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The Visible Minority Category and Urban Analysis

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Abstract: Race and ethnicity are slippery concepts. In this paper, I examine the implications of using fixed racial and ethnic categories in urban analysis. I am especially concerned with the concept of “visible minority” as an ontological category for measuring residential segregation in Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver. The paper uses quantitative data and hypothesis testing to expose problems of racial classification. The findings reveal limitations of applying a universal and essentialist conception of visible minority in urban analysis. I also discuss political implications of using this category.

Keywords: Census of Canada, visible minorities, residential segregation, racial discourse.

Introduction

Race and ethnicity are slippery concepts. They are constructed through complex and interlocking processes of identification and differentiation. Yet, in everyday usage, notions of race and ethnicity are commonly accepted as ontological facts. In this paper, I take a critical position towards racial and ethnic categories and follow a theoretical perspective, which suggests that ethnic and racial categories are cultural and ideological creations (Boyd et al. 2000, Hiebert 2000, Kobayashi 1993, Mitchell 1993, Smith 1989). Recognizing the cultural and ideological nature of racial and ethnic representations, I examine the implications of using fixed racial and ethnic categories in urban analysis.

Of particular concern is the concept of “visible minority” as an ontological category for measuring residential segregation in Canadian cities. Research on segregation typically uses census data and often endorses the visible minority category as an analytical tool for examining residential patterns of social groups (Archambault et al. 1999, Chard and Renaud 1999, Doucet 1999, Hiebert 1999). Although most urban research examines the visible minority category in conjunction with other ethnic characteristics, I focus in particular on the rationale for using “visible” distinctness as an analytical category. Some researchers (examining the contexts of the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia) have suggested that discourses of race—and precisely the uncritical adoption of racial categories such as visible minority—create and re-enforce hegemonic systems of exclusion and domination (Hage 1998, Omi and Winant 1986, Steinberg 1981).

In relation to these claims that racial discourse structures systems of hegemony, my aim in this paper is rather modest. I merely examine the relationship between racial representation and the application of racial categories in urban research. My aim is not so much to produce groundbreaking empirical findings of the residential distribution of racial minorities in Canadian cities as it is to expose the problematic nature of racial categorization in the context of urban analysis. Thus, I participate in a wider project of deconstructing racial discourse in Canada.

Few quantitative studies engage with the critical literature on the social construction of race. The contribution of this paper is that it juxtaposes empirical results from a statistical analysis of racial residential patterns against a theoretical perspective of the social construction of racial categories. Thereby I examine the limitations of applying the visible minority category to urban analysis.¹ The findings reveal important limitations of applying universal and essentialist conceptions of visible minority to urban analysis. Researchers and policy makers need to recognize these limitations. I also discuss political implications of using the visible minority category.

Background

Visible Minorities in the Census

The 1996 Canadian Census featured for the first time a visible minority category. This category was modelled after the Canadian Employment Equity Act of 1986, which defines visible minorities as non-Caucasian, non-white and non-Aboriginal peoples (Boyd et al. 2000). In 1987, Balakrishnan and Kralt reported that the "... Secretary of State for Multiculturalism has tentatively defined ten groups as visible minorities, including Blacks, Indo-Pakistanis, Chinese, Indo-Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Ethnic Filipinos, Pacific Islanders, Lebanese, and Arabic (p.138-9)." A decade later, the 1996 Census designates Arab/West Asian, Black, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Latin American, South Asian, Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander as visible minorities. According to the Employment Equity Act, the visible minority category identifies a target population for a public policy goal of "treating persons in the same way but [that] also requires special measures and the accommodation of differences."

The wording of the Employment Equity Act suggests that the rationale for the visible minority variable is to identify persons who experience racial discrimination. Thus, the purpose is not to delineate self-assessed groups, which form around characteristics such as language, ancestry, tradition, class and religion, but rather to respond to an existing discourse of race that stigmatizes people on the basis of biological attributes, i.e. phenotype and body

¹The paper can also be seen as an internal critique of the positivist research tradition: I use quantitative data and a strategy of hypothesis testing—a typically positivist approach—to expose internal problems of racial classification.

shape (Kobayashi and Peake 1994, Sibley 1995, Wetherell and Potter 1992). This particular strategy of compensating for racial injustice, however, is problematic because it essentializes race and endorses a racial ideology that affirms biology as a legitimate scheme of classification. This ideology benchmarks the Caucasian (i.e. European-origin) population as the “invisible mainstream,” and positions the non-European population as the marked outsider.

