

Should we collect racial statistics?

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At heart I am a quantitative geographer, a 'numbers' person, and hence I believe in the use of statistics and think they serve a valuable purpose in aiming to describe the world. However I also embrace qualitative viewpoints, acknowledging the fact that society is made up of individuals who do not neatly fit into categories. In addition I am an idealistic realist. By that I mean I have a vision of how I believe society should be, whilst being aware that to achieve improvements in the short term one must work with society as it stands, rather than against it by trying to pretend it is something it is not, with no time for interim evolving.

It is from this standpoint that I approach the subject of racial statistics and ethnic classification. Recently, utilising ethnic information gained from the 1991 Census, I was forced to confront the debate over whether it was correct, useful, and socially acceptable to categorise people according to some self-defined ethnicity. Given the confusion surrounding the definition and usage of the terms 'race', 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic minorities' many readers of this article may have encountered similar problems. As Ballard points out "The term ethnicity is itself a relative newcomer to the vocabulary of social science, and its meaning is by no means clearly settled" (Ballard forthcoming 1997, p.2).

There exists a certain degree of confusion over what ethnicity is and who ethnic minorities are. 'Race' and 'ethnicity' are often used interchangeably which adds to the confusion, though the two definitionally are quite distinct. Race refers to biologically and genetically inherited characteristics, whereas the term ethnicity is used to describe cultural aspects of a person. Coleman and Salt argue that there has been a change in language, with 'race' being a 1970s term which has been replaced by 'ethnicity' in the 1980s and 1990s, with "few social scientists accept[ing] distinct 'racial' groups as biological realities, only as social constructs" (Coleman and Salt 1996b, p.14). Hiebert (1994) meanwhile says that race is one basic determinant of ethnicity. The precise meaning is the source of a highly contentious debate, with Bulmer proposing "Membership of an ethnic group is something which is subjectively meaningful to the person concerned, and this is the principal basis for ethnic categorisation" (Bulmer 1996, p.36). However he proposes that essentially the 1991 Census question aims to identify

the main visible ethnic minority groups, and hence is concerned more with 'race' than 'ethnicity'.

The census ethnic group question - which is essentially a self-assessed classificatory one - reflects the fact that members of both ethnic minority groups and the majority population perceive differences between groups in society and define the boundaries of such groups, taking into account a variety of characteristics including physical ones such as skin colour. (p.36).

In terms of the statistical representation and analysis and monitoring of ethnic minorities, the 1991 Census was something of a landmark in that it was the first time that the general public as a whole were asked to identify themselves in terms of their ethnicity. Therefore the inclusion of race or ethnicity in statistical collection, for example the census, implies that such a factor is of some importance. "The use of racial categories, implying racial difference, in other words, implies the existence of some degree of inequality that is based on racial or ethnic difference and that can be quantified" (Gordon 1992, p.18). Malik in his new book 'The Meaning of Race' (1996) says "Race is both everywhere and nowhere", drawing attention to the fact that society today is in favour of eliminating racial discrimination, but in order to achieve this, one has to define people according to racial or ethnic categories, citing "...the widespread support for legislation against racial discrimination.....And yet race seems to shape so much of our lives today". An obvious example is the way in which employers now monitor applicants and appointments for jobs according to their ethnicity, in order to ensure that all groups are being given equal opportunities. These divisions according to race are entirely 'man-made', and in Britain are often now restricted to only certain physical characteristics, namely colour, as Malik points out "[t]he clue to the importance of race in Western thought, therefore, lies not in biology but in society". He argues that classifying difference by race is used as an explanation when idealistic notions of equality come up against the reality of persistent inequality.

Few people would argue that the situation of ethnic minorities in society is equal, although some claim that the balance is tipping too far the other way, with people bending over backwards to be politically correct, and hence in fact discriminating against 'whites'. Either way people are discriminated against and treated unfairly on the basis of their skin colour, and however undesirable it may be it is a fact of our society. An attempt needs to be made to quantify this, and it is here where the dilemma arises. How to clarify the different racial or ethnic categories people at present are given to identify with, without adding to the perpetration of this difference and categorisation? We do not wish to encourage

these divisions, but by ignoring the fact that they do exist we are also ignoring the problem! Thus essentially I am in agreement with the second group of researchers identified by Peach below.

