

Does Money Whiten in the United States? Re-examining the Rules for Inheriting Race

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Abstract

The idea that “money whitens” is one of the more fascinating, and divisive, subjects among scholars of race in Brazil and Latin America. Debates continue as to whether or not a dark-skinned person would be perceived and treated as if they were white once they acquired sufficient wealth, income or education. However, in the United States, it has generally been taken for granted that the boundaries between whites and blacks, in particular, are too rigid to allow for significant racial mobility—even across generations. We plan to draw on restricted-use census and ACS data (1970-2010) for children in couples consisting of one white and one black parent to explore: (a) how they have been racially classified; (b) whether the likelihood that they would be classified only as “white” has varied over time, or by Hispanic origin; and (c) whether classification differs by socioeconomic status, as the “money whitens” hypothesis would suggest.

Does Money Whiten in the United States? Re-examining the Rules for Inheriting Race

The idea that “money whitens” is one of the more fascinating, and divisive, subjects among scholars of race in Brazil and Latin America. Debates have continued for decades as to whether or not a dark-skinned person would be perceived and treated as if they were white once they acquired sufficient wealth, income or education (e.g., Harris 1964, Wright 1990, Wade 1993, Andrews 2004, Sheriff 2001, Villarreal 2010). Some insist that “money whitening” is either a myth (Golash-Boza 2010), or a largely symbolic strategy that marks people as whiter on paper than they are in everyday interactions (Twine 1998). At the same time, studies show that Brazilian survey interviewers do “whiten” people with higher socioeconomic status, relative to the race they claim for themselves (Telles 2002), and that more highly educated nonwhite Brazilians are both more likely to be married to a white person, and more likely to classify their children as white (Schwartzman 2007).

Yet, what may be most interesting about this debate is not what is contested, but what is taken for granted: that, whether or not whitening happens in Brazil or other parts of Latin America, it definitely does *not* happen in the United States. The categorical black-white divide in the U.S. is often invoked as a contrast in studies of racial fluidity and whitening in Brazil. It is assumed that the boundaries between whites and blacks are too rigid to allow for significant racial mobility in the U.S.—even across generations. However, previous research has not directly investigated the question of whether, and under what circumstances, Americans of African descent will report their race as white. Rather, most related studies address the shrinking likelihood that a child with one black parent will be classified as only black (Roth 2005), the chances that a multiracial part-black person will report as single-race black (Campbell 2007), and the recent multiracial movement (DaCosta 2007), which advocates for children of interracial marriages to be identified as multiracial. Scholars making explicit connections between the U.S. and Latin America have argued that race and racial inequality in the United States are becoming “Latin Americanized” (e.g., Hochschild 2005, Skidmore 1993), highlighting the development of a more graded or continuous notion of race. Yet, even they do not consider the possibility that Americans of African descent might be “whitened” by achieving high socioeconomic status.

This gap in the empirical literature is even more intriguing because census and national survey data has long existed that could shed light on whether or not “money whitens” in the United States. This stands in contrast to Brazil and other parts of Latin America, where large-scale quantitative data is relatively recent. We aim to fill this gap, drawing on 40 years of the best available U.S. data about children with both a white parent and a black parent.

Our primary aim is to discover whether the child’s reported race is more likely to be white if the parents have higher socioeconomic status, in line with the “money whitens” hypothesis. One route to whitening noted in the research on Brazil focuses on the role of “marrying up” (Schwartzman 2007), or contracting a “status exchange” marital partnership

(Gullickson 2006b), which suggests that the socioeconomic status of the black parent might be particularly important in these processes. To the extent that money does whiten in the U.S., we also aim to examine whether the phenomenon is limited to Americans who report Hispanic origins; this would suggest the idea that “money whitens” is not accepted by the general population but might have been imported along with immigration from Latin America.

As part of this study, we also aim to provide a broader historical look at how children of black-white couples have been racially classified in the United States between 1900 and 2010, and how this has varied by the family’s Hispanic origin.

Data, Sample Selection, and Measures

Data: We propose to use high-density restricted-use samples of the US Censuses of 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000, as well as a high-density version of the 2006-2010 pooled American Community Survey data. These samples are available to approved researchers via the Restricted Data Center network (Liebler has been approved to conduct this research). The samples contain about 17% of the population in each year, which increases our sample sizes, relative to the public-use versions of these data, and thus reduces our standard errors.

Sample selection: In each data set, we will focus on children ages 0-9, who are living with one single-race white parent and one single-race black parent, one of whom is the householder. If sample size allows, we will randomly select one child per sibling set. Parent-parent-child triads will be excluded if anyone’s race was allocated by the Census Bureau.

