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What Majority-minority Society? A Critical Analysis of the Census Bureau's Projections of America's Demographic Future

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Abstract

On the basis of demographic projections by the U.S. Census Bureau, many Americans believe that their society will transition soon to a majority-minority one. The author analyzes the latest version of the projections and finds that the pivotal group is made up of individuals who come from mixed minority-white family backgrounds. It is projected to grow very rapidly in coming decades, and Census Bureau classification practices mean that most of its members are counted as minority. Without this classification, however, the emergence of a majority-minority society by 2060 is far from certain. Moreover, the evidence we possess about the characteristics, social affiliations, and identities of mixed individuals contradicts this Census Bureau practice, except for partly black individuals, who suffer from high levels of racism. Taking into account the ambiguous social locations of most mixed minority-white persons, the author suggests that, even should a majority-minority society appear, it will not look like we presently imagine it.

Keywords

demography, ethnoracial classifications, majority-minority society, mixed minority-white background, population projections

Americans widely believe that their country is on the verge of a demographic precipice, when whites will no longer form the majority of the population. This future demographic state, often described as the "majority-minority society," has been projected by the U.S. Census Bureau (2015, 2018b) to occur in the mid-2040s. At some moment in that decade, the number of Americans who describe themselves as non-Hispanic and solely white by race is expected to dip below the 50 percent mark. Many observers believe that this projected state of demographic affairs will betoken a thoroughgoing transformation of American society, signaled by whites' loss of societal power—power not just in political and economic domains but in cultural arenas such as music and literature as well.

This anticipated future has been greeted very differently by various groups in American society. According to numerous analysts of the 2016 presidential election, its unexpected outcome stems from the anxieties of many whites about loss of status due to demographic change (Mutz 2018). Indeed, social psychologists have shown repeatedly that in response to scenarios of future white minority status, whites tend to adopt politically conservative stances and to express more negative attitudes toward minorities (e.g., Craig, Rucker, and Richeson 2018). (One intriguing strand in this research appears to indicate, however, that these reactions may be altered by prompting more inclusive conceptions of whiteness with a narrative that incorporates the offspring of minority-white mixed unions [Myers and Levy 2018].) In all likelihood, the scenario of white minority status is telescoped into the very near future, or even the present, by many whites, given the tendency by Americans of all groups to exaggerate minority population sizes (Alba, Rumbaut, and Marotz 2005; Lawrence and Sides 2014). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, a majority of whites believes that there is now significant discrimination against their group (Gonyea 2017).

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A very different segment of Americans, which could be described as multicultural and progressive, finds this future an occasion for celebration. For instance, the writer Hua Hsu (2009), in a highly cited essay in *The Atlantic* that responded to an earlier version of the Census Bureau projections, welcomed the date in the mid-2040s as "the end of white America," "a cultural and demographic inevitability." He enthused about the potential of a "new cultural mainstream" in a "post-white America."

But is a majority-minority society inevitable in the next several decades? And if it occurs, what might it look like? In this article, I take a close look at the projections and find that the forecast of the loss of majority status by whites (shorthand for non-Hispanic whites) hinges on a crucial, unexamined assumption: that, in accordance with Census Bureau practice, the growing number of individuals with mixed white and minority parentage can be meaningfully classified as "not white" or "minority." Without this classification, the emergence of the majority-minority society in the near future is far from certain. Moreover, the evidence that we possess about mixed minority-white individuals—in terms, for example, of social affiliations and identity preferences (described later in the article)—is generally inconsistent with viewing them as not white but does suggest their ambiguous social location. The major exception to these patterns involves individuals with both black and white ancestry—a modest sized minority of the mixed white group (Alba, Beck, and Sahin 2018a)—who suffer from the high racist hurdles confronting other Americans with African descent (Alba and Foner 2015). Nevertheless, the rising importance of the in-between population of the offspring of contemporary mixed unions should lead us to rethink what we imagine the majority-minority society to be like.

The Demographic and Sociological Background of Ethnoracial Projections

Race and Hispanic origin (ethnicity) are different from the other demographic characteristics on the census form, such as sex and age. In general, answering questions about the former calls for more interpretation of the social circumstances of an individual's life and family origins, and it invokes identity in the sense of a presentation of self that can be shaped by individual choice as well as by "reflected appraisals" in the eyes of others. That race and ethnicity are not obvious in the same way as, say, age (sex also increasingly involves elements of choice, but not yet to the same degree as race and ethnicity) is demonstrated by the difficulties many Latin American immigrants have in answering the race question: they must learn how to translate their imported categories of racial identity into the ones conventional in the United States (Roth 2012).

