Methodological pitfalls of measuring race: International comparisons and repurposing of statistical categories

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Official statistics are political creations more than theoretically-guided concepts. The papers in this panel make this exceptionally clear, as does the work of many others (e.g., Loveman 2014; Nobles 2000; Prewitt 2013). This means that official measures of race in countries around the world are unlikely to be guided by theoretical concern for distinguishing the different dimensions that are all embedded under the umbrella term: "race". Furthermore, categories created for official statistics or national censuses can take on a life of their own. They can be applied to new contexts and inform public debates beyond their original demographic or political purposes. Here, I argue that the need for theoretical clarity across dimensions of race is magnified by comparisons across national contexts. I also discuss, using the example of the Canadian measure

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of “visible minorities” how the repurposing of statistical categories can create its own methodological pitfalls in measuring distinct dimensions of race.

International comparisons across multiple dimensions of race

Recent research has focused attention on the multiple dimensions of the concept of race – including how people identify themselves (*racial identity*), how they are seen by others (*observed race*), what they check on official forms or surveys with limited options (*racial self-classification*), how they believe they are seen by others (*reflected race*), their *phenotype*, *racial ancestry*, and others (Campbell, Bratter, and Roth 2016; Campbell and Troyer 2007; Roth 2016; Saperstein 2012). As I have argued elsewhere (Roth 2016), the term “race” is used as a proxy for all these dimensions, which means that race scholarship and discourse even in a single national context frequently compares across several theoretically distinct concepts. While these concepts are related, in many people’s lived experience they do not always overlap. A person may be seen by others differently than how she classifies herself (Saperstein 2006). And her socioeconomic outcomes and interactions likely have more to do with her phenotype or observed race than with her racial self-classification, which is what surveys and official statistics usually measure (Roth 2010; Telles 2014).

The methodological challenges of consistently measuring specific dimensions of race, and capturing the most appropriate dimensions for the outcomes in question, amplify when we broaden our scope to international comparisons. In a comparison of ethnic and racial enumeration in 141 countries’ national censuses, Morning (2008) discovered a wide variety of measurement approaches, with countries variously using terms including “nationality,” “ancestry,” “color,” “ethnicity,” and “caste”. In her study of Latin American censuses, Loveman (2014) found that at

the turn of the 21st century, these nations varied greatly in the types of census questions they used to measure ethnoracial diversity, including questions to identify minority populations by ancestry, customs, identity, group membership, physical appearance, and race. Even though most censuses today capture self-classification, question wording as well as rules about who completes the form, create considerable variation in what their race and ethnicity measures actually capture.

The papers in this panel illustrate how different countries focus on or confuse different dimensions of race and ethnicity. Simon shows that many European countries focus on national origin or migration background, measures that provide some information about ethnicity although it is often racialized as well. Song reports that the British census asks for racial self-classification, but with a focus on particular types of mixture. She argues that it is unclear which dimension of race someone checking a 'Mixed' box is providing – racial identity or racial ancestry. This may also be said for someone checking two or more races in the U.S. census, which illustrates that self-classification on these forms may differ from racial identity, or how people think of themselves. Telles notes differences across Latin America in what census race/ethnicity questions measure, including some like the Brazilian census which combines concepts of race, ethnicity, and color in one question. Yet even this question does not fully capture the variation in skin color that he argues is a dimension we need to be measuring to study racial stratification. And while Québec has primarily focused on data on ethnic and linguistic categories, as Piché shows, what it actually measures has changed over time for political reasons so that today it is not really capturing ethnicity at all. Meanwhile, the rest of Canada focuses on a combination of ethnic and racial self-classification and the enumeration of a unique category it calls “visible minorities”, a measure I will discuss in more detail.

This variety of national approaches to measuring race and ethnicity is not necessarily inappropriate, as different dimensions of race may be more salient in different countries. But it creates all the more need for researchers to be attentive to what dimensions of race these measures are capturing, and for comparative data beyond official statistics that measure the same dimensions of race and ethnicity internationally.

Repurposing of statistical categories: The case of visible minorities in Canada

Another methodological challenge for studying race and ethnicity stems from how statistical categories are used. Categories designed to capture particular dimensions of race or ethnicity, once they enter public discourse, can be repurposed in ways that change their meaning and capture a different dimension. In the U.S., this has arguably occurred with the category “Hispanic” – originally a statistical category intended to capture ancestry, but which was repurposed as a panethnic or racial identity for many people (Mora 2014; Roth 2012).

In Canada, the visible minority classification illustrates this situation. Visible minorities are defined as “persons, other than Aboriginal people, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour.” (Government of Canada 1995). The designation is primarily used as a statistical and demographic category by Statistics Canada, mainly in connection with enforcing the Employment Equity Act, which requires employers to eliminate employment barriers and increase the representation of four designated groups: women, people with disabilities, Aboriginal peoples, and visible minorities. It is a derived category, allocated by Statistics Canada based on responses to a self-classification question that combines race and ethnicity categories (Figure 1). Statistics Canada imputes this variable such that non-visible minority status is allocated to people who 1)

mark themselves White or Aboriginal (in a separate question),¹ 2) mark Latin American, Arab, or West Asian together with White, or 3) mark Latin American, Arab, or West Asian and provide a European write-in response (e.g., English). All others are designated visible minorities, including those who mark Latin American, Arab, or West Asian and provide a non-European write-in response (e.g. who mark Latin American and write in “Peruvian”) (Statistics Canada 2008).

