

# Indigenous household structures and ABS definitions of the family: What happens when systems collide, and does it matter?

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June 2004

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## ABSTRACT

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In August 2001 three CAEPR researchers, each based in a different community, observed the conduct of the national Census in the Northern Territory and Cape York Peninsula. The purposes of this research were twofold: to evaluate the ABS's Indigenous Enumeration Strategy as it was applied in this particular context, and to assess the quality of the data that were collected. This paper, based on research in a remote Northern Territory outstation community, focuses on the questions that were designed to elicit information about household structure.

The data collected in the census are a vital tool for the formulation of policy across a very broad range of issues. Pursuing the red herring of forcing Indigenous families and households into mainstream categories is a waste of time and effort, and diverts attention from the significant underlying issues. If the quantifiable population characteristics of Indigenous Australians are to emerge clearly from census data, the questions on the Indigenous form need to be as culturally neutral as possible, in order to minimise misunderstanding on the part of the Indigenous interviewers and respondents.

The designers of the census need to step back from the questions on household structure, and decide precisely *what* information they wish to elicit. Is it information primarily about family structure, or about the size, age distribution, gender composition, and dependency structures of households? If it is decided that the latter data are the most important, one possibility which would sit more comfortably with the Indigenous facts, would be to add a new type of household to the ABS list—the *extended family household*.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

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In August 2001 I observed the conduct of the national Census at an outstation community ('community A') in the Northern Territory.<sup>1</sup> The purposes of this research were twofold: to evaluate the ABS's Indigenous Enumeration Strategy (IES) as it was applied in this particular context, and to assess the quality of the data that were collected. This paper focuses on the questions that were designed to elicit information about household structure.

The IES has not changed substantially since 1981, when it was introduced in the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia (see Taylor 2002 for a summary). Subsequent developments have essentially extended it to areas in the other States where there are discrete Indigenous communities. The key features that distinguish the IES from the general census procedures are the use of interviewer collectors, many or most of whom are themselves local Indigenous people, and the administration of forms with a modified format and content.

The basic procedural structure of the IES is as follows. In each region where there are large numbers of Indigenous people, the responsibility for coordinating the census effort lies with an ABS Census Field Officer (CFO). The CFO appoints, for each Collection District, one or more community coordinators, and they in turn, with the assistance of the CFO, select and train a team of interviewer-collectors (henceforth 'enumerators') whose task it is to carry out the interviews. There are three main forms involved in the data collection process. Two of them will be the focus of this paper: the Special Indigenous Household Form (SIHF) (Fig. 1) and the Special Indigenous Personal Form (SIPF) (Fig. 2).

A SIHF is completed for each household group, or in practice, dwelling. Theoretically, this is done as part of the interview process, but at community A the enumerators filled out these forms using their own local knowledge before visiting any of the dwellings. This form not only asks for a list of the people who live at the dwelling and any visitors, but also has a column for entering each person's relationship to the head of house (person 1).

## COMMUNITY A: A BRIEF SKETCH

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The population of community A fluctuates from around 20 (when there is a large ceremony taking place elsewhere) to over 250 (when there is a ceremony taking place at the community); its normal resident population is in the region of 100 people. At the time of the enumeration about 50 per cent of the people listed as 'living here' on the SIHFs were away, at a location where a major funeral that had just taken place, or visiting relatives living elsewhere in the area. But the community was also host to a number of visiting relatives from the immediate region, and from three other communities outside the immediate region. Although the problems surrounding the definitions of 'resident' and 'visitor' will not be elaborated in this paper it should be obvious that problems potentially exist in such a community.

Fig. 1. The second page of the SIHF (partial reproduction)

List all of the people who live here and people who are staying here						
Person Number	Name: • List people in family groups • Include all children and babies • Include all people who live here most of the time, but are away	Sex	Age	How is this person related to Person 1? (Head of house)	If visitor write 'V'	Personal Form needed? Yes/No
		Write 'M' or 'F'				
1				Person 1		
2						
...						
35						

Fig. 2. The SIPP, questions 4–6.

**4 How are you related to Person 1 (Head of house)?**

Examples of relationships: husband, wife, de facto partner, son, daughter, granddaughter, uncle, son-in-law, friend, unrelated

☐ Person 1

Relationship to person 1

**5 Are you more closely related to anyone else here in this house?**

☐ No

☐ Yes, who?

