

USED FOR ILL; USED FOR GOOD:

A CENTURY OF COLLECTING DATA ON RACE IN SOUTH AFRICA^{*}

Tom A Moultrie and Rob Dorrington[†]

1. INTRODUCTION

South African history offers important insights into both extremes of the debate as to whether politically and sociologically sensitive data on race, population group or ethnicity should be collected and presented in official reports, surveys and censuses. By exploring the contours of the uses and abuses of data on race in South Africa over the past century, this paper seeks to contribute to that debate. As the title of this paper suggests, these data can be used for ill, such as being used to bolster and perpetuate one of the most odious political systems of modern times. However, these data can also be used for good as is the case more recently in South Africa, where the self-same data (albeit with a crucially important difference, as will become clear) are important to the process of transformation, as South African society grapples with undoing the legacy of its racist past, although – as this paper argues – their importance may have been overstated.

The paper is presented in three sections. The first briefly reviews the mainstream literature on the nature of census data and its power to impose and define social relations that, largely, serve the interests of a dominant (economic, political, social, colonial, imperial) elite. The second contends that this conventional view can not be applied mechanistically to the South African case: certain key features of apartheid-era legislation, notably the Population Registration Act of 1950, had the obvious, and fundamental, effect of removing a great deal of individuals' agency about how they chose to present and interpret their identity in relation to power. To understand better this process, this section of the paper engages with the historical material relating to identity in the South African polity over the course of the twentieth century. The final part of the paper reflects on the political changes that have happened in South Africa since 1990, and how the actively-pursued political and social agenda of transforming relationships not only vertically between individuals and the state, but also horizontally among individuals, has been used to justify the continued collection of data on race. In doing so, we gaze into the future, and ask the important question of whether, indeed, the collection, capturing and interpretation of social statistics by race is desirable in the long term, or whether more significant social and

^{*} Paper presented at the QICSS/INED Conference on Social Statistics and Diversity held in Montreal, Canada. 6-8 December 2007

[†] Respectively, Senior Lecturer in Demography and Professor of Actuarial Science at the Centre for Actuarial Research (CARE), University of Cape Town, South Africa. Tom.Moultrie@uct.ac.za

economic cleavages, for example class, require that we commence a process towards social statistics data collection along those lines instead.

2. REIFYING “RACE”: POWER AND SOCIAL STATISTICS

Over the last twenty years, awareness has increased among sociologists and philosophers that censuses (in particular, among all the forms of data collected by a modern state) and the categories that they impose, serve to reproduce and reify a view of social ordering and hierarchy of a dominant elite. Some, for example the philosopher Ian Hacking (Hacking 1990, 1991, 1999), would contend that one of the defining characteristics of a thoroughly modern state lies in its capacity to collect and collate such data. Other authors approach the same concept slightly differently, but all have as a common theme the power of large screeds of statistics to simultaneously both anonymise and individualise people in a way that allows those in power to better understand the nature of their citizenry. As Anderson (1991: 166) notes, “the fiction of the census is that everyone is in it, and that everyone has one – and only one – extremely clear place” therein. The urban geographer James Scott sees the same phenomena in different terms:

Officials of the modern state are, of necessity, at least one step – and often several steps – removed from the society they are charged with governing. They assess the life of their society by a series of typifications that are always some distance from the full reality these abstractions are meant to capture ... State simplifications such as maps, censuses, cadastral lists, and standard units of measurement represent techniques for grasping a large and complex reality (Scott 1998: 76-77)

Hacking goes on to argue that Scott’s “state simplifications” require not only for the categories themselves to be invented, but that this exercise in the “systematic collection of data about people has affected not only the ways in which we conceive of a society, but also the ways in which we describe our neighbour. It has profoundly transformed what we choose to do, who we try to be, and what we think of ourselves” (Hacking 1990: 2). Simply put, the process of categorising and labelling – of “naming into existence” as Goldberg (cited in Kertzer and Arel (2002: 21)) puts it – is a significant component in manufacturing and reproducing identity.

Kertzer and Arel (2002) develop this line of argument further, and in the process coin the neologism ‘statistical realism’ to describe the claims made by some scientists and demographers that the formulation of classificatory systems in censuses are objective and are not socially constructed. Instead, they suggest that “far from being a scientific enterprise removed from the political fray, the census is more like a political battleground where competing notions of “real” identities, and therefore competing *names* to assign to categories, battle it out” (Kertzer and Arel 2002: 20-21 emphasis in original).

There is a further dimension to these arguments, which relates to an apparent bifurcation in the literature that draws a distinction between the use of census data to govern (or manage) a

population benignly in a democracy, where the individuals and minorities so counted can use the information to articulate and engage with the state to advance their own interests on the one hand; and a more sinister notion associated with enumeration with the intention of controlling a subjugate population on the other. The distinction is perhaps a little contrived, and assertions of benign or malign design do not advance the debate particularly much: in large measure, the distinction between use of data for managing or controlling a population hinges on the ability of the people being counted to use (or subvert?) the data effectively for purposes other than those intended by the state (for example to secure or lobby for sectoral interests).

Of all the classifications imposed on individuals in a census, it is not surprising that questions relating to ethnicity, race and identity have been the most contentious. Kertzer and Arel (2002) and Nobles (2002) have carefully documented the misapplication of concepts of race and ethnicity in a wide variety of settings, ranging from the United Kingdom to Brazil.

