BLACK, WHITE, AND SHADES OF GREY
(AND BROWN AND YELLOW)

Margo Anderson

Department of History
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Milwaukee, WI 53201

Stephen E. Fienberg

Department of Statistics
Carnegie Mellon University
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

Abstract

The Statistical Policy Office in the U.S. Office of Management and Budget is currently reassessing the contents of OMB Statistical Directive 15, which defines the racial and ethnic classifications to be used in connection with all administrative and statistical data collection. Any revision of these standards has important consequences both for how we as a nation view and how we govern ourselves. The brief paper provides some background, context, and advice for the current review of, and possible revisions to, statistical Directive 15, and was prepared to accompany a paper describing the current OMB review (see, Evinger, 1995).

Key words: Census; Multiple classifications; OMB Statistical Directive 15; Race and ethnic classification.

INTRODUCTION

Current discussions surrounding the federal statistical review on race and ethnic classifications force us to consider a number of seeming paradoxes and contradictions:

- On the one hand, we are told by modern anthropologists and geneticists that there is no scientific basis for a concept called race and, on the other hand, we know that a substantial number of geneticists engage in research on genetic differences among population groups.

- Federal policy requires universities to report student admissions by race and ethnicity in order to comply with affirmative action regulations. The presumption of such regulations is that admissions of the race and ethnic groups should be roughly proportionate to the numbers in the qualified applicant pool. On the other hand, research that investigates the alleged differences in "intelligence" among population groups, such as in Herrnstein and Murray's recent book, *The Bell Curve*, has been excoriated and attacked as racist.

- It is illegal to require information on race as part of an employment application, but federal law require employers to report the race of applicants. (Such data are typically collected by voluntary and anonymous self-reports from applicants, ignoring problems of non-response.)

- It is difficult to explain why we can "see" that some people are black and some are white, and with a bit of investigation we can link this distinction to the color of their parents, yet we are told that this "racial" difference may not be genetically based.

Something must be wrong.

Actually, some of the "genetic" arguments described above, if not wrong, are at best irrelevant. It is commonplace to see the argument made that genetic diversity among the "races" is minuscule, or that variations in skin color are linked to small genetic differences. While this may well be true, it does not follow that the consequences of these differences are unimportant. Questions remain about whether, for example, differences in intelligence, however measured, are related to differences in genetics. If so, we might then ask if such relationships have any relevance for public policy and social science research. Racial and ethnic classification seems to be swept up into this discussion in ways that raise many questions about statistical measurement of race and ethnicity and its conceptual base.

What about the reality of the use of such classification schemes? Using race as a means of classifying the population has a long statistical tradition in the United States. Beginning with the first census in 1790, we have always measured it in some form or another, although the labels have changed as have the purposes justifying its measurement. To set the current discussion in a historical context, we begin by reviewing the history of racial questions on the decennial census. Then we turn to the issues that have made the categories used in OMB Statistical Directive 15 of major importance to various groups, and provide additional background for the current OMB review. We end with a bit of advice.

FEDERAL STATISTICAL PRACTICE

As the Evinger article demonstrates, OMB Statistical Directive 15 is a product of the Civil Rights Revolution and specifically of efforts by federal agencies to implement the new laws in the 1970s. The practice of classifying the American population by race and ethnicity in official government statistics, in law and in popular thinking, of course, is much older. In fact it reflects the character of the United States as the first "new nation," a "nation of immigrants," and more ominously as a nation in which some people conquered, enslaved, and exploited other people in the process of nation building. It is this complex historical legacy that resonates through the debates about racial and ethnic classification and makes the revision of OMB Statistical Directive 15 a flashpoint for many of the most difficult issues of equity in contemporary American life.

Racial classifications are embedded in the original "constitution" of the American state. Though the Declaration of Independence emphatically proclaimed that "all men are created equal" and the Constitution grounded political authority and sovereignty in the "people of the United States," the actual language of Article I, Section 3 of the Constitution embodied a less equitable principle.

