PROBLEMS OF QUESTIONS SUCH AS RELIGION AND ORIGIN IN THE CANADIAN CENSUS

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Today we are to speak about problems encountered in asking such questions as religion and origin in the Canadian Decennial Censuses. You will have surmised that our problems do not arise primarily in the areas of tabulating or compiling the data as, aside from the editing involved in preparing origin statistics, nothing could be more straight-forward than the mechanical aspects of putting the answers together in tables. Actually, such problems as we have arise in the field and stem largely from two causes. We must find ways to phrase each question in such a way that the populace will understand what it is that the census-taker is attempting to find out. Secondly, questions such as those on "religion" and "origin" may have an emotional impact on some people and may lead to some distortion in the answers hence affecting the relative accuracy and usefulness of the data. But I am getting ahead of myself and had best drop back to cover some of the background of the Canadian Census and review how some of the questions came to be asked and how they are interpreted.

In 1870 an Act was passed by the Canadian Parliament to provide for "The first census in Canada to be taken in the year 1871 --- to ascertain and show, with the utmost accuracy possible --- all statistical information which can conveniently be obtained and stated in tabular form touching population and the classification thereof, as regards age, sex, social conditions, religion, education, race, occupation, and otherwise ---".1/

Here then, we see that from the very beginning the law of Canada provided for inclusion of questions on "religion" and "race" and, as a result, we have asked these questions continuously since 1871. "Race" in recent years has fallen into discard being replaced by "origin". It is under the authority of the Census Act that such questions came to be asked and have continued from census to census.

Provision being made for collection of information on "race" and "religion", the question arose as to the interpretation of these terms. Dealing with the question of definition first we find that the interpretation of the term "religion" in the Census has been approached rather broadly in that people are asked what religious denomination they "profess" or "prefer" - Roman Catholic, Anglican, Judaism, etc. - being given the opportunity to state "none" or "atheist" and the like, this being their wish.

This approach we believe accounts for the relatively few problems of any kind found in the collection of statistics on religion. Because religion is associated with a denominational "preference" and the classification "none" is admissible, no complications regarding definition are apparent.

In the case of "race" it has always been the intent to determine "ethnic" origin. This concept has not varied throughout the history of the Censuses but, unfortunately, it has not been easy to define and has been difficult to explain concisely and briefly on a questionnaire. It has not been possible to strike upon any single factor that will adequately identify the "origin" of all persons. Changing political boundaries and intermarriage are two of the factors that make it difficult for many to say with assurance that "my origin is Scottish, Syrian, Greek or Polish". At some time in the progress of Canadian Censuses, there took place a switch in the concept of "origin". The initial emphasis on geographic or national origin in the definition of "origin" gave way to an increasing concern about cultural associations.

Consequently, the approach to collecting the information about "origin" has shifted from census to census in an attempt to make the census-taker's requirements clear to the respondent. One approach that has been tried is to state the question in terms of political-geographic background and the second to link it to linguistic affiliations.

Before 1941, the birthplace concept predominated because, aside from selected ethnic groups such as the Jews, Poles and Ukrainians, the country of origin is as good an indicator of most persons' ethnic background as one can readily find. Thus, in the 1931 Census, the statement on the meaning of origin contained: "--- For the remaining elements of the population (whites), those namely which derive originally from Europe --- the question as to origin usually elicits the original place of residence and implied cultural surroundings of the family before transfer to the North American continent. In most cases, therefore, the replies to the census questions indicate the country or section of Europe from which the family originally came ---".2/

Through time, however, the feeling grew that linguistic affiliations were the most important influence in most cases in determining the cultural background of our people rather than the geographic or political affiliations. Therefore by 1941, the relevance of birthplace as the primary determinant of "origin" decreased in importance and in 1951 origin was defined for the purpose of census collection as follows: "You will first try to establish a person's origin by asking the language spoken by the person (if he is an immigrant), or by his paternal ancestor when he first came to this continent".3/ However, the 1951 Census has shown that this linguistic affiliation is not sufficient to clearly distinguish backgrounds in the case of origin. The 1951

Census of Canada recorded, for instance, that there were:

2,569 Jews of British Origin
429 Jews of French Origin
7,600 Jews of Polish Origin
9,118 Jews of Russian Origin

in the Canadian population.

