Cognitive Interview Evaluation of the Revised Race Question, with Special Emphasis on the Newly Proposed Middle Eastern/North African Response Option

National Center for Health Statistics
Collaborating Center for Questionnaire Design and Evaluation Research

Stephanie Willson
Sheba K. Dunston

Introduction

Efforts are underway to modify the standardized race and ethnicity questions present on many surveys in the Federal Statistical System. Specifically, two changes are being considered. One includes combining what was two separate questions on race and ethnicity into one question. A second change is the adoption of a new response option for respondents of Middle Eastern or North African (MENA) descent. This report summarizes findings from a cognitive interview evaluation of the newly proposed race question, with special emphasis on the new MENA category. The purpose of the study was to understand how the question functioned both overall and for respondents with MENA backgrounds. Cognitive interviewing was used to understand interpretive patterns and identify any difficulties in the question-response process (Willis 2005; Miller et al., 2014). As a study in question validity, this research documents the phenomena being captured by the question and discusses the question-response process in terms of any difficulties exhibited by respondents. Additionally, because federal surveys are administered different ways, the question was tested in two modes: a self-administered mode (consistent with that being considered by the U.S. Census Bureau) and an interviewer administered mode (consistent with the National Health Interview Survey format).[1]

This report has three sections. The next section briefly describes the study methodology, including the procedure for sampling, the data collection method, and analysis plan. The third section of the report presents the findings, including four distinct patterns that formed the foundation for how respondents decided to report their race and ethnicity.

Methodology

Sampling and respondent characteristics

Sample selection for the project was purposive. The aim was to choose respondents who met criteria relevant to the study; therefore, recruitment focused on obtaining respondents from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. Although emphasis was placed on respondents with MENA backgrounds, it was important that sample composition included respondents of all backgrounds, as defined by the response options. Recruitment was carried out through a combination of flyers, special interest groups, and respondent word-of-mouth (i.e., snowball sampling).

The demographic breakdown of respondents appears in Tables 1 and 2. A total of 89 interviews were completed. Most respondents were either Black/African American (26), White (25) or MENA (23). Eleven were Asian, four were Hispanic/Latino, two were American Indian/Alaska Native and one was Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander (see Table 1). Additionally, there were fairly even numbers of

[1] Each version can be seen in Figures 2 and 3 in the Appendix

different ages, genders, and educational attainment (see Table 2). A limitation of this study is that, due to recruitment challenges and time constraints, the sample did not include respondents from all categories. Most notably there were no respondents with Israeli backgrounds and only four Hispanic respondents.

Table 1: Respondent Race and Ethnicity, as Reported in Survey Instrument*

Race/Ethnicity	Number
White	**25**
German	10
Irish	7
English	7
Italian	1
Polish	3
French	1
Other (Specify = Scottish, Dutch, Scots-Irish, Danish)	8
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish	**4**
Mexican or Mexican American	1
Puerto Rican	0
Dominican	0
Cuban	0
Colombian	0
Salvadoran	1
Other (Specify = Honduras, Chile)	2
Black or African American	**26**
African American	17
Haitian	0
Ethiopian	3
Jamaican	1
Nigerian	0
Somali	2
Other (Specify = Black, American, Kenyan, East African, Oromian, Gahanna, Sudanese, Guinea)	9
Asian	**11**
Chinese	2
Filipino	0
Asian Indian	4
Vietnamese	0
Korean	1
Japanese	0
Other (Specify = Pakistani)	4
American Indian or Alaska Native (Specify)	**2**
Middle Eastern or North African	**23**
Lebanese	4
Iranian	1
Egyptian	4
Syrian	2
Moroccan	4

Race/Ethnicity	**Number**
Israeli	0
Other (Specify = Saudi, Sudanese, Iraqi, Armenian, Berber, Yemeni, Palestinian, Jordanian)	13
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	**1**
Native Hawaiian	0
Samoan	0
Chamorro	1
Tongan	0
Fijian	0
Marshallese	0
Other (Specify)	0
Something Else (Specify = Jewish, Armenian)	**2**

*Numbers do not add to denominators because more than one option could be selected.

Table 2: Respondent Age, Gender, and Education (n = 89)

	Number
Age	
18-29	27
30-49	36
50-64	13
65 and over	12
Missing	1
Gender	
Male	45
Female	43
Other	1
Education	
Less than high school	2
High school diploma or GED	19
Associate's degree	8
Some college, no degree	7
Bachelor's degree	25
Graduate degree	28

Data collection

Staff at the Collaborating Center for Questionnaire Design and Evaluation Research (CCQDER) conducted all 89 interviews. Forty-six respondents received the interviewer-administered version and 43 received the self-administered version. Most interviews were conducted off-site; only two were conducted at the CCQDER laboratory. Prior to the interview, respondents filled out several forms, including a consent form to allow audio-recording of the interview and a Respondent Data Collection Sheet to record demographic information. Once paperwork was completed, the interviewer described the mission of NCHS, the purpose of the current study, and how the interview would take place. Interviews lasted no longer than one hour, and a $40 token of appreciation was given to each respondent.

The race question was embedded among several other demographic questions in order to simulate a line of questioning typical of many survey instruments. The instrument began with a question on age, followed by race, marital status, and educational attainment. Interviewers first administered the survey questions as intended under actual field conditions and obtained respondents' answers to all the questions. The self-administered version was completed by the respondent, while the interviewer-administered version was read to respondents. The second part of the interview consisted of retrospective probing designed to capture contextual insight into the ways in which respondents interpreted the question, considered and weighed out relevant aspects of their lives, and formulated a response based on that consideration. Although several demographic questions were asked, interviewers probed only on the race/ethnicity question.

Upon completion of the interviews, all were transcribed and uploaded into Q-Notes, a software application for data storage and analysis of cognitive interviews. Eleven interviewers of varying levels of experience participated in data collection. A training session was held for all interviewers, but especially for those with less experience. Additionally, the use of Q-Notes allowed the Principle Investigator to monitor data quality as interviews were being completed.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted according to the grounded theory approach, which inductively generates explanations of how respondents answered the race and ethnicity question. This method generates explanations of response error and various interpretive patterns that are closely tied to the empirical data. This includes the constant comparative method of analysis, in which analysts continually compare data findings to original data, resulting in data synthesis and reduction (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Strauss and Corbin 1990; Suter 2012).

Analysis was conducted from the transcribed interviews. Several levels of analysis were performed, per Miller et al. (2014). First, analysts synthesized interview data into summaries, detailing how each respondent interpreted the question and formulated their answers. Next, analysts compared summaries across respondents, identifying common themes. Once themes were identified, analysts compared themes across subgroups, revealing ways in which different groups of respondents processed the question differently depending on their differing experiences and socio-cultural backgrounds. Finally, analysts drew conclusions, determining and explaining how the question performed as it functioned within the context of respondents' various experiences and socio-cultural locations. In each analytic step, data were reduced into a theoretical summary detailing the question's performance. As such, these different analytic steps represent both data reduction and a movement toward larger conceptual themes. These themes are discussed next.

Findings

The Question-Response Process of Reporting Race

For some respondents, reporting race and ethnicity is always a straightforward task that requires little retrospection or thought on their part. These respondents approached this question on race and ethnicity in much the same way they would approach any question on race and ethnicity, giving little thought to their reply. In other words, they answered the question in much the same fashion they might report age. One respondent said, "I'm Black. Have always been Black and always known I've been Black…it's just sort of a constant fact of my existence." White respondents often reflected this pattern as well. Having

never had to explain why they answer “White” on standardized race questions, many had trouble articulating what it means to be “White”. They just “knew” that they were. One respondent said, “I don’t really think about it that much...I don’t ever think of, like, being Welsh. I just think I’m White because that’s what we have to mark ourselves when asked.”

