
Defining Race and Ethnicity

The Constitution,
the Supreme Court,
and the Census

C. Matthew Snipp

•

This essay examines different definitions and understandings of race and ethnicity in American society. Given the commonplace reality of these phenomena within our world, we might assume that some consensus exists about the meaning of these terms. Such an assumption, however, would be deeply flawed. Definitions of race and ethnicity abound, and what each term means varies dramatically over historical time and from one nation to another. The French, for example, are dismissive of the idea of race and prefer to exclude it from polite conversation and government statistics. Given the limitations of space, this essay, which is written from the perspective of a sociologist, is specific to the United States and focuses on demographic practices and governmental policies. After presenting a brief history of the origins of the terms "race" and "ethnicity," the essay examines the impact of several Supreme Court cases on our notions of race before turning to the racial cosmologies articulated over time by the U.S. Census. In general, the analysis presented in this essay highlights the role that institutions, government agents, and political agendas play in shaping and defining the way race and ethnicity are understood in the United States.

THERE ARE FEW TERMS THAT ARE MORE DEEPLY EMBEDDED WITHIN the conversations of everyday life than the descriptors of "race and

ethnicity.” Applications for jobs, scholarships, drivers’ licenses, and other modern privileges routinely request this information. As we encounter others in our everyday world, we instantly and unconsciously assess their age, sex and race, or ethnicity. Race and ethnicity are relevant considerations when choosing our friends, future mates, and clandestinely, when we choose our neighbors and co-workers. To settle any doubt about the pervasive presence of race and ethnicity in modern society, a Google search is one powerful measure of popular discourse. Using the phrase “race and ethnicity” yields a list consisting of 47,500,000 entries—a considerable number. This number is even more imposing when, and for the sake of comparison, searches for personalities in popular culture such as “Britney Spears” produce lists that are impressive in number yet are still significantly smaller than the number of entries for race and ethnicity.

HISTORICAL ORIGINS

It is impossible to discuss the meaning of race and ethnicity in American society, or in any society, without taking note of the intellectual roots of the ideas we hold about them.¹ Most scholars agree that race and ethnicity exist mainly as a means for accentuating or highlighting differences that may exist between groups (Omi and Winant 1994; Fredrickson 2002). The terms serve as shorthand for designating people belonging to some groups as “others” or “not one of us.” The practice of identifying some people as “like us” and others as “not like us” is one that predates written history and quite possibly was present in the earliest forms of human societies.

In its modern usage, race often has been used to reflect some set of biological properties, and the Spanish Inquisition is credited with being the first to connect biological qualities with social and cultural habits. The Inquisition linked “blood” and “blood purity” with the Jewish faith by presenting the question of whether it was possible to cleanse the Jewish blood from Jews who converted to Christianity (Fredrickson 2002). This connection has provided a vocabulary for racial discourse framed in terms of blood and blood purity that persists into the twenty-first century.²

¹ A lengthier and very accessible discussion of the intellectual history of race and racism can be found in George Fredrickson’s *Racism: A Brief History* (2002).

² For example, an agency of the U.S. government, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, issues a document known as a “Certificate Degree of Indian Blood” that is evidence of American Indian ancestry.

The concept of race, and its association with blood and other biological traits, remained an ill-formed idea for at least three centuries. However, the Enlightenment embedded the concept of race within modern secular thought in several ways. The Swedish naturalist and one of the founders of modern biology, Carl Linnaeus, introduced in 1735 a classification to describe the several varieties of *Homo sapiens*. Linnaeus differentiated Europeans, American Indians, Asians and Africans, and a residual category of “monstrous” races that later proved to be nonexistent (Fredrickson 2002). Forty years later, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, a founder of physical anthropology, published *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind* (1776). This work proved to be an authoritative classification of the known races and introduced the terms “Caucasian,” “Mongolian,” “Ethiopian,” “American,” and “Malay” to describe them.