Name

Relationship e.g. grandson, niece, daughter

**6 Are you married?**

Prompt categories below

☐ Never married

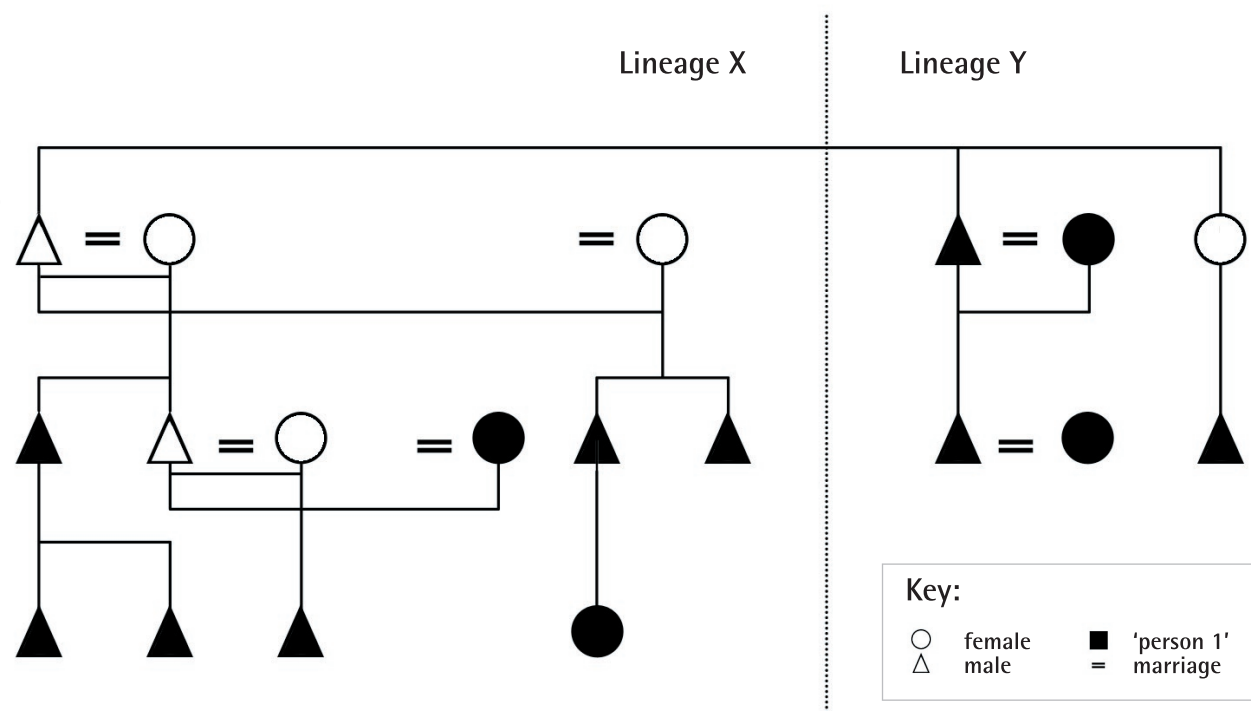
☐ Widowed

☐ Divorced

☐ Separated but not divorced

☐ Married



**Fig. 3. Person 1 (Head of Household) for each household at community A.**

The community is structured around the members of two related patrilineages (lineage X and lineage Y) on whose land the community lies. X and Y, the apical ancestors of the two lineages, are classificatory brothers.<sup>2</sup> Fig. 3. shows the kin relationships, in simplified form, of the people designated as 'person 1' for each occupied dwelling. The census does not capture (because it does not seek to) these inter-household relationships, but it is arguable that the data collected by the census on the composition of individual households make sense only in the context of this larger picture.<sup>3</sup> At the time of the census there were 13 occupied dwellings in the community. The census enumeration took place over three days, between 6 and 8 August, during which time people came and went.

## THE PROBLEM OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

The basic problem faced by the ABS in collecting data from traditionally-oriented Indigenous people is one of translation.<sup>4</sup> Even in the case of what seem, at first glance, to be straightforward demographic characteristics, such as a person's age, the Australian settler culture and traditionally-oriented Indigenous cultures view things differently. Whereas most, if not all, non-Indigenous Australians know the precise date and year of their birth, traditionally-oriented Indigenous people tend to focus on life stages and relative degrees of maturity rather than on chronological age.

Translation becomes even more complex when we enter the realm of the sociocultural. For example, in attempting to gather data on Indigenous 'households' and their structure that is comparable with data on settler Australian households we cannot assume, a priori, that we are talking about the same kind of thing.

Prior to the census enumeration, the regional Census Field Officer was doubtful that the kinship questions on the SIPF would yield useful data, because he was aware that local Indigenous kinship terms and Anglo-Celtic terms are different.<sup>5</sup> David Martin reports that these questions were also 'enormously problematic' for Wik people at Aurukun (Martin 2002: 20). The enumerators were instructed to ask the questions using Anglo-Celtic kinship terms first, and to use local terms only in cases where clarification was needed. During the enumerators' training session, the CFO went through the basic English kin terms to ensure that they knew the meaning of terms such as *niece*, *nephew*, *uncle* and *aunt* as well as of the more core kinship terms of the Anglo-Celtic system.

At community A, the enumerators tried very hard to follow the CFO's instructions, used Anglo-Celtic kinship terms themselves (as they had been instructed), and encouraged the interviewees to do so as well. The remainder of this paper is an analysis of the procedure and an evaluation of the data that resulted. But first, a cautionary tale.

## KINSHIP IN A KIN-BASED SOCIETY: A VIGNETTE BY WAY OF ILLUSTRATION

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Had I not been present at the community A census count, a significant number of 'person 1s' at the community would not have had their details recorded on a SIPF. According to the CFO this did not happen anywhere else in the region, but it is worthy of discussion because it highlights a particularly dramatic point of difference between local Indigenous and mainstream social structure and cultural values. I did not notice the systematic omission immediately, because the first two dwellings we visited on the first day did not result in complete enumerations. At the third dwelling, however, I noticed that no SIPF was completed for person 1, in this case the oldest member of the community.

I asked the enumerators if they were going to do a SIPF for this man, thinking that they had just overlooked it because he was inside the house. To my surprise, they said that they did not think it was needed. I decided at this point that I would be doing everyone a favour if I temporarily abandoned my 'observer' status. (And besides I was intrigued—what could the reason be?) So I asked why. The answer was that it was not necessary for person 1 in each household to have a SIPF done, *because their kinship relationship to everyone else in the household was already specified on the SIHF*. Thus at this stage they were thinking of the SIHF, which had been filled in before the enumeration proper started, as person 1's SIPF.

What led them to this conclusion? The reasons must have been powerful, for they produced what might be called a culturally induced 'blind spot'. Indeed, it took more than one conversation to convince them that SIPFs were needed for these individuals. There were several factors that conspired to produce this 'mistake'. Question 4 on the SIPF (see Fig. 2) asks for information that has already been recorded on the SIHF (see Fig. 1). So indeed do the first three questions—but with an important difference. For people at community A, the most salient question on the entire SIPF is Q. 4 ('How are you related to person 1?'), because kinship is the central organising principle of their society. The misapprehension that person 1 does not need a SIPF is reinforced by the design of the question, which is not at all clear about how

person 1 themselves should be treated. For the enumerators, Q. 4 simply did not apply to person 1. This fact overrode all else, and acted as a brake to further questioning.

As will be evident from the general thrust of this paper, the advantages of employing local enumerators in Indigenous communities far outweigh the disadvantages, and no criticism of the enumerators is implied here. However, Indigenous enumerators are being asked to do something very difficult, to deploy the skills and knowledge that they have acquired as members of their community, while simultaneously assuming the position of temporary 'outsiders'—agents of the state as it were. The designers of the SIPF need to be more aware of this delicate balance.

## THE HOUSEHOLD QUESTIONS AND THEIR INTERPRETATION

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The three questions on the SIPF that are intended to elicit data on the structure and composition of households are Q. 4–6. Question 4 has been mentioned above. Question 5 ('Are you more closely related to anyone else here in this house?') attempts to collect fine-grained data on household composition, and in particular on whether individual 'families' can be isolated within it. It is perhaps the clearest example on the SIPF form of a question that has been formulated from the end-user's point of view. The issue of whether it will make sense to the interviewee—or the interviewers—has not been adequately considered. Even if one is thinking in terms of the Anglo-Celtic kinship terminology, it is difficult to decide how one might answer this question. If the results from the three CAEPR case studies are typical of the whole Indigenous enumeration, this question will not have yielded any useful or even interpretable data whatsoever. At community A this question was essentially abandoned by the interviewers, as 'a real whitefella question', for reasons that will become clear.

Question 6 ('Are you married?') posed no problems to the enumerators or the interviewees at community A. The category 'de facto' is not allowed for on the SIPF. Most local marriages would be classified as de facto relationships in mainstream terms, but it would be quite inappropriate, in the view of local Indigenous people, to classify them thus. At Aurukun, responses to this question were treated idiosyncratically by individual respondents. Some with long-term de facto partners stated that they were 'married', while others in the same situation stated that they were 'never married' (Martin 2002: 23).

