# WHO AM I? REFLECTIONS ON MEASURING ETHNIC ANCESTRY IN CANADA

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## INTRODUCTION

On St. Patrick's Day this year, I reflected on my ethnic ancestry. Am I Irish? I have Irish origins, having two great-grandmothers who were Irish, one of whom is my namesake. But I really have no connection to Irish culture or the Irish community. So, would I declare Irish as part of my ethnic ancestry? If I were answering the Census of Population ethnic origin question, should I write-in "Irish"?

My dilemma is not unique. There are countless people in Canada who face the exact same dilemma when answering the ethnic question on the census form. Does it really matter what my ancestry is? Is this information useful for public policy programs, or the delivery of services in Canada?

For some, there is considerable interest in having Canadians identify and report their ethnic heritage. In recent years, there has been a rise in interest in

exploring one's ethnic heritage. There are genealogical research companies offering services for someone to explore their origins and their ancestors. These companies offer access to some 30,000 historical databases to do this – ones often based on historical census files.

## WHAT IS ETHNIC ANCESTRY?

It is well known that ethnicity is a difficult concept to measure. There is no internationally recognized classification. Experience has shown that respondents (and researchers) have a number of interpretations of the meaning of the terms, 'ethnicity', 'ethnic ancestry', 'ethnic origin', and 'ethnic identity' – all often used interchangeably. The reporting of a set of ethnic origins in one data collection largely reflects a number of factors, such as the respondent's knowledge of family history, number of generations in Canada, time since arrival in Canada, their understanding of and views on the topic.

Social scientists note the inherent fluidity of the ethnic concept, and use terms such as "symbolic ethnicity" or "ethnic options", especially in reference to European origins.[1] People may have a certain ethnic heritage, but it does not mean that it is a "lived" experience with close attachment, such as to a culture, community or to customs. Others note the cultural heterogeneity within groups, the importance of the social context in which groups get identified and institutionalized, and the dichotomy between the external categorization process and internal self-identification (Brubaker 2004). Mary Waters (1996) summarizes as follows:

> "Social scientists who study ethnicity have long concluded that while ethnicity is based on a belief in a common ancestry, ethnicity is primarily a social phenomenon, not a biological one. The belief that members of an ethnic group have that they share a common ancestry may not be a fact. There is a great deal of change in ethnic identities across generations through intermarriage, changing allegiances, and changing social categories."

For those involved in data collection, it is challenging to have a single question which can encompass the complexity, diversity and the various dimensions of the ethnic concept.[2] In its data collection endeavors, Statistics Canada has focused on ethnic ancestry, defining it as the ethnic or cultural origins of a person's ancestors, pertaining to the ancestral "roots' or background of the population, and to not be confused with citizenship or nationality.

## THE EXPERIENCE IN CANADA

The Census of Population has been the principal source of data on Canadian's ethnic origins, recorded in nearly every census since the 1871 Census. This history reflects the long-standing and continuing demand for the information, and is some

1 "Symbolic ethnicity" is a nostalgic allegiance to, love for, and pride in a cultural tradition that can be felt and lived without having to be incorporated in the person's everyday behaviour (Gans 1979). Sociologist Mary Waters has coined the term "ethnic options" to express the idea that ethnic identity of the descendants of immigrants is flexible, symbolic and voluntary, not a definitive aspect of their identity (Waters 1990).

2 Certainly a challenge for surveys and censuses, and a concept not easily or readily collected with administrative data sources.

of the most widely requested data from the census.

The census ethnic question over time has become largely symbolic of the complexity, the nuances and the many dimensions of the ethnic mosaic in Canada. The question has evolved over the decades, reflecting the changing ethnic composition of the population, shifting views on ethnicity and Canadian society, and modernized methods to census enumeration and data capture technologies.[3]

Most recently, the ethnic ancestry question was asked on the 2016 long-form questionnaire "What were the ethnic or cultural origins of this person's ancestors?". Its format consisted of four write-in spaces, with 28 examples. The examples are intended to guide respondents in answering the question, based on a long-standing methodology for the selection of examples.[4] They are not meant to be response categories.

This question format has changed very little since the 1996 Census, though there have been some minor alterations to the text. The most significant change is the list of examples which is modified for each census based on an established methodology. The most substantial change has been the presence and placement of the "Canadian/*Canadien*" example.[5] It was listed as the fifth example in the 1996 Census, then first place in the 2001, 2006 and 2016 Censuses, and in the 2011 National Household Survey (NHS).[6]

Not surprisingly, the presence of the Canadian example on the questionnaire has led to considerable numbers providing this response. In the latest Census, 11.1 million people responded Canadian (alone or in combination with other origins), or nearly one-third of the population. Most of those reporting Canadian (89%) had both parents born in Canada, and 70% of the total Canadian response was in just two provinces, Quebec and Ontario.

