

Immigration, Intermarriage, and the Challenges of Measuring Racial/Ethnic Identities

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ABSTRACT

This commentary reviews recent demographic trends in immigration and intermarriage that contribute to the complexity of measuring race and ethnicity. The census question on ancestry is proposed as a possible model for what we might expect with the race question in the 2000 census and beyond.

Through the use of ancestry data, changes in ethnic identification by individuals over the course of their lives, by generation, and according to census question directions are documented. It is pointed out that the once-rigid lines that divided European-origin groups from one another have increasingly blurred. All of these changes are posited as becoming more likely for groups we now define as “racial.”

While it is acknowledged that race and ethnicity will become increasingly difficult to measure as multiple racial identities become more common and more likely to be reported, it is argued that monitoring discrimination is crucial for the continued collection of such data. (*Am J Public Health*. 2000; 90:1735–1737)

The new race question in the 2000 census addresses major demographic changes in American society and poses many challenges for researchers and policymakers. In this commentary, I review 2 major demographic trends that create difficulties for those trying to measure and classify the population by race and ethnicity—immigration and intermarriage. I then review the lessons researchers have learned from examining the census ancestry question. I propose that the variability, complexity, and indeterminacy of the census ancestry question, which has allowed multiple responses since it was first asked in 1980, may be a model for what we might expect with the race and Hispanic-origin questions in the 2000 census and beyond.

Immigration

We are in the midst of a large wave of immigration to the United States that is transforming the ethnic and racial composition of the population. Since the 1965 Immigration Law, which removed the national-origin quotas that had limited much legal immigration to those originating in Europe, immigration to the United States has been high and mostly from non-European sources. By 1998, 10% of the population (26.3 million) were foreign born, and another 10% (28.1 million) were the children of immigrants—the second generation. The foreign-born share of the population has doubled since 1970, when it was only 5% of the nation's population.¹ By the 1990s, 17% of immigrants to the United States came from Europe or Canada, 30% from Asia, and almost half from Latin America. The United States has changed from a society that before the mid-20th century was largely Black and White to one with a large number of groups we define as “racial” or “ethnic.” In addition, heterogeneity within each of the ethnic and racial categories has increased. The future composition of the population will reflect how these new immigrants and their children identify themselves and how much they marry across ethnic and racial lines.

In 1997, 61% of Asians, 38% of Hispanics, 8% of Whites, 6% of Blacks, and 6% of American Indians were foreign born.² One of the tasks immigrants face in assimilating in America is learning how to classify themselves in the American racial classification scheme.³

Many immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean come from multiracial societies in which different categories that fall somewhere between White and Black are more socially recognized than in the United States. Indeed, until the recent change in the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidelines allowing multiple identities, these immigrants had to exchange their Latin American conception of race for the American “one-drop rule,” which classified people as Black if they had any Black ancestors at all. These immigrants may now feel more free to identify all of their racial backgrounds in the census and on other forms.

Intermarriage

Rates of intermarriage have been growing since 1960 for all groups, even those defined as “racial” groups. While the proportion of non-Hispanic Whites marrying non-Whites or Hispanics is still small, the rate of increase in recent decades has been dramatic. According to Harrison and Bennett, “in 1960 there were about 150 000 interracial couples in the United States. This number grew rapidly to more than 1.0 million in 1990. When marriages with Hispanics are added the intergroup marriages totaled about 1.6 million in 1990.”⁴ While over 93% of Whites and of Blacks marry within their own groups, 70% of Asians and of Hispanics and only 33% of American Indians do. Although Black–White intermarriages are still the least prevalent, among younger people there is evidence of dramatic change. Richard Alba reports that “10% of 25 to 34 year old black men have intermarried, most with white women.”⁵

By 1997, 4% of married couples were in intergroup marriages as defined by OMB race and Hispanic categories. Among Whites, the foreign born and native born have similar intermarriage rates. Among Asians and Hispanics, the native born have higher intermarriage rates, but among Blacks, the foreign born have higher intermarriage rates.⁶ Thus, continued

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This commentary was accepted June 25, 2000.

high immigration will have different effects on the intermarriage rates for different racial and ethnic groups. This will ultimately affect the numbers in each of these groups who might choose to check more than 1 race.

