

MEASURING MĀORI IN AUSTRALIA: INSIGHTS AND OBSTACLES

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Abstract

There are now as many as one in six Māori living in Australia. Due to census practice and a lack of administrative data in Australia on ethnicity, it has been, and remains, difficult to calculate their number or assess their characteristics. Despite these challenges, important insights for social policy in New Zealand can be gained from endeavouring to do so.

CHALLENGES TO MEASURING MĀORI IN THE AUSTRALIAN CENSUS

The Australian census does not have an ethnicity question. Instead, it asks respondents to select the ancestry or ancestries with which they “most closely identify” (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006:7). The most common responses from the previous census are included as tick-box options to speed data processing, but since these are also all nationalities – including “Australian” – other examples are specifically provided on the form to show that ancestry rather than nationality is being sought. These include Hmong, Kurdish and Māori.

An ancestry question was first used in Australia in 1986. With the dismantling of the “White Australia” policy in the early 1970s, and the influx since then of large numbers of “new Australians”, the question was intended to measure the manifest changes in the composition of the Australian population. In the lead-up to the formulation of the 1986 census, the Australian Bureau of Statistics had given active consideration to whether to measure ancestry or ethnicity (Kunz and Costello 2003:4). The former was chosen, but it was hardly an unqualified success. Due to a high non-response rate and confusion as to its meaning, the ancestry question was shelved for the 1991 and 1996 Australian censuses while officials considered different types of questions that might yield better-informed responses. A question on ancestry was reinstated in the 2001 census and retained in very similar form in 2006. It has nevertheless continued to have its limitations, as we shall see.

In 1986 respondents were invited to trace their ancestry back to their grandparents and were given space to insert up to three nominated ancestries. The intention can never have been to count all three, however, as the form had only two coding boxes beneath these three lines. This led to an unknown number of lost ancestries. For groups with typically high multiple-ancestry response rates, such as New Zealanders (including Māori), this would have had a disproportionate impact, although country of birth figures provided an alternative (and certainly more satisfactory) means of measuring the number of New Zealanders in Australia. The Māori total of 26,035 people had other problems: it included more than one thousand

¹ I acknowledge the helpful comments of Paul Callister, Robert Didham and Richard Bedford on a draft of this paper.

Cook Island Māori,² whom demographer Jeremy Lowe was told had been included in the same code (1990:7).

On top of these challenges, the subsequent dropping of the ancestry question, coupled with the 1986 removal of the ethnic origin question from New Zealand arrival and departure cards, suddenly made it practically impossible to calculate the size of the rapidly growing Māori population in Australia. Those interested in this population were relieved, therefore, when the ancestry question was returned in 2001. This time the census gave a total of 72,956 Māori, but the impact of lost ancestries was even greater. This was because census respondents were invited to trace their ancestry back to their great-grandparents, and were given space on the form to enter several unlisted ancestries, but again were not advised that only two ancestries would be counted and thus were unable to prioritise accordingly. Moreover, the tick-box options were counted first, in descending order from the most popular (English and Irish), thus creating an enormous bias towards them.

In 2003 the Australian Bureau of Statistics attempted to calculate the scale of the lost ancestries by sampling some 367,000 census forms. From this exercise it was able to estimate what the ancestry totals should have been if all entered ancestries had been counted. The Māori estimate was 17,525 lost ancestries, or 19.4% of the official total (Kunz and Costello 2003:56). Although Māori were not as affected as some other groups (around 50% of Jamaican, French and Swedish ancestries were lost, for example), this nevertheless showed that the official 2001 figure was only a subset of the entire Australian-resident Māori population.

