

**THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF PRIVACY AMONG SPECIAL POPULATIONS:  
THE POWER FACTOR**

Melinda Crowley, [Melinda.Crowley@census.gov](mailto:Melinda.Crowley@census.gov)  
U.S. Census Bureau, Washington DC, 20233

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**1. Introduction**

This paper focuses on a neglected dimension of privacy and survey nonresponse which is the role that power plays between special populations<sup>2</sup> and institutional others<sup>3</sup> which may affect the rationales that some respondents have for deciding whether or not to disclose personal information on a census form. The privacy orientations discussed in this paper are the result of concrete social experiences respondents have encountered which contribute to the strength of particular attitudes and social perceptions regarding privacy issues. Respondent impressions represent a belief system towards privacy preferences based on cultural, social and behavioral factors. Privacy is addressed in this paper not only as a theoretical concept, but as a social issue that must be better understood by survey practitioners.

**2. Methods**

Research findings are all derived from a second phase of collective ethnographic research that examined privacy implications for the decennial census (Gerber 2001). Data for this qualitative research were exploratory and collected in the tradition

of sociocultural anthropology - primarily by means of individual ethnographic interviews with open-ended probes and vignettes.

One of the strengths of ethnographic research is the comprehensive perspective it provides researchers. By going directly to the social phenomenon under study and observing it as completely as possible, we were able to develop a deeper understanding of respondent privacy attitudes which impact survey research. Although ethnographic field research typically yields qualitative data, this research was not just a data-collecting activity, but a way to expand our comprehension of privacy as a social and behavioral trend.

A total of 81 in-depth interviews were conducted for this phase of research. Both special population groups and white respondents were sampled (see Table 1). Special population respondents were over sampled since, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, people of color, young adult males and immigrants are among the population groups considered “hard-to-reach (HTR)” and thus, are consistently “underenumerated.” Recruitment was nationwide and included respondents from California, Illinois, Florida, Washington DC, Maryland, Virginia and New York.

**Table 1**

Respondent Research Sample: Phase II (n=81)				
White	Black	American Indian	Hispanic	Asian
10	16	20	20	15

**3. Discussion and Findings**

**3.1 The Political Economy of Privacy**

American society is an information-based society with personal information as a salient part of the economic data base. Government and corporate businesses justify their increasing demands for personal information as a tool to aid their decision-making efforts. However, previous research data points to an eroded public trust of government and commercial corporations (Crowley 2002, Gerber 1999). They are perceived as two of the major consumers and abusers of personal information

<sup>1</sup> This paper reports the findings of research undertaken by Census Bureau staff. This paper has undergone a more limited review than official Census Bureau publications. The views expressed are attributable to the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Census Bureau. This report is released to inform and encourage cross-disciplinary discussion and research among interested parties. The author expresses her gratitude to those most closely connected to this research for their contributions. The author is grateful to Eleanor Gerber, Jan McStay, John Boise, Besty Strick, Alisu Gloua-Shousburg, Susan Trencher and Bhavani Arabandi.

<sup>2</sup> Special populations refer to non-white individuals who are members of historically, under-enumerated groups; including immigrants, ethnic minorities and individuals considered to be low-income or poor.

<sup>3</sup> Institutional other is defined here as a governmental or public sector agency (i.e. Census Bureau, Justice Department) and as a non-governmental or private sector corporation or organization (i.e. banks, marketers, grocery stores).

(Crowley 2002)<sup>4</sup>. The clamor for respondents to protect their privacy also clashes at times with the data needs of survey researchers. One African American male respondent, who I shall refer to as William\*, age 30, had this to say about divulging personal information to the government and the Census Bureau:

*The only concern, and it may be a little paranoid, and it may be indicative of a lot of the minority community, is suspicion about government and the Census and the way the numbers are tabulated and what those numbers are used for. And me not being too different from most minority communities, I was most suspicious as to okay, what are these numbers going to be used for. ....Would these statistics be used fairly or unfairly. Let's say when district lines or money is appropriated if you actually had numbers that actually showed that more money should be appropriated in one area and then you don't do it, that's unfair. I was just more concerned with making sure things were done on the up and up on the government side.*

The implication of William's sentiment was also shared by other respondents. Concerns about government having the ability or power<sup>5</sup> to misuse their statistical capital could possibly bring about political and economical injustices to communities to which special population respondents belong. Respondent discussions often implied a 'what-if' attitude towards survey compliance: *What-if I provide my personal information, will the institutional other use this data to help or hinder my member group? What-if I provide my personal information, will the institutional other use my information to serve or harm me?*

The political economy of privacy is about exercising social power, freedom of choice and personal control over information deemed private. When respondents believe they are in a situation in which maintaining or achieving privacy is

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See Crowley report "Generation X Speaks Out on Civic Engagement and The Census: An Ethnographic Approach;" Section 4.5 on Distrust, Skepticism and Discontent.

