

The Importance of Identifying Multiracial People in Social Science Research

TALKING DATA EQUITY

APRIL 11, 2025

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Who are we?

- ▶ **Annabelle Atkin, PhD**
- ▶ Developmental Scientist
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- ▶ Purdue University



- ▶ **Keita Christophe**
- ▶ Developmental Psychologist
- ▶ Assistant Professor,
Department of Psychology
- ▶ McGill University





Agenda

- Positionality
- Census data
- Multiracial identity theories
- Race data collection options (and consequences)
- Tips & takeaways

Positionality





Multicultural

Mixed heritage

Definitions

Multiracial person:

Individual with biological parents of different racial backgrounds

Multiethnic

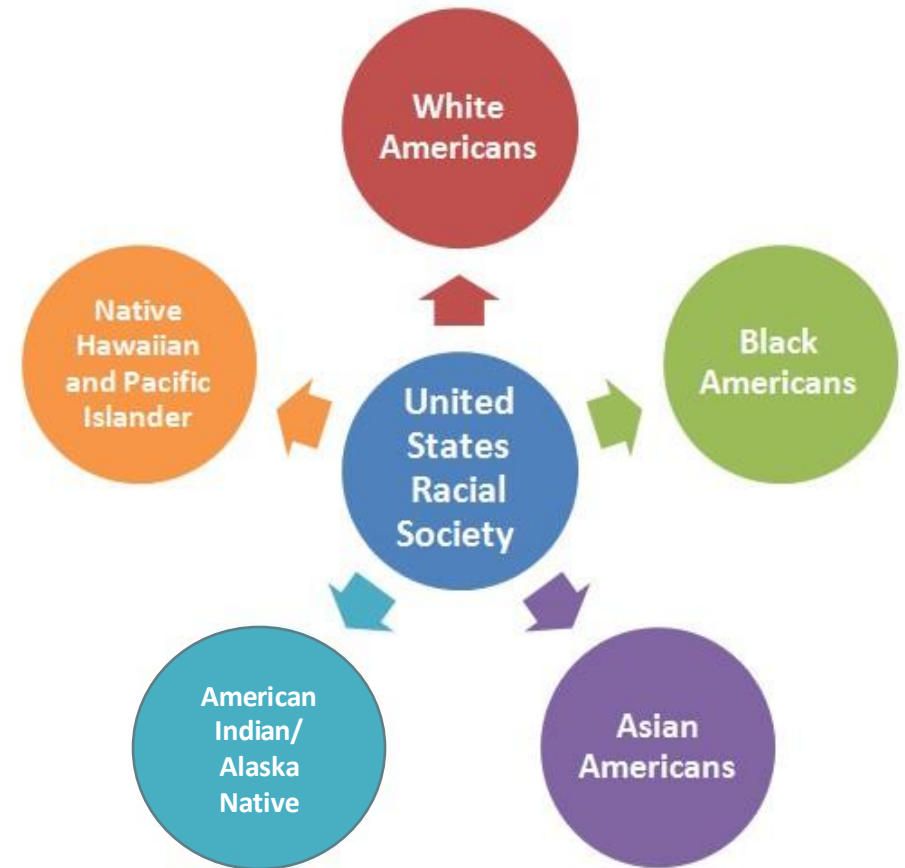
Mixed Race

Multiracial

Biracial

Racial groups (according to the 2020 U.S. Census)

1. White
2. Asian
3. Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
4. African American/Black
5. American Indian/Alaska Native
6. Some other race



2020 U.S. CENSUS

[Home](#) > [Sex](#) > [Age](#) > Hispanic Origin

Is Annabelle L Atkin of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin? ([Help](#))

- ☒ No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
- ☐ Yes, Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano
- ☐ Yes, Puerto Rican
- ☐ Yes, Cuban
- ☐ Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
Enter, for example, Salvadoran, Dominican, Colombian, Guatemalan, Spaniard, Ecuadorian, etc.

What is Annabelle L Atkin's race? [\(Help\)](#)

Select one or more boxes **AND** enter origins. For this census, Hispanic origins are not races.

☐ White

Enter, for example, German, Irish, English, Italian, Lebanese, Egyptian, etc.

☐ Black or African American

Enter, for example, African American, Jamaican, Haitian, Nigerian, Ethiopian, Somali, etc.

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native

Enter name of enrolled or principal tribe(s), for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village of Barrow Inupiat

☐ Chinese

☐ Filipino

☐ Asian Indian

☐ Vietnamese

☐ Korean

☐ Japanese

☐ Other Asian

Enter, for example, Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc.

☐ Native Hawaiian

☐ Samoan

☐ Chamorro

☐ Other Pacific Islander

Enter, for example Tongan, Fijian, Marshallese, etc.

☐ Some other race

Enter race or origin.

8. What is Person 1's race or ethnicity?

Mark all boxes that apply **AND** print ethnicities in the spaces below.
Note, you may report more than one group.

☐ **WHITE** – Provide details below.

- | | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> German | <input type="checkbox"/> Irish | <input type="checkbox"/> English |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Italian | <input type="checkbox"/> Polish | <input type="checkbox"/> French |

Print, for example, Scottish, Norwegian, Dutch, etc.

