

The Risks of Multiracial Identification

By NAOMI SCHAEFER RILEY

The comment period has closed on proposed new guidelines from the U.S. Department of Education on how colleges should ask students about race. No longer, the guidelines say, should applicants simply be given the choice of black, white, Asian, American Indian (or Alaska Native), or native Hawaiian (or other Pacific Islander). Now they should be allowed to check off more than one box, as well as note whether they identify as Hispanic. Eugene L. Anderson, an associate director of the American Council on Education, told *Diverse*, a higher-education magazine, that he expected colleges would be pleased with the new guidelines: "They make sense; they respect peoples' individual notion of racial identity, which is important."

No doubt colleges also appreciate the department's instructions for practical reasons. The proliferation of multiracial options on a variety of forms, including college applications, reflects the new demographic reality in America. On the 2000 census, nearly seven million Americans checked off two or more racial boxes. And a study last year by researchers at Cornell University found that the number of interracial marriages involving white people, black people, or Hispanics each year in the United States has jumped tenfold since the 1960s.

In a sense, these developments represent the realization of the dream of a melting pot. In 1963 Norman Podhoretz, the editor of *Commentary*, penned a controversial essay called "My Negro Problem — And Ours," expressing despair about the chances for real racial integration in this country. That could not occur, he wrote, "unless color does in fact disappear: and that means not integration, it means assimilation, it means — let the brutal word come out — miscegenation."

I remember reading the essay for the first time and being struck by the simple logic. After centuries of enslavement and decades of segregation, America had made startling progress in ending the rancor of race relations. But what to do about the bitterness remaining? Podhoretz's answer seemed to guarantee that ultimately racism would simply have to die out.

At the time, he sensed that there would be resistance to assimilation. He worried intensely about whether white people like himself would come around to accepting interracial marriages. And he was prescient about another obstacle: that some black people would oppose them.

In the 43 years since the essay appeared, both Podhoretz's highest hopes and his greatest fears have been realized. Interracial marriage is on the rise, but the products of those marriages seem more focused than ever on figuring out and defining themselves by each individual part of their racial identity. Rather than becoming comfortable moving in a variety of racial and ethnic environments,

they are expressing discomfort in every one. At the same time that color is beginning to "disappear," as Podhoretz would say, it seems more relevant than ever in some circles.

An article last semester in *The Harvard Crimson* detailed the complaints of a number of mixed-race students who said they felt uneasy attending the meetings of groups that were meant for only one of their multiple ethnicities. Paloma A. Zepeda, half-Mexican and half-Russian, said that when she came to meetings for the Mexican-American student group *Raza*, people would say, "Look, white people come to *Raza*." Ms. Zepeda protested, "I am a member of the Hispanic community, but I don't think that's the sum total of everything."

Then there was Yalun H. Tu. He told the *Crimson* reporter he felt uncomfortable at the Chinese-student gatherings: "They would talk about how Chinese mothers are overbearing and strict. But my mother is Caucasian and relaxed, so I couldn't empathize." He lamented, "I just didn't feel that communal bond that I think often binds these groups."

Some of these "outcasts" have started forming new groups. Harvard now has *ReMixed*, a new multiracial organization on the campus. The University of California at Berkeley has a *Mixed Student Union*; then there is Brown University's *Organization of Multiracial and Biracial Students* and Bryn Mawr College's *Half and Half*. Several campuses have "Hapa" organizations for "half-Asian" students.

But even those mixed-race groups cannot satisfy some students. One told the *Crimson* that her acquaintances at Harvard's Hapa group focused too much on East Asian identities, instead of South Asian ones. They went out, she complained, for dim sum, "which I enjoy, but don't identify with culturally." But she didn't feel welcome in the regular South Asian group, either, because in a theatrical performance the group's leaders cast her in the role of a white person.

The level of specificity that seems to be required for many young men and women to feel comfortable today is bordering on the absurd. Ultimately it's sad. Advocates of diversity on college campuses insist that they are not just assembling faces of different colors for aesthetic purposes; they are trying to offer students a model of how to live in a multiracial, multiethnic society. But students do not seem to be learning to be more tolerant of people unlike them. They are demanding that they be surrounded and sheltered by people who are exactly like them.

Colleges have long experienced what sociologists refer to as the "lunch-table problem." That tendency toward racial self-segregation may find its origins in students' upbringings, but it is surely furthered by campus multiculturalists. Over the years, I have had many students I've interviewed tell me that they were never encouraged to identify themselves by their race so much as when they set foot on a college campus. Both administrators and student-run organizations often pressured them

to engage in activities that put them in a particular racial box. So it's not surprising that students now want activities that conform to every contour of their ancestry.

And today that multiracial pride is extending beyond college campuses. Witness the interest in tracing one's identity through DNA. Last winter Henry Louis Gates Jr., chairman of the department of African and African-American studies at Harvard, announced in a Wall Street Journal article, "My Yiddishe Mama," that blood tests revealed that his great-grandmother was an Ashkenazi Jew. Most people probably find that kind of information interesting, but not vital to their sense of identity. Presumably Mr. Gates has not since decided he feels comfortable only around people who have a mix of Jewish and African blood.

But there are plenty of people who attach a great deal of importance to this sort of thing. Last spring The New York Times reported on a white couple who had the DNA of their adopted twins tested to see if something in the boys' ancestry might help with their college-admissions prospects. Their sons turned out to be 9 percent Native American and 11 percent Northern African. Another man found through DNA testing that he was Jewish and demanded Israeli citizenship. A woman, a descendant of Jamaican slaves, claimed a Scottish slave owner was her mother's great-great-grandfather. So she demanded (she said it was mostly playful) property from the man's family in Scotland. One can only imagine the complex mathematical formulas that would be employed if reparations for slave descendants were ever instituted. Perhaps a new kind of "one-drop rule" would be needed.

Of course some people identify as mixed race not just because of a strand of DNA, but because they are simply not easily identifiable, or they want to celebrate their identity. Earlier this year, the artist Kip Fulbeck brought out *Part Asian, 100% Hapa* (Chronicle Books), a photo album in which he asked more than 100 Hapas, "What are you?" The project, he said, was intended to help turn a derogatory word into a term of pride.

It seems inevitable that one day no one will bother asking Fulbeck's question because no one will find multiracial faces worthy of notice. Indeed, the other day I found myself a little startled when I boarded a commuter train out of New York City and found nine blond-haired, blue-eyed college students sitting together. What a rare sight. My first thought was that they must be Swedish tourists.

Though I am confident that racial mixing will become increasingly common thanks to greater tolerance in our society and the effects of globalization, I am not at all confident that it will have the kind of harmonious effect Podhoretz once predicted. Perhaps human beings just have too great a desire to identify with people who look like them, or to find out what their ancestors looked like. Perhaps no matter how many boxes they have to check off, no matter how complicated the system of

racial classification becomes, people will hang on to racial identity for dear life because that's what their fathers and grandfathers did before them.

But we are exacerbating an already problematic tendency with faddish ideology. When a "multicultural" sensibility doesn't seek to overcome race but makes it central to one's identity, and when one can be truly at home only with people who share that identity, the result is a ludicrous situation in which people can empathize only with a smaller and smaller group of their peers. That sort of isolation is my problem — and ours.

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