Choosing race: Multiracial ancestry and identification

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ABSTRACT

Social scientists have become increasingly interested in the racial identification choices of multiracial individuals, partly as a result of the federal government's new "check all that apply" method of racial identification. However, the majority of work to date has narrowly defined the population of multiracial individuals as the "biracial" children of single-race parents. In this article, we use the open-ended ancestry questions on the 1990 and 2000 5% samples of the US Census to identify a multiracial population that is potentially broader in its understanding of multiraciality. Relative to other studies, we find stronger historical continuity in the patterns of hypodescent and hyperdescent for part-black and part-American Indian ancestry individuals respectively, while we find that multiple-race identification is the modal category for those of part-Asian ancestry. We interpret this as evidence of a new, more flexible classification regime for groups rooted in more recent immigration. Our results suggest that future work on multiracial identification must pay closer attention to the varied histories of specific multiracial ancestry groups.

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1. Introduction

Although the United States has been home to a significant multiracial population since its founding, American scholarly interest in the racial identity of mixed-race people is a fairly new phenomenon. This development is due in large part to the federal government's recent change in its official classification system to allow individuals to identify with more than one race (see Office of Management and Budget, 1997). With multiple-race statistical data newly available, especially after Census 2000, it became clear that millions of Americans choose to "mark one or more" races when given the opportunity. This finding gave new impetus to social scientific research on identity formation.

In this article, we seek to explain patterns of racial self-identification by multiracial people in the United States. Do they prefer to select one race or several to describe themselves, and why? Using census data from 1990 and 2000, we identify a mixed-race population by targeting adults who report having ancestry in more than one racial group. This approach offers several advantages over other more common methods of identifying multiracial populations. Most importantly, this approach captures a multiracial population that is broader and potentially more historical in its understanding of multiraciality than the post-*Loving* "biracial baby boom" often targeted in previous studies.[1]

Our method identifies patterns of multiracial self-classification that have not been identified by researchers using other techniques. In particular, we describe a striking divergence between the racial self-reporting of people with mixed black, white, and/or American Indian ancestry on one hand, and those who report some Asian ancestry. We conclude that two regimes of multiracial identification are at work—one historical and the other contemporary—and that they may coexist

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[1] *Loving v. Virginia* was the 1967 Supreme Court decision that struck down all state laws prohibiting interracial marriage (Davis, 1991).

in the foreseeable future without one necessarily displacing the other. Moreover, we offer a series of potential explanations for the understudied question of why Asian ancestry is more strongly associated with multiracial identification.

The racial affiliations of mixed-race people offer insights into both macro-level historical trends in racial ideology and boundary formation, and micro-level mechanisms that shape individual decisions about racial identification. As we will show, the identification choices that individuals make today continue to be influenced by concepts of race that formed centuries ago: ideas (or their absence) of the properties of races and the nature of hybridity still dictate to a considerable extent how people conceive of their racial membership. Multiracial identification may be even more significant, however, for what is implies about the future of our heterogeneous nation. If the rigid racial-assignment rules of the past are on the wane, can we expect a more racially egalitarian society as well?

Before we proceed, we think it worthwhile to address a point of potential concern. Any discussion of "multiracial" people implicitly risks essentializing and reifying race by implying that multiraciality results from the mixing of "pure" racial types. This would directly contradict the accepted sociological understanding of race as a social construction. Instead, our notion of "racial ancestry" is meant to take advantage of the common folk understanding of race that ties it to ancestry as a matter of inheritance, in order to compare two different forms of identification. In contrast to many other studies that seek to define some objective criteria for multiracial classification (e.g. the child of parents belonging to different single races), our study takes the subjective nature of racial identity seriously and simply attempts to compare two different subjective forms of racial identification, one implicitly embedded in a person's ancestral identification and the other, more explicitly, in their response to the official race question.

2. Background

2.1. Historical patterns

Historically, the racial assignment of mixed-race people in the United States has primarily followed two conventions. The better-known of these conventions is the "one-drop rule," whereby an individual with any known African ancestry has traditionally been classified, both socially and officially, as black (Davis, 1991; Hollinger, 2003). This custom follows the logic of hypodescent, according to which mixed people are assigned to the lower-status of their (two or more) ancestral groups. Although evidence of this practice can be found during the era of slavery, the one-drop rule became more heavily codified in law after the Civil War, when Southern states enacted segregation measures that necessitated precise legal definitions of who was black and who was white (Williamson, 1980; Davis, 1991). Although it is not clear how widespread the one-drop principle remains, it certainly survives to some extent in the contemporary United States: the fact that a man whose mother was white is routinely considered our first black president testifies to its enduring power.

Perhaps less well-known, but just as deeply rooted, is the historical convention whereby people of mixed white and American Indian ancestry have frequently been racially classified as white. In this hyperdescent regime, American Indian heritage is not considered to have the determining properties that African ancestry does, and so individuals who claim to have indigenous American origins can—and indeed are likely to—classify themselves as white (Snipp, 1989). This outlook reflects a history of belief that American Indian "blood" could and would be absorbed without detriment by the European American population (Wolfe, 2001). The hypodescent/hyperdescent asymmetry was also apparent in the very different instructions that census enumerators were given in the 19th and 20th centuries for classifying mixed-race people depending on whether they were white and black or white and American Indian (Morning, 2003).

Not surprisingly, these two longstanding regimes of racial assignment arose to sort out the mixed offspring of the groups that were most numerous in the United States' early history. In short, our most prominent and rigid racial-classification rules reflect the history of what might be called our nation's "original" races: European, African, and American Indian. Without discounting either the long history of Asian immigration to the United States, or the early presence of some groups that are now included under the "Hispanic" umbrella, we employ this "old" (or "original") vs. "new" distinction to reflect the relative demographic weight (and political recognition) of various racial groups at different points in our nation's history.

Today, however, our racial landscape is very different from what it was when the "old" regimes of black hypodescent and American Indian hyperdescent emerged. Hispanics now make up the largest minority group, and although the US government does not recognize them as a race, they are increasingly being "racialized" in the public, the media, and the academy—that is, positioned as a large bloc akin to (and distinct from) whites and blacks. At the same time, the US population of Asian descent is projected to multiply considerably in size over the coming decades (US Census Bureau, 2008), and individuals of Asian ancestry have played a prominent role in the multiracial movement, particularly through college organizations.

Moreover, the growth of these "new" groups is not the only challenge facing existing regimes of racial assignment. Since the 1960s, the salience of American Indian ancestry has clearly been on the rise, contributing to dramatic growth in the size of the population enumerated as American Indian (Eschbach, 1993, 1995; Liebler, 2010). Finally, the rapid growth in black/white interracial marriage (Gullickson, 2006) and the resulting growth in the black/white biracial population have led some commentators to question the relevance of the one-drop rule in post-Civil Rights America.

These demographic and social developments pose an exciting challenge for the study of multiracial identification in the 21st century. What "rules," if any, guide the ways in which mixed-race people of varied backgrounds are identified and

identify themselves today? Are the hypodescent and hyperdescent conventions of the past likely to remain in force, and if so, do they apply to the United States' relatively "new" races as well?

2.2. Contemporary decisions

Research on individual-level decisions about how to identify one's self or children in racial terms has often involved qualitative ethnographic or interview studies (Korgen, 1998; Renn, 2004; Rockquemore and Brunsma, 2002; Twine, 1996), with a liberal dose of autobiography (see Root, 1992, 1996). With the advent of "mark one or more race" data collection, however, quantitative analyses of racial classification on census forms and large-scale surveys are steadily increasing in number. These might best be described as "identification" studies, following Brunsma's (2005, p. 1134) argument that "racial identity and racial identification represent two related yet distinctly different outcomes": "Identification. . .refers to how multiracial people racially classify and designate themselves on surveys and censuses."

