American Indian Tribal Non-Response: Patterns and Trends from 1970 to 2010

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Details of North American native cultures are tribe-based. There are hundreds of American Indian and Alaska Native tribes, each with distinct languages, traditions, material culture, and histories. There is no "general" American Indian language or religion, for example. To be culturally American Indian, it seems, a person would need to know and draw upon tribe-specific information. In this research, I investigate those American Indians who did not report a tribe to the Census Bureau in one of five censuses between 1970 and 2010.

My first research question is descriptive: Who leaves the tribe information blank? To answer this, I use full-count decennial census data from 1970 to 2010 (RDC data), comparing characteristics of tribal respondents to those who leave it blank. A limited amount of information is available about every American Indian in the census, but it includes: age, sex, Hispanic origin, household structure, group quarters status and type, residence in a homeland, urban/rural status, and the race/Hispanic composition of the local area.

The instructions for reporting a tribe have changed over the decades since the question started in 1970. In 1970 and 1980, the instruction said "print tribe" and four out of five American Indians did so (80% and 78% respectively). In 1990, the instruction changed to "Print the name of the enrolled or principal tribe." With this more specific instruction, a higher percentage of people who reported American Indian wrote something in the box – 90%. Perhaps most people without an enrolled or principal tribe felt they did not qualify as "American Indian" and selected a different race response. However, this pattern of high response did not last. In 2000 and 2010, the instruction was much like in 1990: "print name of enrolled or principal tribe." Single race respondents in both years more often wrote a tribe response (82% in 2000 and 71% in 2010 wrote something in the tribe box). Only 70% of multiple-race American Indians reported a tribe in 2000 and even fewer (63%) did so in 2010.

My second research question asks: Why have these tribal response rates been changing over time? Reasons for this non-response may have changed substantially since 1970. For example, the cultural importance of tribal languages and traditions may have waxed and waned over time. Alternatively, the reasons for non-response may have remained stable while the number of people fitting the non-response profile has increased. To answer this research question, I model tribal non-response using logistic regression analyses that contain parallel measures for each year but are

conducted separately by year. Measures in the long form samples focus on characteristics of the individual (e.g., report of non-American Indian ancestry, level of education and income), of other people in the home (e.g., does anyone in the home speak an American Indian language? Does anyone in the home also report American Indian race), and of the area (e.g., is it an area with few other American Indians?).

Prior analyses of 1990 (public) and 2000 (RDC) data show reasons that American Indian people do not report their tribe. General survey item non-response is part of the story – people with low education, poor English skills, and those living in cities are less likely to respond. Response to the tribe item is more common among people who report American Indian ancestry, who live with another American Indian, who live with someone who speaks an American Indian language, and who live in a homeland area. Results of the present analysis will show whether these patterns hold in earlier decades (1970 and 1980) and continue in 2010.

Preliminary results in Figure 1 show non-response rates about twice as high among Hispanic American Indians as non-Hispanic American Indians (Hispanic origin was not assessed in 1970). A preliminary look at state-specific tribal non-response rates (in Figure 2) shows more of a state-by-state pattern among single-race American Indians than multiple-race American Indians. It also shows high tribal non-response in the east in 1970 and 1980, but not as much in other years.

By the 2015 PAA meetings, I will write a full paper addressing the two research questions about those who do not report a tribe and why rates of tribal non-response have changed over time. This information will be useful to several groups including tribes looking to understand their populations, the Census Bureau aiming to get high response rates and meaningful responses, and sociologists working to understand the relationship between racial identity and ethnic group membership.

Figure 1: Tribal non-response among American Indians in 1980 through 2010

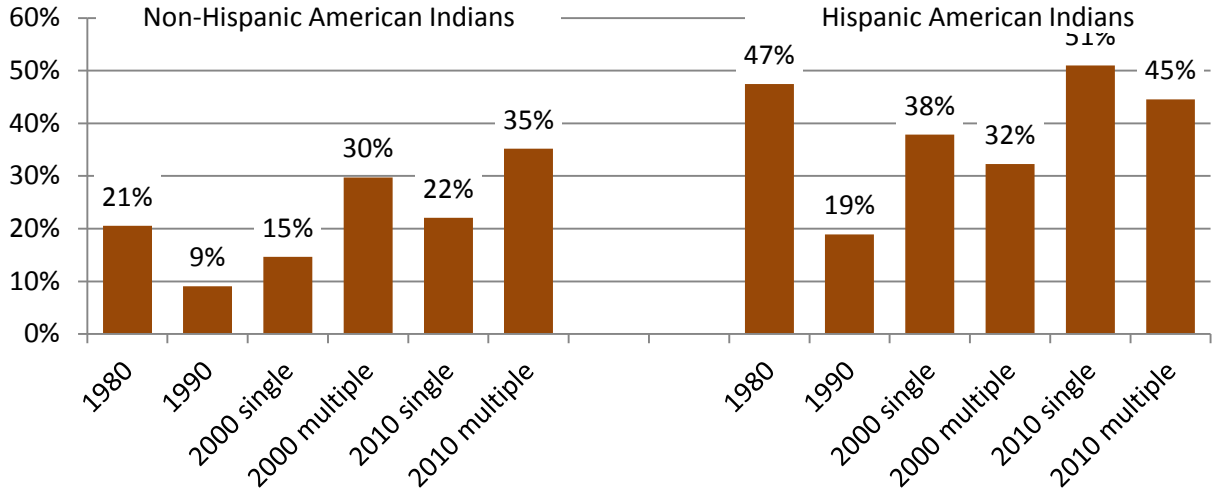

Figure 2: American Indian tribal non-response rate by state, 1970-2010