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Check All that Apply: The Census and the Multiracial Population

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Check All that Apply: The Census and the Multiracial Population

Abstract

In this presentation, we introduce the idea that different definitions of being multiracial and attitudes toward acknowledging mixed-raced origins might have affected the 2000 census enumeration of the multiracial population. How multiracial people self-identify and how society identifies multiracial people has become an escalating debate among many people. Because more Americans than ever are claiming their multiracial heritages, how they deal with the "other" category, or other restrictions to answering race and ethnicity questions ("Please check only one") is one of the most compelling issues in society today.

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When the 2000 census allowed Americans for the first time to describe themselves as belonging to any combination of listed races, the multiracial population of the United States has become visible in new ways. The nation's racial demography is no longer mapped solely in terms of discrete, mutually exclusive categories and our official statistics have revealed a sizeable number of people who do not fit neatly into a single box. 2.4 percent of the nation's 281.4 million people used more than one race to describe themselves. An overwhelming majority of the 6.8 million multiracial Americans, 93 percent reported that they were of two races; 823 people checked all six race categories. The majority of people who claimed two or more races chose four categories: 32 percent said they were white and "some other race," 16 percent said they were white and American Indian or Alaska Native, 13 percent marked white and Asian and 11 percent responded as white and black or African-American. (U. S. Census Bureau, 2000)

The multiracial category is likely to grow in the coming years due to the percentage of children who were reported to be multiracial being up three times greater than that of adults (U. S. Census Bureau, 2000). They now account for 4 percent of all children under 18, twice the percentage of multiracial adults (U. S. Census Bureau, 2000). The fuel for the increasing multiracial child population is the boom in interracial marriages. There are 1.6 million interracial married couples today, 10 times as many as in 1960 (Tolerance.org, 2001). Some analysts believe this number will grow as Asian-Americans and Hispanics - who have higher intermarriage rates than whites and blacks - continue to make up an increased percentage of the overall population.

Anticipating this shift in awareness, the media has already produced many articles that prominently refer to the mixed racial origins of celebrities and to predictions that multiracial ancestry will become a common feature of American society. For example, a 1999 U.S.A. Today article begins: "In the future, lots of us will be like Mariah Carey. Or Soledad O'Brien. Or Tiger Woods...As a new millennium looms, America is set to become more a nation of blended races and ethnic groups than it has ever been" (U.S.A.

Today, 1999).

However, race mixing is nothing new - by some estimates, 80 percent of African Americans have at least some white blood and a quarter have some Native American blood. Nothing demonstrates that fact more clearly than a story that made front-page headlines in 1998 citing evidence that Thomas Jefferson had fathered at least one black child. In the past, America defined anyone with "one drop" of black blood as black. Many young mixed-race blacks still identify as black, but more and more are identifying as multiracial and a few as white.

Now that the 2000 census results are tabulated, the enumeration of the "more than one race" population might seem a straightforward affair. However, the interpretation of this data promises to be anything but simple. As Census Bureau analysts have recognized, even the question of how to present the results poses its own complications. Should all multiracial combinations be lumped together in a single "two or more races" category, or should each possible combination be listed separately? Representative or not, the results that have emerged from the 2000 Census provided the first official portrait of multiracial America and thus it is important to grasp the mechanisms behind its construction.

In this presentation, we will introduce the idea that different definitions of being multiracial and attitudes toward acknowledging mixed-race origins might have affected the 2000 census enumeration of the multiracial population. How multiracial people self-identify and how society identifies multiracial people has become an escalating debate among many people. Because more Americans than ever are claiming their multiracial heritages, how they deal with the "other" category, or other restrictions to answering race and ethnicity questions ("Please check only one.") is one of the most compelling issues in our society today.

The issue is far broader than just a black and white one. Today's young adults include Black Asian individuals, Asian Hispanics, White Native Americans and every other possible combination. The old labels can no longer capture the shifting subtleties of blood, culture and identity. Our perceptions of diversity need to be broadened to accommodate the rapidly growing multiracial and multiethnic student population. But how can we accomplish that? Through the ideas and research presented, we will facilitate a discussion about the potential impact of multiracial students on our campuses across the nation. We will also present findings from on-going research with multiracial college students at Iowa State University. Resources on multiracial organizations and conceptual framework for research will be provided for participants.

Presenters

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