

‘Ethnic Group’ and the Population Census in Great Britain¹: Mission Impossible?

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ABSTRACT. This paper will review the reasons why it was felt necessary (for the first time) in the 1991 Census of Population in Britain to insert a question on ‘ethnic group’ and at the same time ask why it took so long for this to happen. It then questions whether it is possible to generate a valid and reliable measure of ‘ethnicity/ethnic group in such an exercise, especially given that conflicting pressures/agendas mean that the resulting question(s) is inevitably destined to be deployed to meet disparate and competing ends (therefore inevitably becoming ‘Janus-faced’). Focus then turns to the specific form the question has taken, first in 1991 and then in 2001. As the author was a member of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Working Party on the ethnic group question, an insight is given into the forces constraining those who wanted a more radical shift in question structure and content. It also outlines briefly how samples of data from the Census can be used to enhance research. It concludes with an assessment of the potential use of data generated in 2001, especially in light of the fact that religion was also added to the Census agenda at this time (and looks forward to the 2011 Census and beyond). Above all else, it reveals the difficulties inherent in generating data on an extremely complex concept that is amenable to multiple competing interpretations.

Key words: CENSUS, ETHNIC GROUP, ETHNICITY, MINORITY, RELIGION, SAMPLE, STATISTICS.

‘Ethnic group’ and the Census: why did it take so long?

Although Britain has long been a multi-ethnic or polyethnic society with, for example, a significant Black (African) presence going back to the sixteenth century (Fryer 1984), interest in the issue of ethnicity on the part of policymakers is of much more recent origin. Large scale immigration since World War Two served to focus the official mind. Although Britain ostensibly had an ‘open door’ policy on immigration in the 1950s, when labour needs were especially acute, concerns were already evident about the implications of an increase in the size of the ‘coloured’² population (Carter,

¹ The population census reported in this paper strictly covers England and Wales only. As the census document deployed in Scotland is very similar, however, the general substantive points also apply there. Northern Ireland runs its own separate census.

² This was the most commonly used term in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s to refer to what in Canada are seen as ‘visible minorities’ and, in the US, as ‘persons of color’.

Harris and Joshi 1987; Solomos 2003). That debates in government circles were heavily racialised can be seen from the fact that Britain, in its search for new sources of labour, turned initially not to the New Commonwealth but to Eastern and Southern Europe (via the European Volunteer Force). The concern was clearly therefore not predominantly about culture but about skin colour. This fact is important because it can be seen to have exerted a marked influence on the subsequent measurement process.

Social scientists and policymakers who wished to explore the position of the New Commonwealth migrants in the immediate post-war decades could rely on census 'country of birth' data as a fairly good proxy. There were, of course, a number of (say) Indian-born Europeans, and some 'coloured' UK-born Indians (either the children of post-war migrants or descendants of earlier smaller scale migrations (Ballard and Ballard 1977)). As time went on, this became an increasingly unreliable strategy, and analysts started to look for new ways of identifying these groups. The first of these resulted in the focus on households whose 'head' was born in the New Commonwealth or Pakistan (also known as NCWP households). The problem is that this also produces increasingly inaccurate estimates, as more and more UK-born descendants of migrants set up new households.

By the 1970s it was generally acknowledged that existing statistics were inadequate for estimating the size of communities of minority ethnic origin. This led to the demand from some quarters for a more direct measure of 'ethnic group'. The Office of Population Censuses and Statistics (OPCS – the forerunner of the ONS) duly undertook an extensive programme of research both to test the receptiveness of the public to such a question and to try different versions. The main findings, published by Sillitoe (1978), included details of a proposed question for the 1981 Census. Crucially, they also contained evidence of a certain amount of disquiet in urban areas with significant African-Caribbean populations. There was widespread suspicion that the government's motives for collecting such data were less than magnanimous. The increasing strength of the political Right had stoked up fears of greater repression and possibly even moves towards compulsory repatriation.

In the event, the question did not appear until 1991. It was well known that the UK's Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher was personally hostile to the principle of asking such a question. She had made it clear that she regarded talk of social divisions based on differences of 'ethnicity' and indeed 'class' as old-fashioned socialist dogma. To her, it was an outmoded form of discourse which had no place in a modern, forward-looking property- and share-owning democracy. Although formally a Cabinet Office decision, the deletion of the 'ethnic origin' question from the 1981 Census form is now generally agreed to have been her personal decision, and hers alone.

Disagreements about the question had led to a rather curious series of political alignments. Thatcher found herself on the same side (for almost certainly the only time in her life) as many radical Blacks in inner urban areas and large sections of the White Left (including some prominent experts in the field of ‘race’ and ethnicity such as Prof. John Rex). The principal concern was that the data might be of use to those, including possible future governments (even) further to the Right of the Thatcher administrations, intent on adding to the oppression of urban minorities. In the pro-question camp were the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), who wanted the question to help them to assess the impact of the Race Relations Act 1976, a much larger number of social scientists (than in the opposing group), and organisations on the extreme Right (such as the British National Party – BNP) which generally approved of the strategy of ‘pin-pointing’ areas of minority settlement.

Is ‘ethnicity’/ethnic group amenable to measurement in a national census: a case of conflicting agendas?

