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INTRODUCTION CHAPTER

Identity Choice: Changing Practices of Race and Multiracial Identification

In 2000, the United States Census Bureau made a small change to the wording of the racial identification question. Question number six on the census form asked: “What is this person’s race? Mark one or more races to indicate what this person considers himself/herself to be.” The directions *mark one or more* replaced the words “fill ONE circle for the race¹” which had been used in the prior Census. When census data was released, officials found that more than 6.8 million Americans, or 2.4% of the population, opted to check multiple races. This mark one or more option on the racial identification question was again employed in the 2010 Census. Reports show that, over this decade, the number of Americans who checked multiple races grew by over 30%: to slightly over 9 million, or 2.9% of the population. These statistics suggest that the population who identifies with two or more racial categories, or what will be referred to in this book as *multiracial*, is growing faster than those who identify as either (only) white or (only) black.

Reports such as these offer a sense that the multiracial population is a *new* demographic subpopulation in the United States. Today, the federal government distinguishes those who checked multiple races as a separate racial group and labels them the “two or more races population.” Statistical tables distributed by the Census Bureau which present data on the racial diversity of the country include the two or more races population as a unique group alongside the

¹ Emphasis in original

categories of “white” “black” and “Asian.” Rising rates of interracial marriage combined with documented populations of individuals who report to be multiple races lead many to equate multiracial individuals with other new populations such as immigrants. In the mainstream media, multiracial Americans are framed to have their own lifestyles, challenges and unique characteristics. For example, starting in February 2011, the *New York Times* began running a regular series called “Race Remixed” which primarily highlighted the unique challenges of young adults who identify as multiracial. *USA Today’s* website also features a section on race and the Census which includes stories such as “Multiracial No Longer Boxed in by the Census²” and “Attitudes Toward Multiracial Americans Evolving.³”

Yet, while some herald this as a new advance in society, the fact is that racial mixing is an enduring feature in the United States. Marriage between partners of two different racial groups has indeed been outlawed for most of American history, but intimate interracial relationships have existed since the first settlers arrived to the Americas in the sixteenth century.⁴ The notion that different racial, ethnic or other ancestral peoples did not reproduce across group lines does not square with demographic evidence: demographic simulations estimate that all human beings alive today likely share a common ancestor (Rhode et al 2004). Moreover, Anthony Perez and Charles Hirschman (2009) report that most native born Americans have ancestors from different parts of the world. F. James Davis (1991) estimates that at least 70% of African Americans are of mixed racial background. Moreover, colonization and other migration

² El Nasser, Haya. 2010. “Multiracial No Longer Boxed in by the Census.” *USA Today*. March 15. Online edition. http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/census/2010-03-02-census-multi-race_N.htm

³ Lewan, Todd. 2008. “Attitudes Toward Multiracial Americans Evolving.” *USA Today*. June 15. Online edition. http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2008-06-15-race_N.htm

⁴ Since the Supreme Court decision in the *Loving v. Virginia* case in 1967, which ruled anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional, the number of reported interracial marriages has grown from 150,000 in 1960 to 5 million in 2000 (Lee and Edmonston 2005). A Pew study estimates that approximately 8.4% of all marriages in the U.S. are interracial and 15.1% of new marriages in 2010 were interracial (Wang 2012).

patterns lead to the interracial mixture of immigrants even before they arrive to the United States. Take, for example, today's Latino immigrant population. Latin Americans represent descendants of those Europeans, Asians and Africans who intermingled with the indigenous peoples in the Americas (Menchaca 2001; Rodriguez 2000). Thus, the contention that multiracial Americans today represent a *new* demographic development often fails to acknowledge the complex history of interracial interactions that have occurred inside and outside the United States.

It is indeed true that interracial marriage rates in the United States are rising and that the children of these marriages constitute a share of today's population (Wang 2012). However, the typical emphasis on the novelty of interracial mixing in this country does not fully capture the true significance of what today's multiracial population reflects about race relations in twenty-first century America. These typical views take an ahistorical approach to understanding race relations because they only focus on the current circumstances rather than consider how past practices and longstanding institutions influence those relationships documented in today's society. These typical approaches thus deflect our attention from the more important lessons and insights that we can and should draw from the documentation of a multiracial population in today's society. Multiracial individuals show us that our norms that surround race and racial classification are indeed changing, but that the implications are more complex and nuanced than what is commonly discussed.

This book advocates for a new conceptual approach for understanding the significance of today's multiracial population. I argue that we can document a multiracial population today because there exist institutional opportunities to assert a multiracial identity and there are some Americans who choose to take advantage of this opportunity. Those who self-identify as multiracial are not the only Americans who are of mixed racial heritage, rather they represent

individuals who choose to designate themselves as such. In contrast, there are many Americans who are clearly aware of the fact that they have ancestors of different racial backgrounds but who choose not to self-identify as multiracial. These individuals follow the more longstanding American norm of racial classification by identifying with (only) one of the established racial categories such as “white,” “black,” or “Asian.” Therefore, what a multiracial population really demonstrates is a growing flexibility in how Americans understand and choose to describe their race. Just as importantly, Americans are increasingly growing more tolerant and accepting of this identity flexibility. Although the majority of Americans identify with only one established racial category, we have seen no major public rejection of those individuals who choose to evoke a multiracial identity.