Adding to the uncertainties about ethnoracial census reports is the rapid growth in the number of Americans who come from mixed family backgrounds, that is, who have parents from two different major ethnoracial categories. The great majority of these individuals have one white parent and one minority (nonwhite or Hispanic) parent. The increasing level of ethnoracial mixing in families is reflected in the upward trend in intermarriage, whose fraction among new marriages was 17 percent in 2015 (Livingston and Brown 2017). Intermarriage appears to have been rising steadily since the 1967 Supreme Court decision in *Loving v. Virginia*, which invalidated the last antimiscegenation laws; at that time, the rate was about 3 percent.

The trend line of the rise in the formation of mixed families implies that individuals with mixed family backgrounds are found disproportionately among children and youth. Alba, Beck, and Sahin (2018b) showed that in 2013, infants in mixed families represented 14 percent to 15 percent all of U.S.-born infants, and the great majority, almost 80 percent, had one non-Hispanic white parent. (And of those who were partly white, infants whose other parent was Hispanic were more than half.) This growing group affects the stability of ethnoracial reporting. Liebler et al. (2017), comparing the same individuals in the 2000 and 2010 censuses, detected considerable "churning" in ethnoracial classifications, largely traceable to the inconsistencies associated with mixed family backgrounds (see also Alba et al. 2018b).

It has been widely assumed until now that the census reports of race and Hispanic origin reflect stable social traits of individuals. A great deal of social research—on residential segregation, for example—would make little sense if that were not true. An assumption undergirding that voluminous research tradition is that decade-to-decade changes in segregation index values reflect changes in patterns of residence, not identity shifts (e.g., Massey and Denton 1993).

The assumption of stability is logical within the framework of sociological race theory (Omi and Winant 2014; Valdez and Golash-Boza 2017). The race model assumes that the cardinal features of race as a social characteristic arise from the positioning of racial groups within a hierarchical power structure involving majority domination of minorities. Racial boundaries are thought to be patrolled by the more powerful side, an aspect of the majority's attempts to "hoard" opportunities (Tilly 1998). Hence, insofar as racial categorizations in general reflect a balance between internal self-assessments and external labels imposed by others, the race model, especially with respect to minorities, attributes greater weight to the external side. Because racial groups are segregated and mostly endogamous, race for most individuals is an unambiguous social trait assigned at birth (i.e., it is ascriptive).

A different, if related, model is the ethnicity one. Ever since the famous definition of Max Weber (1968) equating ethnicity with "a subjective belief in common descent," this model has emphasized a strong element of internal self-assessment; that is, ethnicity is more an identity of the individual than a category imposed by outsiders (though it is shaped by both forces). To be sure, an ethnic identity is influenced by social constraints arising from family origins, and it

is shaped by attachments to specific individuals, communities, and cultures and by experiences that begin in childhood. The ethnic model and the race one share one major feature: in either case, group identities exist within a power hierarchy, but in the ethnic case, the hierarchy is not as determinative of individual life chances, and there is more latitude for individual and even group mobility with respect to a societal regime of ethnoracial categories.

The ethnic model plays a central role in neoassimilation theory and research, which also shed light on some possibilities associated with mixed ancestry (Alba and Nee 2003). Interethnic union has long been regarded as a key step in a multigenerational assimilation process. Research on the ethnic identities of whites who are the offspring of mixed unions shows these to be both more flexible and muted by comparison with the identities of whites having an undivided ethnic heritage (Alba 1990; Waters 1990). Gans (1979) coined the term *symbolic ethnicity* for identities that are more about "feeling ethnic" on occasion than about "being ethnic" in everyday life, and this notion seems to apply well to the identities of many whites from mixed ethnic backgrounds.

Reflecting on the historical experience of large-scale assimilation in the United States, Alba and Nee (2003) argued that assimilation is better conceived as entry into a majority-dominated mainstream than as acquisition of membership in the majority itself, which in the contemporary period would require nonwhites to become white. This conceptual shift appears more suited to an assimilation that, rather than extinguishing ethnoracial identity, encourages it to take more occasional and muted forms suitable for everyday interactions with social peers from different ethnoracial backgrounds. Alba and Nee pointed to the post–World War II mass assimilation of the descendants of southern and eastern European immigrants, when ethnic and religious identities—Italian American or Jewish—became integrated into the U.S. mainstream rather than disappearing. In the contemporary context, the implication is that identification on census forms as having mixed ethnoracial background is not necessarily indicative of a "group" membership. I will return to this issue.

The Dependence of the Population Projections on Mixed Majority-minority Individuals

What the Projections Say

What I now show is that the majority-minority scenario in the Census Bureau population projections depends crucially on an ultimately untenable assumption about the ethnoracial placement of individuals who report mixed minority and white family origins. An unheralded feature of the projections is, in fact, the very rapid growth of this group by the middle of the century.

The point of departure for the latest (2017) projections is 2016 population estimates by sex, age, and race/ethnicity (see U.S. Census Bureau 2018a). (Nativity was also included as a dimension of the projections, requiring the use of American Community Survey [ACS] data, but I do not consider it here.) The projections were carried through 2060 and required detailed assumptions about fertility, mortality, and international migration that need not concern us here.