There are two key questions to be asked in relation to the widening of the census agenda to encompass ethnic origin or group³. The first is why this is considered desirable (assuming that one accepts that it is): the second, whether it can be done.

As we saw above, the ‘why question’ has been seen largely in terms of defending the interests of those minorities who have suffered wide-scale discrimination in areas such as education, employment and housing. It is therefore a means of assessing disadvantage, a phenomenon which has sometimes been called the ‘ethnic penalty’ (Karn 1997). There is a second question, however, which will be seen as the source of a critical problem for those wishing to generate ethnicity data from an exercise such as a census.

Enlightened policymakers say that they require data on ethnicity so as to ensure that services at a local level are in tune with the needs and aspirations of their (polyethnic) client/customer base. Social scientists, as a disparate grouping, have a rather broader remit, but are clearly interested in aspects of ethnic identity as well as ethnicity as a focus for exclusionary forces.

Then comes the rather more difficult question as to whether it can be done effectively in the context of a census, bound as this exercise is by the

³ Actually, these are also two quite separate issues. To refer to ‘origin’ implies an ancestral location in space and time, but does not necessarily imply ‘group’ membership, at least directly. The latter term implies that it is meaningful to talk in terms of collectivities with a common identity and awareness on the part of individuals that they share this commonality.

strictures of a self-completion questionnaire (albeit one where a census enumerator is available to provide advice and support). This point is crucial in that ethnicity and ‘ethnic group’ are not easy concepts to operationalise, and there are obvious methodological and resource issues limiting the number of questions which can be devoted to the topic (usually one, but at the most two).

So, what is ethnicity? There is only room for the briefest of summaries, but most interpretations view it as invoking some notion of ‘memories of a shared past’ (Bulmer 1986). These ‘memories’ may be based at least partially on ‘invention’ and may be manipulated by powerful groups involved in a conscious process of ‘ethnic mobilisation’⁴. ‘Ethnic group’ identity may take the form of ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1993). In addition, it is usually recognised that it is about more than history and the idea of primordial ties. The contemporary literature on the subject, which is clearly vast (see, for example, Hutchinson and Smith 1996; Guibernau and Rex 1997; Jenkins 1997; Fenton 1999 and Ratcliffe 2004 as a sample of more recent work), usually concedes that ethnicity, as with culture, is constantly shifting, and may indeed be viewed as situational. Certainly, it is a mistake to invoke an essentialist view which ‘freezes’ it both in time and space.

Seen in these terms, it is clear that national census offices have a problem. There is no way that ethnicity in this sense can be ‘measured’ in a self-completion questionnaire. But, is this really what proponents are seeking to ascertain? Here we return to the question of why we need to ask about this aspect of one’s identity. As argued above there are two aims: to assess evidence of disadvantage between communities and to provide a basis on which to evaluate the needs and aspirations of diverse ‘groups’. Unfortunately, it is here that the real problem emerges.

There is a clear tension between the desire to address the non- or anti-discrimination agenda at the same time as meeting the very different agenda concerned with addressing needs and aspirations (with specific reference to those from different minority ethnic communities). These two agendas are in a very real sense mutually contradictory, leading to a situation where the resulting question is inevitably Janus-faced. This is the crux of the problem of category construction. If we ask people to identify the ‘ethnic group’ to which they belong, self-identity is the target. This meets the agenda of those seeking to plan for diverse needs. However, if the focus is on the target of

⁴ One of the most obvious examples of this in the recent past is provided by ethnic nationalists in the Balkan wars in the late 1980s. Serb leaders, for example, frequently invoked historical ‘memories’ of a ‘Greater Serbia’, illustrating their rhetoric with hitherto largely forgotten folk songs/tales, literature and poetry (and so did their enemies).

exclusionary forces (crucially, the dominant argument) then the requirement is for data on ‘ascribed identity’, i.e. how those people are seen by others. Of course, one cannot ask respondents to assess this. Finding a heuristic solution to an essentially intractable problem leads to a situation where the question format purports to ask about the former (as it logically must) but the categories are designed to permit the imputation of data on the latter. It is this looking simultaneously in two directions which accounts for the logically confused/confusing appearance of the questions asked in the British censuses of 1991 and 2001. [The ‘ethnic group’ questions, as we shall see shortly, contain a bewildering mixture of geographical/nation(ality)-based and pseudo-racial categories, masquerading as ethnicity].

There is one further issue which needs to be noted, and it has to do with the measurement of ‘self-identity’, or ‘who one sees oneself as’. As is widely recognised, the advantage of household self-completion questionnaires as against interviews with ‘household representatives’⁵ is that it permits intra-household consultation, the checking of documents, and so on. This is fine for factual data (say) on housing, education and employment matters. But the degree to which such consultation does, or does not, take place is quite critical in the context of self-definition. This is because the latter is very much (indeed, by definition) a personal matter. Whereas all members of a household are asked the ‘ethnic group’ question, it is quite possible that the ‘household representative’ will fail to delegate the completion of different sections of the census form. So, for example, a Jamaican-born respondent may espouse an exclusively Caribbean ethnicity, and effectively impose this identity on her/his UK-born children. The latter may of course see themselves in rather different terms, (say) as Black-British or Jamaican-English. The key point is that this is likely to be rather more of a problem for those who are interested (for whatever reason) in data on self-identification than it is for those primarily concerned with ascribed ethnic identity. Exactly why this is the case, will be seen shortly.

