Section Six: How historians have used census data

Historians have used census data to study many aspects of Victorian society. This section will consider historians' investigations into two principal aspects of nineteenth-century society: household structure and occupation.

The study of household structure provides a window onto daily life unlike any other. Households and their inhabitants can be described as the building bricks of British society. The reconstruction of households can represent family life, kin support systems and social mores. Beyond the nuclear family, household structure can reveal mobility levels within Britain and immigration levels into Britain. Household information can reveal much about the role of women in society, the position of children within a family unit, it can also provide information on the role of the extended family, and, more broadly, on marriage and fertility patterns, and levels of widow and widowerhood. The study of households can reveal much about non-familial households, for example, groups of unrelated adults lodging together, or more commonly, lodgers paying rent to share accommodation with a family. It can reveal much about servant keeping in Victorian society. In tandem with occupational information, household data can help measure to what extent individuals contributed to the income of the household. Information about relationships within households was included in all censuses from 1851 onwards. It is, therefore, on the final five censuses of the nineteenth-century that this section is based.

The definition of a 'household' in nineteenth-century census-terms is an artificial construction. nineteenth-century census administrators had a clear notion of what a household ought to look like. The 'model' household consisted of a husband and wife, their relations by birth or marriage, and any servants and apprentices. Aside from servants and apprentices who had a legal contract with their employers that included co-residence, in this ideal model the 'family' and the 'household' were one and the same. In residential terms, the family had exclusive possession of a house or flat which they owned or rented from a landlord. Experience, of course, showed that this ideal was not often achieved, particularly in the working class areas of towns and cities, where individuals and families sub-let from other households.

To overcome the difficulties in defining a household based on unrealistic Victorian perceptions, historians have attempted to establish methodologies for defining the household in the census. One approach has been the adoption of more neutral terms to define the occupants of a household as the 'co-residing group' (alternatively 'co-residing unit'). In addition to definition of a household, the simple identification of the
individuals in any one household or co-residing group can also pose problems. One convention developed by historians for the five nineteenth-century censuses from 1851 onwards is to define the household to include all the names listed in an enumerators' book from the 'head' of a household down to the last name preceding the next entered 'head'. This convention is based on the enumerators' own methodology of ending all entries before the next 'head' of household with a solid black line in the enumeration books. Enumerators therefore literally as well as figuratively 'underlined' the division of households.

Further reference to the original enumerator's books can reduce some of the historical problems regarding a household entity, by using the schedule numbers in enumerator's returns. Each household schedule filled out was given a different number. From the 1851 census these schedule numbers run consecutively in the first column of an enumerator's book. In census computer databases the original household schedule number assigned each person is invariably used as a unique identification field (ID field) to avoid confusion, for example, over people with the same surname and forename. However, the decisions of individual enumerators on what group of people constituted a separate household could be arbitrary and often subjective, for example, lodgers who paid rent to a family could often appear as members of that family's household, when in fact, they constituted their own separate households. In addition, the overcrowding and sub-division of houses, tenement flats and even rooms in large nineteenth-century industrial cities could make it impossible for enumerators to make more than a guess in some cases where one particular 'household' or 'co-residing unit' ended and another began.

Information on occupations based on the census is of great importance for reconstructing Victorian society. The early censuses asked simply for occupation under broad categories. Analysis of the responses to the occupation census question was relatively limited until the Census Report for 1831 grouped workers into seven broad categories. The number of workers (male only) over the age of 20 was recorded for seven economic categories: 1. agriculture; 2. manufacture; 3. retail trade or handicraft; 4. capitalists, bankers, merchants and professionals; 5. miners, fishermen, non-agricultural labourers etc.; 6. those not included in the previous categories, such as retired or disabled; and 7. servants. The number of male servants under 20 and the number of female servants were also given in this category.

