Who's afraid of income inequality?

The major public policy debate for human geography in Britain in 1999 will be over whether the government can be persuaded to allow a question on income to be asked in the 2001 Census of Population. The Green Paper on the 2001 Census was cancelled when the 1997 general election was announced. Censuses, and the questions they ask, have always been politically sensitive. The White Paper on the census has been severely delayed because of internal wrangling in Whitehall over its contents. The White Paper was due, belatedly, to be published by the end of January 1999, when this commentary was also due to be written. By the start of February it had still not been released, severely curtailing the scope for public debate over the form of this major social survey of Britain. The census is by far the most important source of information on the human geography of this island. The census debate, as I explain in the commentary below, should be centred around the need for a question on income, which should be proposed in the White Paper to be written into the census act of parliament. However, the delays to the publication of the White Paper, and the refusal of government ministries to provide any comment, suggest that the income question is threatened. The most likely scenario is that it will be 'tested' and 'rejected'. If that were to happen we should then ask: who is afraid to know the level of income inequality in Britain? Because the income question is how inequality would be measured.

During 1997 and 1998 the Office for National Statistics (ONS) of Her Majesty's Government undertook the most widespread and thorough public consultation ever conducted on the proposed contents and procedures of our national census of population, set to take place in spring 2001. To facilitate this process the Economic and Social Research Council (in conjunction with the Joint Information and Services Committee) funded a set of consultative meetings for the academic community and members of ONS to attend. They also commissioned a survey of census users' opinions, the results of which were published in this journal last year (Rees, 1998). This public consultation, and the coordinated academic response, were important to social research in Britain in general and to geographical research in particular because of the significance of the 2001 Census. The 2001 Census will be used as the empirical benchmark for the state of British society for decades to come (the census is also conducted in Northern Ireland, but released in such a different form that almost all analysis excludes the province). The first Census, in 1801, was a landmark from which change was measured by social reformers in the 19th century (as by Chadwick, 1842). As a long-term benchmark it was superseded by the Census of 1901, used extensively to supplement social surveys at the start of this century (such as Rowntree, 1941). The 2001 Census will, similarly, be the benchmark used by planners, researchers, and reformers in the mid-21st century, when they report on how that century has begun to emerge for the people of Britain.

Given the importance of this particular census, which will be the most expensive and best planned social survey in the history of this island (Diamond, 1999), given the unprecedented extent of the consultation process, and given the change of government in 1997 to a party historically committed to social statistics (Levitas and Guy, 1996), hopes ran high amongst academic users of the census that their views would be considered and that this would be a census of great value to social research for decades to come. Amongst the census users who completed the consultation survey, the largest group were academic

geographers. Hence the need for this commentary in this journal. Because of the unique quality of geographical resolution in the census it is geographers who make most use of this resource amongst all social scientists and it is geographers who will be most affected by any shortcomings in the census. Indirectly, of course, we are all affected by shortcomings in the census, as the results are used to coordinate public policy. What then is the most important question that the census must include?

The most popular new question, which over 90% of respondents to the academic consultation thought of as essential or highly desirable was the introduction of a new question on total gross income of individuals. Indeed "The new question on income gained overwhelming approval" (Rees, 1998, page 1794) as compared with "underwhelming" support for a suggested new question on religion (only the asking of whether people spoke Irish, Gaelic, or Welsh was less supported). Academics were concerned that the income banding being proposed should not be limited to categories of income below £25 000 and indeed this was one of the 22 recommendations that Professor Rees made on their behalf to government through this survey, but they saw no need to recommend the actual question in that list of 22 requests—so obvious was its necessity. In this they were joined by the representations made on behalf of local authorities, the National Health Service, and private businesses, all of whom saw the immense value of a question on income. In fact, as far as I am aware and as best as I have been able to ascertain, there has been no opposition to such a question from any of the groups consulted. How and why then, given such a clear mandate, may the government, through ONS, decide to omit what was their suggestion in the first place (they 'tested' it in the 1997 census test), and instead propose in the census White Paper of 1999 not to confirm a question on income in the 2001 Census?

Before asking how and why the government may chose to omit the income question it is necessary first to say what it would be most useful for. Over the 1970s and much more so in the 1980s it became evident that inequalities in income in Britain were rising rapidly. It also became evident to many social researchers in the 1980s and 1990s that the underlying causes of most of the social structures and patterns which they were studying were socioeconomic inequalities. Most simply, for geographers, much of what was being mapped was the spatial manifestation of inequalities in income. It took some longer than others. For example, I spent three years drawing maps of the results of the 1991 Census (Dorling, 1995) before realising that many, if not most, of these maps were simply an adaptation on one theme: income. However, the only measures of income at small level available at that time came from commercial sources such as the income people report on their building society mortgage applications (Dorling, 1995, page 204). The other possible source of small area data on income is to estimate it given other census statistics, but for very large groups of people this is not possible—most obviously for pensioners.