Identification studies for multiracial people have become prevalent in recent years but are difficult to summarize for several reasons. First, as we will discuss in more detail below, the methodology and data limitations of these studies vary considerably. For example, many studies examine the identification choices of individuals when they are forced to choose only one race, while other studies examine data where individuals are allowed to check multiple races. Second, scholars have approached the topic of identification from different fields with somewhat overlapping, but distinct, research agendas. For example, some scholars approach the issue from the field of child development, keenly focused on the individual experience of identity formation (Herman, 2004; Hitlin et al., 2006), while other scholars have approached the issue from the field of racial boundary formation and its macro-level consequences for racial formation in the United States (Brunsma, 2005). Third, studies vary considerably in terms of the variables they focus on—such as economic status (Xie and Goyette, 1997; Korgen, 2010) or appearance (Rockquemore and Brunsma, 2002)—when seeking to account for multiracial people's self-identification. Finally, despite a growing number of studies, there is a clear lack of established theoretical expectations, competing or otherwise, to drive the field forward.

Probably the most common theme linking multiracial identification studies is the question of whether the pattern of hypodescent observed for part-black individuals in the past continues today and whether that pattern applies to other minority groups as well. The evidence on the first question is equivocal, partly because we lack an objective historical baseline from which to decide whether the one-drop rule is or is not on the decline. For example, both Roth (2005) and Campbell (2006), using different methodologies, argue that the proportion of part-black individuals who check more than one box, and even their non-black race alone, is large enough that the one-drop rule cannot be thought of as dominant in these individuals' self-classification practices. However, Qian (2004), despite similar proportions, argues that the one-drop rule remains dominant for individuals with some black ancestry because they are far less likely to claim either both identities or their non-black identities alone relative to other multiracial individuals.

The evidence on whether the pattern of hypodescent applies to other groups is clearer; partial Asian or Hispanic ancestry is much less likely to be subjected to a "one-drop" rule. Part-Asian individuals have been consistently shown to vary more in their self-classification than part-black individuals do, and they are less likely to claim Asian ancestry alone than part-black individuals are to describe themselves solely as black (Saenz et al., 1995; Xie and Goyette, 1997; Qian, 2004; Roth, 2005). There is little work on individuals of part-Hispanic ancestry because of a data limitation in the way Hispanicity is identified in most data. Nonetheless, the few studies that have examined part-Hispanic individuals have found significant variability in self-classification (Brunsma, 2005).

Identification studies have paid much less attention to whether the traditional regime of hyperdescent remains powerful among those of part-American Indian ancestry, despite an active field of research on American Indian racial classification overall (Garroutte, 2003; Nagel, 1996; Unrau, 1989; Wilson, 1992). In fact some scholars have extended the "test of hypodescent" to individuals of part-American Indian ancestry (Brunsma, 2005), seemingly ignoring a well-established literature that documents exactly the opposite phenomenon for those of part-American Indian ancestry. In general, the placement of part-American Indian individuals within multiracial identification studies has been confused and problematic, largely as a result of the way in which multiracial individuals are identified in these studies, as we will discuss in more detail below.

Other studies of American Indians do suggest a challenge to the regime of hyperdescent, however. It is well established that since at least 1970, the American Indian population has grown much faster than it could have by natural increase alone, suggesting that there has been a net influx of individuals who have "switched" their racial identification to American Indian from something else (Eschbach, 1993, 1995; Liebler, 2010). Such switching implies a weakening of the pattern of hyperdescent, as more individuals discard other possible racial identifications in favor of an American Indian one or, as of 2000, add American Indian to existing racial identifications.

2.3. Who is multiracial? The methodological challenge of identifying the mixed-race population

Researchers who want to investigate the identification of multiracial people all face a common problem: How to define and measure the mixed-race population to be studied? As Harris and Sim (2002, p. 625) put it, surveys (including the decennial census) each capture "*a* multiracial population, not *the* multiracial population" (emphases added). Morning (2000) shows how flexible the boundaries are by calculating that a definition of "multiracial" that included individuals with

genealogically-distant mixture would put the share of mixed-race Americans around 40% of the total population, instead of the roughly 2% figure to emerge from the 2000 census.

To identify mixed-race people in large statistical databases, researchers have primarily used three strategies. The most direct approach is simply to rely on self-reports, that is, individuals' responses indicating they are multiracial (e.g. Tafoya et al., 2004). Although this technique is useful for analyzing the characteristics of self-identified multiracial people, it is inappropriate for exploring the varied racial labels that mixed-race people choose, since it includes only those who have opted to report a multiracial identity. In other words, if these responses were to be used to analyze the race options taken by individuals, then the analysts would be guilty of sampling on the dependent variable.

Some studies try to work around this problem by analyzing the choices that self-reported multiracial individuals make when they are also asked to indicate which single race best describes them. For example, Campbell (2006) uses the 1995 Current Population Survey Supplement on Race and Ethnicity to analyze which single race is preferred by respondents who indicate a multiracial identity. This technique is particularly helpful for "bridging" methods that attempt to compare results across datasets where some allow for multiracial reporting and some allow only single-race reporting. However, this approach limits the racial identification choices of multiracial respondents because it forces a single-race response, thereby eliminating the option of multiracial identification as their preferred choice.

Perhaps the most common strategy to date for identifying multiracial individuals has been based on the racial identities that their parents report (Brunsma, 2005; Chew et al., 1989; Eschbach, 1995; Herman, 2004; Qian, 2004; Roth, 2005; Saenz et al., 1995; Xie and Goyette, 1997). The advantage of this approach is that it provides an objective measure of multiracial status that does not suffer from the problem of sampling on the dependent variable above. However, there are several notable drawbacks to this approach. First, parental information is commonly only recorded for parents who live in the child's household. Therefore, children living in single-parent or stepparent families are either excluded from analysis or potentially misclassified. Second, information on parental race is usually gathered only for children younger than 18 years of age and living with their parents. This poses two problems. One is that this technique is only able to identify the segment of the multiracial population that is under 18, ignoring several generations of older mixed-race Americans. The other problem is that since children's race is often reported by one of their parents, the resulting data does not represent multiracial individuals' racial self-identification, but rather, the labeling choices their parents make on their behalf. While such information is certainly valuable, it tells us more about older generations than it does about younger ones, and it says nothing about the identification that mixed-race individuals choose for themselves, nor how those choices might change as children grow to maturity and leave their parental home.

The final shortcoming of this approach, at least in our view, is that it limits the definition of "multiracial" to first-generation children of interracial couples, also known as "biracial" offspring. This reduction reinforces the erroneous notion that multiraciality is a new, post-*Loving* phenomenon in the United States (Spencer, 2006). More importantly for scholars who analyze attitudes toward multiracial ancestry as a window onto broader race thinking, it eliminates from study a crucial element of analysis: the major role that historical period plays in shaping the range of racial identities—if any—from which people feel they can choose. This blind spot is clearest in the case of individuals of part-American Indian ancestry. Of the 2.4% of individuals who checked more than one box on the race question in Census 2000, 15.9% of them checked the American Indian and white boxes (Grieco and Cassidy, 2001). The American Indian/white combination was the second most frequent multiple check-off option, after white/other. Almost certainly, most of these individuals are not the product of one parent who identifies only as white and one parent who identifies only as American Indian, but are rather drawing upon more historical knowledge about their family history in claiming both European and American Indian ancestry. Yet most studies of multiracial identification use the parental method to identify multiracial respondents and thus the only part-American Indian ancestry individuals in the sample are those where one parent was identified as American Indian alone and the other as something else. In other words, the parental method is incapable of telling us anything about what the census has enumerated as one of the most common forms of multiraciality.

