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Cognitive Testing of NCHS Race Questions
Interviews Conducted July 8 – September 23, 2002
in the Questionnaire Design Research Lab, NCHS
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Overview

This report describes the QDRL project to analyze the racial identity follow-up question for respondents reporting more than one race, specifically the question: “Which one of these groups, [READ GROUPS], would you say best represents {your/name’s} race?”

The purpose of cognitive analysis was to 1) better understand respondents’ interpretations of the question as well as the processes by which responses were constructed; such information would help to determine the type of information collected by the question, and 2) identify potential problems in the question leading to response error, item non-response or respondent burden.

Two rounds of cognitive interviews were conducted. The first round, consisting of 20 interviews, was conducted with participants of multiple race backgrounds. An interpretive analysis of the first round interviews revealed that while a majority of participants responded according to a cultural understanding of race (i.e. the racial group to which they feel the strongest sense of affinity or belonging), some participants based their responses on other dimensions of racial identity (e.g. how they believe others perceive them or a percentage breakdown of their genealogy). Some participants had difficulty determining the question’s intent or could not determine which criteria upon which to base their answer. Consequently, these participants were unable to or required additional effort to provide a response.

In analyzing these first round interviews, four dimensions of racial identity were identified as conceptualizations that individuals use when reporting race: cultural, social, administrative and ancestral. To improve the relevancy of the follow-up question for respondents as well as to provide respondents with clearer direction, the question was re-written as four separate questions, each worded specifically to capture these various dimensions of race. Additionally, the questions were written in a yes/no format so, if the particular dimension of racial identity was not relevant to the respondent, this could be recorded as a “no” response.

The second round of interviews, consisting of 10 participants, was conducted to continue examination of the “best represents” question as well as to examine the re-written questions. The revised questions were as follows:

Cultural: Do you feel like you belong to or relate to one of these groups [READ GROUPS] more than the other? Yes/No If yes, which one?

Social: Do you believe that you are identified more often by other people as belonging to only one of these groups, that is [READ GROUPS]? Yes/No If yes, which one?

Administrative: In the past, have you reported one of these groups, [READ GROUPS] more often than the other(s) for official purposes such as driver's license, employment or school applications? Yes/No If yes, which one?

Ancestral: Thinking about your ancestral background, that is your blood relatives, do one of these categories, [READ GROUPS], reflect more of your family tree? Yes/No If yes, which one?

Analysis of the second round interviews suggests that the four re-written questions produce little to no respondent burden, are relevant to participants and are consistent with participants' conceptualizations of racial identity. Because the "best represents" question was primarily conceptualized as a cultural question (in both rounds of interviews), it is recommended that consideration be given to replacing the "best represents" question with the cultural version—with this change data content will remain consistent, yet respondent burden and non-response are likely to diminish. It is also recommended that additional cognitive work be conducted with participants from differing racial groups, specifically those with Asian and Native American backgrounds, as well as with proxy respondents.

Methods

Sample. The NCHS Cognitive Methods Staff (CMS) conducted 30 in-depth, semi-structured cognitive interviews. Participants were recruited from an advertisement running in the Washington Post (see Appendix A). Potential participants were individuals who considered themselves as having a multiple-race background or who had a child with a multiple-race background. Recruited participants were paid 75 dollars to participate in the study. The final sample consisted of 23 women and 7 men between the ages of 19 and 65. Of the 30 participants, 18 participants reported an annual household income of \$30,000 or above, 3 reported an annual income between \$20,000 and \$30,000, 8 reported an annual income below \$20,000. (One participant did not provide an annual income.) Two participants did not receive a high school diploma, 23 held at least a high school diploma, and 5 held at least a bachelor's degree.

The racial composition of the sample consisted primarily of participants who had black and white racial backgrounds. However, some of the participants reported an American Indian descent and a few reported an Asian descent. It is difficult to give a precise account of the racial composition; participants were asked to report their race four times across their participation in the study, and reporting varied depending on the

particular format of the question. The following chart illustrates the racial composition as participants identified themselves 1) in the initial phone screening, 2) when completing the research consent paperwork, 3) when responding to the racial identity question in the cognitive interview, and 4) when describing their racial background in the open-ended component of the interview.