When viewing the multiracial population through this lens, what becomes clear is that there is a growing tension between the perceived roles of *assigned classification* and *identification* in how Americans understand the application of race. Since the important advances of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950’s and 60’s, there has developed a subtle but important shift from viewing race as a characteristic which was primarily the product of social assignment (classification) to one which designates a person’s sense of self (identification). As a result, race is increasingly seen as a marker of personal identity which has cultivated the belief that individual agency and choice should determine how one is to be racially identified. In this context, we find more individuals asserting their own racial identity or preferred identity label, resulting in increased public visibility of multiracial identities. Yet, conceptualizing race as identity is a distinct contrast to the norm of the early twentieth century in which individuals were assigned a racial category based on existing social rules. In particular, the socially established rule of hypodescent, also commonly referred to as the “one-drop-rule,” dictated that a person

with a non-white ancestor would be assigned to the relevant non-white category and never as white (Davis 1991). In many ways, those Americans who use one established racial identity to describe themselves rely on historic racial norms to define their relevant assignment into a racial group and embrace an identity that matches with that racial classification.

Because it is argued that those who self-identify as multiracial do not follow historic social norms and instead assert their preferred multiracial identity, these individuals most clearly demonstrate, what will be coined in this book as, *identity choice* or the expression of race as a reflection of personal identity. But self-identified multiracial individuals are not the only individuals today who practice identity choice. Americans who identify with only one established racial category have also, in many ways, made a choice to express a particular racial identity. However, for multiracial individuals, their choice and decision to express race as a hybrid is a distinct contrast to historic practices and represents a new and modern form of racial identity. Moreover identification as multiracial is a behavior that social scientists are increasingly able to document and systematically analyze due to the way we collect data on race today. For this reason, multiracial identities will be the key case used to understand the formation and implications of identity choice.

Building from these ideas, this book proposes and develops a distinctive approach for understanding and interpreting the empirical findings presented in the forthcoming chapters. The specific orientation offered here is that readers should understand “multiracial” as a form of self-identification which individuals assert when there exist opportunities to do so. Therefore, rather than accept an individual’s race as a given fact, this approach encourages readers to instead question why some choose to identify as multiracial while others adopt identity attachment with

(only) one established racial category, in particular as white, black, Asian American or Latino.⁵

This approach emphasizes the importance and essential practice of explaining multiracial identification as a contrast with attachments to established racial categories.

It should also be noted that this book makes a specific empirical choice to focus primarily on the ways in which Americans report their race in official forms such as for the Census and in private data collection efforts such as public opinion surveys. This is one of many arenas where individuals can promote and represent their racial identities but I argue this particular context is particularly consequential because these types of data collection efforts are well publicized to the public and are often framed as important “facts” about the population which in turn can influence how Americans understand the social features of their nation (see also Prewitt 2012; Yanow 2002). This book thus offers a unique perspective on how to interpret the empirical patterns that are often shown about multiracial individuals and those who identify with one established racial category.

The lessons provided by this book address how we can understand, more broadly, the new directions in racial formation in the twenty-first century. Our ability today to document the existence and growth of a self-identified multiracial population alongside the persistence of populations who identify with established racial categories serves as a unique empirical opportunity to understand a process of racial formation, in other words a stage when racial categories are being contested. This book thus employs a multi-method design in order to uncover the many complex forces that explain this racial formation process: first, I employ

⁵ I recognize that the focus on only four groups--whites, blacks, Asian Americans and Latinos--does not reflect an exhaustive set of racial categories used in the United States. The federal government recognizes indigenous groups such as American Indian, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiians or Pacific Islanders as distinctive racial groups. Due to data limitations and due to the fact that these indigenous groups hold a unique legal status in the United States that is different from that held by whites, blacks, Asian Americans and Latinos, these indigenous groups will be excluded from most analyses of this book. I hope that future research will incorporate the experiences of these indigenous groups.

historical analysis and qualitative interviews to unveil exactly how contemporary racial norms have shifted from those in the past and how norms become integrated into governing institutions. Once establishing this context, I examine survey and census data to understand how changing racial norms are revealed through individual behavior. This book will demonstrate that through contrasting historical approaches to race with those practiced today, we can see that what are often framed as “new” developments in American race relations are not exactly novel but are, in reality, direct responses to those social norms about race from the previous era.

Tracing Racial Norms: From Assigned Classification to Personal Identification

This book will begin by employing a historical analysis to explain why the rise of identity choice appears at the end of the twentieth century. Today, it may be common to find expressions of multiracial identities in many different areas of public life such as popular culture, the arts and even political campaigns. But multiracial identities are increasingly more visible because Americans are living in a political and cultural environment that allows for the expression of these identities. Central to this argument is the historical claim that Americans have witnessed a cultural shift from viewing race as a process primarily of *assigned classification* to the vantage point of believing that race can be primarily a product of *identification*. This cultural embrace of viewing race as identification is, in many ways, consequential to how we understand the implications of all racial categories, but has provided a unique opening for the expression multiracial identification.