This is an appropriate point at which to turn to the first of Britain’s ‘ethnic group’ questions.

The 1991 Census question on ethnic group

As noted earlier, the primary focus of the 1991 Census question was the relatively large-scale immigration from the New Commonwealth and Pakistan following World War II. Indeed, prior to the 1970s there had been little

⁵ The notion of ‘household representative’ has recently entered official discourse in place of ‘head of household’ as a more emancipatory concept in terms of micro-level gender relations.

interest in asking about such matters. But political discourse on immigration and community relations was already highly racialised by the mid-1950s. This became even more pronounced in the wake of major urban disturbances in Nottingham and Notting Hill (London) in 1958. The introduction of formal immigration controls on New Commonwealth citizens from 1962 onwards, and in particular the introduction of tight numbers limits in Harold Wilson's White Paper in 1965 led to what is usually termed 'the numbers game'. Whilst for the political Right this was an opportunity to go on the offensive, the liberal Left fought to counterbalance numbers limits (and exclusionary discourse) with anti-discrimination legislation. This began with the first (narrowly focused and rather weak) Race Relations Act of 1965 (RRA 1965). The focus on substantive concerns such as education, employment and housing in the RRA 1968 provided a welcome shift in the policy terrain for those minorities who had suffered from years of discrimination. It was with this, and even more so the RRA 1976 which was accompanied by the establishment of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), that the interest in monitoring the 'ethnic penalty' on a national scale began in earnest.

The focus remained very much on the NCWP population, as can be seen from the 1991 Ethnic Group question. Other sizeable minorities had also suffered discrimination, of course, most notably the Irish and before them the Jews. So had others such as migrants from eastern and southern Europe: the Poles, Slavs, Cypriots and so on. The categories are partly based on the issue of volume (i.e. how large particular 'groups' are) and partly on the political significance imputed to the settlement of certain communities.

Two things are clear from the question used:

- It is not about 'ethnicity' or ethnic group in any sense which a social scientist would recognise, or at least acknowledge as legitimate;
- It is an explicitly 'racialised' measure (see Figure 1).

It is inconceivable that 'White' could be regarded as a *bona fide* ethnic group, containing as it does all national groups of the British Isles, all European nations (including southern European groups such as Cypriots – of both Greek and Turkish origin), North Americans, South Africans and Australians of European origin, and so on⁶. 'Black-Caribbean' sub-

⁶ It is interesting to note here that some parallel classification schemes in the UK had subdivided the White/European group. The Metropolitan Police in London (MET) have long used a scheme which attempts to distinguish between 'light-skinned European types' and 'dark-skinned European types'. The latter constitutes, of course, an even more explicitly racialised measure than the Census question.

sumes all island groups whether of Anglophone or Francophone origin: Black-Africans, all residents of sub-Saharan Africa who are of ‘non-White’ (and non-Asian) heritage. Each of the ‘South Asian’ groups is highly diverse internally, incorporating as it does Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Gujeratis, Kashmiris, Tamils, and numerous other groups. The ‘Chinese’ are equally diverse (with many national, regional, linguistic and religious sub-groups).

At one level, this simply underlines an earlier point, namely that a census cannot hope to grasp the complexity of the modern world in ethnic terms. Methodological considerations dictate that the number of categories has to be relatively small. There are also resource considerations if one encourages respondents to write in descriptions of their precise self-defined ethnicity. The problem is that the organising principle underlying the question format is to do with putative ‘race’⁷. The ‘White’ we are followed by the ‘Black’ and the ‘Brown/coloured’ *others*. The fact that the ‘White’ category is both at the apex of the list and is undifferentiated speaks volumes. White minorities remain invisible, irrespective of whether they face discrimination or have distinct needs and aspirations. The question format does rather suggest to the ‘visible minorities’ that ‘White is alright’ (irrespective of origin) but that they as ‘the other’ are appropriate for dissection into constituent elements (with externally imposed, and possibly alien, labels). Then, as if to underline the point that the underlying logic of the question is one of ‘racial (and not ethnic) groups’, Small Areas Statistics (SAS) are only available on the basis of much broader ethnic group bands, namely ‘White’ ‘Black’, ‘Asian’ and ‘other’. This bears an uncanny resemblance to the ‘racial’ categories employed uncritically in public (including academic) discourse in the 1950s and 1960s.

In terms of more specific problem areas, there is the question of how East African Asians were coded. These ‘twice migrants’ (Bhachu 1985) might define themselves as such, in which case they would ultimately be categorised as ‘Asian-other’. Were they to define their ethnic group as (say) ‘Indian’, i.e. in terms of their slightly more distant family origins, they would obviously be coded in these terms. It is therefore impossible to reach

⁷ There is no space here to devote to a lengthy treatise on the concept of ‘race’: there is in any case an extensive literature on the subject (Montagu 1964; Miles 1982, 1993; Mason 1990, 2000; Malik 1996 to name but a few). The point here is that the categories are organised in terms of alleged differences in phenotype, in post-war UK terms ‘white’, ‘coloured’ and ‘black’. ‘Race’ is placed in inverted commas in order to draw attention to ‘dangerous myth’ perpetuated by pseudo-scientific theories of difference: the concept is merely a social construct; albeit one with extremely powerful implications for the material and psychological well-being of large numbers of (in this case) UK citizens of minority origin.

a firm conclusion as to the size of the East African Asian population. As to whether it nevertheless provides a more accurate picture of their 'ethnicity/ethnic group' is a mute point.

