

UNDERSTANDING RESIDENCE TERMS: THE MEANING OF CENSUS TERMS TO RESPONDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The Census Bureau is engaged in a wide program of research to examine issues related to undercoverage of minorities and renters. The current paper tentatively examines one possible reason for the undercounting of minority populations. Members of these groups may not understand the Census questions in the ways they are intended. Miscommunications may occur in all groups, but it is reasonable to believe that they are less likely to occur in majority than in minority populations, since the framers of Census questions tend to be culturally and linguistically similar to the mainstream population.

A knowledge of the respondents' system of meaning is necessary to evaluating problems in communication. The methods and theoretical framework of cognitive anthropology, which focus on qualitative evaluation of conceptual systems and their linguistic expressions, can be helpful in understanding such problems.

Research which I carried out in 1989 for the Center for Survey Methods Research, focused on respondents' conceptual system for understanding residence (Gerber 1990). This small scale cognitive study concentrated primarily on the use of terms live and stay and among African Americans. These terms are used in many Census questionnaires, including the 1990 Decennial Census.

Respondents also used a number of other terms to talk about residence, but these terms were not analyzed in detail at the time. The current paper is continued analysis of data from that study, examining the full range of residence terms used by respondents. The paper will also present a preliminary analysis of the conversational contexts in which certain key terms occur. This analysis introduces some new questions beyond the central one of which meanings assigned to terms:

1. When a term is introduced, is it redefined using other residence terms under consideration?
2. Is the term used spontaneously or only after it has been introduced by an interviewer?

3. Is the term part of a formal or informal speech context?

If informants redefine terms presented to them into other terms which are more familiar, they are responding in terms of concepts which are not actually used in the questions. In this case, it is important to understand the full range of natural vocabulary used by respondents in order to make a complete cognitive assessment of responses to questionnaires. Terms which are only in the recognition vocabulary are less familiar and may be less well understood. In addition, the specific formal or informal contexts in which a term is familiar may have important effects on the meaning which is assigned to it.

Methods

The interviews on which this research is based are described in detail elsewhere. Twenty five interviews were carried out primarily with low income African American respondents. Sixteen people were interviewed in a soup kitchen in Washington D. C. All but one of them were currently housed. These interviews were broadly exploratory. The aim was to elicit some of the concepts and terms that the respondents use in understanding residence. The second set of nine interviews were carried out in a church in Suitland, Maryland. These respondents were familiar with the cultural context of the residence and relationship patterns described in the first set of interviews. Complex or ambiguous living situations drawn from the first set of interviews were presented to the second set of respondents. They were asked to judge where characters in these living situation vignettes usually lived. It was useful to alter the circumstances of the vignette to see how particular features of the situation affected the judgements made. A brief sorting task involving twelve residence terms was also carried out.

For this paper, the interviews were reanalyzed, focusing on the entire range of terms which the informants used in expressing residence concepts.

The number of informants who used a particular term was recorded for the first sixteen unstructured interviews. (No attempt was made to quantify the number of times that each term was used by each respondent. Since the interviews were of different lengths, described different living situations, and certain informants are more verbal than others, it is not certain what such a quantification would have meant.) The second set of interviews were useful in examining respondents responses to vocabulary introduced in a more structured set of questions. The card sorting task was analyzed by looking for a stable cluster of terms which occur in association with the term usually lives here.

Live and Stay

Before examining the range of terms used by these informants, it is necessary to summarize the results of the previous study. It was found that respondents recognized distinct meanings for the terms live and stay. To live somewhere, in general, represented a more stable and long term attachment to a place of residence, than did staying there. Stays in a place could be considered temporary even if the stayer had been present for 3 to 6 months. Living in a place did not require that the person be present for long periods of time. People who were seldom in a place might be considered to live there. Many children living apart from their parents (in custody with other relatives or in college) were still considered as living with their parents. These calculation seemed to reflect an estimate people made of residence patterns over a long period of time.

The expectations and agreements people had made were also an important element in distinguishing between the two concepts. If you intend residence to be permanent, then it is, even on the very first day. Respondents used various criteria to judge peoples' intentions. In some cases, agreements were explicit. Other signs of intention, such as having keys, bringing belongings with you, and making financial contributions are considered important. Where a person eats and sleeps were not generally seen as important criteria for deciding where someone lives.

A third concept was also used to define where a person lives. This was a notion that you live at a place that is considered your "official residence" usually by some government agency. In this view,

the address you give to the IRS, the post office or your parole board is considered to be the place where you live.