If we first begin by reviewing the origins and political purpose of race in the United States, we recognize that, historically, race has been practiced as a process of classification: a racial category is assigned to individuals. Most importantly, racial classification served a

particular purpose: it was the primary feature used to defend the social order that upheld one group, whites, as superior and all other groups as inferior. Because race is central to understanding group relationships, reliance on racial categorization became institutionalized and deeply embedded in social practices (Haney Lopez 1996; Marx 1998; Sidanius and Pratto 1999; Smith 1999). Both institutions and individuals sought to preserve and defend the boundaries that defined each racial category. Individual interactions which policed who could be “white” enforced the racial categorization system in everyday interactions while laws such as those promoting “separate but equal” sanctioned local practices that physically separated racial groups. Racial categories represent powerful social tools used to serve the political objective to maintain an explicit social hierarchy of groups.

To buttress this social hierarchy, race has been understood to be represented by a small set of discrete categories. Categories such as “white,” “black,” and “Asian” have been used to designate a range of rights and liberties such as who is a full citizen, what rights can be exercised, or where someone can own a home. To uphold these associations, racial categories have been assumed to be mutually exclusive from one another so it is never assumed that a person can be a member of more than one racial category. Then to maintain durability of these categories, people were sorted into discrete racial groups based on socially defined rules prevalent at a given time period. For example, as what has been defined above, the rule of hypodescent, was asserted to create an inclusive category of “black” (Davis 1991; Hollinger 2003). Historic mixed race populations such as “Mulatto” and “Octoroon” were rooted in these assumptions of hypodescent. Alternatively, whiteness was defined by phenotype and what was labeled “common knowledge” understandings which effectively equated whiteness with certain European heritages and was used to maintain the perception of exclusivity and privileges

associated with the white racial category such as citizenship (Gross 2008; Haney-Lopez 1996). By comparing the definitions that determine who is classified as white or as black, we can see that racial categories were first defined by different social rules, then individuals were sorted into those categories based on those rules. In turn, one's racial classification was attached to a particular social status and rights were bestowed based on that status.

Although race has been assigned to individuals, this is not to say that race has never been conceived as an identity. Because race represents a salient social marker, individuals recognize that their assigned classification is an important characteristic describing who they are and their place in society. Individuals largely accept their racial classification and adopt that racial status as a feature of their individual identity. Historians have reviewed early slave narratives and document the powerful influence of race in determining how people understood their sense of self (Berlin 2000; Blassingame 1979; White 1999). Furthermore, group identities have developed among individuals who recognize their shared racial status. One would be hard pressed to counter the belief that members of the Klu Klux Klan strongly embraced a white racial identity (Blee 2002). Groups have also emphasized and expressly highlighted their racial status so that they could be differentiated from others. For example, when waves of new immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe arrived to the United States in the late nineteenth century, they were assumed to be inferior to native born Americans whose ancestors were largely from Northern and Western Europe. To distance themselves with low status blacks and other minorities, these immigrants downplayed national origin differences by expressly highlighting their designated white racial status (Jacobson 1998; Ignatiev 1995; Roediger 1991). In all of these cases, however, racial and ethnic identities were not necessarily direct products of personal preferences or choices but rather were developed as a response to an imposed classification.

The shift from conceiving race primarily as a process of assigned classification to one that can be asserted through personal identification did not happen abruptly but was slowly cultivated as the result of multiple political, cultural and demographic shifts that happened over the second half of the twentieth century. While Chapter 2 will cover these in greater detail, some examples include those advances attributed to the Civil Rights Movement that have weakened the ability to explicitly discriminate on the basis of race. Although studies confirm that racial tensions and discrimination still exist today (Massey 2007; Oliver and Shapiro 2006), there have been important and notable gains towards racial equality since passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960's. These advances have, in many ways, challenged the pessimistic outlook towards race relations in this contemporary era and has thus encouraged the outlook among many that one's race is less likely to be a structural barrier (for example, see Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997).⁶ Alongside emphasis in federal policy towards racial equality, there have been cultural developments such as the growing discussions on "multiculturalism" and "diversity" (Glaser 1998; Kymlicka 1996). These new values reframe racial difference in a positive rather than in a pejorative light. Inclusive practices in which Americans are not simply asked to accept but also offer opportunities to encourage and celebrate racial and cultural differences is often found in pop culture and the mainstream media.

Collectively, these social, political and cultural changes are highlighted because they can be seen to have cultivated the public perception that, contrary to previous eras, individual agency can challenge and possibly overcome the constraints of race. Alongside this is an increased emphasis on personal self-expression which is reflected in practices of racial identification. In-

⁶ At its most extreme, a growing contingent of Americans believe that race is now irrelevant to American life and so the country can now engage in decisions that are "colorblind." These frames fortify American liberalism and a public belief that individual merit is the primary obstacle to personal success. At the same time, scholars have been critical of the color-blind perspective, see Bonilla-Silva 2003

depth interviews with multiracial activists presented later in this book will reveal an embrace of individual agency that is applied to the preference to self-identify as multiracial. By asserting a multiracial identity, activists advocate that personal preferences in racial identification should and can play a role in how people are racially classified by others. This agency-oriented perspective is a distinct contrast to the historical logic applied to racial categorization in which identity was rooted in the experience of assigned racial categorization. While these activists hold a distinct multiracial group consciousness and so are recognized as individuals who represent a unique class of political activists, their ideological perspectives and personal experiences will offer qualitative insight into the narratives that uphold the practice of multiracial identity choice.