Although many of the founding fathers of the United States, especially Thomas Jefferson, were deeply influenced by Enlightenment thinking, it is not clear how much they were influenced by the work of Linnaeus and Blumenbach. Nonetheless, the crafting of the U.S. Constitution took special notice of race and incorporated it into the political framework of the United States as a category of civil status. The necessity of recognizing race stemmed from the controversies surrounding slavery and a tacit acknowledgment that American Indian tribes were sovereigns beyond the jurisdiction of the U.S. government. Specifically, Article I, Section 2, of the Constitution stipulates that

Representatives and direct Taxes . . . shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons. . . . The actual Enumeration shall be made . . . within every subsequent Term of ten Years, in such Manner as they shall by Law direct.

Thus, for purposes of determining political representation and taxes—the two issues most critical in the American Revolution—African slaves were counted as 60 percent (3/5) of a whole person and American Indians were excluded. In this manner, race was used to determine civil status in the most fundamental legal document of the nation.

In the nineteenth century, race and racial differences were the pre-eminent concerns of the racial sciences, eugenics and ethnology, better known today as scientific racism. Scholars such as Lewis Henry Morgan, Francis Galton, and Arthur de Gobineau labored to identify and catalog racial differences and to establish a biological basis for why some races

were superior or inferior to others. By the late nineteenth century, others scholars such as Franz Boaz and his students began to challenge key tenets in scientific racism, such as the presumption of cultural inferiority or superiority. This challenge also led scholars critical of scientific racism to embrace the concept of ethnicity as an alternative to the concept of race (McKee 1993).

The term "ethnicity" is derived from the Greek word "ethnikos" or "ethnos," meaning people or nation (Peterson 1980). As an alternative to the concept of race, ethnicity is rooted in national identity or in behavior sets connected with subgroups within nations. An ethnic group may share a common language, religion, family structure, diet, and lifestyle—to name only a few traits associated with ethnic differences. Most significantly, ethnicity connotes a group's differences that are wholly disconnected from biology, and further, does not imply invidious judgments about these differences.

In the twentieth century, the popularity of the term "ethnicity" grew slowly and coincided with the growing presence and influence of the social sciences within the academy. After World War II, the social sciences vigorously undertook the task of debunking ideas that for many years served as the conventional wisdom of scientific racism. In 1942, Ashley Montagu published his groundbreaking work *Race: Man's Most Dangerous Myth*. Montagu's work laid the foundation for understanding race as purely a social construction that can change over time and from one social environment to another. In the years after World War II, a consensus has grown behind the idea that race is nothing more than a social construct and that ethnicity is tied to social, as opposed to biological distinctions. By the late twentieth century, the terms "race" and "ethnicity" had come to be used interchangeably. Clearly, however, the two terms have very different intellectual pedigrees and as the discussion to follow will show, these ideas involve considerably different social and political implications.

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO DEFINING RACE AND ETHNICITY

In the early years of the twentieth century, social scientists seemed content to agree that ethnic differences represented cultural and behavioral differences that were uniquely social in nature; however, debates about the content and quality of racial characteristics continued to rage (McKee 1993). A recurring issue within these debates was how best to define

and understand the fundamental content of the concept of race. Was race fundamentally a biological characteristic, a product of the social environment, or both? How did the biology of race connect with the sociology of race and how did biological characteristics come to have social consequences?

For much of the twentieth century, social scientists, especially those in sociology and anthropology, struggled to define the meaning of race. But after decades of debate, dozens if not hundreds of different definitions for the concept of race could be found in the social scientific literature. By 1953 it was clear to at least two sociologists, George Simpson and Milton Yinger, that efforts to define race were at an intellectual dead end; countless inquiries had yielded countless variations on themes about which little or no consensus existed. However, they noted that while an absence of consensus existed about the true meaning of race, certain themes seemed to emerge from these disparate accounts. Simpson and Yinger argued that while it might not be possible to obtain a single conceptual definition of race that would be widely accepted, it was possible to classify racial definitions into several different types of concepts. Specifically, they suggested that there are at least three types of racial definitions: mystical definitions, biological definitions, and administrative definitions (Simpson and Yinger 1953). Understanding these definitional types provides some useful insights about the way that race is defined in the United States.

