

Measuring Race by Observation and Self-Identification

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Introduction

Both the Census and the General Social Survey (GSS) have been reviewing and conducting experiments about how race is measured on surveys (for the Census see Anderson and Feinberg, 1995; Bates, et al., 1994; Edmonston, et al., 1996; Evinger, 1995; Farley, 1996; Gerber and de la Puente, 1996; McKay, et al., 1996; Tucker, et al., 1996; for the GSS see Smith, 1995). In each case the goals are to develop valid and reliable measures of race that also identify socially meaningful groups and are consistent or calibrated with current procedures for measuring race.

The 1996 Race Experiment

The standard GSS procedure for measuring race (RACE) is to code by observation or by asking "What race do you consider yourself?" Coding by observation is done "only if there is no doubt in your mind." The three response categories are White, Black, and Other (SPECIFY). Verbatims are filled-in for the Other category. Interviewers indicate which procedure they followed by answering an interviewer question - "DID YOU ASK RESPONDENT'S RACE? YES/NO." Traditionally, the vast majority of racial assignments have been done by observation. On the 1993 and 1994 GSSs between 86-90% of the cases were coded by observation. In addition, the GSS also has ethnicity items which are described in Appendix 1.

The experimental racial classification procedure consisted of four parts (See Figure 1). In part A interviewers racially classify all respondents. In part B they place a confidence rating on their racial assignment. This was designed to parallel the interviewer instructions on the standard question about when race is to be marked by observation or asked. In part C everyone is asked their racial identification using the standard GSS item. That means that all respondents are racially classified both by observation and by self-identification. Finally, for instances in which the two racial classifications disagreed, interviewers were asked in part D to explain the reasons for the disagreement.

As Table 1 shows, the racial distribution based only on interviewer observations does not differ significantly (prob.=.725) from estimates based on the standard GSS procedure which basically relies on interviewer observation supplemented by self-identification where doubt existed in the interviewers' judgment. In part this is due to the fact that these procedures overlap considerably with most cases being classified by observation.¹ But

¹But the overlap is actually less in 1996 than is typical. In 1993 race was asked for 10.3% of cases, in 1994 for 14.2%, and in 1996 for 29.7%. While the increase may partly reflect a trend, it is likely that interviewers administering the standard race item were influenced by the racial experiments on the other half of the sample. Since virtually all interviewers administered both versions, they were familiar with the new version on which all respondents were asked their race. This probably encouraged them to ask race on the standard version more frequently than previously.

the version based on self-identification does differ significantly from the standard procedure (prob.=.002). While the proportion Black does not vary, the proportion White drops under self-identification and the proportion Other increases.

Table 2 shows that despite the shift in marginals there is high consistency between racial classification by self-identification and interviewer observation. In 94.5% of all cases or 95.1% of cases with missing values excluded race matches. Looking from the perspective of interviewer assignments, 94.6% of Whites were still classified as White, 0.2 as Black, 4.8% as Other, and 0.4% were missing. For Blacks it was 0.3% White, 96.0% Black, and 3.7% Other. For Others it was 5.6% White and 94.4% Other. This indicates that almost all of the switches are between Whites and Others or Black and Other with minimal switches between Blacks and Whites. This pattern is consistent with earlier Census studies that showed that classifications using the same instrument but at different times and/or between different household members produced greater consistency between Whites and Blacks than involving other races (Bureau of the Census, 1974; Johnson, 1974).

The high consistency reflects the fact that interviewers were overwhelmingly confident in their own judgements about respondents' races. 94.6% had "no doubt in my mind," 4.4% had "some doubt, but pretty sure," 0.2% "a lot of doubt, pretty unsure," and 0.7% were "completely unsure." Their assessments of uncertainty were related to disagreements over racial classification. There were differences between interviewers and respondents for 3.7% of the cases in which the interviewer had no doubt, for 24.2% when there was some doubt, and 38.5% when there was a lot of doubt or more.

