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Since the 1996 Census considerable discussion has arisen concerning the composition and character of Indigenous population growth. The paper examines some of the features of this debate and analyses terminologies employed in key texts in order to tease out patterns in the representation of Indigenous demographic change and its implications for identity. The paper finds that terminology used to describe Indigenous self-identification is often inappropriate; notions underlying such descriptions are sometimes inadequate; identity and identification have been mistakenly conflated; and notions of identity are under-theorised. It positions discussion of 'unexplained growth' in the context of history, specifically that of the Stolen Generations.

INTRODUCTION

The publication of Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data on Indigenous populations following the 1996 Census of Population and Housing has inspired considerable and ongoing debate, as recent editions of *People and Place* attest. The 1996 results surprised observers, and surpassed previous ABS projections on Indigenous population growth. In the ten years from 1986 to 1996 the recorded Indigenous population, by Census count, rose by 50 per cent.¹ The Estimated Resident Population (ERP) for Indigenous Australians on 30 June 1996 was 372,052 persons; an increase in the intercensal period, 1991 to 1996, of over 31 per cent.²

Discussion has arisen concerning the composition and character of Indigenous population growth; the issue of 'identification' on Census forms — often conflated with identity itself — is central to this debate. This paper examines some of the features of this debate concerning identity and population. In particular, we seek to identify commonly employed figures of speech in the presentation of population data, and some inherent problems in their usage. And second, in locating discussion of the Census in its historical context, we look to the role of the

Stolen Generations in the analysis of components of what one writer has called the Indigenous population explosion.³

INDIGENOUS RIGHTS TO SELF-DEFINITION

Article 8 of the United Nations Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states:

Indigenous peoples have the collective and individual right to maintain and develop their distinctive identities and characteristics, including the right to identify themselves as Indigenous and be recognised as such.⁴

Eleanor Bourke, commenting on Aboriginality past, present and future, sees her Indigenous identity as firstly, a historical fact predating contact.⁵ This means that her use of the term 'Aboriginal' is broader than some others. According to Bourke, it is not simply a reaction to opposition, the identification of yourself as one with other victims of European invasion. It is the original identity that comes with a relationship to this particular land. That identity is multiple, but able to be totalised. At the same time, Aboriginality adapts to a changing present; it participates actively in a variety of social processes, the result of which is that both black and white identity are modified. In

addition, Indigenous organisations, constructed over long periods of resistance to colonialism, are also important expressions of Aboriginal identity. Bourke argues that deeply ingrained and ongoing traditions, such as kinship traditions, continue to provide important channels for personal identity. But as Michael Mansell points out, Aboriginal identity is not a club anyone can join.⁶ It occurs in a familial, community and historical horizon. This latter point underscores the position of the Commonwealth's definition of Aboriginality, used for establishing eligibility for Indigenous programs which, as Marcia Langton points out, is preferred by the vast majority of Aboriginal people over the racial definitions of the assimilation era.⁷ The working definition, in use from the 1970s, and supported by the High Court, reads:

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives.

**ENUMERATION AND EXPLICATION:
'UNEXPLAINED' COMPONENTS OF
POPULATION DISCOURSE**

The analysis of demographic change, including such issues as regional variation, and the components of growth, is undoubtedly an appropriate and important exercise. There are indeed important questions arising from these analyses, particularly in relation to service delivery and policy frameworks.⁸ Various authors have pointed to the fact that the increased Indigenous population at the 1996 Census bears the same demographic profile and socio-economic status as the Indigenous population in previous counts.⁹ For example, in the criminal justice area alone, if there are not serious reductions

in Indigenous arrest and imprisonment rates, Indigenous prisoner numbers will continue to rise commensurate with the rises in population, with all the attendant risks of further and higher numbers of deaths in custody.¹⁰

Analysis of the Census data is therefore a legitimate and *needed* process. The importance of the recent work of Australian demographers, and the significant achievements in the last two decades in relation to Indigenous demographic issues, can't be underestimated.¹¹ However, as the Hansonite phenomenon of the mid-90s so amply demonstrated, population and race issues are a hotly contested arena in Australian political and social discourse, both historically and in contemporary terms. They bear a high potential for damage, particularly, but not exclusively, to Indigenous communities. Through the 1990s some 'right-wing' populist commentators maintained virulent attacks on Indigenous people and their right to identify themselves.¹² It's therefore incumbent upon those who enter this debate, particularly at the level of expert commentary, and government-funded publications, that language, modes of description, and terminologies be deployed that seek to enhance constructive debate, and not obscure it.

