Ethnic Origin and the Canadian Census: Background and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

As Canadian society changes and evolves, so does the nature of the questions posed by recent censuses. In this essay, the author charts the development of "ethnic origin" and "visible minority" questions in recent Canadian censuses. Because census data are necessary for the development and implementation of public policy, it is important that the information collected be able to map out the ethno-cultural diversity of Canadian society in such a way as to monitor diversity, and so as address, and ultimately even redress, certain inequalities that may result from the increase in immigrant populations.

"Data available in Canada on ethnicity are rich, pertain to a long period of time, and are of high quality – of very high quality when compared internationally" Krotki & Reid (1994, p.17)

Ethnic origin and visible minority questions in the Canadian census

Numerous historical and sociological circumstances help account for the development of "ethnic origin" and "visible minority" questions in the Canadian census. For instance, in the late 1960s, the fifth volume of the *Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism* made it clear that ethnocultural communities other than those of French and British ancestry also contributed greatly to the culture and fabric of Canadian society. Consequently, Canada adopted its Multiculturalism policy in 1971 which was then enshrined as the *Multiculturalism Act* of 1988, the first pluralism law of its kind in the world (Fleras & Elliot, 1992). Key features of the Multiculturalism Act include the following statement:

"The Government of Canada recognises the diversity of Canadians… as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society and is committed to a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Canada."

While seeking to improve the acceptance of ethnocultural diversity by all Canadians, the law served as a public policy tool for defusing potential intergroup tensions that could arise from the increasingly multiethnic and multilingual composition of the Canadian population (Breton, 1984). Thus, from 1971 onwards it became even more important to maintain the use of the ethnic origin question in the Canadian census. This necessity was enshrined in both the *Multiculturalism Act* and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The Multiculturalism Act declared it to be "*the policy of the Government of Canada that all federal institutions shall… collect statistical data in order to enable the development of policies, programs and practices that are sensitive and responsive to the multicultural reality of Canada*" (section 3.2.d). Furthermore, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* stated: "*The Charter shall be interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians*". While mainly addressed to the judiciary, this element of the Charter imposed a duty on the Government of Canada, the sole authority capable of collecting the data, to provide the courts with factual information on the ethnic ancestry of Canadians. Thus, the ethnic origin question became vital as a way of not only respecting the spirit of the Canadian Charter but also of monitoring the very diversity that was the target of the official policy on Multiculturalism.

In their extensive overview, White, Badets and Renaud (1993) provided a detailed analysis of the issues and challenges involved in measuring 'ethnic origin' in the Canadian census from 1767 to 1991. The wording and ethnic labels provided for the ethnic origin question of the Census varied across the decades reflecting not only changes in Canadian immigration policies but also changes in 'myth founding' premises about the desirability of ethnocultural diversity as a basis for nation

building in Canada. For instance, in addition to the examples of cultural groups provided in the ethnic origin question, the 1951 to 1991 Census provided only *one* open-ended option to report respondents' ancestry. However the cumulative effect of the more open immigration policies of the 1970s and the growing rate of exogamy did increase the ethnocultural diversity of the Canadian population. Consequently, the ethnic origin question drafted for the 1996 and 2001 census included four write-in options as a way of more fully describing respondents' ancestry. As can be seen below, as many as twenty-five labels were provided as examples of ethnic ancestry in the ethnic origin question (Q17) of the 2001 census.

Q17: While most people in Canada view themselves as Canadians, information on their ancestral origins has been collected since the 1901 Census to capture the changing composition of Canada's diverse population. Therefore this question refers to the ***origins of the person's ancestors****. To which ethnic or cultural group (s) did this person's* ***ancestors*** *belong?*

> ***Specify as many groups as applicable:*** *For example, Canadian, French, English, Chinese, Italian, German, Scottish, Irish, Cree, Micmac, Métis, Inuit (Eskimo), East Indian, Ukranian, Dutch, Polish, Portuguese, Filipino, Jewish, Greek, Jamaican, Vietnamese, Lebanese, Chilean, Somali, etc. (four blank spaces are provided for write-in responses)*

Though more complex to analyse, the 1996 and 2001 ethnic ancestry question had the advantage of more accurately reflecting the multiethnic background of Canadian citizens. Multiple responses to the ethnic origin item allowed cultural communities, policy makers and scholars to monitor the degree of 'ethnic mixing' and exogamy that was emerging in the Canadian population. The option of indicating more than one ethnic origin was also concordant with social psychological research showing that most individuals have multiple group identities (Nagel, 1994). Belonging to more than one cultural/ethnic ancestry has been shown to break down simplistic "us/them" categorisations within multicultural environments (Capozza & Brown, 2000). The criss-crossing category memberships which characterises multiple group memberships is related to more positive intergroup contacts and the reduction of prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviours (Bourhis & Gagnon,1994; Brewer & Gaertner, 2001).

