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Racial Fluidity and Inequality in the United States¹

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The authors link the literature on racial fluidity and inequality in the United States and offer new evidence of the reciprocal relationship between the two processes. Using two decades of longitudinal data from a national survey, they demonstrate that not only does an individual's race change over time, it changes in response to myriad changes in social position, and the patterns are similar for both self-identification and classification by others. These findings suggest that, in the contemporary United States, microlevel racial fluidity serves to reinforce existing disparities by redefining successful or high-status people as white (or not black) and unsuccessful or low-status people as black (or not white). Thus, racial differences are both an input and an output in stratification processes; this relationship has implications for theorizing and measuring race in research, as well as for crafting policies that attempt to address racialized inequality.

Race is generally treated as an input in the American stratification system. Individuals are assumed to be identifiable as members of distinct racial pop-

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ulations and subject to differential treatment based on this presumed membership. The members of valued populations receive greater access to the resources and rewards of society, on average, than members of devalued populations (Massey 2007). Because membership in these populations is assigned partly by ancestry or is based on readily observable and heritable physical features, the hierarchy of social positions can be passed on generation after generation, resulting in relatively low levels of mobility (Tilly 1998). Indeed, despite several decades of attempts to ameliorate racial inequality in the United States, large gaps in social, physical, mental, and material well-being remain, particularly between Americans of African origin and everyone else (Fischer and Hout 2006). These gaps persist because of a combination of institutional inertia, implicit prejudice, accumulated disadvantage, and social isolation, as well as calculated acts of social closure and explicit racism, or, if one focuses on more downstream determinants, various human capital or cultural “deficiencies” (Wilson 1987; Darity and Mason 1998; Massey and Denton 1998; Oliver and Shapiro 2006; Quillian 2006; Roscigno, Garcia, and Bobbitt-Zeher 2007).

We seek to extend this standard sociological account of U.S. racial inequality by incorporating recent research on racial classification and identification from the fields of race and ethnicity and social psychology. While the consensus position among contemporary sociologists is that race is socially constructed (American Sociological Association 2003), in practice, racial fluidity is assumed to fall outside the purview of most empirical analyses of inequality in the United States. In part owing to the focus of existing research, racial fluidity is generally assumed to be limited to three circumstances: (1) a small minority of present-day Americans with widely recognized mixed ancestries, such as Latinos, American Indians, and the children of the post-1960s “biracial baby boom”; (2) macrolevel changes in social hierarchies that marked historical epochs in the United States, such as the early 20th century “whitening” of southern and eastern Europeans; or (3) places with a high degree of racial mixing, such as Brazil. However, if race is a categorical descriptor imposed on otherwise continuous human variation (Ossorio and Duster 2005) and racial categorization is a fundamentally social process, even from a cognitive perspective (e.g., Eberhardt 2005), then in many cases it may be theoretically and empirically inappropriate to treat an individual’s race as a constant. Drawing on insights from previous literature, we argue that, instead of taking an individual’s race as a given, scholars studying stratification—and sociologists in general—should be asking who is perceived or identifies as a particular race, when, and why? This also im-

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plies a reversal of the typical relationship between race and inequality. Where existing studies ask whether racial differences lead to inequality, we add: Does inequality reinforce racial distinctions among Americans?

In demonstrating this approach, we provide new empirical evidence of the fluidity of race and its relationship to inequality from a large, nationally representative sample. Using data from the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), we show that not only do Americans change the way they identify over time, but the way they are classified by others also changes significantly: one in five sample members experienced at least one change in racial classification over a 19-year period. Further, both sets of changes occur in part as a response to changes in social position. For example, Americans who lose their jobs are more likely to subsequently be seen as black and identify as black, and people who get married are more likely to be seen as and identify as white, regardless of how they were perceived or identified previously. These effects are only strengthened when one change in social position triggers, or is accompanied by, others, as when marriage increases household income or unemployment follows incarceration. Our results are consistent with the claim that race is not simply a marker of privilege or stigma ascribed at birth; like other status characteristics, race also implies—and is in part defined by—a set of expectations by which people are continually judged in everyday interactions.

A more dynamic conception of race can also help to explain the stability of both black stigmatization and white privilege in the United States. Our findings indicate that some portion of Americans who experience an increase in their social position are “whitened” as a result of this mobility, and similarly, some portion of those who experience a decrease in their social position are “darkened.”² Perversely, this implies that in the contemporary United States, the more fluid race is at the individual level, the more entrenched racial inequality will be at the societal level, as changes in the classifications and identifications of individuals serve to reinforce the existing racial order. Indeed, if this relationship between racial fluidity and inequality continues, the convergence of the much-heralded majority-minority society and the potential for upward mobility generated by the impending retirement of the disproportionately white baby boomers (Alba 2009) may yield a racial future that looks more like the past than many either hope for or expect.

² In this article, we examine changes toward and away from categorization as white or black. Thus, being “whitened” would include changing from black to anything else as well as changing explicitly to white. Similarly, being “darkened” includes changing to anything but white as well as changing explicitly to black. However, when we say that somebody changes to (or becomes) white or black, we are referring to a change in either how they are classified by others or how they identify themselves from one point in time to the next. This does not necessarily imply that the change is permanent.

RACE: FIXED OR FLUID?

The classic debate over the origin and definition of race concerns its relative biological and social roots: How much of our racial classification system can be traced to socially defined boundaries and how much can be attributed to biological characteristics and genetic inheritance? We take a different starting point: Is race a fixed characteristic of individuals or a flexible one? Most empirical research treats race as the former, while contemporary theories of race and ethnicity, as well as recent studies of individual identities and external perceptions, suggest the latter.

Early conceptions of race firmly located putative racial differences in biology. These ranged from claiming that members of different races were members of different species to believing that members of different races had different “blood,” “humors,” or other bodily fluids (Gossett 1997; Banton 1998). Regardless of their specific source, racial differences were generally considered immutable and were linked to stereotypical beliefs about personality and behavior. Certain races were judged to be inferior or superior on the basis of these stereotypes, and such rankings were used to both explain and justify social, political, and economic inequality (Frederickson 2002).

The now-typical counter to this biological view is commonly referred to as the “social construction” of race (see Omi and Winant 1994). Scholars in this tradition highlight the social processes through which some characteristics become more salient than others (e.g., skin color instead of shoe size) and differences in those characteristics come to define membership in a given racial population (e.g., black vs. white). Contemporary race scholars also note that the definitions of race and its constituent categories differ across countries and change over time (Davis 2001). For example, when anti-miscegenation statutes were proliferating throughout the United States in the late 19th century, a person could be considered black in one state but not in the neighboring one (Jenks 1916). Similarly, the same person could be recorded in the U.S. census as “Hindu” in 1920, “White” in 1940, “Other” in 1960, and “Asian” in 1980 (Nobles 2000).

While the social constructionist view of race clearly calls into question the immutability of racial divisions, most discussions of racial change revolve around macrolevel, epoch-defining shifts, such as the rise of the one-drop rule following Reconstruction in the South (Williamson 1995), the “whitening” of southern and eastern European immigrants (e.g., Jacobson 1999), the black, brown, and red power movements of the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Nagel 1995), or the 1990s push for multiracial classification (DaCosta 2007). By focusing on change at the societal level, one could be left with the impression that, though race is a product of social norms and power relations, once racial divisions are socially defined in a given period, racial population membership remains fixed for each individual. From this per-

spective, studies examining racial inequality in a particular era could acknowledge the social construction of race in the abstract while still treating as given that period's racial categories and the sorting of individuals into those categories. Indeed, standard practice in quantitative research assumes that one's race is set at birth and predates one's life chances (Zuberi 2000). Similarly, though recent qualitative research has done much to illuminate how people draw racial boundaries between themselves and others (e.g., Waters 1999; Lacy 2004), these efforts are generally focused on a particular population at a given point in time. As such, this body of work does not speak to processes of fluidity and inequality that have the potential to generate changes across typically defined racial lines. Qualitative researchers also often, if inadvertently, treat membership in any given racial population as an underlying fixed characteristic (Morris 2007).

The analyses that follow, along with a growing literature documenting the fluidity of racial self-identification in national surveys (e.g., Harris and Sim 2002; Hitlin, Brown, and Elder 2006; Craemer 2010), cast doubt on these standard practices. We argue that treating race as malleable at the macrolevel but fixed for individuals oversimplifies the relationship between race and social status in the United States. Racial change is not limited to instances when group boundaries shift or are redefined to encompass different populations; individuals also cross these boundaries—intentionally and unintentionally—when their personal characteristics change (Loveman and Muniz 2007). Both processes have implications for understanding and measuring racial inequality, but the existence of the latter, in particular, has been overlooked by mainstream inequality research, in part because individual boundary crossing is typically seen as an exception to the rule rather than an integral part of maintaining the “social invention” (American Sociological Association 2003) that is race in the United States.

Racial Identification

Racial divisions are typically thought of in two different ways: (1) a personal statement of community membership selected for either political/economic gain or a sense of belonging (Espiritu 1993) or (2) a categorical label ascribed on the basis of physical characteristics and linked to stereotypical beliefs about behavior (Frederickson 2002). We distinguish these as different dimensions of “race”: racial identification, naming oneself as a member of a racial group (as on a survey), and racial classification, the categorization of others as members of particular racial populations.³ Each dimen-

³ For analytical purposes, it is important to further distinguish *racial identification* into its public and private dimensions. The latter reflects racial “identity,” in the sense of how individuals think of themselves, whereas the former captures how individuals identify

sion of race has consequences for both an individual's life chances and how researchers understand the dynamics of racial inequality. We synthesize findings from the literatures on racial identification and classification below, highlighting the factors that explain fluidity and exploring their relevance to inequality.

Recent empirical research on racial identification in the United States has highlighted its potential fluidity and complexity. This body of work shows that self-reports in surveys are affected by a host of considerations from the composition of social networks (Vaquera and Kao 2006) and neighborhoods (Xie and Goyette 1997) to the respondent's country of origin (Rodriguez 2000; Davis 2001), the way the question is worded or the category options offered (Farley 2002; Snipp 2003), and even the context in which the survey is administered (Harris and Sim 2002). Adults with multiple known racial or ethnic origins often report only one (Waters 1990), and parents with different ancestries do not necessarily report their biological children as being multiethnic (Lieberson and Waters 1993) or multiracial (Roth 2005; Tayofa, Johnson, and Hill 2005; Bratter 2007). Even people who ostensibly share the same ancestry (e.g. young adults who report having one black and one white parent) may choose to identify in a range of ways based on their previous social experiences (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002).

This research can be interpreted in two different ways, which partly reflect long-standing debates over the relative weight of "primordialism" and "constructivism" in generating racial and ethnic divides (see Wimmer [2008] for a review). The primary point of disagreement is whether the observed fluidity is essentially superficial—a methodological artifact that alters people's racial data even as their "true" race remains unchanged—or whether the fluidity of racial data is capturing socially meaningful distinctions and differences in people's life experiences.

If one assumes that race is fixed, that everyone has a "true" racial origin, and that this inherent characteristic predicts attitudes and important life outcomes, then observing fluidity is problematic. It compromises both the reliability and validity of survey data by distorting the objective information being sought. From this perspective, fluidity in racial identification is generated by poor question wording and limited answer options or is an issue of comprehension limited to people who do not understand U.S. racial categories or cannot find their preferred category among the available op-

themselves racially to others. Much like racial identification and classification, the dimensions of private identity and public identification influence one another while remaining distinct aspects of a person's racial experiences. Given the focus of our inquiry and the nature of our data, when we refer to racial identification in this article, we are referring only to its public expression, measured in our case by how Americans respond to survey questions about their race or ethnicity.

tions (e.g., recent immigrants, Latinos, and multiracial individuals). This implies that clearer questions or better categories would eliminate the fluidity we observe and that eliminating these inconsistencies is desirable.

If, instead, race represents an evolving social hierarchy, the divisions of which have been shaped by the legacies of past domination (Wacquant 2002)—that is, if race is real to the extent that we believe it is and construct our social interactions accordingly—then both the stability of racial identification (or classification) and the collective belief that these perceptions should be stable have been created as part of that process. Thus, far from being problematic, data on racial fluidity present an opportunity to study the active “construction” and often hidden meaning of race in the United States. In advocating this perspective, we echo previous scholars who argue that U.S. racial divisions operate in a constant cycle of unstable equilibrium, maintaining their existence through political compromises and post hoc justifications (Omi and Winant 1994).

