

AN OPEN-END APPROACH TO MEASURING RACIAL AND ETHNIC LABEL PREFERENCES OF BLACK AMERICANS

Judith A. Schejbal, National Opinion Research Center; Paul J. Lavrakas, Ohio State University; Tom W. Smith, NORC
Judith A. Schejbal, NORC, 55 E. Monroe, Suite 4800, Chicago, IL 60603

Keywords: race, ethnicity, African-American, Black, racial labels

Labeling is a common practice in our society. We use labels to help us categorize and understand our environment, as well as to help us group objects, behaviors and ideas. Labels add organization and structure to our surroundings. When applied to people, they play an important role in the definition of groups and the individuals who belong to these groups. Race and ethnicity are examples of labels that are used to define groups of people.

For demographers, survey researchers, and other scientists, race and ethnicity are used regularly as independent variables in analyses aimed at understanding substantive topic areas. They are usually measured by asking respondents to choose their own race and ethnicity from a finite set of pre-coded categories that are read aloud to them. Although this approach is easy to administer and easy to quantify, it does not allow for much variation. That is, it does not always allow for specific respondent preferences that are not included on the pre-coded list. In addition, it does not push the respondent into thinking about how he/she identifies him/herself independent of standard categorical measures of race and ethnicity.

It is important for survey researchers to keep updated on the variations and changes in racial and ethnic label usage. The accurate measurement of race and ethnicity is dependent upon researchers' inclusion of racial and ethnic categories that are not only appropriate, but also generally accepted. Because the success of a survey depends upon the cooperation of a representative sample, it is important for researchers to be sensitive to the racial and ethnic label preferences of their respondent groups. It is also important for the accurate measurement of race and ethnicity that survey researchers pay attention to changes in these label preferences and adapt their measurements accordingly. Researchers do not want to use either out-dated labels or new labels that are not yet generally accepted.

Relevant Local Area Research on Racial and Ethnic Labels for Blacks

The following data are from a local area survey and indicate the racial and ethnic labels chosen by Blacks

when asked to identify their own ethnicity and race. To the authors' knowledge, these data are unlike any that heretofore have been available because they came from answers given to open- end race and ethnicity survey items (i.e., items that did not prompt survey respondents with response options from which to choose). All other survey data that provide a perspective on preferred racial and ethnic labels for Blacks have explicitly provided respondents with response choices (i.e., closed-end items).

Methodology

The data presented were gathered from 1991-1995 by the Northwestern University Survey Laboratory in Evanston, Illinois. In each year, the Survey Laboratory conducted a telephone survey of over 1,000 English-speaking adults living in the Chicago metropolitan area (i.e., the City of Chicago and the surrounding suburbs). Household telephone numbers were generated via random-digit dialing (RDD).

In all five years, respondents were asked to indicate their ethnicity and race without an interviewer prompting them with response choices (i.e., ethnicity and race were presented as open-ended items). The ethnicity question was worded as follows:

In addition to being an American, what do you consider your main ethnic or national group?

The telephone interviewers were trained to not offer any response categories and to record the respondent's answer one of two ways: either by using a pre-coded list of likely responses, or by writing in the verbatim response if it was not found on the pre-coded list.¹ In either scenario, the interviewer was explicitly trained not to prompt the respondent. The terms "Black" and "African-American" were pre-coded on the list as separate response options.

¹This precoded list was never read to the respondents. It was included for the convenience of the interviewers and to aid in the administration of the questionnaire. The list consisted of responses that the researchers thought were the most likely answers for respondents to give.

Similarly, the race question was worded as follows:

What race do you consider yourself?

Interviewers again were explicitly trained to not offer response categories. If a respondent indicated that his/her race was "Hispanic", the interviewer replied, "Ok, in addition to being Hispanic are you White, Black, Indian or some other race?" Interviewers recorded responses to the race question in the same manner as the ethnicity question. The pre-coded race list included the racial categories currently used by the decennial census.

In 1993, the survey included two split-half experiments to further investigate the meaning of the two racial and ethnic labels for Blacks. One experiment varied the order in which the ethnicity and race items were asked. The other experiment varied the use of the labels in a racial attitudes sequence that was asked earlier in the questionnaire. The second split-half experiment was also used in 1994.

