

New Issues: Rethinking Race

By Amitai Etzioni

There are strong sociological reasons to argue that the US Census should introduce a new racial category, *All-American*, into its next count. Others have suggested that this category be named "multi-racial." Inclusion of such a category would allow millions of Americans who are not, and do not see themselves, as members of any one race to be recognized as people with a blended heritage, reflecting the mixed heritage of America itself. While the actual census is still more than two years away, the decision how Americans may define themselves is going to be made by the Office of Management and Budget and the Department of Commerce later this year. The importance of the decision ranges well beyond changing the check-off boxes on the new Census forms.

In the 1990 Census the government required Americans to define their race using one of 16 categories. The main groupings are white and black, which in 1990

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accounted for 92% of all Americans. (The remaining racially defined categories are Native American, Aleut, Eskimo, and ten variations of Asian or Pacific Islanders.) And, for the first time, the Census recognized that a growing number of Americans are of mixed racial background. For instance, Asian and white Americans intermarry at a high rate and have children who compose a rapidly growing race of blended Americans. Since 1990, the number of interracial children has quadrupled—now reaching the two-million mark. Millions of other Americans are viewed as members of one race but see themselves as members of another. The 1990 Census allowed these Americans to select the marginalizing label of "other." Despite the unattractiveness of this characterization, which smacks of outsider, about 9.8 million, 4% of the total population, chose this designation rather than be defined according to the established mono-racial categories.

Enter Politics

The question now is if future censuses should allow people to select a multi-racial category. Suggestions to include the multi-racial category send some African American leaders ballistic. Abraham K. Sundiata, chairman of the Afro-American studies Department of Brandeis, sees here a drive to undermine black solidarity. He fears that in cities where blacks now hold majorities, the new category will divide them and undermine their dominance. All this will happen, he implies, because some African Americans will somehow be forced into the new multi-racial category. He disregards that people will still be free to check the box of their choice, even if the new category is added.

Another reason several African American leaders object to a multi-racial category is that race data is used for the enforcement of civil rights legislation in employment, voting rights, housing and mortgage lending, health care services, and educational opportunities.¹ They fear that the category could decrease the number of blacks in official statistics, and thus undermine efforts to enforce anti-discrimination statutes and undercut numerous social programs based on racial quotas.

This fear was rather explicitly stated during a recent Congressional hearing by Representative Carrie Meek who stated:

I understand how Tiger Woods and the rest of them feel. But no matter how they feel from a personal standpoint, we're thinking about the census and reporting accuracy...The multi-racial category would cloud the count of [the] discrete minorities who are assigned to a lower track in public schools,...kept out of certain occupations and whose progress toward seniority or promotion has been skewed...Lastly, Mr. Chairman, multi-racial categories will reduce the level of political representation for minorities.²

What is a Race Anyway?

One may wonder if the number of Americans involved is large enough to justify what at first seems like a tempest in a tea pot. The underlying reason is that one tends to underestimate the number of Americans who might qualify for the new category because one assumes that only those of a mixed racial heritage may fall into the All-American box. Actually there are considerable differences in color and other racial features within all racial groups, which makes the question of who is in versus out much more flexible than often seems. For instance, many dark-skinned Hispanics who do not see themselves as black, and many light-skinned African Americans who do not wish to pass as white, would be free to choose the new category.

Rethinking Race

One should also note that those who study race professionally, especially physical and cultural anthropologists, strongly object to the concept of racial categorization. They point out that no single gene can be used to differentiate one race from another; moreover, indicators from blood types to texture of hair vary a great deal both among and within groups considered to be of one race. Indeed, the American Anthropological Association passed a resolution stating that “differentiating species into biologically defined ‘race’ has proven meaningless and unscientific.”

The Merits of a New Category

Dropping the whole social construction of race does not seem in the cards, even if the most far-reaching arguments against Affirmative Action and for a “color blind” society, win the day. However, there are strong sociological reasons to favor the inclusion of a multi-racial category in the 2000 Census.

Introducing a multi-racial category has the potential to soften racial lines that now divide America by rendering them more like economic differences and less like caste lines. Sociologists have long observed that a major reason the United States experiences relatively few confrontations along class lines is that Americans believe they can move from one economic strata to another. (For instance, workers become foremen, and foremen become small businessmen, who are considered middle class.) Moreover, there are not sharp class demarcation lines as there are in Britain; in America many workers consider themselves middle class, dress up to go to work, and hide their tools and lunches in briefcases, while middle class super-liberal professors join labor unions. A major reason confrontations in America occur more often along racial lines is that color lines currently seem rigidly unchangeable.

If the new category is allowed, if more and more Americans will choose this category in future decades, as there is every reason to expect given the high rates of intermarriage and a desire by millions of Americans to avoid being racially boxed in, the new Census category may go a long way in determining if America in the next century will be less caste-like and more class-like, a society in which differences are blurred.

Skeptics may suggest that how one marks a tiny box on the 2000 Census form is between ones’ self and the keepers of statistics. But, as this sociologist sees it, if the multi-racial concept is allowed into the national statistics, it will also enter the social vocabulary. It will make the American society less stratified along racial lines, less rigidly divided, and thus more communitarian.

Beyond the Census

The best indication that changes in the Census may lead to more encompassing changes in our social categories and

thinking is supported by the fact that these processes already have begun to unfold. In California, where our future is often previewed, there is already an Association for Multi-Ethnic Americans, and in several states, legislation has been introduced to allow the multi-racial category on school forms. Two states, Georgia and Indiana, have required the multi-racial category to be used by their government agencies.