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☐ **HISPANIC, LATINO, OR SPANISH** – Provide details below.

- | | | |
|--|--|------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mexican
or Mexican
American | <input type="checkbox"/> Puerto
Rican | <input type="checkbox"/> Cuban |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Salvadoran | <input type="checkbox"/> Dominican | <input type="checkbox"/> Colombian |

Print, for example, Guatemalan, Spaniard, Ecuadorian, etc.

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☐ **BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN** – Provide details below.

- | | | |
|--|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> African
American | <input type="checkbox"/> Jamaican | <input type="checkbox"/> Haitian |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Nigerian | <input type="checkbox"/> Ethiopian | <input type="checkbox"/> Somali |

Print, for example, Ghanaian, South African, Barbadian, etc.

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☐ **ASIAN** – Provide details below.

- | | | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese | <input type="checkbox"/> Filipino | <input type="checkbox"/> Asian Indian |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Vietnamese | <input type="checkbox"/> Korean | <input type="checkbox"/> Japanese |

Print, for example, Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc.

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2030 U.S. Census

☐ **AMERICAN INDIAN OR ALASKA NATIVE** – Print, for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village of Barrow Inupiat Traditional Government, Tlingit, etc.

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☐ **MIDDLE EASTERN OR NORTH AFRICAN** – Provide details below.

- | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lebanese | <input type="checkbox"/> Iranian | <input type="checkbox"/> Egyptian |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Syrian | <input type="checkbox"/> Moroccan | <input type="checkbox"/> Israeli |

Print, for example, Algerian, Iraqi, Kurdish, etc.

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☐ **NATIVE HAWAIIAN OR OTHER PACIFIC ISLANDER** – Provide details below.

- | | | |
|---|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Native
Hawaiian | <input type="checkbox"/> Samoan | <input type="checkbox"/> Chamorro |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tongan | <input type="checkbox"/> Fijian | <input type="checkbox"/> Marshallese |

Print, for example, Palauan, Tahitian, Chuukese, etc.

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

☐ **SOME OTHER RACE OR ETHNICITY** – Print details.

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

This question collects information in accordance with the *Employment Equity Act* and its Regulations and Guidelines to support programs that promote equal opportunity for everyone to share in the social, cultural, and economic life of Canada.

19 Is this person:

Mark "X" more than one circle or specify, if applicable.

- ☐ White
- ☐ South Asian (e.g., East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, etc.)
- ☐ Chinese
- ☐ Black
- ☐ Filipino
- ☐ Latin American
- ☐ Arab
- ☐ Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Thai, etc.)
- ☐ West Asian (e.g., Iranian, Afghan, etc.)
- ☐ Korean
- ☐ Japanese

Other — specify:

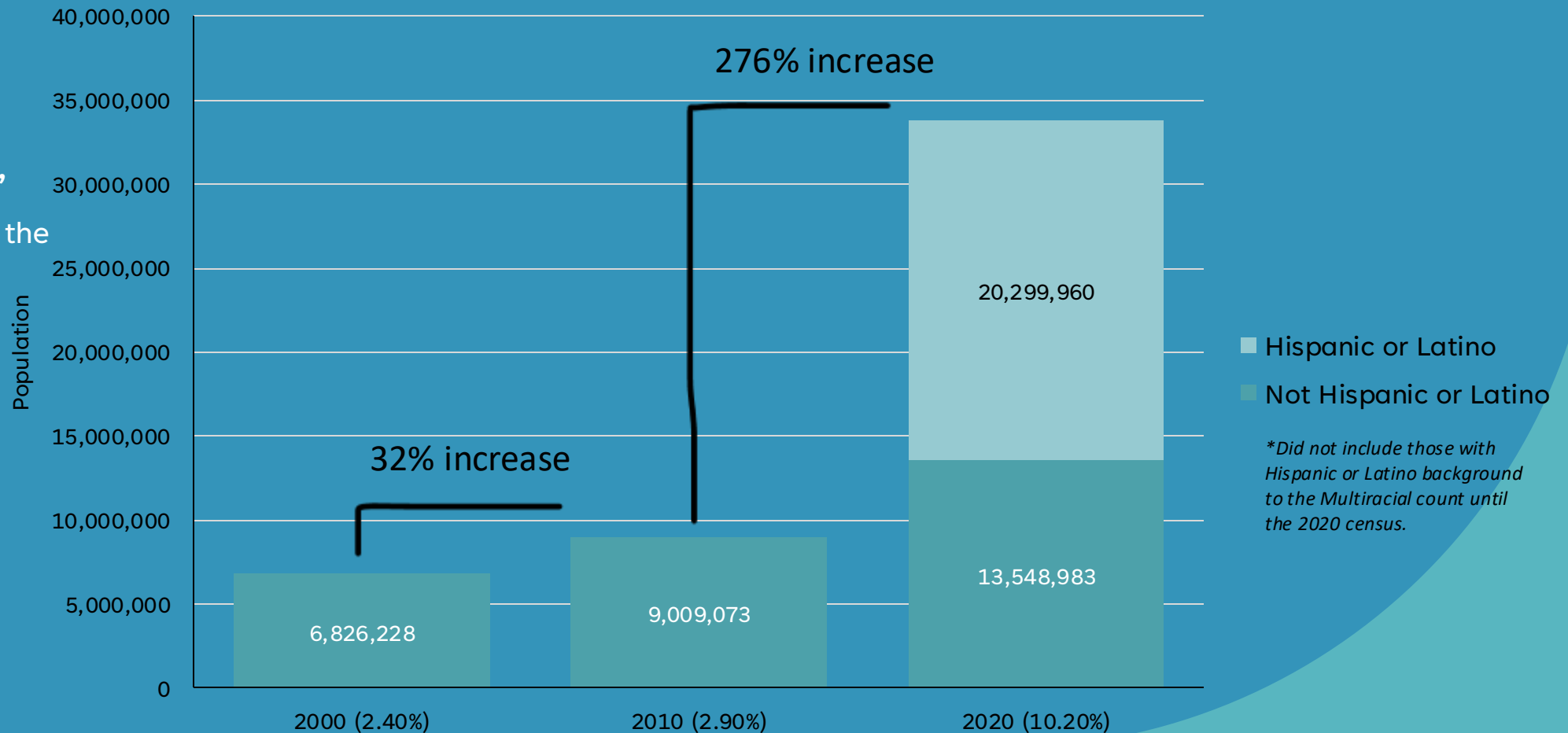
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StatsCan Race/Ethnicity Question