Mystical definitions of race are rooted in folklore, religious beliefs and other traditions such as origin stories that are largely outside of empirical experience. They represent attempts to explain variations in the human race by ascribing them to the actions of gods, spirits, and other mythological beings that transcend everyday human experience. One noteworthy example from the 1930s is the creation of the mythological race of Aryans by Nazi propagandists to justify the extermination of "lesser" races, especially European Jews. Needless to say, while mystical definitions may be interesting, they are of little value for most purposes in scientific inquiry.

Biological definitions of race are perhaps best known owing to more than a century of publications on the subjects of eugenics and ethnology. Following Linnaeus and Blumenbach, biologists, geneticists, physical anthropologists, and others debated intensely the exact number of races into which human beings could be classified. Advances in modern genetics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries allowed the argument to progress to the point that a race could be defined

as a "homogeneous gene pool." The discovery of various genetic markers enabled scientists to develop tests that could be used to assign individuals to a particular race. For example, earwax texture and fingerprint patterns could be used to identify certain "races" (Snipp 1989). However, as the numbers of these markers proliferated, they often yielded contradictory results that could only be reconciled by increasing the numbers of possible races. That is, as more markers became available, the more difficult it was to identify gene pools that could be considered truly homogeneous.

By the late twentieth century, scientists were beginning to seriously question whether race was a meaningful scientific construct, and many were skeptical about its utility (Gould 1996; Cavalli-Sforza 2001). However, recent discoveries connected to the mapping of the human genome have allowed geneticists to reliably assay the continental origins of genetic material. This has paved the way for a resurrection of biological interpretations of race associated with continental origins insofar as unique patterns of genes can be identified with Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. This research and its nascent implications for a revitalized biology of race has been the object of intense controversy since its discovery (Erlich and Feldman 2003). The social and political implications of this work remain highly ambiguous.

Administrative definitions of race are constructions promulgated by government agencies and other bureaucratic institutions for the purpose of realizing a political agenda or completing an administrative task. This type of definition is the most commonplace insofar as administrative definitions of race are encountered in applications for employment, scholarships, and a variety of other situations for which government agencies require information about race or ethnicity to be collected from a particular constituency. Administrative definitions of race can vary a great deal over time and from one nation-state to another.

The reason for the variability in administrative definitions of race over time and across nation-states should be obvious. As governments and the agendas they pursue change, so do the racial classifications that they use. Classifications change in response to evolving conditions in the social and political environment. For example, as new ethnic groups immigrate en masse from nation-state to another, national governments often seek to monitor their movement and deploy various kinds of surveillance to estimate their numbers, locations, movements, and other details. Obtaining this information requires some sort of method

for determining membership within the ethnic group of interest. This entails, of course, devising a new ethnic classification system that may replace or modify any existing systems already in place.

There are many examples of administrative definitions of race. In the eighteenth century, the authorities responsible for the Spanish colonies in what is now Mexico promulgated an elaborate system of *castas* to describe the various combinations of racial and ethnic mixing taking place among Europeans, Native Americans, and Africans. This classification included the term "mestizo" to describe the offspring of Spanish and Indian parents, and labeled the children of Spanish and African parents as "mulattos." The *castas* included fourteen other possible combinations and they were preserved for posterity in a series of paintings depicting the physical features of each racial/ethnic admixture.

Besides the *castas*, another noteworthy administrative definition of race was devised by South Africa during the era of racial apartheid. Unlike the *castas*, the South African system was relatively simple. It consisted of three categories: black, white, and colored. However, the South African system illustrates the arbitrary and sometimes nonsensical nature of administrative definitions. Specifically, the South African system classified as "Colored" persons who were neither black nor white. This included most persons from Asia, except for the Japanese, who were considered white. This was a concession to Japanese business representatives, with whom the South African government was trying to curry favor during the years when South Africa was boycotted by the international community.

DEFINING RACE AND ETHNICITY IN AMERICA

As indicated above, counting people by race is a tradition deeply embedded within the governing framework of the United States. Indeed, some notation of race has been taken since the first census in 1790.³ As mandated by the Constitution, the first administrative definition of race used by the United States took note of African slaves and American Indians subject to taxation who were living under the jurisdiction of the United States. The implementation of this classification in the decennial census is significant because for most of this nation's history—at least throughout the nineteenth century and into the first half of the

³ A lengthy discussion of census practices can be found in Snipp (2003).

twentieth century—the census was the only reliable source of information about race and ethnicity in the United States.