The overall format of the question is clearly more suited to the CRE's agenda than it is that of social scientists and policymakers interested in the broader implications of a multicultural society. Even accepting our criticisms, we have to acknowledge that we have a much-improved picture of the social landscape of Britain. The latter has also been improved by a modest extension of the census agenda in other areas such as health and housing. Even more important was the introduction of a major facility for users of census data.

British governments had consistently opposed requests from social scientists and policymakers for what in the US are known as 'public use' samples. It was argued that such a facility could lead to a loss of anonymity on the part of respondents and that the overall commitment to confidentiality would be compromised. This is despite the retention of the 100-year rule applying to census forms⁸. This position was successfully challenged in the lead up to the 1991 Census, and therefore the Samples of Anonymised Records (SARs) were made available to users who signed an agreement to the effect that they would not attempt to identify households or individuals or even claim to have done so. Two separate SARs were made available⁹: a 2 percent sample of individuals and a 1 percent sample of households.

These were enormously useful in permitting more detailed analyses than had hitherto been possible. Without paying large sums of money for special tabulations users had been restricted to the published material (which clearly conformed simply to agendas dictated by the Departments of State concerned). More complex statistical analyses could also be undertaken. There was one major drawback, however. Data on spatial scale was heavily restricted, so that in the case of the Household SAR the smallest area available to users was Registrar General's Standard Region. This essentially ruled out detailed analyses incorporating spatial patterns, an issue which has become increasingly important over the past decade with allegations that periodic outbreaks of urban unrest are often linked in one way or another to locality and levels of segregation. In fact this issue rose to the top of the policy agenda in 2001 and has remained there (Ratcliffe 2004).

⁸ Individual census forms are kept in secure storage and embargoed for a period of 100 years from the day of a census.

⁹ Would-be users were required to apply for a license to obtain access to the data, at which point they had to sign a legally binding commitment to conform to these strict modes of conduct. Access was not withheld unreasonably as the data were generated by the use of public money.

Ethnic group in 2001: reflecting the 21st century?

By the turn of the century, the case for an ‘ethnic group’ question was stronger than ever. Periodic urban unrest, racist attacks and ongoing discrimination against minorities meant that there was a pressing need to collect such data at a national level. The murder of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence in London, and the abject failure of the Metropolitan Police to bring the miscreants to book, led to mounting pressure on the government. The resulting public inquiry, chaired by Sir William Macpherson, revealed widespread ‘institutional racism’ in, but also far beyond, the police and criminal justice system (Macpherson 1999).

An ONS Working Party was convened to discuss the form that the 2001 question should take. Members were drawn from government departments, local authorities, the CRE, academe (including the current author) and community groups. The group met at regular intervals to discuss ongoing research by the ONS (for example, Rainford 1997) and to assess the merits and demerits of different ways of asking the question. The most radical suggestion was to divide the question into two: the first allocating respondents to a broad category, such as ‘White’; the second to explore finer group divisions. This was rejected as being too complicated and potentially confusing. Others suggested, as in the case of the Canadian census, that we ought to ask about ancestry.

The latter was rejected as both impractical (not least following the testimony of a female committee member whose ethnic identity had at least ten distinct components) and beyond the scope of a census with its many diverse, and competing aims. The committee saw their primary task as producing a question which would reflect much more effectively the rapidly changing social scene of Britain in the early 21st century. ‘Mixed’ marriages were on the increase, and it was acknowledged that young people of South Asian, African or African/Black-Caribbean origin often added the term ‘British’ when asked to describe how they saw themselves. Political lobbying from many quarters, not least from the large Irish population, was leading to a further questioning of the census categories.

In many ways, the experience of sitting on such a committee merely endorsed the view that questionnaires are perhaps best constructed in rather smaller groups. Furthermore, although the broadly based working committee represents an admirable attempt to reflect users’ needs, it is ultimately the government and their Departments of State that have the final say (thereby undermining the democratic potential of the consultation process somewhat).

A number of very important issues were raised at these meetings not least surrounding the, at times, sharply contrasting needs of the various

constituencies represented on the committee. Local authorities, health professionals, and especially social scientists, tended to place a heavier emphasis on the fine grain detail of ethnic identity and, in the longer term, the ability to assess shifting patterns. For the former groups this was seen as necessary in the context of effective service delivery. This detail seemed to be of rather less interest to central government, whose principal remit was to assess broad patterns of inequality and difference. For those wishing to develop a more theoretically sound measure of 'ethnic group' than that used in 1991, one major constraining factor was ever present.

It was agreed early on that *comparability* was a key issue. Most of those around the table accepted the principle that whatever the ultimate form of the question, the categories needed to have close equivalence to those in 1991. Without this, after all, we would not be in a position to assess social change processes. The problem is that the world itself changes, and therefore to ask the same question in the same form would be foolish. Asking about 'ethnic group' is in this sense no different from asking about household amenities, the nature and incidence of which change over time.

