



# Clear communication of race and ethnicity for public health: best practices & common failings

September 23rd, 2021  
12-4pm EST

## **RESOURCE PACKET**

Disclaimer: This workshop is hosted by the Interdisciplinary Association for Population Health Science (IAPHS). The materials herein reflect the work and thoughts of the authors (Martinez, Andrabi, Goodwin, Wilbur, Smith, & Zivich), and are not necessarily reflective of all members of IAPHS, IAPHS itself, or the author's affiliations (e.g., UNC Chapel Hill).

## Table of Contents

<b>1. The Team + Citing Our Work</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>1a. Meet the Team</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>1b. How to Cite</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>2. Summary of Workshop Information</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Conceptualization (Definition)</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Operationalization (Measurement)</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Operationalization (Coding)</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Peer Review</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>3. Workshop Activities</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>4. Resources for Clear Communication</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>4a. Capitalization Practices</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>4b. Current Guidelines: Journals &amp; Institutions</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>4c. Key Readings</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>5. References</b> .....	<b>22</b>
<b>5a. Sections 1-4.</b> .....	<b>22</b>
<b>5b. Slide Decks</b> .....	<b>22</b>

# 1. The Team + Citing Our Work

## 1a. Meet the Team

We are a collaborative team of a PhD students from epidemiology, sociology, anthropology and health policy who trained together at the [Carolina Population Center](#), an interdisciplinary research center associated with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. While engaged in interdisciplinary research discussions, we noted a distinct lack of consensus both between and within our disciplines on the use of race and ethnicity in publications.

In 2019, motivated by Dr. Thomas LaVeist's 1996 article "[Why we should continue to study race... but do a better job: an essay on race, racism, and health](#)" (Ethn Dis), we started a project examining the conceptualization, operationalization, and use of race in academic publications. Using a clear set of defined inclusion/exclusion criteria and a simple stratified random sample of articles, we extracted and analyzed how race and ethnicity was defined, measured, coded, used within a discipline's literature over time. We focused on trends in three disciplines – medicine, epidemiology, and medical sociology – sampling articles from high impact factor field-specific journals.

We found that while the proportion of articles that included data on participants' race and ethnicity increased over time for each discipline reviewed (epidemiology, medicine, and medical sociology), the majority failed to report *how* race and ethnicity were measured. Further, exceptionally few (~1/240) studies conceptualized (i.e., defined) race and ethnicity. Manuscripts from this project are currently under review. As publications influence both the research practices of current scientists and shape future researchers, we feel that it is important to (1) have a clear understanding of the trajectory of the use of race and ethnicity in research and (2) highlight opportunities for improvement in scientific communication.

Beyond disciplinary divides, our group is diverse along many axes of identity and being, including but not limited to racial and ethnic. Within our group, we identify as Black, Indigenous, White, immigrant, Latina, Muslim, South Asian, and multiracial.

Follow our work here: <https://www.biosocialteam.com>

Questions or comments? Contact the team here: [biosocial.collab@gmail.com](mailto:biosocial.collab@gmail.com)



**Rae Anne M. Martinez, MSPH.** Rae Anne is an Epidemiology PhD student at the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill. Martinez is broadly interested in how psychosocial stressors are embodied through epigenetic modification and subsequent impacts on health across the life course. She is also interested in exploring historical & contemporary conceptualizations of race and ethnicity in health scholarship and their relationship of these social constructs to health. Martinez was a Flinn Foundation Scholar at the University of Arizona, where she received her B.S. in Molecular & Cellular Biology and a B.A. in Sociology in 2014. She received her MSPH from UNC Chapel Hill in 2019. [Google Scholar.](#)



**Nafeesa Andrabi, MA.** Nafeesa Andrabi is a fifth-year Sociology PhD student at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill, a Biosocial trainee at the Carolina Population Center and a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellow. Her research centers on understandings of race among Muslims in the United States and the mental and physical health consequences of Muslim racialization in the US context. [Google Scholar.](#)



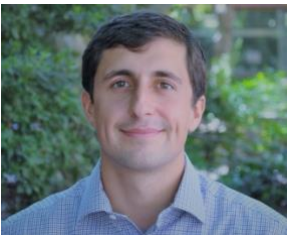
**Andrea “Andi” Goodwin, MA, MS.** Andi Goodwin is a fifth-year graduate student in University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill’s Sociology doctoral program, and a predoctoral trainee in the Carolina Population Center’s biosocial training program. Her general research interests include social stratification’s association with health disparities and caregiving burden in the US context. [ORCID](#).