When the framers actually wrote the formula for allocating political representation among the states "according to their respective numbers," slaves "counted" as only three-fifths of a free person, and "Indians not taxed" were not to be counted at all. These decisions thus required the decennial census – the new instrument created to count the population –to classify the population into free, "other persons," i.e., slaves, and Indians not taxed. Since the pre-existing racial shorthand of white, black, and red underlay the civil categories, very quickly a classification by "color" supplanted the civil statuses in statistical compilations. Free people were presumed to be white, but could also include, "the free colored." Whites also included indentured servants, who were not "free." Slaves were black or mulatto, but not white. After the Civil War, the Thirteenth Amendment nullified the Three-Fifths Rule, but the federal government continued to count the population by race. "Indians" were designated as "civilized Indians" and "Indians not taxed" until 1924 when Congress awarded citizenship to all "American Indians" born in the United States.

From the very outset, the federal statistical system and the population census defined three of the five categories currently listed in Statistical Directive 15. Along with sex and age, they were the basic variables characterizing the American population. In later years, revisions in racial classification would be built atop these existing three categories.

The remaining two categories in OMB Statistical Directive 15, Asian and Pacific Islanders, and Hispanics, also have a long historical trajectory. Chinese immigrants began to arrive in the United States in the mid nineteenth century. By 1870, the census listed a category for "Chinese" as a new "color" as well as recording Chinese nativity under the question on place of birth. Since naturalization laws restricted citizenship to immigrants who were "white," Chinese immigrants were excluded from naturalization and became "aliens ineligible for citizenship." The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 barred further immigration. "Japanese" was added as a response to the "race or color" question in 1890. "Filipino," "Hindu," or "Korean" were added in 1920. The amalgamation of the disparate Asian "racial" categories into the Asian and Pacific Islander group was a result of the creation of OMB Statistical Directive 15 in 1977.

The historical antecedents of the "Hispanic" category tell a different story. The first notable "Hispanic" residents of the U.S. were neither a definable racial group nor an immigrant group, but rather the roughly 80,000 residents of New Mexico and California living in lands annexed to the U.S. as a result of the Mexican War (1846-1847). In the twentieth century, immigrants from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and other Latin American nations migrated to the U.S. These groups merged to form a large and growing population which identified as of “Spanish culture and origin.”

“Hispanic” Americans have resisted being classified as a “racial” group, and were so classified in only one federal census (in 1930) when the Census Bureau listed “Mexican” as a possible answer to the “color or race” question. Mexican Americans objected to the practice and it was not repeated. Nevertheless, a constellation of information from questions on nativity and mother tongue have made residents of “Spanish origin or descent” identifiable in statistical compilations in the years before the official creation of the “Hispanic” category in 1977.

This brief history barely scratches the surface of the full story of racial and ethnic classification in the federal statistical system, but it does give a flavor of the complexity of the issue. The demands of future classifications must also meet two newer criteria: namely, the needs of the civil rights enforcement machinery, and an emerging claim of the “right” of Americans to define their own identity.

CIVIL RIGHTS AND SELF-IDENTIFICATION

Civil rights activists and legislators struggled long and hard to dismantle the system of overt Jim Crow discrimination by race, and guarantee voting rights, public accommodations, economic and educational opportunity, and housing choices to people long barred from full citizenship because of ethnicity, race or color. To do so, however, they proposed not only a full equal rights agenda, but also the creation of an administrative system to monitor the implementation of equal rights in the major sectors of American life. Thus organizations representing Black, Asian, Hispanic, or Native Americans insisted that the federal government continue to report statistics on the ethnic or racial identity of Americans and promote “affirmative action” policies to end the legacy of discrimination. Such agencies as the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs in the Department of Labor, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and the Office of Civil Rights in the Department of Education thus mandated that employers, schools, and other public agencies report the racial and ethnic distribution of their clients, employees, or students.

The “Civil Rights Revolution” of the 1960 also coincided with changes in research practice which made self-identification the preferred response method in survey research. By

1970 the census was taken by mail, and thus people puzzled out the "right" answers to questions alone in their own homes. It is the pressure for statistical information to monitor civil rights enforcement along with the self-identification rule which together have led to the current dilemmas facing us in revising OMB Statistical Directive 15. The boxes listed in say, a census questionnaire, list the possible answers which meet administrative purposes. But if we all pay homage to a rule of self-identification, then people can claim the right to "be what they are" and not fit in established categories.

A BIT OF ADVICE

We offer those in OMB and the members of the interagency research group on race and ethnicity four pieces of advice:

1. Do away with the labels "race" and "ethnicity" and substitute something more neutral such as "identified population groups." This would then dissolve the debate about whether "Hispanic" is a racial or an ethnic category, and the government can then not force distinctions from individuals who are unwilling or incapable of making them.

