

COMMENTARY/**Chester E. Smolski**

Identifying differences is a problem

Her mother is black and Native American; her father is Mexican and Italian; so with what racial and ethnic group does she identify? On her college entrance application she wrote "African-American." This topnotch student, with demonstrated ability in scholarship, athletics, music, leadership and community involvement, is exactly the type of student Harvard wants, so she has been invited to be in its entering class this fall. No small feat since nine of 10 applicants are rejected.

Ethnicity and race are two of the 10 criteria used at Harvard in making selections for admission, for diversity is the key word today, whether selecting college freshmen or choosing the work force. Affirmative Action legislation has mandated that minorities be given recognition and, often, priority over whites, now a very controversial subject. But what is a minority?

It was easy identifying people in 1790 when the first census was taken: 81 percent of the 4 million residents in this country were white and 19 percent were colored, the minority population. Although "other," referring to race, has been used throughout this century, it wasn't until 1977 that the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued its Directive 15 which provided "Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Statistics and Administrative Reporting." As a result, subsequent data on Black, White, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian or Pacific Islander and Hispanic origin, based on these standards, have appeared in the 1980 and 1990 censuses and all other government surveys and studies.

But what of those people who are of mixed origin, as in the case of the prospective Harvard freshman? In 1990 3.9 percent of Americans identified themselves as "other" as did 2.5 percent of the persons in Rhode Island. Some believe that mixed-race people, formerly known in American history as "mulattoes," should now be called "tan Americans."

And what names should be used? We have gone from "Colored" to "Negro" to "Black" and now "African-American." Is "Hispanic" the best term to use when in the East we speak of "Latinos" while in the West they speak of "Chicanos?" Many are very sensitive to racial and ethnic classification.

It is for this reason that the Census Bureau will be conducting a survey of about 118,000 households this June to test several options that OMB will propose. Of interest in the May 1995 Current Population Survey which is done for the Bureau of Labor Statistics, when asked their preferences for racial or ethnic terminology, these were the results: Black, White, American Indian, Multiracial and Hispanic.

There is a common misuse on the part of the general public regarding the terms race and ethnicity. Race refers to a group of people distinguished by distinctive, inherited biological characteristics, such as skin color, physical stature, facial features, hair type, etc. A simple classification of race based on color is yellow, white and black.

Ethnicity, by contrast, refers to acquired cultural characteristics, such as religion, distinctive customs, or native or ancestral national origin. Greek and Italian, for example, refer to ethnicity but Greek race and Italian race would be quite incorrect since both are of the white race.

It is important to note that Hispanic is an ethnic term and can be of any race. This sometimes results in confusion

because the white population of this country is 80.3 percent (91.4 percent in Rhode Island) while the "white, not of Hispanic origin" population is 75.6 percent (89.3 percent in Rhode Island). And both numbers are used!

And what is an Hispanic? According to official guidelines from OMB, Hispanic means a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.

Even Rhode Island gets into the Hispanic picture. As a state we had the largest percentage increase of Hispanics in the nation between 1980 and 1990, at 132 percent, and Hispanics, at 4.6 percent of the state population, are our largest minority. Of these 45,752 Hispanics, most of whom come from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, 55

percent live in Providence. The 23,744 Hispanics in Providence represent 15 percent of the city population and are the largest minority in the capital city.

By the year 2050, when the country's current population of 265 million will reach 392 million, 51 percent of that number will be Non-Hispanic White, according to the Census Bureau, down from its current 76 percent.

Only time will tell whether racial and ethnic classification will then be a moot question or one that still plagues government surveyors. Until that time, "What are you?" will still be the order of the day.

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