Bearing this mind a number of key issues were discussed in the group:

- Given lobbying from a number of groups for separate category status how many of these (and which) should be accommodated?
- What exactly is meant by the term 'mixed'? Given that 'races' do not exist, it is erroneous to think in terms of 'mixed-race'. If one instead thinks in terms of 'mixed-ethnicity', or even 'mixed heritage' then are we not all 'mixed'?
- This implicitly raises the issue of ancestry. Should there be a question delving further into one's roots?¹⁰
- Should there be a complete re-think as to the format of the question? A number of different approaches were considered.

The final version of the question is shown in figure 2.

The key features in comparison with the previous question are:

- A difference in format to identify sub-groups (rather than listing all groups separately);
- A partial disaggregation of the White category to incorporate a code for 'Irish' and to permit a distinction between 'British' and others of 'White background';
- The addition of a 'mixed' category, focusing on relations between Whites and selected minority groups (an important issue to be addressed below);

¹⁰ At this point, there was discussion as to the appropriate number of generations and whether we were really in a position to, and actually needed to know, 'who people really were'!

- The addition of ‘British’ to the ethnic group labels attached to the Black and Asian groups;
- The residual ‘any other ethnic group’ being listed alongside the ‘Chinese’.

The predominant focus on NCWP groups remains. This is partly due to the comparability factor but mainly a result of an acceptance that these groups face ongoing maltreatment in most aspects of their lives (even allowing for the class factor). Urban policy has also acknowledged (if not successfully addressed) the specific needs of minority groups. Although a small proportion of the population as a whole, there are significant concentrations (especially of Muslim communities) in certain inner urban areas (Ratcliffe 1996, 2004; Ratcliffe *et al* 2001; Department for Communities and Local Government 2006). However, as to the issue of social class, it is clearly a mistake to view all minorities (and certainly all members thereof) as equally affected by ‘exclusionary forces’. The middle classes of all groups have avoided the worst effects of the latter: indeed the ‘Indian’ middle class have been remarkably successful in material terms (even more so, given the hurdles placed in their way).

As to the former point (comparability¹¹) the key issue concerns the need to reflect demographic change in the census categories, but not at the expense of the ability (in this case) to assess changes in the fortunes of minorities. The latter tends therefore to act as a ‘brake’ on any innovative plans with regard to the census categories and, of course, to the structure of the question itself.

The format change (employing sub-group sections) was preferred to a filtering system tested by the ONS. It seemed (from piloting at least) to be well understood by respondents. The introduction of even a minimal form of differentiation of ‘Whites’ is to be welcomed, though the suspicion remains that the decision to list the Irish separately owes rather more to political expediency than it does to the desire to identify them (or any other White population) as a distinct ‘ethnic group’¹².

¹¹ For a general discussion of comparability see information of the ONS <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census/GetData/Datacomparability.asp>

¹² There are arguably many other (quite sizeable) White groups which could be added, such as Welsh, Scots, Cypriots and Australians. Some Welsh nationalists launched a campaign of civil disobedience (by asking like-minded people to tear up their census forms).

Also, as we point out later in the paper, since expansion of the EU from 2004 onwards, there are highly significant populations of Eastern European origin across Britain and Ireland, most notably from Poland, Lithuania and Slovakia.

Overall, the changes do little to dispel the impression that the question continues to be dominated by a highly racialised discourse, rather than a concern to understand ethnic diversity. There are a number of points here:

Although it is to be welcomed that 'British' is now formally/'officially' accepted as a possible identity for those of South Asian, African or African-Caribbean background, the fact that this is part of the sub-heading means that it is not possible to distinguish the 'Asian British' from the 'Asian'.

Even more important is the organisation of the groups. 'White' remains at the apex, and the 'Asian', 'Black' and 'Chinese' in the lower reaches of the list. Statisticians will argue that this makes sense in that the 'Whites' constitute by far the largest group numerically. The problem is that the way the list stands there is a rather disturbing atavism, an echo of nineteenth century Social Darwinist thought. The three 'pure minority' sub-groups are the only ones in alphabetical order, and Whites (at the top) are followed by 'Mixed'. Crucially, 'Mixed' takes the form 'White and': 'White and Black Caribbean', 'White and Black African', 'White and Asian'. All other 'mixes' are consigned to a residual category. These moral, ethical and political considerations aside, the question clearly had the potential to provide a much more detailed picture of Britain's increasingly diverse population than had been available hitherto. These issues are addressed below.

Using the 2001 data on ethnic group and religion

As implied already the resulting data were more suited to those concerned with assessing disadvantage than to those wishing to understand ethnic diversity. In terms of overall quality, there were initially some concerns about both reliability and validity, and about undercount, but these have been largely allayed.

In 1991, the political furore surrounding the imposition by the Thatcher government of the 'Poll Tax'¹³ certainly reduced the quality of data in poor urban areas. Many adult family members simply became invisible. In 2001, there was no parallel deterrent. There was, however, evidence of an adverse reaction to the aggressive marketing campaign by the ONS (under the slogan 'Count Me In'¹⁴). Data imputation was the standard solution adopted

¹³ A regressive form of local taxation levied on adult residents that did not reflect the ability to pay. In other words, the richest millionaire would pay the same amount as a State pensioner.

