Review of ABS Standard Indigenous Identification Question

Workshop, 27 November 2013, University of Sydney
Host: Sydney Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics
Location: Room 020, Level 0, New Law School Annexe, Eastern Ave, University of Sydney, Camperdown

1. Welcome to country by Donna Ingram.
2. Introductory remarks: Professor Shane Houston (University of Sydney):
   - The most critical piece of data about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is the count of ‘who we are’. The count is intrinsically linked to the Standard Indigenous Identification Question.
   - This Workshop will explore the relationship between the count and identity. A key question will be whether descent on its own is enough to claim Aboriginal identity.
   - The external environment within which this Workshop takes place is particularly charged – not just because we are talking about personal identity – but because of the ebb and flow of public discourse.
   - This Workshop provides the opportunity to think deeply about these complex issues and questions.

   - Kim’s presentation is available at http://sydney.edu.au/health-sciences/scatsis/events.shtml
   - There was discussion about the difference between the identification question used from 1981 to 1991 and the question used from 1996. ABS did qualitative research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in 2000 to review understanding of and views on the past and present Questions. Participants preferred the 1996 version. They had issues with the instruction about “mixed origin” on the earlier Question. These issues fell into several categories:
• Refusing to answer because it was offensive – “mixed” being seen as harking back to the bad days of being defined as “half or quarter casts” or “full blood”.
• The meaning of the word “mixed”. Did this mean “mixed” Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, or “mixed” non-Indigenous and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?
• That the Question forced people to choose between Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander heritage and non-Indigenous heritage. No way for people of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin to identify as such.
• Likelihood that some people would answer ‘No’ to the 1991 version but ‘Yes’ to the 1996 version if they were of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin.

  ▪ Michelle’s presentation is available at http://sydney.edu.au/health-sciences/scatsis/events.shtml. From 1960, the US has seen an increase in the American Indian and Alaskan Native population beyond what can be explained by demographic factors.
  ▪ The civil rights movement from the 1960s onwards influenced people to identify.
  ▪ In the 2000 Census 2.8% of the US population reported American Indian or Alaskan Native ancestry. 1.5% reported American Indian or Alaskan Native (AIAN) as their race. Note the tight requirements for reporting race as AIAN: need to name registered tribe.
  ▪ Discussion about the order of responses to the Indigenous status question in the US Census. Like ABS, the US Census Bureau places ‘No’ as the first response, on the basis that this is the most common response. The US Census Bureau tried an alphabetic list of responses (which places ‘American Indian’ first) and also tried placing ‘No’ at the end of the list of responses. Both caused confusion. Many people who were not American Indians ticked this box when it appeared first on the list, apparently seeing the word ‘American’ but not the word ‘Indian’.
5. Dr Vanessa Lee (University of Sydney): Torres Strait islander perspective
Vanessa’s presentation is available at http://sydney.edu.au/health-sciences/scatsis/events.shtml
- Dr Lee linked the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage and marginalisation to the need to get the Standard Indigenous Identification Question right.
- Australia has a long history of inquiries, reports and recommendations for how to improve the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people. There is also a history of these recommendations not being implemented, or implementation of the onerous recommendations only such as those that remove children from their families. To Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people this feels like a continuation of the Protection years.

6. Key participant views. Professor Lisa Jackson-Pulver (UNSW)
- Propensity to identify as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person is not a ‘solved problem’ as yet. The issue of identifying on any type of form has significance and meaning, and the issues are greater than the particular words on the form.
- Those asking the identification question or using the symbols of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultures need to understand the real meaning and significance of the words and symbols being used.
- In the university environment there is particular significance in identifying to the university as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person as there are particular programs available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and also particular obligations to the university community.

7. Group discussion led by Professor Ian Ring (University of Wollongong).
Points for discussion:
1) The purpose of the Standard Question
2) Alternatives to the current Standard Question?
3) Collection of information about sub-population groups?
4) Research needed to inform decisions about points 2 and 3
1) Discussion about the purpose of the Standard Question

- ABS slide show gave the purpose of the Standard as ‘To enable the consistent collection of data that:
  - tells the ongoing statistical story about, and for, Aboriginal and Torres Islander peoples, and
  - provides a basis for the allocation of government funding for both general and specifically targeted services.’
- There are four purposes for the data collected by the Question:
  - To inform Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
  - To inform non-Indigenous people
  - For official statistics
  - For administrative (including policy) purposes
- After discussion the group agreed that the purpose of the Question may be summed up as:
  
  ‘This is who we are; this is our number’

2) Discussion about alternatives to the current Standard Question

- Agreed that descent is a requirement for being an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, but that it is descent plus cultural identity that makes a person an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.
- “Are you an Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?” would be an option for the Question that removes the concept of ‘origin’
- Use of all three aspects of the Commonwealth definition? ABS has looked at this in the past and decided that the practical aspects made it unfeasible to collect this information. But data collections could provide an explanation of the three principles in the Commonwealth definition (descent, self identification (including stating community of origin, if known), community acceptance) in order to guide respondents.
- The potential new question would be used in all collections.
- Options for a new Question would need substantial testing. NATSISS is one option for testing.
Consider use of visual clues in question (US suggestion), e.g. capitalised NO
Confirmed by group that Standard Indigenous Question should continue to be a stand alone question

3) Discussion about an additional question about sub-population groups

- Support for this in group, though the view was also put forward that information about a person’s mob is their own business.
- Would this potential new question be asked in all ABS and non-ABS administrative collections or just ABS collections or just the Census? Probably just the Census?
- Use of ancestry question in Census should be explored to allow people to express Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent even if they have not identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in the Standard Question.

4) Research needed

- Impact of removing ‘origin’ from question
- Bigger question of meaning of identification/identity by self and others; explore what people think they are answering when asked about origin versus new approach; this will help in ensuring continuity of time series
- Impact of electronic census (2016 or 2021?) on Indigenous reporting
- Understanding impact of special investment in Indigenous reporting in Census
- Research and consultation about how to structure a question about nation/clan/mob/location