

## **Response to Change: Census Racial Classification and Biracial Children's Racial Options**

To classify race, Americans must mark one racial category only in the 1990 Census, but are able to mark one or more in the 2000 Census. How did interracially married couples respond to changes in racial classification with their children's race? Using data from the 5% PUMS of the 1990 and 2000 U.S. Censuses, I examine racial classification of children among African American-White, Asian American-White, and American Indian-White couples. In 1990, black-white couples are least likely to classify their children white while Asian-white couples are most likely. In 2000, black-white and Asian-white couples tend to classify their children biracially, but among those who identify their children with one race, the 1990 pattern remains. Further, I apply cohort approach to examine how children aged 0 to 5 in 1990 and aged 10-15 in 2000 were racially classified. This approach helps understand why some intermarried couples do not classify their children biracially.

## Extended Abstract

For the first time in the census history, Americans were able to mark one or more racial categories in the 2000 Census to classify their race. This change, in part, responds to a growing number of children born to couples of interracial marriage. Results from the census show that 2.4% of the population classified themselves with two or more races. The percentage rose to 4% among the population under age 18 (Jones & Smith 2001). The emergence of this two or more race classification represents a significant change in racial statistics and the treatment of this population may affect race-based policies in the United States (Goldstein & Morning 2000).

Prior to the 2000 Census, the classification of two or more races was not possible because race was considered mutually exclusive so children of intermarried couples had to choose only one race. When intermarried couples must mark one racial category for their children, their answers may depend on their experiences on race relations and views on racial stratification. Saenz et al. (1995) and Xie and Goyette (1997), examining racial identification of children with one Asian parent, found that racial identification of children depends on parents' socioeconomic status and demographic characteristics. Qian (2004) compared racial identification of young children of all intermarried couples. Race of the minority spouse is a strong predictor. In addition, racial identification of children of intermarried couples depends on sex and nativity status of the racial minority parent, education, and neighborhood racial compositions.

To be sure, racial identification of children of intermarried couples is not a random choice. Intermarried couples may make special efforts to instill a racial identity into their children. Children formulate their own racial identities in response to their physical looks, socialization, and others' perceptions towards them at different stages of their lives, but racial identity instilled by their parents from their early age provides a solid foundation. The 2000

Census opens a new way to classify children's race for intermarried couples. Intermarried couples are supposed to fill out both their races for their children. However, some children born to intermarried couples are identified with the race of one parent rather than the races of both parents. Is this a random choice? Or is it a choice that parents made to reflect their racial experiences and their understanding of racial dynamics in American society?

#### PREVIOUS LITERATURE

Interracial marriage is viewed as the final stage of assimilation for racial minorities (Gordon 1964). One central perspective of assimilation is the assumption that there is a process that diverse minority groups gradually come to share a common culture, gain equal access to the opportunity structure of society, and gradually desert old cultural and behavioral patterns (Park & Burgess 1969). Thus, intermarried racial minority individuals may lose their own identities or at least become indifferent about their children's racial identification. However, previous literature shows that children born to minority and white couples are likely to be identified with a minority race (Qian 2004, Saenz et al. 1995, Xie & Goyette 1997). Marital assimilation does not indicate the loss of minorities' racial identities. In contrast, racial awareness may heighten because of their direct contact and competition with mainstream society (Olzak 1983, Saenz et al. 1995).

However, whether children born to intermarried couples are classified as minority depends on the race of the minority parent. In 1990, African American-White couples were least likely to identify their children with white, followed by American Indian-white couples, while Asian American-White couples were most likely to identify their children with white (Qian 2004). Although African American-white couples were least likely to identify their children

with white, a significant percentage classified their children race of other. Multiracial classification available in the 2000 Census makes it possible for biracial children to belong to both racial groups. Nevertheless, it may not always be the case. Racial identities may not be just about their own choices but also reflect perceptions of others. In the words of Nagel (1996: 21), “ethnic identity lies at the intersection of individual ethnic self-definition (who I am) and collective ethnic attribution (who they say I am).”