However, for most respondents, reporting race was more of a process that took some thought in the context of this particular survey question. These respondents could report their race in different ways, and sought to provide an answer that was commensurate with the intent of this particular question as they understood it. For example, one respondent who marked “MENA” then “Moroccan” often chooses both “Black” and “White” on forms that do not offer the MENA category. When asked how he decides upon a category, he said, “Usually when I come to that part [questions on race], it’s a little bit tricky. Because when I’m applying to it [jobs] they have mixed race…no, sorry, they have ‘Other’. Okay? But when I go, for example, to do dating, they have ‘Mixed Race’. Okay? So it’s a little bit tricky. Not all of them they have the same options. They have different options.” He went on to explain how his answer can change, “When you’re talking about ethnicity, I’m mixed. I can be Black. I can be Middle Eastern.”

This phenomenon was apparent in the differences between answers respondents provided on the Respondent Data Collection Sheet and the survey instrument. Before participating in the cognitive interview, respondents completed the Respondent Data Collection Sheet which is standard for all CCQDER projects. The form is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Respondent Data Collection Sheet

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

Public Health Service
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

National Center for Health Statistics
3311 Toledo Road
Hyattsville, Maryland 20782

OMB# 0920-0222; Approval expires 07/31/2018

Respondent Data Collection Sheet

This form asks for basic information about you. At the end of the study, your information will be combined with information from other people in the study and will help us form a picture of the characteristics the people who participated in our study. For our records we would appreciate it if you would take a minute to fill out this form.

1. How did you hear about us?
☐ Washington Post/Express ☐ Craigslist ☐ Email list
☐ Flyer ☐ We called you to come back ☐ Friend

2. What is your gender?
☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other ____________

3. What is your age?
____

4. What is your marital status?
☐ Married ☐ Divorced ☐ Widowed ☐ Separated ☐ Never been married ☐ Living with a partner

5. Are you Hispanic or Latino?
☐ Yes ☐ No

6. What is your race? Mark one or more races to indicate what you consider yourself to be.
☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
☐ Asian
☐ Black or African American
☐ Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
☐ White

7. What is the highest level of school you have completed?
☐ Less than High School (No Diploma or GED)
☐ High School Diploma or GED
☐ Associate Degree
☐ Some College
☐ Bachelor's Degree
☐ Graduate Degree

The race and ethnicity questions are formatted differently on this form compared to the questions tested in this project.[2] There are two important differences between the Respondent Data Collection Sheet version and the cognitively tested survey instrument. First, there is no Middle Eastern or North African (MENA) category on the Respondent Data Collection Sheet. Second, the Hispanic category is listed as an ethnicity question, separate from the main race question on the Respondent Data Collection Sheet, but is combined into one question in the survey instrument tested here. Each version produced different frequencies; that is, there were differences in how respondents reported race on the Respondent Data Collection Sheet compared to the survey instrument. These results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Responses on Survey Instrument vs. Respondent Data Collection Sheet

Race/Ethnicity	Survey Instrument	Respondent Data Collection Sheet
Middle Eastern or North African	23	n/a*
White	25	44
Hispanic Latino or Spanish	4	5
Black or African American	26	34
Asian	11	12
American Indian or Alaska Native	2	1
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	1	2

[2] Figures 2 and 3 in the Appendix show both the interviewer- and self-administered race/ethnicity questions as cognitively tested for this project.

Race/Ethnicity	Survey Instrument	Respondent Data Collection Sheet
Other	2	n/a

*One respondent wrote in "Middle Eastern"

There were at least 23 instances where respondents' selection on the survey instrument differed from their selection on the Respondent Data Collection Sheet. The biggest difference in reporting of race was among respondents with MENA backgrounds. Table 3 shows that the number of Whites decreased from 44 on the Respondent Data Collection Sheet to 25 on the survey instrument. Similarly, the number of "Black/AA" decreased from 34 to 26. Respondents with MENA backgrounds checked "White", "Black/AA", or both "White" and "Black/AA" on the Respondent Data Collection Sheet. In contrast, on the survey instrument respondents with MENA backgrounds often included "MENA" in their answers. They chose both "White" and "MENA" (n = 13) or "Black/AA" and "MENA" (n = 4) or only the "MENA" category (n = 10). Clearly, the structure of the question, specifically the response option choices, alters the way some people report race. The next section discusses how the structure of the question influenced the question-response process for the race/ethnicity question.

The Impact of Question Structure on the Question-Response Process

Because the structure of this race question was different from most forms and surveys they have encountered, many respondents processed this question differently. The detailed response categories – in particular the addition of MENA – caused respondents some initial confusion. For example, one respondent with an Iranian background crossed off her initial answer of "Persian" under "White" because she did not immediately see the MENA option. In explaining she said, "Because usually this [MENA] won't be listed…I was like, whoa, this threw me off." She went on to explain, "Anything that asks me what my background is, I always check 'White'. I guess it also has to do with the fact that I consider myself White more than Middle Eastern just because I grew up here, I was born here, I connect more with American culture. But also in the fact that there was never an option, anyway, for Middle Eastern, Iranian." With the addition of the category, she answered "White" and "MENA-Iranian" on the form. Another respondent was so unaccustomed to being offered a MENA category that he actually did not see it among the response options, and initially marked "White". When he began to complain that the "White" category was not accurate for him, the interviewer pointed to the MENA category and, after expressing surprise, the respondent changed his answer to MENA.

The detailed categories and the combined race/ethnicity feature of the question caused some to report their race in a way that was slightly different from what they would normally do, or in a way that was slightly different from the way they normally think about themselves. For example, one respondent, who usually checks 'White' and 'Hispanic' on forms, did not choose 'White' on this form. Thinking he could only select one, he chose "Hispanic" and then "Mexican". He said, "So if 'Hispanic' had been an option under 'White', then I would have chosen 'White' with a subcategory of 'Hispanic'. But since it was equal weight on there, I chose 'Hispanic' because it was more appropriate than 'White'." Another respondent from Kenya also had to adjust her normal response process. She said:

> *Usually I just say 'Black or African American' and I'm done. But then I saw that you had included…oh, you can say that you were Nigerian and you could say that you were from Somalia. Which means it just sort of cared what country in Africa I was from, or that I was African. Because it's never had that…I was like, 'Oh, I can put Kenya.' Usually you're just lumped in with Black and African American.*

A respondent with Egyptian-born parents answers “Black/AA” on most forms. In explaining why that is his usual response, he said, “Egypt is an African country. Whenever I see a standardized test, I always put African American.” But on this form he chose MENA because it’s more reflective of his family background and in line with the way he thinks about himself. He said, “It’s not about physical appearance. It’s about heritage or where you were born. Not physical appearance.” In sum, many respondents went through a different question-response process with this question than they do with other standardized questions on race and ethnicity.

Specifically, there were four distinct patterns that formed the foundation for how respondents decided to report their race and ethnicity. These patterns are similar to those found by Miller and Willson (2002) and are labeled as cultural, ancestral, administrative, and social. Although the patterns are heuristically distinct, in reality they are not mutually exclusive and may have elements that conceptually overlap. Respondents used these different patterns alone and in combination when thinking about how to report their race. Moreover, the patterns that they chose to frame their responses were informed not only by their personal life experiences, but also by the structure of the question, specifically, the level of detail in the categories and the introduction of atypical categories (e.g., MENA). The next section explains each pattern and demonstrates how respondents used them when answering the survey question.

Ways of Thinking About Race/Ethnicity

Cultural Pattern: The most common pattern that provided the basis for respondent answers was tied to feelings of connectedness to a group. The label “cultural” is meant to capture the idea that respondents often based their answers about race and ethnicity on a feeling of connectedness to a group that arises from shared cultural ideas or experiences. The concept of connectedness to a group manifested several ways: having a common sense of place, a shared group experience, or a shared culture.

<u>Shared Sense of Place</u>: Some respondents described a shared race/ethnicity cultural experience as simply growing up in homogeneous communities. Many White respondents expressed this sentiment. Being “White” was expressed as growing up in White neighborhoods. When asked to describe being “White”, one person said, “It’s just growing up, everybody was White.” Another respondent had a similar response, “There is nobody in my neighborhood who wasn’t White. We were the whitest of white…we weren’t exposed to anyone who wasn’t White.” When pushed for more clarification, some gave nebulous replies. One respondent associated “Whiteness” with suburban life. When asked to explain he said, “I grew up in the suburbs of anywhere USA, right down to the Wonder Bread and Marshmallow Fluff.”

