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Indigenising demographic categories: a prolegomenon to indigenous data sovereignty

Frances Morphy[1]

> We should recognize that quantification facilitates a peculiarly modern ontology, in which the real easily becomes coextensive with the measurable. (Espeland & Stevens 2008: 432)
>
> Reference to 'reality' is a commonplace among both producers and users of statistics. This 'reality' is understood to be self-evident: statistics must 'reflect reality' or 'approximate reality' as closely as possible. (Desroisières 2001: 339)

Introduction

Is engagement with quantification inevitable for indigenous peoples who seek sovereignty over data that describe them? A radical response would be to resist the hegemony of quantification and reject quantitative social science, and demography in particular, as a 'way of knowing'—about anything. The least radical would be simply to

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accept the status quo and continue to allow others to frame indigenous identities and futures—to accept what I have elsewhere termed 'enforced commensurability' (Morphy 2007a: 40). But the ubiquity of quantification as a technology of power (see Scott 1998; Anderson 2006), at the state level and now increasingly on the world stage (see Espeland & Stevens 2008; Davis et al. 2012; Davis, this volume), seems to make engagement a strategic imperative if people are to act for themselves rather than merely be acted on.

If indigenous people accept, as a pragmatic middle course, that they should engage with and refashion this technology of power to their own ends, it is necessary to understand precisely what this entails, both as an ontological and as a logistical project. In pressing for more active participation in, even control of, the framing and collection of quantitative data that describe them, the world's indigenous peoples are faced with a complex double bind, for this engagement entails negotiating the 'peculiarly modern ontology' in which the measurable is coextensive with the real—a proposition that is at serious odds with many indigenous ontologies and epistemologies.[2] It involves appropriating a technology of Global Northern modernity and refashioning it as a defence for alternative indigenous modernities founded on very different ontologies and on primarily qualitative systems of value—and evaluation. In the process, indigenous ontologies will inevitably become entangled in the ontology of the quantifiable. Managing the consequences of such an ontological shift is one of the major challenges facing indigenous people as they define their own futures.

As an illustrative example, in a recent article in *Arena*, Codding et al. (2015) deploy the technology of quantification to make a persuasive argument for the value of mosaic burning practices to the Western Australian (WA) economy. They put some dollar figures on the contribution of Martu people in the desert country of WA to 'ecosystems service' through this practice. The article makes the argument that removing Martu from their small remote communities, so that they can no longer make this contribution, will be more expensive in the long run for the WA Government than supporting them to live on their country.

2 It is also at serious odds with many intellectual traditions of the West, including those with a strong tradition of qualitative research such as anthropology.

Making Martu burning practices 'real' entails re-categorising them so that they become visible to the technologies of quantification. In re-categorising mosaic burning in quantifiable terms, the authors are countering former prime minister Tony Abbott's comment that living in remote communities is merely a 'lifestyle choice'. They choose this strategy because state and Commonwealth governments—deaf to qualitative discourse about the social value of 'connection to country'—are more likely to take note of such quantitative evidence. Yet this framing of Martu burning practices as a quantifiable 'ecosystems service', while mounted by others in defence of the Martu way of life, is not how most Martu themselves would frame it.[3] Should they later decide to do so, they are the ones who will need to work to reframe their own cultural practices as quantifiable.

There are two major aspects to data sovereignty. If a transfer of responsibility for the framing of data is to occur, power relations need to change. Davis et al. (2012: 89) suggest that institutions of power could focus on 'empowering *actors who are governed by indicators*—for example by giving them access to the expertise they need to contest decisions based upon indicators' (emphasis in the original). I will not address this aspect of data sovereignty in detail, since it is the topic of other chapters in this volume (see, in particular, the contributions by Smith, Snipp and FNIGC), but I note that, as the Martu example shows, quantitative work is expensive, time-consuming and logistically complex, in addition to requiring very specific kinds of expertise.[4] Transfer of power will need to be accompanied by institution building, and transfers of expert knowledge and considerable quantities of money.

