

Question bank Commentary: Ethnicity

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Crispin Jenkinson, 'Measuring Health Status and Quality of Life' 1998, Question Bank Topic Commentary on Health, <http://qb.soc.surrey.ac.uk/topics/health/jenkinson.htm> [The Question Bank is an ESRC funded Internet social survey resource based in the Department of Sociology, University of Surrey.]

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Introduction

An ethnic group is a collectivity within a larger population having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared past, and a cultural focus upon one or more symbolic elements which define the group's identity, such as kinship, religion, language, shared territory, nationality or physical appearance. Members of an ethnic group are conscious of belonging to the group. There is no doubt that the inclusion of the question on ethnic minority group membership in the 1991 Census was aimed at identifying the size and distribution of the main visible ethnic minority groups in Britain, distinguishable in terms of skin colour from the majority population. To that extent the Census question is concerned with 'race' rather than 'ethnicity'.

'Race' however is a controversial term, not least because of the political misuses that have been made of the concept, particularly in Nazi Germany. The idea that an objective classification of mankind's major biological categories into 'races' is either possible or useful, and that in turn individuals can be assigned to such categories, has been progressively discredited. Though there are discernible differences in skin colour, head form or type of hair among members of the human species, no satisfactory general classification of 'races' exists to which individuals may be assigned on the basis of these characteristics. This is evident, for example, in the wide variations in skin colour which exist within the population as a whole, or the variations within sub-groups originating from particular geographical areas [3]. At the same time, it is the case that the visible difference in skin colour between most members of an ethnic minority group and the majority White population is an attribute to which social significance is attached.

Membership of an ethnic group is something which is subjectively meaningful to the person concerned, and this is the principal basis for ethnic categorisation. The Census question -- which is essentially a self-assessed classificatory one -- reflects that fact that both members of ethnic minority groups and of the majority population perceive differences between groups in that society and define the boundaries of such groups, taking into account physical characteristics such as skin colour. What the Census question reflects is the inability to base ethnic identification upon objective, quantifiable, information as in the case of age or income, and the necessity to ask people which group they see themselves as belonging to.

Terminology

In order to ask a successful self-identification question about ethnicity or 'race', one must use a clear terminology. One of the difficulties in this area is that the

terminology in general use has changed markedly over time. If one traces the post-war shifts in terminology, the earliest studies of British race relations used the term 'Negroes' or 'coloured' or 'coloured migrants' for persons of West Indian descent (Bulmer 1986a). One study was entitled *Dark Strangers* (Patterson 1963). Asian migration from the Indian sub-continent increased in the 1960s, the term 'immigrants' or 'coloured immigrants' or 'Commonwealth immigrants' became much more commonly used. The first national study of racial discrimination, published in 1968, referred to the 'Commonwealth coloured immigrant population' (Daniel 1968). In the early 1970s, in official publications of statistics about ethnic minority groups, the term 'New Commonwealth and Pakistan ethnic origin' was intensively used for a period (cf Moser 1972).

In the mid-1970s in the years preceding the 1981 Census of Population there was a shift in empirical social research toward using terminology placing an emphasis upon area of origin. In the second Political and Economic Planning (PEP) national survey of race relations (Smith 1976) the terms 'West Indian', 'African Asian' and 'Indians and Pakistanis' were used. West Indians were defined as people born in the West Indies or Guyana, or (if born in Britain) people whose families originally came from there. African Asians were defined as people who were racially Asian and who either were born in Africa or were living there immediately prior to coming to Britain, or belonged to families which were originally African Asian. Indians and Pakistanis were defined as people who were not African Asians and were born in India or Pakistan or who belonged to families which originally came from India or Pakistan. 'Asian' was used to refer only to people coming from the Indian sub-continent. Other Asian groups such as Chinese or Japanese were not included in the sample. This classification had similarities with the OPCS estimates of the population of New Commonwealth and Pakistan Ethnic Origin, which was broken down by geographical area of origin.

Other studies at this time used this terminology in one form or another. In Ken Pryce's study of West Indian life styles in Bristol (1979), those researched are referred to throughout as 'Jamaican's or 'West Indians', whether born in the West Indies or Britain. John Rex and Sally Tomlinson (1979), and Peter Ratcliffe (1981), in their studies of Handsworth in Birmingham use the terms 'West Indian' and 'Asian', with the term 'ethnic group' introduced as a more general term. The third national survey of race relations, carried out by PSI in 1981 (Brown 1984), used a broadly similar definition of 'West Indian', 'African Asian', 'Indian' and 'Pakistani' to that of the second survey in 1974.

A question on ethnic minority group membership, in addition to being tested in the OPCS methodological research for the census, was introduced into a number of national surveys carried out by OPCS for government departments. The first occasion was the National and Dwelling and Housing Survey, a very large scale survey into the nation's housing carried out for the Department of the Environment in 1976 in the wake of the cancellation of the 1976 mid-term Census (DoE1980: 316). This survey for the first time asked a question on ethnic origin. Respondents were handed a card and asked:

'To which of the groups listed on this card do you consider(person) belongs'

- 01 White
- 02 West Indian
- 03 Indian
- 04 Pakistani

- 05 Bangladeshi
- 06 Chinese
- 07 Turkish
- 08 Other Asian
- 09 African
- 10 Arab
- 11 Other (give details)
- 12 Mixed origin
- 13 Refused.