In the nineteenth century, the official racial and ethnic classification used by the federal government evolved in response to the changing composition of the population and in response to political concerns of the era. In 1820, for example, the census began collecting information about the foreign-born population as concerns mounted about the national “stock” of new immigrants. The 1820 census also was noteworthy because for the first time enumerators were instructed to take note of each person’s “color” and record whether they were white, black, or American Indian.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, scientific racism was virtually unassailable as a scientific doctrine, and hostility to foreigners—especially from Asia—was an established norm. These attitudes and beliefs were reflected in the approach of the United States to counting its inhabitants in each decennial census and in its efforts to articulate a racial cosmology more complex than one that distinguished only between whites, blacks and American Indians. The 1850 census acknowledged for the first time the existence of black-white and black-American Indian sexual relations by adding a category for mulatto to the census questionnaire. In the 1860 census, categories were added to include Chinese and Asian Indians, reflecting concerns about immigrant railroad workers. Ten years later, a category for Japanese was added to the 1870 census (Snipp 2003).

The 1890 census followed the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), the cessation of the Indian Wars in the West, and a growing concern among politicians over racial purity. To address these concerns, the census counted Chinese and Japanese, and American Indians (both taxed and not taxed), and it subdivided the mulatto population into “Quadroons” and “Octoroons.” It responded to nativist concerns about the impact of immigration on the nation by showing that a substantial amount of the growth in the U.S. population was due to immigration from Europe, particularly southern and eastern Europe. This finding provided potent fuel to the anti-immigration movement and others concerned with the “degradation” of American stock (Anderson 1988).

The official classification of race in the early decades of the twentieth century continued to evolve with changes in immigration and changing ideas about the nature of race. For example, in 1922 the Supreme Court was challenged to define the meaning of “White” in *Takao Ozawa v. U.S.*, a case involving a man of Japanese descent who claimed a right to become

a naturalized citizen. The Court concluded that only persons of the white race were eligible for membership. In trying to establish the meaning of white, the Court said:

Manifestly the test afforded by the mere color of the skin of each individual is impracticable, as that differs greatly among persons of the same race, even among Anglo-Saxons, ranging by imperceptible gradations from the fair blond to the swarthy brunette, the latter being darker than many of the lighter hued persons of the brown or yellow races. Hence to adopt the color test alone would result in a confused overlapping of races and a gradual merging of one into the other, without any practical line of separation. Beginning with the decision of Circuit Judge Sawyer, . . . the federal and state courts, in an almost unbroken line, have held that the words “white person” were meant to indicate only a person of what is popularly known as the Caucasian race. . . . With the conclusion reached in these several decisions we see no reason to differ. . . . The determination that the words “white person” are synonymous with the words “a person of the Caucasian race” simplifies the problem, although it does not entirely dispose of it. Controversies have arisen and will no doubt arise again in respect of the proper classification of individuals in border line cases. The effect of the conclusion that the words “white person” means a Caucasian is not to establish a sharp line of demarcation between those who are entitled and those who are not entitled to naturalization, but rather a zone of more or less debatable ground outside of which, upon the one hand, are those clearly eligible, and outside of which, upon the other hand, are those clearly ineligible for citizenship. (*Ozawa v. U.S.* 1922)

As it happened, the Court was called upon to clarify its tortured logic in *U.S. v. Bhagat Singh Thind*. This 1923 case involved an Asian Indian man, Bhagat Singh Thind, who claimed the right to naturalization. Thind argued that because he was born in a northwestern region of India that many ethnologists considered part of the Caucasus, he was eligible for citizenship as a Caucasian. Trying to clarify its use of the term “Caucasian” in the *Ozawa* case, Justice Sutherland delivered the opinion:

The word “Caucasian,” not means [*sic*] clear, and the use of it in its scientific [*sic*] probably wholly unfamiliar to the original framers of the statute in 1790. When we employ it, we do so as an aid to the ascertainment of the legislative intent and not as an invariable

substitute for the statutory words. Indeed, as used in the science of ethnology, the connotation of the word is by no means clear, and the use of it in its scientific sense as an equivalent. . . . But in this country, during the last half century especially, the word by common usage has acquired a popular meaning, not clearly defined to be sure, but sufficiently so to enable us to say that its popular as distinguished from its scientific application is of appreciably narrower scope. It is in the popular sense of the word, therefore, that we employ it as an aid to the construction of the statute, for it would be obviously illogical to convert words of common speech used in a statute into words of scientific terminology when neither the latter nor the science for whose purposes they were coined was within the contemplation of the framers of the statute or of the people for whom it was framed. . . . They imply, as we have said, a racial test; but the term "race" is one which, for the practical purposes of the statute, must be applied to a group of living persons now possessing in common the requisite characteristics, not to groups of persons who are supposed to be or really are descended from some remote, common ancestor, but who, whether they both resemble him to a greater or less extent, have, at any rate, ceased altogether to resemble one another. It may be true that the blond Scandinavian and the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim reaches of antiquity, but the average man knows perfectly well that there are unmistakable and profound differences between them to-day; and it is not impossible, if that common ancestor could be materialized in the flesh, we should discover that he was himself sufficiently differentiated from both of his descendants to preclude his racial classification with either. (*U.S. v. Thind* 1923)

For African Americans, the ascendancy of Jim Crow legislation in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century institutionalized the so-called one-drop rule. The one-drop rule held that even the smallest amount of black heritage was sufficient to warrant the designation of "black." In the 1930 census, enumerators received the instruction that

a person of mixed White and Negro blood was to be returned as Negro, no matter how small the percentage of Negro blood; someone part Indian and part Negro also was to be listed as Negro, unless the Indian blood predominated. (Snipp 2003)

This instruction, of course, relies on terminology (blood) rooted in medieval beliefs about race.

In addition to institutionalizing the one-drop rule, the 1930 census also added categories for Mexicans, Hindus, Koreans, and Filipinos. These groups were beginning to immigrate to the West Coast, mostly as agricultural labor, in sufficient numbers to attract the attention of politicians and their constituencies. In California, for example, there was considerable public concern about the numbers of Filipinos entering the state.

DEFINING RACE AND ETHNICITY IN POSTWAR AMERICA

From 1940 to 1960, the federal government published relatively little information about racial and ethnic minorities. The information that was available was produced once a decade in reports from the decennial census usually titled *Nonwhite Population by Race*. The racial and ethnic landscape of early postwar America consisted of whites, blacks, American Indians, and a polyglot category of Asians and other races. Latinos were absent from consideration insofar as Mexican American advocacy groups, including the Mexican government, had lobbied to have Mexicans counted as white for statistical purposes (Snipp 2003).

In the 1950 census, as in previous censuses, enumerators ascribed race on the basis of physical appearances. Because census enumerators received no instructions from their supervisors about how to code race on their questionnaires, we can presume that the ascription of race was regarded as a self-evident exercise. However, in 1960, in an effort to reduce the cost of the census, the Census Bureau drastically reduced the number of enumerators it used and replaced them with a form that was delivered through the mail and was to be completed and returned to the Census Bureau by the nominal head of the household. This meant that race was no longer ascribed by enumerators on the basis of physical appearance. Instead, race became a matter of personal identification, based on self-reports provided by the person completing the census form. Race in the 1960 census was now based instead on subjective judgments about the self-identification of racial and ethnic ancestry. Wittingly or unwittingly, Census Bureau planners devised a statistical measure of race that was wholly consistent with constructionist theories. That is, race is purely a matter of subjective experience in the everyday social environment—race meant whatever an individual understood it to mean. One by-product of this change was a dramatic increase in the American Indian population, especially in urban

TABLE 1.1 | FEDERAL AGENCIES THAT COLLECT AND REPORT INFORMATION ABOUT RACE AND ETHNICITY

-
- Commerce
 - Education
 - Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)
 - Federal Reserve
 - Health and Human Services (HHS)
 - Housing and Urban Development (HUD)
 - Justice
 - Labor
 - Agriculture
 - Veterans Affairs
-

areas where they had been misidentified in earlier censuses as white, black, or possibly Asian (Snipp 1989).

