

Don't Brown the Latinos

by Amitai Etzioni

Students applying for admission to colleges in the United States are typically asked to identify their race. The lists of options students are offered to choose from pose two problems. The first problem is faced by students who do not wish to be racially defined, and prefer to simply present themselves as Americans. The other problem is for Hispanics, the most rapidly growing part of the population. Some Hispanics see themselves as black, some as white, and most as neither. (In the 2000 U.S. Census, 2 percent of Hispanics chose the option black, 48 percent chose white, 42 percent chose "some other race," and 6 percent chose more than one race). Colleges deal with these challenges in different ways (oddly, many of the same colleges provide different classifications for applicants to undergraduate and graduate divisions). Often the message that their admission forms impart, surely unwittingly, is that 1) wishing not to be racially identified is out of line if not outright unacceptable and that 2) Hispanics are a race unto themselves.

One may ask: Who cares about such matters of terminology? What does it matter what it says on some form that students typically face once in their lifetime? The fact is that when students anxiously seek admission to their colleges of choice, they tend to study admission forms long and hard. Most will go a long way to accommodate what they consider to be signals from the college that they are keen to make their home in the future. If the form asks about voluntary work, they will spend evenings and weekends volunteering. If the form asks for a personal essay, they will spend many a day and night trying to figure out how to best present themselves. And, whatever the form implies about their race, they will take very much to heart. Last but not least, some colleges explicitly state on their admission forms that this information will be used in determining who will be admitted and who will receive scholarships. Few will take such a message lightly.

Race versus Ethnicity

Social scientists have shown that race is merely a social construction, a label people stick on others, which has little objective meaning. I grant that race is a social construction, but it's an immensely powerful one. In our society, to define a group of people as a distinct race and for them to come to see themselves in this way is to set that group much farther apart than it otherwise would be. It is to create a divide where there used to be only a space. Race is a place you cannot leave, nor can your children, nor can theirs. Ethnic lines are much more muted and apt to blur in your future. The difference between race and ethnicity is vast: Race is considered a biological attribute, a part of your being that cannot be dropped or modified. Ethnic origin, in contrast, is in your past; it is where you came from. You can keep as much or little of it as you please. Many people play it up in some periods of their life or down in others, and so do their children. Any way you cut it, racial differences are divisive, but ethnic ones are part of the mosaic that makes up America.

The rapidly growing Hispanic population is in a unique position in this matter at this stage in American history—will they be socially constructed as a race or as an ethnicity? If Hispanics are to be viewed as a distinct race, as brown Americans, and above all if Hispanics develop the sense of disenfranchisement and alienation that many African Americans have acquired (often for very good reason), America's divisions of the worst kind—immutable categories of race—will expand their reach and power. If, on the other hand, Hispanics will see themselves as members of one or more ethnic groups, this will go a very long way toward marginalizing race in America and those who thrive on promoting it. Just as to be a member of another race (whatever it is) is to set you apart, so being a member of another ethnic group is to be a "normal" American. All Americans are expected to have dual ethnicities, to be

Polish-, or German-, or Anglo-, or Italian Americans. Adding to this collage Cuban Americans or Mexican Americans is as American as apple pie.

What Colleges Do

NO OUT

Several college admission forms are helping construct Hispanics as a distinct race rather than a conglomeration of ethnic groups by requiring Hispanics to declare their race. The University of Texas, for instance, is one of the universities that does not indicate that the racial question is optional. Indeed it is mandatory. True that the university calls the classification "ethnic background," but all the categories other than "Hispanic" are racial. "Hispanic" is simply added to the list as if it were another race.

Here is the way the form lists the options:

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian or Pacific Islander
- African American, Black
- Hispanic or Latino
- White Non-Hispanic Origin

SECOND WORST

Quite a few colleges use the same or very similar classifications, but differ from the University of Texas mainly because they inform the students that answering this question is optional. Moreover, some colleges offer an alternative for students who do not identify with the available options or do not wish to box themselves in racially by providing a box for "other" or "choose not to report." There is no such alternative on the University of Texas form.

Here is the basic pattern followed by scores of schools including Southern Methodist University, Bowling Green State University, and the University of Connecticut:

- Black/African American
- White
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Hispanic/Latino
- Native American/Alaska Native
- Other

Although the "other" alternative gives students a theoretical way to opt out, the option is not a very attractive one. The label "other" or "choose not to report" is hardly a flattering way to characterize those who wish to buy out of the racial scheme. "Other" sounds like "alien." And "choose not to report" implies that you have something to conceal, and sends the message that "Fine. If you do not wish to tell us, we will let you get away with it." One cannot but assume that colleges could better accommodate those who wish to "deracialize" by offering them a more attractive option, such as "nonracial" (or my favorite, albeit perhaps too cute by half, "all-American").