Range of Residence Terms Used by Respondents

Thirty one different terms for were used by the first set of respondents in addition to live and stay. The terms are presented below, with the number of respondents using the term:

Term	Number	Term	Number
Belongs with	2	Moved (back)	2
Check up on	1	Own space	4
Come through	2	Be on my own	1
Come around	1	Pajama party	1
Drop through	1	Permanent address	1
Drifter	1	Relatives	1
Domain	1	Renting	1
Establish for		Rent a room	1
themselves	1	Roommates	3
Family	8	Shacking	1
Home	15	Spend time	3
Household	4	Supposed to be there	1
House	3	Stops by	1
Live with	2	Visits	2
Lives there		Visitors	1
part time	1		

The general picture presented by these terms is one of wide diversity, with most terms being used by only one or two respondents. However, certain terms were used with much higher frequency. These are home (used by 15 of 16 respondents), family or relatives, used by 9 respondents, and the various forms of own place, used by 6 respondents in this group. The term household, which appears in census questionnaires, was used by only four respondents. (In one of these cases, the use of the term was probably conditioned my use of it in a question.)

The frequency of use of the terms home, family, and own place indicates that they are core residence terms for respondents. This is also indicated in the card sorting task done by the second set of respondents. In this sorting task, five terms proved to be highly associated with usually lives here and with each other. The five terms were at home, family, my own place, belonging, and roommates. Four were selected by all nine respondents who completed the task. My own place was selected by eight of nine respondents.

The Concept of Home

Home as a concept is quite close in meaning to

lives with, which may account for its high level of use in an interview in which questions were phrased in terms of the latter concept. As we have seen, the term home was used by all but one respondent in the first set of interviews, and by all nine respondents in the second set of interviews. Home was often used in an attempt to define or explain other concepts which were being discussed, particularly live. An example will demonstrate how the term was used in this way:

"Q. What does usually live someplace mean?

A. It's their permanent address...that's what it means to me.

Q. Permanent address?

A. That's their home...The understanding that I get from the question you asked,...that would mean that it would be their home."

It is apparent from the above quotes that home expresses a form of permanent attachment to a place. Many respondents quoted offer definitions of usually live (t)here by simply replacing that term with the term "home." Even in the instances where they interpolate other terms like "permanent address" and "usually stay" when they try to explain what they mean, they tend to fall back on "home" as the term which anchors their definitions.

However, home carries with it a bundle of connotations which the term live does not:

1. Home as a place of ease. As one respondent put it, "you feel free at home". You can put your feet up, or go to the refrigerator without asking permission. The quality of the relationship which is involved is probably more important than specific privileges:

"A. But other than that, I felt I was at home.

Q. What does it take to feel at home?

A. To be comfortable, not to feel like you're intruding...just like family...at home, relaxed comfortable, you get along fine, don't have complications, the relationship is compatible."

2. Home as a place where you have control. Respondents are likely to distinguish between the roles of lease holder or owner, and a person who depends on the owner or lease holder for space. The implications which respondents see in this control were discussed in the previous study. For current purposes, it is necessary to note that control is one of the associations of home for some respondents. For example:

A. After being in the shelter system?... You know you can go home to it. You can fix it up the way you want it fixed up. You can have the company you want to have. You can not have the company you don't want to have."

This element of control is sometimes enough to make a distinction create a distinction between living and staying for some respondents. The respondent quoted above thought she would classify a roommate as someone who "stayed" with her:

"Probably. Because I still think of it as my home, I have never shared someone else's home, I have always shared my home with someone else."

3. Home as the place to which you are socially assigned. There is a tendency for respondents to describe home as the place from which a person takes an identity, or where his/her primary social unit is located. In this data, this place does not always have to be the place where a person spends most time. Respondents often described young people who were socially assigned to the homes of their mothers, even though they spent most of their time elsewhere. They often expressed this in terms of being told that they could always "come home" or "move home" if they needed to. This led to an assignment of the mother's place as "home." For example, one young woman who described herself as a drifter and who had been staying for some time in a semi-abandoned building with a girlfriend described the situation in these emotional terms:

"I know I has a home. I know that. I have that...I always be there...that is one place I can go and feel real comfortable, if I can't be nowhere else. If anything else goes wrong, I can always count on that...If you get tired of everything and everybody, you just go.