¹⁴ Indeed, this spawned a counter-campaign rather predictably named 'Count Me Out'. Prominent here were Welsh nationalists who had demanded a separate category 'Welsh' in light of the 'concession' made to those who wished to identify themselves as 'Irish'.

by the ONS analysts. In other words, missing data (for example in the case of non-response) was imputed using a statistical model based on the demographic configuration of other households in the locality on which reliable data are available¹⁵.

In terms of gaining a greater purchase on ethnic and cultural diversity, another key addition to the census agenda is worthy of detailed consideration here. Since the Census Act 1920, it had been illegal to ask a question on religion¹⁶. The ONS argued in the lead up to the 2001 Census that there was now considerable evidence, especially from faith groups such as Muslims, that such a question was not only possible (in terms of public acceptability) but also desirable (in that it would provide a great deal of vital data, both about discriminatory forces and about culture and ethnicity). The current author found the former argument rather difficult to accept because, (a) in the wake of a marked increase in Islamophobia in the 1990s (Runnymede Trust 1997, 2000), many Muslims were feeling decidedly vulnerable¹⁷, and (b) the research supporting the ONS' view did not in this case strike one as particularly persuasive (Rainford *op.cit.*).

A question was finally approved by the ONS and duly laid before Parliament¹⁸. As a Private Member's Bill (rather than one directly sponsored by the government), it only had an outside chance of being passed. In the event it succeeded, but only at the last possible opportunity (having fallen to the filibustering tactics of the Conservative opposition on previous occasions). The closeness to the production deadline is highlighted by the fact that two versions of the census form were prepared for the printers (one with the religion question inserted, the other without it). The one concession to those opposing the question was that its completion was not to be made mandatory, a statement to this effect being placed on the covering page of the Census form itself (and again in the question instructions).

Some were clearly unhappy about this addition, so much so that an internet campaign was launched encouraging people to write in 'Jedi Knight'¹⁹ in the space provided. In the event, some 50,000 people are

¹⁵ To see data on non-response and imputation levels <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/editimputevrep.asp>

¹⁶ This does not apply to Northern Ireland, where religion has long been accepted as a core element of the census agenda.

¹⁷ The Census preceded the urban violence in areas of Muslim settlement in northern England in the summer of 2001 (Kalra 2003), and of course 9/11, but it was clear that tensions between Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities and local Whites were not of recent origin.

¹⁸ This was necessary as a change in the law was required (granting permission for its inclusion on the Census Form).

¹⁹ A reference to characters from the cult movie series based on 'Star Wars'. The campaign organisers encouraged disaffected respondents to do this on the grounds that if sufficient people were to give this response, this spurious category would be reified/ratified.

believed to have done so (though ONS decided that this issue would not be acknowledged in the official data). This rather novel mode of resistance to the state-sponsored data collection process was clearly aimed to undermine the integrity of the data, and to send a rather broader message to the government. In the event, it appears not to have undermined the reliability of responses, at least from those who are seriously committed to a faith²⁰. Much more significant were the numbers opting not to answer the question (as they were perfectly entitled to do – given that it was voluntary), and the numbers professing to have no religion. In a secular society with declining formal attendance at places of worship (amongst the 'White' population) the latter is not surprising. In fact, ethnic differentials were particularly interesting.

Overall, 15 percent of the English and Welsh population reported having no religion although variation by ethnicity was marked. Just over half of all Chinese people, and one quarter of people from Mixed ethnic backgrounds stated that they had no religion. Asian, Black African and White Irish were least likely to have no religion. In contrast, fewer than 1 in 200 Pakistanis and Bangladeshis reported having no religion.

Further, on the matter of non-response:

Fourteen percent of people in the 'Other Black' group chose not to answer the religion question, almost twice the average for England and Wales as a whole. Similar proportions of people in the Black Caribbean and Mixed ethnic group also gave no answer (2001 Census of Population data provided by the Office of National Statistics, London) (see Figure 3).

The most striking feature of the question is that it is in a sense both hierachised and racialised. The *We* (i.e. White) category in the 'ethnic group' question is mirrored by the lack of differentiation of the 'Christian' group²¹, and its place at the top of the list of categories. It is almost as if there is far less interest in the culture and religion of the majority ethnic groups, than of the various minority groups²². The religions most often associated with the latter are listed in considerable detail.

²⁰ Non-response, at 7.7 percent, was a little higher than other questions.

²¹ This is not, of course, to suggest that Christians are necessarily White: it is simply to argue that Christianity is projected as the norm. The most vibrant expressions of the faith often come from the Black church movement, and there are (admittedly rather small) numbers of practicing Christians amongst South Asian groups.

²² Crucially, it is not possible to disaggregate the Christian denominations of those identifying themselves as 'Irish'. Given that faith is central to the endemic sectarian conflict in Ireland, this would be unthinkable both north and south of the border.

Whatever the concerns associated with this question, however, the data permit a greater level of insight into the nature of Britain's minorities, and perhaps especially those of South Asian origin. We know, for example that the 'Indian' group is by far the most diverse in terms of religion. Forty-five percent follow the Hindu faith, 29 percent are Sikhs and a small minority (13 percent) follow Islam. In sharp contrast, 92 percent of those of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin are Muslim.

The majority of those identified as 'Black' (71 percent) defined themselves as Christian. As might have been predicted, the 'Mixed' groups are highly diverse; a small majority (52 percent) being of the Christian faith. What we do not know, of course, is the branch of Christianity to which respondents are referring. Historically, we would expect major differentials along ethnic lines.