Visible Minority as Political Project

Kobayashi (1993) uses the term “statistexts” to describe census variables which truncate multi-dimensional attributes of a social group to a statistically measurable fact. In the context of the creation of statistexts, she recognizes that “the statistician faces the impossible task of representing a myriad of interpretations with a single fact or figure (p.514)” and “any attempt at statistical representation is political at the core ... [and] an ideological product ... (p.513).” For instance, in Canada, Ethiopian immigrants are commonly designated as “Black,” although this category reduces complex cultural identities to a singular denominator, which, for Ethiopians themselves, may be meaningless. Kobayashi (1993: 519) concludes: “The term ‘Black’ is, therefore, a political and ideological statistext. No matter in which of the political contexts it is used, it re-inscribes the notion of “race” as a legitimate means of distinguishing human beings.”²

As a legacy of colonialism, the racial distinction between the European-origin population and non-Europeans is common in Western settler countries like Canada or Australia (Ang and Stratton 1996, Boyd et al. 2000, Hage 1998). Following Kobayashi’s (1993) line of argument, the particular idea of identifying visible minorities in the 1996 Canadian census, and of separating out non-European residents based on their biological differences and descent, is the product of a public debate of immigration and multiculturalism policy. Abu-Laban (1998), reflecting on the immigration and multicultural discourse of the 1980s and 1990s, suggests that the political rhetoric of multiculturalism was aimed specifically at ethnocultural and racial minority groups while European-origin

² My interest in this paper focuses on the racial category of visible minority, although I must note that the Canadian census contains a number of questions that allow for classifying people by language, place of birth, citizenship, ethnic origin, etc.

Canadians were perceived as the unmarked norm. The visible minority category is designed to identify population groups in Canada that deviate from this norm (also Bissoondath 1994).

Many people identified as visible minorities indeed favour this category because it can facilitate political solidarity and be used to counteract racial discrimination, as originally intended by the Canadian Employment Equity Act. Nevertheless, this racial platform for resistance is only mobilized in reaction to the experience of discrimination—which results from the existence of racial stereotypes in the first place (Kelly 1996, Smith 1989). Thus, racial identities are ultimately imposed identities; they are not self-defined identities (Hiebert 2000). The imposed nature of the visible minority category is illustrated by Mukherjee (quoted in Ray 1998: 27), who quotes a critic of racialization:

In an official Green paper on Immigration and Population I learn that I'm something called a 'visible minority' from a 'non-traditional area of immigration' who calls into question the 'absorptive capacity' of Canada. ... I cannot describe the agony and the betrayal one feels, hearing oneself spoken of by one's own country as being somehow exotic in nature ...

Although many people benefit from the anti-discrimination measures extended to visible minorities, the adoption of the visible minority variable in the census also reinforces and legitimizes imposed racial identities.

If visible minorities are statistical texts, reflecting imposed categories of racialization, then the only utility of visible minority categories lies in measuring racial discrimination. Since visible minorities are not social groups that reflect self-identified communities, the category is not suitable to examine processes that relate to self-representation and internal community formation. Other categories should be more appropriate to investigate such processes.

Race and Segregation

Racial discourse has material consequences in the form of residential segregation. Residential segregation by race is a common phenomenon in the United States, Britain, and Canada where people are categorized by their colour (Chard and Renaud 1999, Kaplan and Holloway 1998, Peach 1996). Much of the research on racial residential segregation follows the tradition of the Chicago School (Burgess 1925, Park 1926) and embraces essentialist conceptions of race in a rather uncritical manner. However, other research by Smith (1989),

for instance, demonstrates in a British context that the social construction of ethnic and racial categories translates into housing market inequalities for 'Blacks.' In Canada, Anderson (1991) shows how a discourse of race embeds social and political processes that have segregated the 'Chinese' population of Vancouver.

But racial differentiation is not a one-directional process causing residential segregation. Rather, the symbolic representation of a neighbourhood and the meaning of race are recursively interrelated. Ley (1995), for instance, suggests that racial identity in the Kerrisdale community in Vancouver is constructed within and through a political confrontation between long-term residents, struggling to preserve the 'English' appearance of their neighbourhood, and Chinese immigrants, demanding their rights to build houses according to non-European aesthetic standards. The rhetoric of race is entangled with the cultural representation of neighbourhood and residence.

Discourses of race are undeniably tied to processes of residential segregation (Anderson 1991, Smith 1989). The discourse of race is not located outside of residential space; and racial categories *produce* residential space as much as they *are produced* through it (Ley 1995). Processes that led to the adoption of a visible minority category in the Canadian Census may also produce residential segregation. It is therefore feasible to consider both the visible minority category and residential segregation as elements of a wider discourse of race.

Geographical Contingencies

Race is a local product. The cultural meaning of race and visible minority are produced and "naturalised" inside the context of social and political space (Kobayashi and Peake 1994, Smith 1989). While "The West" comprises a massive, transnational scale across which a discourse of orientalism has produced racial categories, Canada defines a national scale on which racial categories are constructed differently than, say, in the United States, the United Kingdom or Australia. The city provides a third, more-finely grained scale on which racial identities are produced. The Census category "visible minority," however, fixes racial identity across Canada and remains insensitive to inter-metropolitan differences of racial identity.

