The Generational Locus of Multiraciality and Its Implications for Racial Self-Identification

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Estimates of the size of the multiracial population in the United States depend on what prompts people to report multiple races on censuses and surveys. We use data from the 2015 Pew Survey of Multiracial Adults to explore how racial self-identification is shaped by the generational locus of an individual's multiracial ancestry—that is, the place in one's family tree where the earliest interracial union appears. We develop the theoretical rationale for considering generational heterogeneity and provide its first empirical demonstration for U.S. adults, by estimating what shares of the population identify multiracial ancestry in their parents' or grandparents' generation, or further back in their family tree. We find that multiracial generation is related to—and likely confounded with—the ancestry combinations that individuals report (e.g., white-Asian, black–American Indian). Finally, we show that later generations are less likely than their first-generation counterparts to select multiple races when they self-identify. Consequently, we argue that generational locus of multiracial ancestry should be taken into account by demographers and researchers who study outcomes for multiracial Americans.

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The projected decline in the white share of the U.S. population over the next 50 years regularly garners media interest, but an equally striking demographic projection that has drawn much less attention concerns the multiple-race

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population. By far, the count that the U.S. Census Bureau expects to grow most rapidly between 2014 and 2060 is the number of Americans who choose "more than one race" (Colby and Ortman 2015).

Whether this expectation for mixed-race Americans is realized will depend not just on the familiar variables of fertility, mortality, and net migration, but also on a factor that has not traditionally figured into demographic analysis: individuals' decisions about how to classify themselves (Perez and Hirschman 2009). Recent research has made it clear how flexible racial self-reporting can be (Liebler et al. 2017; Saperstein and Penner 2014), and both quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests this malleability is particularly true for respondents who report multiple races (see their relatively low consistency rates in Matthews et al. 2017, 57; note also Doyle and Kao 2007; Hitlin, Brown, and Elder 2006; Khanna 2011; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2007). Consequently, making informed projections of population growth requires an understanding of the characteristics associated with, and the mechanisms behind, multiple-race reporting. In other words, research on the racial self-identification of mixed-ancestry people is essential because their choices underpin the estimates and projections for one of the most dynamic segments of the U.S. population.

Sustained academic attention to "the multiracial experience" (Root 1996) emerged in the 1990s, making it a fairly new (though vibrant) area of scholarly inquiry. The availability of large-scale data for such research has also been rather limited until recently. The U.S. government formally recommended the collection of multiple-race responses in the census in 1997, and thus only two decennial censuses (2000 and 2010) so far have included this information. (Multiple-race reporting has also been included on the annual American Community Survey as well as on other federal, state, local, and private-sector forms.) And it was only in 2015 that a random sample of adults nationwide was employed to produce a large survey of multiracial respondents: the Pew Research Center's Survey of Multiracial Adults, which we use below. Accordingly, there is still considerable work that can be done to understand the factors that influence individuals' decisions to identify with more than one race.[1]

As part of this effort, we draw attention to a factor in multiracial self-identification that has received little attention to date: the "generational locus" or "genealogical locus" of one's mixed-race ancestry (Morning 2000; see also Song 2017a), that is, the place in one's family tree when the earliest interracial union appears. Researchers in the past were well aware of the existence of mixed-race Americans (U.S. Census Bureau 1918; Frazier 1957/1997; Nobles 2000), yet multiraciality is often presented as a recent phenomenon, attributed to the Supreme Court's 1967 decision striking down state bans on interracial marriage. As a result, the mixed-race population is usually treated as a novel, "first-generation" community of young people with parents of different races—the "Brave New Faces" (Alaya

2001) or "The New Face of Race"(Meacham 2000) of U.S. media headlines. In reality, interracial unions have been a feature of our society ever since the Spanish, French, and British first established colonies in North America (Sollors 2000). This long history of hybridity makes the mixed-race population of the United States a multigenerational one, including millions of Americans of all ages who are descended from interracial unions that took place in the generation of their grandparents, great-grandparents, or beyond. In other words, the multiracial population is not solely a first-generation community, but rather a layered collective including second, third, and further generations—not unlike how scholars differentiate people in terms of how genealogically close they are to the (im)migrant experience (Rumbaut 2005; Lieberson 1973). As we show, this generational status is associated with individuals' likelihood of identifying with more than one race.[2]

