

Racial Identity and Census Categories: Can Incorrect Categories Yield Correct Information?

Nancy A. Denton*

Introduction

The issues that Michael Omi raises in his essay regarding the inadequacy and inaccuracy of the racial/ethnic categories used by the U.S. Census Bureau¹ are troubling to me and to many other demographers. As Omi points out, our initial response is to defend the categories and to want to preserve them so that we can continue to measure change, be it progress or lack thereof, in the relative standings of people living in the United States.² At the same time, the points Omi raises must be convincing to any sensitive reader; Omi's perspective is often shared by those who find that the categories do not describe who they are, such as those of "mixed race,"³ who may be unable to check off a single box on the census form. In fact, historian David Hollinger argues that it is mixed-race persons who will ultimately deal the current categories

* The author is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University at Albany, State University of New York. She holds a Ph.D. and an M.A. in Demography from the University of Pennsylvania and an M.A. in Sociology from Fordham University. The editing assistance of Ben Weiss is gratefully acknowledged, as are the comments of Richard Alba. Please direct all correspondence to the author at Dept. of Sociology SS-340, SUNY, Albany, NY 12222.

1. Michael Omi, *Racial Identity and the State: The Dilemmas of Classification*, 15 *LAW & INEQ. J.* 7 (1997).

2. *Id.* at 22 ("[S]ocial scientists and statisticians want to retain a system of classification, but are arguing for categories which are conceptually valid, exclusive and exhaustive, measurable and reliable over time.")

3. See NAOMI ZACK, *RACE AND MIXED RACE* 142-44 (1993) (describing a special form of alienation felt by Americans of mixed race). Many other writers have mentioned the special issues of mixed-race people. See, e.g., Sharon M. Lee, *Racial Classifications in the U.S. Census: 1890-1990*, 16 *ETHNIC & RACIAL STUD.* 75, 83-84 (1993) (describing the evolution of census race classifications after many Americans chose not to force themselves into one of the standard race classifications); Paul R. Spickard, *The Illogic of American Racial Categories*, in *RACIALLY MIXED PEOPLE IN AMERICA* 12, 20-22 (Maria P. P. Root ed., 1992) (illustrating the social and personal tension felt by Americans of mixed racial ancestry); Lawrence Wright, *One Drop of Blood*, *NEW YORKER*, July 25, 1994, at 46, 47-50 (noting the role that mixed race people and the problems from "diametric" race classifications have played in shaping of U.S. history).

their death blow.⁴ After summarizing the current categories' links—or lack thereof—to race theory, Hollinger notes that the five blocks of what he calls the “ethno-racial pentagon” (black, white, Native American, Asian and Latino), “whatever their shifting labels, have come to replicate the popular color-consciousness of the past: black, white, red, yellow and brown.”⁵ The current categories' lack of conformity to biological reality and to basic principles of logic⁶ is troublesome. This leaves me with the dilemma of wanting to defend the continued use of categories whose meanings I admit to be erroneous.

Two underlying assumptions motivate me in this endeavor. First, the issue of what the “correct” racial/ethnic categories are will not go away, and the chances of developing a small, coherent set of categories that will please all groups are, in my opinion, slim. In fact, as the nation becomes more racially and ethnically diverse,⁷ the debate surrounding these racial/ethnic categories is likely to intensify for two reasons: (1) the increasing size of currently small groups, and (2) increasing intermarriage. Increasing group size is clearly related to immigration, but even if both legal and illegal immigration were to cease immediately, the nation would continue to become more diverse due to varying age structures and fertility regimes among native-born members of different groups.⁸ Intermarriage of Asians and Hispanics with non-

4. DAVID A. HOLLINGER, *POSTETHNIC AMERICA* 43 (1995).

5. *Id.* at 32.

6. *See id.* at 29-31 (explaining that the current categories fail to correspond even to the archaic “racial” definitions of Caucasian, Negroid and Mongoloid). *See also id.* at 33-34 (comparing classifying people by physical traits to classifying books in a library by size and shape). For a more formal treatment, see ZACK, *supra* note 3, at 73-75. *See also* Lee, *supra* note 3, at 91 (“[C]ensus classifications of race are a taxonomic nightmare, where racial and ethnic categories are mixed together.”); Wright, *supra* note 3, at 53 (“Whatever the word ‘race’ may mean elsewhere in the world, or to the world of science, it is clear that in America the categories are arbitrary, confused, and hopelessly intermingled.”).