However the data collected at community A might cause some puzzlement to the sharp-eyed analyst. Two dwellings contain a female person 1 who describes herself as married, but there is no evidence of a cohabiting spouse in either case. Why do these women describe themselves as married, rather than as widowed, separated or divorced? The reason is that local Indigenous marriages are often polygamous: it is not at all uncommon for a man to have more than one wife (and often those wives are sisters). It has become common nowadays for a man to live with only one of his wives, and for the other wives to occupy one or more separate dwellings. In local terms this does not constitute either separation or divorce, if the relationship between the two parties remains amicable. In both the cases mentioned here, the husband lived in a nearby dwelling with another of his wives (see Fig. 3). This configuration of linked households is a common local feature.

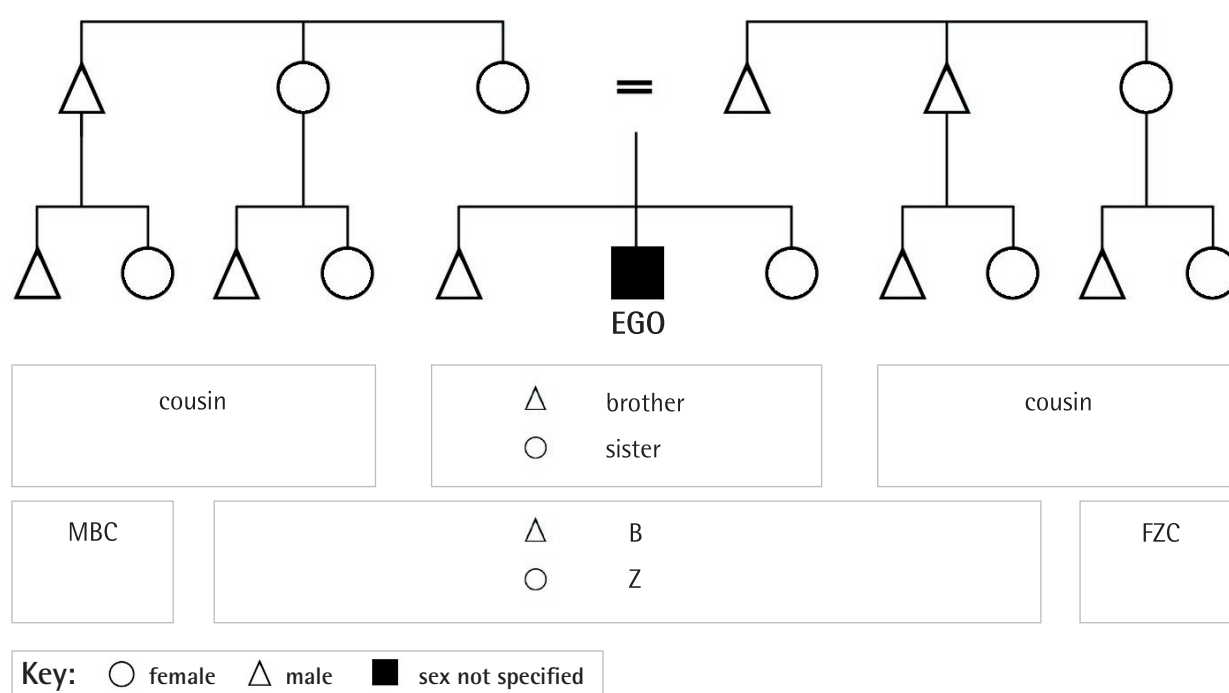
## A TALE OF TWO KINSHIP SYSTEMS

There are two major problems underlying the interpretation of and responses to these questions: the lack of congruence between the kinship terminology of the local system and that of the Anglo-Celtic system, and the difference in the dynamics underlying the structure and composition of households in mainstream and local Indigenous societies. In the following sections of the paper these problems are explicated, beginning with a detailed comparison of the local Indigenous and Anglo-Celtic kinship terminologies.

### *A rose by any other name? Terms for core kin*

Questions 4 and 5 on the SIPF attempt to elicit information about household structure using the idiom of kinship, as they do on all census forms. Herein lies the crux of the problem. All socialised human beings—including those raised in societies where the Anglo-Celtic system prevails—view their kinship system and its kinship terms as 'natural', because they are inculcated at such an early age. However, the kinship terminology of mainstream Anglo-Celtic Australia, like the local Indigenous kinship terminology, forms an elaborate abstract system in which terms only have meaning in relation to the overall structure of the system. The principles according to which the Anglo-Celtic system is constructed differ markedly from the principles underlying the local system. If two kinship systems differ markedly in their structure, it is not possible simply to translate the terms from one system to the other, and any attempt to so do

**Fig. 4. Siblings and cousins in the Anglo-Celtic and local Indigenous systems.**

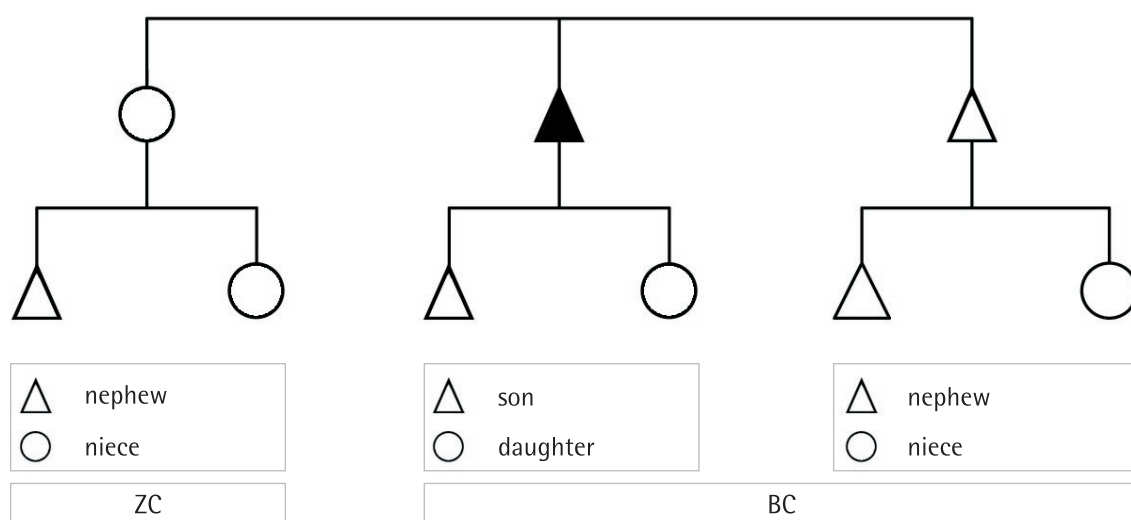


will result in a failure of translation and incoherent data. To begin to unravel the truth of this assertion, let us start with terms for siblings and cousins in the two systems.

