

Attachment S - Written Justification for Sensitive Questions on the 2010 Census Alternative Questionnaire Experiment Race and Hispanic Origin Research Focus Group Moderator Guides

January 13, 2011

Background

One important component of the 2010 Census Alternative Questionnaire Experiment Race and Hispanic Origin Research is a series of focus groups that will be conducted to complement the quantitative analyses. The focus group research seeks to identify the source of response issues that emerged from the AQE mailout/mailback questionnaires, identify trends in race and Hispanic origin reporting, understand how and why people identify their race and ethnicity in different ways and contexts, and give us a better understanding of response patterns. The Census Bureau will be conducting 67 focus groups with a wide variety of diverse racial and ethnic communities throughout the United States and Puerto Rico, to explore questions and concepts of racial and ethnic identification.

Exploring Sensitive Topics

There are two potentially sensitive topics in the Middle Eastern / North African moderator guide, which we propose exploring within these focus groups. First, we explore the role of religion in racial identity for the Middle Eastern and North African population. Second, we examine how societal changes since 2001 might impact the racial identification of Middle Eastern and North African communities in the United States.

Dr. Howard Hogan provided an update on these two sensitive topics in the AQE Focus Group research to the Census Bureau's Data Stewardship Executive Policy Committee, which serves as the focal point for decision-making and communication on policy issues related to privacy, security, confidentiality and administrative records. The importance of exploring these topics in the AQE research was understood. We believe that small focus groups are precisely the place to begin to explore these sensitive topics and questions with the Middle Eastern and North African community.

As we move forward with preparing for future data collections, this research will help us understand more about the response patterns of Middle Easterners and North Africans to questions on race and ethnicity. We believe the findings will yield insights to the complexities of the classification of Middle Easterners and North Africans as "White" when a number of respondents self-identify otherwise.

While historically (1878-1944), Middle Eastern and North African communities sought classification as "White" over "Asiatic" in order to attain citizenship status in the United States (Gualtieri 2009), this is changing. Numerous Middle Eastern and North African community organizations led write-in campaigns encouraging individuals to identify their specific heritage on the 2010 Census race question (Ashmawey 2010, Kahn 2010).

Topic 1: The centrality of religion in “racial” identity for Middle Eastern and North African communities.

The first topic is the inclusion of a question in the Middle Eastern / North African Moderator Guide which explores the role of religion in racial identity, a topic some people may consider sensitive.

We propose asking:

“How do you see your religion affecting your racial or ethnic identity?”

We revised the wording for this question from the original wording, which asked:

“Has your religion had an impact on your racial identity? How so?”

We believe exploring the role of religion in racial identity is critical for the Middle Eastern and North African community, in order to understand the complexities of race reporting for this population. As with other communities, we know that life experiences influence racial identification, particularly for Middle Eastern and North African communities where racial identification is fluid and complex (Dallo et. al, 2008; Gualtieri 2009; Malek 2009; Naber 2000; Naff 1993; Suleiman 1999).

To be clear, we are not collecting data on religion. Rather, we are exploring the ways in which religion may have an impact or be integral with one’s “racial” identity. Recent research stresses that religion is a key aspect to identity among Middle Eastern and North African groups (Ajrouch and Jamal 2007; Barakat 1993; Gualtieri 2001; Haddad 2004; Orfalea 2006). In particular, Barakat (1999: 125) contends that for Middle Easterners and North Africans, religious affiliations “are comparable to – indeed, inseparable from – tribalism or ethnicity.”

In addition, the theme of religion and racial identity was discussed by the Census Bureau’s interdivisional AQE Focus Group team and developed through consultation with key external decennial census advisors and the contractor’s experts with the Middle Eastern and North African community. Helen Samhan, a 2010 Decennial Census Advisory Committee member, and former Executive Director of the Arab American Institute Foundation, stressed the importance of understanding Middle Eastern and North African race reporting in the context of religion, since religion and race and ethnic reporting are inextricably linked for this community.

We believe exploring the theme of religion in racial identity addresses the goals of the AQE focus group research to explore how identity is formed, changes, and may be fluid, as well as *why* people identify in certain ways, both in person, and on forms like the Census for Middle Eastern and North African communities in the United States.

Topic 2: The impact of 9/11 on racial identity for Middle Eastern and North African community in the United States.

The second topic is the inclusion of a question in the Middle Eastern / North African Moderator Guide which examines how post-9/11 experiences of Middle Easterners and North Africans in the United States have impacted their racial identification, a topic some people may consider sensitive.

We propose asking:

“Has your racial identity changed since 2001? If so, how?”

We revised the wording for this question from the original wording, which asked:

“Have you faced any discrimination in the US since 9/11?

Have these experiences affected your racial identity? How so?”

Again, this theme is critical to exploring and understanding race reporting for this population. Recent research shows that self-identification is fluid and may be influenced by how people are identified or wish to be identified in society. In particular, research has shown that Middle Easterners and North Africans experiences in the United States changed after 9/11 (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2009; Cainkar 2009; Jamal and Naber 2008; Tehranian 2007).

The theme of exploring how post-9/11 experiences of Middle Easterners and North Africans impact their racial identity was discussed by the Census Bureau’s interdivisional AQE Focus Group team, and developed through consultation with key external decennial census advisors and the contractor’s experts with the Middle Eastern and North African communities. Helen Samhan also stressed the importance of understanding Middle Eastern and North African race reporting in the context of 9/11.

We believe exploring the theme of the impact of 9/11 on racial identity addresses the goals of the AQE focus group research to explore how identity is formed, changes, and may be fluid, as well as *why* people identify in certain ways, both in person, and on forms like the Census for Middle Eastern and North African communities in the United States.

Conclusion

We believe these two questions – the role of religion in racial identity and post- 9/11 experiences – while potentially sensitive, are central for exploring the important topic of racial identity with Middle Eastern and North African communities. This research will shed light onto our understanding of the response patterns of Middle Easterners and North Africans to questions on race and ethnicity.

This research exemplifies the Census Bureau’s responsiveness to America’s racial and ethnic diversity. In addition to enhancing the quality of the Census Bureau’s future research, this study

will strengthen our partnership with Middle Eastern and North African community organizations and demonstrate our sensitivity to their cultural values and experiences.

As we move forward with preparing for future data collections, these findings will yield insights to the complexities of the classification of Middle Easterners and North Africans as “White” in relation to their common self-identification as something other than “White.” We expect this research will be a successful endeavor, and will provide the Census Bureau with great insights to understanding how and why people identify their race and ethnicity in different ways and contexts.

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