By tracing the historical development of race, we can see a subtle but important shift from perceiving race primarily as assigned classification to a characteristic influenced by personal preferences and identity. What becomes apparent is that today's rise of a self-identified multiracial population is largely a response to the assumptions cultivated in the early twentieth century in which racial categories were strictly assigned and considered to be immutable. The belief that race can be conceived by the individual and primarily reflect a product of personal identity is developed as a belief that historic practices should no longer apply. Yet, at the same time, the belief and practice of race as assigned classification has not disappeared and, many might argue, it is in no way a waning practice. Thus, the findings in this book show that, while racial identification as multiracial might be increasingly a visible practice, the established racial categories, particularly the distinction between "white" and "black," continue to influence the meaning of multiracial identities. So while some may argue that the rise of multiracial individuals is fundamentally changing how Americans understand race (see for example, Hochschild, Weaver and Burch 2012; Lee and Bean 2010), this book demonstrates that the

significance of multiracial identification must instead be seen as a product of historical processes and events in American race relations.

Institutional Opportunities: The Option to Mark One or Many Races

In addition to cultural norms, the transition from conceiving race as assigned classification to an indicator of personal identity can also be documented in how the federal government has shifted its collection of racial statistics over time. When officials first began collecting racial data, the race of respondent was determined by the enumerator (Anderson 1988; Snipp 2003). The federal government outlined its definition of each racial category and directed enumerators to classify Americans based on this template. But starting in 1960, the Census began using a mail-in form in which each American was instructed to self-report her own characteristics to the federal government. Race was then characterized as a reporting of how a person understood her own race rather than what was defined by the government. The opportunity to express one's own conceptualization of race was then expanded in 2000 when the Census Bureau changed the instructions by offering the opportunity to "Mark One or More" races on the racial identification question.⁷

One of the unanticipated implications of these institutional changes on the Census is that it has created an environment where race is conceptualized as a form of personal identification (see also Nobles 2000; Prewitt 2012; Williams 2006). In addition declaring your own race, the flexibility that allows individuals to designate multiple racial categories offers many different options for how Americans want to respond: they can declare the race that others think they are,

⁷ For more information, see the "Federal Guidance on Maintaining, Collecting and Reporting Racial and Ethnic Data to the U.S. Department of Education," *Federal Register*, 72(202): 59266-59279. See also <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/reic/resource.asp>

they can follow historical precedent and self-identify with one established racial category, or they can employ the choice to mark multiple race boxes (see also Bailey 2008; Roth 2012; Saperstein and Penner 2012). However, while there are many options in how one might want to respond to a race question, we at the same time cannot assume that individuals use the exact same logic or motives when they declare their race. A useful example that best reflects the many competing logics to answering the race question is the contrast between the multiracial identities expressed by the activists who sought to change the racial identification question on the 2000 Census and the racial identity of President Barack Obama.

Contrasting Two Cases of Racial Identification

The 2000 Census change was the product of lobbying efforts mobilized by a group of organizations which represented interracial couples and their families (Williams 2006). These activists framed race as an expression of one's heritage and background (see for example, Root 1992). Their arguments promoted a desire to promote views of personal identity and "accuracy" in racial reporting and so their lobbying strategies targeted data collection activities by the Census Bureau (Williams 2006). Carlos Fernandez, then president of the multiracial advocacy group Association of MultiEthnic Americans (AMEA), testified in favor for a change on the racial identification question by stating:

"We believe that every person, especially every child, who is multiethnic/interracial has the same right as any other person to assert a identity that embraces the fullness and integrity of their actual ancestry... Each and every time we confront one of these [government] forms, we are faced yet again with the awkward, irrational, and for many of us, the offensive task of selecting a 'race' or

‘ethnicity’ which does not truthfully identify us and has the further result of failing to count our community.⁸”

In the fight to change the wording on the census form, multiracial advocates argued that the existing method used by the government to collect racial identification, which only allowed respondents to select one racial category, not only discriminated against those of multiple racial backgrounds but was also outmoded. Advocates argued that government collection procedures should keep pace with the growing racial complexity of American society. By offering a multiracial option, advocates believed that the option would help raise public awareness and encourage people to express their own perceptions of racial identity on official forms. Their emphasis was also on recognizing the role of family ancestry: those who have two white parents would classify themselves as white, while those who have parents of two different races would be able to declare those two races. In this way, activists conceived racial categorization as both an indicator of identity and family ancestry. Thus, once Americans were given the option, activists’ proposed assumption is that all Americans would take the opportunity to report the nuances of their race.

Yet, once the new question wording was implemented in 2000, it became increasingly clear that how a person chooses to racially identify herself is not simply dictated by parental ancestry. Contrary to expectations, it became apparent that many Americans with parents of two different races did not opt to select multiple racial categories on the census. To the disappointment of many multiracial activists, the most prominent child of interracial parents in

⁸ U.S. Congress, House, Subcommittee on Census, Statistics and Postal Personnel, Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, *Hearings on the Review of Federal Measurement of Race and Ethnicity*, testimony by Carlos Fernandez, June 30, 1993, pg 127. Downloaded from <http://www.ameasite.org/classification/tstmny93.asp>

the United States, President Barack Obama, selected only “black” as his racial identification on his 2010 census form. Obama’s family background was well publicized to the American electorate when he ran for president in 2008. Americans are now well aware of the president’s personal narrative as a child of a white mother from Kansas and a Kenyan immigrant father but who was reared by white grandparents in Hawaii (Obama 2007). Although Obama often described his mixed racial background in campaign speeches, he explicitly self-identifies as (only) African American.