Results

As shown in Table 1, in each year the term "African-American"² was more likely to be used by the respondents as the label of choice in answering the ethnicity question than in answering the race question. Beginning in 1993 and continuing through 1995, a significantly greater proportion of Blacks identified their ethnicity and their race as "African-American" than had been the case in 1991 and 1992. Furthermore, in 1993-1995, more adults used the label "African-American" to identify their ethnicity than used "Black." However, the majority of Blacks continued to identify their race as "Black" in these same years.

Table 2 shows the paired combinations of respondents' answers to the open-ended ethnicity and race items by year. By 1993, the proportion of Blacks who

²For all five years, "Afro-American" was included in the category "African-American" and was infrequently used.

Table 1:
Self-Ascribed Racial and Ethnic Labeling Among Blacks
1991-1995 in Chicago-Area RDD Surveys

Term of Choice	% in 1991	% in 1992	% in 1993	% in 1994	% in 1995
For Ethnicity:					
African-American	35.0	38.0	50.0	56.7	48.2
Black	55.5	54.5	38.6	34.0	43.1
Negro	XXXX	XXXX	1.8	XXXX	XXXX
None	6.0	2.7	5.3	5.0	6.0
Other*	3.5	4.8	4.5	4.3	2.7
For Race:					
African-American	22.0	25.4	37.4	35.3	33.7
Black	78.0	74.6	59.1	61.7	65.6
Negro	XXXX	XXXX	3.5	XXXX	XXXX
Other Black	XXXX	XXXX	XXXX	3.0	0.8
(n)	(200)	(193)	(115)	(300)	(547)

NOTE. The term, "Negro," was coded in the 1993 survey only. The statistics in the 1993 column represent data from the half of the respondents who were asked their ethnicity first, followed by their race (as was done for all respondents in the 1991, 1992, 1994 and 1995 surveys).

Data used in the 1995 analyses included City of Chicago residents only. Data used in the 1991-1994 analyses includes both City of Chicago and suburban area residents. Approximately 10% of the sample each year was comprised of suburban residents.

*Includes a variety of ethnic identifications, e.g., Cuban, Puerto Rican, Jamaican, Nigerian, etc.

Table 2:

Self-Ascribed Combinations of Racial-Ethnic Labeling Among Blacks
1991-1995 in Chicago-Area RDD Surveys

Combination of Labels	% in 1991	% in 1992	% in 1993	% in 1994	% in 1995
Ethnicity=BLACK Race=BLACK	53.6	53.2	33.3	29.3	39.6
Ethnicity=BLACK Race=AFRICAN-AMERICAN	7.7	5.8	10.1	8.5	7.7
Ethnicity=AFRICAN-AMER. Race=BLACK	22.7	18.5	28.3	32.0	25.6
Ethnicity=AFRICAN-AMER. Race=AFRICAN-AMERICAN	16.0	22.5	28.3	27.2	27.1
(n)	(181)	(173)	(99)	(272)	(547)

NOTE: Data used in the 1995 analyses included City of Chicago residents only. Data used in the 1991-1994 analyses includes both City of Chicago and suburban area residents. The suburban residents comprise approximately 10% of the sample each year.

used "Black" to identify both their race and ethnicity dropped to three in ten respondents, down from one-half of the respondents in previous years. In 1995, however, the proportion of Blacks who used this combination of labels increased to nearly four in ten respondents.

The proportion of Blacks who used "African-American" for both race and ethnicity increased to nearly three in ten respondents in 1993-1995. Approximately three in ten respondents used "African-American" for ethnicity and "Black" for race beginning in 1993. However, less than one in ten used "Black" for ethnicity and "African-American" for race across all five years.

As previously noted, in 1993 a split-half experiment was included that varied the order of the ethnicity and race items. There was a slightly greater (though nonsignificant) likelihood for Blacks to choose "African-American" as their ethnicity when ethnicity was asked before race (50% vs. 45%). In contrast, item-order had no apparent effect on which of the two terms was used in labeling one's race. This experiment was not repeated in the 1994 and 1995 surveys.

The second split-half experiment included in the 1993 survey varied the use of the terms "African-American" and "Black" in a five-item racial attitudes sequence occurring approximately five to eight minutes before respondents were asked their ethnicity and race.