African American, American Indians, and Asian Americans have different histories in the United States and have experienced different kinds of prejudice and discrimination. Different histories in the past and different receptions today lead to differences in how intermarried couples classify their children’s race. Historically, black-white marriage was strongly discouraged and subject to legal penalties, while American Indian-white marriage was promoted for political and economic reasons (Sandefur & Trudy 1986). Children of black-white couples were not accepted in white society, as one drop of black blood made one an African American (Davis 1991). Hypodescent – the one-drop rule – solidified the barrier between blacks and whites because no one who might possibly be identified as black could be identified as white (Snipp 2002, Spickard 1992). Thus, mixed-race individuals with part black race are traditionally labelled black. Such traditions are still practiced among African American communities and the norms are such that the communities do not even see favorably those who identify themselves with a racial group other than Black (Jones 1994). In the 1990 census, while 60% of children born to African American-white couples were identified with black, a significant percentage of children (15%) were identified with race of Other (Qian 2004). This suggests that some intermarried African American-white couples may not want to follow the practices of the past,

but also do not want to simply classify their children as white. We may expect more to report their children black and white in the 2000 Census and few to report their children white.

In contrast, there was no one drop rule for descendants of American Indian-white couples. American Indians have been identified by hyperdescent (Snipp 2002). Persons whose ancestry is one-fourth or less American Indian were generally not considered Indian (Davis 1991). As a result, many of these children were classified as white (Eschbach 1995, Sandefur & Trudy 1986). However, census data in 1980 and 1990 indicate rapid increases in American Indian population because many mixed-race American Indian-white individuals reported their Indian race in response to positive views of the American public towards American Indians and social movements that have fostered American Indian pride (Eschbach et al. 1998, Nagel 1995). In 1990, half of children born to American Indian-white couples were identified with American Indian and the other half were identified with white (Qian 2004). American Indian-white children living in cities are more likely to be identified as white than those living elsewhere. American Indians living in cities are usually not people customarily regarded American Indians (Liebler 1996) while American Indians living in tribes usually classify themselves only American Indian for government service needs (Snipp 2002). A similar divide may happen in the 2000 census in which some children are identified with white while some others American Indian.

Asian American-white marriage is a recent phenomenon, appearing in an era of greater tolerance for racial minorities (Schuman et al. 1997, Xie & Goyette 1997). There was no rule with racial identification of children born to Asian American-white couples. However, the “push” factor from Asian ethnic communities may increase the likelihood of these children identified with white. Asian ethnic communities are historically ethnically homogeneous and are

unwilling to include biracial children as part of the communities (Spickard 1989). Indeed, only 41% of children born to Asian American-white couples were identified with Asian and over half were classified as white in the 1990 census (Qian 2004). In addition, most Asian American-white marriages involve Asian American women rather than Asian American men. Children born to Asian American-white couples are often identified as white because men are thought to carry on family names in traditional Asian cultures.

In summary, African American-white couples are expected to be least likely to classify their children white because of the lingering effect of the hypodescent rule. American Indian-white couples may be divided in racial identification because of a greater percentage of mixed-race American Indian population and urban/rural differences. Asian American-white couples tend to classify their children as white. In addition to race of the minority spouse, couple level characteristics, especially characteristics of the minority spouse, are likely to affect children's racial identification.

Relative status between the white and minority spouses may affect who has a greater say about their children's racial identity. Sex of the minority parent is a strong predictor of children's racial identity. Intermarried couples in which the minority spouse is male are far more likely than those in which the minority spouse is female to identify their children minority (Saenz et al. 1995, Xie & Goyette 1997). The child takes the father's racial identity because the child usually carries the surname of the father. This is also the case for whites with multiple European ethnic backgrounds who use surnames to justify their ethnic identification (Waters 1990).

Another related variable is whether the minority spouse is the householder. In the census questionnaire, this is the person or one of the people living here who owns, is buying, or rents

this place. It could be the person who filled out the questionnaire, who had the power of making racial identification for their children. Or it could be the person who is the head of the household, who may be able to decide how their children are racially identified. We would expect that the minority spouse who is the householder is likely to classify their children with the race of the minority spouse.

Studies on ethnic options show that well-educated whites are more knowledgeable about their ethnic backgrounds and are more successful than their less-educated counterparts in passing ethnic information along to their descendants (Lieberson 1985, Waters 1990). For interracial married couples, the effect of educational attainment may be weak because racial information is often evident and may not need to be passed along. However, highly educated individuals may be more likely to identify their children biracial than their less educated counterparts because the well-educated may be knowledgeable about the changes in racial classification in the 2000 census. Past studies also show that the likelihood of Asian identification is positively associated with educational attainment (Saenz et al. 1995, Xie & Goyette 1997). However, how educational attainment affects children's racial identification is unclear when classification of multiple races becomes a choice.

Children of Asian-non-Asian couples in which the non-Asian spouse has part Asian ancestry are more likely to be identified as Asian than are those in which the non-Asian spouse has no Asian ancestry (Xie & Goyette 1997). This suggests that shared ancestry minimizes potential conflict between spouses over the child's racial identity. It is likely that shared ancestry has a similar effect for other intermarried couples. Thus, intermarried couples in which the minority spouse is biracial – part white race and part minority race – are more likely to classify their children white than those in which the minority spouse has single race identification.