A VARIATION

The common application used by some 300 colleges, including most of the Ivy League, offers somewhat different options. Students are asked "If you wish to be identified with a particular ethnic group, please check all that apply (optional)." However, the list of options they are given are racial plus Hispanics. Students are also offered the opportunity to select their specific country of origin. In effect, this means that ethnicity comes in as a second classification. The menu of options is as follows:

- African American/Black
- Native American, Alaska Native (Select tribal affiliation)
- Asian American (Select countries of family's origin)
- Asian, including from Indian subcontinent (Select countries)
- Hispanic, Latino (Select Countries)
- Mexican American, Chicano
- Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander
- Puerto Rican
- White or Caucasian
- Other (Specify)

By including the "white or Caucasian" category, this form implies that all Hispanics are non-white (in contrast to the widely used term "non-Hispanic white"). Although students are permitted to choose more than one option, the message is nonetheless that "white" and "Hispanic" are distinct categories. The truth is far from it. Indeed, 48 percent of people who identify as Hispanic also identify themselves as white.

The Media Too

These colleges are not alone; the media is currently in the habit of similarly radicalizing Hispanics by frequently listing them as an implicitly racial group alongside blacks and whites. For example, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reports that "the same number of African-Americans, Hispanics and Asians are opposed to abortion as whites" (January 29, 2006, A1). *The Economist* states, "the obvious correlation is with economic status: whites and Asians are at the top of the heap while Latinos and blacks struggle at the bottom" (March 11, 2006, 52). This formulation tends to make the reader think that we are dealing with a racial line-up, although one could interpret such comparisons as referring to two or more racial groups and one ethnic one. There is no room for doubt, however, when reporters refer to Hispanics explicitly as a racial group. *The Wall Street Journal* informs us that "racial disparity abides among U.S. children, 25% of which will be Latino by 2020" (July 20, 2005, A1). A *Los Angeles Times* reporter writes, "to ease racial tensions, black prisoners had been separated from Latinos. Inmates of both races complained that they had not been allowed to shower, phone home, or put on clean clothes" (February 10, 2006, A1).

Thus college forms and the media reinforce each other in a direction that makes America more divisive. Before we

travel any farther down this road, we should at least consider an alternative.

Drop Race

We would be much better off if we dropped racial categorization all together as the French do. If and when we must classify people by their backgrounds rather than by their achievements, we ought to do so according to country of origin (which is an ethnic marker). Berkeley and UCLA have designed their admission forms in ways that move us in this direction. Their forms essentially follow the pattern below:

- African-American/Black
- American Indian/Alaska Native
- Chinese/Chinese American
- East Indian/Pakistani
- Filipino/Filipino American
- Japanese/Japanese American
- Korean/Korean American
- Mexican/Mexican American/Chicano
- Pacific Islander
- Vietnamese/Vietnamese American
- White/Caucasian (includes Middle Eastern)
- Other Asian (Not including Middle Eastern)
- Other Spanish-American/Latino (includes Cuban, Puerto-Rican, Central American, South American)
- Other

An even better scheme would separate African Americans from Caribbean Americans and other people considered "black" by the Census, such as Haitians and those who hail from Jamaica and Trinidad. These populations have faced different historical challenges and often have different needs. For example, they did not share African Americans' history of slavery, but they often face the challenge of learning English as a second language. In this way race would become less of a factor and country of origin, and all that it implies, would gain in importance.

Affirmative Action Need Not Suffer

The 1980 Census allowed me and some 6.75 million other Americans to buy out of the racial boxes by marking "other"—a poor label, but nevertheless a commendable classification. Since then this option has been eliminated from the U.S. Census and replaced with "other race" in 1990 and "some other race" in 2000. Several colleges adhere to the same pattern in their admission forms. In some cases this pattern is dictated by state law. In Michigan for example, state law mandates that "multiracial" must be used and that "other" cannot be used (the University of Michigan thus uses "races not included above, please specify").

I realize that these classifications are used to calculate the proportion of students admitted from various racial backgrounds to satisfy affirmative action goals where they are in place. The more students opt out of racial classifications, the fewer minorities campuses will be able to report that they admit. However, it seems inappropriate to pressure or, in the case of Texas, insist, that youngsters, at a very impressionable stage of their life, be racially classified against their true preferences, to improve diversity scoring. And affirmative action programs can be tailored to support people of various ethnic groups (and socioeconomic class) rather than by race.

By focusing on country of origin, we would remind one another that although we all came in different boats, we now sail in the same ship. We would stress that all differences among us, although far from trivial, are transitional. That we are not different tribes that happen to reside next to each other on one piece of land, but that, when all is said and done, we are one people.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amitai Etzioni teaches sociology at The George Washington University. He is the author of several books, including *The Monochrome Society* (Princeton University Press, 2001), and the proud father of three half Mexican American sons.