

Is it Time to Get Rid of Ethnicity Checkboxes?

Shôn Ellerton, December 12, 2019

In a truly global integrated society, there will be no need for ethnicity checkboxes. But are we ready yet?



I can envisage a future, perhaps, fifty years down the line in which ethnicity checkboxes are a thing of the past. I can see it now. Someone in the future, researching old material on the Internet and then coming across old application forms riddled with ethnicity checkboxes or reading new articles how people were once (in the olden days) asked to identify what ethnic origin they belong to.

Seriously. Think about it rationally.

Perhaps a child in the future might read the article or look at an old form and wonder.

‘Mom! Mom! This is crazy! Look at this. Did you know that they used to separate people into different groups?’

Her reply might be, ‘Honey, I know. We were just told to do it.’

‘But why?’ asks the child.

‘Don’t know. Data collecting or something?’

‘But, but.... why?’, mutters the child.

‘I know. I know. They had some weird ideas back then.’, replies the mother.

‘Let’s leave it at that.’

If you think about it, that conversation *could* happen.

Why do we casually accept being asked to identify what ethnic origin we are from on just about every form we complete without a second thought? The

question that very few ask, is why. Sure, if I meet somebody or ask a friend where their family came from, it is only out of interest. It is comparable to me asking somebody what language they speak or what parts of the world they would like to travel. It's a way of establishing something common or interesting to talk about. That's all.

I've asked several people what their thoughts are regarding ethnicity checkboxes being included on application forms and census takings. Most do not really know except to say that it's a form of data collecting.

Data collecting? For what, exactly.

Maybe take a conversation between two people travelling to work on the train.

'Did you know that 23% of the population of Sunnybrook county comprises of those from an Asian background?'

'Oh! Is that so?'

'That's right, and you know that suburb on the south side of the city? Well, it's 45% Hispanic.'

'How interesting. Sorry, why do I need to know?'

And that's my point. *Who* needs to know? And *why*?

As for census takings, the old-fashioned method of your local council sending you a census form to complete is totally dopey and, to be honest, archaic. It's clearly a very accurate gauge on what our census is because I am one of many who relish in randomly ticking anything in it before submitting it. (*sarcasm*).

Frankly, in our age of facial recognition software, algorithms and high-resolution photography, we could get far more accurate census data by mining the data from online spending habits and cameras taken in public spaces and shopping malls.

We are becoming a more globalised and integrated society, although, some of the recent movements in line with identity politics and wokeness are, in fact, possibly hindering integration. *Globalised* should not be taken solely as being defined as a worldwide economy where barriers to trade and communication between nations are removed but also should be in the context of having a society in which we can move and mix with other cultures all around the world with relative ease.

I cringe when someone promotes *integrated society* and *embracing diversity* in the breath of the same sentence. It seems logical to me that the very act of

integrating a society is to move away from *embracing* diversity and vice versa. Everyone is treated as an equal without reference to race, creed or religion. Not all agree with true integration of society, that much is apparent. Various factions of society are proponents on preserving certain ethnic groups, much like treating them as museum pieces.

An example of this that occurs from time to time in New South Wales, Australia is when Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children need to be put up for adoption under the [NSW Adoption 2000 Act](#) whereby every effort to find foster parents of indigenous origin be found as a priority rather than basing the decision on the best possible home for the child. Unfortunately, the pain caused by the [Stolen Generations](#) is still vivid within the collective memory of the Australian populace.

Going back to the checkbox issue, let me ask a question here. If a couple from two different ethnic backgrounds conceive and that child *appears* to look like it came distinctly from one of the parent's ethnic backgrounds, who does the child identify with? The first feature at the top of most people's minds when making a guess will be skin colour. That's right. Skin colour. The very feature we've been trying so hard for decades not to make a fuss about.

Look, here's the other thing. What's to stop anyone from declaring that they come from an ethnic background which is not their own? Now *who* is going to contest that? If I wanted to state that I *identify* myself as being Mongolian, who's going to dispute it? Actually, I do have Mongolian blood from one side of my family, about an eighth or so, but I do not have much knowledge about Mongolia except it is north of China and must be a very cold place in the winter. But sure, why not tick the box? Nobody is going to check your DNA, and even if they did, what percentage of an ethnic group is required to meet the requirements of being part of that group? Of course, it's not going to work.

There are some who espouse that the purpose of collecting ethnic data using application forms for jobs or university candidates are ways of meeting ethnic quotas through [affirmative action](#) . It is not in the scope of this article to discuss affirmative action; however, there are many cases whereby applicants are confused or lie as to their ethnic origin just to gain admittance or fulfil that quota. It works for some but clearly not for others. This is a very divisive subject indeed.

Thankfully, most ethnicity checkboxes on forms and applications offer a *Prefer Not to Say* option. If given this option, this is the one I personally select as I do with the equally divisive religion checkboxes. Religion checkboxes are fast

fading away and I suspect that ethnicity checkboxes will as well sometime in the future. If there is no *Prefer Not to Say* option and the question is mandatory, I'll just choose any of them. Why not?

Many of our systems are still offering only *one* ethnic group as an option on forms. Case in point, I happen to work in a government organisation as a data warehouse manager. There are eight ethnicities defined here and you can only choose one or nothing at all. They are... Wait for it...

Aboriginal, Caucasian, Island/Maori, Middle Eastern, Negroid (*gasp!*), Oriental/Asian, Other, Southern European.

I'm astonished that these categories still exist. I truly am.

I cannot fathom out the logic of why we still need to include ethnicity checkboxes on so many forms and applications. I can certainly understand the need to have checkboxes on what languages one can speak fluently. Even blood type could be very useful or even essential in some situations. As noted above, the use of religion checkboxes has been on the decline, and quite rightly so. If a total stranger came up to you and said, 'What religion do you practice?', an appropriate response would be 'That's private, and, by the way, mind your own business.'

If we abandon having to include ethnicity checkboxes on forms, let's at least include a *specific requirements* comments section. This provides specific information which may be significantly important to that individual's needs. Unlike a checkbox, which just gets ingested into the system as a piece of data for data's sake, a comments section requires someone to read and action it. Most of the time, it will be left empty, which is totally fine, is it not? The individual in question *may* want to point out that he or she is from a specific ethnic background or anything else, but let's not prod for ethnicity data needlessly. It is, essentially, useless and goes against the whole notion of a truly integrated community, but rather has the sole aim to package people into neat little ethnic boxes.

At the end of the day, we are all *Homo Sapiens*.