Questioning Ethnicity: Q and A on Ethnic Identity and the Census of Canada

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ABSTRACT

Ethnic identity has been the object of much scrutiny from academics and policy-makers in Canada during the 1990's. The study of ethnic origin continues to be the object of criticism from those who do not feel it is salient and therefore urge governments not to inquire into it and those who believe that when relevant ethnic attachment represents a threat to Canadian identity and thus government should discourage such sentiment. This paradox is reflected in the ongoing debate over whether Statistics Canada should include a census question on ethnic origins. Empirical evidence reveals that ethnicity is relevant to many Canadians. The debate is a microcosm of sorts for broader discussions over the current direction of Canada's multicultural policy and how it addresses ethnicity. In that which follows a series of replies are offered to the most often heard criticisms directed at ethnic identification and inquiry into the phenomenon.

Question: Is ethnic identification relevant to Canadians?

Answer: In surveys, a majority of Canadians have repeatedly acknowledged that they value Canada's diversity and its multicultural policies. A 2001 CROP-Environics survey amongst youth in Quebec and the rest of Canada confirmed that a majority regard ethnicity as important to their personal sense of identity and believe that it will remain important in Canadian society in the future. Yet another survey conducted by Environics in 2003 reveals that following language, ancestry and ethnic origin are the next most important markers of Canadian's identity. Indeed amongst Canada's English language population, ancestry and ethnic origin were the most widely given reply to the question on identity markers ahead of language, gender, religion, social class and political orientation.

Question: As a socially constructed expression of identity does ethnic identification not lead to an artificial sense of community?

Answer: Community formation along ethnic lines is by no means uncommon and indeed ethnic identification has been and continues to be an important dimension of such organization and generally of civil society. Clearly not all persons who identify themselves in the Census on the basis of ethnicity are involved in communal activity. This is also true for other identity-based questions on the Census, whether they pertain to religion, visible minority status or language.

Question : Est-ce que le sentiment d'appartenance ethnique empêche l'intégration à l'intérieur du Canada ?

Réponse : D'après un sondage d'Angus Reid, 95 % des Canadiens affirment que l'on peut être fier d'être Canadien tout en étant fier de ses racines. Plus encore, en ce qui a trait aux symboles nationaux (par exemple le drapeau et l'hymne national), ces gens, qui s'identifient à l'intérieur des communautés ethniques, ont un niveau d'appartenance plus élevé que la moyenne pour ce qui est de l'identité canadienne. Cette notion soulève davantage de questions sur ce que l'on entend par intégration et comment l'identité ethnique est impliquée à travers cela. En effet, la question du recensement sur l'origine ethnique peut élargir notre compréhension des processus d'intégration économique, linguistique et sociale.

Question : Est-ce que les questions de recensement sur l'origine ethnique renforcissent les différences entre les Canadiens en mettant l'emphase sur ce qui nous sépare plutôt que sur ce qui nous unit, causant ainsi une menace de cohésion ?

Réponse : Dans les sociétés démographiques, les citoyens possèdent de multiples identités et appartenances. Très souvent, l'échec de reconnaître de telles différences et de s'en accommoder lorsque nécessaire est nuisible à la cohésion. Mettre l'emphase sur les éléments qui nous unifient en tant que citoyens ne nécessite pas que nous rejetions les différences de nos origines et antécédents.

Question: Do ethnic leaders pressure people into defining themselves along ethnic lines?

Answer: People are under no pressure to define themselves ethnically or participate in ethnic community activity. On the other hand, those who desire to identify themselves with an ethnic community should also not face stigmatization or accusations of being 'Uncanadian'.

Question: Does emphasizing ethnic origin as a basic principle for shaping society result in ghettoization and, ultimately, in dangerous balkanization?

Answer: Ethnic origin is not the guiding principle for shaping Canadian society and Canadian identity. However it is a part of that identity as are language, regional attachments, gender, religion, etc. There is residential concentration of certain communities, notably those who are more recently arrived, and very often such organization is helpful to the adaptation process. The information on ethnicity in the Census is very useful in assessing these patterns and in evaluating their impact.

Question: Why can't we be as patriotic as Americans, for whom ethnic origins are irrelevant?

Answer: The American Census asks questions about ethnic origin and in 1990 only 7.3% of respondents reported that they were of 'American' origin, some 16 points less than the 23% that reported Canadian in the Canadian census.

Question: Can't other census questions give us all the information required to address issues of diversity?

Answer: Indeed there are other questions on the Census that address a variety of issues that are relevant to our origins. They include data on visible minorities, place of birth, languages, religion, etc. However these very essential questions do not on their own address all the issues that may arise from Canada's diversity.

Question : N'est-il pas vrai que plus les gens répondent « Canadiens » à la question de recensement sur l'origine ethnique, plus le sens de la citoyenneté se voit approfondi, contribuant ainsi à une unité canadienne plus forte ?

Réponse : Cette déclaration présume que le déracinement contribue à un sentiment d'appartenance plus fort pour le pays. Au Canada, il y a des personnes qui vivent ici depuis plusieurs générations et pour qui l'appartenance au pays a en fait diminué à travers le temps. Toutefois, il existe des Canadiens qui sont arrivés récemment et qui ont un sentiment d'appartenance très fort pour le Canada. La généralisation dans ce domaine est très problématique.

Question : Pourquoi ces « groupe ethniques » ne peuvent-ils pas être des Canadiens, comme nous ?

Réponse : Ils sont Canadiens. Il existe plusieurs façons d'être Canadien. Une importante question qui découle de cela se pose : quelle est la définition de « Canadien » aux yeux de ceux qui font de telles déclarations ? Cela implique-t-il de renier ses origines ? Plus le lien est fort entre l'identité nationale et ethnique, plus on risque d'obtenir le résultat opposé en polarisant ceux qui se disent Canadiens et les « autres ».

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Question: Because declaring ethnic origins is a form of self-identification the information is less reliable.

Answer: The notion that ethnicity is a function of self-identification with true or imagined communities neglects that, to varying degrees, all group identities require some form of recognition.

Question: This information on ethnicity has no bearing on those matters in the public sector and therefore the state should not be involved in something that rests in the private domain. In short, the information can and should be collected by the groups themselves.

Answer: The information collected is valuable in many areas of the lives of Canadians, from employment and health to education and immigration. Few communities have the resources to collect such information. In recognition of this the Canadian Multiculturalism Act declares 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.

Question: Researchers can no longer use the data on ethnicity due to continued changes in the formulation of the question, the increased number of multiple declarations and the growing number of persons who identify themselves as ethnically Canadian.

Answer: Measuring identity is complex and examining the impact of ethnic attachments presents several challenges. While it is harder to compare results from one Census to the next, other identity-based questions on the Census have also been modified to adapt to changing realities. Still research on ethnic ancestry and identity is socially relevant and when employed in conjunction with other identity markers via the census or opinion surveys, it can yield valuable information to policy makers. The results have been modified somewhat by several factors, including changes to the question, the confusion of some as to how to answer and the growing number of respondents who answer 'Canadian'. Despite the increase in 'Canadian' responses to the ethnic origin question, persons of backgrounds other than British or French have not given this answer to a substantial degree rendering comparisons feasible. As in other areas of the Census, the data needs to be used and interpreted with the appropriate cautions.