

Review of the Measurement of Ethnicity

A question of ethnicity — one word, different people, many perceptions: The perspectives of groups other than Māori, Pacific peoples, and New Zealand Europeans.

Executive Summary

November 2001



2001

Ute Walker
Vice President
New Zealand Federation
of Ethnic Councils
Palmerston North

A question of ethnicity – one word, different people, many perceptions: The perspectives of groups other than Māori, Pacific Peoples and New Zealand Europeans

Review of the Measurement of Ethnicity in Official Statistics
Perspectives paper for consultation

Executive Summary

By Ute Walker
New Zealand Federation of Ethnic Councils Inc
for Statistics New Zealand

November, 2001

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this paper are not necessarily those of Statistics New Zealand.

Statistics New Zealand Contact : Jo-anne Allan
Classifications and Standards Division
Email : jo-anne_allan@stats.govt.nz
Ph: 03 374 8858

Executive Summary

1. Definition

Definitions of ethnicity are based on self-identification and/or definition by others.

Groups

'Ethnicity' is used as a label, which helps to differentiate ethnic groups within a population. Traditionally ethnic groups have been distinguished by objective features such as cultural values and customs, beliefs, language, common history, etc.

Individuals

Individuals have their own perceptions of ethnicity and whether they belong, or wish to belong, to a group or not. The way they understand their personal 'ethnic identity' can differ from how others see them.

Ethnic identification is a dynamic process and changes over time, according to individuals' experiences and what they regard as relevant in a situation.

Ancestry (biological and social roots) continues to play an important role in ethnic identification.

Describing one's ethnicity in relation to 'Māori', 'Pākehā' or 'New Zealander' is a complex issue experienced during the acculturation process, ie finding one's place in New Zealand society.

2. Measurement

Measuring ethnicity through self-reported group membership is practical but has a number of difficulties:

- Group names are decided by others. They stress similarities but may blur distinctions which are important to groups and individuals. For example 'Chinese' differ in geographic, cultural, political and linguistic background (eg Malaysian Chinese, Mainland Chinese, Taiwanese, etc).

- Multiple ethnicity is more complex than the sum of selected group names. Multiple responses do not express preferred combinations or how the different parts relate to each other (eg complementary or conflicting).
- Static ethnic group categories do not reveal the developmental and changing dynamics of ethnicity, including the strength of commitment to a group.
- Where people identify with groups on the basis of shared characteristics, the characteristics are not equally important to all. For example, for some, language is a crucial symbol of ethnic identity but not so important for others.

3. Research

There have been only a few studies into ethnicity issues for groups other than Māori, Pākehā and Pacific peoples. Few investigations have looked at:

- the multidimensional and changing nature of ethnicity
- intra-ethnic relations
- recent arrivals compared with New Zealand born people
- refugees
- multiple ethnicity, particularly of children

Both definition and measurement of ethnicity need to reflect the complex cultural, situational, and psychological dimensions of the concept if they are to produce more valid and reliable ethnicity data.