7. *See* Jeffrey S. Passel & Barry Edmonston, *Immigration and Race: Recent Trends in Immigration to the United States*, in *IMMIGRATION AND ETHNICITY: THE INTEGRATION OF AMERICA'S NEWEST ARRIVALS* 31, 54-55 (Barry Edmonston & Jeffrey S. Passel eds., 1994) (showing how recent immigration trends have changed the racial/ethnic composition of the United States); TODD GITLIN, *THE TWILIGHT OF COMMON DREAMS: WHY AMERICA IS WRACKED BY CULTURE WARS* 108-10 (1995) (describing the history and future of growing racial diversity in the United States).

8. Passel & Edmonston, *supra* note 7, at 50. For example, Passel and Edmonston show that had no more immigrants arrived after 1960, the proportion of the population that was non-Hispanic white in 1990 would have been 81.1% instead of the 75.2% measured in the 1990 Census. *Id.* By the middle of the next century, births will be the largest component of change in the size of the Asian and Hispanic populations even if immigration remains at current levels. *See* Barry Edmonston & Jeffrey S. Passel, *The Future Immigrant Population of the*

group members is already around thirty percent, and black intermarriage has increased dramatically as well, albeit from a very small base.⁹ As their population size increases, ethnic groups gain greater political clout to assert claims to special census categories, while increasing intermarriage and the births that result from it generate the need for categories that take the identity of both parents into account. Thus, both of these trends imply the need for more categories on the census or other survey forms.

A second and more important reason for my addressing the issue of the current racial/ethnic categories is what they reveal about inequality in U.S. society. My own work on residential segregation,¹⁰ as well as my reading of the social science literature on race, convinces me that the current imperfect categories correlate with, and to some extent are used to justify, serious social consequences that we need to be concerned about as a society. Current levels of segregation for African Americans in large cities in the Northeast and Midwest remain near their all-time high, and show few signs of significantly decreasing in the near future.¹¹ These levels of segregation carry with them disastrous consequences for the worst-off African Americans¹²—those whom William Julius Wilson has called “the truly disadvantaged”¹³—but they also influence the lives of all African Americans in subtle but powerful ways.¹⁴

United States, in IMMIGRATION AND ETHNICITY: THE INTEGRATION OF AMERICA'S NEWEST ARRIVALS 317, 338 (Barry Edmonston and Jeffrey S. Passel eds., 1994).

9. See Richard D. Alba, *Assimilation's Quiet Tide*, 119 PUB. INTEREST 3, 16 (1995) (noting that according to 1990 Census data, only 6% of black men and 2% of black women intermarry); RICHARD D. ALBA, *ETHNIC IDENTITY: THE TRANSFORMATION OF WHITE AMERICA* 12-13 (1990) (noting that in 1980, only 2% of blacks intermarried); HOLLINGER, *supra* note 4, at 42 (stating that marriages between African Americans and whites have increased by 300% since 1970); GITLIN, *supra* note 7, at 109 (noting that in 1986, of the black men who married outside the South, 10% married white women, up from 3.9% in 1968). As intermarriage becomes more common, the fact that people are instructed on most forms to choose only one “race” becomes increasingly difficult for the offspring of these marriages.

10. DOUGLAS S. MASSEY & NANCY A. DENTON, *AMERICAN APARTHEID: SEGREGATION AND THE MAKING OF THE UNDERCLASS* (1993).

11. *Id.* at 222.

12. *Id.* at 148-85. See also Florence Wagman Roisman, *Intentional Racial Discrimination and Segregation by the Federal Government as a Principal Cause of Concentrated Poverty: A Response to Schill and Wachter*, 143 U. PA. L. REV. 1351, 1359 (1995) (describing a recent article on housing that shows that the best predictor of living in the worst public housing is not poverty, but race).

13. WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON, *THE TRULY DISADVANTAGED* at vii-xi (1987) (focusing on the black ghetto underclass).

14. Joe R. Feagin, *The Continuing Significance of Race: Antiblack Discrimination in Public Places*, 56 AM. SOC. REV. 101, 102 (1991) (pointing out that discrimination against middle-class blacks occurs across a continuum).

Hispanics face many of the same segregation problems as African Americans. While segregation levels of Hispanics are not nearly so high as those of blacks,¹⁵ poverty among Puerto Ricans exceeds that of African Americans.¹⁶ Native Americans continue to be disadvantaged as well.¹⁷ The internal heterogeneity subsumed by the term "Asian" makes the category problematic,¹⁸ yet segregation levels of Asians are almost as high as those of Hispanics.¹⁹

The fact that these gross (some might say grotesque) inequalities correspond to groups categorized in the current way creates the paradox of incorrect categories yielding correct information, a puzzle this article attempts to resolve. Part I of this article argues for a theoretical distinction between individual and social identities. Part II proposes a two-question method for dealing with the separate issues of individual identity and social identity in census data collection. The conclusion summarizes some of the policy implications of dividing individual and social identities.