	Black White	Black White Indian	Black Indian	White Indian	Black Asian	White Asian	Asian Black Indian	Black White Asian	White	Black	Other	NR DK	Total
Phone Screen	17	7	0	0	0	2	0	1	3	0	0	0	30
Consent Form	14	2	0	0	1	1	0	0	4	5	0	2	30
Cog. Int. Race Quest.	13	3	2	0	1	1	0	0	4	1	3 (Other, BWO, WO)	0	30
Cog. Int. Open-ended	10	13	0	1	0	2	1	0	3	0	0	0	30

Interviewing protocol. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in the NCHS Questionnaire Design Research Laboratory. The average length of interviews was 75 minutes. Each interview varied depending on participants' racial background and their conceptualizations of racial identity.

The interview protocol was developed specifically so that the questions would be consistently tested across participants but also so that conceptualizations of racial identity could be explored. The protocol consisted of three parts: 1) Participants were administered the initial part of the National Health Interview Survey for which the individual and all family members were accounted and demographic information, including the racial identity questions, was collected in a straight-forward manner, typical of a survey interview. 2) After this more formal interchange, the questions were repeated using cognitive interviewing techniques; Interviewers asked in-depth, emergent probe questions to fully understand how the participant interpreted the question and constructed a response. In the cases where participants were unable or had difficulty providing an answer, the interviewer asked questions specifically toward understanding the nature of the difficulty. 3) Participants were asked open-ended questions relating to their conceptualization of racial identity as it pertains to their everyday experience (see Appendix B for protocol). As such, the interviews were semi-structured based on the particular circumstances of the participant and their perceptions of the proposed question.

Interviewers were all trained and experienced in conducting open-ended qualitative interviews. To this extent, data from the interviews hold the capacity of providing an in-depth understanding of the types of response patterns respondents may use when constructing a response to the questions as well as potential response errors that may occur when responding to each question.

Analysis of interviews. Analysis was conducted from transcribed interviews and Interviewer notes. The text of the interviews was collated by question so that comparisons could be made systematically across all participants. Two levels of analysis were then performed. First, distinct occurrences in which participants specifically expressed difficulty or confusion while answering were noted. Second, participants' interpretations of each question were examined. To analyze the interpretive aspects of question response, the constant comparative method, a standard method for analyzing qualitative data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Creswell, 1998), was employed. By comparing across all cases, individual responses were categorized according to a participant's particular interpretation of a question. From these categories, interpretive aspects (e.g. the consistency and degree of variation among participants) of each question were examined.

Findings

Twenty-four participants reported multiple races in the initial portion of the cognitive interview and were, consequently, screened into the "best represents" question. Of those 24 participants, 13 had no difficulty reporting an answer and described the question as relevant to their personal experience. Seven participants, however, experienced some difficulty discerning the intent of the question—specifically, the intent of the phrase "best represents." With additional consideration and reflection, these participants were able to report a racial category that they felt "best represented" their race. Three participants were unable to discern what they deemed a "legitimate purpose" for the question and refused to provide an answer.

"Best Represents" Question Interpretation:

Those 21 participants, who responded to the question, based their answer on one of four different dimensions of racial identity:

- 1) socially, by the way in which they believed others most often perceived them (This was based on their perception of their physical characteristics or what others have said to them.)

"If I were light-skinned and had long straight hair, I might tell you white best represents [me]. ... When I look in the mirror, I see a black man."

- 2) culturally, by the particular community in which they felt a stronger sense of belonging,

"I was raised that way [as an African-American.] I was taught the things that you teach your son and daughter to look out being not white in this world. Growing up in the South, you know, you had to understand what you do and what you don't do to keep the family surviving, from your house being burnt down."

- 3) administratively, by the way in which they (or their parents) most often reported their race in administrative or official capacities, such as with birth certificates, driver's licenses, and employment or school applications,

“In reality, it's who do you say you are, like [what] you say on your forms.”

- 4) and ancestrally, by the group which composed the largest percentage of their genealogy.