Other respondents described this connectedness to group as where they were “born and raised.” This was especially prominent among immigrant respondents or respondents who were first or second generation American citizens. One respondent chose the MENA category because, he said, “I was born in Sudan and I would consider myself like anybody growing up in Africa and belong to that earth. And I’m tied to the continent of Africa. At any time, I consider myself of the African people because we were born over there.” A respondent from India who answered “Asian” then “Asian Indian” expressed the same thought. She said, “I’m from India…I grew up there. I was born there.” Even though she has been in the United States for nine years, she still thinks of herself as Indian. “I think the family is the most important thing. If you grew up there and your family’s there, that’s who you are. Because you remember the place you grew up forever…you will always be attached to the place where you are born.”

<u>Shared Group Experience</u>: A second dimension of group connectedness centered on feelings of a shared group experience. Black respondents often described being "Black" in terms of a shared history of oppression among Black Americans. For example, one respondent said, "I mean, I'm a Black lady living in the United States of America. We don't have the same privileges as anyone else. We have stuff stacked against us before we can even do anything." Another person said of being Black, "Well, I don't really want to say 'struggle', but that's part of it. Nothing comes easy. You have to work ten times as hard. Nothing is handed to you." When asked her thoughts about what it means to be Black, another respondent replied:

> *I'm basing it on how I was brought up. How I was treated. And that's how Black folks are treated. There were treated as if they were the lowest thing ever…When we were going to school…we had to pass a White school down the street from our house and walk 5 miles to another school that was one little room. That struggle ties Blackness, to me.*

That unique experience and history served to differentiate this group from other people of color who, although they may share similar physical features (e.g., African immigrants), are not seen as members of the same group. After choosing "African American" as her ethnicity, one respondent explained why it was not the best choice, "So in a sense I'm not African. I know my ancestors are from there. I don't know about the culture there. Well, I do, but I can't say I know from experience…I was born here. I'm a Black American. I'm not African." Another respondent had a similar reaction:

> *Out of the category [Black/African American], the only one [ethnicity subcategory] that kind of fits me is African American. But it doesn't sound right to me. I don't know their language. I think the whole demure of a Black American and African American is different. We were brought up different. We don't have anything in common.*

Another respondent said, "I don't consider myself technically African American. Kind of due to I don't know what my actual heritage is. So I just consider myself 'Black' because I don't know what ties to Africa I have." And another respondent when asked if 'Black' and 'African American' were the same said, "Not really. Because Black, we were born here. And African Americans came here. I was born here." One Black American respondent more directly expressed the idea that physical features have little to do with group membership. She said, "I mean, of course there are people from other cultures who look similar to me but aren't Black and don't consider themselves Black." She goes on to say, "I've seen African Americans treat Africans as a different thing and in a negative light…So I feel like, for better or for worse, 'African American' has become a separate sub-race from 'African'."

Respondents on the other side of this equation had similar thoughts. African immigrants did not necessarily associate their race/ethnicity with Black Americans. One respondent from Kenya said, "Some Africans don't consider themselves 'Black'. They're not African American, they're just African. They identify as African." When asked about herself, she continued, "I definitely would say I'm Kenyan. Because it's just culturally, when you're a child of both worlds, for someone else it may be different…I'm American [she became naturalized]…but culturally I am more Kenyan than I will ever be African American." One respondent from Somalia said, "So, I'm Black. But when you say 'African American' you're excluding those that come from Jamaica, come from other parts of Africa or…whatever." Another respondent from Somalia had difficulty choosing the ethnicity category under "Black/African American" for similar reasons. She said, "Well, I'm not American. I'm African, Africa. I would be glad if they put African…I mean Black African. It would be better." Another respondent from Ghana summed it up this way:

I personally don't like it [having to check 'Black/African American'] because there is two different, in my opinion, there is two different types of 'Black'. Ok, there is the ones that are from here. You know your entire family is from the United States and they are born and raised here. And I'm not trying to throw anything against them, but they act totally different from an African person. You know, I'm raised different from some of the Black people that I know were born and raised here with their family and everything from here. It's kind of different. We are raised different…So, I just, the only thing we have in common is skin tone.

<u>Shared Culture</u>: A third dimension of connectedness to a group was feeling a sense of shared culture. This was obvious among respondents who were born and raised in another country. When asked to explain his answer choice, one respondent from Jordan said, "The culture. Certain traditions, like food or lifestyle. So that's how you say you are." Another respondent marked "Asian" and wrote "Hmong" under "Something Else". In explaining his answer he said:

I think historically the Hmong people tend to identify themselves by being Hmong no matter where they live – by whether they live in the United States or any other country. Even though we originated from China, we identified ourselves as Hmong…We still maintain our native tongue, our mother tongue. We still maintain our culture."

A respondent from Ethiopia said, "From childhood, from our family, we speak Oromo language. Speaking Oromo language makes us Oromos. Then we are culturally connected to the Oromos. Psychologically connected to the Oromos. We grow up with the Oromo values, so we consider ourselves Oromo."

Providing an answer based on feeling culturally connected to a group occurred often among non-immigrant respondents as well. Respondents who marked "White" sometimes described their ethnicity according to their cultural understandings of the subgroup. One respondent marked "White", then "Irish" and "Other - Scots-Irish". He understood his strong personal work ethic as originating from ethnic traits. He said, "I do claim my ethnicity with great pride. There is a long history of the Scots-Irish. In essence, kind of how they built America. There's been books written about that." Similarly, another person who marked "White", then "German, Irish, English, and French" said, "I always have this idea in my head that this feisty part of my personality comes from the Irish and French side and the German and English part is more English tempered."

But by far it was non-White respondents who specifically connected culturally to their ethnic background and answered the question on this basis. Moreover, respondents from varied backgrounds – Hispanic, Black, Asian and MENA – all exhibited this pattern.

<u>Hispanic respondents</u>: One respondent who marked "Hispanic" and then "Honduras" said, "It means identifying and relating to the different parts of our culture – the language, the food, the country…because I was not born in Honduras, but I still consider myself to be Honduran." Another respondent who marked "Hispanic" and "El Salvador" had a similar rationale. He said, "Well, I wasn't born in El Salvador, but my parents were. I was born here, but I identify myself as being that race…because of my people. I identify myself with them. I grew up in the culture, so I guess you can say that's part of…to be that."

Black/AA respondents: Respondents who marked “Black/AA” also reported a cultural sense of connectedness to the group. One respondent said, “I was raised in a Black church. Everything was traditional…Afro-American things. Jazz. A lot of family traditions…my aunt sings, I sing, I dance. My uncle danced. A very athletic family – a lot of sports.” Another person said, “Culturally, I was raised in an African American culture…I grew up in [city] and they called [city], ‘Chocolate City.’ It’s a predominantly African American city, so it heavily influences the culture.” One respondent marked “Black/AA” but mentioned also having White and Native American in his background. When asked why he did not include those in his answer, it was because he was not culturally connected to those groups. He said, “No – I’ve been brought up Black, Black, Black. Raised in Black neighborhoods.”

Asian respondents: Exhibiting a similar pattern, one respondent marked “Asian” and checked “Chinese.” He did not mark “Taiwanese” even though his parents lived most of their life there. He explained, “Culturally I was thinking that because I’m more influenced by the Chinese culture and I love the Chinese culture…and I think it’s also because of the education. I was educated with lots of Chinese culture, and that’s probably a reason why I think of myself as Chinese instead of Taiwanese.” Another respondent chose “Asian Indian” because of “a lot of cultural things, like speaking Telegu, like singing. I did a form of Indian dance for ten years. I cook Indian food. I was socialized in an Indian way.”

