

# Counting the population or describing society? A comparison of British and French censuses

Ernestina Coast  
London School of Economics  
[e.coast@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:e.coast@ucl.ac.uk)

Alex Fanghanel  
Bedford University  
[a.fanghanel@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:a.fanghanel@ucl.ac.uk)

Eva Lelièvre  
Institut National des Etudes Démographiques  
[eva@ined.fr](mailto:eva@ined.fr)

Sara Randall  
University College London  
[s.randall@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:s.randall@ucl.ac.uk) (author for correspondence)

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Feedback and comments would be much appreciated**

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## Introduction and rationale: Census data on households

*“The effective use of man-power and the planning of land use, of housing, and of environmental, health and social services—all these must begin with the latest figures about the population both as it is now and as it will be in the future.” (1963)*

*« C'est-à-dire que le recensement, l'objectif principal c'est de compter les personnes sur le territoire et les compter une seule fois, c'est pas forcément de reconstituer l'échelle pertinente de décision au sein d'un logement. »<sup>1</sup> (Civil servant, INSEE)*

National population censuses are the largest and most complex statistical operations conducted by states; 96% of the world's population was enumerated in the 2010 round of censuses (UNSD 2013). The enumeration of population has been described as “the most visible, and arguably the most politically important, means by which states statistically depict collective identities” (Kertzer and Arel 2002)(p.3). Few countries have never conducted a census (Eritrea, Western Sahara), or have halted any form of census-taking (UNSD 2013).

Traditional censuses share a number of characteristics which are internalised as part of demographic training, including: universal coverage; absence of double counting; some form of compulsory inclusion; no sampling and a geographically defined area of coverage. However, census operations vary considerably from enumerator-administered short census schedules to online completion of lengthy questionnaires.

Census data are used by politicians, policy advisors, statisticians, lobby groups and national and international organisations for the planning and allocation of resources, welfare and support. Data collected at household level in population censuses are therefore – in principle – significant for the promotion of socio-economic health, welfare and well-being of people at all levels of society. Census data are used for a wide range of purposes including: electoral arrangements; baseline data for planning local health and education services; to identify locations for future services and infrastructure; as a sampling frame for subsequent surveys; for the estimation of vital statistics in the absence of any other data. In order that census data are comparable, and comprehensible, across time and space it is important to understand if, and how, concepts and definitions change between censuses.

Censuses are difficult and complex operations; the costs (time, human and financial) of conducting censuses mean that whether to conduct a census (or not) is debated by many countries because “it is difficult to justify a census in strict economic terms” (Newell 1988). A UN 2011/2012 survey on census methods used in countries in the 2010 round found that, of the 123 countries that replied, 85% were using a “traditional” census in order to collect data for a total population count (all countries in Africa, North America, South America and Oceania), 10% were using administrative registers<sup>2</sup> and the remaining 5% a different

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<sup>1</sup> Trans “For the census the principal aim is to count all the people in the land and to count them once only, it's not about finding out about the relevant level of decision making within a dwelling”

<sup>2</sup> UNSD (2013). Overview of National Experiences for Population and Housing Censuses of the 2010 Round. New York, United Nations Statistics Division.

methodology altogether<sup>3</sup>. The “prestige” of doing a traditional census (Newell 1988) remains important for many countries, and can represent belonging to the international statistical community (Randall, Coast et al. 2013).

Recent on-going debates, particularly in high income countries, about whether to replace the traditional census with high quality and extensive administrative data are responding to a range of issues including cost, increasing availability of good administrative data and public concerns about privacy and potential data (mis-)use (Coleman 2013) (Rowland, 2003).

### **Census unit of enumeration: household**

A key concept in censuses is the household, which determines the units for which much data are collected and analysed, thus influencing the data which are the basis for many policies. In this paper we use the household as the lens through which we study census change over time. Interrogation of how censuses use households, how definitions evolve in the way that they do, and close reading and consideration of the way that they change, reveal some of the drivers behind census variations between countries. By comparing the way in which ‘households’ have been defined in censuses we can gain an insight into what census commissioners and designers consider important – what their preoccupations and priorities are, what they think appropriately captures how people live, and, whether indeed, such representation can, or should seek to, reflect reality. The household enumeration unit excludes populations that live in institutional settings (military, hospitals, boarding schools, etc.), and we focus here only on non-institutional populations.

Household units are vital for the planning and use of resources by governments, and censuses remain an important source of household data in most countries. Although some academic consideration has been given to the way in which ‘household’ as a conceptual, statistical and analytical category has been used in social research (Bauman 1999; Beaman and Dillon 2010; Casimir and Tobi 2011; Randall, Coast et al. 2011), particularly in countries of the global South, there remain few examinations of the ways in which the concept of household itself has evolved in Europe, and the implications for social science analyses (c.f. (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik and Warner 2008).

UN agencies such as UNSD and UNFPA are influential international frameworks through which many nations develop and use statistical definitions. A UN document published in 1959 outlined a standardised definition of household:

*A private household should preferably be defined as: (a) one-person household: .....(b) multi-person household: a group of two or more persons who **combine to occupy the whole or part of a housing unit and to provide themselves with food or other essentials for living**. The group may pool their incomes and have a common budget to a greater or lesser extent. The group may be composed of related persons only or of unrelated persons or of a combination of both, including boarders but excluding lodgers.* (Statistical Office of the United 1959) (p. 74)

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Germany uses a combination of traditional housing census, sample survey and register-based census *ibid.*p.5-6 [UNSD. (2013). Overview of National Experiences for Population and Housing Censuses of the 2010 Round. New York: United Nations Statistics Division.], Valente (2010).

This UN definition remained largely unchanged for several decades. In 1980 the UN published its “Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses”, defining the household<sup>4</sup> as:

*1.223 The concept of “household” is **based on the arrangements made by persons, individually or in groups, for providing themselves with food or other essentials for living....***

*1.226. Households usually occupy the whole, part of or more than one housing unit but they may also be found living in camps, boarding houses or hotels or as administrative personnel in institutions, or they may be homeless. Households consisting of extended families that make common provision for food or of potentially separate households with a common head, resulting from polygamous unions, or households with vacation or other second homes may occupy more than one housing unit. (Statistical Office of the United Nations 1980) (p.50)*

In 1997 the part highlighted in bold was reiterated in a further UN document (UNSD 1997) p.50). The approach of the census household definition is driven in large part by pressures of universality and the avoidance of double-counting in the census endeavour (Randall, Coast et al. 2013). Implicit in such enumeration units, and their definition, is a tension between accurately counting the population (once and only once) and providing information about the way in which people live and organise themselves.

