

Counting Race and Ethnicity: Options for the 2000 Census

Long before Tiger Woods drew public attention to the problem of characterizing Americans of "mixed race," the federal government had begun to reconsider the classification scheme employed by the Census Bureau and other agencies in collecting and reporting data on race and ethnicity. The existing scheme, created in 1977 under Office of Management and Budget Statistical Directive 15, recognizes five basic categories: American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, Hispanic, black, and white. The use of additional categories in data collection is not precluded by Directive 15, but the reported results must be "organized in such a way that the additional categories can be aggregated" into those on the basic list. On the Census form—surely the most visible instrument for federal data collection on race and ethnicity—respondents must select only one of these basic categories, or else choose the nondescript "Other."

Recently, the Census Bureau has conducted surveys testing alternative schemes, including one that includes a separate "multiracial" category. As this issue goes to press, OMB is preparing to release a report by an Interagency Committee for the Review of the Racial and Ethnic Standards, recommending whether this change or some alternative should be implemented in time for the 2000 Census. After a period of public comment, a final decision will be made this fall.

Much of the impetus for a multiracial category has come from two organizations: PROJECT RACE (Reclassify All Children Equally) and AMEA (Association of MultiEthnic Americans). These groups argue that the current Census form forces those with parents of different races to deny or suppress part of their heritage. For an increasingly large number of Americans, they say, the government's insistence that individuals fit themselves into one of the existing racial categories constitutes an unreasonable or even a repellent demand. On the other side, opponents of a multiracial category argue that the advantages of granting recognition to a small class of people are far outweighed by its administrative and social costs.

Unfortunately, the debate between these two camps has been governed by the assumption that the *only* alternative to the present scheme is a menu of exclu-

sive categories augmented by the multiracial option. But there is a third alternative, which we believe is preferable to either maintaining the status quo or adding a multiracial category: namely, a "mark one or more" option that allows respondents to check more than one box, but does not offer a new category for mixed race.

To see why this is the best alternative, it will be helpful first to explore the ethical and policy issues surrounding racial and ethnic classification. We will consider the reasons why data on race and ethnicity are collected in the first place, as well as the grounds for assessing the adequacy or appropriateness of a classification scheme. We will then examine the case for creating a multiracial category, sifting through the arguments on both sides of the public debate. While some objections to the multiracial category seem to us misplaced, we conclude that the creation of such a category would have serious drawbacks. We argue finally that the "mark one or more" option avoids these drawbacks and is thus the superior option.

Purposes and Constraints

Any ethical or policy analysis of Directive 15 must begin with the recognition that there is no such thing as *the* correct classification scheme for race and ethnicity (or for anything else, for that matter). A classification scheme based on skin color is not more or less correct than one based on ancestry; a scheme containing a composite category—e.g., Asian or Pacific Islander—is not more or less correct than one that instead breaks the large category into several smaller ones. Classification schemes are constructed for particular purposes, and so there are at least as many classification schemes as there are purposes for classifying.

It follows that it is impossible to assess a classification scheme without a clear understanding of the purposes for which it is designed and (not always exactly the same thing) the uses to which it is put. Although, in terms of a given purpose, one classification scheme can be better than another, no single scheme can claim to be *the* correct grid that articulates our diversity.

What purposes, then, are served by the collection of data on race and ethnicity? One is statistical or demo-

graphic: the government tracks trends and shifts in population growth and distribution, as well as correlations between different racial and ethnic groups and a variety of socioeconomic, health, and educational indicators, to meet the needs of statistical agencies such as the National Center for Health Statistics. A second purpose is legal and political: it is to meet the needs of federal agencies responsible for civil rights monitoring and enforcement. These two purposes are to some extent related; federal agencies are interested in correlations between race and various indicators of wealth or well-being because they want to track the persistence and effects of racism and discrimination. But since differences between racial or ethnic groups in characteristics such as disease incidence may arise from sources other than racism and discrimination, the two purposes are least partially independent.

