

Race and Ethnicity Research Ethics Considerations

Background Principles

- In the human research setting, researchers should consider race and ethnicity during recruitment, data collection, data analysis, data storage, and the sharing of results.
- Researchers should consider geographic and cultural norms in the context of their research, the expectations, and sensitivities of involved participants, and to consider the norms of their specific field of research.
- According to the TCPS, “[r]esearchers should not exclude individuals from the opportunity to participate in research based on attributes such as culture, language, religion, race, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, linguistic proficiency, gender, or age, unless there is a valid reason for the exclusion.” (See “Inclusive Participation” below).
- When collecting demographic information, researchers must consider how collecting demographics can compromise identifiability of data by giving additional data points that may promote re-identification.

Definitions

Race and ethnicity are two distinct constructs. While sometimes used interchangeably, researchers should understand the specific concept they are interested in, distinguished from related concepts such as immigration or language ([CIHI, 2020](#)).

Ethnic or cultural origin: “refers to the ethnic or cultural origins of the person’s ancestors.” ([Statistics Canada, 2021](#)) Ethnic groups share “common identity, heritage, ancestry, or historical past, often with identifiable cultural, linguistic, and/or religious characteristics” ([Ontario, 2021](#)). While it is not possible to list all the ethnic or cultural origins on demographic questionnaires, consistent with the goals of the study, researchers may choose to include options deriving from the [Ontario Human Rights Commission \(2017\)](#), such as: Arab, African, Chinese, European, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Latin-American, South Asian, Southeast Asian, West Asian, First Nations, Métis, Inuk, [International] Indigenous, multiple/mixed ([OHRC, 2017](#)).

Race: socially constructed classifications of people into groups based principally on physical traits (phenotypes) and skin colour. Race is not based on science or biology, but on societal distinctions, with consequences on people’s lives and livelihood. Race can change over time, and can overlap with ethnic, cultural, and religious groupings. ([Ontario, 2021](#)) When asking about racial origin or lineage, or what race a participant would identify as, consistent with the goals of the study, researchers may choose to include the options deriving from the [Canadian Institute of Health Information \(CIHI, 2020\)](#): Asian, Black, Latino/Latinx Indigenous, Mixed Race, East/Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern, South Asian, White, don’t know, prefer not to answer.

Indigeneity: Indigenous is a global term that refers to the Original Peoples of a country ([Ontario, 2021](#)). In Canada, Indigenous typically refers to people of First Nation, Inuit, and/or Métis descent “regardless of where they reside and whether their names appear on an official register.” Indigenous groups have distinct histories, cultures, languages ([TCPS 2 2018, Chapter 9](#)), and distinct traditional knowledge, perspectives, and worldviews ([Hart, 2010](#)).

When collecting this data, options such as “population group not listed, specify, don’t know, prefer not to answer, and multiple/mixed” and a self-description fill-in response can enhance participant comfort.

Data Collection

Researchers may deem it pertinent to their investigation to collect information on ethnic or cultural origin, race, and/or Indigeneity as a facet of a participant's identity. In this case, researchers should follow the TCPS (2018) Core Principles of Respect for Persons, Concern for Welfare, and Justice, refraining from inequitably collecting too much or not enough information [pertaining to race and/or ethnicity, or not].

When collecting demographic information with Indigenous people, researchers must consider how collecting demographics can compromise identifiability of data by giving additional data points that may promote re-identification, for example, in small Indigenous communities.

Researchers should be able to justify why it is relevant to collect information including ethnic or cultural origin, race, and/or Indigeneity, where this information is an important item of analysis of research, and briefly explain how the collection of such data promotes the research objectives without excluding relevant groups.

Race and Ethnicity as demographic data

Collecting demographic information should be done in a way which allows for participant choice in disclosure with attention to potential stigmatization, and equitable and fair treatment. The REB requires that researchers ask, rather than assume, the demographics of the researched populations, considering geographic and cultural norms in the context of their research, while upholding norms of their specific field of research. Researchers may choose to reuse or augment race and ethnicity demographic questions from published literature in their field. Researchers should consider geographic and cultural norms in the context of the settler-colonial context if research is happening in North America.

Researchers may ask about race or ethnicity by using a question such as "How would you describe your race?" "Choose the options that best describe your ethnicity/cultural origins." It may be appropriate to explain to participants the purpose of asking any questions about ethnic or cultural origins and race.

Changes and shifting socio-political contexts, as well as geographic location, should inform response categories included when collecting demographic data about race and ethnicity/cultural identity. Offering a check-box style which allows for multiple responses.

