'Invisible' Social Groups, Identity Intersections and Counting:

Challenges for Policy Making in Diverse Societies

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ABSTRACT

While Statistics Canada has come to provide a wealth of valuable and sophisticated information about many segments of the population, the author suggests that it still leaves certain areas of identity unexplored. Public policy development and research bear the consequences of these oversights. Meeting the social and economic expectations of highly diverse societies requires moving away from strictly quantifiable identity markers towards more qualitative data. The author suggests constructing public policy around social groups rather than population aggregates.

The cultural diversity of most North American, European and Australasian societies today is inescapable, especially in these continents' large and economically vibrant cities. It is in cities that the inter-locking conditions of global economic, political and social interdependence are most strongly experienced by individuals, and where the challenges of managing cultural exchange and dealing with the inequalities that arise from discrimination are most acutely felt. New local policies and relationships between governments and the organizations of civil society will be critical in crafting inclusive cities and societies out of plural, and sometimes inequitable, conditions. It is not clear, however, that we have a sufficiently strong appreciation for the many forms of diversity that exist among city people to craft policies that diminish the risks of social exclusion. To a certain degree, we are captives of the categories and ideas that have been used for many decades to enable examination of those qualities of individuals and households that at priori seem to be the most meaningful to the people who develop policies and programs.

Marginalization as experienced and practiced in society is one of the principal reasons why we should be concerned with identity intersections. Unlike societies in which a tyrannical leader might oppress one or more social groups, marginalization in most contemporary democratic societies is a function of structural conditions – a result of the unquestioned norms, habits, symbols and policies that constitute normal everyday life. To challenge marginalization and increase the degree of inclusion demand a serious examination of the structural conditions that lead to exclusion. Such a project, however, is predicated on a much more nuanced understanding of *social groups,* identity formation and the meanings of identity in everyday life.

To a remarkable degree, our understanding of social diversity has been framed by a focus on social 'aggregates' that have been translated into adequate and meaningful representations of social groups. Aggregates are normally defined by one or more attributes such as street address, education, income or eye colour. The census, for instance, furnishes a handsome amount of information about people who are routinely aggregated into groups by researchers and policy makers. Such groups, at least implicitly, are interpreted as being approximations of an identity and of the ways in which people live. But a social group is a function of affinity – similar experiences or ways of life – rather than by a set of phenotypic characteristics or social attributes. These affinity-based relationships and experiences encourage individuals to associate with each other and share a common identity. It is not correct to argue that some of our most standard measures of a population do not furnish information about social groups, but they fall far short of capturing the full range of diverse groups that constitutes contemporary societies. Social groups are defined by an identity, not simply by a set of shared attributes.

Identity is constituted relationally. At its heart lies self-perception as developed in relation to social categories and the involvement that individuals have with others and communities. In a context of global interdependence and movement that has allowed an unprecedented number of strangers to rub shoulders in city spaces that range from neighborhoods to shopping malls to workplaces, people have actively retained, renewed, invented and expressed a range of identities.

These encounters have strengthened already held identities such as ethnic, locale or occupational ones; importantly, they have also facilitated the formation of new ones as produced through the encounter itself. In general, ways of understanding societies and people have not kept pace with this churning process of identity renewal and invention. As a consequence, our ability to develop and implement policies and programs that are based on a strong understanding of complex and multifaceted identities, and that meaningfully address marginalization, suffers.

Statistics Canada has made great strides in providing information about many different segments of the population, and information on sex, age, foreign-born status, ethnicity and 'race' (or visible minority status), which has informed a great number of positive public policy initiatives undertaken by all levels of government. Compared to most decades of the 20th century, contemporary population data is far more sophisticated and never before have we been in such a strong position to speak in meaningful ways about diversity issues. The data gathering exercise, however, privileges those characteristics of the population that a priori have been determined to be highly salient, meaningful or 'measurable.' In the process, many dimensions of identity that influence how people behave and make decisions are left unobserved and are consequently not part of policy development.

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Sexual orientation is one example of an identity marker about which relatively little information is collected, but nevertheless influences a range of behaviours and intersects with numerous facets of identity about which information is readily available. Understanding the importance of sexuality, alone and in interaction with other identity markers, would enhance our understanding of a range of public policy questions – from housing to employment to workplace discrimination to aging. Although 'sexuality' in some circles has become almost synonymous with sexual minorities, it is of course generic to the population and structures the decisions and experiences of straight, gay and bisexual individuals[1]. Given the primordial importance of sexuality to the human condition, it is surprising how little sex intrudes into research and public policy development.

Data collection issues are perhaps one of the most salient reasons why we know so little about sexuality and its intersections with other identity markers. After many decades of discrimination, for instance, many gays and lesbians regard questions about sexuality that might be posed by a government with some degree of reticence and suspicion. Others may well look upon such questions as too great an invasion by government into private lives. And perhaps sexuality will always remain a dimension of human behaviour that standard measures of population characteristics will not be able to capture. This does not mean that ease of measurement should be the critical factor which structures whether some forms of marginalization merit attention.