We shall argue that a change in Directive 15 need not impede agencies in carrying out the statistical and civil rights purposes of collecting data on race and ethnicity. At the same time, it is important to realize that the *significance* of a racial classification scheme extends beyond these purposes. Two considerations lead us to this view. First, the Census is mandatory: all Americans are required to respond to it. Second, there is an obvious sense in which the Census conveys the official view of race and ethnicity—granting recognition to certain categories but not others, establishing a framework for thinking about diversity and social policy. For these reasons, its classification scheme becomes a prominent social fact in its own right. As such, it has *expressive* or *symbolic* significance beyond its explicit purposes.

It is in terms of this expressive and symbolic significance that we can best understand the demand for changes in the present classification scheme by Americans who regard themselves as of mixed racial or ethnic heritages. While we recognize that self-expression is not a purpose of the Census, it is essential that the classification scheme in use not force people to violate their own sense of their racial identity or that of their children. Given the expressive and symbolic role of the Census, members of PROJECT RACE and AMEA are right to insist that official survey forms not compel them to misrepresent their racial self-identification. That an increasing number of people in our society genuinely, and reasonably, feel tied to more than one racial group is a powerful reason for rejecting any framework requiring exclusive identification.

Some have sought to trivialize the failure of Directive 15 to accommodate people who regard themselves as belonging to more than one category by arguing that the number who so regard themselves is insignificant—less than the margin of error in the Census count. But although the number may be *statistically* insignificant, it is not *socially* insignificant. The

present classification scheme reinforces a view of racial identity as exclusive and rigid—a view that has serious political and cultural consequences beyond the Census itself.

Enforcement Issues

Defenders of the status quo have argued that the suggested changes to Directive 15 would subvert the purposes of the racial classification scheme and have troubling symbolic implications. One major concern among civil rights advocates and enforcement agencies is that the inclusion of a multiracial category would hamper the government's antidiscrimination efforts. They fear that significantly fewer people would classify themselves as "black," thereby creating a distorted picture of the magnitude of racial discrimination.

The expectation of a large shift may be exaggerated, however. Results of test surveys suggest that only a minute percentage of people who now classify themselves as black would shift to the multiracial category.

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(The effect of including the category is greater on people of other racial mixes, but that is not a primary concern of the civil rights community.) While the shift in self-identification among African-Americans could be greater in future Censuses as people became accustomed to the new category, it would probably have only a very slight impact on the racial data available for civil rights enforcement in the next decade.

Beyond this, we suspect that concerns about lost information rest on a misunderstanding of the multiracial category—one that has not been addressed by its proponents. The public debate would lead one to think that the multiracial category was "opaque"—that it provided *no* information about constituent races. But in fact, the multiracial category being tested asks respondents to list their constituent races. Even if many people who now classify themselves as black switched to multiracial, almost all who did so would list "black" as part of their racial mix. Thus, there would be no lack of information about their racial composition. (The same would be true, obviously, for the "mark one or more" approach, which by definition would allow respondents an opportunity to provide information about all the races with which they identify.)

These facts alone, however, are not enough to assuage civil rights concerns. Even if detailed informa-

tion about race continues to be *collected*, this will hardly matter for enforcement purposes if this information is not *reported* or *presented* in ways that serve those purposes. Unfortunately, proponents of change have had little to say about this critical issue.

Here is one possibility. Suppose that a classification scheme allowed people to list all the racial categories to which they felt they belonged—whether under a multiracial category or by marking one or more. At the data presentation stage, instead of reporting “the number of blacks with household incomes over \$60,000,” the Census might report “the number of people with household incomes over \$60,000 who listed ‘black’ as

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one of their constituent races,” as well as “the number of people with household incomes over \$60,000 who listed *only* ‘black’ as their race.” It has been argued that civil rights enforcement requires exclusive, single-race data presentation—that we must be able to assign people who check multiple races to one of the existing categories. But which one? And what about purposes other than civil rights enforcement?