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Power is defined here as the ability to impose ones' will on others irrespective of their wishes.

\*Respondent name has been changed.

problematic, then respondents seek ways to protect, nurture, extend and enhance a threatened privacy domain. The ability to exercise choice and control when requests for personal information are received is being able to choose how, when, under what circumstances, and to what degree respondents are able to relate to institutional others.

One reason for targeting special population groups is because these respondents are believed to be more sensitive to claims of privacy since previous research suggests that their privacy is often compromised by institutional others because of their minority status or experiences (Crowley 2002)<sup>6</sup>. Also, many of the respondents who are members of these special population groups appear to be concerned about privacy because the loss of control over personal information means greater susceptibility to discriminatory exclusion from employment, insurance, credit opportunities and so on. These respondents state that they are sometimes subjugated to intense regulatory requests for personal information, thus enjoying less privacy while lacking the resources necessary to defend against scrutiny, surveillance and intrusion of their privacy.

Although special populations may enjoy less privacy in their lives whether it is due to nosey neighbors who live in the same public housing complex or because of the kinds of blue-collar jobs in which they are employed, these special population groups have become very skilled at finding ways to protect their privacy. And unfortunately for those of us who are in the business of gathering, collecting and analyzing personal information, when respondents protect their personal information, it often leads to nonresponse or to the disclosure of partial and/or inaccurate information.

For example, immigrant respondents who come to the United States seeking employment are often vulnerable to attacks on their privacy and faced with a barrage of questions concerning their residency status. Non-white respondents often charged that their privacy is often invaded upon in terms of racial profiling, whether walking down the street in the "wrong" neighborhood or while driving a vehicle. Low-income respondents report that their privacy is constantly intruded upon with a litany of financial questions asked by institutional others, especially if they live in subsidized housing facilities. Uneasy historical relations between special population groups and institutional others are cause for current distrust and

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See Crowley's "Generation X Speaks Out on Civic Engagement and The Census: An Ethnographic Approach."

credibility anxieties. All of these kinds of experiences set the context for why special population respondents continue to possess a higher degree of skepticism and distrust against institutional others.

Respondents are well aware that personal information is power and the ever-increasing capability of institutional others to collect, store, sell, trade and transmit information has serious implications for the imbalance of power between public and private agencies in relation to the insignificant power of the individual to determine when, how and to what extent personal information is communicated and circulated to others. What I have described here also applies as a larger cultural schema to all respondents (regardless of race, income, or citizenship), but it is the power that institutional others possess and may act on that special population groups seem to be more sensitive to and concerned about. A 37 year old Caucasian respondent argues:

*I'm not a big conspiracy buff. I don't think there's a big agency out there that's trying to collect data on me to turn over. I think my data would be relatively uninteresting to begin with. And so I had no problem filling [the census] out. I thought it was, what's the opposite of intrusive? Very non-intrusive.*

### 3.2 Information Supply and Demand

Respondents are well aware that information is power. The constant requests for respondents to disclose personal information, which is a commodity, a marketable product or good onto itself, is a disruption of one's privacy. The supplier of the personal information is the respondent and the demander of the personal information is the institutional other. The transaction of exchanging personal information (the product) is either *traded*, that is, disclosed for some type of beneficial incentive like money; *bartered*, that is, information is provided without exchanging money, perhaps in exchange for some service or because of some altruistic motive (civic responsibility); or the personal information (the product) is *partially provided or not provided at all*, possibly because the demand for the personal information outweighs the benefit to supply it, that is, the risks to supply the personal information are too great to assume for the respondent (harassing telemarketing phone calls to identity theft).