Central to our deliberations is the need to consider what race means in the context of social statistics. Nobles (2002) suggests that, even if it were more common before decolonisation, only a very few countries continue to collect data on race in censuses and surveys, although it is not regarded as particularly aberrant for the rather curious reason that questions on race are still routinely asked in American censuses. What function does race serve in official social statistics? Both Head (1997) and Krieger (2000) offer a useful framework for considering the matter. They point out that there are three different conceptualisations of race and racial statistics. Two of them simply serve to muddy the waters of the debate. They need to be dispensed with up front.

The first conceptualisation posits that race is purely biological – i.e. race as speciesism – and that there is only one race of humans on the planet, which makes the categorisation statistically redundant. In this view, all six billion-plus people have the same race; and hence there can be no statistical variation by race relative to other variables.

The second is that differences in outcome variables by race are phenotypical (i.e. genetic). While some genetic differences are (at least superficially in the case of skin colour) the most obvious delineation of race, it is hard to develop a coherent argument that the small genetic differences between different races directly condition demographic outcomes except in the case of rare inherited traits such as sickle cell anaemia. Hence, works such as those by Tukufu Zuberi (2001) and – in the South African context – Zuberi and Khalfani (1999) misdirect our attention to old and discredited notions of racial determinism based on genetics and which hark back to the darker side of demography's eugenics-associated past. Certainly, the 'statistical realists' described by Kertzer and Arel (2002) would have to fall into this category in order to hold that racial differences in outcome were in fact inherent to the physical race, and that the categorisation of race was objectively justifiable.

Zuberi, of course, also engages with the third conceptualisation of race (and the one most frequently used by sociologists), namely that “race” is a social construct. This is the sense that has been imparted to the debate on the collection of data in censuses and surveys, and which has been described above.

A social constructionist approach reminds us that there is nothing inherent to an individual’s race that is causal of social outcomes, and that in this sense, “race” is a proxy for a gamut of other factors, such as class, place of residence, life opportunities etc.[‡] With enough of these other factors included, racial categorisations – so the argument goes – should become statistically irrelevant.

However, as Krieger (2000) points out, it might perhaps be naïve to strive for this. True, race itself may not directly cause, or cause to be affected, health or other social or demographic outcomes, but where it can be demonstrated that race may implicitly or explicitly mediate decisions and/or opportunities over an individual’s life course, irrespective of the other variables for which race is regarded as a proxy[§], then race itself is important in understanding inequalities in health and demography.

Are the examples given and situations alluded to by Krieger exceptional? We would argue not. Vestigial racism is depressingly commonplace around the world. Thus, while we would wholeheartedly concur with objections to regarding race as a biological determinant, the experience of South Africa over the course of the twentieth century offers a powerful case to understand race as a social determinant of social, health and demographic inequality, as well as providing a useful example against which to develop a case as to why statistics on race should continue to be collected. These issues are developed further in the next section.

3. COLLECTION OF DATA ON RACE IN SOUTH AFRICA (OR, COUNTING NON-PEOPLE)

The emergent orthodoxy that critically engages with the power of social statistics to shape fundamentally individual realities, and its connection with the modern state, has found a voice among some South African sociologists and philosophers. Deborah Posel, one of South Africa’s pre-eminent sociologists and historians of the genesis of apartheid, advances the quintessentially Foucauldian idea that the “intellectual power of statistics was closely interwoven with the emergent power of the modern state” (Posel 2000: 117). The role of the census, she further argues, is central: “quantitative measurement was one of the epistemological underpinnings of power in many colonial states, where censuses and surveys were as much exercises in defining subject populations as in measuring their various demographic characteristics” (Posel 2000: 120).

[‡] It is also worth observing, in passing, that if one regards both “race” and “ethnicity” as social constructs, it is perhaps not surprising that the boundaries between the two concepts are so ill-defined (as has been pointed out by Kertzer and Arel).

[§] See, for example, some of the instances cited in Krieger (2000: 213).

What, then, was the nature of information collected on race in the segregationist and apartheid years?

A frequently-made error by those considering this topic in the South African context is to presuppose that South Africa's racist history began with the articulation of Grand Apartheid, and the coming to power of the National Party in 1948. While 1948 represented a watershed in South African politics, because for the first time a government was elected (by the White electorate) on an explicit platform of racial segregation, the foundations of the apartheid state had been laid many decades earlier.

For the purposes of this paper, it is useful to reflect in some detail on the nature of questions on race and ethnicity in South African censuses from 1911 onwards (for interested readers, a useful – if brief and necessarily superficial – account of census data collection in South Africa both pre- and post-Union can be found in Christopher (2002)).