After the 1960 census, federal efforts involving the collection of information about race proliferated. This development was largely in response to the passage of civil rights and other race-based legislation and the desires of Congress to ensure that the laws, policies, and programs it was creating were having the intended effect. Throughout the executive branch of the federal government, agencies began to collect and monitor information about the racial composition of the constituencies and to widely disseminate this information (Table 1.1).

As the volume of race-based data increased exponentially, problems connected with the comparability and coverage of this information soon became apparent. For example, some agencies produced reports showing information about “Whites” and “Nonwhites.” These reports could not be compared to the reports of other agencies showing information about “Whites,” “Blacks,”⁴ and “Others” without sacrificing the detailed information about blacks in the latter report. Of course, neither of these approaches was satisfactory for persons seeking information about Latinos, American Indians, Asians, or any other group subsumed under the “Other” category.

By 1974, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) set about the task of creating a standard classification for the production of statistical information about race. The Federal Interagency Committee on Education (FICE) was assigned the task of devising a standard taxonomy and set

of definitions for racial and ethnic groups of particular interest to the federal government. After months of deliberation, the committee adopted a recommendation late in 1976 that the federal government should collect information about five more or less distinct groups: (1) American Indians and Alaska Natives; (2) Asians and Pacific Islanders; (3) Non-Hispanic Blacks; (4) Non-Hispanic Whites; and (5) Hispanics, of any race. This recommendation became official policy when OMB adopted it and designated it as *OMB Directive No. 15*. Although this document stipulated the groups for whom information should be collected, it did not try to define the meaning of these designations beyond to state simply, “These classifications should not be interpreted as being scientific or anthropological in nature” (OMB 1977).

The importance of the adoption of *OMB Directive No. 15* should not be underestimated. Because this document became the standard for all agencies of the federal government, including its grantees and contractors, its five mandated categories became, in effect, a racial cosmology for the United States. *Directive No. 15* stipulated the categories by which most Americans would identify themselves on job applications, college scholarship applications, census forms, and virtually every other form and application that requested information about race. This directive also constrained social scientific inquiry insofar as it made government data available about some groups but not others. For example, as a result of *Directive No. 15*, information about births and deaths is readily available for blacks but not for Arab Americans because the latter are not included in the directive. In short, *OMB Directive No. 15* defined the known racial and ethnic landscape in the late twentieth century.

Conveniently, the categories mandated by *Directive No. 15* closely coincided with those used by the census. The 1980 census was administered under the mandate of this directive and it included categories for race and a new question designed to obtain information about persons of Hispanic origins. The Census Bureau also introduced a new open-ended question requesting information about ethnic ancestry. Although these new questions posed a number of difficulties, they were used again in the 1990 census (Snipp 2003).

The 1990 census proved to be a pivotal event in the way that public perception focused on the meaning of race. Two sets of controversies surfaced from the 1990 census questionnaire and the way that it solicited information about race. One set of complaints was lodged by groups who were omitted from the race question. For example, advocacy groups representing Taiwanese and Arab American interests argued that each

⁴ In the 1960s, these reports most often used the term “Negro” instead of “Black.”