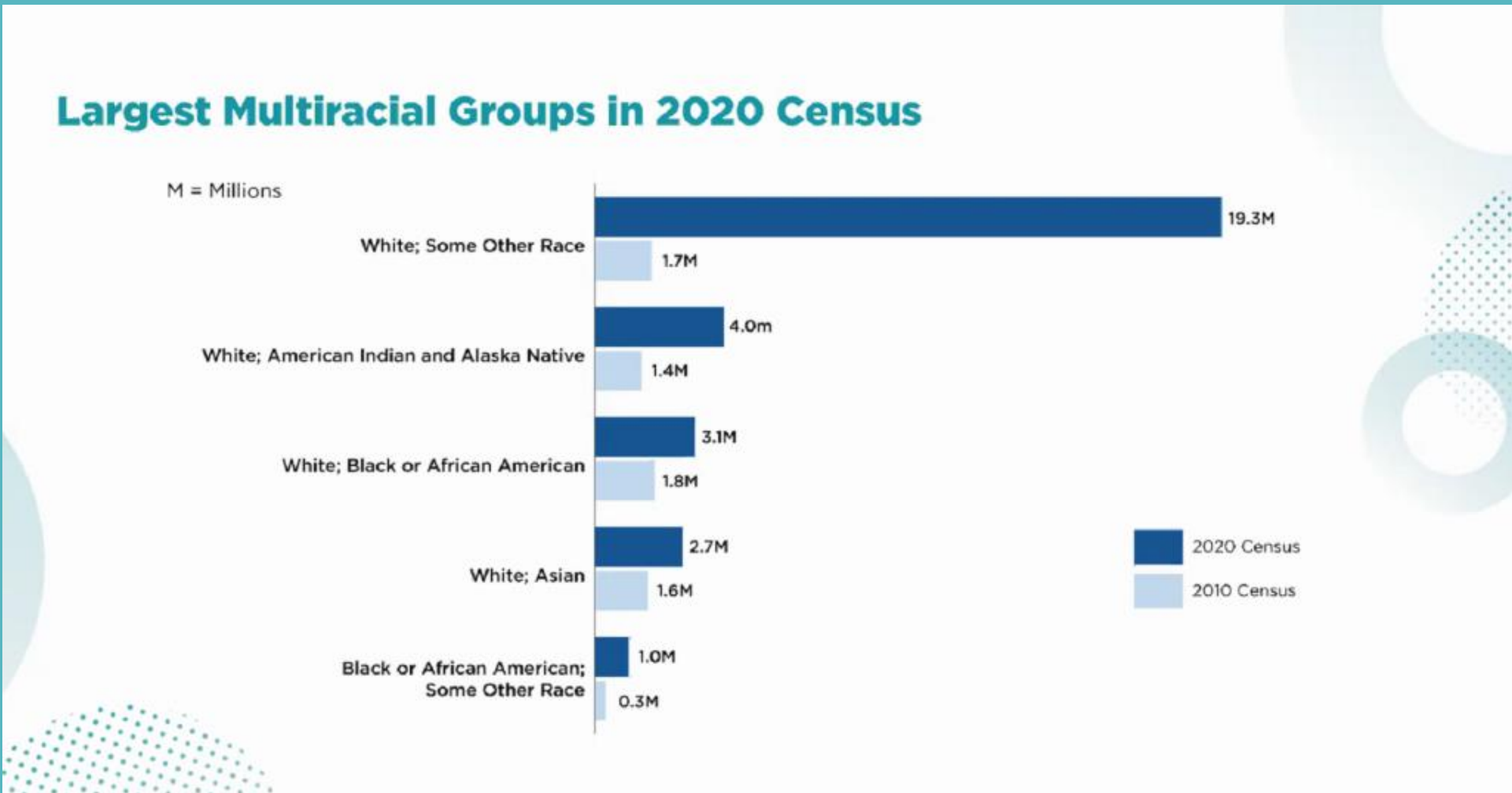
Note different categories, some of which would often be grouped in 1 racial group (Asian) in social science research