The power factor of privacy is triggered when respondents feel they have to disclose or supply

personal information to an institutional other due to their situation or position of dependence; or, irrespective of a respondent's wishes, they feel obligated or under restraint to provide personal information. In such instances respondents no longer control the access to their product; that is, to whom their personal information is distributed and how it is distributed. Power is thus unilateral<sup>7</sup> and not bilateral<sup>8</sup>. One Hispanic respondent shares:

*How I decide to do it (disclose personal information) depends on how bad I need the exchange. I guess that's what it is. I'm getting something for something. They are getting the personal information they seek and I'm getting something. Things I give information to like insurance, school and other agencies, I don't see that I really have a choice. I have to do it. It seems like there is no trade-off really. You have to do it (share personal information).*

Privacy represents the control of transactions between and among individuals and institutional others in which the ultimate aim is to minimize respondent vulnerability or risk. Increased concern about privacy among respondents may reflect a declining confidence that institutional others will maintain personal information as confidential.

A strong preference among respondents for face-to-face contact may indicate a strategy on the part of respondents to decrease their risk or vulnerability when supplying personal information. Table 2 reveals that 44.4% of sampled respondents prefer personal contact interviews. 60% of these respondents were Black; 53% Asian; 42% Hispanic; and 38% American Indian. There are a number of factors that may be associated with respondent mode preferences when protecting ones' privacy.

Since few other institutional others use personal visits to the same extent the Census Bureau does to collect personal information, the very effort of making a personal visit may convey a greater sense of importance and legitimacy among respondents. For example, personal contact may be preferred by special population respondents (e.g. immigrants) who have literacy challenges. Also, some cultures are

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Unilateral Power is a form of external power that can be exercised to subject another to a condition of dependence.

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Bilateral Power is a mutual form of power exchanged between parties that is not due to restraint or obligation.

characterized by a greater use of oral versus written communication, thus face-to-face interviews encourage bilateral empowerment for respondents rather than a unilateral power exchange with institutional others.

Respondent preferences for mail participation may reflect greater privacy, convenience and control of decennial ‘self enumeration.’ Table 2 shows that 36.1% of sampled respondents favor mail mode response as a first choice preference. Perhaps similar advantages of the Internet are counteracted by uncertainties about who has access to on-line personal information. Only 13.9% of respondents chose the Internet as a desirable survey response mode. Access to the Internet itself may account for the low preference rate among special population respondents.

The data presented in Table 2 also shows that telephone mode response is the most unacceptable mode preference by 44.4% of sampled respondents. Phone contact does not allow for any visual cues or verification of interviewer identity. Also, to the extent that respondents are solicitation-weary, they may associate phone contacts with a healthy degree of skepticism.

**Table 2.**

Decennial Participation Mode Preferences (n=81)				
	Mail Mode	Personal Contact Mode	Telephone Mode	Internet Mode
First Choice	36.1%	44.4%	5.6%	13.9%
Second Choice	27.8 %	27.8 %	16.7 %	25.0 %
Third Choice	13.9 %	11.1 %	25.0 %	11.1 %
Fourth Choice	11.1 %	8.3 %	8.3 %	16.7 %
Unacceptable Mode Choice	11.1%	8.3 %	44.4 %	33.3 %

**3.3 The Narrowing Down of Privacy**

Respondents overwhelmingly expressed the concern that there is “less privacy” in today’s society than compared to the past. The narrowing down of privacy seems to be an increasing anxiety among special population groups because constant requests for personal information are seen as forms of policing, snooping and harassment by institutional others. One respondent had this to say about supplying personal information,

*Because it’s another bloody form, it reminds people of the power of government over our lives. These forms remind you that the government just has so much control over everything we do. There is no privacy anymore.*

The ability or power individuals have to control the amount, access and process in which personal information circulates about them via institutional others is premised on honoring and respecting respondent interaction management values. Paying attention to respondent strategies towards interaction management may lead to a more balanced consideration of respondent control and choice; thus shifting the unequal perception of power between information suppliers and demanders to one that is bilateral as opposed to unilateral. Instead of the respondent always working to thwart invasions of privacy, responsibility should also be placed on institutional others to avoid perceived and actual invasions of privacy. Otherwise, the cost to institutional others in the business of survey research is increasing nonresponse rates among special populations due to neglected respondent interaction management concerns.

Although respondents are convinced that privacy is narrowing or shrinking, it is important to caution that information that is deemed private or personal is situational, meaning, personal information varies over time and in different situations. Personal information is neither intrinsically private or public, but is dependent on the context in which it is placed.

**3.4 Respondent Rationales and Expectations**

The rationales that respondents in this study often used to decide to disclose personal information with regards to decennial census compliance centered on eight core reasons as displayed in Table 3. The rationales used in this study may not be comparable as respondent rationales for individuals who participate in economic (e.g. Survey of Income and Program Participation), demographic or topical surveys (e.g. Current Population Survey).