Assimilation in the Past

While the major race and ethnic groups in the United States stay relatively stable in the short run, there is enormous uncertainty in measurement at the boundaries of the groups and at the individual level. This uncertainty is due to a variety of causes—both substantive in terms of the socially constructed and volatile nature of ethnicity itself and technical in terms of the measurement error that is present in any attempt to measure social phenomena.

Groups we think of as “ethnic groups” were seen in earlier times as “racial groups.” In the 19th century, the Irish were seen as a “race” apart from other European groups. They were stereotyped for their criminality, lack of education, and poor family values, and they were often portrayed as apes in cartoons of the time and referred to as “niggers turned inside out.”⁷ If those debating immigration restrictions in the early part of the 20th century had made population projections to predict the “race suicide” they felt new immigrants were causing, they would have projected the numbers of Southern and Central Europeans and Irish and shown how these growing groups would have made White Protestants a minority by some date in the far-off future. Such predictions would have failed to factor in the decline in the relevance of the boundaries separating European groups from one another. These groups have reached equality with White Protestants in education, income, and residential distribution. These social and cultural changes have interacted with ethnic intermarriage to produce an ethnic fluidity that would have been unthinkable then.

Ethnic identity is thus increasingly a matter of choice for Whites in the United States. An American of Italian, Irish, and Scottish ancestry, for example, can “choose” to identify with 1 or more of these ethnic ancestries and discard or “forget” others.^{8,9} Current “racial” population projections do not take into account the possibility that today’s “racial” groups will become tomorrow’s “ethnic groups,” with all of the uncertainty in measurement and identity that entails.

Ancestry Data

Research on how individuals of mixed European ethnic ancestries report their identities to the census can provide some clues as to

how individuals of mixed race might choose an identity. The ancestry question on the 1980, 1990, and 2000 censuses was a fill-in-the-blank question that asked, “What is this person’s ancestry or ethnic origin?” Under the blank line, a number of possible responses were given as examples. In 1980, up to 3 write-in responses were coded; in 1990, up to 2 were coded. The instructions said, “Persons who have more than one origin and cannot identify with a single group may report two ancestry groups.”

Analyses of these data from both the 1980 and 1990 censuses show enormous change, flux, and inconsistency. Overall, education is positively linked to reporting multiple ancestry. Less-educated people tend to report fewer identities.^{8,10} In 1990, there was a clear “example effect”; the number of Cajuns, for example, who were listed as an example in the 1990 census form, grew at a rate of over 6000% between 1980 and 1990. English was the largest ethnic-ancestry group in 1980, but it dropped by 34% when it was not listed as an example in 1990. Given this example effect, it is not too risky to predict that when the results of the 2000 census are calculated, the numbers of Italians, Cambodians, and Norwegians in the United States will have increased, since all 3 are listed as examples in the 2000 census instructions and were not in 1990.

Analyses show that, regarding the ancestry question, intermarried parents filling out the census form simplify their children’s ancestries. In situations where one parent reports one single White ethnic origin (X) and the other parent reports another (Y), a substantial percentage of the children (around 40%) are not described as the logical combination of parental ancestries (XY); instead, only one parent’s origin is reported.¹¹ These inconsistencies between the ethnicity parents report for themselves and what they report for their children lead to estimates that are from 14% to 17% less than what would be expected if parents gave their children their exact ancestries.

Life-course changes have been documented as well. As people get older, they report fewer ancestries. When the complexity of ethnic-origin responses are tabulated by age, a sharp simplification is observed in the late teens and early 20s, when young people leave home and establish their own households, compared with younger ages.⁹ There is also evidence that when some people marry, they change their ancestry to match that of their spouses.^{11,12} For instance, if a woman who was Italian and Polish married an Italian man, it is likely that she would drop the Polish ancestry and that both spouses would report that they were Italian. Lieberman and Waters suggest that standard demographic studies of intermarriage that ask whether ethnicity affects choice of marriage partner might actually be measuring

the opposite—whether choice of marriage partner affects choice of ethnic identity. They suggest that studies of religious intermarriage might provide a model for dealing with this problem.¹¹ It has long been recognized that religious conversion at the time of marriage would bias estimates of religious intermarriage downward if the only data one worked with were current religion of both spouses. As a result, studies of religious intermarriage use 2 variables—religion at age 16 and current religion—to measure intermarriage. Perhaps a measure such as current race or ethnicity and race or ethnicity at age 16 will be necessary to measure intermarriage in a time of mixed race and ethnicity and changing identifications.

