

Brazil in Black and White?

Race Categories and the Study of Inequality

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ABSTRACT

Many scholars advocate the adoption of a black-and-white lens for analysis of racial inequality in Brazil. Drawing on a nationally representative dataset that includes race questions in multiple formats, we evaluate how removal of the ‘brown’ category from social surveys would likely affect (1) the descriptive picture of Brazil’s racial composition, and (2) estimates of income inequality between and within racial groups. We find that a forced binary question format results in a whiter and more racially unequal picture of Brazil through the movement of many higher income mixed-race respondents into the white category. We also find that regardless of question format, racial inequality in income accounts for relatively little of Brazil’s overall income inequality. We discuss implications for public policy debates in Brazil, and for the broader scientific and political challenges of ethnic and racial data collection and analysis.

Introduction

The recent introduction of race-targeted affirmative action policies in Brazil unleashed a contentious national debate over whether, how, and toward what ends the government should engage in the racial classification of citizens. In its general contours, this national conversation in Brazil echoes analogous discussions in a growing number of countries around the globe. Voices of opposition to the Brazilian government's long-established practice of official racial classification raise principled arguments in defense of the liberal ideal of individual equality before the law. They also question the morality and scientific legitimacy of government use of racial categories, pointing to ignominious historical examples of abuse enabled by official racial classification and citing the unscientific nature of racial categories *per se* (Fry et al 2007). Proponents of government initiatives to draw racial or ethnic distinctions among citizens in certain contexts counter with principled, political, and pragmatic arguments of their own. They note that official racial categories can capture social distinctions without implying that 'race' is valid as a biological category. They also argue that official racial classification can facilitate government efforts to promote *true* equality of citizens through reparation or remediation of historical injustices to racially defined minority populations (Manifesto 2008).

As in other contexts, the precise configuration of the Brazilian debate over government recognition and use of racial categories is shaped by the particular history of the state's approach to dealing with racial and ethnic difference in the national population. The Brazilian state has a long history of recognizing racial and color distinctions within the population in censuses as in other administrative domains (Nobles 2000). However, the explicit use of such categories in public policy or law was rare (in stark contrast to the United States.) Though some have argued aggressively against all forms of government recognition of racial or color distinctions, the crux

of debate in Brazil does not appear to pivot on whether the state should classify citizens by race or color at all, but on the specific categories it should use to do so, and the legitimacy of public policies that attach material consequences to categorical membership.

For social scientists, policy makers, and activists, one key stake in this broader debate is the format of the question used by Brazil's census agency, the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE), to collect official race/color statistics. The IBGE has always included a 'mixed race' or 'brown' category as one option when race/color is asked in the census. This corresponds with Brazil's self-definition over the course of the twentieth century as a nation that is, in its 'essence', mixed. Critics contend that the official distinction between 'black' and 'mixed' Brazilians on the contemporary census perpetuates an ideological myth of a fluid racial order; they argue that in reality Brazilian racial dynamics are essentially binary, and official categories should reflect this state of affairs. Debate thus centers on whether the IBGE should retain the long-established convention of including a distinct category on official surveys for 'mixed' or 'brown' individuals. These debates also extend into those surrounding the classification schemes employed for the administration of race-targeted policy.

Categories used to collect racial/color statistics have wide-reaching repercussions, determining which lines of distinction become socially visible and amenable to statistical analysis and policy intervention. This article examines how a change in the classification scheme used to collect official statistics could affect social scientific understanding of racial dynamics in Brazil. If the 'mixed-race' category on the national census were eliminated, would the Brazilian population end up looking lighter or darker? Would racial inequality appear attenuated or more severe?

We begin with a critical overview of the contemporary debate over racial classification schemes in Brazil. We identify the primary criticisms of the official classification scheme currently used in Brazil's national census, and point to sources of momentum toward removal of the intermediate 'mixed' or 'brown' category from official surveys and race/color-targeted public policy. Drawing on a unique nationally representative dataset that includes race/color questions in multiple formats, we then evaluate how a switch to a binary classification scheme would likely affect social scientific understanding of racial dynamics in Brazil. Our empirical analysis examines how a change to a binary classification scheme for data collection affects: (1) the descriptive picture of Brazil's racial composition, and (2) statistical estimates of income inequality between and within racial groups. We conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of our findings for contemporary debates over the state's collection and use of racial statistics.