Symbolically, inclusion of the ethnic origin question within the census also served to enshrine the status and importance of ethnocultural communities as full-fledged members of Canadian society. Documenting the vitality of cultural communities through census data on ethnic origin also enshrined the potential role of such minorities in re-defining and transforming the content of Canadian national identity. Thus the ethnic origin question provided demographic data which could be used to document the emerging founding myth of an officially multicultural Canada, qualitatively "distinct" from the assimilationist "melting pot" policy adopted by the neighbours south of the border (Berry, 2001; Bourhis et al., 1997).

An early critique of the multiculturalism model was levied by Quebec nationalists who asserted that the policy demoted French Canadians to the status of any other ethnocultural minority of recent immigrant background (Rocher, 1973). Quebec nationalists depicted the Multiculturalism policy as another example of how Anglo-Canada refused to recognise French Canadians on an equal footing with the English of Canada. The Multiculturalism policy asserted that in Canada "*although there are two official languages, there is no official culture, nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other*". Indeed the adoption of the Multiculturalism Policy announced the political demise of the concept of Canada's "two founding people" (Bourhis, 1994).

Not surprisingly, another critique of the Multiculturalism Policy emerged from the more traditional Anglo-British sectors of Canadian society whose status as a "founding people" was also challenged by the Multiculturalism policy (Driedger, 1996). The Multiculturalism policy represented a shift from the long established anglo-conformity policy of assimilation towards the British cultural symbols of the nine English majority provinces of Canada (Fleras & Elliot, 1992). It challenged the dominance of anglo-conformity reified as the common super-ordinate "Canadian identity" shared by all Canadians regardless of ethnic, linguistic or religious background (Breton, 1988). Without a common unifying core defining what is a "Canadian", how could immigrants and ethnocultural communities develop a sense of "belonging" and "loyalty" to their new country of settlement? By officially recognising the distinctiveness of all ethnic communities, the Multiculturalism policy was seen by many 'old stock' English Canadians as fundamentally divisive for Canadian identity (Bibby, 1990).

The ethnic origin question of the 1991 census was criticized by 'old stock' English-Canadians for excluding from its broad range of examples the very label most likely to unite all citizens: "Canadian". Right up to census day on June 4th 1991, the *Toronto Sun* ran a "Count-Me-Canadian" campaign which urged citizens to state "Canadian" as a response to the ethnic origin question of the census (Boyd, 1999). Results of the 1991 census showed that as many as 4% of respondents spontaneously indicated "Canadian" as their ancestry on the ethnic origin question. Boyd (1996) referred to this "Canadian" origin result as a "*dormant response waiting to be invoked*", especially for British ancestry respondents characterised by centuries of residency in Canada. In addition to crediting the "Count-Me-Canadian" campaign for the 1991 census results, Boyd (1999) proposed that "*Increasing levels of immigration, changed source countries, and the strengthening of neo-liberal ideologies may have set the stage for an upsurge in "Canadian" responses, particularly in certain geographical areas*" (p 7). Thus, Anglo-British ambivalence towards two decades of Government sponsored changes in both immigration and integration (Multiculturalism) policies had some impact on ethnic origin responses in the 1991 Census.

Given the popularity of the 'Canadian' label provided by Anglo-British respondents in the 1991 census, Statistics Canada included the 'Canadian' label as the fifth example for the ethnic origin question in the 1996 Census. To this day, the order of ethnic ancestry examples provided on the ethnic origin question is based on the most frequently

reported ethnic origins obtained in the previous census. Following the high rate of endorsement of the 'Canadian' label obtained in the 1996 census (38%), 'Canadian' was provided as the first example of the ethnic origin question in the 2001 census ('Canadian' in the English language census; 'Canadien' in the French language census).