South Africa was formally constituted as a Union of four provinces in 1910. Section 34 of the South Africa Act of 1909, which established the essential constitutional principles of the Union, mandated that “in 1911 and every five years thereafter”, a census of the European population of the Union shall be taken for the purposes of this Act” (South Africa 1911:16). The Census Act of 1910 further allowed for censuses to be conducted at the discretion of the Governor-General, and that it could be taken “of the population” (South Africa 1911: 116). It is noteworthy that the neither the Census Act, nor the South Africa Act, required a census of the entire population to be conducted at regular intervals, although in the parliamentary debates on the Census Bill, the Minister of the Interior, Jan Smuts, was reported to have said that

In South Africa there would be the quinquennial census in 1911, and in the South Africa Act there was a provision that every five years thereafter there should be a census of the whole male European population of South Africa; and the method of distribution of seats and the representation of the Union was to follow the results of that census. There would be a universal census every ten years, not only for the white male adult population but for many other questions ... [it] would be possible for the government to provide for an elaborate census , embracing information on all matters which should be covered by a census, and to provide every five years for a more restricted census, which would only deal with questions of the white population necessary for Constitutional purposes... (South Africa 1910: 61-2)

The whites-only census scheduled for 1916 was delayed until 1918 as a result of the War; a full census was conducted on schedule in 1921. The next whites-only census was conducted in 1926, but the full enumeration that was supposed to have happened in 1931 was restricted to whites because of the economic hardship of the Depression (South Africa 1938: vii). The 1936

** The requirement for quinquennial censuses was dropped after 1941 by the Census Amendment Act of 1935. After 1941, censuses were required to be held decennially.

census was accordingly designated to enumerate all South Africans. As Jan Hofmeyr, Minister of the Interior argued in parliament at the time of the debate on the Census Amendment Act of 1935^{††},

We have now had no non-European census since 1921 and I think we have experienced the serious disadvantages which have followed upon not having a full census of the population in 1931. We are fully conscious that we could not wait until 1941 before we had another census. That is why it was essential to hold a non-European census in 1936... (South Africa 1935: 853-4)

The last whites-only census was conducted in 1941, with a full census being conducted in 1946. Thus, prior to the promulgation of the Population Registration Act in 1950, censuses that sought to cover the entire population were conducted in 1911, 1921, 1936 and 1946. Posel thus errs in her observation that “in practice, limited censuses of ‘non-whites’ were undertaken in [only] 1911 and 1946. But only one census covering all races was conducted, in 1936” (2000: 123).

These four censuses offer a fascinating insight into the collection and categorisation of racial data in South Africa before apartheid. A copy of the census form was not appended to the official report on the 1911 census (South Africa 1912), but the tabulations of the population by race reveal an idiosyncratic (not to mention quite confused) approach to racial and ethnic classification (Table 1) that is strongly redolent of that discussed by Hirschman (1987) with reference to Malaysia. Note particularly, the conflation of terms reflecting race, ethnicity and nationality. This is, perhaps, not that surprising: as Christopher (2002; 2005) has noted, there was a vigorous attempt to standardise censuses across the British Empire in the first few decades of the twentieth century. In any event, and significant to this paper, race was (at least to a degree) self-reported. Such latitude was certainly not given again in South African censuses until 1996.

The 1921 census set a precedent which would last for more than fifty years: four different enumeration forms were used, based on the race of the respondent. In a move that presaged the creation of the Bantustans along ethnic lines, questions on ethnicity were asked of Africans too.

^{††} Interestingly, given the widespread consternation about the racial composition of the Union that can be found at the time (see Moultrie (2005)), the debate around the Census Amendment Act, which sought to replace the constitutional requirement for quinquennial censuses with decennial ones from 1941, was almost entirely silent on the matter of race. MPs were far more concerned about the whether such a move was indeed desirable, and in whose favour only decennial reapportionment of representatives would work.

Table 1 Classification of race/ethnicity in the 1911 South Africa Census

European or White			
Other than European or White	Bantu	Baca Basuto, including Bapedi Bavenda Bechuana Bomvana Damara Fingo Hlangweni Kaffir (unspecified) Ndebele Pondo Pondomise Swazi Tembu Tonga (alias Bagwamba, including Tshangana) Xesibe Xosa (sic) Zulu	
		Other tribes	Southern Rhodesian Tribes Northern Rhodesian Tribes Nyasaland protectorate tribes Portuguese East African tribes Other
	Mixed and Coloured, other than Bantu	Hottentot Malay (Cape) Mixed Griqua Mozambique Chinese Indian Other	Bushman Hottentot Koranna Namaqua Afghan American Coloured Arabian Creole Egyptian Krooman Malagasy Mauritian St Helena Syrian West Indian Zanzibari Other

More significant were the instructions given to enumerators in this census[‡]:

3. The Census embraces ALL RACES of the Population and the following distinctions will be observed for enumeration and tabulation:

European or White Persons – This applies to all persons of European descent as defined in the South Africa Act. Europeans are to be regarded as persons of pure European descent. The offspring of any mixed marriage in which one of the parties is not of pure European descent are to be regarded as Coloured persons.

Natives – The term “Native” is used to designate all pure-blooded aboriginals of the Bantu Race, the names of the chief tribes of which will be found at the foot of form C.4.

Asiatics – The chief Asiatic nations represented in South Africa are British Indians, Chinese, Japanese, Syrians, Afghans and Burmese.

[‡] Extended quotes from official census documents are shown in sans-serif typefaces.

Coloured persons – The embraces all persons of mixed race, and the Census classification includes, amongst others, Hottentots, Bushmen, Cape Malays, Griquas, Korannas, Creoles, Negroes, and Cape Coloured.