In much empirical modelling it has now become so obvious that income, or its proxy, socioeconomic status (SES), determines so many of life's chances that the phrase "having taken into account SES" is becoming very familiar to readers of research papers. That phrase having been said, and introduced into whatever model is being used, the writers then move on to discuss the more interesting findings which are not so obvious, whether this is in measuring the educational success of pupils at school, their chances of getting to university (HEFC, 1997) or their chances of living to enjoy their old age (Independent Inquiry into Inequalities in Health, 1998). Indeed, in the complex mathematical modelling of morbidity and mortality rates SES often ranks alongside age and sex as 'determinants' to be allowed for early on in the modelling process (for example, Wiggins et al, 1998). This is not to argue that there is anything wrong with this research, which certainly does not accept that one group

should 'naturally' experience particular events more frequently than any other. Rather it illustrates just how well accepted the importance of social status and material well-being are amongst social researchers. Currently, using the existing census data, we have to guess blindly at these factors, at worst assuming that anyone who has the word 'manager' in his or her job title is well paid and respected while also assuming that all those who do not work for a living are badly off. The socio-economic position of children is extremely hard to quantify, that of pensioners even more so, and people not in work are classed by their last known occupation (if they had one). A question which asked the gross income of adults (and hence would allow children to be classified by the income of their parents) would advance the possibilities of explaining inequalities in British society immeasurably.

What then are the reasons for resisting such a question? People would object to it, or find it hard to complete—are possible responses. However, almost all other government social surveys in Britain ask this question and it is asked in other national censuses successfully worldwide. Individuals' answers to census questions (unlike other government surveys) are confidential and cannot be released from ONS for 100 years under the census legislation. People are already prepared (and compelled by law) to tick boxes which were previously thought of as too sensitive. For example, on issues such as their ethnicity (outlawed in 1981), whether they suffer a long-standing illness (new to 1991), on questions bordering on their sex life (the cohabitation question new to 1991), and ministers are now keen to enquire as to their religious beliefs (traditional in the census of Northern Ireland and possibly new to Britain in 2001). For commercial surveys, in returning junk mail, when subscribing to free offers, or even when filling in warranty forms for household goods, it is now very common to tick a box asking for your range of income. What possible reason could there be to exclude such an obviously needed and uncontroversial question in the census?

In a survey of government statistical agencies *The Economist* magazine rates Statistics Canada the best in the world. In Canada, as elsewhere of course, they have been asking the income question for some time: "Information on the income of individuals and families is the single most useful indicator of their economic well-being. Since 1971, Census of Canada collects information on the sources of income of respondents 15 years and over in a 20% sample of households. When combined with demographic, socio-cultural and economic characteristics collected in the census, the census income data become an extremely rich source of research on many societal issues" (Rashid, 1998, page). Rashid goes on to explain how Statistics Canada impute missing income data for the 9.8% of forms which require this [a similar proportion to the 8.5% of people in Britain who were not even listed as present on census forms in 1991 (Dorling, 1995, page 14)]. Reluctance to complete the question or difficulty with imputing missing responses are thus not good reasons to reject the question.

So if there is no good statistical or social scientific reason for excluding this key question, why may researchers, policymakers and the people of Britain be kept in the dark over where the rich and poor live in this country? A commentary is too short a space to try to begin to explain the convoluted thinking that may lie behind the politics of contemporary official statistics (see instead Levitas and Guy, 1996). But, in short, I believe this government does not want to know too much about the rich, and what an income question tells us most about is the rich. This is because, despite what they say, government ministers are more interested in 'inclusion' than 'inequality' (Levitas, 1998). For people to be included and to monitor inclusion you only have to know about the poorest. You only need the answers to questions such as who is not earning. To promote equality you need to know about the richest as well. It is easy to believe in

greater equality, much harder to achieve it, and for this government, it appears to me, it may be too hard even to begin to measure.

> "I believe in greater equality. If the Labour government has not raised the li[illegible] standards of the poorest by the end of its time in office it will have failed" (Tony Blair, 1996, quoted in Howarth et al, 1998).

You can believe in equality as much as you like. But why be afraid to measure it?

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