Interviewers indicated the reason for differences in racial classification for the 5.5% that did not match on race. As Table 3 shows, the major reason for disagreement (36.5%) involved respondents with Hispanic backgrounds.² In many cases interviewers classified them as White or Black (usually the former) based either on their physical characteristics (i.e. European or African ancestry) and/or the interviewer's perception that Hispanic was a ethnicity rather than a race. In terms of physical criteria one interviewer noted "his skin is black, I'd say he's a black Hispanic." In terms of whether Hispanic is an acceptable racial category two interviewers observed "Hispanic is not a race and yet he says it is" and "Hispanics think of themselves in a separate category sometimes." But the disagreements also ran in the opposite direction with some respondents choosing White or Black while the interviewer had assigned them as Hispanic (e.g. "Most Hispanics think of themselves as Hispanic not White or Black.").

Second, in 16.2% of the cases respondents rejected racial classifications. One said "I don't believe in the concept of race, I consider myself genetically mixed as are all Americans," the

²In addition to the references cited in the first paragraph studies on measuring the race and ethnicity of Hispanics include Aguirre, 1993 and Zimmerman, et al., 1994.

interviewer recorded in another case that "the R did not want to be classified as any race," and in several cases respondents listed their race as "human."

Third, 14.9% were missing a code on one of the measures.

Fourth, 6.8% represented a biracial person in which the respondent chose one race and the interviewer the other (e.g. "He identifies with his 50% heritage of Indian blood.").

Fifth, 5.4% involved interviewers seeing no physical resemblance between the respondent and the race he/she identified with (e.g. "He looked White, I didn't think of another race," "R hardly has any features of Indian," and "I think he's just trying to be a wise guy. He's Spanish and whiter than me.").

Sixth, 4.1% of respondents identified with a race that they admitted they didn't biologically belong to (e.g. "I was born White, but consider myself Native American. I'm not, but I consider myself.").

Seventh, 4.1% involved simple mispunches in which the race entered did not reflect what was written down. Strikingly, these involved three of the four cases of apparent switches between Black and White. With these removed there was only a single case in which a person was classified as Black under one procedure and White under the other.

Eighth, 4.1% consisted of people in groups that fall near the dividing line culturally and biologically between Whites and Asians (e.g. Kurdish and Iranian).

Ninth, 2.7% concerned people classified as Black by the interviewer, but Other by self, because the respondent objected to the label "Black" (e.g. "I consider myself Negro which is Brown.").³

Tenth, 2.7% were people classified as White who mentioned terms that were coded as Other even though they did not contradict being coded as White (e.g. Jewish and White American).⁴

Finally, 2.1% were people who identified with the race of

³On racial labels for Blacks see Smith, 1992.

⁴Some terminology differences also show up among the descriptors people consistently classified as White or Black by interviewer and self-identification. For self-identification interviewers were asked to fill-in the term used. For Whites a majority (58.1%) didn't write in anything. This probably partly came about because in the standard race question fill-ins were used exclusively for the Other race category. But mostly it appears to reflect the fact that the person mentioned the precoded term (White or Black). White was listed by 22.6% and the remaining 19.3% gave close approximations to White (Caucasian, White English American, White Caucasian, etc.). (This was based on only a sample of 31 cases because the text was not data entered. A full analysis would undoubtedly reveal additional terms.) A similar pattern prevailed for Blacks.

their spouse or significant other. In one case in which a woman was listed by the interviewer as White, but called herself Other, the interviewer noted, "She is living with a Black man and I think she was trying to appear closer to him." In another case a combination of inter-marriage and geography apparently contributed to a difference in classification. The respondent was born in New Zealand and was of Irish ancestry. She married and had a child with a native Hawaiian (and probably lived in Hawaii) and later divorced and moved to the mainland. She was coded as White by the interviewer, but called herself a "Pacific Islander" (Other).

Another comparison can be made by examining the exact terms utilized among the cases classified as Other by both methods (n=74). First, 55.7% used exactly the same labels both times. Second, for 18.0% the respondent used a term more detailed than, but consistent with, the label that the interviewer utilized (e.g. a nationality rather than a regional reference, such as Filipino vs. Asian). Third, for 11.5% the interviewer supplied a narrower term than the respondent did (e.g. such as Indian vs. Asian and Chamorro vs. Pacific Islander). Fourth, for 11.5% a term was missing for one procedure. Finally, for 3.2% there was some conflict between the terms. In one case the interviewer classified a person as Indian, but that person said "I like all races, they're human beings. It doesn't matter." In another case the interviewer used Hispanic and the respondent Spanish. This creates a conflict only under rules that would classify Spanish as European/White and Hispanic as Other.