Most analysis following the 1996 Census results has been temperate. In a number of publications the ABS has both presented and analysed the data,¹³ leading demographers have published commentaries,¹⁴ and media interest has been significant.¹⁵ However, for the most part, the debate concerning demographic change remains a predominantly white discourse. The relative absence of Indigenous voices in this debate allows, in part, the uncontested character of certain assumptions concerning issues of identity, which go to the heart of Indigenous national identity.

However, our study makes no claim to be a comprehensive review of all the literature relevant to Indigenous demography. Rather, we seek, through an analysis of the discursive, rhetorical strategies employed in key texts, to tease out patterns and trends in the representation of Indigenous demographic change and its implications for identity.

Identity/Identification

In general, notions of identity are under-theorised in the writings on demography, one effect of which is a confusion of identity with identification.¹⁶ In an otherwise valuable contribution in one recent ABS publication, for example, a serious slippage occurs between arguments concerning perceived shifts in decisions to affirm Indigenous status at the Census(es), and the very nature of Indigenous identity. This slippage occurs over three steps

First, the paper contends that the way 'some people' answer the Indigenous status question at the Census can change over time, citing the Post-Enumeration Survey as evidence of such changeability.¹⁷ Second, it is proposed that this changeability was reflected at the 1996 Census when a section of 'the population' was recruited into the Indigenous population, using as evidence here changes in identity transmission to the offspring of inter-marriages.¹⁸ These two factors form the basis for the general proposition that (for those of 'mixed ancestry') it's likely that identification as Indigenous can be changed over time, and, in 'different situations', (that is, in and beyond the Census).¹⁹ This leads to the general statement that Indigenous *identity* can be characterised as a 'fluid variable',²⁰ and to the general description of that identity as subject to 'a great deal of flux and change'.

The implication (and one that appears

to run through much of ABS commentary on the subject) is that Indigenous identity is, in some essential way, tied for its existence to the five-yearly marking of a box on a Census form! This is clearly erroneous. Propensity to declare, mark or signal one's identity (in a given context), and the state or nature of one's identity, are clearly separable. Second, and more disturbing, is the inference that recent Indigenous population growth at the Census is the result, in part, of an inherent predisposition for variation, fluidity, and changeability in Indigenous people's identity. The third inference is paradoxical: the extent of the Indigenous population rests, it is proposed, in part, on the variability of a group of 'some people', who are apparently neither Indigenous nor non-Indigenous, that is, people who are notionally unidentifiable (or 'mixed').

By way of elucidation, Alan Gray asserts that a sensible starting point is to observe that the difference between the expected count and the actual enumeration can be attributed, first, to Census procedures, and, second, to self-identification on Census forms as distinct from asserting Indigenous identity. He goes on to say that:

... Asserted and even assertive Aboriginal identity is not necessarily congruent with marking a box on a Census form, or any other form, especially if there is any suspicion about the way in which the information might be used.²¹

As to the common use of the term 'identification change', Gray labels it 'perniciously misleading' if it used to describe changes occurring in the inclusion and identification in the Census of people who (in other contexts) normally identify themselves as Indigenous.²²

'Ethnic switching'

There is an unfortunate tendency within

the commentaries to denote Indigenous identity as inherently problematic or ambiguous. There is also a propensity to equate Indigenous identity with ethnic identity, or to treat Indigeneity as but one ethnicity among many.²³

There are claims that Indigenous identity/identification is subject to the vagaries of 'ethnic switching',²⁴ 'ethnic identification',²⁵ 'category movement',²⁶ or is part of an 'ethnic identity repertoire'.²⁷ Emphasis has been placed on changes in 'propensity to identify',²⁸ and the unpredictability of revealed Indigenous populations, on 'recruitment'²⁹ to Indigenous communities, and 'inter-ethnic mobility'.³⁰ And there is consistent reference made to the 'unexplained components' of Indigenous population growth.

While it is perfectly legitimate to discuss the various modalities — biological, cultural, political — that comprise identity(ies) in a post-colonial setting, it is completely inappropriate to imply that Indigenous identity has within it some quixotic basis. Further, in the Australian political context Indigenous people are not an ethnic minority. The Australian Indigenous community have a particular and unique status within Australian society. As the inhabitants of this continent for over 60,000 years Indigenous people in Australia have no peers. 'Ethnicity' is not a cultural/political marker employed by Indigenous people to identify themselves or their aspirations. Loaded terms such as 'recruitment' — bearing images of 'spruikers' for this or that community — also give rise to unnecessary confusion about the processes that inform any Indigenous person's decision to assert their Indigeneity by way of a Census form. There's a general sense conveyed by the use of such terminology in combination, that characterises the Indigenous community as one in which individual

members may slip egregiously from one identity marker to another, based on a storehouse — a 'repertoire' — of potential identity markers.