FIGURE 1.1 | FACSIMILE OF THE RACE QUESTION FROM THE 1990 DECENNIAL CENSUS

<p>4. Race Fill ONE circle for the race that the person considers himself/herself to be.</p> <p>If Indian (Amer.), print the name of the enrolled or principal tribe. _____</p> <p>If Other Asian or Pacific Islander (API), print one group, for example: Hmong, Fijian, Laotian, Thai, Tongan, Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on. _____</p> <p>If Other race, print race. _____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> White <input type="radio"/> Black or Negro <input type="radio"/> Indian (Amer.) (Print the name of the enrolled or principal tribe.) _____ <input type="radio"/> Eskimo <input type="radio"/> Aleut <li style="text-align: center;">Asian or Pacific Islander (API) <input type="radio"/> Chinese <input type="radio"/> Filipino <input type="radio"/> Hawaiian <input type="radio"/> Korean <input type="radio"/> Vietnamese <input type="radio"/> Japanese <input type="radio"/> Asian Indian <input type="radio"/> Samoan <input type="radio"/> Guamanian <input type="radio"/> Other API _____ <input type="radio"/> Other race (Print race) _____
<p>7. Is this person of Spanish/Hispanic origin? Fill ONE circle for each person.</p> <p>If Yes, other Spanish/Hispanic, print one group. _____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> No (not Spanish/Hispanic) <input type="radio"/> Yes, Mexican, Mexican-Am., Chicano <input type="radio"/> Yes, Puerto Rican <input type="radio"/> Yes, Cuban <input type="radio"/> Yes, other Spanish/Hispanic (Print one group, for example: Argentinean, Colombian, Dominican, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, Spaniard, and so on.) _____

SOURCE | U.S. Census Bureau

of these groups should be included as an option on the race question. Native Hawaiians also complained that they should not be grouped with Asians and other Pacific Islanders (see Figure 1.1). Another set of complaints stemmed from the instruction that respondents should mark only one race for each person in the household. Representatives of multiracial family organizations argued that by forcing parents to choose only one race for their children, they were causing multiracial couples to privilege the race of one parent over another when identifying the racial heritage of their children. They claimed that this was a source of marital stress and that it did not adequately capture the true multiracial heritage of children who have parents of different races.

DEFINING RACE AND ETHNICITY IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY AMERICA

These complaints caused the Office of Management and Budget to begin a thorough review of *Directive No. 15* in 1993. This review included consultation with expert social scientists, hearings held around the country, numerous meetings of a large interagency committee, and a program of testing by the Census Bureau to find alternative approaches to measuring the racial and ethnic composition of the United States. In October 1997, OMB issued a revised standard for *Directive No. 15* that attempted to address the concerns raised by the various groups who objected to this rule.

Specifically, the revised standard for the collection of data about race and ethnicity mandated a new set of categories and a new set of instructions. The new categories included whites, blacks, American Indians and Alaska Natives, Asians, and Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders. It also stipulated that Hispanics should be regarded as an ethnic group to be identified separately from the categories of race, suggesting that the Hispanic ethnic group included people of different races and that the identification of groups such as non-Hispanic whites and Hispanic blacks should be retained.

The new categories were a modest departure from past practices and at most represent a significant gain by Native Hawaiians insofar as they were able to obtain recognition as a group distinct from Asians and other Pacific Islanders. A more far-reaching modification was the new language instructing agencies to allow multiple entries for the identification of racial heritage. Specifically, questions soliciting information about racial heritage should include an instruction permitting respondents to “mark one or more” or to “select one or more.” This change allowed individuals to identify themselves with multiple races, and it was first implemented in the 2000 census. A facsimile of the question used in the 2000 census to obtain information about race is shown in Figure 1.2.

Although the vast majority of Americans (274.6 million persons) reported only one race in the 2000 census, 6.8 million persons reported two or more races. The modified race question created a number of complex problems, including some that still remain unsolved. One of the first dilemmas to arise in connection with the new question was how to report the information that was generated from the 2000 census. There are sixty-three unique racial combinations that can be constructed from the choices offered in the 2000 census form. When these sixty-three racial designations are combined with the Hispanic/non-Hispanic

FIGURE 1.2 FACSIMILE OF THE RACE QUESTION FROM THE 2000 DECENNIAL CENSUS

NOTE: Please answer BOTH Questions 5 and 6.

5. Is this person Spanish/Hispanic/Latino? Mark the "No" box if not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino.

No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino Yes, Puerto Rican
 Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano Yes, Cuban
 Yes, other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino—Print group. →

6. What is this person's race? Mark one or more races to indicate what this person considers himself/herself to be.

White
 Black, African Am., or Negro
 American Indian or Alaska Native—Print name of enrolled or principal tribe. →

Asian Indian Japanese Native Hawaiian
 Chinese Korean Guamanian or Chamorro
 Filipino Vietnamese Samoan
 Other Asian—Print race. → Other Pacific Islander—Print race. →

Some other race—Print race. →

SOURCE | U.S. Census Bureau

distinction, the census yields 126 possible categories. This number of categories produces unwieldy tabulations. In response to this problem, the Census Bureau publishes subsets of the data for persons who identify with one race only and for persons who report two or more races. The OMB also has offered guidance for possible aggregations of these categories for the purposes of civil rights enforcement (Snipp 2003).

