

CENSUS MANAGEMENT AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY: LOOKING AT  
QUESTIONS ON ETHNIC OR ANCESTRAL ORIGIN

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## Introduction

The management of the Canadian census has become an issue of heightened public interest due to the Harper Government's retrenchment of data collection by Statistics Canada. This became a major public issue beginning in mid-2010 with the announcement of a reduced compulsory short form census questionnaire and the downgraded status of the accompanying long form which had been a compulsory questionnaire sent to 20% of households. It became voluntary despite widespread complaints over data coverage losses with the Government's only concession being that the long form would now go to 30% of households as a voluntary survey. Statisticians and demographers are still sifting through the implications and limitations of this set of decisions. Projecting the future of demographic, social and lifestyle data in Canada is thus an ongoing dilemma made more

intense by recently announced widespread personnel cuts at Statistics Canada.<sup>1</sup>

One aspect of this broader debate which merits attention is the reduction of the questions asked in the universal compulsory short form. One of the types of questions removed for the 2011 short form were those dealing with ethnic identity or national ancestry, something long asked in Canada. In fact, such types of questions are a common feature of many countries' statistical collection. Ann Morning reports that in a survey of national census questionnaires the UN "found that 65% enumerated their populations by national or ethnic group".<sup>2</sup> Countries such as Great Britain, Canada, and the U.S., she observes, are generally assumed to gather such information in the interests of "Enumeration for antidiscrimination" efforts.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile some countries such as France, Germany or Spain generally do not collect this

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Louise Egan, *Data Hounds Fearful at Statistics Canada Faces Cuts: Reputation Already Hit by Controversial Census Changes*, *Montreal Gazette* (May 2, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Ann Morning, "Ethnic Classification in Global Perspective: A Cross-National Survey of the 2000 Census Round" *Population Research Policy Review* (2008), volume 27; p. 239.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*; p. 243.

information as it is seen by the state as detracting from a broader national identity.<sup>4</sup>

Government decisions to not gather this type of information on the Canadian census raise interesting matters for debate. One is how this Government choice relates to the trend of recent decades whereby increasing numbers of respondents opted to answer Canadian instead of traditional European or other ethnic ancestries. This trend is, in fact, common to Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, all countries with a shared history of British colonialism and Commonwealth membership. Some may suggest that it indicates a positive trend of strengthening national consciousness. This might be spun as a nationalistic outcome manifesting closer social integration. Others might raise data questions though about a lack of comparability to past responses in other censuses, which pinpointed ethnic or ancestral origin; or questions about whether this is possibly a jingoistic kind of national attachment. Furthermore, there is the question about the potential weakening of

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

antidiscrimination prevention, the primary assumed reason for the type of question in the past. This paper will examine the trend of national naming in response to questions of ethnic or ancestral origin in the case of New Zealand, Australia and Canada. It will be argued that the more limited 2011 census short form has evaded a needed national debate in Canada over the purpose of the census questions and the value of more complete information on ancestry and ethnic identification.

### Ethnic or Ancestral Origin

For those unfamiliar with parsing census questions let us take the example of the 2011 United Kingdom census and its questions related to ethnic and/or ancestral origin.<sup>5</sup> This is not to endorse or to challenge the UK format as reference to their choice of questions is simply meant to illustrate one version of this kind of census question. The last UK census was conducted like the last Canadian census in 2011 and it

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<sup>5</sup> This information may easily be found on the website of the UK Office for National Statistics.

included a much broader range of questions than those found in the corresponding Canadian census. Among these added questions were the following. Question 15 asked “How would you describe your national identity?” with various UK choices (English, Welsh etc.) and Other as listed options. Question 16 asked “What is your ethnic group?” with choices grouped under “A. White”; “B. Mixed/ multiple ethnic groups”; “C. Asian/ Asian British”; “D. Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British”; and “E. Other Ethnic Group”. Various choices are offered under each of these lettered sections. It might also be noted that other census questions go on to ask about the respondent’s main language and their general proficiency in English.

### National Naming and the Case of New Zealand, Australia and Canada

Canada, Australia, and New Zealand each conduct regular highly-regarded counts of their national populations. Working with these counts can offer insights along a multitude of socio-cultural dimensions.