The third approach for identifying multiracial people is really a loose collection of strategies that rely on comparing multiple responses to the race question in different contexts. For example, Harris and Sim (2002) take advantage of the fact that the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (known as "Add Health") asked respondents for their race in different ways (permitting multiple responses and forcing single-race choices) and locations (asking at home and at school), and recorded parental race as well. As a result, students who reported one race at home and another at school might be considered multiracial. Hitlin et al. (2006) also use Add Health data, but they search for race-reporting inconsistencies over time by comparing the Wave 1 (1994–1995) results to those of Wave 3 (2001–2002).[2] These methods have the appeal of relying on individual's self-reports, rather than their racial identification by others. However, for the purposes of examining the racial identification choices of multiracial individuals, this approach has two important limitations. First, even small numbers of misreports can swamp the "true" population of interest. Second, it is difficult to determine what racial identification individuals prefer, precisely because the method of identifying multiracial individuals is to search for discrepancies in their reporting.

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[2] Penner and Saperstein (2008) also examine race-reporting inconsistency over time, but their objective is not to identify a multiracial population.

3. Methods and data

3.1. Using ancestry to identify the multiracial population

To avoid many of the drawbacks described above, we adopt Goldstein and Morning's (2000) method for identifying the multiracial population based on adults' self-reported ancestry, regardless of generation.[3] Specifically, we use US census data to identify individuals who reported ancestral descent from two or more groups that are commonly considered racially distinct. The major innovation in our approach is that the identification of multiracial individuals is entirely divorced from the race question itself.

We argue that ancestry reports offer a special advantage over methods that rely on race responses. Race is a basic cognitive dimension of social interaction in the United States that individuals use to interpret and organize their social world. Ancestry, on the other hand, is a less sensitive concept that has far less salience in daily life. Furthermore, the routinized nature of race reporting for most Americans often yields preset, single-race answers, rather than detailed descriptions of one's origins. In recent decades, the ancestry question appeared only on the long form of the US census, which was distributed to 1 in 6 households. (It has since been supplanted by the Census Bureau's annual American Community Survey.) Due to its open-ended nature and relative rarity, the ancestry question is more likely to generate spontaneous and novel responses.

Although the concepts of race and ancestry are distinct, they are not independent. Race is popularly understood in the United States to be a matter of inheritance, and therefore a person's responses to the ancestry question implicitly provide a form of racial identification, albeit not necessarily an identification that is consistent with the racial categories available on the US Census. It is this implicit correspondence between race and ancestry responses that we take advantage of here to ask a straightforward question: conditional on acknowledging two ancestries that are commonly understood to belong to different racial groups, how does a person answer the race question?

By probing ancestry responses for evidence of multiracial heritage that is distinct from the information provided on the more familiar race question, we are able to address several shortcomings of other methods. First, our approach does not limit the target group to those who explicitly select a mixed-race label, thus avoiding the problem of "selecting on the dependent variable." Second, unlike studies of biracial children, we are able to identify an adult multiracial population. By restricting this population to heads of household, we can limit our analysis to individuals who are likely to be self-reporting, rather than relying on the proxy identification of parents or other relatives. Third, again in contrast to studies of biracial children, we are able to identify a broader population that includes both individuals who are the children of parents who identify as belong to different single races and individuals who recognize a long history of race mixing within their family tree.

Our approach is not without its own drawbacks and we are not advocating that other methods should be discarded in favor of our own. As we noted earlier, different approaches will capture different types of multiracial populations. For researchers particularly interested in the identity formation of the children of interracial parents, our approach is not particularly useful, because that particular group is not identifiable within our sample. On the other hand, for researchers interested in a more historical approach to understanding multiracial identification, our method has the advantage of incorporating individuals with a far more diffuse understanding of their identity than do other approaches. In particular, our strategy is preferable to other methods for testing popular theories of hypodescent and hyperdescent, because it better captures the relevant "at-risk" population: the population that is aware of and acknowledges ancestral descent from more than one racial group, independent of whether they believe such ancestry makes them multiracial. Given the differences between our methodology and those used by other researchers, we will compare our results to prior findings and consider how they are shaped by these diverse approaches to sample construction.

3.2. Data and sample selection

Data come from the 5% samples of the 1990 and 2000 US Censuses available from the IPUMS project (Ruggles and Sobek, 1997). Using both the 1990 and 2000 Censuses allows us to compare results in the case where respondents were allowed to only check one box in response to the race question to the case where respondents were allowed to check multiple boxes.

Typically, one member of the household fills out the census form for the entire household. Although there is no definitive way to determine which person in the household responded for the entire household, the most likely candidate is the person reporting as the head of household (HH). Therefore, we limit our analysis to 5,273,239 heads of household from our Census 2000 sample in order to more accurately capture self-identification. This restriction limits our ability to generalize our results across gender because female heads of household are a selective group.[4]

We seek to analyze the race reporting of individuals whose ancestry responses indicate multiracial heritage. The ancestry item is an open-ended question that asks "What is this person's ancestry or ethnic origin?" and provides two lines for respondents to write in their answers. To determine whether these write-in ancestries indicate multiple racial origins, we must "racialize" them. Because both the terms "ancestry" and "ethnic origin" imply some information about race, we do

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[3] See also Eschbach et al. (1998), Lieberson and Waters (1988) and Liebler (2010).

[4] We analyzed our data separately for men and women to determine how sensitive our results were to gender. Aside from a few moderate differences, the distribution of race reporting is similar for men and women and our overall conclusions would be unchanged were we to exclude one or the other gender. These results are available upon request.

Table 1

Distribution of racial ancestry reporting for heads of household, Census 1990 and 2000. *Source*: IPUMS 5% samples of the 1990 and 2000 US Censuses.

Response	1990		2000	
	Number	%	Number	%
No ancestry	410,143	8.9	992,042	18.8
One ancestry	2,945,582	64.1	3,179,084	60.3
Officially-recognized race	2,412,937	81.9	2,298,142	72.3
Unofficial race	279,191	9.5	460,245	14.5
Racially uninterpretable ancestry	253,454	8.6	420,697	13.2
Two ancestries	1,237,675	26.9	1,102,145	20.9
Same officially-recognized race	1,094,807	88.5	957,691	86.9
Same unofficial race	1121	0.1	1835	0.2
Different officially recognized races	106,977	8.6	95,410	8.7
Different unofficial races	696	0.1	2075	0.2
Officially recognized and unofficial	33,992	2.7	44,941	4.1

Notes: Results are unweighted. Officially recognized race refers to the five racial categories recognized by the US Office of Management and the Budget (white, black, American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, and Pacific Islander).

not believe that this approach misrepresents respondent's answers. However, because the ancestry question is an open-ended question, respondents are not restricted to an understanding of their racial ancestry that is necessarily consistent with census racial categories. In fact, responses to the ancestry question are highly varied; the Census Bureau classified about 500 unique responses to the ancestry question in Census 2000 (Brittingham and de la Cruz, 2004). To simplify, we collapse this large number of responses into a smaller set of racial ancestries, using Goldstein and Morning's (2000) method. These racial ancestries are the five different official race categories established by the Office of Management and Budget's (1997) Directive 15—i.e. white, black, American Indian, Asian, and Pacific Islander—as well as a residual set of ancestries that either fall outside these official categories or are racially uninterpretable. The unofficial categories are Hispanic, Caribbean and South American, Middle Eastern, and South Asian.[5] The racially uninterpretable categories are American[6] and Mixed.[7]

