

The Jerome Levy Economics Institute of Bard College

Public Policy Brief

No. 35A, September 1997

Reflecting the Changing Face of America

Joel Perlmann

If a child has a white mother and a black father, then the child is racially . . . what? Presently, on the census form, individuals may declare racial origins by choosing one from among the categories white, black, Native American, Asian/Pacific Islander, and "other." The matter of racial classification involves more than how just the Census Bureau counts racial origin; every government agency that counts race does so in the same way. The directions for counting races are found in Office of Management and Budget Directive 15, and these directions are up for reconsideration. By late October the OMB will recommend whether or not to revise the directive. Congress could also intervene; and all this is happening during what the president has declared to be "the year of discussion on race."

Interest groups have lined up on two sides in a debate on how to change this arrangement (U.S. House of Representatives 1994; U.S. Office of Management and Budget 1995). *Multiracial advocates* urge that along with the four specific racial categories there be listed a new category, called "multiracial." Respondents who check this category would then indicate from which two, three, or four of the specific races they are descended. The demand here appears to be more for recognition of multiraciality than for any specific political or economic advantage for multiracials. *Civil rights advocates*, which include civil rights organizations and representatives of blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asians/Pacific Islanders, oppose adding a multiracial category or permitting people to list more than one race. They are concerned that if individuals are allowed to indicate origins in more than one racial group, action on the basis of civil rights legislation will be muddled and enforcement of civil rights thereby weakened. Antidiscrimination efforts, affirmative action, and voting rights could all be affected.

An interagency task force coordinated by the OMB recommended in July against adding a multiracial category, but in favor of permitting people to list more than one race. This recommendation should be supported, but for reasons different from those cited in most other discussions (including the task force's). The argument presented here stresses that races should be seen as ethnic groups who were treated in very distinctive ways in American history and that racial intermarriage is a subset of ethnic intermarriage. This perspective makes the public's stake in the multiracial debate clearer and is an important but hitherto ignored connection between the multiracial debate and forecasts of the future racial composition of the United States.

Ethnic Intermarriage

American as Apple Pie Ethnic intermarriage has been crucial to the making of "Americans" out of the descendants of "hyphenated Americans," especially those from Europe. From colonial times to the present, immigrants typically married their own, the second generation did so much less consistently, perhaps a majority of the third generation married people of other ethnic origins, and by the fourth and fifth generations,

who even kept track? The evidence for the history of ethnic intermarriage is about as overwhelming and unambiguous as for any generalization about the American population: from de Crèvecoeur's observations in the eighteenth century on "this new man, the American" arising out of various European immigrant stocks to the data in census after census in the twentieth century (Heer 1980; Lieberman and Waters 1988).

Counting "Multiethnics" Over the years the Census Bureau typically has asked three questions related to ethnicity (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1979). (1) A respondent whose parents were born abroad is asked to state the country in which each was born. One born in Italy, one in Poland? The bureau records both. (2) In 1980 and 1990 respondents were asked to list the ancestry or ancestries with which they identified, thereby allowing Americans to declare connections with origins even if their immigrant ancestors had come to the United States many generations back. This type of self-identification introduced a strong subjective element. People may have origins in too many groups to list or may not even know what their origins are; so what matters, it is argued, is groups with which they identify. The instructions explicitly tell Americans that they can identify with *more than one* ethnic ancestry, and millions of Americans have done so. The bureau has preserved much of the complexity of the responses in its coding and tabulations. These responses varied wildly from 1980 to 1990 because many have weak identifications with any ancestry. "English" fell and "German" rose by large proportions, only because the bureau switched the ordering of these two ancestries. Keeping track of American ancestries gets messy because of intermarriage patterns, as it should; a simple answer to the question on ancestry would be a false answer. (3) In the past two censuses respondents have been asked whether or not they are "of Hispanic origin" and, if so, of which specific Hispanic group. Respondents of mixed Hispanic and non-Hispanic origin decide for themselves how to answer the question.