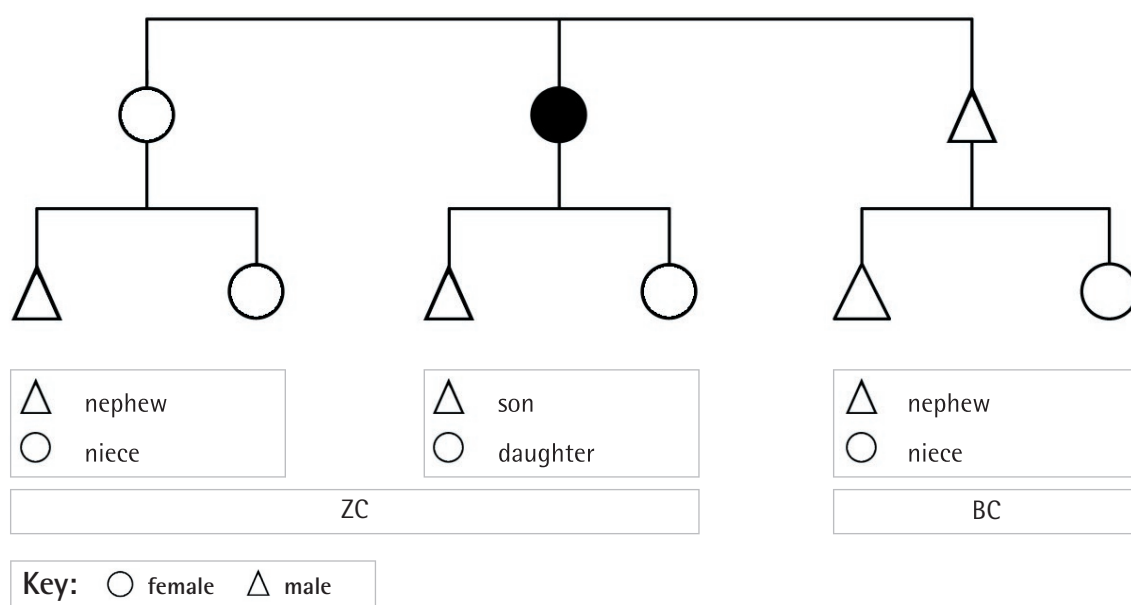
In the Anglo-Celtic system, the term *cousin* is used to refer to the children of a person's (ego's) father's sisters and brothers, and of their mother's sisters and brothers. In other words, the system merges, under the term *cousin*, all the children of ego's parent's siblings. The Anglo-Celtic term *cousin* is neutral with respect to sex. Anglo-Celts call the children of their own father and mother either *brother* or *sister*, depending on their sex.

**Fig. 5. Children in the Anglo-Celtic and local Indigenous systems.**

Male ego



Female ego



The local Indigenous system is completely different. Local people call the children of their mother's brother MBC and the children of their father's sister FZC.<sup>6</sup> A MBC may also simultaneously be a MMBDC, and the same term is applied to both categories of relative. Like *cousin*, these terms are neutral with respect to sex. Put another way, the system distinguishes two kinds of cross-cousins: matrilineal (MBC) and patrilineal (FZC). Local people use the term B for the male children of their mother and her sisters and of their father and his brothers, and they use the term Z if they are female. In other words, in the local system siblings and parallel cousins are merged. Like the Anglo-Celtic terms for siblings, these too are differentiated by sex.<sup>7</sup>

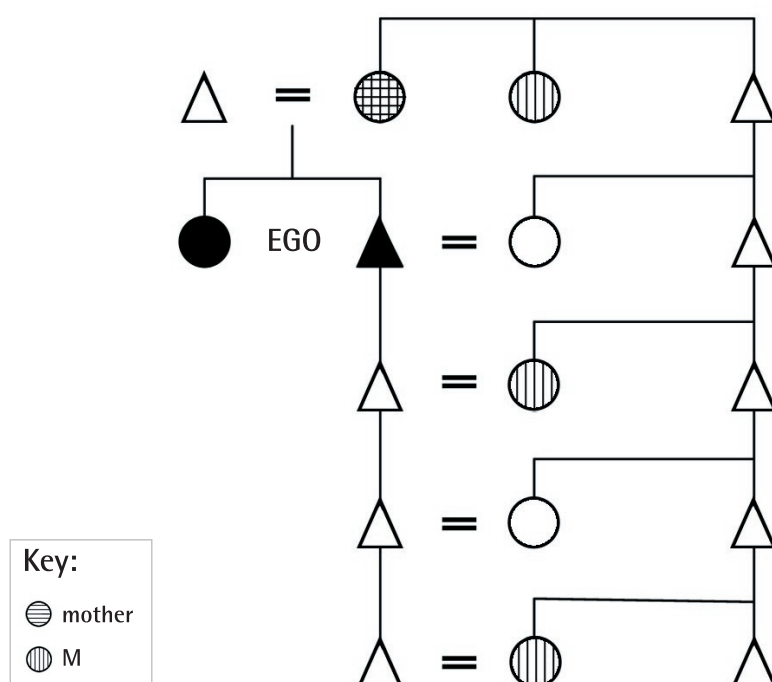
People raised in the Anglo-Celtic system think of *son* and *daughter* as 'natural' categories. Children are defined, as it were, with respect to their parents' marriage: both parents use the same terms for their offspring. The children of ego's brothers and sisters are merged under the term *nephew* for males and *niece* for females. The local Indigenous system operates according to a different set of principles, which appear just as 'natural' to local people. A woman calls her own children and those of her sisters ZC, and those of her brothers BC. A man calls his own children and those of his brothers BC, and those of his sisters ZC. Children are here being defined not with respect to their parents' marriage, but with respect to their lineage: BC means 'child of my patriline' and ZC means 'child of my matriline'.<sup>8</sup> These terms for children (as with Anglo-Celtic *cousin*), are not differentiated according to sex.

All kinship systems have terms that are 'classificatory' in the sense that they classify people together according to a set of underlying structural principles. The term *cousin* is probably the most classificatory of the Anglo-Celtic kinship terms (although *uncle*, *aunt*, *grandparent*, and the category *in-law* are also quite complex). But the local Indigenous system applies more (and more abstract and general) principles of classification than does the Anglo-Celtic system. For example, all males in the generation above ego in ego's patriline (including ego's own father) are F, and all females in the generation above ego in ego's mother's patriline (including ego's own mother) are M. But these terms have even wider application: they apply also to kin in generations other than the parental generation. Let us take 'M' and 'mother' as our example.