Across Europe, there have been considerable shifts in living arrangements, households and daily lives over the past five decades. The continuing reconfiguration of the nuclear family leads many people, children especially, to have two (or more) homes and belong to two (or more) households (ESRC 2006; Stillwell, Coast et al. 2009). Highly mobile professionals may live parts of weeks or months in one place and parts in another. Changing social norms and socio-political institutions mean that levels, rates and ages of family formation, cohabitation, (re-)partnership (re-)divorce and (re-) marriage have shifted substantially (Smallwood and Jefferies 2003; Demey, Berrington et al. 2013; Stone, Berrington et al. 2013). The emergence, for example, of living-together-apart (LAT) unions is one such recent example (Haskey 2005 ).

This paper compares and contrasts the approaches of censuses to reflect changing society in two settings (England and Wales [E&W] and France) and addresses 3 research questions:

- i. What are the implications of different national settings for census design, conduct and analysis?
- ii. In what ways, and why, does the unit of enumeration change over time and space?
- iii. What are the implications of national differences in census operations for understanding society, both within and across nations?

### **International comparisons: E&W and France**

Our study design is one of international comparison, using the same research methods to address the same research questions in two different nation states (Hantrais and Mangen 1996; Hantrais 2009). E&W and France are high income European settings with similar fertility, mortality and ageing populations. Both settings have a long history of collecting census data, albeit with rather different historical roots for the collection of vital statistics.

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<sup>4</sup> The sub-heading “Household” included “ [or family] “, underlining the mutability of these concepts

In her comparative historical study of the emergence of demographic and vital statistics in England and France in the Nineteenth Century, Schweber shows the “enthusiasm” of the English government for statistical data in order to better understand social problems such as poverty and public health; by contrast the French government were rather less enthusiastic (Schweber 2006).

In E&W the census is the responsibility of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), and in France the census is under the auspices of the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (*Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques*: INSEE). ONS is the statistical institute of England and Wales, headed by the National Statistician, who is accountable to Government. Its historical roots lie in the creation of the Central Statistical Office in 1941, becoming the Office for National Statistics in 1996. The most significant recent change to the ONS has been its legislative independence in producing statistics, culminating in the establishment of the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA) in 2008. The ONS is the executive office of the UKSA, which means that its funding is a part of, and is reported by, the UKSA. The ONS does not, therefore, report to an individual Minister or Ministry, an essential component of its independence in the production of data.

INSEE is a Directorate General of the Ministry of the Economy, Finance, and Industry. It is a government agency staffed mainly by civil servants. INSEE operates under government accounting rules: it receives its funding from the State's general budget. INSEE organizes the population census, produces the main indicators for the national economy (national accounts, consumer price index), and periodically conducts statistical surveys of households on specific topics (employment, living conditions, housing, health etc.). Finally, INSEE also uses administrative data (civil registration records, annual income tax returns etc.) for statistical purposes. There are therefore subtle but significant differences in the institutional arrangements between E&W and France for responsibility for the census (Table 1)

**Table 1: Comparison of ONS and INSEE**

	<b>INSEE</b>	<b>ONS</b>
<b>Who funds</b>	National government: direct via Ministry of the Economy, Finance and Industry	National government: indirect via UKSA
<b>Legislation</b>	Census enshrined in law <sup>5</sup>	Legislative independence
<b>Who answerable to</b>	Ministry of the Economy, Finance and Industry	UKSA (independent of Government)
<b>Staffed by</b>	Civil servants	Civil servants
<b>Census mission statement</b>	“Chacun de nous compte <sup>6</sup> ”	“Who we are. How we live. What we do.”

<sup>5</sup> Law n° 2002-276 of February 27, 2002 (articles 156 to 158) establishes the principles for conducting the census and disseminating the annual official population of every commune.

(<http://www.insee.fr/en/methodes/default.asp?page=sources/ope-rp.htm>)

<sup>6</sup> Trans: Each and everybody counts/is considered/is important. *There is a pun on the word ‘compter’ here.*

## Methods

Two research methods were used: (1) a review of census documentation (including census schedules, enumerators' manuals, training materials, allied and associated paperwork, and internal documentation) which was organised longitudinally to examine in what ways they have evolved since the 1960s and comparatively to examine similarities and differences between countries in order to obtain a rich understanding of the diverse pressures across countries; (2) in-depth interviews (n=24 UK, n=25, France) conducted with key individuals situated at different places on the chain of data production (census designers, interviewers, statisticians, policy makers, diverse data users and academics) and oriented around respondents' roles in the collection and/or use of household data. Discussion particularly focused on the way in which the "household" is defined and used in censuses and surveys. Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using Nvivo<sup>7</sup>. After reading all the interviews multiple times the research team collaboratively developed a coding book with both descriptive and analytic codes. Some of the analytic codes focused on hypotheses which were developed before the research was undertaken whereas others emerged inductively from the interview material and were the subject of considerable debate and elaboration by the research team. The data and analyses presented here are explicitly comparative, both over time (1960s-present) and space (E&W and France). For a detailed description of the broader project within this work was conducted, including its ethical review, see [www.householdsurvey.info](http://www.householdsurvey.info).

We present our results and analyses thematically, integrating documentary and transcript evidence throughout. We present all key terms or quotes in French in their original language, and provide authors' translations in footnotes, in order to preserve the original meaning of words which might be lost in translation; many terms are difficult to translate precisely because they have technically slightly different meanings in French and English.