Clearly, the collected data would have to be transformed in some way. Such a transformation would involve “assignment rules,” so that individuals who checked more than one race would, *for certain purposes*, be assigned to a single race for data presentation. Thus, for example, a person who listed “black” and “white” as constituent races could be considered “black” for civil rights purposes, but would not need to be reported as black for other purposes, such as health statistics.

Proponents of change might well object to this strategy. They could argue that the government was taking back with one hand what it gave with the other—offering the multiracial category or “mark one or more” as a sop to critics of the present scheme, while continuing to relegate multiracial Americans to the Directive 15 categories. The civil rights community might object just as strongly. For if a strategy classifies people as black for civil rights purposes *either* if they classify themselves as exclusively black *or* if they list black as a constituent race, that strategy might appear to rely upon a version of the notorious “one-drop-of-blood” rule, which says that a person with even a single black ancestor is to be classified as black.

These objections, however, can be answered. If, in monitoring civil rights enforcement, a federal agency counted as black those who listed themselves as both

“black” and “white” or as “multiracial: black/white,” it would not be deciding that their self-identification was mistaken—that they *really* belonged to a racial category other than the one they had chosen. It would merely be recognizing that anyone with black ancestry is *at risk of discrimination* because of broad social acceptance of the one-drop-of-blood rule. The pool of at-risk voters or job-seekers should not be regarded as comprised exclusively of blacks, but of people *with black ancestry*. There is no inconsistency in counting a person as a member of this pool while deferring to his self-identification as multiracial, or as white *and* black.

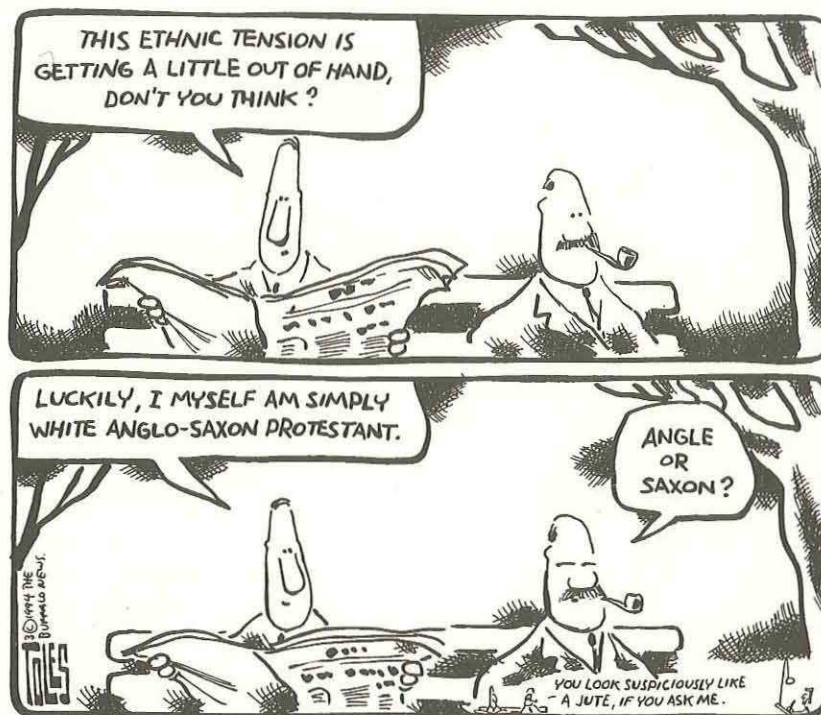
Of course, assignment rules would not be devised only for those who listed “black” as a constituent race. In looking at employment or housing discrimination against Asian-Americans, for example, one would consider all those who listed Asian as one of their races, since “Eurasians” are likely to be subject to the same prejudices and resentments as “pure” Asians.