Obama’s reasons for identifying as black are accounted for in his 2004 autobiography. But one revealing reflection on race was a simple statement he offered during a Democratic presidential debate in 2007.⁹ When queried about his black racial identity, Obama stated “you know, when I’m catching a cab in Manhattan - in the past, I think I’ve given my credentials.” With this statement, Obama communicates the persistent constraints imposed by race. For him, race is not a choice but rather a feature imposed on him by society and one that has clear implications for how he is treated as an individual. The example of hailing a taxi speaks to not only the basic, everyday implications of assigned racial classification but also how race impacts how individuals experience the world. By identifying as black, Obama asserts his recognition that classification as black distinctively characterizes his life experiences.

This contrast between Obama and advocates of multiracial option on the 2000 Census demonstrates how different personal understandings of race correspond with decisions about racial identification (See also Campbell, Bratter and Roth 2016). Some children of interracial marriage define their race as primarily an indicator of family ancestry and choose to self-identify as multiracial. In contrast, there are individuals that follow existing rules of racial classification,

⁹ For the transcript see: <http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/07/23/debate.transcript/>

such as hypodescent, and identify with an established racial category. Thus, different definitions of race encourage distinct forms of racial identities. Some multiracial activists may argue that their race should be a reflection of family ancestry but this is their personal approach to race, not a universal definition of how race operates. In contrast, Obama's racial identity reflects distinctively different considerations beyond family background. Obama's position reflects how historical and social processes that have defined race in America create meaning for race. Taxi cab drivers perceive Obama as black because they rely on characteristics such as skin color, phenotype, common knowledge and other social cues to racially classify individuals (Cornell and Harmann 2007; Hattam 2007; Omi and Winant 1994). This example perfectly illustrates the racial environment in which Americans operate today and the complexity that characterizes processes of racial identification that can be largely attributed to the new opportunities to assert multiracial identity choice.

Race as a Reflection of Personal Identification

Building from this contrast, this book pushes readers to adopt a more nuanced approach for understanding what it means when a person reports her race to be only one established racial category and how that differs from the decision to assert one's race as multiracial. Today, Americans live in a culture where race is commonly declared by the individual and interact in an environment where racial identity choices are institutionally sanctioned. In this environment, race is not understood simply a marker of one's demography but more appropriately a feature asserted by an individual. I contend that a more useful conceptual approach to thinking about today's multiracial population is that they exercise the identity choice to be multiracial. At the same time, like the example of President Obama above, those who self-identify with only one

established racial category are also making identity assertions about how they want to be racially classified by others. Both the multiracial activists and President Obama are given different options for how to express their race, but each chose different racial identities which were guided by different ways of conceptualizing race.

Because we typically collect race data using a measure of self-report and giving the option to check multiple races, how a person declares her race is a useful empirical measure for understanding how both that individual chooses to racially identify and how that person understands her place in the racial order. This book thus adds to this literature by asserting that racial identities are important reflections of how a person approaches race.¹⁰ Because race represents a socially and politically consequential feature in the United States, Americans do not take their racial identification lightly and are well aware that their racial identification is an important social marker.¹¹ Racial identification has not been typically described as a representation of a person's approach to race because historically it was assumed that an individual identifies with the racial category in which she was assigned. As a result, most research tends to focus on how race encourages attachment to particular *group* identities (for

¹⁰ Of course, identification with a racial category represents one of many dimensions reflecting how an individual understands race. Other scholarship has developed different measures to document how an individual processes race such as level of racial prejudice or resentment, implicit racial attitudes and personality scales such as ethnocentrism (Dovidio Kawakami and Gaertner 2002; Kinder and Kam 2009; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Sears et al. 1997). However, many of these scales involve assessment of out-groups and perceptions of racial conflict. In contrast, racial identification is an indicator of how the individual understands her own orientation in the context of the American racial hierarchy (Masuoka and Junn 2013). Moreover, racial identification is an act that Americans practice most often in their everyday life. A person is more often asked to describe her racial identity than, for example, asked to deliberate the implications of institutionalized racism.

¹¹ We know that racial identity is associated with other many important factors such as self-esteem and belonging to groups (Goodstein and Ponterotto 1997; Phinney and Chavira 1992; Rumbaut 1994; Steele 2010). Although studies on early childhood and adolescent development show that early in life, racial identities are flexible and subject to surrounding social contexts (Phinney 1990; Quintana 2007), it is typically the case that the majority of even young adults report the same racial identity across contexts and their attachment to their ethnic identities increase with age (Harris and Sim 2002; Kiang et al 2010; Nishina et al 2010). So while not all possible social identities a person could use to characterize her sense of self reflect purposeful and meaningful descriptions, how a person chooses to describe her race is generally recognized by Americans to have social or political consequence.

example, Conover 1984; Dawson 1994) because it was not certain that an individual would develop identity attachment to an assigned category. However, because individuals are now presented with different racial identity options when being queried about their race, such as the opportunity to self-identify as multiracial, scholars are now confronted with the task to explain *why* a person makes the identity choices that they do.