According to the projection tables published online, the United States will become a majority-minority nation in the middle of the 2040s. Specifically, in 2045, the projections show the percentage of non-Hispanic whites dipping to 49.8 percent (see Table 1). By 2050, that percentage falls to 47.8 percent, and by 2060, the end point of the projections, to 44.3 percent.

However, as noted, the white population (non-Hispanic whites) is defined to exclude individuals who report mixed family backgrounds.[1] That is, any individual who indicates mixed Hispanic and non-Hispanic white parentage or mixed white and nonwhite racial origins is counted as not white. The rapid growth of the mixed group[2] through the life of the projections is enough to challenge the forecast of a majority-minority society, even by 2060.

Getting into the Weeds of the Projections

To understand fully the leverage exerted by the mixed minority-white group on the projections, it is necessary to dig beneath the surface of the projections to the mechanisms involved in the construction of the reported "data." Two features of this construction are critical. First, the projections assume in effect that the ethnoracial classifications of individuals in the population are fixed (i.e., unvarying over the projection period). (Or, to put it more technically, the projections assume that temporal change in any population category is governed exclusively by the demographic balancing equation, involving only birth, deaths, and net migration. Identity shift is not considered.) This is of course unrealistic for individuals of mixed background, who have unusually

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[1]A tricky issue concerns the gap between those who come from mixed family backgrounds and those who report mixed origins on the census (Roth 2018). There is an extensive overlap between these groups but also nontrivial slippage. A substantial if inestimable (at this point) fraction of individuals from mixed families are reported, by themselves or other household members, in terms of single ethnoracial categories (Hispanic or single-race non-Hispanic) on the census. This is true even of infants for whom parents tend to acknowledge both parental sides (see Alba et al. 2018a; Bratter 2007; Lichter and Qian 2018). It is also the case that some individuals who appear as mixed in the census are reporting mixing that occurred in the grandparents' generation or even before (see Morning and Saperstein 2018).

[2]The term *group* here is a semantic convenience. The individuals from mixed family backgrounds do not at this point constitute a social group, though they have the potential to do so in the future (see Strmic-Pawl 2016).

Table 1. Summary Percentages for 2017 Ethnoracial Census Bureau Projections, 2016 to 2060.

	2016	2020	2025	2030	2035	2040	2045	2050	2055	2060
Total (%)	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00
Not Hispanic or Latino	82.21	81.27	80.11	78.93	77.74	76.54	75.40	74.34	73.37	72.50
One race	80.12	78.98	77.56	76.11	74.61	73.10	71.62	70.20	68.87	67.60
White	61.27	59.70	57.75	55.77	53.76	51.74	49.75	47.83	46.02	44.31
Black or African American	12.45	12.53	12.64	12.75	12.86	12.98	13.12	13.26	13.41	13.56
American Indian and Alaska Native	0.74	0.73	0.73	0.72	0.72	0.71	0.70	0.69	0.68	0.67
Asian	5.49	5.83	6.25	6.67	7.08	7.47	7.85	8.21	8.55	8.85
Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander	0.18	0.18	0.19	0.19	0.19	0.20	0.20	0.20	0.21	0.21
Two or more races	2.09	2.29	2.55	2.83	3.12	3.44	3.78	4.13	4.51	4.89
Hispanic or Latino	17.79	18.73	19.89	21.07	22.26	23.46	24.60	25.66	26.63	27.50

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2018b).

fluid identities, as revealed by the substantial census-to-census churning, mostly movement between mixed and unmixed categories, as detected by Liebler et al. (2017; also Alba et al. 2018b).

Moreover, the fixing of these classifications in the projections consigns the great majority of individuals with one white and one minority parent to the "not white" side of the ledger. Ethnoracial classifications are determined when individuals are first "encountered," either because they appear in the 2016 base or when they are projected to be born or to immigrate. Because in 2016 so many of the individuals from mixed backgrounds were still children, their ethnoracial classifications were determined by the way their parents reported them on a census form. Parents most often describe their children in ways that honor maternal and paternal sides of their heritage; hence, the large majority of children of mixed unions are reported as mixed and classified as "not white" in the projection summaries (Alba et al. 2018b; Bratter 2007; Lichter and Qian 2018). Because the ethnoracial assignments of births during the projection are governed by the same empirical probabilities of how parents in specific ethnoracial combinations report their children, the same conclusion applies to them (U.S. Census Bureau 2018a:6).