Identification and inequality.—At the individual level, this unstable equilibrium plays out in part through the relationship between changes in racial identification and one’s (desired) social position. A classic example is the phenomenon known as passing. This type of racial change occurs when individuals who can plausibly claim membership in more than one racial population alter their presentation of self to conform to the behavioral norms of the more advantaged population.⁴ One recent case is the late Anatole Broyard, a book critic for the *New York Times* who severed ties with his Louisiana Creole family of origin in order to “pass” as white (Gates 1997).

For researchers who treat race as a fixed characteristic of individuals, status-driven changes in identification affect estimates of racial differences by creating an underestimate of mobility and an overestimate of racial inequality in well-being. That is, Broyard’s income, wealth, and occupational prestige—and the successes of his children—would be counted among those of “whites” rather than “blacks.” Of course, the language of over- and underestimates is also loaded, as it implies that there is a correct category (their “true” race) in which all individuals should be placed. We argue instead that to the extent that passing is successful, both in going unnoticed and in achieving the desired result (increased socioeconomic status), it is emblematic of how racial fluidity interacts with racial inequality. Individual-level fluidity serves to maintain existing racial boundaries and the hierarchy of social positions they imply.

⁴ While “passing” is typically defined as individuals consciously choosing to change their presentation of self in search of increased status, the effect might also run in the opposite direction, where changes in status gradually change how people come to think of themselves.

Racial Classification

Most research on race has focused on racial identification. However, sociologists have begun to stress that the concept of race comprises multiple dimensions and that self-identification is only one aspect of how race colors people's life experiences (e.g., Telles 2002; Saperstein 2006; Brown, Hitlin, and Elder 2007; Campbell and Troyer 2007). It is equally important to understand how individuals are perceived or racially classified by others and how this process is linked to attitudes and behavior. We briefly summarize the existing research, drawn largely from outside of sociology, on each of these issues.

Person perception.—Studies in social cognition suggest that Americans classify faces by race spontaneously, even when not explicitly asked to do so, and that out-group classified faces provoke activity in a part of the brain, the amygdala, thought to control fear or threat response (see Eberhardt [2005] for a review). At the same time, the process of racial categorization is not well understood, though recent research has begun to untangle which features function as racial category cues to observers (see Mason, Cloutier, and Macrae [2006] for a review) and examine real-time influences on the categorization process (Freeman et al. 2010). This work suggests that people use face shape, skin tone, and hair markers when making racial classification decisions. For example, MacLin and Malpass (2001) find that simply changing the hairstyle—from one that is stereotypically Latino to one that is stereotypically black—on an otherwise ambiguously raced face leads people to categorize the face in the direction of the racial marker and also evaluate other facial features differently (e.g., with “black” hair the otherwise unchanged face is perceived as having darker skin). Studies also show that which characteristics people say they use to categorize faces and other measures of their judgment processes tend to contradict one another (Montepare and Opeyo 2002; Blair, Judd, and Fallman 2004).

This research demonstrates that racial categorization is an automatic process that often occurs outside the awareness of the person doing the categorizing. It also suggests that relatively small differences in facial features or the context in which they are presented can affect racial categorization. Further, the process can be disrupted by introducing seemingly contradictory information (Locke, Macrae, and Eaton 2005), as discussed in more detail below.⁵

⁵ Unfortunately, it is common for researchers to remove cases in which “errors” in racial classification were made from the final analyses (e.g., Locke et al. 2005). Many studies also predefine the populations in question or use exemplars assumed to be racially unambiguous. Though it is unclear to what extent such results are applicable in a framework that does not view differences in classification solely as errors, we present these studies as indicative of the current state of knowledge on cognitive racial classification.

Stereotypical associations.—Americans generally associate whites with positive traits, such as “smart” and “rich,” and blacks with negative traits, such as “corrupt” and “poor” (Allen 1996); these associations have been shown to be at least partly nonconscious and active even in individuals who are otherwise racially egalitarian (see, e.g., Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz 1998). Indeed, research has demonstrated that negative beliefs about blacks can be activated without mentioning race at all through the use of racially coded words such as “inner city” (Hurwitz and Peffley 2005) or “welfare” (Gilens 1995).

Other studies find that, net of racial category membership, having Afrocentric features (e.g., full lips, wide nose, kinky hair) makes it more likely that a person will be described by others using stereotypically black characteristics, such as “musical” or “aggressive” (Blair, Judd, and Fallman 2004), and will be treated more harshly by the criminal justice system (Blair, Judd, and Chapleau 2004; Goff et al. 2008). Skin tone has also been shown to be related to variations in positive and negative evaluations (Maddox 2004).

Most important for our purposes, research shows that the racial categorization process itself is related to, and perhaps influenced by, these stereotypical associations and value judgments about the individual in question. For example, Richeson and Trawalter (2005) find that people take longer to racially categorize photographs of admired blacks (e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr.) and disliked whites (e.g., Jeffrey Dahmer) and are more likely to make “mistakes” than when categorizing either disliked blacks or admired whites. Similarly, Weeks and Lupfer (2004) find that lower-class black people are primarily described by their race, whereas middle-class black people are primarily described by their class. This phenomenon is known as “subtyping” and suggests that group members who behave counter to the stereotypes of the group are redefined as being outside of the group (see Kunda and Thagard [1996] for a review).

To the extent that the stereotypical associations noted above are bidirectional—for example, seeing black people makes you think of crime and thinking of crime makes you pay more attention to black people (Eberhardt et al. 2004)—it is a relatively small leap to expect that people who better fit the stereotypes of a particular racial group will be more likely to be classified as such. Indeed, recent nonexperimental evidence from Brazil suggests that an individual who has achieved high social or economic status is likely to be classified among the more advantaged population almost as a courtesy. For example, Nobles (2000) notes that Brazilian survey interviewers may not ask high-status individuals to report their race in order to avoid intrusion but will assume that they prefer a whiter category than the one to which they might be assigned on the basis of their appearance alone. Similarly, Telles (2002) finds that interviewers are more likely to “whiten” dark-

skinned Brazilians of higher socioeconomic status than the individuals are to whiten themselves.

Classification and inequality.—For researchers who treat race as a fixed characteristic, “whitening”—the phenomenon of individuals being reclassified after they manage to climb the social ladder—much like passing, would create an inconvenient overestimate of racial inequality. For those who see race as fluid and intimately tied to markers of status, “whitening” is one way racial divisions are reinforced through processes of social closure rather than a coding mistake or measurement error.⁶

Thus, we suggest that taking racial fluidity into account in studies of inequality is less a matter of reestimation than reinterpretation. The well-known changes in racial identification that are related to social position, such as passing, and the potential for status-driven changes in racial classification, such as whitening, have important implications not just for measuring the extent of racial inequality but for understanding how it is created and maintained. For example, it is possible that one of the reasons the racial hierarchy in the United States has remained relatively stable over time is that upward mobility gets redefined: white people appear to be more successful in part because successful people become white, through either self-identification, external classification, or both. This mechanism is consistent with macrohistorical accounts of the whitening of Italians and others of southern and eastern European origin during the early 20th century, coincident with their rise in socioeconomic status (Jacobson 1999), as well as claims regarding the infamous “mulatto escape hatch” in Brazil (Degler 1971).

Theoretically, the relationship between racial classification fluidity and social mobility also works in reverse. Downward mobility could be hidden as well: black people may appear to be more criminal or unemployable, in part because criminals and the unemployed are more likely to be seen as black (or less likely to be seen as white). In this way, racial inequality would function as a recursive system: racial divisions not only would help to produce inequality but would also be a product of inequality.

ANALYTIC APPROACH

To test this relationship, we examine whether racial classification and identification change over time for the same individuals and whether any such changes are related to—or even the result of—changes in social position. We focus on aspects of social status that are already racialized (i.e., racial

⁶ In Brazil, the term “whitening” typically describes a self-motivated, status-seeking phenomenon much like passing (see Schwartzman 2007). We use it here to denote a slightly different process, one in which the improvement in racial status is accorded by others, whether or not it is actively sought by the individual in question.

differences in these outcomes are well known and are linked to group stereotypes), such as incarceration, unemployment, and unmarried parenthood, and we ask whether changes along these status dimensions also shape racial perceptions, in the sense that stereotypical associations related to a particular social position actually alter the way individuals are perceived racially by others or identify themselves.

By exploring whether race changes over time, partly in response to changes in an individual's social position, we shift from treating race as a fixed characteristic of individuals to thinking about it as a propensity to identify or be classified in a particular way at a particular point in time. This brings the generally accepted macrolevel "social construction" of race to the microlevel and is in line with previous work on how racial identification is sensitive to context as well as how relatively minor changes in physical appearance or other cues can affect the racial categorization process.

Multivariate modeling.—To examine the effects of social position on racial classification and identification, we estimate logistic regression models examining whether respondents are classified or identified as white (vs. nonwhite) and black (vs. nonblack) in a given year. By constructing our outcome variables as dichotomies, we can explore which characteristics move individuals either toward or away from the traditional poles of privilege and stigma in the United States: whiteness and blackness. However, we also estimate supplemental models of racial classification using multinomial logistic regression to allow for changes among all three racial categories available to the survey interviewers (black, white, and "other") and to ensure that changes from white to other or black to other (or vice versa) are not driving our results. (See table A1 and the appendix for more details.) To assuage concerns that our findings could be driven by the small minority of respondents for whom racial perceptions are thought to be more fluid and complex, we also estimate supplemental models for both racial classification and identification that examine only non-multiracial, non-Hispanic, non-American Indian respondents (see table A2).

In the second part of our analysis, we present descriptive results using sample restrictions to probe further and examine whether changes in racial classification and identification are related to changes in social position. For example, among respondents who were previously classified as white and never unemployed, we report differences in the percentage currently classified as white by their employment status. We also estimate two sets of supplemental models to test the robustness of these results: (1) linear probability models with and without person fixed effects, which help to control for the effects of unmeasured respondent characteristics such as skin tone (see tables A3 and A4); and (2) logistic regression models with multiple lags of racial classification and status variables to assess whether it is appropriate to conclude that one's racial classification and social position are mutually

constitutive (see tables A5 and A6). We provide additional explanation and justification of these models below.

Though each of the modeling strategies we employ has its strengths and weaknesses, we argue that, in combination, they demonstrate consistent evidence of the reciprocal relationship between racial fluidity and inequality in the United States.

DATA AND METHODS

Data for our analyses of microlevel racial change come from the 1979 cohort of the NLSY, a representative sample of 12,686 U.S. men and women who were 14–22 years of age when first surveyed in 1979. Respondents were eligible to be interviewed every year thereafter until 1994, when interviews began occurring biennially. Data collection is ongoing. We utilize data from 1979 to 2002, the most recent year in which racial data were collected.

It is important to note that while the NLSY respondents were selected to be representative of their cohort, their experiences with racial fluidity and social mobility may not be representative of the U.S. population as a whole. They were born at the tail end of the baby boom, between 1957 and 1965, and came of age in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement. Thus, we urge the usual measure of caution associated with interpreting findings based on a single cohort. Other more recent surveys also include repeated measures of race in multiple waves, such as the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). However, the NLSY has a much longer time series for interviewer classification, and the age of its respondents is better suited to studying mobility and status attainment processes among adults. As the Add Health cohort ages, and if multiple measures of race are retained in future waves, it could provide a useful comparison to our analysis.

Dependent Variables

The NLSY includes a variety of questions regarding racial and/or ethnic origin, including some that are asked of the respondent and others that are coded by the interviewer.⁷ The respondents reported their racial/ethnic “origin or descent” in 1979, as well as whether they are of Hispanic origin and the “race or races” they consider themselves to be in 2002. The inter-

⁷ Among all available measures of race/ethnicity, the NLSY user’s guide recommends that researchers use the data on race derived from the household screener in 1978 because they are used to calculate the survey weights (National Longitudinal Surveys 2006, table A.3.1). It is not clear to what extent previous researchers have followed this recommendation because few specify the source of the racial data they use. Racial/ethnic data on the respondent gathered during the initial household screening were coded using

viewers also classified the respondents by race in all but one survey year from 1979 to 1998.

