A Mulatto Escape Hatch? Examining Evidence of U.S. Racial and Social Mobility in the Jim Crow Era

Aliya Saperstein
University of Oregon

Aaron Gullickson
University of Oregon

Abstract

The association between being "mulatto" and having higher status than other Americans with African ancestry has been well-documented in the historical United States. However, in census data, classification as mulatto depended on the decisions of enumerators; thus, it is unclear whether being recorded as mulatto was related to advantages that accrued specifically to people with mixed African and European ancestry, or a self-fulfilling prophecy of social turned racial status as perceived by others, or both. We examine evidence for a recursive relationship between racial and social status among Americans of African ancestry, using person fixed-effects models and panel data from the IPUMS Linked Representative Samples. Preliminary results suggest that the likelihood of being perceived as mulatto was related to increases in occupational status among men, but only in the South. We also find high levels of fluidity in mulatto classification between censuses -- including notable "downward" racial mobility.

Introduction

Many scholars have argued that racial distinctions were invented in order to justify or explain hierarchies of status and power in colonial societies (Field 1990; Frederickson 2002; Omi and Winant 1994). However, these racial distinctions were subject to individual interpretation and even active resistance as people negotiated the racial hierarchy and adapted it to their everyday lives. By studying changes in how Americans were racially classified, and whether and how such changes were related to other changes in their characteristics or life chances, we seek to illuminate the process of racial boundary formation and its relationship to stratification in the United States.

One of the most commonly noted individual-level strategies for negotiating racial hierarchy, known colloquially as "passing," or academically as "boundary crossing" (Alba 2005; Loveman and Muniz 2007), involves presenting oneself as a member of a more advantaged racial group either in search of increased social position or after having achieved it. This change in racial status could also be conferred by others, either as a perceived "courtesy" (in the case of a status upgrade) or as a result of actual changes in perception. Recent work suggests that this interweaving of racial and social status does shape how Americans racially identify and are perceived by others in the contemporary United States (Penner and Saperstein 2008; Saperstein and Penner 2010). However, much of the historical evidence for these patterns has been anecdotal or inferred from cross-sectional data sources.

In this paper, we explore the existence of fluidity in racial classification in the United States between 1880 and 1920, using linked micro-data samples from the U.S. Census that capture changes in both that racial and social status of individuals over time. In particular, we use person fixed-effects models to examine whether shifts in classification between black and "mulatto" are associated with increases in social position and/or other changes in individual and county-level correlates, such as urban residence and racial composition. The period from 1880 to 1920 is particularly interesting for studying the fluidity of racial boundaries, as it was during this contentious post-Reconstruction, Jim Crow era that a potentially more variegated racial hierarchy hardened into a stark black-white dichotomy enforced through the infamous "one drop rule" (Williamson 1995; Davis 2001).

The "mulatto" category employed by the census during this period was intended to describe individuals whose ancestors were both African and European; in general, such individuals had higher average social status than other Americans with African ancestry (Gullickson 2010). Mulattoes were over-represented among the "free colored" population, prior to the Civil War, and tended to occupy more advantaged positions than blacks in the post-war labor market. However, in census data, classification as mulatto depended on the decisions of enumerators; thus, in most previous studies of racial inequality during this period, it is unclear whether being recorded as mulatto was related to advantages that accrued specifically to people with mixed African and European ancestry, or a self-fulfilling prophecy of social turned racial status as perceived by others, or both.

By using panel data, we can begin to untangle the direction of causality between racial and social status: If, for example, being mulatto simply gave men an advantage in the labor market, then increases in occupational status should not be related to changes in racial status between censuses; however, if higher occupational status also made one more likely to be perceived as mulatto by enumerators, then an increase in occupational status between censuses would be related to an increase in the likelihood of being classified as mulatto in the next enumeration. Preliminary analysis reveals surprising levels of fluidity in mulatto classification between censuses and some evidence for a recursive relationship between racial and social status, though our results suggest distinct patterns of racial hierarchy existed between the South and the rest of the United States.