With a less restrictive immigration policy adopted from the early 1970s onwards, the increasing presence of visible minorities made the issue of racism and discrimination more salient in Canada. By the mid 1990s, concerned Government departments, NGOs and visible minorities themselves felt that the ethnic origin question was no longer sufficient to properly track the presence of visible minorities in Canadian society, let alone provide the necessary baseline data needed to monitor patterns of inequality in employment, housing and the justice system. Consequently, the 1996 and 2001 Canadian Census added a new "visible minority" question which was presented with the following preamble inviting respondents to choose one or more pre-coded labels which best represented their category membership and/or add a category membership of their choice in the single blank space provided:

Q19: This information is collected to support programs that promote equal opportunity for everyone to share in the social, cultural and economic life of Canada.

Is this person: Mark "X" more than once or specify, if applicable: White, Chinese, South Asian (e.g. East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, etc), Black, Filipino, Latin American, Southeast Asian (e.g. Cambodian, Indonesian, Laotian, Vietnamese, etc.), Arab, West Asian (e.g. Afghan, Iranian, etc.), Japanese, Korean, Other-Specify (one blank space is provided).

For many concerned citizens, the visible minority question in the 1996 and 2001 census empowered visible minorities with the baseline data needed to document patterns of inequality and discrimination in Canadian society (Fleras & Elliot, 1999). While the "ethnic origin" question (Q17) documented the ethnic ancestry of Canadians, the "visible minority" question (Q19) provided respondents with the opportunity to categorize themselves as having a background which did not necessarily coincide with the details of their ethnic origin. Though the Canadian parliament insisted in keeping both questions in the 2001 census, some scientific civil servants in Statistics Canada preferred to drop the ethnic origin question (Q17) altogether. In contrast, scientific civil servants in the Department of Canadian Heritage preferred the ethnic origin question (Q17) because it referred to ethnic ancestry rather than to the less acceptable pre-coded "racial categories" contained in the "visible minority" question (Q19). Furthermore, Canadian Heritage did not feel that Q19 was an adequate replacement of Q17 because the "visible minority" question made it impossible to track 3rd generation Whites of various ethnic ancestries (e.g. Italian, Greek, German, Jewish, Polish, Ukranian, Lebanese, Chilean).

Thus both the "ethnic origin" and "visible minority" questions were complementary not only describing the multiethnic complexity of the Canadian population but also in setting the baseline data needed for establishing "employment equity programs" and anti-discrimination measures in housing, education, the police and the judiciary (Fleras & Elliott, 1999). Visible minorities, NGOs, and public policy makers could use this combined census data as evidence justifying measures to redress inequities based on ethnic and national origin (CHRC, 1997; CDPDJ, 1998). Census data on "ethnic origin" and "visible minority" background was also used to fine tune integration policies while providing up-to-date portraits of ethnic diversity in Canada. Given the availability of extensive census data on ethnic diversity, racist ideologues were hard-put to falsify or misrepresent basic demographic information concerning the ethnic and linguistic composition of the Canadian population.

Some changes in the ethnic composition of Canada

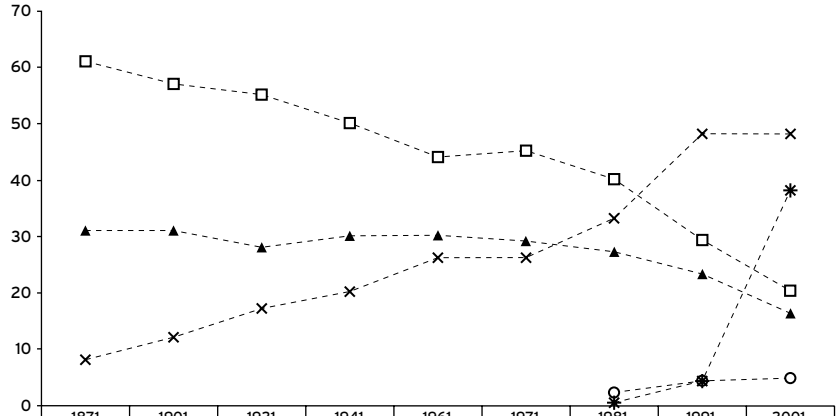
Census data gathered from the 19th century to the present provides an interesting portrait of changes which occurred in the ethnic composition of the Canadian population. Though not without its problems, Figure 1 summarises ethnic origin data obtained in the Canadian census from 1871 to 2001 expressed in percentage scores. Note that the proportion of Canadians who declared British as one of their ethnic ancestries declined from 61% in 1871 to 29% in 1991 and then to 20% in the 2001 census. The percentage of the population who reported they had French ancestry dropped from 31% in 1871 to 23% in 1991 and then to 16% in 2001. The drop in the proportion of respondents who declared either British or French ancestry between 1991 and 2001 was mainly due to the fact that close to eleven million respondents (38%) reported "Canadian" or "Canadien" as one of their ethnic ancestries in the 2001 census. The percentage of citizens who declared at least one ethnic origin other than British or French rose from only 8% in 1871 to as many as 48% in 2001 census (combining single and multiple origin responses). Finally it is noteworthy that the proportion of citizens who declared Aboriginal as a single or multiple origin rose from 2% of the population in 1981 to as many as 4.5% of the population in the 2001 census.

