The Alternative Questionnaire Experiment: Findings for the Middle Eastern and North African Population in the United States[1]

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Abstract

The Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) population is often considered hard-to-count in the United States. Following the guidelines set by the Office of Management and Budget, the U.S. Census Bureau classifies the MENA population as White but collects their ancestry data in the American Community Survey. This paper explores how the 2010 Alternative Questionnaire Experiment (AQE) contributes to improving the quality of the data that the Census Bureau collects on MENA ancestries. It discusses results from the AQE conducted during the 2010 Census and evaluates the forms that use the combined race and ethnic origin question in comparison to the control form. This research aims to contribute to improving measurement of the MENA community in the United States.

Keywords: Arabs, race, ethnicity, ancestry, hard-to-count

1.   Introduction

The Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) population is often considered hard-to-count[2] in the United States. Following the guidelines set by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the U.S. Census Bureau classifies MENA responses collected from the race question as White but also collects ancestry data in the American Community Survey. The Census Bureau thus uses two approaches to classifying responses where people self-identify as MENA – race and ancestry. Using the question on race, the Census Bureau follows the guidelines set by OMB. In 1997, OMB issued revised standards on race and ethnicity[3] which consider people who have origins "in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa" as White. It is important to note that the current race question is not designed to collect White and Black ancestry responses.

In 2003, using data collected from the long form used in Census 2000, the Census Bureau issued a brief on the Arab population in the United States. In this brief, the following definition was provided of the population:

> "For the purposes of this report, most people with ancestries originating from Arabic-speaking countries or areas of the world are categorized as Arab… It is

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[1] This paper is released to inform interested parties of ongoing research and to encourage discussion of work in progress. Any views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the U.S. Census Bureau.

[2] The term "hard-to-count" is not used here in its typical definition. We use the term to refer to population group counts and not enumeration of these groups.

[3] The OMB standards use "ethnicity" and "Hispanic origin" interchangeably. The authors at times use the term "ethnicity" to refer to Hispanic origin and at other times use the term as a larger, umbrella term referring to detailed groups reported by respondents such as "Lebanese," "African," or "Fijian."

important to note, however, that some people from these countries may not consider themselves to be Arab, and conversely, some people who consider themselves Arab may not be included in this definition…" (de la Cruz and Brittingham 2003, p. 1).

The American Community Survey, which has since replaced the long form used in Census 2000, asks individuals to report their ancestry or ethnic origins in the ancestry question. This is the Census's second approach to classifying the MENA population. The Census Bureau defines ancestry as "a person's ethnic origin, descent, 'roots,' heritage, or the place of birth of the person or the person's parents or ancestors before their arrival in the United States."

MENA responses to the ancestry question fall under two major categories, 1) Arab and 2) non-Arab responses. Arab responses to the ancestry question are tabulated under Total Arabs and specific Arab ancestries. Among those classified as having Arab ancestries are Algerians, Bahrainis, Egyptians, Emiratis, Iraqis, Jordanians, Kuwaitis, Lebanese, Libyans, Moroccans, Omanis, Palestinians, Qataris, Saudi Arabians, Syrians, Tunisians, and Yemenis. The ancestry tabulations also include groups like Kurds and Berbers as Arabs. Ancestry groups are also tabulated for non-Arab responses such as Armenians, Israelis, Turks, and Iranians. Groups with origins in Comoros Islands, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, and Sudan are not considered as MENA responses and are classified as sub-Saharan Africans.

Although the ancestry question collects data on White and Black ethnicities, the current race question is not designed to collect these responses. As MENA responses to the race question fall under the category of White, this approach makes this population hard to separately identify as MENA. The race question, in its current design, does not allow for detailed reporting of Black and White ancestries, including other groups such as Afro-Caribbean and Eastern European. This means that data collected from this question cannot be used to provide population counts for Black and White ethnic groups in the United States.

In an effort to better understand how people self-identify their race and ethnicity, including the MENA population, the Census Bureau embarked on a research project called the 2010 Census Race and Hispanic Origin Alternative Questionnaire Experiment (AQE).