Enumerating the Multiple-Race Population

How the multiracial population is delimited has implications for the generational structure that we discern in it, which makes it especially important to attend to how multiraciality is defined and measured. In an early article exploring young people's choices to identify with more than one race, Harris and Sim (2002) pointed out that when we try to enumerate mixed-race people, we are capturing "a" multiracial population, not "the" multiracial population. Different data-collection methods or question formats lead to different counts, as do different definitions or inclusion rules.[3]

Moreover, the same questions and categories can yield different counts, depending on the circumstances in which individuals encounter them. As Harris and Sim (2002) reported, the same student who identifies as multiracial on a self-completion survey at school might not do so when answering an interviewer's questions at home. Multiracial self-identification on the census or surveys may also be particularly unstable because it depends on multiple-race responses being salient and conceptually available to respondents. Given the long reach of the "one-drop rule," a custom by which Americans with any African ancestry are considered solely as black, there are many Americans for whom "mixed race" is not a plausible identity, regardless of their ancestral background. In short, the sensitivity of multiracial counts to definitions, instrument design, and the malleability of mixed-race identity makes the estimation, projection, and description of the multiple-race population especially challenging.

To investigate mixed-race Americans' self-identification, we first identify a potential multiracial population, comprising all the individuals who could be considered mixed race regardless of whether they identify themselves as such. To borrow the model of political scientist Kanchan Chandra (2012), this "nominal" pool includes all individuals who possess the "descent-attribute(s)" required for membership. More specifically, we assign to the potential mixed-race population any person who descends from ancestors who are considered members of more

than one race, whether or not these kin self-identify (or would have self-identified) as such.

To be sure, this theoretical construct of the nominal multiracial population is not without drawbacks. For one thing, the source of ancestry data used will affect the size (and other characteristics) of the population. Following Goldstein and Morning (2000) and Gullickson and Morning (2011), we use individuals' ancestry reports as indicators of multiple-race descent, which brings with it problems of recall and variation in knowledge of one's ancestors. In addition, this approach means that individual respondents' notions of racial categorization introduce variation into the reporting of multiracial ancestry. Finally, our labelling as mixed a person whose ancestors "are considered" members of distinct races is a present-oriented one that entails shifting definitions of multiraciality over time, as cultural beliefs about which groups constitute races change. For example, today "Hispanic or Latino" may be considered a distinct race (at least by some), and thus a potential element of multiraciality, but that may not always have been the case. Despite the challenges of data quality and the ever-shifting terrain of racial boundary-marking (Wimmer 2012), however, the construct of a nominal multiracial population offers a parsimonious way to delimit—at a given point in time—the pool of individuals whose racial self-identification we wish to explore.[4]

Factors Shaping Multiracial Self-Identification: The Importance of Generation

Once we have delimited our potential mixed-race population, the next step is to ask: What prompts a person in that nominal pool—that is, someone who could potentially claim multiraciality—to actually do so? Or to use Chandra's (2012) language, what prods an individual to "activate" a nominal category? Previous research has explored factors as varied as appearance (Khanna 2011); neighborhood composition (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2007); parental characteristics (Xie and Goyette 1997); interview setting (Harris and Sim 2002); and gender, class, and religion (Davenport 2016) in multiple-race self-reporting. However, the multigenerational nature of the mixed-race population has been largely overlooked. All too often, researchers apply terms like "multiracial," "biracial," and "mixed-race" solely to the offspring of racially discordant couples (see for example Khanna 2011). Indeed, demographers have often studied the multiracial population solely by looking for people who are reported as having parents of different races (see for example Xie and Goyette 1997). Even when later-generation multiracials are included—for example, by sampling individuals who select multiple races for themselves—we rarely ask respondents about the genealogical locus of their mixed ancestry.

Such approaches ignore both theory and evidence that suggest that the generational locus of one's mixed-race heritage matters for racial self-identification, as well as for other outcomes such as attitudes or socioeconomic status. For one thing, there are likely to be *period* effects related to multiracial generation,

whereby the era in which an interracial union formed mattered for a couple's socioeconomic outcomes and for those of their descendants. The consequences of multiracial status have varied in the United States, as attitudes, legal discriminations, and classificatory practices toward interracial couples, mixed-race people, and nonwhites generally have changed over time (Davis 1991; Lee 1993; Schuman et al. 1997; Sollors 2000). The legal persecution, media interest, and social opprobrium that Mildred and Richard Loving faced for their 1958 marriage, for example, would not be the lot of a white man and black woman married in 2008. Moreover, the children of these unions would likely face a different range of choices for their self-racial identification.