Race/color classification in the Brazilian census

The IBGE is the governmental agency responsible for designing and collecting the decennial population census. Until the 1991 Census, the IBGE asked census respondents, 'What is your color (*cor*)?' For the 1991 and 2000 censuses, the question read 'What is your color or race (*raça*)?' Since 1940, excepting the 1970 census in which a color/race question was not included, the IBGE has employed the categories *branco* (white), *pardo* (brown), *preto* (black), and *amarelo* (yellow or of Asian ancestry), adding *Indígena* (Indigenous) in 1991. Fewer than 1 per cent of Brazilians self-classified as either 'yellow' or indigenous in the 2000 census.¹ In this article, we restrict our analysis to classification and stratification dynamics along the black-to-white continuum. We refer to the IBGE's current use of three categories to capture this

continuum as a ‘ternary format’, and compare it to a ‘binary format’ that eliminates an intermediate ‘brown’ or ‘mixed’ category.

The appropriateness of the current census categories is contested in Brazil (Telles 2004; Bailey and Telles 2006; Rocha and Rosemberg 2007; Sant’Anna 2009). One line of critique is that the official census categories do not map well onto the categories Brazilians typically use to identify themselves in daily life. The category used by the IBGE for ‘black’ (*preto*), for instance, is a color term that is most often used in daily talk to describe objects, not people. When *preto* is used to describe a person in colloquial speech, it often carries a negative connotation (Sansone 2003). In the context of an official survey, the *preto* term invokes the darker end of a color continuum as opposed to a racial group identification. The IBGE’s use of the term *pardo* (brown) has also been called into question for its poor fit with prevailing emic categories (Harris et al. 1993; Rocha and Rosemberg 2007). In the category set used by IBGE, *pardo* represents an intermediate category between white and black. *Pardo* translates literally as a brown color, but in the context of official surveys it may also refer to ‘racial mixture.’ Colloquially, however, *pardo* is not a preferred term for describing someone who is perceived as racially mixed (Sansone 2003). In its stead, a popular non-census term, *moreno*, is widely embraced in Brazil by many who self-classify officially as *pardo* (Harris et al 1993; Silva 1999). In the interest of privileging emic terminology, some scholars have advocated replacing the *pardo* category in the census with *moreno* (Harris et al 1993). The majority of scholars working in this field oppose such a substitution, however, because *moreno* is seen as too capacious to be useful in the analysis of racial/color inequality (Telles 2004).

A second line of critique of the current census categories also targets the black and brown categories, but for a different reason. Since at least the 1980s, activists and scholars affiliated

with the Brazilian black movement have argued that inclusion of the intermediate brown category along side a black category in the census distorts demographic depictions of Brazil. They posit that because of the ambiguity of the brown category, many nonwhites actually self-classify in the white category, and many other nonwhites who might most appropriately belong to the black category self-classify as brown. The net result is a swelled white per cent and a decreased black per cent (Nascimento and Nascimento 2001). Seeking to counteract this whitening tendency, activists organized a public campaign leading up to the 1991 census calling on Brazilians to embrace their blackness by rejecting the tendency to self-classify in lighter categories. The campaign slogan admonished: 'Don't let your color pass into white' (Nobles 2000; Sant'Anna 2009).

Along these same lines, critics argue that the IBGE's privileging of a ternary 'color' classification scheme over a binary 'racial' scheme contributes to the perpetuation of the view that Brazilian racial dynamics are fluid and continuous as opposed to sharp and dichotomous. The use of the brown category in official statistics is construed as problematic because it softens the appearance of a racial divide; the brown category helps to buffer the symbolic and material gap between black and white. From this perspective, the act of drawing an official distinction between blacks and browns helps to sustain a belief in mulatto mobility even in the face of evidence that blacks and browns do not differ greatly on most indicators of material well-being (discussed below).

The categories used in Brazil's census are also called into question by those working to create and consolidate collective solidarity among Brazilians of African descent. These critics argue that the IBGE's use of the brown category encourages Brazilians to draw distinctions within the afro-descendent population based on physical appearance. In the words of prominent

afro-Brazilian activist and politician Benedita da Silva (1999, p. 18) ‘the use of these identifiers [brown and black] causes a serious loss of [black] identity’. In more radical variants of this argument, the IBGE is accused of a deliberate effort to deny or impede the consolidation of a unified black identity in Brazil. Thereza Santos (1999, p. 29) argues, for example, that ‘built into the official census is what we call deformation—the prevalence of arbitrary designations in relation to the item ‘color’ that seek, fundamentally, to establish fissures in the identity of blacks’. From this critical perspective, the classification scheme currently used by the IBGE continues a long history of government stigmatization of blackness and promotion of ‘race mixture’ as a path towards whiteness (Skidmore 1993; Nobles 2000).

