

The Evolution of American Diversity: Evidence from the Last Quarter Century

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The origins of the American population and the demographic processes that gave rise to it are often obscured by contradictory images in contemporary popular discourse. One image is that of the melting pot, which suggests that immigration from different lands and intermarriage among the descendants of immigrants gradually weaken ancestral ties, leaving a blended population that has either lost touch with its ancestral roots or simply replaced them with a common “American” identity. A second image is that of a pluralistic or multicultural society in which ethnic groups coexist while preserving their respective cultures and identities, which are passed down through the generations. A final image is that of a racially hierarchical society, where social status and political and economic power reflect and reinforce racial group membership while flattening over ethnic distinctions. We characterize the identities that emerge from these viewpoints as products of ethnic entropy, ethnic succession, and ethnic exclusion, respectively.

Since each of these viewpoints reflect the historical and contemporary experiences of different Americans, attempts to devise a single, coherent narrative on the origins of the population are destined to fail. Likewise, to the extent that each of these viewpoints leads to different interpretations about the form and function of ethnic identities, attempts to defend a single, coherent system for the *classification* of the population are destined to follow. While the melting pot metaphor provides a fair characterization of contemporary European descendents, it is hardly appropriate for African Americans, whose racial identities are often mandated by “one drop” ideologies that define those with even partial African ancestry as black. These conflicting images and ideologies are echoed by an ever changing array of categories and questionnaire items on race, ethnicity and ancestry.

In spite of the ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding racial measurement and classification in the U.S., reports about the present or future racial composition are given front page coverage by the mass media and treated as unproblematic topics (at least methodologically) of social and political significance by the public at large. Alarmist projections about “unprecedented” levels of immigration and bold claims that Latinos are the largest U.S. “minority” are often held as demographic truths, while historical comparisons showing higher rates of immigration in the 19th century and clarifications of the fact that Latinos can be members of *any* race are buried in subsequent paragraphs or ignored altogether.

Demographic accounts of the American population often repeat these mistakes, treating racial and ethnic groups as discrete populations. The demographic balancing equation limits accounts of population growth to changes in natural increase and migration. Over a given period of time, the change in population P can be expressed as

$$\delta P_t = N_t + M_t \tag{1},$$

where natural increase N_t is defined as the number of births less the number of deaths and M_t is net migration (immigration less emigration). The combined form is given as

$$\delta P_t = (B_t - D_t) + (I_t - E_t) \tag{2}.$$

Equation (2) holds that if comprehensive data were available, it would be possible to fully explain changes in the size and composition of populations by accounting for fertility and mortality differentials as well as selective immigration and emigration. These simple yet flexible models have a rich tradition in demography, providing population forecasts as well as historical accounts of change. In the early 20th century, officials used these accounts to fuel Nativist reactions and to justify federal policies aimed at restricting immigration by national origins. Following the discovery of an undercount in the 1940 Census (Price 1947), demographers adapted the model for use as a coverage evaluation tool (Coale 1955). Today, there are increasingly refined models that incorporate differential fertility, undocumented migration, and even intermarriage, allowing demographers inside and outside the Census Bureau to describe and project the composition of the U.S. in great detail.

Despite these refinements, racial and ethnic groups are still treated as discrete populations in demographic accounting equations, a practice that is difficult to reconcile with contemporary images of the ethnic “melting pot,” which presuppose intermarriage and the emergence of offspring with mixed ancestry. In addition, though multiracialism is widely held to be a 20th century phenomenon, fueled by the “interracial baby boom” in the wake of *Loving v. Virginia* (Korgen 1998), interracial unions were common as early as the 18th century, even if not widely acknowledged (Spencer 2006). Indeed, both historical and contemporary estimates suggest that 3/4ths of African Americans and up to 1/4th of whites are descended from mixed African and European ancestry (Myrdal 1944; Shriver et al. 2003; Stuckert 1958; 1976; Yinger 1985). In addition, estimates of outmarriage among Asians and Latinos range from 20 to 40 percent, and while outmarriage among African Americans is much lower, the rates have risen in recent decades.

Demographic accounts are further imperiled by evidence that racial and ethnic identities are at times a matter of choice. Self-definition of race and ethnicity was introduced, perhaps inadvertently, with the 1960 Census, in which householders began filling out census forms for themselves (Prewitt 2005). The freedom to define oneself was widened further with recent revisions to the classification system which allowed individuals, for the first time, to “mark one or more races” beginning with the 2000 Census. The option of identifying with multiple races has been mandated, if not yet fully implemented, in all governmental statistical systems at the national and local level (Office of Management and Budget 1997). Of course, the group(s) that individuals choose to identify with may not correspond to their ancestry, or to what others may think based on observable characteristics like physical appearance. Nor is there any guarantee that an identity, once chosen, will not be changed at a later date. Indeed the decision to do so, repeatedly no less, is explicitly stated in the “Multiracial Bill of Rights” (Root 1996:13), widely championed by the multiracial movement that lobbied the OMB to change the racial measurement guidelines (Brunsma 2006).

Still, these fragile foundations of racial and ethnic measurement, both past and present, coexist with a social structure where even deeply flawed categories are highly correlated with socioeconomic status, life expectancy, and countless indicators of well being. This

reality underscores the need to consider *all* sources of racial and ethnic composition, including the potential contributions of uncertainty and selective preferences in racial reporting.

In ongoing and upcoming analyses, we provide a detailed assessment of the growing diversity of the American population over the past quarter century. Combining microdata from the last three censuses and the 2005 American Community Survey with period life tables and emigration estimates, we decompose the changes in racial and ethnic composition into each constituent source. Identity preference is approximated using a residual methods approach on a reduced-form balancing equation, which allows us to estimate the impact of aggregate identity shifts on the composition of the American population and provide more thorough accounts for the stability and uncertainty of race and ethnic reporting among major U.S. sub-groups.

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