MENA respondents: Finally, MENA respondents also reported a cultural connection to group. One respondent marked “MENA” and “Syrian.” She said, “I was definitely raised with a strong ethnic identity. We eat Syrian food, my grandparents spoke Arabic. My grandmother still speaks Arabic – that’s her preferred language.” One respondent chose “Other” and wrote in “Armenian”. He said, “I was raised as an Armenian. Armenian church. Armenian school on Saturdays. Armenian food.” A respondent who said she “self identifies as Black Iranian” explained, “Self-identification would definitely just come from the cultural upbringing that I’ve had, which would be the Iranian culture. Being Iranian-American first.” She goes on to say, “Iranian culture was my dominant culture. It’s what I knew. Being Bahai, being Iranian, that was basically it…you know, my food was Iranian, I spoke Farsi.” And finally, another respondent chose “MENA” and “Lebanese”. The cultural connection was clear to him. He explained, “Yeah, I was lucky because my grandparents lived with us. So they were always home and they just spoke Arabic and French to me. Until I started school I really didn’t speak a lot of English…so I would say the culture has also influenced me. I eat Lebanese food all the time.”

Additionally, respondents who chose the MENA category often based their answers on Arab culture more generally. This was seen as not defined by national borders, but rather by a common language and culture that tied people together as a group. As a result, respondents would sometimes write in “Arab” as their ethnicity under either the “White” category or the “MENA” category. When asked what it meant to be Arab, many respondents linked it directly to language. One respondent explained her selection of MENA by saying, “Because I speak Arabic. And we are from the Middle East, from Arab-speaking countries. So that’s why we consider ourselves Arab.” Another respondent also expressed the importance of language in defining the group. “In general, if you are in the Middle East, the color is not really an issue. Once you know how to speak the language, you’re considered one of the same group.” A respondent from Morocco chose that subcategory and explained, “The language is one of the common things that brings us together. Arabs are supposed to speak Arabic. But I’d say it’s more than that. It’s also the cultural aspects of it. The heritage. Our history.” One respondent marked “Palestinian and Jordanian” because she was born in Jordan but her family was originally from Palestine. But she also said she was Arab. When asked to explain, she said, “The Middle East is just one piece, and it’s just different countries, but we speak the same language, we have the same food. We can say, almost the

same traditions. You cannot separate, you are Arab or you are from Jordan. You speak Arabic and you are from the Middle East, you are Arab."

Ancestral Pattern: A second pattern that provided the basis for many respondents' answers was based on genealogy and ancestry, often colloquially referred to as a person's "family tree". This was especially true among White respondents who were accustomed to answering only "White" for standardized race questions. For example, one respondent who answered "White" said, "I identify as White and also my family history is from Northern Europe. So I have ancestral descendency from, you know, White areas." Another person answered "White" then "English" and "Other = Ukrainian". Explaining his answer, he said, "Because I'm 50% by blood. By blood I'm 50% Ukrainian and I think the other 50% is either pure English or probably some Dutch." Another White respondent checked "Irish" and "English". When explaining being "White", he said, "I don't know of anyone in my gene pool that is not White…I'm three quarters Irish and one quarter English if I put numbers on it."

Respondents with little sense of ethnicity often invoked this pattern of response. Their ethnic background was not a salient feature of their life in a cultural sense, but they still based their answer on their known genealogy. One respondent who checked "White" and "Polish" and "Other-Romanian/Russian" admits she did not think of herself in these terms. She said:

> *So those boxes I checked under 'White' are like the family tree. They're more factual as opposed to meaningful. And I'm not sure if that's because I'm White or because that's part of the way it is to be White in the United States – that a lot of White people don't have a strong connection to their family's ancestral homes. But those are the country names, the subset of White. [They] are not important parts of my identity.*

Respondents for whom ethnicity held little importance invoked this pattern to some extent because of the structure of the question. The level of detail in the response options led many respondents who never think of themselves as anything beyond "White" to provide an answer based on every possible nationality that may be part of their ancestry – even when that background held no special meaning for them. One White respondent explained:

> *Because it was a more detailed question than I am used to, I assumed more information is better than less. Because I am used to just White, Black, Hispanic, Asian…The way these details were asked are unusual and I haven't seen them before. So it made me feel like I should be thoughtful about it and be as thorough as possible.*

Another respondent checked "German, Irish, English, and French" even though she did not usually think of herself in those terms. Instead, she said, "I refer to myself as a typical American mutt." Others expressed a similar view and even used the same term, "mutt", to describe the phenomenon. One White respondent chose "German, Irish, English, French and Other = Scottish". She admitted having almost no cultural affiliation with any of those groups. To explain her answer she said:

> *Well, because for me, I knew I was a mutt. So to try to think about exactly…I don't know. It just seemed is it okay for me to check all these options? Am I truly…how much Irish do I really have in me? I just knew I was multiple things. So I could definitely check off the English because I primarily have a lot of British in me. I know I have Scottish in me. But it's just some of the other things that I sort of question that I heard was in my family background. But I haven't done the*

> *research myself. And you asked me about it and I'm like, well…so I've heard that's my background. It was difficult for me.*

Moreover, it was common among White respondents to check off answers for categories they were wholly unsure of. One respondent checked "Irish" and "English". She said:

> *What I've heard in my family…I've heard them talk about my heritage on my father's side was English. That's what I heard from the family grapevine. I also heard there was some Irish in there from my mother's side. This is all hearsay from the family. So I don't really have any real proof.*

One respondent checked "German, English, Irish, and Other = Dutch and Scottish". She was more certain of some than others, but decided to check everything that came to mind. However, the fact that she had difficulty trying to remember all ethnicities in her background illustrates the lack of importance this held for her. When asked how she chose to answer the question, she said:

> *It's everything I can think of. So if I had to say it was most salient, I'd probably go with German because I know the origins of my mother's maiden name and my dad's too. I probably would say German Scottish. But then another way I can think about it is, I think we are only a little Dutch and I think we are more German, English, and Irish. So I thought about it two ways. One is, what do I actually know about my family heritage and it anchors like that into the name…But then also I feel like a vague sense of something more…I just checked all that applied. I was trying to think about what was more…I did have a moment there where I thought there were mostly three, but I can't quite remember.*

Although the ancestral question-response pattern was most common among White respondents, respondents from other groups sometimes exhibited the pattern as well. The difference is that family background was often seen as more meaningful and important. One respondent marked "MENA" and "Egypt" saying, "I just selected what most closely relates to me and my family history…From what I know my parents are from Egypt, their parents are from Egypt. Pretty much from what my parents know, their entire family is from Egypt." Another respondent marked "White" and "Persian". She did not choose "MENA" because in thinking about her ancestry, her roots go back further than modern classifications. Her family has deep roots in Iran, "At least like a thousand years. We have a family tree on my dad's side and it's like a thousand years…I have it. I have it framed. And my mom's side too. They go way back."

Respondents who were immigrants or first or second generation Americans also used this pattern to answer the question. In particular, the nature of the response options prompted them to think of countries they or their ancestors had immigrated from. One respondent who marked "MENA" and "Egyptian" explained, "I guess heritage is Egyptian. My parents were Egyptian. They were born and raised there. The whole line is Egyptian. I don't know what else to say – they're all Egyptian." The question was easy for one person who marked "MENA" and then "Jordan". Born in Jordan, he explained, "In the Middle East they follow family name. Which goes back 400 to 500 years. Most of them will have a family tree, which is normally only men…I saw that tree myself, in my family. It originated a long time ago. That's basically how we know where we originated." Another respondent marked "Black/AA" and "MENA" then "Iraq". In explaining his answers he thought about genealogy and where his family was from. He said, "My mom is African American, my dad is about, majority

Middle Eastern, because his father is from the Middle East. And my mom is basically born and raised in [city], so pretty African American. Dad was born in [city] and his dad was born in Iraq."