Thus, for a variety of interrelated reasons, critics have challenged the IBGE census categories. The IBGE has responded to critics’ concerns by holding meetings with interested parties and conducting experimental pre-tests with a variety of alternative classification schemes. To date, the IBGE has opted to continue using the controversial brown and black categories. The IBGE’s justifications for maintaining the brown and black terms in the census appear based on historical continuity and evidence of their acceptance by the population as a measure of skin color (Silva 1996; Sant’Anna 2009).

The 2010 census query on race/color is set to replicate the format used in the 2000 census. For the time being, then, the IBGE will continue to collect population data using the ternary [white/brown/black] color classification scheme. But the pressure for change to binary categories – what Edward Telles (2004) refers to as ‘the black movement classification scheme’ – continues to mount.

Brazil in Black and White?

The growing salience of a binary perspective on Brazilian racial dynamics is fueled by at least two significant developments: the embrace of dichotomous categories by the majority of academics conducting research on race/color inequality in Brazil, and the recent adoption of race-targeted affirmative action policies by state actors and federal government agencies. The now standard convention of collapsing brown and black categories for analysis of racial disparities in Brazil stems directly from two decades of sociological research challenging the theory that mixed race Brazilians fare better over the life course than their black counterparts – the so-called ‘mulatto escape hatch’ (Degler 1971). In the 1980s, sociologists Carlos Hasenbalg (1985) and Nelson do Valle Silva (1985) upended the conventional wisdom that Brazilians of mixed ancestry had more opportunities for upward mobility. These researchers documented strikingly similar socio-economic profiles of blacks and browns compared to whites. Hasenbalg (1985) concluded that ‘nonwhites’ (browns and blacks) in Brazil were exposed to a ‘cycle of cumulative disadvantage’ relative to whites in an on-going struggle for status attainment. Part of that disadvantage was clearly disparities in wages, where Silva (1985) documented that browns and blacks earned on average about half that of whites. Due to these similar profiles, both Hasenbalg (1985) and Silva (1985) argued that in terms of statistical analyses of race/color inequality, a white vs. nonwhite classification scheme was most appropriate.

Other scholars embraced the practice of collapsing brown and black survey respondents together in quantitative analyses, but opted for alternative labels for this grouping.² Most analysts reject the designation ‘nonwhite’ in favor of positive descriptors such as *afro-descendente*, Afro-Brazilian, or *negro*, which assert something shared among members of the aggregated category over and above their shared deprivation compared to whites.³ Most social scientists have come to

agree, then, that the sum of census blacks and browns should be conceptualized and studied as a single collective, most commonly referred to as *negros* (Reis and Crespo 2005; Lovell 2006).

By the 1990s, the black movement's vision and the categories of scientific analysis had converged in a dichotomous classification scheme for understanding racial dynamics in Brazil. This convergence was not coincidental, as many social scientists concerned with racial discrimination and injustice in Brazil have been in dialogue with black movement activists, and several notable black movement activists also contribute as academics to scholarly discourse and debate. The momentum towards a binary approach to the analysis of racial dynamics created by the shared perspective of activists and social scientists has not yet been sufficient to shift the state's approach to data *collection*. But the convergence of the classification scheme used politically by the black movement and social scientifically by academics has bolstered the legitimacy and broader public influence of a binary perspective on Brazilian racial dynamics.

Momentum towards broader adoption of a black-and-white lens for understanding racial dynamics in Brazil accelerated in the wake of the state's introduction of race-targeted affirmative action policies beginning in the early 2000s. This change-of-course for the Brazilian state was brought about by complex interactions between black movement and state actors during the preparations for and participation in the 2001 United Nations Conference on Racism in Durban, South Africa (Htun 2004, Telles 2004). This conference's final document, of which Brazil is a signatory, endorsed affirmative action for descendents of slaves and propelled forward the debate about racial inequality and discrimination in Brazil. In large part as a result of the antiracism conference, there was a 'post-Durban transformation' (Telles 2004, p.72) of public policy in Brazil, resulting in a rapid institutionalization of affirmative action in various governmental spheres.

It may be in the area of higher education that the recent institutionalization of race-targeted policy has most reverberated in the Brazilian public sphere. Beginning in 2001, the state universities in Rio de Janeiro became the first to adopt racial quotas in admissions for *negros*. Several other state universities followed suit in the following years, as did one federal university in Brazil's capital city Brasília. That university's quota legislation reads: 'To compete for the openings reserved through the quota system for *negros*, a candidate should: be of *pardo* or *preto* color, declare one's self *negro*, and specifically opt for the quota system for *negros*'. By the year 2009, several dozen Brazilian public universities had adopted some form of racial quotas for Afro-Brazilians.

