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Multiracial Identity

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Multiracial Identity in the United States Today

In the year 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau allowed individuals to self-identify as two or more races on its decennial census form. This marked a major change from the 1960s protocol that limited self-classification to only one racial category. Due to this modification, 6.8 million or 2.4 percent of the population claimed more than one race. This number jumped to 9 million or 2.9 percent of the population in 2010. The increase of approximately 2.2 million individuals represented a growth of 32 percent in the number of persons identifying as more than one race, referred



While multiracial identity in the United States has only recently been recognized by government and state agencies, the categorization of multiracial groups in the Americas dates back several centuries. This eighteenth-century painting of *casta* portraits displays the suspected results of miscegenation of Spaniards, Indians, and Africans. (Schalkwijk/Art Resource, NY)

to here as mixed raced or multiracial. It is speculated that this group could rise to 21 percent of the population by 2050. Although hailed as a multiracial baby boom by some, the above demographics subtly demonstrate how multiracial identification is both a social identity *and* a political project, occurring at the institutional, group, and individual levels. Specifically, the role of the federal government, multiracial advocacy groups, and personal ascriptions are all crucial to understanding the broader dynamic of multiracial identity.

This entry examines multiracial identity from each of the aforementioned perspectives, positing that classification entails more than individual claims and assertions; rather, the interactions between the state, multiracial groups, and personal decisions lead to a more nuanced understanding of the process of multiracial identification. The government plays a critical role in creating the “mark all that apply” (MATA) option on the census. The emergence and influence of multiracial activist organizations advocating for recognition of this population is significant now. Finally, there is considerable social psychological literature addressing mixed-race

identity, focusing on the four largest pairings. Early research characterized this population as dysfunctional and pathological; however, current research posits that multiracial identity is fluid, contextual, and normal.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AND MULTIRACIAL IDENTITY

Despite the seemingly rapid growth of multiracial individuals in the U.S. population, they have long existed prior to 2000. They simply were not consistently recognized or acknowledged by the government or state agencies. For example, in 1850, along with "Negro," the census listed "Mulatto," which originally was defined as all people of mixed-race ancestry but came to mean only persons with any trace of Negro blood, as a racial category until 1920 (although it was excluded in 1900). "Quadroon" (one-quarter black ancestry) and "Octoroon" (one-eighth black ancestry) appeared on the 1890 census. Due to fears of blacks surreptitiously accessing the privileges of whiteness during Jim Crow segregation, by 1930 all of these categories disappeared from the census, subsumed under the category "Negro." As a response to the hard-won civil rights legislation of the 1960s (that is, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Fair Housing Act of 1968, and so forth) and increased immigration after 1965, the federal government mandated the official count of these specific racial categories: Asian Pacific Islander, Native American/Alaskan Native, black, white, and the ethnic category Hispanic. These data are needed to monitor legislative compliance by state and local entities, such as businesses or other organizations that receive funds from the federal government. However, due to growing criticism emanating from interracial organizations regarding single-race classification, in 1997 congressional hearings were held in Boston, Washington, DC, Denver, San Francisco, and Honolulu addressing racial taxonomy and the census. Multiple interest groups testified before Congress with the most vocal voices emerging from multiracial advocacy groups. Thus, the Census Bureau, operating as a political apparatus of the state, created the possibility for the codification of a mixed-race identity with persuasion from these entities.

MULTIRACIAL ADVOCACY GROUPS AND MULTIRACIAL IDENTITY

Considerable controversy surrounded monoracial classification with the emergence of the "multiracial movement." In the 1990s, multiracial political organizations such as Project RACE (Re-classify All Children Equally) and the Association of Multiethnic Americans (AMEA) testified at government public hearings for the addition of a "mark all that apply" option or a "multiracial"

category to the decennial census. Project RACE strongly advocated a separate multiracial box while AMEA promoted the MATA option. These groups and other multiracial organizations claimed that mixed children were not allowed to acknowledge or recognize their full ancestral backgrounds, ultimately selecting the race of one parent over another, leading such children to feel stigmatized, potentially suffering lower self-esteem than other groups. Borrowing the language of the civil rights movement, these groups argued that their “inalienable rights” were undermined or withheld. The Association of Multiethnic Americans further contended that medical data was needed for multiracial people in order to ascertain any illnesses or diseases particular to this population; hence, the necessity for options that recognized this group on government and state forms. The MATA choice was eventually selected by the Office of Management and Budget and offered on the 2000 census. However, multiracial organizations such as Project RACE were able to influence some states—Georgia, Ohio, Michigan, and Illinois—to add a multiracial category to official state documents. Thus, the move to add a multiracial box or MATA option to the census was a political project by multiracial groups for legitimacy and recognition from the federal government. As a by-product of this controversy, substantial research on multiracial identity has been produced since the 1990s.

RESEARCH ON MULTIRACIAL IDENTITY

According to census data, of all the multiracial combinations, 83 percent of those reported in 2010 included white as one of the pairings. Other than white the most frequently reported unions were with blacks, Some Other Race, and Asians. The four largest racial combinations in 2010 were white–black (1.8 million), white–Some Other Race (1.7 million), white–Asian (1.6 million), and white–American Indian/Alaska Native (1.4 million), with other couplings totaling less than 500,000. Census estimates indicate that between 2000 and 2010 the white–black population increased by 134 percent or a little over 1 million people with the next largest expansion coming from the white–Asian population at 87 percent, and 750,000 people. Moreover, the South and the West are the areas with the largest numbers of multiracial individuals.

