

THE MULTIRACIAL CATEGORY AS "WILD CARD" IN RACIAL QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

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Introduction

In February, 1994, the National Science Foundation sponsored a two-day Workshop to assess the adequacy of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Statistical Directive 15, which had provided the Federal Standards for Race and Ethnicity Classifications since 1977. The OMB mandated categories for Race are: White, Black, Asian or Pacific Islander, and American Indian or Alaskan Native; those for Ethnicity are: Hispanic origin, and Not of Hispanic origin. Congressional Hearings on the OMB Race and Ethnicity Categories had been held in 1993 and, in July of 1994, OMB conducted public hearings on the categories in the following locations: Boston, Massachusetts; Denver, Colorado; Honolulu, Hawaii; San Francisco, California.

Of the many race and ethnicity issues debated in these various forums, the issue of adding a multiracial reporting option was the most highly publicized and widely debated. U.S. Census figures had showed an increase in multiracial children in the U.S. from 460,302 in 1970, to 1,937,496 in 1990 (Bennett, McKenney, and Harrison, 1995.) Arguments for adding a multiracial reporting category advanced by proponents of this category include the following:

- (1) the current system forces children to deny the racial heritage of one parent;
- (2) providing a multiracial category increases the accuracy of racial reporting;
- (3) the current system does not capture the racial diversity of the population.

Methods

The first of a series of major research initiatives to evaluate possible changes in the OMB racial and ethnic categories was the Current Population Survey (CPS) Supplement on Race and Ethnicity, conducted jointly by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Bureau of the Census in May, 1995. The CPS is a monthly survey of the population using a scientifically selected sample of 60,000 households representative of the civilian noninstitutional population of the U.S. The CPS routinely collects information on the race and ethnic origin of household members during the first month's interview. The opportunity to try out new versions of race and ethnicity questions in this population would

provide comparative data on how these questions are answered under current and modified wording conditions. If the modified wording conditions included a "multiracial" reporting category, the comparison would yield a measure of the potential shift from current racial groups, e.g., Black, American Indian, to "Multiracial."

The Supplement was organized into four panels, or versions:

Panel I: Separate race and Hispanic origin questions, no multiracial category;

Panel II: Separate race and Hispanic origin questions, with a multiracial category;

Panel III: A combined race and Hispanic origin question, no multiracial category;

Panel IV: A combined race and Hispanic origin question, with a multiracial category.

Cognitive Research Interviews to Pretest the CPS Supplement

Eighty-two cognitive research interviews to pretest the Supplement were carried out in the winter of 1994 in the following locations with the populations indicated: Albuquerque (American Indians); Chicago (Blacks); Houston (Hispanics, Whites); New Orleans (Creoles); New York City (Hispanics, Whites); Rural California (Hispanics); Rural Mississippi (Blacks); Rural West Virginia (Whites); San Francisco (Asians and Pacific Islanders, Hispanics, Multiracials); Washington, DC (Asians and Pacific Islanders, Blacks, Hispanics, Multiracials, Whites). Respondents for each racial/ethnic group included those with less than a high school education as well as those with some years of college. The protocol for the interviews called for the respondent to paraphrase the question, i.e., to tell the interviewer what the question meant in his or her own words. For questions containing terms of special interest to the Supplement, e.g., "race," "ethnicity/ethnic group," "multiracial," the respondent would also be asked to provide a definition of the terms in the context of the question.

In the cognitive interviews, all of the respondents offered some variant of "more than one race" in defining the term "multiracial." From information gathered from probing respondents for their definitions

of “race” and “ethnicity/ethnic group,” we learned that race and ethnic group are overlapping concepts for some non-Hispanic as well as Hispanic individuals.

Findings

Table 1. displays the racial distribution in response to the race question across the four panels in the CPS Supplement. The only racial group for whom the multiracial category had a significant effect was the “American Indian, Eskimo” and Aleut.” The percentage of people identifying themselves as American Indians was 0.73 percent and 0.79 percent on the panels with a multiracial category, compared to about 1.0 percent on panels that did not include this category

Researchers were able to compare the racial identification of CPS respondents as reported on the CPS control card, which represents the present OMB categories, and their racial identification on the CPS Supplement, under the four panel conditions. Table 2. displays the results of this comparison. We see that a small percentage of respondents in each of the racial groups reported a different racial group on the Supplement, even in Panel One, the control panel that offered the same racial categories as the Control Card. The tendency to report a different race was greatest for the American Indians in all 4 panels, but much more pronounced in panels with a multiracial category.

When we compare how American Indians identified on the panels with a multiracial category, we see that *only a small percentage actually moved to the multiracial category.* Only 4.24 percent shifted to “multiracial,” on Panel 2, and only 7.9 percent shifted to “multiracial.” on Panel 4. Rather, the presence of the “multiracial” category only served to intensify the shift to another race on the list. Across panels, the biggest shift was to White. On Panel 2, the multiracial panel that did not include an Hispanic category, 41% of the American Indians switched to another racial category. Over half, 53% of these, switched to reporting as “White.”

Turning now to the breakout of multiracial reporting for the total CPS Supplement sample displayed in Table 3, we see that for the 1.65% in Panel 2, and 1.55% in Panel 4, who reported as multiracial, considerable numbers only reported one race under multiracial. Further investigation revealed that almost all of the single-race respondents reporting as “Something else” and those reporting as “one race and Something else,” were reporting ethnic groups, such as “Italian,” or “German” as races. We classified those who reported two or more races as “Multiracials,” and those who did not report 2 or more races, but reported ethnicities as races, as “Unconfirmed Multiracials.”