The Ultimate Question

At stake is the question of what kind of America we envision for the longer run. Some see a complete blur of racial lines with Americans constituting some kind of new hybrid race. *Time* ran a cover story on the subject, led by a computer composite of a future American with some features of each race, a new rather handsome breed (almond shaped eyes, straight but dark hair, milk chocolate skin). This would take much more than a change in racial nomenclature, but it could serve as a step in that direction.

Others are keen to maintain strict racial lines and oppose intermarriage; these same people often seek to maintain the races as separate “nations.” (The term nation is significant because it indicates a high degree of tribalism.) In a world full of interracial strife, this attitude—however understandable its defensive nature in response to racial prejudice and discrimination—leaves at least this communitarian greatly troubled. The more communitarian view seems to be one in which those who seek to uphold their separate group identities will do so (hopefully viewing themselves and being viewed as subgroups of a more encompassing community rather than as separate nations) but those who seek to redefine themselves will be enabled to do so, leading to an ever larger group that is free from racial categorization.

If a multi-racial category is included in the 2000 Census, further down the road, maybe as early as the 2010 Census, we may wish to add one more category, that of “multi-ethnic” origin, one which most Americans might wish to check. Then we would live to recognize the full importance of my favorite African American saying: We came in many ships but we now ride in the same boat.

Endnotes:

¹ House Committee on Government Reform and Oversight, Census 2000, 106th Congress, 1st session, April 23, 1997. Testimony of Bernard L. Ungar, Associate Director, Federal Management and Workforce Issues, General Government Division of United States, General Accounting Office.

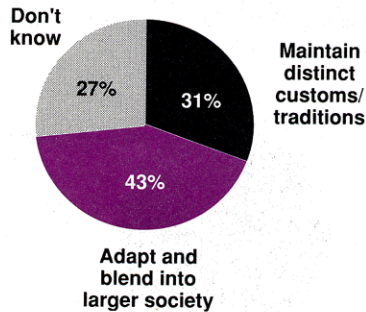
² House Committee, Census 2000.



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Strong Support for “Adapt and Blend”

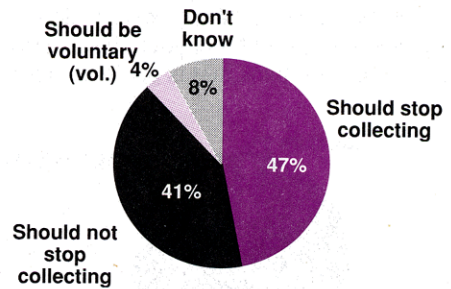
Question: Some people say that it is better for a country if different racial and ethnic groups maintain their distinct customs and traditions. Others say that it is better if these groups adapt and blend into the larger society. Which of these views comes closer to your own?



| | Whites | Blacks |
|--------------------------------------|--------|--------|
| Maintain distinct customs/traditions | 29% | 33% |
| Adapt and blend into larger society | 45 | 36 |
| Don't know | 26 | 31 |

Source: Survey by the National Opinion Research Center-General Social Survey (GSS) February 1-May 25, 1996.

Question: Some people think the US Census should stop collecting information on race and ethnicity in an effort to move toward a more color-blind society—even if it becomes more difficult to measure progress on civil rights and poverty programs. Do you think the Census should stop collecting such information, or not?

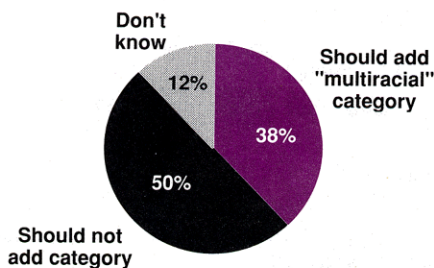


| | Whites | Blacks |
|----------------------------|--------|--------|
| Should stop collecting | 47% | 48% |
| Should not stop collecting | 41 | 44 |
| Should be voluntary (vol.) | 4 | 2 |
| Don't know | 8 | 7 |

Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for *Newsweek*, February 1-3, 1995.

The Traditional Racial Categories May Be Too Confining

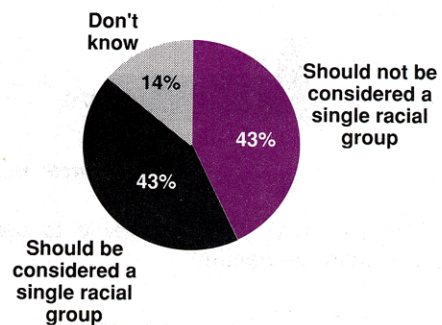
Question: Some people say the US Census should add a “multiracial” category to population surveys so some people aren’t forced to deny part of a family member’s heritage by having to choose a single racial category. Others say there should not be a “multiracial” category because it would require a costly re-adjustment of government programs based partially on race or reduce the political influence of existing racial groups. Which comes closer to your view?



| | Whites | Blacks |
|-----------------------------------|--------|--------|
| Should add “multiracial” category | 36% | 49% |
| Should not add category | 51 | 42 |
| Don't know | 13 | 10 |

Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for *Newsweek*, February 1-3, 1995.

Question: Some people say that black Americans today have such differing mixtures of African and European ancestry that it no longer makes sense to think of them as black and members of a single racial group. Others say black Americans share common social and political circumstances and they should be considered part of a single racial group, despite the issue of mixed ancestry. Which comes closer to your view?



| | Whites | Blacks |
|--|--------|--------|
| Should not be considered a single racial group | 44% | 34% |
| Should be considered a single racial group | 41 | 58 |
| Don't know | 15 | 8 |

Source: Survey by Princeton Survey Research Associates for *Newsweek*, February 1-3, 1995.