The U.S. Multiracial Population

In 2020, the number of the “two or more races” population increased **276%**, and now comprises **10%** of the U.S. population (33.8 million)



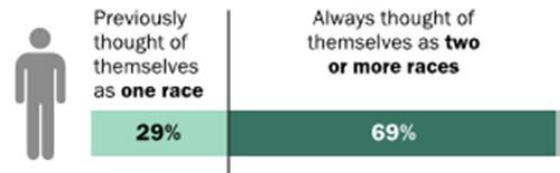
Demographics: Two or More Races



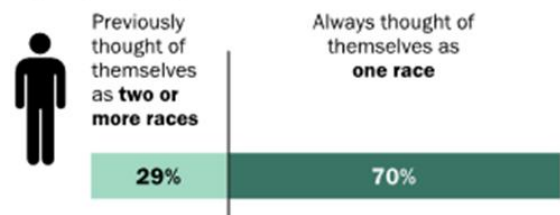
How accurate is the data?

For Some, Racial Identity Has Changed

Percentage of adults with a multiracial background who say they are **two or more races** who ...



Percentage of adults with a multiracial background who say they are **only one race** who ...



Note: Multiracial adults are two or more races (based on backgrounds of self, parents or grandparents). Those who gave no answer are shown but not labeled.

Source: Pew Research Center survey, Feb. 6-April 6, 2015 (n=1,555 multiracial adults)

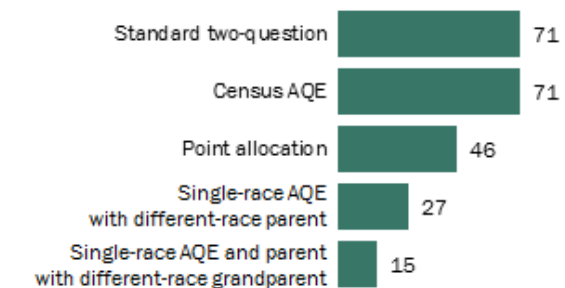
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Q10a-b

Are Multiracial Americans being over- or under-estimated?

Many Who Allocate Points to More Than One Race Don't Consider Themselves "Mixed Race"

Among adults who select two or more races on each measure, % who say they consider themselves "mixed race"



Note: Sample sizes for adults identifying two or more races in each method are as follows: Standard two-question (n=83), Census AQE (n=98), Point allocation (n=264), Single-race AQE with different-race parent (n=111), Single-race AQE and parent with different race grandparent (n=116).

Source: Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel, merged Wave 5 and 7 file, July 7-Aug. 4, 2014 and Sept. 9-Oct. 3, 2014 (N=2,721)

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Critical Multiracial Theory

Monoracial paradigm in U.S. society – race is immutable and fixed

Does not recognize Multiracial realities

Results in a monocentric system (Jackson & Samuels, 2019)

- Privileges monoracial identities as the norm
- Pathologizes multiraciality as exotic and abnormal
- Upholds whiteness as a racially pure category
- Perpetuates the one-drop rule
- Essentializes multiraciality as inherently problematic

Consequences of the Monoracial Paradigm

- ***Monoracism*** – discrimination targeting Multiracial status

(Harris, 2016; Johnston & Nadal, 2010)

- Being exoticized, tokenized, objectified, rejected
- Being put into monoracial boxes, or forced to pick a monoracial identity

Data scientists & researchers may be contributing to this!

- Parents do not talk about race, utilize colorblind messages

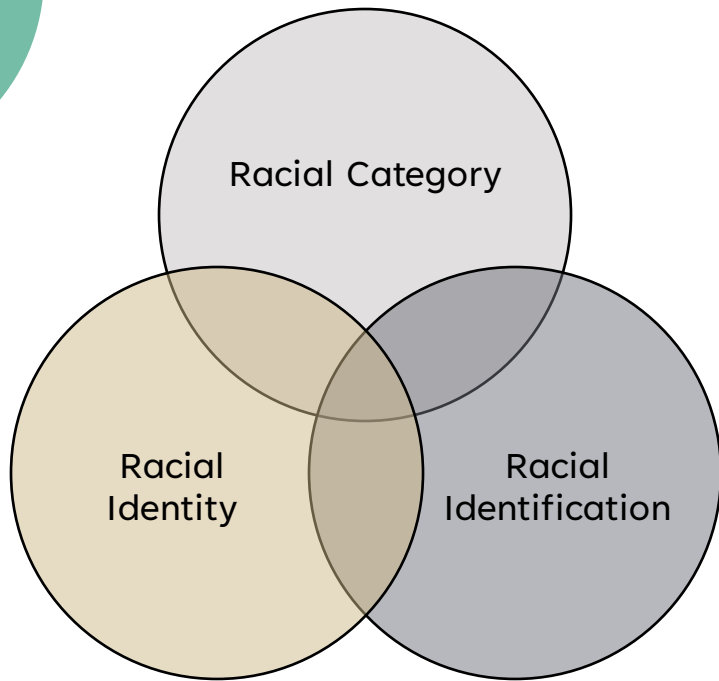
(Jackson et al., 2017; O'Donoghue, 2005; Rauktis et al., 2016; Rollins & Hunter, 2013; Samuels, 2009, 2010; Snyder, 2012)