Table 1 shows the distribution of household heads' (HH) racial ancestry responses for both our Census 1990 and Census 2000 samples. Significantly more HH's reported no ancestry in 2000 than in 1990 (18.8% vs. 8.9%). Other than this issue, the results are similar for both, so we focus on Census 2000. About 19% of HH's did not report any ancestry, about 60% of HH's reported one ancestry, and 21% reported two ancestries. Among those HH's who reported one ancestry, about 72% reported a racial ancestry that corresponds to an official race category, while 15% reported an unofficial racial ancestry, and the remainder (13%) reported a racially uninterpretable ancestry. In about 87% of the cases where HH's reported two different ancestries, these ancestries came from the same officially-recognized racial ancestry. This group is almost exclusively composed of individuals reporting two different European ancestries. A very small fraction of individuals (0.2%) report two ancestries that correspond to the same unofficial racial ancestry. The final three groups of HH's all reported two different racial ancestries. For this analysis, our focus is on individuals who identified with two different officially-recognized racial ancestries, a category that made up 1.8% of household heads in our Census 2000 sample and totaled 95,410 respondents in our Census 2000 sample and 106,977 respondents in our Census 1990 sample.

Our intent is not to reify the existing categories of racial distinction in the US by selecting only individuals who report officially-recognized racial ancestries. We choose these individuals because their responses to the ancestry question reveal recognition of a multiracial ancestry that could be reported using the standard racial categories available in the US Census.

Our coding of racial ancestry certainly leads to some measurement error because some individuals who we believe are providing a multiracial ancestry are not intending to do so. For example, an African-ancestry British immigrant to the United States might report both an "English" and an "African American" ancestry. According to our approach, this individual would be coded as reporting a multiracial ancestry, when they are actually using the ancestry response to report both a racial identity (black) and their national origins (English). While these sorts of measurement errors are unavoidable, we believe that the number of such errors is likely to be small and concentrated among the foreign-born. Furthermore, the bias that is generated with such measurement errors is fairly clear. These measurement errors will reduce the proportion of individuals with a multiracial ancestry who report more than one race and increase the proportion of the same individuals who will report single races.

It might seem unusual that we exclude individuals who report a Hispanic ancestry from our sample given the growth of the Hispanic population in the US and the increasing academic and popular interest in Hispanic groups. This exclusion is largely driven by a data limitation inherent in the way Hispanicity is recorded in the US Census. Because Hispanicity is asked

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[5] Although "Asian Indian" is technically a racial category on the US Census, there is ample evidence that the racial identification of South Asians in the US is quite ambiguous and that, for most Americans, "Asian" means East Asian (Kibria 1996; Morning 2001; Shankar and Srikanth, 1998).

[6] This includes individuals who reported a US State as an ancestry (i.e. "Texan") and individuals who report "Canadian" as an ancestry (but not "French Canadian").

[7] This category might seem to capture our interest in multiracial individuals, but given that 86% of people who report this ancestry reported being white-alone in Census 2000, it is more likely that this response is primarily used by white individuals who can claim various and diverse European ancestries.

Table 2
Distribution of multiracial ancestry heads of household by type, Census 1990 and 2000. *Source*: IPUMS 5% samples of the 1990 and00 US Censuses.

Combination	1990		2000	
	Number	%	Number	%
White/American Indian	96,206	89.9	80,133	84.0
Black/American Indian	4015	3.8	5336	5.6
White/Asian	2651	2.5	4362	4.6
White/black	2062	1.9	2865	3.0
Black/Asian	207	0.2	433	0.5
American Indian/Asian	*121*	*0.1*	*239*	*0.3*
White/Pacific Islander	*764*	*0.7*	*881*	*0.9*
Black/Pacific Islander	*15*	*0.0*	*27*	*0.0*
American Indian/Pacific Islander	*51*	*0.0*	*59*	*0.1*
Asian/Pacific Islander	*885*	*0.8*	*1075*	*1.1*

Notes: Results are unweighted. References to "American Indian" incorporate Alaska Natives. *Italics* designate groups excluded from later analysis.

as a separate question on the US Census, part-Hispanic ancestry respondents were never forced to make a single-race/multiple race decision in completing their Census forms. They did not face the same options in confronting the Census form itself as other respondents who indicate a multiracial ancestry. The appropriate parallel to our methodology here would be to analyze answers to the Hispanicity question among those individuals who report a part-Hispanic ancestry, but such an analysis is beyond the scope of this article (see Emeka and Vallejo (2010) for an analysis of this type).

Within our sample of multiracial ancestry respondents, we have ten different multiracial ancestry groups. Table 2 shows the number of HH's within each group. Although the overall totals for each Census are around 100,000 respondents, the white/American Indian group alone accounts for about 90% of the total sample in 1990 and 85% of the total sample in 2000. The sample sizes for the remaining groups are thus considerably smaller.

For purposes of our analysis we exclude part-Pacific Islander-ancestry individuals and American Indian/Asian ancestry individuals, leaving us with five multiracial ancestry groups (white/black, white/American Indian, white/Asian, black/American Indian, black/Asian). The results for Pacific Islander-ancestry individuals overwhelmingly reflect the racial atmosphere of Hawaii, which is considerably different from the racial atmosphere of the mainland United States. There is also a potential methodological problem with identifying individuals of native Hawaiian ancestry. In some cases, individuals who report "Hawaiian" as their ancestry may have been indicating a native Hawaiian ancestry. However, state names were also reported as ancestries for other states without any implicit ethnic identification. In two cases, moreover, the part-Pacific Islander ancestry groups are too small to produce reliable statistics (as is the American Indian/Asian group). While we think examination of these understudied groups would be beneficial in future studies, due to space constraints we limit our discussion here to the five largest multiracial ancestry groups formed by the sharper racial boundaries of the mainland United States.[8]

3.3. Methods

Our analysis proceeds in two steps. First, we analyze the distribution of race reporting for the five multiracial ancestry groups. We analyze this distribution separately in the 2000 and 1990 samples, in order to compare the results when the multiracial option is not available with the results when the multiracial option is available. Second, we then compare these distributions of race reporting to distributions observed for the same multiracial group by scholars using other methods to identify multiracial populations. Throughout the remainder of this paper, we use the weighted frequencies for both our Census 1990 and Census 2000 samples to determine the distribution of race reporting.

For cases in the Census 2000 data where a respondent checked more than one box in response to the race question, we treat such respondents as identifying as multiracial. In almost all cases, multiracial-ancestry individuals who selected more than one box chose at least the two races that corresponded to their multiracial ancestry. The percentage of respondents who selected more than one race but did not choose races consistent with their multiracial ancestry ranged from 4.1% for white/black ancestry respondents to 0.6% for white/AIAN ancestry respondents. A substantial proportion of these individuals in all cases checked one of their racial ancestries and "some other race." We exclude these inconsistent multiracial respondents from the numbers presented in the analysis below.

We primarily use graphical techniques to display our findings, but the full distributions of race reporting for each multiracial ancestry group (including ones not analyzed here) are available in Tables A1 and A2 of the data appendix, for 1990 and 2000 respectively.