Because of our focus on the “money whitens” hypothesis, we will include only children whose race was reported as (a) black, (b) white, (c) black and white (or a write in response such as “mixed”), or (d) “other race.” Restricting the sample to these racial classifications also increases the likelihood that the child is not an adopted or stepchild, as might be the case if they are reported as American Indian, Asian, or Pacific Islander. After 2000, we can explicitly limit our sample to the biological children of the householder.

Measures of Hispanic origin: We will be testing several measures of Hispanic origin, including an indicator of whether both parents report Hispanic origin, whether exactly one parent reports being Hispanic, and/or whether the child is reported as Hispanic. Prior to 1980, the census did not ask about Hispanic origins directly, so we will code a family as Hispanic if any member of the triad was born abroad in the Caribbean, Central America, or South America.

Measures of Socioeconomic Origin: We plan to rely primarily on measures of each parent’s completed education and his or her occupational standing. We also aim to construct a continuous variable that expresses the family’s income in terms of its relation to the poverty line (taking into account family composition).

Preliminary Results

Using public-use microdata from IPUMS (Ruggles et al. 2010), we have generated preliminary results, spanning from 1900 to 2010 (“2010” is data from the 2006-2010 ACS). In Figure 1, we illustrate the proportion of young children (ages 0-9) with a black parent and a white parent who were reported as white. From 1900 to 1990, more than 20 percent of all such children were classified as white, including nearly half at mid-century, as the Jim Crow era was nearing its end. Although these marriages were uncommon in many decades (see Gullickson 2006a), Figure 1 shows that the resulting children were not universally classified using the “one drop” rule, either by their parents (beginning in 1960) or by enumerators (before 1960).

[Figure 1 about here]

Using IPUMS data from 1970 to 2010, we next divided these children into groups based on (a) whether the child was reported as Hispanic or not (this designation is imputed by IPUMS in 1970), and (b) whether the family was “poor” (at or below the poverty line), “middle” income (between poverty and 3x the poverty line), or “rich” (above 3x the poverty line). These divisions allow us to provide preliminary evidence about whether the “rich” families are especially likely to report their children as white (the “money whitens” hypothesis), and whether the answer to this question is different among people with links to the Caribbean or Central or South America (where “money whitening” is thought to take place). These preliminary comparisons are presented in Figures 2 and 3. They show that rather than a tendency for richer black-white couples to report their children as white, there is a slight tendency for poorer parents to do so. Moreover, this tendency is stronger among Hispanic children than among non-Hispanic children.

[Figures 2 and 3 about here]

Finally, we explore the effect of parent’s educational attainment on the likelihood that their children will be classified as white. As Schwartzman (2007) notes, parents’ education may be a better proxy for the whitening effects of status than income (or poverty) because it varies less from year to year, and is more likely to have been attained before the birth of the child in question. Of course, unlike household poverty levels, completed education may also differ between spouses. For these results, we focus on the completed education of the black parent, as it is thought to drive the status exchange interracial union, which allows the black parent to both marry a lighter-skinned or white spouse and then “whiten” his or her children.

[Figures 4 and 5 about here]

The comparisons by education reveal an intriguing contrast between the era of enumerator classification (pre-1960) and self-report (1960 and later). The whitening of non-Hispanic children with a highly educated black parent occurred with some frequency prior to 1960. However, in more recent years, Hispanic children in less educated interracial families are especially likely to be classified as white. This contrast mirrors debates about whitening in Brazil that pit national survey data with interviewer classifications (e.g., Telles 2002) against local ethnographic work highlighting the aspirational aspects of self-identification (e.g., Twine 1998).

Next steps

If accepted, we plan to conduct the following additional analyses before the 2013 PAA meetings: We will use restricted-use data from 1970-2010 to increase our sample size substantially. We will estimate multivariate models predicting the likelihood that a young child of a black and a white parent will be classified as white (vs. all else), controlling for each parent's education, occupational standing, age cohort, and Hispanic origin(s)/birthplace, as well as the black parent's gender. We will include region and year fixed-effects to account for changes over time and differences across regions. We plan to test other model specifications as well, including separate analyses for each year, and separating Hispanic from non-Hispanic families.

