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Bridging Social Psychologies

"Jason and Kevin, 7 Days"

Photograph by Dona Schwartz



The Journal of Microsociologies

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The Journal of Microsociologies

A JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Passing as Black: Racial Identity Work among Biracial Americans

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Drawing on interview data with black-white biracial adults, we examine the considerable agency most have in asserting their racial identities to others. Extending research on “identity work” (Snow and Anderson 1987), we explore the strategies biracial people use to conceal (i.e., pass), cover, and/or accent aspects of their racial ancestries, and the individual and structural-level factors that limit the accessibility and/or effectiveness of some strategies. We further find that how these biracial respondents identify is often contextual—most identify as biracial, but in some contexts, they pass as monoracial. Scholars argue that passing may be a relic of the past, yet we find that passing still occurs today. Most notably, we find a striking reverse pattern of passing today—while passing during the Jim Crow era involved passing as white, these respondents more often report passing as black today. Motivations for identity work are explored, with an emphasis on passing as black.

Keywords: passing, identity work, biracial, multiracial, identity

My father has sixteen brothers and sisters and . . . a lot of them used to pass as white . . . I mean it's easier if you can go to any movie theater you want. [A] few of my aunts told me about a place they used to go to and eat all the time that was “whites only” . . . they did it as a joke . . . they did it because they wanted to show how stupid [segregation] was. —Olivia, age 45

Until relatively recently, few racial options have been available to multiracial people—especially those with black ancestry. The one-drop rule, rooted in slavery and Jim Crow segregation, defined multiracial people with any drop of black blood as *black* (Davis 1991). Just like their monoracial black

counterparts, they had few, if any, rights (e.g., they were enslaved, they could not vote, they were restricted from many public facilities). According to Daniel (1992), “Multiracial individuals for the most part have accepted the racial status quo, and have identified themselves as Black. A significant number of individuals, however, have chosen the path of resistance . . . Individual resistance has taken the form primarily of ‘passing’” as white (91). Like Olivia’s aunts (described above), many Americans passed as white to resist the racially restrictive one-drop rule and the racial status quo of the Jim Crow era (Daniel 2002; Williamson 1980).

Racial passing has generally been understood as a phenomenon in which a person of one race identifies and presents himself or herself as another (usually white). According to Ramona Douglass, a multiracial activist and cofounder of the Association of Multiethnic Americans, however, the *concept* of passing (not the act itself) is racist in origin (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1992; see also

The authors would like to thank David Brunsmas, Caitlin Killian, Corey Fields, and the four anonymous reviewers for their feedback on earlier drafts of this manuscript. Direct correspondence to Nikki Khanna, Department of Sociology, University of Vermont, 31 South Prospect Street, Burlington, VT 05452; nkhanna@uvm.edu.

Williamson 1980) because it is entwined with the racist one-drop rule. Even if a person has white ancestry and looks white, he is considered “really” black because of his black ancestry (no matter how distant); white identity is perceived as somehow “fraudulent” (Daniel 2002: 83). Kennedy (2003) provides a more precise definition and defines passing as “a deception that enables a person to adopt specific roles or identities from which he or she would otherwise be barred by *prevailing social standards*” (283; emphasis added). Thus, if one were “really” black, as defined by the social standards of the Jim Crow era (e.g., the one-drop rule) and presented himself or herself as white, he or she was perceived as deceiving the public with a false identity.

Passing as white was especially attractive during the Jim Crow era when blacks had few rights and opportunities, yet little is known about racial passing today. Some scholars argue that given the increase in opportunities to black Americans, passing is a relic of the past. For instance, Russell et al. (1992) claim that “Today . . . while some African Americans pass ‘part time for economic reasons, the vast majority of those who could pass don’t—and would never dream of doing so” (73). Similarly, Daniel (1992) says, “It would be difficult to say whether passing has actually decreased with the dismantling of segregation and the implementation of civil rights legislation . . . [but] it would be safe to conclude . . . that the most immediate impetus behind passing has been removed” (93). While the driving force behind passing may have faded, we ask: Are biracial people still passing today? If yes, how so and why?

Further, Brunnsma and Rockquemore (2001) argue that racial identities are subject to some degree of constraint, especially for those with black ancestry. They claim, however, that, “It remains to be seen how much negotiation and strategy [of race] is involved” (244). Focusing on this gap in the literature, this study also investigates the ways in which black-white people manage their racial identities in day-to-day interactions. Passing is one strategy of racial presentation, but there are likely other ways in

which people manage their identities. Thus, we also ask: How much individual strategy is involved in racial identity today? And what types of strategies, other than passing, are used?

To address these questions, we first contextualize the study with a look at racial passing during the Jim Crow era. Second, we review the identity literature. Symbolic interactionists suggest that identity is process—society influences identities, yet individuals are also active agents in shaping their identities (Cooley 1902; Gecas and Schwalbe 1983). Certainly this is true among those who actively passed as white during the Jim Crow era. Much remains to be learned, however, about how biracial people may act as active agents today; more general research on “identity work” (Snow and Anderson 1987), however, provides some clues. Third, we describe the research methodology, the sample characteristics, and limitations of the sample. The first author interviewed 40 black-white biracial adults, and based on these results we describe the key findings of the study.

Specifically, we find that respondents describe considerable agency in asserting their preferred racial identities to others, and they use various strategies—verbal identification/disidentification, selective disclosure, manipulation of phenotype, highlighting/downplaying cultural symbols, and selective association. We extend the identity work literature by delineating a typology that distinguishes passing from other types of identity work in order to create a more nuanced and fluid analysis of identity and the ways in which people manage their identities—respondents use these strategies to conceal aspects of their racial ancestry (i.e., to *pass* as monoracial), but when passing is not feasible or desired, they may *cover* (i.e., downplay) (Goffman 1963) or *accent* (i.e., draw attention to) particular ancestries. We further extend research on identity work by identifying structural-level factors, such as social class and social networks, which limit the accessibility and/or effectiveness of some strategies of identity work (in addition to individual-level factors like phenotype).

Moreover, we find that the majority of these biracial respondents identify as biracial or multiracial, but occasionally pass as mono-racial. While passing during the Jim Crow era involved passing as white, we find a striking reverse pattern of passing today—only a few respondents situationally pass as white, while the majority of respondents describe situations in which they pass as black. After describing the identity strategies that respondents use, we explore their motivations for identity work—with a focus on passing as black. We conclude by framing the findings within the larger literatures of identity and race, including a discussion of the implications of these findings regarding a broader sociological definition of passing.