The Race Question

The census question on race has many peculiar features. First, the bureau instructs respondents to "mark one [race] only," in striking contrast to its treatment of parental birthplaces, ancestry, and Hispanic origin. Second, the word race does not appear in the question; the respondent is asked to complete the sentence "This person is . . ." and is asked to choose one from among the four specific racial designations and the designation "other." The bureau tabulates the answers under a heading of races. Third, listed under the specific races are heterogeneous subgroupings, for example, the countries of birth or origin in Asia or specific Native American tribes. Fourth, the bureau's comments on its race question reveal some discomfort about the scientific standing of the data it collects, justifying its subjective construct in its statement that "[race] reflects self-identification; it does not denote any clear-cut scientific definition of biological stock. . . . the categories of the race item include both racial and national origin or sociocultural groups" (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1979). Moreover, in recent research the bureau discovered that most people simply could not distinguish among "such terms as race, ethnicity/ethnic origin, and ancestry" (Tucker et al. 1996). However, even though racial classification is based on self-identification, as ancestry is, the respondent cannot choose to identify with more than one race, as he or she can do with ancestry. That is because race counts lie at the heart of a great deal of civil rights legislation.

The great irony is that data on race are gathered through a subjective procedure of self-identification, but used as the basis of legal status in the civil rights domain, and that domain requires legal statuses that are, in the words of the original mandate to the OMB, "complete and nonoverlapping." Yet to arrive at these legal statuses by denying that members of different races marry is like treating them as members of different biological species. If racial barriers are to be broken down, racial intermarriage must be treated in the same way that other ethnic intermarriage is treated, while also ensuring that civil rights legislation is not hobbled by ambiguities.

Patterns of Mixed-Race Marriages

There are two patterns of interracial marriage today: it is uncommon among blacks and common among other nonwhites. Following the pattern of European immigrants, Asian and Hispanic immigrants tend to marry their own, but their children often marry members of other groups. The impact of these intermarried couples and their children has not been fully felt because the second generation of post-1965 immigration is only now reaching marriageable age, but it will become significant in a few years. By 1990 two-fifths of young, native-born Hispanics, over half of young, native-born Asians, and more than half of those who consider

themselves Native Americans by race married members of other groups. In contrast, nine-tenths of young, native-born blacks married other blacks.

Both patterns involve huge numbers of people. However, the number of Asians and Hispanics is growing rapidly through immigration, so the proportion of blacks among all "nonwhites" (including Hispanics) is declining quickly. Before 1970 a nonwhite American was very likely to have been a black American; today the chances are better than even that a nonwhite American is not black. The percentage of blacks among all nonwhites was 66 percent in 1970 and 48 percent in 1990; the Census Bureau forecasts that it will decline to 30 percent in 2050 (Harrison and Bennett 1995; Farley 1996).

This shift within the nonwhite population also has implications for civil rights legislation and the need for unambiguous legal status. That legislation was originally designed for blacks, but much of it has come to be extended to other nonwhites. Black intermarriage has been rising rapidly recently, but from a very low base; however, whether or not black intermarriage becomes more widespread, the multiracial challenge to the clarity of civil rights law is considerable and rapidly expanding.

How to Count the Multiracials

One way to acknowledge the reality of interracial marriage is to change the census instruction on the race question from "Mark one only" to "Mark one or more" or to the somewhat stronger formulation "Mark all that apply." A second way is to add a fifth specific racial category, called multiracial, and ask respondents who choose that category to indicate to which races they belong. However, the multiracial category is not necessary. Learning that someone has black and white origins has meaning; assigning a label of multiracial to that person conveys no additional information. Worse still, specifying a multiracial category implies that something more *is* being communicated, that multiraciality is equivalent to a new racial status. Adding a multiracial category tends to solidify the significance of race, instead of simply allowing the statistics on racial intermarriage to show how high or low the racial divide is. It also suggests that to describe a person as multiracial is to say something important about that person. To some multiracials, as for some multiethnics, that status may be important, but to others, it may be inconsequential.

As to which of the two formulations of the instruction seems better, the weaker formulation, as the analogy to ancestry would suggest, is preferable. The many agencies involved would prefer "one or more" as a less radical departure from the past, and also it would not encourage people to list distant roots in any number of groups with which they feel no kinship.