### Counting people, understanding their living arrangements: document review

*I think the topic of household composition and household structure, and capturing it, is fundamental to how we understand relations across the life course and vital for policy and planning and vital for informing the assumptions of policy. (Academic, UK University, 2011)*

A review of census documentation highlights significant, but subtle, changes in census household definitions over the past half century in England & Wales (Table 2). Analysis and interpretation of these definitions suggests three key analytic categories, present to varying degrees, in British<sup>8</sup> census definitions of the household: sharing of space; sharing of food; and links with addresses and (possibly) thereby local administration (Table 2). Changing dominance of these categories over time can be understood as a reflection of changing

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<sup>7</sup> Anonymised transcripts of the UK interviews have been deposited in the ESRC data archive and can be found at: <http://store.data-archive.ac.uk/store/collaborativeCollectionEdit.jsp?collectionPID=archive:730&tabbedContext=collCollection&collectionTitle=null>

<sup>8</sup> We use the term 'British' here as shorthand for England and Wales, whilst recognising that the census in Scotland and Northern Ireland are conducted by their respective statistical offices.

social norms and patterns of living arrangements. We identify categories which our analyses suggest are the dominant or secondary theme(s) in each definition

In 1961, the first year that census data were computerised, common housekeeping is central. In English the words household and housekeeping suggest not only the importance of the dwelling ‘house’ but also of the relationships within that physical structure; the ‘holding’ or ‘keeping’ of ties between individuals – whether related or not – within a dwelling. For the purposes of this 1961 definition, the shared meals and the exclusive use of a room as well as the need for shared housekeeping make the household. Beyond this, no indication of what might be meant by common housekeeping is given. The requirement that people within a household must have exclusive use of a room offers a spatial dimension to the definition of household. This aspect of the definition appears in future household definitions, but, crucially the exclusivity of the room requirement would eventually be turned on its head, but not before being further enshrined in later definitions.

Five years later, in 1966, common housekeeping (undefined) and shared meals define the people in a household together with a further explanation that different households cannot share one room regardless of whether they eat meals together, or not. In 1966 a further degree of specificity was introduced, focusing on breakfast, possibly introduced in order to counter ambiguity about what constitutes a meal as well as reflecting changes in lifestyles.

**Table 2: Census definitions of the household, E&W, 1960-2011**

Decade	Analytic category			E&W definitions
	Shared space	Shared food	Address	
1960s	Secondary	Primary / dominant	Not present	<b>1961</b> One person living alone or a group of people living together, partaking of meals prepared together and benefiting from a common housekeeping. A person or persons living but not boarding with a household in a house, flat etc., should be treated as a separate household. But a person living with a household who usually has at least one meal a day provided by that household while in residence is part of that household (breakfast counts as a meal for this purpose). A household must have exclusive use of at least one room. If two people share one room and do not have exclusive use of at least one other room, they should be treated as one household.
	Secondary	Primary / dominant	Not present	<b>1966</b> Any group of persons, whether related or not, who live together and benefit from common housekeeping, or any person living alone who is responsible for providing his or her own meals. A person living but not taking meals with a private household was treated as a separate household, but if that person has at least one meal a day with the household he was regarded as part of that household. Breakfast counted as a meal for this purpose. By convention a household had to have at least one room. Two or more persons living in one room were regarded as one household regardless of whether or not

				they had meals together or shared common housekeeping.
<b>1970s</b>	Secondary	Primary / dominant	Secondary	<b>1971</b> ‘Either one person living alone or a group of persons (who may or may not be related) living at the same address with common housekeeping. Persons staying temporarily with the household are included. A boarder having at least one meal a day with the household counts as a member of the household (breakfast counts as a meal for this purpose), but a lodger taking no meals with the main household counts as a separate one person household even if he shared the kitchen and the bathroom. A group of unrelated persons sharing a house or flat would count as one or as several households according to whether they maintained common housekeeping or provided their own meals separately.
<b>1980s</b>	Primary / dominant	Primary / dominant	Secondary	<b>1981</b> Either one person living alone or a group of people (who may or may not be related) living, or staying temporarily at the same address with common housekeeping. Enumerators were told to treat a group of people as a household if there was any regular arrangement to share at least one meal a day, breakfast counting as a meal, or if the occupants shared a common living or sitting room.
<b>1990s</b>	Primary / dominant	Primary / dominant	Secondary	<b>1991</b> Either one person living alone or a group of people (who may or may not be related) living or staying temporarily at the same address with common housekeeping. As in 1981, enumerators were instructed to treat a group of people as a household if there was any regular arrangement to share at least one meal (including breakfast) a day, or if the occupants shared a common living or sitting room.
<b>2000s</b>	Secondary	Secondary	Primary / dominant	<b>2001</b> ‘One person living alone or a group of people (not necessarily related) living at the same address with common housekeeping – that is, sharing either a living room or sitting room or at least one meal a day.
<b>2010s</b>	Secondary	Secondary	Primary / dominant	<b>2011</b> One person living alone or a group of people (not necessarily related) living at the same address who share cooking facilities and share a living room or sitting room or dining area.

Sources: (General Register Office 1962) (p. ii); (General Register Office 1968) (p. xi); (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys 1979) (p.9); (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys 1981) (p. 6); (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys and General Register Office for Scotland 1992) (p. 10-11); (Office for National Statistics, General Register Office for Scotland et al. 2004) (p.34); (Office for National Statistics 2013) (p. 20).

This 1966 definition was used in a one-off trial 5 year census of a 10% sample of the population of England and Wales. Hansard (the parliamentary record) reports suggest that this interim census survey was required to accommodate contemporary ‘rapid change and development’ and to plan resource allocations (1963) indicating the importance placed in British censuses of reflecting society. The complication of not accurately reflecting poorer

single person households which was a consequence of the exclusive room requirement in 1961 and 1966 (thus making the planning of the use of manpower, and identifying overcrowding and housing needs difficult) was addressed in part by changes to the definition in 1971.

Whilst the common housekeeping requirement (still unexplained) remains, in 1971 far greater emphasis was placed on the requirement to share a meal a day which makes the difference between inclusion or not in a household unit for apparently unrelated people (boarders and lodgers). The beginning of the definition requires that the household must share common housekeeping, *and* that there is a subsequent meal requirement. At the end of the definition, the one household/several household distinction turns on whether co-residents share either common housekeeping *or* meals. No definition is given of 'common housekeeping' but it evidently excludes the sharing of meals which, without common housekeeping is sufficient for a group of unrelated persons to count as a household. This later section of the definition is in tension with the earlier section where both requirements appear to be necessary. These nuances introduce an element of hierarchy: a lodger/boarder is attached to an existing household if s/he fulfils the criteria, but the "main" household already exists. By contrast, a flat-share is a collection of equals without there being a "main" household that would otherwise exist. The 1971 definition of the household refers to address for the first time but excludes reference to any spatial requirements/ rooms—whether shared or exclusive for identifying households. Consumption practices and arrangements were key to the definition in 1971. In earlier British definitions there is the assumption that people live together behind the same front door – although this is not outlined explicitly until 1971 when 'living at the same address' is integrated into the definition.