2.   The 2010 Census Race and Hispanic Origin Alternative Questionnaire Experiment

The AQE was conducted during the 2010 Census and focused on improving the race and Hispanic origin questions by testing different questionnaire design strategies. The first objective of this research was to increase reporting in the standard race and ethnic categories established by OMB. The OMB standards state that there are two minimum categories for data on ethnicity ("Hispanic or Latino" and "Not Hispanic or Latino") and there are five minimum categories for data on race ("American Indian or Alaska Native," "Asian," "Black or African American," "Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander," and "White"). The other research objectives were to lower item nonresponse to reduce the number of missing race and Hispanic origin responses, improve the accuracy and reliability of race and Hispanic origin results, and elicit and improve reporting of detailed race and ethnic groups. The 2010 AQE methodology had a three-part design, consisting

of a mail survey, a telephone reinterview, and a series of qualitative focus groups. This paper only focuses on the mail survey and focus groups, which are the components of the AQE that are most relevant to the MENA population.[4]

The main component of the AQE was a mail survey involving a series of 15 experimental questionnaires and two control questionnaires that were mailed to a national sample of housing units. Almost 500,000 housing units received an alternative questionnaire as their 2010 Census questionnaire. The experimental questionnaires focused on areas of research that included testing the use of new and modified examples in the race and Hispanic origin questions and exploring approaches to combining the race and Hispanic origin questions into one item, which examined the addition of write-in lines for the White and Black checkbox categories.[5]

A series of qualitative focus groups were intended to supplement the quantitative mail survey and reinterview research. A total of 67 focus groups were conducted with about 800 participants in 26 locations across the United States and Puerto Rico. The focus groups were conducted to identify reporting issues that emerged from the AQE questionnaires, as well as to gain a better understanding of racial and ethnic self-identification. The focus groups were conducted with a broad range of racial and ethnic communities, including the MENA community. Participants in the focus groups varied in terms of age, gender, education, nativity, and ethnic group.

2.1   Description of the experimental questionnaires

The AQE control questionnaires asked the same Hispanic origin and race questions as the 2010 Census's standard questionnaire (see Figure 1). The 15 experimental questionnaires were grouped into different design strategies. In this paper, we focus only on those design strategies that are relevant to the MENA population. The first design strategy tested several features including the use of modified examples in the race and Hispanic origin questions. Examples were added to the White, Black or African American, and American Indian or Alaska Native categories. These examples were tested to aid in clarifying the categories where OMB intends for these populations to report. The examples of German, Irish, Lebanese, and Egyptian were added to the White checkbox category.

The second design strategy focused on several approaches to combining the race and Hispanic origin questions into one item. OMB considers race and ethnicity to be two separate and distinct concepts; therefore, Hispanics can be of any race. However, Census data demonstrate that some respondents, especially Hispanics, do not identify with the OMB race categories. Instead, some respondents view Hispanic origin as a race, rather than an ethnic group. Responses to the race question that reflect a Hispanic origin are classified as Some Other Race (SOR). SOR was intended to be a residual category for respondents who do not identify with the OMB race groups, but the SOR population was the third-largest race group in 2010. With the projected continued growth of the Hispanic

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[4] For a complete description of the methodology and full results of the 2010 AQE, see the *2010 Census Race and Hispanic Origin Alternative Questionnaire Experiment* final report (Compton et al. 2012).

[5] In addition, the areas of research also included removing the term "Negro" from the "Black, African Am., or Negro" checkbox label, limiting the use of the term "race," and testing the use of a spanner to clarify the Asian and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander checkbox categories.

population, it is possible that SOR will become the second-largest race group in the near future. Therefore, this design strategy tested four approaches to combining the race and Hispanic origin questions into one item.

Figure 1. Hispanic origin and race questions on the AQE control forms

The MENA focus groups completed the 'streamlined' combined question, one of the four combined approaches (see Figure 2). A simple instruction was used that instructed respondents to mark one or more boxes and to write in a specific race or origin. The terms 'race' and 'origin' were used to represent both OMB concepts. This combined question provided examples and write-in areas for each major response category – "White," "Black, African Am., or Negro," "Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin," "American Indian or Alaska Native," "Asian," "Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander," and "Some other race or origin." This approach removed all national origin checkboxes (e.g., "Puerto Rican," "Japanese," "Samoan"), which streamlined the design

of the combined question. All groups that were national origin checkboxes on the 2010 Census form were added as examples to offset any decrease in the reporting of these particular groups. The new examples for the "White," "Black, African Am., or Negro," and "American Indian or Alaska Native" checkbox categories were also used in the streamlined combined question.