15. Reynolds Farley & William H. Frey, *Changes in the Segregation of Whites from Blacks During the 1980's: Small Steps Toward a More Integrated Society*, 59 AM. SOC. REV. 23, 32 (1994) [hereinafter Farley & Frey, *Changes in the Segregation of Whites from Blacks During the 1980's*] ("[S]egregation of blacks remains much greater than that of the two other major minorities, Hispanics and Asians."); see generally William H. Frey & Reynolds Farley, *Latino, Asian, and Black Segregation in U.S. Metropolitan Areas: Are Multiethnic Metros Different?*, 33 DEMOGRAPHY 35, 36 (1996) (analyzing a statistical comparison of racial segregation in U.S. metropolitan areas).

16. Marta Tienda, *Puerto Ricans and the Underclass Debate*, 501 ANNALS AM. ACAD. POL. & SOC. SCI. 105, 106 (1989) ("So severe has the decline in Puerto Rican economic status been that this minority group has fared worse than blacks in the 1980s, a reversal of the situation prevailing during the 1960s.").

17. American Indians are unemployed at three times the rate of whites. Roderick J. Harrison & Claudette E. Bennett, *Racial and Ethnic Diversity*, in 2 STATE OF THE UNION: AMERICA IN THE 1990S 141, 185 (Reynolds Farley, ed., 1995). Native American men earn less than white men at all levels of education, married-couple Native American families average 70% of the income of similar white families, and the figure for female-headed families is only 57% of the white rate. *Id.* at 175, 193. As a result, Native Americans have the highest poverty rate for individuals and families of any group, and their child poverty rate is second only to that of African-Americans. *Id.* at 195.

18. Sharon Lee discusses the nine groups listed on the 1990 Census form under the Asian and Pacific Islander (API) category (Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Asian Indian, Hawaiian, Samoan, Korean, Laotian and Vietnamese) and the history of how these particular groups came to be listed. Lee, *supra* note 3, at 85-90. In another article, Lee documents the variance in poverty among these subgroups. Sharon M. Lee, *Poverty and the U.S. Asian Population*, 75 SOC. SCI. Q. 541, 549 (1994).

19. Farley & Frey, *Changes in the Segregation of Whites from Blacks During the 1980's*, *supra* note 15, at 32.

I. Individual Identity vs. Social Identity

The current census categories fail to recognize a fundamental distinction between "how I see myself" and "how others see me." Most people probably see themselves as different (sometimes better and sometimes worse) from how outsiders see them. Yet many discussions of the failings of census categories typically begin with the issue of how hard it is for individuals to fit themselves into current categories.²⁰ From there, the discussion typically moves to an attack on the underlying biological,²¹ social²² or historical²³ basis for the categories, such as the "one drop"²⁴ rule by which any African ancestry suffices to categorize an American as "black."²⁵ Others argue that the categories, however defined, are becoming increasingly inaccurate as mixed race persons become more numerous.²⁶ Some of the more thoughtful discussions, like Omi's²⁷ and Hollinger's,²⁸ then argue that the categories themselves are politically determined, and that they therefore have no relation to the reality of individual identity.²⁹ However, the focus always remains on the individual who is trying to fit himself or herself into the little boxes on the form.

20. See, e.g., CLARA E. RODRIGUEZ, *PUERTO RICANS: BORN IN THE U.S.A.* 60 (1989) (pointing out the discrepancy between how Puerto Ricans classify themselves and how they are classified by non-Puerto Rican interviewers).

21. See, e.g., Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Racisms*, in *ANATOMY OF RACISM* 3, 5 (David Theo Goldberg ed., 1990); Lucius Outlaw, *Toward a Critical Theory of Race*, in *ANATOMY OF RACISM* 58, 62-68 (David Theo Goldberg ed., 1990); ZACK, *supra* note 3, at 12-18 (outlining the history and biology of the concept of race).

22. See, e.g., Antonio McDaniel, *The Dynamic Racial Composition of the United States*, in *AN AMERICAN DILEMMA REVISITED: RACE RELATIONS IN A CHANGING WORLD* 209, 270 (Obie Clayton, Jr. ed., 1996) ("Generically, race refers to social relations among 'distinct' peoples.").

23. See generally LAWRENCE H. FUCHS, *THE AMERICAN KALEIDOSCOPE* (1990) (discussing historical patterns of ethnicity in the United States and how they are reflected in America's current ethnic landscape); RONALD TAKAKI, *A DIFFERENT MIRROR: A HISTORY OF MULTICULTURAL AMERICA* (1993) (presenting a multicultural view of the history of America's various immigrant groups).