The implication that large increases in the revealed population of Indigenous people at the Census(es) is indicative of changes in Indigenous identity *per se* is an uninformed, and potentially racist assumption. To argue that Indigenous identity is subject to 'a great deal of flux and change',³¹ and by implication to mysterious shifts and realignments is, to repeat our point, to engage in a highly suspect discourse. Such an approach dehistoricises the position of Indigenous peoples in a dominantly 'other' (that is, white) culture, and characterises such identity as potentially fragile, incomplete, or, indeed, whimsical. Rather it would be more constructive to engage in a discussion of Indigenous populations, and the role of identity as perceived by Indigenous Australians themselves, including families.

'Mixed' marriages

The attempt to represent Indigeneity extends to notions of the effects of inter-marriage on identity. Misconstrued by some as the sole determinant of Indigenous population growth,³² inter-marriage has been mis-represented as involving integration, amidst reported fears of a 'dilution of cultural integrity'.³³ But just whose integrity is being 'diluted'? Given the claims that between 83 and 88 per cent of the offspring of such partnerships now identify as Indigenous,³⁴ it could well be argued that it is the non-Indigenous identity which is standing in line for 'dilution'!

The recent work of Bob Birrell draws attention to the (comparatively) high level of inter-marriage that exists in Australia between members of Indige-

nous and non-Indigenous communities compared to black and non-black communities in the United States.³⁵ However, as Birrell notes, the most appropriate US comparison would be with Native Americans, for whom the data were not available. To what degree inter-marriage furthers reconciliation is also a moot point. There's no evidence presented to suggest that inter-marriage actually shields Indigenous people from racism. As Marcia Langton points out, the overwhelming majority of white Australians have no personal relationships with, Indigenous people.³⁶ Ian Anderson makes a similar point: it's largely through the writings of non-Indigenous commentators, and populists, that most non-Indigenous Australians 'know' Indigenous people.³⁷

The quest for signs of 'integration' amongst such writers is therefore important. Some columnists and social commentators present inter-marriage as a sign of white tolerance and Australian egalitarianism,³⁸ in much the same way as Indigenous sporting success has been presented as indicating that social disadvantage is a thing of the past.³⁹ The subtext here is that inter-marriage will 'deal with' (ie., that is subvert) issues of Indigenous sovereignty, land rights and compensation. There's no evidence to suggest that inter-marriage will have this effect. Indeed, in the period of the 1990s, in which the incidence of inter-marriage has reportedly grown, a revival and expansion in Indigenous cultural expression, representation, media and politics has also been observed. Birrell remarks that there's no suggestion arising from the data that inter-marriage undermines identity.⁴⁰ Indigenous commentators, such as Jackie Huggins, believe a strong cultural identity would continue to be maintained, and that inter-marriage may

assist in breaking down barriers.⁴¹ But Huggins, and Bourke, point out that even within mixed marriages people can still hold racist views of Indigenous people.

WHITE DEFINING BLACK: INDIGENOUS IDENTITY(IES) AND THE CENSUS

It could be argued, however, that the true 'fluid variable' here is the history of white definitions of Aboriginal identity. As Mick Dodson notes, white definitions of Aboriginality have been 'infinitely elastic',⁴² traversing a full gamut of possible human and non-human type representations, from curiosities to monstrosities. In every area of life — in law, administration, politics, art, academia and religion — white Australia has produced its manifold versions of the native/the primitive/the Aboriginal, of Indigeneity.⁴³

The one constant in this process of representational schizophrenia, is the fixation of white culture with officially dominating and controlling Indigenous people, their identity and thus their futures — and with controlling the process of representation. In the arena of the law, for example, this is evidenced by the over 700 pieces of legislation pertaining to Aborigines passed by Australian parliaments.⁴⁴ Within these Acts appear some 67 different definitions of Aboriginality. In Victoria alone between 1854 and 1982, 74 Acts of parliament were passed with specific references to Aborigines.⁴⁵

This history of (re)defining Indigenous people extends to the Census. Section 127 of the constitution stated that: *In reckoning the numbers of people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives shall not be counted.* From 1911 the Census did, however, include questions on 'racial origin' to enumerate those identifying as Aboriginal. The

purpose of this was to discount them from the total!