Albeit socially acceptable now, much of the initial research on multiracial identity in the twentieth century characterized these individuals as “tragic mulattos” or “marginal men.” Specifically, some scholars argued that since these people were born from two “inherently” different populations (predominantly black and white in the early 1900s) they would experience emotional distress resulting in psychological or mental breakdowns. As a result, mixed-race individuals were supposed to identify with their minority statuses because they were unable to possess a fully

developed dual-racial identity. Much of the research during this time depicted these individuals as aberrations with inferiority complexes, whose very existence was due to pathological behavior that inhibited their psychological adjustment. Literature in the 1960s and 1970s paralleled the previous decades tending to pathologize mixed-race persons as a group. Multiracials were ostensibly found to exhibit confusion over their racial identity, had feelings of lower self-esteem, possessed divided family loyalties or parental rejection, and frequently manifested psychological or behavioral problems.

Yet with increasing state and local legitimization of multiracial populations, research moved away from dysfunctional depictions of these groups to examining the *process* of multiracial identity. Extant research operates from an ecological approach, explicating how this population constructs their identity given particular contexts. Thus, racial identity is understood as fluid, contextual, and situational, based on influence from family, friends, and other factors. For example, focusing on the largest multiracial combination—blacks and whites—researchers have found that some offspring from this combination selected a primary black or white identity or created an in-between “multiracial”/“mixed” identity. These choices are partially influenced by environmental composition; for example, discrepancies have been found between how some multiracial adolescents identified themselves in school versus home environments due to peer and parental influence. Furthermore, some black–white multiracials have identified as black because they want to fit in with their black peers in college or live in predominantly black neighborhoods with mainly black friends. There are similar dynamics for other multiracial combinations.

Examining multiracial Asians, phenotype (whether a mixed-race Asian looks stereotypically Asian to others) and exposure to Asian cultural background (that is, proficiency in the Asian parent’s first language, frequency of eating food from the Asian parent’s country, and ever having resided in the Asian parent’s country of origin) all influence whether one identifies as Asian or white. Hence, some researchers have found that if a mixed-race Asian is viewed as Asian by others then he or she will likely identify as such. In addition, if someone from this group knows and fluently speaks the minority language then they are more likely to identify as Asian as opposed to white. Other potential factors include the father’s educational attainment, whether the father or mother is Asian, and generational status, among others.

Close to half (44%) of those who identified themselves as Native American and Alaskan Native also identified as another race (2.3 million out of 5.9 million overall) on the census. Furthermore, 63 percent of those who identified as American Indian also classified themselves as white—the largest contingency of multiracial American Indians. Indeed, more than half of Indian marriages are to those who are not American Indian, with the highest rates occurring

with whites. Similar to other multiracial combinations, identity is determined by influence of family, as well as attributes such as phenotype, language proficiency, and ancestral knowledge. In addition, for this group, geography—whether one lives on an Indian reservation or in an urban area—is a key factor. For example, those who live on reservations tend to more so identify as American Indian whereas urban residents face constraints when attempting to select an Indian identity. This may be due to the “homeland” effect, the idea that the spiritual and cultural impact of living on a reservation promotes an Indian identity. Yet, the federal government classifies someone as American Indian based on blood quantum, or the percentage of supposed “Indian blood” a person possesses. Thus, mixed-race Native Americans with less than one-fourth percentage Indian blood are not classified as such by the government but may define themselves or be identified by others as Indians. As with previous groups, we see the intersection and influence of external groups such as the state over personal beliefs.

The final largest multiracial combination is white and Some Other Race. Census data indicate that Hispanics, who can select any racial category, overwhelmingly choose white (alone) and Some Other Race (alone) as their racial identity. In 2010, 53 percent of Hispanics selected white as their racial background and 37 percent selected Some Other Race. Yet, on the 2010 census, Hispanics make up 97 percent of the category Some Other Race. Hence, analysis of the Some Other Race category is essentially the Hispanic population in the United States. Similar to other unions, parental and outsiders’ racial ascriptions, Spanish language proficiency, and sustained contact with Hispanic culture determine a white, Latino, or multiracial identity. Also, some scholars argue that Hispanics and Latinos possess more nuanced conceptions of race and ethnicity, viewing themselves as essentially a mixture of different racial and ethnic groups (for example, mestizos), complicating their identity process in the United States.

Finally, further complicating the process of racial identification, some research has found that particular mixed-race individuals have an easier time manipulating their racial identities; for example, Asian–white and Hispanic–white racial identities have been characterized as “optional” in comparison to a black–white multiracial identity. Due to the historical legacy of the one drop rule—the essentialist once legalized belief that a single trace of black blood makes one racially black—black multiracials often find that others greatly influence them to identify as black; whereas, Asian–white and Hispanic–white multiracials possess the freedom to identify however they want. Despite these limitations and differences, current literature does not depict these groups as dysfunctional. Thus, the influence of the federal government and interracial organizations in racial classification has changed the discourse on mixed-race identity at the macro- and microlevels.

Where being multiracial was once viewed as a problem with an increasingly growing population it is now viewed as normal.

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See also: Ethnic Identity; Multiracial Americans: Categories and Perceptions

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