The data also provided a clear picture, for the first time, of the relative sizes of the major South Asian populations. ONS figures suggested that Pakistani Muslims constituted the largest group with around 658 000 persons, followed by Indian Sikhs with 301 000 and Bangladeshi Muslims with 260 000. As noted earlier, however, we are not in a position to distinguish between the 'Asian' and 'Asian-British' groups. Nor are we able to assess whether those who (say) follow Islam or Judaism, see this dimension of self (rather than, say, their 'ethnic group' classification) as the dominant aspect of their self-identity²³. It is quite possible, indeed likely, that many Muslims will see Islam as a prior form of identification to their national origins, for example in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran or Afghanistan. This in many ways simply underlines the earlier point that the data are better at identifying minorities on the basis of national origins and putative phenotype group than they are in terms of ethnicity. In other words, the data do not measure 'ethnicity' but they do separate respondents by geographical origin and, up to a point, those who are especially liable to suffer 'racial' discrimination on the basis of their physical appearance.

A chance has also been lost to improve the power of analysis open to social scientists and other interested parties. Intense lobbying for finer detail in the samples of anonymised records (SARs) in terms of spatial scale has largely failed. Concerns about possible breaches in anonymity and confidentiality were the deciding factors, even though the risks are clearly remote. This means that small area analysis will be confined as before to the Small Area Statistics (SAS) data (with its relatively crude ethnic group

²³ It is quite conceivable, of course, that neither will be foremost in the construction of their self-identity. This is why a much more neutral approach to identity was used by Modood *et al* (1997).

measure, based on a conflation of census categories. For example, 'non-White' groups are re-coded simply into 'Black', 'Asian' and 'Other'. On the other hand, the Individual SAR was now based on a 3 percent sample²⁴ (rather than 2 percent as in 1991), increasing scope for more sophisticated analyses. The 1 percent Household SAR was also retained²⁵.

Also on the positive side, there was a moderate increase in the data on education and on health and caring responsibilities. The general message, however, is that the census data on 'race' and religion will need to be complemented with much more detailed locally based studies. This is the only way to provide sufficiently nuanced information on the needs and aspirations of minority communities. These local studies also provide us with the ability to plug crucial gaps in our national database, gaps that in truth the census will never be able to fill.

The census is an inappropriate vehicle for the 'measurement' of ethnicity in a really meaningful sense. It cannot permit an assessment of differences in house condition and built environment, poverty levels, quality of education and health delivery. Nor can it provide insightful evidence on the local quality of life in terms of the levels of inter- and intra-community conflict. What it can do, however, is to provide a general backdrop for these analyses, and to enable us to make broad statements as to apparent differences in material position between (rather loosely defined) 'communities'. As the comparability argument is continuing to constrain those developing the 2011 question, it seems inevitable that we will be drawing similar conclusions once again following the release of data from the next Census.

Despite these broader concerns, we do now have data, and a measurement tool (i.e. the census questions), which enable policymakers at cen-

²⁴ The ONS website (www.statistics.gov.uk/census) has this to say:

"The Individual SAR (Licensed) is a three percent sample, which relates to some 1.84 million records, of responses from the 2001 Census. These data have been completely anonymised so that no individuals from the census can be identified. The geography from which the sample is taken is Government Office Region (in England)."

The data are available for England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. There is information for each individual on the main demographic, health and socio-economic variables, household variables, e.g. religion, accommodation; the sex, economic position and social class of the individual's family head; and limited information about other members of the individual's household (e.g. the number of pensioners).

²⁵ The ONS website explains:

"A 1 percent Special Licence Household SAR has been released for England and Wales only. The file allows linkage between individuals in the same family and in the same household. Access is under an ONS Special Licence from the UK Data Archive. Users must agree to a higher standard of data stewardship to protect the confidentiality of the data."

tral and local government level to make progress towards meeting their obligations under European Council Directive 2000/43/EC²⁶ – in the sense of addressing ethnic differentials.

Postscript: a new context for the 2011 Census

Since the 2001 Census was undertaken, the nature of the British population has undergone some highly significant changes. Following the influx of significant numbers of asylum seekers and refugees in the 1990s and early-2000s, Britain has now witnessed the arrival of new source of economic migrant.

Since 2004, the EU has undergone major expansion due first to the accession of eight Eastern European countries (A8), supplemented more recently, in 2007, by the addition of Bulgaria and Romania to the ‘European family’. Britain was one of only three countries (the other two being Ireland and Sweden) that permitted free access to A8 migrants. This has resulted in a continual influx of workers from countries such as Poland, Slovakia and Lithuania, driven by a powerful economic imperative. As these workers are not required to register for work and are not formally recorded in immigration statistics, data on these groups are weak (a fact that permits discursive space for racists and the anti-immigration lobby more generally). The lack of such population data also makes it extremely difficult (and therefore expensive) to plan and carry out surveys of these groups²⁷.