Racial classification.—Interviewers were instructed to classify the respondent's race at the end of the interview. Thus, we do not have a measure of the interviewer's first impression of the respondent's race; rather, we have a classification colored by the respondent's answers during the survey interview. This is ideal for the purposes of assessing the effects of social status on racial classification because the interviewers heard a range of information about the respondents, from their income and education to their employment and marital history, prior to recording their race.⁸

Interviewers were not given any special instructions as to how to classify the respondents by race (National Longitudinal Surveys 2006), and the categories available to them were "black," "white," and "other." Descriptive statistics on how respondents were racially classified by interviewers are reported in table 1 below, along with other key variables. Of the observations in which respondents have racial classifications in consecutive survey years, 6% are described by a different race than in the previous person-year and 20% of the individuals in the sample experienced at least one change in how they were racially classified between 1979 and 1998.⁹

a variety of methods, ranging from recording of Spanish surnames to interviewer classification (Light and Nandi 2007). As a result, we do not examine differences between this variable and the other two. We do not use the survey weights in our analyses for similar reasons, and because it is not clear how to conceptualize race-based weights if race is not a fixed characteristic of individuals

⁸ In 1979, interviewers would also have heard the respondents' racial identification prior to making their racial classification. In all subsequent years in which racial classification data were collected, the respondents were not asked to identify themselves by race. Interestingly, the level of inconsistency between racial identification and racial classification in 1979 and the level of inconsistency between racial identification in 1979 and racial classification in 1980 are quite similar, and statistical tests fail to find a difference. Thus, we conclude that the interviewers hearing the respondents' self-identification in 1979 did not significantly influence their classification.

⁹ In referring to the previous year, we are referring to the previous survey year. Thus after 1994 the comparison is made to the interviewer's classification from two calendar years prior. Also, in 1987 a shortened version of the survey that did not include interviewer-classified race was conducted primarily by telephone. Therefore, the 1988 racial classifications are also compared to the data from two calendar years prior. Given that some portions of the interviews in the other survey years were also conducted by telephone (typically on the order of 5%–10% of the interviews), we conducted supplementary analyses (not shown) to ensure that there were no substantive differences in the effects of socioeconomic status on racial classification between phone and in-person interviews. As the results were similar with and without the telephone interviews included, we do not distinguish between the two interviewing modes in our analyses. To the extent that vocal cues are also part of the racial classification process, the interviewer remarks from either interview type would be part of the phenomenon in which we are interested. Indeed, previous research examining audio recordings of telephone interviews with the 1997 NLSY cohort finds that perceived racial differences in speech patterns are related to labor market inequality (Grogger 2011).

To get a better sense of what we mean by experiencing a “change” in one’s race, it is helpful to look at some of the actual racial classification histories of NLSY respondents. If we represent being classified as white, black, or other in a given year by the letters **W**, **B**, and **O**, respectively, we see that some people are consistently classified over time (**BBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBB**) or have only one discrepant classification (**WWWBWWWWWWWWWW**), whereas other people vary considerably over time (**WWOWWOWBOBW WOWBBO**) or experience a shift in how they are racially classified at some point (**BBBBBWWBWWWWWWWW**). Of the 2,588 respondents who experienced a change in their racial classification, 33% had one discrepant classification, 14% had two, 22% had three or four (11% each), and 30% had five or more discrepancies.

It is possible that these changes in respondents’ racial classification from one survey year to the next could be the result of mistakes made by the interviewers, for example, when interviewers were in a hurry to complete their remarks and meant to check “white” but mistakenly checked “black.” To the degree that the mistakes were randomly distributed, this explanation would decrease the signal-to-noise ratio in our analyses, making it more difficult, perhaps even impossible, to find evidence of the expected relationship between social position and racial classification. Also, if mistakes in coding were driving the changes in racial classification, we might expect to find similar rates of inconsistency in other interviewer-coded measures. Rates of inconsistency from one year to the next are substantially lower for gender classification, which NLSY interviewers were also asked to record at the end of each interview; thus, it seems unlikely that changes in racial classification can be attributed solely to this mechanism.¹⁰ Finally, even if the interviewers themselves explained the discrepancies as errors, the research in social psychology discussed above suggests that differences in the racial classification of respondents can be interpreted as the result of nonconscious cognitive processes shaping the interviewers’ perceptions of others.

Racial identification.—In 1979, respondents were handed a card with 28 possible origin or descent responses, including categories such as “Black, Afro-American, or Negro,” “English,” “Cuban,” and “Vietnamese.” NLSY coded up to six responses. In 2002, following updated federal standards for collecting data on race/ethnicity (Office of Management and Budget 1997), respondents were asked two separate questions: one about Hispanic origin and one about race; the latter allowed for multiple mentions among

¹⁰ About one-quarter of 1% (0.27%) of the sample experience changes in perceived gender, whereas nearly 6% change racial classification from one year to the next. Even if we think that there would be twice as many errors for race as for gender (because there is only one “mistake” choice for gender as opposed to two for race), this is still a sizable discrepancy. Of course, given that gender classification decisions also draw on social norms and expectations, we expect that changes in interviewer-classified gender are unlikely to simply reflect interviewer error either.

the six official racial categories. We collapse responses for each year into non-mutually exclusive binary variables for reporting white, black, and all other responses. We also created separate binary variables for identifying with one of the various Hispanic origins in 1979 and for identifying more than one racial origin in 1979; summary statistics are reported in table 1.¹¹

The resulting comparison between the respondent's self-identification in 1979 and 2002 has limitations. We chose generality over specificity—in terms of the number of categories—in part because our hypotheses about the effects of social position on changes in racial perceptions are specific to changes between black and white and not to changes among the nonblack, nonwhite categories (e.g., whether being incarcerated would lead to a change in identification between Asian, Pacific Islander, and American Indian).¹² We also sought to make the two measures of identification as comparable as possible, both to each other and to the classification categories available to the survey interviewers. Several of the category names are highly comparable, such as “Black, Afro American, or Negro” in 1979 and “Black or African American” in 2002. For others that are less comparable, such as “Indian-American and Native American” in 1979 and “American Indian and Alaska Native” in 2002, or the difference between listing specific Latino or Spanish origins in 1979 and offering only a yes or no question in 2002, we tested alternate coding schemes and estimated models both with and without the given populations to ensure that these distinctions were not driving our results.¹³

The most important limitation of the NLSY racial identification measures is that we cannot examine year-to-year changes as we can for racial

¹¹ In defining a response as “multiracial,” we do not count respondents who listed multiple European origins (British, Irish, German, etc.); we include only those cases in which the responses crossed what are defined in the contemporary United States as “racial” boundaries (e.g., black and Chinese).

¹² This is not to say that such analyses would not be valuable and interesting questions for future research, only that they lie beyond the scope of this study.

¹³ White is not on the list of origin or descent responses in 1979. Instead, respondents selected from European ethnic or national categories, such as Irish, French, Portuguese, and Russian. We collapse these into a single European category that is then compared to self-identified whites in 2002. Thus, our analyses do not count reporting Greek in 1979 and white in 2002 as a change in identification over time. In separate analyses (not shown), we split Europeans into northwestern (e.g., English, French, German) and southeastern (e.g., Italian, Russian, Greek) because of research suggesting that they were racialized differently in the United States until the mid-20th century (Jacobson 1999), but there was little difference in the likelihood of a change in racial/ethnic identification between the two groups. In both 1979 and 2002, the residual category includes American Indian, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Hispanic/Latino responses. A separate variable also indicates whether respondents marked a Hispanic/Latino origin category in 1979. So, a respondent who marked “French” and “Cuban” would appear in our racial identification variables as both European and nonblack, non-European, whereas a respondent who marked only Cuban would appear only as nonblack, non-European. Both would also be coded as Hispanic on the separate Hispanic indicator variable that we use as a control

classification. For racial classification, the NLSY includes measures of the interviewer's perception of the respondent's race from as many as 17 surveys between 1979 and 1998, whereas measures of racial identification were collected at two time points more than two decades apart. This gap in time means that we are unable to demonstrate direct and immediate effects of changes in social status on changes in racial identification. Nevertheless, it is useful to compare our interviewer classification and self-identification analyses to examine whether the results are consistent, as we would expect given work suggesting that one's racial identification is shaped and constrained by how one is perceived and treated by others (e.g., see Khanna [2010] on "reflected appraisals").

Independent Variables

Our primary independent variables are repeated measures of the respondent's social position, including long-term unemployment, poverty, incarceration, welfare receipt, educational attainment, marital and parental status, and place of residence. Given widespread racialized stereotypes regarding, for example, who goes to prison, collects welfare benefits, or becomes an unmarried parent, we expect that people who experience a loss of status on any of these dimensions will be more likely to be classified and identify as black and less likely to be classified and identify as white. Similarly, we expect status gains, such as getting married or moving to the suburbs, to be positively associated with "whiteness" and negatively associated with "blackness," all else being equal.

We take two approaches to examining the effects of these factors on changes in racial classification and identification. For the majority of variables, we include measures of whether the respondent ever experienced the given social status to better capture the lasting effects of factors such as incar-

in all models. We argue that this double counting in 1979 for people who reported a Hispanic origin and a non-Hispanic origin provides better comparability between the self-identification responses in different years. In 2002, people who answered yes to the Hispanic origin question and gave an answer to the race question are assigned to more than one race category (e.g., respondents who answered yes to the Hispanic origin question and white to the race question are coded in our data as nonblack, nonwhite, and white). Respondents who refused to answer the race question after having answered yes to the Hispanic origin question are coded racially as nonblack, nonwhite. The downside of this scheme is that a respondent who answered only Cuban in 1979 but selected both Hispanic and white in 2002—because of the change in survey questions—would be counted on different sides of our binary variable for identification as white in the two years. However, this affects our estimates only if some 1979 Cubans report this way in 2002 and some do not (e.g., some refuse to answer the race question) and this difference is related to their status. If this were the case, given that we are interested in how social position is related to racial identification, it would not be an artifact of the survey design but part of the relationship we seek to illuminate.

ceration, having been a teen parent, or graduating from college. For other key variables (place of residence and marital and parental status), we examine the effects of current status because of their importance as immediate context cues. Supplemental analyses (not reported) estimating classification models with all current effects and identification models with all lasting effects provide similar results, indicating that our substantive conclusions about racial fluidity and inequality are not affected by these coding decisions.

Key status variables.—Our measure of unemployment indicates whether the respondent ever reported being unemployed for more than 16 weeks in the previous calendar year. We draw on the NLSY poverty indicator to examine whether the respondent's total family income was ever below the poverty level. Welfare receipt indicates whether the respondent or the respondent's partner ever reported receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (and later Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), food stamps, Supplemental Security Income, or any other public assistance. To measure incarceration, we use information recorded under "type of residence" at the time of the interview and examine whether the respondent was ever interviewed while in jail or prison. This likely underestimates the number of incarcerated respondents because it misses those who were incarcerated for spells in between survey waves or those who were not located for interviewing (or refused to be interviewed) because they were incarcerated.¹⁴ Educational attainment is captured by an indicator variable for whether the respondent reported completing 16 or more years of schooling, which we treat as a proxy for whether the respondent graduated from college. There are a number of ways to measure the respondent's education in the NLSY, each of which produced similar results; we present the dummy coding for college graduation because it provided the best and most parsimonious fit to the data.

Other measured factors, such as marital and parental status and place of residence, affect inequality and mobility more indirectly but are still linked to widespread racial stereotypes. For example, Kennelly (1999) shows that employers tend to assume that black women are single mothers, while black men are often portrayed as absent and irresponsible fathers (Glauber 2008). To capture the intersection of marital and parental status in these stereotypical associations, we created a series of indicator variables for being an unmarried parent, a married nonparent, and a married parent, with unmarried nonparent serving as the reference group. We also include measures of whether the respondent was a teen parent or was married as a teen (defined as 18 or under) and current family size (an indicator for having four or more children living in the household). Place of residence was captured with two indicator variables, one for living in the inner city and another for living in the suburbs.

¹⁴ See Saperstein and Penner (2010) for more details on the incarceration data.

The descriptive statistics in table 1 are presented in two different metrics: person-years from 1979–98 and persons in 2002, consistent with the observations used in our models for classification and identification, respectively. The reported frequencies also reflect the coding decisions regarding current and lasting effects noted above. This combination results in some relatively rare events appearing fairly common in table 1. So, for example, our models include a measure of whether someone has ever received welfare benefits. In any given year in the 1979–98 period, 27% of NLSY respondents had ever received welfare and in 2002 41% of respondents had ever received welfare. However, in a given year between 1979 and 1998, 12% of respondents were currently on welfare and in 2002 7% of respondents were receiving welfare benefits.