Given this argument, I adopt a particular methodological strategy and analytical framework which highlights racial *self-identification*. Therefore, only those who self-identify as multiracial will be considered “multiracial” in this book. In addition, those who self-identify with only one of the established racial categories of “white,” “black,” “Asian,” or “Latino¹²” will be labeled as that racial category or by the term “monoracial.” Self-identified multiracial individuals choose to adopt monikers such as “mixed,” “multiracial,” “biracial,” or like the golfer Tiger Woods, they create their own term like “Cablinasian” to describe their racial identity.¹³ This book does not focus on a particular term embraced by multiracial individuals, but rather the fact that they have embraced the option to assert their own form of racial identity that reflects a hybrid of two or more established racial categories. Many might claim that there are other ways of identifying a multiracial person such as identifying a person’s genetic

¹² In this book, “Latinos” will be designated as one group and in most discussions will be labeled as a racial group or “monoracial.” However, those who claim to be Latino but also assert to have a multiracial identity will be included in the self-identified multiracial population. I acknowledge that describing Latinos as one racial group is not consistent with Latinos’ official federal classification as an “ethnic” group. Today, the federal government defines Latinos as an ethnicity which means one can be Latino and one of the six racial categories of white, black, Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native or Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian or “some other race.” Because the objective of this book is to understand and explain multiracial identification, I choose not to focus on the problematized classification of Latinos as an “ethnic” group and rather treat Latinos as a group to be contrasted with the three other major racial groups: whites, blacks and Asian Americans. Because I believe that a discussion about race in the United States should include a discussion that incorporates Latinos, I made the decision to include rather than to exclude Latinos in this book. For a more extensive discussion of Latinos as an “ethnic” or “racial” group, please see Rodriguez 2000.

¹³ This is the term Tiger Woods famously used in a 1997 interview on the Oprah Winfrey show. Some hypothesize that, this interview helped garner greater public recognition that there are multiracial identities (Cole and Andrews 2011; Ibrahim 2009).

background, distinguishing those with an ambiguous racial phenotype, or only selecting individuals who have parents in an interracial marriage.¹⁴ However, these definitions rely on different approaches of defining race by emphasizing the role of other imposed social norms and so these approaches are not analyzed in this book.

By highlighting race as self-identification, the empirical analyses are oriented towards understanding the processes that lead individuals to declare a racial identity and to reveal the possible political consequences of their chosen racial identification. I argue that identification as multiracial is a decision individuals arrive at, and so is not simply a social identity that is automatically adopted. The contrast between President Obama and multiracial activists is most effective at illuminating how individuals can arrive at distinctively different conclusions about their racial identity. For many Americans, the adoption of a racial identity is not a straightforward process but rather is a complicated one in which there are many conflicting ideological and normative considerations as well as social contexts that must be taken into account. Although this book highlights multiracial identification, because self-identifying as monoracial can also be understood as an identity choice, the body of the evidence highlights the contrast between multiracial and monoracial identities. I will examine the evidence to understand how particular logics, social contexts and personal resources are correlated with the decision to identify as multiracial and contrast these patterns with those that are correlated with the decision to identify as monoracial. The evidence will show that, even though multiracial identification is a relatively new option for Americans, there are some distinctive patterns that differentiate attachments to a multiracial identity from those attachments to monoracial identities.

¹⁴ There is indeed a growing literature which explores these topics. Please see Hochschild, Weaver and Burch 2011; Pauker et al. 2009; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2007.

This book highlights the decision to self-identify as multiracial but it should also be recognized that within the multiracial population there is significant racial diversity. Multiracial individuals can declare different racial combinations such as white-black-Native American, white-Asian or Asian-Latino. Importantly, census data shows that the majority of self-identified multiracial individuals denote two races, with one of their races being “white.” These patterns inspire many hypotheses: they could suggest that there are more open opportunities to declare certain types of multiracial identities today or, alternatively, they could suggest that certain types of multiracial identities are more desirable than others. The evidence in this book will show that there are distinctive demographic and attitudinal differences based on the racial combinations reported by multiracial individuals. So while I assert that the multiracial population shares a common decision to self-identify as racially hybrid, the historically established racial hierarchy is still important for understanding the social and political implications of multiracial identities.

Taken together, an important lesson that will be gleaned from the evidence is that, while identity choice exists, not all racial identities are understood as fluid and flexible. While Americans can choose between self-identifying as “multiracial” or with one monoracial minority category such as “black,” “Asian” or “Latino,” I do not find evidence that identification as “white” is understood as a flexible identity option. Moreover, flexible racial identity choices are not an option for all Americans. Racial identity choice may be made available by institutions such as the Census, but what becomes clear is that only certain types of individuals can actually practice multiracial identities in reality. In other words, a person might think of herself as multiracial but her interactions with others lead her to identify as a monoracial minority. Like the processes that lead to the creation of the established monoracial categories, the option to choose multiracial identity is also structured by social and political circumstances. In this way, the

formation of multiracial identities shares an important similarity with established monoracial identities since there are structural and cultural barriers that continue to dictate use of racial categories. Thus, multiracial identification is not simply an indicator of a person's attitudes toward race but also reflects the circumstances of an individual's surrounding context and the resources made available to that person.

Implications of Identity Choice

Once we make the connection between race and self-identification, there are many different directions to evaluate the social and political consequences of identity choice. This book offers three ways of thinking about the possible implications: the role of multiracial identification in development of political attitudes, citizen reactions and evaluations of racial identity assertions, and the lessons gleaned about racial formation in the twenty-first century.