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[8] Although we do not examine the results for these groups here, we do show the distribution of race reporting for all groups in 1990 and 2000 in Appendix Tables 1 and 2, respectively. Based on the results for other groups presented below, it appears that Pacific Islander ancestry functions in some ways similar to American Indian ancestry because very few part-Pacific Islander-ancestry individuals identified as Pacific Islander alone. At the same time, however, Pacific Islander ancestry also functions like Asian ancestry in that multiracial identification is the modal category for all part-Pacific Islander ancestry groups. Because of the data issues raised above and the small sample size of some groups, however, we consider these results to be highly tentative.

4. Results

4.1. Multiracial groups' race reporting in 2000 and 1990

Fig. 1 shows the distribution of race reporting for each of our multiracial ancestry groups in Census 2000. The most obvious feature of these distributions is how different they are from one another. Despite the seeming heterogeneity, we argue that the results follow three simple nested rules. First, part-Asian-ancestry groups are most likely to identify themselves as multiracial. Multiple-race responses were the modal category for both white/Asian ancestry (49.2%) and black/Asian ancestry (64.1%) respondents. Second, among those groups with no Asian ancestry, part-black ancestry groups are most likely to identify themselves as black alone, consistent with a pattern of hypodescent. For white/black individuals, the modal category is black alone (52.7%) and few respondents (6.6%) chose white alone. Similarly, the majority of black/American Indian ancestry individuals identify themselves as black alone (67.7%). Third, the remaining group of white/American Indian ancestry individuals is most likely to select white alone (85.1%), consistent with a pattern of hyperdescent.

What happens when multiracial identity is not an option? In Fig. 2, we show the distribution of race reporting in the 1990 census in which respondents were only allowed to identify with one race. For the three non-Asian-ancestry groups, the patterns of hypodescent and hyperdescent observed in 2000 were similar in 1990: both white/black (82.1%) and black/American Indian (93%) ancestry individuals overwhelmingly identify as black, while white/American Indian ancestry
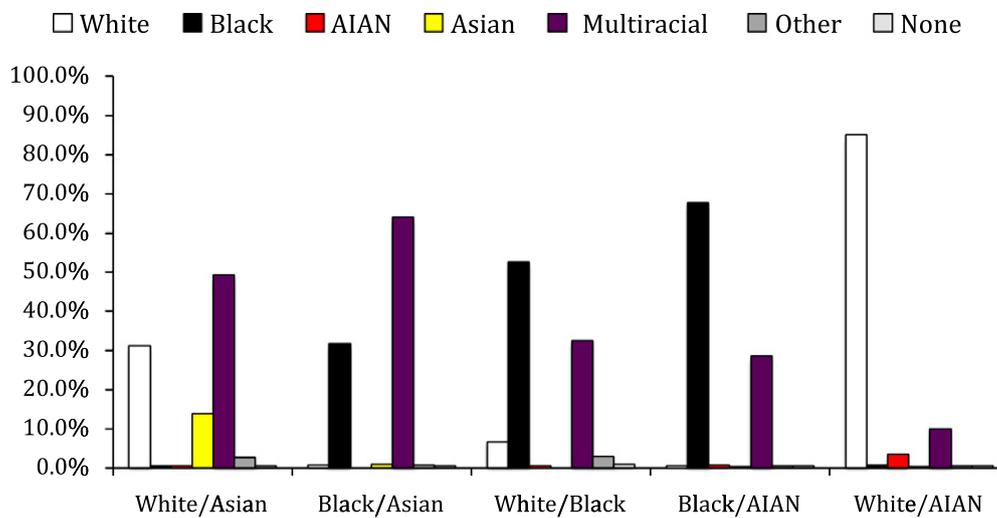

Fig. 1. Distribution of race reporting by multiracial ancestry heads of household, Census 2000. *Source*: IPUMS 5% sample of the 2000 US Census. *Notes:* All frequencies are weighted. "AIAN" stands for "American Indian and Alaska Native."
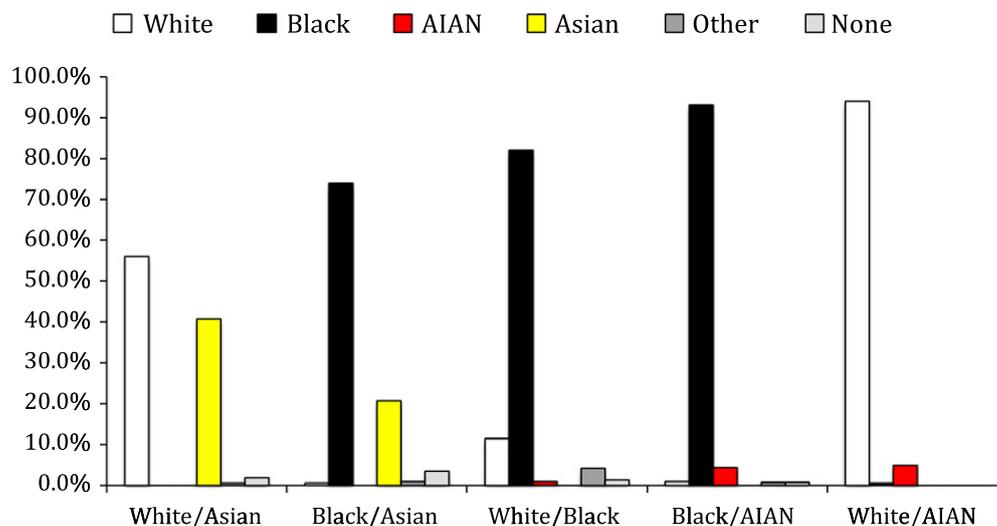

Fig. 2. Distribution of race reporting by multiracial ancestry heads of household, Census 1990. *Source*: IPUMS 5% sample of the 1990 US Census. *Notes:* All frequencies are weighted. "AIAN" stands for "American Indian and Alaska Native."

individuals overwhelmingly identify as white (94.0%). But the multiple-response option that was the modal response for the two Asian-ancestry groups in 2000 was not available in 1990. In both of these cases, the majority of individuals identified with the non-Asian race: 55.9% of white/Asian respondents identified as white and 73.9% of black/Asian respondents identified as black. In other words, under these restrictive conditions—similar to those that have prevailed for much of US history—where multiracial recognition is disallowed, Asian heritage seems to function like American Indian ancestry. Asians with African ancestry are subject to hypodescent, whereas those with European origins follow a hyperdescent pattern. This finding lends support to DeGenova's (2006) contention that in many crucial respects, the racial positioning of American Indians has served as a template for the racialization of Asians (and Hispanics) in the United States (see also Snipp, 2000, 2003).

Perhaps the most striking feature of the results for 1990 is the apparent lack of variability in identification within each ancestry group. In four of the five groups, the modal category accounts for 70% or more of the observations. Only in the case of the white/Asian ancestry group does there appear to be less agreement on the "correct" category. Moreover, very few multiracial ancestry respondents rejected the standard racial categories available to them. Across all groups and on both the 1990 and 2000 censuses, the proportion of respondents either checking "other" or leaving the race question blank was very small. In general these proportions were smaller in 2000 than in 1990, suggesting that the ability to identify with more than one race in 2000 encouraged some multiracial-ancestry individuals who would have otherwise rejected the race question to respond. Together, these results suggest a high degree of internalization of group conventions concerning racial self-classification under restrictive conditions, as well as acceptance of the norm of racial self-classification.

4.2. Discussion of 1990 and 2000 multiracial reporting: a new regime for Asian ancestry

These three distinct regimes of racial identification that we discern—that is, multiraciality for mixed-race people of Asian descent, hypodescent for all others with African ancestry, and hyperdescent for the remaining white/American Indian group—reflect different histories of racialization for people of Asian, African, European, and Native American origin. We find clear evidence of traditional one-drop classification still applying to groups with black ancestry, as well as the legacy of hyperdescent affecting the self-identification of people who report American Indian and European origins. These patterns are only fully detectable when using a method such as ours that captures individuals' acknowledgement of historical (or generationally distant) multiracial ancestry.