Spatial criteria return in 1981: a household must live at an address and share common housekeeping (not defined). The shared meal endures but is no longer essential for identification of a household. In 1981, for a household to be identified an alternative to sharing meals is sharing a living room. This has changed from exclusive use of a room required in 1961 and 1966. Sharing a living room is sufficient for people who live together (e.g. group of friends) but do not eat together to be counted as a household – presumably reflecting a widespread increase in house / flat sharing between students or young unrelated adults. The sharing of a meal means that people who lodge with a household and whose meals are provided count as part of the household even if they do not use the common rooms. This will tend to capture a greater number of people within one household. One reading of this definition suggests that shared housekeeping could include either the shared room or the shared meal, but this only becomes explicit in 1991 where the definition clarifies that common housekeeping means *either* a shared meal *or* a shared common space. Thus, as long as the person or persons live at the same address and share a meal or a common room, they count as a household. This 1991 definition is almost exactly the same as the 2001 definition.

In 2011, three further subtle changes appear; the concept of 'common housekeeping' disappears (possibly reflecting the fact that it was always rather unclear), the requirement for the meal to be shared is replaced by the requirement to share cooking facilities *and* to share a living room or sitting room, or dining area. The household members must still all live

at the same address. The sharing of cooking *facilities* as opposed to meals takes an element of the consumption requirement out of the definition; it is no longer necessary that a household is nourished from the same larder; they do not need to eat at the same time or eat the same thing. This reflects the fact that fewer and fewer household members (whether related or not) eat together in England and Wales, and better reflects the increase in unrelated individuals – often students, young people or migrant workers – who share dwellings, particularly in urban centres, because of increased housing costs.

It is clear that census household definitions in England and Wales are attempting to reflect changes in the ways the majority of people manage their lives in terms of co-residence, eating and managing living space. There will always be arrangements that are difficult to capture but the essential point is that the definitions are trying to pre-empt major trends. Such subtle definitions also require trained census-enumerators for clarifications: the general population which the census enumerates, are not all able to grasp these subtleties.

Such nuances are totally absent in France. Differences between France and E&W emerge on a number of fronts. The nuanced English definition changes up to and including 2001 (but excluding 2011) focused on identifying whether there should be one or several households behind the front door. In France, the main concern is the opposite;

*« Je pense que quantitativement l'attention se porte d'ailleurs plutôt sur les ménages qui sont sur plusieurs logements que le même logement avec plusieurs ménages. »*<sup>9</sup>  
(Academic Data Analyst, 2011)

Until 1954 there were some ambiguities but from that time onwards the idea of 'ménage-logement' (household=dwelling)<sup>10</sup> became fixed. In 1962 the French census household was defined as:

*« l'ensemble des personnes, quels que soit les liens qui les unissent, qui habitent une unité d'habitation privée, c'est-à-dire, un local séparé et indépendant ».*<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore the French census is recorded on a *de jure* basis encompassing those in their 'residence principale' (main residence) whether or not they were present on census night. This is because the purpose of the French census (see below) is an integral part of commune administration. Lastly, in terms of management of census data collection, French census forms have been self-completed since 1881! This called for a simplified and straightforward unit - "le logement" - within which everybody is counted.

Since 1946, in the instructions accompanying the self-completed forms (bulletin) for the French census, there has been a clear distinction between the family and the household in the sense that "unrelated individuals usually living in this place, whether related or not, need

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<sup>9</sup> Trans: I think that quantitatively, our attention is focused more on households spread across several *logements/dwellings* than on several households in one *logement/dwelling*.

<sup>10</sup> The 'logement' or dwelling in France cannot be translated by 'address': in France a large house split into flats will all have the same 'address' although each flat is a different 'logement'. The best translation seems to be dwelling which represents all those people who reside behind a front door. Henceforth we will use 'logement', or 'dwelling' as the translation of 'logement'.

<sup>11</sup> Trans: All those individuals, whatever the links that have brought them together, who live in one private residential unit, that is to say a dwelling which is separate and independent (Recensement général de la population de 1962 : ménages - familles / Insee. - Paris : INSEE, 1968, 239p.)

to be listed and fill a form". The unambiguous definition of "ménage-logement" was set in the 1954 census. In 1962, questions about family ties are excluded from the form. Then in 1968, appears the notion of "résidence principale" i.e. corresponding to permanently occupied dwellings with the effect of excluding bargees, caravans, etc. which were until then included in the 'ordinary households'. From then people in such mobile accommodation are enumerated separately.<sup>12</sup>

In 2004 the French census was transformed into a rolling census and the definition changed slightly from "résidence principale" to "résidence habituelle" (usual residence) defined as "the place where you live the longest during the year". This means, for example, that students living away from the parental home for much of the year or elderly people who have had to leave their family home (but still own / retain rights in it) to live in a retirement home are now enumerated where they live for most of the time. This has ramifications for household structure and size. However these changes have not been made in response to attempts to better represent living arrangements but more to distinguish between the fiscal unit ("foyer fiscal"/"résidence principale") which groups people declaring a joint revenue who can live separately, and the actual local residents who draw services and amenities from the local authorities in the commune where they are enumerated.

The French census definition of the household ("ménage-logement") itself remains identical throughout the whole half century despite broadly similar transformations in living arrangements to those occurring in Britain (although it is possible that in France, compared to Britain, fewer families have abandoned joint family meals and there may be less flat sharing by young, single unrelated adults). This stability in France is because of (a) constraints posed by the administrative and legal obligations behind the French census (see below) and (b) the fact that the key unit in the French census is the 'logement'; the individuals within that 'logement' just need to be enumerated (once only) as individuals and do not need to be further divided into households that represent some sort of basic economic unit in society.