Other respondent controls.—The likelihood of reporting a given racial identity, being classified in a particular way, and experiencing the changes in social status detailed above are all related to other characteristics of the respondent. Thus, we also include controls for the respondent’s country of birth (an indicator for being born outside the United States), whether the respondent gave multiple racial origin responses in 1979 or reported a Hispanic origin in 1979, whether the respondent currently lives in the South, the respondent’s self-identified gender, and age.¹⁵

Several respondent characteristics have missing data, including current poverty status (12%) and welfare receipt (4%). Rather than use only cases with full information, we generate dummy variables for whether data are missing or not, recode missing data to zero, and include both the standard controls and indicators for missing data in our models. Supplementary analyses (available on request) confirm that using listwise deletion of cases with missing data on any of our independent variables produces similar results.

Interviewer characteristics.—We also control for demographic characteristics of the interviewer because of research demonstrating interviewer effects on survey responses generally (e.g., Freeman and Butler 1976; Krysan and Couper 2003) and on interviewers’ perception of respondents’ skin tone specifically (Hill 2002).

¹⁵ Interestingly, while racial identification is thought to be more fluid among teens and young adults, we do not find this to be the case for racial classification. When we model the effect of age on the likelihood of experiencing a change in racial classification between two years (net of respondent and year fixed effects), our results suggest that changes in classification grow significantly more common as the NLSY respondents move into their 20s, 30s, and 40s. More important, for our purposes, we find that the effect of age is no longer significant once we have introduced our key status variables into the model. Supplemental analyses that replicate table 4 below but split the sample by age also reveal nearly identical results for both younger and older respondents (results available on request). Unfortunately, as we have measures of racial self-identification at just two points in time, we cannot examine whether self-identification exhibits a similar age pattern.

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

	Person-Years (1979–98) (1)	Persons (2002) (2)
Racial classification (%):		
Classified as white by interviewer	67	...
Classified as black by interviewer	27	...
Classified as other by interviewer	6	...
Racial identification (%):		
Self-identified as European in 1979	56	52
Self-identified as black in 1979	26	30
Self-identified as nonblack, non-European in 1979	27	27
Self-identified as white in 2002	59	59
Self-identified as black in 2002	30	30
Self-identified as nonblack, nonwhite in 2002	12	13
Respondent characteristics (% , unless noted otherwise):		
Ever unemployed over 4 months	37	53
Ever below poverty line	56	67
Ever incarcerated	3	6
Ever received welfare	27	41
Ever graduated from college	13	21
Ever married as a teen	10	11
Ever teen parent	13	14
Marital/parental status (reference, unmarried without children):		
Married without children	11	10
Married parent	30	48
Unmarried parent	13	17
Large family (four or more children)	3	5
Place of residence (reference, rural and not elsewhere classified):		
Living in an inner city	18	28
Living in a suburb	30	53
Self-identified as Hispanic in 1979	17	18
Self-identified multiple races in 1979	11	10
Born outside the United States	7	7
Living in the South	39	42
Female	51	51
Mean age (years)	26	41
Interviewer characteristics (% , unless noted otherwise):		
Racial identification:		
Self-identified as white	85	85
Self-identified as black	11	11
Self-identified as nonblack, nonwhite	4	4
Educational attainment:		
Less than a high school diploma	1	0
High school graduate	21	21
Some college/vocational degree	39	33
Bachelor's degree or more	39	46

Racial Fluidity and Inequality in the United States

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Person-Years (1979–98) (1)	Persons (2002) (2)
Female	93	89
Mean age (years)	50	53

NOTE.—Data are from the 1979 NLSY. Col. 1 describes all person-years ($N = 160,536$) with nonmissing information on interviewer-classified race in two consecutive surveys for 1979–98, corresponding to 12,604 persons. Col. 2 describes all persons ($N = 7,710$) with racial identification data in both 1979 and 2002. We do not include 31 person-years (col. 1) and eight persons (col. 2) that were dropped from our models in table 4 below because of perfect prediction. Categories for respondent racial identification are not mutually exclusive, and the percentages do not sum to 100 because of multiple responses.

The interviewer characteristics introduced as controls include race (self-identification as white, black, or other), gender (a dummy variable for identifying as female), education (dummy variables for some college and college graduates compared to everyone else), and age.¹⁶ We also include year fixed effects (i.e., dummy variables for the year of interview) in each model. These effects account for trends in “whitening,” “darkening,” or “othering” respondents that may be caused by societal changes in the definition of race, along with other year-to-year changes in survey design, question wording, or interviewer training.

It is worth noting that, while the respondents were sampled to be nationally representative, the NLSY interviewers in all years are overwhelmingly female, white, and highly educated. These characteristics are typical of American survey interviewers generally, but it is unclear to what extent their racial classifications generalize to the population as whole. Work in social psychology suggests that categorization might differ by race (Richeson and Trawalter 2005); however, other studies examining interviewer-classified race report that controlling for interviewer characteristics did not have a substantive effect on the results (Ahmed, Feliciano, and Emigh 2007; Campbell and Troyer 2007).

RESULTS

We begin by presenting descriptive evidence that both racial classification and identification change over time. We then estimate logistic regression

¹⁶We also have information on whether the interviewer had interviewed the same respondent in previous years. Restricting the sample to only cases in which the respondent was interviewed by the same interviewer as in the previous year (i.e., the person who made the racial classification that we are controlling for) does not affect the substance or significance of our results.

TABLE 2
COMPARISON OF INTERVIEWERS' RACIAL CLASSIFICATION OF RESPONDENTS
BETWEEN TWO INTERVIEWS

RACE IN PREVIOUS YEAR	RACE IN CURRENT YEAR			
	White	Black	Other	Total
White	95.8	.5	3.7	100
<i>N</i>	103,690	554	4,036	108,280
Black.	1.3	98.3	.5	100
<i>N</i>	553	42,550	199	43,302
Other.	45.1	2.3	52.6	100
<i>N</i>	4,041	205	4,708	8,954
Total	67.5	27.0	5.6	100
<i>N</i>	108,284	43,309	8,943	160,536

NOTE.—Data are from the 1979 NLSY. *N* is given in person-years. Percentages and *N*s sum across the rows. Table includes all observations in which respondents had nonmissing racial classifications in two consecutive surveys.

models to determine whether changes in race are related to differences in social status, net of characteristics of the survey interviewer and other characteristics of the respondent. Finally, we examine whether changes in social status are associated with changes in either racial classification or identification.

Change over Time

The analyses in this section examine the extent of individual racial fluidity in the United States for both racial classification and identification. Previous research has demonstrated considerable fluidity in racial identification, as discussed above. We echo those findings and demonstrate that racial classifications exhibit significant fluidity over the life course as well.

Table 2 reports year-to-year change in racial classification in percentage terms. Each row displays the racial classification of respondents in the previous year by whether they were classified as white, black, or other by the interviewer in the current year. As these categories are mutually exclusive, we would expect that if race did not change over time, all of the observations in table 2 would be in the diagonal cells. Observations in the off-diagonal cells indicate that, for example, 1.3% of respondents who were classified as black in the previous year are classified as white in the current year. Similarly, we see that 3.7% of respondents classified as white in the previous year are currently perceived as other and that among respondents classified as other in the previous year, 45% are currently classified as white.

Table 3 takes a similar approach to examining change in racial identification. Each row reports the percentage of respondents who identified a

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TABLE 3
COMPARISON OF RESPONDENTS' RACIAL SELF-IDENTIFICATION IN 1979 and 2002

RACIAL/ETHNIC ORIGIN IN 1979	RACE IN 2002			Total
	White	Black	Nonblack, Nonwhite	
European	94.6	2.6	4.0	101.2
<i>N</i>	3,807	103	163	4,023
Black	1.4	98.4	2.3	102.1
<i>N</i>	31	2,244	53	2,281
Nonblack, non-European . . .	57.1	4.6	41.1	102.8
<i>N</i>	1,199	97	864	2,101
Total	43.6	28.9	27.6	100
<i>N</i>	4,523	2,333	973	7,710

NOTE.—Data are from the 1979 NLSY. The *N* reported in each cell corresponds to the number of respondents who gave a particular combination of 1979 and 2002 responses; the total *N*s correspond to the number of respondents who selected the given category in 1979 (row totals) or 2002 (column totals). Row percentages do not sum to 100% because respondents could offer more than one response in 2002. Similarly, the *N*s for all cells in a row (or column) do not sum to the total *N* for that row (or column) because each respondent counted in a given category in 1979 could have offered multiple 2002 responses (and vice versa).

given racial/ethnic origin in 1979 by how they racially identified in 2002. Because respondents could offer more than one response in both 1979 and 2002, the rows do not sum to 100. Nevertheless, if racial identification did not change over time, we would expect that all of the diagonal cells would be 100. That would indicate that 100% of people who had said that they were, for example, black in 1979 also said that they were black in 2002. However, this is not the case; there are notable differences in how respondents racially identify between 1979 and 2002. For example, of the respondents who identified as black in 1979, 98% identified as black in 2002, with 1.4% responding as white and 2.3% as nonblack, nonwhite.

The largest shift depicted in table 3 occurs for respondents who identified with a nonblack, non-European origin in 1979 (e.g., Asian, Pacific Islander, Latino, American Indian). The majority (57%) identified as white in 2002. This likely reflects, in part, the change in question wording and category options between the two years. For example, previous research demonstrates that significant numbers of people reported American Indian “ancestry” while identifying their “race” as white on the U.S. census (Snipp 1986). However, we are interested in whether there are differential responses to the same set of circumstances; that is, not everyone who identified the same way in 1979 identifies the same way in 2002 though they were equally exposed to the change in the question wording.

Overall, the results from tables 2 and 3 suggest that the racial classification and identification of Americans are more flexible than is commonly ac-

counted for in models of racial inequality. The boundaries around blackness continue to be more rigid than those around whiteness, as one would expect given the history of racial divisions in the United States (Davis 2001), and the levels of fluidity are significantly lower than one might expect under similar circumstances in Brazil (Telles 2002). At the same time, the fact that the proportion of the population likely to experience a change in either classification or identification (or both) is larger than typically acknowledged in the United States suggests that the abstract idea of race as a flexible, social construction is not as far removed from the realities of microlevel interactions as many outside the field of race and ethnicity might think.

The Effects of Social Status

We now turn to modeling which social factors influence racial classification and identification. On the basis of previous research, one might expect that the changes in racial classification and identification demonstrated above would be explained by characteristics of the survey interviewer, the survey context or time period, and other characteristics of the respondent. That is, such changes would be more likely for certain types of people, regardless of their current or previous social position. We build on this line of inquiry and show that differences in social status also play a significant role in how Americans identify and are classified by race.

Table 4 presents odds ratios from four separate models estimating how respondents are racially classified by interviewers and identify themselves. The results show that both racial classification and identification are responsive to a wide variety of factors. All models use cluster-robust standard errors to account for clustering on interviewers, which produces standard errors that are more conservative than those from models accounting for clustering on respondents. In all four models we also control for respondent's previous race, so that we are examining, for example, the effect of having been unemployed on the odds of being classified as white in the current year, net of how the respondent was racially classified in the previous year.

Looking first at the key status variables, we find that having been unemployed for a long spell, in poverty, incarcerated, and on welfare all have statistically significant effects, such that people who have had each of these experiences are more likely to be seen by others and identify themselves as black and less likely to be seen by others and identify themselves as white. The results can be interpreted as the difference in the odds of being classified or identifying as the race given at the top of the column. For example, in the first model, the odds ratio for having ever been in poverty (.697) indicates that, net of all other measured factors, including whether the respon-

TABLE 4
ODDS RATIOS FROM LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODELS PREDICTING
RACIAL CLASSIFICATION AND IDENTIFICATION

	INTERVIEWER-CLASSIFIED RACE		SELF-IDENTIFIED RACE	
	White (1)	Black (2)	White (3)	Black (4)
Ever unemployed > 4 months	.75*** (-10.78)	1.39*** (5.92)	.65*** (-4.80)	2.18*** (3.73)
Ever below poverty line . . .	.70*** (-10.45)	1.43*** (6.43)	.55*** (-5.65)	2.34*** (4.21)
Ever incarcerated	.71*** (-4.66)	1.41** (2.58)	.60* (-2.34)	1.34 (.70)
Ever received welfare	.88*** (-3.55)	1.19** (2.70)	.91 (-1.09)	1.30 (1.14)
Ever graduated from college	1.38*** (8.07)	.77** (-3.17)	1.13 (1.08)	.84 (-.80)
Ever married as a teen	2.12*** (14.84)	.44*** (-9.43)	2.87*** (7.40)	.32** (-2.92)
Ever teen parent	.60*** (-11.70)	1.55*** (5.31)	.60*** (-3.57)	1.94 (1.57)
Married without children	1.40*** (7.71)	.73*** (-3.45)	1.29 (1.62)	.41** (-3.08)
Married parent.	1.31*** (8.10)	.75*** (-4.76)	1.46*** (3.34)	.42*** (-4.11)
Unmarried parent.	.78*** (-5.40)	1.48*** (4.05)	.87 (-1.10)	1.31 (.84)
Large family	.74** (-3.28)	1.24 (1.35)	.87 (-.79)	1.24 (.43)
Lives in an inner city	.64*** (-5.74)	1.68*** (5.58)	.30*** (-5.82)	3.73*** (3.90)
Lives in a suburb	1.182** (3.18)	.880 (-1.84)	.59** (-2.89)	1.36 (.95)
Same race previously	159.28*** (61.63)	4,638.02*** (96.45)	199.16*** (32.17)	2,960.26*** (27.44)
Identified as Hispanic in 1979	1.11 (.62)	.20*** (-6.13)	4.99*** (6.89)	.30* (-2.49)
Identified multiple races in 1979	1.70*** (9.40)	.70*** (-3.80)	.13*** (-11.93)	.21*** (-4.09)
Observations	160,536		7,710	
Pseudo R^2	.68	.92	.59	.89

NOTE.—Data are from the 1979 NLSY. All models control for the respondent's age, sex, whether the respondent was foreign born, whether the respondent lives in the South, and the interviewer's self-identified race, sex, age, and education. Interviewer-classified race models also include year fixed effects. Z -statistics are reported in parentheses. All models account for clustering on interviewers; models accounting for clustering on respondents provide similar results.

