

The 1981 Census and Ethnicity: some points of view.

The question of the question on ethnicity in the 1981 Census raises many questions. Should such a question be asked at all?

If not, why not? If yes, why? What use will such information be? To what uses will it be put? What is ethnicity as distinct from nationality, birthplace or colour anyway?

Official 'justification' of a question on ethnicity has been made in the 1978 White Paper on the 1981 Census: "In order to help in carrying out their responsibilities under the Race Relations Act, and in developing effective social policies, the Government and Local Authorities need to know how the family structure, housing, education, employment and unemployment of the ethnic minorities compare with the conditions in the population as a whole."

Others claim that accurate information is needed to dispel myths and allay fears. Others still, that a precedent should be set for the collection of data for race, that it makes for good social history... and lots of fun for demographers in 2081.

The law states that information collected in the Census must address a need and be useful. The White Paper (above) defined such a need and use. Both are questionable....; the level of detail available from a census can only be of use for the formulation of broad social policy, and is more appropriate to the general needs of the poor population than to specific needs of the black population.

Smaller, local, more detailed surveys might be more useful in determining social policy with respect to race and in monitoring existing policies such as the Race Relations Act.

Indeed, discrimination might best be investigated at the organisational and institutional rather than individual level. Census data on ethnicity might be less useful than expected because of inaccuracies arising from misunderstanding what is required... self-identity or fact-

Ethnic origin itself says nothing about culture. It looks as if we are really talking about a headcount of the black population.

The law also states that census questions should be acceptable to the public, presumably both in content and form. Assuming that the content is acceptable, research on the form has been under way since 1974. The only examples from other countries in Ken Sillitoe's article

(1) are from Canada, the USA, Australia and the Commonwealth Caribbean: one wonders if there are examples from countries who, like Britain, don't have an almost entirely 'recently' immigrated population -

It seems to be a difficult task to establish a question form which is acceptable to all sections of the population and which yields accurate information, not least because some white British find it hard to believe they are European.

Religion has been considered a possible refinement of the ethnicity of people of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan origin.

It has since been removed however, not because of its racist application so much as its illegality under the 1920 Census Act.

Interestingly though, such a question is legal and is asked in Northern Ireland.

1. Ken Sillitoe. Ethnic Origin - the search for a question. Population Trends 13, p.25-30. Office of Population Censuses and Surveys.

The meeting on 27 February will include a discussion on the question of ethnicity in the 1981 Census: One or two people from the Runnymede Trust will be there to put their point of view.