Exception: Not Reporting American Indian

As stated above, White respondents often answered the race/ethnicity question by providing every possible race and ethnicity they thought might be in their ancestry. The one exception to this was the American Indian category. Respondents felt they needed ironclad evidence of this ancestry in order to choose it, and even then they would not do so if it was deemed to be a small fraction of their genealogy or not a personally relevant life experience. However, Black and (to a lesser extent) Hispanic respondents similarly would not report American Indian – and for similar reasons. The only difference is that while White respondents would list *every* possible ethnicity they could think of except American Indian, Black respondents chose *only* "Black/African American" and omitted American Indian.

Some respondents did not choose the category because they lacked definitive evidence of their genealogy. One person said, "I haven't really done that much in-depth research to really say that I qualify [as American Indian]." It was often part of "family folklore" and, therefore, not seen as legitimate to many respondents. Examples of explanations for omitting American Indian include:

> *It's somewhat unknown how long ago – it's a story that my great grandmother told my mother. So it's more like a family story than a for-sure ancestor.*
>
> *Supposedly my great grandmother on my dad's side has some sort of Native American in her. I don't know firsthand and I don't know a tribe or anything like that. So I don't consider myself Native American.*
>
> *On my mother's side they claim a lot of…they claim Native American, but there's no documentation of it. There's no proof of it.*
>
> *It's only a half generation. I guess because it's my grandmother and we only know very little about her half of the Indian side of the family. We don't have enough details. We just know one of her parents was Indian.*
>
> *In terms of Native American, I may have some, but it would be very way-back-when, but I don't really identify as Native American at all.*

Other respondents felt the percentage was too small and that there were formal rules for being able to claim American Indian identity. One respondent said, "Technically, there is a lot of criteria that makes you American Indian and allows you to qualify for different things. And it's something like 1/16 and I think I am 1/32. I can't exactly remember what it is, but there is a very specific criteria." Another respondent said, "I'm not like a big expert on Native American identity, but I know that some Native American nations have different rules, or whatever, for membership. And that's not something that I am interested in delving into for myself, because I just don't feel that is true for me…I don't identify culturally as Native American." In fact, not culturally identifying with American Indians as a group was a common reason for not choosing that category.

Some respondents did not mark "American Indian" because they were not raised to identify with that part of their background. One respondent said, "I do know I have some Native American ancestry, but

because of society, it is not visible and it is not something that I learned about growing up. Or my family particularly affiliated with the European heritage is what probably most comes to mind." Two other respondents grew up thinking of themselves only as Black, regardless of the other races in their ancestry, including American Indian. Therefore, they chose only "Black/AA".

Some respondents did not choose the American Indian category because of the implications of doing so. One respondent explained why he chose only "White" but talked about having American Indian ancestry. He said, "I simply don't want to appropriate the Native American experience. I don't want to claim that or minimize their cultural experience without them having to worry about Whitey over here claiming that I'm 1%." Similarly, another respondent marked only "Black/AA" and not "American Indian". She said:

> *I don't claim it particularly because of the social implications of that…Because there's benefits you can get. Like you can get free schooling, you can travel back and forth between Canada and Mexico freely without needing a visa. But, again, I didn't really live that experience, so I don't feel like I can claim it.*

Administrative Pattern: Respondents often decide how to describe themselves based on the context in which they must do so. This pattern was most common among non-White (or multiple-race) respondents, and how they decide to report race/ethnicity on standardized questions can depend on the purpose of the question. As a result, reports may vary when filling out forms for official purposes such as driver's license, medical forms, employment, or school applications. As one respondent who answered "White" then "Other = North African" said, "First thing I ask myself: why are they asking me this question. Sometimes I just answer because it's part of the [job] application." He said, "Other times I go with Indian too. And sometimes I was scared – maybe I'm wrong – they would not hire me. Sometimes if you're 'Black' or 'Other', some places will not hire you. If you're White they will hire you first." One respondent marked "White" and "MENA" then "Palestine". But other times he marks "White" or even "Other". He said:

> *Actually, so, the last time I filled out an application for a job, even my current job, I think I chose 'White'. I remember choosing 'White' and I think there was an 'Other' category. But I know in the past in just doing surveys for, like, an organization, if there was community-type work or something, if there was 'Other' there, I may choose 'Other'.*

When asked when or why he decides to choose "White" vs. "Other", he tied it to that which would give him the best job opportunity. He said, "It could be one of those, mentally I feel like, okay – if it's a job opportunity, I want to get this job. I better choose this right category." Another respondent marked "Black" then "Sudanese" and "Asian" then "Asian Indian". For medical reasons she said that sometimes she'll mark "Hispanic" on forms. In explaining why, she said:

> *Yes, sometimes I have chosen Hispanic. And, again, it has something do to with…I want to say Lupus. But I'm not sure it was Lupus. It may have been Lupus, but it was something that generally affects Blacks and Hispanics more than Caucasians in medical…things. Again, those times it's kind of valid.*

One respondent on this question chose "White" and "MENA" then "Saudi". When asked if he would always choose MENA, he said, "Sometimes, but it depends on what it's for." When asked to explain, he said, "For TSA precheck I would not select it. However, let's say it was for a Middle Eastern

scholarship, maybe." He explained that he would not mark MENA for TSA precheck, "Because I think there are certain connotations that come with that part of the world. Especially anything relating to any kind of commercial aviation." This, in fact, was a unique pattern among MENA respondents. Unlike other groups, choosing the MENA category had a unique political context. This is discussed next.

Political Environment and reporting MENA

Respondents who chose the MENA category were sometimes pleasantly surprised to see it. It is not a category often included on surveys or other standardized forms and, as a result, respondents with a Middle Eastern or North African background often find themselves in the position of having to choose from among ill-fitting categories (this is discussed more in the next pattern). The question tested in this study was a more natural fit and many respondents preferred it to what they normally see. One respondent said, "I was excited to put 'Middle Eastern'." When asked to explain he said, "Part of my identity is where I'm from. I'm…you know, my family is from Lebanon. I'm proud to be Lebanese." Another respondent who chose "White" and "MENA" then "Palestinian" said, "We'd love to see a Middle Eastern category. You know, it's something we have been – a lot of people have been – trying to fight for many years, as far as Census and things like that." Similarly, a respondent who marked "White" and "MENA" then "Lebanon" said, "I wish they [surveys] were all like this, to be honest. Because usually you have the option of White, Hispanic, Black, American Indian…you only have those and I never felt like…most of them don't apply, obviously. But I never felt like 'White' sums it up." Another respondent from Morocco said, "I never got this choice before, but it's good. It's here now, it's good so we can have this option. I hope all jobs have this option." A respondent who chose "Palestinian" and "Jordanian" also preferred the MENA choice. He said, "For forms and surveys I would like to be Middle Eastern." Another respondent summed it up this way:

> *I think it's time for Arab-Americans to get some recognition, to have our voices heard. And to basically have a count, have a number and not just be part of…lumped into various categories, whether it's 'Other' or 'White' or whatever. But I think it's time to have, you know, whatever percentage we are in this country, to have our voices heard. I think it's very important to give us some credibility for the work we're doing.*

Essentially, some MENA respondents preferred a category that reflected who they are better than the "standard" race/ethnicity choices that do not reflect their background.

However, other respondents expressed concerns about identifying themselves as MENA on surveys. This included both recent immigrants and those who were born in the United States. One respondent who chose "MENA" and "Jordan" mentioned that it may be a difficult choice for some people. He said, "As you know, at this time, with this new administration and everything is cray [crazy] and going haywire, people worry about these things." Another respondent who marked "Iranian" made a similar comment. She said, "I'll tell you one thing, though. Based on everything that's going on right now in politics…this might be…I don't know if people are going to be selecting that [the MENA category]." Some respondents identified government surveys in particular as something to be wary of. One respondent chose "MENA" and then "Saudi", but wouldn't always make that choice, especially if the question were tied to government. He said he would avoid "putting it on a government security thing…it seems like it's not a necessary discriminator for what describes who I am and it would open me up to more questions than I feel are not necessary to learn who I am and what I'm about." Another respondent who marked "MENA" and "Syrian" admitted she would not choose a MENA category on an actual government survey. She explained why:

I will be very honest with you. If there was a government survey that had Middle Eastern as a box, I would not check it. Not right now…I will tell you that I have no desire to be on an Islamic or Muslim country registry. My grandparents came here to escape from oppression and I don't really think I need to go back to that.