24. ZACK, *supra* note 3, at 19. The "one drop" rule was used in the United States after 1915 for racial classification purposes. Anyone with even a minute amount of African ancestry was classified as "black." *Id.*

25. *Id.* For a discussion attacking the concepts of race used in the United States, see *id.* at 19-28.

26. See, e.g., HOLLINGER, *supra* note 4, at 43-46.

27. See Omi, *supra* note 1, at 13-20.

28. See HOLLINGER, *supra* note 4, at 6-7 (suggesting that "affiliation" is a more accurate term than "identity"); see also *id.* at 25-32 (describing how different cultural identities are lost by collapsing identity into the five pentagon categories).

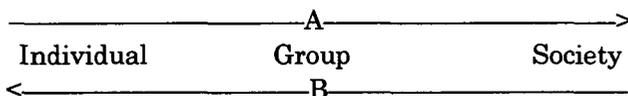
29. See generally Omi, *supra* note 1 (discussing federal racial classifications and their problematic construction); HOLLINGER, *supra* note 4 (arguing that current racial and ethnic classifications are not sufficient for complete discussions about public affairs).

To begin to understand these criticisms requires an examination of how an individual comes to define himself or herself. Most people would agree that identity is not something arrived at in isolation, but rather, that it is the result of interactions between what goes on inside a person's head and what happens to that person in interactions with their family, friends and acquaintances in the larger world.³⁰ As Hollinger notes in arguing that we should replace the term "identity" with "affiliation," "the concept of identity is more psychological than social, and it can hide the extent to which the achievement of identity is a social process by which a person becomes affiliated with one or more acculturating cohorts."³¹ Gitlin makes the point even more clearly:

How men and women think is not simply a function of what they have seen or felt in their own lives. Nor is their form of thought a genetic shadow cast by their parents or grandparents. People think within the intellectual and cultural currents that surround them—currents with histories, even if the sources cannot be seen from downstream.³²

Thus, a conceptual diagram of the process of identity formation would appear as follows:

Figure 1. Paths of Identity Formation



The terms "individual," "group" and "society" have been kept deliberately vague as a way of suggesting their complexity in real life. "Individual" refers to the internal thoughts that a person has in an attempt to answer the question "who am I," as well as to their individual experiences in the world. "Group" includes, but is not limited to, interpersonal experiences with parents, siblings, extended family, friends, schoolmates, neighbors and work colleagues. "Society" is a shorthand way of referring to the many larger groups in which an individual interacts, such as their occu-

30. See generally GEORGE H. MEAD, *MIND, SELF AND SOCIETY* (1934) (asserting that the mind and self are generated through a socialization process); CHARLES HORTON COOLEY, *SOCIAL ORGANIZATION* (1983) (showing that people are social animals and that their identities are created collectively); Richard Jenkins, *Rethinking Ethnicity: Identity, Categorization & Power*, 17 *ETHNIC & RACIAL STUD.* 3 (1994) (arguing that ethnic identity should be understood as an example of social identity).

31. HOLLINGER, *supra* note 4, at 6.

32. GITLIN, *supra* note 7, at 200.

pational group, social class, city, political party, region of the country and the country itself.

The conceptual diagram in Figure 1 reveals two important points. First, the standard racial categories of the census or of Hollinger's ethno-racial pentagon³³ seem to be created by moving along arrow B, but an individual clearly establishes his or her identity by moving along arrow A. The two arrows help sort the current debate into two parts, each with its own starting point: one beginning with the individual and one beginning with society. Thought of in this way, there is no contradiction when individual identity does not agree with social identity: Individuals define their identity in one way and society can define the same individual in another.

Arrows A and B demonstrate that individual identities must be reconciled with the fact that people are also defined by society, usually by virtue of obvious physical characteristics or historical characteristics such as residence in a particular location or membership in a certain occupational group. To some extent, these definitions take into account what category the person thinks he or she belongs in, as on a self-reported census form, but the categories themselves are defined at a societal level and reflect the history and structures of racial stratification that the society has experienced.³⁴

This is not to say that the categories themselves are deserving of use simply because they are defined at the macro- instead of the micro-level. Rather, the discrimination and prejudice that the use of the categories is intended to help remedy are triggered by how society views a person, regardless of how that person defines himself or herself. This distinction between personal and external identity gets blurred because the effects of structural racism tend to be seen and conceptualized at the individual level, such as in the case of unwed mothers, school dropouts, poor children, drug use or homicide. The racism, however, ultimately originates at the societal level.

