

Say it Loud: The Obama Effect and Racial/Ethnic Identification of Adolescents

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The current study examined how self-reported racial/ethnic identification of adolescents living in poverty may be related to significant societal events and seminal public figures. Data from a multiple cohort longitudinal study, conducted in Mobile, Alabama between 1998 and 2011, were used to examine the impact of Barack Obama's nomination and presidency on racial/ethnic identification. The results show that significantly more adolescents changed their self-reported racial/ethnic identification from White or Mixed-Race to Black or Mixed Race after the election than before. These results suggest that a distant public figure can serve as a role model with observable effects for adolescents.

Keywords: Racial identification, adolescent development, identity development

Theory suggests that identity development begins in early childhood and continues throughout young adulthood (Erickson, 1968; Marcia, 1966). Adolescence, however, is recognized as the stage during which identity formation becomes a critical developmental task (Erikson, 1963; Meeus, 2011). Individuals who achieve a stable sense of identity during adolescence are less likely to exhibit problem behaviors and experience adjustment difficulties (Crocetti, Klimstra, Hale, Koot, & Meeus, 2013; Meeus, van de Schoot, Keijsers, & Branje, 2012). Adding to the

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complexity of this critical process is the multifaceted, multidimensional nature of identity or sense of self (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Eccles, 2009; Fuller-Rowell, Burrow, & Ong, 2011) and the importance of the context in which identity develops (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Racial or ethnic identity is often considered one of the fundamental and most complex components of social identity and late adolescence is a critical period for the development of ethnic identity (Yip, Seaton, & Sellers, 2006).

While race and ethnicity are two separate constructs, and they are often examined in tandem because of their inherent similarities. Both race and ethnicity are “socially constructed and ascribed statuses reflecting broader sociohistorical and political influences” (Chao & Otsuki-Clutter, 2011, p. 47). Race has sometimes been conceptualized by focusing on shared visible and/or physical characteristics of a socially constructed group (Hudley & Irving, 2011), while ethnicity is often characterized by discussion around cultural norms, national origin, and common language (Quintana, 2007). Researchers often use the hybrid term “race/ethnicity” to acknowledge the distinctions in these constructs while encompassing the scope that both descriptions provide (Cross & Cross, 2008; Quintana, 2007). Using this joint construction, researchers have examined several correlates of racial and ethnic identity (Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995; Phinney, 1989).

Closely related to racial and ethnic identity (internal processes and feelings about being a part of a particular group) is racial and ethnic identification (declaration of one’s racial or ethnic group). Racial/ethnic identification is often considered a preliminary step in the racial/ethnic identity process (Nishina, Bellmore, Witkow, & Nylund-Gibson, 2010). The limited research on racial and ethnic identification suggests that racial and ethnic identification during adolescence is even more fluid than racial and ethnic identity (Eschbach & Gomez, 1998; Harris & Sim, 2002; Nishina et al., 2010).

Few studies have examined larger societal influences on the racial and ethnic identification of adolescents (Fuller-Rowell, Burrow, & Ong, 2011). Given that influences of media images or public figures on other areas of adolescent social development are clearly articulated in the literature (Smetana, Campion-Barr, & Metzger, 2006), it would be plausible to hypothesize that larger societal influences would also influence racial and ethnic identification in adolescents. Fewer events in recent history have been more publicized than the presidential nomination and election of Barack Obama. The *Obama Effect* has been investigated in experimental situations (Hoyt, 2012; Marx, Ko, & Friedman, 2009; Taylor, Lord, McIntyre, & Paulson, 2011) but not as often in natural or observation studies. Typically, the outcome studied has been academic performance in the face of negative stereotype threat. The current study examines the influence of the nomination and election of Barack Obama on racial/ethnic identification of adolescents who initially self-identify on a survey as White, Black American, and/or Mixed Race.