Second, a large part of the mixed white and minority group, especially those with one Hispanic parent, is hidden from view in census data and, by default, classified as minority. In the current census ethnoracial data collection and classification scheme, there is no way for individuals to report that they are part Hispanic and part non-Hispanic. This problem arises from the two-question format currently used to gather information about ethnoracial background (Alba et al. 2018a). Because, by Census Bureau definition, a Hispanic person "may be of any race," once the Hispanic box is checked, an individual is Hispanic regardless of what is reported on the race question. The Census Bureau has proposed a remedy: a single question that combines "Hispanic" with the race options and allows multiple responses. The 2015 National Content Test (NCT) showed this question to be superior to the current two-question format. One reason

is that it allowed respondents to report Hispanic as one of multiple groups. The majority of these reports combined Hispanic with white: Roughly 15 percent of Hispanics declared that they are also "white," and follow-up interviews confirmed the meaningfulness of these identities (U.S. Census Bureau 2017:47).[3]

The Census Bureau intended to use the improved, single-question format in the 2020 decennial count, but the inability of the Office of Management and Budget to set new federal ethnic and racial standards in time has blocked that change. Nevertheless, because the proposed question is a clear improvement over the two-question format, I will assume that it will come into use at some point during the projection period. In any event, the social realities imperfectly captured on the census questionnaire cannot be grasped without some accounting for the large number of individuals who are part Hispanic and part Anglo (i.e., non-Hispanic white). Hence, in analyzing the projections, I will estimate in a rough way the number of such individuals, on the basis of its correspondence with the number of non-Hispanics who are mixed white and a minority race.

To be specific, an approximate, if safely conservative, estimate of the number of individuals who would report mixed Hispanic and Anglo ancestry (if they could) is equal to the number of non-Hispanics who report mixed white and minority races. In arriving at this estimate, I have used calculations from the 2015 NCT (U.S. Census Bureau 2017), the

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[3]Many Hispanics apparently do not find the race question meaningful. One consequence is frequent use of the "other" racial category (U.S. Census Bureau 2017). In addition, many appear to choose the "white" category because they associate it with being "American" (Dowling 2014). Because of their presence among whites as defined solely by the race question, the Census Bureau's alternative projection of racial groups, which shows whites (both Hispanic and non-Hispanic) to retain majority status through 2060, is not convincing. That is, the Hispanic portion of whites includes an unknown number of individuals who are not mixed but choose the "white" race for reasons other than ancestry.
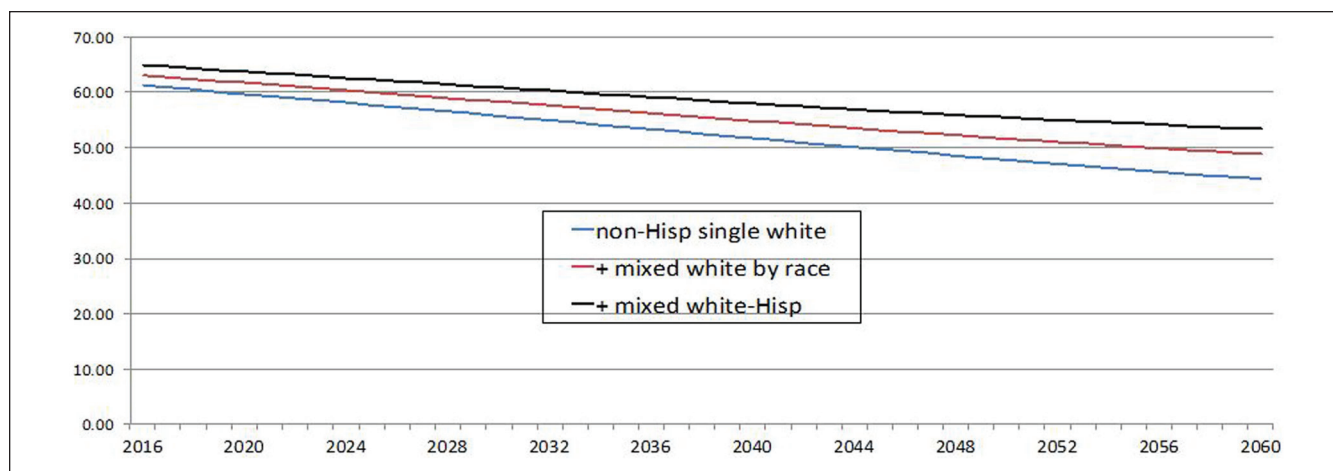
Figure 1. Projections of whites as a percentage of the population, according to more and less inclusive conceptions of whiteness.

Pew Research Center study of Hispanic identity (Lopez, Gonzalez-Barrera, and López 2017), and an analysis of the parental backgrounds of 2013 infants (Alba et al. 2018b). All yield similar estimates, exemplified by the following calculation: if we take the 2015 NCT's estimate, cited above, that about 15 percent of Hispanics also declare meaningfully that they are "white" and apply it to the total percentage of Hispanics in the 2016 population data, 17.8 percent (in Table 1), then it would seem that 2.7 percent of the population would report mixed Anglo and Hispanic ancestry if they could. This is of the same order of magnitude as the percentage who are non-Hispanic and report two or more races, 2.1 percent (Table 1; the great majority of these racially mixed individuals, nearly 90 percent, are part white). The fact that the percentage who are part Hispanic is larger indicates that the assumption of equality is conservative. The results that follow therefore probably understate the impact of the mixed group on the projections. They are nonetheless impressive.

