



Challenges of Measuring an Ethnic World

Science, politics and reality

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2. *The Enumeration of Ethnic and Racial Groups in the Census: Some Devilish Principles*

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Introduction

I wish to suggest some propositions about the enumeration of racial and ethnic groups in the census. Since I do not know whether they are right or wrong or if they apply to more than one nation's census, I will call these Devilish Principles. If they are correct, then they are principles and I hope you will spell my name correctly in citing them. If they are wrong, then I am just being a devil's advocate, so no harm is done.

An Old Story

The first Principle is that censuses have long found it difficult to enumerate ethnicity (in using the term "ethnicity" I will include race and other related attributes). This is a serious problem at present and it is affected by contemporary events, but difficulty in ascertaining ethnicity is not a new problem and it therefore reflects forces that are not idiosyncratic to our own times. What follows are some examples.

In a report on the 1931 Census of British Malaya, C.A. Vlieland (1958) describes the difficulty in ascertaining race. He describes the procedure of first delineating six main racial groups: "Europeans (including Americans and all White races), Eurasians, Malaysians, Chinese, Indians, and 'Others'". These are, in turn, subdivided into over 70 races. From a current viewpoint, the latter step is unusual. But it is not unlikely that present practices will appear equally odd 60 years from now. This matter I will address later. The special difficulty in classifying the Chinese in Malaysia should strike a familiar note for those addressing contemporary classification problems, even if it involves different groups:

The classification of Chinese is a matter of considerable difficulty, and whatever list of divisions is adopted, the census authority can not hope to escape a considerable measure of expert criticism. The writer's plea is that the classification adopted in this report represents a tolerable compromise between the conflicting views of different authorities who were consulted and the practical considerations which weighed with him as the authority responsible for the census. The classification is admittedly based on an inconsistent blend of political, geographic and linguistic, rather than ethnographic

The Enumeration of Ethnic and Racial Groups in the Census: Some Devilish Principles

criteria, but is intended to reflect those broad divisions with which a non-specialist administrator is mainly concerned in Malaya (542-43).

Then he goes on to describe problems with Asian Indians in Malaya as well. All of this should sound familiar to you; the groups may be different but it is the same story. The census authority cannot hope to escape a considerable measure of expert criticism, as he/she endeavors to "blend" a variety of criteria to meet the diverse concerns of the users.

Calvin Beale (1958), writing about the enumeration of mixed blood racial groups in the 1950 U.S. Census, particularly in the South, concludes:

In view of the wide variation in race status found among the mixed bloods, and the changing status of some groups, it is the writer's opinion that no overall instruction regarding their classification in the census can be effective. Separate instructions can be effectively issued in certain areas, but problems of race classification promise to vex census takers and demographers for many years to come (540).

There are other early examples of ethnic difficulties in official statistics. Everett C. Hughes (1958) studied the delineation of race in German statistical yearbooks before and during the Nazi era. Both the conception of race and the classification of Jews shift radically. In the pre-Nazi yearbooks, "race" is about stallions; and there is a religious category called Israelites (546). Thus, for example, there are data on Israelite-Protestant marriages as there are for Catholic-Protestant marriages. A variety of changes occurred during the Nazi era, culminating in a racial reclassification such that Israelites are no longer listed with other religions. Instead, there is a racial classification with information on Jews, Jewish mixtures of the first degree and Jewish mixtures of the second degree.

According to Dudley Kirk's superb study of *Europe's Population in the Interwar Years* (1946), concern about ethnicity intensified in many nations after the Versailles Treaty brought the First World War to an end. In turn, this affected the enumeration of ethnic groups in various European censuses between the two wars. Kirk points to a variety of enumeration problems, focusing particularly on the biases and distortions that reflect efforts to increase the size of some groups and decrease the size of others. For example, languages that were arguably separable were combined as if they were one tongue (and hence one ethnic group), whereas artificial divisions are introduced in other circumstances to minimize the size of the group. Kirk observes:

Under such circumstances census figures on ethnic composition are inevitably weighted in favor of the dominant nationality. Questions are customarily phrased so as to favor the dominant group and in their replies many doubtful, borderline persons of double language or mixed nationality find it convenient to identify themselves with the dominant

The Enumeration of Ethnic and Racial Groups in the Census: Some Devilish Principles

element. The political and economic advantages of belonging to the majority group undoubtedly result in an exaggeration of the percentage of that element in the reported census distribution, entirely aside from the manipulations of the central statistical offices (1946, 223).