RACIAL AND ETHNIC IDENTIFICATION

Shifts or changes in racial/ethnic identification are often considered a part of the exploration phase of racial/ethnic identity development. Racial/ethnic identity development may proceed in three stages: from lack of examination, to exploration or search, to identity achievement (Phinney, 1989, 1990). Oyserman et al. (1995) conceptualized racial and ethnic identity (REI) as a tripartite model including connectedness, awareness of racism, and embedded achievement. Connectedness is described as a constructive awareness of group belonging. Awareness of racism is an awareness of other’s negative views about one’s racial group. Embedded achievement is characterized by the belief that success and achievement are closely identified with good or productive group membership and that success of some group members helps other members to succeed. In this model, variability in racial/ethnic identification would likely occur in the connectedness phase as individuals search to find group membership and belonging.

The fluctuation in group membership and identification labels during adolescence may be influenced by myriad contextual factors. For example, as Black American adolescents begin to develop a racial/ethnic identification and subsequently racial/ethnic identity, they may find it difficult to achieve connectedness when they have contextual demands, such as having to cope with anticipated and experienced prejudice and discrimination (French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2006). Individual factors, such as bi-racial and multiracial backgrounds (youth who report two or more racial or ethnic heritages; Root, 1992), also are closely related to mutability in racial/ethnic identification. In previous studies, youth who reported being bi-racial or multiracial were more likely to show more inconsistencies and changes in racial/ethnic identification than adolescents who reported only one racial or ethnic background (Harris & Sim, 2002; Nishina et al., 2010). Psycho-physiological individual factors such as heritage language proficiency and physical appearance also have been associated with changes in racial/ethnic identification during adolescence (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 2001; Eschbach & Gomez, 1998; Fuligni, Kiang, Witkow, & Baldelomar, 2008).

Individual demographic factors such as gender and age have also been associated with changes in racial/ethnic identification. Nishina and colleagues (2010) found significant gender differences in ethnic identification between males and females. Specifically, they found that Black and multi-ethnic middle school girls reported more consistency in ethnic identification than Black and multi-ethnic boys. Conversely, Kelch-Oliver and Leslie (2007) reported that their sample of bi-racial females described challenges that would make it more difficult for multiethnic or biracial females to adjust to multi-ethnic identification, including issues with differing cultural standards of beauty.

Age also can influence racial identification. The *impressionable-years hypothesis* suggests that the age of individuals affects their reactions to racially relevant events (Alwin, Cohen, & Newcomb, 1991; Sears & Levy, 2003). The hypothesis has been used to explain why Americans who experienced the Civil Rights era in their young adulthood became more racially liberal than their forebears (Firebaugh & Davis, 1988; Steeh & Schuman, 1992; Wilson, 1996). It would be disingenuous to suggest that Obama's nomination, election, and presidency are/were not a "racially relevant" event (Fuller-Rowell, Burrow, & Ong, 2011).

Variability in racial/ethnic identification has been associated with influences of the adolescent's immediate contextual environment such as family, peer, and school influences. For example, multi-racial youth who did not live with both biological parents have been more likely to report being multiracial than the multiracial youth who lived with both parents (Harris & Sim, 2002). Similarly, studies have found that the ethnic identity of Black youth is largely shaped by racial socialization provided by families (Neblett, Smalls, Ford, Nguyen, & Sellers, 2009). Cultural socialization, an aspect of racial socialization, occurs through messages that promote racial/ethnic pride and may include lessons from family and others about positive role models (Hughes et al., 2006; Williams & Smalls-Glover, 2014).

More distal or macro-factors may also play a role (Brittian, 2012; Bronfenbrenner, 1986, Elder, 1998) in racial/ethnic identification. Neighborhood and community factors such as neighborhood and school ethnic composition have consistently been identified as influential predictors of adolescent racial/ethnic identification (Eschbach & Gomez, 1998; Harris & Sim, 2002; Nishina et al., 2010). Mixed-Race and White American adolescents may experience "cultural mismatch" (Halpern-Felsher et al., 1997) or "minority stress" (Meyer, 1995) when they live in neighborhoods in which the great majority of their peers identify as Black American (Spencer, 2001; Welch, Sigelman, Bledsoe, & Combs, 2001). This mismatch or minority stress may contribute to difficulties in developing racial/ethnic identity and in inconsistencies in self-reported racial/ethnic identification.

