

Measuring Perceived Mistreatment: Potential Problems in Asking About “Discrimination”

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Many studies have used survey data on perceived everyday mistreatment to assess the extent and health impact of racial discrimination and of discrimination based on weight, sexual orientation, and other reasons. Some surveys use the word “discrimination” in the initial question put to respondents, while other surveys do not use this word. This research note argues that including “discrimination” in the initial question may depress reports of perceived mistreatment, particularly among whites. It tests this possibility with data from the 1995–1996 National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States, which used “discrimination” in the initial question, and the 2001–2003 National Survey of American Life, which did not use this word. Findings suggest that using “discrimination” in the initial question considerably depresses whites’ reports of everyday mistreatment.

A growing amount of research during the past two decades has examined the extent and impact of perceived everyday mistreatment. The importance of this work has generated scholarly assessment of the measurement of such mistreatment. This research note contributes to this assessment by considering whether the use of the word “discrimination” in the initial question typically put to respondents may depress reports of everyday mistreatment. It does so by comparing racially specific results from two national surveys that differed in their use of “discrimination” in the initial question while having virtually identical items on everyday mistreatment.

Background

People face discrimination in their daily lives because of their race, gender, sexual orientation, weight, and other reasons. Such everyday mistreatment may harm their physical and/or mental health and impair their social relationships (Lewis, Cogburn, and Williams 2015; Pascoe and Smart Richman 2009; Schmitt et al. 2014). Because everyday discrimination appears rather common and has these consequences, it has attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years.

The study of everyday mistreatment was spurred two decades ago with the inclusion of items measuring perceived mistreatment in the 1995 Detroit Area Study (DAS; Williams et al. 1997) and the 1995–1996 National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS; Kessler, Mickelson, and Williams 1999). Similar sets of items have since been included in the Health and Retirement Study, the National Survey of American Life, and other national and local surveys. The items in all these surveys typically ask respondents how often they experience several examples of interpersonal mistreatment, including being treated with less courtesy and with less respect than others. Respondents reporting any such example are then often asked to indicate the reason(s) (choosing from a list including age, gender, race, weight or height, sexual orientation, or other reasons depending on the survey) for their mistreatment.

The original items on perceived mistreatment were developed and used to measure the extent of racial discrimination and its effects on mental and physical health (Kessler, Mickelson, and Williams 1999; Williams et al. 1997). Accordingly, measures of perceived everyday mistreatment have informed many such assessments during the past two decades (Barnes et al. 2008; Kessler, Mickelson, and Williams 1999; Lewis, Cogburn, and Williams 2015; Williams et al. 1997). However, the wording of these measures typically contains no reference to race and thus lends itself to measuring perceived mistreatment regardless of the reason. Many studies thus use these measures to assess the health impact of obesity-based discrimination (Carr and Friedman 2005; Schafer and Ferraro 2011; Sutin and Terracciano 2013); some studies also use them to assess the impact of mistreatment stemming from sexual orientation (Mays and Cochran 2001; Riggle, Rostosky, and Danner 2009) and to assess gender differences in the impact of perceived discrimination (Jang, Chiriboga, and Small 2008). Extending these various lines of investigation, recent research examines the health effects of experiencing multiple mistreatments based on the combination of one's race, gender, weight, and/or sexual orientation (Grollman 2014).

Although this growing body of research has been valuable, certain issues remain concerning how mistreatment is measured (Blank, Debad, and Citro 2004; Krieger et al. 2005; Lewis, Cogburn, and Williams 2015). For example, respondents may report mistreatment when none actually occurred (*vigilance bias*) or they may fail to report mistreatment when an example did occur (*minimization bias*). In another issue, some surveys ask respondents about mistreatment “because of your race” or some other given reason (the *one-stage approach*), while other surveys instead ask about the reason(s) for mistreatment only after a respondent reports a generic form of mistreatment (the *two-stage approach*). Scholars debate which approach elicits more accurate reports of

discrimination. Although the two-stage approach is common and has its advocates, some respondents in this approach may say their perceived mistreatment stemmed from a reason such as their race or weight when in fact it may have stemmed from some other reason (Lewis, Cogburn, and Williams 2015).