**Rachel E. Wilbur, MPH.** Rachel Wilbur is a sixth-year doctoral candidate in the department of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill, where she previously completed an MPH in Health Behavior and Health Education. Her research explores the effects of social determinants of health, historical, and intergenerational trauma and resilience on contemporary health among Native American and Alaska Native populations. [Research Gate](#).



**Natalie R. Smith, MS, PhD.** Natalie Smith is a cancer prevention postdoctoral fellow at the Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health. Natalie works to promote the implementation of strong, evidence-informed policies to prevent and control chronic disease. To do this, she pursues research geared towards (1) simulating the comparative health and economic effects of public health policies, and (2) improving how researchers disseminate findings to policymakers. She earned her PhD in Health Policy and Management at UNC Chapel Hill in 2021 and her MS in Biostatistics, also from UNC Chapel Hill, in 2017. [Google Scholar](#).



**Paul N. Zivich, MPH, PhD.** Paul Zivich is an epidemiologist who specializes in causal inference, with a specific focus on interference, infectious diseases, and statistical software. Paul is a postdoctoral fellow at the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health. [Google Scholar](#).

## 1b. How to Cite

Manuscripts related to this work are currently under review or in progress. To support the work of our team of junior scholars and students, you can directly site these materials via the [Carolina Digital Repository](#) (search the title of the workshop).

We also suggest you check out our blog series, which is also citable via the Carolina Digital Repository.

Martinez RAM, Andrabi N, Goodwin AN, Wilbur RE, Zivich PN. Thoughtfully Measuring and Interpreting Race In Population Health Research. *IAPHS Blog* blog. 2021. <https://doi.org/10.17615/bs67-jj32>

### Re-use Request

You are welcome to use all of these resources for your own personal exploration.

Please ask reach out to the team ([biosocial.collab@gmail.com](mailto:biosocial.collab@gmail.com)) or to Rae Anne Martinez ([raeannem@ad.unc.edu](mailto:raeannem@ad.unc.edu)) before re-using or adapting these materials for delivery in a course or other format, so that we may check with the other content developers for permission as appropriate.

## 2. Summary of Workshop Information

### Conceptualization (Definition)

#### ***Why is conceptualization important?***

It is important to clearly communicate your concepts of race and ethnicity in order to ensure that you have a clear understanding of what you are measuring and so that you can provide a strong justification of why the measures are relevant to your research question. Providing your definition of race and/or ethnicity in publications also aids in dispelling misconceptions or misinterpretations regarding the definition and use of racial and ethnic constructs in your work.

#### ***Example Definitions:***

Race: Fluid, relational, contextually-specific social construct often derived by assigning social meaning to observable characteristics like skin tone or hair texture.<sup>1,2</sup>

Ethnicity: Fluid, relational, and contextually-specific social construct. It is often used to reflect cultural commonalities.<sup>1</sup>

#### ***Conceptualization Action Items:***

For your own research:

1. How do you define race? How do you define ethnicity? How are your definitions for race and ethnicity similar or different? Do they overlap?
2. Why is race and/or ethnicity important for your research question?
3. Where do race and/or ethnicity fit into your conceptual model?
4. Do you state what your conceptualization of race is (social construct, essentialist, or other) in your manuscript?

As you review others' research:

1. Can you tell what the authors' conceptualization of race and/or ethnicity is (social construct, essentialist, or other)?
2. Do they combine or conflate race with ethnicity?

#### ***One Thing You Need to Do for Operationalization:***

Ask yourself, "Could someone reviewing this article tell what my conceptualization (definition) of race and/or ethnicity is (social construct, essentialist, or other)?"

# Operationalization (Measurement)

## Why is measurement important?

Purposeful measurement of race and ethnicity is important because measurement is indelibly linked to results. Without a proper understanding of how studies have measured race and ethnicity, it is not possible to synthesize findings across studies in order to draw overarching conclusions.

Table Adapted from Roth (2016).

Dimension of Race	Definition	Measurement
Racial Identity	Subjective self-identification, not limited to pre-set options	Open-ended self-identification questions
Racial Self-Classification	The race you check on an official form or survey with constrained options (e.g. the Census)	Close-ended survey question
Observed Race	The race that others believe you to be	Interviewer classification
Appearance-based	Observed race based on readily observable characteristics	Interview classification with instructions to classify on first observation
Interaction-based	Observed race based on characteristics revealed through interactions (e.g. language, accent, surname)	Interviewer classification with instructions to classify after interaction or survey
Reflected Race	The race you believe others assume you to be	“What race do most people think you are?”
Phenotype	Racial appearance	Usually interviewer classification
Color	Skin color	Usually interviewer classification on a Likert scale or color palette
Other features	Hair texture or color, nose shape, lip shape, eye color	Usually interviewer classification on a series of categorical variables

## Measurement Action Items:

For your own research:

1. What dimension of race and/or ethnicity did you assess? Was this the dimension you were intending to assess?
2. Can you justify why this measure of race and/or ethnicity will best address your research question?
3. Have you thought critically about the limitations of this measurement?

