

5. The Indigenous Enumeration Strategy: an overview assessment and ideas for improvement

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This brief final chapter offers both an overview assessment of the conduct of the 2001 Census, based on a synthesis of the case studies, and some ideas for future improvement of the ABS's Indigenous Enumeration Strategy, as applied to Aboriginal communities in sparsely settled northern and central Australia. The chapter is in three parts entitled 'Who to count', 'How to count' and 'What to ask'. These seem to us to address the big issues that arise from the case studies and also to cover the ways in which the census could perhaps be better adapted to the circumstances of Aboriginal people in northern and central Australia in the future.

Who to count

The standard census procedure in Australia is to count those who sleep in each dwelling on census night, asking them whether they are usual residents or visitors and also asking them whether there are other absent usual residents of the dwelling. In the IES this is still, officially, the approach. However, in the Northern Territory, where two of our case studies were located, there is some tendency to move towards a 'usual residents' basis of counting. In this approach, all usual residents of a dwelling are counted and visitors to a dwelling are not counted if they have some other usual residence where it is judged they will be counted. We say some 'tendency', since this only occurred in one of our two Northern Territory case studies.

The counting in Morphy's outstation case study was, in our judgment, essentially done using the standard procedure of counting those in situ and asking them about absent usual residents. This procedure carries some potential for double counting, if absent usual residents are also counted elsewhere as visitors. But the in situ principle has the advantage of counting people where they are found, or 'encountered', and of relying on the people themselves for information about their demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. The reasons that the Northern Territory branch of the ABS seems tempted to abandon this methodology in favour of a usual residents count would appear to relate to the time extension involved in the IES and to Indigenous people's high levels of residential mobility. Because the IES is interview-based, it takes a week or weeks, rather than a day or two, and is often occurring in different places at different times. The Northern Territory administration of the ABS fears that through this time extension and with people's mobility, counting in situ will miss people, as both they and the census collectors move around. While under-counting is a possible outcome of time extension and mobility, we do not believe that switching to a usual residents basis of counting solves this problem. We also believe that such a strategy introduces problems of its own, relating potentially to both under-counting and to data quality.

In the Alice Springs town camps, for example, where the usual residents method of counting was used, a number of people who were present in the town camps at the time of the census were not counted, on the grounds that they were only visitors and would be counted elsewhere as usual residents. But the point has been made in all the case studies that Aboriginal people in northern and central Australia often move between several dwellings within one or more than one community location and so it is not clear that all such visitors will in fact be counted elsewhere as usual residents of a particular dwelling. Indeed, as the case studies and earlier work by Martin and Taylor (1995) show, people can be missed even when their mobility is only within one community between several dwellings. The idea of counting usual residents is too much of a gamble and it also means that more census interviewees are supplying information about third parties, which introduces greater data quality concerns. The methodology used in the Alice Springs town camps probably led to a greater under-count than that used in the Northern Territory outstation case study. While the number of usual residents of the town camps was probably reasonably well captured, the number of visitors in the town camps at the time of the census was not well captured at all. It is quite possible that not counting these people in the town camps contributed to under-counts in the larger central Australian region, as they were possibly not counted elsewhere.

The Aurukun case study in far north Queensland, along with the outstation case study in the Northern Territory, shows how counting those present, plus asking them about absent usual residents, can work as a census methodology in Aboriginal communities. As we have suggested, this methodology will, if anything, err towards double counting; however, this would seem the lesser of two evils and can at least potentially be eliminated by informed cross-checking between areas. No such cross-checking is even potentially possible when visitors encountered in particular places are not counted, on the assumption that they will be counted elsewhere as usual residents.¹

The other way to guard against both double-counting and under-counting using the standard census methodology is to specify more clearly the treatment of absent usual residents. Presently the training package specifies that people who are 'away fishing, hunting, on sorry business, etc.' should have a SIPF filled out for them and hence be counted, as it is judged that they are unlikely to be counted elsewhere. It also specifies that if they are 'away in a city, town or other community' they do not need a SIPF because it is judged likely they will be counted elsewhere. This seems to us too generous an assumption. Two of our case studies identified the issue of usual residents away at sports carnivals in Aboriginal communities. In both cases there was no attempt made to count those at the sports carnival, and indeed at Yuendumu there was a deliberate choice made to move the count away from the carnival. So under the standard census counting methodology these people need to be put clearly in the category of absent usual residents who need to be counted at their usual residence, which in the two-form structure means having a SIPF completed in their absence. Sports carnivals constitute one very important case in which the circumstances of absent usual residents from Indigenous communities need to be more closely specified, but probably not the only one.

