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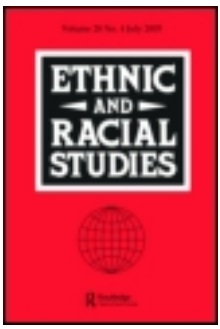

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Brazil in black and white? Race categories, the census, and the study of inequality

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Abstract

Many scholars advocate the adoption of a black-and-white lens for the analysis of racial inequality in Brazil. Drawing on a nationally representative dataset that includes race questions in multiple formats, we evaluate how removal of the 'brown' category from the census or other social surveys would likely affect: (1) the descriptive picture of Brazil's racial composition; and (2) estimates of income inequality between and within racial categories. We find that a forced binary question format results in a whiter and more racially unequal picture of Brazil through the movement of many higher income mixed-race respondents into the white category. We also find that regardless of question format, racial inequality in income accounts for relatively little of Brazil's overall income inequality. We discuss implications for public policy debates in Brazil, and for the broader scientific and political challenges of ethnic and racial data collection and analysis.

Keywords: Racial classification; racial inequality; census; statistics; Brazil; affirmative action.

Introduction

The recent introduction of race-targeted affirmative action policies in Brazil unleashed a contentious national debate over whether, how, and toward what ends the government should engage in the racial classification of citizens. In its general contours, this national conversation in Brazil echoes analogous discussions in a growing number of countries around the globe. Voices of opposition to the Brazilian government's long-established practice of official racial classification raise principled arguments in defence of the liberal ideal of individual equality before the law. They also question the morality

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and scientific legitimacy of government use of racial categories, pointing to ignominious historical examples of abuse enabled by official racial classification and citing the unscientific nature of racial categories *per se* (Fry et al. 2007). Proponents of government initiatives to draw racial or ethnic distinctions among citizens in certain contexts counter with principled and pragmatic arguments of their own. They note that official racial categories can capture social distinctions without implying that 'race' is valid as a biological category. They also argue that official racial classification can facilitate government efforts to promote *true* equality of citizens through reparation or remediation of historical injustices to racially defined minority populations (Manifesto 2008).

As in other contexts, the precise configuration of the Brazilian debate over government use of racial categories is shaped by the country's particular historical approach to dealing with racial and ethnic difference. The Brazilian state has a long history of recognizing racial and colour distinctions within the population in censuses as in other administrative domains (Nobles 2000; Loveman 2009). In stark contrast to the United States, however, the explicit use of such categories in public policy or law was rare. Though some have argued aggressively against government recognition of racial or colour distinctions, the crux of debate in Brazil does not appear to pivot on whether the state should classify citizens by race or colour at all, but on the specific categories it should use to do so, and the legitimacy of public policies that attach material consequences to categorical membership (Bailey and Peria 2010).

For social scientists, policy makers, and activists, one key stake in this broader debate is the format of the question used by Brazil's census agency, the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE), to collect official race/colour statistics. The IBGE has always included a 'mixed-race' or 'brown' category as one option when race/colour is asked in the census. This corresponds with Brazil's self-definition over the course of the twentieth century as a nation that is, in its 'essence', mixed. Critics contend that the official distinction between 'black' and 'mixed' Brazilians on the census perpetuates an ideological myth of a fluid racial order; they argue that in reality Brazilian racial dynamics are essentially binary, and official categories should reflect this state of affairs. These debates also extend to the classification schemes employed for the administration of race-targeted policy.

Categories used to collect racial/colour statistics have wide-reaching repercussions, determining which lines of distinction become socially visible and amenable to statistical analysis and policy intervention. This article examines how a change in the classification scheme used to collect official statistics could affect social scientific understanding of

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racial dynamics in Brazil. If the 'mixed-race' category on the national census were eliminated, would the Brazilian population end up looking lighter or darker? Would racial inequality appear attenuated or more severe?

We begin with a critical overview of the contemporary debate over racial classification in Brazil. We identify the primary criticisms of the classification scheme used in Brazil's national census, and point to sources of momentum toward adopting a binary lens for social analysis and public policy. Drawing on a nationally representative dataset that includes race/colour questions in multiple formats, we then evaluate how a switch to a binary classification scheme on the census would likely affect social scientific understanding of racial dynamics in Brazil. Our empirical analysis examines how a change to a binary classification scheme for data collection affects: (1) the descriptive picture of Brazil's racial composition; and (2) statistical estimates of income inequality between and within racial categories. We conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of our findings for contemporary debates over the state's collection and use of racial statistics.