In the remainder of this chapter, I focus on the second, less often discussed, epistemological aspect of data sovereignty. Davis et al. (2012: 89) suggest that 'institutions of power might support or subsidise the production of competing indicators, and refrain from promulgating indicators themselves'. I call this sovereignty over

3 A point to which this group of authors pays detailed and careful attention in their writing for an academic audience (see, for example, Bliege Bird et al. 2008, 2012; Codding et al. 2014).

4 Rendering Martu practice as quantifiable has required years of meticulous research by a team of environmental anthropologists who have employed a range of sophisticated statistical techniques in the process of quantifying the data (see, for example, Bliege Bird et al. 2008, 2012; Codding et al. 2014).

the process of categorisation. It is not just a question of contesting decisions based on indicators preordained by others; it also involves the assertion of sovereignty over the choice of indicators.

In what follows, I begin by sketching what appear to me to be crucial aspects of the technology of quantification that indigenous peoples need to bear in mind to make informed judgements about how to refashion (or subvert) it. I then move to consider challenges that indigenous peoples face in their efforts to achieve epistemological sovereignty over the data that define them. The first is to challenge the 'reality' (or normativity) of preordained systems of categorisation. In addressing this question, I will pay particular attention to the culturally inflected categorisations that frame conventional demographic inquiry and show how these distort or render invisible potential alternative, indigenous categorisations.

The second challenge is how, then, to determine the nature of the data to be collected—including how to set about 'naming' the indicators that measure indigenous realities. Space precludes any detailed consideration of these issues, which I have begun to explore in a series of publications deriving from population-related research undertaken on behalf of the peoples of the Fitzroy Valley in Western Australia (Morphy 2010a) and the eastern Yolngu clans of north-east Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory (Morphy 2007b, 2010b, 2012).

'Data' and 'indicators'

It is important to distinguish between data and the use of data to create indicators. Davis et al. draw the contrast between data per se—for example, on numbers of people between the ages of zero and 14, between 15 and 64 and 65-plus—and the aggregation of such data in a particular way:

> [F]or instance, by dividing the sum of the first and third figures by the figure for the number of people in the 15 to 64 group. If that number is then labeled a 'dependency ratio,' and the same calculation is made for other units or other times, the collection of processed data is capable of being used for the purposes of … comparisons of 'dependency' and qualifies as an indicator. (2012: 74)

This example serves at once to make the distinction between the two and to illuminate pervasive Global North categorisations in demography, at the level of both data and indicators. The Global North assumption that data on chronological age can be used to construct a valid index of 'dependency' rests on several other assumptions: first, that chronological age ranges are a proxy for (indicators for) degrees of economic engagement; second, that a 'normal' economy is one in which capacity to earn money is the primary source of acquiring the means to live. In a Global North economy, this is, broadly speaking, the case: capacity to earn is the basis of participation in the economy and it resides with people in the 15–64 age group; those aged under 15 (who are in compulsory education) and those over 65 (who are in retirement) are 'dependants'. The acceptance of this indicator as a measure of some kind of universal socioeconomic 'truth' leads then to the idea of the 'demographic dividend' in populations where people of 'working age' substantially outnumber their 'dependants'.

Now imagine a society where capacity to produce food through foraging (or subsistence horticulture) is almost as significant as money earned through wages and welfare transfers,[5] where the 'good' of compulsory schooling (particularly if children have to attend boarding schools to receive it) offsets the time that 'school-age' children can spend in honing their knowledge of their environment and their productive skills—a process that begins as soon as they are effectively mobile. In this society, those 'over 65' are respected elders on whose lifetime of accumulated wisdom and knowledge everyone else depends. In such a society, school-age children are already active economic players and elders, far from being 'dependants', are the reservoirs of productive

