
El Foro

Killing two birds with one stone? Why we need two separate questions on race and ethnicity in the 2020 census and beyond*

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Abstract The lack of theoretical and methodological clarity about “race” and ethnicity is a major stumbling block for mapping and ameliorating inequalities among Latinas/os and other marginalized groups in the United States as well as across the globe. In this article, I examine the findings of the Alternative Questionnaire Experiment Final Report of the 2010 U.S. Census. I explore the value-added by analyzing the social outcomes of Latinos by ethnicity (national origin, ancestry, cultural background) and race (racial status). I argue that you cannot kill two birds with one stone; you cannot capture two analytically distinct concepts with one question.

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Race and Ethnicity as Analytically Distinct Social Constructions and Pathways of Inequality

The lack of theoretical and methodological clarity about “race” and ethnicity is a major stumbling block for mapping and ameliorating inequalities among Latinas/os and other marginalized groups in the United States as well as across the globe (Omi and Winant, 1994, 70). To address this problem, I along with my colleague Laura Gómez co-founded the Institute for the Study of “Race” and



Social Justice at the University of New Mexico.¹ The mission of the Institute is to promote the establishment of empirical, theoretical and methodological clarity about “race” that draws on cutting-edge thinking from multiple disciplines and diverse empirical traditions.

I place “race” in quotes to call attention to the myth of race as biology and to underscore that race is a socially constructed category of social status in particular historical contexts, rather than a reified category that is essential or fixed. Despite the fact that “race” is neither rooted in biology (or genetics) nor fixed in time and space, social hierarchies based on race impact US society at all levels and in multifaceted ways across a variety of social institutions, including schools, neighborhoods, mass media, health-care access and outcomes, criminal justice and law (American Sociological Association (ASA), 2003). A fundamental assumption of the work of the Institute is that “race” is the fundamental axis of stratification that is analytically distinct from ethnicity and class (Omi and Winant, 1994; Bonilla-Silva, 1999, 2005; López, 2003, 2013; Gravlee *et al*, 2005; Jones *et al*, 2008; Collins, 2009; Transdisciplinary “Race” Working Group, 2010; LaVeist-Ramos *et al*, 2012; Griffith, 2012; Turner *et al*, 2013).

The European colonization of indigenous people and the enslavement of people of African descent produced very different “social races” in the Caribbean and Latin America, centuries before the United States was established as an independent nation (Wagley, 1975). For example, although I was born and raised in public housing in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, New York City, I share the same ethnicity as my Dominican immigrant parents and Spanish is my first language. Despite all of these cultural similarities, my father, who is light-skinned and not of discernible so-called “African phenotype”, occupies a very different racial status than my mother and me who are racialized as Black women in most circumstances in the United States and beyond.



(Photograph of Nancy López and parents, Ramon López and Maria López, March 2012; courtesy of Nancy López)

Regardless of intention, the unintended consequence of the proposal to create “Hispanic” as a racial category in the United States is negation of the fact that

¹ In Fall 2011, Dr. Laura Gómez joined the faculty at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). As of Fall 2011, Dr. Nancy López directs the Institute. We are grateful to Dr. Robert Valdez, former executive director, RWJF Center for Health Policy, for providing seed funding for the inauguration of the Institute in January 2009.

distinct “social races” have been part and parcel of Latin American and Caribbean societies since the Americas of the late fifteenth century. In other words, the legacy of the enslavement of indigenous and African peoples in the Americas has produced hierarchies that are independent of national origin and ethnicity and instead map onto social hierarchies that are based on phenotype, color and a constellation of other social characteristics (Wagley, 1975; Gravlee *et al*, 2005).

In this article, I examine the findings of the Alternative Questionnaire Experiment (AQE) Final Report of the 2010 US Census (Compton *et al*, 2012). I depart from the premise that the primary purpose of the collection of national and local data on race and ethnicity is to assess our progress in creating a more perfect union for all. Over the last four decades the “gold standard” for the collection of racial and ethnic data is collecting self-identified data whenever possible; however, the gold standard needs to also consider the importance of the collection of race and ethnicity data that allows civil rights organizations and researchers to monitor and assess race and ethnic discrimination as distinct pathways of inequality. I explore the value added by analyzing the social outcomes of Latinos by ethnicity (national origin, ancestry, cultural background) and race (racial status.) I argue that you can’t kill two birds with one stone; you can’t capture two analytically distinct concepts with one question.