The importance of constructing public policy around social groups rather than population aggregates is very well illustrated by the standard approaches to understanding the residential geography of North American cities. For decades, geographers and sociologists have suggested through social area analyses that cities are organized in both concentric and sectoral patterns as a function of three identity markers – class, family status and 'race' or ethnicity. The patterns that their analyses reveal, however, are very much a function of the census variables that are entered into statistical models. For example, gender was not included in early modelling exercises, and it has never been possible to incorporate sexuality and physical ability because of an absence of data, and as a consequence the residential geographies of many social groups have been either rendered invisible or present only by inference. The standard way in which the social geography of cities has been represented, and has informed urban planning for many decades, furnishes relatively little insight into the ways of life and housing/neighbourhood consumption patterns of many social groups. Gays and lesbians, individuals suffering from various kinds of physical disabilities who may not have access to a full range of transportation options, and homeless individuals and families are but three examples of social groups whose urban lives sit apart from normative understandings of people and place.

When researchers 'discovered' the gentrification of the inner city in the 1970s they also discovered that gays and lesbians were frequently among the early renovators of older housing. *The discovery* of urban gays in turn highlighted how standard approaches to understanding the residential geography of the city shed no light on the behaviours of some social groups, some of whom were affluent and whose physical and social transformations of urban spaces were far from invisible. The housing and neighbourhood consumption patterns of gays and lesbians seemed both strangely exotic and new to researchers and eventually the general public. Given that there were no data about sexuality, it was easy to be surprised that an individual's sexual identity could inform where he or she chose to live. It was one of the first times that gays and lesbians as a social group seemed important to consider in analyses of housing markets and city life. The housing and neighbourhood

choices of gay men and lesbians were brought out of a research closet and encouraged researchers to consider a dimension of urban social life that until that point had been rendered practically invisible. Even today, decades after people first started to write about gentrification, knowledge about the relationships between urban space and sexual identities among gays and lesbians, especially in interaction with identity markers such as class, gender and ethnicity, remains woefully rudimentary.

The same sort of story can be told for other social groups whose characteristics and experiences only weakly intrude into public consciousness and policy. The complex and diverse homeless population (e.g., youth, men, women, immigrants, families and mentally ill) and physically challenged people are but two examples of groups that, like gays and lesbians, remain camouflaged in standard data sets used in urban analysis and planning. Moreover, even numerically-small social groups for which data are collected – e.g., lone-parent families led by either women or men – often remain on the margins of policy and program initiatives. In a social justice context in which numbers of people are often the significant factor in prioritizing which forms of oppression deserve attention, being on the numerical margins for all intents and purposes is itself a kind of invisibility.

In our socially, culturally and economically diverse cities there are real implications of not taking identity intersections seriously. If we take the example of sexual orientation, by not seriously incorporating this basic quality of the human condition into how we plan and live in cities essentially perpetuates the normative qualities of heterosexual universality, thereby rendering minority sexualities invisible. In addition, the fact that only the dominant group's cultural expressions receive widespread recognition means that there is little acknowledgment of the diversity that exists within the "heterosexual" label. The practices of heterosexuality do vary by gender, age, ethnicity, religion and class, although this is scarcely recognized. Finally, being able to ignore sexuality in all of its various expressions enables the perpetuation of a 'comfortable' image that some built environments, namely middle-class suburbs, are 'family places.' As such it is possible to imagine that sexuality really does not impinge upon the social meaning of the suburbs or the experience of living in these environments for adults and youth who wrestle with their own sexual identities – that the spaces of sexuality are really just *downtown things.*

It will not be simple to incorporate the intersections of identity into public policy development in the years ahead. As the urban planning examples discussed here illustrate, the ways in which people have understood, planned and built cities for many decades essentially revolves around three unitary identity markers: class, family status and ethnicity. Such an approach is both a function of the kinds of population data that are readily available and the degree to which the results mesh with the experiences of the majority and the powerful. If addressing the social risks associated with marginalization and producing conditions that lead to greater equity among *all* social groups without erasing differences are not policy priorities, then regarding the population as a set of aggregates is not a problem. Such an approach is, however, at odds with the celebration of urban social and cultural diversity and the recognition that diversity is a key labour force characteristic and element of economic growth in a post-industrial economy. Building social and economic policies that incorporate identity intersections and address marginalization will require inventing and adopting ways of understanding those invisible social groups whose members are so weakly 'present' in standard data sets. This may require that policy be developed around the experiential rather than strictly quantifiable dimensions of diverse Canadian identities.

Notes

1 In this paper, I use the terms gay and lesbian to connote homosexuals. Other researchers prefer the term 'queer' which usually denotes a more expansive definition of sexual identity than just simply gay or lesbian and usually refers generically to people and groups marked by dominant cultures as 'other' on the basis of sexuality. In categorizing marginalized sexualities and identities, 'queer' includes gay men and lesbians, as well as people who identify themselves as bisexual, transsexual, transgendered and/or sadomasochist.