There is legislation pending before Brazil's national congress for expanding these measures to all federal universities and other domains. The initiative, the *Estatuto da Igualdade Racial* (Law of Racial Equality), was first proposed in 2003 (Paim 2005). One version of the legislation calls for affirmative action in federal universities, public sector hiring and media representation for 'Afro-Brazilians,' defined as 'individuals that self-classify as such or as *negros*, *pretos*, *pardos* or by analogous definition'. In its adoption of the categories 'Afro-Brazilian' and/or *negro*, the proposed law advances a dichotomous approach to racial classification for official purposes.

Thus, it appears that changes may be afoot in the Brazilian government's approach to racial classification of its citizens. Already, the IBGE frequently lumps browns and blacks together for analysis and presentation of racial statistics, using the category *negros* to refer to the aggregated group. Given the growing pressure towards adoption of a binary scheme for collection and analysis of race/color statistics in Brazil, in what follows we examine how such a

shift would likely affect how social scientists understand the dynamics of racial inequality in Brazil.

Classification schemes and the study of inequality

Our analysis explores how social scientific understanding of color/race dynamics in Brazil might be altered if social surveys were to omit a ‘mixed’ or ‘brown’ option. We focus on two key questions. First, how would adoption of a binary classification scheme affect the descriptive picture of the racial composition of the Brazilian population? Researchers currently describe the *negro* population as making up roughly half the national population. This figure is obtained by post-hoc combination of all brown and black census responses. If respondents had to choose between a binary divide at the point of enumeration, would *negros* still make up half the Brazilian population? Second, how would adoption of a binary classification scheme affect estimates of racial inequality? Would racial disparities in socio-economic outcomes appear the same, better, or worse if survey respondents self-classified in a dichotomous format on the census? Using national survey data that include both formats, self-classification according to the categories of the census and self-classification according to a dichotomous scheme, we suggest answers to these questions.

Data and Methods

We use the *Pesquisa Social Brasileira* (Brazilian Social Survey or PESB), a nationally representative dataset of all persons aged 18 and over. The survey was modeled on the American General Social Survey (GSS) and conducted between July-August, 2002. The complete sample consists of 2,364 persons sampled across 102 municipalities. According to the 2000 census (IPUMS), the population of Brazil is 53 per cent white, 39 per cent brown, 6 per cent black, 0.4 per cent yellow (Asian), and 0.45 per cent indigenous. The entire sample for the weighted PESB

survey, following the same self-classificatory racial scheme of the census, is 46 per cent white, 34 per cent brown, 11 per cent black, 3.7 per cent yellow, and 5.7 per cent indigenous. Because we focus on the black-white continuum in this article, we exclude 34 individuals that self-classified as ‘yellow’ or indigenous in the IBGE-format census question.

Comparison of three classification formats

We compare three classification schemes to explore alternative perspectives on Brazil’s color/race composition and racial inequality. The first classification scheme, which we refer to as Scenario A, is self-classification in the official IBGE census categories (closed format, white, brown, or black). The second classification scheme, Scenario B, is derivative of Scenario A. We take the sum of self-classified blacks and browns from Scenario A and combine them into a single ‘nonwhite’ category. This post-hoc construction of a binary white vs. nonwhite classification scheme follows accepted convention for statistical analysis of racial inequality in Brazil, as noted above. Finally, Scenario C is self-classification in a forced binary scheme (closed format, white or black).

The forced-choice binary format is a first of its kind for large-sample surveys in Brazil. Respondents were first asked: ‘Which of these terms best describes your color or race?’ They chose from white, brown, black, yellow and Indian (we exclude the latter two). Subsequently, the brown respondents were asked a follow-up question: ‘Between the colors white and black, which one better describes your color or race?’ The inclusion of this unusual format in the PESB survey enables us to consider how the Brazilian population might self-classify if the IBGE were to eliminate the intermediate brown term, as some have suggested, and how that change could affect measures of racial inequality.

It is important to clarify that the forced binary choice question in the PESB survey uses the terms white versus black (*preto*) rather than white versus *negro*, the term found in some race-targeted legislation. The latter term is preferred by many affirmative action administrators and black movement actors who define *negros* as the sum of individuals who self-classify as brown (*pardo*) and black (*preto*) in the census format. However, studies reveal that this broad definition of the *negro* term may not be embraced by the population at large. Telles (2004, pp. 86–87) writes: ‘*Negro* in the popular system, like *preto*, refers only to those at the darkest end of the color continuum. Thus, while the black movement has succeeded in giving *negro* a broad definition in its use by the government and some media, the popular use of the term continues to be narrower.’⁴ Moreover, studies comparing those who self-classify as black/*preto* and those who self-classify as *negro* find that both generally represent the darker end of the color continuum in contrast to browns (Telles 2004; Bailey 2008). Hence, available evidence suggests that responses to the forced dichotomous question in 2002 PESB would have been similar if the term *negro* had appeared in lieu of *preto*.