This perhaps raises the question as to whether all those who had named at least two other ancestries as well as Māori would have regarded themselves as being of Māori ethnicity, or whether the 40,303 who gave sole Māori ancestry would have been the most likely to have identified as such. These questions inevitably arise when one attempts to compare the Australian and New Zealand census results. The New Zealand census asks a Māori descent question as well as an ethnicity one, and there is an argument for comparing the descent total with the Australian census ancestry tally given the similarity of the concepts, if not the question form. But it is highly likely that most, if not all, these 90,000 people (that is, the official count plus the estimated number of lost ancestries) would also have identified as being of Māori ethnicity had such a question been asked, because the Australian ancestry question is clearly interpreted by many as one of identity. The use of the word “identify” in the 2001 census guide and the millions answering “Australian” bear testimony to that.³

Doubtless as a response to the problem of lost ancestries, in 2006 the question and guide introduced an instruction to respondents to enter two ancestries only. When the results were released in June 2007, the official Māori total rose to 92,912, a 27% rise over 2001. Assuming census respondents adhered to the new instruction, however, this in fact represented something of a contraction, for we know that there were already 90,000 Māori-ancestry respondents in 2001. The 2006 figure is certainly not explained by a net migration gain of New Zealand citizens from Australia – indeed, the number of New Zealand-born in

² That is, 1,048 persons who were either born in the Cook Islands or both of whose parents were born in the Cook Islands.

³ The 2006 census guide (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006:7) even included the explanation that “Ancestry is not necessarily related to the place a person was born but is more the cultural group that they most closely identify with”. This definition is rather similar to the way the 2006 New Zealand census *Guide Notes* defined “ethnic group”.

Australia rose 9.5% from 2001 to 2006. What it probably represents instead is people squeezing out “Māori” from their ancestry choices because of the new restriction. This kind of contraction was common across a large number of ancestry groups, with many others recording lower tallies than their estimated 2001 total.

Alternatively – or rather additionally – the 2006 totals may well reflect the ongoing entry of more than two ancestries by many census respondents, regardless of the new instruction. Although the advice of the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2007 was that the 2003 data quality investigation of ancestry responses would not be repeated, there may even have been a similar number of lost ancestries in 2006 to 2001 (pers. comm., Robert Didham, 23 January 2009).

Several other complications are worth noting about the identification of the Australian-resident Māori population. The first is that, although now classified under a separate code, it is impossible to prevent Cook Island Māori being caught up in the Māori ancestry total if they simply enter “Māori” on the census form.⁴ As a result, there were 654 individuals among the 72,956 Māori in 2001 born in the Cook Islands (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs 2003:65) and 540 among the 92,913 in 2006 (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, no date a:2). Given the numbers of those with Cook Island backgrounds born in New Zealand and the level of intermarriage between Māori and Cook Island Māori, these totals are likely to represent the minimum number of Cook Island Māori included in the Māori ancestry tallies. With only two ancestries being recorded it is difficult to know which of these ancestries is more likely to have been lost where both and a third ancestry (such as a tick-box option) were stated.

The second matter is that, quite apart from any “squeezing out” or loss of ancestries, many Māori in Australia appear quite content not to enter “Māori” as an ancestry response at all. Te Puni Kōkiri’s 2006 survey of 1,205 (predominantly New Zealand-born) Māori in Australia revealed that some 12.5% would answer the census only as “New Zealander” (Hamer 2007:31–32). This is despite the fact that the very act of completing this self-selecting survey was certainly an expression of Māori identity. Answering the ancestry question in this way was explained by some as arising from one’s primary frame of reference overseas being as a New Zealander. It may well also be that similar proportions of Australian-born Māori would answer simply as “Australian”. The question arises as to whether these people should simply be discounted from attempts to measure the number and characteristics of Māori in Australia. On the basis of the Te Puni Kōkiri survey, at least, this seems unjustifiable. The nomination by them of their nationality to answer a question about ancestry provides no ground to conclude that such respondents would answer “yes” to a New Zealand census Māori descent question and “no” to a Māori ethnicity one.⁵

Finally, it should also be added that Māori in Australia may be significantly undercounted. Post-enumeration surveys in Australia have tended to indicate that the New Zealand-born have roughly double the national average of undercounting (much of which stems from their typically young-adult age profile), but the Māori proportion is likely to be even higher. This assumption is based on their high degree of residential mobility, their self-perception as

⁴ The same problem occurs in the New Zealand census when Cook Island Māori enter “Māori” in response to the census ethnicity question.