4. It will often occur than an Enumerator, especially in the poorer localities, will be asked for, say, a European form (C. 1) by persons who obviously cannot be classified as white. In such cases, Enumerators must be instructed to refrain from giving offence by any comment or question in the presence of the parties concerned, **but to make a private note on the completed forms against the names of any persons he considers cannot be classed as European, and report the circumstances to you. Thereafter the particulars in respect of the persons in question should be transferred to the form or forms applicable to their race** (South Africa 1924: 10, emphasis in bold added)

Evidently, individuals were not given freedom to define their race or ethnicity subjectively; but a quasi-official, but nonetheless state-sanctioned, process of racial classification began to be imposed from above. Certainly, one's race was now not entirely self-reported; the final say went to the enumerators and their supervisors.

By the time of the 1936 census, fifteen years later, these ideas had shown some accretion. Segregation was not only enforced in the real world of people and places, but also (rather comically) in the more abstract and virtual realm of census tabulations:

4. Racial distinctions of the population. The existence in South Africa of three main racial groups, plus a fourth of mixed origin, means that in effect four separate censuses are taken simultaneously. As far as tabulation of the results is concerned, four separate tabulations are actually undertaken, **and the tabulation cards are never mixed....**

Every endeavour is made during enumeration and later during audit prior to tabulation to place the individuals enumerated to the correct ethnological groups as defined in paragraph 4 above. The use of four different census forms although greatly assisting the correct assignment and simplifying the work for machine tabulation has been criticized in certain areas where the races are very mixed, such as in the Cape Peninsula. Cases have occurred where parents who are quite willing to use the correct form for entering their own particulars have objected to using a separate form for their children who happened to fall within the definition of "mixed or coloured." These entries are accepted to avoid giving offence and afterwards transferred to the correct form either by the Enumerator, the Supervisor, or in the Census Office before tabulation....

The following is an extract from the instructions to Census Enumerators:- "It is admittedly extremely difficult to discriminate by outward appearances, especially in the Cape Peninsula, and where doubt exists, discreet inquiries should be made locally to ascertain whether a person of doubtful descent is looked upon locally and received by his European neighbours as a European". (South Africa 1938: viii, emphasis added)

Attempts at "deception", thus, were treated as before, with enumerators and supervisors again having the power to reassign people's race on the grounds of appearance and behaviour.

The 1946 enumeration followed the 1936 approach fairly closely. However, by the time of the 1951 census, several major changes had occurred, most notably the accession to power of the National Party in 1948, and the passing of the Population Registration Act of 1950. The Act was one of the central supports of apartheid policy, creating the racial categories that would later be used to determine residence, access to education, and a host of other social benefits.

Individuals would be classified at birth in terms of the Act, and one's population group could only be changed by judgment of the Supreme Court.

However, in spite of the modernist, totalising, quasi-scientific bent of the apartheid state described by Posel (1991), even by 1960 astute commentators had noted with a degree of puzzlement the apparent anomaly that lay at the heart of much apartheid policy: that, despite "the whole pattern of every individual's life – from the cradle to the grave – [being] circumscribed by his race ... the absence of any uniform basis of race classification is, therefore, all the more surprising" (Suzman 1960:339). The Population Registration Act of 1950 was supposed to rectify this, but in his review a decade later, Suzman could still point to a bewildering panoply of racial and ethnic definitions enshrined in national legislation other than those in the Act. In this regard, then, West's (1988:101) argument that the "key to the current classification system lies in the Population Registration Act" would appear to be overdone, not least because it downplays South Africa's pre-apartheid segregationist history. While the Population Registration Act did indeed set out the codification of ethnic and racial groups in the country, it was, as West himself describes it, a "farrago of imprecision" (West 1988:103) using terms such as "race", "class", "tribe" without adequate definition, and thereby presupposing that these terms were self-evidently obvious and unambiguous. As Suzman curtly noted in 1960, the process was an attempt to "define the indefinable" (Suzman 1960: 367).

What accounts for this imprecision? Several competing explanations can be advanced. It could simply be the result of the fact that as a social construct, racial definition is of necessity difficult to codify exactly. Or it could simply reflect incompetence on the part of those tasked with categorising, or even a degree of reservation about the project. However, most likely it was a symptom of the extreme arrogance of those in power, presuming, common with Humpty Dumpty^{§§} that the terms employed in the various pieces of legislation were common-sensically self-evident, irrespective of the legal (in)exactitudes employed.

The 1951 census provided the seed data for the Population Register that emerged in the wake of the Population Registration Act, and hence the categories that had been used more-or-less unchanged since 1921 were modified to accommodate the new terminology of the Act.

Races. Throughout this report, four racial groups, namely whites, Asiatics, Coloureds and Natives, are distinguished, but a fifth group, the Cape Malays, is shown in tables 1 and 10 only. In all other tables the Cape Malays are included in the group "Coloureds". The four racial groups are as follows-

Whites – Persons who in appearance obviously are, or who are generally accepted as white persons, but excluding persons who, although in appearance obviously white, are generally accepted as Coloured persons.

^{§§} "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less." (*Alice in Wonderland*)

Natives – Persons who in fact are, or who are generally accepted as members of any aboriginal race or tribe of Africa.

Asiatics – Natives of Asia and their descendants, mainly Indians and Pakistani, with a few thousand Chinese, and small numbers of various other Asiatic nationalities.

Coloureds – All persons not included in any of the three groups referred to above. The great majority of the persons in this group are the persons known as the Cape Coloured, but persons of mixed white and non-white blood are also included. The Cape Malays, when not shown separately, are also included in this group.