2. Enunciate a set of principles, not for the review process for the revision of the OMB Directive, but for the categories of "population groups" to be included. These principles do not need to be scientifically-based, but they do need to be intelligible and capable of distinguishing groups to be included from those who are not.

3. Allow people to identify with more than one group. There is no statistical principle of which we are aware that requires classifications to be mutually exclusive. Since group identification is typically traced through parents and relatives, when parents come from different population groups their offspring should not be forced to choose between them. Many Americans identify with two or three or even four of the current "race and ethnic" categories (see the excerpts from interviews with "biracial" Americans drawn from Funderburg (1994) in Appendix B). In a diverse and increasingly multi-cultural society, an increasing proportion of Americans can be expected to avail themselves of multiple group identification. We can always construct statistical rules for taking multiple responses and producing aggregate information on the categories.

4. Do not equate consistency of classification schemes across agencies with consistency of responses by individuals. Especially when it comes to classification schemes, minor variations in presentation of questions (not just the wording) can yield substantially different responses, and an individual may respond quite differently to the same question in different contexts, e.g., replying to the census, or applying for a job. This is especially true in the present context for those who have multiple group identifications.

These four suggestions do not, in and of themselves, resolve the dilemmas about whether to include Cape Verdeans as a new category or to move Native Hawaiians to the same category as American Indians and Alaskan Natives. But paying attention to them might remove some of the irrationality that has arisen in the debate over what categories to include and what to call them. Because the political stakes that are associated with inclusion in the official classification scheme are so high, the statisticians in OMB have a difficult task ahead of them.

APPENDIX A: RACIAL AND ETHNIC CATEGORIES CURRENTLY USED FOR FEDERAL STATISTICS AND PROGRAM ADMINISTRATIVE REPORTING (Source: OMB Statistical Directive 15, 1977)

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 affiliations or community recognition.
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 Philippine Islands, and Samoa.
Black	A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa.
Hispanic	A person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.
White	A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, North Africa, or the Middle East.

APPENDIX B: THE COMPLEXITY OF SELF-IDENTIFICATION, EXCERPTS FROM FUNDERBURG (1994)

The first two quotes are from the same person:

p. 338 But I wonder if we can get new studies funded when the U.S. Census tells me that the reason there's no information on biracial people is because if they actually broke up those numbers, ...the black community would lose, and you don't want to do that to your community, do you?

When I called the U.S. Census Bureau, I got a black woman on the phone who was very, very honest with me. She said, "I'll tell you exactly why it hasn't been done. Because it would skew the statistics and could really impact on the funding the black community depends on for Head Start and on apportionment regarding voting and block-grant monies."

pp. 339-340 My grandfather's father, the Indian, lived to be a hundred and four. Am I going to live that long? My black grandmother is going to be eighty-six, and everybody says she is going to put us all in the grave. I'd like to know if I've got any of that. My white grandmother, my Russian-Jewish grandmother, died of multiple myelomas. What do these factors mean to me? What do I draw from either one of these parent groups? Do I have a lesser propensity to sickle-cell anemia because of the Russian Jew or because of the Native American?

pp. 368-370 I am the bastard child of a white woman and a black man who, as I understand it, was married, had a family and was a respected person in the community .... Both of my adoptive parents are black. Now my adopted mother is every bit as fair as the pure driven snow. However, she has very Negroid features, and she doesn't have straight hair, but her grandmother was pure-blood Mexican, and she's got a whole lot of mixture there in her background, too. My [adopted] father has brown skin, and the only thing I can relate to in terms of another ethnic group is the Native American Indian, and Cherokee in particular, in his family.

REFERENCES AND READING

The November 1994 issue of the magazine *Discover* contains a series of articles on the scientific basis of racial classification. The book by Herrnstein and Murray explores the differences in performance on IQ tests and other measures of intelligence by racial groups. It has been attacked largely on the basis of the definition in intelligence, but also using the argument that racial groups are associated with only small amounts of small genetic variation. Funderburg's book contains extensive interviews with children of mixed unions, with one "black" and one "white" parent. The workshop report by Edmonston, Goldstein, and Tamayo Lott has considerable information on different statistical perspectives on and information about the statistical measurement of race and ethnicity, especially in connection with OMB Statistical Directive 15, as does the panel report on requirements for the year 2000 census. The *New Yorker* article by Wright raises many of the related political and social issues.

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