Towards a comparable measure of race and ethnicity in cross-national research?

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Abstract

This paper discusses some of the methodological difficulties in the construction of a standardized measure for the concepts of race and ethnicity in cross-national research. We begin with some theoretical considerations in the measurement of two constantly evolving concepts. We then examine the key differences how certain racial and ethnic groups are defined in some of the classic immigrant receiving and ethnically diverse countries, depending on the actual wording of the questions and the level of details collected, using data sources from census and other large-scale national surveys in these countries. Finally, we consider how transnational movements and global migration make the quest for reliable and valid measures ever more urgent and important in capturing the new demographic patterns and exceptional of different groups, particularly those of multiple-origins.

Measuring the concepts of race and ethnicity is not just a theoretical or methodological exercise that interests only academics. It is also of significant policy interest in population projections, resource allocation in education, housing, and health. The monitoring of civil rights in the United States depends heavily on data for race and ethnicity. In any case, this exercise has undoubtedly kept scholars occupied for decades most notably in the 'classic' immigrant receiving countries (Australia, Canada, and the US) and former colonial powers (most western European countries). The courts and legal bureaucracies have had a major role in setting standards for the groups to be monitored under an array of different classifications noted variously as race, ethnicity, or nationality.

The most common understanding of the difference between race and ethnicity is that *race* defines groups by (primarily) skin colour whereas the *ethnicity* captures other cultural dimensions that represent one's identity such as ancestry, kinship, tribes, religion, language, and even shared territory. From the days of a simple dichotomy of 'White' and 'Black' to the addition of more refined groups among Asians. Curiously, in the United States, is defined as a dichotomy between Hispanic and non-Hispanic insofar as official guidance asserts that Hispanics may be of any race (OMB Directive No. 15, revised October 1997). Some progress has been made in developing accurate measures in official statistics of racial and ethnic groups in many countries. However, to date, surprisingly little headway has been gained in constructing a comparable measure of race and ethnicity that can be used in cross-national research except Heath and Cheung (2007) who made an attempt to develop standardised measures of 'ethnic group' in their comparative analysis of ethnic minorities in thirteen western labour markets. Confronted by the difficulty of different national traditions for measuring something that approximates the sociological concept of ethnicity, they opted for parents' country of birth and respondents' country of birth instead of ancestry or nationality.' The use of parental country of birth is also far from ideal (Heath and Cheung, 2007:38) for certain groups such as the Asian Indians are ethnically diverse. This goes some way to illustrate the methodological difficulty in developing comparative measures of race and ethnicity. Identifying any single ethnic group is tricky enough let alone multiple or mixed race or ethnic groups.

It is not difficult to see why measuring race and ethnicity is fraught with methodological nightmares. First, these concepts do not travel well across space and time. One would not need to try very hard to notice that 'Asians' in the US refer to Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and other smaller ethnic groups of East Asian origins but it also includes Indians from the Asian-subcontinent, whereas the same term is usually defined as Indian, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in official statistics in the UK. Second, these concepts are susceptible to changes over time due to continuous migration and transnational movements. New groups are added as old groups are dropped or modified due to different kinds of social and political reasons. For example, Arabs will appear as an ethnic group for the first time in the 2011 UK Census. In the United States, Arab-American lobbied for recognition as a distinct race in the 1990s but they were denied when the Clinton administration published a revised classification in 1997.

Capturing intra-ethnic diversity

Like most methodological dilemmas, the measurement of race and ethnicity also faces the trade off between parsimony and precision. In survey research, too many categories result in too many small groups that are no good for statistical analyses. Fewer larger groups are too heterogeneous for any meaning conclusions to be drawn about any one group. Take Chinese for example, in the eyes of the majority of the 'white' population, all Chinese are the same but are they? Taiwanese, Malaysian Chinese, Singapore Chinese, Hong Kong Chinese, Vietnamese Chinese, and Mainland Chinese from the People's Republic of China may all be 'transnationally connected and socio-economically differentiated' (Vertovec 2007:1024), despite a common Chinese heritage.

Developments in Census questions also reflect the changing concerns of different national governments, especially in addressing issues in relation to immigration. In addition to questions on race and ethnicity, many censuses also ask respondents' country of birth, nationality, language spoken at home, in some cases, parental country of birth (Australia and Canada), ancestry, or national origin, and years since arrival or length of residence. In Mexico, for example, "indigenous" entails a linguistic distinction noting persons who speak a Native language, as opposed to Spanish. Conceivably, this means that the children of indigenous parents cannot be considered indigenous as well unless they learn the language of their parents.

Multi-ethnic or 'Mixed' groups

The task of identifying and representing groups accurately is further complicated by the rise of inter-racial and inter-ethnic marriages and the increasingly common mixed-race or multi-ethnic children. Some argue that the advent of transnational movements renders the conventional concepts of race and ethnicity inadequate to capture the complexity of the ever increasingly diverse multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural populations (Vertovec 2007). Many Census Bureaus have already responded by introducing extra categories to represent these 'new' groups. For example, the UK 2001 Census ethnicity question contains a 'Mixed' category. For the first time respondents can choose between the options of 'White and Black Caribbean; White and Black African; White and Asian or any other Mixed background. Similarly, the Mexican census uses a category for mixed: "Mezclada".

The United States census does not use a category for mixed race persons but it does allow respondents to "mark all that apply" and provides a long list of options they may select.

Towards a comparable measure?

To capture the uniqueness of each group and to achieve the goal of differentiating groups of by this socially significant dimension, the issue of identity is crucial. Depending on the country of origin, or one's ancestry, some respondents and especially children of multiple-origins may choose to identify themselves in a 'hyphenated' or hybrid fashion, such as African-American, or Vietnamese Chinese.
To illustrate how different question wordings might lead to a different understanding of a generic group, for example, the Chinese populations in the West, than when identifiable sub-groups are used, we use the US Census, the Current Population Survey, and the American Community Survey to estimate the number of Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese living in the US. We then map these onto the UK, Australian and Canadian data using the same procedure.

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