* $P < .05$.
** $P < .01$.
*** $P < .001$.

dent was classified as white in the previous year, having been in poverty reduces the odds of being classified as white in the current year by roughly 30% (table 4, col. 1).

Other characteristics that are related to racial stereotypes, such as being an unmarried parent and living in the inner city, also have significant effects in the expected directions. For example, the odds of being classified as black are 1.7 times larger for respondents who live in the inner city. Again, this is noteworthy because the model controls for whether the respondents were classified as black in the previous year. The results for self-identification follow a similar pattern: having ever been unemployed (for more than four months in the same year) more than doubles the odds of identifying as black in 2002, controlling for whether the respondent identified as black in 1979. Summing over the 13 social status variables across each of the four models, we see that 46 of the 52 odds ratios are in the expected direction—such that low social status or negative experiences are associated with being classified and identifying as black and higher status or positive experiences are associated with being classified and identifying as white—and, of those, 34 odds ratios are statistically significant at the $P < .05$ level.

For most of the odds ratios that are not statistically significant or in the expected direction in table 4, the effect estimates are significant and in the expected direction when the relevant variables are included in models without the other measures of social status. So, for example, the effect of having a college education on identification is statistically significant when modeled with only the control variables and previous racial and ethnic responses. This suggests that the relationship between education and racial classification and identification is mediated by other measured status factors, such as poverty and unemployment. The lone exception to this pattern is the effect of having ever been married as a teen. In all models, teen marriage is related to significantly higher odds of being classified and identifying as white and significantly lower odds of being classified or identifying as black. The direction of this association is not entirely unexpected, as concerns about marriage among African-Americans tend to focus on their low rates of marriage overall and the lack of “marriageable men” (Wilson 1987). Further, the predominant stereotypes about African-Americans during the 1980s and 1990s revolved around teen and unmarried parenthood (Furstenberg 2003), with public concern focused on the absence of marriage before childbearing and not on its presence. That is not to say that the teen marriage effect should be interpreted as a status gain that leads to or reinforces perceptions of whiteness; it is possible that, in this case, the link between teen marriage and being seen as white is related to widespread stereotypes about “white trash” (Wray 2006).

In interpreting the statistically significant results in table 4, it is important to remember that they, too, are net of all the other factors in the model; they

indicate, for example, that there is an effect of incarceration on racial classification above and beyond the effect of prolonged unemployment. However, as people are likely to experience several of these statuses simultaneously, it is useful to consider the cumulative effect of a number of status changes. Figure 1 illustrates this point by presenting predicted probabilities for the likelihood of being classified as white for a hypothetical 29-year-old man who did not report a Hispanic origin or multiple racial/ethnic origins in 1979 and was born in the United States. He completed 12 years of education, is married with children, and lives in a nonsouthern inner city. This hypothetical respondent was also classified as white in the previous year. At baseline, the estimated probability reflects that he had never been incarcerated, long-term unemployed, or in poverty. Each subsequent bar in the figure makes one (additional) change to his status-related characteristics so that the final bar illustrates the probability of being classified as white in the current year for a man who is now unmarried, has been incarcerated, has been unemployed for more than four months, and has an annual income below the federal poverty line.¹⁷ This accumulation of negative status results in a decreased likelihood of being classified as white from 96% at baseline to 85%. Thus, it is important to consider not only the individual odds ratios from our models but also how multiple related dimensions of social position can affect changes in racial classification.

Changes in Social Status

The analyses up to this point have shown not only that race is fluid for a substantial minority of Americans but that being in certain social positions is associated with being classified or identifying as black or white, net of how one was classified or identified previously. Figure 2 builds on these results by explicitly examining how changes in social position are related to changes in respondents' racial classification or identification. We illustrate this process using changes in employment status; other variables provide similar results.

Racial classification.—Panel A includes two comparisons, depicting the percentage of respondents classified as either black or white in the current year. The observations are limited to people who were classified as black or white, respectively, in the previous year. To capture changes in employment status, we limit observations to respondents who, as of the previous year, were never unemployed for more than four months. This sample re-

¹⁷ In making these comparisons, it is important to note that while logit coefficients are additive, their effect on predicted probabilities is nonlinear. That is, while poverty and incarceration have similar effects on the likelihood of being classified as white (see table 4, model 1), including poverty changes the predicted probability more in the figure because poverty is added later than incarceration.

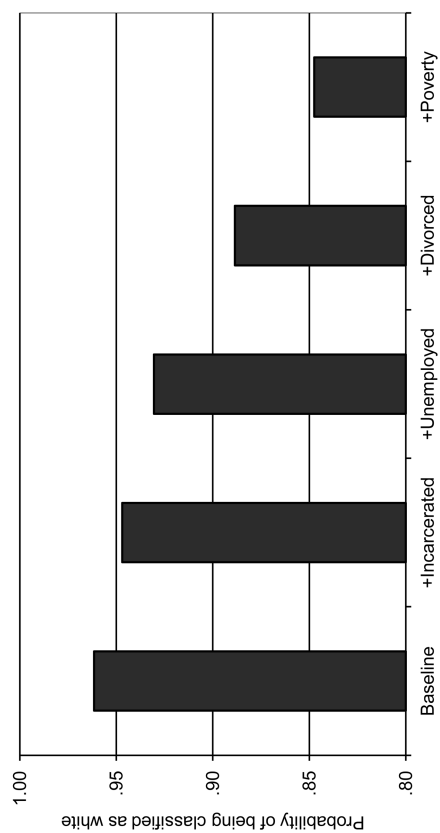


FIG. 1.—Cumulative effect of multiple status changes on racial classification. Data are from the 1979 NLSY. The baseline category represents the predicted probability that a 29-year-old married father with a high school education, who lives in a nonsouthern inner city, does not identify as Hispanic or multiracial, and was classified as white in the previous year was seen as white in 1990.

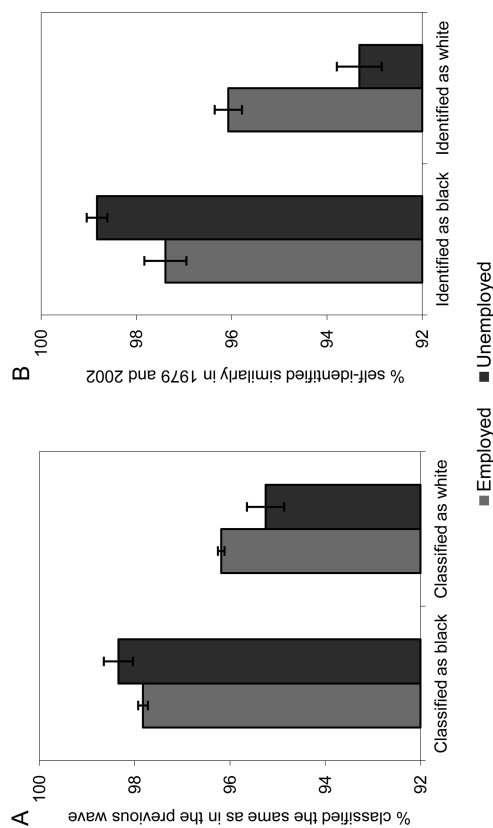


FIG. 2.—Changes in social status and race. Data are from the NLSY 1979; the lighter color = employed, and the darker color = unemployed. (A) The percentage of people who were classified as black or white in the current survey (1980–98) by whether they became unemployed for the first time. Restricted to those classified as black or white, respectively, in the previous survey and who were never previously unemployed. (B) The percentage of people who identified as black or white in 2002 by whether respondents experienced unemployment between 1980 and 2002. Restricted to those who identified as black or European, respectively, in 1979 who were not unemployed in 1979. (Unemployed measures whether the respondent was unemployed for more than four months in the calendar year prior to the interview. Error bars are ± 1 SE.)

striction allows us to compare the current racial classifications of respondents who experienced a change in their employment status in the intervening year with the classifications of respondents who previously were classified the same way but did not experience a change in social position.

Both comparisons in panel A reveal classification differences in the expected directions: a higher percentage of newly unemployed respondents are classified as black and a lower percentage are classified as white, even if they were classified as such in the previous year. While the differences are relatively small—for example, 96% of continuously employed respondents were again classified as white the following year, compared to 95% of respondents who lost their jobs in the interim—these represent year-to-year changes, and the differences for both black and white classifications are statistically significant ($P < .05$). To the extent that these status changes accumulate and are not simply additive at a given point in time, as we illustrated in figure 1, even these small effects could play an important role in shaping racial classification over the life course.

Racial identification.—Panel B illustrates analogous comparisons depicting differences in the percentage of respondents identifying as black or white in 2002. The observations are limited to people who identified as either black or European, respectively, in 1979 and to people who were not unemployed in 1979. Thus, each pair of bars compares the racial identifications of people who experienced a change in social position between 1979 and 2002 to those of people who did not. The pattern of results is also the same as illustrated in panel A: a higher percentage of ever-unemployed respondents identify as black and a lower percentage identify as white, and the difference in each is statistically significant ($P < .05$).

As we have just two data points for racial identification and respondents may have experienced several changes in social status during the intervening years, we interpret the findings in panel B of figure 2 as suggestive of the pattern of racial fluidity people experienced. Nevertheless, when viewed in light of the racial classification findings in panel A and the models above, we argue that the results represent important evidence that changes in racial identification are not merely related to differences in social status; they occur partly in response to changes in social status.

Models.—To strengthen our evidence that changes in social position cause changes in racial classification and identification, we estimated two additional types of multivariate models (see the appendix). First, we included person fixed effects along with our earlier list of controls. This technique is useful for several reasons. Person fixed effects allow us to control for all unmeasured characteristics of the respondents that are time invariant, many of which are likely to affect racial classification and identification. For example, to the degree that factors such as familial history, skin tone, and name do not change over time, they will be accounted for in these

models. Person fixed-effect models are also helpful in capturing the effect of changes in social status on changes in race. They can be thought of as providing within-person estimates of the effects of the variables of interest; so in essence we are comparing racial classifications and identifications of particular individuals between when they were and were not, for example, married. We find that even after including person fixed effects, a number of characteristics remain significant predictors of how people are racially classified and identify (see table A3).

Second, in the case of racial classification by interviewers, where we have up to 17 observations for each respondent, we also examine whether the lagged values of our key status variables predict racial classification once we have controlled for lagged values of racial classification (Granger 1969). This allows us to determine whether poverty, for example, provides useful information in predicting a person's current racial classification above and beyond the information provided by knowing how they were racially classified in previous years. We find that each of our key status indicators is useful in predicting respondents' current racial classification even after controlling for how respondents were previously classified (see tables A5 and A6). These results suggest that not only does racial classification shape social status but social status in turn affects how people are racially classified.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Our results demonstrate that racial classifications and identifications change over time and that they do so in socially patterned ways. Perhaps more important, they suggest that perceptions of an individual's race are also responsive to changes in social position. Not only is social status related to racial classification and identification, but it partly explains why some people change race and others do not. As figure 2 shows, people who experience a long spell of unemployment are more likely to subsequently be classified and identify as black than they would be if they had remained steadily employed.