- Monoracial focus
- Not prepared to embrace multiraciality or respond to monoracism

Racial Identity Typologies

- **Singular Identity:** Choosing One Race
- **Protean Identity:** Choosing Multiple Races
- **Transcendent identity:** Choosing no race
- **Border Identity:** Choosing a Third Space (i.e., creating one's own identity and label)
 - E.g., “Eurasian”, "Cablinasian“, “Mexipino”, “Blasian”





Identity Development

- **Racial Identity:** an individual's self-understanding.
- **Racial Identification:** how others understand and categorize an individual.
- **Racial Category:** what racial identities are available and chosen in a specific context.



Rockquemoor, 2009

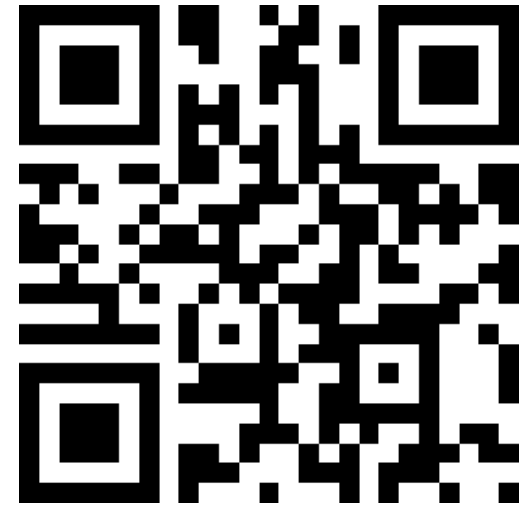
"I look like a White girl, but I don't feel like one. I'm a Black woman."
Photo of Halsey and her father



An Exploratory Mixed Methods Study of Multiracial Americans' Race Choices on the 2020 Census

Atkin & Minniear, 2023

tinyurl.com/AtkinMin23



Question: “Why did/would you respond to the census the way you indicated? Did you respond to the census checking boxes for all of your racial-ethnic groups or only one or some of your racial-ethnic groups? Why?”

Themes:

- 1) **Identity driven** - “I responded by only checking the ones I felt I grew up with. I also have small amounts of black and native American ancestry, but because I did not grow up with experiences of either of those cultures, and I am such a small portion of them, I choose not to claim them.”
- 2) **Accuracy driven** – “I chose all of my racial backgrounds because I know that the census is used to distribute different kinds of resources amongst communities, and I feel like it's important to very accurately report your information.”
- 3) **Externally driven** - “I responded based on the outward appearance and perception that people would have about me. Outwardly I am most perceived as a black African American male so I selected that option.”

Key Takeaways for Multiracial Identity

1. Mixed-race people construct different racial identities based on their experiences and context
2. There are a number of factors that influence their identity choices
3. People with the same racial background may choose to identify in different ways
4. The boxes one checks on forms may not reflect their identity or racial background
5. There is no one right way for a Multiracial person to identify



Please answer these additional questions.

All fields are required unless marked optional

Demographics information

Patient Race

- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- ☐ White
- ☒ Other Race

Patient Ethnicity

- ☐ Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin
- ☒ Not Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin
- ☐ Unknown

Continue scheduling

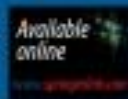
Cancel

Race and Social Problems

VOLUME 5 • NUMBER 3 • SEPTEMBER 2013

 Springer

12552 • ISSN 1867-1748
5(3) 147–238 (2013)



Christophe, N. K., Atkin, A. L., Stein, G. L., Lee, R. M., & The LOVING Study Collaborative. (2024). How collection of racial demographics highlights or hides participants' Multiraciality: An illustrative example and warning for social scientists. *Race and Social Problems*, 17, 1–11.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-024-09423-z>

<https://tinyurl.com/CARSP2024>



Sample

- ▶ N = 688 Multiracial college students
- ▶ Recruited from 3 sites across the US
- ▶ Only eligible if they had biological parents of 2 different racial groups
- ▶ Racial categories (8 options)
 - ▶ Black, Asian/Asian American, Native Hawaiian or PI, White (EA), Hispanic/Latina(o), Native American/Al, MeNA, not listed
- ▶ Indicated own race + race for each biological parent

Table 1 Descriptives for non-racial demographic variables

Variable	Sample (N=688)
Age range	18 to 57
Mean age (<i>SD</i>)	21.2 (5.4)
Gender identity	
Female	503 (73.1%)
Male	163 (23.7%)
Gender Minority	24 (3.2%)
Generational Status	
U.S.-born	600 (87.2%)
Foreign born	57 (8.3%)
Social class	
Poor	23 (3.3%)
Working class	74 (10.8%)
Lower middle class	129 (18.8%)
Middle class	310 (45.1%)
Upper middle class	134 (19.5%)
Affluent	12 (1.7%)
Data Collection Site	
Southwest	360 (52.3%)
Southeast	212 (30.8%)
Midwest	116 (16.9%)

