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Answer the race question [Abigail Thernstrom]

Many of us believe America is much too preoccupied with race. The race question on the census reflects that preoccupation. Why answer it – when it just perpetuates race-think? Aside from the question of breaking the law, why not refuse to fill in the blank?

Race is an obsession, and we conceptualize the term in a peculiar way. We are an ethnically diverse society – and presumably that's good. But, in defining the diversity of the nation, why focus on blacks and Hispanics, ignoring, for instance, Jews? Like Hispanics, Jews are an ethnic group. In fact, if we are going to understand America as a pluralistic society, why not both expand the definition of ethnicity and add a religious question?

In addition, the race/ethnic categories are a mess. For instance, East Indians are classified as Asians, but only because East Indian spokesmen in the 1980s pressured to have the group treated as a protected minority group by the Small Business Administration in order to get below market-rate loans – even though East Indians generally have incomes far above the national average. The census picked up the classification from the SBA. It's an arbitrary classification – and not uniquely so.

Many legitimate arguments are being made for refusing to answer the race question on the census by dear and admired friends of mine. But two problems: One, if you don't answer, census officials will just impute your race, most often on the basis of the color your neighbors. Refusing to answer is thus a no-win strategy.

More important, if we want accurate information on, say, black unemployment, would we rather have census data or rely on the NAACP to feed us unreliable and perhaps dishonest information, driven by a political agenda that is not necessarily in the national interest? Steve and I make much use of census numbers in writing about race and ethnicity in America; we like to think we are conveying an accurate picture, thanks to the Bureau of the Census.