Eleven different sets of questions have been used since then,⁴⁶ and the types of questions developed, particularly up to 1966, reflect the developing white obsession with genetic classification. In 1947, for example, the Census asked respondents the following:

Race.— For persons of European Race, wherever born write ‘European.’

For non-Europeans state the race to which they belong, for example, Aboriginal, Chinese, Negro, Afghan, etc.

If the person is half-caste with one parent of European race write also ‘H.C.’ for example as H.C. Aboriginal’, ‘H.C. Chinese,’ etc.

Just as Tindale asserted his pseudo-scientific theories of hybridity — Indigenes as quadroons, octoroons — so too the Census in 1966 asked for analysis of racial make-up, viz: *If of more than one race give particulars, for example, ½ European-½ Aboriginal, ¾ Aboriginal-¼ Chinese, ½ European-½ Chinese.*

Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus have pointed out that Section 127 rested on the assumption that Indigenous people were inferior⁴⁷ — ergo, they could not expect the same level of financial support and service accorded to other Australians to be distributed on the basis of *their* populations. As the arbiter of these numbers, the Census has therefore historically assisted a racist objective. Further, it has operated in a wider sense as one element of a representational framework, or discursive network, attempting to define (and confine) Indigenous people. In this sense the Census has never been a neutral, objective process, but rather one actively engaged in the representation of identities.

EXPLAINING THE ‘UNEXPLAINED’

In 1937, A. O. Neville, Chief Protector of Aborigines said:

We have the power under the act to take any child from its mother at any stage of its life ... Are we going to have a population of one million blacks in the Commonwealth or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there were ever any Aborigines in Australia?⁴⁸

There is a strong oral tradition and awareness within the Indigenous community that the size of that community is, and has been always, greater than that revealed in state controlled statistical counts such as the Census. Colin Tatz shows that there is a corollary here with other communities that have suffered genocide.⁴⁹

Tatz has argued that sections of the Australian community are in denial in relation to the meaning of the wholesale white practice of child removals from Indigenous families.⁵⁰ The UN Convention on Genocide is unambiguous. Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defines genocide as a variety of specified acts committed with intent to destroy in whole or part a national, ethnical, racial or religious group. One of the five specified acts determined is as follows:

*(e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.*⁵¹

This is how one respondent to the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families saw the relationship of white practice to the public admission of their identity.

... My grandfather wanted us to deny our Aboriginality so that we wouldn’t be taken away ... We weren’t allowed to say we were Aboriginal, and we weren’t

allowed to mix with the Aboriginal people in the country town where we lived ...⁵²

Bringing Them Home details forcible removals, lives lived in constant fear. It contains stories depicting a people under siege, who developed elaborate and often drastic methods to secure the safety of their children, and themselves. It also contains accounts of the widespread practice of white guardians of Aboriginal children changing their identity and thus denying their Aboriginality.⁵³ *Bringing Them Home* places Indigenous identity in an historical context — of severe emotional and physical duress, a literal target of removal from the Australian landscape.⁵⁴ It's in this context that discussion of the 'unexplained' component of Indigenous population increase can be located.

The core of much debate on Indigenous population growth is the analysis of approximately 50 per cent of the intercensal growth (between 1991 and 1996), the proportion which is nominated as 'unexplained'. While 50 per cent of growth is accounted for by Indigenous fertility and offspring identification, the ABS regards between 12 and 13 per cent of the *total* counted in 1991-96 as due to what it has labeled 'category movement'.⁵⁵ The ABS proposes that respondents have answered the Census Indigenous origin question differently to their previous responses in earlier Censuses.

However, by looking at the demographic profile of this latter group at the 1996 census, Gray shows that this group has the same proportionate age distribution of previously counted Indigenous populations — an age distribution nothing like that of other Australians.⁵⁶ John Taylor likewise shows that the overall social and economic profile of the Indigenous population is largely unchanged from 1991.⁵⁷ In other words

the people who have come forward at the 1996 Census are the same type of people, and only one group in Australia fits this description — Indigenous Australians.