Several vexing and still unresolved problems involve how to compare these numbers with statistics collected earlier in time given the fact that some multiracial persons may change the way they report their

race from one time to another. Comparisons over time are particularly problematic since only one race was reported in the past; consequently, persons who report more than one race today must be reallocated to a single racial category as in previous reports. There is no agreed-upon way regarding how this should be done or whether such a reallocation is even possible. Another problem is that when persons have two more races that they can report, they do not always report this information consistently. Sometimes they may report two or more races and other times they may selectively report only one race. Statistics from the American Community Survey, a precise, nationally representative sample collected in conjunction with the decennial census, show about two million fewer multiracial persons than were enumerated in the census. Ostensibly, these two numbers should have been approximately the same. Finally, how to obtain accurate third party reports from employers or school administrators about the complex multiracial heritages of employees or students also has been a significant and unresolved problem.

CONCLUSION: DEFINING RACE AND ETHNICITY IN THE UNITED STATES AND BEYOND

As this essay has attempted to show, the business of defining race and ethnicity is a tricky one. In some respects, pinpointing the meaning of ethnicity is an easier task than trying to define race. This is only because the concept of ethnicity is a relatively new idea that was developed with a specific reference in mind and for many years remained within the confines of scholarly discourse.

In contrast, the notion of race is an old idea that dates back to medieval Europe and possibly earlier. At different times, it has referred to differences in blood, differences in a variety of biological characteristics, differences in character, and lately, to a set of social categories constructed to achieve some set of legal and political objectives. These different meanings are rooted in mythology, pseudo-science, and the intentions of governments and other institutions with particular agendas in mind. Under these circumstances, the muddle and confusion attached to the idea of race and what it means is hardly surprising. What is perhaps more surprising is that we often act as if none of this confusion exists. Laws are written, policies are enacted, and judges render opinions as if the meaning of race is both well understood and the subject of great agreement.

Assuming that the meaning of race is fixed and unchanging is a convenient fiction that anchors a great deal of our everyday thinking and an even larger amount of public policy. But despite the convenience of this sort of thinking, the conceptual content of the term "race" has evolved tremendously over the centuries. It continues to be a shorthand expression for describing "otherness," but how we understand and deal with others has shifted over time. We understand that enslaving and mistreating others simply because they are different is no longer acceptable in civilized society. We are beginning to understand that because people are different, they are not inherently superior or inferior to one another.

Works Cited

-
- Anderson, Margo J. 1988. *The American Census: A Social History*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Blumenbach, Johann Friedrich. 1776. *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind*. New York: Bergman, 1969.
- Cavalli-Sforza, Luigi Luca. 2001. *Genes, Peoples, and Languages*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Erlich, Paul, and Marcus Feldman. 2003. Genes and Cultures: What Creates Our Behavioral Phenome? *Current Anthropology* 44:87-107.
- Fredrickson, George M. 2002. *Racism: A Short History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Gould, Stephen Jay. 1996. *The Mismeasure of Man*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- McKee, James B. 1993. *Sociology and the Race Problem: The Failure of a Perspective*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Office of Management and Budget (OMB). 1977. *Directive No. 15, Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Statistics and Administrative Reporting*. Washington, DC: United States Office of Management and Budget.
- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. 1994. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. New York: Routledge Press.
- Peterson, William. 1980. Concepts of Ethnicity. In *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, edited by Stephan Thernstrom. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Simpson, George Eaton, and J. Milton Yinger. 1953. *Racial and Cultural Minorities: An Analysis of Prejudice and Discrimination*. New York: Harper & Bros.
- Snipp, C. Matthew. 1989. *American Indians: The First of This Land*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- . 2003. Racial Measurement in the American Census: Past Practices and Implications for the Future. *Annual Review of Sociology* 29: 563-588.