Figure 2. AQE streamlined combined Hispanic origin and race question

5. What is this person's race or origin? *Mark X one or more boxes* **AND** *write in the specific race(s) or origin(s).*

☐ White — *Print origin(s), for example, German, Irish, Lebanese, Egyptian, and so on.* ↙

☐ Black, African Am., or Negro — *Print origin(s), for example, African American, Haitian, Nigerian, and so on.* ↙

☐ Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin — *Print origin(s), for example, Mexican, Mexican Am., Puerto Rican, Cuban, Argentinean, Colombian, Dominican, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, Spaniard, and so on.* ↙

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native — *Print name of enrolled or principal tribe(s), for example, Navajo, Mayan, Tlingit, and so on.* ↙

☐ Asian — *Print origin(s), for example, Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Hmong, Laotian, Thai, Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on.* ↙

☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander — *Print origin(s), for example, Native Hawaiian, Guamanian or Chamorro, Samoan, Fijian, Tongan, and so on.* ↙

☐ Some other race or origin — *Print race(s) or origin(s).* ↙

2.2　Results

2.2.1　Detailed Reporting

One of the research objectives of the AQE was to elicit reporting of detailed race and ethnic groups. The design and layout of the different questionnaires affected respondent reporting. Examining results from the mail survey, less than 2 percent of the White population reported a detailed origin (e.g., "English," "Egyptian") on the control form where a dedicated write-in line is not provided for the White checkbox (Compton et al. 2012). As expected, the experimental combined questionnaires that provided White ethnic groups a write-in line to report their specific origin had a much higher percentage of White detailed responses. Between about 30 and 50 percent of White respondents reported a detailed origin on the experimental combined questionnaires (Compton et al. 2012). This suggests that a combined approach may be beneficial to the MENA population in directly soliciting detailed responses of those classified as White, which could be published and utilized by the community.

2.2.2　Focus Groups

In this paper, we use findings from one focus group that was conducted with 12 participants of Iranian descent and five focus groups that were conducted with a total of 60 participants of other MENA origins.[6] These focus groups were conducted in Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York City, and Washington D.C.[7]

Participants in both the Iranian and MENA focus groups were first asked to complete the separate Hispanic origin and race questions on one of the control forms. The race question on the control form was difficult for many participants to answer. Many did not identify with the OMB race categories. Participants in these groups most frequently (about 40 percent) reported as SOR only and wrote in a detailed response such as Arab American, Iranian American, Middle Eastern, or other specific ethnicities. Almost 25 percent of participants reported as White alone and about 20 percent reported as White and SOR, providing a detailed group (Carroll et al. 2011). This quote from a participant in one of the focus groups echoes what many participants expressed:

> "…I chose Some Other Race and…I put in Middle Eastern. Since Arab is not a race and all the other races didn't seem to fit my identity or race…I put in that region as all the other categories are categorized by region…" – Washington, D.C. (Focus group transcript, February 19, 2011)

The second questionnaire that the MENA groups completed was the streamlined combined question. Participants frequently reported as White. Specifically, about one-third marked the White checkbox, with most writing in a detailed response. In addition, one-quarter of the participants reported as SOR and about one-quarter reported as White and SOR (Carroll et al. 2011).

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[6] Iranians had a separate focus group because they are non-Arabic speaking and have a different historical perspective relative to other MENA groups.

[7] Two focus groups were conducted in Los Angeles - one focus group with Iranian participants and one focus group with participants of other MENA origins.

Concerning the examples added to the White checkbox, some participants mentioned that having the examples clarified for them that they should identify as White, but the majority of participants found the examples of "Egyptian" and "Lebanese" to be inaccurate. Many felt that the example of Egyptian was particularly a bad choice since many Egyptians are Black (Carroll et al. 2011). Typically, the participants in these groups did not consider people of MENA descent to be White. One participant noted:

> "I never had the privilege of a White person in this country and I was always considered White… I never really got the benefit of what a White person gets and I never got the benefit that a minority person gets..." – Los Angeles, CA (Focus group transcript, January 22, 2011)

Participants recommended that there should be a separate racial category for those who would identify as Middle Eastern, North African, or Arab. These comments were echoed across all of the AQE focus groups including those conducted with other racial and ethnic groups.

3. Implications and Further Research

Although the combined question approach may contribute to improving the quality of data collected on the MENA population, this approach needs to be refined and new strategies will need to be developed for further testing. It is too early to determine if a combined race and Hispanic origin question will be used in the 2020 Census, but the Census Bureau plans to test versions of a combined question leading up to 2020. The results from these tests will provide information for further consideration and discussion, and inform the ways in which strategies are developed to further examine new collection modes and improved coding, editing, and tabulation procedures of race and ethnic data in preparation for the 2020 Census. The Census Bureau plans to further discuss the potential for including tabulations for the MENA population as we develop testing plans leading up to the 2020 Census.

4. References

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