The last three groups, when combined, are referred to as the non-white group.

The 1951 census formed the basis of the Population Register established under the Population Registration Act, No. 30 of 1950, and it was therefore necessary to follow the racial definitions appearing in the Act, which differ somewhat from those previously used for census purposes. The following aboriginal races are now classified as Natives: Bushman, Hottentot, Koranna and Namaqua. This accounts for some apparent inconsistencies in the figures for Natives and Coloureds for 1951 as compared with 1946 in some magisterial districts, especially in the Cape Western area. (South Africa 1955a: v)

Reference to explicit instructions to enumerators to “correct” racial classifications in the 1951 census cannot be found in the census volumes. Of course, this does not mean that such activities were not pursued. However, by the time of the 1951 census, other important pieces of apartheid legislation (notably the Group Areas Act of 1950, which determined the geographical areas in which different population groups were allowed to work and, particularly, reside; and the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949) would most probably have had the (unintended?) effect of simplifying the process of enumeration that required different forms for different population groups.

With only minor changes (for example, a relabelling of Native to Bantu to Black), the categorisation from 1951 (as well as the use of four different census forms, with different questions) endured until the end of apartheid, and is still in use. One significant addition was made at the time of the 1970 census, namely a further question to Africans on ethnicity. This reflected the imminent creation of Bantustans (four of which were declared independent states between 1976 and 1981) on ethno-linguistic lines, in part a cynical ploy to maintain a fiction of white domination by fragmenting Africans along “ethnic” lines^{***}.

It can thus be surmised that in the context of apartheid South Africa, that the debate referred to in the previous section about the power of the census to typify and impose a classifying order on the population is rendered largely irrelevant. Covertly, in the three censuses from Union to 1948, and overtly in the censuses that followed thereafter, individual agency in defining one’s own racial identity was, to all intents and purposes, non-existent. This means, again, that individuals’ ability

^{***} It is of course not surprising to note that no equivalent process of ethnic division was applied to the White population to distinguish those with English, Dutch, Portuguese etc. ancestry.

to consider their race outside the parameters of a very fixed position within South African society was dramatically curtailed. It therefore becomes exceedingly difficult to sustain an argument that it was the census that crystallised racial identities in apartheid and segregationist South Africa; rather than being a tool for locating self-reported identity into a small number of categories, the census directly and indirectly, explicitly and implicitly, required of respondents to simply verify their pre-assigned racial identity.

Perhaps paradoxically, then, it would appear that it is precisely in the situation which *a priori* might have been thought to be the most striking example of a census “naming categories into existence” that this process is weakest; not least because that process had happened indirectly elsewhere.

4. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: COLLECTION OF DATA ON RACE, POST-APARTHEID

The transition to democracy in South Africa in the 1990s presents some challenges to demographers and social statisticians. In the first instance, the repeal of the Population Registration Act in 1991 removed the legal basis for classification of the population by racial or ethnic group. At the same time, the coding of country of birth and population group in the national identity number that all South Africans must by law have, was dropped, and racial classification was removed from both the birth and death certificates. In the absence of a set of legal definitions (no matter how flawed), any classification on the basis of race must now be self-reported. This raises important moral and legal questions as to how to enforce a racial classification required by any corrective legislation such as that to enforce employment equity, for example.

The question of whether social statistics in a post-apartheid South Africa should still collect information on race was a concern during the planning for the 1991 South Africa Census, the last one before democracy. It has not been possible to identify the exact source of the dispute as to whether that census should collect information on population group, but – shortly before the census went into the field – the (apartheid) state’s Bureau of Information (and, interestingly, not the Central Statistical Services) saw it necessary to issue a communiqué entitled “Statistics on Population Group Essential” (Zuberi and Khalfani 1999), in anticipation of the repeal of the Population Registration Act. It would appear that the conclusion reached then, that it was desirable to continue to collect information on population group, has, somewhat surprisingly, not been challenged since; as we show below, there has been almost no change in the nature of the information on race or ethnicity sought by the South African state from its citizens and residents following democracy.

It is interesting to track the evolution of the questions on population group over the three censuses conducted in 1991, 1996, 2001, and the most recently conducted national survey (the 2007 Community Survey^{†††}). The question asked, and the universe of possible responses, in these surveys is as follows:

Table 2 Classification of population group in official South African censuses since 1991

Survey	Question	Universe
1991 Census	Population group	White, Coloured, Asian, Black
1996 Census	How would <the person> describe him/herself?	African, Coloured, Indian, White
2001 Census	How would <the person> describe him/herself in terms of population group?	African, Coloured, Indian, White, Other (Specify)
2007 CS	How would <the person> describe him/herself in terms of population group?	African, Coloured, Indian, White

Thus, the 1991 Census had no qualms about asking about population group directly, without the suggestion that individuals had a choice. The Population Registration Act was still in force (it was only repealed later in the same year), and so the classificatory system employed still had legal (if not moral) force. Evident uncertainty about the rectitude of asking the question is evident in the 1996 census, where no mention of race, or population group, is made in the question at all, but still contrives to ask about individuals' population group, albeit changing the order of the groups in a clear effort to indicate that the question was different from those asked in the past. The question was modified slightly in the 2001 Census, clearly making use of the previous terminology "population group" to indicate what the question was aiming for, and retained in the 2007 CS.

