

CONTACTING US

NEWSROOM: (541) 346-5511
 ADDRESS: Oregon Daily Emerald
 P.O. BOX 3159
 Eugene, Oregon 97403
 E-MAIL: ode@oregon.uoregon.edu
 ONLINE EDITION: darkwing.uoregon.edu/~ode

PERSPECTIVES

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF Sarah Kicker
 EDITORIAL EDITOR Mike Schmierbach
 NIGHT EDITOR Doug Irving

Fitting into categories

AN EMERALD EDITORIAL

Changes in the United States census represent a key step in recognizing that racial and ethnic identity are individually defined

Think of the government as a big snake. A good idea goes in one end, and then you can watch as the lump that represents that idea slowly makes its way through the system.

One particular idea has finally made its way through the big boa we call the federal government — allowing people to place themselves into more than one racial category on U.S. census forms.

The Office of Management and Budget took four years to research and debate the idea, and the notion had been around for a while before the discussion started. Finally, however, the office made a decision.

The census currently has four racial categories, of which respondents were previously only allowed to select one. Under the new rules, people can select all the categories they feel they belong to.

Another change will create a fifth category by separating Asians from Pacific Islanders. In addition, all the categories have been refined and more clearly defined.

"Hispanic" will continue to be an ethnic category rather than a race, but it will be relabeled as "Hispanic or Latino."

As a whole, we support these decisions. There is still plenty of room for debate over the proper categories or the best way to describe the existing ones, but as a whole the changes are admirable.

It has taken the government far too long to recognize that many people no longer fit easily into one racial category. According to The Associated Press, there were more than 2 million children in mixed-race families in 1990, up from 500,000 in 1970. Even this statistic is incomplete because it relies upon old census statistics that did not allow individuals to report themselves as mixed race.

Long overdue, the new rules will allow people to better select and identify their racial background. Race is determined not by genetics or innate traits, but by the culture with which a person identifies.

By recognizing this fact, the government has revealed a deeper flaw in the census and other information gathering surveys. Because racial identity is defined by the individual, attempting to force individuals to place themselves within a few rigidly defined categories is dishonest.

To begin with, other survey questions, such as those on standardized tests, need to expand their categories to coincide with what the census has decided. They should do more, however, by working to find a way to allow people to more accurately identify themselves.

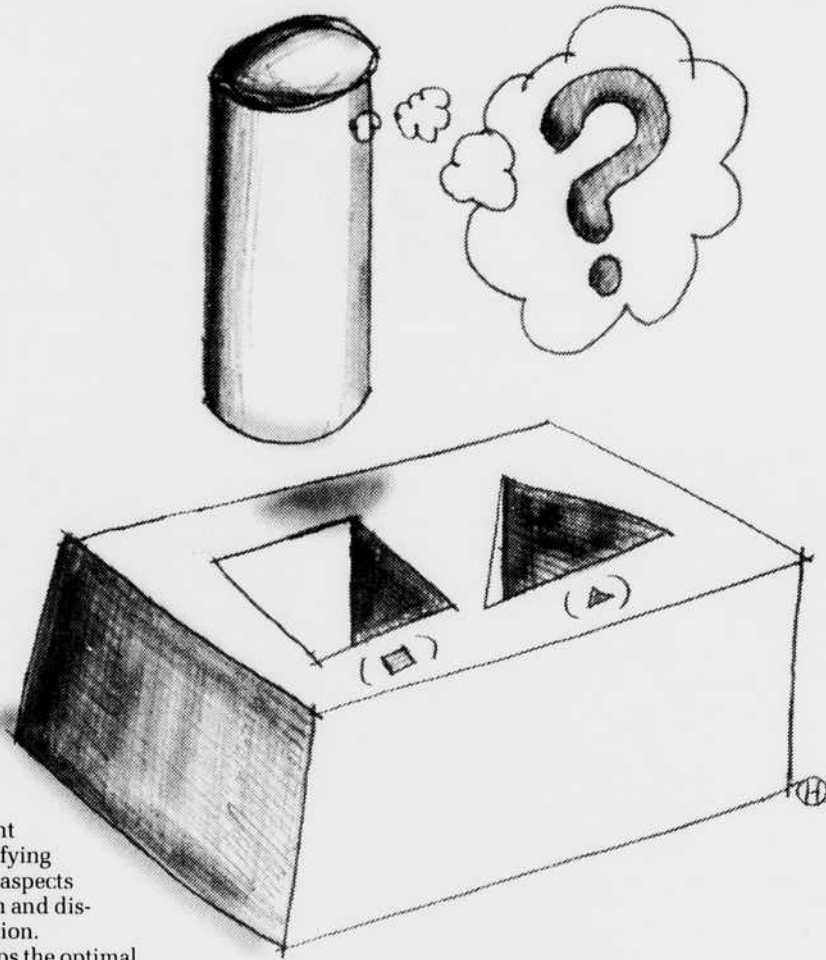
A careful balance must be obtained. Reducing the question to a blank line, while the most accurate way of determining race, ethnicity and

culture, would prove statistically useless. Information about race is important in identifying ongoing aspects of racism and discrimination.

Perhaps the optimal solution would be to ensure that there continue to be categories that differentiate between identifiable racial characteristics while also providing space for people to clearly identify their exact racial identity. This would enable the government to track the possibility of racism, which is usually due to identifiable characteristics. At the same time, it would allow individual ethnic cultures to have a clearer sense of the role they play in the U.S. identity.

I suppose this is a lot to ask of the government because it just finished a meal. Allowing people to identify their race as they see fit is important, though, and is therefore worth showing down the snake's throat.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses may be sent to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu



New census categories:

American Indian or Alaska Native: A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America, including Central America, and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment.

Asian: A person having origin in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand and Vietnam.

Black or African-American: A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa. Terms such as Haitian or Negro can be used in addition to black or African-American.

Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander: A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa or other Pacific Islands.

White: A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East or North Africa.

In addition, the separate ethnic category of Hispanic will now be known as "Hispanic or Latino." It covers people of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.

SOURCE: The Associated Press

Quoted

"About a quarter of a teaspoon of powdered emu eggshell is enough to get you randy for at least two days."

Ivan Durrant, Australian artist, quoted by Reuters news service.

"This is a rare and peculiar judge who does what he believes is right."

Lawyer Oliver Mitchell,

discussing Hiller Zobel, the judge in the nanny murder trial, as quoted in the Tuesday Register-Guard. Does what's right? That really is a rare and peculiar judge.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, it was the era of people not washing their hands after using the bathroom, it was the era of people eating with their hands and falling violently ill after transferring bacteria to one another. In short, it was not a very sanitary period."

From a poster that was part of a campaign by the Allegheny County Health Department to promote hand washing in and around Pittsburgh as quoted in the November Harper's.

"What do you think the accuracy of juries is? If it's lower than 90 percent perhaps we should just dispense with juries and have polygraphs."

Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, responding to arguments that juries, and not lie detectors, should determine the honesty of witnesses, in the Tuesday Register-Guard. For that matter, what is the accuracy of Scalia's decisions? If it's below 90 percent, should we just replace him with a rabid dog chewing on a copy of the First Amendment?

DRAWING BOARD