Q. So it sounds like your mother's place is your base, but you're not there all the time.

A. "I'm not - - I'm there, but I'm also here."

It is interesting to note that this respondent twice insists that she is "there" at her mother's place, although this cannot be interpreted in either a spatial or a temporal sense. Her social attachment to her mother's house was apparently also recognized by her "man friend", who would only give her "help" (probably money) at her mother's house. "That's because he knows that's where I should be."

This sense of social (and emotional) attachment to a parent's house is probably what accounts for the fact that almost all respondents felt clear that college students or children staying elsewhere for school should be counted at their parents houses. One of the vignettes portrays a child of 16 staying during the school year with an aunt to go to school. It produced this typical discussion:

"Q. Should her mother count her as usually living with her?

A. Yes, because this is her home. She's just away. That doesn't mean she don't live [there.]...

Q. Would it make a difference if she had a room at her mother's or not?

A. That's still her home. Cause she's only away...just for school...Go home on the weekends, but when they say go home they go where they actually live, although they are staying with the grandmother."

(Several other informants told me that college students could be considered as living in two places, but they seemed to reserve the word home for the parents' houses.)

Respondent above also has employed the term belong to describe the attachment to the mother's place. Perhaps it is this sense of belong which explains a potential contradiction in the data: The term was spontaneously used by only two informants, but it was selected by all informants who performed the card sorting task as part of the cluster of terms which go with usually lives there. It seems that the concept of social attachment is more usually expressed in other terms (like should be there and attached to) but when respondents were offered the term belong it was both recognizable and highly salient to them. Respondents tended to pick it up when I used it in a question or vignette, and use it in connection with the concept of home, (in its sense of "place of social assignment") :

"Belonging, yes...Since she says she belongs at her mother's house. But if you belong somewhere that's totally different from your place of residence. Like if I was to move out, I'd still belong at my mother's house. If something was to happen to me out here, I could always go back to my mother's because that's where I belong...So that's my home away from home."

4. Home as local area. Respondents sometimes use the word home to indicate an attachment to a

neighborhood or a city. The areal senses of the word home, in this population, seem to be relatively unimportant. However, it is possible that with immigrant groups, this concept would take on greater significance.

The Concept of Family

In the context of this paper, it is not necessary to describe at length the family system in African American culture. Papers by Peter Hainer (1987) and the Valentines (1971) have discussed the effects of this family system on problems of enumeration. The focus of this analysis is much more narrow. It will concentrate exclusively on the way in which the term family is used in discussions of residence.

It should be noted that although the term was used by more than half of the informants, it did not occur with very high frequency within the text of the interviews, as home appears to do. Nevertheless, people talked about specific relatives in almost every interview. The previous discussion of the centrality of mothers to the concept of home demonstrates this amply. Other categories of relatives were mentioned as well. However, respondents discuss these people in describing specific living situations. They did not invoke the abstract concept of family very often in doing this.

Family is not a residence concept per se, and it is not generally directly elicited by questions phrased in terms of living and staying. Only one respondent seemed to make this leap:

"Q. Who else lives or stays with you there?

A. You mean my family?

This respondent was actually living with two roommates, which indicates that the use of the term family was not simply a prelude to a description of a specific group of people. It perhaps reflects a notion that some people seem to have that the Census Bureau's questions are about families:

"Because you could usually live in college, but that wouldn't be your address...according to what you are asking, because you would want that person listed with their family."

Own place as a residence concept

The importance of having one's own place to respondents was discussed in the previous study. Respondents often express a desire to "have my own place" or "my own apartment". Most of the

time this is an expression of the desire to have control over living space by being the owner or renter. The concepts of own place and home are conceptually linked, because they both involve the ideas of rights to be there and control. In most contexts, the two terms are often used interchangeably.

Household

Because of its use in Census questionnaires, it is important to examine the uses of the word "household", although it was used by only four respondents in the first set of interviews, and only one additional respondent in the second set of interviews. Because of its importance as a Census concept, it is worthwhile to examine the contexts in which it is used more closely.

The term was occasionally included in the questions which were asked, but there is little evidence that responses to these questions matched the Census concept of household. For example, in answer to the question "Who is in your household?" one respondent at first began to list off her children, who were all staying with different relatives. When the question was amended to "Who is living with you in your household now?" she mentioned herself, her common law mate, and the landlord's son, who occasionally stayed an upper part of the house while it was being renovated. This same tendency towards over-inclusion was demonstrated by another respondent, whose first response to the question "Who is in your household?" was to list the names of the occupants of all four apartments in her building. Even this definition of household did not remain stable: when I asked if she was unsure of listing anyone in her household, she said "Sometimes [my son] gives me a hard time. Sometimes I don't want to count him." The son was an adult living in another part of the city.