Another respondent chose the MENA category but expressed similar concerns. He appreciated that this question provided a category that reflected who he was, but he was leery of being identified and stereotyped. He expressed mixed feelings:

I understand that the survey is going to be just to help and assist in developing some policy or something like that. To let all people fill out their categories and they're equal from the other ethnic groups. But for me, I want to emphasize and speak about this. This list is applicable for me to express and explain about my identity. But these days, what is going on, the people consider the Middle Eastern…all the time, they tie it with terrorism and the terrorist groups and with the bad things. With the terrible things. And actually, it's not.

Social Context Pattern: Sometimes respondents report race and ethnicity based on the way others in society view them. This pattern was most pronounced among respondents who chose the MENA category. Immigrants in particular expressed confusion or difficulty in adjusting to United States racial categorizations. One respondent who chose "MENA" then "Moroccan" said of U.S. categories, "It's like you're categorizing people because of the skin or something, which is unusual to my background. I mean, I don't understand it…I didn't know these things until I came here."

Because typical racial categorizations in the United States do not adequately reflect the MENA experience, people with MENA backgrounds are often forced into choosing an ill-fitting category. One respondent marked "Black/AA" and "MENA" then "Sudan". He explained how a choice that fits him is not usually available and he is placed in an ill-fitting category:

Well, actually, that's one of the problems. When you have an official application, if you want to fill it, issued by the government, despite if it's an optional choice to fill it as you'd like. But the problem…my identity…it doesn't categorize. Because all the time…I'm an African guy. But the suitable category for me, as Middle Eastern, we don't have the category for the Middle Eastern. It's more applicable for me to emphasize and explain about myself as my identity…but all the documents – if you deal with immigration, if you deal with lawyers, if you deal with any official offices – there is no category. Sometimes you find yourself in another category, say, Black, White American.

Fitting into a non-meaningful, not applicable, or irrelevant category was not always an easy process, and it occurred one of two ways. Some respondents have answered race questions based on how they have been told to answer by other people. But other respondents have answered based on their own judgments and perceptions of how they fit into American conceptualizations of race.

<u>Being Told How to Answer</u>: Some MENA respondents had grown accustomed to choosing a category on the basis of what someone else told them they should do. But the structure of this question was different because it included a MENA category, prompting them to rethink how they should answer. Some respondents chose only the new MENA category. For example, one respondent who chose "MENA" then "Morocco" usually marks "Other" or "White". He remembers being confused when he

first moved to the United States, and marked "Black" because it most closely matched his skin tone. But then he was told to switch:

> *I remember going to the DMV one time and asking them – because I didn't have the right option and I wanted to do it right. So I said, 'Hey, I'm from Morocco, do you know what option I should put?' And she said, 'Oh, you put White. You're not Black and you're not African American.' So I started putting that.*

Another respondent from Morocco who marked only "MENA" described the initial confusion he had over United States categories and how he dealt with the issue. He said:

> *When I went to school I asked my professor. He said, most of Americans are asked this question [on race]. I asked him what should be who I am? He said, 'Where are you from?' I said from North Africa. He said the North African and Middle Eastern, they belong to the White…Since the professor, whenever I go to apply for a job, we have to choose this, I have no choice, I have to go with 'White'.*

Another respondent from Morocco said, "I'll put 'White' because I've been advised to put 'White'. Technically, I guess, the closest thing is White if you're North African."

While some respondents chose only the new MENA category, other respondents chose both the category they had grown accustomed to choosing *and* the new MENA category (because it was closer to the way they thought about themselves). This was true for both respondents born in the United States and recent immigrants. For example, one United States-born respondent who marked "White" and "MENA" then "Syrian" said, "I was really confused [by the options of 'White" and "MENA" in this question] because I've always been 'White' on every survey. And, well, for a long time I was checking 'other' and somebody said, 'Oh, no – Middle Eastern is 'White'. So then I was checking 'White'." Another respondent from North Africa had a similar experience. He said, "Like high school. I'd first ask…I'm from Egypt, so what would I be considered? He [teacher] said White, since I'm from North Africa." He chose "MENA" and "White" on this form explaining, "I don't feel that I completely fit into that image [of White], but at the same time I don't mind it." But the MENA choice was a better one in his mind. "I just selected what most closely relates to me and my family history." Another respondent from Egypt had the same response process and judgment, marking both "White" (because that's where others have put him) and "MENA" (because that actually fits his experience). He said, "I select both of them. I am from Egypt, so that is Middle East exactly. And Egypt is North Africa. That's why I put it. In USA, I've never been…no one ask me this question before Egypt. So when I go to government or hospital [in Egypt], they don't have this kind of question. When I came here to America, they put me in 'White'." He went on to explain that it was U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement that first put him in the "White" category.

<u>Deciding for Self How to Answer</u>: A second response process for choosing among ill-fitting categories is that MENA respondents choose an "American-based" category that they (verses another person) decided comes closest to describing them. These respondents were less likely to choose multiple categories and more likely to choose only "MENA" in this question. One respondent usually chooses "White". He said, "If there's a question to respond to on some type of form or something, we just put "White" because there's nothing else that is applicable." But on this question he chose "MENA" and "Jordan", where he was born and raised. Another respondent marked "MENA" then "Lebanese" and commented that, because MENA is not usually a choice, he will often choose "White". He said,

"Usually on SATs or job applications I just say 'White' because 'Middle Eastern' is not usually an option. And my skin color is white, so I'm a white guy. But I've never understood why Middle Eastern is not on there. Because I feel like there is a difference from, you know, White Europeans from Ireland and a Lebanese person." Another respondent who marked "MENA" then "Egyptian" said,

> *In school they always taught us that Egypt was like the debate between North African and Middle Eastern. It's interesting how they put it in the same one [here]. Usually they don't give Middle Eastern so I always put…they don't put North Africa either, so I always put African American.*

However, on this form she chose MENA because it adequately reflected how she was raised. She said, "I jumped at it – Middle Eastern/North African."

Finally, a few respondents who chose "Black/AA" commented that the way they see themselves has been shaped by the society around them. Even though these respondents had multiple races or ethnicities in their genealogy, they answered only "Black/AA" on this question. One respondent who also had White and American Indian in her background did not report either one. She said, "As far as society is concerned, I am looked upon as African American…And in the U.S., just one drop means you're Black." Another older respondent gave a similar rationale. He described a similar background of White, American Indian, and Black, but chose only "Black" for this question. He said, "I have a little bit of all of that in me, but because of the times, if you had any Black in you, that's what you were considered. So that is why I have been African American." Another respondent also identified herself as having White, American Indian, and Black ancestry. But she marked only "Black/AA". When asked why she didn't check the other races, she said, "I don't accept that, I don't embrace that. When you look at me, you don't see it. I wasn't raised around Caucasian people. We have them in our family, but everyone around me identifies as Black…In society, I wouldn't be considered White at all."

Other Patterns

"Middle Eastern" seen as different from "North African"

Some respondents who chose the MENA category mentioned that the pairing of Middle Eastern with North African misleadingly suggested that the two regions are similar. One respondent with origins in Morocco said, "I try to make the clear distinction. Because a lot of people put us in the Middle East, but it is not at all. While we can relate a little bit, our cultures are still very different." Another respondent from Morocco said, "I prefer if it was just Middle Eastern and separated from North African…it should be separated for various reasons, from geographically, culture, heritage…" A respondent from Egypt explained, "In school [in Egypt] they always taught us that Egypt was like the debate between North African and Middle Eastern. It's interesting how they [this survey] put it in the same one." Another respondent from Morocco preferred the category to be separated, but still chose it. He explained, "It would identify me as from that region. But hopefully we can educate the people that North Africa is separate from Middle East. We're two different groups!"