Inconsistency across self- and parent race question

Classification	Monoracial (1 category)	Biracial (2 categories)	Multiracial (3+ categories)
Own race	91 (13.2%)	505 (73.4%)	92 (13.4%)
Sum of parent races	0	419 (60.2%)	269 (39.1%)

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Sum of parent races	0	419 (60.2%)	269 (39.1%)

Our sample is 100% Multiracial confirmed via our eligibility criteria

If we only used self-identified race, 13.2% omit categories and would be labeled as monoracial

Inconsistency across self- and parent race question

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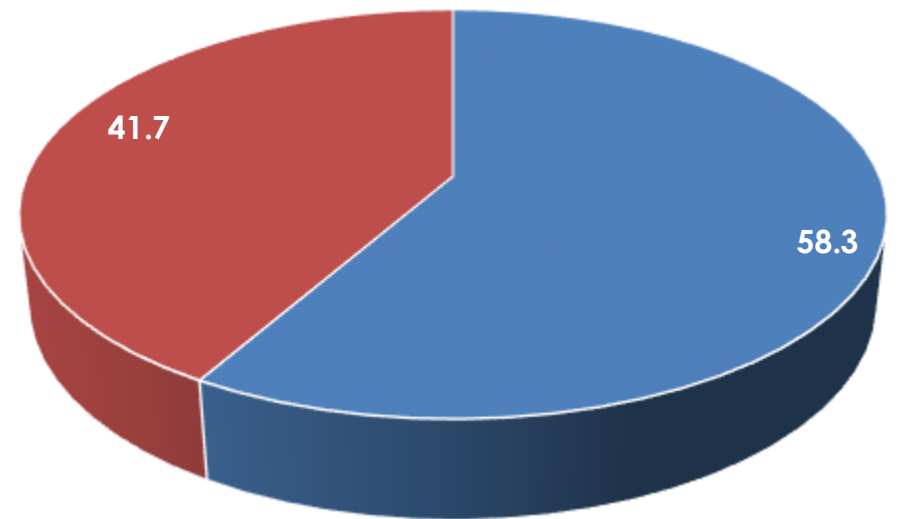
The diagram illustrates the increase in multiracial reporting. A blue arrow points from the 'Own race' row to the 'Sum of parent races' row, indicating the transition from self-identified race to parent-reported race. Another blue arrow points from the 'Multiracial (3+ categories)' column in the 'Own race' row to the 'Multiracial (3+ categories)' column in the 'Sum of parent races' row, highlighting the increase in the number of people reporting to 3+ racial groups.

Using parent race questions leads to a **192% increase in the # of people reporting belonging to 3+ racial groups** relative to self-identified race.

Inconsistency across self- and parent race question

41.7% participants would be **classified differently** based on whether you used either the parent race questions of self-identified race question (N=287)

13.2% if only distinguishing between monoracial (1 group) or more than 1 group



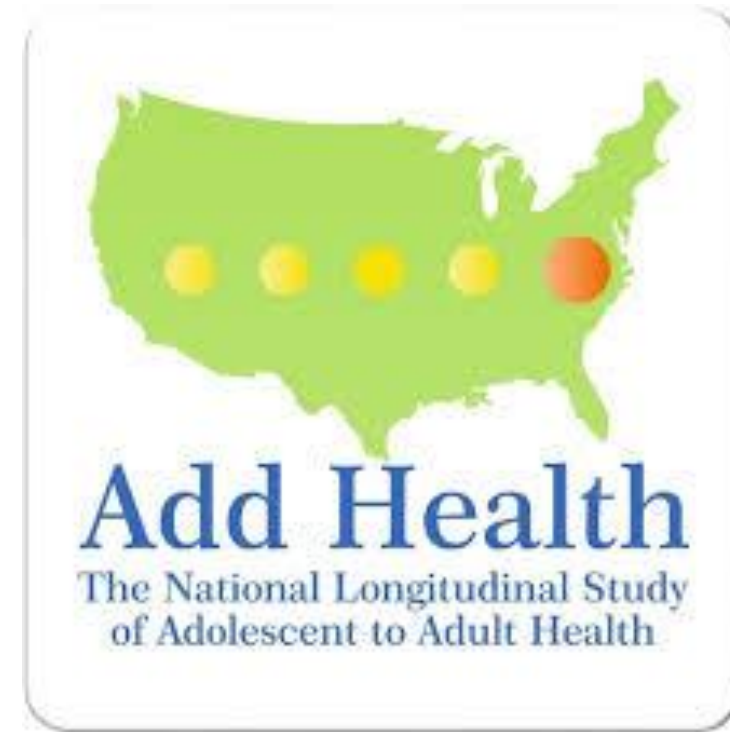
■ Consistent ■ Inconsistent

Inconsistency found across studies

National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health)

Nationally representative U.S sample of >20,000 adolescents recruited in the mid-90's

- ▶ 4.8% Multiracial based on parental race questions
- ▶ 6.8% Multiracial based on self-identified race when asked at school
- ▶ 3.6% Multiracial based on self-identified race when asked at home
- ▶ **640+ youth classified differently across question and context**



(Harris & Sim, 2002)

Inconsistency found across studies

Mauer et al., 2020

705 diverse families with children assessed at 9, 10, & 14 years old

13.8% of caregivers classify their child differently across assessments

14.5% of parent-reported and child-reported race questions at 1 time point don't agree



Who are these people?

