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An Inconvenient Truth:

"Hispanic" is an ethnic origin, not a "race"

By Nancy López (August 24, 2013)

Kenneth Prewitt's provocative [August 21st New York Times commentary](#) calls us to "fix the census archaic racial categories." He contends that the current national statistical system is untenable because it has not kept pace with post-1965 demographic shifts. However, it is puzzling that while Dr. Prewitt chides the Census for conflating race and nationality, he proceeds to do just that.

His solution is to ask two new questions: "One based on a streamlined version of today's ethnic and racial categories," and a second, separate comprehensive nationality question. This recommendation would effectively conflate race with ethnic origin as if these were one and the same thing. But the inconvenient truth is that knowing a person's ethnicity, (for example, their cultural background, nationality or ancestry), tells you nothing about their race or their social position in society that is usually related to the meanings assigned to a conglomeration of one's physical traits, including skin color and facial features.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of Dr. Prewitt's recommendation for a streamlined version of today's ethnic and racial categories is his proposal to make Hispanics a "race." He points to the fact that 37% of Hispanics marked "some other race" in the 2010 Census race question as proof that the question is flawed. But could it be that it is that many Hispanics or Latinos occupy an in-between racial status that precludes them from being readily identified as white, black, Asian or Native American in the U.S. context?

As the daughter of Dominican immigrants who was born and raised in public housing in New York City, I wonder who exactly would be included in the "Hispanic" race? Present day Latinos in the U.S. context consist of people that may share a common national origin, language, culture and ancestry, but they may simultaneously occupy very different racial statuses, even in the

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same biological families. If Hispanics were designated as a "race" instead of an ethnic origin, would this mean that, by fiat, Sonia Sotomayor, Thomas Perez, Dolores Huerta, Sammy Sosa, Ricky Martin, George Lopez, Jennifer Lopez, Cristina Aguilar, Zoe Saldana, Eva Langoria, would suddenly become members of the same "race"?

I agree that we need to do a better job of collecting race and ethnicity data in the Census and beyond. For example, Dr. Prewitt's suggestion that we bring back the parental place of birth question is an important suggestion that will allow us to examine the experiences of the children of immigrants. However, the conflation of race and ethnic origin has many unintended consequences that will impede our ability to monitor whether there are different experiences among Hispanics as well as many other groups that are analytically distinct from ethnicity.

For example, an innovative 2013 study by the U.S. Department of Housing based on 8,000 participants in 28 metropolitan areas, used multiple measures of race to test for the presence of housing discrimination. They found while there was discrimination related to ethnic markers, such as name and sound of voice, the most prevalent form of discrimination was based on the meanings assigned to physical appearance or race. This meant that potential apartment renters with the same social class credentials received different treatment based on their racial status. There is also a plethora of social scientific research that finds similar value in keeping two separate questions on race and ethnic origin for understanding inequality in labor market outcomes, schooling, earnings, health status, and criminal justice.

Dr. Prewitt very clearly affirms the need to continue to collect race data; however he falls short of recommending that continued testing of Census questionnaire formats be assessed in terms of their ability to interrogate inequalities in social outcomes. For example, the U.S. Census can test whether the inclusion of "Hispanic" as a race would mask the levels of racial segregation that exist among Latinos who identify as white vs. some other race, etc.

We cannot kill two birds with one stone. Two separate questions on race and ethnicity are necessary on the Census, not only for monitoring and eliminating inequalities among Latinos but also for assessing social outcomes among our growing mixed race population and other communities vis-a-vis residential segregation, labor market discrimination, unequal schooling, race-gender profiling, voting rights violations and other social inequalities. How else would we know whether we have made progress in creating a more perfect union for all?

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