Race/colour classification in the Brazilian census

Until the 1991 census, the government census agency (IBGE) asked census respondents, 'What is your colour (*cor*)?' For the 1991 and 2000 censuses, the question read 'What is your colour or race (*raça*)?' Since 1940, excepting the 1970 census in which a colour/race question was not included, the IBGE has employed the categories *branco* (white), *pardo* (brown), *preto* (black), and *amarelo* (yellow or of Asian ancestry), adding *Indígena* (Indigenous) in 1991. Fewer than 1 per cent of Brazilians self-classified as either 'yellow' or indigenous in the 2000 census. In this article, we restrict our analysis to classification and stratification dynamics along the black-to-white continuum. We refer to the IBGE's current use of three categories to capture this continuum as a 'ternary format', and compare it to a 'binary format' that eliminates an intermediate 'brown' or 'mixed' category.

The appropriateness of the current census categories is contested in Brazil (Telles 2004; Bailey and Telles 2006; Rocha and Rosemberg 2007; Sant'Anna 2009). One line of critique is that the official census categories do not map well onto the categories Brazilians typically use to identify themselves in daily life. The category used by the IBGE for 'black' (*preto*), for instance, is a colour term that is most often used in daily talk to describe objects, not people. When *preto* is used to describe a person in colloquial speech, it often carries a negative connotation (Sansone 2003). In the context of an official survey, the *preto* term invokes the darker end of a colour continuum as opposed to

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a racial group identification. The IBGE's use of the term *pardo* (brown) has also been called into question (Harris et al. 1993; Rocha and Rosemberg 2007). In the category set used by IBGE, *pardo* represents an intermediate category between white and black. *Pardo* translates literally as a brown colour, but in the context of official surveys it may also refer to 'racial mixture'. Colloquially, however, *pardo* is not a preferred term for describing someone who is perceived as racially mixed (Sansone 2003). The term *moreno* and its variants are used more widely in everyday life (Harris et al. 1993; Silva 1999). In the interest of privileging emic terminology, some scholars have advocated replacing *pardo* with *moreno* in the census (Harris et al. 1993). The majority of scholars working in this field oppose such a substitution, however, because *moreno* is seen as too capacious and ambiguous to be useful in the analysis of racial/colour inequality (Telles 2004).

A second line of critique of the IBGE's classification scheme comes from activists and scholars affiliated with the Brazilian black movement who have argued that inclusion of the intermediate *pardo* category distorts demographic depictions of Brazil. Citing the ideological privileging of whiteness in Brazilian society, they posit that the availability of a 'mixed' category encourages Brazilians to 'deny their blackness' and 'lighten' themselves on the census (Nascimento and Nascimento 2001). It is likely that this tendency is exacerbated by the fact that racial classification in Brazil is to some degree interconnected with social status (Carvalho, Wood and Andrade 2004; Schwartzman 2007). Seeking to counteract the cultural proclivity to 'whiten', activists organized a public campaign leading up to the 1991 census calling on Brazilians to embrace their blackness by rejecting lighter census categories. The campaign slogan admonished: 'Don't let your colour pass into white' (Nobles 2000; Sant'Anna 2009).

Along these same lines, critics argue that the IBGE's privileging of a ternary 'colour' classification scheme over a binary 'racial' scheme contributes to the perpetuation of the view that Brazilian racial dynamics are fluid and continuous as opposed to sharp and dichotomous. The use of the brown category in official statistics is construed as problematic because it softens the appearance of a racial divide; the brown category helps to buffer the symbolic and material gap between black and white. From this perspective, the act of drawing an official distinction between blacks and browns helps to sustain a belief in mulatto mobility even in the face of evidence that suggests blacks and browns do not differ greatly on most indicators of material well-being (discussed below).