Many of the arguments against the current categories move along arrow A, posing the problem of how an individual fits his or her identity into one of the categories. While this problem manifests at the micro-level of filling out a form, when we think of the

33. See *supra* text accompanying note 5.

34. See Omi, *supra* note 1, at 10-11; Lee, *supra* note 3, at 86-91; see also William Petersen, *Politics and the Measurement of Ethnicity*, in *THE POLITICS OF NUMBERS* 187, 230 (William Alonso & Paul Starr eds., 1987) (explaining the political consequences of group definition).

macro-level "racial" distribution of U.S. society, it is the five categories in the ethno-racial pentagon that come to mind, not the more specific cultural groupings that are lumped together within the categories. Thus, people distinguish between race and ethnicity:

When it is said that race affects one's destiny more than ethnicity does, the reference usually turns out to be to different degrees of mistreatment within a social system, not to different degrees of cultural particularity and group enforcement of norms. Some of the various ethnic groups within the Euro-American bloc have had their share of suffering, but it is dwarfed, according to our common if not always stated understanding, by the suffering inflicted on races. Moreover, the Chinese American suffers less as a Chinese than as an Asian, just as the Crow suffers not as a Crow but as an Indian. Although Japanese Americans were interned during World War II as Japanese rather than as Asians, that Asianness made the difference is proven by the less harsh treatment afforded Americans of highly visible German or Italian affiliations. This distinction between degrees of victimization is the key to the place of Latinos in the ethno-racial pentagon and to the assertion of a racial status on their behalf.³⁵

A related confusion is that the categories are frequently discussed as being linked to culture. Thus, the categories are dually linked to the value to individuals of being able to express their cultures as well as to the intrinsic worth of those cultures per se.³⁶ Hollinger argues that this confusion of the political with the cultural results in a "tragic contradiction," whereby people who want to expand the number of categories used in order to affirm the variety of cultures in the contemporary United States conflict with people who want to focus on protecting historically disadvantaged populations from discrimination.³⁷ Both are valuable goals, but they are not the same goal.³⁸

A second point suggested by Figure 1 is that if one connects the two arrows into a circle, or a series of spirals, then the diagram suggests the process of feedback, whereby individuals revise their concept of who they are based on input from the larger outside

35. HOLLINGER, *supra* note 4, at 37.

36. See, e.g., GITLIN, *supra* note 7, at 141, 153; HOLLINGER, *supra* note 4, at 36, 48-50; David Lopez & Yen Espiritu, *Panethnicity in the United States: A Theoretical Framework*, 13 ETHNIC & RACIAL STUD. 198, 201-03 (1990).

37. HOLLINGER, *supra* note 4, at 49.

38. Hollinger has specifically characterized this contradiction: "When we now refer to a race, we most often mean to address the unequal treatment of people on the basis of biological ideas long since discredited." *Id.* at 35. He continues, however, in the next paragraph: "Race does not serve us at all well, however, when we want to talk about culture." *Id.* at 36.

world. Yet critics who seek to simply replace the pentagon categories with a comprehensive set of coherent, consistent categories to give comparable data over time, critics of the categories ignore this feedback process and view identity as fixed.

The existence of these feedback loops is not in dispute. Omi and others give numerous examples of how immigrants tend to see themselves as persons from specific nations at the time of immigration but forge a larger, more umbrella-like identity *after* arrival in the United States.³⁹

Africans did not come to America as Africans, they came as Akan, Yoruba, Ibo, and Wolof. Europeans did not come as Europeans, they came as English, Scottish, French, and Irish. Likewise, Asians are not coming to the United States as Asians, they arrive as Chinese, Japanese, and Indians. Migrants from Latin America do not come to the United States as Hispanics or Latinos, they come as Mexicans and Cubans.⁴⁰

Once here, immigrants learn that society considers them a part of a larger group represented by one of the five categories, because despite how much or how little their individual identity has changed over time, being part of a non-white group has been depressingly consistent as a basis for prejudice and discrimination.⁴¹ The revisions to identity are frequently externally and/or politically driven.⁴²

In my opinion, one of the reasons identity is so important for persons of color is the reflection of the cumulative effects of segregation, discrimination and other oppression on individuals. Whites have the *option* of ethnic identity, whereas people of color do not. The notion that we all have ethnicities has been identified by Mary Waters as a subtle reinforcer of racism and a key factor

39. Omi, *supra* note 1, at 17 ("In the wake of the civil rights movement, distinct Asian ethnic groups . . . began to frame and assert their 'common identity' as Asian Americans."); McDaniel, *supra* note 22, at 270-71 (describing how third-generation European immigrants "lose" their foreign identity and move into the white mainstream); FUCHS, *supra* note 23, at 334 (explaining how Laotian, Cambodian and Vietnamese immigrants called themselves Indo-Chinese "because leaders of those groups found that cooperation and consolidation would enhance their influence"); Lopez & Espiritu, *supra* note 36, at 208 (summarizing factors affecting panethnicity and how they vary among subgroups of broad ethnic groups). See generally Alejandro Portes & Dag MacLeod, *What Shall I Call Myself? Hispanic Identity Formation in the Second Generation*, 19 ETHNIC & RACIAL STUD. 523, 524-29 (1996) (describing at length the interaction between the immigrant status of some ethnic minorities and their identity development).