Other factors, such as regional differences, have also been identified. Harris and Sim (2002) found that adolescents with White and Black racial heritages living in the southern region of the

United States are less likely to identify themselves as White than such adolescents living in other areas in the United States.

In this study, we extend the literature by examining the effect of media or public figures on adolescent racial/ethnic identification. Specifically, we examined the change in adolescent self-reported racial/ethnic identification before and after the nomination and presidential election of Barack Obama.¹ We also examined the potential moderating effects of gender and age. We hypothesized that Black and Mixed-Race American adolescents who experienced Obama's rise to political power became more willing to "own" their racial/ethnic identity, to self-report themselves as Black or as Mixed-Race.

METHOD

To test the hypothesis that racial identification would change in predictable ways following the 2008 presidential primary season, data from the Mobile Youth Survey (MYS) were used. The MYS is a longitudinal multiple cohort study of adolescents (aged 9–19) conducted annually in the highest poverty neighborhoods in the Mobile, Alabama metropolitan statistical area (MSA).

Site

The Mobile MSA, with a total population of over 540,000, is dominated by the city of Mobile, with a population of approximately 200,000. In 2000, 46.1% of Mobile's population were Black American and 1.4% were of Hispanic descent; 22.4% lived in poverty. The median household income was \$31,445. Prichard, a city of nearly 30,000, borders Mobile; in 2000, 83.3% of Prichard's population was Black American, and 0.6% was of Hispanic descent; 44.1% lived in poverty. Prichard's median household income in 2000 was \$19,544. In 1990, 42% of Black Americans in the MSA lived in high-poverty census tracts, placing Mobile third in the nation in this measure of concentrated poverty (Jargowsky, 1997).

Sample

In 1998, the MYS researchers selected the 13 highest poverty neighborhoods in the Mobile MSA for their study. Their goal was to obtain a 100% sample of eligible adolescents living in these neighborhoods. Using a combination of active and passive recruitment strategies, they obtained response rates between 60% and 70%, depending on neighborhood. In subsequent years, they attempted to continue surveying these adolescents until they turned 19. Response rates ranged from 59% to 82%, depending on the neighborhood and the survey year. Annual retention rates averaged approximately 70%. As adolescents moved, their new neighborhoods were added to the sampling plan; by 2011, the researchers were actively recruiting adolescents in approximately 50 neighborhoods. A detailed description of the sampling frame, the recruitment process, and the interview process can be found in Bolland et al. (2013).

Even though the sample is not random, it is representative of adolescents living in the MYS neighborhoods, and missing data can reasonably be treated as missing at random. In an analysis of school records for adolescents (aged 9–15) living in MYS neighborhoods, Bolland (2012) found that the MYS sample was slightly more impoverished (based on free and reduced-cost lunch eligibility) and contained marginally more Black Americans than the neighborhoods as a whole (all effect sizes are very small or small). However, neither standardized test scores nor school violations and discipline differed between MYS participants and non-participants. In

addition, there were no differences in standardized test scores or violations/discipline between those participants lost to follow-up during any given year and those who were retained.

Each year, between 1,771 (1998) and 3,308 (2010) adolescents participated in the MYS. Across all 14 years, a total of 12,387 adolescents were enrolled in the study, contributing a total of 36,164 data points (an average of 2.92 longitudinal observations per respondent).

Measures

In addition to a number of other questions, MYS respondents were asked to indicate each year whether they were Black/African American, White/Caucasian, Mixed-Race/Creole, or Hispanic. Respondents answered “yes” or “no” to each question, so they could indicate multiple races/ethnicities (cf. Herman, 2004). The vast majority of respondents indicated that they were Black/African American (across years, $M = .961$, $SD = .008$, range = .946–.973). Relatively few respondents indicated that they were White/Caucasian (across years, $M = .022$, $SD = .006$, range = .014–.030) or Mixed-Race/Creole (across years, $M = .053$, $SD = .006$, range = .044–.060). Although an average of 2.8% of respondents indicated that they were Hispanic ($SD = .013$, range = .014–.059), we have reason to believe that many respondents did not understand this question (school district records indicate that fewer than 10 of the MYS respondents were Hispanic); we excluded adolescents who indicated they were Hispanic from our study sample. Each year, a number of respondents (between 71 and 136) indicated that they were both Black/African American and White/Caucasian. We classified these respondents as Mixed-Race (in addition to those who indicated that they were Mixed-Race/Creole). Revised proportions, based on this adjustment, are as follows: Black/African American ($M = .937$, $SD = .007$, range = .927–.950); White/Caucasian ($M = .008$, $SD = .004$, range = .002–.013); Mixed-Race/Creole ($M = .055$, $SD = .006$, range = .044–.062).