We believe that it is a virtue, not a flaw, of a proposal for racial classification that it recognizes the legitimacy of grouping people differently for different purposes. For example, a person with one black and one white parent could be counted among the growing number of multiracial Americans for purposes of tracking intermarriage among traditionally segregated groups, but also regarded as being at risk of anti-black discrimination in a society where racial bias still follows the one-drop-of-blood rule. To object to such multiple groupings is to embrace a spurious objectivity about race, which allows classification in only one racial group for any purpose whatsoever. If we become accustomed to employing different groupings for different purposes, we may learn to see racial identity as more fluid, indeterminate, and superficial, with the ultimate effect of reducing race consciousness. In our judgment, that would be a good thing.

Social Impact and Symbolism

Opponents of the multiracial category have raised other objections, however, that are more difficult to dismiss. While some of these objections are overstated, they suggest that inclusion of a multiracial category may have a disturbing symbolism and a divisive social impact. The “mark one or more” option, we will argue, avoids or significantly mitigates these problems.

First, some civil rights leaders argue that the multiracial category would undermine the solidarity of a victimized community. They fear that it would encourage African-Americans with mixed ancestry and/or lighter skin to deny their commonality with other black Americans in the hope of acquiring a more privileged status. As we have seen, test surveys suggest that in the short term, inclusion of the multiracial category would not result in widespread defection by



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people who formerly classified themselves as black. Over time, however, the shift in self-identification could grow more significant.

Critics also fear that the mere inclusion of the multiracial category would symbolically denigrate "unmixed" and darker-skinned blacks. In their view, the multiracial category would be perceived as an insertion into a racial hierarchy in which "black" is negatively valued, and "white" positively valued. Instead of challenging these implicit valuations, it would help sustain them by offering an apparent refinement of the classification scheme—bolstering its spurious claims to objectivity by making it seem more accurate, like the elaborate, "scientific" schemes of overtly racist countries.

One might think that the eclectic composition of the multiracial category—encompassing many different racial and ethnic combinations—would prevent it from contributing to an official or implied hierarchy of racial types. But the history of the "colored" category in apartheid-era South Africa suggests otherwise. A category that includes a variety of combinations might still be viewed as holding an intermediate value between black and white.

Proponents of the multiracial category naturally take a different view of its symbolic import. For them, a central tenet of American racism has been the one-drop-of-blood rule, which conceives of blackness as much in terms of taint as in terms of hierarchy. It is this racial outlook that helps account for the historic American obsession with miscegenation. And it is *this*

outlook, some proponents say, that the multiracial category would symbolically repudiate, since it would defy the principle that any trace of black ancestry defines a person as black.

This disagreement about the symbolic effect of the multiracial category is difficult to adjudicate, since the two sides are emphasizing different aspects of American racism. We believe that an official scheme of racial classification should strive to repudiate *both* the one-drop-of-blood rule and the appearance of a racial hierarchy. In our judgment, the "mark one or more" option succeeds best at meeting this challenge.

The Case for "Mark One or More"

Like the addition of the multiracial category, the "mark one or more" approach would free respondents who regarded themselves as racially mixed from having to choose between their affiliations (or their parents). However, it would *not* offer up a new category that might be construed as intermediate between black and white. It would allow lighter-skinned blacks, or people with one black parent, to opt out of an exclusive identification as black if they wished, but it would not give official status to a new, competing affiliation.

In the public debate, that status is in fact what proponents of the multiracial category have called for: they insist that being multiracial is itself a distinctive identity. "People with a combination of racial and/or ethnic origins *are* multiracial/multiethnic people," leaders of PROJECT RACE and AMEA have written.

These groups affirm "the individual's right to be called multiracial/multiethnic." And they specifically reject the "mark one or more" option by insisting that any listing of constituent races on the Census form appear "under the 'multiracial' umbrella." Otherwise, they say, the "multiracial population" will be "undercounted, miscounted, or rendered invisible."

We agree that mixed-race people should be free to identify with every part of their racial heritage. But the insistence on a separate multiracial identity goes too far. A multiracial category would lump together people with very disparate identities. One cannot assume that a multiracial black/white has a great deal in common with a multiracial Asian/American Indian. Even their experiences of dual identity, divided loyalty, and cultural diversity may be significantly different. Admittedly, this could change over time: multiracial people might develop more commonalities, more of a distinctive identity, as their ranks swell. And the introduction of a multiracial category could even help engender such an identity. But at present, a multiracial category would misleadingly give a single name to an extremely diverse group of people.

