

Churning races in Canada: Visible minority response change between 2006 and 2011

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Race response change happens

Governments and academics gather data to track and reduce socioeconomic disparities by race, and this usually means asking a single simplified question to assess something as complicated as racial or ethnic identity. Previous studies found that *some people change their answers to the race question in the census when asked again some years later. Why do most people have stable responses while some do not?*

Data and analysis:

Using linked Canadian data, we examine personal, social, and economic characteristics that predict response stability as White or as one of six visible minority groups, versus a change in response to/from White or to/from another visible minority group.

Results:

- Response change rates in Canada are generally comparable to those in the US, the UK, and New Zealand, with White the most stable group and multiple-response groups among the least stable.
- Mixed heritage (reported in a separate question) is very predictive of response change; in the three largest visible minority groups – Chinese, South Asian, and Black – it predicts change to another visible minority group, but not change to or from a White response.
- Immigration status is strongly associated with response changes between White and a visible minority group, but not with changes from one visible minority group to another.
- Exposure to own-group members in the local area is predictive of response stability.
- Change in socioeconomic standing has little link to response change.
- Joining and leaving a group are usually predicted by the same characteristics and in the same direction.

Why do some people change their race answer when asked again?

- Are people with a complicated racial background more likely to change responses?
- Are people with better understanding of the race question or acceptance of the racial categories less likely to change responses?
- Are people who experienced changes in socioeconomic status more likely to change responses?
- Do people change responses to fit in their surroundings?

2006-2011 linked data from Canada

2006 Census + 2011 National Household Survey

Linking done by Statistics Canada

- 75% of people in the 2011 population (not incl. young kids and immigrants) were *linked to themselves* in 2006
- 22 million linked cases

1.06 million in the linked data filled out the 2006 census long form. We study these cases, weighted to represent all in 2006.

The Canadian race question

Visible minorities are defined as non-Aboriginal & non-White

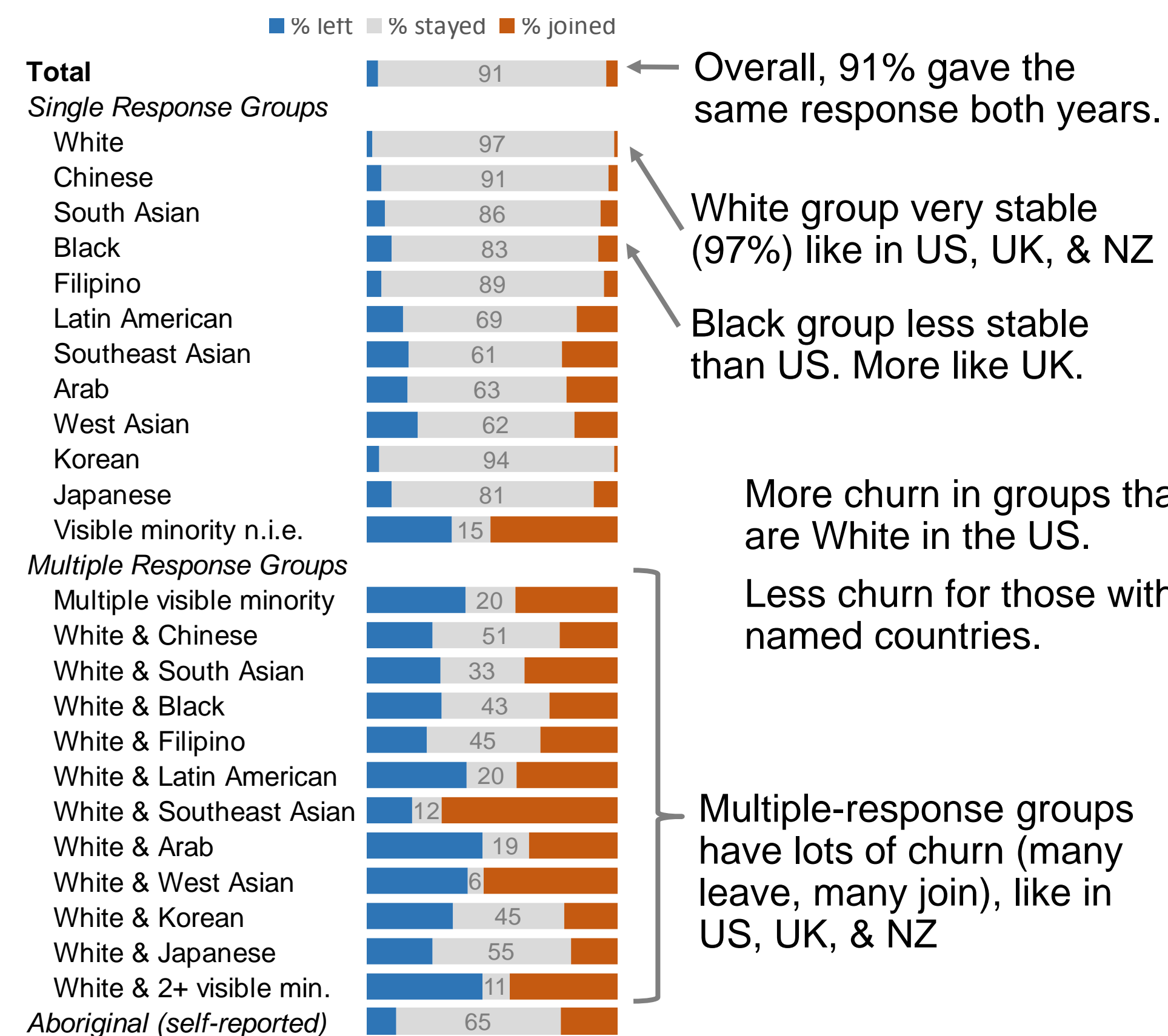
- Arab, Latin American & West Asian are *not* White (unlike US)
- Aboriginal response? Skip Q.19.