However, in stark contrast to instructions in early apartheid censuses, enumerators in the 1996 and 2001 censuses (as well as in the 2007 CS) were under strict instructions not to challenge responses about population groups. In the 2001 Census,

Enumerators were instructed to accept whatever response was given, even if they did not agree with it. Enumerators were instructed to ask this question about each person even if the population group seemed obvious. Enumerators were also alerted to the fact that persons of different population groups could form part of the same household. (Statistics South Africa n.d. (c. 2004): 12)

The CS enumerator's manual for that question was similar:

POPULATION GROUP: How would (the person) describe him/herself in terms of population group?

Ask for everybody even if the population group seems obvious. Remember that persons of different population groups do sometimes form part of the same household, so you cannot assume the population group of any household member.

Accept the response that is given even if you do not agree and under no circumstances may the response be queried. (Statistics South Africa 2006: 48, emphasis in the original)

However, of greater interest is that, while instructions to enumerators have been explicit in their determination not to 'reclassify' respondents on the basis of perceptions or prejudice,

^{†††} The Community Survey (CS) interviewed almost a million South Africans in a sample survey conducted in lieu of a census in 2006. The next full census is scheduled for 2011.

there is evidently little preciousness about doing so at the data cleaning and processing stage. In the 1996 census, no option was given to respondents to classify their population group as anything other than one of the four apartheid-era categories:

During Census '96 when some people whom identified as Griquas requested to be identified as a separate population group (sic). At short notice, instructions were changed to allow interviewers to write '5 Griqua' on the questionnaire and these responses were coded separately. However, the number of people identifying themselves as Griqua was small and represented an under-identification of the number of people who would have been identified as Griquas if there had been such a category on the questionnaire to indicate that this was a valid response. In the SuperSTAR database, people identifying as 'Griqua' have been included with 'Unspecified'. Data on the Griquas identified in the Census is available separately as a special request but users should be aware of its limitations. (Statistics South Africa n.d. (c. 1998))

The 2001 census form made provision for a category of "Other - Specify". However, in the editing process, the following was observed:

The number of responses for 'other' was so few that results for this category are largely unusable in tables produced at lower geographical levels. For this reason, the category 'Other' was removed and re-allocated amongst the remaining valid values during the editing process. The raw data will, however, contain the 'Other' category. Raw data will be available only in the product containing the sample database (Statistics South Africa 2003: 147)

Presumably the option of classifying oneself as "Other" was dropped from the 2007 CS as a result of these problems. However, these editing processes raise doubts about individual agency in reporting their population group.

In 1996, 0.92 per cent of the population did not record their population group (more, of course, might have elected consciously to mis-report their response – for example Coloured, and even Afrikaners and liberal whites, as African). These non-responses were classified as "Unspecified". Presumably many of these were the Griqua referred to above. In 2001, the option of "Other - Specify" was offered, and then removed from the formal tabulations. In this census, however, non-response to this variable was not allowed at the editing stage. Accordingly, a complex set of edit rules was devised to attribute one of the four population groups to people who did not respond to the question. A similar procedure was applied in 2007. The question that then arises is this: if a respondent is not allowed to offer a response of "not stated", or – preferably – "refuse to answer", how free is the decision to report one's population group? We would argue that restricting one's answer to a very narrow range of categories that draw their meaning from apartheid legislation does not constitute a freedom to report one's population group according to one's own moral position on the matter and avoids the barometer of popular acceptance of such classification that would have been provided by the options not to state or to specify another category. Is the situation any better than it was in 1991? Yes, but only marginally. It does force us, however, to consider the uses to which this information is now put, and to

understand why such a tight rein is kept on the choices offered to people of how to classify themselves.

Should we continue to capture data on race or population group? We think the answer is – for the foreseeable future – a qualified ‘yes’. The qualification is necessary since an absolute position returns us to where we started; to the reification of race, and racial difference. As suggested in the introduction, the overwhelming reason advanced for continuing to collect information on population group is to monitor and track progress in redressing the iniquities of apartheid social and economic policies. There is a lot of merit to this argument. Given South Africa’s past, if one were to not collect data on race, this would be “tantamount to denying history. It would mean denying racial oppression and its consequences ... However arbitrary this definition, it is imperative to maintain continuity, in order to measure progress in eliminating the racially defined inequalities of the past” (Head 1997:4). However, being self-reported, the continued collection of data on race will no doubt deviate systematically over time from its original intention of seeking to capture information on the population’s racial composition had the apartheid definitions still remained in force, an observation that enjoins us not to fall into the trap of again reifying race.

Under what conditions should that qualification hold? We argue that there are several. First, if race is still significantly associated with demographic, social and economic outcomes and capabilities, after controlling for a slew of other factors, this suggests that there is an unmeasured effect associating race with the outcome. Second, and this may be particularly pertinent in the case of a country with limited vital registration, official and other data, race offers an important proxy for a host of other socio-economic differences. Were the first condition to be met, we may seek to replace race, or population group or ethnicity, with the combination of socio-economic variables that render race (or its equivalents) irrelevant. All too frequently this may not be the case insofar as data relating to those other socio-economic variables may not be captured on administrative systems. A case in point relates to data on HIV, such as prevalence, an important determinant of mortality if not many other variables of demographic interest, one rarely has much socio-economic information about the individual other than population group, age, years of schooling and possibly one other variable.