Racial Identity and Political Attitudes

Longstanding research comparing the political attitudes and behaviors of blacks and whites--and increasingly from the contrasts with Asian Americans and Latinos--shows that racial classification and identification matter for politics (Bowler and Segura 2012; Fraga et al 2011; Masuoka and Junn 2013; Tate 1994; Wong et al 2011). The pivotal study by Michael Dawson (1994) demonstrated that because blacks share the historical experiences of discrimination and status as a marginalized racialized group, they are more likely to take racial group considerations into account when forming their individual political opinions. As such, Dawson's study shows the clear impact of being classified as a racialized, non-white subject on development of a person's political interests and attitudes. If multiracial individuals do, in fact, reflect a different

approach to how they conceive of race compared to other Americans, then we cannot overlook their growing presence in society and so should include this group in an analysis of political behavior and attitudes.

Studies have shown that there is a distinct difference between the political attitudes of whites and racial minorities (Bowler and Segura 2012; Fraga et al 2011; Masuoka and Junn 2013; Tate 1994; Wong et al 2011). Scholars explain these persistent findings by pointing to the structural and institutionalized nature of race as it is practiced in the United States. Whites enjoy a privileged status on the hierarchy that largely is bestowed by their racial classification. In contrast, racial minorities adopt responses to the political system based on the social and political constraints to which they are subjected. Race is a persistent consideration for racial minorities because it acts as a constant force in their daily activities whereas for whites, race is rarely at the forefront of the mind because their race does not often present personal obstacles. When making this comparison between whites and racial minorities, we can see that our theories explaining the connection between race and political attitude dimension are rooted in assumptions that individual attitude development reflects their assigned position in society.

Self-identified multiracial individuals thus pose a challenge to these existing assumptions. Self-identified multiracial individuals have chosen their racial identities and, as I claim, multiracial identification reflects an embrace of agency in acts of racial classification. If we adopt an identity choice approach, then we should expect that multiracial individuals may not entirely view their race as a constraining feature on their lives. As such, it is an important question whether the logics commonly used to explain the connection between race and political attitude development for racial minorities also apply to multiracial individuals. This book uses a comparative approach to examine if multiracial attitudes align more closely with whites or with

racial minorities (specifically blacks and Latinos) on policy issues related to racial redistribution. I argue that if multiracial political attitudes align closer with those of whites, then this can be used as evidence to uphold the argument that multiracial individuals view their race as personal identity rather than a structural feature that constrains individual life chances.

Racial Identities as a Political Cue to Voters

By highlighting the tension between racial classification and identification, we become more aware that a person's racial identity may not match how others choose to racially classify that person. Multiracial identities represent the most obvious case for this, especially given the fact that, until recently, it was not common to assert a multiracial identity. Given the lack of precedent, may individuals want to self-identify as multiracial even though other Americans would classify them as white or a monoracial minority. But self-identification as monoracial is also subject to this same tension. As captured in the example above with President Obama, there are many Americans who might be possibly seen as mixed race because they are children of interracial marriages but they choose to self-identify with only one established racial category. While identification as monoracial could possibly signal acquiescence to historic racial norms, in a growing culture of self-identification, we can also recognize monoracial identification as an identity choice.

However the possible mismatch between how one chooses to racially identify and how others choose to perceive your race raises questions about the influence of racial identification on interpersonal interactions. To what extent do we pay attention to the racial identity a person asserts and to what extent do your own perceptions of a person's race inform how you interact with and treat that person? Does one process override the other? Those who embrace narratives

of identity choice might believe that a person's asserted identity should primarily guide how others perceive your race. At the same time, this belief conflicts with social science research that shows how quickly individuals assign others into racial groups (Allport 1954, Brewer 1988, Macrae and Bodenhausen 2000).

In the context of politics, there are particular political stereotypes linked with each racial and ethnic group, which in turn, are used to make decisions about their own interests. For example, blacks are commonly assumed to be overwhelmingly Democratic and supportive of governmental intervention (Tate 1994; Tate 2010) and studies show that white voters use these assumptions to determine their vote choice for black candidates (Lerman and Sadin 2016). Moreover studies show that race is often used as a political tool by elites to either mobilize or demobilize voters during campaigns (Barreto 2010; Mendelberg 2001). Identities, in particular, serve as useful mobilization tools. For example, when candidates emphasize their ethnic backgrounds, they seek to engage voters with a similar ethnic background by relying on the unspoken assumption that the candidates will demonstrate loyalties to co-ethnic constituents (Dahl 1961; Parenti 1967).

Therefore, it is up to question whether assertions of racial identity guide interpersonal interactions or decision-making. By examining to what extent a person's racial identity preferences align with how others perceive that person's race, I can determine how assertions of racial identity can override processes of racial assignment. This book will consider how voters racially classify political leaders and to what extent these perceptions guide their evaluation of leaders. By raising the tension between assigned classification and identification, we become more aware that race may not be an easy or automatic shortcut for individuals to rely on when making political decisions, as what has been typically assumed in the scholarship. Messages

about identity may conflict with other definitions of race, forcing voters to process multiple pieces of information when making decisions about how they evaluate their political leaders.

New Questions for Racial Formation

Finally, in addition to the implications of identity choice on individual political attitudes, identity choice pushes us to think more conceptually about the meaning of racial categories and future developments in American race relations that may result from more dominant claims of identity choice. By developing the identity choice framework, I raise awareness about the growing emphasis on personal agency and personal preference which many Americans are beginning to adopt in their approach to race. In many ways, the narratives generated by multiracial activists that emphasize agency and self-expression promotes the view that race is becoming a more flexible practice. Yet, each of us experiences the tension between assignment and identification differently and so how individuals respond to this tension will be central to how we understand the role of race. In light of this view, the evidence in this book pushes readers to think about how individuals navigate the competing norms that characterize race as assigned classification and those that characterize race a product of personal identification.