*« ...dans le recensement français nous n'avons rien sur les revenus. Donc l'idée de partager le même budget, de vivre sur le même revenu, on ne peut pas l'appliquer au recensement – et les gens du recensement ne veulent pas même qu'on pose une question sur le revenu, même qu'on aborde le sujet des revenus, en disant quand même que le recensement c'est pour compter des personnes, donc il faut que les gens répondent le mieux possible au recensement et donc n'abordons pas les sujets qui pourraient être jugés indiscrets, qui pourraient bref fâcher –donc [...] on est resté sur la notion de ménage – logement. »<sup>13</sup> (INSEE Survey designer, 2011)*

From this the understanding of the UN recommendation of taking into account the way people organise themselves is only envisaged by INSEE in terms of budget sharing and not in

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<sup>12</sup> See Insee document: <http://www.insee.fr/fr/ppp/sommaire/imeths01c.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Trans: in the French census we collect nothing about income. Thus the notion of budget-sharing, of living off the same income, we cannot use it in the census –and the census people would not even agree to it, not even agree that a hint be made about it; they would say that, after all, the census is made to count people therefore in order for them to answer reliably, let's not talk about touchy subjects which could antagonize them-- thus [...] we have remained with the concept of "ménage-logement".

terms of common “cooking pot” or shared meal as is done by ONS. Because income is a touchy subject, notoriously difficult to collect and possibly suggesting that there is a link between the census data and fiscal administration, it cannot be included in the census. Thus the *logement* i.e. the physical “box” became and defines the *ménage* (household).

### ***Managing fieldwork (terrain)***

ONS and INSEE also have to deal with the practicalities of census data collection. In E&W es in 2011, census forms were posted to the occupants of each registered address in the Postal Address File:

*Yes, but what we’ve ... and it’s borne out of the practicality really of wanting to be able to enumerate these people and because it is not immediately obvious. It is a front door, the postman’s putting something through the door, so we’ve got no idea whether we’ve got 5 rooms of people who count themselves individually or not, so we can deliver one questionnaire and we can make clear on there if you all share a kitchen and some living space essentially, a cooking space and living space is what we’re, if you share those facilities we’re counting you as one household (ONS Survey designer, 2011)*

A key driver for the changing definition of the household in 2011 was the way in which the census was administered:

*In 2011 because the questionnaires were posted out and posted back, so we weren’t going to see people, that had to change, but part of that came from the experience in 2001 where in the 2001 census the definition was broadly comparable with that which had gone previously so it was a group of people living together sharing common housekeeping was the term, and the questionnaires were hand delivered so if the field staff made contact they could explain that but what we found increasingly was that our field staff who were then supposed to be making that judgement, making that decision, weren’t making contact, particularly in London and other cities. (ONS Survey designer, 2011)*

Changing technology and resource constraint have reduced the use of enumerator-administered census forms, meaning that the definition had to be easier to interpret by respondents:

*It was also then clearer when we didn’t make contact with the householders – which we weren’t doing – in that we were posting the questionnaires out, for them to understand what we were looking for, so we took away the social element of it and made it physical for practical reasons.” (ONS Survey designer, 2011)*

French census forms have been self-completed since 1881 and enumerators only distribute the forms and retrieve them (le ‘dépôt-retrait’). This way of administering the census is a key constraint.

*En France on n’a pas de répertoire des personnes –donc pas de répertoire des ménages- on n’a pas le droit de créer ce type de répertoire [...] on avait par contre, une base de logements, c’est moins sensible politiquement et donc on a considéré*

*qu'on parlait de l'unité observable, le logement [...] et on a assimilé un logement égale un ménage.*<sup>14</sup> (INSEE civil servant, 2011)

*[...] en fait l'INSEE tire finalement essentiellement des échantillons de logements, qui vont être des résidences principales pour les personnes d'un même ménage et c'est là qu'on va trouver nos enquêtés, c'est une porte d'entrée.*<sup>15</sup> (INSEE trained engineer, 2011)

In France the census enumerator is given a list of *logements* as recorded in the *Répertoire d'Immeubles Localisés* (RIL). This register which is maintained and up-dated by each municipality (or commune) gives the number of accommodation units/flats (*logement*) at each address. The enumerator must distribute a *Bulletin Logement* to each dwelling (*logement*) on the list and leave the correct number of individual questionnaires (*Bulletins individuels*) for the occupants. All usual occupants, whatever their age, must fill an individual bulletin and be listed on the *Bulletin Logement*.

### **The census as a reflection of society and daily life: perspectives from key informants**

Analysis of British census documentation suggests that the household definitions generated by ONS are making substantial efforts to accommodate and represent changing realities. This is not necessarily the perspective of those who undertake interviewing work for ONS. One respondent who worked door to door interviewing households suggested that the ONS definition of the household is rigid and does not try to capture reality

*It's like using words, words change their meaning over time, you can't say 'I've had to use that word because we've always used that word'. So this is the thing, I think as an organisation we're not flexible, we don't take on-board these things.*(ONS Field force enumerator, 2011)

This respondent was not aware that definitions had changed over time but she is unlikely to have worked for the organisation for more than a few years and to have been able to observe such changes. In fact there was a very substantial shift between 2001 and 2011 motivated by two, very different drivers: practical, methodological considerations, and an attempt to reflect contemporary changes in the organisation of everyday life. The nuanced changes to the definition of the household over the past 50 years were generated by the second of these drivers whereas getting rid of common housekeeping and the shared meal in 2011 may reflect social trends in eating patterns as well as the practicalities of 2011 census data collection.

Two UK University academics who not only use household data in their research but have also worked with ONS and other international statistics agencies to analyse census data

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<sup>14</sup> Trans: In France we have no population register (not even postal) ; therefore there is no register of households – we do not have the legal right to create such a register [...] on the other hand we do have a housing register [logements] that is less politically sensitive and so we start from the observable unit, the dwelling [logement] and we assume that a 'logement' equals a household

<sup>15</sup> Trans: In fact INSEE effectively draws their samples from 'logements' which will be the main residence for people of the same household and that's where we find our respondents – that's the entry point.

suggest that the impetus behind changes to definitions has been primarily to reflect changes in social life:

*The household, in that respect, is defined as a sort of dwelling space where you're the only person in that space typically a flat. The rules have changed as to how you're supposed to define household. In the past they've talked about [...] everyone in the household sitting together [...] down together to eat a communal meal. Um that's sort of [...] been removed [...] I think I'm getting this the right way around, I hope so [...] as that's simply socially become a less common occurrence. (UK: Academic Data Analyst, 2011)*

*The questions they ask, how do you identify several households within the same dwelling, for example I remember a traditional definition of household in Britain was ... people who share, cooking facilities, I think that is the latest definition, because it used to be people who share a meal, and then they realised that nobody shares meals nowadays. (UK Academic Researcher working on household, 2011)*

This is very different from INSEE where the census prioritises very different dimensions: counting individuals and providing legal population counts is what is really important, not how they organise their lives (see quotes at the beginning of the paper) even though census data are used to publish statistics on *communes* inhabitants and their characteristics: composition by sex and age, occupation, housing conditions, modes of cohabitation etc.