"Black" seen as different from "African American"

Respondents who chose the “Black or African American” category often had a preference for one term or the other and viewed them differently. They marked the category, but clarified that they did not necessarily see the terms as interchangeable. This was true for both respondents born in the United States and for those born in Africa. In fact, some respondents specifically described it as a difference of birth place. When asked if “Black” was the same as “African American” one respondent said, “Not really. Because ‘Black’, we were born here. And African Americans came here. I was born here.” She defined herself as Black. Another person had the same reaction. He said, “I don’t think I’m African American. For the simple fact that I don’t know anybody from Africa. I don’t have family there. I think that’s a stereotype. Thinking all Black people are from Africa, I don’t think that’s true.” A respondent born in Africa (who marked “Black/AA” then “Ghana”) also would prefer two separate terms. To him it was a matter of birth place and cultural distinctions, such as parenting norms. Of combining the two into one category, he said:

> *I personally don’t like it. Because there is two different, in my opinion, there is two different types of ‘Black’. Okay, there is the ones that are from here. You know, your entire family is from the United States and they are born and raised here. And I’m not trying to throw anything against them, but they act totally different from an African person. You know, I’m raised different from some of the Black people that I know that were born and raised here with their family and everything from here. It’s kind of different. We are raised different.*

Some respondents preferred the term ‘Black’ and disliked the term ‘African American’ because of a perceived element of political correctness that misrepresents people’s actual experiences or genealogy. One respondent (born in the United States with a father from Sudan) said:

> *Why don’t they ever have ‘African’? Everybody’s not African American. Maybe it’s my personal thing, but I think African Americans are, to me, particularly Black people in America who may or may not know their origins are from Africa. So you lump them in one category calling them African American…So I have a major problem with that ‘African American’ term in general…I don’t care how politically correct people think it is, I don’t like it at all.*

Another respondent (born in the United States with parents from Ethiopia) also believed the term ‘African American’ was a politically correct term. She said, “It’s a politically correct name that I think people came up with in the 70’s or 80’s.” Another respondent who marked this category also saw herself as Black and thought the term ‘African American’ was no longer relevant. She explained, “So in a sense, I’m not African. I know my ancestors are from there. I don’t know about the culture there. Well, I do, but I can’t say I know from experience…I was born here. I’m a Black American. I’m not African. I think the term is outdated.”

However, some respondents who chose “Black/AA” *did* prefer the term “African American” because it was a term designed to show respect. One person said, “I might say, ‘I’m a Black female’ from time to time. But if I’m sitting across from a Caucasian, I’ll say African American. For me, I feel ‘Black’ is a step above ‘Negro’. If I’m with other Black people, I’ll say Black. But with people that aren’t, I’ll say African American.”

Confusion over “Asian Indian” subcategory

Respondents of Asian Indian descent pointed to problems with the Asian Indian category. It did not match with the way they understood themselves or the way they believe other people understand the

term. One respondent said that the category leans toward the East Asian understanding of race/ethnicity. She said, "In my experience, people's perception of Asian is only East Asian and doesn't include the Indian subcontinent…I'll just check 'Asian', but I'm kind of aware that when I check that, people tend to assume East Asian." But when describing herself she said, "I would never say I'm Asian Indian. I would say I'm Indian." One respondent did not choose the "Asian Indian", but instead chose "other" and then "Indian". When asked to explain why she did not choose "Asian Indian" she said:

> *When I read that as Asian Indian and not exclusively Indian, I feel like it's a mixed race – maybe somebody who is Chinese and Indian mix. Because the initial options were Chinese, Filipino…they seem to be very, like, oriented toward the Eastern side and not so much India. And that's why I was like, I'm not quite sure what that option means. If it's a mix. That's why I was like, 'I'm not Asian Indian, I'm just Indian-Indian'.*

One respondent from Pakistan had difficulty with all the unfamiliar choices. He chose both "Asian Indian" and "Other", writing in "Pakistani". He said it was the first time he had seen the term "Asian Indian". "So in my head I thought it was a typo when I was reading it off because I've never seen, as part of any form, saying 'Asian Indian.' All they do is 'Asian' and there's no other category for Indian or Pakistani when you're filling out the forms."

To further demonstrate the confusion with this category, another respondent had parents born in India who moved to Trinidad. That part of herself she identifies as Caribbean Indian. She chose "Asian Indian" but realized this was not the best fit for her. She said, "When I get these forms, you don't have me there, very neatly check the box…how truthful can I get, as close to the truth can I get. That's what I hate about these forms. I always feel like I have to lie." When asked to explain she said, "To qualify Indian with Asian seems a little inaccurate…Asian Indian is that big group, but you have those sub-groups in there, like Caribbean Indians, you have the Kenyan Indians or South Africa Indians…This [Asian Indian category] is a broad label."

Mode Effects

The survey instrument was tested in two modes – interviewer-administered and self-administered. Forty-six respondents received the interviewer-administered version and 43 took the self-administered version. While this was primarily not a mode effect study, some mode issues were observed. The main finding is that there were not conceptual differences in the way respondents answered the race/ethnicity question based on mode. Response patterns were similar in both formats. Moreover, respondent difficulties were minimal and those that did arise were common to both modes. There were two main issues: respondents did not always receive all the response options, nor did they always understand that they could select more than one option.

Respondents do not always receive all options

In both formats, there exists the possibility that respondents either will not read or will not hear all the response options. Quite a few respondents who completed the self-administered version chose a category without reading all of the options. As a result, some missed a category that applied to them. This happened most often among MENA respondents because it was a category that they were not accustomed to seeing. As a result, most chose their usual category – often "White" but also

"Black/AA". For example, as one respondent was filling out the survey, she selected "White" and filled in "Persian." As she continued to read, she was surprised to see the MENA category. She asked, "Is it okay to take this [her original answer] out? Because usually this [MENA option] won't be listed."

This issue was not limited to the self-administered format. In the interviewer-administered format, respondents sometimes interrupted the interviewer and answered the question before hearing all the choices. This occurred mostly during the initial race question, but also with the follow up ethnicity/country-of-origin question. For example, as one interviewer read the answer choices, one respondent interrupted and said, "Can I jump to that 'Other'? And…It's Armenian. Both my parents are Armenian and I was raised Armenian." Also, some respondents immediately answered the race question and said "African American" before the interviewer finished reading the answer categories. Another respondent, who chose "Asian" for race, chose "Asian Indian" for the follow up ethnicity/country of origin question before the interviewer finished reading the options. Once respondents heard a category that applied to them, many felt compelled to answer immediately, without waiting for categories they assumed would be irrelevant.

However, of the two, it is more likely that respondents will receive all response options in the interviewer-administered mode than the self-administered version. Properly trained interviewers should deliver all categories, even if interrupted by the respondent.

Some Respondents did not understand that the question was "mark all that apply"

Regardless of mode, respondents did not always understand that they could choose more than one option. In the self-administered version, some respondents did not notice the "mark all that apply" instruction in the question stem. One respondent checked "White" then "Other = Middle Eastern". As he continued to read, he checked the "MENA" box and crossed out his initial answer of "White". This respondent did not realize he could choose more than one option and explained that "White" is his usual answer. He was born in the United States and when asked he says, "I was born here, but my parents are from Egypt…." He goes on to explain how both his heritage and his birthplace are important to him, but that did not realize he could select more than one answer.

Similarly, in the interviewer-administered version a few respondents specifically asked follow up questions regarding how many categories they could choose. One respondents asked, "So I can choose two?" This respondent did not hear the statement "…mark all that apply." Another respondent, who chose "Black/AA" for both the initial and the follow up ethnicity question, mentioned during the interview she has some Native American ancestry. The interviewer asked why she did not also choose "Native American" to the initial race question. She responded, "Most of them [surveys] say you can only pick one—some people may be bold and pick two or 3. Typically I would just pick one." When asked if she would choose two, were she able, she said yes. While this confusion was possible in both modes, it may be less prevalent in the interviewer-administered mode, to the extent that interviewers can ensure respondents hear the entire question and can clarify questions.