Consider those respondents who see themselves as "black and white" or "black and white, but socially black"—the locutions used by many people with parents of different races. For them, there would be some distortion in choosing the multiracial option from a list of exclusive categories. These people regard themselves as having dual racial identity, not as belonging to a mixed or hybrid group that includes many other racial mixes. Again, the test survey results suggest that few people currently identify as "multiracial" to the extent of checking that category on an exclusive list. This suggests that while the "mark one or more" option would be slightly more procrustean than the multiracial option for a small number of people—those who now identify themselves as multiracial—it would better fit what is likely to be a larger number of people—those who identify with more than one race without identifying themselves as multiracial.

Equally important, by not reifying a multiracial identity, the "mark one or more" option would avoid some of the symbolic and social effects of that dubious refinement in racial categorization. Like the multiracial category, the "mark one or more" option appears to repudiate the one-drop rule. But it does so, we believe, without any suggestion of a more refined racial hierarchy. It can be seen, instead, as decomposing racial identity, by implying the legitimacy of composite descriptions.

Some opponents of any change to Directive 15 worry that a "mark one or more" option, and the plurality of counts of different racial groups that could result, might confuse and anger the public even more than the current system's failure to recognize multiple racial

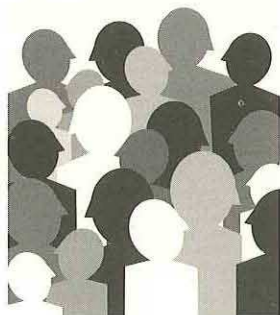
identities. They argue that the American people need and want the federal government to provide one number, one set of racial "facts."

Clearly, public education would have to accompany the change we are proposing. But it is an untested assumption that the public (or the courts or whomever the relevant audience is deemed to be) could not comprehend the complexities of multiple counts for multiple purposes. Social reality is complex. Racial identity is complex. Each generation of Americans is better educated than the one before it, and it is not unreasonable to think that the average American's ability to understand nuance and complexity might also be rising. And if it isn't, then perhaps it is time to improve comprehension of the complexity of racial identity and classification—its meaning, its purposes, and its implications.

In addition to supporting the "mark one or more" option for the purpose of data collection, we believe that federal agencies should have the latitude to tabulate racial data in a way that seems most appropriate to their purposes in gathering that data in the first place. Federal programs would benefit if their racial classifications were more closely tailored to the purposes they were intended to serve, and if agencies had to make explicit the assumptions they used in adopting particular assignment rules. In classifying people differently for different purposes, agencies would be disabusing the American public of the recalcitrant notion that there is an overarching "fact of the matter" about racial identity across the many purposes for which racial data are collected.

—Judith Lichtenberg, Suzanne Bianchi,
Robert Wachbroit, and David Wasserman

This essay has been adapted from a memorandum that the authors submitted to the Office of Management and Budget on May 2, 1997, concerning suggested changes to Directive 15. Suzanne Bianchi, professor of sociology at the University of Maryland, joined three Institute members in this research project, which was funded by the National Science Foundation and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. Sources: "Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity," *Federal Register*, vol. 59, no. 123 (59FR 29831-35), June 9, 1994; "Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity," *Federal Register*, vol. 60, no. 166 (60FR 44674-93), August 28, 1995; *Spotlight on Heterogeneity: The Federal Standards for Racial and Ethnic Classification*, National Research Council, Committee on National Statistics (National Academy Press, 1996); joint letters to the Office of Management and Budget from PROJECT RACE and AMEA (September 29, 1995, and January 6, 1995); "Coalition Statement on Proposed Modification of OMB Directive No. 15," submitted by Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, National Urban League, and Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies (Nov. 18, 1994); U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Results of the 1996 Race and Ethnic Targeted Test," Population Division Working Paper No. 18 (May 1997).



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