“If you look at the [family] tree, I'm like over 85 percent white.”

Participants who had no trouble responding immediately interpreted the question as inquiring into one of these dimensions. Those who had difficulty but who ultimately provided an answer also based their answer along one of these dimensions. These participants, however, required additional time and effort (in some cases a substantial amount) to make sense of the question within a social, cultural, administrative or ancestral framework. Those who refused to provide an answer did not conceptualize the question as inquiring into one of these dimensions, but rather stated that they were unsure, if not skeptical, of the question's intent because they saw it as dismissive of their multiple-race backgrounds. These three participants viewed the question as an unreasonable attempt to classify respondents within standardized race categories.

Of the four potential ways of interpreting the question, almost two-thirds of the participants who answered the question interpreted and responded to the question through a cultural understanding. That is, in answering the question, most participants chose the racial group to which they felt a stronger sense of belonging. Not surprisingly, in the open-ended section of the interview, almost all participants described “race” as constituting a cultural component, including “the clothes you wear,” “how you talk,” “where you live,” “who you hang out with” and “how you were raised.” Only a few participants stated that they conceptualized “race” solely on the basis of skin color.

“Best Represents” Question Response Problems:

As indicated earlier, the primary difficulty with the question arose when participants did not have a clear picture of its intent, that is, when they did not immediately see that the question was asking about one of the four dimensions of racial identity. This lack of clarity was due to the wording “best represents,” which is relatively broad and provides little direction for question interpretation. As such, the question leaves respondents with much discretion in determining what is actually being asked. When participants had difficulty determining an interpretation for “best represents,” they could not immediately provide a response:

Participant: Best represents my race? Even if I consider myself one [white] and two [black]?

Interviewer: Yes, ... does that seem weird?

Participant: Yes, it seems...because you said what do I consider myself and I said one [white] and two [black], and then you said which one best represents your race. But if I consider myself.... I don't understand how one can [best represent me]. Is there a neither choice or I have to pick one? I have to pick one?

Furthermore, because of the broad possibilities for interpreting the question, a few participants viewed the question as disregarding the fact that they had just identified as multi-racial and was looking to categorize them within one of the “more legitimate,” standardized categories. Instead of interpreting the question as asking about one of the four racial identity dimensions (as the majority did), these participants viewed the question as asking, “What race are you, really?” Consequently, these participants took offense to the question:

Interviewer: What does the question mean to you?

Participant: That meant that I should make a choice between, you know, which one should represent me. It's like I say I'm black and white, and people say no, well, which one are you? and I say no, I'm black and white. No, no, no, which one are you? I'm black and white, and that's who I am. I'm not black OR white, I'm black AND white. So, to me, the question represents having to make a choice of who I am, and the person that I am is black and white. I might identify more with one race or the other because, you know, of who I'm close with, you know, the relationships that I have, likes and dislikes even, but, at the same time, I am black and white.

Finally, it should be noted that a couple participants considered the category “biracial” to be a racial category on a par with the categories “black” and “white,” and were reluctant to provide any other response. This type of problem occurred most often with participants who had one white parent and one black parent. In one case, a bi-racial participant considered herself as having three races (black, white and bi-racial) and, consequently, reported “white,” “black” and “some other race.” For the best represents question, she then reported “some other race” which she understood as “biracial.”

New Questions Using Racial Identity Dimensions:

Because of the problems identified in the “best represents” question, four new questions deriving from the four racial dimensions were written and then tested in the second round of interviews. The questions are as follows:

Cultural: Do you feel like you belong to or relate to one of these groups [READ GROUPS] more than the other? Yes/No If yes, which one?

Social: Do you believe that you are identified more often by other people as belonging to only one of these groups, that is [READ GROUPS]?
Yes/No If yes, which one?

Administrative: In the past, have you reported one of these groups, [READ GROUPS] more often than the other(s) for official purposes such as driver's license, employment or school applications? Yes/No If yes, which one?

Ancestral: Thinking about your ancestral background, that is your blood relatives, do one of these categories, [READ GROUPS], reflect more of your family tree? Yes/No If yes, which one?