Alternative Projections Using More Inclusive Definitions of "Whites" Produce Different Futures

Figure 1 displays the projected white part of the population, under various assumptions about the mixed group.[4] The lowest line represents the Census Bureau projections: the percentage that is non-Hispanic and solely white by race dips under 50 percent in the mid-2040s. The middle line adds in the projected non-Hispanics who are white and another race.

[4]The construction of Figure 1 requires some analysis at a very detailed level of the projections. The Census Bureau (2018b) makes available a file that, for each year of the projection and each year of age, shows breakdowns for specific combinations of sex, Hispanicity, and race. Thus, to find the specific figures by year and age for non-Hispanics of mixed white and some other race, one must subtract the number for non-Hispanics with *only* white race from the number for non-Hispanics with *any* white race.

In this case, the transition to a majority-minority society does not occur until the mid-2050s, and by 2060 the white portion of the population is still at 49 percent. The upper line includes the estimated group that is part Hispanic and part Anglo. Although this line steadily declines—the white part of the population decreases throughout the projection—it does not cross the 50 percent threshold by 2060. The majority-minority society does not occur by that point.

The downward slope of the upper line may leave the impression that the majority-minority society is just a matter of a little more time, but that conclusion is more uncertain than it seems. Consider the projected infant population, a strong indicator of the future. Figure 2 shows its projection under alternative assumptions. The lowest line represents again the census-defined white group, which appears to plummet as a percentage of all infants, starting out below 50 percent in 2016 and dropping to 34 percent by 2060. However, the upper line, which again includes the projected number of non-Hispanics who report both white and nonwhite races and the estimated number of Hispanics with Anglo ancestry, presents a very different picture. Although it descends, it does so slowly, dropping by just 5 percentage points over the life of the projection; and in 2060, white and partly white infants still make up a majority.

What the example of infants demonstrates is the powerful growth of the mixed-white population in the projections. The size of this group (of all ages) rises threefold during the projections. By the 2050s, one of every three babies with white ancestry also has Hispanic or racially nonwhite ancestry; and these mixed infants are almost a fifth of all infants, of any ethnoracial background. Consequently, assumptions about the ethnoracial assignment of mixed minority-white individuals have a large impact on the projections. The Census Bureau's assumption that they are not to be counted with whites determines the outcome of the majority-minority society by the mid-2040s.
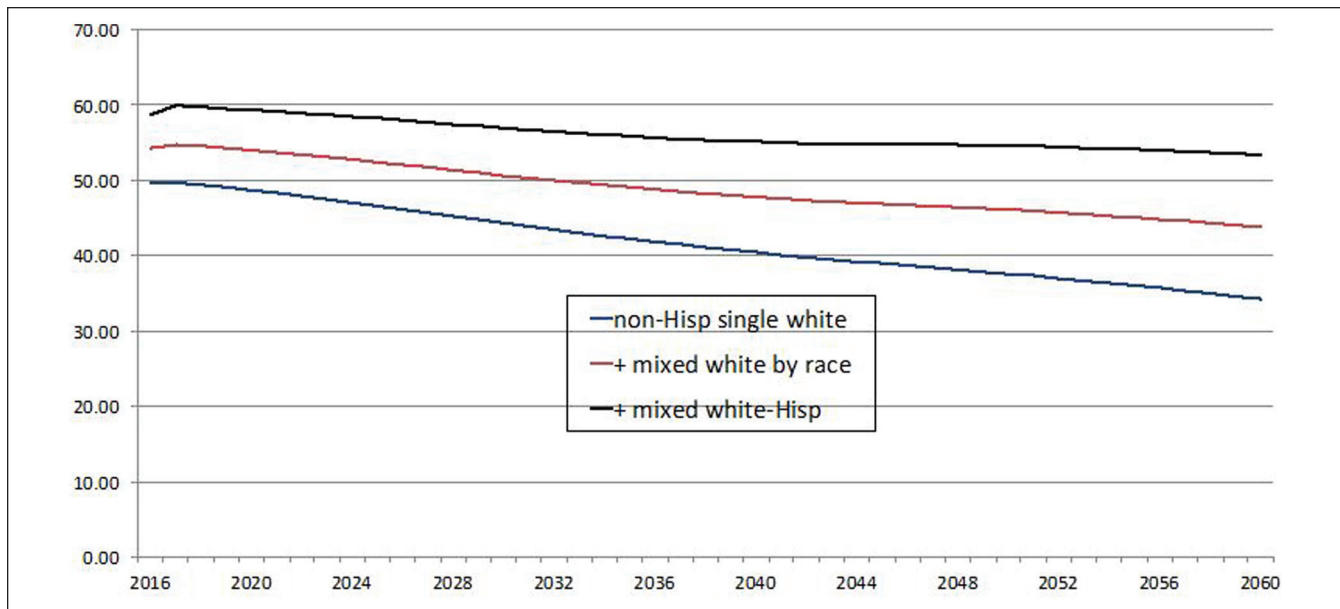
Figure 2. Projections of whites as a percentage of infants under alternative conceptions of whiteness.