5 Bliege Bird et al. (2012) collected data on Martu foraging in the summer months of 2006 (January to April) and in the transitional and winter months (April to August) in 2009. They calculate that in summer, per capita consumption of 'bush foods' averaged 29.13 per cent, ranging from 16 per cent to 41 per cent, of daily caloric intake. In the second period, when allocation of time to foraging is generally higher, mean bush food consumption represented 49 per cent of daily caloric intake. Martu live in a desert environment. In the tropical north, working with Kuninjku people, Altman (1987) made a major study of foraging at Mumeka outstation in 1979–80, and participated in a follow-up study in 2002–03 (see Altman 2011). Altman reports that in 1979–80, based on an analysis of foraging over 269 days, 46 per cent of Mumeka's energy needs and 81 per cent of their protein came from bush foods (2011: 124). In 2002–03, although foraging produced a smaller proportion of the total intake, 'the quantum harvested was of a similar magnitude' (Altman 2011: 129). In many parts of more 'settled' Australia, such as on the south coast of New South Wales, foraging remains an important source of food for Aboriginal people (see Gray & Altman 2006).

knowledge on which an important part of the economy depends.[6] For such a society, 'dependency' is a more complex phenomenon than in the Global North—it is not a one-way relationship—and chronological age is not necessarily a good indicator of dependency.

A 'dependency ratio' may be judged by the members of such a society as something important to calculate for their own purposes—or maybe not. If it is, what kinds of data might illuminate it? Accepting demography's 'off the peg' ratio is almost certainly not the answer. So there are two levels, not one, at which an indigenous demography needs to pay attention to the collection of data for its own purposes: what indicators will be useful for its defined purposes and what data will be used to construct them?

Characteristics of indicators

In the next section, I move to consider what lies behind the framing of data, but it is worth first considering some characteristics of indicators. Davis et al. (2012) identify four, which I discuss in turn below.

Indicators name things

Naming asserts the claim that the phenomenon measured by the indicator exists (is 'real'): 'The indicator represents an assertion of power to produce knowledge and to define or shape the way the world is understood' (Davis et al. 2012: 76). Thus, indicators are never neutral and 'objective'; they depend on culturally specific categorisations that determine what it is 'significant' to measure. And, if they are dictated 'from above', the power of definition rests there. To claim 'naming rights', indigenous peoples need to replace indicators that have been constructed according to hegemonic categories and motivated by Global North normative assumptions with indicators that reflect their own local understandings of their social world.

6 See Kukutai & Taylor (2012: 18) for further commentary on the problems of using chronological age to construct indicators.

Indicators compare and rank

The ordinal structure of indicators enables comparison and ranking, and this exerts pressure for 'improvement' as measured by the indicator (Davis et al. 2012: 76). Encapsulated indigenous minorities within settler states constantly find themselves being compared, as a 'population', with the 'mainstream population'—and found wanting. They have 'gaps' that need to be 'closed', and improvement is defined in terms of the indicators that measure the gaps. The homogeneity of indicators at the national level is justified in terms of the 'problem of comparability'. In Australia (although perhaps not in Aotearoa/New Zealand; see Bishop's chapter, in this volume), this is a hermeneutic circle that seems completely resistant to external pressures for change and to the introduction of heterogeneous measures. It is a manifestation of enforced commensurability.

To break this hermeneutic circle, it is necessary first to interrogate the objects of comparison. In Australia, the 'Indigenous population' is a construct defined in terms of its opposition to the 'non-Indigenous population'. This definition may have some relevance at the national level, but it is of limited utility to particular Indigenous organisations, groups or people (I will call these 'polities' for the sake of brevity) intent on forging their own set of comparators.[7] Indigenous demographies are most likely to be local or, at most, regional in their scope, and the first task is to define the relevant group with which comparisons are to be drawn (see Snipp, this volume). This is far from an easy matter and in some instances may involve contestation over identity and over the boundaries of the group (see Rodriguez-Lonebear, this volume). It may entail creating boundaries where none existed before. These groups, too, will in most cases inevitably be relational constructs because encapsulated indigenous polities in postcolonial societies are linked in complex ways to both other indigenous polities and the encapsulating society.[8]

7 I intend 'polity' to encompass more than the 'post-classical' 'families of polity' identified by Sutton (2003). The groupings he describes are most typical of regions of Australia where dispossession, displacement, disease and frontier violence have taken their heaviest toll. In 'very remote' Australia, such as in the Yolngu region of north-east Arnhem Land, forms of social organisation that are more similar to local precolonial forms have persisted; for a relevant discussion, see Morphy (2013).