Ego's own generation and the generations of their grandparents and grandchildren can be termed 'harmonic' generations, and ego's children's, parents' and great grandchildren's generations can be termed 'disharmonic' generations. The term M applies to any female member of ego's mother's patriline who is in a disharmonic descending generation with respect to ego. No M is any more or less of an M than any other, just as no *cousin* is any more or less of a *cousin* in the Anglo-Celtic system. This is not to say that people do not distinguish between their actual mother and other people they address by the term M, in terms of sentiment and behaviour.

People have been told that M means 'mother', and so that is how M was often translated by the enumerators, whether the person was, in Anglo-Celtic terms, a *mother*, a *daughter-in-law*, a *nephew's wife*, a *great granddaughter-in-law*, or a *brother's great granddaughter-in-law*. The last two, significantly, are scarcely kin terms at all in the Anglo-Celtic system. Sometimes the enumerators, realising that some categories of M do not count as *mother* in the Anglo-Celtic system, attempted to substitute the 'correct' Anglo-Celtic term—with varying degrees of success, as noted below.

Fig. 6. The Anglo-Celtic term 'mother' and the local Indigenous term 'M' compared.



It should now be clear that none of the Anglo-Celtic terms for the kin comprising the 'nuclear family' are directly translatable into local Indigenous kinship terms. And vice versa—none of the core terms, let alone the non-core terms, of the local Indigenous system are directly translatable into Anglo-Celtic kinship terms. The plight of the Indigenous enumerator, who is faced with this problem in a real-time interviewing situation, is severe indeed.

### *The meaning of marriage*

The local Indigenous and Anglo-Celtic systems differ in another very important way. In the Anglo-Celtic system (as it operates today), people are rarely kin before they get married. A marriage brings together, in a set of *in-law* relationships, two previously unrelated kindreds. Their only point of intersection is the married couple—the *husband* and *wife*—and the connection is then carried down into the couple's descendants. Kinship, in other words, is constituted through marriage, and Anglo-Celtic kin terms are therefore univalent.

In the local Indigenous system, the preferred marriage is between people who are already in a kinship relationship: a man marries his (actual or classificatory) matrilineal cross-cousin: his MBD. A woman thus marries her (actual or classificatory) FZS. There are no separate terms for marriage partners and 'in-laws'. Marriage in the Indigenous system does not *create* bonds of kinship: it reinforces and reaffirms *already existing* kin relationships. Marriage is constituted through kinship, and kin terms are therefore potentially bivalent. Thus a man's MBD may be his wife, but she is firstly a kind of *cousin* in the Anglo-Celtic system, and a man's male ZC (actual or classificatory sister's son) is his *nephew* in Anglo-Celtic terms, but may also in addition be his daughter's husband, or *son-in-law*.



Local people (and ABS staff) are unaware of this difference between the two sets of kin terms. The enumerators sometimes translated a bivalent kin term by one of its possible equivalents in the Anglo-Celtic system, and sometimes by the other. For example, local Indigenous term FZDC could be 'translated' as a type of 'cousin' (strictly speaking in the Anglo-Celtic system this person is ego's 'first cousin once removed'), but the salient fact about this person from the perspective of the local system is that they belong to the category '(potential) son-in-law'. Thus it is perfectly possible for a woman with no daughters and an unmarried man to refer to each other as FZDC and MMBD, and for these terms to be translated as 'son-in-law' and 'mother-in-law' respectively, as happened on one SIHF and the related SIPFs.

### *Everyone is kin*

The Indigenous kinship terminology encompasses categories of people which the Anglo-Celtic system does not. It distinguishes and covers seven patrilineal lines that are related matrilineally through the marriage system. In the local Indigenous universe, everyone is classifiable as kin. The Anglo-Celtic kinship terminology focuses on the individual and their direct ancestors and descendants, and merges patrilineal and matrilineal kin at every level. The system fades off very quickly into *cousins* and then non-kin as soon as it leaves the realm of ego's nuclear families of origin and procreation. In the Anglo-Celtic system there is simply no term for (Z)DDFZC, who is the person (or the sister of the person) who potentially marries your (Z)DD (daughters' daughter from a female point of view, and sister's daughter's daughter from a male point of view). In the Indigenous system, this person is kin. At community A someone with this relationship to person 1 was a resident in more than one of the dwellings. The question of classifying this person as 'unrelated' never arose. Instead much thought went into what the 'correct' Anglo-Celtic term would be.

### *The effects of training*

In their training, as has been mentioned, the enumerators had been taken through the basic terms of the Anglo-Celtic system by the CFO, and they were often successful in assigning the 'correct' term—in Anglo-Celtic terms—with core kin. In at least one case, a father's brother, who in local terms is another F ('father') was put down as 'uncle', and the use of the terms 'nephew' and 'niece' corresponded to Anglo-Celtic usage. The enumerators' own superficial knowledge of the Anglo-Celtic system and the training provided by the CFO thus had some effect. But it did not penetrate very far into the system, as the next section of the paper will demonstrate.

### *The unanswerable question*

It should now be clear that in the context of local Indigenous kinship, Q. 5 is unanswerable. Even if one is operating according to the Anglo-Celtic kinship system it is difficult to know how one might answer it. Who is closer to ego: father or mother? In a three-generation household, who is closer to ego: parent or child? Is the relationship to a spouse closer than to a child? Is the relationship to a sibling closer than to a child? What precisely is meant by 'closely related'? Is it a question about biology, or a question based on unexamined assumptions about what constitutes closeness in terms of a particular system of kinship?



## KINSHIP AND THE HOUSEHOLD

The preceding section has gone some way to establishing that Anglo-Celtic kinship terminology is not the ideal idiom for attempting to elucidate the structure of local Indigenous households. But what of the implicit model of the household that lies behind the census questions? The definition of the household given in the *2001 Census Dictionary* (ABS 2001) allows for the possibility of more than one 'household' in a dwelling, but not for households whose membership is spread across more than one dwelling. Two major types of 'household' are identified: those whose members are 'related' (family-based households), and those whose members are 'unrelated' (group households).

In the ABS definition of the family, 'the basis of a family is formed by identifying the presence of either a couple relationship, lone parent-child relationship, or other blood relationship ... *other related individuals* (brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles) may be present in the household' (ABS 2001: 202–3; emphasis added). Although the ABS does not use the term 'nuclear family' it is clear from the definition that this is what is meant by a 'family', since other 'related individuals' may be associated with it, but are not part of it.

The model does not fit the Indigenous facts on the ground. Indigenous households 'who make common provision for food or other essentials for living' (ABS 2001: 209) are often spread across more than one dwelling (for example in the case of a man and his co-wives, as mentioned before). Moreover, as Anne Daly and Diane Smith note: 'the nuclear family is not the most common residential form ... indigenous households in the 1990s were characterised by considerable compositional complexity, porous social boundaries and large size' (1999: 2). What was and is true of the households of Yuendumu and Kuranda discussed by Daly and Smith was also true for the households at community A in 2001.