The visible minority classification serves as a proxy for non-White physical appearance, as the word “visible” and references to non-white colour imply. The allocation rules use White self-classification or European ancestry as (imperfect) indications of a Whiter appearance. On the one hand, it is a positive step that the Canadian government, through its Employment Equity Act, has paid attention to the theoretical mechanisms on which most employment discrimination occurs – racial appearance, or phenotype, rather than racial self-classification. Yet in terms of measurement, we have no way of knowing how good of a proxy measure this is for racial appearance. To my knowledge, there have been no studies to test its accuracy.

Despite having been created for a very specific purpose, the visible minority classification has come to be used more broadly. Economist Frances Woolley writes of this category, “having being used for a quarter-century, it has gained a life of its own. The Statistics Canada visible minority counts are now a standard measure of Canada's ethnic and cultural diversity. They feed into newspaper stories about white flight or about immigrant foods ‘with names I can’t even pronounce’” (Woolley 2013). Having entered Canadian public discourse, the classification has now materialized as a self-identification category in various contexts, where its meaning may be further altered. For many years, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) included the

¹ The visible minority designation excludes Aboriginal people only because they are treated as a separate designated group by the legislation, and are identified by separate census questions.

self-identification question, “Are you part of a visible minority group in Canada?” Similarly, the Canadian University Survey Consortium’s rotating triennial surveys of first-year, middle years, and graduating university students included the same self-identification question.²

An example shows how the meaning of the category can change when it is altered from an allocated measure intended to capture racial appearance to a self-identification dimension. Table 1 shows the responses of undergraduate students at the University of British Columbia who completed both the 2006 National Survey of Student Engagement and the 2005 Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement, which asked the detailed census race/ethnicity question. It shows that some Asian students – specifically, fractions of those who identified as Chinese (9%), Korean (8%), South Asian (8%) and Southeast Asian (5%) – did not identify as visible minority, although they would be designated as such by Statistics Canada. This occurred despite the specific mention of most of these groups as examples in the question wording. The local context is important here. At this time, Chinese students represented the largest ethnoracial group at UBC; 37% of first-year students identified as Chinese, according to the 2005 BCSSE, followed by Whites at 33%. Together, Chinese, South Asian, and Korean students made up 47% of the first-year population. In 2006, Asians also made up 33% of greater Vancouver, and the majority of some areas; the municipality of Richmond, for instance, was 61% Asian.³ Thus, it is likely that in answering a self-identification question, some Asian students did not feel like a minority. Substantial portions of Latin American, Arab, West Asian also did not consider themselves visible minorities; we do not know if this self-identification matches the government’s definition or how they are seen by others. And even small percentages of White and Aboriginal students considered themselves visible

² In the late 2000s, these questions were changed to the Canadian census race/ethnicity question, making time series data problematic.

³ Author’s calculation from 2006 Canadian Census data at www.statcan.gc.ca

minorities, further suggesting how this measure becomes subjective when converted to capture self-identification.

Statistical categories are themselves cultural artefacts. They are political creations that can take on a life of their own beyond their original purpose. The shape they take, and what dimensions of race or ethnicity they come to represent, is likely to differ across countries. Researchers need to be aware of these methodological pitfalls and, with international comparisons in particular, be careful to use the measures that best represent the theoretical dimensions that matter most for their outcomes of interest.

Figure 1: Race/Ethnicity Question on 2016 Canadian Census

[illegible]

Table 1: UBC Students' Responses to Race/Ethnicity and Visible Minority Questions

Self-identified Visible Minority responses on NSSE 2006 <i>Are you part of a visible minority group in Canada?</i> <i>Some visible minority groups include individuals of African, East Asian (China, Japan, Korea), Southeast Asian (Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia), Indo-Pakistani, or Middle Eastern descent.</i>						
	No		Yes		Total	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Race/ethnicity responses on BCSSE 2005 <i>Are you...?</i>						
Officially defined as Visible Minority						
Chinese	9	28	91	291	100	319
Filipino	0	0	100	16	100	16
Japanese	0	0	100	8	100	8
Korean	8	2	92	23	100	25
South Asian	8	4	92	48	100	52
East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, etc.						
Southeast Asian	5	1	95	19	100	20
Vietnamese, Cambodian, Malaysian, etc.						
Black	0	0	100	1	100	1
May be Visible Minority						
Latin American	60	6	40	4	100	10
Arab	50	2	50	2	100	4
West Asian	14	2	86	12	100	14
Iranian, Afghan, etc.						
Multiracial	60	31	40	21	100	52
Officially defined as Non-Visible Minority						
Aboriginal	80	4	20	1	100	5
Inuit, Métis, North American Indian, etc.						
White	99	424	1	6	100	430
Other	43	6	57	8	100	14
I prefer not to respond	73	30	27	11	100	41
Total	53	540	47	471	100	1011

Source: 2005 Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) and 2006 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), compiled by Marsha Trew, Director of Assessment for UBC Student Development and Services

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