8 See Axelsson & Sköld (2011) for a range of examples.

The second task is to define what is to be compared, and the answer, most often, is not likely to be direct comparison with the 'mainstream' population. In constructing their own indicators, indigenous polities need to attend to their own values, social structures and aspirations. The comparator more likely to be of interest is some wished-for set of conditions for their own polity. The relevant comparisons will therefore be across the same polity over time rather than between polities or 'subpopulations'. And each set of such indicators for comparison, far from being homogeneous with other such sets, is likely to be unique to the polity in question because of particularities of culture, locale and defined purpose.

There are also likely to be commonalities of value, of structural factors and of aspirations between indigenous polities, and this possibility will be worth exploring. Indigenous polities can learn from each other as they go about the task of building their own sets of indicators. More 'homogeneous' sets of indicators may emerge from such processes, but the important point is that this is not the initial goal. In indigenous demography, it is heterogeneity—the identification of difference and the measurement of that difference in its own terms—that is the primary goal.

A final, additional point can be made about this aspect of indicators. In the world of the Global North, change (aka 'development' or 'improvement') seems to be constantly desired, as if there was some perfect future state to which all of humanity should be jointly aspiring. However, an indigenous perspective might allow for the possibility that 'improvement' is not always necessary; sustaining something of value that already exists may be equally (or more) important.

Indicators simplify complex phenomena

As Davis et al. put it: 'Simplification, or reductionism, is central to the appeal (and probably the impact) of indicators' (2012: 76). In the next section, I will examine how categorisation is used as a tool of simplification with respect to complex phenomena such as the 'family' and the 'household'. Here I give one example from the Australian Census in which, in both 2001 and 2006, Indigenous people were

faced with a question in which 'traditional beliefs' were listed as an option for religious affiliation. In 2001, I observed that at a Yolngu community in north-east Arnhem Land:[9]

> Q. 16 (What is your religion?) generated much debate; people wanted to mark more than one box … As one interviewee put it: 'My beliefs are traditional, but my religion is [Christian denomination]'. …
>
> There is no explicit indication that it is permissible to mark two boxes for this question. [One of the local Yolngu paid enumerators] E1's solution was to mark only 'Traditional Beliefs', often declaring as he did so, 'Yolngu [Indigenous] comes before Balanda [non-Indigenous], so we'll put Traditional Beliefs'. Most interviewees agreed to this. The other enumerators sometimes marked both [Christian denomination] and 'Traditional Beliefs', and sometimes only one or the other, depending presumably on what the interviewee's response was. (Morphy 2002: 46)

As with many simplifications, relevant complexity is masked by inadequate categorisation. In both 2001 and 2006, the logistics of the census in north-east Arnhem Land were nightmarish for the organisers and collectors because the regional population was constantly on the move between funerals (see Morphy 2002, 2007c). The size, complexity and importance of Yolngu funerals are directly attributable to aspects of 'traditional beliefs' combined with the importance of extended kin networks, and indeed there has been an intensification of mortuary ritual activity in response to the contemporary conditions of Yolngu life (see Morphy & Morphy 2008, 2011). Yet many if not most Yolngu are also Christians. Because of the lumping of 'traditional beliefs' into the same category as religions such as Christianity, the prevalence of the former is consistently underreported. This feeds into a narrative about the inevitable demise of such belief systems in the face of encroaching modernity and masks their continuing—while changing—significance in contemporary Yolngu lives.