In contrast both British academics suggest that the definition of the household had changed – and that the shared meal requirement, in particular, had disappeared – because of ONS's attempts to define a household in such a way as that it continues to reflect the reality of the population to whom the definition is applied.

*[to] share the kitchen, that's quite standard, and what we've tried to do is make sure ... Those people could go their lives never talking to each other, they just happen to share a cooker, so we count those as separate households, which is why we started saying you have share a lounge or a dining room, there has to be some kind of social space that you're sharing for us to count you as household. (ONS Survey Designer, 2011).*

The importance of the social, in what makes a household – the 'hold' of the house – becomes clear and accounts for the 'and' in the 2011 definition. The imperative to create a household definition which reflects the changing way in which people live appears to be the rationale for this series of historical subtle changes.

In France, things are very different, the census 'household' is not regarded as a conceptually strong entity, it appears in our interviews with data users that the term "ménage" has many different meanings according to data sources and institutions using them:

*On aura en fait trois unités statistiques qui ressemblent au ménage et qui sont distinctes, la première qui est liée à la cohabitation dans le logement, c'est le ménage, la seconde qui est couverte par les droits sociaux [...], c'est l'assuré social et ses ayants droit [...] la troisième c'est le foyer fiscal parce qu'en France l'imposition est collective qui rassemble les parents et les enfants [...] y compris les enfants majeurs et ne vivant pas avec leurs parents, peuvent joindre leur déclaration de revenus à*

*celles de leurs parents [...] pour des raisons avant tout d'optimisation fiscale.*<sup>16</sup>  
(Academic Data Analyst, 2011)

Three types of “ménages” are identified each corresponding to institutions: administrative data producers, social benefits providers and fiscal collectors. Only the first of these is the census household and it encompasses those people who live behind the door of a ‘logement’ with no interest in how they organize their daily lives: thus it is clear that the French census household cannot really be compared to the British census household.

*L'objectif principal du recensement c'est compter et donner des informations qui intéressent les communes [...] Donc par exemple dans le recensement on ne fait pas la différence entre une famille recomposée et une famille traditionnelle, les liens sont donnés mais comme c'est du traitement de masse ils ne sont pas exploités.*<sup>17</sup> (Senior civil servant, INSEE, 2011)

*Mais l'estimation que l'on donne de la population en France c'est pas le recensement tout seul. C'est un mélange entre l'observation de la collecte et l'utilisation des données de la taxe d'habitation.*<sup>18</sup> (INSEE Civil servant, 2011)

*La loi permet l'appariement, l'INSEE reçoit des données de toutes les autres administrations, y compris fiscales mais uniquement à des fins statistiques.*<sup>19</sup>  
(Academic Data Analyst, 2011)

French data producers are constrained within priorities ensuring that the final counts are tenable, and that the data collected are, at the national level, compatible with other sources both in terms of housing stock and fiscal declarations. In such circumstances any attention given to how the “household” represents people’s living arrangements is secondary.

Although the household is supposedly a statistical unit which is independent from ‘family’ in reality the two are closely intertwined and the presence of a ‘family’ in a household is an important element in any analysis. The nuclear family concept remains paramount. Rules about who was first ‘household head’ and subsequently ‘reference person’ are illuminating. The notion of a ‘head’ suggests traditional patriarchal social structures based on age and sex, although these were not enshrined specifically in the definition.

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<sup>16</sup> Trans: In fact we have three statistical entities which resemble a household but are distinct, the first is defined by cohabitation in the same dwelling, it is the ‘ménage’, the second one is defined by social entitlement [...], it refers to the person paying/receiving social security contributions/ benefits and the his/her eligible dependents (partner, children etc.) [...]the third one is the fiscal unit because in France taxation is collective and can group parents and children [...] even adult children who do not live with their parents can attach their income revenue declaration to those of their parents [...] in order to minimise their taxes.

<sup>17</sup> Trans: The main aim of the census is to count and give relevant information to the municipalities [...] For example in the census, no difference is made between a family with stepchildren and a traditional family, the family ties are declared but since it is mass processed, these are not analysed nor coded.

<sup>18</sup> Trans: Nevertheless the estimates given of the total population and local populations in France do not come from the census only. It is a mix between the census enumeration matched with the data from the council tax.

<sup>19</sup> Trans: INSEE has a legal right to match data, INSEE receives data from all the other administrative bodies, even the Inland Revenue, but purely for statistical purposes.

In E&W *“the head of household (as it was named until 1991) is the first person on the form who was (i) aged 16 years or over, and (ii) usually resident at the address of enumeration (...) The head of family or family unit is taken to be the head of household if the family unit contains the head of household (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys and General Register Office for Scotland 1992)”*.

It was only in 2001 that the UK adopted the concept of household reference person: *“for a person living alone, it follows that this person is the Household Reference Person (HRP). If the household contains only one family (with or without ungrouped individuals), the HRP is the same as the Family Reference Person (FRP). If there is more than one family in the household, the HRP is chosen from among the FRPs using the same criteria as for choosing the FRP (economic activity, then age, then order on the form. If there is no family, the HRP is chosen from the individuals using the same criteria”* (Office for National Statistics, General Register Office for Scotland et al. 2004). As the new designation shows, there is a systematic priority given to the family within the household. It is only in 2011, that the “hold” supplants the family with a new procedure: *“A Householder (Or joint householder) is the person resident or present at the address who: a) owns/rents the accommodation and/or is responsible for paying the household bills and expenses”* (Office for National Statistics 2013).