Table 4 shows the distribution of multiracials and unconfirmed multiracials after this reclassification. We see that over sixty percent of those choosing the multiracial category in panel 2, and almost twenty percent of those choosing it in panel 4, were respondents who were reporting multiple ethnic rather than multiple racial identities.

The Supplement findings also shed light on the use of the multiracial category for reporting the racial identity of children in interracial households. In the May, 1995 CPS Supplement, the race of children below the age of 17 was reported by the parent. There was a total of 384 households in Panels 2 and 4 in which the parents were reported as being of different races and there were children 16 years and younger in the household. Table 5 displays the race reported for the children in these 384 households. We see that one or more children were identified as multiracial in 31.5 percent of these interracial households, and that the multiracial category was used to describe 27.6 percent of the 735 children in these households.

Summary and Conclusions

When the multiracial category was used in an interviewer-administered survey, there was a significant decline in American Indian and Alaska Native counts. The decline in reporting as American Indian or Alaska Native was accompanied by a larger shift to reporting as another race, e.g., White, than reporting as “multiracial.” About half of the respondents who used the multiracial category reported multiple ethnic groups rather than races. Over two-thirds of interracial married couples did not use the multiracial category to report the race of children in the household.

At this point in time, the majority of interracial couples do not choose to report their children as multiracial in an interviewer-administered survey. The presence of the multiracial category does not necessarily increase the accuracy of racial self-reporting. The presence of the multiracial category does not necessarily yield a truer picture of racial diversity in the U.S.

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References

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Table 1. Racial Distribution from the First Question in the CPS Supplement Assessing Racial Identity (In percent)

Race/Ethnicity	Panel			
	1	2	3	4
White	79.88	79.74	75.78	74.66
Black	10.29	10.66	10.60	10.27
Hispanic	-	-	7.53	8.20
American Indian/Eskimo/Aleut	0.97	0.73	1.06	0.79
Asian/Pacific Islander	3.83	3.25	3.25	3.30
Something Else	4.68	3.70	1.50	0.92
Don't Know/Not Applicable	0.34	0.26	0.28	0.32
Total Multiracial	-	1.65	-	1.55
Totals	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

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From Tucker et al, 1996.

Table 2. Comparison of Racial Identifications on CPS Control Card and CPS Supplement

Panel	Race on CPS Control Card	Race on CPS Supplement			
		Same Race	Different Race	"Something Else	"Multiracial"
1	White	95.80	1.15	3.05	---
	Black	95.02	1.84	3.14	---
	American Indian/ Eskimo/Aleut	74.50	20.78*	4.72	---
	Asian/Pacific Islander	90.91	3.06	6.03	---
2	White	95.64	0.88	2.34	1.15
	Black	93.70	1.65	1.89	2.77
	American Indian/ Eskimo/Aleut	58.94	34.44*	2.38	4.24
	Asian/Pacific Islander	92.67	1.80	3.70	1.83
3	White	91.28	7.82	0.82	---
	Black	94.72	2.21	3.06	---
	American Indian/ Eskimo/Aleut	71.98	22.94*	5.07	---
	Asian/Pacific Islander	88.01	5.49	4.88	---
4	White	90.15	8.38	0.54	0.92
	Black	94.62	2.07	0.94	2.36
	American Indian/ Eskimo/Aleut	61.71	27.84*	2.51	7.94
	Asian/Pacific Islander	86.00	2.70	4.35	6.93

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Table 3. Multiracial Breakdown

	Panel			
	1	2	3	4
	%	%	%	%
Total Multiracial	-	1.65	-	1.55
no race / DK / NA	-	0.02	-	0.00
“Se” as only race	-	0.51	-	0.22
only 1 race	-	0.53	-	0.15
WB / BW	-	0.09	-	0.16
Amerind + 1 race	-	0.20	-	0.28
A/PI + 1 race	-	0.07	-	0.28
1 race + “Se”	-	0.16	-	0.07
Other 2 races	-	-	-	0.20
3 or more	-	0.08	-	0.21

From Tucker et al, 1996.

Table 4. Percentage “Multiracials” and “Unconfirmed Multiracials”

	Panel 2		Panel 4	
	M	UM	M	UM
	%	%	%	%
Name 1 race				
<i>Hispanic</i>	2.21	10.74	0.0	0.71
<i>Non-Hispanic</i>	4.81	45.76	5.15	17.02
Name 2+ races				
<i>Hispanic</i>	3.53	4.61	22.79	0.0
<i>Non Hispanic</i>	26.03	2.31	52.46	1.88
Totals:	36.58	63.42	80.40	19.60

From McKay, Stinson, de la Puente, and Kojetin, 1996

**Table 5. Race of Children (age 16 and younger) from Households with Married Parents of Different Races.
CPS Supplement on Race and Ethnicity, May 1995**

Panels 2 and 4 only

Child's Race	Number of Households with at least one		Total Number of Children	
	Child identified as:	%	identified as:	%
White	175	45.6	322	43.8
Black	20	5.2	35	4.8
Hispanic	29	7.6	55	7.5
American Indian	22	5.7	38	5.2
Asian, Pacific Islander	15	3.9	24	3.3
Multiracial	121	31.5	203	27.6
Other	35	9.1	58	7.9
Total	384	*	735	100