18 Is this person an Aboriginal person, that is, North American Indian, Métis or Inuit (Eskimo)?

19 Is this person:

Go to Question 20

How common is response stability?



Why do some people change answers?

Predicted probabilities of response change/stability in seven groups

We addressed our four hypotheses using seven multinomial logistic regression models (separate by response group) predicting response stability and change.

Mixed ethnicity and immigrant status are among the most powerful predictors.

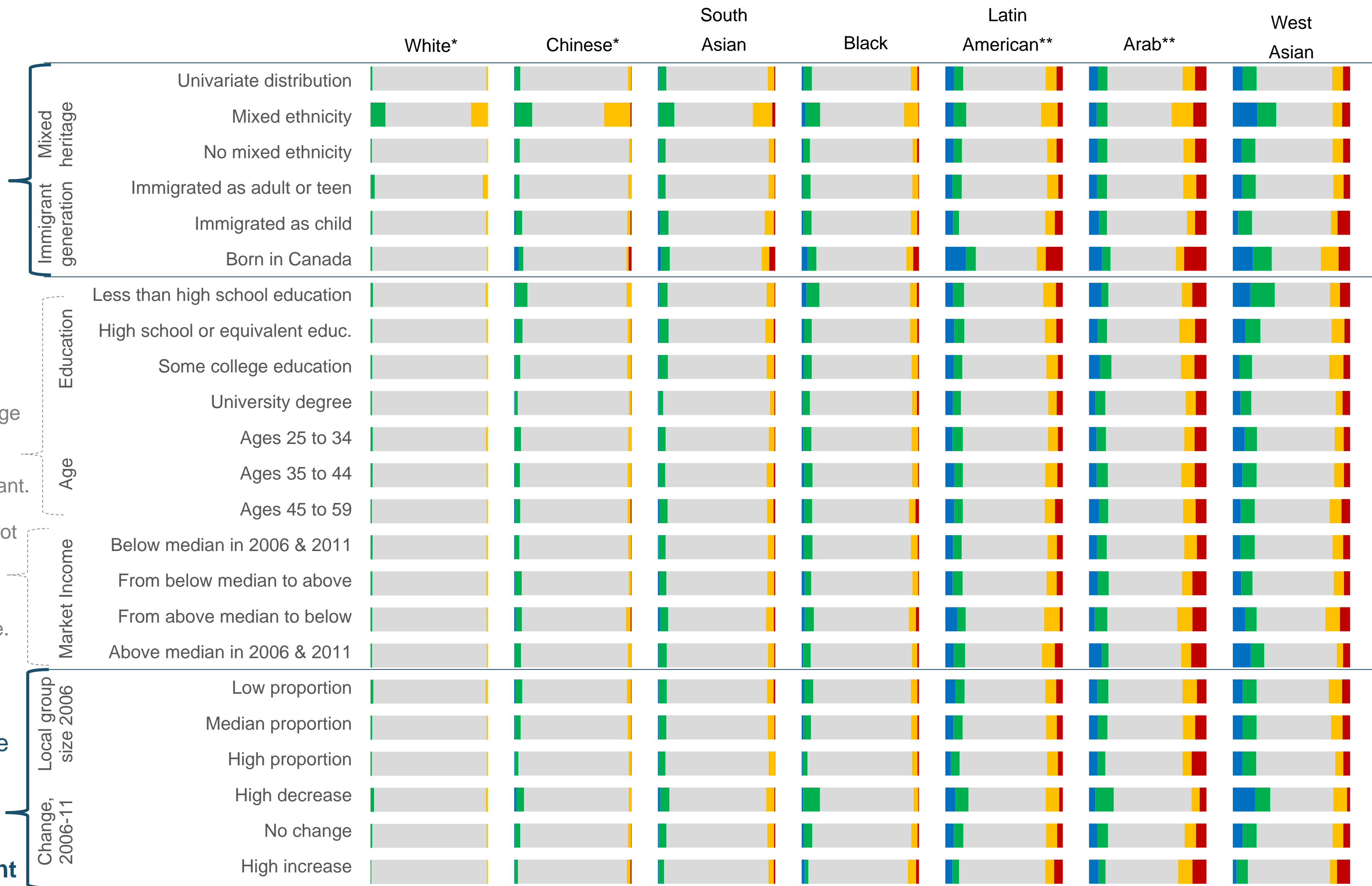
Is response change because a simple question cannot measure complex realities?

Less response change with more education and age, but usually small or non-significant.

More income does not predict change to White. Less income does not predict change to non-White.

Living near others in the group and change in proportion predict response change.

Is response change because people want to feel connected to those around them?



* The White and Chinese models have very good model fit.

** The Latin American and Arab models have very poor model fit.

Response change affects demographers

Our results and those in the US, UK, and NZ all indicate that response change is widespread. Instead of relying on the assumption that race or visible minority response is life long, demographers should relax the assumption, gather relevant data, and apply methods that allow the possibility that a response will change. Who you've been and who you are going to be can be as important as who you are at a single point in time.