In contrast, our findings on the racial identification of Asian-ancestry groups show a striking departure from the long-standing patterns of hypodescent and hyperdescent that have traditionally characterized the classification of other multiracial groups in the United States. Unlike groups with some combination of white, black, and/or American Indian ancestry, which prefer single-race labels even when—as on the 2000 census—multiple-race reporting is an option, part-Asian individuals favor marking more than one race. We suggest several potential explanations, even though they are not testable with our data.

One possible explanation is simply that not enough time has passed for rigid racial-assignment rules to have formed for this group since Asian ancestry typically implies a generationally recent immigration to the United States; about 73% of Asian Americans were first or second generation in 1998–2000 (Yang, 2006). In that case, the current tendency toward multiracial identification for people of partial Asian descent may simply be a temporary stage in a process toward an eventual hyper- or hypodescent regime.

Alternatively, it may be the case that Asian-origin population growth has taken place largely after the period in which strict racial-categorization norms were most likely to be formed. The hypodescent and hyperdescent rules governing the offspring of what we have called the US's "original" races were very much instruments of racial oppression that took shape in an era of the most extreme political, economic, and social discrimination. The multiracial Asian population may simply have come into being in a period in which such strict classificatory tools for racial governance no longer seemed as necessary. In this case, we would not expect strong single-race assignment norms to form with respect to part-Asian people anytime in the foreseeable future.

The relative generational recency of the Asian-American population may mean that a process of immigrant incorporation and/or assimilation is at work, one that is quite distinct from the modes of incorporation of the United States' African, European, or American Indian populations. Although it is not clear why recent immigrant origins would predispose people toward the recognition of multiple origins, it may be that migration entails an acknowledgement of and sense of connection to two social worlds—i.e. the home country and the country of destination—that lends itself to the recognition of racial mixture as well. This may be all the more true in our era of globalization, when technological advances in transportation and communications make such transnational ties more feasible.

A corollary of the Asian-American population's relative generational recency is that the part-Asian respondents in our sample are more likely than others to be the biracial children of single-race parents as opposed to the descendants of interracial unions further back in the family tree. Multiraciality may be more salient for such biracial offspring than it is for people whose mixed-race heritage is more generationally distant.

We reiterate that these are speculative accounts whose merit we cannot test here. However, given the consistency of our finding about part-Asian groups' preference for multiracial identification, juxtaposed with the scarcity of existing literature explaining this phenomenon, we hope to offer some original contributions to an eventual empirical research agenda in this area.

4.3. Comparing multiracial groups' race reporting across different analytic methods

We now turn to a comparison of our results with results obtained by other authors using different techniques to identify a multiracial population. First we compare our Census 2000 results to the results of Roth (2005) and Brunsma (2005), both of which used parental race to identify a multiracial population. With the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS), Brunsma had the advantage of being able to identify the race of biological parents even when they were non-resident, thanks to the survey design of the ECLS. However, the children in his sample were younger and in a narrower age range (4–6 years of age) than those in Roth's Census 2000-based study.

Fig. 3 compares our results for Census 2000 to the results of Roth (2005) and Brunsma (2005). We exclude Brunsma's results for black/American Indian and black/Asian ancestry individuals, due to small sample sizes (17 and 30 children, respectively). Despite the differences in design noted above, the results of Brunsma (2005) and Roth (2005) are quite similar for all groups. What is equally remarkable is just how different our results are from both of these studies for white/black, white/American Indian and black/American Indian ancestry individuals. For white/black as well as black/American Indian individuals we find a far stronger pattern of hypodescent. For example, according to both Brunsma and Roth, the modal
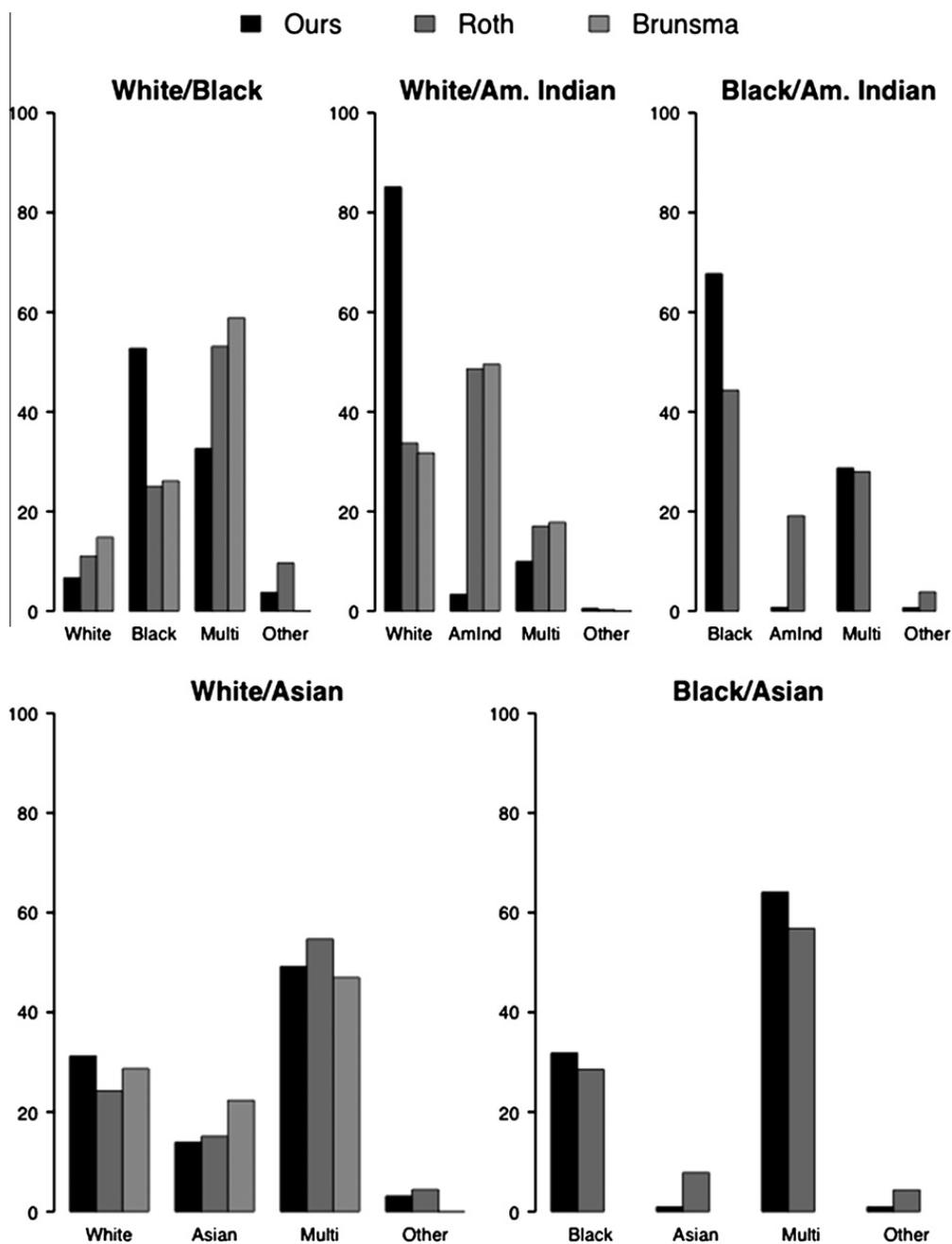

Fig. 3. Comparison of race reporting among Census 2000 respondents in our study, Roth (2005), and Brunsma (2005).

category for black/white people is a multiracial designation, while in our sample, the modal category is black alone and considerably fewer respondents are reported as either white alone or multiracial. Although a substantial number of respondents in our sample (32.6%) still reported being multiracial, we believe that these results should serve as a caution on any declarations that the "one-drop rule" is no longer operative for individuals of part-black ancestry in the United States.