40. McDaniel, *supra* note 22, at 271.

41. See *id.* at 271-72, 278; MARY C. WATERS, ETHNIC OPTIONS: CHOOSING IDENTITIES IN AMERICA 2-3 (1990) (describing how South, Central and Eastern Europeans were once seen as separate "races" but over time became "white").

42. See *supra* notes 34-37 and accompanying text.

that impedes whites from understanding what race means for people designated as non-white.⁴³

These arguments about the social definition of the categories are in no way intended to minimize the importance of a healthy sense of identity. But in a complex world, we all have many identities and interests. While being a member of a disliked group may cause suffering and will no doubt shape the person,⁴⁴ we as a society need to work to combat the causes of that suffering. Unfortunately, the suffering will not be affected by changing the words on the census form. The effects of racism all too frequently operate on the level of appearance, not identity. In fact, the presence of the two distinct arrows, A and B, corresponding to "individual identity" and "social identity," suggests a possible solution to the disagreements over the current racial/ethnic survey categories. This possible solution is the next topic of discussion.

II. Reflecting the Reality of Identity: Two Separate Questions

Despite the economic cost of adding questions to the census, serious consideration should be given to replacing the current two-part census question on "race,"⁴⁵ or five-part survey questions based on the ethno-racial pentagon,⁴⁶ with two separate questions,

43. WATERS, *supra* note 41, at 163-64 ("[I]f your own ethnicity is a voluntaristic personal matter, it is sometimes difficult to understand that race or ethnicity for others is influenced by societal and political components.")

44. GITLIN, *supra* note 7, at 207 (explaining that those whose identities are despised have less freedom to choose their identity).

45. Question 4 of the 1990 Census asked individuals to fill in one circle for the race that person considered himself or herself to be. There were sixteen racial categories as options: White, Black or Negro, Indian (American), Eskimo, Aleut, Chinese, Filipino, Hawaiian, Korean, Vietnamese, Japanese, Asian Indian, Samoan, Guamanian, other Asian or Pacific Islander, or other race. BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, 1990 CENSUS OF POPULATION E-6 (1992) [hereinafter 1990 CENSUS]. Question 7 of the 1990 CENSUS asked whether the person was of Hispanic origin. If so, the person was asked to indicate which category, including Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban or other Spanish/Hispanic. *Id.*

46. A Directive from the Office of Management and Budget provides:

1. Definitions

The basic racial and ethnic categories for Federal Statistics and program administrative reporting are defined as follows:

a. *American Indian or Alaskan Native.* A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North America, and who maintains cultural identification through tribal affiliation or community recognition.

b. *Asian or Pacific Islander.* A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, or the Pacific Islands. This area includes, for example, China, India, Japan, Korea, the Philip-

one asking personal identity and the other asking social identity. The first question should allow multiple responses, while the second should force people to choose one of the five blocks of the ethno-racial pentagon.⁴⁷

The exact wording of these questions should be more a matter of research than of argument. I suggest the following as a starting point:

Q1. *With which of the following group (or groups) do you most closely identify? (You may choose more than one)*

Q1 could either include a list of many categories, allowing for write-in responses and mixed-race designation, or be open-ended as the 1990 Census "ancestry" question was.⁴⁸ It would not, however, limit people to only three responses as the 1990 ancestry question did.

pine Islands, and Samoa.

c. *Black.* A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa.

d. *Hispanic.* A person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.

e. *White.* A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, North Africa, or the Middle East.

OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET, STATISTICAL DIRECTIVE NO. 15 (May 12, 1977). See Omi, *supra* note 1, nn.24-25. Affirmative action forms, school forms, marketing surveys and many other forms frequently use a five-part categorization of American Indian or Alaskan Native; Asian or Pacific Islander; Black, not of Hispanic origin; Hispanic; and White, not of Hispanic origin, although the order and wording varies and sometimes Hispanics are divided into white and black groups.

47. The second question might further divide Hispanics into white Hispanics and black Hispanics. Many Hispanics report themselves to be racially "other." Omi, *supra* note 1, at 14 (reporting that 1990 Census Bureau reports show forty percent of Hispanics chose "other"). Nancy A. Denton & Douglas S. Massey, *Racial Identity Among Caribbean Hispanics: The Effect of Double Minority Status on Residential Segregation*, 54 AM. SOC. REV. 790, 793 (1989). Research, however, has shown significant differences between "black" and "white" Hispanics in segregation, with Hispanics of African descent having much higher levels of segregation than other Hispanics. *Id.* at 802-03.

