

Floor Discussion

Rhonda Carney
Bureau of the Census

The first paper, Dimensions of Self Identification among Multiracial and Multiethnic Respondents in Survey Interviews presented by Timothy P. Johnson, University of Illinois reports the findings from a laboratory study designed to investigate self identification among 69 multiracial and ethnic women. The study examined respondent reactions to two questionnaire formats for collecting racial information, and a third version that included a "multiracial" response option. Findings suggest that a respondent's racial identification varies considerably across question formats and that people of mixed heritage prefer a racial identification question that provides them with the opportunity to acknowledge their multi-cultural background. Many respondents also expressed a desire to identify each of the specific groups that constitute their racial or ethnic background.

Edith McArthur, National Center for Education Statistics, presented the second paper which studied the race and ethnicity categories used in the administrative records systems in public schools. Many parents, schools, and members of the public have expressed concern to the Department of Education that the current five federal race and ethnic categories are not sufficient, and specifically that they lack a category for people who identify as multiracial or multiethnic.

The third paper, presented by Manuel de la Puente and Eleanor Gerber of the Bureau of the Census, discussed the development and testing of race and ethnic origin questions for the 2000 census. The paper addressed two major issues related to the reporting of race and ethnic origin by respondents. The first was the use of a "multiracial" category and a "mark more than one" option in the race question for respondents who identify with more than one race. The second focused on combining the race and Hispanic origin questions, so that "Hispanic" would become one of the response options, along with White, Black or African American, Indian (Amer.), and Asian and Pacific islander. This paper documented the cognitive research undertaken to develop race and ethnic origin questions for inclusion in the two major tests being conducted in 1996 (the National Content Survey and the 1996 Census Survey) in preparation for the Year 2000 census.

Alan Zaslavsky of Harvard University asked "What do you anticipate you are going to find out about our ability to make longitudinal comparisons as we change the structure of these kinds of racial questions? Will you have much information about how people answer a new set of questions, which allow a broader range of options that are more responsive to what people want to say about themselves, [what would they] have answered under these older categories, particularly since to some extent those categories are enshrined in some other inflexible formulas that are in the legislation that you are trying to address?"

Eleanor Gerber, Bureau of the Census responded that the comparison between the traditional questions and the new questions will be made in the reinterview, which will allow comparisons between traditional and non-traditional in the exact manner as raised in Mr. Zaslavsky's question. Ms. Gerber was quoted as saying "the proportions cannot be addressed at this session, but for those who are interested, they should stay for the next session and listen to the results of the Bureau of Labor Statistics paper."

Nampeo McKenney, Bureau of the Census asked Timothy Johnson to speak briefly about the selection process used to identify persons of multiracial backgrounds for his study. Mrs. Mckenney stated that the research done by the Census Bureau found people of multiracial backgrounds who did identify with one race and not with multiple races, as well as others who identified two or more races.

Mr. Johnson replied that they also found some respondents who clearly reported having parents of different racial classifications, but who clearly identified with only one of those races. This was found in 10 to 15 percent of the sample. These individuals primarily were raised by a single parent, and it was usually the parent of a minority background; the parent of the majority race was not there during most of the child's upbringing. So in a very strict biological sense they consider themselves multiracial, but for any other effective or cultural reasons they clearly identify with only a single race.

Stephen Feinberg of Carnegie Mellon University commented that he had the impression from various comments made at the session that it was already determined that there was a correct answer for the forms. After a lengthy discussion, Mr. Feinberg's perception was that there is not a correct answer, however, he felt it will be difficult to determine if people have answered truthfully, because the words are changed in questions and the context of the words are changed on the alternative forms. Mr. Fineberg therefore had two questions, first, "how one can evaluate the field test and know what the results mean?" "Secondly, might not the goal of the field test be to discover how different the answers might be? So that the place for a multiracial box might not be at the bottom of the list, but at the top."

Eleanor Gerber, Bureau of the Census, is quoted as stating "we really do not think there is only one correct answer to these questions and that is implicit in the instructions that are given to people: "It's what race you consider yourself to be." We know that the concept is not biologically constructed, but it is psychologically and socially constructed, and that is what we are trying to capture. Ms. Gerber pointed out that the question raised was one of data quality, and that we can look at the forms in comparison to each other, because there is no objective measure."