The categories used in Brazil's census are also called into question by those working to create and consolidate collective solidarity among Brazilians of African descent. These critics argue that the IBGE's use

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of the brown category encourages Brazilians to draw distinctions within the afro-descendent population based on physical appearance. In the words of prominent Afro-Brazilian activist and politician Benedita da Silva (1999, p. 18) 'the use of these identifiers [brown and black] causes a serious loss of [black] identity'. In stronger variants of this argument, the IBGE is accused of a deliberate effort to deny or impede the consolidation of a unified black identity in Brazil. Thereza Santos (1999, p. 29) argues, for example, that 'built into the official census is what we call deformation – the prevalence of arbitrary designations in relation to the item "color" that seek, fundamentally, to establish fissures in the identity of blacks'. From this critical perspective, the classification scheme currently used by the IBGE continues a long history of government stigmatization of blackness and promotion of 'race mixture' as a path towards whiteness (Skidmore 1993; Nobles 2000; Loveman 2009).

Thus, for a variety of interrelated reason, critics have challenged the IBGE census categories. The IBGE, in turn, has continued with the traditional classification scheme, citing the importance of inter-census continuity and evidence that the population accepts the terms as descriptors of skin colour (Silva 1996; Sant'Anna 2009). Meanwhile, pressure from some quarters for change to binary categories – what Edward Telles (2004) refers to as 'the black movement classification scheme' – continues.

Brazil in black and white?

The growing salience of a binary perspective on Brazilian racial dynamics is fuelled by at least two significant developments: the embrace of a dichotomous analytical lens by the majority of academics conducting research on race/colour inequality in Brazil, and the recent adoption of race-targeted affirmative action policies by state actors and federal government agencies. The now common convention of collapsing brown and black categories for analysis of Brazilian racial disparities stems directly from two decades of sociological research challenging the theory that mixed-race Brazilians fare better over their life course than their black counterparts – the so-called 'mulatto escape hatch' (Degler 1971). In the 1980s, sociologists Carlos Hasenbalg (1985) and Nelson do Valle Silva (1985) upended the conventional wisdom that Brazilians of mixed ancestry had more opportunities for upward mobility. These researchers documented strikingly similar socio-economic profiles of blacks and browns compared to whites. Silva (1985) found, for example, that browns and blacks earned on average about half that of whites. While their findings also showed that browns did slightly better than blacks on average on some indicators, the similarity of browns and blacks

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relative to whites led both Hasenbalg (1985) and Silva (1985) to conclude that a white vs nonwhite scheme was most appropriate for statistical analyses of race/colour inequality.

Other scholars embraced the practice of collapsing brown and black survey respondents together in quantitative analyses, but opted for alternative labels for this grouping.[1] Most analysts reject the designation 'nonwhite' in favour of positive descriptors such as *afro-descendente*, Afro-Brazilian, or *negro*, which assert something shared among members of the aggregated category over and above their shared deprivation compared to whites.[2] While there are notable exceptions (e.g., Fry et al. 2007), many social scientists have come to agree that the sum of census blacks and browns should be conceptualized and studied as a single collective, most commonly referred to as *negros* (Reis and Crespo 2005; Lovell 2006; see also Santos et al. 2009).

By the 1990s, several black movement activists and social scientists converged in the view that a binary lens was needed to adequately understand racial dynamics in Brazil. This convergence was not coincidental, as many social scientists concerned with racial discrimination and injustice in Brazil had been in dialogue with black movement activists, and several notable black movement activists also contributed as academics to scholarly discourse and debate. The momentum towards a binary approach to the analysis of racial dynamics created by the shared perspective of activists and social scientists has not been sufficient to shift the state's approach to data *collection*. Nonetheless, the convergence of the classification scheme used politically by influential voices in the black movement and social scientifically by influential voices in academia has bolstered the legitimacy and broader public influence of a binary perspective on Brazilian racial dynamics.

Momentum towards the broader adoption of a black-and-white lens for understanding racial dynamics in Brazil accelerated in the wake of the state's introduction of race-targeted affirmative action policies beginning in the early 2000s. This change-of-course for the Brazilian state was brought about through negotiations between black movement and state actors during preparations for the 2001 *United Nations Conference on Racism* in Durban, South Africa (Htun 2004; Telles 2004). This conference's final document, of which Brazil is a signatory, endorsed affirmative action for descendants of slaves and propelled forward the debate about racial inequality and discrimination in Brazil. In the wake of Durban, affirmative action policies were rapidly introduced and institutionalized in various governmental spheres.