AQE Findings: Combined Question Leads to Less Detail on Latina/o National Origins and Ethnic Background

In a significant departure from Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Guidelines that require the collection of Hispanic ethnicity/origin as separate from race (racial status), the AQE tested questionnaire formats that included “Hispanic” as a race (Compton *et al*, 2012). The first and only time that a specific Hispanic origin group was included in the US Census race question was when “Mexican” was listed as a race in the 1930 Census. Beginning in 1960, the Census has allowed individuals to self-identify their race, and self-identified race data have become the “gold standard.” Previously, enumerators reported the race or racial status of the homes they visited by observation. In 1980, the “Hispanic origin” question was asked of everyone who filled out the Census and this is the case up until the present day (Rodriguez, 2000; Roth, 2010; Rodriguez *et al*, 2013). Since the 2000 Census, individuals have been able to mark one or more race.

The major impetus for vetting a variety of combined questionnaire formats was the fact that in the 2000 Census 97 per cent of respondents marking “some other race” alone identified as Hispanics (Humes and Hogan, 2009). Over the past two decades, anywhere from 37 to 43 per cent of Hispanics have eschewed identifying with any of the standard racial categories and instead write their national origin



or some other Hispanic identifier under the “some other race” category. Indeed, in the 2000 and 2010 Censuses the “some other race” category was the third largest “race” after Whites and Blacks.

Census officials have declared the “some other race” phenomenon a major problem that impedes their ability to report “accurate” and “reliable” data to the OMB for the administration of federal programs (Humes and Hogan, 2009, 125). To ameliorate this “problem,” the AQE tested a variety of streamlined questionnaire formats that included Hispanic as a racial category along with White, Black, American Indian and Asian. Depending on the format, a write-in space was provided so individuals could write in their “origin” or ethnic affiliation in the same question as their race.

On 8 August 2012, officials from the US Census Bureau held a press conference to unveil the 2010 AQE results. The report hailed the combined questionnaire format as a success on two fronts. First, it did indeed dramatically reduce the number of Hispanics who marked “some other race.” Whereas in the two-question format well over a third of individuals identifying as Hispanic marked “some other race,” under the streamlined versions less than 1 per cent did so. The second success story of the combined format was that it did not result in an undercount of Hispanics. This was a major finding because there was a real concern that a combined questionnaire might contribute to an undercount of the Latina/o population.

Despite the success of the combined questionnaire format, it did have a costly negative unintended consequence. The AQE found that the combined questionnaire format, which combined Hispanic origin with race, produced less detailed information on Latinas/os.² In other words, although we solved the problem of having over a third of Latinos identify as “some other race,” and we didn’t miss counting any Hispanics, we did know less about their national origin and racial status. Nevertheless, the AQE report concludes with a major recommendation to further test and refine the combined questionnaire formats in preparation for the 2020 Census. Noticeably absent from the list of recommendations was any call to further test what is lost or gained by the streamlined versus two-question format in terms of civil rights monitoring and enforcement. This is in large part because of the rearticulation of the purpose of the data collection from civil rights monitoring and enforcement to focusing instead on the identities of people filling out the survey:

The ultimate goal should be to develop a racial and ethnic classification system that will allow the multi-cultural population to self-identify their heritage in the most meaningful manner possible, yet will still provide the critical data needed for the enforcement of Civil Rights laws and monitoring equal access. (Humes and Hogan, 2009, 127)

Although well intentioned, the problem with the rearticulation of the purpose of racial and ethnic data collection from civil rights enforcement and monitoring to collecting “identities” is that race is more than just an identity; it is a social status in a particular sociohistorical and political economic context. One’s racial

2 I use the terms Latinas/os and Hispanic interchangeably.

status is independent from one's ethnic identity; it is usually an ascribed status based on the meanings attributed to a combination of one's physical appearance and gender in a given context. For example, in 2012, Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African American young man, was accosted and murdered by George Zimmerman (the adult son of a Peruvian immigrant mother and a non-Hispanic White man). In 2013, George Zimmerman was declared "not guilty beyond a reasonable doubt" because he acted in self defense. What is important to recall here is that Zimmerman's conclusions about Trayvon Martin's alleged criminality would not have been any different if Trayvon's ethnicity had been Peruvian, Puerto Rican, Mexican or Dominican. After all, it was not his ethnicity that made Trayvon fit the "profile" of a criminal; it was his racial and gender status. In my book, *Hopeful Girls, Troubled Boys: Race and Gender Disparity in Urban Education*, I found that regardless of how second generation Caribbean youth in New York City identified their ethnicity (for example, Dominican, West Indian, or Haitian) they were racialized in very similar ways – as Black young men in the United States (López, 2003). The majority of these young men spoke about navigating multiple microaggressions where they were cast as potential criminals in public spaces, schools, and workplaces, as well as in their neighborhoods. Although race-gender profiling is hegemonic and legal, injustices and even murder of young men racialized as Black, regardless of their ethnic identities, will continue to be justified in the criminal (in)justice system as "common sense."