Each year, MYS respondents were also asked to indicate their gender and their age. Gender was coded (0 = male, 1 = female) based on responses at time t . Age was dichotomized based on responses at time t into young (0) and old (1) adolescents, with 9- to 15-year-olds coded as young and 16- to 19-year-olds coded as old. Finally, we dummy-coded the years of data collection as Pre-Obama (1998–2007 = 0) and Post-Obama (2008–2011 = 1). We refer to this variable as “Obama.”

Analysis Plan

We treated each pair of consecutive observations as a case, with the first observation designated as time t and the second treated as time $t + 1$. Thus, we were able to examine the change in racial identification between t and $t + 1$ as a function of age and gender at t and Obama at $t + 1$. Since the same respondent may have contributed data over several consecutive pairs of years, we controlled for this using a generalized estimating equation framework. We conducted three sets of analyses, examining change from White at t ($N = 88$) to Black or Mixed-Race at $t + 1$; Mixed-Race at t ($N = 769$) to Black at $t + 1$; and Black at t ($N = 16,105$) to Mixed-Race at $t + 1$. The first analysis combines Black and Mixed-Race at $t + 1$ because there are so few White cases at t , with a consequent lack of statistical power. Since each of the dependent variables is dichotomous, we specified a logistic link function and a binomial error distribution. As in other analyses we have conducted (e.g., Bolland et al., 2007), we eliminated cases with high levels of inconsistency within the entire data set at either time t or $t + 1$.

Although this study includes large numbers of adolescents, the number of cases for several analyses is relatively small. We, therefore, discuss findings of marginal statistical significance (i.e., $p < .1$) as well as findings with p -values $< .05$.

RESULTS

Examining the marginal means, we found that 62% of the adolescents who self-identified as White at time t changed their report at $t + 1$ to Mixed-Race or Black; 65% of the adolescents who self-identified as Mixed-Race changed their report to Black; and 2.7% of the adolescents who self-identified as Black changed their report to Mixed-Race. In addition, 0.77% of the adolescents who self-identified as Mixed-Race and 0.28% of the adolescents who self-identified as Black American at time t , respectively, self-identified as White American at time $t + 1$.

In our comparison of changes in racial identification during the pre-Obama years and the Obama years, we first examined changes in racial identification for those adolescents who self-identified as White at time t but as Mixed-Race or Black at time $t + 1$. Because of the small sample of adolescents who self-identified as White at t , we could examine the main effects of Obama, age, and gender but not the interaction effects. This was the same reason we combined changes to Mixed-Race and changes to Black into one category of change. Obama had a statistically significant effect on the probability of change (Table 1), with a greater probability of self-identification change from White to Mixed-Race or Black during the Obama years (.9192) than in the pre-Obama years (.5744). Additionally, there was a gender effect, with more self-identification changes from White to either Mixed-Race or Black occurring for males (.8787) than for females (.6793).

Next, we examined changes in self-identification from Mixed-Race at time t to Black at time $t + 1$. All three variables demonstrated statistically significant main effects (see Table 1). A smaller proportion of adolescents changed their self-reported identity from Mixed-Race to Black during the Obama years (.5693) than during the pre-Obama years (.7220). Compared to males (.7107), a smaller proportion of females (.5830) change their self-reported identity from Mixed-Race to Black. Additionally, a smaller proportion of older adolescents (.5892) changed their self-reported identity from Mixed-Race to Black, compared to younger adolescents (.7054). Both interaction effects were marginally significant. A greater proportion of males changed during the pre-Obama years (.8012) than during the Obama years (.6262). Females, however, did not show a proportional difference in their self-identification rates (pre-Obama, .5951; Obama, .5386). Younger adolescents (.7975) were more likely to report a change from Mixed-Race to Black prior to Obama taking office as compared to the Obama years (.6315). The older adolescents, however, did not show a proportional difference in self-identification changes before and after Obama took office (Pre-Obama, .5929; Obama, .5455).

