Racial Fluidity and Inequality in the United States

Culture of Health Program
National Academy of Medicine
March 2023
Broad research agenda

• Is race a fixed characteristic or a fluid one?

• How are changes in race associated with changes in social status?
Our Standard Inequality Story

Race

Employer expectations
Police treatment
Marriage markets

Employment
Incarceration
Marital status
Health
## Illustrative cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person ID</th>
<th>Pre-unemployment</th>
<th>Post-unemployment</th>
<th>% white pre</th>
<th>% white post</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7943</td>
<td>.WOWWW</td>
<td>WWO0000000000</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9282</td>
<td>WWWWWWWWWOW</td>
<td>OWWO0000</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person ID</th>
<th>Pre-unemployment</th>
<th>Post-unemployment</th>
<th>% black pre</th>
<th>% black post</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>343</td>
<td>OBO</td>
<td>BBBB BBB BBBB BB</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9266</td>
<td>W.OWW</td>
<td>BOBO BOBO BOBO</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B=black, O=other, W=white, .=missing
Cumulative effects

Probability of being classified as white

Baseline: 1.00
+Incarcerated: 0.95
+Unemployed: 0.90
+Divorced: 0.85
+Poverty: 0.80
Key findings

- Race is not a fixed characteristic of individuals
  - It is a flexible marker of status

- Both identification and classification change
An experimental manipulation

- Is this a causal effect?
- How is status information transmitted?
- Can status information affect classification process even when the ultimate categorization is unchanged?
An experimental manipulation
An experimental manipulation

Video courtesy of Jon Freeman
Summary

- How Americans are racially classified by others is influenced by a host of life experiences.
- These processes are at play across many different race categories and stereotypes.
- Stereotypes shape racial perceptions even when the classification does not change.
- Relevant factors vary by gender.
- Context and interactions matter.
Thank you!

Results presented from projects supported by the Russell Sage Foundation (83-09-05, Penner and Saperstein PI’s), the UC Center for New Racial Studies (Penner and Saperstein PI’s), National Institutes of Health (F31-MH09200, Freeman PI) and National Science Foundation (BCS-0435547, Ambady PI).