With the experience over generations of a hostile officialdom, is it any wonder that many Indigenous people have avoided the Census count, even years or decades after the events described above began to cease? *Bringing Them Home* estimates that between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were removed between 1910 to 1970. Taylor notes that the sheer size of child removals has created a 'large potential pool of census respondents'.⁵⁸ We contend that the 'pool' is not simply composed of people subject to removal, but also includes entire generations affected by these policies. Peter Read's comments on the severity and extent of the implementation of the policy in New South Wales are instructive.⁵⁹ It is in New South Wales that the largest numerical rise in Indigenous population between 1991 and 1996 occurred.

This then may well be part of the reason for the so-called 'unexplained' component, a reason not located initially in Indigenous behaviour at all, but rather in the behaviour of others. Specifically, attempts to wipe out, breed out and write out Indigenous Australians.⁶⁰ In this historical context, the decisions of significant numbers of Indigenous people to now affirm their heritage at the Census(es) has therefore little or nothing to do with 'ethnic switching', or notions of 'recruitment'. It has everything to do with a reality of changed historical conditions and the abandonment of attempts to eliminate the Australian Indigenous population; a new situation in which the human rights of Indigenous people are finally gaining some respect.

CONCLUSION

The Census historically engages in the construction and representation of notions of identity, reveals differences and changes, and the discourse upon its data is just as revealing. But the recent discussion and analysis of Indigenous population growth does indicate that some re-thinking is required. The terminology used to describe Indigenous self-identification is often inappropriate; notions underlying such descriptions are sometimes inadequate; identity and identification have been mistakenly conflated; and notions of identity are typically under-theorised. Lastly, some assumptions concerning the nature of Indigenous identity are inadequate, shallow or offensive.

It is within the context of Australian race relations that the question of Indigenous population growth, its relationship to identity issues, and the difference

between expectation and enumeration needs to be located. The analysis and critique of population data in relation to colonised peoples must then take into account the relationship of the state to those groups. The difference between the expected, and the observed population growth (called the 'error of closure'),⁶¹ can therefore have a fundamental historical basis. The gap between an expected population total based on previous counts and estimates, and the actual enumeration could be coined a 'legacy of history' divergence; a coinage that shifts the emphasis on self-identification towards the broad social milieu in which it occurs. While not discounting other factors, (such as Census procedures themselves),⁶² it appears that at the 1996 Census this 'legacy divergence' was potentially in the order of 12 to 13 per cent of the total.

References

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- ² *Population Distribution*, op. cit., pp. 6, 70; Estimated Resident Population was subsequently revised upwards to 386,000, *Experimental Estimates*, 1998, op. cit.
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- ⁴ Quoted in M. Dodson, 'The Wentworth Lecture — the end in the beginning: re(de)finding Aboriginality', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, vol. 1, 1994, p. 6
- ⁵ L. Dobrez (ed.), *Identifying Australia in Post Modern times*, Bibliotech, Canberra, ANU, 1994, pp. i-xviii; E. A. Bourke, 'Australia's First Peoples: Identity and Population', in C. Bourke, E. Bourke and B. Edwards (eds), *Aboriginal Australia*, University of Queensland Press, 1994, pp. 35-48
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- ¹² Hugh Morgan of Western Mining, has called for a register of 'full-blood Aborigines' for the purpose of land claims, in S. Bennett, *White Politics and Black Australians*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, 1999, pp. 30-31; members of the Queensland National Party call for the Federal Government to recognise as Aboriginal only those with more than 50 per cent Indigenous blood, M. Dodson, op. cit., p. 3; Ron Brunton attacks the notion of the collective identity of the Aboriginal community, and suggests that Indigenous population increase at the (1991) Census may be in part due to people seeking an advantage based on race, R. Brunton, *Black Suffering White Guilt?*, Institute of Public Affairs, 1993, p. 10; (For an Indigenous reply, see I. Anderson, 'Black Suffering: White Wash', *Arena*, June-July, 1993, pp. 23-25); P. P. McGuinness suggests that the generation of stolen children has been a hoax! ABC's *Lateline* program, 25 August 1999; 'PM expresses "regret"', *ATSIC News*, September 1999, p. 8; (cf. Robert Manne, 'A cruel case of absurd historical denial', *The Age*, 15 November, 1999, p. 17).
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- ²⁶ ABS, catalogue no. 4705.0, op. cit., p. 9
- ²⁷ Ross, op. cit., p. 1
- ²⁸ ABS, catalogue no. 3230.0, 1998, p. 30, ABS catalogue no. 3231.0, 1996, p. 12, ABS catalogue no. 3231, 1998, p. 23
- ²⁹ Ross, op. cit., p. 54
- ³⁰ ABS, catalogue no. 3231.0, 1996, p.13
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