It was expected that these questions would prove to be more successful in eliciting responses because they were created inductively, that is, directly from multi-racial individuals' conceptualizations of racial identity. Additionally, the questions were not vague; they provided participants with explicit direction about what to consider and did not require participants to think through conceptualizations of race identity. Finally, the questions were written in a yes/no format so that if, by chance, participants deemed a question irrelevant, they could answer "no" without feeling forced into providing a contrived answer.

The findings from the second round interviews indicate that, for the most part, the expectations regarding the new questions were correct. While four of the ten participants experienced some type of difficulty with the "best represents" question, no one experienced any difficulty with the four new questions. All participants easily answered all four questions. Even participants who were offended by the "best represents" question and who refused to provide an answer had no difficulty or misgivings with the re-written follow-up questions. This is clearly represented in the following interview passage with a participant who had taken offense to the "best represents" question:

Interviewer: Which one of these groups, that is black or white, would you say best represents your race?

Participant: That's a horrible question. I wouldn't answer the question.

Interviewer: Okay. So you would just kind of refuse to answer?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. We'll come back and talk about it, but let me finish the questions first.

Participant: Okay.

Interviewer: Do you believe that you're identified more often by other people as belonging to only one of these groups?

Participant: Correct.

Interviewer: Okay. Which group?

Participant: Black.

Interviewer: Okay. And of those categories, white or black, have you reported one group more often than the other for official purposes, such as employment and school applications?

Participant: No.

Interviewer: Okay. And do you feel like you belong to or relate to one of these groups more than the other?

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. And which one?

Participant: Black.

Interviewer: Okay. And do any of those categories, that's white or black, reflect more of your ancestral background or your family tree?

Participant: No.

While every participant provided a response to each of the new questions, some participants (like the participant above) reported "no" to some of the questions. The

following chart outlines each participant’s response to the “best represents” question as well as the 4 new questions:

	Best Represents	Social	Administrative	Cultural	Ancestral
Participant 1	*Black	Yes, Black	No	Yes, Black	No
Participant 2	Other/Black	Yes, Black	Yes, Black	Yes, Black	Yes, Other/No
**P3: Mother	Black	Yes, Black	Yes, Black	Yes, Black	Yes, Indian
**P3: Father	Other	Yes, Other	Yes, Black	Yes, Black	Yes, White
Participant 4	*Black	No	Yes, Black	No	No
Participant 5	*Black	Yes, Black	Yes, Black	Yes, Black	No
Participant 6	White	Yes, White	No	Yes, White	Yes, White
Participant 7	*Refused	Yes, Black	No	Yes, Black	No
Participant 8	White	Yes, Black	No	Yes, White	No
Participant 9	Black	Yes, Black	Yes, Black	Yes, Black	No
Participant 10	Black	Yes, Black	Yes, Black	Yes, White	Yes, Black

* Indicates that the participant had difficulty responding to the question

** Participant 3 did not identify herself as having a multi-racial background though she reported her mother and father as being multi-racial. The data in the chart represents her proxy report for both her mother and her father.

Of the four new questions, the ancestral dimension received the most “no” responses. This was due to the fact that most of the second round participants had one white parent and one black parent and, therefore, saw their genealogy as being equally black and white. Nevertheless, none of these participants had any difficulty or misgivings with this question; though it did not pertain to them, it was seen as a valid question with a legitimate purpose.

Most notably, though the majority of second round participants had one black parent and one white parent, the new questions (particularly the social and cultural questions) were relevant and meaningful to participants. Only one participant answered “no” to the social and cultural question. It should also be noted that participants considered their response to each of the new questions uniquely and according to the particular racial dimension posed by the question. No one suggested that the questions were redundant or were eliciting indistinguishable pieces of information.

Recommendation

It is recommended that consideration be given to replacing the “best represents” question with the cultural version for two reasons. First, because the cultural version is more specific and clearly directs respondents to consider a particular component of their racial identity, response burden as well as item non-response are likely to improve. Secondly, because the “best represents” question was primarily conceptualized as a cultural question (in both rounds of interviews), it is expected that the data would remain consistent despite the wording change.