The period effects related to the generational locus of multiracial ancestry also likely contribute to what are usually interpreted as effects of specific racial combinations (e.g., white-black, white-Asian, etc.). Gullickson and Morning (2011) suggested as much after finding that individuals reporting mixed Asian ancestry were more likely than those reporting mixed African ancestry to self-identify using more than one race; they hypothesized that this reflected the more generationally recent characteristic of mixed Asian people, as opposed to the more genealogically distant source for mixed blacks, which was grounded in earlier beliefs about "one-drop" racial classification. In short, the period-specific social treatment of both interracial unions and their multiracial offspring is likely to have implications for later generations and should not be conflated with the impact of particular combinations of racial ancestry.

In addition to the *period* effect associated with the genealogical locus of one's multiracial ancestry, there is also likely to be a *generational effect* due to the "genealogical distance" (Lieberson 1973, 561) between a person and the earliest (i.e., original) interracial union in his or her family tree. Broadly speaking, we expect that a first-generation experience of growing up with two parents who identify differently in racial terms is distinct from a later-generation experience of associating one's multiracial heritage with much more distant ancestors, with whom one has had little or no personal contact. More precisely, we anticipate two dimensions of the generational effect, involving the loss over time of (1) genealogical knowledge and (2) direct kinship ties. The loss of information about one's ancestors over generations is a general condition hardly limited to mixed-race people, and research on European Americans provides ample evidence that the dissipation of genealogical knowledge has a real impact on individual identity (Nahirny and Fishman 1965; Alba 1990; Waters 1990). It is no accident that Gans (2014) labels this condition the plight of "late-generation" European ethnics. Regarding the second dimension, we hypothesize that genealogical distance is associated with weakened or broken kinship ties, particularly those that span perceived racial divides. Accordingly, we expect that in the contemporary United States, being the "biracial" daughter of a white father and black mother entails stronger social ties to the white community than does being the seventh-generation "black" descendant of a white slave owner and black slave.[5]

Although the literature on multiracial generations is sparse, as we have suggested previously, there are two important studies that lend support to our hypothesized relationship between genealogical distance, on one hand, and racial

identification on the other. In the United States and the United Kingdom, respectively, Bratter (2007) and Song (2017b) found that parents who identified as mixed-race did not necessarily apply that label to their children. Using data from the 2000 U.S. Census, Bratter discovered that monoracial parents in interracial unions were more likely than couples including a mixed-race parent to select multiple races for their offspring. Put differently, first-generation multiracial children were more likely to be labelled by their parents as multiple-race than were second- or later-generation offspring. Song's interview study of sixty-two mixed-race parents found that just 65 percent of the respondents said they would identify their children with multiple races. Her interviews, moreover, documented a variety of reasons for selecting other kinds of racial identities, including a child's physical appearance, the parent's familiarity with particular racial branches of the family tree, or what Bratter termed racial "overlap" (i.e., shared racial ancestry) with the nonmixed parent. Although these studies explore parents' racial classification of their children, rather than the latter's self-identification, and they do not go beyond a two-generation parent/child comparison, they offer important evidence of the impact of the generational locus of multiracial ancestry on a person's racial categorization.

Evidence from the 2015 Survey of Multiracial Adults

We have begun a project to explore empirically the relationship between the genealogical locus of one's multiracial ancestry and his or her racial identity, attitudes, social networks, and socioeconomic status, drawing on the Pew Research Center's 2015 Survey of Multiracial Adults.[6] In this article, we present several initial findings that pertain to the topic we have developed theoretically above: the association between multiracial generation and racial self-identification, and how the former can confound associations between ancestry combination and the latter.

The Pew Research Center's 2015 Survey of Multiracial Adults was conducted online by the Gfk Group using its nationally representative KnowledgePanel, whose respondents were recruited through either random-digit dialing or address-based sampling. Through KnowledgePanel, Pew screened 21,224 U.S. adults for the races of their parents, grandparents, and earlier ancestors as well as for their own racial self-identification (Pew Research Center 2015). It is these screening data—along with those collected by Pew from a smaller comparison sample ($n = 1,495$)—that we analyze here.