In thinking about privacy, this research demonstrates that it is important to understand the level of concern a respondent has with regards to privacy as well as the basis for that concern. The factors involved in the development of an individual’s response to decennial cooperation are varied.

During individual interview sessions, respondent open-ended questioning (*Why did you agree to participate in the Census?*) revealed that respondent decision-making processes to participate in decennial

enumeration relied heavily on the opportunity for respondents to give back to the community. Table 3 illustrates that 26.7% of sampled respondents stated ‘civic duty’ as the most prevalent reason for decennial compliance. Respondents perceived providing personal information for the good of the public as a voluntary motive or as a ‘bilateral power’ incentive as opposed to a compulsory obligation to partake in the Census. In fact, only 18.8% of respondents in our study were motivated to cooperate with decennial enumeration efforts because they thought participation was mandatory.

**Table 3**

<b>Respondent Rationales To Participate in the Decennial Census (n=81)</b>	
<i>Rationale for Participation</i>	<i>Percentage of sample in which rationale was a decennial census participation factor</i>
*For the public good; civic duty or responsibility	26.7%
*Personal benefit or incentive	22.7%
*Information request deemed legitimate, relevant, trustworthy	19.8%
*Saw public campaign ad; received an advanced letter	18.8%
*Thought participation was mandatory	18.8%
*Policy on privacy	6.9%
*Positive rapport with interviewer	6.9%
*Access to available help in filling out form	2.9%

**\*Not Exclusive Rationales**

The pattern of rationales presented in Table 3 reflect a position of bilateral empowerment among respondents rather than a sense of unilateral entitlement as is often exhibited by institutional others. The most prevalent rationale responses from respondents are premised on the importance of decennial participation and positive expectations from the results of decennial participation, whether the outcomes pertain to public or private gains.

It is noteworthy to understand the role that privacy plays in respondent rationales for and against decennial enumeration. Prevalent rationales for not participating in the Census, as shown in Table 4, are focused more on concerns that represent ‘unilateral power’ or how participation would result in a net loss to the respondent personally.

For instance, 58.5% of respondents confessed that concealment of an illegal or illicit activity (respondent has something or someone to hide or protect) was incentive enough to avoid decennial enumeration efforts. Respondents shared that they did not want to further risk their chances of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) or the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) contacting them because they naively put their faith in a confidentiality statement drafted by an institutional other. Table 4 also shows that 46.6% of sampled respondents revealed that a lack of trust in the privacy and confidentiality promises created by institutional others was a reason *not* to participate in the decennial census.

**Table 4**

<b>Respondent Rationales <u>Not</u> To Participate in the Decennial Census (n=81)</b>	
<i>Rationale for Non-Participation</i>	<i>Percentage of sample in which rationale was a decennial census participation factor</i>
*Respondent had something or someone to hide or protect	58.5%
*Lack of trust in privacy & confidentiality promises; too many personal questions asked	46.6%
*Distrust, suspicion of government	36.6%
*Do not view participation as important	15.6%

**\*Not Exclusive Rationales**

#### 4. Recommendations

However one defines personal information, collecting this kind of data is the life-line of the work of a survey methodologist. This research suggests that:

- Item nonresponse should be evaluated for possible attempts by respondent’s seeking to control the communication and circulation of personal information in addition to other explanations such as misunderstanding question content;
- Clear explanations of the survey’s legitimate claim to the information are likely to be useful in convincing respondent’s to answer questions and reveal personal information. Explanations should include more than just descriptions of official policy, but should also

explain the way in which data is protected;

- Face to face (personal contact) interviews among special population groups are the preferred response mode over mail, Internet or telephone response when dealing with the disclosure of personal information;
- Respondent rationales to participate or not to participate in the Census are significant when respondents are processing or negotiating their final decisions with respect to decennial census compliance; and finally,
- Census and survey outreach messages should downplay any hints of compulsion. Outreach messages should not emphasize, for instance, that decennial census compliance is required by law. Many respondents report negative reactions to ‘forced participation’ and ‘unilateral empowerment.’

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## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is my premise that special population individuals who fear the loss of control over their personal information really fear an even more fundamental social concern - the growing power of large public and private institutional others in relation to the insignificant power and ability of the individual to thwart the constant demands, mandates and uses of personal information.

## References

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