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Figure 1: Race responses for children of Black-White couples, ages 0-9

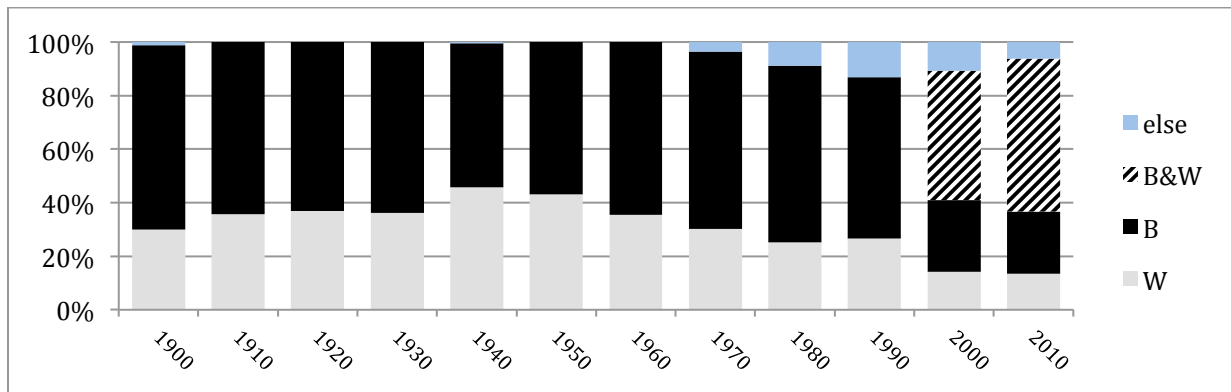


Figure 2: Race of non-Hispanic children of Black-White couples, by poverty status

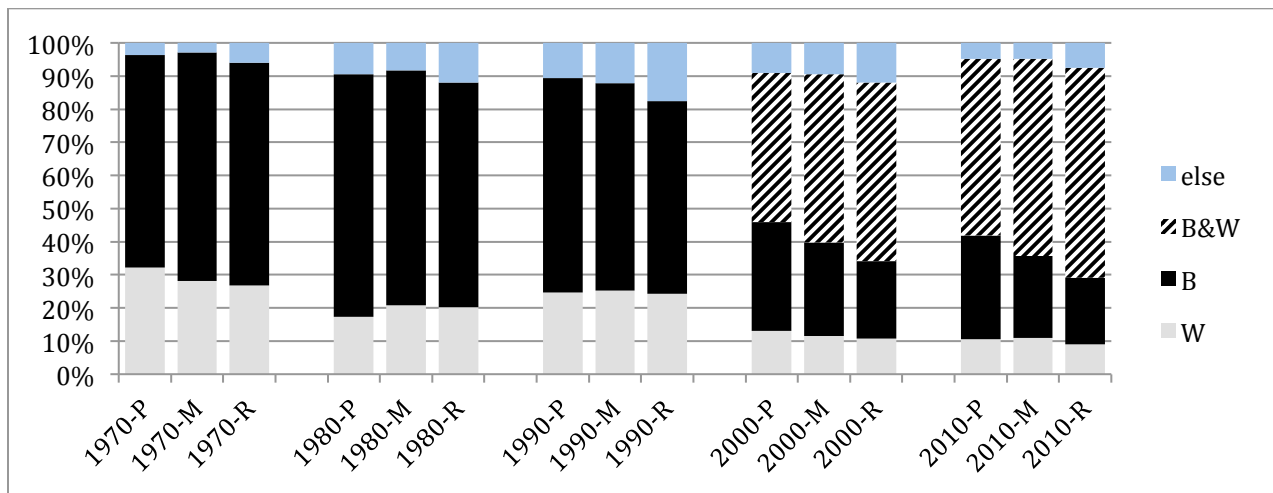
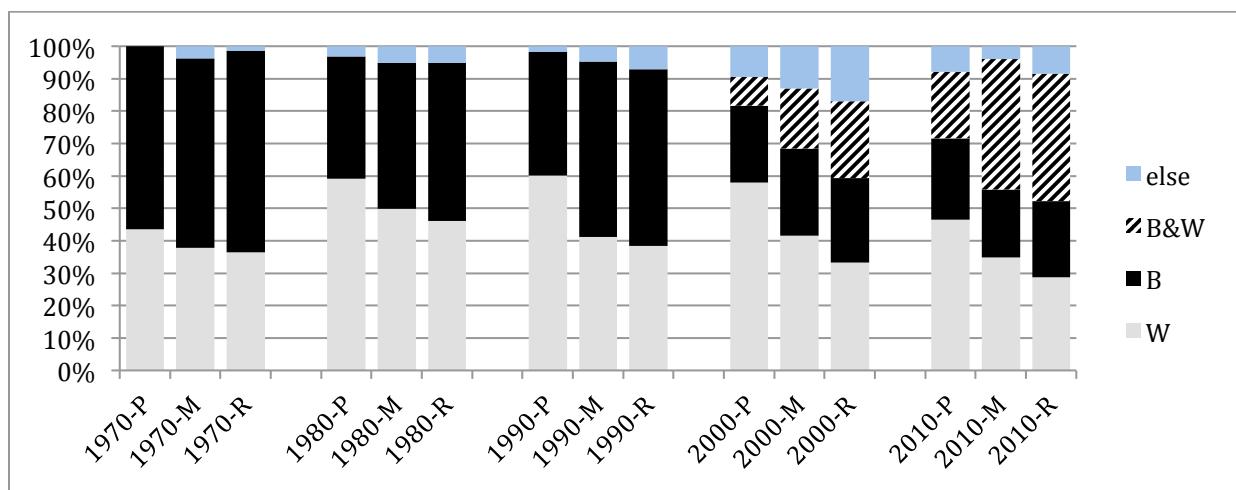