Of course, for a society as racially conditioned as South Africa’s, the analysis and use of data on population group is not restricted to the evaluation of elementary demographic differentials in birth, death and population growth rates. Indeed, population group is usually one dimension in bi- and multi-variate tables of social statistics. As a consequence, the use of a population group variable has found uses, and become important, in a great many political, social, economic and developmental debates. Thus, for example, the variable is used in attempts to measure the impact of efforts to remedy the social iniquities of the past (by means of health

metrics, as well as access to welfare and basic services); economically (in terms of measures of employment, and ownership of assets); as well as for setting regulatory or developmental targets (for example, in the case of employment equity policies).

However, in all instances mentioned (and particularly so in the case where population group is used to define measureable goals), the great unasked question in the South African polity is what this variable is measuring now that population group is entirely self-defined.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The South African story offers several challenges to the dominant narratives of race, power and demography. First, there is a need to juxtapose the arbitrariness of classification systems in South-East Asia cited by Hirschmann (with their amalgam of race, ethnicity, linguistics and geography), with the fairly rapid accretion of state-defined identity in South Africa. While indeed South African ethnographers were not above using race in some cases and ethnicity in others (most obviously in their agglomeration of ‘whiteness’ as race while fracturing ‘Africanness’ along ethnic lines to maintain the fiction of white numerical dominance), one has to question the relevance to South Africa of the argument advanced by Appadurai (1993) and others that the act of counting and census-taking was central to the colonial project.

The imprecision in the terminology used to define race, and its manifest inability to accurately enumerate its population, strikes at the very heart of an enduring debate about the nature of the apartheid state. Moultrie (2005) has traced the evolution of government rhetoric on the racial composition of South Africa from 1900 through to the 1970s, paying particular attention to the origins, manifestations and of notions of “swamping” and “race suicide” in official discourse, and has shown its centrality to several key pieces of apartheid planning (notably the findings of the Tomlinson Commission published in 1955 (South Africa 1955b)). Yet, the inability of the apartheid state to either conclusively classify or count its subordinate populations for most of the segregation and apartheid eras stands in stark contrast to the “mania for measurement” described by Posel (2000) and the primacy afforded to ‘scientific’ evidence by the “grand tradition” of Commissions of Enquiry described by Ashforth (1990).

Surely, if the actual numbers were important, greater efforts would have been made in this regard? Instead, one is forced to conclude that it was the act of counting, not the realised total (which was known to be wrong – but in the desired direction, i.e. underestimating the number of “non-whites”) that was important; that – as Posel has observed – the process of counting lent a scientific veneer to policies that were – in essence – the antithesis of science. It is, therefore, a matter of some curiosity, given the theoretical debate about the importance of the process of counting in shaping colonial identities, as well as the well-documented concerns about the white population being swamped, that the counting of African South Africans was done in

such a desultory way from 1911 to the last apartheid-era census in 1991. How does one square the portrayal of a racist, totalising, modernist state with that of one that could not accurately count the population it was trying to subjugate? This is a matter for further research and thought, although we would suspect that the answer lies in one or more of the following explanations: a shortage of administrative capacity within government; ideological battles within the ruling party over whether idealistic or pragmatic apartheid should be pursued which undermined the utility of a ‘scientific’ consideration of the matters at hand; a mindset that paid particular attention to where the subordinated population should NOT be (in terms of apartheid’s spatial framework), with a concomitant carelessness about counting the population in the areas where was allowed to be; and – almost certainly – the difficulty of counting “non-people” including a general unwillingness of Africans to be counted, especially if they were living on the fringes of apartheid spatial planning.

But several other interesting questions present themselves which relate both specifically to South Africa, as well as to the broader debate around the importance and desirability (or otherwise) of collecting information on population group, ethnicity or race.

Having sought to answer the question of “should we collect” as we have above also answers, in part, the question as to whether it would be preferable instead to collect sufficient socio-economic data instead to allow some form of class-based analysis to emerge. Theoretically, the idea has much merit; doing so would move away from the reification of a presumptive link between a proxy for socio-economic distinction, and that distinction measured directly. But is it really that much of an improvement? First, reducing socio-economic differences down to a composite variable (for sake of argument, let’s call this a measure of social class) runs the risk of being reified and fossilised in much the same way as race, ethnicity and population group have in the past. Social class, as with most other sociological variables, is fluid over time and also has far less permanence as a feature of an individual than does race or ethnicity. Any move to a summary measure of social distinction has to guard against this stasis – but then, if it is constantly changing, how does one examine trends and changes diachronically at all? In practice, furthermore, the proposal is fraught with problems. Even in relatively wealthy societies, to collect the range of data on socio-economic variables required to proxy accurately for race (and even more so in South Africa) may be logistically and financially impossible.

Finally, we wonder at the relative durability of apartheid racial categories since 1991. Perhaps, following Fanon (1967), it is not surprising that there has been relatively little discontinuity in the data on population composition beyond that which can be explained by emigration and differential underenumeration: concepts of race and racial distinction and differencing are firmly embedded in the South African psyche.