RACIAL PASSING DURING THE JIM CROW ERA

According to Daniel (2002), the “great age of passing” occurred between 1880 and 1925 and “was no doubt a direct response to the Jim Crow laws that were passed at the end of the nineteenth century” (52). Morning (2003) notes that scholars in the early twentieth century were particularly interested in estimating the numbers of “blacks” who were passing into the white population. One sociologist estimated that approximately 10,000 to 20,000 people with black ancestry disappeared into the white population each year from 1900 to 1920 (Williamson 1980). Other scholars have put the figure significantly higher at over 100,000 people annually (Daniel 2002).

For some, passing was *continuous* and involved a complete break with the African American community (Daniel 1992). They cut ties with their black communities, friends, and even family members to gain access to opportunities unavailable to them as African Americans (e.g., schools, jobs), and to escape the social stigma associated with blackness. *Stigma*, according to Goffman (1963), refers to any physical or social attribute that devalues an individual’s identity, and race is arguably one such attribute in particular contexts. Goffman (1963) discusses many ways in which the stigmatized cope with the stigma

itself, and one such way is to “pass” as the dominant group. Indeed, Valdez and Valdez (1998) analyze race on birth, marriage, and death records of one Virginia family to illustrate how people crossed state lines (to locations where they were unknown) in order to pass as white. More commonly, however, passing was *discontinuous* and involved only intermittent trips across the color line for practicality, amusement, and/or revenge (Daniel 1992). For these individuals, passing as white was a means to enjoy a meal at a white restaurant or shop at a white department store. Drake and Cayton (1945) interviewed individuals who occasionally passed as white “to get a thrill” from going to racially exclusive establishments (162). Olivia’s aunts (described in the opening quote) sometimes passed as white to gain access to “white only” movie theaters and restaurants, but they also passed to show the “stupid[ity]” of Jim Crow segregation.

While an attractive option for those wanting to gain access to privileges and opportunities (and the only strategy for those wanting to cross the otherwise impervious color line), passing was unavailable to the majority of the population. One’s ability to pass hinged upon personal skin shade and facial features, and having a close phenotypic approximation to whiteness (Day 1932 as cited in Daniel 1992). For those who did not outwardly appear white, the one-drop rule restricted them to only one racial option—black.

Recent studies show that the one-drop rule continues to shape black identities (Khanna 2010), yet research also suggests that the one-drop rule may be losing its power leading to more racial options (Brunsma and Rockquemore 2001; Korgen 1998). Korgen (1998), for example, argues that black-white biracial Americans have more choice in identity and a greater range of racial options than in previous decades. In particular, she finds that those born before the civil rights era are likely to identify exclusively as black, while those born in the post-civil rights era identify as black, biracial, and sometimes white. The widening of racial options is also reflected in recent changes to the U.S. Census. Prior

to 2000, Americans were forced to “choose one race,” which further reinforced the one-drop rule by ignoring that some Americans were multiracial and identified with more than one race (not just as black). The 2000 Census, however, allowed Americans to choose “all that apply,” which was due, in part, to multiracial activists who lobbied for more racial options. With widening racial options and increasing opportunities available to African Americans, this raises questions as to what extent passing occurs today.

IDENTITY AS A PROCESS: INDIVIDUAL AGENCY AND “IDENTITY WORK”

Much of the work that examines identity among biracial/multiracial people draws on the symbolic interactionist framework (Blumer 1969; Mead 1934; see Rockquemore and Brunson 2002). The key aspect of this framework is *social interaction*—race and identity arise out of a social process in which meanings are created and modified through social interaction with others. Society shapes an individual’s identity, while at the same time, the individual plays an active role in shaping his/her own racial identity.

While much of the research on biracial people draws on the symbolic interactionist perspective, a majority of studies on biracial people focus on factors (e.g., one-drop rule, social networks, social class) and processes (e.g., reflected appraisals) that act on individuals to shape their racial identities. Khanna (2004, 2010), for instance, looks at how reflected appraisals (i.e., how people think others see them) and the one-drop rule influences racial identity among biracial adults. Scholars, however, argue that people are not merely passive objects shaped by society, but are also active and creative agents of identity (Cooley 1902; Gecas and Schwalbe 1983). Williams (1996) suggests that biracial individuals are “active participants in shaping their racial identities . . . Not only do biracial individuals ‘get race done unto them, but they also do race as well’ (208). Jim Crow era passing is a clear example of people who were active agents in shaping their identities,

yet little is known about the ways in which biracial people “do race” today.¹ Racial passing is one type of racial performance, but likely there are additional ways in which people perform race (e.g., by highlighting and/or downplaying particular identities, but not necessarily concealing an aspect of their ancestry to pass as monoracial).

Further, little work examines racial strategies, yet research on stigma and identity suggest some strategies which may be applicable to biracial people. Goffman (1963), for instance, describes ways in which people cope with a stigmatized identity; strategies include “passing” (concealing the stigma), but also “covering” (managing the intrusiveness of the stigma). For instance, ethnic minorities might conceal their stigmatized ethnicity to pass as white, or they may cover their ethnicity by anglicizing their name. According to Goffman (1963), they cover the ethnicity, not to pass, but rather to “restrict the way a known-about attribute obtrudes itself into the center of attention” (103).

Extending this work, scholars further examine how stigmatized groups manage stigma, and much of this work looks at strategies of stigma management (see Kaufman and Johnson 2004). Many of these strategies comprise what Snow and Anderson (1987) call “identity work.” In their study of the homeless, for example, they find that individuals “engage in a range of activities to create, present, or sustain identities” (1348), and these activities include: (1) procuring or arranging physical settings/props, (2) cosmetic face work/arrangement of personal appearance, (3) selective association with other individuals/groups, and (4) assertion of personal identity through verbal construction or identity talk.

In addition, McCall (2003) highlights the importance of studying identity in terms of the “Me” and the “Not-Me.” The “Me” refers to the identification with a category

¹ There is a growing body of work, however, on how monoracial people negotiate or “do race” (see Jackson 2001, Lewis 2003, Markus and Moya 2010 for examples).

(e.g., I am white), while the “Not-Me” refers to the disidentification with a category (e.g., I’m *not* white). While identities are often externally imposed by others, individuals may resist categorization as a form of reactive identity work by creating a “Not-Me” identity. Killian and Johnson (2006) find that North African immigrant women in France sometimes refuse an immigrant identity by saying, “I’m *not* an immigrant!” (a “Not-Me” identity). Thus, these immigrant women reject the immigrant label, which was once believed to “lack room for negotiation” (60). Moreover, they explore the role of resources in determining these women’s ability to resist the label; resources like social class and proficiency in French were particularly important. Like the homeless and these immigrant women, biracial individuals likely have some measure of individual agency in shaping their identities. The identity literature is growing, but much remains to be learned about the extent to which biracial people manage their identities and the strategies they use. Further, more work is needed to identify factors that influence the accessibility and efficacy of various strategies of racial identity work.