Implications for Multiple-Race Reporting

What are the implications of these findings for multiracial reporting? One is that the categories provided on the census form and the instructions given to respondents can have a large effect on people’s answers to the census. Another is that parents report more detail on their children’s ancestries than do the children themselves as they age and especially after they leave home. To the extent that the movement to include multiracial categories on the census form is led by parents who are concerned about having to choose a race for their children, there may not be much of an issue if the children themselves merely simplify their identity to 1 race when they leave home.

The pool of potential multiple-race respondents is quite high. In the 1990 census, 5% of the US population reported an ancestry that differed from their primary race or Hispanic identification. By race, 4% of Whites and 5% of Blacks report multiple ancestries. More than 25% of those reporting their race as American Indian report a non-American Indian ancestry, and about 10% of Asian and Hispanic respondents report a non-Asian or non-Hispanic ancestry, respectively.¹³ These people are all “potential multiracials”—people who choose 1 race in the census but feel strongly enough about their other ancestries that they report them on another question.

One innovative population projection takes into account such multiple ancestries and projects them forward to show how complex these measurement issues may become. Smith and Edmonston found that in 1995, of the population comprising Asians, Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites, 7% reported multiple ancestries. By the year 2050, under medium assumptions of immigration and intermarriage, 21% of the population will be of multiple ancestry. Asians and Hispanics will be the most mixed, at 35% and 45% multiple ancestry, respectively.

So far in the debate about multiple-race reporting, political attention has focused on Black–White interracial and on the implications of an interracial category for the long-run political and social fortunes of African Americans. This reflects the enormous importance of the Black–White color line in American society and the distinctive legacy of slavery. Yet the Asian, American Indian, and Hispanic populations are much more likely to be strongly affected because of their much higher rates of intermarriage and their much smaller numbers overall.

American Indians may be a model for what we might expect with other groups as intermixing and the reporting of intermixing grow. Much of the growth in the self-identified American Indian population in recent decades has been due to “potential” American Indians, previously self-identified as White, claiming American Indian racial identity. To receive certain government benefits, such as treatment at the Indian health service, Indians have had to “prove” their identity—either through blood quantum certification or tribal enrollment in a federally recognized tribe. Self-identification as an Indian is not enough. This is an extreme model of what might happen in the future if the rates of intermarriage become very high and identity choices become unstable across racial groups and if the government continues to allocate some resources to individuals because of their racial and ethnic identities.

Comparison of those people who self-identify racially as American Indian and those who self-identify as American Indian by ancestry shows that racially identified American Indians are poorer, more concentrated on reservations, and more likely to report only 1 identity.¹⁴ Any study of changing income patterns among American Indians must be mindful of

the fact that changes in socioeconomic status could be due to new, more affluent people identifying as Indian. The addition of a multiracial category will affect not only the size of groups but also their measurable characteristics. Increasingly, changes in the health status of particular racial and ethnic groups could be due to changes in the composition of those identifying with the groups.

It is tempting to conclude that the subjective nature of identity, the difficulty of accurately measuring it, and the increasing variability in individual responses mean that we should no longer use race and ethnicity to classify the population. Yet that would be the wrong lesson to draw from the more subjective ancestry data. As difficult as they may be to use (and the race data will become increasingly more difficult to use and interpret), the ancestry data from 1980 and 1990 have yielded a great deal of important and useful conclusions about our society. Ancestry data have been used to document how well we as a society have reduced inequality and social distance among European-origin groups. Our goal for the future should be to continue to collect data on race and Hispanic origin, however messy and complicated, until we can document the same amount of progress and equality for all Americans. Until that day, we need these data to monitor our progress and to protect people whose skin color and culture put them at risk in our society. □

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