Measures of Inequality and Income

We begin by employing the Theil-L index to estimate levels of income inequality. We use this measure because it satisfies the basic requirements of a rigorous inequality index (Cowell 1995) while facilitating the income decomposition analysis we employ to estimate inequality within and between racial categories (Mookherjee and Shorrocks 1982).

Interpretation of the Theil-L index is similar to the Gini Index.⁵ The measure is defined as:

$$GE(0) = \text{Theil-L index} = \text{mean log deviation} = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \ln \frac{\mu}{y_i} \quad (1)$$

where n is the number of individuals in the sample, y_i is the income of individual i , $i \in (1,2,\dots,n)$ and $\mu = 1/n \sum y_i$ is the arithmetic mean income.

We measure income as the natural logarithm of hourly individual wages. Valid income values were smoothed – to avoid the interviewee's preference for certain values while reporting income – and standardized by the number of hours worked in a month assuming that people work 22 days per month. About five per cent of individual income values were missing and about 25 per cent of these values were equal to zero (housewives, unemployed or retired persons). Individual income is in 2002 Brazilian *Reais* (R\$), and the exchange rate on October 2002 was \$1USD= R\$3.74.

Decomposition analysis

Decomposition analysis is carried out for each of our three classification scenarios. This allows us to see how much of the total inequality in income is attributable to inequality between individuals in different racial categories and how much is attributable to inequality among individuals within the same racial category. In Scenario A, the decomposition separates total inequality into a component of inequality *between* whites, browns and blacks, and a component of *within*-category inequality. In Scenarios B and C, the between and within components refer to whites and nonwhites/blacks since there are only two partitions (though the size and make-up of the two sides of the binaries differ in scenarios B and C). Total inequality (I) can then be expressed as a direct sum of between (I_B) and within (I_W) inequality, $I = I_W + I_B$. Within and between inequalities are defined as:

$$I = I_W + I_B \tag{2}$$

where f_j is the population share and $\lambda_j = \mu_j / \mu$ is the mean income of each subgroup j , (j = white, brown, black), relative to that of the whole population. The first term of equation (2) represents within-category inequality and is simply the sum of subgroup inequalities weighted by population shares. The second term, inequality between subgroups, reflects differences in the subpopulation means. In decompositions by racial category this term corresponds to the relative mean income weighted by population shares. The between component represents the share of total inequality due to differences in the mean incomes of the racial groups. When these two components, I_B and I_W , are divided by total inequality they express the share accounted for by within- and between-category inequalities in the distribution of income.

Results

Classification Schemes and Racial Composition

The overall picture of Brazil's racial composition changes markedly depending on the classification scheme used to collect and report race/color statistics. Figure 1 shows that when the current IBGE categories are used (Scenario A), the Brazilian population is comprised of a slight majority white population (52 per cent), followed by a very large mixed-race population (36 per cent) and a much smaller black segment (11 per cent). This classification scheme sustains a traditional view of Brazil as a 'mixed' country.

[Figure 1 about here]

When the black and brown categories from Scenario A are collapsed to create Scenario B, we see that whites and nonwhites each account for roughly one half of the population (52 per cent vs. 48 per cent). This post-hoc redesignation of categorical boundaries, representing the dominant analytic approach in the field, yields a picture of Brazil as a country about evenly split between whites and nonwhites. In Scenario C, where Brazilians are forced to choose between

classification as black or white, the population appears significantly whiter (68 per cent), with a smaller minority population (32 per cent).

Our results show that adoption of a forced dichotomous format on official surveys could result in an unintended consequence: the swelling of the white side of the divide. When confronted with the binary format, fully 44 per cent of browns opt for the white category. Critics of the current IBGE classification scheme have argued that it contributes to an artificial inflation of the white share of Brazil's population as reported in official statistics (Santos 1999; Turner 2002; Nascimento and Nascimento 2001).⁶ Our results suggest that self-classification in a binary category scheme would result in an even whiter official picture of the Brazilian population. The classification scenarios we consider generate three very different demographic pictures of Brazil. It is a country with a bare majority white population, a very large mixed population, and a small black population, or it is a country nearly evenly split between white and nonwhite, or it is a largely white country with a minority black population.