**TABLE 1. TOTAL ETHNIC ORIGIN RESPONSES OF «CANADIAN», 1991 TO 2016**

| CENSUS YEAR | TOTAL CANADIAN RESPONSES |
|---|---|
| 1991 | 1,033,030 |
| 1996 | 8,806,275 |
| 2001 | 11,682,680 |
| 2006 | 10,066,290 |
| 2011 | 10,563,805 |
| 2016 | 11,135,965 |

Sources: Statistics Canada, censuses of population 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2016; 2011 National Household Survey.

3 At the end of the 19th century, the term "racial" was used in censuses. This was replaced by "ethnicity" in post-war censuses, and limited to paternal lineage until the 1980s.

4 The first 19 examples are the most frequently reported origins in the precedent census. Examples of Indigenous cultural groups are also provided, and several examples are chosen to provide coverage of world regions not already covered by the 19 most frequently reported origins. In total, 28 origins are listed as examples for each census.

5 The appearance of "Canadien" as an example has resulted in it being the most frequently reported ethnic origin in Quebec. The reason for this is that many respondents in Quebec identify with the early French settlers in New France (Quebec), who at that time were referred to as *les Canadiens*.

6 "Canadian" was first listed as an example in the 1996 Census. Given its high frequency, it became the first example on the 2001 census form. During the 1990s, there was a media campaign to have people respond Canadian on the census form.

## THE CHALLENGES

The ethnic origin question has posed certain challenges to census takers, and to those wanting to analyze ethnicity data over time.

### EXAMPLES OR RESPONSE CATEGORIES?

One key challenge lies in providing examples to the ethnic question. The presence of this list of examples has influenced the reporting of some origins (those listed as examples), or not reporting other origins (those not listed as examples). It seems clear that many Canadians interpreted the examples to be similar to response categories, and in turn, influenced the overall distribution of ethnic origins from one census to the next.

A more recent illustration of these points was the decline in Jewish counts from the 2011 NHS to the 2016 Census.[7] In 2016, 143,655 persons reported Jewish as an ethnic origin, whether alone or in combination with other origins, representing a decline of 54% from the number reported in the 2011 NHS (309,650 persons). Jewish did not appear as an example for the 2016 ethnic question (in line with the long-standing methodology for selecting examples), whereas it had been among the examples provided in the 2011 NHS and previous censuses. Statistics Canada, working with an expert advisory group, conducted an in-depth analysis of reporting patterns of "Jewish" over a number of censuses. The conclusion was that "examples on the questionnaire can influence results by providing a boost to those origins included among the examples, compared with those which are not." (Smith and McLeish 2019).

### CANADIAN, EH?

Many people now report Canadian on the census form – either as their only response, or in combination with other origins. This is largely a consequence of having "Canadian" as an example on the census form, further illustrating how examples can create response biases.

Persons of long history in the country, going back many generations, and perhaps uncertain which origins to report on the census form, may choose to simply write-in "Canadian". While not an issue per se, it is not clear whether people feel this is their identity, nationality or citizenship. Having Canadian as the first example signals to respondents perhaps contradictory messages as to whether the question is measuring ethnic ancestry or, in fact, ethnic identity – the group people most identify as their ethnicity. It may signal that the question is more about symbolism than a measure of one's ancestral origins. Whatever the case, it is not clear what responses of "Canadian" actually mean when analyzing the data.

Census takers at the time when Canadian became the first example were concerned about the utility of the resulting data, and had even pondered dropping the question from the census.[8]

7 The Jewish example in the ethnic origin question has been questioned as seemingly referring to a religion; however, many people in Canada identify Jewish as their ethno-cultural background.

8 At that time, Canada was not alone in having challenges with the ethnic origin question. In the Australian 2001 Census, 36% of the population reported Australian to their ethnic question. As in Canada, "Australian" was an example on the questionnaire for the Australian census.

As a follow-up to the 2001 Census, Statistics Canada conducted the 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey. With the rising reporting and demands to report "Canadian", the survey was done to better understand how Canadians of different ethnic backgrounds interpret and reported their ethnicity. A particular focus was on distinguishing between one's ethnic ancestry and one's ethnic identity.

## MIXED HERITAGE

Another confounding aspect of the ethnic ancestry question is how many origins people can (or should) report. The Census has since 1981 accepted multiple ancestries to be reported, and in recent censuses captured up to six origins.[9] This only makes sense, as it reflects the complexity of the origins of the population in Canada, the multiple waves of immigration to the country and subsequent generations born in Canada. In 2016, four in 10 people reported more than one origin.

The reporting of multiple ethnic origins, however, has led to considerable challenges for how the information is tabulated and disseminated and understood. For researchers, it is difficult to actually make use of and analyze the data. For each origin published from the Census, there is a single response count and a multiple response count.[10] So, constructing a breakdown of the ethnic composition of the population, where categories are mutually exclusive, is difficult. Moreover, it is not clear that all multiple responses actually indicate a "mixed heritage". In some cases, the multiple write-in responses are not mutually exclusive, but rather clarifications of an ethnic background (e.g. "Punjabi, East Indian or "Somali, African"). It is also not known whether there is significance in the sequence of listing multiple origins by respondents.