All these issues point to the need for ongoing consideration of the measurement of perceived everyday mistreatment. In this regard, a further measurement issue has escaped scholarly scrutiny. This issue involves the impact of including the word “discrimination” in the initial question put to respondents. I now turn to this issue.

Using “Discrimination” When Asking About Perceived Mistreatment

Although the major surveys measuring perceived everyday mistreatment all use similar lists of examples of everyday mistreatment, they differ regarding whether the word “discrimination” is used in the initial question asked of respondents before being presented with these examples. This difference is seen in the 1995 DAS and the 1995–1996 MIDUS, the two surveys that stimulated research on perceived everyday mistreatment. Although each survey included almost identical lists of examples of everyday interpersonal mistreatment, they differed in one potentially crucial respect. DAS respondents were first asked, “In your day-to-day life how often have any of the following things happened to you?” In contrast, MIDUS respondents were first asked, “How often on a day-to-day basis do you experience each of the following types of discrimination?” Thus, the DAS did not use “discrimination” in its initial question, while MIDUS did use it.

The latter usage may be problematic for several reasons. First, the use of “discrimination” may prime respondents into responding positively if and only if they believe they had experienced an example of mistreatment because of discrimination and not for some other reason, for instance, because someone else was just acting obnoxiously or because the respondents believed the mistreatment they experienced was somehow their own fault. Second, in American society, it may well be likely that respondents who read or hear the word “discrimination” will think immediately of *racial* discrimination and thus will not indicate experiencing an example of mistreatment if they did not attribute it to racial discrimination. Third, and on a related note, people may generally view discrimination as an act committed by someone in a superior status against someone in a subordinate status. If so, whites as the dominant race may be less likely to view mistreatment against them as discrimination. Finally, whites may view the concept of discrimination as something that applies mainly to a major event such as being turned down for a job or job promotion or being denied the opportunity to buy or rent a home, and not as something that applies to “mere” everyday interaction. These possibilities suggest that the

use of “discrimination” in the MIDUS formatting may depress reporting of perceived everyday mistreatment for some and perhaps many respondents, especially white respondents.

To test this hypothesis, I analyze data from the 1995–1996 MIDUS and the 2001–2003 National Survey of American Life (NSAL). As discussed below, both surveys included almost identical lists of examples of everyday mistreatment. However, they differed in their use of “discrimination” in the initial question put to respondents. As noted earlier, MIDUS’s initial question was, “How often on a day-to-day basis do you experience each of the following types of discrimination?” In contrast, NSAL’s initial question used the 1995 DAS wording that omitted “discrimination”: “In your day-to-day life how often have any of the following things happened to you?” This difference between MIDUS and NSAL permits an assessment of the possible impact on mistreatment reporting of the presence or absence of “discrimination” in the initial question. To perform this assessment, this article compares the percentages of non-Latino black and non-Latino white respondents, respectively, in the two surveys who reported experiencing mistreatment situations.

Methods

MIDUS is a national probability sample of non-institutionalized, English-speaking respondents aged 25–74 living in the mainland United States in a household with a telephone. Respondents were first interviewed over the telephone and then via two mailed questionnaires. MIDUS has four sample subsets, including a general population sample (phone response rate = 70%), siblings of persons from the general sample (phone response rate = 64%), a twin pair sample (phone response rate = 60%), and a city oversample (phone response rate not provided). Data from these respondents were gathered primarily in 1995 and 1996. Of the 7,108 respondents who completed the telephone interview, 6,329 completed the mailed questionnaires, for a mailed questionnaire completion rate of 89 percent. Further details about MIDUS may be found in Brim, Ryff, and Kessler (2004). Although MIDUS did not ask respondents directly about their Hispanic or Latino origin or identity, it did ask them about their nation of origin. To produce a sample of non-Latino blacks and whites, I excluded respondents who indicated a national origin in Central or South America. This exclusion yielded effective sample sizes of 239 non-Latino blacks and 5,147 non-Latino whites.