It is apparent that aside from difficulties in defining the concepts in understandable terms one might have difficulty because the answers, if given under emotional stress, could be distorted or untrue. Some questions provoke relatively little emotional feeling on the part of respondents. Thus, for example, the questions directed towards establishing a person's sex has, in general, more chance of eliciting a straight factual answer. However, as one attempts to penetrate more deeply into the characteristics of the population and uncover "facts" about its social, religious and economic circumstances, the questions asked may produce emotional responses to some degree. For example, some persons are sensitive concerning their ages, while some men would rather be known as "sanitary engineers" than as "street cleaners".

In the same way, questions on religion and origin could provoke emotional reactions that might lead to erroneous replies. In the case of religion there is apparently less difficulty; the reason being that the Census does not try to determine the "degree" of a person's religious participation. Actually all that is attempted is to obtain a statement of "profession" or "preference", rather than "affiliation", with the opportunity supplied to give the answer "none" if desired. Enumerators are, in fact, cautioned against "forcing" a person to state a denomination if the person has no religious association. And, although some people may feel obliged to state a connection with some denomination when their association with that religion is remote in the extreme, the concept behind the question is substantially filled because by definition we are looking for a "preference" and are not striving in any degree to determine the extent of religious participation. Thus, census totals for a given denomination exceed those shown on church rolls and this excess is, in itself, of interest to religious authorities.

Questions pertaining to origin may be subject to similar emotional reaction. Many people of some, we think a relatively small number, ethnic and language groups seem to feel it expedient to claim affiliation with another group rather than admitting their true origin. For instance, people of Russian origin may feel that they will be more readily accepted if they claim to be Polish or Ukrainian. During the two World Wars, persons of German extraction often laid claim to Dutch ancestry. Such distortions are not too difficult to detect because the answers received will vary with the political and social climate existing at the times that censuses are carried out.

This being true, it becomes necessary to attempt some appraisal of the extent that such problems distort the accuracy of the statistics. That errors and distortions exist would not be denied. But in spite of some distortion valuable use can be made of the figures.

Some effort was made by Norman Ryder to appraise the accuracy of the "origin" series, the results of which were published in the Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science.[4] Those interested in this subject would be well paid to turn up his article.

Briefly put, however, Mr. Ryder attempted to establish the quality of origin statistics "viz., the extent to which the aggregates established by answers to this question actually correspond with the language groups".[5] After an examination of data relating to people of European extraction and reporting other than English or French as their mother tongue, Mr. Ryder concluded that the Census statistics, useful figures though they may be, contain errors for certain specific groups.

For instance, he demonstrated that certain origin groups contain a number of persons that judged on the basis of language spoken should belong to other groups. Typical of these are the Netherlands, Russians and Poles. On the other hand, there is evidence that some of those who speak German and Ukrainian find their way into the wrong categories leaving their own origin groups under-enumerated. Some of these errors can be traced to the fact that immigrants speaking a given language will come from an area that has changed hands and now belongs to another country. Thus, language and birthplace do not apparently match up. Such complications are difficult to sort out. In addition, these errors vary between Censuses apparently depending on how the public opinion of the time regards the various groups.

If then, questions like these create problems in enumeration and response that are liable to distort the results, one might ask: why carry them on? In the first place these figures, rough though they are, contribute a good guide to the numbers of people of various ethnic groups and religious denominations settled in Canada. In a world where rumours and ignorance concerning the size and composition of minority groups feed suspicion and often persecution, even rough data bearing some relation to facts, can prove a useful counter.

Aside from this, a surprising number of individuals and groups ask for material of this nature. They seem to feel that although the statistics are rough, they still supply a guide in their work and they would prefer to have them, approximate though they may be, rather than have no data at all. Among the users of origin statistics are found the various national organizations, such as the Canadian Jewish Congress, the Ukrainian Association of Canada, St. Jean Baptiste Society, and the Lebanese and Syrian Society. Business firms and marketing research agencies are also heavy users of this material. As for religious statistics, church authorities use them for a good many purposes and all denominations are insistent upon the question being retained in the Census schedule. This, of course, gives them some

idea of how numerous their supporters will be in the various areas of Canada. Demographers can also use statistics on religious denominations to attempt to trace patterns of family size and other characteristics for Canada as a whole and for smaller geographical areas.

Canada, like the U.S.A., is a nation built out of immigrant peoples. Since the early 1600's successive waves of people born in foreign lands have come ashore to settle and develop the country. Figures on birthplace, language spoken, religion, and origin, taken together with the questions on education, occupation, etc. should and could be of great value to anyone engaged in studying the impact that Englishmen, Jews, Germans, Methodists, Roman Catholics and Mormons have had on the building up of a culture in Canada. Those interested in the social and cultural development of our country - in some respects unique with its strange association of two distinct main cultural groups of people - will find material of this nature important.

