USING “SOCIALLY ASSIGNED RACE” TO PROBE WHITE ADVANTAGES IN HEALTH STATUS

Objectives: We explore the relationships between socially assigned race (“How do other people usually classify you in this country?”), self-identified race/ethnicity, and excellent or very good general health status. We then take advantage of subgroups which are discordant on self-identified race/ethnicity and socially assigned race to examine whether being classified by others as White conveys an advantage in health status, even for those who do not self-identify as White.

Methods: Analyses were conducted using pooled data from the eight states that used the Reactions to Race module of the 2004 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System.

Results: The agreement of socially assigned race with self-identified race/ethnicity varied across the racial/ethnic groups currently defined by the United States government. Included among those usually classified by others as White were 26.8% of those who self-identified as Hispanic, 47.6% of those who self-identified as American Indian, and 59.5% of those who self-identified with More than one race.

Among those who self-identified as Hispanic, the age-, education-, and language-adjusted proportion reporting excellent or very good health was 8.7 percentage points higher for those socially assigned as White than for those socially assigned as Hispanic (P = .04); among those who self-identified as American Indian, that proportion was 15.4 percentage points higher for those socially assigned as White than for those socially assigned as American Indian (P = .05); and among those who self-identified with More than one race, that proportion was 23.6 percentage points higher for those socially assigned as White than for those socially assigned as Black (P < .01). On the other hand, no significant differences were found between those socially assigned as White who self-identified as White and those socially assigned as White who self-identified as Hispanic, as American Indian, or with More than one race.

Conclusions: Being classified by others as White is associated with large and statistically significant advantages in health status, no matter how one self-identifies. (Ethn Dis. 2008;18:496-504)

Key Words: Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, Racism, Self-rated Health

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INTRODUCTION

Racial health disparities have been documented in the United States since data on “race” and health have been jointly collected.1–4 The question remains, however, why the variable “race” is such a potent predictor of health outcomes, especially when it is widely acknowledged that “race” is a social construct, not a biological descriptor.5–9 We gain some insight into this question by observing that the “race” noted by a hospital admissions clerk on a medical record is the same “race” noted by a sales clerk in a store, a taxi driver or police officer on the street, a judge in a courtroom, or a teacher in a classroom, and, in our opinion, this “race” is quickly understood as the social interpretation of our physical appearance in a given place and time, and she suggests that it can be measured by a person’s response to the question “How do other people usually classify you in this country?”12 Note that this “socially assigned race” is distinct from self-identified race/ethnicity, and could be a useful tool for probing the impacts of racism on health because it measures the ad hoc racial classification upon which racism operates.

In this article, we explore the relationships between “socially assigned race,” self-identified race/ethnicity, and excellent or very good general health status. We then take advantage of subgroups which are discordant on self-identified race/ethnicity and “socially assigned race” to examine whether being socially assigned as White conveys an advantage in health status, even for those who do not self-identify as White. Using “socially assigned race” to probe advantages in health status associated with being classified by others as White, we aim to further elucidate the impacts of racism on health.

METHODS

The Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), developed by