I am not advocating that the mixed group should instead be counted with whites. Their position in such a binary scheme is profoundly ambiguous: they start life with close family links to whites and also to minority kin. In this respect, they are an intermediary group, one that calls into question the appropriateness of the minority-white binary as applied to the American future.

It should be apparent, in any event, that our understanding of what the U.S. might look like in coming decades hinges on what we are willing to assume about the mixed minority-white group. This raises the obvious question of what we know about them. The review to follow does not lead to a conclusion that settles the mixed group on one or the other side of the minority-white binary. It does, however, challenge forcefully the Census Bureau's assumption that they should be counted among nonwhites.

Mixed Minority-white Backgrounds: What Do We Know?

The evidence we possess about individuals from mixed minority-white backgrounds is admittedly still on the thin side. But with one major qualification, it does support the notion that those who are partly white are mostly integrated with the white population, though they also generally retain important connections to the minority side of their ancestry. The data to be cited below come from multiple sources: (1) analyses of large-scale population surveys such as the decennial census (Liebler et al. 2017), the ACS data (Alba et al. 2018a, 2018b; Miyawaki 2015), the Current Population Survey (Duncan and Trejo 2011, 2018), the Pew surveys of multiracial Americans (2015) and of Hispanic identity

(Lopez et al. 2017), and an annual national survey of college freshmen (Davenport 2016); and (2) specialized studies, including Telles and Ortiz's (2008) study of Mexican Americans and the small in-depth interview studies of mixed individuals such as the ones conducted by Lee and Bean (2010), Rocquemore and Brunsma (2007), and Strmic-Pawl (2016).

Let me start with what we know about infants from census data. This gives us insight into the social contexts in which children in mixed majority-minority families are growing up. (Infants are especially suitable for study because of the high likelihood that both parents are present in the household, allowing ethnoracial parentage to be unambiguously established; in census data, moreover, parental data provide the only way of detecting part-Hispanic persons.) Partly white infants appear on the whole to be growing up in circumstances similar to those of infants with only white parents; infants of white and black parentage are the major exceptions to this generalization. In terms of family income, mixed families with one white parent and one minority parent generally have an average level of affluence more like that of white families than they do that of families with parents belonging to the same group as the minority partner (Alba et al. 2018b). By contrast, families with black fathers and white mothers, the most common black-white pairing, are only slightly advantaged in income terms compared with families of two black parents.

Because income is related to housing situation, this broad similarity to the situations of white families carries over into residential space. Distinguishing between "outer-urban and suburban homeowners" and "inner-city renters" (Alba et al. 2018b) reveals that white families are much more

concentrated in the former: about half there versus one fifth in the latter category. For the black and Hispanic families with infants, the proportions are reversed.

Mixed minority-white families are situated residentially more like white families than like minority ones, implying that many children in mixed families are growing up in communities with numerous white children. Mixed Asian-white families are even more concentrated in the outer-urban and suburban owner category than are all-white families. Hispanic-white families are found considerably more in these advantaged contexts than in urban renter ones, but their distribution between the two is not as lopsided as in the all-white case. Black-white families are more often in the urban renter category than in the other, and when the father is black—the more common case—their distribution between the two is no different from that of all-black families.

For data about adults with mixed backgrounds, we can turn to some recent surveys. Especially useful are studies that identify mixed backgrounds by tracing ancestry rather than by asking individuals to identify themselves ethnoracially, because the latter approach confounds family background with identity (Duncan and Trejo 2018). Two Pew surveys, one of multiracial Americans and the other of individuals with Hispanic ancestry, fit this bill and give insight into the identities and experiences of these individuals. The two surveys reveal that these partly white adults possess more fluid social identities than unmixed adults and, at the same time, appear comfortable with the white or European sides of their backgrounds. For instance, according to the Pew survey of multiracial Americans, individuals who are white and Asian or white and American Indian are likely to feel they have a lot in common with whites and that they are accepted by them. Their social distance from whites appears less than from the groups of their minority heritage. These individuals are more likely to believe that a casual observer would take them for white than for another ethnoracial category. Nevertheless, those who are white and Asian favor a multiracial identity, while those who are white and American Indian do not (see also Davenport 2016).