Data and Methods

We make use of the IPUMS Linked Representative Samples produced by the Minnesota Population Center (MPC) for our data analysis. These samples link individuals from the 1850-1930 IPUMS census samples to the full-count data from the 1880 census, allowing for longitudinal analysis of Census data. There are several datasets available for each sample census year. For the preliminary analysis in this extended abstract, we analyze the linked sample between 1870 and 1880 for men. Linkage data for women is more problematic because of surname changes as a result of marriage. Ultimately, we intend to perform this analysis for both men and women for the 1870 to 1880, 1880 to 1900, 1880 to 1910, and 1880 to 1920 linkages. The 1850 and 1860 census data does not include

slave populations and so are of limited use to us and the 'mulatto' option was removed from the 1930 census form.

The linkages between each census year were made on the basis of five variables: birth year, place of birth, given name, surname, and race. Although race was used as a linking variable, distinctions were not made between those who were classified as black and those who were classified as mulatto. Thus, by design, the linkage procedure eliminates any potential switching between white and black/mulatto, but not switching between black and mulatto.

To score potential links, the MPC used the Freely Extensible Biomedical Record Linkage (FEBRL) software. This software generates scores for each potential link depending on the similarity of the five linking variables in two records. Positive scores indicate potentially "true" links, and negative scores indicate potentially "false" links. Any cases in the sample data with more than one potential "true" link in the 1880 census data were dropped, so the final data consist only of links with one unambiguous "true" link. This does create some bias in the linked data toward individuals with less common names born in less-populated areas.

For the linkage of black/mulatto men in the 1870-1880 data, we have a total sample size of 2,181 linked cases. In a split person-year format, this gives us 4,362 cases.

For our multivariate analyses we use a person fixed-effects logistic regression model. The outcome variable of interest is whether the individual was identified in a given census year as mulatto. The advantage of the fixed-effect model is that it allows for "within-person" comparisons, holding all unobserved time invariant variables (such as skin tone and other physical characteristics) constant. The regression coefficients tell us how the likelihood of a person being classified as mulatto vs. black changes as a function of other changes in that person's life, such as occupational changes, changes in employment status, changes in marital status, migration, etc.

Results

Table 1 shows the correspondence between an individual's reported race in 1870 and their reported race in 1880. About 17% of men were classified as mulatto in 1870 and about 16% of men were classified as mulatto in 1880, so there was little change in the aggregate racial distribution between the two censuses. However, there was a significant amount of individual switching between the two censuses. Of the 370 men who were classified as mulatto in 1870, only 48% (177) were classified as mulatto in 1880. Of the 1,811 men who were identified as black in 1870, 9.4% (171) were identified as mulatto in 1880.

Although there is clearly a great deal of fluidity in racial classification, the pattern in Table 1 is far from random. The odds ratio from the table is 8.8 and the X^2 statistic is highly statistically significant ($p<0.001$). In other words, the odds of being classified as mulatto in 1880 are 8.8 times higher for those who were classified as mulatto in 1870

than they are for those who were classified as black in 1870. The fluidity arises from the fact that the odds of mulatto identification in 1880 for those who were classified as mulatto in 1870 are still only about even. Thus, as being mulatto was associated with higher status, downward racial mobility was more common among men than upward racial mobility during this decade in the United States.

There are some important regional differences the fluidity of racial classification among African-ancestry men. Table 2 shows the odds ratio and the odds that a man classified as mulatto in 1870 will be classified as mulatto in 1880 for several different regional subgroups. Because we are comparing two time points and respondents may have migrated across regions, we first look only at men who were either consistently in the South or non-South for both census years. The odds ratios are significantly higher in the South than they are in the non-South, although they are substantial for both regions. Finally, we look at individuals who have migrated across regions between each census. These individuals have removed themselves entirely from the context of their classification in the 1870 census, and as one would expect, the odds ratio for this group is significantly lower.

We now move to looking at the characteristics that predict shifts in racial classification between 1870 and 1880. We use person-fixed effects panel models to estimate changes in various covariates on the log-odds of being classified as mulatto. Because we have a relatively small sample of "switchers" and because many of our variables are somewhat sparse or highly correlated within that small sample, we present estimates of the bivariate relationship between each of our independent variables and racial classification. As independent variables, we use occupational income scores (which roughly measure the prestige of each occupation), employment status, ever-married status, farm status, urbanicity of the county of residence, and age (in 10 year groups). We also estimate models separately for the full dataset, respondents who were in the South in both censuses, and respondents who were in the non-South in both censuses. Our preliminary results are presented in Table 3.