There was a significantly greater proportion of Blacks who identified their ethnicity as "African-American" (51% vs. 40%) when previously presented with "African-American" in the five-item racial attitudes sequence, compared to the group of respondents who were presented with "Black" in the racial attitudes sequence. For race, there was a similar but smaller (and nonsignificant) difference associated with the experimental manipulation in the proportion of respondents who used "African-American" vs. "Black" to identify their race. That is, a greater proportion of Blacks identified their race as "Black" when presented with "Black" in the five-item racial attitudes sequence, compared to the group of respondents who were presented with "African-American" in the racial attitudes sequence (48% vs. 44%). Overall, responses were in the hypothesized direction towards a greater usage of the term that had been heard earlier in the questionnaire.

This second split-half experiment was repeated in the 1994 survey. A significantly greater proportion of Blacks identified their race as "African-American" (44% vs. 31%) when they had previously heard the label "African-American" used in the five-item racial attitudes sequence, compared to the group who had heard the word "Black". In addition, a significant proportion of Blacks identified their race as "Black" (65% vs. 54%)

when they had previously heard the label “Black” used in the five-item sequence, compared to the group who had heard the word “African-American”.

Demographic Correlates of Label Preferences

Two logistic regression analyses were conducted to determine whether the label-preferences, “Black” or “African-American,” to describe one’s ethnicity or race were associated disproportionately within any demographic subgroups of the Black population or whether these choices were distributed proportionally across all Blacks. The results of these analyses are shown in Table 3.

These findings are based on a pooled sample of 1,356 Black respondents who used the term “Black” and/or “African-American” to describe their ethnicity and/or their race in the five annual Chicago area surveys. Other demographic measures that were gathered and available for use in these regression analyses included: (1) whether or not the respondent was the only

adult in the household, (2) if the respondent lived in the City of Chicago or a suburb, (3) the respondent’s educational attainment measured in years, (4) if the respondent was employed full-time, (5) the respondent’s gender, (6) the previous year’s household income, (7) if the respondent was married, (8) if the respondent had children, (9) if the respondent owned or rented her/his home, (10) if the respondent was Protestant, and (11) the respondent’s age in years. In addition, a control variable for the year of the interview was included. In each of these logistic regression analyses, the dependent variables were coded with a “0” for those respondents who identified themselves as “Black” and a “1” for those respondents who identified themselves as “African-American.”

As shown in the columns on the left side of Table 3, respondents most likely to identify their ethnicity as “African-American” were those with a higher educational attainment, who had a high household income, and who rented their homes. In contrast, those most likely to identify their ethnicity as “Black,” had lower

TABLE 3
Logistic Regression on Label Preference for Ethnicity and Race*

Independent Variables	Ethnicity			Race		
	B	Wald	p <	B	Wald	p <
Only adult in Hshld	-.006	0.00	NS	.139	0.75	NS
City/Suburban resident	.250	1.38	NS	.266	1.53	NS
Educational attainment	.140	12.92	.000	.088	5.13	.024
Employed full-time	.134	0.86	NS	.180	1.51	NS
Gender	-.133	0.91	NS	.015	0.01	NS
Hshld income	.139	4.79	.029	.085	1.84	NS
Marital status	.065	0.14	NS	.225	1.72	NS
Presence of children	-.078	0.31	NS	.113	0.62	NS
Own/rent home	.299	4.12	.043	-.098	0.43	NS
Protestant religion	-.035	0.06	NS	-.072	0.24	NS
Year interviewed	.199	19.45	.000	.171	13.11	.000
Age in years	.003	0.31	NS	-.014	7.12	.008

* The dependent variables for ethnicity and race were coded as dichotomies with a “0” representing anyone who said “Black” and a “1” representing anyone who said “African-American.”

levels of education, a low household income, and owned their homes. For race, educational attainment and age were found to be statistically significant within this multivariate context. Those respondents most likely to use the label, "African-American," to identify their race had college degrees and were younger, while those respondents most likely to use "Black" to identify their race did not graduate from high school and were older.

In addition to the logistic regression analyses with these two dichotomous dependent variables, a four-category nominal variable was formed to represent the four possible answer-combinations that could be given to the ethnicity and race items for all five years of data: (1) "Black" ethnicity, "Black" race (given by 41% of the 1,356 respondents); (2) "Black" ethnicity, "African-American" race (given by 8%); (3) "African-American" ethnicity, "Black" race (given by 26%); and (4) "African-American" ethnicity, "African-American" race (given by 25%).