Classification Schemes and Racial Inequality

Regardless of the classification scheme used, Brazil is clearly stratified along color/race lines. In all three scenarios, we see inequality in mean individual income. However, the magnitude of racial disparity in income changes considerably under alternative classification scenarios.

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1 shows mean hourly income in *reais* in each classification scenario. In Scenario A, there is a very large gap between the mean hourly incomes of whites and blacks, at R\$ 7.03 and R\$ 2.42, respectively. The brown population occupies a midpoint between those two poles, earning on average R\$ 4.74 per hour. In Scenario B, we see a significant gap between white and nonwhites; on average, nonwhites earn about 60 per cent what whites earn (R\$4.20/ R\$7.03). In

Scenario C, the racial disparity in mean hourly wage grows considerably. Whites earn on average R\$7.00 an hour while blacks earn R\$ 2.83, i.e., only 40 per cent of whites' average hourly income. The racial gap in mean wages is much larger in scenario C than in scenario B because the browns that opted for the white side of the binary in Scenario C have higher incomes on average than the browns that opted for the black side of the divide (R\$6.90 vs. R\$3.05, respectively).

Color/race inequality is also evident when we compare income shares to population shares in different classification schemes. Looking again at Figure 1, we see that in Scenario A, whites garner a larger share of total income relative to their population share (65 per cent to 52 per cent, respectively), while blacks are most disadvantaged, holding only 5 per cent of income while making up 11 per cent of the population. In Scenario B, nonwhites are 48 per cent of the population but make only 35 per cent of overall income. Once again, the most dramatic differences appear in Scenario C. At 68 per cent of the population, whites garner fully 84 per cent of total income.

Comparative estimates of within-category inequality (Theil-L index) provide additional insight into income distribution by race/color in Brazil. Results in Table 2 show that within-category inequality in Scenario A is highest for browns (.74) and lowest for blacks (.29). In Scenario B, the nonwhite side of the dichotomy has the highest within-category income inequality (.57 vs. .67). In contrast, in Scenario C (forced choice format), the white side now has the highest inequality (.66), and the black side becomes more homogenous in terms of its income structure (.39).

[Table 2 about here]

One final measure that reveals how different classification schemes affect our understanding of inequality is how much the within-category vs. between-category inequality in each scenario contributes to overall income inequality in Brazil. Results in Table 3, Panels 1 and 2, show that while overall income inequality in our sample is high (.652), between-category differences using current IBGE categories (Scenario A) account for only 8 per cent of it. Within-category inequality accounts for the lion's share of income inequality in Brazil (92 per cent in the case of Scenario A). When the two nonwhite categories are collapsed in Scenario B, the contribution of between-category inequality to overall inequality is reduced further, to 5 per cent. The forced binary classification scheme (Scenario C) produces the greatest between-category differences, accounting for 12 per cent of total inequality.

[Table 3 about here]

In sum, our results show that significant disparities in mean income between color/race categories are evident in all three classification scenarios, attesting to the chronic problem of racial inequality in Brazil. Our findings also show that the classification scheme used to collect and analyse race/color population data alters specific conclusions about the racial composition and level of inequality between and within race/color groups in Brazil. In particular, our analysis reveals that if the brown category were omitted from Brazilian social surveys, the population's composition would likely appear much whiter, while the magnitude of disparity in income between white and black would likely appear much greater.

Discussion and Conclusion

The fact that different classification schemes yield very different pictures of the nature and extent of racial disparities in income bears on contemporary debates over how to understand and address race/color inequality in Brazil. Our findings also speak more broadly to the scientific and

political challenges of ethnic and racial data collection and analysis in the current historical moment.

With respect to on-going debates in Brazil, our results raise questions about the prevailing view that Brazilian browns and blacks are equally disadvantaged and hence can be unproblematically grouped together in social scientific studies of race/color inequality and as beneficiaries of affirmative action policies. Mean income of browns in our sample falls between those of whites and blacks (cf. Silva 1985; Telles and Lim 1998; Telles 2004). In addition, within-category inequality is greatest for the brown category and lowest for the black category, suggesting the internal heterogeneity of the socio-economic profiles of browns in contrast to the more uniformly low socio-economic profiles of blacks. Thus, analyses that merge browns and blacks into a single groups may lose valuable information, and public policies that target browns as no different from blacks may miss their mark (cf Schwartzman 2008; Bailey 2008). Our results suggest that policies that combine race/color-targeted policy with socio-economic criteria of some kind (racial quotas and social quotas combined, as some institutions are adopting in Brazil) may better reach the intended beneficiaries of these programs than race-targeted policies alone (Ceaser 2005).