It may be in the area of higher education that the recent institutionalization of race-targeted policy has most reverberated in the Brazilian public sphere. Beginning in 2001, the state universities in

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Rio de Janeiro became the first to adopt racial quotas in admissions for *negros*. Several other state universities followed suit in the following years, as did one federal university in Brazil's capital city Brasília. By the year 2011, dozens of Brazilian public universities had adopted some form of racial quotas for Afro-Brazilians.

After stagnating in various legislative committees for several years, in 2010 the Brazilian Congress finally passed, and the President signed, the *Estatuto da Iqualdade Racial* or the Statute of Racial Equality (Seppir 2010). The law institutionalizes several types of affirmative action initiatives to tackle existing racial inequality and to promote equal opportunities for Afro-Brazilians. Importantly, the law adopts the racial term '*negro*' for the population that it defines as 'persons who self-identify as *pretas* and *pardas* using the IBGE race or colour question, or that adopt some analogous self-definition' (p. 1). In its adoption of the *negro* category, the law advances a dichotomous approach to racial classification for official purposes.

In sum, there is growing pressure toward adoption of a binary lens to parse racial dynamics in Brazil. The IBGE now frequently lumps browns and blacks together in official analyses and reports, using the category *negros* to refer to the aggregated group. In what follows, we examine how a shift to a dichotomous approach to race/colour data *collection* would likely affect the picture of racial inequality in Brazil.

Classification schemes and the study of inequality

Our analysis explores how social scientific understanding of colour/race dynamics in Brazil might be altered if social surveys were to omit a 'mixed' or 'brown' option. We focus on two key questions. First, how would adoption of a binary classification scheme affect the descriptive picture of the racial composition of the Brazilian population? On some accounts, the *negro* population currently makes up roughly half the national population. This figure is obtained by post-hoc combination of all brown and black census responses. If respondents had to choose between a binary divide at the point of enumeration, would *negros* still make up half the Brazilian population? Second, how would adoption of a binary classification scheme affect estimates of racial inequality? Would racial disparities in socio-economic outcomes appear the same, better, or worse if survey respondents self-classified in a dichotomous format on the census? Using national survey data that include both formats, self-classification according to the categories of the census and self-classification according to a dichotomous scheme, we suggest answers to these questions.

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Data and methods

We use the *Pesquisa Social Brasileira* (Brazilian Social Survey or PESB), a nationally representative dataset of all persons aged 18 and over. The survey was modelled on the American General Social Survey (GSS) and conducted between July and August 2002. The complete sample consists of 2,364 persons sampled across 102 municipalities. According to the 2000 census (IPUMS), the population of Brazil is 53 per cent white, 39 per cent brown, 6 per cent black, 0.4 per cent yellow (Asian), and 0.45 per cent indigenous. The weighted PESB sample is 46 per cent white, 34 per cent brown, 11 per cent black, 3.7 per cent yellow, and 5.7 per cent indigenous. Because we focus on the black-white continuum in this article, we exclude 34 individuals that self-classified as 'yellow' or indigenous in the IBGE-format census question.

Comparison of three classification formats

We compare three classification schemes to explore alternative perspectives on Brazil's race/colour composition and racial inequality. The first classification scheme is self-classification in the official IBGE census categories (closed format, white, brown, or black). The second classification scheme is derivative of the first. We take the sum of self-classified blacks and browns from the IBGE format and combine them into a single 'nonwhite' category. This post-hoc construction of a binary white vs nonwhite classification scheme follows a common convention for statistical analysis of racial inequality in Brazil, as noted above. The third classification scheme is self-classification in a forced binary scheme (closed format, white or black).

The forced-choice binary format is the first of its kind for large-sample surveys in Brazil. Respondents were first asked: 'Which of these terms best describes your colour or race?' They chose from white, brown, black, yellow, and Indian. Subsequently, the brown respondents were asked a follow-up question: 'Between the colours white and black, which one better describes your colour or race?' The inclusion of this unusual format in the PESB survey enables us to consider how the Brazilian population might self-classify if the IBGE were to eliminate the intermediate brown term, as some have suggested, and how that change could affect measures of racial inequality.