48. The wording of the 1990 ancestry question was: "What is this person's ancestry or ethnic origin? (See instruction guide for further information)." Underneath the write-in box was written, in parentheses, "For example: German, Italian, Afro-Amer., Croatian, Cape Verdean, Dominican, Ecuadoran, Haitian, Cajun, French Canadian, Jamaican, Korean, Lebanese, Mexican, Nigerian, Irish, Polish, Slovak, Taiwanese, Thai, Ukrainian, etc." 1990 CENSUS, *supra* note 45, at A-6. The questionnaire is reproduced in all U.S. Census volumes.

Q2. Into which category would a stranger or someone who didn't know you well place you? (Choose only one)

White

Black

Asian

Native American

Hispanic⁴⁹

Q2 would thus ask people to answer based on how they think they are perceived by people who do not know them or when they are first introduced to people.

By having both questions together, people would get the satisfaction of personal identification as well as providing the data to allow monitoring for discrimination. In terms of the census, this means that both questions would have to be on the "short" form, given to 100% of the population, in contrast to the current ancestry question, which appears only on the "long" form, given to a sample of households.⁵⁰ Q2, with its precoded answers, amounts to a collapsed form of the method in which we currently collect data, but the coding difficulties of an open-ended write-in question like Q1 are problematical for the 100% form; this is why the current ancestry question appears only on the "long" form. Should these coding difficulties prove insurmountable, there would still be benefit to having two questions and agreeing on a list of possible responses to Q1, which would include "multiracial." The essential element is that Q2 not ask people to "identify with" the forced choices, but to say where an outsider would place them.

An obvious advantage of the two-question strategy, in the census and elsewhere, is that while it would preserve data trends over time, it would also highlight the discrepancy between how we

49. The final question might include alternate terms such as "White/Caucasian/Euro-American," "Black or African-American," "Hispanic, Chicano/a or Latino/a," or "Native American/American Indian." The question could also include a disclaimer such as "Hispanic people may be of any race" in order to clarify how black Hispanics should be classified. I have not included the alternate terms here as they would be placed on census questions as a result of research, and my purpose here is to keep the idea conceptually clear rather than to deal with the technicalities of question writing.

50. The Census Bureau sent one of two versions of the census questionnaire to each housing unit in the United States. 1990 CENSUS, *supra* note 45, at D-2. A short-form consisted of basic population and housing questions. The long form had all of the questions from the short form plus some additional questions. Because each housing unit received at least one of these two forms, each unit was asked all of the basic population and housing questions. In accordance with the Census Bureau sampling procedure, only one in six housing units received the long form and, thus, the additional questions. *Id.* See *id.* for a detailed explanation of the sampling procedure.

see ourselves and how others see us. The more survey forms adopt the two-question strategy, the more people's attention would focus on the issue. The two-question method would change the nature of the public discussion about race while allowing individuals to express their individual identities. At the same time, it would provide data necessary to demonstrate the very real inequities associated with race,⁵¹ for in today's world, statistics are extremely important.

A less obvious benefit of the two-question strategy is that it might also enable the variation within the five common categories to be highlighted. While this intra-category variation is often used to argue against the usefulness of the categories themselves,⁵² combining the current categories with the ability to compare personal and social identity would more effectively point out that the categories are of little use as a basis for discrimination. As the internal variance within the pentagon increases in visibility, realtors, employers, bankers, insurance agents and governments will increasingly find that the categories do not tell them what they want to know. Specifically, they will find that the categories are not effective in helping to identify who is a good tenant, a reliable employee or a timely bill payer.

Continuing to use the current categories in any form requires addressing the issue of whether their continued use helps to maintain structural racism.⁵³ In doing so, we must not make the mistake of assuming that structural racism is any more objective, essential or unchanging than the notion of racial identity itself. The

51. See, e.g., *supra* notes 11-19 and accompanying text (discussing the significant relationship between race, poverty and residential segregation).

52. See, e.g., Lee, *supra* note 3, at 85-86 (pointing out that use of the census category "Asian and Pacific Islander" combines the poverty of Indo-Chinese refugees with the high socioeconomic status of Japanese Americans); Portes & MacLeod, *supra* note 39, at 543-44 (finding significant differences between Hispanic youth who identify as Hispanic and those who identify with a specific nationality, with the latter being more assimilated into the mainstream of U.S. society).

