



By Kerry Ann Rockquemore

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OPENING Pandora's Box

According to Greek mythology, Pandora opened a forbidden box and unleashed a wide variety of sorrows that plagued humanity. In a similar fashion, the Census Bureau has recently opened the mysterious box known as “race” in America. The decision to allow individuals to “check all that apply” to describe their racial identity on the 2000 Census has resulted in a statistical quagmire. More importantly, it has inflamed the debate over the meaning and usefulness of racial categories.

While many thought the option would have little impact, both demographers and politicians have been surprised by the newly released findings that more blacks than expected identified themselves as being of more than one race on their census forms. Nearly 1.8 million people checked black *and* at least one other race as an indication of their

racial identity. The trend toward multiple race identification is most pronounced among young people, with 8% of blacks under 17 choosing more than one race, compared to only 2% of those 50 and older. This “check all that apply” approach to racial identification has caused a seismic shift in the way race is understood in America. In fact, the very *idea* of races as mutually exclusive, biologically real categorizations of human beings will never be the same again.

But while the latest census findings are revealing, they mask the important fact that the multiracial population is much larger than the number of those who chose more than one racial category on their census forms. In *Beyond Black: Biracial Identity in America* I document the fact that individuals with one black and one white parent make various distinct choices about their racial identity. Some identify exclusively as black, others exclusively as white, others exclusively as biracial. Others choose among black, white and biracial depending on their social context, and still others claim to have no racial identity whatsoever. Which racial identity an individual chooses is based upon both social and psychological factors such as the racial composition of their social networks, physical appearance, and experiences of discrimination. Given the multidimensional nature of racial identity among mixed-race people, we should be aware that the census data (and estimates of the size of the multiracial population derived from them) are inherently limited because they very likely *only* capture those mixed race people who explicitly identify as such, while excluding those who identify in a myriad of other ways.

A change in how we understand racial identity and group membership is, for some, long overdue and, for others, a bit premature. Irrespective of personal choices, the Census Bureau’s decision to allow the “check all that apply” option has forced social scientists, government officials, and pollsters to question the validity of the constructs “black” and “white.” What, in fact, do “black” and “white” represent after generations of racial mixing, intermarriage, and within-group diversification? The assumption underlying the use of these longstanding categorizations in research, legislation, and public discourse is that each represents a fundamental commonality, a monolithic group experience that captures social and physical distinctions between American citizens.

However, the ongoing use of “black” and “white” as meaningful designations stands in stark contrast to the longstanding agreement among most scholars that racial groupings are not grounded in biological reality. It is precisely because race *is* a grand delusion that the concept requires an elaborate set of rules and regulations to be maintained (rules that would be unnecessary if it were a genetic fact). Knowing that pure races are non-existent, grouping individuals into fictional categories becomes a problematic task, fraught with inconsistencies.

Racial categorization becomes even more difficult when we consider that while race is biologically unreal, it persists as a *social* reality. Despite the decrease in structural barriers since the passage of civil rights legislation, African Americans continue to experience residential segregation, educational inequalities, and discrimination in mortgage lending, the criminal justice system, and the labor market.

In addition to these institutional inequalities, race continues to affect the way individuals perceive each other and their social interactions on a daily basis. As Heather Dalmage pointedly states in her book, *Tripping on the Color Line*, “While there may be one [human] race, only some members of that race can catch a cab on 42nd Street.” Her observation illustrates the way that biological fantasy becomes social reality in the context of daily interactions.

It is this lingering social reality of race that has led civil rights activists and social scientists to argue that census categorization, and by extension the construct “black,” is a necessary and inherently political designation. Ultimately, the use of “black” and “white” for comparative purposes seems most useful and necessary when we measure persistent inequalities among groups, and unnecessary, or at least inaccurate, when we use them to describe individual self-understandings.

What can we learn from the multiracial census data about the future of “black” and “white” as racial categories? The fact that many more people than expected chose multiple races as a representation of their racial identity has several implications. First and foremost, it necessitates the creation of increasingly elaborate rules and statistical procedures to define who is “black” and who is “white.” The system of racial classification was initially created to provide a uniform standard, in order to have compatible, non-duplicated, exchangeable racial data among federal agencies. Allowing individuals to “check all that apply” begs a series of classificatory questions as to how to categorize individuals who have parents of different races for population estimates, or what to do with people who claim three or more racial identities.

More important than the logistical concerns are the substantive questions about how we can use racial data in meaningful ways for civil rights monitoring and compliance. If individuals who identify as multiracial, but look black, experience discrimina-

tion, is it because they are assumed to be black or because they are assumed to be multiracial? Does the distinction matter? Can people experience discrimination if they identify as black, are multiracial by parentage, but appear white?

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On a broader level, the way in which we understand multiracialism directly reflects the state of race relations in America. The slow yielding of our rigid understandings of race to more fluid notions of group membership mirrors the awkward position of race in the new millennium. It is simultaneously real and unreal, both a biological fallacy and a social reality, differentiating individuals’ opportunities and life chances.

Viewed through this lens, the “check all that apply” option was a step forward in acknowledging the porous nature of blackness and whiteness. The subsequent decision that multiracial responses would be collapsed back into the traditional categories for bureaucratic use is a step backward, albeit an acknowledgment of our continued need to monitor racial discrimination. This awkward dance indicates that while movement has taken place, we continue to stand still, trapped by the manmade concept of race and the group inequities it has created.

Amidst all these uncertainties, one thing remains clear: allowing individuals to check more than one race was akin to opening Pandora’s box. Once opened, there simply is no closing it. Reaggregating the data for various governmental purposes will not negate the existence of the multiracial population, nor individuals’ self-understandings. In other words, there is no going back. While the Census Bureau and various government agencies are left to deal with the resulting bureaucratic and statistical mess, we—as a nation—are left to consider what multiracialism means for the way in which we conceptualize race, and what implications it has for our collective future.

Given the existing population trends and the general evolution of American society, the controversy over what it means to be “black” and “white” and what it means to be somewhere in between shows no signs of abating. While Pandora released many evils that afflicted humanity, the one item left in the box was hope. Certainly, we will need a profound sense of hope to steer ourselves toward a progressive reconceptualization of race and racial categorization. ●