It is important to clarify that the forced binary choice question in the PESB survey uses the terms white versus black (*preto*) rather than white versus *negro*, the term found in some race-targeted legislation. The latter term is preferred by many affirmative action administrators and black movement actors who define *negros* as the sum of individuals who self-classify as brown (*pardo*) and black (*preto*) in

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the census format. However, studies reveal that this broad definition of the *negro* term may not be embraced by the population at large. Telles (2004, pp. 86–7) writes: '*Negro* in the popular system, like *preto*, refers only to those at the darkest end of the colour continuum'. Thus, while the black movement has succeeded in giving *negro* a wide currency in the government and the media, the popular use of the term continues to be more limited.[3] Moreover, studies comparing those who self-classify as black/*preto* and those who self-classify as *negro* find that both generally represent the darker end of the colour continuum in contrast to browns (Telles 2004; Bailey 2008). Hence, available evidence suggests that responses to the forced dichotomous question in the 2002 PESB would have been similar if the term *negro* had appeared in lieu of *preto*.

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Measures of inequality and income

We begin by employing the Theil-L index to estimate levels of income inequality. We use this measure because it satisfies the basic requirements of a rigorous inequality index (Cowell 1995) while facilitating the income decomposition analysis we employ to estimate inequality within and between racial categories (Mookherjee and Shorrocks 1982). Interpretation of the Theil-L index is similar to the Gini Index.[4] The measure is defined as:

$$\mathrm{GE}(0) = \text{Theil-L index} = \text{mean log deviation } \frac{1}{n}\sum_{i=1}^{n} \ln \frac{\mu}{y_i} \qquad (1)$$

where n is the number of individuals in the sample, y_i is the income of individual i, $i \in (1, 2, \ldots, \mathrm{n})$ and $\mu = 1/n \sum y_i$ is the arithmetic mean income.

We measure income as the natural logarithm of hourly individual wages. Valid income values were smoothed – to mitigate the interviewee's preference for certain values while reporting income – and standardized by the number of hours worked in a month assuming that people work twenty two days per month. About 5 per cent of individual income values were missing and about 25 per cent of these values were equal to zero (housewives, unemployed, or retired persons). Individual income is in 2002 Brazilian *Reais* (R$), and the exchange rate on October 2002 was $1USD = R$3.74.

Decomposition analysis

Decomposition analysis is carried out for each of our three classification scenarios. This allows us to see how much of the total inequality in income is attributable to inequality between individuals in different

racial categories and how much is attributable to inequality among individuals within the same racial category. In the IBGE classification format, the decomposition separates total inequality into a component of inequality *between* whites, browns, and blacks, and a component of *within*-category inequality. In the post-hoc and forced binary formats, the between and within components refer to whites and nonwhites/blacks since there are only two partitions (though the size and make-up of the two sides of the binaries differ in the post-hoc and forced binary classification schemes). Total inequality (I) can then be expressed as a direct sum of between (I_B) and within (I_W) inequality, $I = I_W + I_B$. Within and between inequalities are defined as:

$$GE(0) = I_W^{GE(0)} + I_B^{GE(0)} = \sum_{j=1}^{k} f_j GE(0)_j + \sum_{j=1}^{k} f_j \ln(1/\lambda_j) \qquad (2)$$

where f_j is the population share and $\lambda_j = \mu_j / \mu$ is the mean income of each category j, ($j =$ white, brown, black), relative to that of the whole population. The first term of equation (2) represents within-category inequality and is simply the sum of intra-category inequalities weighted by population shares. The second term, inequality between categories, reflects differences in the subpopulation means. In decompositions by racial category this term corresponds to the relative mean income weighted by population shares. The between component represents the share of total inequality due to differences in the mean incomes of the racial categories. When these two components, I_B and I_W, are divided by total inequality they express the share accounted for by within- and between-category inequalities in the distribution of income.

Results

Classification schemes and racial composition

The overall picture of Brazil's racial composition changes markedly depending on the classification scheme used to collect and report race/colour statistics. Figure 1 shows that when the current IBGE categories are used, the Brazilian population is comprised of a slight majority white population (52 per cent), followed by a very large mixed-race population (36 per cent) and a much smaller black segment (11 per cent). This classification scheme sustains a traditional view of Brazil as a 'mixed' country.