The standard ABS approach to the issue of who to count, advocated by both central office and all State and Territory administrations within the ABS except the Northern Territory, needs in our view to be adhered to. It is not perfect, but it is the best available resolution of the issue, particularly if the circumstances in which to count absent usual residents are well elaborated. To keep error due to time extension to a minimum, the best solution is simply to keep time extension of the count itself to a minimum. This may be achieved, in part, by streamlining the interview procedures, which is an issue relevant to both of our next two sections.

How to count

The IES, as currently practiced in northern and central Australia, relies on two major adaptations in how the count proceeds: an interview process, rather than household self-completion of a form, and a modified household plus personal form structure. While the interview process seems to us to be indispensable and working well as an adaptation, we do not believe that the two-form structure is working well at all. The two- or three-form structure—if we count the community-level Dwelling Check List as well—is administratively cumbersome and far too demanding on both Aboriginal interviewers and interviewees. The structure only worked in the Aurukun and outstation case studies which we observed because the SIHFs were largely filled out beforehand away from interviewees. But even in these cases, filling out just the SIPFs with interviewees was a time-consuming and onerous task which tested the endurance and interest of both the interviewers and the interviewees to the limit. In the Alice Springs case study, where an attempt was made to fill out both the SIHFs and SIPFs in the presence of interviewees, this proved far too demanding and cumbersome and had to be abandoned.

We believe that for Aboriginal communities in northern and central Australia it should be possible to design a single household form that can be administered by interview. This form should build on the existing SIHF, with its provision for large numbers of people in a household, and it should extend the numbers of questions asked of individuals on that form beyond the basic age, sex, usual resident/visitor demographics. Such a form would be a move towards the more standard census household form structure, and an argument could even be made that the appropriate adaptation is to do interviews using standard household forms in some Indigenous communities. But for the more traditionally-oriented communities in northern and central Australia with low levels of western economic activity and in which English is often not the first language of spoken daily interaction, we believe that there is a need for a specific, restricted Indigenous household form.

If we recall, from Chapter 1, the way in which the IES started as an adaptation of the census to the circumstances of more traditionally-oriented Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory and Western Australia in 1976 and 1981, before spreading to South Australia, Queensland and, in 2001, also into New South Wales, we can perhaps see where it has gone somewhat astray. Its ability to focus specifically on the circumstances of more traditionally-oriented Aboriginal communities in northern and central Australia has probably been somewhat weakened over the years, while it has probably also been

somewhat unnecessarily applied in places like New South Wales where many people living in discrete Aboriginal communities could probably deal with standard census forms and with household self-completion of forms.

Our solution would be to distinguish the interview from the 'special form' aspect of census adaptation. While both could be used in the most traditionally-oriented Aboriginal communities, like those in our case studies, interviews with standard forms could be used in other Aboriginal communities. This would make it possible to design the new Indigenous household form specifically for the circumstances of the most traditionally-oriented Aboriginal communities in northern and central Australia. Some Indigenous communities might also have mixtures of households who used the standard and special household forms with and without interview. This leads us on the issue of what questions should be asked in this revised Indigenous household form.

What to ask

This is the most difficult issue of all. While many standard questions seem of little social relevance to circumstances in traditionally-oriented communities, and produce answers which are close to nonsensical, we also acknowledge that there are enormous political and social pressures for the retention of standard questions so that an attempt can be made to construct standard statistics comparing Indigenous and other Australians.