NSAL is a national household probability sample of adult African Americans, Caribbean blacks, and non-Latino whites living in the mainland United States and drawn from 64 primary sampling units. (Caribbean blacks are excluded from this article’s analysis.) Approximately 86 percent of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, while 14 percent were conducted via

telephone; interviews were conducted between February 2001 and March 2003. The overall response rate was 72.3 percent, while the response rates for the three ethnic groups were as follows: African American, 70.7 percent; Caribbean black, 77.7 percent; and non-Latino white, 69.7 percent. The total number of 6,082 respondents in the NSAL includes 3,570 African Americans and 891 non-Latino whites. Further details about the NSAL may be found in Jackson et al. (2004). Because the MIDUS respondents were aged 25–74, I excluded NSAL respondents outside this age range to produce effective sample sizes of 2,936 non-Latino blacks and 740 non-Latino whites.

Everyday Mistreatment Items

Following its initial question, MIDUS listed the following examples of everyday mistreatment: (a) you are treated with less courtesy than other people; (b) you are treated with less respect than other people; (c) you receive poorer service than other people at restaurants or stores; (d) people act as if they think you are not smart; (e) people act as if they are afraid of you; (f) people act as if they think you are dishonest; (g) people act as if they think you are not as good as they are; (h) you are called names or insulted; (i) you are threatened or harassed. NSAL's list of everyday mistreatment examples was identical except for a modest wording difference in situation (g), which in NSAL was "people act as if they're better than you are." I considered these two wordings for situation (g) as basically equivalent for the analysis that follows.

Possible responses to MIDUS's initial question were "often, sometimes, rarely, never," while possible responses to NSAL's initial question were "almost every day, at least once a week, a few times a month, a few times a year, less than once a year, never." These different response sets preclude an exact comparison, but for the purposes of the comparison, I deemed the NSAL responses ranging from "almost every day" to "a few times a year" as equivalent to the MIDUS responses of "often" and "sometimes." The comparison thus involves the racially specific percentage of MIDUS respondents who report experiencing an example of discrimination "often" or "sometimes" with the percentage of NSAL respondents who report experiencing an example "almost every day," "at least once a week," "a few times a month," or "a few times a year."

Results and Discussion

Table 1 compares the equivalent percentages as just described of the MIDUS and NSAL non-Latino black and white respondents who reported experiencing the nine everyday mistreatment situations. This comparison uses the common difference between proportions Z-test for two independent samples (for large samples, $Z = 1.96$, $p < .05$; $Z = 2.58$, $p < .01$, $Z = 3.29$, $p < .001$).

Table 1
 Comparison of Responses to Perceived Everyday Mistreatment Items in 1995–1996 MIDUS and 2001–2003 NSAL (% Reporting “Often” or “Sometimes” in MIDUS and “At Least Once a Day,” “at Least Once a week,” “a Few Times a Month,” or “a Few Times a Year” in NSAL; Standard Deviations in Parentheses)

	MIDUS Blacks	NSAL Blacks	MIDUS Whites	NSAL Whites
1. Treated with less courtesy	38.8 (.83)	45.7* (1.27)	9.4 (.68)	29.6*** (1.09)
2. Treated with less respect	42.3 (.88)	41.2 (1.24)	10.0 (.69)	29.9*** (1.10)
3. Receive poorer service	46.1 (.89)	40.0 (1.11)	5.4 (.61)	21.6*** (.91)
4. People think you are not smart	47.3 (.94)	43.6 (1.44)	9.3 (.70)	26.2*** (1.18)
5. People afraid of you	37.4 (.99)	27.6* (1.34)	7.2 (.63)	15.7*** (1.02)
6. People think you are dishonest	34.8 (.97)	24.7* (1.24)	3.4 (.51)	7.9*** (.76)
7. People think you are not as good/they’re better	50.2 (.92)	54.6 (1.59)	11.7 (.74)	47.7*** (1.28)
8. Called names or insulted	17.0 (.87)	17.4 (1.14)	4.0 (.55)	16.1*** (1.09)
9. Threatened or harassed	8.3 (.31)	8.9 (.86)	2.6 (.48)	9.1*** (.82)
Mean for all nine items	35.8	33.7	7.9	22.6***
Number of cases across mistreatment items	230–232	2,881–2,898	5,065–5,079	733–736