When the black and brown categories from the IBGE format are collapsed, we see that whites and nonwhites each account for roughly one half of the population (52 per cent vs 48 per cent). This post-hoc redesignation of categorical boundaries, representing the dominant

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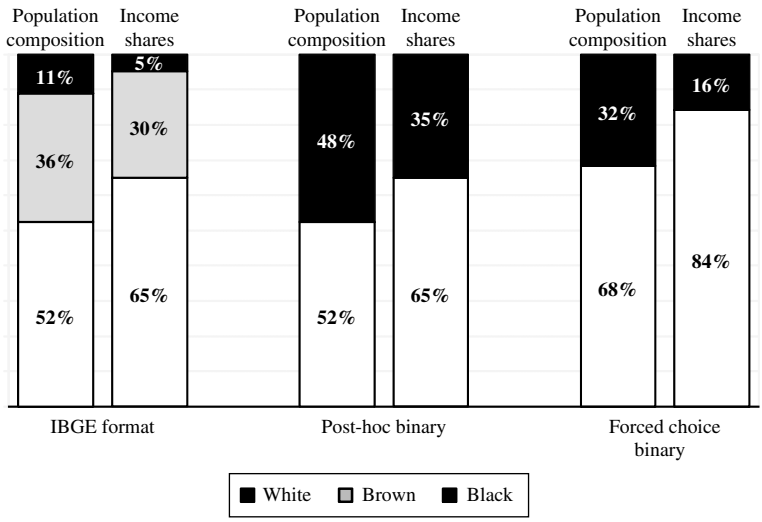
Figure 1. *Colour/race composition and income shares of Brazilian population in three classification formats*



analytic approach in the field, yields a picture of Brazil as a country about evenly split between whites and nonwhites. When Brazilians are forced to choose between classification as black or white, the population appears significantly whiter (68 per cent), with a smaller minority population (32 per cent).

Our results show that adoption of a forced dichotomous format on official surveys could result in an unintended consequence: the swelling of the white side of the divide. When confronted with the binary format, fully 44 per cent of browns opt for the white category (see Bailey 2008). The preference for whiteness among respondents forced to choose between white or black does not come as a surprise; the ideological privileging of whiteness is documented in an extensive body of historical and ethnographic scholarship (e.g., Skidmore 1993; Sheriff 2001; Loveman 2009). Our findings provide an indication of just how strong this preference remains at the end of the twentieth century.

Critics of the current IBGE classification scheme have argued that it contributes to an artificial inflation of the white share of Brazil's population as reported in official statistics (Santos 1999; Turner 2002).[5] Our results suggest that self-classification in a binary category scheme would result in a demographic snapshot that looks even whiter. The classification scenarios we consider generate three very different pictures of Brazil. It is a country with a bare majority white population, a very large mixed population, and a small black population, or it is a country nearly evenly split between white and

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nonwhite, or it is a largely white country with a minority black population.

Classification schemes and racial inequality

Regardless of the classification scheme used, Brazil is clearly stratified along race/colour lines. In all three scenarios, we see inequality in mean individual income. However, the magnitude of racial disparity in income changes considerably under alternative classification schemes.

Table 1 shows mean hourly income in *reais* in each classification scheme. In the IBGE format, there is a very large gap between the mean hourly incomes of whites and blacks, at R$7.03 and R$2.42, respectively. The brown population occupies a midpoint between those two poles, earning on average R$4.74 per hour. In the post-hoc binary format, we see a significant gap between white and nonwhites; on average, nonwhites earn about 60 per cent what whites earn (R$4.20/R$7.03). In the forced binary format, the racial disparity in mean hourly wage grows considerably. Whites earn on average R$7.00 an hour while blacks earn R$2.83, i.e., only 40 per cent of whites' average hourly income. The racial gap in mean wages is much larger in the forced binary than in the post-hoc binary because the browns that opted for the white side of the binary have higher incomes on average than the browns that opted for the black side of the divide (R$6.90 vs R$3.05 respectively).