This four category variable was used as the dependent measure in a discriminant stepwise analysis. The predictor variables in this analysis were the same set used in the logistic regression analyses, including the control variable for year-interviewed. The discriminant analysis identified a subset of six variables (including the year-interviewed control variable) that were statistically significant at well beyond the .001 level (Wilks' Lambda). In order of importance, these variables were: Educational Attainment, Age, Household Income, Owner/Renter Status, and Having Children.

"Black" for both Ethnicity and Race. The most distinguishing characteristics of those respondents most likely to use the label "Black" for both their ethnicity and their race were: having relatively less education, being older, having less household income, being renters, being without children at home.

"African-American" for Ethnicity, "Black for Race. The most distinguishing characteristics of those respondents most likely to use the label "African-American" for their ethnicity and "Black" for their race were: having relatively more education, being older, having a moderate income, being renters, being with children at home.

"Black" for Ethnicity, "African-American" for Race. The most distinguishing characteristics of those respondents most likely to use the label "Black" for their ethnicity and "African-American" for their race were: having a moderate educational attainment, being relatively young, having a moderate income, being homeowners.

"African-American" for both Ethnicity and Race. The most distinguishing characteristics of those respondents most likely to use the label "African-American" for both their ethnicity and their race were: having rela-

tively more education, being younger, having higher incomes, being homeowners, being without children at home.

Reinforcing the findings of the logistic regressions, it was the respondents with the highest levels of education who were the most likely respondents to use "African-American" to describe their ethnicity and their race. They were especially likely to use the term for their ethnicity. In contrast, those respondents with the least level of formal education were the most likely respondents to use "Black" to describe their ethnicity and their race. They were especially likely to use "Black" for their race.

Discussion of Data Presented and Recommendations for Future Research

As shown in the local area data presented, "African-American" was more likely to be used by Blacks to identify their ethnicity than their race.

Education was a consistently significant demographic variable in both the logistic regression and discriminant stepwise analyses conducted with the local area data. Those respondents who identified their race and/or ethnicity as "African-American" had higher levels of education than those who identified their race and/or ethnicity as "Black". In addition, age was a significant demographic variable in the logistic regression analyses for race. Those respondents who identified their race as "African-American" were younger than those who identified their race as "Black". This finding is consistent with Smith's (1992) discussion of younger Blacks acceptance of new racial labels more readily than older Blacks.

These local area data results are consistent with national trends (Smith, 1992). That is, respondents are using both "African-American" and "Black," to describe themselves. "African-American" is gaining a wider acceptance as an ethnic term rather than a racial term. For the time being, both terms are acceptable to respondents and can be used by survey researchers with little risk of offending respondents. However, it is important for survey researchers to keep abreast of changes in racial label preferences of Black Americans in order to be certain that the labels used in public surveys are not offensive to and are appropriate for the individuals that the labels are meant to identify.

Continuing research on ethno-racial label preferences of respondents is very important if these variables are to be accurately measured. For the present, we recommend that surveys routinely include ethnicity and race as separate survey questions. As shown in five years of surveying residents in the Chicago metropolitan area, a majority of Blacks might prefer "African-

American” for their ethnicity and “Black” for their race. However, this trend needs to be tested at both the local and national levels. In addition, it is important to test the open-end methodology more fully when asking respondents to identify their race and ethnicity. Researchers need to understand if respondents identify themselves differently under different survey conditions.

Finally, there is the issue of multi-racial groups. As respondents continue to identify with their heritage and multi-racial backgrounds, survey researchers are challenged to develop accurate ways to measure both ethnicity and race. Respondents must continue to be presented with open-end items that do not limit their response choices if the multi-racial identification is to be accurately measured.

References

- Lavrakas, P.J., Schejbal, J.A., Smith, T.W. (1994). The Use and Perception of Ethno-Racial Labels: “African-American” and/or “Black”. 1994 Annual Research Conference and CASIC Technologies Interchange Proceedings.
- Smith, T. W. (1992). Changing racial labels from “colored” to “negro” to “black” to “african-american.” *Public Opinion Quarterly*. 56(4), 98-514.