Government departments dealing with aspects of citizenship and immigration use the figures extensively. They have an important bearing on the study of immigration for they show the extent that the newer peoples are mixing with the basic stock of the country and adapting to Canadian institutions. Certain classes of immigrants adapt readily to the Canadian way of life, intermarrying with native British and French stock, and are easily assimilated. Others are less successful in adapting to the society and institutions of Canada or because of recent arrival are comparatively unassimilated. The statistics from the Census on the relationship between official language, mother tongue and the language indicated by the origin reported can also help to determine the extent to which immigrant groups maintain their individual identities.

This, we think, illustrates that an appreciable demand exists for statistics of this type. Merely because, to date, figures gathered have contained errors seems a poor excuse not to continue the search for more reliable methods of collecting accurate data.

In doing this, some may say that it is not right to "pry" into another's religion or his origin, but we submit that this does not constitute any more "prying" than asking a man his age or occupation. Some may say that these are personal matters and attempting to uncover them will create difficulties. We can only say that we have not found that the people of Canada in general regard the questions either as "impertinent" or "prying".

In the taking of a census some individuals for one reason or another refuse to answer some or all of the questions. We can say, however, that no exceptional trouble has been caused by our questions on religion, language, origin, etc. People generally do not resent them or refuse to answer them, but generally speaking it is lack of knowledge and problems of definition, consistant with concept, that cause the Canadian census-takers the most headaches.

In 1951 it was necessary for the Canadian Census to accept "Canadian" and "American" for those respondents who were borne out of families having several generations of birth on this continent. Particularly is this true in those families in which the admixture prevents them from making a clear-cut selection of their origin. Too wide a use, however, of these two terms would ultimately defeat the purpose of the census questions. This has not happened yet, however, as only one per cent of the total population reported "Canadian", "American" and "unknown" in 1951.

Similar problems are encountered, of course, in other areas of the Census. For instance, questions on education and occupation are hard to define. In the case of education, Canada's principal statistics are compiled in the Education Division of DBS, being supplied from the institutions and the provinces who have complete jurisdiction in the field of education. Although it has been suggested that the Census be used to obtain extensive and precise information on education, the net result of the extensive questions necessary would be to make the Census unwieldy. Consequently, in 1961 our Census will be confined to two questions - "What was the highest grade or year attended" and "In the past school year has the person attended a school or university".

Questions on occupation raise difficulties centering around the concepts of employment. Particularly serious is the problem as to whether or not the enumerator can obtain an accurate listing of a person's occupation if the enumerator talks to someone other than the person concerned. In 1961 we hope to further improve our census data on employment subjects through such means as more intensive publicity, stepping up the cooperation of employers who provide each employee with a more precise definition of his job (a very useful effort in 1951), better wording of the questions and improvements in the Classification of occupation and industry.

Historically speaking, the difficulties that have arisen in securing answers to census questions in Canada, have not been due to resistance or resentment on the part of the public, but rather to a lack of knowledge of, or an understanding of, definitive answers on the part of the respondent. In the future, therefore, we must continue to look for improved methods of securing our data in such a way that the relative usefulness of the statistics will not be impaired. In order to do this we must be very clear concerning what we seek. If we determine exactly what we want, then by thought and trial we can develop the particular combination of questions that will give us the answers we need, adding to the accuracy and the usefulness of the Census of Canada.

In conclusion, it is apparent why my US colleagues requested this paper and that it stems out of the problems that they encountered particularly on the inclusion of the question of "religion" in 1960. We have been told by an emminent authority that one reason such questions are practical in our Census may be sought in some fundamental characteristics of our constitution which one is not competent to discuss in this paper. Census-wise,

however, as has been pointed out by Dr. Omer Lemieux on many occasions, and as was implied in the first part of this paper, "we have asked these questions continuously since 1871 and Canadians, generally speaking, around Census time go all out to provide the best information in their possession."

Nevertheless, we must admit that were we trying to ask such questions for the first time for inclusion in 1961 one could almost bet that we should face greater problems because of public reaction. "Familiarity" has made the Canadian Census respondent more willing to supply the answers to census questions. His main problem is in trying to sort out just where he belongs in the census classifications and hence in the census tables. "Familiarity" in this case has not bred contempt because first and foremost the Canadian wants a good census.

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