The legislative framework that supported apartheid-era classifications (in particular, the Population Registration Act of 1950) has been repealed. And, despite the continued and common usage of these classifications in all spheres of public life (including in censuses and surveys), there is no longer a legal definition of what it means to be African, White, Indian or Coloured. In effect then, population group is increasingly a self-determined identity (albeit tightly controlled by the state), with all the attendant problems that self-reported variables pose for demographers and social statisticians. At the same time, measurement of progress towards achieving equality in all spheres of civic life in South Africa requires a collective use of coherent and consistent definitions of identity as defined by the previous dispensation, the ongoing quiescence of the population to continue to use and apply these terms to oneself is required. Such quiescence is neither guaranteed nor enforceable without legislation. Given the country's history of race-based legislation, we see this as highly improbable.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1993. "Number in the colonial imagination," in Breckenridge, Carol A. and Peter van der Veer (eds). *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*. Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 314-339.
- Ashforth, Adam. 1990. *The Politics of Official Discourse in Twentieth-Century South Africa*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Christopher, Anthony J. 2002. "'To define the indefinable': Population classification and the census in South Africa", *Area* **34**(4):401-408.
- Christopher, Anthony J. 2005. "Race and the census in the commonwealth", *Population, Space and Place* **11**(2):103-118.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1967. *The Wretched of the Earth*. London: Penguin.
- Hacking, Ian. 1990. *The Taming of Chance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hacking, Ian. 1991. "How should we do the history of statistics?," in Burchell, Graham, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (eds). *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, pp. 181-195.
- Hacking, Ian. 1999. *The Social Construction of What?* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Head, Judith. 1997. *Collecting health statistics in the New South Africa: Which category should be used, "race" or class?* Unpublished mimeo. Cape Town: University of Cape Town.
- Hirschman, Charles. 1987. "The meaning and measurement of ethnicity in Malaysia: An analysis of census classifications", *Journal of Asian Studies* **46**(3):555-582.
- Kertzer, David I. and Dominique Arel. 2002. "Censuses, identity formation, and the struggle for political power," in Kertzer, David I. and Dominique Arel (eds). *Census and Identity: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity, and Language in National Censuses*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-42.
- Krieger, Nancy. 2000. "Refiguring "race": epidemiology, racialised biology, and biological expressions of race relations", *International Journal of Health Services* **30**(1):211-216.
- Moultrie, Tom A. 2005. "Racism and reproduction – Population rhetoric in South Africa, 1900-1974", *African Studies* **64**(2):217-242.
- Nobles, Melissa. 2002. "Racial categorization and censuses," in Kertzer, David I. and Dominique Arel (eds). *Census and Identity: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity, and Language in National Censuses*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 43-70.

- Posel, Deborah. 1991. *The Making of Apartheid, 1948-1961: Conflict and Compromise*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Posel, Deborah. 2000. "A mania for measurement: statistics and statecraft in the transition to apartheid," in Dubow, Saul (ed). *Science and Society in Southern Africa*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 116-142.
- Scott, James C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- South Africa, Union of. 1910. *House of Assembly Debates vol 1*. Cape Town: Government Printing and Stationery Office.
- South Africa, Union of. 1911. *Statutes of the Union of South Africa, 1935*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- South Africa, Union of. 1912. *Census of the Union of South Africa, 1911*. Report No. UG32-1912. Pretoria: Government Printing and Stationery Office.
- South Africa, Union of. 1924. *Third Census of the Population of the Union of South Africa, Enumerated 3rd May 1921*. Report No. UG37-1924. Pretoria: Government Printing and Stationery Office.
- South Africa, Union of. 1935. *House of Assembly Debates vol 24*. Cape Town: Government Printing and Stationery Office.
- South Africa, Union of. 1938. *Sixth Census of the Population of the Union of South Africa, Enumerated 5th May 1936. Volume I*. Report No. UG21-1938. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- South Africa, Union of. 1955a. *Census of the Population of the Union of South Africa, Enumerated 8th May 1951. Volume I*. Report No. UG42-1955. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- South Africa, Union of. 1955b. *Summary of the Report of the Commission for the Socio-Economic Development of the Bantu within the Union of South Africa*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Statistics South Africa. 2003. *Computer Edit Specifications for Census 2001* Report 03-02-43 (2001). Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.
- Statistics South Africa. 2006. *Community Survey 2007: Enumerator's Manual*. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.
- Statistics South Africa. n.d. (c. 1998). *Metadata for the Persons File (Census 1996)*. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.
http://www.statssa.gov.za/census01/Census96/HTML/Metadata/Metadta/comm_profiles_databases_toc.htm Accessed 28 October 2007
- Statistics South Africa. n.d. (c. 2004). *Census 2001 Metadata*. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.
<http://www.statssa.gov.za/census01/html/Persons.pdf> Accessed 28 October 2007.
- Suzman, Arthur. 1960. "Race classification and definition in the legislation of the Union of South Africa - 1910-1960", *Acta Juridica*:339-367.
- West, Martin. 1988. "Confusing categories: Population groups, national states and citizenships," in Boonzaier, Emile and John Sharp (eds). *South African Keywords: The Uses and Abuses of Political Concepts*. Cape Town: David Philip, pp. 100-110.
- Zuberi, Tukufu. 2001. *Thicker Than Blood: How Racial Statistics Lie*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Zuberi, Tukufu and Akil K. Khalfani. 1999. *Racial classification and the Census in South Africa, 1911-1996*. ACAP Working Paper No. 7. Philadelphia: African Census Analysis Project.