Recording ethnic identity in national censuses is a politically sensitive issue. There are two schools of thought. On the one hand, there are those who argue that since, in principle, all people are equal before the law, questions of ethnic, socially constructed identities that divide the population serve to heighten divisions. They argue that the data should not be collected. On the other hand are those who argue that inequality of condition and treatment on ethnic and racial lines exists in Great Britain and that until it is quantified, the targets for correction will not exist. (Peach 1996b, p.1).

There is a sense in which this debate over whether racial statistics should be collected is in the past, and whilst not denying the validity of continual questioning of 'the question', what is more pressing is how the subsequent information obtained is used, and whether anything beneficial has been achieved, and also whether there have been any adverse consequences. Are the statistics gained being used? Arguing that ethnic monitoring is a necessity to improve the current situation is only validated if in fact this is occurring. Has there been a fulfilling of the reasons given for including the question?

It is also important that conceptual categories used are discussed as they, and the statistics derived from them, have a big impact on policy directives. As all such conceptual categories are socially constructed it is "always vital to establish how, by whom and for what purpose" (Ballard forthcoming 1997, p.2) and what alternatives may have been available.

The census ethnic group question which has emerged uses a pragmatic, heterogeneous set of categories which pre-census tests showed that people were prepared to identify with and which fitted the reality of the differences between major groups derived from relatively recent post-war immigration from diverse third-world countries. (Coleman and Salt 1996b, p.10).

"Categories must represent a group with which individuals are prepared to identify. Indeed any ethnic group only exists if individuals identify themselves with it (or are so identified)" (Coleman and Salt 1996b, p.476)

I would argue that the ethnic question in the census is devised by the ethnocentric majority who are identifying groups for others to then assign themselves to. It is not so much a question to identify ethnic diversity, but to separate those out of non-European descent. Ballard (forthcoming 1997)

speaking on the ethnic question in the 1991 Census comments "...its conceptual foundations are both confused and contradictory, largely because of the pragmatic way in which the new question was framed. Ethnicity, it suggests, is associated solely with membership of a visible minority group; members of the dominant majority were invited to identify themselves as White" (p.1). Coleman and Salt (1996b) agree with this assertion that for the white majority ethnicity is seen as a visible characteristic.

Most of the British population would probably deny that they belonged to an ethnic group. Ethnicity is regarded, if it is considered at all, as something to do with minority groups of immigrants, especially coloured immigrants. Furthermore there is little interest in England in the social or economic differences (if any) between people of English, Scots, Welsh, Italian or Polish origins. (p.479).

Bulmer argues that it is the dominant ethnic group, the 'whites' who attribute the importance of skin colour and hence take race and ethnicity to be virtually synonymous. Recognising that race in Britain today implicitly implies skin colour, and acknowledging that "the visible minorities quite rightly repudiate (in sharp contrast to the "white" majority) any suggestion that they can be positively identified in biological terms" (p.2), the question is phrased in terms of identifying oneself with an ethnic group which has more cultural connotations, but is essentially asking people to define their race.

The resulting choices in the last Census were as follows: White, Black-Caribbean, Black-African, Black-Other, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Other. The actual answers were given 35 codes, the seven pre-coded, plus 28 derived from the two 'other' categories descriptions. (These are listed in full on page 3 of Peach 1996a). It is important to note that had some of these other 28 been included, e.g. Black British, then they may have been ticked in preference by some of those who used the pre-coded ones (which the majority did).

So what analysis has been done? Whilst doing a word search on ethnicity I was surprised, and pleased, to come across a book entitled Ethnicity in the 1991 Census, that is until I discovered there were going to be four volumes in total! Whilst appearing to encompass a lot of material, there does seem to be an abundance, or rather an over abundance of descriptive information, which whilst possibly interesting is not very meaningful or helpful in giving practical steps forward to alleviating the problems. To give the statistics on their own I would suggest is not enough, the facts cannot be left to speak for themselves.