It is also recommended that additional cognitive work be conducted to ensure that the new cultural question works as well with other racial groups, specifically Asian and Native American, as it did with White and Black participants. None of the second round participants were of Asian descent. Furthermore, additional cognitive work should be conducted with proxy respondents to ensure that the questions work as well with respondents who are answering for other members of their household.

\$75 CASH!

ARE YOU:

- Multi-racial
- Bi-racial
- Of mixed heritage
- Or think you might be?

OR

DO YOU HAVE:

- Parents or Grandparents who were each of a different race, or
- A Child, Parent or Grandparent who is two or more different races?

If you answered “yes” to any of the above questions and are 18 years or older, you are eligible to participate in an interview about race questions on health surveys for a study conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics. Interviews will be conducted in English and will last no longer than 1 ½ hours. All participants will be given \$75 as a token of our appreciation!

For more information call:

Appendix B

Interview Guide: Round One

Interviewer Instructions: 1) Administer questions without cognitive probes, 2) Administer questions again using cognitive interviewing techniques, 3) Follow-up cognitive interviewing with the additional in-depth probes.

Explain purpose of the project: To examine race and ethnicity questions that will be used on health surveys and what people consider when answering the questions.

*Explain format of the interview:
will ask the survey questions then, will discuss their answers then, will ask them some additional questions about your racial background that will help us have a better understanding of race and racial identity*

Part 1 and 2: NHIS Demographic Questions and Cognitive Probes

NAME

What are the names of all persons living or staying in your home? Start with the name of the person, or one of the persons, who owns or rents your home.

Interviewer directions: Loop through all household members

SEX

{Are/Is} {you/name} male or female?

Male _____

Female _____

AGEDOB

What is {your/name} age and date of birth? Please give month, day, and year for the date of birth?

Age= _____

Date of Birth= _____

NATOR

{Do/does} {you/name} consider {yourself/himself/herself} to be Hispanic or Latino?

(Where did {your/name's} ancestors come from?)

Yes.....1 (Go To HISPAN)

No.....2 (Go To RACE)

Probe: Why do you say that? How difficult is this question to answer?

HISPAN

Please give me the number of the group that represents {your/name's} Hispanic origin or ancestry. You may choose up to five (5), if applicable.

- Puerto Rican.....1
- Cuban/Cuban America.....2
- Dominican (Republic).....3
- Mexican.....4
- Mexican American.....5
- Central or South American.....6
- Other Latin American.....7
- Other Hispanic/Latino.....8
- Refused.....97
- Don't Know.....99

Probe: How did you get your answer? How easy was this to answer?

Probe: Have you ever heard of the word "ethnicity?" What does it mean to you? Does it mean the same thing as "race?"

RACE

What race or races {do/does} {you/name} consider {yourself/himself/herself} to be? Please select 1 or more of these categories.

- White.....1
- Black/African American.....2
- Indian (American).....3
- Alaska Native.....4
- Native Hawaiian.....5
- Guamanian.....6
- Samoaan.....7
- Other Pacific Islander.....8
- Asian Indian.....9
- Chinese.....10
- Filipino.....11
- Japanese.....12
- Korean.....13
- Vietnamese.....14
- Other Asian.....15
- Some Other Race.....16
- Refused.....97
- Don't Know.....99

Probe: How did you come up with your answer? Is there another category that would fit better?

MLTRAC

Which one of these groups, that is [READ GROUPS], would you say BEST represents {your/name's} race?

_____ enter race

Probe: Why do you say that? Do you have any problems answering this question?

Part 3: Follow-up Questions

Ancestral History:

What is your lineage on your mother's side? Father's side?

Racial Identity— as defined by others:

Do your family members think of your race the same way that you think of it?

How about friends and co-workers?

Have school systems or government officials defined your race differently from how you would define it?

(Instruction: Ask if any of these questions relate to other any other household members)

Racial Identity--as defined by Self:

Earlier you said that you saw yourself as [fill in], have there been times in the past when you thought of yourself differently? When were those times?

Do you define yourself differently when you are among different friends?

Do you define yourself differently when you are among different family members?