Increased interest in occupational structure in the census at the time in part reflected a desire to amass data on Britain's the economic structure and the relative size of occupational groupings. In turn, this increased contemporary analysis aids present-day investigations into nineteenth-century employment trends. In the census schedules from 1841 to 1881 a householder was asked for the specific 'rank,

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1 Enumerators were the foot soldiers of the census administration process. They were locally appointed by district registrars to undertake the counting (enumeration) of the population. Each enumerator counted the number of inhabitants in an allocated area of around 200 houses. As the census became more detailed the enumerator's responsibilities increased. Ideally, those appointed as enumerators had some background of service to the local community. For example, enumerators were often local officials, members of the clergy, teachers or overseers of the poor law. Otherwise, qualifications were few; the phrase 'fit person' was often used to define a suitable enumerator. Literate individuals aged 18 to 65 were employed. Enumerators were male until the appointment of a few female enumerators to conduct the census of 1891.
profession or occupation' of every individual in the household. From 1891 this was reduced to the more straightforward 'profession or occupation'.

Changes to the abstracted census occupational headings over time revealed shifts in the importance of employment types. For example, clerks were recorded as working in their field of occupation, rather than as clerical workers, e.g. clerks employed by railways were recorded as railway workers until the census of 1881, when they were recorded as clerks working in the tertiary sector of industry. This gave a sudden, artificial boost to the numbers of recorded clerks in 1881. The number of clerks recorded in the census reports rose from 91,000 in 1871 to 181,500 in 1881.2

In 1886, Charles Booth3, the renowned social investigator, revised census occupational categorisations. This decision was linked to Booth's attempts to link occupation and family size with poverty as part of his multi-volume survey of Life and Labour of the People in London.4 Motivated by the shifting occupational categorisations in the published Census Reports, Booth presented a paper entitled 'occupations of the people of the United Kingdom, 1801-81' before the London Statistical Society.5 In his 1886 paper Booth claimed to have devised a more consistent occupational time series for all the censuses since 1801. Booth objected to the fact that some trades that were recorded independently as occupations in earlier Census Reports were swallowed up under other occupational groupings for later censuses. He also noted that large groups of females, such as wives and adult

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3 Charles Booth (1840-1916) was a pioneering social investigator and successful businessman. Booth was born in Liverpool on 30 March 1840. He was educated at the Royal Institute School in the City. He became a successful Liverpool shipping magnate as Chairman of Alfred Booth and Co. Ltd and Director of the Booth Steamship Co. He moved to London in 1875. He became interested in the welfare of the London poor. As a strong advocate of laissez faire politics and economic individualism he sought to provide evidence against increased state intervention into people's lives.

His investigations into poverty began in 1886 and the final volume of his seventeen-volume study Life and Labour of the People in London was not published until 1903. While the extent of the poverty he uncovered acted as a spur to progressive political opinion on social issues, Booth himself advocated self-help and free enterprise. Booth's work was largely impressionistic and subjective. For example, he stressed the positive aspects of life in the nation's capital and the vitality and happiness of the poor. Meanwhile, he advocated the state institutionalisation of the most helpless and debased of the poor leaving the respectable and independent working class better able to compete in the market place.

Booth later became a Privy Councillor in 1904 and acted as a member of the Tariff Commission. He died on 23 November 1916. For further details on Booth see T.S. and M.B. Simey (1960), Charles Booth - Social Scientist. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

4 Life and Labour of the People in London by Charles Booth was a multi-volume pioneering social investigation. Booth's investigations began in 1886 and the final volume of his seventeen-volume study was not published until 1903. The first volume of Life and Labour of the London Poor appeared in 1892 (it had been preceded by a specific study of East London in 1889). Booth's investigation was the first to systematically study the general problems of poverty rather than look at specific individual harrowing cases.

5 The London Statistical Society (now the Royal Statistical Society) was founded in 1834 at a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. In 1840, the Society set up a committee to make recommendations for the contents of the 1841 census. Many of the London Statistical Society's recommendations were introduced and helped to shape the census as it is known today. The Society suggested the introduction of a household schedule to list each individual by name and characteristics. It also proposed the introduction of enumerators' transcripts of the household schedule information, a wider range of questions and the central tabulation of data.