All of these experiences over time underline the fluidity of the reporting of ethnic ancestries in Canada, and the evolution of the social context in which they are reported. It renders historical comparability nearly impossible. This is complicated by the fact that some people report specific origins in one census, but not necessarily the same ones in another census.[11]

**TABLE 2. REPORTING OF MULTIPLE ETHNIC ORIGINS, 1991 TO 2016**

| CENSUS YEAR | TOTAL MULTIPLE RESPONSES | TOTAL POPULATION |
|---|---|---|
| 1991 | 7,794,280 | 26,994,045 |
| 1996 | 10,224,495 | 28,528,125 |
| 2001 | 11,331,490 | 29,639,035 |
| 2006 | 12,921,445 | 31,241,030 |
| 2011 | 13,816,025 | 32,852,320 |
| 2016 | 14,162,175 | 34,460,065 |

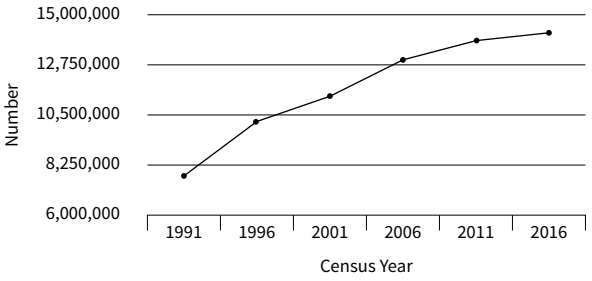
Sources: Statistics Canada, censuses of population 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2016; 2011 National Household Survey.

9 In 2016, 250 different ethnic origins were reported, a testament to the diversity of ethnic ancestries in Canada.

10 A single response occurs when a respondent provides only one ethnic origin. A multiple response occurs when a respondent provides two or more ethnic origins, and "total responses" are the sum of both single and multiple responses for each ethnic origin captured in the census.

11 Another factor influencing historical comparisons is that the census is essentially proxy reporting, meaning that from one census to another different people in the same household could report differently the ethnic heritage of other members.

**CHART 1. MULTIPLE ETHNIC RESPONSES, 1991 TO 2016**




Sources: Statistics Canada, censuses of population 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2016; 2011 National Household Survey.

## WHY COLLECT ETHNIC ANCESTRY DATA?

Despite all of these challenges, information on ethnic ancestry is very much requested and is important to communities across Canada, as well as for ethnic organizations to know the size, composition and socio-economic situation of the groups they represent.

There is a growing demand to have ethnic or racially disaggregated information to examine inequalities and to understand the situation of minorities and vulnerable populations in society. During the COVID-19 pandemic situation in Canada, there were repeated calls for the collection of ethnic or race-based health and other data. Such data are important in understanding if certain ethnic communities are more vulnerable to COVID-19, and to know the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic and public health directives. The lack of key indicators by ethnicity or race is seen as a major data gap – one that needs to be filled to support fulsome evidence-based decision-making. Without these data, heath and other officials are driving blindly when addressing vulnerabilities and differential impacts.

Detailed ethnicity data serves other purposes. It supports employment equity policies, and policies aimed at achieving equal opportunity in society and combatting racism and discrimination.[12] The ethnicity question can be most meaningful and useful if used in conjunction with other ethno-cultural questions, such as birthplace of parents (to identify the first, second and third-plus generations), visible minority status, Indigenous self-identity, as well as country of birth, religious affiliation and language. Together all of these questions provide a rich and comprehensive portrait of the ethno-cultural mosaic of Canada.

The ethnic ancestry question is also key to understanding the diversity of outcomes of populations such as the Black population and Indigenous peoples (First Nations people, Métis and Inuit), as well as the diversity within these populations. In 2016, more than 200 ethnic origins were reported by the Black population[13], and nearly 30% reported more than one ethnic origin. More than two million people reported an Indigenous ancestry, while

12 Detailed ethnicity data will be important to provide support and evidence for the Government of Canada's "Building a Foundation for Change – Canada's Anti- Racism Strategy 2019-2022".

13 "Black" is a response category under the Population group/Visible minority question – a separate question on the census form to the ethnic origin question. Likewise, the Indigenous self-identification question is separate from the ethnic origin question.

1.7 million people self-identified as a First Nations person, Métis or Inuit. It is important to understand the diversity of those who say they have a particular heritage such as Black or Indigenous, as well as those who self-identify as Black or as an Indigenous person. The socio-economic outcomes, issues and challenges for these groups may be different, just as the degree of inequality and marginalization they face may be different.

## CONCLUSION

The next Census of Population will be conducted in 2021. The content of the census questionnaire at the time of writing of this article has not yet been made public. It will be interesting to see how census takers will ask the ethnicity question in 2021. Statistics Canada tested alternative versions of the question during the 2019 Census Test, leveraging electronic collection to minimize the response biases with the current question in regard to examples. Whatever the question or format, it will undoubtedly once again reflect the complexity of the ethnic mosaic in Canada. The challenges in the interpretability of the data emanating from the question will likely remain, because the ethnicity concept itself is elusive, fluid, socially constructed and sometimes symbolic.

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