DATA AND METHODS

This paper is part of a larger study examining racial identity among black-white biracial adults. In 2005 and 2006, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews with 40 black-white biracial adults living in a large urban area in the South. To participate in the study, respondents must have had one black and one white parent (as identified by respondents). Respondents were asked open-ended questions on a range of topics such as their racial identities,² how others have influenced their identities, how their identities have

changed over time and situation, and if and how they assert particular identities to others. Interviews were audio-taped and respondents’ names were replaced with pseudonyms.

Because locating biracial individuals within the general population is often difficult, we primarily relied on convenience sampling. The first author began recruiting respondents by placing flyers in a variety of places, including local colleges, universities, and places of worship. Flyers read, “Do you have one black parent and one white parent?” We omitted terms such as “biracial” or “multiracial” from the flyers, aware that individuals who did not consider themselves biracial or multiracial may not have responded. The first author also asked interviewees to pass along her information to others with similar backgrounds.

Characteristics of Respondents

Our data collection efforts resulted in a sample of 40 black-white biracial individuals. The ages ranged from 18 to 45, with the average age a little over 24 years of age. More than half of the respondents, 57.5 percent, fell between the ages of 18 and 22, which is typical college age; this is not surprising considering that our recruitment efforts began at local colleges and universities. Of the remaining respondents, 27.5 percent fell between the ages of 23 and 30, and 15 percent were over the age of 30. Regarding gender, 22.5 percent are men and 77.5 percent are women.

In terms of socioeconomic background, the majority of respondents have a middle-to upper-middle class background as measured by their educational backgrounds and that of their parents. All respondents are currently enrolled in college or are college-educated—67.5 percent are current college students and 32.5 percent had completed a bachelor’s degree; 15 percent of respondents are pursuing advanced degrees. While respondents often had limited information about their parents’ incomes, they frequently described parents who were highly educated. Most had at least one parent with a bachelor’s

² To gauge identity, we use several questions: (1) How do you identify yourself to others?; (2) How strongly do you identify with being [black; white]? Would you say very strongly, somewhat, very little, or not at all?; and (3) Is there a racial group, whether white or black, with which you more strongly identify? While all questions are designed to measure identity, we focus only on responses to the first question in order to gauge how they publicly identify themselves to others.

degree (75 percent) or some college (87.5 percent), and 47.5 percent had at least one parent who held an advanced degree. The middle- to upper-middle class social status of the sample is further evidenced by the professional occupations of many of the parents (e.g., doctors, entrepreneurs, college professors, teachers, lawyers, nurses, as well as a dentist, scientist, college dean, accountant, airline pilot, judge, and minister).

Finally, regarding racial identification, the majority of respondents (33 of 40) label themselves using multiracial descriptors (e.g., as biracial, multiracial, mixed-race). In comparison, only six respondents labeled themselves as black, and one respondent as white. The fact that so few respondents labeled themselves as black mirrors recent studies, which similarly show a weakening of the one-drop rule and widening of racial options (Brunsma and Rockquemore 2001; Korgen 1998). Furthermore, respondents' identifications are situational; they generally identified themselves to others as biracial, but in some contexts, passed as black or white.

Limitations

Given the nature of the study and the characteristics of the sample, there are several limitations to be discussed. First, this study examines the phenomenon of passing (among other forms of identity work), yet if biracial people are passing for one race on a day-to-day basis, they likely would not have answered the advertisements to participate in this study. Hence, we examine those who pass as white or black on an intermittent basis, but not those who may be passing on a continuous basis.

Second, this sample is heavily female, and Storrs (1999) suggests that racial identity may be more salient for women than men; men's self-concepts may be more tied to other identities, such as those based on occupation rather than race. If racial identity is indeed less salient for men (more work is needed here), then racial identity work and passing may be less frequent for men than women.

Third, these respondents were, for the most part, middle- to upper-middle class and often embedded in predominantly white settings. They were more likely to pass as black rather than white, but it is plausible that working-class biracials may be more motivated to pass as white (if their physical appearance allows it) or, at the very least, they may be more motivated to highlight their white ancestry than their middle-class counterparts; disadvantaged by social class, they may draw on white privilege (if they can) to access opportunities for upward social mobility. Conversely, because of their lower social class status, they may be even more likely than these respondents to present themselves as black. As will be discussed, these middle-class respondents passed as black to fit in with black peers, to avoid what they perceived as a stigmatized white identity, and to benefit from affirmative action programs. It is plausible that working-class biracials are more likely to live and work in minority/black settings and hence pass as black to fit in with black peers and neighbors; in minority/black settings, whiteness may be even more stigmatized as compared to white settings, and hence working-class biracials may feel more pressure to conceal their white ancestry; finally, because they are more disadvantaged financially than their middle-class counterparts, affirmative action opportunities may be more crucial to moving up the socioeconomic ladder and so biracial people may be more likely to present themselves as black on admissions, employment, and scholarship application forms.

Finally, these respondents were recruited from a large urban area in the southern United States, which may have further biased the findings. Those in urban areas may have more agency in performing race than those in more rural areas in which people may be more connected and knowledgeable of each others' family backgrounds (including racial backgrounds). In contrast, those in urban areas may more frequently come into contact with those who have little information about them, which may offer more opportunities to play with how they present their race. It

is also possible that biracial Southerners show different patterns of racial passing than biracials in other regions. A few individuals in this sample occasionally passed as white (to avoid discrimination in the workplace), but it is possible that passing as white is less frequent in other parts of the country, which have historically had less racial tension and overt conflict. Put simply, those in other regions may feel less need to do so.

RACIAL IDENTITY WORK: STRATEGIES AND MOTIVATIONS

We find that respondents regularly do racial “identity work” (Snow and Anderson 1987) and employ a variety of strategies to present their preferred racial identities to others. In this section, we first explore the strategies that respondents use to manage their identities, and we identify factors which influence the accessibility and efficacy of these strategies. After outlining the various identity strategies and limitations, we then examine the motivations of identity work—with a focus on passing as black. Of those presenting monoracial identities to others, we find that they more often pass as black, rather than white—31 respondents describe situations in which they pass as black as compared to only three respondents who situationally pass as white.