⁵ Some verification of the likely extent of this type of response by Māori in Australia may be gleaned from an analysis of the ancestry responses for those saying they speak Māori in the home, or those nominating Rātana or Ringatū as their religion.

temporary migrants, and their disinclination to take part in the Australian polity, as suggested by their very low take-up of Australian citizenship. Even Te Puni Kōkiri survey respondents who completed the survey in the two months immediately after the 2006 Australian census – and in whose minds the census should have been fresh – reported a remarkably high degree of non-response to it (Hamer 2007:27–28, 61–70, 151–154).

WHY MEETING THESE CHALLENGES IS IMPORTANT

Altogether, therefore, there are numerous challenges to accurately measuring the Māori population in Australia. Despite these difficulties it is important to try to do so, for a number of reasons. In the first place, it is critical that there be an understanding of the extent of out-migration of Māori (and other New Zealanders) to Australia. If Māori are clearly over-represented in the New Zealand migrant population in Australia, then the impact on them of negative “push factors” in New Zealand is likely to be larger than imagined. At the 1986 census those reporting Māori ancestry were just 8.5% of the New Zealand-born, but by 2006 this had risen to 15.1%, thus indeed suggesting – despite the ancestry question flaws – an over-representation of Māori among New Zealand migrants to Australia in the last two decades (Hamer 2007:25, Department of Immigration and Citizenship no date b:2).⁶

It also seems important to understand how Māori are faring in Australia, for two reasons. The first is so that they can be compared with Māori in New Zealand, to enable the impact of their migration on their education, choice of partner, health, employment, and so on to be measured. A common suggestion is that Māori fare worse in social statistics the further removed they are from access to their culture⁷, but this may not hold true for expatriates who have become a voluntary as opposed to an involuntary minority. Another common perception is that Māori in Australia enjoy higher wages and a better standard of living than in New Zealand, and this notion undoubtedly drives further migration. But just how well off Māori really are in Australia, and how vulnerable they may be there to economic downturns, could have a major influence on their likelihood to return to New Zealand.

Then there is the case for measuring Māori in Australia for the sake of gauging the overall state of Māori development. What point is there, one might wonder, in fixating on Māori unemployment levels in New Zealand when one excludes from consideration 16% (and rising) of the Māori population who live within the same trans-Tasman labour market? In this era of globalisation, and especially given the ongoing levels of connectedness within whānau, hapū and iwi, it seems logical to measure Māori progress and achievement beyond the confines of the New Zealand nation state. What impact, for example, has out-migration had on the sum health of te reo Māori, or on Māori participation in tertiary education, or on overall Māori life expectancy or rates of imprisonment?

⁶ The figure of 15.1% is my calculation from the more limited figures supplied in the Department of Immigration and Citizenship paper. “English”, with 181,460 responses, comprised 33.5% of the total New Zealand-born ancestry responses and “Māori” made up 10.9%. This means there must have been around 541,000 ancestry responses for the 389,470 New Zealand-born, and that the Māori proportion was around 59,000 (and thus 15.1% of all New Zealand-born).

⁷ Mason Durie, for example, has written (with reference to Te Hoe Nuku Roa, a longitudinal study of Māori households) that a “secure Māori identity appears to be correlated with good health, and with better educational outcomes even in the presence of adverse socio-economic conditions”. His definition of those with a “secure Māori identity” is “competent Māori speakers” who “have regular contact with Māori cultural institutions and networks and shares in Māori land” (Durie 2001:56).

Unfortunately, it is uncommon for Australian administrative data to be collected or published on an ethnic or ancestry basis. Quite aside from issues of census consistency, therefore, there are other enormous barriers to measuring Māori in Australia. In an ideal world compatible census data and similar approaches to the recording of ethnicity in administrative statistics should be an objective of some importance for officials on both sides of the Tasman. In the meantime, the Australian census can nevertheless provide much valuable information about Māori in Australia, especially if one remains conscious of the limitations of the data.

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