Race/colour inequality is also evident when we compare income shares to population shares in different classification schemes. Looking again at Figure 1, we see that in the IBGE format, whites garner a larger share of total income relative to their population share (65 per cent to 52 per cent, respectively), while blacks are most disadvantaged, holding only 5 per cent of income while making up 11 per cent of the population. In the post-hoc binary format, nonwhites are 48 per cent of the population but make only 35 per cent of overall income. Once again, the most dramatic differences appear in the forced binary format. At 68 per cent of the population, whites garner fully 84 per cent of total income.

Comparative estimates of within-category inequality (Theil-L index) provide additional insight into income distribution by race/colour in

Table 1. *Mean income in reais per hour (R$)*

	White	Brown	Black
IBGE format	7.03	4.74	2.42
Post-hoc binary format	7.03		4.20
Forced binary format	7.00		2.83

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Table 2. *Income inequality within race/colour category [GE(0)]*

	White	Brown	Black
IBGE format	0.57	0.74	0.29
Post-hoc binary format	0.57		0.67
Forced binary format	0.66		0.39

Brazil. Results in Table 2 show that within-category inequality in the IBGE classification scheme is highest for browns (.74) and lowest for blacks (.29). In the post-hoc binary scheme, the nonwhite side of the dichotomy has the highest within-category income inequality (.57 vs .67). In contrast, in the forced choice binary format the white side now has the highest inequality (.66) and the black side becomes more homogenous in terms of its income structure (.39).

One final measure that reveals how different classification schemes affect our understanding of inequality is how much the within-category vs between-category inequality in each classification scenario contributes to overall income inequality in Brazil. Results in Table 3, Panels 1 and 2, show that while overall income inequality in our sample is high (.652), between-category differences using current IBGE categories account for only 8 per cent of it. Within-category inequality accounts for the lion's share of income inequality in Brazil. When the two nonwhite categories are collapsed, the contribution of between-category inequality to overall inequality is reduced further, to

Table 3. *Decomposed estimates of racial inequality in alternative classification formats*

	Aggregate Inequality [GE(0)]	Within component	Between component
Panel 1: Aggregate income inequality			
IBGE format	0.652	0.602	0.050
Post-hoc binary	0.652	0.619	0.033
Forced binary	0.652	0.574	0.078
Panel 2: Share of total inequality accounted for by inequality within and between race/ colour categories			
IBGE format	100%	92%	8%
Post-hoc binary	100%	95%	5%
Forced binary	100%	88%	12%

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5 per cent. The forced binary classification scheme produces the greatest between-category differences, accounting for 12 per cent of total inequality.

In sum, our results show that significant disparities in mean income between race/colour categories are evident in all three classification scenarios, attesting to the chronic problem of racial inequality in Brazil. Our findings also show that the classification scheme used to collect and analyse race/colour population data alters specific conclusions about the racial composition and level of inequality between and within race/colour categories in Brazil. In particular, our analysis reveals that if the brown category were omitted from Brazilian social surveys, the population's composition would probably appear much whiter, while the magnitude of disparity in income between white and black would probably appear much greater.

Discussion and conclusion

The fact that different classification schemes yield very different pictures of the nature and extent of racial disparities in income bears on contemporary debates over how to understand and address race/colour inequality in Brazil. Our findings also speak more broadly to the scientific and political challenges of ethnic and racial data collection and analysis.

First, our results raise questions about the prevailing view that Brazilian browns and blacks are equally disadvantaged and hence should be grouped together in social scientific studies of race/colour inequality and as beneficiaries of affirmative action policies. Mean income of browns in our sample falls between those of whites and blacks (see Silva 1985; Telles and Lim 1998; Telles 2004). In addition, within-category inequality is greatest for the brown category and lowest for the black category, suggesting the internal heterogeneity of the socio-economic profiles of browns in contrast to the more uniformly low socio-economic profiles of blacks. Thus, analyses that merge browns and blacks into a single group may lose valuable information, and public policies that target browns as no different from blacks may miss their mark (see Bailey 2008; Schwartzman 2008). Our results suggest that policies that combine race/colour-targeted policy with socio-economic criteria of some kind (racial quotas and social quotas combined, as some institutions have done in Brazil) may better reach the intended beneficiaries of these programmes than race-targeted polices alone (Ceaser 2005).

