Professors Study Racial Identification Questions

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Although racial identification has been a part of the U.S. Census policy since its inception, neither race nor ethnicity is a scientific construct. Quite the contrary.

Few factors are more telling of socio-political fluidity than the shifting labels that mark the practice of U.S. Census reporting over time. For example, the original U.S. Census in 1790 had only three racial categories: free whites (divided by gender), slaves (blacks), and all other free persons (Indians). Every census since then has posed the question of race, but the racial categories employed have been added, dropped and revised based upon the prevailing social and political climate of the time.

By 1890, the census categories had expanded to white, black, mulatto, quadroon, octoroon, Chinese, Japanese and Indian to reflect the multiracial legacy of slavery and the recent influx of early Chinese and Japanese immigrants. To complicate matters further, “Hispanic” was added as an ethnic category in 1970 even though a person of Hispanic origin can be of any race. To this day, the Hispanic category maintains the distinction of being the only ethnic category explicitly tracked by the census even though ethnicity is a social construct that can be arguably claimed, albeit arbitrarily, by any person.

Fueled by recent immigration trends from non-European countries and the 1967 Loving vs. Virginia case that eliminated legal barriers against interracial marriage in the United States, this inevitable recipe for multiracial/ethnic mixtures has resulted in a plethora of complex questions for the army of politicians, public policy makers, educators, scholars, marketers and health care workers who look to such population trends

to help them make strategic decisions.

The potential demise of race as a clearly definable, albeit socially constructed, category that can carefully segregate people into mono-racial groups such as white, black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian or American Indian/Alaska native calls to question myriad institutionalized practices that rely upon such rigid classifications to design programs, products and services targeting any of these vibrant populations.

The insistence of the fluidity of race is a social phenomenon more recently exemplified by the activist-championed notion of multiracial categories in the U.S. Census of 2000.

For all intents and purposes, the ability to check more than one box on the Census 2000 form pushed the United States to the edge of a multiracial frontier that few people understand and even fewer may be ready to confront.

Indeed, when first given the opportunity on the U.S. Census of 2000, almost 7 million people or 2.4 percent of the U.S. population identified themselves as belonging to two or more races. Undoubtedly, all of these factors indicate a potential growth in the multiracial/ethnic population as they continue to mature, become parents, and foster a heightened awareness of mixed heritage identity within their own families and among their peers.

Since the 1980s, this heightened awareness has fostered an increase in political activism among multiracial university students. Such awareness is illustrated by the proliferation of student and community organizations such as MAVIN Foundation, Multiracial Americans of Southern California, the Association of Multiethnic Americans, Hapa Issues Forum, Mixed Media Watch, Mixed Folks and Generation MIX, to name a few.

As awareness about and among people who belong to more than one racial/ethnic group continues to mount, so does the need to understand the identities and perspectives of this growing population.

The Study

In our research, 20 mixed heritage informants describe lived experiences as marked by invisibility, fluidity, liminality (term for when people are not clearly in one category or another but on the border of each), and a perpetual process of reframing. Although our informants are middle class, male, female, gay, straight, and possess multiple racial/ethnic heritages, it is the experience with their race/ethnicity that is the focus of our study.

Historically, race and ethnicity in the U.S. has been defined as mono-racial/cultural categories — as in the

census process. Since they do not fit neatly into any one specific racial/ethnic category, our respondents face multiple cultural challenges and complexities.

Their cultural challenges begin with their experience of invisibility or liminality because they do not fit into a single “pure” racial or ethnic category that is the historical imperative of the racial classification system of mainstream U.S. culture. America’s single-race classification system has served to keep one group dominant (white Europeans) and all other groups separate in their own distinct group.

Mixed-heritage individuals, thus, commonly face social invisibility in relation to macro U.S. culture because they don’t fit the expected mono-cultural norm. At the meso-group level, they are commonly rejected by members of the multiple groups to which they belong.

The case of Maria illustrates this multilevel cultural complexity that she faces in her daily life. Maria, whose mother is Puerto Rican American and father is Mexican American, was often called a “half breed” or “mongrel” by teachers and school friends. At home, she is pressured by aunts on both sides of her family to deny her other heritage. Her Puerto Rican American aunt says she is Puerto Rican American and the Mexican American aunt says, “no, you are Mexican American.”

In addition, Maria’s paternal grandmother often says she isn’t “Mexican enough” because she is part Puerto Rican. Maria, on the other hand, thinks of herself as being a member of multiple groups — Mexican, Puerto Rican and American — calling herself “a Triple.”

She loves aspects of her parents’ two cultures that she learned — the food and year-round family celebrations. She also loves aspects of her U.S. mainstream culture: the hotdogs at baseball games and the individualist “can do” attitude and values that give her the motivation to pursue a career in academia rather than the family business.

**Research Highlights**

There are four highlights of our study, to be published in the *Applied Anthropologist* next winter:

1 — It includes an historical overview and discussion of the U.S. Census in framing the treatment and perception of persons with mixed heritages over time.

2 — It sketches the recent change in the census as a result of pressure from groups organized by mixed heritage individuals.

3 — It features our respondents’ viewpoints about their complex and dynamic identity in their own words, illustrating four common themes of their everyday experience: rejection/non acceptance, liminality, fluidity and the need to constantly reframe their thinking, communication and responses to daily situations.

4 — It presents implications for policy and practice. The importance of this dynamic agency model of mixed heritage identity construction cannot be understated because there are implications for every work sector.

In addition to seeing this study as contributing to a growing literature on mixed ancestry people in the U.S., it specifies implications and strategies for work in all employment sectors: health, media, education, government, business and human services.

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