Building from this is an even larger question of whether the rise of identity choice changes the meanings attached to established racial categories. What is particularly striking is that the rise of multiracial identification is not found to change or even problematize the existing racial order. Framing race as identity offers Americans the ability to assert different types of hybrid racial identities but at the same time, these hybrid identities only make sense when contrasted against established monoracial categories. This book discusses the possible future implications of identity choice and shows that there are some systematic patterns but there also

other findings that inspire new questions. The empirical patterns reflect what is possible to know in the beginning stage of racial formation and thus offers future scholars the opportunity to draw new evidence and hypotheses about the trajectory of race in the United States.

Overview of the Book

In the pages that will follow, I further develop the identity choice approach and employ multiple methodological strategies in order to reveal the process of racial formation which is occurring today. The analyses presented in Chapters 2 and 3 build on one another to develop the claim that Americans increasingly perceive race as a product of personal identification. Chapter 2 first sets the foundation by outlining the historical course of events which explain the rise of identity choice at the turn of the twenty-first century. This chapter traces the curious evolution of racial classification practices in the United States by charting those historical events and cases that established the American racial classification system. I then trace how the tension between assigned classification and identification came to light by describing how different events which occurred largely around the time of the modern Civil Rights movement created a norm that framed race as a product of personal identification.

Although the shift between assigned classification and identification influence all Americans, Chapter 3 analyzes the narratives used to defend the assertion of multiracial identities. Past studies have shown that widespread public visibility of multiracial identities can be attributed to a small number of activists who sought to mobilize and promote multiracial identification choice (DaCosta 2007; Williams 2006). These activists have clearly embraced an ideological view about race which proposes that racial identity should be a product of individual choice. This chapter presents data from a sample of 27 in-depth interviews with multiracial

activists representing nearly 20 different non-profit advocacy organizations or activities dealing with multiracial representation that I conducted in 2006. The objective of this chapter is to outline how those narratives posed by activists offer coherent and compelling arguments as to why individuals should choose to self-identify as multiracial. What the interviews will show is that activists do not only assert a multiracial identity but reflect a clear group consciousness in which their identity is connected with a distinct set of ideological beliefs. These interviews reveal how this particular group is responding to historic practices of race and have developed a narrative of identity choice which justifies the decision to self-identify as multiracial.

To further substantiate the claim that multiracial identities exist because there are social and political opportunities to assert these identities, Chapter 4 presents evidence demonstrating that multiracial is a form of identity rather than an objective demographic trend. Using data from the Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University *Race and Ethnicity in 2001: Attitudes, Perceptions and Experiences Survey* (WKH 2001) and the 2009 *Racial Attitudes in America II* collected by Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (Pew 2009), I demonstrate that multiracial identification is a complex identity that is not simply an essentialist reporting of a person's family background or heritage. I also offer an interpretation of census data and discuss how multiracial identification is most likely asserted when there are resources or opportunities to do so.

Chapters 5 and 6 offer two different ways to understand the possible individual-level implications of identity choice. Chapter 5 focuses first on the influence of racial identification on individual political attitude formation. Using two datasets which include sizable samples of whites, blacks, Latinos and self-identified multiracial individuals--the *American National Election Study 2008 Time Series Study* and the 2009 Pew--I compare the responses across

monoracial and multiracial groups on partisanship, public policy preferences and racial attitudes. I then consider to what extent racial background continues to influence political attitude formation among multiracial individuals by evaluating the extent to which the racial combination reported by a multiracial respondent explains the variation in political attitudes found within the multiracial population. This chapter also considers some evidence towards the speculation that multiracial individuals perceive a shared racialized experience.

Chapter 6 assesses how individuals react to assertions of identity choice by examining how voters understand President Barack Obama's race. President Obama represents one unique case of identity choice assertion: he publicly identifies as African American yet consistently highlights his mixed racial background. The first half of the chapter compares how whites, blacks and Latinos racially classify Obama. Because there are a sizable number of respondents who identify Obama as mixed race rather than black, the second half of the chapter examines whether those who racially classify Obama as mixed race evaluate the President more favorably than those who classify him as black. In particular, I test the *de-racialization* hypothesis: the expectation that minority political leaders who deemphasize their loyalties to co-ethnics will generate greater political support among the white electorate. This chapter explores whether perceptions of Obama as a mixed race person had the effect of deracializing the President among white voters.

The concluding chapter takes stock of the politics surrounding identity choice and multiracial identification. In this final chapter, I review and assess how today's multiracial population offers an ideal case study of racial formation. I also discuss some of the larger societal implications to the rise of identity choice as well as some of the new questions that are stimulated by the ideas and evidence presented throughout the book. The conclusion emphasizes

the importance of evaluating the implications of multiracial identification in contrast to monoracial identities. Rather than seeing multiracial individuals as a harbinger of dramatic change to the practice of race in the United States, I argue that instead we see multiracial identification and the growing perspective of identity choice as ideas that are in direct dialogue with, rather than in replacement of, longstanding established racial categories.