Implications for Civil Rights Legislation The changes in the reporting system should not be undertaken in order to lower (or raise) the numbers in any racial category. Civil rights advocates have raised several issues in connection with counting multiracials. One irrelevant argument is that multiracial advocates seek to free multiracials from the burden and responsibility of minority status. Quite apart from the fact that this argument misstates the motivations of the multiracial advocates, motivations are not at issue. The true civil rights concern is that permitting multiple responses may reduce the number in any minority group, thereby weakening the range of situations to which civil rights violations can be applied. On the whole, legislation involving the status of a single individual, such as eligibility for affirmative action, should not be much affected because the eligibility of multiracials has been established in the courts and such precedents should not be affected by a change in the race question (Ballentine 1983). In situations in which people are counted for determining employer discrimination within a firm, the question of how to count multiracials is likely to arise in the future even if Directive 15 remains unchanged. The most obvious area in which a change in the classification system could operate adversely is in connection with voting rights and other legislation that is directly dependent on local area census counts (for example, the local racial mix for discussions of possible hires by local firms). Also, as multiracial advocates have correctly noted, one can be hired as a black and fired as a white by an employer.

The important point is that the count--the aggregation of answers--is distinct from the answers to the race question on the form. The answers to the question will indicate that some people list themselves in more than one race category. How those answers are counted for purposes of civil rights law is a separate matter. There

are several possible approaches, most of which were developed in a recent Census Bureau report (Bennett et al. 1997).

- The *single race approach* counts as the total number in a racial group those who list themselves in that group only. Thus some respondents (small in number) would no longer be counted as members of a racial minority. For this reason the other two illustrative approaches are more likely to be taken seriously.
- The *historical series approach* counts multiracials as members of a racial minority if they list two groups and the second group is white or other. People who list two minority racial groups or three or more groups are counted only in a multiple race category.
- The *all-inclusive approach* counts people in whatever categories they select, resulting in category counts aggregating to more than 100 percent. A person who checks off white, black, and Native American, for example, would be counted three times.

The bureau conducted extensive tests to examine the effects of the approaches on the outcome of counts. The impacts would be small at present, even using the single race method.

The historical series approach has the advantages of great similarity to present counting procedures and avoiding counts exceeding 100 percent. Whether the latter characteristic is truly an advantage is debatable because it reinforces the idea that people of mixed descent can be neatly placed in one racial category. When many people trace their descent to more than one origin, the total of percentages descended from all origins will necessarily add up to more than 100 percent, as it does in ancestry counts.

A Ceiling for Short-Term Changes Although testing suggests minimal short-term effects from any of the changes, there could be surprises, and those concerned with the policy are unlikely to feel fully reassured by the tests. A mechanism for restricting the short-term impact of changes in counts, such as introducing any change resulting from new counting procedures over three years, might therefore be worth considering.

The Long Run As racial intermarriage becomes more prevalent and the offspring of these marriages become more prevalent, civil rights law will have to contend with more and more multiracials. The single race approach excludes mixed-race people from minority counts, the historical series approach includes most of them, and the all-inclusive approach includes all.

We must hope that the civil rights of racial minorities, as well as civil rights law, will have evolved a great deal in a generation or two. However, given the predictable long-run change in the composition of the population, we may wish to consider a variant of the all-inclusive approach in which a person would be allocated to each racial category that he or she lists, but is counted in each category as a fraction of a person. Someone who lists white, black, and Native American, for example, would be counted as one-third of a person in each racial category. This fractional strategy may seem too gimmicky or distasteful, but it does preserve the 100 percent total of nonoverlapping categories without ignoring the impact of intermarriage. Moreover, fractional counting deals, however imperfectly, with the long-term danger of counting huge numbers of mixed-origin people as though they were only members of one minority group.

Forecasting "the Browning of America"

A second public issue that pivots on the way multiracials are counted is how the future racial composition of America is forecast. In a 1990 article on "the browning of America" (Henry 1990), *Time* magazine called attention to the Census Bureau forecast that the population will be more than half nonwhite by the middle of the next century.

The branch of the Census Bureau that does some important projections, such as age, sex, and total population, somehow got saddled with doing racial projections; as a result, dedicated and discerning demographers were linked to a sadly misguided effort. The racial projections are based on the bizarre assumption that there will be

no further intermixing of peoples across racial lines. The bureau's projections assume that a child born to an interracial couple today will take the race of the mother and that starting tomorrow no American will marry across race lines. If an Asian-American woman and a non-Hispanic white man marry today, the bureau projects that *all* their descendants in the year 2050 will be Asian-American and will be *only* Asian-American. If two immigrants arrive from Guatemala today, the bureau projects that *all* their descendants will marry *only* Hispanics through the year 2050 and beyond.

