Good Question:
An Exploration in Ethics

A series presented by the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University
Classification

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A person’s life chances are far more greatly influenced by how others see and situate them.
How might social policies change as more Americans identify themselves as “multiracial”?

Are more Americans, in fact, identifying themselves as “multiracial”? Census 2000 provided respondents with the first opportunity to select more than one racial category. At the time, 2.4 percent of all respondents—or about 6.8 million people—actually selected two categories or more for their racial self-classification. While preliminary reports from Census 2010 indicate that the number of persons checking “two or more” racial categories has risen 35% since Census 2000, the overall proportion remains at less than 3% of all Census respondents.

The best evidence suggests there has yet to be a sea change in the proportion of Americans selecting a multiracial identity. Furthermore, practices of racial self-classification are much less likely to have any significant implications for the direction of social policies than practices of social classification—how people are perceived and categorized racially and ethnically by others. A person’s life chances are far more greatly influenced by how others see and situate them than by the individual’s personal selection of a racial classification. Indeed, an individual’s physical attributes and their interpretation by others often are the critical factors dictating how he or she is treated by others.

For example, research conducted by colleagues and myself demonstrates that darker-skinned black men face significantly higher discriminatory wage penalties in U.S. labor markets than light-complexioned black men. In fact, light-complexioned black men appear to face employment conditions that are largely the same as those of white men.
With regard to the connection between racial classification and social policies, there has been substantial political pressure to move away from race-targeted policies that were designed to address economic disparities in the U.S. But that pressure is not attributable to the rise in persons choosing a multiracial identity. It is a result of a broader political sentiment. Black Americans continuously are portrayed as undeserving of social policy initiatives uniquely signed to address their condition, particularly via popu- lar discourses that frame blacks’ subordinate economic condition as due to their own personal irresponsibility and bad behavior.

But suppose we accept the premise that only non-race- targeted or non-race-specific policies are feasible in the current American context. Is there evidence available to identify policies that would reach persons subjected to severe discrimination and disadvantage without race or ethnicity as criteria for eligibility for the benefits of those policies?

The answer is an absolute “yes.” For instance, programs that are universal—for example, a federal job guarantee for all citizens 18 years of age or older. And it is a qualified one. The key is to design policies in such a way that wealth or net worth standard in place of an income standard. Since the wealth distribution is so much more severely skewed by race and ethnicity or by skin shade than income, the provision of social benefits adjusted to statistical studies designed to tease out the factors that truly explain American economic disparities—often are the critical factors determining who or who is treated by others. For example, research conducted by colleagues and myself demonstrates that darker-skinned black men face stigmatization and deprivation because of their appearance. Men with similarly life chances are far more greatly influenced by how others see and situate them than by the individual’s personal selection of a racial classification and categorization. Races they would have supported if they had been darker-skinned black men are routinely assigned to give students a sense of issues related to race and discrimination. William Darby, Jr., Arts & Science Professor of Public Policy, African and African American Studies, and Economics at Duke University, acknowledges that these two particular titles produce singular narratives that give the complexity of the unique histories of the Holocaust and of the Jim Crow South, he says. He begins with a book that is written from the perspective of the white eye looking on someone else’s research, “because it

William Darby, Jr.
Arts & Science Professor of Public Policy, African and African American Studies, and Economics at Duke University.
Narratives are equally powerful in the shaping of public policy.

“These two particular titles produce singular narratives that belie the complexity of the unique horrors of the Holocaust and of the Jim Crow South,” he says. He is especially critical of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, “because it is written from the perspective of the white eye looking in on the black community. Why not have students read a book that is written from the internal perspective of blacks instead?”

It would be difficult to hold writers accountable for the veracity of their tales, Darity says, but he believes readers should be encouraged to critically unpack the narrative and ask, “What is the story that is being told about why these conditions exist? And how credible is that explanation?”

He also asks that we do the same when considering our own position in life. “If one comes from a family that is exceptional, the tendency is to create a narrative of your own life as one of exceptionality. My own parents had talents, but I did not feel that we were the only folks that could have charted that path. I never had the sense that other people were poor simply because they weren’t trying.”

As they consider the relationship between academic research and fictionalized accounts, Darity encourages his students to also think about what kind of social and economic policies they would have supported if they had read these books and relied, even subconsciously, on the given portrayals.

Darity also points to the collection of middle and high school books, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Anne Frank’s *Diary of a Young Girl*, that are routinely assigned to give students a sense of issues related to race and discrimination.
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