The implications for the 2011 Census are clear. The ethnic question would need to be much more detailed in its identification of ‘White’ groups if it is to account for these new migrants (lest we have to fall back once again on the ‘Country of Birth’ question). Given that debates about such groups as the Poles are at the top of the current policy agenda²⁸, it seems

²⁶ The Council of European Union, *Council Directive 2000/43/EC*, 29.06.2000. Official Journal of the European Communities, 19.07.2000, L. 180/22 http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/fundamental_rights/pdf/legisln/2000_43_en.pdf

²⁷ By way of illustration, these difficulties caused the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) to abandon plans to include recent migrants to Britain from eastern central Europe in its 2008 study of migrant victimisation.

²⁸ They have generated a renewed focus on the potential dangers of unplanned immigration. The Local Government Association (LGA) has recently been involved in a furious lobbying campaign (see: <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pageId=121870>) to persuade central government to improve levels of funding to help them cope with the educational, housing, health and welfare needs of these groups. Schools, for example, are witnessing a rapid increase on the numbers of pupils who have little or no command of English. Indeed, in some primary schools, none or only a few pupils have English as a first language. Increasing hostility towards these new groups is creating major tensions in areas that hitherto experienced relative harmony (in terms of the relations between minority ethnic groups).

vital that Eastern European nationals are identified unambiguously in the forthcoming Census. This illustrates very well our earlier point that measuring 'ethnic group' effectively in a national census, and then trying to use it to assess social change, generates almost intractable methodological problems given that, by definition, the measurement process inevitably lags behind the very 'change' it is attempting to grasp.

As to what will happen post-2011, it is rather too early to say. However, in May 2008 the government muted the idea that, owing to the expense of running a decennial census combined with the latter's inherent inflexibility (for example, its inability to capture population 'churn' – rapid change such as that generated by the influx of A8/A2 migrants), it was going to look at other options. One might, of course, be to rely on national sample data such as that reported in Modood *et al* (1997) possibly combined with local population projections. Another might comprise some form of local registration scheme. In an age of increasingly rapid social change, the one thing that is sure is that the search for a much more flexible and sophisticated data capture mechanism has to be seen as a major policy (and research) priority.

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Figures

FIGURE 1. The Ethnic Group Question in the 1991 Census of Population:

11 Ethnic group

Please tick the appropriate box

If the person is descended from more than one ethnic or racial group, please, tick the group to which the person considers he/she belongs, or tick the “Any other ethnic group” box and describe the person’s ancestry in the space provided.

White	0
Black-Caribbean	1
Black-African	2
Black-Other	
<i>please describe</i>	
Indian	3
Pakistani	4
Bangladeshi	5
Chinese	6
Any other ethnic group?	
<i>please describe</i>	

FIGURE 2. The Ethnic Group Question in the 2001 Census of Population:

8. What is your ethnic group?

- Choose ONE section from A to E, then
- ✓ the appropriate box to indicate your cultural background

A White

- British Irish
- Any other White background, *please, write in*

B Mixed

- White and Black Caribbean
- White and Black African
- White and Asian
- Any other Mixed background, *please, write in*

C. Asian or Asian British

- Indian Pakistani
- Bangladeshi
- Any other Asian background, *please, write in*

D. Black or Black British

- Caribbean African
- Any other Black background, *please, write in*

E. Chinese or other ethnic group

- Chinese
- Any other, *please, write in*

FIGURE 3. The 2001 Census of Population Question on Religion:

10 What is your religion?

- This question is voluntary
- ✓ *one box only*

None

Christian (including Church of England, Catholic, Protestant and all other Christian denominations)

Buddhist

Hindu

Jewish

Muslim

Sikh

Any other religion, *please write in*

„Etninė grupė“ ir gyventojų surašymas Didžiojoje Britanijoje: misija neįmanoma?

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S A N T R A U K A. Straipsnyje aptariamos priežastys, kodėl buvo būtina, beje, pirmą kartą, 1991 m. visutinio surašymo metu Didžiojoje Britanijoje įtraukti „etninės grupės“ klausimą ir analizuojama, kodėl tai užtruko taip ilgai. Jame taip pat keliamas klausimas, ar įmanoma taip sukurti pagrįstas ir patikimas priemones „etniškumui“ ar etninei grupei identifikuoti, ypač atsižvelgiant į tai, kad galutinės klausimų formuluotės neįsvengiamai būna nulemtos skirtingų ir ne visada tarpusavyje suderinančių tikslų. Straipsnyje aptariama specifinė klausimo forma, pateikta 1991 m., o vėliau ir 2001-aisiais. Kadangi autorius buvo Nacionalinio statistikos departamento (Office for National Statistics) etninės grupės klausimų darbo grupės narys, jis aptaria veiksnius, dėl kurių nepavyko iš esmės pakeisti klausimo struktūros ir turinio. Straipsnyje taip pat nagrinėjama, kaip gyventojų surašymo duomenų imtys gali būti naudojamos tyrimams, išskaitant potencialų 2001 m. surašymo duomenų panaudojimą – ypač atsižvelgiant į tai, jog 2001 m. buvo pridėti klausimai, susiję su religija. Apibendrintai tariant, autorius atskleidžia sunkumus, kurie kyla renkant duomenis apie sudėtingą ir prieštaragingai interpretuojamą sąvoką.

P a g r i n d i n i a i ž o d ū i a i : ETNINĖ GRUPĖ, ETNIŠKUMAS, IMTIS, MAŽUMOS, RELIGIJA, STATISTIKA, SURAŠYMAS.