One of the interesting trends to be noted in each of these countries is the periodic emergence of debate surrounding questions of ethnicity and/or ancestral identification. Their national statistical collection agencies must grapple with the wording of such questions and the interpretation of responses. One of the most striking commonalities among the three countries is the notable levels of census respondents whose answers to such questions reflect national identification rather than customary understandings or academic perceptions of ethnic heritage and/or ancestry. As settler societies with lengthening histories as self-governing countries it should perhaps not be surprising that national pride should occasionally manifest itself, but what should students of demography and the national census make of the patterns of nationalist responses? Do ethnicity questions need to be reconsidered? Why might they still be needed among the array of census questions? What do the trends of nationalistic responses tell us? All these questions are engaging the attention of governments and scholars.

New Zealand represents perhaps the clearest case of ongoing reflection upon ethnicity questions encountering responses asserting national identity. A few years ago Statistics New Zealand published their *Final Report of a Review of the Official Ethnicity Statistical Standard* [2009] which was the culmination of a two year process involving consultations, research, and an initial draft report. From the outset they identify the clear trend spanning these three countries. “National naming in census ethnicity questions is not confined to New Zealand. In recent years it has also appeared in other countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom.”

[Preface] Taking the advice of the New Zealand report let us turn our attention to the case of the three former British dominions, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

There are three basic questions to be assessed in this preliminary study of the response patterns. What is the pattern of responses in the three countries in regard to national naming? What seem to be the



factors contributing to this pattern? The findings from these two questions can then be used to reflect on the place of ethnicity and/or ancestry questions and the debates over their inclusion in modern census and demographic research. There are still reasons for gathering data on ethnic composition but there is a need for sophisticated consideration of where we go with such questions and their place in the census of population.

Let us briefly review the experiences with ethnicity identification in the three countries at hand beginning with the New Zealand case. Before the 1986 census inquiry on ethnicity “was based on a race concept and people of mixed race were required to report their ‘proportion of blood.’” [2009; 9] With the 1986 census the notion of cultural affiliation was substituted in place of the racially oriented question. Since then, responses have been based on self-identification, an approach to defining ethno-cultural status vulnerable to changing self-perceptions and cultural attitudes. “This definition is

based on the 'cultural affiliation' concept of ethnicity, which measures cultural identity or identities that people themselves choose." [2009; 9] Subsequent reviews of this methodological direction were conducted in 1988, 2004 and 2009.

Question 11 of the 2006 New Zealand census asked "Which ethnic group do you belong to?" and a variety of possible responses followed including New Zealand European, Maori, Samoan and other specific choices plus the option of 'other.' Responses to this question revealed growing adoption of New Zealander as the chosen response. In fact, "the number of 'New Zealander' responses to the ethnicity question increased from over 90,000 in 2001 to over 400,000 in 2006 making 'New Zealander' the third largest response group in the 2006 Census after 'New Zealand European' and 'Maori'. [2009, Preface] Over 11% of respondents choosing to report their national identification as their ethnicity raises concerns related to the insight to be gained from the question as currently phrased or answered. This led to further

attitudinal research and “cognitive testing of the census ethnicity question” [2009; 11] which disclosed three types of respondents choosing the New Zealander response. Some believe New Zealander to ‘a unique national and ethnic identity’ while others found the offered choices inadequate and the reference to Europe not to be pertinent. Meanwhile some indicated unease with any ethnicity question and harboured fear its divisiveness.

As in the New Zealand case, the issue of ethnicity and ancestry arose again as an Australian census concern in the mid-1980s. An ancestry question was introduced in 1986 as a way of gaining a better picture of ethnic make-up but in the end “it was not useful ... as there was a high level of subjectivity and confusion about what the question meant, particularly for those people whose families had been in Australia for many generations.” [Australian Bureau of Statistics Fact Sheet: Ancestry, 2001; 1] Given this, the ancestry question was omitted from the 1991 and 1996 censuses. User pressure led to a Consultative

Group on Ancestry and it was decided to reinstate a question so as to gather information on “those people who were either born overseas, or whose parents were born overseas.” [Ancestry Fact Sheet; 2] Using the 2006 Australian census as a reference point let us turn to the wording of the ancestry question.

Question 18 of the 2006 Australian census asked “What is the person’s ancestry?” and respondents were instructed to “Provide up to two ancestries only.” [Australian Bureau of Statistics 2914.0 – 2006 Census of Population and Housing Ancestry Fact Sheet] A list of 7 possible national choices was offered beginning with English and Irish ending with Australian. A prompt was then offered indicating “Other” and examples such as Greek or Vietnamese were provided. Australian was the most popular response in both the 2001 and 2006 censuses. Ranking 1 and 2 in the responses were Australian and English: 2001 Census - Australian 6, 739, 594 with English at 6, 358,880 while in 2006 Australian edged upward with 7, 371, 823 responses to 6,283,647 for

English. In both of these censuses the next most popular responses were Irish and Scottish with each coming in with fewer than 2,000,000 responses.