Kirk then observes that minorities and their spokespersons, in the course of taking issue with official figures, commonly make excessive claims in the opposite direction.

A major paper by Petersen (1969) relates to Kirk's thesis. In an attempt generalize about factors influencing the way censuses classify ethnic and racial groups, Petersen demonstrates how the delineations reflect the concerns and perspective of the dominant group(s). I believe one could now propose a different thesis, in the opposite direction, such that subordinate groups are specially likely to affect how they are delineated by the census. We will get to that soon.

Distortions stemming simply from either respondent errors or enumeration procedures are also not new. Fellegi (1964) describes an experiment with the 1961 Canadian Census, such that respondents are asked the same set of questions by different enumerators. The largest variability in responses were on questions dealing with: ethnic group, mother tongue and official language — particularly ethnic group. "These questions are quite emotionally charged in Canada, and as it turns out, the interviewers did not seem to be detached" (1037). In terms of respondent distortions, Ryder (1955) was able to demonstrate that Canada's opposition to Germany in the Second World War led to a massive decline in the German ethnic response among Canadians, accompanied by an increase in the number reporting Dutch ancestry.

In summary, these examples demonstrate that census difficulties in enumerating ethnic groups are not particularly new. They reflect a variety of problems: sometimes it is uncertainty about how a handful of questions (that must be easily coded) can gauge a complex set of delineations in a satisfactory way. The ethnic mixes that normally ensue after contact do not make the task any easier. Often, even experts will not agree among themselves on the most reasonable and appropriate ways of delineating the groups. On top of this, there are political and social pressures operating which impact on both what can be asked and what is asked. Perhaps in an earlier period these pressures stemmed primarily from the dominant group and the government. Now these pressures arise from more diverse sources and governments are, appropriately, less likely to ignore the concerns of subordinate groups on this matter. Finally — even if there is full agreement on the conceptualizations and appropriate concerns — the intense feelings that respondents sometimes have about this topic, as well as certain inherent ambiguities, may distort the actual enumeration results.

The Enumeration of Ethnic and Racial Groups in the Census: Some Devilish Principles

An inherent clash between the nature of censuses and the nature of ethnic relations

A second Devilish Principle is that an inherent clash exists between the nature of ethnic relations and the typical orientation of organizations that produce censuses. There is usually a dynamic set of processes operating for racial and ethnic groups. The groups keep changing after they migrate, or are conquered, or otherwise brought into contact with other populations. The categories change, the membership changes, boundaries shift, conceptualizations are altered, there are mixed marriages, the categories themselves shift and new delineations occur. (Note that these changes are not the same as what ensues from simple assimilation such that social, economic or cultural attributes change in a certain direction for a fixed category of people.)

The U.S. race question illustrates how inadequately these dynamics are enumerated by the census. The question does not allow for hybridized offspring representing two groups, even in such circumstances where we know that very high levels of intermarriage, as between various Asian groups and White segments of our American population, will lead to persons for whom a single answer may be increasingly inappropriate. Since there is no room there for that kind of mix — the question allows for only a single response — we can conclude in this case that racial and ethnic events in the United States have moved ahead faster than have the census procedures for dealing with the consequences of these dynamic events. The race question used in the United States stems from an out-of-date concept (where Chinese, Japanese, Guamanians, etc. are each classified as separate "races") but it did adequately serve many purposes. So in a different period this would have been a relatively minor issue.

Now there are rapid changes following a stretch in which there were relatively slow-moving shifts in the ethnic/racial categories. I will not even get into the question of whether it is appropriate to use the term race for such groups as Chinese, Japanese and Koreans. Obviously, it is no more appropriate than labeling Swedes, Greeks, Poles and Germans as different races. In addition, a substantial segment of the Hispanic population of the United States has shifted its racial response in the last two censuses. They have moved from describing themselves as "White" on the race question to using none of the existing racial categories. In its most general sense, what we witness is a changing meaning and criterion used for a given concept — even one such as race — as well as what peoples are to be so labeled (see Pitt-Rivers 1977).