Disagreements are related to the complexity of a person's ethno-racial background. Among those who could name no ancestry on the ethnicity items, conflicts appeared for 2.0% of the cases. This group consists mostly of people whose ancestors came to the US many generations ago and heavily consists of Whites from the South and Blacks (Smith, 1980, 1982, 1984). Among those mentioning two or more ethnicities, but all from the same racial region (e.g. European or Asian), there were disagreements for 3.7%. Among those with two+ ethnicities with two+ racial regions represented, there were conflicts for 7.0%. But in reverse of this pattern of more diverse backgrounds producing more disagreements 7.5% of those with a single ethnicity had differences. This largely comes about because of Hispanics in the single ethnicity group. For 35.5% of Hispanics with one ethnicity there were disagreements, but there were differences for only 4.8% of non-Hispanics with a single ethnicity.

Conclusion

Overall there are minimal differences between racial classifications by interviewer observation and self-identification. At most 5.5% of the cases disagreed and this counted as disagreements all cases with missing data, misspunches, subtle differences in terminology, and refusals of respondents to chose a racial category. Cases in which interviewers and respondents actually assigned different races amounted to only 3.3% of cases.

The main source of the conflicts concerns the classification of Hispanics (36.5% of all and 61.2% of cases involving two different races).

Disagreements due the different classification of mixed race people accounted for only 6.8% of all conflicts (or 11.4% between two different races).⁵

Various arguments can be made in favor of racial classification by self-identification or observation. On the one hand, the absence of precise, scientific standards for racial classification in general and the problem of assigning mixed-race people in general argues in favor of self-identification. Race, so this point of view goes, is a matter of psychological affiliation with a group and only the individual can express his/her identification. On the other hand, while acknowledging the absence of codified and purely objective standards, race is not a groundless concept and most researchers and respondents have a shared idea of what the term refers to. Racial categories are socially defined and since they are based on visible, physical characteristics, race can be determined by observation. Of course both methods can lead to what, by some standards, could be considered errors of classification. Self-identification leads to a number of people refusing to classify themselves and others mentioning language, nationality, or religion rather than race. Observation clearly leads to mislabeling and can only function if races are limited to gross distinctions between physically distinct groups. If cultural criteria (e.g. Spanish language and heritage) are important elements of racial classification or if distinctions are desired between physically similar groups (e.g. Chinese and Koreans), then observation is inadequate.

Switching to the self-identification standard would make the GSS more consistent with the Census and most other surveys.⁶ However, if the GSS adopted self-identification, this would disrupt the GSS time series because self-identification produces a greater proportion Other than interviewer observation does. How much change would occur would depend on the precise self-identification item adopted. Selecting the item used in this experiment would presumably lead to a change along the lines of what was reported in Table 1. However, this item is substantially different from the

⁵On classification of mixed-race respondents see Carey, et al., 1996 and Johnston, et al., 1996.

⁶Actually for the Census and Current Population Survey the situation is complex. The race of all members of the household is assigned by a household informant. That person may or may not consult the other members or the household and may or may not know the racial self-identity of other household members. Most surveys that select a random respondent are telephone and for that reason must rely on self-identification. The National Election Studies, which like the GSS is based on personal interviews for its main surveys, has used interviewer observation since 1952.

Census self-identification item and if the rationale for change was to follow Census procedures, then the size and even nature of the shift is uncertain. Moreover, at present it is not possible to adopt a Census standard since the Census race item is under review. If the Census has a new procedure settled upon by the Fall of 1997, we should consider adopting an experiment similar to this one with the goal of comparing the GSS to the new Census standard.

Table 1

Racial Distributions by Methods

	Standard	All by Observation	By Self- Identification
White	80.8	81.7	77.9
Black	13.2	12.9	12.6
Other	6.0	5.4	9.5
Missing	(0)	(5)	(5)
	(1439)	(1465)	(1465)

Table 2

Consistency of Racial Classifications

		Self-Identification			
		White	Black	Other	Missing
Interviewer Observation	White	1129	3	57	5
	Black	1	181	7	0
	Other	4	0	74	0
	Missing	4	0	1	0
		(1465)			

Table 3

Reasons for Disagreements in Racial Classification

Hispanics	36.5
R Rejects Racial Classification	16.2
One Classification Missing	14.9
Mixed Race	6.8
Physical Features Don't Match	5.4
R Identifies with Other than Biological Race	4.1
Mispunches	4.1
Other Races	4.1
Black Terminology	2.7
White Terminology	2.7
Current Intermarriage	2.7
	(82)