The Pew study of Hispanics arrives at a similar picture of the impact of mixed Hispanic ancestry on Hispanic identity. It links generational distance from immigration to mixed ancestry, finding that two thirds of third- and later generation Americans with Hispanic ancestry also have non-Hispanic ancestry (see also Duncan and Trejo 2011). A substantial portion of those with non-Hispanic ancestry have a weakened Hispanic identity or no such identity at all. Consequently, those without a Hispanic identity make up substantial shares of later generations (i.e., a quarter of the third generation, and half of the fourth and later ones). And most of these individuals believe that they are seen as white by casual observers (though a fifth believe they would be seen as black).

Individuals who are partly black are quite distinct from other mixed-white groups (see also Lee and Bean 2010; Rocquemore and Brunsma 2007; Strmic-Pawl 2016).

Individuals who are black and white show a stronger sense of identity and affiliation with blacks than with whites. These mixed-black individuals believe they have a lot in common with other blacks and feel very accepted by them. They think that casual observers are more likely to see them as black than as white or multiracial. They also report more experiences with racism and discrimination; particularly notable is harassment by police (Lee and Bean 2010; Pew Research Center 2015; Strmic-Pawl 2016), The distinctiveness of black ancestry among mixed whites reveals the continuing power of anti-black racism in the United States (Alba and Foner 2015).

Overall, these findings are consistent with what we know about ethnoracial switching in the census. The already cited study by Liebler et al. (2017) is based on a unique census data set matching individuals in the 2000 and 2010 decennial censuses. It shows considerable inconsistency in the ethnoracial reports of individuals who report as mixed in either census.[5] That is, a large number of these individuals appear as unmixed in the other, most often as white. For instance, nearly two thirds of individuals who report as Asian and white in either census appear as single race in the other, and "white" reports outnumber "Asian" ones by 60 percent (Alba et al. 2018b). Once again, individuals who are black and white are exceptions. They are also quite inconsistent across censuses but are much more likely to report as "black" rather than "white" as a single race category.

The Pew survey of multiracial Americans is also informative about social milieus of mixed adults. Most individuals who are American Indian and white live in white-dominated social worlds. Almost three quarters say that all or most of their friends are white, and two thirds live in largely white neighborhoods. Those who are Asian and white appear to inhabit more diverse worlds, but ones in which whites still are likely the dominant element. Nearly half say that most or all of their friends are whites, compared with just 7 percent who say this about Asians, and nearly two thirds say that all or most of their neighbors are whites. Individuals who are black and white are located in rather different milieus. Half of them say that all or most of their friends are black. However, just a third claim to live in mostly black neighborhoods; more than 40 percent live in mostly white neighborhoods.

Data on marriage patterns offer added support for the notion that many individuals with mixed white and minority family backgrounds are socially integrated with whites. One basic source here is census data, which have the drawback of introducing some uncertainty because of possible selectivity

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[5]One uncertainty here arises from our lack of knowledge about how the census form is completed in a household. In many cases, one person completes the form; the extent to which he or she asks others how they want to be identified ethnoracially is unknown. Differences over time in how the form is completed may account for some of the inconsistency. In any event, the person completing the form is usually a family member with intimate knowledge of the backgrounds of others.

in who reports mixed race. In any event, individuals who report being partly white and partly some other race most often take white partners. In a recent analysis, Miyawaki (2015) showed that American Indian-white and Asian-white individuals have high rates of marriage to whites, about 70 percent. A majority of black-white persons also marry whites. In all cases, the rates of marriage to someone from their same minority background are much lower. The same conclusion appears to apply to the major Hispanic group. Telles and Ortiz's (2008) study of Mexican Americans, which links to a 1965 survey and consequently contains unusually complete information about family background, finds that individuals from mixed families are much more likely (i.e., their odds are five times higher) to marry Anglos than are those from unmixed backgrounds. We lack similar studies for the rest of the Hispanic population.

In conclusion, the available evidence contradicts the Census Bureau's uniform assignment of mixed minority-white individuals to the nonwhite side of a binary divide. Indeed, it throws a harsh light on such a binary conception of American society. Individuals from mixed minority-white family backgrounds have, in the vast majority, strong kinship ties to whites and to others from at least one minority group. Given this intermediary position, their social location is fundamentally ambiguous. The studies we have at this point indicate that, with the salient exception of black-white persons, most mixed individuals are integrated with whites. But that fact does not make them white, and many, if not most, assert a mixed identity (Davenport 2016; Strmic-Pawl 2016). A better conception may be that their presence in social milieus with many whites is creating ethnoracial diversity within a white-dominated mainstream, just as after World War II, the integration of Jews and Catholics created religious diversity within a Protestant-dominated mainstream.

What Majority-minority Society?