Notes: This analysis was conducted via the online Survey Documentation and Analysis system (sda.berkeley.edu), using the RFNWT population weight for MIDUS and the NSALWTCT weight for the NSAL. Asterisks indicate two-tailed statistical difference (*Z*-test) between proportions of MIDUS blacks and NSAL blacks or between proportions of MIDUS whites and NSAL whites, respectively; **p* < .05, ****p* < .001. MIDUS worded item #7 as “people act as if they think you are not as good as they are, while NSAL worded it as “people act as if they’re better than you are”; these wordings are deemed basically equivalent.

Based on the results of this testing, the black percentages in Table 1 are very similar overall across MIDUS and NSAL, with six of the nine black comparisons essentially equivalent, and the two black means for all nine items also equivalent. The three black comparisons that were statistically significant show no clear trend, with two means higher in MIDUS and one mean higher in NSAL. Meanwhile, the NSAL white percentage is always much higher than the MIDUS white percentage for all nine items, and the NSAL white mean is about three times higher than the MIDUS white mean, with all the white comparisons statistically significant. Concomitantly, the black/white difference in perceived mistreatment is much smaller in NSAL (a 1.49 ratio in the means for all nine items) than in MIDUS (a 4.53 ratio).

This comparison between the two surveys is inexact for at least two reasons: the time interval between the surveys and their non-identical methodologies in addition to their initial question on everyday mistreatment. At the same time, the overall similarity of the black percentages in the surveys is rather striking in view of this imprecision. Given this similarity and the earlier conceptual discussion of white perceptions, the large discrepancy in the two surveys' white percentages points to the use or non-use of "discrimination" in the initial question as a possible reason for this discrepancy. It does not seem likely that whites somehow became three times more likely to perceive and/or to report interpersonal mistreatment in the 5- to 7-year period between the two surveys. It is also not clear that any methodological differences between the two surveys beyond the initial question could have produced such dissimilar results for whites while still producing generally equivalent results for blacks. These considerations suggest that the use of "discrimination" in MIDUS may have indeed depressed whites' reports of everyday mistreatment.

Conclusion

Public opinion researchers and survey methodologists have long known that minor differences in survey question wording may affect respondents' answers. By suggesting that the use of "discrimination" in the initial question on everyday mistreatment may have this same effect for whites, this article extends prior work on question wording and adds to scholarly consideration of the measurement of perceived everyday mistreatment.

Many studies of the extent and health effects of perceived everyday mistreatment have used MIDUS data or data from other surveys that use the MIDUS wording. To the extent that the use of "discrimination" may depress whites' reports of everyday mistreatment, as this article's analysis suggests, these data may be less than ideal and even inadequate for perceived mistreatment studies involving whites. Because many of the everyday mistreatment studies have involved white respondents, these studies' results may be suspect

if whites are failing to report a significant amount of mistreatment because “discrimination” was used in the initial question asked of them.

Future research should continue to assess the measurement of perceived everyday mistreatment. In view of this article’s finding, such research should in particular investigate the possible impact of using “discrimination” in the initial question regarding such mistreatment. Here, it would be important to conduct a survey experiment with alternate wordings of the initial question given to randomized subsamples of respondents. This and other assessments of the measurement of perceived everyday mistreatment remain critical for understanding the extent and impact of mistreatment and discrimination in American life.

ENDNOTES

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