Question of race not simple for Mexican Americans

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When Mexican Americans say they are “white” on the U.S. Census, it’s often not for the reasons many assume, says Julie A. Dowling, a professor of Latina and Latino studies and author of a new book.

About half of Latinos check "white" in response to the question about race on the U.S. Census. About half check "other race."

They identify they are Latino in response to a previous question just for that purpose.

Their choice of "white" or "other race" may have little to do with their skin color, their use of English or Spanish, or their comfort within the

larger culture, contrary to common assumptions, says Julie A. Dowling, a University of Illinois professor of Latina and Latino studies.

Those are assumptions drawn from the experience of European Americans, but they don't match with the experience of Latinos, particularly those of Mexican origin in Texas, according to Dowling, the author of the new book "*Mexican Americans and the Question of Race*" (University of Texas Press).

For most European Americans, marking "white" likely means they experience little discrimination based on their racial background, Dowling said. For a Mexican American, it's often a response to discrimination. "It's for them a way of saying, 'I belong, I'm an American citizen, and I want to be recognized as such,' " she said.

Her case in point: the border counties of southern Texas. Most are more than 80 percent Latino, and more than 80 percent of those Latinos marked "white" on the 2010 census.

Go there, however, and you won't find the "wave of whiteness" those numbers suggest, she said. "If you walk into those towns, you would not see people who are all light-skinned, and speak only English."

What you'll find, Dowling said, based on in-depth interviews for her book, is that many Latinos marking "white" on the census would not describe themselves as white in any other context.

"Checking 'white' doesn't mean that they no longer identify strongly with their Mexican heritage or that others are treating them as if they're white," Dowling said. "It's about their ideology, it's about the framework that they're using to explain their experiences with race."

Most of those who mark "white" have likely experienced discrimination,

but may downplay those experiences "because it doesn't match what they want to say about themselves," she said. "They manage that disconnect by minimizing those experiences."

Further complicating the matter in Texas, Dowling said, is that Mexican Americans historically were segregated in schools and elsewhere in a manner similar to African-Americans. A key argument in court cases that fought such segregation was that Mexican Americans were white.

Dowling's conclusions are based on an analysis of census data, as well as on interviews with 86 Mexican-origin respondents split about equally among three Texas locations: the border cities of Mission and McAllen in far southern Hidalgo County, the border city of Del Rio about 320 miles to the northwest and Dallas/Fort Worth in the northern part of the state.

About 25 percent of the respondents were immigrants, about 40 percent were second generation in the U.S., and about one-third were third generation or later.

Dowling's book is timely given a proposal being considered by the U.S. Census Bureau that would change the way the census form deals with race, ethnicity and national origin. Dowling has consulted with the bureau as part of its process and supports the change.

Under the proposal, separate questions on race and Latino ethnicity would be removed in favor of a single combined question about race or origin. The respondent would be asked to check one or more of seven major categories, among them white and Hispanic/Latino/Spanish. Under each category, the respondent then would be asked to write in a specific term, such as German or Irish under white, and Mexican American or Puerto Rican under Hispanic/Latino/Spanish.

In Census Bureau tests, this combined question format resulted in data that better reflected how people actually identify themselves, confirmed by extensive follow-up interviews, Dowling said. The number of Latinos checking "white" dropped from about 50 percent to between 9 and 16 percent, she said. The proposed new format also did not produce the undercount of Latinos that some had feared.

The change is needed, Dowling said, because "other race" has become the de facto Latino racial category. Latinos made up 97 percent of "other race" in the last census, making it the third largest racial category, behind white and black.

The separate question about Latino ethnicity on the current form also can have a stigmatizing effect, Dowling said, citing focus group studies conducted by the Census Bureau. "Some Latinos feel singled out, and that has implications for how they feel about answering the census form, as well as how other people see them as a group.

"The Census Bureau has found a way to capture the numbers that also better reflects how people actually identify themselves, and that is really exciting."

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