Have you ever defined yourself differently for applying to school systems? Applying for jobs?

Filling out government forms?

(Instruction: Ask if any of these questions relate to other any other household members).

Interview Guide: Round Two

Part 1 and 2: NHIS Demographic Questions and Cognitive Probes

NAME

What are the names of all persons living or staying in your home? Start with the name of the person, or one of the persons, who owns or rents your home. (Loop through all HH members.)

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

SEX

{Are/Is} {you/name} male or female?

Male _____
Female _____

AGEDOB

What is {your/name} age and date of birth? Please give month, day, and year for the date of birth?

Age= _____
Date of Birth= _____

NATOR

{Do/does} {you/name} consider {yourself/himself/herself} to be Hispanic or Latino? (Where did {your/name's} ancestors come from?)

Yes.....1 (Go To HISPAN)
No.....2 (Go To RACE)

[Probe: What does the term “Hispanic” mean to you? What does “ethnicity” mean? Does it mean the same thing as “race?”]

HISPAN

Please give me the number of the group that represents {your/name's} Hispanic origin or ancestry. You may choose up to five (5), if applicable.

- Puerto Rican.....1
- Cuban/Cuban America.....2
- Dominican (Republic).....3
- Mexican.....4
- Mexican American.....5
- Central or South American.....6
- Other Latin American.....7
- Other Hispanic/Latino.....8

RACE

What race or races {do/does} {you/name} consider {yourself/himself/herself} to be?
Please select 1 or more of these categories.

- White.....1
- Black/African American.....2
- Indian (American).....3
- Alaska Native.....4
- Native Hawaiian.....5
- Guamanian.....6
- Samoan.....7
- Other Pacific Islander.....8
- Asian Indian.....9
- Chinese.....10
- Filipino.....11
- Japanese.....12
- Korean.....13
- Vietnamese.....14
- Other Asian.....15
- Some Other Race.....16

MLTRAC

Which one of these groups, that is [READ GROUPS], would you say BEST represents {your/name's} race? _____ enter race

Probe: Why do you say that? Do you have any problems answering this question? What does "BEST represents" mean to you?

SOCIAL IDENTITY

Do you believe that you are identified more often by other people as belonging to only one of these groups, that is [READ GROUPS]?

Proxy: Do you believe that [NAME] is identified more often by other people as belonging to only one of these groups?

Yes No Which one? _____

[Probe for all: What do you think this question is asking? Can you put it into your own words?]

OFFICIAL IDENTITY

In the past, have you reported one of these groups [READ GROUPS] more often than the other(s) for official purposes such as driver's license, employment or school applications?

Proxy: In the past, has [NAME] reported one group more often than the other(s) for official purposes such as driver's license, employment or school applications?

Yes No Which one? _____

CULTURAL IDENTITY

Do you feel like you belong to or relate to one of these groups [READ GROUPS] more than the other?

Proxy: Does [NAME] feel like [he/she] belongs to or relates to one of these group more than the other?

Yes No Which one? _____

[Probe: Does “relate to” mean the same thing as “belong to?”]

ANCESTRAL IDENTITY

Thinking about your ancestral background, that is your blood relatives, do one of these groups [READ GROUPS] reflect more of your family tree?

Proxy: Thinking about [NAME’S] ancestral background, that is {his/her} blood relatives, do one of these groups reflect more of {his/her} family tree?

Yes No Which one? _____

Part 3: Follow-up Questions

Ancestral History:

What is your lineage on your mother's side? Father's side?

Racial Identity— as defined by others:

Do your family members think of your race the same way that you think of it?

How about friends and co-workers?

Have school systems or government officials defined your race differently from how you would define it?

(Instruction: Ask if any of these questions relate to other any other household members)

Racial Identity--as defined by Self:

Earlier you said that you saw yourself as [fill in], have there been times in the past when you thought of yourself differently? When were those times?

Do you define yourself differently when you are among different friends?

Do you define yourself differently when you are among different family members?

Have you ever defined yourself differently for applying to school systems? Applying for jobs?

Filling out government forms?

(Instruction: Ask if any of these questions relate to other any other household members)