Native-born minorities are conscious of racial differences in social and economic conditions and recognize the salience of race in American society (Portes 1984). In contrast, immigrants likely attribute their low socioeconomic status to their immigrant status rather than to their racial minority status. Some are eager to Americanize and reject their cultural roots to fit in (Gans 1992, Saenz et al. 1995). As a result, intermarried native-born Asians are more likely than their foreign-born counterparts to classify their children as Asian (Saenz et al. 1995, Xie & Goyette 1997). This nativity difference is also expected to hold true for children of other intermarried couples.

Finally, where intermarried couples live affect their children's racial identification, especially for American Indians. The large number of American Indians with mixed ancestry indicates volatility in reporting of American Indian race (Harris 1994). American Indians who live in metropolitan areas tend to be biracial themselves and weak in American Indian identity. So I expect that American Indian-white couples are more likely to classify their children for those living in metropolitan areas than for those who living in non-metropolitan areas.

## DATA

The data for this study come from the 5% Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) of the 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census. In order to have a sample of intermarried couples and their children, I limit one spouse to be the householder so his/her spouse and their children can be linked into one record. I include currently married couples in which one spouse is a native-born non-Latino single-race white and the other spouse is a non-Latino African American, Asian, or American Indian. I classify mixed-race African American-white individuals as African American, Asian-white individuals as Asian American, and American Indian-white individuals as American Indian, but create a variable to classify whether minority parents are biracial.



Children are limited to be age 5 years old or younger. I impose this age limitation for three reasons: First, census data only have information on current marriage. Biracial children cannot be adequately identified if intermarried couples are divorced. This may create bias since divorced intermarried couples may differ from those who do not divorce. Because parents of young children are less likely to divorce than those of older children, including only young children in the sample reduces the potential selection bias. Second, young children are much more likely than older children to live with their parents, so the potential bias caused by the possibility of children not living with parents is small. Third, this study examines couples' racial identification of their children so including only young children in the sample reduces the likelihood that parents' choices are affected by children's physical looks or friend networks.

I only select one child from each couple to avoid non-independence across observations. For couples with more than one child under age 5, the youngest child is included in the sample. This increases the likelihood that the couple are the child's biological parents because census data do not have direct information on whether children are biological to both parents. In addition to select the youngest child for the analyses, I have taken the following measures to increase the chance that children are biological to both parents. First, I exclude stepchildren and adopted children of the householder. Second, I exclude cases where the child's race does not match that of either parent to minimize the possibility that children are transracially adopted. These measures also reduce the likelihood that children from previous marriages are included in the analysis. Young children born to the wife from previous marriages, if any, are not included because they are stepchildren or adopted children of the householder. Meanwhile, young children born to the husband in his earlier marriages, if any, are unlikely to live with the couple given that the ex-wife usually has the custody of the children.

One variable included in the model is sex of the minority spouse. Sex of the minority spouse is used to test the hypothesis that a child is more likely to be identified with the father's race rather than the mother's race. A related variable is whether the minority spouse is the householder. The householder, to say the least, is the person who filled out the census questionnaire and, more likely, is the head of the household. He/She may decide or have a greater say about the child's race. I classify biracial individuals as racial minorities in the analysis but create a variable to identify whether the minority spouse is biracial or not. The hypothesis is that the child is more likely to be identified white if the minority spouse has part white race than if the minority spouse has no part white race.

I also examine the effect of similarities and differences in spousal educational attainment on children's racial identification. The categories include: 1) the minority spouse is more educated than the white spouse; 2) the minority spouse is less educated than the white spouse; 3) both spouses have at least college education; 4) both spouses have some college; 5) both spouses have a high school education or less. Nativity status of the minority spouse has the following categories: 1) native-born; 2) immigrated before 1980; 3) immigrated in the 1980s; and 4) immigrated in the 1990s. Type of residence includes those who live in metropolitan areas and those who do not live in metropolitan areas.