Realistic assumptions about future intermarriage imply both more and less ethnic transformation in the United States than the projections suggest. If the descendants of Guatemalans intermarry with non-Hispanics, more people will have some Hispanic origin by 2050 than would be the case if the descendants of Guatemalans married only other Hispanics, even though many of these people likely will be only one-quarter or one-eighth Hispanic. They also will be part something else, very likely part non-Hispanic white.

Others have tried to predict the race individuals will choose on the 2050 census form. If at that time respondents are obliged to "Mark one only," it must be recognized that the choice will have little meaning. A truly educational purpose would be served by what a genealogist might discover in 2050 about the origins of Americans. A "genealogist's forecast" would underscore for the public how much intermarriage and consequent blending of peoples will occur and would bring to center stage the uncertainties about black-white intermarriage. Surely this sort of genealogist's exercise is much closer to what the public thinks it is getting, namely, the actual origins of Americans, when it is fed projections about "the future racial composition" of the country.

Why is the Census Bureau in the business of making long-term racial projections? The bureau's other projections, such as age, sex, and population, are used in a variety of endeavors. Is the racial projection an atavism from a more racist era, or is it a misguided effort to forecast how many Americans in 2050 will be covered by the civil rights legislation of today?

References

- Ballentine, Chris. 1983. "Who Is a Negro?" Revisited: Determining Individual Racial Status for Purposes of Affirmative Action." *University of Florida Law Review* 35 (Fall).
- Bennett, Claudette E., U.S. Department of the Census Population Division, and U.S. Bureau of the Census Decennial Statistical Studies Division. 1997. *Results of the 1996 Race and Ethnic Targeted Test*. Population Division Working Paper No. 18, Economics and Statistics Division, U.S. Bureau of the Census.
- Farley, Reynolds. 1996. *The New American Reality: Who We Are, How We Got There, Where We Are Going*. New York: Russell Sage.
- Harrison, Roderick J., and Claudette Bennett. 1995. "Racial and Ethnic Diversity." In Reynolds Farley, ed., *State of the Union: America in the 1990s. Vol. 2, Social Trends*. New York: Russell Sage.
- Heer, David M. 1980. "Intermarriage." In Stephan Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University.
- Henry, William A. 1990. *Time*, April 9, 28-31.
- Lieberson, Stanley, and Mary Waters. 1988. *From Many Strands: Ethnic and Racial Groups in Contemporary America*. New York: Russell Sage.
- Tucker, Clyde, et al. 1996. *Testing Methods of Collecting Racial and Ethnic Information: Results of the Current Population Survey Supplement on Race and Ethnicity*. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Statistical Note No. 40. Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Labor Statistics.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1979. *Twenty Censuses: Population and Housing Questions, 1790-1980*. Ortina, Wash.: Heritage Quest.
- U.S. House of Representatives. 1994. *Review of Federal Measurements of Race and Ethnicity. Hearings before the*

Subcommittee on Census, Statistics and Postal Personnel of the Committee on Post Office and Civil Service. House of Representatives, 103d Cong., 1st sess., April 14, June 30, July 29, November 3, 1993. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

U.S. Office of Management and Budget. 1995. "Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity; Notice." *Federal Register* 60, no. 166 (August 28): 44,673-44,693.

About the Author

Senior Scholar Joel Perlmann is guiding a research initiative entitled "Ethnicity and Economy in America--Past and Present," which focuses on the processes by which immigrants and their descendants are assimilated into U.S. economic life and the impact immigration has on current policy issues such as international competitiveness, the labor market, and income distribution. Currently, he is involved in three projects: "The Jews Circa 1900: Social Structure in Europe and America," "Assimilation and the Third Generation," and, with UCLA professor of sociology Roger Waldinger, "The New Immigration's Second Generation." Perlmann, who also holds the post of Levy Institute Research Professor of History at Bard College, received a Ph.D. in history and sociology from Harvard University.

The full text of this paper is published as Levy Institute Public Policy Brief No. 35.

The Jerome Levy Economics Institute is publishing this proposal with the conviction that it represents a constructive and positive contribution to the discussions and debates on the relevant policy issues. Neither the Institute's Board of Governors nor its Board of Advisors necessarily endorses the proposal.

© Copyright 1997 by The Jerome Levy Economics Institute.
ISSN 1094-5237
ISBN 0-941276-32-5