CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND CENSUS CONCEPTS

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O NE of the questions most frequently asked about the 1950 Census of the Americas is, "Will all the countries use the same population schedule, or questions?" When this is answered with a categorical "No," the next question usually is, "How, then, are you going to get international comparability of the censuses of the twenty-two American nations?"

For many people, including some statisticians, the essential element in attaining comparable results in a statistical inquiry is to ask exactly the same questions in exactly the same way of all the respondents and then tabulate the answers in accordance with a uniform mechanical pattern. Differences between the various sub-groups of the population universe are then measurable with a high degree of accuracy. How often this accepted statistical procedure fails to yield the desired results when used in measuring the relatively homogeneous population of the United States, we do not know. We do know that it is *not* a satisfactory technique when applied to widely divergent culture patterns such as those of the Western Hemisphere.

The Committee on the 1950 Census of the Americas has never concerned itself very much with census *questions*. Its emphasis has been on census *topics,* or items, or for which as nearly comparable data as possible are desired for all countries. The Population Commission of the United Nations has also placed its stress on census topics or items rather than questions. Indeed, the close working relations between the Committee (often referred to as COTA) and the Population Commission and staff of UN have resulted, for all practical puposes, in a single international list for population census purposes. The definitions of these topics are in most instances very general, capable of adaptation to various culture patterns, and related to social and economic problems as widespread as mankind—

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those related to sex, age, marital status, place of birth, citizenship, language, literacy, occupation, etc.

With agreement reached on the most necessary general topics to be covered by population censuses, *i.e.,* a minimum international list, a great step toward international comparability of censuses has been taken. But, this is only a first step, and to rest here with the hope that each country will be able to take a census conforming to these international standards is sheer wishful thinking. Quite naturally we think first of the administrative and physical difficulties; for example, the lack of census offices with trained personnel, the inadequate financial support of statistics, the lack of maps, communication and transportation facilities, etc. These are serious indeed in many countries of the Western Hemisphere, but they are problems to which many different available skills and interests can be applied and are being applied in preparation for 1950.

The conversion of an international minimum list of census topics into a practical census schedule, with instructions, procedures, and tables for each country presents problems which have not been solved and on which research is now just beginning. I consider this one of the most important fields for research by demographers and statisticians at the present time. Until we know how to draft census schedule questions and instructions suitable for each cultural group, *i.e.,* meaningful in the language, concepts, values, and experiences of different peoples, we cannot hope to have comparable international population statistics, or even know when they are not comparable.

The cultural pattern of the Western Hemisphere can be divided initially into two major areas: the two countries north of the Rio Grande which are basically Northwestern European and dominantly English; and the twenty countries south of the Rio Grande which are basically Southwestern European, and dominantly Spanish.

Through centuries of intimate contact the French and English elements of Canada have come to have an essentially common culture, and it probably is not significantly different from

that in the United States for census purposes. This does not mean that, in this English-speaking area, there are no areas which should be studied for the application of special census techniques.

Latin America presents a greater number of cultural problems to the statistician, both because of the diversity of cultures within the area, and because of the difficulties of securing exact conceptual equivalents among the official languages—Spanish, Portuguese, French, and English. As to language, Guatemala, with a population of about 3,000,000, has six Indian dialects in addition to the official language, Spanish. Other countries with significant population groups which do not speak the national language, and in many instances differ culturally from the main population of the country are Mexico, El Salvador, Panama, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil, and Venezuela. In each of these countries, and to a lesser extent in some others, it will be necessary to frame the population census instructions in such a way that the agreed-to topics will have the desired meaning to the respondents in their own language.

Recently our Committee prepared a questionnaire on the basic census topics. We used Latin American technicians who are studying in the United States to translate the original English version to Spanish. To do so required the invention of new terminology in Spanish and Portuguese, terminology which, when tested on other Spanish-speaking trainees, was not readily understood. For example, a topic on the international list for data collection by all countries is the number of "households." In neither Spanish or Portuguese could a term be found which had the exact equivalent of the concept "household." The invented term is "census family" (in Spanish, "familia censal.") Now there are statistics on "families" and "census families" both included in some of the plans. On the other hand the Spanish word "vivienda" is superior in concept for census purposes to our closest equivalent "dwelling unit."