Measurement and Operationalisation

From the point of view of the Census, the key issue is whether a workable question can be devised which would enable members of different ethnic groups to be identified. Various possible ways of operationalising the concept were available, and have been used over the years. These will now be reviewed. They are summarised for convenience in Table 1, which should be read in conjunction with the qualifications in the text which follows. The discussion relates to Great Britain, and this volume does not cover Northern Ireland. It is worth noting that Northern Ireland censuses have, exceptionally for the UK, included a question on religion.

Alternative Approaches: Skin Colour

Popular perceptions of ethnic difference in relation to non-white groups -- and to an extent for a period social science researchers -- used terminology referring directly to skin colour. The term 'coloured' was widely used in the 1950s, but then fell out of use being regarded as pejorative and inaccurate. The metaphor of colour retained a powerful idea, however, and early discussions of a possible Census question in the mid-1970s included references to measures of the appearance of different types of beer as an analogue to the measurement problems faced in the Census in relation to ethnic minority groups.

In fact one attempt was made to gather data on skin colour by observation, in the General Household Survey. From its inception in 1971 until well into the 1980s, the interviewer in the General Household Survey was asked to record whether the respondent was white, coloured or not known. No assessment was made of persons not seen by the interviewer, and most of these were children. If both parents were seen, the interviewer imputed their children's colour from 1980 to 1983. This observational variable was then used to tabulate data. Its use was not particularly extensive, although some tables appeared in Social Trends. The question suffered both from the limitations of interviewer error in observation, and from the limited amount of information which it yielded. 'Coloured' was an ambiguous term, and it was not clear which ethnic groups it included. Did it, for example, include people of Maltese, Cypriot, or Arab origin; how were people of mixed racial origin classified, and so on? When both interviewer data on colour and the ethnic origin question (see below) were included in the GHS in 1983, and one was tabulated against the other, 99% of those describing themselves as West Indian, 98% of Indians, and 97% of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis were classified by the interviewer as coloured, but of the remaining ethnic groups (including 'mixed ethnic origin'), one quarter were recorded by the interviewer as white (OPCS 1983: 12). The data did not provide a breakdown of the members of different ethnic

minority groups, and this together with its imprecision accounted for its relative unpopularity.

A further development in the late 1970s and early 1980s was the use of the term 'black' to refer to members of non-white ethnic minority groups. Although this might be used in a loose way to indicate members of non-white ethnic minority groups, its use by members of ethnic minority groups themselves had more specific connotation in terms of promoting a positive self-identity among ethnic minority group members, and a sense of common political purpose. [Not all people of South Asian descent, however, welcomed the term, and this led to the use by some of the phrase 'black and Asian' to refer to the main ethnic minority groups.]

The report of the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee Ethnic and Racial Questions in the Census (1983 a,b,c) recommended that four questions be asked to identify a person's ethnic group in the census. These were:

(a) Are you white ? Yes/no

(b) Are you black ? Yes/no

If you are black, are you: British/West Indian/African/Other

(tick as many boxes as apply)

(c) Are you of Asian origin ? Yes/no

If yes, are you British/Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi/West Indian/Chinese/Vietnamese/Other (please tick as many boxes as apply)

(d) Other groups.

Are you Mixed race/Arab/ Greek Cypriot/ Turkish Cypriot/None of these

(tick one box).

What remained ambiguous was whether 'black' referred primarily to persons of West Indian and African origin, or also included people of South Asian origin. Sometimes in political discourse it was more inclusive, but the tendency in research terms was to limit 'black' to the two former groups, and to talk about 'black and Asian' when referring to the main non-white ethnic minority group groups in the UK. This indeed is the implication of the Select Committee question given above.

Alternative Approaches: National / Geographic

The Select Committee questions quoted above take the form of a direct question, relying on self-classification. This is the solution to the problem of trying to find a satisfactory ethnic origin question which has most commonly been adopted. It has been the practice, for example, in censuses in other multi-ethnic societies such as the United States and Canada. Instead of a proxy variable such as country of birth or nationality, a direct question is asked seeking the person's own categorisation of their ethnic group, or in the case of the Census that of the member of the household completing the enumeration form.

When a question is framed in this way, the increasing tendency in the UK context in the last fifteen years has been to rely on elements in the question which referred to national or geographical origin, with the accompanying assumption that these mapped onto ethnic groups. Thus the term 'West Indian' or 'Indian' are taken as short-hand terms for members of ethnic groups originating in those parts of the world. White persons born in, for example, India, are taken not to belong to these groups, and would be expected to exclude themselves, choosing some other alternative such as 'white' or 'English'. In the case of migrant ethnic groups, combination of more than one identifier, as in 'East African Asian', can be used to differentiate between groups in a multi-ethnic society. In a sense one might argue

that this is, if not a proxy variable, proxy terminology, since one is using national or geographic origin to identify people of a particular ethnic group.

The two previous in combination e.g. black African

A further development has been to combine national or geographical origin with a colour term such as 'black', as in 'black African', to identify more precisely what group one is referring to for people originating from a part of the world which is itself multi-ethnic, such as the West Indies. The term 'black British' has given rise to particular difficulties of meaning and use, and will be discussed more fully in the next section.

Alternative Approaches: Racial Group

Finally, there are a small number of cases where a classification is used which is more than an identification in terms of national origin or geography. Some of the OPCS tests of questions used categories such as 'Chinese' or 'Arab' which arguably are in effect a racial classification of a kind, even if they also have to an extent certain geographical connotations.

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