The trend toward adoption of national identification as the response to a question on ethnicity/ancestry was repeated in the Canadian case up to 2006. Such a question was not included in the most recent compulsory short-form 2011 census. Going back to the 2006 Canadian census the national identification pattern was clear; “The largest group enumerated by the census consisted of just over 10 million people who reported Canadian as their ethnic ancestry’ either alone (5.7 million) or with other origins (4.3 million). [Statistics Canada, Canada’s Ethnocultural Mosaic, 2006 Census: National Picture] Next in frequency of response came English, French, Scottish and Irish. The actual wording of the ethnic origins question in 2006 was “What were the ethnic or cultural origins of this person’s ancestors?” [Statistics

Canada 2006 Census] A list of possible responses was offered in light of the results to a similar question in the 2001 census.

Canada has a long history with regard to census questions related to ethnicity/ancestry. Statistics Canada reported after the 2006 census that such data had “been collected in all but two national censuses since Confederation. They went on to note that “Since 1970, the demand for statistical information on ethnicity ... increased with government policies in the area of multiculturalism and diversity.”

[Canada’s Ethnocultural Mosaic] It bears repeating that a question of this sort was not included in the controversial compulsory 2011 Canadian short-form census. No questions on ethnicity, ancestry, aboriginal status were included in the compulsory census questions ultimately approved by the Harper Government. The issue is raised in the voluntary long-form but the value of the responses to the optional long-form remains little-explored.

This brings us to several questions for further consideration and analysis; namely why might these questions still be considered for inclusion and what this pattern of responses might indicate. Bruce Curtis points out to us that “Census making is a political-scientific activity. It is a general condition of scientific practice that objects of knowledge and targets of intervention must be represented theoretically before they can be known scientifically.”<sup>6</sup> With this in mind let us consider what may be needed in an ethnicity/ancestry measure bearing in mind that we are only scratching the surface of the attendant philosophical and empirical complexities. Trovato, for example, suggests certain kinds of information to be gained from this kind of measure. Among these are an understanding of ‘ethnic mobility’<sup>7</sup> which involves factors such as inter-marriage, reproductive choices, and family formation trends. He also draws attention to growing awareness in Canada over recent decades that “the country’s

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce Curtis, *The Politics of Population: State Formation, Statistics, and the Census of Canada, 1840-1875* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2001); pp. 27-28.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Trovato, *Canada’s Population in a Global Context: An Introduction to Social Demography* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2009); p. 16.

multicultural makeup and growing ethnic diversity need to be properly studied.”<sup>8</sup>

The 2009 New Zealand Report on the ethnicity measure reports that government planning at all levels depends on ethnicity information for “identifying the demand for public policies, programmes and services and tailoring their delivery to ensure effective results.” (New Zealand, 2009; 8) Health planning and engagement with Maori peoples are among the examples of where such data is needed. Material from the Australian Bureau of Statistics speaks to similar concerns (government planning, intergovernmental proceedings, and engagement with aboriginal peoples) coupled with attention to immigrant settlement experiences. [2914.0 – 2006 Census of Population and Housing Fact Sheets, 2006]

Ethnic mobility, immigrant settlement experiences, government planning, aboriginal engagement, and multicultural assessment speak

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid; p. 34.



to a certain framework for government investigation and data collection. Ann Morning offers a helpful classification of “four types of governmental approach to ethnic enumeration”<sup>9</sup> and for the three countries at issue here the applicable approach is, as noted at the outset, what she terms number 4 “Enumeration for antidiscrimination”, the notion that ethnicity needs to be monitored so as to provide needed information so as to ensure cultural equality, multiculturalism and prevention of discriminatory practices.

Thus the lesson seems to be that national feeling and distance from the source countries that commenced the colonial settlement have promoted an environment whereby the design and interpretation of ethnicity questions have been complicated. This apparently growing widespread trend of identifying national identity as personal responses to ethnicity questions is constraining our ability to work with available census data. One response may be the Harper Government’s choice to remove the question from the short form and assign it to the optional

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<sup>9</sup> Morning; p. 243.

long-form census. Another more sophisticated answer may be found in the reasoning of the New Zealand and Australian reports which asserted a continued need to ask questions on this matter. This might well be an approach better suited to Canada's multicultural aspirations. It also bears noting that a broader national debate over the role and nature of Canadian census questions might well be helpful in encouraging us to think of our data needs, the information needed for public policy and antidiscrimination purposes, and the refinement of our census questions to reflect more completely national character and aspirations.

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