In France as described by Courson (1982), no precise definition of the head of the household was ever given on the bulletins or in the census instructions. Up to and including the 1975 census a ‘household head’ was designated for each household in France and either this person was self-declared or was ascribed this role at the moment of the census; theirs was the name in the first position of the household membership list. Courson suggests that the recorded household head reflected implicitly a combination of ‘traditional’ characteristics which justified his position. After the social unrest of 1968 it became socially problematic to use the notion of ‘household head’ so the 1982 French census replaced household head with ‘reference person’ that is, *“the person who without regard to gender is the oldest economically active or the oldest person in the household”* (INSEE 2013). Thus there was an attempt in France to reconfigure the language around the census household with new social trends. Despite this, because a majority of households were constituted of families, there was probably little change in the designated person, indeed, the instructions given for non-familial households continue to base criteria for identifying household head on age, activity and gender:

*S’il n’y a aucune famille dans le ménage, on retient comme personne de référence du ménage la plus âgée des personnes actives du ménage ou, s’il n’y a aucun actif dans le ménage, la personne la plus âgée du ménage. S’il y a une famille dans le ménage, on retient comme personne de référence du ménage l’homme (l’adulte de sexe masculin) dans le cas d’un couple ou la personne adulte sans conjoint dans le cas d’une famille monoparentale*<sup>20</sup>.

In the UK the structure within the household – once it has been identified – focuses on the relationships between all members captured in a household grid. In France such data are

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<sup>20</sup> Trans : If there is no family within the ‘ménage’, the reference person is set to be the oldest of the occupied persons in the household, if no one is employed in the household, the oldest. If there is a family identified in the household, the reference person is set to be the adult male when there is a couple or the single adult in case of a one parent family. Note n°52 des Résultats du recensement général de la population de 1982.

collected but not coded or exploited because understanding and representing how people live their lives is not seen as the aim of a census.

### **Institutional drivers**

Census requirements that every individual be counted once and once only, distorts the picture in both France and the UK because neither approach is very good at capturing the increasingly complex and mobile living arrangements of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Both British and French censuses rely on an apparently common unit of enumeration (*household / ménage*), the definition of which is inspired by both the UN directives and accommodated by their national statistical organisations. The interplay between the objectives of the census, the constraints and the practicalities of data collection lead to different strategies and practices in the conduct of the census between the two countries. In the previous section we reflected on potential social and practical drivers of these changes. We suggested that in E&W, priority is given to an attempt to capture “Who we are. How we live. What we do” by adapting the household definition to reflect social change, whereas in France the absence of change in the definition of the household since the 1960s suggests that there is no place for such imperative.

But how far do institutional drivers, meaning administrative pressures, also influence British statisticians in their design and use of household definitions? Is reflecting real life really as paramount as first appears, or does the other data constraints also figure in their strategies? The 2011 E&W census definition no longer includes “common housekeeping”. Is this because common housekeeping is an ambiguous term in 2011? Or, are the practicalities of using the definitions in data collection being prioritised?

*Because of the changes that we've made of our definitions are for practical reasons, that's the ... it's not because, it's not because, the way people are living is changing but that's not really why we're changing our definitions, we're changing our definitions because we have to make them useful to us to actually be able to count people, that's really been the driver (ONS Survey designers, 2011)*

Population transformations such as urbanisation and migration, and changing ways of organising domestic lives – eating meals separately, strangers sharing accommodation – certainly play a part in understanding the evolution of this definition, but also, as ONS suggest here, the dominant ‘driver’ is the need to make definitions which actually facilitate ‘counting people’. When understood against this background, the definition of the E&W household looks like a statistical unit primarily to satisfy census requirements of universal coverage without double counting, rather than one which attempts to reflect changing social reality.

On the other hand, the ‘principles’ defining the objectives of the French census are clearly imposed by law (see Law n° 2002-276 of February 27, 2002 (articles 156 to 158)): establishing the official population of each *commune* comes under the authority of the State. Particular attention is given to the equality of treatment of all municipalities across all the national territory, because of the importance of these population counts for the establishment of the electoral constituencies and the budget of each local authority

(Godinot, 2005). Clearly, the census is a legally embedded operation, under the authority of a Directorate General of the Ministry of the Economy, Finance, and Industry (INSEE):

*La collecte est déléguée aux communes sous la tutelle scientifique et le contrôle de l'Insee. C'est l'Insee qui identifie le calcul des populations légales [...] il y a des enjeux très importants pour les communes puisque les subventions allouées dépendent de la taille de la commune.*<sup>21</sup> (INSEE Civil servant, 2011)

As our interviews testify, counting people and providing the legal population counts of municipalities is the priority of the French census. Thanks to these institutional drivers, there is little flexibility, nor is there the capacity for evolution of the household definition in the census which is tied to strong legal obligations. Since INSEE must provide the municipalities' *legal population counts*, there is a strong concern about the fact that some individuals might be counted twice and an imperative to avoid this; this has driven the changes in French census data collection since 2004.

Before 2004, when the census was everywhere in a single round, two population counts were produced according to whether "double counts" were included - individuals possibly surveyed in two places (students in their hall of residences and at their parents', for example). Municipalities' legal population counts included "double counts", the total population of France was computed without "double counts". Since 2004, the census is based on an annual data collection, successively surveying all the municipal territories over a five-year period (a rolling census). Five census surveys are used to produce the census results in the middle year (2004 to 2008 for the census population of 2006). In order to better evaluate local population counts, the calculation of the legal population count also relies on fiscal data even though taxation is not individually based in France. Thus the census is not a data collection exercise in isolation trying to get a snapshot of the social situation of the country but a negotiated solution to an administrative problem.

## Discussion

We thus observe two totally different national approaches to the data collection exercise that is called a census: these approaches reflect profound political and institutional differences and have epistemological ramifications which call into question the issue of comparability of some aspects of census data across national boundaries. In countries where the census is an integral part of the administrative and legal framework those dimensions will dominate the ways in which the data are collected, classified and potentially analysed. Thus, in France, there is little pressure for the units of census data collection to reflect societal level changes in living arrangements unless they influence the 'logement'. In such circumstances where people are not encompassed within the critical administrative unit [in France the 'logement'] they will be excluded. Thus, in France because mobile housing (barges, boats and caravans) cannot be permanently ascribed to a geographically defined municipality, people living in such accommodation have been excluded from the census of ordinary households since 1968 and enumerated separately. In the UK where the

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<sup>21</sup> Trans: Data collection is now delegated to the municipalities under the scientific and legal control of Insee. Insee is in charge of the calculation of the legal population [...] a lot is at stake for the municipalities because the amount of their national subsidies rely on the municipality legal size.

census has no administrative association such people and their mobile accommodation *should* be included because they, and their housing / social needs need to be represented for planning purposes and for analytic completeness.