As you review others' research:

1. What dimension of race and/or ethnicity was assessed?
2. Do the authors explicitly justify why this measure of race and/or ethnicity is best fit for their study?
3. Do authors discuss limitations of their measurement?

## One Thing You Need to Do for Measurement:

Ask yourself, “Could someone reviewing this article state what dimension of race and/or ethnicity I used in my methods?”

# Operationalization (Coding)

## Why is coding important?

Thoughtful coding of race and ethnicity data is important because the practice of coding can fundamentally alter the results of data, analysis, and ultimately, the interpretation of results.

## Selecting a coding schema:

1. How are variables being combined?
2. Why are they being combined?
3. Does the resulting code match the research question?
4. Are the findings still representative of the original data?

## Guiding questions on the “Other” category:

In your own research:

1. What purpose does the “other” category serve in my research?
  - a. Does it provide meaningful information about/for the populations included in the category?
  - b. Does it provide a valuable comparison to the groups outside of the “other” category?

As you review others’ research:

1. Do they use an “other” category? If so, do they say who is in it? Do they justify its use?
  - a. What are the benefits and limitations of using this category *for the researchers*?
  - b. What are the benefits and limitations of using this category *for the participants*?

## Solutions to Common Coding Problems:

1. Resist the temptation to collapse categories unnecessarily
2. If you must use an “Other” category, ensure that it serves a specific analytic purpose
3. Be transparent about your coding decisions in both analysis and publication

## One Thing You Need to Do for Coding:

Ask yourself, “Could someone reviewing this article reproduce my coding scheme from the original data?”

# Peer Review

## Why is interrogating communication of race and/or ethnicity in peer review important?

As authors, reviewers, and editors, we respect the peer review process for many reasons. The greatest, perhaps, in theory is that peer review keeps us accountable to doing “good” research. A hugely simplified view of “good” research to our team means asking important population health questions, demonstrating methodologic rigor according to our own discipline, and reproducibility or validation of study findings. Failure to communicate definitions of complicated constructs, to fully explain measures, to justify (re)coding schemes, or motivate the inclusion or use of data in publication limits our ability to reproduce studies. During peer review, we have the privilege of holding others accountable and ensuring that all information is clearly communicated.

### Guiding questions:

1. Do the authors clearly motivate **why** racial or ethnic data was important to the study question?
2. Do the authors define race and/or ethnicity is (i.e., **what** is race? A social construct, a biological construct, or something else)?
3. Do the authors unambiguously state the measure of race and/or ethnicity that was used (e.g., **who** answered the question and **how** was it asked)?
4. Do the authors state **how** they code race & ethnicity?

TDLR: Ensure the papers you review include the how, who, what, & why of race and ethnicity

### A few things You Need to Do in Peer Review:

1. Check the guidelines!
  - Check to see if journals you review for follow ICMJE guidelines
  - Check to see if journals you review for have additional policies
2. Ensure that papers you review meet those guidelines
3. (If you are in the position to do so) Suggest new accountability measures
  - Suggest that journals introduce more rigorous guidance
  - Suggest that journals introduce accountability measures
4. Call out biological racism



### **3. Workshop Activities**

**IAPHS 2021 Preconference Workshop: Clear communication of race and ethnicity for public health**  
**Martinez, Andrabi, Goodwin, Wilbur, Smith, Zivich.**  
**September 23rd, 2021**

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## 4. Resources for Clear Communication

### 4a. Capitalization Practices

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## 4b. Current Guidelines: Journals & Institutions

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## 4c. Key Readings

### **Articles on clearly communicating race & ethnicity in interdisciplinary, public health literature.**

Boyd RW, Lindo EG, Weeks LD, McLemore MR. On Racism: A New Standard For Publishing On Racial Health Inequities. *Health Affairs Blog* blog. 2020

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### 5b. Slide Decks

#### **Introduction**

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#### **Part 1: Conceptualization**

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## **Part 2: Operationalization (Measurement)**

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## **Part 3: Coding**

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## **Part 4: Peer Review**

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### ***Closing thoughts***

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