However, we also want to stress that these should not be thought of as permanent changes in an individual's race. Table 5 presents some illustrative cases of respondents who have experienced long-term unemployment. These example racial classification histories underscore that while respondents are more likely to be seen as black (or are seen as black more often) after unemployment than they were before unemployment, they are not necessarily always seen as black (panel A). Similarly, these examples illustrate that people are more likely to be seen as nonwhite after unemployment than they were before losing their job, but this does not mean that they are never again seen as white (panel B). This suggests that what has changed is the person's likelihood of being seen as black or white in any given encounter.

TABLE 5
ILLUSTRATIVE RACIAL CLASSIFICATION HISTORIES BEFORE AND AFTER
LONG-TERM UNEMPLOYMENT

A. CLASSIFIED AS BLACK				
PERSON ID	Before Unemployment	After Unemployment	% Black before Unemployment	% Black after Unemployment
343 . . .	OBO	BBBBBBBBBBBBBB	33	100
9266 . . .	W.OWW	BOBOWOBBOBO.	0	45
9372 . . .	OOO	BBBBBBBBBBBOBB	0	93
B. CLASSIFIED AS WHITE				
PERSON ID	Before Unemployment	After Unemployment	% White before Unemployment	% White after Unemployment
8857 . . .	WOOWWWW	WOOOOOOWOO	71	20
9282 . . .	WWWWWWWOW	OWWOOOO	90	29
9969 . . .	WWWWWWWWWW	WWOOOO	100	33

NOTE.—Data are from the 1979 NLSY. B denotes classification as black, W as white, and O as other; a period denotes missing classification data. Percentages reflect the number of years the respondent was classified as the given race relative to all years with nonmissing classifications.

In the past, demonstrations of the fluidity and social construction of race have been met with calls for abandoning racial categorization because it is unnecessarily divisive and creates boundaries that would not otherwise exist (e.g., Connerly 2001). Nevertheless, we do not believe that the idea that race is fluid at the individual level should be interpreted as evidence that racial divisions do not exist or are only imagined. Race, whether viewed as being fundamentally biological, macrosocial, or interactional, remains real because it has important consequences for peoples’ life chances. Our results show that racial divisions, like other aspects of social structure, do not simply happen to people; racial inequality is actively (if sometimes unintentionally) reproduced in everyday interactions.

The idea of studying racial inequality from an interactional perspective is not new (see, e.g., Tilly 1998). But the empirical evidence shown above, demonstrating that a substantial proportion of Americans have racial classifications and identifications that are fluid over time, presents new opportunities and quandaries for research and public policy. Below, we explore the implications of our findings in the realms of theory, methodology, and politics.

Rethinking Race

We argue that our results are consistent with a view of race as a flexible propensity rather than a fixed characteristic. That is, race does not simply af-

fect a person's social status; a loss or gain in status can alter both how people identify and how they are perceived by others. For example, we would expect that getting married would result in respondents' likelihood of being classified and identifying as black to decrease, with a corresponding increase in their likelihood of being classified and identifying as white.

The process is analogous to how a change in diet or stress level can alter an individual's relative risk of dying of heart disease as opposed to cancer. People can be thought of as having different starting propensities to identify or be classified as a given race, much as people have different family histories of high cholesterol or breast cancer. Some will have relatively low, near-zero propensities to be classified in or identify with more than one category. Others, including people whose facial features or physical characteristics are difficult to categorize, will have relatively high baseline propensities to be racially classified or identify in a variety of ways. This could explain why, for example, people who report Hispanic or multiracial backgrounds are more likely to have fluctuating racial classifications and identifications over time.¹⁸

However, our results suggest that racial fluidity is not limited to populations with high, but theoretically fixed, propensities toward ambiguity (table A2); the categorization propensities themselves also change with changes in social position (fig. 2). Just as working in a high-stress job can increase an individual's risk of having a heart attack, regardless of any predisposition to heart disease, becoming unemployed increases the likelihood that an individual will be seen as black by others, regardless of how the individual was perceived previously. It is also important to remember that, in our framework, fluidity encompasses both empirically observed and empirically unobserved changes in racial perceptions. So, while the propensities to identify or be classified as a particular race might have to cross a threshold in order to trigger an observed change (as on a survey), a stint in prison or falling into poverty nevertheless increases one's odds of being seen as black and decreases one's odds of being seen as white in any future encounter.

To further underscore this point, we examined the distribution of predicted probabilities calculated on the basis of the results from table 4. Rather than presenting the percentage of people whose recorded racial classification changed (as in table 2), these estimates highlight the proportion of respondents who have a nonnegligible probability of experiencing such changes. For example, 5% of previously classified nonwhites have a 21% chance of being currently classified as white, with a comparable probability

¹⁸ We do not see these baseline racial propensities as being solely biological or genetic. An individual's starting propensity to be seen or identify in a particular way also depends on the social context in which the person was raised as well as the prevailing social understandings of race and racial categories.

of 19% for respondents previously classified as black. Further, among all respondents who were previously classified as nonwhite, 50% have at least a 7% chance of being classified as white in the current year, again with a similar probability for respondents who were previously classified as black. These results are consistent with recent experimental research demonstrating that visual status cues (being dressed in a business suit vs. a janitor's outfit) affect racial perception even when they do not ultimately alter racial categorization (Freeman et al. 2011). The experiments also demonstrate that the effects of visual status cues on both categorization and the more subtle perceptions that inform the categorization process do not operate only among those with ambiguous phenotypes.

These perceptual processes have implications for understanding racial discrimination. Like most research on racial inequality, studies of discrimination typically assume that a person's race is fixed and self-evident. Our results are an important reminder that an act of discrimination first requires classifying an individual as belonging in a particular racial category and that this determination is central to the process of racial discrimination. Thus, not only does discrimination along racial lines occur because of stereotypes about racial groups, but these stereotypes also play a role in defining how an individual is racially perceived and thus their likelihood of experiencing discrimination in everyday interactions.

Remodeling Race

Treating race as immanently fluid rather than inherently fixed also has implications for survey data collection and research methods. If racial perceptions are plastic and both self-identification and other classification are related to an individual's social position, then untangling the relationships between race and inequality (or mobility) requires having multiple measures of race at multiple points in time. This is a relatively uncommon practice in data collection to date. To our knowledge, other than the NLSY, only the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health has publicly available data on both self-identified and interviewer-classified race for the same individuals using comparable measures across multiple waves of a national survey. Further, both quantitative and qualitative research examining whether the relationship between race and inequality works differently in different contexts should consider collecting racial classifications from multiple vantage points (e.g., teachers, health care professionals, hiring managers) at multiple points in time (see Morris 2007).

The fact that race in the United States is more fluid than commonly believed also raises questions about how to define and operationalize racial strata in nationally representative samples and how to determine participation in racially targeted studies. For example, should a study focused on a

particular population, such as African-Americans, interview only people who are currently classified or identify as black? In a longitudinal design, should studies drop individuals who experience a change in their classification or identification? While these questions may seem nonsensical, they do so only to the extent that we take people's race for granted, as an obvious and unchanging characteristic that is exogenous to their life chances, rather than a flexible measure of their status that reflects both future opportunities and the accumulation of past experiences. Thus, even methodological decisions made at the sampling stage depend on how race has been conceptualized and have implications for whether or not one can fully explore the relationships between race and other outcomes of interest.

In terms of analysis, our results suggest that the standard method in quantitative research of coding race using a series of mutually exclusive dummy variables is also more problematic than previously thought (see Zuberi [2000] and Martin and Yeung [2003] for discussion of its other limitations). The changes in racial classification and their relationship to the respondent's social position demonstrated above are more subtle and gradational than can be captured by a single categorical variable in a standard regression analysis. Several researchers across the social sciences have suggested measuring racial identification using continuous measures that capture salience or indexing a series of questions to capture dimensionality (e.g., Phinney 1990). Racial classification could similarly be coded in terms of the average classification over a period of years or a count of how often a person was seen in a particular way. These and other outside-the-box suggestions are worth considering, especially for scholars who do not simply control for race but use it as a primary explanatory variable.

In addition to changes in data collection and variable coding, modeling strategies for studying the relationship between race and inequality also need to be reconsidered in light of the fluidity we reveal. One way to capture both the continuous distribution of racialization and the uncertainty surrounding the categorization of individuals would be to estimate racial stratification analyses in two stages: the first using multinomial logistic regression to estimate the propensities of being classified or identifying as the races of interest and the second to include the racial propensities, rather than the mutually exclusive categories, as the primary predictors of the outcome of interest (e.g., wages). Sociologists could also develop more creative approaches, such as isolating exogenous variation through natural experiments or other identification strategies, perhaps drawing inspiration from recent research in economics (e.g., Angrist and Lavy 1999).

Finally, it is important for researchers to recognize that the effects of race and social status operate in both directions, particularly given the effects on self-identification. To the extent that individuals tend to "lighten" or "darken" themselves after experiencing changes in social position, using

the racial identifications from standard surveys misconstrues the relationship between race and inequality, not to mention misidentifies the causal mechanism. At a minimum, this implies changes to the interpretation of the coefficients that represent race in standard models. Ideally, it will also inspire efforts to model racial inequality as the recursive system that our results imply. While methods such as the two-stage analysis outlined above take the first step of acknowledging the fluidity of race, they still place race firmly on the right-hand side of the regression equation. To take the next step will require formulating novel dynamic models, such as time-series hazard models or agent-based simulations, that capture the social interactions integral to the coevolution of both the perceptions of an individual's race and the other outcomes of interest. (See Butts and Pixley [2004] for one such promising strategy.)

Reproducing Race

Racial fluidity also has implications that extend beyond the academy. Typically racial change is discussed and analyzed as a top-down process of official classification schemes or legislation. A particularly apt example is a recent South African high court ruling that Chinese South Africans now “fall within the ambit definition of ‘black people’” for the purposes of implementing postapartheid policies of racial redress (*Chinese Association of South Africa v. Minister of Labour*, High Court of South Africa [Transvaal Provincial Division], case no. 59251/2007, June 26, 2008). While not negating the importance of these macrolevel changes, our results suggest that racial divisions are also defined at a much more local level: in coffee shops and classrooms and around the dinner table, as Americans grapple—consciously and unconsciously—with how to define themselves and others. Theoretically, then, changes in race could occur from the bottom up, for example, if white people were to enact race differently in their everyday interactions by openly challenging racial stereotypes and denouncing their privilege, as Noel Ignatiev and the authors of *Race Traitor* provocatively suggest (Ignatiev and Garvey 1996).

However, our findings indicate that the flexibility of race at the individual level, far from being a progressive force, serves to reproduce existing racial disparities in the contemporary United States. If nonwhites who achieve high status are more likely to subsequently be seen as and identify as white, and nonblacks who lose status are more likely to be seen as and identify as black, then the combination of racial fluidity and social mobility effectively maintains racial inequality in the aggregate, even as some individuals improve their status. Thus, contrary to the hypothesis that racial fluidity, or boundary crossing, will be less common in high-inequality contexts such as the United States (Wimmer 2008), we argue that high levels of inequality can

coexist with individual-level fluidity. A high level of racialized inequality increases the incentive for individuals to pursue boundary crossing, and to the extent that boundary “policing” also will be higher in such contexts, our results suggest that such efforts are both selective and symbolic. That is, there will be more interest in maintaining the status hierarchy and the appearance of rigid boundaries than there will be in eliminating racial fluidity *per se*.

This relationship between racial fluidity and inequality also has implications for whether or not the United States will become a majority-minority society by midcentury, as demographic projections suggest (U.S. Census Bureau 2008). Though some demographic changes may seem inevitable, as older, disproportionately white cohorts of Americans are replaced by younger, more diverse ones, it is important to remember that the boundaries of whiteness have expanded before: during the second quarter of the 20th century, in response to the social mobility of what are now considered white “ethnics” (Warren and Twine 1997). Alba (2009) notes that similar structural opportunities for upward mobility are on the horizon if the baby boomers’ retirement opens up spots in professional occupations for younger nonwhites. Yet the outcome, let alone the likelihood, of such a shift remains unclear: widespread increases in socioeconomic status for nonwhites could challenge the current hierarchy or, in a repeat of history, upwardly mobile members of currently disadvantaged racial populations could be absorbed into the dominant group and celebrated as the latest success of the American melting pot.