53. See Wright, *supra* note 3, at 54 ("The use of racial statistics . . . creates a reality of racial divisions, which then require solutions, such as busing, affirmative action, and multicultural education, all of which are bound to fail, because they heighten the racial awareness that leads to contention."). Some postmodern theorists also criticize social scientists who use racial categories in social research for obscuring the power relationships that lead to race being used as a means of social categorization, even if the research acknowledges the categories to be socially constructed. See, e.g., Abby L. Ferber, *Exploring the Social Construction of Race: Sociology and the Study of Interracial Relationships*, in AMERICAN MIXED RACE: THE CULTURE OF MICRODIVERSITY 155, 162-63 (Naomi Zack ed., 1995) ("In representing race as a given foundation, sociologists obscure the relationships of power that constitute race as a foundation.")

racial categories have changed significantly over the years,⁵⁴ and individuals have become increasingly aware of their personal multicultural identities.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the fact that discrimination and prejudice have become more subtle and more polite since the civil rights movement does not mean that they have gone away. To paraphrase Gitlin, the fact that people suffer because their identity is despised is an argument for finding ways to increase their satisfaction and for fighting discrimination, not for trying to change the categories we use to identify them.⁵⁶

Clearly, the addition of new questions to surveys, and especially to the census, would be costly. However, altering the current questions to make them inclusive enough of the myriad of personal identities that people hold is nearly impossible, as the many discussions of the Census Advisory Committees have shown in recent years.⁵⁷ Furthermore, without the sort of change in outlook that the two-question strategy reflects, these issues are likely to become even more intractable as the nation becomes more diverse.⁵⁸

Conclusion

The reality of the five "pentagon" categories becomes obvious if one assumes the vantage point of the larger society looking at the individual; the effect of membership in one of these categories, in terms of discrimination, prejudice, bigotry and inequality, does not emanate from the individual outward, but from society inward. This is not to say that the individual does not bitterly resent being defined by the larger society. But personal identity is different from what may be called "external identity," and it is the latter that is used by individuals, institutions, government at various levels and society to discriminate against and dominate others.

The task of establishing a strong and proud personal identity may indeed be made harder by the fact that the outside world is prejudiced against people who look like you. As Zack describes, the current categories result in some people, particularly those of mixed race, being "racially designated,"⁵⁹ which is not a very com-

54. McDaniel, *supra* note 22, at 280. See generally Lee, *supra* note 3 (outlining changes in census classifications of race over the last century); Petersen, *supra* note 34 (discussing changes in census classification of race since 1790).

55. GITLIN, *supra* note 7, at 207.

56. *Id.*

57. The meeting minutes and recommendations of the Census Bureau Advisory Committees are archived electronically at <<http://www.census.gov>>.

58. See *supra* notes 7-9 and accompanying text.

59. ZACK, *supra* note 3, at 172.

fortable position. However, giving people a more accurate choice on the census or any other form, by itself, will do nothing to change the imposition of external identity. Regardless of how truly one is able to express one's personal identity, structural racism in U.S. society will persist in forcing people into one of the five boxes of the racial/ethnic pentagon for the foreseeable future.

Many who would like to see an elimination of the census categories would be happy if discrimination could no longer be statistically proven, allowing them to argue that the United States has finally arrived at a "race-blind" point in its history.⁶⁰ While this is clearly not the intent of persons who simply find that they do not fit into the current categories, nor of most participants in the current debates about the categories, we must be careful to separate the two sides. Personally, I feel very strongly that dismantling the survey categories would help the cause of the former group more than the latter. If our goal is to become a truly race-blind society, it is better to keep the ill-fitting categories in order to have some data, however imperfect, with which to advocate the need for change.

The future of these racial/ethnic categories in governmental statistics is unclear. But we will move closer to a recognition of how the categories should be changed if we avoid confusion of the individual-level process of identity formation with the societal-level process of identifying groups. The fact that individual identity is vitally important does not preclude the fact that societal identity of groups is also important. Because the two are not necessarily the same, it logically follows that they do not necessarily have to agree. The way in which a person defines himself or herself is distinct from the way in which society defines him or her, although both have important repercussions and ramifications. We gain nothing but confusion by trying to blend the two concepts or obfuscate their distinctness.

60. See, e.g., DINESH D'SOUZA, THE END OF RACISM 552 (1995) ("Yet by ending racial classification, and limiting government use of ethnic data for scholarly research, Americans across the ideological spectrum can take an important step toward transcending the historic barriers of race."); JARED TAYLOR, PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS: THE FAILURE OF RACE RELATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA 356 (1992) ("If blacks get favors simply because they are black, it encourages them to think of themselves neither as individuals nor as Americans, but as blacks."). For an effective critique of this concept of race-blindness, see john a. powell, *An Agenda for the Post-Civil Rights Era*, 29 U.S.F. L. REV. 889, 892 (1995) ("The concepts of neutrality and colorblindness . . . both as goals and as strategies, have always been extremely limited and problematic in terms of racial justice.").

