

What percentage of black parentage do you need to be considered black?

A Straight Dope Classic from Cecil's Storehouse of Human Knowledge

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Dear Cecil:

My girlfriend is half black and half white. While she was filling out a form recently I noticed when it came to the question of race she checked "black." I asked her why she didn't mark white since she is as much one as the other. She replied that in America one is considered black if the amount of black parentage is one eighth or greater. Is or was this true? Why? Since I am a Mexican male, what will the white establishment consider our children? Not that it matters, but I'd like to know what is in store for us.

— An in-love but mixed-up couple, Los Angeles

Cecil replies:

Lord knows. My advice is, if anybody asks, tell 'em the kids are Phrygian. Nobody will have any idea what you're talking about and you'll be able to divert the conversation to some less stupid topic.

These days there's not much official guidance on who's black and who's white. The census bureau has adopted the sensible policy of letting you be whatever you mark down on the form. You can look like Snow White and talk like George Plimpton, but if you want to be a Fiji Islander, by God you're a Fiji Islander as far as the census is concerned.

Things are only marginally more rigorous when it comes to stuff like affirmative action. A spokesman for the Small Business Administration says they'll basically take your word for what race you are, although conceivably they might ask for a birth certificate or passport in the rare event there was some question.

Unofficial standards are a different story. Experts on race relations agree that up until very recently, and to some extent even today, white America held to the "one-drop" rule: if you had one drop of black blood in you — any detectable African ancestry at all — you were black. This peculiar attitude may well be unique in the world; even

South Africa acknowledges the existence of people of mixed race.

The one-drop rule didn't reach its full flowering until after World War I but its roots go back to before the Civil War. Prior to 1850, mulattoes — people of mixed race — were widely recognized as being distinct from full-blooded African slaves. In fact, in some parts of the south, notably South Carolina and Louisiana, free mulattoes were a (relatively) privileged class, with money, prestige, and sometimes slaves of their own.

After 1850, however, southern whites became obsessed with the idea of racial purity and white superiority. If you had any black blood at all, you were supposed to be out back choppin' cotton. White planters who got female slaves pregnant willingly enslaved their own children. Far from being scandalized, other southerners complained that some mulattoes remained free to pollute the gene pool.

Defeat in the Civil War only intensified these feelings. States not just in the south but throughout the Union passed increasingly strict antimiscegenation laws — laws that weren't struck down by the Supreme Court until 1967. The one-drop rule was actually enacted in only seven states (Virginia did so in 1930); more commonly the cutoff was one-eighth black. But according to historian Joel Williamson (*New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the U.S.*, 1980), the one-drop rule was the de facto standard throughout the country.

Williamson relates an episode from the 1920s musical *Showboat* in which a white boy in love with a mulatto actress is accused by a Mississippi sheriff of violating the state's antimiscegenation law. Thinking fast, the white guy pricks his beloved's finger with a knife, swallows a drop of the blood, and says, hey, I'm no white man, I've got Negro blood in me. The sheriff lets him off.

So where does that leave you? Hard to say. No question the one-drop rule still prevails for a lot of white folks. But since even racists don't have the nerve to ask for proof of pedigree these days, what matters most is what you look like. The fact that you're Hispanic is the perfect smokescreen. Your kids probably won't pass for Swedish but they'll be able to declare themselves black or Hispanic as the whim moves them. Better yet, have them say it's nobody's damn business.

Another suggestion

Dear Cecil:

In your column on racial designations, you omitted what was to me the most important alternative. For 40 years the only response I have ever given to questions on my race put to me by anyone under any circumstances has been human. There are no other races. Back in 1959, the D.C. Department of Motor Vehicles (or whatever it was called back then) sent me a questionnaire for renewal of my driver's license. In response to a question on race, I answered "human." They returned the form to me on the ground that I had provided an improper or unacceptable answer to the question. I wrote back saying I was not about to be instructed on scientific matters by a bunch of two-bit bureaucrats; that I had given the only legitimate answer to the question; that they were suborning perjury by pressuring me to provide any other answer on an official government form. They issued the license with a conventional racial designation on it. I erased the designation (licenses were then on heavy paper, not encased in plastic as now), and wrote them saying I had done so on the ground that I would not permit an official document relating to me to bear false information. They wrote back telling me that altering an official document made me subject to criminal prosecution with a possible \$300 fine and 10 days in jail. I wrote back and said, "I dare you." pointing out that the trial would be latched on to by the then-emergent civil rights struggle and could cause the department considerable embarrassment. Nothing further ensued, and a few years later they redesigned the whole license, deleting any references to race and introducing picture driver's licenses.

Recently a retired D.C. official involved in these matters said in an interview that "only four or five" people had objected to racial designation. I am proud to have been one of them. After a respite of some years from racial questions they have again become widespread, ostensibly for the acquisition of demographic data. I continue to advise that such questions be answered "human." I strongly believe that if everyone were to respond in this fashion to questions on race, ours would be a far happier society.

— Franklin E. Kameny, Washington, D.C.

Cecil replies:

Hear, hear, brother. For those who find "human" a bit smartass, I advise just leaving the question blank. If anybody is dumb enough to come after you, Cecil will be pleased to contribute to your defense.

Then again, you could say the kids are Albarazados

Dear Cecil:

I found your column on racial designations interesting and thought I could help clarify or confuse the issue even more by sending you the Mexican list of names for the possible mixtures of races. These are the basis of the caste system in Mexico. There is also a series of paintings to accompany this, so that those unable to read could at least get an idea of the racial features. The pictures also give an idea of the kind of work assigned to a person of that caste.

— Brother Edward Loch, S.M., San Antonio, Texas

Cecil replies:

Holy cow. The list, which is from *Las Castas Mexicanas* by Maria Concepcion Garcia Saiz (1989), gives names for more than two dozen racial/ethnic combinations. These range from the well-known *mulatto* (white/black) and *mestizo* (white/Indian) to *zambo* (Indian/black or mulatto), *morisco* (white/mulatto), and *albino* (white/morisco). Then you get into *ahi te estas* (mulatto/mestizo coyote — don't ask), *albarazado*, *barcino*, *calpamulato*, *cambujo*, and on and on. Clearly Americans aren't the only ones obsessed with their neighbors' pedigrees.

— Cecil Adams