Strategies of Identity Work

Respondents use a variety of strategies to pass or, when passing is not desirable or feasible, to cover an identity (i.e., downplay its obtrusiveness [Goffman 1963]). Further, identity work is not just about concealing or covering a stigmatized identity, but highlighting a non-stigmatized or preferred identity, or what we term *accenting*. While covering involves downplaying an attribute, accenting involves emphasizing or accentuating it. Further, accenting differs from passing; not everyone can pass as black or white (e.g., one’s ancestry may be well-known; one’s phenotype may prevent it), but they may be able to accent their black or white ancestry as a form of identity work. To conceal (i.e.,

pass), cover, or accent particular aspects of their racial ancestries, respondents use five strategies: (1) verbal identification/disidentification, (2) selective disclosure, (3) manipulation of phenotype, (4) highlighting/downplaying cultural symbols, and (5) selective association.

First, respondents do “identity talk” (Snow and Anderson 1987) via *verbal identification/disidentification*. In short, they claim or disclaim identities by verbally saying, “I’m this” or “I’m not that.” Anthony presents himself as black through verbal identification, and says, “I guess I just always make sure people know I’m black. Like even when I went to an all white school, I used to say, ‘I’m black . . . Even though they knew I had a white father, if they ask, ‘I’m black. That’s it.’ By saying ‘I’m black,’ Anthony invokes a “me” identity (McCall 2003).

According to McCall (2003), identity processes must be studied in terms of the “Me” (identifications), but also the “Not-Me” (disidentifications). Caroline, for example, verbally resists being classified as black and says:

In my [graduate] program, I think we maybe have like four black people, not including myself. And the other day, one of the [black] guys said to me, “Oh, in our class, there are only three of us.” And I said, “Three of who?” And I didn’t know what he was talking about and he looked at me. And I was like, “Don’t do that. Don’t lump me in [with being black] because I don’t see myself that way and I don’t like it when you just assume that.” And then one time, I was taking an African Cultural Studies class and our teacher was black and she made reference to the black students in the class and lumped me in there with them. And I raised my hand and I was like, “I’m not black.” And she almost wanted to argue with me like, “Yes you are.” And no, no I’m not.

As a reactive form of identity work, she creates a “Not-Me” identity by saying, “Don’t lump me in” with being black and “I’m not black.”

A second, and related identity strategy is *selective disclosure*—selectively revealing and/or concealing particular racial identities to others. Unlike Anthony and Caroline (above), where peers were aware of their biracial backgrounds, some respondents manage the racial information they give to others to pass as monoracial (often as black). Storrs (1999), in her study of multiracial women, similarly finds that her respondents used selective disclosure to maintain their non-white identities by neglecting to reveal their white ancestry unless directly asked or challenged. In school, Samantha intentionally conceals her biracial background and says, “There was a time in middle school [that] I never told anyone what I was. A lot of times they never asked. They just kind of assumed, Well she’s black. They just assumed . . . I [was] like, Okay, what’s the reason for bringing it up?” Similarly, Natasha, who currently attends an HBCU (an Historically Black College/University) selectively reveals only her black background to her black peers. She says, “Since I’ve been at college, I don’t even mention [that I’m biracial]. I don’t bring it up unless it’s brought up to me . . . I would just rather say ‘I’m black’ and that be the end of it. It’s definitely not something that I advertise.” Both Samantha and Natasha conceal their white/biracial ancestry to pass as black.

In addition to selectively disclosing particular identities in face-to-face social interactions, respondents strategically reveal and conceal particular ancestries when filling out race questions commonly found on school, job, and scholarship applications. While Natasha (above) reveals only her black identity to black peers, she consciously manipulates her identity in different ways on forms. Highlighting the situational nature of her identity, she says, “[W]hen I fill out the little question things, I used to always check ‘other.’ Now I just check ‘black’ . . . I’ve also learned to manipulate the situation that I’m in. I know that if I say I’m ‘biracial,’ I will get certain things, and if I say I’m ‘black’ I will get certain things. So I know I probably play with that a little bit.” Like Natasha, the majority of respondents use selective

disclosure on applications (more on their motivations in the next section).

Third, respondents manipulate their phenotypes (e.g., hair, skin) to manage their identities; this parallels Snow and Anderson’s (1987) “cosmetic facework or arrangement of personal appearance” in their study of the homeless. Most respondents cannot alter their phenotypes in ways to present themselves as white, but they often describe modifying their phenotypes to pass as black or to accent their black ancestry. Others alter their phenotypes to cover or downplay their white ancestry. When growing up, Olivia’s peers knew she was biracial, yet she manipulated her hair to downplay her white ancestry and says:

When I was younger . . . I had very long hair and I identified more with African Americans . . . So I usually kept my hair pulled black or kept it up or tried to do different things to blend in more . . . [Other black girls] used to call me “white girl” because my hair was very long and it would blow in the wind . . . Back then I used to get up in the morning for school and leave my hair down and run out. And then when they started saying I was a white girl . . . I would never leave my hair down.

Likewise, Anthony modifies his hair to pass as black and says, “I used to have really long hair and sometimes I would pick it up into a “fro.” Michelle, who claims that she looks white, covers her white background by manipulating her skin color (e.g., tanning) because she does not “want to be seen as a white person.”

Fourth, respondents manage their identities by highlighting and/or downplaying cultural symbols they perceive associated with whiteness and blackness (e.g., clothing/dress, food, language). While altering phenotype is not an option for everyone (e.g., not everyone can pick their hair into an afro), invoking cultural symbols is frequently employed in racial identity work. For example, to pass as black, Anthony draws on cultural symbols of clothing and language. Describing how he presented himself as black in school, he says,

“You know, pants sagging . . . I used to kind of slur my speech a little bit because I used to talk very properly and I used to force myself to sound different. Sound like I was more black.” Denise, too, describes passing as black especially when “trying to get into a step team or . . . choir . . . or . . . something where people in the organization are black, like a fraternity or sorority.” When asked how she presents herself as black, she responds, “Probably the way I style my clothes . . . looking like I dress like I’m a black person . . . I have to change how I appear.”

While Anthony and Denise highlight black cultural symbols (via clothing and language) to manage their black identities, Stephanie managed her black identity in school by distancing herself from cultural symbols of whiteness:

[I attended] an all black school and so all my friends were black then . . . I remember NSync being out . . . and my friends listened to them and I hated that. I hated any music that wasn’t black. I hated any clothes that black people didn’t wear . . . I felt like I had to stress to people that I was black . . . So I felt like “I hate NSync. I hate this white music.”

By distancing herself from these so-called white symbols (e.g., white music, clothing), Stephanie works to downplay or cover her white ancestry.