Rearticulating the So-Called "Some Other Race" Problem as an Opportunity for Exploring Differences in Social Outcomes

As a sociologist of racial, ethnic and gender stratification, I see the phenomenon of "some other race" as an empirical and analytical goldmine. For example, the 2010 Census identified very unique responses to the race question among Latinas/os. For example, Cubans, the last Latin-American country to abolish African slavery, had the highest number of people identifying as White alone (85 per cent), as well as one of the highest numbers of individuals identifying as Black alone (5 per cent). Dominicans were the least likely to report race as White alone (30 per cent) and most likely to report as Black alone (13 per cent), as well as "some other race" and "multiple race." About half (53 per cent) of Hispanics who identified their national origin as Mexican reported their race as White alone and 39 per cent reported their race as "some other race." These variations in responses to the race questions should not be construed as a problem or as "inaccurate" or "not reliable." Rather, these differences reflect the reality that Latinos are racialized in very different ways. This reality represents a research opportunity for examining the heterogeneity of the lived experiences and social outcomes of Latina/o communities *vis-à-vis* housing, criminal justice,



educational attainment and labor market outcomes; however, it is not clear whether the AQE report explored any of these differences.

What do we gain from analyzing the heterogeneous responses of Latinos to the race question? Logan (2003) analyzed social outcomes for three large groups of Hispanics: White Hispanics, Black Hispanics and Hispanic Hispanics (aka those Hispanics who identify with the “some other race” category); he found that White Hispanics fared better than those identifying differently. Hispanic Hispanics were somewhere in the middle and Black Hispanics were subjected to similar levels of segregation as others who identified their race as Black.

There is mounting evidence that there are very distinct social outcomes in terms of intermarriage, housing segregation, educational attainment, prison sentencing, labor market outcomes and so on that vary for Latinos according to racial status. In other words, Latinas/os who identify and/or are racialized as “some other race,” White or Black may have very different experiences with discrimination and social inequality (Logan, 2003; López, 2003; Jones *et al*, 2008) across a variety of social outcomes, including housing segregation (Massey and Denton, 1993; Logan, 2003; Telles, 2006; Turner *et al*, 2013); health (Jones *et al*, 2008; LaVeist-Ramos *et al*, 2012); education (Telles and Murguía, 1996); criminal justice (Steffensmeier and Demuth, 2000); and employment (Rodríguez *et al*, 2011). Each of the aforementioned studies collected race and ethnicity data via a minimum of at least two distinct questions. If we collect data on race and ethnicity as interchangeable concepts we may miss the opportunity to examine whether there are unique experiences among diverse co-ethnics that may occupy very different racial statuses (See also Telles, 2006; Rodríguez *et al*, 2011; Vidal-Ortiz, 2004; Qian, 2005 and U.S. Census, 2010).

Although the Census engages in further testing and refinement of questionnaire formats for race and ethnicity data collection, it is important to remember why we collect and analyze race and ethnicity data in the first place: the focus is to assess our progress in civil rights enforcement. Data collection on race and ethnicity is used by federal, state and local agencies to monitor discrimination and segregation in housing (Fair Housing Act), labor market participation (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission), political participation (Voting Rights, Redistricting), educational attainment (Department of Education), health (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Vital Records) and criminal justice (Department of Justice), among other policy areas.³ To be sure, the 1964 civil rights legislation clearly distinguishes race, color, religion, national origin and sex as analytically distinct domains for monitoring and investigating discrimination (see also Turner *et al*, 2013). If we agree that the key purpose of data collection on race and ethnicity is to monitor our progress in creating a more perfect union for all, then we should consider several questions:

- To what extent is one’s ethnicity (cultural background) conceptually interchangeable with race (racial status) as a social position in society?

³ The AQE also tested versions of the questionnaire that omitted the word race – a position that is in direct opposition to the ASA (2003) Race Statement.

- Do these data allow us to monitor and ameliorate patterns of inequality among entire categories of people by race (racial status) and ethnicity (cultural/national origin/ancestry/generational status) as analytically distinct pathways of inequality?
- What is lost or improved by asking about race and ethnicity in one question or two separate questions? How will data be analyzed for monitoring civil rights enforcement?

A compelling question remains: If the OMB already includes Hispanic origin as a federally recognized group that should be monitored for civil rights enforcement and the allocation of federal funding, what, if anything, is to be gained from moving Hispanic from ethnic group to racial group?

- Who has the power and legitimacy to make the final decisions about national data collection on race and ethnicity?
- To what extent are critical masses of Latina/o scholars, policymakers, civil rights organizations and other communities that experience on-going and historic discrimination included in the decision-making process for national guidelines and data collection systems for monitoring and ameliorating discrimination based on race and ethnicity?

