

Abstract

(Re)Modeling Race: Incorporating Racial Theory into Survey Research on Inequality

by

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Over the past decade, debates have raged inside and outside the American academy about whether race should be included in survey research and governmental data gathering. The consensus position – that collecting racial data is necessary in order to monitor racial inequality – is admirable but fails to address the substantial gap between social science theory about race and actual research practice. While racial theory stresses complexity, contingency and a dynamic relationship between race and inequality, standard survey research practice continues to use a single, self-reported measure of race, as if it were a question to which there is only one “correct” answer.

I argue that a multidimensional approach to measuring race reveals the patterns of racial inequality in the United States more clearly than standard single-measure methods. Using a statistical technique called latent class analysis, I demonstrate that race is not simply who we think we are; it also is how we are perceived by others. By combining these two dimensions, researchers gain a more complete view of the American racial landscape and how it has changed over time.

The advantage of my approach is not solely descriptive, however. Examining inconsistencies between perceived and self-reported measures of race also provides the necessary analytical leverage to adjudicate between existing causal claims and narrow the field of potential mechanisms that perpetuate racial disparities. To demonstrate this, I revisit conventional findings regarding the racial distribution of earnings, family income and health care. Contrary to traditional theories of racial discrimination, I find that being seen as white, by itself, does not benefit women in either the labor or the marriage market. Yet when it comes to health care, I find that self-reported race, often presumed to capture “cultural” differences, cannot fully explain the patterns in who receives any of several common screenings.

This suggests that different dimensions of race may be more salient in some contexts and not others, further supporting my argument that standard survey research should incorporate multiple measures of race to better understand processes of racialization and inequality in the United States.