Similarly, our results for white/American Indian ancestry individuals reflect a stronger pattern of hyperdescent than do the results of Brunsma and Roth. We find far more white/American Indian ancestry individuals who are identified as white alone, and far fewer who are identified as multiracial or American Indian alone. The reason for this discrepancy is fairly clear. The biracial children of parents where one parent identifies as American Indian and the other as white are only a tiny fraction of individuals who recognize a white/American Indian multiracial ancestry. The broader population of individuals who recognize both white and American Indian ancestry are far more likely to follow the rules of hyperdescent and select white only as their race. Put simply, analyzing biracial children is a poor method for understanding part-American Indian multiraciality. More generally, a focus on biracial children alone underestimates the continuing weight of traditional hypo- and hyperdescent conventions in the United States.
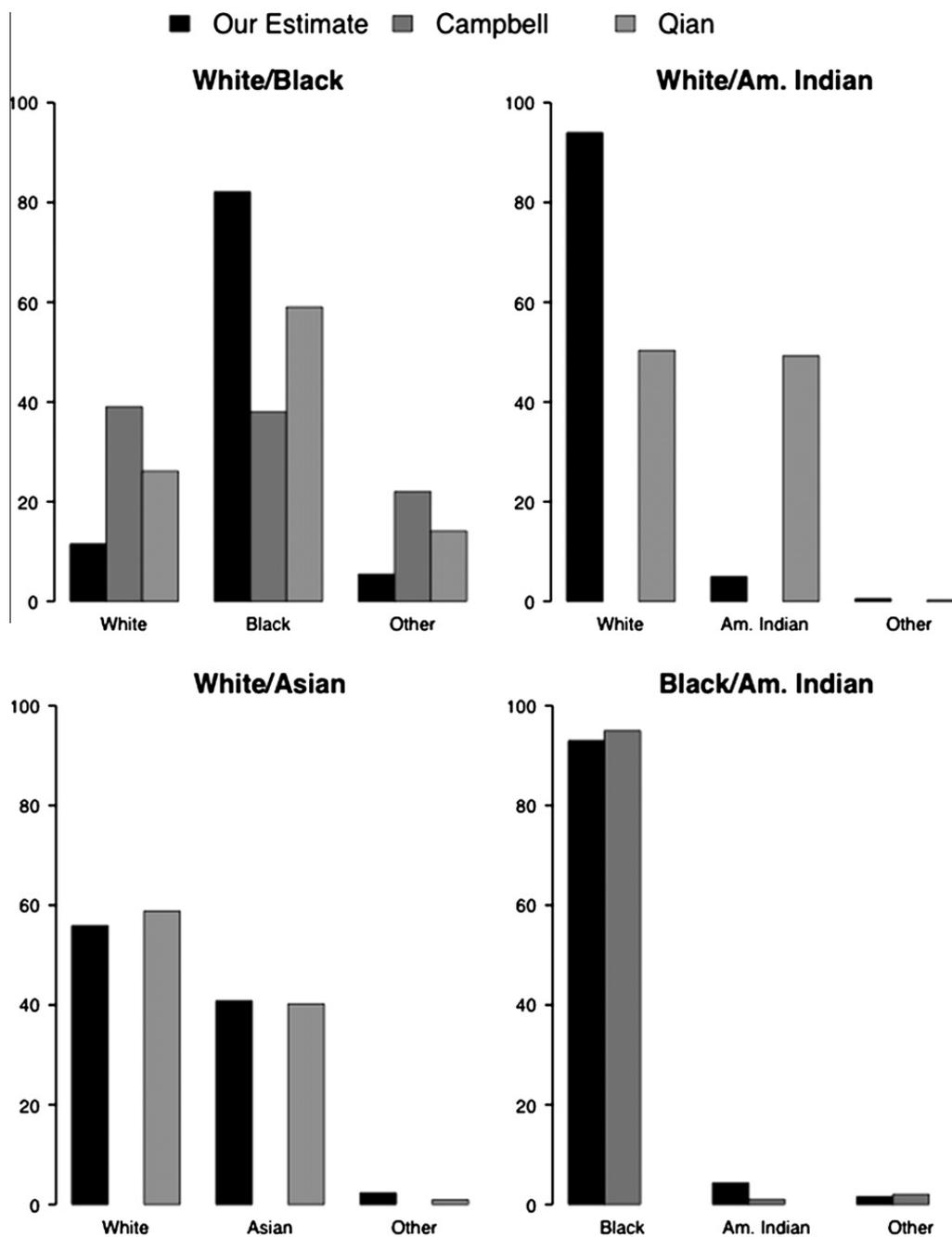

Fig. 4. Comparison of race reporting among Census 1990 respondents in our study, Campbell (2006) and Qian (2004).

It is perhaps not surprising then that our results for part-Asian ancestry individuals are similar to the results for the other two studies. Unlike the other two groups, who have a long history in the United States, our method and the parental method are largely congruent for the newer part-Asian ancestry population. Most of the part-Asian ancestry individuals that we identify probably are the biracial children of white/Asian or black/Asian union, given the recentness of most Asian migration to the United States.

We can also compare our 1990 census results to two studies that examined a forced single-race response. Qian (2004) used a method similar to Roth (2005) to analyze the racial identification of biracial children in Census 1990. Campbell (2006) used the Race and Ethnicity Supplement of the 1995 Current Population Survey to identify multiracial respondents. The Supplement fielded four different panels, each of which posed questions about race and ethnicity in a slightly different manner. However, at some point each panel asked respondents to select one race, and elsewhere gave them the opportunity to report more than one race. Qian (2004) only examined the race reporting for part-white biracial children, while Campbell (2006) only examined the race reporting of part-black respondents, and due to a small sample size, she excludes black/Asian ancestry respondents from analysis.

Fig. 4 compares our results for Census 1990 to the results of Qian (2004) and Campbell (2006). Once again, our results are more sensitive to the influence of traditional conventions on racial self-reporting. In our study, white/black individuals show a stronger pattern of hypodescent, and white/American Indian individuals a stronger pattern of hyperdescent, than they do in the research of Qian (2004) and Campbell (2006), while the results are similar for white/Asian individuals.

4.4. Discussion of methodological comparisons: the relevance of an ancestry-based approach

In comparing the results obtained using different methods for identifying the multiracial population, one might raise the critique that our analysis of an ancestry-based sample is largely retrospective, while methods that focus on biracial children are more forward-looking.

There are two reasons that we believe such a critique is misplaced. First, aside from those who checked "some other race," American Indian was the most frequent box on the race question to be checked in combination with other boxes (Grieco and Cassidy, 2001). From a historical perspective, this result is not surprising because the logic of hyperdescent has allowed acknowledged American Indian ancestry to diffuse across a broad population. Yet this population is not well-represented among biracial children because the generational placement of multiraciality is relatively distant for most individuals of part-American Indian ancestry. If, as DeGenova (2006) suggests, American Indians offer a template for thinking about the racialization of "new" groups, then ignoring part-American Indian multiracial-ancestry individuals creates a very large "blind spot" for understanding the future of racial boundaries in the United States (Snipp, 2000, 2003).