Certainly both Canada and the United States have had, and will continue to experience, periods in which social delineations change so rapidly that old questions and categories are insufficient to deal with new responses. I would speculate that the difficulty stems from the following: census-taking organizations are cautious and not readily inclined towards making changes in either the questions or their coded responses. The organization in each country is likely to be conservative; there will be a preference, when in doubt, to use the existing question. When there is unavoidable doubt or pressure about the existing procedure, then the tendency will be to modify (if at all possible) an existing question. If this is impossible and no recourse is

The Enumeration of Ethnic and Racial Groups in the Census: Some Devilish Principles

available, a new question is introduced. There is good reason for this sequence. Most of us like to have continuity in our data. I have no doubt that a changed question would lead to considerable controversy when users realize they cannot continue to employ an existing data set. Furthermore, even relatively modest changes create confusion for census users. The 1910 and 1920 Censuses of the United States, for example, defined mother tongue for the second generation as the language spoken in the foreign homes of their parents. By contrast, mother tongue for the second generation in 1940 is defined as the principal language spoken at home of the respondents themselves. This change in definition even confused the Census Bureau as they misinterpreted the apparent sizable decline in non-English mother tongues between 1940 and the earlier decades (see Kiser 1956, 314). The Canadian census also shifted its definition of mother tongue, albeit with probably a modest impact on continuity of the time series (Lieberson 1970, 17).

There is a certain amount of experience that develops when a census uses a question repeatedly. The question and its response categories are reasonably debugged. Even though various pilot studies usually precede the introduction of a new question, nobody knows exactly what will happen in the full-scale census. As a consequence, users of the new question may be unhappy with it and users of a dropped question may be even more unhappy.

In essence, race and ethnic relations are usually changing in a society, sometimes very slowly and at other times rather rapidly. However, the groups are measured by an instrument that — for good reason — is likely to be slow in responding to these shifts.

The ambiguity of racial and ethnic groups: separating technical from substantive problems

Another Principle stems from a strange fact, namely there is no clean and consistent definition of the groups that are to be enumerated. To be sure, there is an abundance of definitions of ethnicity. In a graduate seminar, students and I recently reviewed a small part of this literature, finding many authors prepared to critique other works and then offering the real definition. There is no clean definition that is of universal utility in guiding enumeration procedures. It is very difficult to use the same concept for all places and there are changes over time within each setting. We can learn from what other countries do but each historical context is somewhat distinctive. The groups are in flux — sometimes changing slowly, sometime radically. This, in turn, leads to the following Principle: although it is very difficult to develop a totally satisfactory and "crystal clear" conception of ethnicity and race, we can expect a working approach that is at least reasonable for the specific time and place. We can ask for clarity in what is to be enumerated and how it is done. In turn, this means that both the census and the consumers of census data on ethnicity have to distinguish between technical and substantive "errors" about ethnicity in a census.

The Enumeration of Ethnic and Racial Groups in the Census: Some Devilish Principles

There are technical errors in the data on racial and ethnic groups generated by such factors as: poorly conceived items; ambiguously stated questions; inadequate options for the respondents to check off; intentional distortions by the respondents; and coding difficulties. On the other hand, there are "errors" which are caused not by technical problems but rather reflect substantive processes and events. Suppose, for example, parents differ between themselves on the ethnicity they would attribute to their offspring or that children of mixed parentage themselves fluctuate in how they describe themselves or suppose a single broad category gradually replaces several narrower ethnic categories or suppose age influences ethnic responses such that people shift during their life course or even imagine a situation in which one's ethnic response is altered by the ethnic origins of one's spouse or by the ethnic distribution at work or in the residential neighborhood. None of these are unimaginable processes. I would say, however, that it is very hard for census organizations to deal with such substantive "errors". After all, it is always appropriate to worry about validity and consistency. Yet, it is in the nature of race and ethnic relations, particularly during periods of sudden change, for such patterns to occur for no other reason than they reflect ongoing shifts.