Participants who show identity inconsistency :

- ▶ Report **more perceived conflict** between their racial groups
- ▶ Have **less pride** in being Multiracial
- ▶ **Do more exploration** of what being Multiracial means to them
- ▶ Are more likely to have **multiple minoritized backgrounds**



Why should I care?

- ▶ Based on the demographic question you ask, the size of your groups and your understanding of those groups might significantly change
- ▶ You aren't getting Multiracial people placed into different demographic groups at random
 - ▶ Certain types of Multiracial people may be over- or under-represented in different groups, potentially introducing bias into whatever you are measuring

Why should I care?

- ▶ Particularly problematic if you are interested in comparing groups by race/ethnicity
- ▶ Multiracial people are the fastest growing group in the U.S and Canada, meaning **this problem will increase in magnitude across time** as there are more and more Multiracial people



Understanding of Groups may change (Facente et al., 2022)

- ▶ Small sample of MSM with HIV from a community sample in San Francisco
 - ▶ Focus on HIV-related stigma
- ▶ Looked at different ways of racial categorization
 - ▶ Multiracial – category from people with 2+ races
 - ▶ Other – put MR people in ‘other’ category
 - ▶ Hypodescent – put MR people in their ‘lowest’ racial category

“Multiracial” model

Asian/Pacific Islander	36
Black/African American	48
Hispanic/Latinx	142
White	258
Other	15
Multiple	42

“Othering” model

Asian/Pacific Islander	36
Black/African American	48
Hispanic/Latinx	142
White	258
Other	57

“Hypodescent” model

Asian/Pacific Islander	46
Black/African American	61
Hispanic/Latinx	154
White	258
Other	22

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Other category more than triples

“Hypodescent” model

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Hispanic/Latinx	154
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Other	22

Several groups increase – biggest increase is ‘Black’

Understanding of Groups may change - Impact on Point Estimates (Facente et al., 2022)

Category	Multiracial Model ^a			Othering Model ^b			Hypodescent Model ^c		
	RD	95% CI	P Value	RD	95% CI	P Value	RD	95% CI	P Value
Race									
Asian/Pacific Islander	−0.018	−0.306, 0.270	0.904	−0.018	−0.306, 0.269	0.902	−0.018	−0.280, 0.244	0.893
Black/African American	−0.016	−0.279, 0.247	0.905	−0.016	−0.279, 0.246	0.902	0.058	−0.180, 0.297	0.631
Hispanic/Latinx	−0.141	−0.321, 0.039	0.126	−0.141	−0.320, 0.039	0.126	−0.110	−0.286, 0.067	0.223
White	0	Referent		0	Referent		0	Referent	
Multiple	0.213	−0.057, 0.482	0.123						
Other	0.149	−0.267, 0.564	0.484	0.195	−0.043, 0.433	0.108	0.179	−0.169, 0.527	0.313

- ▶ Too small for significant ($p < .05$) differences – look at point estimates
- ▶ **Positive (.213) Multiracial v White group difference obscured in othering & hypodescent models**

Understanding of Groups may change - Impact on Point Estimates (Facente et al., 2022)

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- Moderately unstable estimate for 'other' group depending on the model

Understanding of Groups may change - Impact on Point Estimates (Facente et al., 2022)

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- Negative (-.016) point estimate for Black participants in Multiracial/Othering model becomes positive in hypodescent model when including Black Multiracial people

Ok I care,
but what
should I
do?



1. DON'T Restrict people's ability to self-identify as Multiracial

- ▶ Limits Multiracial people's ability to assert their identity in research, on forms, to government agencies, etc.
- ▶ Has implications for:
 - ▶ Identity & sense of belonging
 - ▶ Self-esteem and motivation
 - ▶ Could add stuff from Atkin & Minnear here as bullet point or whole slide digging into this more



(Townsend et al., 2009)

1. DON'T Restrict people's ability to self-identify as Multiracial

Not classifying Multiracial people as their own racial/ethnic group limits our ability to identify health disparities

Emerging research shows that, relative to White and other monoracial groups, Multiracial populations are at increased risk of:

- ▶ Poor sleep outcomes (duration, quality, etc.)
- ▶ Negative Mental health problems (including depression, anxiety)
- ▶ Suicidality
- ▶ Lower well-being (e.g., lower self-esteem & life satisfaction)
- ▶ Higher substance use

(Chavez & Sanchez, 2010; Chen et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2006; Henson-Garcia et al., 2024; Goodhines et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2019; Senger-Carpenter et al., 2025)

1. DON'T Restrict people's ability to self-identify as Multiracial

Not classifying Multiracial people as their own racial/ethnic group limits our ability to identify health disparities