We identify 18 percent of the individuals sampled as being (potentially) multiracial, according to our nominal definition of a multiracial person as one who descends from ancestors of different races, regardless of how genealogically distant (see Table 1). This in itself is a striking finding, because it is so much higher than the roughly 2.5 percent of the U.S. population that selects more than one race on Census Bureau forms (Colby and Ortman 2015).[7] It speaks volumes about the difference that recognizing multigenerational depth makes when thinking about multiraciality. It also suggests that census mixed-race counts are

TABLE 1
Estimated Population Shares of U.S. Adults by Multiracial Generation

	Percent	Frequency
Multiracial generation		
First generation	2.5%	547
Second generation	5.8%	1,296
Third+ generation	10.1%	2,241
No multiracial ancestry	81.7%	18,214
Total	100%	22,298

SOURCE: Pew Survey of Multiracial Adults, 2015.
NOTE: Unweighted counts. Restricted to respondents with no missing data on race/ancestry measures. Third+ generation multiracial respondents indicate that their great-grandparents or earlier ancestors could be described as a different race than themselves, their parents, or their grandparents. Second-generation multiracials report mixed racial ancestry beginning in the grandparents' generation. First-generation multiracials report different single races for their parents and do not report any additional races for their earlier ancestors.

just the tip of the proverbial iceberg, with a much larger multiracial population potentially coming into view as classification and identification norms change over time.

Table 1 also presents what are, to our knowledge, the first estimates of the generational composition of the American adult mixed-race population. By drawing on the screening questions about the "race(s) or origin(s)" of respondents and their mothers, fathers, grandparents, and "great grandparents or earlier ancestors," we are able to distinguish "first-generation" multiracials (i.e., those who describe their mother and father as monoracial members of different races) from later-generation multiracials (whose interracial mixture stems from the generation of their grandparents or earlier).[8] Our estimate of the nominal multiracial population is quite generationally heterogeneous, as the historical record suggested. Notably, the first-generation offspring of interracial unions that are so often the poster children for multiraciality in fact make up only a small share of all the people in the Pew sample who reported two or more races in their family tree (13 percent, or 547 out of 4,084).

In Table 2, we take up the variation in ancestral racial combination commonly highlighted in studies of the multiracial population, to reveal its relationship to generational structure. As Gullickson and Morning (2011) hypothesized, people who report white and American Indian descent differ from people reporting white and Asian descent not only because of the races with which they are associated, but also because they have very different generational composition. More generally, we see that groups combining white, black, and/or American Indian ancestry have the largest third-generation shares, likely reflecting many seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and early-nineteenth-century unions under conditions of slavery and territorial conquest. Although this colonial history is equally applicable to Latinos, the generational structure of the part-Latino population, like that

TABLE 2
Generational Structure by Reported Racial Ancestry

| | Multiracial Generation | | | |
	First Generation	Second Generation	Third+ Generation	Row N
Reported ancestry				
Black-Indian	2%	35%	62%	234
Black-Latino	27%	20%	53%	49
Latino-Indian	10%	49%	41%	51
White-Asian	62%	14%	23%	111
White-Black	13%	15%	72%	241
White-Indian	8%	39%	53%	1,612
White-Latino	36%	34%	30%	771
2 other races	24%	28%	49%	72
White-Black-Indian	–	30%	70%	263
White-Latino-Indian	–	54%	46%	105
3 other races	–	47%	53%	110
4+ races	–	37%	63%	57
Third+ generation, no specifics	–	–	100%	408
Total	13%	32%	55%	100%
Column N	547	1,296	2,241	4,084

SOURCE: Pew Survey of Multiracial Adults, 2015. Row percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Cells that represent structural zeros are denoted by an en-dash (–).

of the part-Asian group, is also influenced by significant recent (post-1965) immigration. In other words, differences in generational structure mean that different period and generational effects (as we defined them above) are likely at work in shaping outcomes for people with different racial ancestry combinations, and researchers must take these historical processes into account when making comparisons across populations.

Finally, Table 3 illustrates that both the generational locus of one's multiracial ancestry and the specific components of that ancestry are related to racial self-identification. Overall, we find generational distance to be negatively associated with reporting more than one race: just 7 percent of third- or later-generation respondents selected more than one race to describe themselves, even though they reported having ancestors of different races, compared to 46 percent of first-generation respondents. The pattern is broadly consistent with our hypothesis that greater genealogical distance weakens attachment to aspects of one's heritage, in this case not through a loss of information (because they are able to report having ancestors of different races) but perhaps through broken or otherwise more distant ties to the differently racialized branches of their family tree. The pattern is repeated across most of the specific ancestry combinations that we examined. Yet the breakdown by ancestry combination also demonstrates how variation in overall propensities to identify with more than one race—say, 58

TABLE 3
Multiple-Race Self-Identification, by Generation and Reported Racial Ancestry