We believe, nevertheless, that it is possible to devise a simplified Indigenous household form that is tailored more precisely to the circumstances of traditionally-oriented Indigenous people. The general principles which should motivate its design and content are:

- that as a first step, the information to be sought should be ranked in order of priority, and the form should concentrate on eliciting the most important data;
- that the number of questions should be reduced to the necessary minimum;
- that pathways through the form should be as streamlined as possible;
- that the questions should be grounded in the realities of Indigenous lifestyles;
- but designed so that the data outcomes ensure commensurability with data from the mainstream count.

These principles will be briefly exemplified through a consideration of the questions on household composition and structure, place (of residence or of work), origin and ancestry, labour force statistics, education, and culture (as indicated by the questions on language and religion). Other, more detailed recommendations are to be found in the individual chapters.

Household composition and structure

The census cannot hope to capture the complexity of Indigenous principles of kinship and household structure. The attempt to do so in the 2001 Census led to the collection of incoherent and uninterpretable data (see in particular the case studies by Martin and Morphy). The further step of ‘classifying’ this data into the family types recognised in ABS definitions, which do not coincide with the family types found in many, if not most, Indigenous communities, is a completely spurious exercise, and any analysis which takes these data as a basis must allow for this. It should be noted that the complex familial structures of Indigenous societies are one of their most enduring aspects, persisting in communities in ‘settled’ Australia as well as in remote, ‘traditionally-oriented’ communities (see Smith 2000b).

The designers of the census need to step back from the questions on household structure, and decide precisely *what* information they wish to elicit. Is it information primarily about family structure, or about the age distribution, gender composition, and dependency structures of households? ² If it is decided that the latter data are the most important, one possibility which would sit more comfortably with the Indigenous facts would be to add a new type of household to the ABS list—the *extended family household*. This definition would apply to large households in which everyone is related to everyone else, and would therefore conflate the ‘family’ with the usual residents of the dwelling, or household. It would not attempt to distinguish any putative ‘couple families’ or ‘one-parent’ families among the residents of the dwelling, and the post-enumeration categorisation would not attempt to break extended family households into such smaller family units.

This solution is grounded in Indigenous reality, in that it recognises the incommensurability of Indigenous and mainstream principles of household formation (as defined currently by the ABS), while still allowing the dwelling to function as a unit of analysis and measurement across the board. It does not address the issue of linked households, which are such a prevalent feature of Indigenous community life, but that problem seems insoluble given the dwelling-based framework of the census enumeration.

Place

If place were defined to refer unambiguously to the community in question rather than to an address within the community, this would eliminate the need to provide numerous instances of ‘addresses’, identified by Morphy as both unduly time-consuming and culturally inappropriate. It would also circumvent the problem, highlighted by Martin, of identifying place of residence over time in communities where there is both a high level of intra-community mobility and a high turnover of housing stock.

Ancestry and origin

The set of questions on ancestry and origin should be framed from the Indigenous perspective, not from that of the settler culture. If all that is required is an ‘Indigenous identifier’ (as the case in most Australian census enumerations), then only one question needs to be asked, and that is: ‘Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?’.

The questions on overseas parentage are almost certainly superfluous in the vast majority of cases. If more detailed information on ethnicity is sought in future censuses, then the supplementary question should be framed in terms of non-Indigeneity, and the prompts should include 'non-Indigenous Australian', the main Anglo-Celtic categories, Chinese and Afghan, all of which are more likely ancestries for Indigenous Australians than some of the ones suggested in the prompt to the question on the 2001 SIPF.

Education

In many cases, neither the interviewers nor the interviewees will have a high level of formal education. In whichever way the questions on education are framed, the Indigenous interviewers need focused training on the precise meanings of the questions, and on how to interpret the likely answers of the respondents. This applies particularly to the question of further education, where interviewers need clear guidance on what counts as an accredited course, and what is meant by 'full name' and 'field of study'. They should also be helped to identify what counts as a 'place of study'.