Our analysis also suggests that adoption of a binary classification scheme for collection of race/color population data (as opposed to the current convention of post-hoc aggregation of blacks and browns) would likely produce an unintended consequence. The white share of Brazil's population would likely swell to a large majority in demographic counts. While this would work against efforts of black movement activists to re-envision Brazil as a majority African-descendent country, it could bolster arguments in favor of race-targeted public policies by generating a more severe picture of the income gap between blacks and whites. Our analysis

shows that browns who self-classify as white in a constrained binary format have on average higher incomes than those who identify as black. As a result, between-category inequality is the highest in the forced binary classification format. This finding also suggests that if race-targeted policies are not used in conjunction with social criteria, forcing Brazilians to self-classify in a binary format might best ensure the targeted identification of the most needy segment of the nonwhite population.

Finally, while our analysis reveals differences in the picture of race/color inequality generated by different classification formats, it is important to underscore that our results show disparities in income across racial/color lines in Brazil however those lines are drawn. In part, the severity of race/color inequality in Brazil reflects the extreme social inequality in Brazil more generally. Our results reinforce the view that there is a ‘deep structure’ (Muniz 2008, p. 74) to social inequality in Brazil, which cannot be attributed to the dynamics that generate racial inequality in particular. Our income decomposition analysis reveals that although race/color inequalities are large, they contribute only modestly to overall inequality in Brazil. Extreme social inequality, in turn, exacerbates the picture of racial inequality. Telles (2004, pp.107-109) hints at this effect when he compares racial inequality in the US and Brazil: ‘The fact that black and brown men earn 40 and 50 per cent of white men in Brazil, while black men earn 75 per cent of white men in the United States, could simply reflect Brazil’s far greater income inequality’. Consideration of the relationship between Brazil’s deep structure of income inequality and the dynamics of race/color income inequality is crucial for the design of effective social policies that aim to create a more equal society.

Beyond the implications for policy debates in Brazil, our analysis also speaks more broadly to the social scientific and political challenges of determining the most appropriate

categories for the study of racial and ethnic inequality and the design of social policies that aim to reduce it. Because race is socially constructed, no set of categories can be argued on the basis of ‘science’ to be the most ‘accurate’. Which categories are included or excluded from social surveys or public policies is always already a political matter. And the specific categories that get included can have significant consequences, brightly illuminating some lines of ethnic or racial division, while rendering others invisible.

The intrinsically political character of official racial and ethnic categories does not provide *prima facie* support for arguments that states or other social organizations should not or cannot legitimately collect racial or ethnic population data. But to hedge against such arguments, and to maximize the usefulness of such data without facilitating misinterpretation or abuse, it is crucial that analysts maintain a reflexive stance in relation to the racial and ethnic statistics that they collect and analyse. Analysts can better illuminate the primary cleavages of distinction and disadvantage in a given context by considering how the particular categories used to study racial, ethnic, or color inequality may shape statistical findings and analytical conclusions. Likewise, in the realm of public policy, consideration of how official use of one set of categories rather than another may alter the social characteristics of eligible beneficiaries can bolster the effectiveness of targeted efforts to ameliorate racial or ethnic inequality.

ENDNOTES

¹ Indigenous and Asian-descendent Brazilians are generally omitted from quantitative analyses of racial inequality in Brazil due at least in part to the relatively small population size. As a result, many questions about identity and inequality within these populations remain to be addressed.

² Some researchers note that it is problematic to collapse browns into a collective black category because many Brazilians who self-identify as brown are of mixed European and indigenous ancestry, not African (Guimarães 2001).

³ The terms *afro-descendente* and Afro-Brazilian are somewhat problematic labels for the sum of ‘nonwhites’ because in Brazil – in stark contrast to the United States – many self-identified whites claim some African ancestry (Rocha and Rosemberg 2007). Whites’ tendency to acknowledge some African ancestry stems from Brazil’s national origin myth, which asserts that the Brazilian population was formed through the fusion of three races: Europeans, African, and Indians. (Beyond founding myths, genetic testing also reveals that many whites actually do have African ancestry [Santos et al 2009]).

⁴ Júnior (2004, p. 304) also writes that ‘*negro* and *preto* are synonymous’ in everyday language. Rocha and Rosemberg (2007) suggest the popular meanings of these two terms are currently in flux, and may be diverging.

⁵ An empirical comparison between Theil and Gini indexes in Brazil does not show significant differences in their estimates (Ferreira et al 2006, p. 7).

⁶ For example, Nascimento and Nascimento (2001, p.125) write, ‘while official statistics put the sum of *pretos* and *pardos* at 48 per cent, estimates that take into account their distortion by the whitening ideal are closer to 70 or 80 per cent’.