Conventions to consider

Inclusive participation:

The TCPS 2 2018 directs researchers to be wary of disproportionate participation which places direct burdens of participating in research for individuals or groups and/or the inappropriate exclusion of individuals or groups from the potential benefits of research participation. Research participation should be driven by the inclusion and exclusion criteria of the research, that is, the focus, objective, nature of research, and context.

Demographics and Participant confidentiality

Researchers must consider the security, identifiability, and anonymity of data collected and stored, and if the collection of ethnic or cultural origin, race, and/or Indigeneity along with other characteristics jeopardizes participant security and/or safety (TCPS 2 2018 Chapter 5). As part of the consent process, explain to participants how you will protect the data, including policies for retention and destruction of data, particularly identifiable data, and technological and physical measures to safeguard data.

Examples: Researchers should note that demographic changes and shifting socio-political contexts should inform the response categories included. The current socio-political context for Indigenous peoples might indicate the need for the inclusion/exclusions

[From CIHI: Proposed race-based and Indigenous Identity data collection standards \(2020\)](#), informed by Ontario Anti-Racism Directorate. Data Standards for the Identification and Monitoring of Systemic Racism. [2018](#). The Upstream Lab. Screening for Poverty and Related social determinants and intervening to improve Knowledge of and links to resources ([SPARK](#)).

Proposed Race-Based Question

“We know that people of different races do not have significantly different genetics. But our racial identity still has important consequences, including how we are treated by different individuals and institutions. Which race category best describes you? Check all that apply:”

Response category	Examples
<input type="checkbox"/> Black	African, Afro-Caribbean, African Canadian descent
<input type="checkbox"/> East/Southeast Asian (optional: may collect as 2 separate categories — East Asian and Southeast Asian)	Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Taiwanese descent or Filipino, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Thai, Indonesian, other Southeast Asian descent
<input type="checkbox"/> Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, Inuk/Inuit)*	First Nations, Métis, Inuk/Inuit descent
<input type="checkbox"/> Latino	Latin American, Hispanic descent
<input type="checkbox"/> Middle Eastern	Arab, Persian, West Asian descent (e.g., Afghan, Egyptian, Iranian, Lebanese, Turkish, Kurdish)
<input type="checkbox"/> South Asian South Asian descent	(e.g., East Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, Indo-Caribbean)
<input type="checkbox"/> White	European descent
<input type="checkbox"/> Another race category	Another race category Includes values not described above
<input type="checkbox"/> Do not know	Not applicable
<input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer	Not applicable

Proposed Indigenous identity question *

It is recommended that reporting on Indigenous identity data and communities be informed through engagement with Indigenous communities in the jurisdiction of data collection. Distinctions-based approaches — that is, identifying First Nations, Inuk/Inuit, and Métis communities and/or other Indigenous populations such as nations or clans — may be preferred

“Do you identify as First Nations, Métis and/or Inuk/Inuit?”

Proposed response categories (select all that apply)
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes, First Nations
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes, Métis
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes, Inuk/Inuit
<input type="checkbox"/> No
<input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer

From [Statistics Canada. Canadian Community Health Survey, 2017-2018: Annual Component](#) [Public use microdata file] Ottawa, Ontario: Health Statistics Division, Statistics Canada [producer] Ottawa, Ontario: Data Liberation Initiative, Statistics Canada [distributor]

“You may belong to one or more racial or cultural groups on the following list. Please check the response(s) that best describe you”

Proposed response categories (select all that apply)
<input type="checkbox"/> White
<input type="checkbox"/> South Asian (e.g., East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan)
<input type="checkbox"/> Chinese
<input type="checkbox"/> Black
<input type="checkbox"/> Filipino
<input type="checkbox"/> Latin American
<input type="checkbox"/> Arab
<input type="checkbox"/> Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese, Cambodian, Malaysian, Laotian)
<input type="checkbox"/> West Asian (e.g., Iranian, Afghan)
<input type="checkbox"/> Korean
<input type="checkbox"/> Japanese
<input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer
<input type="checkbox"/> _____ (please specify)

Additional Resources

Canadian Institutes of Health Research. Research Involving First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples of Canada – webinar.

<https://na1se.voxco.com/SE/?st=10PfbH%2fdTvG2UCCsjH7WKUsVljYzaEv6Bj6WcCIBlcc%3d>

Gareau, P. L. Indigenous Canada: Online Course. *University of Alberta*.

<https://www.coursera.org/learn/indigenous-canada>

Ontario Human Rights Commission. Call it out: racism, racial discrimination and human rights: Online Course. <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/learning/elearning/call-it-out>

Queens University. Indigenous Community Research Partnerships: Online Course.

<https://www.queensu.ca/indigenous/decolonizing-and-indigenizing/community-research-partnerships-training>

The First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC). Fundamentals of OCAP®.

<https://fnigc.ca/ocap-training/take-the-course/>