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females in the households of male farmers, were not treated alike in any two
 censuses, which resulted in the shift of 350,000 women from one occupational
category to another from one census to the next.

Booth replaced the seven occupational categories used in the aggregate Census
Reports since 1831 with eleven new categories:

Agriculture and breeding
Fishing;
Mining and quarrying;
Building and contracting;
Manufacture;
Transport;
Dealing;
Industrial service
Public service and professional;
Domestic service;
Others (property owning; independent; indefinite)

Booth designed these broad categorisations for use with printed occupational census
abstracts. However, these sub-divisions of the workforce can today be used by
historians to conduct detailed enquiries of work patterns in small sample census
areas by applying Booth's categorisations to individual entries in enumerator's books
(or the same information in census database form).

Historian W. A. Armstrong revised Booth's categorisations in the 1970s. Armstrong's
occupational categorisation combined agriculture and fishing and dropped the 'others'
category from Booth's scheme to leave nine major occupational groupings in order to
simplifying the categories. Armstrong, while approving much of Booth's work on
industrial classification of occupations, pointed out that Booth only worked with
abstracted census tables, so his occupational categorisations were based on the
official Census Office occupational descriptions, not the many thousands of jobs
amalgamated under these broader headings.

The analysis of information about households and occupations highlights two areas
where modern-day historians have used the census as a tool to explore nineteenth-
century society. There are many more possibilities unexplored here, for example
population mobility and immigration patterns can be studied with reference to the
place of birth column entries in enumerator's books. However, such study is not
straightforward. This section has shown that developing modern day methods for
manipulating census information is not an easy process. This is because the
nineteenth-century census information is not historical fact but millions of records of
individuals filtered through the subjective assessment of countless pairs of hands.
Britain's decennial population censuses have been open to individual interpretation
since the first census schedule was completed.

6 W. A. Armstrong (1972), The use of information about occupation, part 2. An industrial classification
1841-1891. In Nineteenth century society. Essays in the use of quantitative methods for the study of

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Exercise: Historical Analysis of Aspects of the Nineteenth Century Census

Note: to complete this activity you will need to access our web site for the database and worksheet:
http://chcc.gla.ac.uk/19th_Century_Census/section06/page05.php

For this exercise you will be using the Gorb81, Sand81, Gorb51, Pres51 and Sand51 tables. Open the tables and answer the following questions.

1. Households
   a. How many households are there in the Gorbals tables for 1851 and 1881 respectively?
   b. What is the average household size in Gorbals for 1851 and 1881?
   c. How many households are there in Sandyford for 1851 and 1881 respectively?
   d. What is the average household size in Sandyford for 1851 and 1881?
   e. The average household sizes for middle class Sandyford are greater in both 1851 and 1881 than for the working class Gorbals district. How might you account for this unexpected difference?
   f. What is the average household size in the Preston 1851 sample?
   g. How does the average household size in the Preston sample compare with the average figure for Preston as a whole of 6.2 recorded in the 1851 census?

2. Occupations
   a. In what occupational groups are most people in the Gorbals 1851 census sample employed?
   b. Now compare this with the Gorbals in 1881. Are there major occupational differences between the two censuses?
   c. Now, look at Sandyford for 1851 and 1881. How did occupational groups in this area change between 1851 and 1881?
   d. Comparing Gorbals with Sandyford in 1851, which specific jobs employed most men and women (i.e. those aged over 14) in these two areas? (Take a note of the top three jobs for both men and women).
   e. In which three occupations were most men and women employed in the Preston 1851 sample? (Note - due to the particular nature of employment patterns in Preston, no occupational coding has been carried out for this table).
   f. Try to identify and count specific occupations listed for cotton workers employed in Preston. What percentage of the adult Preston workforce in the 1851 sample was employed in cotton manufacture? (Note - in Preston overall, 32% of men and 23% of women aged over 20 were employed in cotton).

This section has considered a small range of census topics which historians have used to examine nineteenth-century British society. What aspects of the census not considered in this exercise might be examined to highlight other elements of nineteenth-century society?

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