The increase in ethnic diversity obtained from the 1971 census onwards reflects the changes in immigration policy which until the late 1960s had favoured mainly white immigrants from Northern Europe (Knowles, 1997). As can be seen in Figure 1, Canada as a whole became a country with no ethnically defined "majority" by the 1991 and 2001 census. The multiethnic composition of the Canadian population was most evident in the 2001 census with over fourteen million people (48%) reporting dual or multiple ethnic origins as their ancestral background.

Though Canada prides itself as a country of immigrants, it was also clear that the label "Canadian" was becoming more popular as an ethnic origin response by the 1991 census. While 4% of the population spontaneously reported "Canadian" as a single or multiple ancestry response in the 1991 census when this label was not included as an example in the ethnic origin question, as many as 38% of the population reported this label in the 2001 census when "Canadian" was included as the first example in the ethnic origin question.

In their analysis of the 1996 census, Boyd & Norris (2001) showed that of those who reported "Canadian" as a single or multiple response to the ethnic origin question in the 1996 census, 38% were from Quebec, 31% from

Figure 1. Ethnic origin as a percentage (%) of the Canadian population: Census data from 1871-2001



	1871	1901	1921	1941	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001
Aboriginals (1)							2	4	4.5
British (2)	61	57	55	50	44	45	40	29	20
French (3)	31	31	28	30	30	29	27	23	16
Other ethnic origin (4)	8	12	17	20	26	26	33	48	48
Canadian (5)							0.5	4	38

* Given that many respondents reported multiple ethnic ancestries the total percentage is greater than 100%. Labels used to define 'ethnic origin' have varied during the last century. The ethnic origin definitions reflect more recent developments in the census including multiple ethnic ancestry.
(1) reported Aboriginal origins; (2) British only response and mixed British and French origin/ancestry; (3) French only and mixed French and British origin/ancestry; (4) All other ethnic ancestry including mixed with British and French ancestry; (5) Canadian only response and Canadian mixed with British, French and other ancestry.

Ontario and 9% were from British Columbia while the frequency of this response in the other provinces ranged from only 4% to less than 1%. Most significantly, it was "old stock" Canadians whose ancestry was British or French who were most likely to adopt "Canadian" as one of their ethnic origin response in the 1996 census. In contrast, only 1% of first generation immigrants and 2% of "visible minority" respondents reported "Canadian" as one of their ethnic origins. Of the respondents who chose "Canadian" as one of their ethnic ancestry in 1996, 48% reported English as a mother tongue, thus providing evidence that the label "Canadian" still carries an 'old stock' Anglo-British identity as one of its value connotation. The label "Canadien" provided in the French version of the census also carries an 'old stock' French Canadian connotation as is evident from the fact that as many as 52% of respondents who used this label as one of their ancestral background also reported French as their mother tongue (Boyd, 1999). Thus, British and French origin respondents who could trace their ancestry in Canada for many generations may be those who felt most comfortable in reporting the label "Canadian" or "Canadien" as their ethnic background. From a pan-Canadian nation building perspective, some politicians and policy makers are hopeful that a growing proportion of both old stock and new generation Canadian citizens will adopt "Canadian" or "Canadien" as one of their ethnic origin labels in the next census.

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