9 A feature of the 'Indigenous enumeration strategy' employed in remote Indigenous communities, where levels of literacy in English are typically low, is that the census form is administered by interview unless people opt to fill in their own form.

Indicators implicitly evaluate

This characteristic of indicators has particular relevance to Indigenous lives in Australia today. Indicators do not just shape the way the world is understood, but also contain embedded value judgements:

> Indicators often have embedded in them … a much further-reaching theory—which some might call an ideology—of what a good society is … Often the theory or policy idea is not spelled out at all in the indicator but remains implicit. (Davis et al. 2012: 77)

In the 'good society' envisaged by successive Australian governments, Aboriginal people will be healthy, well educated and employed in the mainstream workforce. Full stop. The Closing the Gap indicators (as at 2011: see NIRA Working Group 2011), numbering 27 in all, are divided into three sets to measure health performance, education performance and employment performance. Anything that might be considered distinctively Indigenous—apart from 'disadvantage'—is studiously and deliberately ignored.[10]

In challenging such an ideology of the good society, an indigenous polity is once again faced with a complex task: the need to articulate its own vision of a good society and devise the indicators that are relevant to it. As a useful heuristic exercise, Indigenous Australian polities might want to examine the categorical assumptions that lie behind the framing of the Closing the Gap indicators, and reframe them (those that are considered relevant) according to a different set of categorisations. They might also consider the silences in the indicators: what are the missing categories? These are the kinds of questions to which I now turn.

Conventional demographic categories and their silences

Let us assume for the moment that the goal of any sovereign indigenous demography is first to define what a particular indigenous polity sees as a 'good society' or a 'good way of life' for its members and, second,

10 As Kukutai & Taylor note: 'The aim is not to give expression and substance to indigenous difference, but simply to compare those aspects of it that the State feels it wants to influence' (2012: 16).

to devise indicators that quantify its components so that change can be monitored over time.[11] Conventional demographic categories reflect mostly implicit assumptions about what is 'good' or 'normal'; making these assumptions explicit is the first step to deconstructing them and constructing new categories with which to replace them.

In the demographic tradition of the Global North, national population surveys are founded on a basic categorisation of socio-spatial units as bounded containers (see Adams & Kasakoff 2004; Morphy 2007c). The prototypical 'family' is the two-generational 'couple (heterosexual) family' consisting of parents and their children; the prototypical 'household' consists of a nuclear family and is contained within a single dwelling. Social space stops at the boundaries of the dwelling: agglomerations of dwellings are defined spatially as 'statistical areas' and the like, and then grouped into ever larger spatial units, up to the boundaries of the nation-state.

Degrees of variation from the prototype are acknowledged, but these reflect the kinds of variation found commonly in settler state societies. So, in Australia, 'lone-parent' families exist as a variant of the family, as do 'three-generational (but only three) families', and the presence of 'other relatives' is allowed for. Households (defined in terms of commensality) may consist of more than one 'family' and may contain 'unrelated' people as well. Finally, a dwelling may contain more than one 'household'.

From a Yolngu point of view, this system of categorisation contains many important silences. The following crucial building blocks of Yolngu sociality, and of their socioeconomic life, are made invisible: a kin-based social universe, in which everyone calls everyone else by a kin term, and extended kin networks. Yolngu dwellings are not bounded containers, but rather anchoring points for a multigenerational subset of an extended family; often only a small core of people are permanent residents of the dwelling—other kin come and go over time.[12]

Moving beyond the level of the dwelling, the silences deepen. Where is the household (if defined in terms of commensality) that encompasses more than one dwelling? Where are the clusters of dwellings that

11 For examples of this process in action, see Hudson, and Yap and Yu, in this volume.

12 For a detailed analysis, see Morphy (2007b, 2010b, 2012).

together anchor larger subsets of an extended family? Where are the homelands communities, in which everybody, ultimately, is related to everybody else in some way, and which function as a single 'household' when it comes to the distribution of meat from large game such as turtles and dugong? Where are the patrilineal landowning clans? Where are the kin links with the people of the surrounding communities?