Finally, we looked at changes in racial identification from Black to Mixed-Race. The main effects of Obama and age group were statistically significant as was the interaction between Obama and gender (see Table 1). A greater proportion of adolescents changed their identification

TABLE 1
Effects of Obama, Gender, and Age on Change in Self-Reported Racial/Ethnic Identification

	<i>White to Mixed-Race or Black</i>			<i>Mixed-Race to Black</i>			<i>Black to Mixed-Race</i>		
	<i>df</i>	χ^2	<i>p</i>	<i>df</i>	χ^2	<i>p</i>	<i>df</i>	χ^2	<i>p</i>
Obama	1	5.85	.0156	1	12.95	.0003	1	4.60	.0320
Gender	1	4.03	.0447	1	7.53	.0061	1	1.73	.1885
Age Group	1	1.38	.2402	1	9.29	.0023	1	24.58	<.0001
Obama \times Gender				1	3.04	.0811	1	5.64	.0176
Obama \times Age Group				1	3.53	.0602	1	0.98	.3220

from Black to Mixed-Race during the Obama years (.0352) than during the pre-Obama years (.0254). Older adolescents (.0219) were less likely than younger adolescents (.0366) to change their racial identification from Black to Mixed-Race. Male adolescents were more likely to change their racial identification from Black to Mixed-Race during the pre-Obama years (.0305) than during the Obama years (.0211). The proportions of racial identification changes from Black to Mixed-Race did not differ for females from the pre-Obama years (.0300) to the Obama years (.0331). See Table 2 for the proportions of pre-Obama and post-Obama changes for each group.

DISCUSSION

The current study examined the changes in Black American, White American, and multiethnic adolescents' racial/ethnic identification before and after the nomination and presidential election of Barack Obama (pre-Obama years and Obama years, respectively). The results of this study are consistent with the literature that suggests that racial/ethnic identification is not a static trait, particularly during adolescence (Nishina et al., 2010). Many adolescents changed their self-reported racial/ethnic identity from time t to time $t + 1$ (regardless of Obama year). In particular, males and younger adolescents in this study reported more changes in racial/ethnic identification, which is consistent with previous findings (Alwin et al., 1991; Sears & Levy, 2003; Nishina et al., 2010). Explanations for these changes can range from systematic or random errors to authentic shifts in how the adolescent participants in the current study elected to report their racial/ethnic identification. Adolescents who provided inconsistent answers to multiple items throughout the survey, however, were not included in the study sample.

In the current study, a significant number of adolescents changed their racial/ethnic identification from White to Mixed-Race or Black after Obama's nomination and presidency compared to before. Interestingly, very few of the respondents changed their identification to White American. This pattern is consistent with previous literature that suggests that Mixed-Race youth in the South are less likely to identify themselves as White (Harris & Sim, 2002). Obama's nomination and election appear to have resulted in a significant increase in the probability of change in self-reported identification from Black to Mixed-Race and a significant reduction in the probability of change from Mixed-Race to Black.

TABLE 2
Change in Self-Reported Racial/Ethnic Identification from $t-1$ to t (across All Pairs of Years)

<i>Self-Reported Race at Time t</i>	<i>Self-Reported Race at Time $t + 1$</i>	<i>Main and Interaction Effects</i>	<i>Proportion of Change</i>	
			<i>Pre-Obama Years</i>	<i>Obama Years</i>
White Mixed-Race	Mixed-Race or Black Black		.5744	.9192
			.7220	.5693
		Male	.8012	.6263
		Female	.5951	.5386
		Younger age group	.7975	.6315
		Older age group	.5929	.5455
Black	Mixed-Race		.0254	.0352
		Male	.0305	.0211
		Female	.0300	.0331
		Younger age group	.0345	.0187
		Older age group	.0389	.0256