A final identity strategy is selective association. Respondents selectively associate with a particular racial group (via peers, friends, and romantic partners) and organizations/institutions (e.g., clubs, colleges, churches), which mirrors Snow and Anderson’s (1987) strategy of “selective association with other individuals or groups.” This strategy is often used by respondents to pass as black or to accent their black identity. For example, Stephanie says, “When I got to high school, all the white people were so nice . . . And I hated them. I didn’t want to be friends with them. I didn’t want to sit with them. I didn’t want them to talk to me. I wanted to sit at the black table. I felt like I had to stress to people that I was black.” While Stephanie

associated only with black peers, Olivia dated only dark black men as a strategy to emphasize her black identity: “I used to only date very dark-skinned black men because I didn’t want people to think I was trying to be white So I stayed with dark-skinned men because it’s like I want to prove that I was black. Yeah, that I’m this black woman. ‘See, I’ve got this very dark man.’ It sounds stupid now, but back then it was important.”

Other respondents manage black identities by joining organizations that reflect their preferred black identities. Alicia limits her peer network to black people and dates only black men, but she also describes being drawn to black organizations:

I’m pretty black Maybe I’m just more concerned about being black right now. . . . And I want to have kids that are part of Jack and Jill and I’m infatuated with my [black] boyfriend. I want to marry him and have children with him. I can’t imagine a life where I wasn’t part of Jack and Jill and I wasn’t in AKA . . . things that are exclusively black . . . I feel like I’m pretty segregated. I kind of segregate myself and I pretty much just hang out with black people.

Alicia, who is “concerned about being black,” consciously controls the racial makeup of her social circles and purposefully participates in organizations (Jack and Jill of America, Alpha Kappa Alpha³) that reflect her preferred black identity.

Factors limiting the accessibility/usefulness of identity strategies. Respondents draw on various identity strategies, and clearly these findings indicate that biracial people have considerable agency with regard to how they identify themselves. We find, however, that these options are not without limits. Extending previous research on identity work (Snow and Anderson 1987; see also Killian and Johnson 2006; McCall 2003; Storrs 1999), we discover several factors that limit

³ Jack and Jill of America is one of oldest black social organizations in the United States; Alpha Kappa Alpha was the first sorority established by black women.

the accessibility and/or effectiveness of these strategies—one's phenotype, social class background, and racial networks.

For instance, race in American society is intertwined with phenotype (i.e., we are often raced by how we look); depending upon which identity one is presenting, manipulation of one's phenotype may or may not be an option. The majority of respondents cannot modify their phenotypes to pass as white, and some respondents have difficulty in altering their physical characteristics to pass as black. However, given the phenotypic variation among blacks (due to centuries of mixing with whites), passing as black is arguably less complicated than passing as white. Having light skin or straight hair, for instance, is not unique to those defined as biracial today; many individuals classified as black also share these traits. In contrast, those wanting to pass as white may face more challenges (e.g., hair cannot always be styled straight, skin tones are not easily lightened).

The difficulty in modifying phenotype will likely also affect one's ability to assert an identity via verbal identification/disidentification. If one looks black, verbally asserting a white identity may be futile because it will likely be challenged by others. In the same vein, those who outwardly appear white may face resistance if they verbally assert a black identity. Kate, for example, claims that she looks white and says, "Whenever [white peers] would be telling racial jokes and . . . I would be like, 'Wow. Hey, I'm black' . . . and they were like, 'You are not black. You are a white girl' . . . they would say I'm white . . . [How did you react?] In my head I would think, yeah am I a white girl . . ." Kate has difficulty verbally asserting a black identity because her assertions are challenged by her peers. In fact, if one's phenotype differs significantly from socially constructed notions of what members of a particular race are expected to look like, they have considerable difficulty asserting that racial identity no matter what identity strategy they employ; this is especially true for those who appear white or black who are trying to pass as the other race.

In addition to phenotype, social class and social networks influence the accessibility and effectiveness of certain identity strategies. For instance, many respondents perform identity work by highlighting or downplaying cultural symbols they associate with whiteness and blackness, yet access to and knowledge of cultural symbols is arguably tied to these larger structural factors. For example, respondents frequently describe using language as an identity strategy (i.e., "talking black"/Ebonics or "talking white"/standard English), yet these different forms of speech are often linked with social class background and racial networks growing up. Some respondents describe having a difficult time doing this type of identity work simply because they do not know how.

Stephanie, for instance, tried to "talk black" to accent her black identity. Recalling an experience in school, she says, "I just remember my [black] friends . . . always telling me that I'm acting white. I need to act more black But like my mom's very businesslike, so it's very proper. So I got it from her. I wasn't very slangish And I went through a period where if someone heard me, they'd say, 'Why do you talk like that?'" At first, Stephanie had considerable difficulty accenting her black identity primarily because she did not know how to "talk black." To remedy the situation, however, she literally worked to learn "black slang" from her black peers. To do this, she relied on resocialization from her black peers and says, "They taught me how to talk. I remember I'd take the school bus to and from school and they would have sessions on teaching me how to talk. All of my friends would teach me how [to talk]. Like, [they'd say], 'Stephanie, say it this way. You're not saying it right.'"

Harris (2004) similarly finds in her study of the black middle-class that they, too, have considerable difficulty in accessing stereotypically black cultural symbols such as language. Often raised in middle-class neighborhoods surrounded by whites, they do not know how to speak in ways that they perceive as "authentically" black. What is considered "authentically" black is merely a social

construction, but respondents nonetheless associate certain characteristics with blackness, often as if these were natural attributes. Some respondents, who were raised in middle-class white communities, similarly claim that they have little knowledge of black cultural symbols (such as language, but also little familiarity with black music and hip-hop dancing); hence, they claim that they have a difficult time asserting their black identities.

The perceived cultural chasm between black and white is further highlighted when some middle-class respondents describe their interactions with blacks as a “culture shock.” Grant says, “Like when I go and try to hang out with [black people], I feel a bit of a culture shock. The Ebonics talking, the dialect—I guess a lot of it has to do mainly with that.” Because he has little knowledge of Ebonics, Grant describes difficulty relating with his black peers and difficulty using language/slang to accent a black identity. Likewise, Kate similarly notes the differences between black and white “culture” and says, “When I am with black people, I think I am just this little white girl. I feel like a white person hanging out with them I don’t fit in I guess I think there are some language differences, like in the way [black people] talk to each other. I don’t understand it a lot of the time It’s just different. It could be more of the culture between different groups.” For these respondents, who grew up in middle-class communities surrounded by white people, they highlight obstacles to identifying as black—namely, lack of familiarity with other blacks and lack of cultural tools they perceive as necessary to assert black identities.