If you don't allow Multiracial people to be their own group, you can't identify disparities then can't direct attention & resources towards supporting the population



(Chavez & Sanchez, 2010; Chen et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2006; Henson-Garcia et al., 2024; Goodhines et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2019; Senger-Carpenter et al., 2025)



2. DO tailor your demographic questionnaires to your research question

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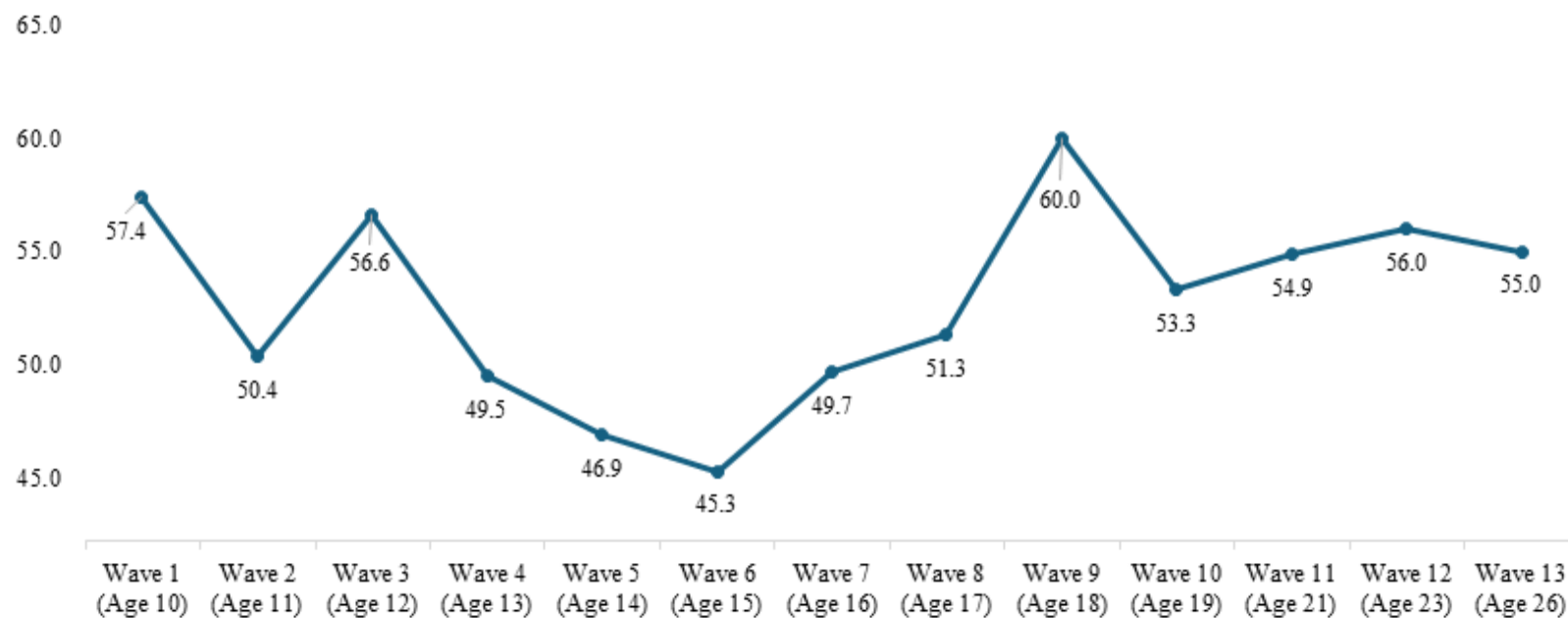
- ▶ **Be intentional about the demographic data you collect**
- ▶ If possible, asking about race/ethnicity in multiple ways can't hurt
- ▶ If not an option, which conceptualization best fits your aims?
- ▶ Interested in parenting processes?
 - ▶ Maybe it matters that one parent is White and one parent is Asian → consider using parental race question to group participants
- ▶ For other questions, maybe self-identified race, or even phenotype or 'street race' (see work of Nancy Lopez) is most appropriate

3. If assessing people at multiple time points, DO ask for racial demographics at each wave

- ▶ Racial self-identification can change over time
- ▶ Example with 659 Mexican-origin youth followed from age 10-26 (Jim et al., under review)

**% identifying as Mexican
American vs. American →**

**Self-labeling changes can have
implications for / be impacted by
stress, development, context,
mental health, identity, etc.**



In general: Be intentional!

- ▶ Avoid arbitrary decision-making
- ▶ Tailor your choice to your question
- ▶ Justify your intentionally-made decision
- ▶ Understand the implications of your decisions re: choosing demographic questions



Conclusions

- ▶ Multiracial people are a rapidly growing, highly heterogeneous group often excluded, mischaracterized, or just excluded from social science research
- ▶ The way we ask our race/ethnicity demographic questions has a large impact on our ability to identify Multiracial people & characterize their experiences
 - ▶ Big implications for sample sizes and any group comparisons
- ▶ No universal 'best practice,' but being intentional and justifying decisions can help researchers better characterize this unique group



Thanks so much!

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