

My Funny Census Form

There must have been a screw-up somewhere. I had eagerly awaited the arrival of my 20-page Official 1990 U.S. Census Form so that I could perform my civic duty by providing answers to all of the questions asked, no matter how irrelevant or intrusive they might seem — but, when it arrived, I noticed something funny. The form looked the same as the one my neighbor received, but some of the questions, some of the instructions accompanying the questions, and many of the multiple-choice answers were completely different.

For instance — in place of the several permutations of relative and non-relative to describe the relationship to PERSON 1 of PERSONS 2-7, ranging from husband/wife and son/daughter to housemate/roommate and unmarried partner — I was given only three ultra-contemporary alternatives: Significant other; Insignificant other; Significant bother. The choices for marital status were likewise simplified to three only: Married; Single; Married sports fan. Rather than the multiplicity of ethnicity offered to my neighbor — Indian, Aleut, Pacific Islander, etc. — the race selection question on my form offered only two all-encompassing options: Minorities, and Those Who Wish They Were Minorities. On the other hand, for the designation of sex, I was given an extra choice, “Undecided,” in addition to the two traditional gender classifications.

My instructions for Question 7 (Is this person of Spanish/Hispanic origin?) insisted that an American citizen should classify himself as Hispanic even if his ancestors had helped found St. Augustine, Florida in 1565, and cautioned that Xavier Cugat fans and Taco Bell employees do not automatically qualify.

My form had all of the same household questions that appeared on my neighbor's form—and then some. For example, Question H1a (Did you leave anyone out of your

list of persons [living in your house] because you were not sure if the person should be listed?) was followed by three possible answers to the question, Why?

- If you knew these people, you'd leave them out too;
- They had too much sense to believe that Title 13 of the U.S. Code would guarantee their privacy; and
- There are 10 people in my house and I can only count to three.

Question H10 (Do you have COMPLETE plumbing facilities in this house or apartment?) was followed, *on my form*, by Question H10a: How frequently do you bathe? (Daily; Every Saturday; Only for special occasions). Question H11 (Do you have COMPLETE kitchen facilities?) was followed by Question H11a, directed at members of families on the go: Which appliance do you use most often? (The microwave; The hot-air popcorn popper; The telephone (Speed dial function for pizza delivery)). And Question H12 (Do you have a telephone in this house or apartment?) was followed by H12a: Does your telephone have an answering machine? (Yes, one with a funny message (at least, *we* think it's funny); Yes, but everybody hangs up on it; Yes, but we never call anybody back).

The instructions for Question 8 (In what U.S. State or foreign country was this person born?) stipulated that Massachusetts could be classified as *either* a state *or* a foreign country (The People's Republic of Massachusetts), that Panama could not be considered a 51st state, and that the “state of confusion” would not be considered an appropriate answer. Instructions for Question 9 (Is this person a CITIZEN of the United States?) explained that a citizen of a foreign country cannot be considered a U.S. citizen no matter how much foreign aid his homeland receives, that a member of the U.S. ruling elite must classify himself as a U.S.

citizen even if he does consider himself a citizen of the world, and that — for the purposes of this census — one should disregard the question of whether or not the United States, as originally conceived by our Founding Fathers, even exists anymore.

On my form, Question 12 (How much school has this person COMPLETED?) was followed by Question 12a: What did he learn? (How to waste his parents' money; How to engage in safe sex; How to answer impertinent questions on long, complicated forms). And Question 15 (Does this person speak a language other than English at home?) offered these options for parents of teenagers: Valley Girl; Rap; He's a teenager (He doesn't speak to us).

Question 21 (Did this person work at any time LAST WEEK?) required a choice from a much more honest selection of answers on *my* form than it did on my neighbor's:

- He was *employed*, but he didn't do any work;
- He worked, but it took three full-time employees to correct everything he did wrong; and
- He's a congressman (we'd have been better off if he hadn't worked).

Question 32h, concerning “any other sources of income received regularly,” on my form specified the following: Prizes received for touring time-sharing properties; Deposits on aluminum cans; and Cash back from Chrysler.

Question 33 (What was this person's total income in 1989?) dispensed with dollar amounts on *my* form, soliciting instead one of the following generalized responses: A lot less after taxes; A lot more than he reported; None of your business.

Like I said, there must have been a screw-up somewhere. I checked around and could find no one who received a census form like mine. Either I got the wrong form, or everyone else did. ■