

degree and R’s father received a high school diploma, R’s mother would receive an education value of “16” and the father would receive an education value of “12,” for a total value of “28” for R’s “parents’ education.” If a respondent only reported one parent, the value of education of the other parent would be “0,” such that a father with a master’s degree but no mother would yield a respondent a total “parents’ education” value of “18.” While this conceptualization of parental education may seem to dampen the effect of a single highly educated parent (e.g., a single father with a doctorate) relative to two moderately educated parents (e.g., a father with a high school diploma and a mother with an Associate’s Degree), the combined variable offers a proxy for a grouping of parental education, household income, and the presence of two parents. This allowed me to provide a reasonably comprehensive measure of parental SES without overloading my models with additional variables, which I sought to avoid because of my small sample size. Finally, I include demographic variables: age and woman. Age is the respondent’s age at Wave 4, and woman is a dichotomous variable for whether the respondent identified as a woman.

In early analyses of this topic I tested a number of other variables, including political party affiliation, liberalism, racial composition of respondent’s friends, and neighborhood racial composition. However, those variables were non-significant and further reduced my sample size because of missing data so I decided to exclude them in favor of the core demographic variables described above.

See Table 1 for descriptive statistics.

Analytic Strategy

My modeling strategy is relatively straightforward. I used multinomial logistic regression to test the effect of skin tone on racial identity change, with “stayed mixed” as the reference category. To ensure collinearity between skin tone and perceived black did not bias the estimates, I first estimated

Table 2 Multinomial logistic regression estimating racial identity change from adolescent to adulthood ($n = 185$)

Variable	Switched to black			Switched to non-black		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)
Intercept	6.69 (6.19)	2.24 (6.77)	4.96 (6.68)	-9.13 (5.91)	-4.81 (4.98)	-8.11 (5.84)
Skin tone	.81** (.34)	-	.72* (.37)	-1.31** (.60)	-	-1.21** (.57)
Perceived black	-	1.47 (1.00)	1.07 (.99)	-	-.87 (.74)	-.62 (.80)
Income	.0000006 (.00001)	-.000003 (.000008)	-.000002 (.00002)	-.00001 (.00002)	-.00001 (.00002)	-.00001 (.00002)
Education	-.08 (.12)	.0006 (.10)	-.05 (.11)	-.05 (.18)	-.12 (.18)	-.10 (.19)
Parents' education	.02 (.04)	.03 (.04)	.02 (.04)	.02 (.04)	.02 (.04)	.01 (.04)
Age	-.24 (.18)	-.13 (.18)	-.23 (.18)	.37* (.19)	.21 (.16)	.38* (.20)
Woman	-.62 (.44)	-.62 (.50)	-.77 (.49)	-.72 (.86)	-.78 (.75)	-.65 (.87)
AIC	324637.67	341329.68	315620.81	324637.67	341329.68	315620.81

* $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$,

Table 3 Proportion of respondents perceived as black

	All	Light skinned	Medium skinned	Dark skinned	Stayed mixed	Switched to black	Switched to non-black
Perceived black	.80	.66	.89	.94	.75	.93	.53

two models: one excluding perceived black and a second excluding skin tone. I then included both variables in a final model.

Results

The results are mostly consistent with my hypothesis. About half of the respondents maintained their multiracial identity, while half of the respondents shifted their racial self-identification, and skin tone is associated with the direction of respondents' racial identity changes. Specifically, dark-skinned respondents were more likely to change their racial self-identification from multiracial to black, and light-skinned respondents were more likely to change their racial self-identification from multiracial to a non-black single race. This remained consistent regardless of whether I included perceived black in the models. Indeed, although perceived black seems to be positively correlated with skin tone [a finding consistent with previous research (Foy et al. 2017)] and racial identity change, it remained non-significant in the models both with and without skin tone. This means whether respondents were perceived as black by others was not associated with their racial identity changes. See Tables 2, 3 for percentages of respondents who were perceived black by skin tone and racial identity change.

Moreover, with the exception of age's positive association with changes from multiracial to non-black single race, none of the other variables were significant in any of the

Table 4 Odds ratios for model 3: multinomial logistic regression estimating racial identity change from adolescent to adulthood ($n = 185$)

	Switched to black Model 3 OR (95% CI)	Switched to non-black Model 3 OR (95% CI)
Skin tone	2.06 (.98–4.34)	.30 (.09–.94)
Perceived black	2.93 (.41–21.20)	.54 (.11–2.66)
Income	1.00 (1–1)	1.00 (1–1)
Education	.95 (.76–1.20)	.90 (.62–1.32)
Parents' education	1.02 (.94–1.11)	1.01 (.93–1.10)
Age	.80 (.56–1.14)	1.46 (.98–2.18)
Woman	.46 (.18–1.22)	.52 (.09–2.99)

models. This is consistent with previous research (Defina and Hannon 2016) and points to the important role of color in the lives of black Americans independent of other factors.

