Black and white is not always a clear distinction

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Is race defined by appearance, or can a person also be colored by socioeconomic status? A new study finds that Americans who are unemployed, incarcerated or impoverished today are more likely to be classified and identified as black, by themselves or by others, regardless of how they were seen -- or self identified -- in the past.

The findings suggest that race may not be as simple as something you are born with, that it is, possibly, tightly intertwined with social status, says University of Oregon sociologist Aliya Saperstein, who co-authored the study with sociologist Andrew M. Penner of the University of California, Irvine.

The study -- begun long before Barack Obama became the nation's first black president-elect -- appears online this week ahead of regular publication in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. It is timely, Saperstein said, because many Americans are raising questions about whether Obama -- the child of a black Kenyan man and a white American woman -- might be considered white because of his successes.

"What I find fascinating about Obama's case is that people are asking questions about it," Saperstein said. "In the past, it wouldn't have been a question what he was, or how we should talk about him. There would have been no debate.

"We do need to take these issues into account when we study race," she said. "Race is not something you are. It is a very complex combination of

factors that certainly does include things like skin tone, hair type and ancestry, but it also includes social status and our own stereotypes about people. Our study suggests that part of how we determine who is white is based on our assumptions about what white people do or what black people do. There is probably more mobility in our society by race than we acknowledge, because socioeconomic mobility often turns into racial mobility, where we define successful people as white and unsuccessful people as black."

The study's findings were drawn from a comprehensive examination of data that has been compiled as part of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth that began in 1979 and continues today, tracking the same individuals. Saperstein and Penner focused on 1979 and 2002, comparing how participants identified themselves in both years and how they were labeled by interviewers each year between 1979 and 1998.

They found that 20 percent of the 12,686 respondents to the survey had at least one change in an interviewer's perception of their racial status during that span. Most of the interviews over the years occurred face-to-face, but the researchers found similar results when interviews were conducted by telephone.

The biggest change noted was that individuals who initially had been classified by interviewers as white were less likely to maintain that classification if they were later jailed, became unemployed or had been living below the poverty line. Researchers found that 96 percent of initially classified white respondents who were not incarcerated later still were identified as white, but that only 90 percent of whites who had been incarcerated in later years were still seen as white.

Nearly the same results held for self-identified classification, the researchers found, with 97 percent of whites in 1979 still saying they were white in 2002 if they had never been impoverished. However, just

93 percent of initially self-classified whites still said they were white in 2002 if they had fallen into poverty between the two years.

Respondents who self identified as black in 1979 and then went to prison were more likely to again say they were black in 2002 than were those who didn't go to prison in between, Saperstein said. "Those who went to prison were more likely to stay black, but those who didn't go to prison might move themselves to another identity."

Saperstein and Penner argue that racial identification can be altered by changes in social position, "much as a change in diet or stress level can alter a person's propensity to die of heart disease as opposed to cancer." In their conclusion, they write: "This suggests that racial stereotypes can become self-fulfilling prophesies: Although black Americans are overrepresented among the poor, the unemployed and the incarcerated, people who are poor, unemployed or incarcerated are also more likely to seen and identify as black and less likely to be seen and identify as white. Thus, not only does race shape social status, but social status shapes race."

Source: University of Oregon