Figure 3: Race of Hispanic children of Black-White couples, by poverty status



Note: P=poor (adjusted household income at or below the poverty line); M=middle income (up to 3 times poverty line); R=rich (more than 3 times the poverty line).

Figure 4: Race of non-Hispanic children of Black-White couples, by black parent's educ.

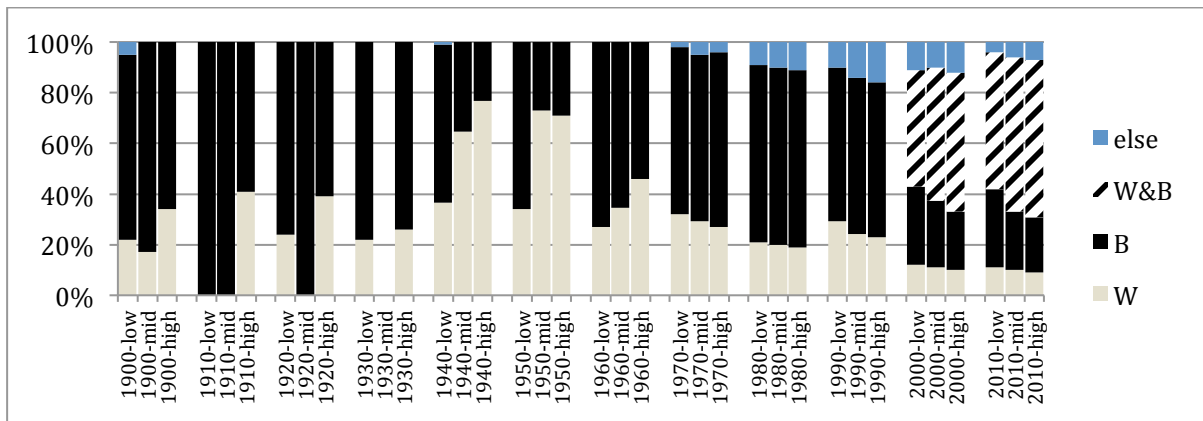
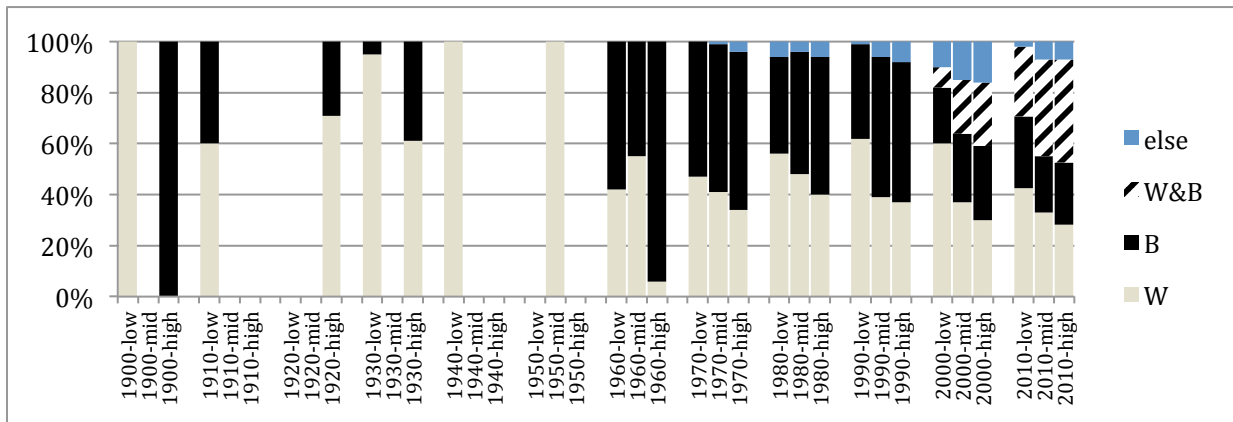


Figure 5: Race of Hispanic children of Black-White couples, by black parent's educ.



Note: Missing bars indicate year-education combinations with no corresponding families or children.