### *Case study 1: Dwelling J*

Table 1 shows the 'usual residents' of one dwelling as they were listed on the SIHF. The local Indigenous kinship term by which person 1 actually addresses each person is given in the last column. Superficially, if we take the kin terms used at face value, this looks like a four generation family, consisting of person 1 and his wife, their daughter and her husband (who is also person 1's sister's son, and hence

**Table 1. Details of dwelling J as recorded on the SIHF, 2001 Census.**

Person no.	Age	Relationship to person 1	Indigenous term
1.	56		
2.	34	wife	MBD
3.	70	mother-in-law	MMBD
4.	34	daughter	BC
5.	38	nephew	ZC
6.	5	grandson	BDC
7.	10	granddaughter	BDC

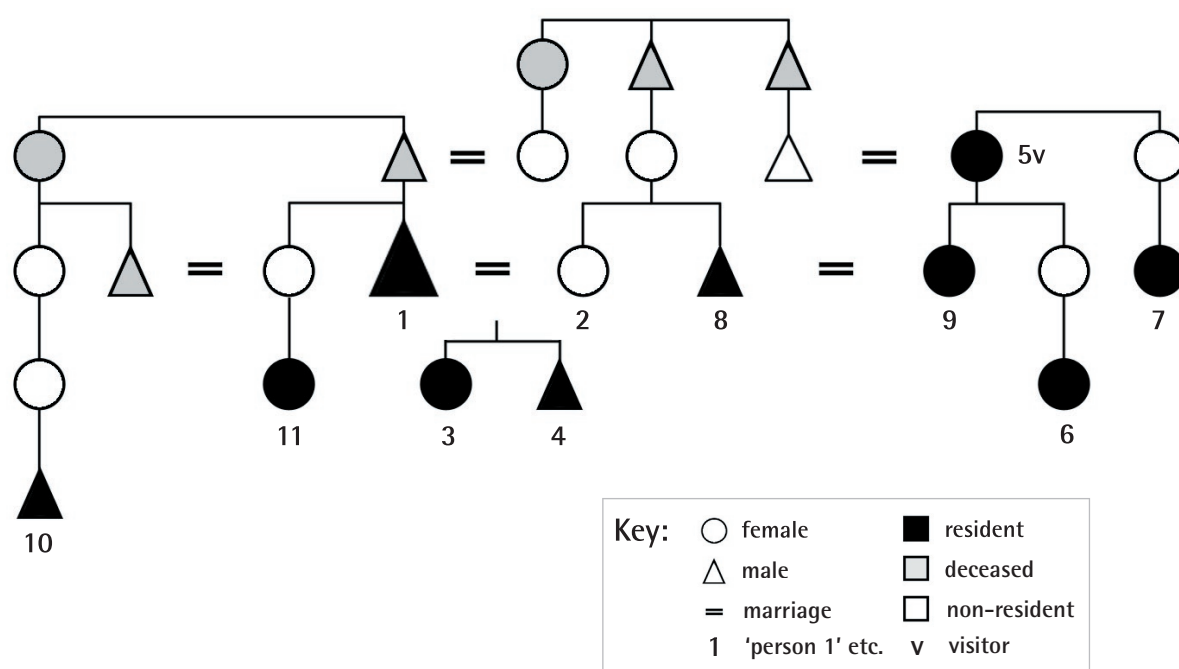


5v (a woman 'visitor') was put down as 'uncle' on the SIPF and as 'daughter' on the SIHF. Person 6 was put down as 'great-granddaughter'. Person 8 was put down as 'brother-in-law' and his wife, person 9, as 'granddaughter'. In terms of the kinship diagram, and the Anglo-Celtic system, these responses seem to be not only wrong, but also incomprehensible. However, if the Indigenous system is taken into account, sense of a kind emerges. These answers represent an attempt, from a local Indigenous viewpoint, to translate from the Indigenous system to the Anglo-Celtic.

In the Indigenous system, person 5v is person 1's M. The enumerators realised, however, that this person would not be classified as *mother* in the Anglo-Celtic system. On the SIHF, in attempting to solve the problem, the enumerators seem to have inverted the relationship: 'daughter' is probably a translation of ZC, which is what person 5v calls person 1. On the SIPF another solution was adopted: 'uncle' is the English term that locals most often use to translate MB (mother's brother). Person 6 is another M. Again, the enumerators realised that *mother* was not the appropriate Anglo-Celtic term. They aimed for an Anglo-Celtic term that picks out an M of a lower generation—but overshoot by two generations. In the great-grandchild's generation, female children are merged under the terms M or FZ, depending on the patrilineage to which they belong.

Person 8 is person 1's wife's brother, and so like her is person 1's MBC. This was 'correctly' translated as 'brother-in-law'. In the case of person 9, the enumerators, perhaps suffering from 'kinship fatigue' at this point, but also from not knowing what the Anglo-Celtic term should be, attempted to opt for a 'straight' translation between the two systems. In the local system, the wife of a male MBC (i.e. person 9 in this case) is MM—a type of 'grandmother'. Once again, as in the case of person 5v, the term was flipped in the translation process.<sup>9</sup>

Fig. 8. Dwelling K—actual relationships of usual residents and visitor.



### *Kinship and the household: conclusion*

Nearly every enumeration observed at community A produced results of the kind described above. The census data, if coupled with the ethnographic data, offer a fascinating insight into the local Indigenous kinship system and principles of household formation, and into how local people think about and abstract principles from their kinship categories. But as raw data on household structure they are unusable, for two reasons. Firstly, the incommensurability of the two kinship systems results in 'relationship' data that reflects neither system, and which cannot be used to construct 'families' within households. Secondly, the implicit model upon which ABS household structures are predicated—the nuclear family—is a bad model for community A households in particular and, it could be argued, for Indigenous households in general. This second point is elaborated in the next section.