In the instances above, it seems clear that household had little, if any, specific meaning to the respondents. Other informants may handle their uncertainty about the term by replacing it with something more familiar:

"Q. Is there anybody who might be part of your household, but you're not sure?

A. No, not at my house. At my house. My mother's house."

This respondent has replaced the term household with house. This substitution does not simply

refer to house as a physical structure. The respondent spent most of her time with a girlfriend, and the place she refers to as my house is where she socially assigns herself. It appears that house may be a term which is very close in meaning to home, but further research would be necessary to establish this. Household should be investigated to see if respondents interpret it in terms of social assignment more than physical location.

It is interesting that in two of the instances when respondents used the term household spontaneously, they were referring to definitions of the term which seem to have originated with public agencies other than the Census Bureau. These respondents were familiar with a number of agencies which define who should be a part of a particular household participating in a program or receiving assistance. This experience tends to condition their use of the term. For example, a man who was living illegally with a relative in a public project, told me "I'm not part of that household", although he had described himself as "living with" his sister in a "family type atmosphere." Another respondent used the term in a similar context:

"Q. Why [would they want to hide things?]

A. Too many people living in the household, and they really not supposed to have those people in there, and that's why they try to hide it. Because if they find out too many people living there they can be put out or evicted...that's the basic thing.

It appears from this data that household either means little to people, or forms part of a formal register of speech which informants learn by interaction with public agencies with which they come in contact. It might be worthwhile to investigate the extent to which these other bureaucratic definitions of the term household bias the reporting of Census data.

Usual Place of Residence

No respondent in the first set of interviews spontaneously used the word "residence." However, a question was included in the second set of interviews which introduced the term "usual place of residence." Respondents in this group did tend to adopt and modify the term for their own use. Residence, place of residence, own residence, resident, and permanent resident are all forms into which the phrase is modified.

It is evident that the "usual" part of the phrase tends to get dropped. This may be because the term usually is confusing to some people in this context:

"Q. Does 'usual place of residence' mean the same thing [as 'usually lives here'] to you?

A. Well, yes - are they usually - are they here? I would also be asking myself, do they use any other address as well. When you say to me they usually live here does that mean I'll be here sometime and another place at another time...Place of residence would be more permanent than, - - the most permanent place."

If residence is interpreted as permanent, then usual residence may be viewed, as this respondent appears to do, as a contradiction in terms.

Address as a residence term

Respondents in the second set of interviews often rely on knowing what a person's address is in order to judge where they live. A variety of terms are used, including campus address, local address, mailing address, permanent address, usual living address, and family address. Respondents seem to reacting to their experiences with institutional requests to provide both a long term and temporary address on application forms. They assume that the Census Bureau prefers to list people at the long term address.

Conclusions

Because of the small number of respondents, it is difficult to generalize with any certainty to other African American informants. The following conclusions are offered primarily as ways of pointing out what may be fruitful avenues for further research.

1. Respondents use a wide variety of terms, representing many levels of attachment to places, in describing living situations. The most commonly used term, (other than live and stay), is home.

2. Home is the most salient term spontaneously used by these respondents. It is often used as a definitional replacement for forms of the term live. Although home and live are similar in expressing stable attachments to a place, they differ significantly. Home bears connotations of intimacy, identity and social assignment: home is where you belong. These considerations often override the implication that a person should be physically present in the place considered home. In these data, highly mobile young people, men with

attachments to a variety of households, children being cared for by relatives other than parents, and college students, are seen as examples of people whose home is not where they usually live. It is interesting to note that problems in enumeration are frequently encountered with these categories of persons. It is also interesting that respondents often seem to respond to questions about where a person lives with a calculation of where home is thought to be. In this data, this is the best example of a concept or term not used in a question which influences responses to it.

3. The term belong is highly recognizable to respondents, and is closely associated with the concept of social assignment. The precise relationship between belong and home warrants further investigation.

4. Few respondents use the term household, and those who do use it in ways not intended by the Census Bureau. There is some evidence of a tendency to use household as part of a formal register of speech learned by dealing with other bureaucracies whose definitions compete with the census definition. Since the term is used in many census questions, this might have effects on the quality of the data provided by respondents.

5. The term residence does not appear in respondents spontaneous use vocabulary, but it is recognized and associated with permanence. However, the term usual residence was confusing to at least one respondent, and others modified it by dropping the usual or transforming it into permanent residence or own residence. The differences between these forms should be investigated.

References

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