If there had been a census through the centuries in what is now England, imagine the problems that would have been faced in enumerating ethnicity. Along the way Celts, Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Normans, Romans and other groups somehow merged and formed a population we now identify as the English. Certainly, in some periods there would have been severe technical problems for census takers worrying about an ethnicity question; in other periods it would have been relatively easy. With the benefit of a broad historical overview, the merging of peoples whom we now know as the English would be obvious. From the limited perspective of censuses taken every ten (or five) years, however, these shifts would appear to the census takers as unmitigated mayhem, with many uncooperative respondents vacillating in their responses either from census to census or from parent to child. Certainly, the ethnic item(s) would be a mess! It would be a tragedy, however, if the search for consistency and precision and reliability kept the census takers and the consumers of census data from recognizing that a massive substantive shift in ethnicity was occurring before their very eyes. It would be a shame if we were to explain the difficulties of the ethnic/racial enumeration as simply due to technical enumeration problems.

In ethnic and race relations, we are often dealing with processes that are in flux. In a certain sense, it means ambiguity about exactly what the people are. Consequently, there will be certain "anomalous" results that would be unacceptable for census questions about, say, age, province of birth or number of children ever born. It is the nature of ethnic relations that we are dealing with a process that changes gradually or sometimes rapidly over time. A census is a snapshot at a given point; had you taken a snapshot at one time and then again two hundred years later, then the changes would look sharp and clear. It is inevitable that a few snapshots taken every five or ten years (Canada and the United States, respectively) through a short span will generate all kinds of interpretive problems since it will be difficult to separate the forest from the trees.

The Enumeration of Ethnic and Racial Groups in the Census: Some Devilish Principles

and the short-term fluctuations may hide the long term shifts. All that we can do is try as hard as possible to avoid technical enumeration problems (for example, the U.S. ancestry question and its instructions confuse historical origins with respondent's personal identification). If technical clarity occurs, then even Shakespeare would conclude that the problem lies not in ourselves but in our sociological stars, i.e. the problems reflect substantive changes in the nature of ethnic relations.

Each group has distinctive needs from the census

Another Devilish Principle is: a given census question will vary between ethnic/racial groups in its appropriateness and importance. For example, the generational factor is extremely important for the first few segments of White groups in the United States — indeed for the first generations of any immigrant population, for example, Asians or groups from Africa and Caribbean. This will not be a priority variable for other groups, for example, the vast majority of the American Black population or Indians in Canada or the United States. It will be of declining importance for various White ethnic populations who consist of increasing numbers who have been in the country for many generations. In Canada, for example, generation is unlikely to help us much in studying French Canadians.

This, in turn, leads to a Devilish Subprinciple. Namely, the groups will differ in the racial and ethnic questions that are most desirable from their point of view. In its simplest form, it means that groups usually favor enumerations which lead to the largest count of their members. (American Indians are an important exception in the United States, often objecting to the inclusion of respondents who do not choose Indian on the "race" question but did indicate Indian ancestry on the separate ethnic ancestry question.) Larger numbers are usually perceived as making the group more important in the society and, as a consequence, having greater leverage in the political system. This Principle means that census enumerations about race and ethnic matters involve a set of tradeoffs: each subgroup has its own list of most desired questions. The census organization of each nation not only has its own set of preferences but it is also a political entity and hence must adjudicate between the diverging preferences expressed by the groups themselves. I believe there is a shift away from ethnic questions in the census reflecting the concerns of the politically dominant ethnic group (as described by Petersen 1969 and Kirk 1946). The groups themselves have increasing influence over the nature of the questions asked and the classification and reporting of the responses.

At the risk of overstating this Devilish Principle, I would claim that each ethnic group has the potential ability to control its own enumeration — in the sense of a veto on how it is defined, classified and described. However, each group has no veto power over other groups. (Choldin 1986, has done a superb job of reviewing the political events leading to the introduction of a Hispanic question in the United States census.) I discovered this principle the hard way while attending a conference on the census a few years ago when the Bureau of the Census was

The Enumeration of Ethnic and Racial Groups in the Census: Some Devilish Principles

preparing for the 1990 Census. I naively suggested there was no reason to have an Hispanic question separate from the ethnic ancestry question since the former — as far as I could tell — could be classified as a subpart of the latter. Several participants from prominent Hispanic organizations were furious with such a proposal. They were furious, by the way, not at me (just a naive academic), rather it was in the form of a warning to census personnel of dire consequences that would follow were this proposal taken seriously.