Statistical information can play an important role in identifying patterns of inequality and the processes that produce them.....It is important to keep in mind, however, that statistics do not just reflect facts which are 'out there' waiting to be discovered, but are the result of many decisions and, of course, can be open to very different interpretations. (Gordon 1992, p.33-34).

Ballard in his review article criticises the authors of Ethnicity in the 1991 Census Volume One (Coleman and Salt (eds.) 1996a) for their lack of acknowledgement of the qualitative circumstances that have led to their statistical results, hence arguing that they are merely descriptive rather than analytical. "Given the deeply qualitative groundings of the phenomenon of ethnicity, it follows that numerical data alone will not, in itself, provide a sufficient basis for understanding its impact" (p.8). Bulmer (1996) also states,

Conceptually, the census categories are a pragmatic compromise which identify some ethnic minority groups and do not identify others. It remains ambiguous whether the categories relate primarily to 'race' or to 'ethnicity'. The census ethnic group categories focus upon visible minorities, and quite significant groups. Particularly those of mixed racial origin, and those of Irish origin, are not separately identifiable. (p.59).

Thus it can appear that there are substantial qualifications and assumptions that are made when using the data, both census data as a whole, and the given ethnic categories. However I am in disagreement with Ballard on a further argument of his.

Once the visible minorities are identified as intrinsically deviant, it follows that the only analytical questions worth asking about them will focus on the speed with which their behaviour is becoming congruent with the "White" norm, and on the obstacles they encounter while seeking to do so.....any suggestion that the new minorities might simply have added some additional dimensions of diversity to Britain's long-standing condition of ethnic pluralism is rendered quite literally unthinkable. Instead their presence is perceived - in a manner with which their Jewish and Irish predecessors were once all too familiar - into a threat to Britain's national integrity. (p.13-14).

I would argue that studies could highlight the social differences, and thus be used to suggest how policies can be altered to accommodate for ethnic minorities so that they work for the specific circumstances and characteristics of these different groups, treating them as a permanent phenomenon. This is as opposed to perceiving ethnic minorities as being deviant from the 'norm' and assuming that they will become gradually assimilated to 'the white majority'. Granted there are many faults with the system of classification of ethnic categories in the

census, and the data generated by the census itself. However, as Bulmer (1996) states, the slight inaccuracies and qualifications are "relatively minor in relation to the value of the data on ethnic groups yielded by the census as a whole" (p.59).

One problem with the utilisation of the census information to say anything meaningful about ethnic minorities is the problem with undercounting. Whilst it is estimated to be about 2.2% for the country as a whole, for ethnic minorities the figure is thought to be nearer 5%. Inner city areas, and young males are those most likely to be undercounted, and the high concentration of ethnic minorities in these groups means that in some areas this value could be much higher (see Simpson, 1996, for a more detailed discussion). Also at present the census allows little scope for those who identify themselves in less concrete terms than the pre-coded categories used as a result of ethnic mixing, for example Black-British. As we get nearer the year 2001 the number of children and young people from ethnically mixed parentage will increase, so this issue will become more pressing. An option is of course to amend the question for the next census, but then this brings with it all the additional problems of comparison. Gordon (1992) also raises the point that people do not always classify themselves by the same ethnic group from one year to the next, referencing a study carried out by Leech in the US which found that only 65 per cent of people were consistent in their identification compared to the previous year.

The ethnic question in the census undoubtedly serves to only isolate the currently visible ethnic minorities and hence does not encompass a full definition of ethnicity and is in fact more closely related to race. However, if this point is recognised, the question, and those for other similar surveys, can be used constructively to determine some of the circumstances of these visible ethnic minorities, who are without doubt marginalised and discriminated against. Thus, despite the obvious limitations and imperfections with the question, it is still of use in its present form until a more suitable alternative is devised, and can be used to aid the elimination of the unequal circumstances of the visible ethnic minorities in this country.

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