In Table 4, I show odds ratios for model 3, which includes both skin tone and perceived black, to provide a broader understanding of the odds of racial identity change associated with skin tone.

The odds ratio for skin tone in the "switched to black" model is roughly 2, which means the odds of medium-skinned respondents changing their racial identification to black rather than maintaining a multiracial identification are twice as high as light-skinned respondents. And the odds of dark-skinned respondents changing their racial identification to black rather than maintaining a multiracial identification

are twice as high as medium-skinned respondents and four times as high as light-skinned respondents. Correspondingly, the odds ratio for skin in the “switched to non-black” model is .30, which means the odds of medium-skinned respondents changing their racial identification to a non-black single race rather than maintaining a multiracial identification are roughly 3.33 times lower than light-skinned respondents. The odds of dark-skinned respondents adopting a non-black single race rather than maintaining a multiracial identification are roughly 3.33 times lower than medium-skinned respondents and roughly 11 times lower than light-skinned respondents. The odds for both models demonstrate the dramatic effect of skin tone on racial identity change, particularly for predicting changes to a non-black racial group.

Discussion and Conclusion

Social scientists have begun to embrace the idea that race is a social construct in more than passing mentions. As a result, increasing awareness of color stratification and more research on racial fluidity have led to a number of discussions about the best way to measure race to achieve the most accurate and impactful research (Howell and Emerson 2017; Roth 2016; Saperstein et al. 2016). To my knowledge, none of these methodological innovations have been incorporated into any recent study at the expense of traditional ways of measuring race, but more studies like this that show the instability of racial identification should continue to push the discussion forward. As the number of multiracial Americans continues to increase and the gap between darker and lighter skinned black Americans continues to widen, it is vital that we continue to explore how people perceive their racial identities and alternate ways to measure race that captures the complexity of race as an idea.

This study broadens our understanding of the racial fluidity researchers have observed recently, particularly among multiracial black adolescents. Particularly, it shows that the range of identity options may be broadening for black Americans as they feel more comfortable stepping outside of the confines of the one-drop rule to explore other racial identities. They may feel less trapped by American racial tradition and by reflected appraisals of their appearance. Instead, they may lay claim to identities that they desire and attempt to shape external perception to fit. Moreover, color seems to play a large role in shaping identity changes. Perhaps as adolescents mature and accumulate experiences based on their color, their attitudes diverge such that they may settle on a self-identification later in life that differs from their childhood

identity. However, this study does not offer insight into the consequences of shifting racial identities, which warrants deeper investigations. Other studies reveal the pitfalls of racial identity mismatch or having a racial identity rejected by the community (Nishina et al. 2017; Sims 2017), and it remains unclear whether racial identity change is a result of trying to cope with identity mismatch or if it may cause identity mismatch and the effect either circumstance may have on respondents' mental and physical health. A fair amount of the respondents who switched to a non-black single race were still perceived as black by their interviewer, which presents the possibility that their racial identity claims may ultimately be rejected, leading to negative health outcomes, which may lead to further racial shifting later in life, contributing to the dynamism of racial identities for multiracial black Americans.

With that in mind, it is important to remember that this study examines change from one point in adolescence to a separate single point in adulthood, we cannot presume such change or lack of change represents any finality on the part of the respondents. It is possible that the dynamism observed for this population in adolescence continues in adulthood such that people who may have changed their identification may change again and those who appear to not have changed may change at some point in the future. Or even their reported identity may simply be how they chose to be identified in this particular context and they leverage other identities in other contexts. More work is necessary to understand the nuances and complexities of these fluid identities. Wave 5 of Add Health, when some of the respondents will be about 40 may help us continue to understand exactly how fluid these identities may be, whether they are constantly in flux or whether they actually settle over time.

This work also complicates our understanding of color differences among black Americans. Specifically, it offers more evidence of attitudinal differences between light- and dark-skinned black Americans amidst growing questions about the ongoing viability of the skin color paradox in the contemporary United States. It also reveals part of the role of color in the race-making process, not just in terms of how people are perceived racially based on their color and phenotype but also how those ideas shape how people view themselves and ultimately identify (e.g., Sims 2012).

Finally, it is important to remember the population under examination here. This study only focuses on black multiracial adolescents, which I consider a unique population to study in racial fluidity research. The results may differ if a different population was studied. Perhaps reflected racial appraisals matter more and color matters less for other populations that are subject to a fair amount of fluidity, such as

Latinos and non-black multiracial people. Social scientists must continue to push our work on racial fluidity forward to continue to reveal the workings of race in our society and embrace the challenge of understanding the idea that race is a “social construct” and what that concept means for how we conduct research and push back against social inequality.

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