Given our changing demographics and diverse immigration streams, there are also other measures that could be important for assessing other pathways of inequality. For example, the parental place of birth question would allow us to investigate the social outcomes of the second generation (children of immigrants).⁴ The collection of these data would allow us to examine patterns of inequality related to national origin and immigrant status (for example, first-generation immigrants who came to the United States as adults, versus second-generation US-born children of immigrants).⁵

4 This question was replaced by an ancestry question in the 1980 Census.

5 Since 1980, the parental place of birth question has been replaced by the ancestry question (Humes and Hogan, 2009).

Establishing Conceptual Clarity about Race and Ethnicity for Interrogating Inequality in the Twenty-First Century

The need for conceptual clarity about race has never been greater. These data continue to serve policymakers, community members and scholars as critical for assessing patterns of inclusion and exclusion for groups of people over long periods of time. Nevertheless, Census officials assert that “there is no firm distinction between ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity,’ as both are dimensions in group identity. Groups currently considered ‘ethnic’ or ‘national’ were once viewed as separate ‘races’ ” (Humes and Hogan, 2009, 111). This assertion neglects the fact that race is more than just an identity; race is a multi-dimensional and multi-level social construction that is constitutive of social structures that are permeated by inequalities that persist in housing, health, education, labor markets and political power (Omi and Winant, 1994; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008; Collins, 2009).



A second potential problem with this claim is that it paves the way for the replacement of the term “race” with the term “ethnic group” or “ethnicity.”⁶ Although well intentioned, eliminating the term “race” from our discourse will do little to ameliorate discrimination, and it may even contribute to the maintenance of the *status quo* (Omi and Winant, 1994; Dubois, 1999; ASA, 2003; Bonilla-Silva, 2005; Gomez, 2007 and Gomez and López, 2013).

The conflation of race and ethnicity has a long history. Although written over six decades ago, the UNESCO race statement calls attention to this long-standing problem. Although the primary purpose of the UNESCO race statement was to affirm the common humanity of the *Homo sapien* race, embedded in this forward-thinking document was the assertion that ethnicity, national origin and ancestry are not analytically equivalent:

To most people, a race is any group of people whom they choose to describe as a race. Thus, many national, religious, geographic, linguistic or cultural groups have, in such loose usage, been called ‘race,’ when obviously Americans are not a race, nor are Englishmen, nor Frenchmen, nor any other national group. Catholics, Protestants, Moslem [sic] and Jews are not races, nor are groups who speak English or any other language thereby definable as a race; people who live in Iceland or England or India are not races; nor are people who are culturally Turkish or Chinese or the like thereby describable as races. (Doniger, 1950, 10)

The social constructions of race and ethnicity have very different genealogies:

There are two other reasons to keep race and ethnicity separate. First, race initially is assigned externally, whereas ethnicity is often a matter of self-assertion. Second, race is intrinsically connected to power relations and hierarchy; ethnicity is not. Race is a way of otherizing, of excluding. Ethnicity is a way of asserting distinctiveness and creating a sense of commonality (Bonilla-Silva, 1999, 903)

I applaud the Census for proceeding with caution before recommending major changes in national data collection systems that will shape how we assess civil rights enforcement for generations to come. I am particularly optimistic about the strategic partnerships between the Census, OMB and diverse civil rights organizations, scholars, researchers and communities working toward creating a more perfect union for all. However, while further versions of the combined questionnaire formats are tested, it is imperative that *this testing is tied to assessing measurable outcomes that are relevant for civil rights monitoring and enforcement*. Currently, it is not clear whether the advantages or disadvantages of a two-question versus a combined-question format are being assessed in terms of the ability to interrogate patterns of inequalities in social outcomes such as residential segregation, among other areas of inequality (Compton *et al*, 2012).

6 In June 2013, France officially eliminated the term “race” from its legal monitoring system. The AAA (1997) and the 1950 UNESCO Race Statement also recommend elimination of the term “race” and replacement with the term “ethnicity” (Doniger, 1950). It remains to be seen whether the United States will follow this so-called “colorblind” path (Bonilla-Silva, 2005; Omi and Winant, 1994).

The value added by the extra “real estate” of having two separate questions on race and ethnicity, not only for Hispanics but also for other groups that have experienced historic and ongoing inequality (for example, Native Americans, Blacks, Asians and Middle Eastern communities), surely outweighs the costs of having poor data that equate ethnicity, cultural background, ancestry and origin with racial status. In the end, if we depart from the premise that race and ethnicity are two analytically distinct social constructions and pathways of inequality then we will require two different questions. You just can’t kill two birds with one stone.

About the Author

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