I would say that all interest groups are morally righteous, at least in presenting their case to the outside world. A collectivity with a particular interest is usually able to claim that anything short of total support is at least a violation of precepts that are universal to the religions of the Western world, to say nothing of running counter to the national interests. Of course, this goes far beyond racial and ethnic groups — I have no doubt that if manufacturers or retailers were to want the census to count the number of refrigerators in each home, they would also find morally righteous reasons for asking that question. But when we come to ethnic/racial groups we have a complex problem which goes beyond the usual pressures exerted by interest groups. To wit, there are deep symbolic elements intertwined in the recognition and description of the groups and these are often coupled with very strong feelings and attachments to one's group. The consequences are considerable; keep in mind that the census is, after all, an official government document. It is, therefore, appropriate to view the enumeration of one's group in a very serious way, not only because of the political, economic, and social consequences — important as these are themselves — but also because of the symbolic representation entailed when the facts about the group are reported as an official governmental report.

A group is not the same as the people in the group

Another feature is the failure of people to follow orderly processes in dealing with their ethnicity. In terms of the notion of boundaries developed in Barth (1969), we often find people crashing through these boundaries. This may reflect assimilation, passing from lower to higher status groups, social pressures, the influence of mixed marriages on mates or their offspring, lack of knowledge, migration to new areas or increasing generational distance from the immigrant groups (see Lieberman 1985; Lieberman and Waters 1986, 1988; Waters 1990; Alba 1990). We must recognize these processes but it is equally important to understand the following Principle: the groups may persist despite a flow of people across their boundaries. We have to consider two separate questions. First, suppose there is an ethnic group, say Poles, and there are people of Polish ancestry who either cross the boundary into some other category or simply belong to no specific category (what I have called the Unhyphenated Whites), then this is a social fact of great importance. Indeed, one of the challenges to census enumeration comes after we recognize that such a pattern does not necessarily reflect a malfunction in the enumeration procedure. The challenge then becomes one of dealing with the rates of crossing and enumerating the socio-economic characteristics of the crossers.

The Enumeration of Ethnic and Racial Groups in the Census: Some Devilish Principles

There is a second issue, however, and that is the boundaries can be permeable but the group does not go away. The existence of crossers does not mean that the group per se is disappearing or is any less real. A substantial outmovement from the Polish category, for example, can even be accompanied by a growth in the number of Poles (depending on birth and death rates, the characteristics of who leaves and immigration or crossing into the group from elsewhere). The first phenomenon does not inherently answer questions about the second phenomenon. Only through recognition of the process can we expect the census to help us address the issues with meaningful and relevant data.

How many questions?

In thinking about the difficulties in enumerating racial and ethnic groups in the census, we need to keep in mind that one of the problems entails a form of "blaming the victim". In modern societies we recognize that income is a complex matter and not likely to be suitably enumerated with just one or two questions. As a consequence, there are numerous questions asked about income, at least in the United States census. Here is a complicated and extremely difficult topic and one accepts that many questions are necessary to pool together the array of information necessary for a reasonable description. The relevance of this for ethnicity in the census stems from the restriction in the number of questions that we ask. This is a separate matter from the difficulties inherent in the subject. We are more willing to ask an elaborate set of questions to ascertain income than to determine ethnicity and race. Since there is a zero sum game, such that expansion of some topics in the census would mean a decline in others, I am not naive enough to think there will be — or even should be — an unlimited expansion in racial/ethnic questions. But it is important to recognize that some of the difficulties we encounter in this conference are not intrinsically insurmountable; rather they reflect handicaps due to a restriction in the number of questions directed at the topic.