## PRELIMINARY RESULTS

**Table 1. Race of Children Aged 0-5 by Racial Combination of Intermarried Couples, 1990 and 2000**

Couples' Combination	Child's Race				Total
	White	minority	Biracial	Other	
1990 Census					
African American-White	26.1	59.0		14.9	2,659
Asian American-White	58.8	40.2		1.0	4,903
American Indian-White	50.3	49.2		0.5	3,751
2000 Census					
African American and White	10.2	25.6	64.2		5,280
Asian American and White	27.2	17.0	55.8		6,707
American Indian and White	33.7	47.3	19.1		4,235
White-Black and White	30.3	0.5	69.2		608
White-Asian and White	50.5	8.2	48.7		1,709
White-Indian and White	51.6	1.3	47.1		3,184

Table 1 shows race of children aged 0-5 by their parent's racial combination. In 1990, 59% of black-white couples classify their children as black while 40.2% of Asian-white children classify their children as Asian. But in 2000, 64.2% of black-white couples and 55.8% of Asian American and white couples classify their children biracially (i.e., white and black for the former and white and Asian for the latter group). Surprisingly, a significant minority identify their children mono-racially. The results also are interesting if the minority parent is biracial. They all lean toward classifying their children white or biracially.

One objective is to examine differences in children's racial identification by race of the minority parent over time. I focus on how the characteristics of intermarried couples affect their children's racial identification. The first goal for this paper is to examine the impact of

intermarried couples' individual characteristics (race of the minority parent, sex of the minority parent, nativity status of the minority parent, educational combination, etc.) on their children's racial identity and whether the impact differs between 1990 and 2000.

The second goal is to explore cohort changes in racial classification between 1990 and 2000. Biracial children could identify only as a single race in the 1990 census, but as more than one racial group in the 2000 census. The lack of comparability in measurement makes observed changes in racial classification of children aged 0 to 4 over this period difficult to interpret. To place this measurement issue in proper context, I begin with a simple demographic exercise. Census data do not track individual interdecade changes in racial identification, but a cohort method is useful for exploring aggregate-level changes in racial identification between the two censuses. Specifically, I compare how intermarried couples reported the race of their native born children aged 0 to 5 in 1990 and in 2000 when they were 10 to 15 years old. Table 2 presents the results of this comparison.

**Table 2. Race of Children Aged 0-5 in 1990 and Aged 10-15 in 2000 by Racial Combination of Intermarried Couples**

Couples' Combination	Child's Race				Total
	White	minority	Biracial	Other	
1990 Census	Aged 0-5				
African American-White	26.1	59.0		14.9	2,659
Asian American-White	58.8	40.2		1.0	4,903
American Indian-White	50.3	49.2		0.5	3,751
2000 Census	Aged 10-15				
African American and White	17.1	34.2	48.7		2,612
Asian American and White	29.4	19.2	51.4		4,653
American Indian and White	33.9	51.7	14.4		4,021
White-Black and White	46.5	1.0	52.5		198
White-Asian and White	53.1	1.6	45.4		897
White-Indian and White	50.6	1.5	47.8		3,526

Compared to the results of children aged 0-4 for 2000 in Table 1, it is clear that older children are less likely to be classified biracial. Whether this has anything to do with children's single race classification in the past is unclear. Some decomposition analyses will be carried out to explore who are likely to change racial classification of children from single race to bi-race.

#### TENTATIVE CONCLUSION

The 2000 Census provides opportunities to millions of mixed-race individuals to report their multiple racial identities. They no longer need to agonize over which single race fits their identities. However, not every mixed-race individual takes up these opportunities. Some continue to identify themselves with one single race. These decisions are unlikely to be personal and are constrained by their physical looks, socialization, and their receptions in mainstream society. Census data, unfortunately, do not allow us to examine who among the mixed-race individuals did not identify with multiple races. This paper attempts to answer indirectly this question by examining how intermarried couples classify their children's race(s). Among children born to intermarried couples, who are identified with single race rather than two races? If single race, which race are the children to be identified with?

The answer to this question is not straightforward. It depends on race of the minority spouse. In general, African American-white and Asian American-white couples are more likely to identify their children with two races rather than to identify them with one race. However, when they identify their children with one single race, different patterns emerge. African American-white couples tend to classify their children black while Asian American-white couples tend to classify their children white. This pattern resembles the results from the 1990 Census when intermarried couples must report one race for their biracial children (Qian 2004). Historically, individuals with part black ancestry were typically identified black. Many

intermarried African American-white couples still follow this tradition, despite their options of two-race identification for their children. In contrast, individuals with part Asian American ancestry were more likely to be identified with white because of the push factor from ethnically homogeneous Asian American communities. American Indian-white couples are least likely to identify their children with biracial – white and American Indian. However, where intermarried couples live determine which single race they are likely to identify their children with. American Indian-white couples living in urban areas tend to identify their children with white and those living elsewhere tend to identify their children with American Indian – a pattern also evident from earlier censuses (Eschbach 1995, Qian 2004).

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