First, we should note that none of these predictor variables was statistically significant for the non-South sub-sample, and in most cases the point estimates were very different than those for the South, suggesting that patterns of racial classification were very different between the two regions, and that the distinction between blacks and mulattoes was weaker in the non-South.

Within the South, two variables were statistically significant. A one-unit increase in the occupational income score of a respondent was associated with a 5.6% increase in the odds of mulatto classification and a move from a rural county to an urban county was associated with 2.87 times higher odds of mulatto classification. To test the robustness of our results, we also compared several multivariate models with different variable specifications and in all cases, both occupational changes and urbanicity were the only statistically significant effects. We suspect some of the other effects are real, but the statistical power in our sample of switchers is too weak to detect the effects.

The last two models in Table 3 estimate the effect of regional migration on racial classification. The first model demonstrates a substantial decline in the likelihood of being classified as mulatto for migrants from the South to the non-South, although the results are not statistically significant. The last model compares migrants between the Lower and Upper South, and suggests that moving to the Lower South from the Upper South reduces the odds of mulatto classification, although again, the results are not statistically significant.

Further Work

This preliminary work demonstrates our technique, but the results presented here will be greatly expanded in the final product. First, we will also include linkages between 1880-1900, 1880-1910, and 1880-1920. The increased number of linkages will increase our statistical power in estimating some of the effects from Table 3 across time periods, but will also allow us to examine how these patterns might have changed over time.

Second, we plan to estimate similar models predicting mulatto classification change for women. The linked sample for women is less generalizable because it does not contain women who were married (or re-married) between the two census periods. This limits our analysis to the extent that, for women, increases in social status -- our presumed trigger of racial classification change -- accrued primarily through marriage. Nonetheless, the sample will allow us to explore whether occupational status is also a predictor of racial status among women, as well as whether the racial status of married women changes along with changes in the status of their husband.

Third, we plan on linking the individual data records to county-level data. We can then examine how patterns of racial identification might have changed as a result of contextual change in the area of residence, either through the migration of the individual or temporal change in the county characteristics themselves.

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Tables

Table 1: Correspondence between reported race in 1870 and reported race in 1880.

Race in 1870	**Race in 1880**		
	Black	Mulatto	Total
Black	1640	171	1811
Mulatto	193	177	370
Total	1833	348	2181

Table 2: Odds ratios and the odds of being classified as mulatto in 1880 given being classified as a mulatto in 1870, by region

Region	**Odds Ratio**	**Mulatto/Mulatto Odds**
All	8.80***	0.92
Consistently South	8.90***	0.82
Consistently non-South	6.52***	1.29
Regional migrants	3.08	0.75

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table 3: Bivariate regression coefficients from person fixed-effects panel models predicting mulatto classification in 1870 and 1880

Variable	Full	South	Non-South
Occupational Score	0.027(0.019)	0.056(.025)*	-0.010(0.035)
Employed	0.693(0.612)	1.792(1.08)^	&
Ever Married	-0.051(0.227)	-0.061(0.246)	&
Farm	-0.161(0.171)	-0.170(0.185)	0.154(0.556)
Urban	0.795(.322)*	1.050(.440)*	0.154(0.556)
Age			
0-9	0.272(0.390)	0.272(0.442)	-0.336(1.29)
10-19	0.312(0.356)	0.377(0.402)	-0.693(1.24)
20-29	0.141(0.294)	0.249(0.337)	-1.39(1.12)
30-39 (ref)	-	-	
40-49	0.312(0.374)	0.580(0.450)	-0.103(0.789)
50-59	0.093(0.515)	0.599(0.617)	-1.696(1.28)
60-69	-0.750(0.788)	-0.462(0.912)	&
70+	-2.250(1.33)^	-1.656(1.42)	&
non-South	0.916(0.59)	-	-
Region (South only)			
Upper South (ref)		-	
Lower South		-0.693(0.707)	

^ $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

& Data cell too small to estimate