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Figure 1: Color/race composition and income shares of Brazilian population in three classification formats

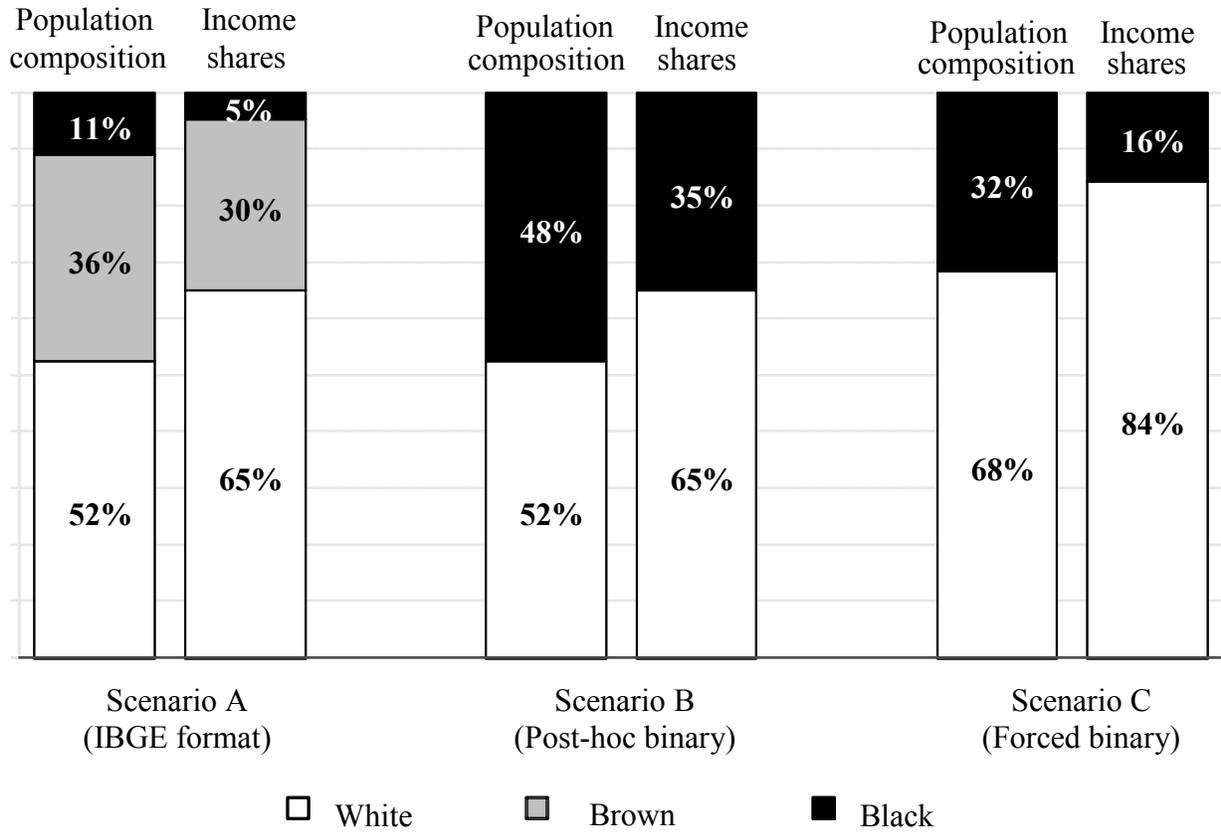


Table 1. *Mean income in reais per hour (R\$)*

	White	Brown	Black
Scenario A (IBGE format)	7.03	4.74	2.42
Scenario B (post-hoc binary)	7.03		4.20
Scenario C (forced binary)	7.00		2.83

Table 2. *Income inequality within race/color category [GE(0)]*

	White	Brown	Black
Scenario A (IBGE format)	0.57	0.74	0.29
Scenario B (post-hoc binary)	0.57		0.67
Scenario C (forced binary)	0.66		0.39

Table 3: *Decomposed estimates of racial inequality in alternative classification formats*

	Aggregate Inequality [GE(0)]	Within component	Between component
Panel 1: Aggregate income inequality			
Scenario A (IBGE format)	0.652	0.602	0.050
Scenario B (post-hoc binary)	0.652	0.619	0.033
Scenario C (forced binary)	0.652	0.574	0.078
Panel 2: Share of total inequality accounted for by inequality within and between race/color categories			
Scenario A (IBGE format)	100%	92%	8%
Scenario B (post-hoc binary)	100%	95%	5%
Scenario C (forced binary)	100%	88%	12%