The majority-minority society is no certainty. Whether the United States becomes such a society in the next several decades depends on what we mean by the concept. In the narrow way that the Census Bureau has defined it—the point at which the number of Americans who declare themselves on the census to be non-Hispanic and unmixed white by race dips below 50 percent—it seems more likely than not to occur eventually. After all, under all the various scenarios depicted in Figures 1 and 2, the white population declines. Even so, the Census Bureau's way of collecting and compiling data probably exaggerates the imminence of this societal transition because of the categorization of individuals from mixed majority-minority backgrounds as not white.

Most of these mixed individuals first make their appearance in the projections as young children, and parents are quite likely to acknowledge both sides of their children's ancestral background in reporting on them. This is the moment at which their ethnoracial assignment is fixed in the projections, and their nonwhite classification stays with them. However, in reality, many are likely to exhibit fluidity in ethnoracial reporting as adults. Because the evidence shows that most mixed individuals feel closer to the white than minority sides of their ancestry, this fluidity implies unanticipated shifts into the white category. In other words, the projections are likely to understate the number of those who in the future will declare themselves as non-Hispanic whites.

Yet even if the majority-minority society as defined by the Census Bureau is attained, it will not look like the conception most Americans today undoubtedly have of it (Hochschild, Burch, and Weaver 2012). In this respect, the Census Bureau projections are deeply misleading. When confronted with projections that foresee whites as a future numerical minority, most Americans probably imagine ethnoracial groups that look approximately as discrete and distinct as they do now but with rather different relative sizes: relatively fewer whites, relatively more Asians, blacks, and Hispanics, in particular. That is to say, the projections establish a binary and therefore zero-sum situation: if individuals are not white, then they are minorities. For example, the main Census Bureau publication on the 2014 projections declared that "by 2044, more than half of all Americans are projected to belong to *a minority group*" (Colby and Ortman 2015:1; emphasis added). Reporting on the same projections, National Public Radio headlined its story "For U.S. Children, Minorities Will Be the Majority by 2020" (Chappell 2015). Similar headlines can be found repeatedly in media discussions of Census Bureau projections and also of its statements about the present ethnoracial composition of infants and young children.

But the rapidly growing number of Americans from majority-minority backgrounds, people who are truly in between in having close family and other linkages on both sides of a major societal cleavage, indicates that this scenario is unrealistic. The social location of many if not most of these individuals is ambiguous, or as Strmic-Pawl (2016) put it, "liminal," or permanently in between.

This liminality implies that the ethnoracial groups of the future will not look like the groups of the present. They will be much more internally heterogeneous (Alba, Jiménez, and Marrow 2014) and much more overlapping. Those who indicate they are Hispanic, for example, will include many more part-Hispanic individuals, who tend to have weaker identities, not speak Spanish, and to be married to non-Hispanics (Lopez et al. 2017). Whites, too, will look much more heterogeneous. As already observed, many individuals of mixed background (and their minority parents) will be socially integrated with whites—as their coworkers, their neighbors, their friends, and their kin. But the reverse is obviously also true—whites will be integrated with them (Jiménez 2017). And it should be noted in this context that mixed unions in particular ramify through kin networks: in 2010, when about 8 percent of all marriages crossed ethnoracial lines, more than a third of Americans said that a "close relative" was married to "someone of a different race" (Wang 2012). (Granted, geography is

important here; this mutual integration will not occur to the same degree uniformly throughout the country.) One can describe the resulting social structure as a white-dominated mainstream, but not an exclusively white one. And, although many mixed-white individuals will identify some of the time as white, they will also express mixed or even minority identities at other times. In other words, the mainstream will look more diverse than it does today (just as it already looks much more diverse than it did just a few decades ago).

But it is not just that the social locations of mixed individuals are ambiguous or liminal; it is also that they are essentially indeterminate, and hence so is the American future. The number of mixed minority-white individuals who are born during the projections—in the future—greatly exceeds the number alive at the 2016 starting point. How these individuals-to-be identify and affiliate themselves will be determined in part by the future behavior of other Americans, white, minority, and mixed. Currently, there is considerable mixing across the major ethnoracial boundaries. This requires a willingness to cross these lines in intimate relationships on the part of many Americans. And the characteristics of the offspring of mixed unions reveals a new willingness on the part of many white Americans to accept partly minority individuals—those who are partly black excepted—into kin and other close relationships. The willingness to mix could continue to increase, or it could recede (Lamont 2018), and such changes if they occur could shape the demographic future in ways that the projections do not—cannot—anticipate.

The final point to bear in mind therefore is this: the critical role in the projections of individuals with mixed white-minority backgrounds means that our demographic future will not be exclusively determined by the usual demographic components: fertility, mortality, migration. It will also be shaped by sociological forces that influence the social locations of individuals who are situated by family background in between the major ethnoracial blocs of American society.

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