Furthermore, one’s racial networks will also influence, to some extent, one’s ability to selectively associate with a particular racial group. Anthony grew up around black people and currently attends an HBCU, but describes a desire to “know more about white people” and a desire to assert that part of his identity. While he wants to broaden his racial networks, he says, “I want to know more white people, but I don’t know how to go about it. I mean you can’t just go into the grocery store

and say, ‘Hey, will you be my friend?’ I just don’t know how to meet [white] people. I pretty much just know black people.” Anthony’s current racial networks, which are predominantly black, make it difficult for him to selectively associate with other whites in an effort to assert that part of his identity.

In sum, these respondents draw on various identity strategies to conceal, cover, or accent identities, although some strategies are more accessible than others and depend on several individual-level and structural-level factors. Here we identify phenotype, social class, and racial networks as important factors, yet this list is in no way exhaustive. Moreover, we find that identity is contextual. Most identify as biracial or multiracial, but in some contexts, they pass as monoracial—sometimes they pass as white, but most often they pass as black. In the next section, we examine motivations for identity work, with a focus on passing as black.

Motivations for Passing as Black

Motivations for passing as white, especially during the Jim Crow era, are well-documented (see Conyers and Kennedy 1963; Daniel 1992, 2002; Kennedy 2003; Williams 2004). Less is known, however, about the motivations for passing as black. While we find a few respondents have passed as white in rare situations, the majority of respondents have, at one time or another, passed as black and they do this for several reasons—to fit in with black peers, to avoid a (white) stigmatized identity, and/or for some perceived advantage or benefit.

To fit in. Not wanting to stand out, especially in adolescence, respondents often describe working to “blend in” to feel accepted by peers. In some cases, they try to fit in with both black and white peers. Kristen grew up attending a predominantly white school and a predominantly black gymnastics program, and says, “Going to school and going to the gym were just two totally different things for me. So it’s like I had to switch. I was like Superman. I was kind of like Clark Kent—take off my glasses going to the gym

and then put them back on when I was in school . . . I would just kind of change. I would just do little things that I very well knew what I was doing.” The “little things” included changing her clothing and speech depending upon the race of her audience (i.e., drawing on black and white cultural symbols). When asked why she altered her appearance and behavior between friends, she says, “To fit in probably. Because I wanted friends in both areas.”

While some respondents employ identity strategies to “fit in” with their black *and* white peers, the majority claim that their black characteristics (e.g., dark skin) prevent their full acceptance by whites (unlike Kristen, above, who claims she looks white). Feeling thwarted by whites, many respondents pass as black to find a place with their black peers. Stephanie describes her experiences in school and says, “First grade through eighth grade I was in the same school and it was an all black private school. So everybody there was black. . . . And all the kids . . . basically told me I was white And I got so frustrated because I wanted to fit in and they kind of made me feel like I wasn’t going to fit in if I didn’t go along with being totally black.” As described earlier, Stephanie uses several strategies (e.g., downplaying white cultural symbols, selective association with black peers) to present a black identity. Michaela similarly managed a black identity for her black peers, and describes how she modified her speech. When asked why, she responds, “Trying to fit in with [my black peers], you try to pick up the lingo they say. I will say ‘crunk this’ . . . ‘that’s the bomb.’”

Kendra, too, passed as black in high school. Using selective disclosure, she says, “In high school, I was trying to fit in I didn’t want people to know that I was half white. That I was mixed. I just wanted to be black because there was a majority of black kids there. . . . Like if [black peers] asked, I would just say I was black.” Trying to fit in with black peers was a frequent theme among the majority of respondents when describing middle school and high school (and to some extent elementary school), yet this motivation appears less important beyond the high school years.

Fitting in with black peers also appeared more important for women than men in the sample; they more often describe situations in which they were discredited as black if their biracial background was revealed. Rockquemore and Brunnsma (2002) find that biracial women often encounter negative experiences with black women because of their looks and/or biracial ancestry, and we also find that they, at times, find their blackness challenged. Describing her experiences with black women, Natasha says:

For some [black] people, [a biracial background] is a strike against you . . . with girls, I can’t escape [my white] side. It’s constantly being brought up . . . they always seem to make sure to tell me I’m not really black. If I would tell someone I’m black, they would say, “No, you’re mixed” . . . when people are always reminding you, “You’re mixed” . . . trying to discredit you, it’s hard.

Natasha is constantly reminded that she is biracial and “not really black.” Olivia, too, describes how some black women do not see her as black: “I think when I was growing up, [black girls] just did not accept me as being a black girl . . . with [black] women, I still think there are some instances where they don’t see me as an authentic black woman. . . .” Thus, wanting to fit in, not have their blackness discredited, nor feel contention with black peers, some respondents consciously concealed their white/biracial ancestries.

To avoid a stigmatized identity. In the Jim Crow era, blackness was stigmatized (e.g., as inferior, backward) and is arguably stigmatized today. In describing an experience as an undergraduate, Caroline notes the stigma and says:

I can remember when I was an undergrad, one time I got braids in my hair . . . that were down my back. And it wasn’t anything dramatic and I thought it looked really nice and I liked it. And as soon as I went back to school in the city . . . I was immediately on guard when I was walking down the street. And I was like, “Oh gosh, I don’t want

people to think I'm black because I have these braids in my hair." . . . I was so nervous . . . that was all that went through my mind, "I don't want people to think that I'm black." . . . I know it sounds awful, but I don't want people to think that I'm stupid or that I'm bitchy or anything like that. So I didn't keep them in for very long.

Conscious about how her braids raced her as black, Caroline manipulates her phenotype (removes her braids) to avoid negative stereotypes she associates with blackness (e.g., stupidity, bitchiness).

While Caroline describes covering her black background because of stigma associated with blackness (her phenotype prevents her from passing as white), others pass as black because of stigma associated with whiteness. Storrs (1999) finds that multiracial women "manage their potentially discreditable non-white identities through identity work, including reversing the stigma associated with the non-whiteness" (188). In short, they stigmatized whiteness by equating it with oppression, prejudice, and discrimination, and we find that some respondents in the present study similarly stigmatize whiteness or find it stigmatized by others. Stephanie describes the negativity associated with whiteness among her black peers, and says:

[My black friends] had never been around white people before. So they only knew what their parents told them. And they were told certain things So their parents might have said something about a white coworker and [my friends] would have thought all white people were bad I'd change myself around and then I was black, so it didn't matter anymore

Likewise, Olivia (as described earlier), covered her white ancestry in high school to avoid stigma associated with whiteness (because her multiracial family was known in the community, passing as black was not an option). She downplayed her white background by tying her straight hair back as a way of distancing herself from whites whom she perceived as "oppressive." Jackie

passes as black with her black coworkers to avoid the stigma that she associates with whiteness. She says, "Well at work, I'm black. That's it. No one knows that I'm half white. I don't want to be associated with all that. [What's 'all that'?] You know, white people think they're better. They can sometimes be ignorant. And that's not me. You can't trust them either. I don't want anyone to think they can't trust me." By passing as black, she distances herself from the associated stigma of superiority, ignorance, and untrustworthiness.