It is also important to note that the issue of whether these racialized groups will grow or shrink in size is separate from, though not unrelated to, the question of whether and to what extent people are moving across category boundaries. Our data cannot speak directly to whether the boundaries of whiteness (or blackness) will expand permanently to incorporate new members; rather our results highlight that individuals are given differential access to category membership based on their social position. That said, the relationship we reveal between racial fluidity and inequality suggests that neither wholesale boundary shifting nor widespread boundary crossing will result in a more egalitarian society without also dismantling the status beliefs that reinforce existing racial divisions (see Ridgeway and Correll 2006). If individuals, and even groups, can cross racial boundaries with little change in the meaning or salience of the boundary itself, as Loveman and Muniz (2007) find in the case of Puerto Rico, then making more room at the top of the status hierarchy will not necessarily erase the crucial distinctions between the top and the bottom. Instead, such changes may only further cement racial stereotypes for those left behind.

All of this points to the potential for contradiction when proponents of top-down change do not take into account the reality of race on the ground.

As Bailey (2008) suggests, recent university admittance policies that promote affirmative action in Brazil are hampered because they do not resonate with many Brazilians' commonsense notions about race. In order to break the cycle between race and inequality, it is important to acknowledge the interplay between micro- and macrolevel processes that shape race, even as we conceptualize them as distinct types of racial change.

CONCLUSION

This study brings together insights from the fields of race and ethnicity, stratification, and social psychology to illuminate the reciprocal relationship between racial fluidity and inequality in the United States. We provide empirical evidence from a nationally representative sample that both racial classification and identification change over time for individuals and that race in the United States is more fluid than was previously thought. We then demonstrate that these changes in racial perceptions are related to social factors such as unemployment, incarceration, and marriage such that the social positions individuals occupy have important implications for both how they are seen by others and how they identify themselves. These social distinctions remain important even when we examine whether changes in social position can lead to changes in racial classification and identification.

Our results emphasize not only that racial divisions are drawn by macro-level decision making but that race and racial inequality are constantly created and renegotiated in everyday interactions. Thus, we propose that an individual's race is best conceptualized as a set of propensities rather than a single mutually exclusive category and that these propensities change over time and across contexts. Finally, we suggest that thinking about race as fluid, ironically, helps explain the rigidity of racial hierarchy in the United States. If a white person is someone who does what a white person is supposed to do and a black person is someone who does what a black person is supposed to do (see Gross 1998), then race is not just an input into the stratification system; it is an output as well.

APPENDIX

In addition to the models presented in the text, we also estimated multinomial logistic regression models; models restricting the sample to non-Hispanic, non-American Indian, nonmultiracial respondents; models with respondent fixed effects; and models incorporating multiple lagged values of the dependent and independent variables. Below we present the results from each in turn.

Multinomial Models

The logistic regression models presented in the body of the article estimate the likelihood of being seen as black versus all else and white versus all else. This formulation tests our specific hypotheses about the relationship between social position and changes in racial classification or identification toward or away from the “extremes” of white and black. However, it is also valuable to examine the various transitions between the black, white, and other categories separately. These results allow us to see, for example, whether a particular status variable has a statistically significant effect on the risk of being seen as white relative to other as well as (or perhaps instead of) the risk of being seen as white relative to black. Whereas the models in the text looked at the classification of whites versus nonwhites, these models show whether the same variables are also significant for all possible two-way comparisons.

To do this we estimate a series of multinomial logistic regression models (see table A1). In contrast to the models presented in the body of the article, we use sample restrictions to examine only those respondents who were classified as a particular race in the previous year rather than introducing the respondent’s race from the previous year as a control variable. While this makes the results from the multiple comparisons made by the different models easier to compare with each other, it also means that the sample sizes are not as large for some of the models; for example, there are just 8,954 person-year observations from respondents who were seen as other in the previous year. Nevertheless, a number of the results remain statistically significant.

The first set of models in table A1 examines only the observations for respondents who were classified as white in the previous year. Model 1 estimates the risk of being classified as black compared to white, model 2 the risk of being classified as other compared to white, and model 3 the risk of being classified as black compared to other. Models 4–6 provide analogous results for respondents who were seen as black in the previous year, and models 7–9 contain the results for respondents classified as other in the previous year.

Overall, the estimates are consistent with the findings presented in the text. Importantly, they demonstrate that the results presented are not driven solely by changes to and away from the middle (or residual) category of “other.” That is, it is not the case that unemployment simply moves an individual from white to other or from other to black; rather, unemployment significantly predicts whether people are changing from black to white or white to black. Table A1 also shows that, in many cases, the odds ratios comparing white to black classification are further from one than the ratios comparing black to other or white to other. This suggests, for example, that

TABLE A1
RELATIVE RISK RATIOS FROM MULTINOMIAL LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODELS PREDICTING RACIAL CLASSIFICATION IN THE CURRENT YEAR WITH
SAMPLE RESTRICTIONS FOR RACIAL CLASSIFICATION IN THE PREVIOUS YEAR

	PREVIOUSLY SEEN AS WHITE			PREVIOUSLY SEEN AS BLACK			PREVIOUSLY SEEN AS OTHER		
	Black vs. White (1)	Other vs. White (2)	Black vs. Other (3)	White vs. Black (4)	Other vs. Black (5)	Other vs. White (6)	White vs. Other (7)	Black vs. Other (8)	White vs. Black (9)
Ever unemployed									
> 4 months	1.359** (3.231)	1.036 (.777)	1.312** (2.725)	.727** (-2.844)	.727 (-1.647)	1.000 (-.002)	.964 (-.666)	1.783*** (3.293)	.540*** (-3.463)
Ever below poverty									
line	1.885*** (5.814)	1.149* (2.276)	1.641*** (3.881)	.903 (-1.005)	2.112** (2.992)	2.338*** (3.324)	.973 (-.335)	1.152 (.749)	.845 (-.879)
Ever incarcerated . . .	.982 (-.061)	1.252 (1.939)	.785 (-.781)	.653 (-1.541)	.820 (-.469)	1.256 (.459)	1.049 (.336)	1.478 (1.005)	.710 (-.871)
Ever received									
welfare	1.094 (.756)	1.158** (2.720)	.944 (-.445)	.850 (-1.312)	.717 (-1.369)	.844 (-.634)	.919 (-1.261)	.924 (-.357)	.995 (-.022)
Ever graduated from									
college	.689* (-2.127)	.780** (-3.244)	.884 (-.666)	1.457* (2.486)	1.105 (.345)	.758 (-.953)	1.283* (2.293)	1.436 (1.572)	.893 (-.474)
Ever married as a									
teen	.389*** (-5.150)	.818** (-2.796)	.476*** (-3.813)	1.670** (2.798)	1.083 (.187)	.648 (-.932)	1.115 (1.213)	.823 (-.509)	1.355 (.786)
Ever teen parent . . .	1.480* (2.540)	1.205* (2.433)	1.229 (1.215)	.605** (-3.126)	.693 (-1.063)	1.147 (.359)	.906 (-1.075)	.554 (-1.733)	1.636 (1.424)

Married without children	.954 (-3.36)	.867 (-1.904)	1.101 (.604)	1.650** (2.917)	1.359 (.899)	.824 (-.528)	1.077 (.787)	.844 (-.662)	1.276 (.929)
Married parent.	.708** (-2.635)	.838** (-3.136)	.845 (-1.194)	1.171 (1.141)	1.349 (1.258)	1.152 (.522)	1.029 (.392)	.536* (-2.452)	1.920* (2.549)
Unmarried parent. . .	2.348*** (5.548)	.965 (-.445)	2.433*** (5.311)	.994 (-.039)	.840 (-.588)	.845 (-.520)	.989 (-.115)	.831 (-.549)	1.190 (.511)
Large family	1.181 (.570)	1.143 (1.273)	1.033 (.109)	.997 (-.010)	.000*** (-41.754)	.000*** (-35.729)	.716* (-2.270)	.300 (-1.597)	2.387 (1.146)
Lives in an inner city.	2.451*** (5.977)	1.638*** (4.403)	1.496* (2.264)	.757* (-2.197)	1.500 (1.515)	1.982* (2.387)	.638** (-3.035)	1.531 (1.712)	.417*** (-3.523)
Lives in a suburb . . .	.888 (-.872)	.959 (-.483)	.925 (-.491)	1.138 (.943)	1.356 (1.050)	1.192 (.572)	.980 (-.192)	1.202 (.727)	.816 (-.831)
Identified as Hispanic in 1979	.728 (-1.778)	31.310*** (32.457)	.023*** (-19.319)	18.807*** (14.107)	127.945*** (16.749)	6.803*** (5.812)	1.887*** (4.310)	.210*** (-6.687)	8.986*** (9.880)
Identified multiple races in 1979	.818 (-1.428)	.460*** (-7.628)	1.776*** (3.399)	1.117 (.490)	.657 (-1.016)	.588 (-1.235)	1.084 (.623)	1.545 (1.509)	.702 (-1.280)
Observations		108,311			43,302			8,954	
Pseudo R^2		.30			.19			.08	

NOTE.—Data are from the 1979 NLSY. All models include year fixed effects and control for the respondent's age, sex, whether the respondent was foreign born, whether the respondent lives in the South, and the interviewer's self-identified race, sex, age, and education. Z -statistics are reported in parentheses; all models account for clustering on interviewers.

* $P < .05$.

** $P < .01$.

*** $P < .001$.

among those seen as white in the previous time period, living in the inner city is perceived to be least incongruous with blackness and most incongruous with whiteness.

Models for Non-Hispanic, Nonmultiracial, Non-American Indian Respondents

Racial fluidity is often thought to affect only, or at least primarily, multiracial Americans and other populations that do not fit neatly into the traditional racial stratification regime in the United States. To ensure that our results were not being driven by these subgroups, we estimate the same models that were presented in table 4, this time using sample restrictions to examine only respondents who did not self-identify as Hispanic, multiracial, or American Indian. In doing so, we aim to show that racial fluidity is not simply a sign of confusion or misapprehension among particular respondents but a function of the relationship between race and inequality.

In 1979, approximately 17% of the sample identified with one or more Hispanic origins (Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, etc.), while nearly 11% identified with multiple races. In 2002, approximately 6% of the sample identified as Hispanic in response to a stand-alone question on Hispanic origin and 1.5% selected multiple races. Individual-level fluidity among these populations, just like the changes toward and away from the categories of white and black discussed in the text, makes it difficult to control for being Hispanic or multiracial in the conventional sense. Here we base our restrictions on the most inclusive definition of each population: respondents who identified as either Hispanic or multiracial in either 1979 or 2002.

In 1980, significant numbers of people reported American Indian “ancestry” while identifying their “race” as white on the U.S. census (Snipp 1986), which suggests that the change in question wording between 1979 and 2002 could be especially significant for estimating identification change among American Indians. The NLSY user’s guide also cautions that some respondents may have misinterpreted the term “Native American” in 1979 as an unexpected 5% of respondents identified as such (National Longitudinal Surveys 2006). Given that we do observe significant changes for this population—76% of respondents who identified solely as Indian American or Native American in 1979 identify solely as white in 2002 (with 2% identifying as both white and American Indian)—we further restricted the models to exclude self-identified American Indians (as measured in either 1979 or 2002).

Even after we remove the respondents most likely to have fluid or complex racial responses, the model results largely mirror our previous esti-

mates in both substance and statistical significance (see table A2). Thus, neither fluidity in racial classification and identification nor its relationship to social status is limited to self-identified Hispanic, American Indian, and multiracial Americans. Instead, we suggest that the processes we describe have implications for the population of the United States as a whole.

Fixed-Effect Models

As noted in the text, we also estimated models of racial classification and identification with respondent fixed effects. These models are useful in that they allow us to control for all time-invariant heterogeneity between individuals (e.g., ancestry) and because they can be thought of as estimating the degree to which a change in an individual's marital status, for example, influences that individual's racial identification and classification.

We present the results of two sets of linear probability models, with and without fixed effects, because the logistic regression models with respondent fixed effects did not converge. Table A3 presents the linear probability models with respondent fixed effects. Table A4 presents baseline linear probability models mirroring those in table 4 to show that the change in functional form yields substantively similar results. Overall, the coefficients in table A3 are smaller than those in table A4, suggesting that the effect of social position on racial classification and identification is partly explained by other time-invariant characteristics of the individuals. However, even after introducing fixed effects, several of the status variables remain statistically significant predictors of racial classification. These results further demonstrate that changes in social position can affect how an individual is perceived racially and how that person identifies himself or herself.

