

*Indigenous Peoples and Demography:
The Complex Relation between Identity and Statistics*

edited by Per Axelsson and Peter Sköld
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The question of identity and how it is represented in official statistics has been the subject of numerous conferences, studies, and scholarly works (Petersen 1987; Statistics Canada and the US Bureau of the Census 1993; Guimond 1999; Siggner 2003; Goldmann and Siggner 1995). Statistics Canada and the United States Bureau of the Census organised a conference in 1992 that focused specifically on this topic. It was noted during the conference that confusion exists between the concept of ethnicity and identity, and that the two terms are often used interchangeably. Butz and Goldmann (1993) stated: "Experience shows that fuzzy definitions and group boundaries, changing terminologies, poor reliability and lack of knowledge of the degree of affiliation with a group make data collection difficult." The collection of articles presented in *Indigenous Peoples and Demography* provides evidence of the impact of the issues noted by Butz and Goldmann on the data about indigenous peoples.

While identity is generally an important construct within a society, it takes on greater importance for indigenous peoples, largely due to their relationship to the non-indigenous population. They were (and, it can be argued, still are) living under colonial rule and circumstances; therefore, identity has political, legal, and social significance for the indigenous peoples. The editors of this book, and the authors of the chapters it contains, clearly understand the added complexity of identity when referring to indigenous populations.

This volume presents a diverse series of articles examining how indigenous identity was, and is, represented in official statistics in different geopolitical contexts. Some of the chapters also address the relationship between indigenous identity and public (State) policy. The diversity of the topics addressed in this book is a double-edged sword. Its strength is the breadth of the topics covered and the valuable insights the chapters provide to social scientists who are considering conducting research on indigenous populations. Its weakness is that the volume appears to lack a specific focus. Unfortunately this is an unavoidable condition, given that the individual chapters are papers that were presented at a conference.

The editors were faced with a difficult task when organizing the sequence in which the articles would be presented. Some articles focus on historical demography. Others present a more contemporary analysis. The editors appropriately chose to organise the book along geopolitical lines. While it is reasonable to question whether current geopolitical boundaries are germane when studying indigenous demography, organising the book in this way recognises the similarities that exist within larger regions, such as the Scandinavian countries.

Many of the chapters attempt to explain how the indigenous people were enumerated, either in the respective censuses or in administrative records and registers. It is evident from the descriptions provided in the chapters that there were inconsistencies in definitions and methods over time and across different sources of data. While it is not explicitly stated in the book, it is clearly implied that researchers must take into considera-

tion the instructions given to the enumerators when conducting research on these population groups. These administrative sources provide the contextual information that is necessary in order to understand the counts that are presented in the statistics.

A common theme emerges from the discussions and presentations in the chapters in this book—namely, that the identities of the indigenous people were constructed by the respective States, and, while they may have been anthropologically reasonable, the motivation was generally administrative in nature. This was true historically and, to a large extent, is still valid today. Although the state interest focused on enumerating the respective indigenous populations, their motivation in conducting the enumeration led to inconsistencies in the categories and classifications that were used to identify the populations of interest. It is also important to note that many of the indigenous populations tend to be highly mobile. Their traditional territories do not necessarily conform to either historic or current geopolitical boundaries. Nevertheless, while the classifications were inconsistent, the basic criteria for constructing the identity of the respective indigenous populations were often centred on language and spatial considerations (i.e., where people lived).

My overall impression is that this book makes an important analytical contribution to the study of indigenous peoples. This point notwithstanding, the book suffers from one important flaw. There often appears to be confusion between the concepts of ancestry and identity. This confusion arises in the descriptions of the historical methods of identifying the respective indigenous peoples. It is not clear whether the confusion originates with the respective States or with the authors of the respective chapters. The authors often quote official documents that refer to criteria based on ancestry. For example, Jastad (chapter 8) notes that census enumerators in 19th-century Norway were instructed to use “nationality criteria” to delineate population groups, and then continued to refer to these criteria as “identity.”

I would be remiss if I did not note another potential omission in the chapter on the Aboriginal population in Canada (chapter 5, Hamilton and Inwood). The authors state that the relationship between the Aboriginal peoples and Canadian enumerations has not been addressed in research. In fact, it has been dealt with extensively and thoroughly by Goldmann and Delic, and will be published in a forthcoming book on Canadian Aboriginal demography (Goldmann and Delic n.d.).

While it is difficult to summarize this book in one or two paragraphs, Pettersen (chapter 11) offers an excellent summary in the form of criteria that need to be met in order to obtain appropriate data on the current conditions of this population group.

1. The demand for changes to the data must come from the indigenous population.
2. Ethnic affiliation must be recognized as important data in official statistics.
3. The State must be willing to invest in collecting these data.
4. The rights of indigenous people to participate in the broader society must be respected.
5. Demographic data must cover the entire country, not just regions where concentrations are known to exist.
6. The sources must be open to changes.
7. Self-identification must be the basic principle.

In addition to the items in this list, it is important to consider the responses of the indigenous populations to the collection activities, as noted by the editors of the volume in the Epilogue. These criteria apply equally to all indigenous peoples, regardless of where they live, and they form an important framework for the collection of data on indigenous populations. They also form an important framework for historical as well as contemporary analysis of the conditions of indigenous peoples.

This book clearly shows that indigenous demography needs to be recognized as an important field of study and research.

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