

Think Outside the Box

United States citizens are routinely asked to fill out forms for school and work that require them to check a box identifying their race: “White, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Asian, Hispanic and American Indian or Alaskan Native.” However, many racial identities cut across these categories, and others do not neatly fit into any.

Khadijah, a high school student, was born in the United States to Muslim parents who immigrated from Algeria. Throughout her youth, Khadijah struggled with her racial and cultural identity and was often bullied for wearing a hijab. She watched as her father, Ziad, who has a Masters Degree in Mathematics, struggled to find a job due to increasing skepticism toward and discrimination against Muslims and those of Arab descent in the workforce, particularly after the events of 9/11. Khadijah knows she is North African, but often doesn’t know how to answer her friends when they press her: “But are you white or black?”

For the majority of her youth, Khadijah did not know what box to check off on forms that asked about race. She wished there was a box that read simply “Other.” If no such box appeared, and without knowing which box she should legally check, she’d often choose a box at random.

When she began applying to college, Khadijah stumbled upon information suggesting that, in the United States, people of Middle Eastern and North African descent are most often classified as white. However, Khadijah was reluctant to think of herself as white because she never felt that people from her culture enjoyed the privileges associated with that racial identity. Ultimately, she filled out her applications, which did not include an “Other” box, by checking off a random racial identity that was not white. She later worried that this would be considered fraud or that she would be accused of exploiting policies like affirmative action.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How could Khadijah’s sense of identity be impacted by the confusion surrounding her race?
2. Is Khadijah’s behavior exploitative of education policies put in place to protect minority groups? Is it justified? Why or why not?
3. Should Khadijah consider herself as belonging to a minority group, even if she is recognized as white by the U.S. Census?