There has to be a willingness to use the existing "space" available for ethnic and racial questions to get at new kinds of questions. I consider the open-ended ethnic ancestry question employed in the 1980 and 1990 U.S. Census as an absolutely magnificent and daring effort, really running counter to conventional census procedures. Later in the conference we can deal with issues such as: whether the question is the best possible one; whether the instructions and examples are as good as they can be; and the difficulty of dealing with multiple responses. But I truly appreciate this bold effort and I recognize how unconventional and expensive the coding problems are when a sizable sample of the population is given the opportunity to fill out a blank line, rather than chose from a variety of fixed options.

One possible approach to the minimum space problem is to rethink the long form administered to 17 percent of the population. (In order to have a simple explication, let us assume that it is a 15 percent sample rather than 17.) Rather than administer the same questions to the entire 15 percent of the population, suppose somewhat different questionnaires are used such that the 15

The Enumeration of Ethnic and Racial Groups in the Census: Some Devilish Principles

percent is divided into three equal subgroups of five percent. We could include ethnic/racial questions A and B in one subsample and ask A and C in the second subsample and B and D in the third. This would allow us to gain more ethnic/racial information and also permit certain cross-tabulations that could not occur when there is no overlap between subsamples. I call these two combined features a system of "layered-overlapping" samples. It would not solve all of our problems but it would permit more information about race and ethnicity than occurs from a single sample based on one long form. There is a price to pay: less detail for small areas; even smaller sample sizes for small groups; a somewhat more complicated recording steps for the sample data; and the need to pay attention to interactions between questions on the responses generated. For example, except for sampling errors, the distribution of responses to ethnic question A should be the same in both subsamples. But these subsamples would allow us to have a generational question without giving up on any other ethnic question, albeit the Ns would not be of the same magnitude as can be obtained from a full sample question.

Subjectivity vs. Objectivity

Another special issue is that ethnic and racial questions in the census almost invariably involve subjective and attitudinal issues. In societies which have no formal processes for assigning an ethnic origin — as contrasted with South Africa's pass laws, the practices in Nazi Germany, the internal passports used in the former USSR or the legal definition of Negro once established by Southern states in the United States — ethnicity and race also entail issues of self-definition. In most democratic societies, the forced classification of persons by a government body is generally viewed as repulsive. I totally support this aversion — it is from my values highly desirable — but one necessary price is a clash with a general disposition of censuses to avoid asking attitudinal questions or other "subjective" questions. Census organizations are resistant to them since it is not part of traditional orientation of census takers. The census asks what year were you born in, how much money did you earn, what is your occupation and where do you live. The census usually does not ask whether you think you are old or not, whether you would call yourself poor or rich, what occupation you would like to have or where you prefer to live. Should there be questions about ethnicity on a census? If so, depending on the time and place, the influence of attitudinal matters may seep into the responses. Like it or not, such an effect is unavoidable. What we need to consider are ways of minimizing the magnitude of such distortions and, when appropriate, ways of directly searching for types of questions that openly reflect significant attitudinal influences.

In conclusion: One last devilish principle

By way of summary, we have to live with ambiguity in our census data on ethnic and racial groups. We have to accept it when the nature of relations is inherently ambiguous. And we have to respond to it. In reacting to rapidly changing conditions, in each census we have to be ready to change our response categories, if not our questions, from those used in earlier decades.

The Enumeration of Ethnic and Racial Groups in the Census: Some Devilish Principles

There is no choice but to accept these conditions if we are to deal with the awesome ethnic diversity of both Canada and the United States, which is one of the most striking characteristics of each nation.

My final Devilish Principle consists simply of repeating a quote from the distinguished philosopher of science, Abraham Kaplan, that Petersen found useful to cite at the end of his significant paper on the classification of ethnic groups in the census:

The demand for exactness of meaning and for precise definition of terms can easily have a pernicious effect, as I believe it often has had in behavioral science. It is the dogmaticisms outside science that proliferate closed systems of meaning; the scientist is in no hurry for closure. Tolerance of ambiguity is as important for creativity in science as it is anywhere else.

And I would simply add, so too for the enumeration of racial and ethnic groups in our censuses.

The Enumeration of Ethnic and Racial Groups in the Census: Some Devilish Principles

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The Enumeration of Ethnic and Racial Groups in the Census: Some Devilish Principles

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