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Race & Ethnicity Survey Questions

Posted by Jeffrey Henning on Fri, Feb 13, 2009

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Race and ethnicity are standard demographic questions, which all too often are asked out of habit. Typically, when a client asks me, "What is the best way to ask about race?" my response is simple: "Don't." They typically respond, "But I have to." From there I probe to determine why they think they need to, and send them in another direction if I can.

Our recommended best practice is to not ask a question if you don't know how you are going to act on the data you collect. For the development and marketing of most products and services, race and ethnicity are not important attributes to target; far more important are education, income, the respondent's tendency to be an early or late adopter of technology, and their use of similar products and services to the one you are researching. If you are concerned with ensuring that the survey sample is representative of the U.S. population, then age, gender, income and geographic location are arguably more important attributes to segment by.

When you are investigating certain language and social issues, it is better to ask for the language spoken in the home today and in the respondent's home as a child than to ask their ethnicity: they might be a third- or fourth-generation American, fluent in English. Putting a label on them might lead you astray.

Now, if you are conducting surveys for elections, social policy and certain medical conditions, you have to ask about race and ethnicity. The Office of Management and Budget spent four years researching this issue. The resulting document, "Standards for Maintaining, Collecting, and Presenting Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity", describes the guidelines for standard data collection across the federal government: a choose-all-that-apply question with five choices for race, and a separate question for Hispanic or Latino ancestry. If you must ask for race and ethnicity, this is the format to use.

When it comes to using this standard, the most common mistake we see our clients make is forcing respondents to select only one choice for race. As described in "Measuring Our Nation's Diversity: Developing a Common Language for Data on Race/Ethnicity":

> The most controversial and sensitive issue-and the one that continues to receive the most media attention and generate the most public discussion-concerned whether and how the standards should be changed to classify data on individuals who have parents of different races and who wish to identify with more than 1 race.
>
> Sample surveys were designed to test the effects of a category labeled "multiracial" and to test alternative approaches for permitting respondents to select more than 1 race. The research conducted under the auspices of the interagency committee indicated that less than 2% of the population selected 2 or more races when given the opportunity to do so but that the proportion of the population identifying with multiple racial heritages seemed to be growing. Furthermore, research indicated that a considerable number of respondents were selecting more than 1 racial category even when instructed to choose only one and that there was not a shared understanding of the term multiracial.The interagency committee recommended, and OMB agreed, that:
>
> - The standard should allow individuals who so desire to reflect more than 1 race when responding to federal data collections.
> - There should not be a separate racial category (a check box) labeled "multiracial."

As the standard itself observes, "The categories in this classification are social-political constructs and should not be interpreted as being scientific or anthropological in nature." Social-political categories change. In the U.S., we once excluded people from voting based on their religion, yet today religion is not a standard demographic question. I look forward to the day when race and ethnicity are no longer standard demographic questions, and when skin color is no more important than hair color or eye color.

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