	% Selecting More than One Category for Racial Self-Identification				
	First Generation	Second Generation	Third+ Generation	No Multiracial Ancestry	Total
All respondents	46%	50%	7%	0.2%	5%
Reported ancestry					
White-Asian	77%	56%	8%	–	58%
White-Black	66%	31%	3%	–	15%
Latino-Indian	60%	48%	0	–	29%
White-Latino	44%	62%	14%	–	41%
Black-Latino	38%	30%	4%	–	18%
White-Indian	35%	45%	5%	–	23%
Black-Indian	0	22%	2%	–	9%
2 other races	18%	30%	0	–	13%
White-Latino-Indian	–	74%	33%	–	55%
White-Black-Indian	–	60%	19%	–	31%
3 other races	–	65%	24%	–	44%
4+ races	–	86%	33%	–	53%
3+ generation, no specifics	–	–	1%	–	1%
Monoracial	–	–	–	0.2%	0.2%
Column N	547	1,296	2,241	18,214	22,298

SOURCE: Pew Survey of Multiracial Adults, 2015.
NOTE: All ancestry combinations reported include at least forty-nine cases total (see Table 2), and none of the reported frequencies by generation is based on fewer than five cases. Cells that represent structural zeros are denoted by an en-dash (–).

percent for respondents with white-Asian ancestors versus 15 percent for those reporting white-black ancestors—may not reflect ancestry combination-specific tendencies so much as distinct generational compositions. In this example, first-generation white-Asian and white-black respondents are more similar in their propensity to identify with more than one race (at 77 and 66 percent, respectively), so the different shares of the first generation in each population is likely a key factor that explains the wide divergence in multiple-race self-identification overall.

Conclusion

As our discussion of the confluence of generation with racial ancestry and self-identification shows, we cannot fully understand the mixed-race population—or

the processes that shape it—until we recognize the legacy and heterogeneity of its generational depth. Given our empirical findings, we urge researchers to consider the role of generation in influencing the counts and characteristics of the multiracial population beyond the usual forces of fertility, mortality, and migration. Changes in the generational structure of the mixed-race population are likely to affect individuals' self-identification as multiracial and thus future census enumeration of the multiple race population.

Notes

1. For useful overviews of the existing literature, see Bratter (2007), Khanna (2012), and Song (2017b).

2. As we hope to have made clear, we use *generation* in the sense promoted by Ryder (1965) and Kertzer (1983): namely, as "a relational concept bound to the realm of kinship and descent" (Kertzer 1983, 128). On the frequent confusion between generation and age, cohort, life stage and/or period, however, see Kertzer (1983) and Alwin and McCammon (2007).

3. See Roth (2016) for application of this observation to racial classification in general.

4. Note that just as our definition of *multiracial* refers to socially constructed understandings of racial groupings and membership—which may or may not include beliefs about biological difference—our definition's reference to *descent* (i.e., with ancestors of more than one socially recognized race) need not be limited to genetic lineage. If American notions of race were to evolve away from biologically essentialist views, then it might well become accepted that a person could be mixed-race by virtue, say, of having been adopted by an interracial couple. See Tuan and Shiao (2011) for a thoughtful discussion of how some Korean children adopted by white American parents at times regarded themselves as white as well.

5. Of course, a great deal would depend on how the other branches of their family trees were racially labeled. But given the period effect that is also at work in this example—namely, the one-drop rule that generally governed such historical unions involving blacks—it seems likely that, in the absence of passing, the descendants of this slave-era union would have been classified as black or mulatto, and married into families who were similarly designated, further attenuating kinship links to the white population.

6. As consultants on the survey design, the authors were granted early access to the resultant data.

7. It is also higher than the 6.9 percent multiracial that the Pew Research Center (2015) calculated, principally for two reasons. One is that we took into consideration the reported races of ancestors prior to the generation of grandparents; the other is that we treated "Hispanic or Latino" as a race for the purposes of multiracial designation. Our approach reflects the growing racialization of Latinos as a group distinct from—but akin to—blacks, whites, and other traditional racial categories, as is warranted by Census Bureau findings that most people who self-identify as Hispanic in the United States decline to identify with races like "white" and "black" when a Hispanic or Latino checkbox is available to them (Compton et al. 2012; Matthews et al. 2017). However, our substantive conclusion about the role of generation does not hinge on this coding decision (results available upon request).

8. Unfortunately, the survey design does not permit generational distinctions so clearly beyond the first. This is because rather than asking individually about the racial identities of each of a respondent's four grandparents, the survey asked about their "races or origins" *en masse*. This gives us an estimate of people who are second- or later-generation multiracial, but no information about the specific relative to whom the different race(s) might have applied. Accordingly, we emphasize here the difference between first- and later-generation multiracial Americans.

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