For Goffman (1963), stigma is an attribute that devalues one's identity and, most important here, it is a social construct that varies situationally; it is not an objective reality, nor a fixed characteristic of an individual. According to Marvasti (2005), an ascribed status such as race or ethnicity is not inherently stigmatizing, but can become so under certain social conditions. Clearly whiteness in most contexts is a privileged identity and does not hold the same stigma as blackness, yet in some contexts having white ancestry arguably carries at least some degree of stigma (for other examples of stigmatized whiteness, see also Killian 1985; Kusow 2004). In these situations, respondents perform identity work (e.g., covering their white ancestry or passing as black) to manage what they perceive as a situationally stigmatized identity.

For advantage. Finally, whiteness in the slave and Jim Crow eras conferred many advantages and privileges, and three respondents describe occasionally passing as white, even today, for some perceived benefit. Beth describes a context when she passed as white via selective disclosure: "I used to be a caseworker. Some of [my white coworkers] assumed I was white and I just rolled with it . . . yeah, you're just sitting there like, 'You really don't have a clue. I'll just continue to be white, if that's what you're going to insist on.' . . . I just left it as 'I'm going to let you assume [I'm white]. And I'll go along with it.'" When asked why she allowed others to assume she is white, she describes this as a protective strategy to avoid prejudice from

coworkers. Similarly, Michelle uses selective disclosure to pass as white at work, and says:

I [identify as white] more so when it's convenient to me in corporate America. I've witnessed where white people get further than the black people And I just think in my whole experience, not just with this job but other jobs, I have to . . . put forth that I'm white. Then they're more likely to trust me I think I use it to my advantage when I need to. [In the work setting?] Yes, because I'm trying to get ahead.

While these respondents pass as white for some perceived workplace advantage, the majority (29 respondents) pass as black in other contexts for perceived advantage—in particular, on college, scholarship, financial aid, and job applications. Frequently unaware that being biracial is often sufficient for affirmative action purposes, they presented themselves exclusively as black. While Michelle describes passing as white at work to “get ahead,” she also describes passing as black on college applications. Explaining why she checks the “black box,” she says, “I thought maybe if I chose black, especially in college, I'd get more financial aid. I'd get more opportunities, and so I kind of thought it was to my best advantage to just say I was black.” Rockquemore and Arend (2002) find that a minority of their biracial respondents identify as white, but they argue that some “mixed-race individuals, who understand themselves as White, *pass for Black* in order to receive social, economic, and educational opportunities” (emphasis in original; 60). We find that the majority of respondents in this sample, who generally identify themselves to others as biracial or mixed, occasionally pass as black when they perceive some advantage in doing so.

Denise passes as black when filling out various forms and says, “[S]ometimes there are more opportunities if you're black. . . . Some are nicer to you. There are some job opportunities where you have more weight if you're a minority. And there are more scholarships.” Stephanie expresses similar sentiments and says, “The funny thing is

like when I applied to [college], like for affirmative action, I checked ‘black.’ I do not check ‘other.’ . . . if I'm applying for a scholarship or something, I am ‘black.’” When asked how she identifies herself to others, Julie says, “I put ‘other.’ Or when you can check both, I put ‘African American’ and ‘Caucasian.’ But also, I would have to say that it depends on what I'm trying to do. If I'm trying to get more money from the government, I am ‘African American.’ There is no white aspect to me.” Concealing their white backgrounds, Julie and others selectively disclose only their black backgrounds on these forms and in doing so pass as black in order to obtain education and/or employment opportunities, scholarships, and financial aid.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study adds to the literature on biracial identity by examining, not the external factors that act upon individuals, but rather the considerable *agency* most have in asserting their preferred racial identities to others. Brunsma and Rockquemore (2001:244) claimed that it remained to be seen just “how much negotiation and strategy is involved” in racial identity for biracial people, and we find considerable strategy and conscious effort. Drawing on Snow and Anderson's (1987) concept of “identity work,” we find that biracial people use a variety of strategies to “do race” — verbal identification/disidentification, selective disclosure, manipulation of phenotype, use of cultural symbols, and selective association. At times, they use these strategies to conceal an identity in order to pass as monoracial or, when passing is not possible or desired, they use them to cover or accent particular aspects of their racial ancestry. Adding to research on identity work, we identify several individual and structural-level factors which affect the accessibility and/or effectiveness of certain identity strategies; they include (but are not limited to) phenotype, social class, and racial networks.

Further, that people perform race is not new; during the Jim Crow era some “blacks”

passed as white. With the implementation of civil rights legislation, however, many argue that the strategy of passing is a relic of the past. We surprisingly find, however, that passing still occurs today and quite frequently, although it looks different today. While passing during the Jim Crow era involved passing as white, we find a reverse pattern with regard to passing today—a few respondents occasionally pass as white, but the majority of respondents describe situations in which they pass as black.

That so few respondents passed as white is not surprising given that this option is unavailable to most (unless they have white skin and appearance) and because passing as white is often “viewed with disdain by other blacks” today (Russell et al. 1992:73). Also not surprising were the motivations for the few individuals who did pass as white—in all three cases, respondents passed as white to avoid prejudice/discrimination and/or for advantage in the workplace. Further, we find that passing as white today is temporary and situational, not the continuous type of passing that marked the Jim Crow era.

Most interesting, however, are not the few respondents who passed as white, but the many that passed as black. Scholars understand the motivations of passing as white in a society dominated by whites, but less is known about motivations for passing as black. We find that biracial people pass as black for several reasons. Most notably, we argue, because they can. While passing as white is difficult for most, passing as black is less difficult given the wide range of phenotypes in the black community regarding skin color and other physical features. With generations of interracial mixing between blacks and whites and the broad definition of blackness as defined by the one-drop rule, Khanna (2010) argues that most Americans cannot tell the difference between biracial and black. Hence, there is little difficulty when many biracial people conceal their biracial background; this is because many “blacks” also have white phenotypic characteristics (because they, too, often have white ancestry). Further, we find that biracial

respondents pass as black for additional reasons—to fit in with black peers in adolescence (especially since many claim that whites reject them), to avoid a white stigmatized identity, and, in the post-civil rights era of affirmative action, to obtain advantages and opportunities sometimes available to them if they are black (e.g., educational and employment opportunities, college financial aid/scholarships).

