



Society for Research in Child Development

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Multi-racial Adolescents Change Their Racial Identification Over Time

Adolescents from multi-racial families tend to shift their reported racial category as they move from early adolescence to young adulthood, suggesting that the assumption of race as “fixed” is especially unjustified for multiracial individuals. This finding comes from a study published in the September/October issue of the journal *Child Development*. The study was supported by the National Institute on Aging (NIA) and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD).

Researchers from the University of Iowa in Iowa City, Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill set out to investigate the prevalence and change of multiracial self-identification as adolescents transitioned to young adulthood. The issue is becoming more relevant given the increasing number of multi-racial individuals in the United States (2.4 percent of the population, or 6.8 million people in the last US Census).

The researchers used the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a nationally representative sample of American adolescents, to examine patterns of responses to the question “What is your race?” from children aged 14 through 18, and then again five years later. The question uses the same categories asked in the 2000 Census, suggesting that national statistics about race might assume more stability than is warranted.

They found that the most common pattern of change was for a teen to add (diversify) or subtract (consolidate) a racial category. In fact, more adolescents changed their category over

time than stayed the same. Thus, someone who selected “Black” *and* “White” as racial categories was much more likely to drop one the next time they were asked to report their race.

Researchers also found that teens who categorized themselves as Native-American were most likely to switch across time, suggesting that this identity is an especially fluid one within the American context.

Additionally, researchers suggest that acts of forced-choice racial self-identification – like that on the US Census – is likely to be difficult and contested for multi-racial individuals. “We conducted a preliminary exploration of various social and psychological factors that influence this fluidity,” said lead author Steven Hitlin, PhD, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Iowa, “and found suggestive evidence that higher socioeconomic background and homogeneous racial environments led to a lower chance of adolescents switching racial identification over time.” Additionally, they found that switching racial self-identification is positively associated with intelligence, although, Dr. Hitlin noted, this relationship requires further exploration.

“These findings suggest that measurement of race is not as straightforward as commonly assumed,” he said, noting at least two important implications of this research:

- While most social scientists and government officials assume that race is stable when they do statistical analyses, that appears to be an incorrect assumption for multi-racial adolescents.
- The findings support other research that finds people do not always treat their ‘race’ as a fixed concept. In fact, sociologists have found that some people are flexible in terms of how they report their race across different contexts as well as across time.

“The idea that people simply have a ‘race’ is an oversimplification of the ways in which people think of themselves as well as how they present themselves to others,” said Dr. Hitlin.

“Race is much more fluid than most people assume.”

Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 77, Issue 5, *Racial Self-Categorization in Adolescence: Multiracial Development and Social Pathways* by Hitlin S (University of Iowa), Brown JS (Miami University) and Elder GH (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill). Copyright 2006 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All Rights Reserved.