### **THE NUCLEAR FAMILY: IS IT 'NATURAL'?**

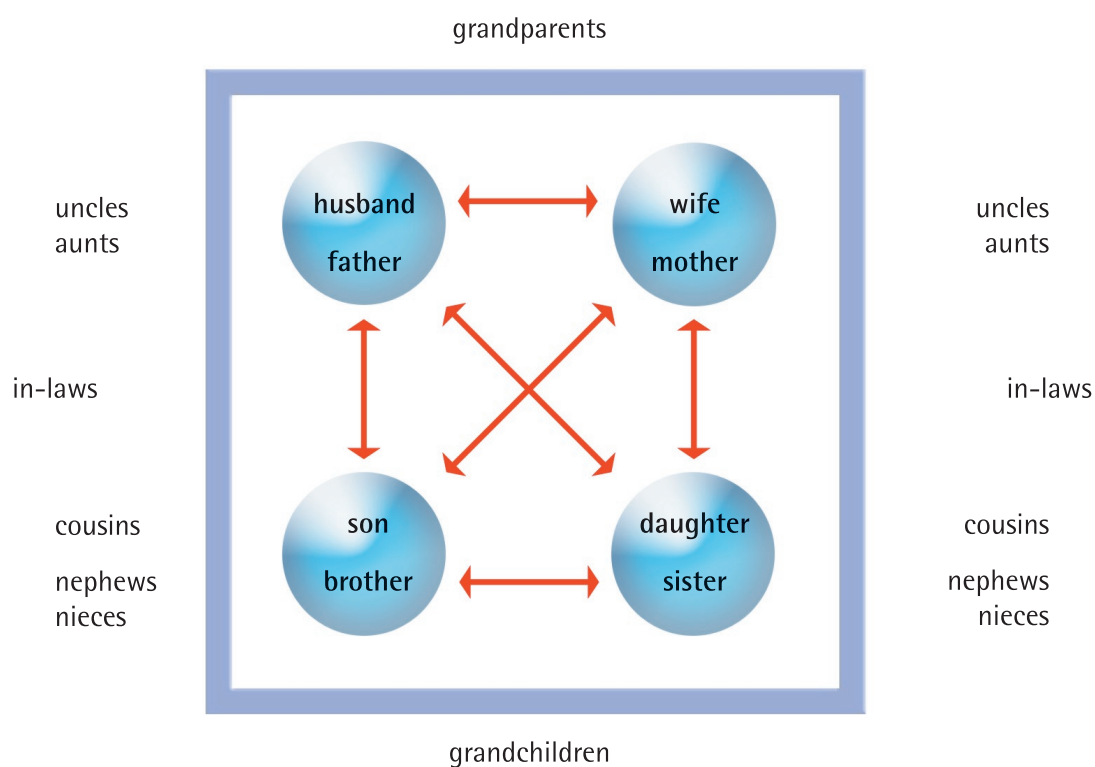
There is an assumption deeply embedded in the psyche and culture of the Anglo-Celtic mainstream that the nuclear family is a 'natural' and universal building block of all human societies everywhere. Anglo-Celtic cultures thus tend to take the nuclear family as the 'norm', and to describe all other household types as variations on, or deviations from that norm. The ABS, as an institution of the Australian Anglo-Celtic mainstream, reflects that tendency in its definitions. The Anglo-Celtic kinship system, with its unique reciprocal terms for the members of the nuclear family, reinforces the view of the nuclear family as somehow 'natural'.

In Fig. 9, each circle represents an ego. The terms within the box are those by which other members of the Anglo-Celtic nuclear family address ego. The nuclear family and its constellation of relationships only comes into being with a marriage: any ego is likely to be a member of more than one nuclear family in their lifetime, first as a child ('family of origin') and then as a parent ('family of procreation').

The local Indigenous kinship system, in contrast, privileges lineages, not nuclear families (Fig. 10). Ego and ego's siblings are not primarily constituents of a nuclear family, but a point of intersection between a pre-existing patrilineage and matrilineage. The box in Fig. 10 does not represent an individual ego, but rather contains a set of relationships that are constituted by the intersection of a patrilineage and a matrilineage in a particular generation. These relationships exist independent of any particular marriage because the FZC–MBC relationship between two people exists before a marriage does, and every person has many FZC and MBC. It is simply impossible to draw a box around a set of reciprocal terms that apply exclusively within a 'nuclear family'. The siblings in the bottom box are BC with respect to their patrilineal parent, and ZC with respect to their matrilineal parent. The terms for sibling (B and Z) lie within the intersection of the two lineages that is constituted by the marriage.

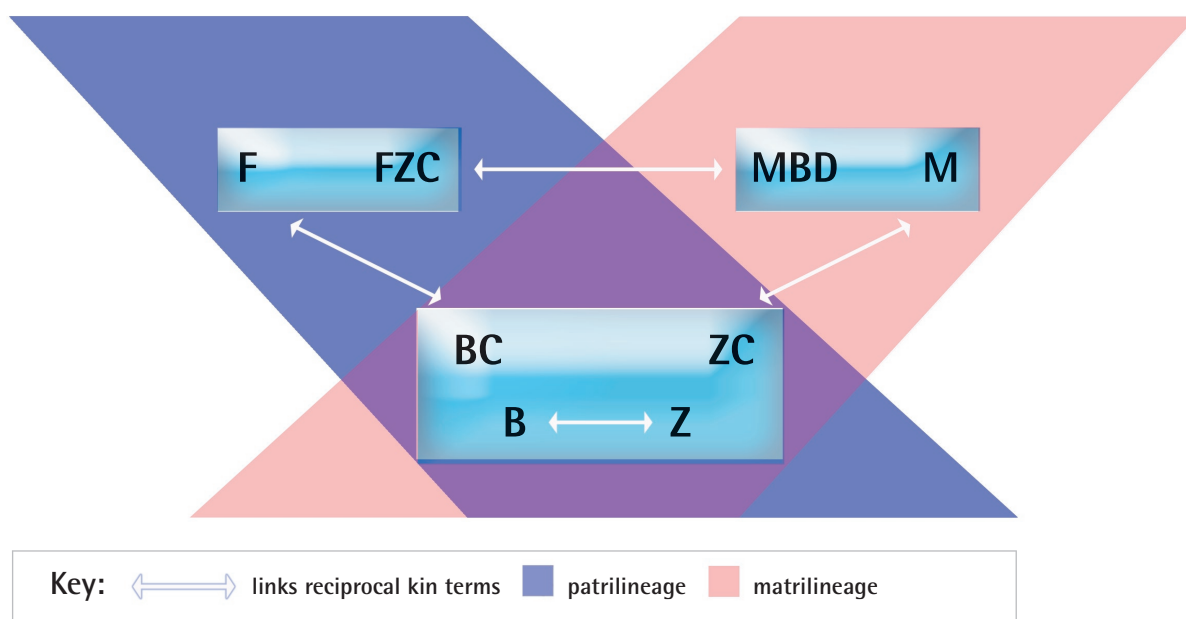
Of course, the structure of its system of kinship terminology does not in itself determine the structure of the unit of coresidence in any society. But it does confer an aura of 'naturalness' on certain types of coresidence units rather than others. In Anglo-Celtic society the household containing a nuclear family appears 'natural', and the ABS uses the nuclear family household as the ideal type in terms of which

Fig. 9. Anglo-Celtic kinship terminology and the nuclear family.



Key: links reciprocal kin terms

Fig. 10. Local Indigenous kinship terminology and the intersection of lineages.



other kinds of households are defined by their difference. In the local Indigenous setting nuclear family households do exist, but they are not any more 'natural' than any other kind of household.