Second, studies of biracial children over-emphasize an unstable historical moment in time. The biracial "baby boom" has certainly led to substantial growth in the biracial population, and presumably future increases in intermarriage will continue to contribute to its growth. However, as these biracial children grow to maturity, find their own partners, and begin to have children themselves, the salience of interracial mixing in the "first" generation will decline and the family genealogies of individuals who might be considered the inheritors of this biracial baby boom will become increasingly complex and variable (Bratter, 2007). While no study can claim to accurately represent this future world, we do believe that our method in some ways better captures a population comparable to this future population than do studies limited to biracial children.

5. Conclusions

In response to the question of how mixed-race people in the United States prefer to identify themselves in racial terms, our research reveals two sets of patterns. One can be referred to as the "historical" regime whereby multiracial people combining European, African, and/or American Indian ancestry were assigned to monoracial groups. Although we describe it as a historical convention, our data suggest it still has real purchase today. The second contemporary pattern of multiracial identification we discern might be called simply the "new" or even "immigrant" regime whereby a multiple-race label is selected. This convention seems to dominate among all the groups of partial Asian ancestry.

We believe that these very clear empirical findings have important implications for the study of multiracial identification. We can sum them up in three catch-phrases: "history matters," "ancestry matters," and "data matter."

5.1. History matters

In our attempts to explain different patterns of multiracial classification across ancestry groups, we have emphasized the role that traditional practices and norms play in guiding individual self-identification decisions. In the cases of the long-standing hypo- and hyperdescent customs, we have been able to draw on a well-established literature concerning the social, economic, political and legal factors that gave rise to these regimes of single-race assignment. But in the case of our unexpectedly strong and consistent finding that part-Asian groups tend toward multiple-race identification, we have had to broaden the scope of historical and contemporary experiences and conditions that might play a role. In this connection,

we have considered factors as diverse as immigration timing, the lived experience of migration, and exposure to period-specific forms of institutional racial discrimination. None of these hypotheses may prove to have any merit, but the evidence that historical norms concerning the classification of the United States' "original" mixed-race groups still endure suggests to us that when contemplating the identification of part-Asian individuals, elements of the broader societal context, past and present, must be taken into account.

5.2. Ancestry matters

A corollary of the claim that "history matters" is that the specificity of particular combinations of racial ancestry matter as well in the study of contemporary mixed-race identification. Because different groups have been racialized differently—that is, conceived of in different ways, ascribed different characteristics, and subjected to varying forms of social stratification—different racial heritages signal distinct trajectories of inclusion and exclusion. As a result, no one-size-fits-all template for multiracial self-identification is likely to apply across different mixed-ancestry groups.

5.3. Finally, data matter

As noted above, there is no single multiracial population; instead, different methods and assumptions produce different portraits of multiracial America. Our research shows that selecting a population that is broader in the generational scope of its multiracial ancestry reveals important patterns and characteristics that have been overlooked by other methods. We do not argue that our strategy is the only one of value, but rather that it provides insights not provided by others. For example, not only are the historical conventions of hyper- and hypodescent more evident in our sample, but their robustness throws into sharper relief the new regime of multiple-race identification that emerges among part-Asian groups. We believe that this approach offers a more thorough and more historically-grounded examination of mixed-race identification than studies that examine the racial classification of biracial children.

A frequent motive for studying the mixed-race population is the belief that its classification is a harbinger of racial attitudes—and demographic shifts—to come. The identification patterns of multiracial people can be read as a signal of prevailing or changing beliefs about the nature of racial differences in general and the boundaries of specific races in particular. Hence the intense interest, for example, in whether or not the one-drop rule seems headed for extinction (e.g. Roth, 2005). The potential for shifts in our definitions of who belongs to which race in turn raises the prospect of changes in the racial composition of our nation that are independent of the usual demographic variables of fertility, mortality, and migration. New developments in the way we categorize blacks, whites, or any other group could have a significant impact on the demographic portrait that we draw of the nation. Recent predictions have included the scenario of a "beige majority" (Lind, 1998) where mixed-race people, whites, Asians, and Hispanics come to be understood as making up a kind-of-white, "beige" majority that is distinct from darker-skinned or "black" America. (See also Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Gans, 1979; Sanjek, 1994; Warren and Twine, 1997; Yancey, 2003 for variations on this theme.)

Our research suggests a cohabitation of historical single-race and contemporary multiple-race identification regimes that does not augur a burgeoning of the self-acknowledged multiracial population in the foreseeable future. Such predictions however are notoriously difficult to make. To give them more solid backing, social scientists will have to take a closer look at how Americans think about their mixed-race ancestry: the kinds of backgrounds they count as multiracial, how they prefer to describe that multiracial heritage, and the considerations they take into account when identifying themselves and others in terms of race.

Appendix A

See Tables A1 and A2.

Table A1
Percentage distribution of race reporting for multiracial ancestry heads of household, Census 1990. *Source*: IPUMS 5% samples of the 1990 US Census.

Race	Ancestry									
	White/Asian	Black/Asian	White/black	Black/AIAN	White/AIAN	AIAN/Asian	White/PI	Black/PI	Asian/PI	AIAN/PI
White	55.9	0.5	11.5	1.0	94.0	35.0	45.8	0.0	7.2	35.3
Black	0.3	73.9	82.1	93.0	0.5	5.8	0.4	80.0	0.0	0.0
AIAN	0.5	0.0	1.0	4.3	4.9	27.5	0.0	0.0	0.4	23.5
Asian	40.8	20.8	0.0	0.1	0.0	29.2	44.7	13.3	81.5	29.4
Pac Islander	0.1	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	6.5	6.7	2.5	9.8
Other	0.5	1.0	4.1	0.7	0.2	1.7	0.5	0.0	1.1	0.0
None	1.8	3.4	1.3	0.8	0.3	0.8	2.1	0.0	6.9	2.0

Notes: Results are weighted. "AIAN" stands for "American Indian and Alaska Native." Columns may not sum to 100% due to rounding error.

Table A2
Percentage distribution of race reporting for multiracial ancestry heads of household, Census 2000. *Source*: IPUMS 5% samples of the 1990 US Census.

Race	Ancestry									
	White/ Asian	Black/ Asian	White/ black	Black/ AIAN	White/ AIAN	AIAN/ Asian	White/ PI	Black/ PI	Asian/ PI	AIAN/ PI
White	31.2	0.7	6.6	0.3	85.1	13.8	31.1	0.0	2.3	17.2
Black	0.1	31.8	52.7	67.7	0.6	7.9	0.0	33.3	0.0	6.9
AIAN	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.7	3.3	10.0	0.2	0.0	0.0	8.6
Asian	13.9	0.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	6.3	10.8	0.0	12.0	10.3
Pac Islander	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	7.5	0.0	1.3	1.7
Multiracial	49.2	64.1	32.6	28.7	9.9	52.7	47.3	66.7	82.0	41.4
Multiracial (inconsistent)	2.3	1.6	4.1	2.0	0.6	9.2	2.2	0.0	0.3	10.3
Other	2.7	0.7	2.8	0.3	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.5	1.7
None	0.4	0.2	0.9	0.3	0.3	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.8	1.7

Notes: Results are weighted. "AIAN" stands for "American Indian and Alaska Native." Respondents who check more than one box, but did not check at least both of their reported racial ancestries were recorded as "inconsistent" multiracial reporters. Columns may not sum to 100% due to rounding error.

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