The phenomenon of passing as black is a particularly important finding because it underscores the changing terrain of race relations and racial politics in the United States. The practice of passing as black, rather than white, suggests that blackness is arguably less stigmatized today than earlier eras of American history—at least in certain contexts. Most respondents express pride in their blackness and embrace (and often highlight through identity work) this part of their background. In fact, in some contexts, whiteness is stigmatized, which suggests a shift in how some attribute meaning to the categories of black and white (see also Storrs 1999).

Further, passing as black is an interesting concept in and of itself given the unique history of race in this country, and it further illuminates changes in race and politics in the United States. In previous decades, the notion of passing as black was impossible given the one-drop rule—if one had black ancestry, they did not pass as black, they *were* black. A person could only pass as white based on a concept that was inherently racist and asymmetrical (i.e., one drop of black blood made one black, but one drop of white blood did not make one white). As the one-drop rule weakens, what it means to pass is arguably undergoing modification, especially in an era where blackness (at least in some contexts) confers tangible benefits. While the notion of passing has historically conjured up images of black-white people (who were perceived as *really* black) passing as white, shifting definitions of blackness may change this and draw new attention to the concept of passing as black.

Relatedly, these findings raise questions about who is (and who is not) black. How blackness is defined is arguably undergoing

revision, and this is evident within the context of affirmative action. Being biracial is often enough to qualify for these programs, which tells us that in some measure, the one-drop rule is still at work; if one checks both black and white boxes, he/she is frequently reclassified as black and is racially positioned to potentially benefit from affirmative action programs. However, because the majority of respondents are unaware of how racial data are reaggregated, they strategically conceal their white/biracial ancestries in order to present themselves as black. This may reveal a growing disjuncture regarding how blackness is defined institutionally and socially—being biracial is equated to black by admissions officers and federal agencies, yet these respondents appear to believe that being biracial is somehow different from being black (or, at the very least, that they think that *others* consider being biracial to be different from being black).

Finally, these findings suggest that social phenomenon of passing as black is both similar and different to more conventional notions of passing. According to Kennedy (2003) passing involves (1) some degree of deception, and (2) the adoption of a role/identity that one would otherwise be barred by “prevailing social standards” (283). In both types of racial passing (i.e., passing as white and passing as black), there is some degree of deception at least from the perspective of these respondents. Respondents who occasionally pass as white, like those who passed as white during the Jim Crow era, knowingly hide their black ancestry; often they selectively disclosed only their white ancestry to coworkers. Likewise, those who pass as black describe how they purposely conceal their white ancestry. For instance, they disclose only their black ancestry or deliberately present themselves in ways to give others the impression that they are black and not biracial.

While both types of passing involve a self-perception of concealment, contemporary passing (i.e., passing as black) can be distinguished from more conventional notions of passing. A black-white person who passed as white during the Jim Crow era clearly defied

“prevailing social standards” (i.e., the one-drop rule) which defined him/her as black. In contrast, a biracial person who presents himself as black is not necessarily challenging present-day norms. While the one-drop rule may be weakening (Brunsma and Rockquemore 2001; Korgen 1998), recent studies suggest that it continues to shape black identities even today (Khanna 2010); thus, when respondents pass as black, they are not necessarily challenging contemporary social norms which arguably define them as black anyway.

Studies show, however, that while the one-drop rule lingers in American society, its weakened state is evidenced by biracial black-white Americans who are increasingly identifying as biracial or multiracial rather than black (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002; Korgen 1998). Indeed, the majority of respondents in this study identify using multi-racial terminology (33 of 40 respondents percent), while only six identify as black. What is most relevant here is not whether those respondents who present themselves as black challenge prevailing rigid norms regarding racial definition, but rather that these respondents present themselves in ways that fly in the face of their self-understanding of their race. Thus, to qualify as passing, the identity does not have to be one in which they were barred by societal rules (since presenting themselves as black does not go against social norms which define them as such), but it does at least have to be one that contradicts how they understand themselves racially (e.g., they understand themselves as biracial, but in some situations, consciously conceal their white ancestry to present themselves as black).

Thus, Kennedy’s (2003) description of passing may be extended to take into account this contemporary form of racial passing: *Passing involves a deception that enables a person to adopt specific roles or identities from which he or she would otherwise be barred by prevailing social standards—or adopt specific roles or identities that contradict one’s self-understanding of their role or identity.* Based on this amended definition of passing, a person who understands himself

as biracial yet presents himself as black is passing. However, a biracial person who understands himself as black and who presents himself as black is not passing because he is not presenting himself in a way that contradicts his self-understanding of his race.

Future Directions

Based on these findings, we suggest three areas for future inquiry. First, many respondents (who generally identify as biracial) identify as black for affirmative action purposes. Apparently unaware that being biracial is generally sufficient for these programs, they strategically omit information about their white backgrounds. These findings raise broader questions about who should benefit from affirmative action programs. Should those who benefit have two black parents, or is having one black parent sufficient? If the one-drop rule historically defined anyone with black ancestry as black, should the same measure be used for affirmative action purposes today? On the other hand, is there something qualitatively different about the experiences of biracial people that differs from their monoracial black counterparts that should prevent them from receiving affirmative action benefits? These questions remain to be answered. Future research should explore American public opinion regarding biracial and multiracial people (those with one white parent) and their inclusion in affirmative action programs.

Second, many of these respondents conceal their white ancestries to pass as black, which raises some interesting questions. Historically, having white ancestry did not preclude a black identity because the one-drop rule defined them as black by default. Is this changing today? Comments from some respondents (see Kate, Natasha, and Olivia) suggest that they, at least at times, find their black identities challenged because they are biracial and/or because of their white phenotypic characteristics. Future work should examine how biraciality is perceived today and further investigate in what factors and contexts biracial people might find their black identities

challenged. Like Rockquemore and Brunnsma (2002), we find that biracial women are more likely than biracial men to encounter negative experiences regarding their biraciality; more work, however, is needed.

Finally, this paper focused on racial passing as one form of identity work, yet passing is hardly limited to multiracial people. According to Russell et al. (1992), "in Nazi Germany, Jews passed as Protestants; in today's army, gay men and women pass as straight; on job applications, older people try to pass as younger. In each case, the reason is traceable to some form of discrimination, be it on the basis of race, sexual orientation, or age" (73). In recent years, increased attention has been given to the many forms of passing (e.g., passing as white, passing as economically privileged, passing as straight) (see Kroeger 2003 as an example), and future work should further examine the variety of ways in which people of social groups (other than race) pass and/or perform various identities, the strategies they use, constraining factors, and their motivations.

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