When that which is approved by law or the Church differs materially from the customs of the people there are other types

of statistical classification difficulties. For example, what is called "common law" marriage in the United States is very widespread in certain Latin American countries. The statistics of a number of countries, however, do not recognize it at all. Thus thousands of women who, for statistical as well as legal purposes, are "single" are mothers and grandmothers. Under these cultural circumstances the adoption of the United Nations definition of marriage as including all forms of marital unions which are socially acceptable is difficult, if not impossible for the census technicians. Since only a civil ceremony has full legal standing in Mexico, but many people prefer a religious ceremony, their marital classification reports separately (1) civil marriage only, (2) religious marriage only, (3) both civil and religious marriage, (4) living together, not married, (5) widowed, (6) divorced, and (7) single. Some countries hesitate to recognize the "living together, not married" as a standard census category. The effect of this on certain types of fertility analysis is obvious.

Cultural differences in the organization of education and the attitude of the population toward education will materially affect international comparability of census data on this subject. There are wide differences between different Latin American countries and even within some countries as to the number of years and level of schooling in "primary," "secondary," and "college." Nor can these differences be avoided by using the number of years of schooling as a census classification because of the wide variation in what constitutes a school year. The statistics on education from the 1950 Census of the Americas will require very careful handling for international comparability.

Probably no aspect of a census of population is more useful in measuring the economic potential of a people than data on the "economically active population," *i.e.*, the "gainful workers," or the "labor force." Relatively few countries of Latin America have attempted seriously to develop more than simple occupation data in their past censuses. How successful will be

the application of modern census concepts and techniques in this field is not known. It seems reasonable to assume that the larger cities of Latin America such as Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Santiago, Mexico City, Havana, etc., are similar enough to corresponding cities in the United States and Europe to permit the use of the same census procedures. Here either the gainful worker or the labor force approach would find the industrialized economy which they are best designed to measure.

A rural Indian village in the Andes, on the other hand, presents a different problem of economic activity. It would be almost ridiculous for an enumerator to ask an illiterate family which persons were usually gainfully employed, or even which ones worked. Every child almost as soon as he can walk becomes a "worker." His education consists of doing things with his mother, father, sisters, and brothers. He has no "job," or even a concept of one; he is part of the family, and the family works together for their own support. The concepts of being an employer or employee, of having a job, of being employed or unemployed are most applicable to highly industrialized countries. Some of these probably disappear entirely in a primitive, self-sufficient agricultural economy. We are not sure just what approach to such a culture will yield the best data for national and international purposes.

One of the important topics on the international minimum list concerns agricultural population. For many purposes it is desirable to have a measure of the number of persons "dependent on agriculture," however that term may be defined. Again the problem of cultural differences complicates our techniques. In many parts of Latin America there is an almost complete admixture of home industry with agriculture. This occurs not only among the native Indian population but throughout the entire lower-income group of the population except in the larger cities. Cloth weaving, shoe-making, wood carving, carpentry, preparation of food for sale, and many other activities utilize the time of all workers in the family when they are not directly needed for farming. At certain times everyone works in agricul-

ture; in other seasons, scarcely anyone. The practice of diversified home industries and sales or exchanges in the village market place of non-agricultural as well as agricultural goods by the same family makes the classification of such families very difficult.

The above examples of the difficulties of the census taker faced with different cultural situations are but a few of many which must be solved in the 1950 Census of the Americas. Especially when we talk about securing internationally comparable data for countries with widely diverse cultures and levels of industrial development, we are apt to be overoptimistic. Much research in which the statistician joins forces with the sociologist and the anthropologist must be completed before we shall know just how true comparability—as distinguished from apparent or "census label" comparability—can be attained.

Some research of this type is now under way in Latin America. Several countries are planning to take trial censuses, using the topics of international lists and the best definitions now available in their language and adapted to their culture pattern. Technicians from the United States are assisting in these trial censuses. We hope that the regional census training institutes which are planned for the next year will bring technicians from all the countries together to analyze the experience gained from the trial censuses under different conditions. But, only after the 1950 censuses are all taken and analyzed shall we be in a position to say whether census techniques have been able adequately to measure radically different cultural areas.