These are the social silences, and silence matters (see also Pool, this volume). In the Yolngu case, as in many indigenous societies, higher-level units of kin-based social grouping are crucial to an understanding of social formations and of the values that underlie Indigenous views of the 'good' society. Yet Global North demographic categories literally make these invisible, as when, in the Data Processing Unit in Melbourne in 2006, the data coders dismembered Yolngu extended family households and reconstituted them as separate nuclear families (see Morphy 2007d: 107–9).

The deepest silences, however, are spatial; this speaks directly to the rights-based agendas of many indigenous polities. In Global North demography, there is a characteristic silence—an absence of indicators—concerning the nature and extent of connection to (or, in many cases, severance from) place. For indigenous peoples, this is surely the one factor that uniquely distinguishes them from encapsulating settler populations. These are fundamentally emplaced peoples, whose very identities are constituted through their autochthonous connection to particular places. In contrast, settler populations come from somewhere else. Whatever meaning-making they undertake to forge connections to the new places they colonise, these meanings are not founded in a sense of autochthony.

Yolngu communities are not just placed arbitrarily in the landscape. Elsewhere (Morphy 2010b), I have detailed the Yolngu clan-based system of landownership and shown how contemporary homelands settlements in north-east Arnhem Land are strategically placed within clan estates. The 1970s homelands movement in this region was in part a reaction to the advent of mining near Yirrkala, the mission settlement to which people from the surrounding clan estates had been drawn from the 1930s on. There was a desire to indicate to the wider Australian society that Yolngu country was not just 'empty wilderness' ripe for settler exploitation, but an inhabited—and owned and cared for—

landscape. For many Indigenous polities, indicators that make place visible as a foundation of valued sociality are likely to be of paramount importance. Yet conventional demographic inquiry is almost always silent on the matter of place; instead, it deals in arbitrarily divisible space. In Australia, space is divided into statistical areas (levels one through four, defined in terms of population size). The resulting lines on the map bear no relation to anything social—or socio-spatial.

Conclusion: the complications of visibility

Indigenous demographies would seek to make visible the formerly invisible, to give 'reality' to significantly different ways of being in the world. Their efficacy would be gauged in the first instance by their usefulness to the indigenous polities that devise and own them: do such demographies allow them to articulate what they value and plan in a measurable way for a desired future? But they would also highlight clearly, perhaps often for the first time, substantive differences that need to be acknowledged and accepted by settler states if they are to formulate policy that supports rather than undermines the self-defined goals of encapsulated indigenous peoples.

In one important respect this makes indigenous demography a double-edged sword, for substantive difference may result from incommensurable systems of value. Once difference is explicitly articulated, what of the right to remain different, even when a valued difference violates the norms of the more powerful encapsulating society? A clear case in point in Australia, where polygamy is officially illegal, concerns the polygynous unions that exist, albeit in modified form, in many Australian Aboriginal societies (see Morphy 2013), including among Yolngu people.

Currently such arrangements are barely visible to the state. Most Yolngu marriages are unregistered, being classified as 'tribal' marriage arrangements. Polygynous family formations are largely invisible in the census and other surveys because typically a man's wives live in separate (usually contiguous) dwellings and, as we have seen, 'households' by definition do not extend beyond the boundaries of a dwelling. The Yolngu appear to have, as a result, rather a lot of 'households' with female heads. Currently, in the matter of widows' pensions, there is tacit acceptance among local Centrelink staff that

all of a man's widows should receive a pension on his death, but would such arrangements survive the official 'outing' of polygyny on to a wider stage? Yolngu need to think carefully about the possible consequences of a Yolngu demography that makes polygyny more visible. Creating an indigenous demography entails a double ontological shift: the indigenous self must appraise not only its own sense of what is real and valued, but also what is real to and valued by the encapsulating other.

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