Interviewer administered issues

The interviewer-administered mode for the most part was delivered smoothly by interviewers and received easily by respondents. It caused only minor confusion, if any. Most of the difficulties related to the sheer number of response categories, particularly the ethnic subcategories, of which there were

seven under each main race category. This made the question somewhat cumbersome to administer. As a result, respondents often asked the interviewer to repeat the categories.

Self-administered issues

The self-administered mode presented different challenges. Specifically, it was not clear to some respondents how they should complete the form. Consequently, some did not physically check a main race category; they only selected an ethnicity or country of origin. Also, many respondents immediately checked a main race category before reading all of the answer categories.

For those who did not select a main race category, some mentioned that they assumed the main race was implied if they checked an ethnicity or country of origin. For example, one respondent checked "Polish" and wrote in "Russian/Romanian" under the "White" category but did not check the "White" box. When the interviewer asked him, he explained, "Oh, oh because subcategories. I forgot to check it. There were a lot of options there and I just went to the most precise one I guess is what I'll say… It felt like checking those boxes meant the same… If I checked one of the sub-boxes it meant I was definitely also white." Another respondent, checked "Chinese" but did not select the main "Asian" race category. When asked, he explained, "I thought I checked this one automatically…That I belong to that group." Most respondents simply did not realize that they needed to check the main box. One respondent who wrote in "Armenian" under "MENA" and checked "German" under "White". When asked if she intended to check "White" she said, "Oh yes! I'm sorry, White." She then checked "White" and when asked if she meant to check "MENA" she also said, "Oh, yes!" Similarly, another respondent who chose German, English, Irish and French did not select the main race category "White". Another respondent wrote in "Yemen" under MENA and "Somali" under "Black/AA" and did not check either of the main race categories (MENA, Black/AA). The interviewer asked if he intended to check these main categories and he said yes. Similarly, another respondent checked "African American" and "Ethiopian" ethnicity subcategories without checking the major category box for "Black/AA". When asked if she considers her race Black or African American she said yes. When the interviewer pointed out that she did not check the main category and why she said, "Oh, I'm sorry. Yes."

APPENDIX: RACE/ETHNICITY QUESTION AS TESTED IN INTERVIEWER- AND SELF-ADMINISTERED MODES

Figure 2: Interviewer-administered format

2. What race or races do you consider yourself to be? Please select 1 or more of these categories: [*READ CATEGORIES*]
   - ❑ White
   - ❑ Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish
   - ❑ Black or African American
   - ❑ Asian
   - ❑ American Indian or Alaska Native
   - ❑ Middle Eastern or North African
   - ❑ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
   - ❑ Something else [*SPECIFY*] ________________

[FOR EACH BOX CHECKED IN Q2, ASK THE CORRESPONDING QUESTIONS BELOW]

a. You said White. What specific ethnic group do you consider yourself to be? Please select 1 or more of these categories: [*READ CATEGORIES*]
   - ❑ German
   - ❑ Irish
   - ❑ English
   - ❑ Italian
   - ❑ Polish
   - ❑ French
   - ❑ Something else [*SPECIFY*] ________________

b. You said Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish. What specific ethnic group do you consider yourself to be? Please select 1 or more of these categories: [*READ CATEGORIES*]
   - ❑ Mexican or Mexican American
   - ❑ Puerto Rican
   - ❑ Dominican
   - ❑ Cuban
   - ❑ Columbian
   - ❑ Salvadoran
   - ❑ Something else [*SPECIFY*] ________________

c. You said Black or African American. What specific ethnic group do you consider yourself to be? Please select 1 or more of these categories: [*READ CATEGORIES*]
   - ❑ African American
   - ❑ Haitian
   - ❑ Ethiopian
   - ❑ Jamaican
   - ❑ Nigerian
   - ❑ Somali
   - ❑ Something else [*SPECIFY*] ________________

d. You said Asian. What specific ethnic group do you consider yourself to be? Please select 1 or more of these categories: [*READ CATEGORIES*]
   - ❑ Chinese
   - ❑ Filipino
   - ❑ Asian Indian
   - ❑ Vietnamese
   - ❑ Korean
   - ❑ Japanese
   - ❑ Something else [*SPECIFY*] ________________

e. You said American Indian or Alaska Native. What specific ethnic group do you consider yourself to be? [*SPECIFY*] ________________

f. You said Middle Easter or North African. What specific ethnic group do you consider yourself to be? Please select 1 or more of these categories: [*READ CATEGORIES*]
   - ❑ Lebanese
   - ❑ Iranian
   - ❑ Egyptian
   - ❑ Syrian
   - ❑ Moroccan
   - ❑ Israeli
   - ❑ Something else [*SPECIFY*] ________________

g. You said Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. What specific ethnic group do you consider yourself to be? Please select 1 or more of these categories: [*READ CATEGORIES*]
   - ❑ Native Hawaiian
   - ❑ Samoan
   - ❑ Chamorro
   - ❑ Tongan
   - ❑ Fijian
   - ❑ Marshallese
   - ❑ Something else [*SPECIFY*] ________________

Figure 3: Self-administered format

2. What is your race or ethnicity?
Mark all boxes that apply AND print ethnicities in the spaces below. Note, you may report more than one group.

- ❑ WHITE – *provide details below.*
  - ❑ German ❑ English ❑ Polish
  - ❑ Irish ❑ Italian ❑ French
  - ❑ Print, for example, Scottish, Norwegian, Dutch, etc.______________________________
- ❑ HISPANIC, LATINO, OR SPANISH – *provide details below.*
  - ❑ Mexican or Mexican American ❑ Puerto Rican ❑ Dominican
  - ❑ Cuban ❑ Columbian
  - ❑ Salvadoran
  - ❑ Print, for example, Guatemalan, Spaniard, Ecuadorian, etc. ______________________
- ❑ BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN – *provide details below.*
  - ❑ African American ❑ Haitian ❑ Ethiopian
  - ❑ Jamaican ❑ Nigerian ❑ Somali
  - ❑ Print, for example, Ghanaian, South African, Barbadian, etc. ______________________
- ❑ ASIAN – *provide details below.*
  - ❑ Chinese ❑ Asian Indian ❑ Korean
  - ❑ Filipino ❑ Vietnamese ❑ Japanese
  - ❑ Print, for example, Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc. ____________________________
- ❑ AMERICAN INDIAN OR ALASKA NATIVE – *provide details below.*
  Print, for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village of Barrow Inupiat Traditional Government, Tlingit, etc.
  ____
- ❑ MIDDLE EASTERN OR NORTH AFRICAN – *provide details below.*
  - ❑ Lebanese ❑ Egyptian ❑ Moroccan
  - ❑ Iranian ❑ Syrian ❑ Israeli
  - ❑ Print, for example, Algerian, Iraqi, Kurdish, etc. ___________________________________
- ❑ NATIVE HAWIIAN OR OTHER PACIFIC ISLANDER – *provide details below.*
  - ❑ Native Hawaiian ❑ Chamorro ❑ Fijian
  - ❑ Samoan ❑ Tongan ❑ Marshallese
  - ❑ Print, for example, Palauan, Tahitian, Chuukese, etc. ______________________________
- ❑ SOME OTHER RACE OR ETHNICITY – *print details below.*
  ____

REFERENCES

Lincoln, Y. and E. G. Guba. (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Miller, K. and Willson, S. (2002) Cognitive Testing of NCHS Race Questions, Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.

Miller, K., Willson, S., Chepp, V., & Padilla, J.-L. (2014) *Cognitive Interviewing Methodology: A Sociological Approach for Survey Question Evaluation.* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Strauss, A. C. and J. Corbin. (1990) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*, 2nd edition. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Suter, W. N. (2012) "Qualitative Data, Analysis, and Design." In *An Introduction to Educational Research: A Critical Thinking Approach*, 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Willis, G. B. (2005) *Cognitive Interviewing: A Tool for Improving Questionnaire Design*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.