Our analysis also suggests that adoption of a binary classification scheme for collection of race/colour population data (as opposed to the current convention of post-hoc aggregation of blacks and browns) would be likely to produce an unintended consequence. The self-

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reported white share of Brazil's population would likely swell to a large majority in demographic counts (see Bailey 2008). While this would work against efforts of black movement activists to re-envision Brazil as a majority African-descendant country, it could bolster arguments in favour of race-targeted public policies by generating a more severe picture of the income gap between blacks and whites. Our analysis shows that browns who self-classify as white in a constrained binary format have on average higher incomes than those who identify as black. As a result, between-category inequality is the highest in the forced binary classification format. This finding also suggests that if race-targeted policies are not used in conjunction with social criteria, forcing Brazilians to self-classify in a binary format might best ensure the targeted identification of the most needy segment of the nonwhite population.

Finally, while our analysis reveals differences in the picture of race/colour inequality generated by different classification formats, it is important to underscore that our results show disparities in income across racial/colour lines in Brazil however those lines are drawn. In part, the severity of race/colour inequality in Brazil reflects the extreme social inequality in Brazil more generally. Our results reinforce the view that there is a 'deep structure' (Muniz 2008, p. 74) to social inequality in Brazil, which cannot be attributed to the dynamics that generate racial inequality in particular. Our income decomposition analysis reveals that although race/colour inequalities are large, they contribute only modestly to overall inequality in Brazil. Extreme social inequality, in turn, exacerbates the picture of racial inequality. Telles (2004, pp. 107–9) hints at this effect when he compares racial inequality in the US and Brazil: 'The fact that black and brown men earn 40 and 50 per cent of white men in Brazil, while black men earn 75 per cent of white men in the United States, could simply reflect Brazil's far greater income inequality'. Consideration of the relationship between Brazil's deep structure of income inequality and the dynamics of race/colour income inequality is crucial for the design of effective social policies that reduce income disparities.

Beyond the implications for policy debates in Brazil, our analysis speaks more broadly to the challenges of determining the most appropriate categories for the study of racial and ethnic inequality and the design of social policies that aim to reduce it (see Muniz 2010). Because race is socially constructed, no set of categories can be argued on the basis of 'science' to be the most 'accurate'. Which categories are included or excluded from social surveys or public policies is always already a political matter. And the specific categories that get included can have significant consequences, brightly illuminating some lines of ethnic or racial division and disparity, while rendering others invisible.

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The discretionary character of official racial and ethnic categories does not provide *prima facie* support for arguments that states or other social organizations should not or cannot legitimately collect racial or ethnic population data. But to hedge against such arguments, and to maximize the usefulness of such data without facilitating misinterpretation or abuse, it is crucial that analysts maintain a reflexive stance in relation to the racial and ethnic statistics that they analyse. Social scientists can better illuminate the primary cleavages of distinction and disadvantage in a given context by considering how the particular categories used to study racial, ethnic, or colour inequality may shape statistical findings and analytical conclusions. Likewise, in the realm of public policy, consideration of how official use of one set of categories rather than another may alter the social characteristics of eligible beneficiaries can bolster the effectiveness of targeted efforts to ameliorate racial or ethnic inequality.

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Notes

1. Some researchers note that it is problematic to collapse browns into a collective black category because many Brazilians who self-identify as brown are of mixed European and indigenous ancestry, not African (Guimarães 2001).
2. The terms *afro-descendente* and Afro-Brazilian are somewhat problematic labels for the sum of 'nonwhites' because in Brazil – in contrast to the United States – many self-identified whites claim some African ancestry (Rocha and Rosemberg 2007). Whites' tendency to acknowledge some African ancestry stems from Brazil's national origin myth, which asserts that the Brazilian population was formed through the fusion of three 'races': Europeans, African, and Indians. (Beyond founding myths, genetic testing putatively demonstrates that many whites do have considerable African ancestry [Santos et al. 2009].)
3. Rocha and Rosemberg (2007) suggest the popular meanings of these two terms are currently in flux, and may be diverging.
4. An empirical comparison between Theil and Gini indexes in Brazil does not show significant differences in their estimates (Ferreira, Leite and Litchfield 2006, p. 7).
5. For example, Nascimento and Nascimento (2001, p. 125) write, 'while official statistics put the sum of *pretos* and *pardos* at 48 per cent, estimates that take into account their distortion by the whitening ideal are closer to 70 or 80 per cent'.

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