Work

The vast majority of Indigenous people in the north and centre of Australia live in areas where there is very little employment, in the mainstream sense of the word. 'Looking for work', in this context, is a pointless activity for most people. In the 2001 Census, the series of questions on the SIPF on employment and looking for work were constructed on the premise that labour market conditions in these regions are comparable to those in other parts of Australia. CDEP schemes were treated as if their sole purpose is to provide 'real' jobs, and all CDEP participants were deemed to have a job. The design of the questions rested, therefore, on two fictions: firstly that there is a local labour market in which employment can be sought, and secondly that all CDEP participants are in paid employment.

This is another example of the dilemma faced in trying to reconcile local Indigenous reality with comparability across the board. For many reasons, comparability may be considered a desirable outcome, and one which outweighs other considerations. That is the first question to be settled. If the principle of comparability is to be preserved, some thought needs to be given as to how the level, or degree of fiction can be reduced, both in the forms of the questions and in the likely responses.

The limits to quantifiability

If the quantifiable population characteristics of Indigenous Australians are to emerge clearly from census data, the questions on the Indigenous form need to be as culturally neutral as possible, in order to minimise misunderstanding on the part of the Indigenous interviewers and respondents. If a person fails to understand the meaning of a question, they are unlikely to provide the kind of answer that is sought. Care must be taken to avoid the 'naturalisation' of Anglo-Celtic cultural categories and assumptions, as happened with the 'nuclear family' and with the 'ethnic' division of the Australian population in the

questions on ancestry and origin. We would further suggest that, given the increasing ethnic diversity of the Australian population, this issue may not be unique to Indigenous people.

That being said, the case studies by Martin and Morphy show clearly that certain kinds of questions, however they are phrased, particularly those that address core elements of contemporary Indigenous identity, are likely to elicit answers that are symbolic rather than technical (in Martin's terminology). The responses to the question on religion are a case in point. The design of the question itself played a part, in making the equation between 'Traditional Beliefs' and Christian denominations, and in failing to signal clearly that more than one answer was possible. It is interesting that the responses in both communities were symbolic, but they were different. In Aurukun, there was perhaps a symbolic identification of 'Traditional Beliefs' with a private Wik domain, not considered appropriate for exposure in a non-Indigenous context, whereas in the outstation community (but not elsewhere in the region, it must be noted) 'Traditional Beliefs' were embraced as a public symbol of Aboriginality. The question on the ability to speak English elicited a symbolic answer from Wik respondents, because of the connection that they make between lack of English and 'being myall', but in the Northern Territory outstation, where the ability to speak English is viewed merely as a useful skill, the answers were technical in nature.

Some questions are inherently more likely than others to elicit symbolic replies. Such responses, which are indicative of underlying beliefs and attitudes rather than constituting objective answers to factual questions, are not amenable to quantitative analysis.

Conclusion

We believe that the five-yearly national census can be better adapted to the circumstances of traditionally-oriented Aboriginal people in northern and central Australia than was the case, as we observed it, in 2001. Adaptation is not a simple task and all methodologies will have their weaknesses and pitfalls. The ABS is to be commended for its openness in allowing us to observe and to constructively criticise its operations in 2001. Interaction between the ABS and academic researchers should be an ongoing relationship in which ideas for improvement of the census methodology for more traditionally-oriented Aboriginal people in northern and central Australia are continually put to the test. This could of course be a more chastening experience for the researchers than for the ABS. Reckoning the Indigenous people of the Commonwealth will never be an easy task.

Notes

1. To be fair, the official approach in the Alice Springs town camps was that visitors who would be counted elsewhere as usual residents should be recorded on SIHFs but not required to fill out SIPFs. However, as we saw in that case study, in the face of a demanding task, this quickly became interpreted as a reason not record them on either type of form.
2. This exercise might be worth undertaking for the census in its entirety, and not just the Indigenous enumeration, since members of many of Australia's other 'ethnic' communities also likely to live in households that diverge in their structure from the types envisaged in the present ABS definitions. It is perhaps time to consider retreating from the 'nuclear family' as the model against which *all* household structures are measured, not just Indigenous households.