Testing the Significance of Lagged Values

Finally, we estimated whether lagged values of unemployment, poverty, incarceration, and welfare are useful in predicting how the respondent was racially perceived, once we have accounted for how the respondent was perceived in previous years.¹⁹ To do this, we regress racial classification on lagged values of racial classification and our independent variables.²⁰ This provides another way to examine whether the effects of social position and racial classification operate in both directions (Granger 1969).

¹⁹We estimated similar models for the other status factors—education, marital and parental status, and inner-city or suburban residence—for which the conclusions are substantively similar (not shown).

²⁰See Angrist and Pischke (2009) for a discussion of the relative merits of fixed-effect models and including lagged dependent variables.

TABLE A2
LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODELS PREDICTING RACIAL CLASSIFICATION
AND IDENTIFICATION FOR NON-MULTIRACIAL, NON-HISPANIC, NON-AMERICAN
INDIAN RESPONDENTS

	INTERVIEWER-CLASSIFIED RACE		SELF-IDENTIFIED RACE	
	White (1)	Black (2)	White (3)	Black (4)
Ever unemployed				
> 4 months	.757*** (-4.736)	1.361*** (4.451)	.557*** (-3.619)	2.513*** (3.753)
Ever below poverty line . . .	.604*** (-8.370)	1.579*** (6.875)	.394*** (-4.820)	2.577*** (3.752)
Ever incarcerated	.602** (-2.887)	1.429* (2.141)	.745 (-.658)	1.292 (.470)
Ever received welfare	.835** (-2.633)	1.222* (2.476)	.555** (-2.832)	1.707 (1.747)
Ever graduated from college	1.419*** (3.938)	.683*** (-3.620)	1.350 (1.537)	.663 (-1.882)
Ever married as a teen	2.357*** (9.174)	.433*** (-7.728)	9.234*** (7.282)	.219*** (-3.614)
Ever teen parent	.590*** (-6.172)	1.581*** (4.364)	.340*** (-3.621)	2.033 (1.302)
Married without children	1.453*** (3.915)	.745* (-2.542)	1.937* (2.108)	.471 (-1.929)
Married parent	1.355*** (4.724)	.747*** (-3.718)	1.944*** (3.784)	.494** (-2.912)
Unmarried parent	.695*** (-3.658)	1.581*** (3.758)	.826 (-.679)	1.781 (1.552)
Large family	.806 (-1.498)	1.284 (1.287)	.399** (-2.692)	1.208 (.247)
Lives in an inner city	.595*** (-5.187)	1.685*** (4.702)	.116*** (-5.753)	5.247*** (4.286)
Lives in a suburb	1.178* (2.164)	.852 (-1.887)	.353** (-2.889)	1.517 (1.163)
Same race previously	3,559.059*** (91.406)	7,934.379*** (93.541)	937.269*** (30.138)	5,089.327*** (24.082)
Observations	116,419	116,419	5,542	5,542
Pseudo R^2	.906	.932	.840	.910

NOTE.—Data are from the 1979 NLSY. All models control for the respondent's age, sex, whether the respondent was foreign born, whether the respondent lives in the South, and the interviewer's self-identified race, sex, age, and education. Z -statistics are reported in parentheses; all models account for clustering on interviewers.

* $P < .05$.

** $P < .01$.

*** $P < .001$.

TABLE A3
FIXED-EFFECT LINEAR PROBABILITY (Ordinary Least Squares) MODELS PREDICTING RACIAL
CLASSIFICATION AND IDENTIFICATION

	INTERVIEWER- CLASSIFIED RACE		SELF-IDENTIFIED RACE	
	White (1)	Black (2)	White (3)	Black (4)
Ever unemployed				
> 4 months	-.002 (-.741)	.002* (2.298)	-.009 (-1.120)	.006* (2.081)
Ever below poverty line . . .	.004 (1.575)	-.001 (-.721)	-.013 (-1.587)	.001 (.388)
Ever incarcerated	-.005 (-.950)	.004* (1.967)	-.028 (-1.625)	.002 (.300)
Ever received welfare	-.002 (-.745)	.000 (.473)	-.002 (-.222)	.002 (.613)
Ever graduated from college	.006* (2.291)	.000 (.151)	-.029** (-2.844)	-.002 (-.449)
Ever married as a teen	-.000 (-.008)	.001 (.414)	.084*** (6.285)	-.003 (-.673)
Ever teen parent	.003 (.416)	-.001 (-.560)	.001 (.082)	-.004 (-.555)
Married without children	.001 (.632)	-.001 (-.782)	.001 (.121)	-.009 (-1.891)
Married parent.	.004* (2.334)	.000 (.101)	.031*** (3.490)	-.010** (-2.923)
Unmarried parent.	-.000 (-.167)	.003** (2.821)	.017 (1.600)	-.000 (-.106)
Large family	-.018*** (-4.591)	.000 (.321)	.020 (1.148)	.003 (.489)
Lives in inner city	.000 (.055)	.000 (.169)	.006 (.722)	.002 (.616)
Lives in a suburb	-.002 (-1.084)	.001 (1.096)	.016* (2.048)	.001 (.425)
Observations	160,536	160,536	15,420	15,420
Individuals.	12,604	12,604	7,710	7,710
R ²	.848	.974	.766	.961

NOTE.—Data are from the 1979 NLSY. All models control for the interviewer's self-identified race, sex, age, and education, as well as respondent's age and whether the respondent lives in the South. Interviewer-classified race models also include year fixed effects. *t*-statistics are reported in parentheses.

* $P < .05$.
** $P < .01$.
*** $P < .001$.

TABLE A4
LINEAR PROBABILITY (Ordinary Least Squares) MODELS PREDICTING RACIAL
CLASSIFICATION AND IDENTIFICATION

	INTERVIEWER-CLASSIFIED RACE		SELF-IDENTIFIED RACE	
	White (1)	Black (2)	White (3)	Black (4)
Ever unemployed > 4 months	-.016*** (-10.128)	.003*** (5.832)	-.039*** (-4.714)	.012*** (3.398)
Ever below poverty line . . .	-.020*** (-10.314)	.004*** (6.563)	-.047*** (-5.055)	.012*** (4.453)
Ever incarcerated	-.024*** (-5.464)	.005*** (3.318)	-.052** (-3.005)	.008 (.941)
Ever received welfare	-.007*** (-3.561)	.002** (2.750)	-.012 (-1.341)	.004 (1.245)
Ever graduated from college	.018*** (8.704)	-.003*** (-3.965)	.012 (1.332)	-.004 (-1.252)
Ever married as a teen . . .	.040*** (15.036)	-.008*** (-9.514)	.105*** (7.693)	-.017** (-3.047)
Ever teen parent	-.029*** (-11.376)	.005*** (6.123)	-.044*** (-3.426)	.011 (1.695)
Married without children	.016*** (8.002)	-.003*** (-3.772)	.025 (1.871)	-.015** (-3.152)
Married parent.	.014*** (7.733)	-.003*** (-4.562)	.034*** (3.484)	-.015*** (-3.862)
Unmarried parent.	-.016*** (-6.173)	.004*** (4.418)	-.020 (-1.824)	.004 (.592)
Large family	-.016** (-3.269)	.001 (1.082)	-.018 (-1.140)	.005 (.634)
Lives in an inner city	-.027*** (-5.816)	.005*** (4.937)	-.102*** (-5.852)	.021*** (3.679)
Lives in a suburb	.008** (3.282)	-.001 (-1.707)	-.036* (-2.518)	.004 (.905)
Same race previously	.820*** (115.851)	.963*** (545.191)	.775*** (57.781)	.933*** (117.314)
Identified as Hispanic in 1979	.010 (.984)	-.010*** (-7.984)	.234*** (6.508)	-.018** (-2.670)
Identified multiple races in 1979	.025*** (9.170)	-.004*** (-5.314)	-.174*** (-9.899)	-.022*** (-4.034)
Observations	160,536	160,536	7,710	7,710
R ²	.764	.953	.646	.926

NOTE.—Data are from the 1979 NLSY. All models control for the respondent's age, sex, whether the respondent was foreign born, whether the respondent lives in the South, and the interviewer's self-identified race, sex, age, and education. Interviewer classification models also include year fixed effects. *t*-statistics are reported in parentheses; all models account for clustering on interviewers.

* $P < .05$.
** $P < .01$.
*** $P < .001$.

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TABLE A5
LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODELS PREDICTING RACIAL CLASSIFICATION AS BLACK WITH
LAGGED DEPENDENT AND INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

	STATUS VARIABLE			
	Unemployment (1)	Poverty (2)	Incarceration (3)	Welfare (4)
Classified as black:				
Previous year	18.484*** (20.539)	18.645*** (15.488)	15.958*** (14.960)	15.730*** (18.065)
2 years ago	8.965*** (12.061)	6.926*** (8.511)	9.515*** (10.488)	8.873*** (11.438)
3 years ago	6.417*** (9.947)	7.561*** (8.695)	5.759*** (7.428)	6.581*** (9.923)
4 years ago	6.481*** (12.042)	6.096*** (8.728)	6.845*** (10.088)	6.875*** (12.475)
5 years ago	8.177*** (11.864)	9.531*** (10.253)	8.896*** (9.926)	8.697*** (12.299)
Status variable:				
Previous year	1.143 (.838)	1.309 (1.453)	3.513** (3.235)	1.282 (1.262)
2 years ago	1.314 (1.751)	1.061 (.332)	1.344 (.626)	1.208 (1.024)
3 years ago	1.123 (.761)	1.388 (1.693)	1.121 (.242)	1.148 (.682)
4 years ago	1.339* (2.095)	1.082 (.454)	1.478 (.933)	.862 (-.763)
5 years ago	.983 (-.128)	1.065 (.357)	.440 (-1.834)	1.250 (1.068)
<i>P</i> -value for joint test of status variables	.022	.003	.000	.003
Observations	101,934	69,177	67,673	91,007

NOTE.—Data are from the 1979 NLSY. Joint tests test the joint significance of the five lagged status variables in the model. *Z*-statistics are reported in parentheses; all models account for clustering on interviewers.

- * $P < .05$.
- ** $P < .01$.
- *** $P < .001$.

Tables A5 and A6 present the results from models controlling for how the respondent was perceived by interviewers in the previous five years. To assess whether there is an additional effect on racial classification related to previous social position, the most important information is the *P*-value for the test of the joint significance of the five lagged status variables, not the statistical significance of any particular coefficient. In each column of both tables our results demonstrate that the lagged values of unemployment, poverty, incarceration, and welfare continue to provide useful information about being classified as both black (table A5) and white (table A6), even after we have accounted for the respondent's racial classifications in the pre-

TABLE A6
LOGISTIC REGRESSION MODELS PREDICTING RACIAL CLASSIFICATION AS WHITE WITH
LAGGED DEPENDENT AND INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

	STATUS VARIABLE			
	Unemployment (1)	Poverty (2)	Incarceration (3)	Welfare (4)
Classified as white:				
Previous year	11.677*** (31.108)	12.927*** (28.590)	11.832*** (28.441)	11.716*** (31.052)
2 years ago	3.717*** (15.570)	3.545*** (12.905)	3.714*** (13.608)	3.688*** (15.011)
3 years ago	3.250*** (11.712)	3.306*** (11.553)	2.973*** (9.504)	3.125*** (11.035)
4 years ago	3.129*** (12.878)	3.136*** (10.489)	3.115*** (11.011)	3.160*** (13.158)
5 years ago	3.693*** (15.510)	3.736*** (12.892)	4.114*** (15.193)	3.773*** (15.934)
Status variable:				
Previous year	.847** (-2.645)	.879 (-1.767)	.725 (-1.458)	.814** (-2.634)
2 years ago	.888 (-1.954)	.881 (-1.777)	.600 (-1.910)	.889 (-1.520)
3 years ago	.939 (-1.110)	.814** (-3.034)	1.013 (.057)	.901 (-1.211)
4 years ago	.788*** (-3.912)	.889 (-1.658)	.820 (-.758)	.896 (-1.345)
5 years ago	.889* (-2.046)	.876 (-1.855)	.734 (-1.408)	.996 (-.052)
P-value for joint test of status variables	.000	.000	.000	.000
Observations	101,934	69,177	67,673	91,007

NOTE.—Data are from the 1979 NLSY. Joint tests test the joint significance of the five lagged status variables in the model. Z-statistics are reported in parentheses; all models account for clustering on interviewers.

* $P < .05$.
** $P < .01$.
*** $P < .001$.

vious five years. Thus, these results suggest that even as race shapes social status, social status plays a role in shaping race.

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