## CONCLUSION

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With more (and more theoretically informed) training it would be possible for local Indigenous enumerators to produce results that would be interpretable in mainstream terms, at least for categories of kin that the mainstream system recognises as kin. Thinking in abstract terms about kinship is an everyday part of local life, and it would simply be a question of working out a systematic set of translation principles. But such a course of action would be based on a questionable premise. What about kin who do not fit Anglo-Celtic categories? Would they be described as 'friends', or 'unrelated'—even if, in many cases they are addressed by the *same* kinship term as people considered to be kin in the Anglo-Celtic system? Would such a solution reflect the reality of the composition and dynamic of Indigenous households? It would not. It would simply represent a more sophisticated attempt to distort the Indigenous system by squeezing it into the mainstream Anglo-Celtic mould. Moreover, this particular local system is only one of many systems of kinship in Indigenous Australia. The same training process would have to be implemented Australia-wide, with adaptations for each local situation. This would be expensive, time-consuming, and logistically complex, if not impossible. The better (and cheaper) course is to go back to first principles.

The census cannot hope to capture the complexity of Indigenous principles of kinship and household structure. The attempt to do so in the 2001 Census led to the collection of incoherent and uninterpretable data. The further step of 'classifying' those data into the family types recognised in ABS definitions, which do not coincide with the family types found in many, if not most, Indigenous communities, is a completely spurious exercise, and any analysis which is based on those data must allow for this. It should be noted that the complex familial structures of Indigenous societies are one of their most enduring aspects, persisting in communities in 'settled' Australia as well as in remote, 'traditionally-oriented' communities (see Smith 2000). While it is true that in settled Australia Indigenous people are, by and large, using the Anglo-Celtic terms themselves to describe their kin relationships, it cannot be assumed automatically that those terms have mainstream meanings.

The designers of the census need to step back from the questions on household structure, and decide precisely *what* information they wish to elicit. Is it information primarily about family structure, or about the size, age distribution, gender composition, and dependency structures of households? If it is decided that the latter data are the most important, one possibility which would sit more comfortably with the Indigenous facts, would be to add a new type of household to the ABS list—the *extended family household*. This definition would apply to large households in which everyone is related to everyone else, and would therefore conflate the 'family' with the usual residents of the dwelling, or household. It would not attempt to distinguish any putative 'couple families' or 'one-parent' families among the residents of the dwelling, and the post-enumeration categorisation would not attempt to break extended family households into such smaller family units. If it is still felt desirable to gather data on which relatives

children are living with, then there could be a question or questions directed at the under-15s only, about whether their actual mother and/or father is a 'usual resident' of the same household.

The case of the 'missing persons 1' highlights the central importance of kinship in local Indigenous life. The presence of questions on kinship both on the SIPF and on the SIHF gives them undue emphasis, and this may have been taken as a signal that these are the most important questions to address, whereas, in fact, kinship is simply being used as a means to model certain kinds of demographic data. At community A, more time was spent on Q.4, and on thinking about how it should be answered, than on any other question. Removing the emphasis on kinship would therefore serve another valuable end, in allowing people to focus more on the other questions on the form.

The solution proposed here is grounded in Indigenous reality, in that it recognises the incommensurability of Indigenous and mainstream principles of household formation (as defined currently by the ABS), while still allowing the dwelling to function as a unit of analysis and measurement across the board. It does not address the issue of linked households, which are such a prevalent feature of Indigenous community life, but that problem seems insoluble given the dwelling-based framework of the census enumeration.

A more radical thought yet: perhaps this exercise might be worth undertaking for the census in its entirety, and not just the Indigenous enumeration, since members of many of Australia's other 'ethnic' communities also live in households that diverge in their structure from the types envisaged in the present ABS definitions. It is perhaps time to consider retreating from the 'nuclear family' as the model against which *all* household structures are measured, not just Indigenous households.

The answer to the question of the title, 'does it matter?' is, of course, yes. The data collected in the census are a vital tool for the formulation of policy across a very broad range of issues. Pursuing the red herring of forcing Indigenous families and households into mainstream categories is a waste of time and effort, and diverts attention from the significant underlying issues. Are the dwellings in discrete Indigenous communities overcrowded? Yes. Are there large numbers of dependents in these households, relatively few old people, and are they comparatively poor? Yes. These are the kinds of broad questions that the census data can throw light on. It cannot be a tool for the analysis of the principles underlying Indigenous household composition, and there is no need for it to be such a tool.

The final point, then, is that there are limits to what can be quantified. Paradoxically, perhaps, removing the idiom of kinship—the central organising principle in traditional Indigenous societies—is precisely the way to see the underlying demographic data more clearly. If the quantifiable population characteristics of Indigenous Australians are to emerge clearly from census data, the questions on the Indigenous form need to be as culturally neutral as possible, in order to minimise misunderstanding on the part of the Indigenous interviewers and respondents. Care must be taken to avoid the 'naturalisation' of Anglo-Celtic cultural categories and assumptions, as happened with the 'nuclear family'. If a person fails to understand the meaning of a question, they are unlikely to provide the kind of answer that is sought.



## NOTES

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1. Because the community is small and its residents would be readily identifiable (at least locally) if it were named, the area in which this case study took place is deliberately left vague and the community is referred to as 'community A'.
2. The term 'classificatory' will be explained below.
3. Note that there are two cases where a man and his wife are heads of separate households.
4. I use 'traditionally oriented' as a shorthand term to refer to Indigenous people who live in discrete remote communities on or near their traditional country, with limited access to the economic mainstream. In such communities the major organising principle of social life is kinship, households are often large and compositionally complex, and many individuals are highly mobile. Subsistence hunting and gathering are valued forms of work that contribute significantly to the local economy. There is an active ceremonial life, based in beliefs about people's spiritual relationship to their country.
5. I use the term 'Anglo-Celtic' rather than 'English' to emphasise that kinship terminology is not purely a matter of language. A kinship system is a cultural construct, not simply a list of terms.
6. The kinship terms of the local system are represented here by the shorthand forms conventionally used in anthropological publications: B = brother, C = child, D = daughter, F = father, M = mother, Z = sister. MB = mother's brother, MMBDC = mother's mother's brother's daughter's child, etc.
7. The term 'cousin' is used at this community—but not in the meaning that it has in the Anglo-Celtic system. It is never used for people who are considered cousins in the Anglo-Celtic system, but rather for certain categories of kin that would be called 'in-laws' in the Anglo-Celtic system.
8. These terms also encompass other categories of kin, but this issue will not be discussed here.
9. The flipping between the perspective of person 1 and the interviewee may be due to the wording of Q. 4. 'How are you related to person 1?' can be interpreted two ways; either as 'What do you call person 1?' or as 'What does person 1 call you?'



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