

Ethnic classification in the national census, 1985-2012:

Evidence from the Ethnicity Counts? project *

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Introduction

While decision-makers in wealthy immigrant-receiving nations acknowledge the existence of ethnic group inequality, the issue of whether to count and classify populations by ethnic criteria remains contentious (Grigolo, Hermanin & Möschel 2012; Morning & Sabbagh 2005). A basic but fundamental question to arise from the dramatic changes in immigration flows, and attendant issues of integration and discrimination, is whether countries have moved towards greater recognition of ethnic diversity in the official statistical sources that inform government policy. To date much of the literature has adopted a case study approach, focusing on ethnic enumeration schemas in a given time or place (Kertzer & Arel, 2002). Social constructivists have emphasized the socio-political nature of ethnicity, showing how collective identities are constituted through state acts of counting and naming. Historians and political theorists have linked state enumeration to political projects of surveillance and control. More recently, demographers have critiqued how their efforts to objectively observe populations are shaped by struggles over symbolic and material resources (Rallu, Piché, & Simon, 2006).

Though the case-study approach has generated many unique insights, a comprehensive, account of ethnic enumeration at a global level is also needed. The goal of the Ethnicity Counts? project, based at the National Institute of Demographic and Economic Analysis in New Zealand, is to develop such an account. In so doing it builds on Ann Morning's pioneering study of global practices of ethnic counting and classification in the 2000 census round (1995-2004, see Morning, 2008). By developing a deeper understanding of

ethnic enumeration, we hope to provide a window into important questions about contemporary nation-building, national identity, and the role of ethnic counting. In this paper we present early findings from the Ethnicity Counts database which combines data on civic (e.g., birthplace, citizenship) and ethnicity questions drawn from national censuses and population registers of more than 200 countries spanning 1985 to 2014, with country-level economic, social and political data. We focus specifically on describing key patterns with respect to the terminology, dimensionality and structure of ethnicity questions and how these have changed over time.

Method

This section briefly describes the methodology used to compile the Ethnicity Counts? database. The first step was to define the population universe according to the United Nations Statistics Division's (UNSD) list of countries that existed in 2011. We then referred to a separate UNSD list to determine whether a census was conducted in each of the three census rounds (1985-1994; 1995 – 2004; and 2005-2014). In the case of Europe, we extended the scope to include countries that employ population registers as a census alternative. Forms were collected from a number of sources including the University of Minnesota's Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) International website, the United Nations Statistics Division website, and direct correspondence with national statistics agencies. The coverage rate for the three rounds currently stands at 70% (1990), 85% (2000) and 78% (2010) although this will increase as additional forms are added.

In deciding what to include under the rubric of 'ethnic counting', we included all questions using the following terms: ethnicity, ethnic group, ethnic origin, descent, ancestry, race, indigenous, tribe, language, mother tongue, and ethnic nationality (also see Morning, 2008). Where nationality was asked, but clearly referred to an ethnic distinction based on culture or descent, we included it as an instance of ethnic counting. Once the forms were assembled we coded a number of variables to capture different

elements of ethnic counting including: (1) whether a question on ethnicity, race, language and so forth was asked; (2) the format of the question (closed, open-ended etc.); (3) the number of available options/identity categories; (4) the number of ethnic questions asked. Likewise, we coded questions relating to civic notions of belonging, in part because these might be used by states as a proxy for ethnicity; in part because we are keen to understand the relationship between ethnic and civic enumeration strategies. Civic questions included those relating to birthplace, parental and grandparental birthplace, citizenship and nationality (where clearly defined in a civic sense).

Findings

Early results show a clear shift towards the recognition of ethnic difference in national censuses, although this has occurred unevenly across time and place. In the 1990 round, Oceania and North America stand out as regions where ethnic counting was routinely undertaken (93% and 87% of countries respectively), whereas in Europe and Africa, such practices were much less common (58% and 69%). By the end of the focal period, the relative share of ethnic counting countries had increased in all regions, but most notably in Europe (83%). Ethnic counting was least likely in Africa and Asia, but even in those regions more than three quarters of census-taking countries asked at least one question relating to ethnicity. In any given round, questions on language dominated, followed by ethnicity, mother tongue and ethnic nationality. The language of race remains, for the most part, confined to the former slaveholding societies in the Americas including the Caribbean and some of US territories in Oceania; whereas distinctions based on indigeneity and tribe were mainly limited to South America and the settler states of North America and Australasia. The conceptual diversity in what counts as ethnicity around the world suggests that any attempt to develop a standardised classification of ethnicity that is mutually intelligible across national boundaries would face serious challenges.

In addition to analyzing patterns of ethnic counting, we also examined the extent to which countries engaged in civic forms of classification. Interestingly, we found that the shift towards ethnic enumeration has been accompanied by an increase in state inquiries into citizenship and parental birthplace, suggesting that ethnic and civic enumeration operate as dual strategies of state surveillance. By adopting a cross-national and time-series approach, this paper provides an important contribution to the burgeoning literature on ethnic counting and classification that, for the most part, has been dominated by a case study approach. Future research will expand on these early findings by modeling the social, economic and political factors associated with ethnic counting, both within a given census round, and over time. In particular we are interested in whether state practices of ethnic enumeration are explained as the unique by-product of parochial histories and conditions (as implied by the case study approach), or are part of a much broader global phenomenon influenced by factors that have similar effects across states.

References

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* Funded by the Royal Society of New Zealand Marsden Fund.