We hypothesized that the changes in racial/ethnic identification would be associated with the nomination and presidency of Barack Obama. In previous studies, racial/ethnic identification shifts were hypothesized to be precipitated by changes in the family dynamics or family structure or dramatic changes in the demographic makeup of the school or neighborhood (Eshbach & Gomez, 1998; Harris & Sim, 2002). While these explanations cannot be ruled out completely for adolescents in our study, it is somewhat implausible to assume that a significant number of the adolescents in the study experienced changes in family dynamics or family structure or a huge shift in the demographic makeup of their schools and neighborhoods at the exact same time as the Obama nomination and presidency. Although we were not able to completely address this possibility, we conducted preliminary analyses to help alleviate concern. First, we examined whether movement to a new neighborhood between times t and $t + 1$ predicted change in racial identification. In two of the three analyses (White to Mixed-Race or Black; Black to Mixed-Race), we found no relationship between neighborhood change and change in racial identification (both $p > .75$), controlling for gender and age. The third analysis did show that neighborhood change was associated with change from Mixed-Race to Black racial identification ($p < .05$), controlling for gender and age. However, when we controlled for neighborhood change in examining the Obama effect on change between Mixed-Race and Black racial identification, the differences in the pre- and post-Obama years remained statistically significant ($p < .05$) and directionally unchanged.

Another explanation found in the literature suggests that lessons from other family members about role models can also be related to changes in racial/ethnic identification (Hughes et al., 2006; Williams & Smalls-Glover, 2014). This explanation is consistent with our hypothesis in that Obama was introduced to the nation as a role model for Black and Mixed-Race Youth.

The results of the current study suggest that micro-systemic influences may be limited as explanations for simultaneous changes in racial identification for a large group of adolescents. It is highly unlikely that micro-level factors would account for the degree of change we observed before and after 2007. Although previous studies have not examined macro-influences on adolescent racial/ethnic identification, Nishina and colleagues (2010) suggested that the Obama presidency would influence shifts in racial identification for multi-ethnic adolescents.

Strengths and Limitations

The nomination and election of President Obama created a natural experiment for examining the effects of a national role model on the racial identification of Black American and Mixed-Race adolescents living in extreme poverty. The natural experiment is a strength because it is not subject to the measurement error that can occur because of fluctuations in the implementation of experiments or because of participants' reactions to being in a study. In addition, the longitudinal nature of the study is a strength because it provides multiple observations before and after the event of interest.

The homogeneity of the sample in terms of poverty, race/ethnicity, and region may limit the generalizability of the findings. That same homogeneity, however, strengthens the internal validity of the conclusions by limiting the possibility that associated, but unmeasured, factors such as socioeconomic status or local context influenced the observed differences.

Conclusions

The current study sought to investigate whether a macro-event such as a national election could have an effect on adolescent racial/ethnic identification. We found that the nomination and election of President Barack Obama were associated with changes in self-reported racial/ethnic

identification of a significant number of adolescents. The findings of this study have implications for interventions for at-risk Black American and multiracial adolescents. One might reasonably argue that Black American and Mixed-Race adolescents often have to cope with threats to their social identity and that such threats can contribute to poor decision making, even in prejudice-free domains (Inzlicht, Tullett, Legault, & Kang, 2011). Exposure to positive, counter-stereotypic role models may reduce the effects of stereotype or social identity threat (Inzlicht et al., 2011; Marx et al., 2009). Exposure to a positive, in-group role models has been demonstrated to improve academic performance (Marx & Roman, 2002), confidence (Reid & Roberts, 2006), and attitudes and aspirations (Nauta, Epperson, & Kahn, 1998). Therefore, the results of this study can be used to support interventions, such as mentoring, that focus on using positive-in group role models. Additional study of the long-term influence of positive role models on racial/ethnic identification in Black and Mixed-Race youth can provide further insight into to this promising field of study.

NOTE

1. In the summer of 2007, the possibility of Barack Obama's nomination was not widely discussed. In the summer of 2008, however, his nomination was all but assured. We, therefore, treat his nomination as effective as of mid-May 2007 even though the nomination was not yet official.

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