UN guidelines for census data collection seem to assume a lack of administrative constraints on who is included, excluded and how they organise their living arrangements: for example the UN definition (1980 p4 above) talks about homeless people living in households – but in France without a ‘logement’ such people cannot constitute a household.

Thus, worldwide, it is necessary to examine how censuses are related to national administration. The institutional embeddedness constitutes part of the explanation of the lack of adaptation to social trends in living arrangements. However there are two interpretations of the subtle changes in definition observed in British censuses: either they are motivated by the need to change the definitions in order to best fulfil the fundamental census requirements of enumerating every single person once and once only, or they are motivated by pressure to be able to undertake meaningful analysis of social trends in living arrangements. Although one might like to interpret them as the latter, the former is the more realistic endeavour and this is reinforced by the changes introduced in the 2011 census. These changes make it clear that **the priority is being able to collect the data and enumerate the absolute numbers** – not represent accurately the complex living arrangements going on behind the door; managing the “terrain”(fieldwork) to generate accurate data is paramount. Having an enumerator assisted census allows subtle definitions to be applied and changed, compared with self-administered questionnaires whether they are delivered, posted or completed on the internet.

This should not really be surprising. The census is, after all, a rather crude accounting tool. On a huge scale and undertaken very rapidly, with lots of negotiations about what questions can be included or are dropped, the census is never, and cannot provide a sophisticated analysis of complex living arrangements. This should be the role of sample surveys which have the potential to represent a much wider range of complex social realities, including multiple household affiliations.

When understood against this background, the definition of the census household looks like a statistical unit only, rather than one which reflects reality. However, if, as in E&W, censuses move away from being administered or facilitated by trained enumerators towards self-completion by individuals, not surprisingly household definitions need to relate relatively closely to what people filling in the questionnaire themselves recognise as such in order to get relatively complete data. Censuses, and definitions associated with them, must navigate this complexity. The negotiation of this tension, slowly over the past 50 years, against a background of rapid socio-economic and demographic change in England and Wales is reflected in these household definitions.

Constrained by its administrative role and self completion the overall French definition of the census household has not altered significantly over the past 50 years, nevertheless there are subtle changes at the margins reflecting social change: the move from household head to reference person and insertion of first “residence principale” (1968) and then “residence habituelle” (2003). However the major changes have been implemented not for the census

but for household surveys – which are a much more powerful and sensitive tool for representing social life, living arrangements and transformations therein

Given that, according to a high level INSEE civil servant “*la définition du recensement est artificielle*”<sup>22</sup> and “*dans le recensement on ne peut pas [modifier les modes de comptage] à cause de ces contraintes sur la définition de la population légale*”<sup>23</sup>, the effort of introducing changes to take into account individuals who belong to several household or individuals co-residing but having separate budgets, INSEE introduced another household definition which is to be used in all household surveys but not the census. It is based on *unités de vie*, [living units] whose members can co-reside or be spread over several dwellings, at the same time one dwelling may house several *unités de vie*. Members of the same *unité de vie* share living expenses together. They were introduced to identify the economic decisional node within the dwellings. It is interesting to note that INSEE being the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies only envisaged the budget-sharing aspect of the living arrangements (the pure economic terms of it) suggested by the UN definition and not at all the meal-sharing or “cooking-pot” side of it, long adopted by the UK census designers, although one could argue that the meal sharing is, in fact, a proxy for the economic unit of consumption. Distinguishing the *unités de vie* proves cumbersome to collect, subject to enumerators’ perceptions and not absolutely obvious to respondents, as our interviews both of INSEE interviewers and survey designers show. Nevertheless they then become a unit that moves much closer to the household that the British census – and British sample surveys - are trying to capture.

## Conclusion

Do these differences matter? In this paper we have argued that the different ways in which E&W and France collect their household level data in censuses is influenced by a number of factors. On the one hand there are social factors; small changes in the organisation of social life which have compelled the English household definition to change very subtly each census round. The social, practical, and institutional drivers influence not only the way that the census is collected in both countries but also what the fundamental social unit enumerated will consist of. Nevertheless, in both countries the principal aim of the census is a total count of the population and the ability to disaggregate these counts down to local levels. Ultimately the constraints generated by such an enterprise on the potential data are considerable: as a huge exercise undertaken partly by briefly trained temporary workers detailed subtleties cannot be introduced. Furthermore the principal constraint of avoiding double counting inevitably means that major compromises have to be made in the ability of the data to represent contemporary realities. Ultimately the aim of a total enumeration is probably achieved – maybe more accurately for France than the UK because of the triangulation of a number of data sources.

Those who are excluded from the UK census are probably not omitted because of the nuances of household definitions but because either they want to remain invisible or they actually are socially invisible and definitional changes are not going to increase contact with, and data from, such people. Why else does it matter? In recent years, moves towards the

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<sup>22</sup> Trans: The census definition is artificial

<sup>23</sup> Trans: In the census we cannot [modify the modes of enumeration] because of the constraints around the definition of the legal population

harmonisation of statistical concepts across the EU area have gained momentum. The aim of harmonisation is to produce 'better' data which are reliable and comparable (THESIM 2006). This harmonisation operates primarily at the level of international sample surveys rather than the census. The advantages of harmonisation are well recognised (Keuning and Morais ; Poulain, Perrin et al. 2006) in terms of determining national and international policy concerning for instance, migration, the transfer of information, and health initiatives. The census however is a data collection tool that is, and probably should remain, outside this harmonisation approach. Ultimately the practical constraints of a census – enumerating people once and once only, and then in some cases the administrative constraints mean that it is ultimately an accounting tool rather than a tool for really understanding social life. People do not organise their lives in ways that are easily captured in one place at one time – thus the census is, by its very nature, an artificial attempt at representing society.

We suggest that household definitions are and always will be imperfect and they will be more imperfect in the census than in surveys. Given the double obligation of being a useable meaningful term in census collection to data analysts *and* to people filling in the census form, the census household definition whether in E&W or in France will not ever be able to catch all social changes in the way household life is organised.

DRAFT

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