Figure 1

1996 GSS Race Experiment

A. CODE WITHOUT ASKING FOR ALL EVEN IF UNCERTAIN.

White.....1
Black.....2
Other (SPECIFY) _____ 3

B. FOR THE RACIAL CLASSIFICATION YOU JUST ASSIGNED IN "A" INDICATE HOW SURE YOU WERE OF RESPONDENT'S RACE.

NO DOUBT IN MY MIND.....1
SOME DOUBT, BUT PRETTY SURE.....2
A LOT OF DOUBT, PRETTY UNSURE.....3
COMPLETELY UNSURE.....4

C. ASK EVERYONE:

What race do you consider yourself? RECORD VERBATIM AND CODE.

White.....1
Black.....2
Other.....3

IF RACE CODED IN "A" DISAGREE WITH RACE CODE IN "C", ANSWER "D".
IF RACE CODED IN "A" AND RACE CODED IN "C" AGREE, GO TO [NEXT QUESTION].

D. WHY DO YOU THINK YOUR RACIAL CLASSIFICATION OF THE RESPONDENT IN "A" DIFFERED FROM RESPONDENT'S SELF-CLASSIFICATION IN "C"?

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Appendix 1: GSS Ethnicity Items

From what countries or part of the world did your ancestors come?

IF SINGLE COUNTRY IS NAMED, REFER TO NATIONAL CODES BELOW AND ENTER CODE NUMBER IN BOXES:

IF MORE THAN ONE COUNTRY NAMED, REFER TO NATIONAL CODES BELOW, CODE UP TO 3 RESPONSES AND THEN ASK A:

A. IF MORE THAN ONE COUNTRY NAMED: Which of these countries do you feel closer to?

ETH1, ETH2, and ETH3 contain respectively the first, second, and third mentions. ETHNIC is the summary measure. It consists of either single mentions of countries (i.e. no mentions in ETH2 or ETH3) or the country one feels closer to as determined by part A. ETH1-3 have been coded since 1984. Before then only ETHNIC is available. In addition, ETHNUM indicates whether a respondent named one country, named two or more countries and chose one, named two or more countries and couldn't choose one, or couldn't name any country.

There are 34 prelisted national codes, plus an Other (Specify) code:

Africa	1	Mexico	17
American Indian	30	Netherlands (Dutch/Holland)	18
Austria	2	Norway	19
Belgium	36	Philippines	20
Canada (French)	3	Poland	21
Canada (Other)	4	Portugal	32
China	5	Puerto Rico	22
Czechoslovakia	6	Rumania	35
Denmark	7	Russia (USSR)	23
England and Wales	8	Scotland	24
Finland	9	Spain	25
France	10	Sweden	26
Germany	11	Switzerland	27
Greece	12	Yugoslavia	34
Hungary	13	Other (Specify)	29
India	31		
Ireland	14		
Italy	15		
Japan	16		
Lithuania	33		

Codes 1-29 were the original codes used since the inception of the GSS. Code 30 (American Indians) was added in 1974 and codes 31-36 (Belgium, India, Lithuania, Portugal, Rumania, and Yugoslavia) were added in 1978. These six additional codes represented all countries which accounted for at least 0.1 percent of cases from 1972 through

1977. Also, in 1978 one original precode, West Indies (28), was deleted from the National Codes since it referred neither to a country nor a distinct ethnic group. After 1977 code 28 became a category representing West Indies (Not Specified) and was recoded from the Other (Specify) precode.

The ethnic variables also employ five collective recodes: Arabic, Other Asian, Other European, Other Spanish, and West Indies (Non-Spanish). These categories are created from specific mentions in the Other (Specify) precode. In addition, the category America (97) is created from mentions of the United States or parts thereof.

Remaining in the Other (Specify) category are a few countries that do not clearly fit into the group codes (e.g. Lebanon, Armenia, Brazil, Israel) and any unspecified or unidentifiable mentions.

In addition to the five group categories that are created by recoding specific mentions from the Other Specify category, a number of precoded categories are broad enough to cover more than one ethnicity. These include Africa, American Indian, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, England and Wales, India, Russia (USSR) {which includes Ukraine}, Switzerland, and Yugoslavia.