Flows of non-European immigration have shaped the contexts in which racial discourse is situated in Canadian cities. In 1998, 71.2 percent of all immigrants intended to settle in Toronto, Vancouver or Montréal (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 1999). But these cities were the destinations for different immigrant groups and entry classes (Ley 1999). Ray (1998: 36), examining Montréal and Toronto, finds that “the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of immigrants speaks against a notion of an overarching common ‘immigrant experience’ both within and between Toronto and Montréal.” In a case study of Vancouver, Mitchell (1993) documents how a group of recent Hong Kong Chinese immigrants and local economic elites were able to manipulate the meaning of race and align the race discourse with their interest in making large capital investments in the city. It is unlikely that this process, and the resulting connotation of “Chinese,” is replicated in Toronto or Montréal.

Although Chinatowns exist in many North American cities, Anderson (1991) shows that over the last 125 years the shifting racial identity of Vancouver’s Chinatown and the meaning of being Chinese has been embedded in the political and social context of Vancouver. Anderson also demonstrates that the residential segregation of Chinese people is linked to these place-particular contingencies. In a contemporary Vancouver context, Ley (1995) argues for a similar connection between a local discourse of race and urban form.

Due to the distinct demographic composition of cities, different historical and political contexts, as well as varying public reaction towards minorities, racial identities are unlikely to be uniform across Canada. Subsequently, processes of housing market exclusion and racial residential segregation probably differ in nature between Canadian cities as they do across major American cities (Abu-Lughod 1999).

Research Design

The empirical section of this paper examines the utility of the visible minority category in the 1996 census for the analysis of residential segregation in Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver. It investigates three hypotheses derived from the literature reviewed above:

Working Hypotheses

1) Ornstein (2000) recently demonstrated that aggregated racial categories, such as visible minorities, “conceal huge variations in the socio-economic condition of [ethnic] groups (p.3).” Similarly, I recognise that visible minority is an imposed statistext, which glosses over complex cultural identities linked to processes of residential segregation. Most research, which uses the overarching visible minority category, also examines ethnic subcategories. However, the logic for including the visible minority category in the census is the assumption that processes of discrimination apply categorically to people who are visibly distinct from the European-origin population. According to this logic, being a visible minority makes a difference regarding residential segregation because of discrimination against non-European origin people. It does not capture the impacts of internal group identity or socio-economic group characteristics. I expect that trends of segregation are much better discernible for finer-grained dimensions of cultural identity, such as ancestry, than for visible minorities as a whole. The first hypothesis therefore is:

Residential segregation is not accurately captured by a single visible minority category. Instead, residential segregation varies widely between cultural subgroups aggregated under the rubric “visible minority.”

2) However, if the visible minority category and residential segregation are both products of a wider process of racialization, then the visible minority category could be used to measure the material manifestation of the race discourse. An opposing second hypothesis therefore is:

Processes of racialization, based on visible markers, have produced a general trend of residential segregation in the housing market, which affects all visible minorities alike. Therefore, common experiences of residential segregation exist for visible minorities.

3) If the discourse of race is structured around historical, social and cultural contexts particular to different cities across Canada, then a spatially fixed census category “visible minority” does not capture the city-contingent nature of residential segregation. A third hypothesis is:

Patterns of residential segregation, measured by the visible minority category, are not uniform across Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver.

Data and Method

The analysis uses census-tract level data from the user summary tapes for the 1996 Census of Population (Statistics Canada 1999). I use the single-response ethnic origin and the visible minority variables. The ethnic origin variable is a self-assessed variable whereby respondents were not limited to pre-designed categories but filled out up to four write-in spaces. However, the census questionnaire provided 24 example categories based on the results of choices made in the previous census. The ethnic origin variable provided information on French, British and Canadian reference groups. In contrast to the self-assessed ethnic origin variable, visible minority information was collected via a mark-in question on the census form with pre-designed categories. The actual question asked: “Is this person...?” followed by ten categories, including “other,” and the opportunity to choose more than one. The analysis is limited to the Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver CMAs. Table 1 summarizes the census data used in the analysis.

Table 1: Visible Minorities and Reference Groups, 1996

	Montréal	Toronto	Vancouver
Number of Census Tracts	756	804	298
Total Population	3287265	4229620	1813840
Canadian	964445	311500	123175
White, British*	93895	453150	222305
White, French**	796345	34475	18685
Total Visible Minority	401020	1336485	564475
Black	121995	274425	16255
South Asian	45980	329260	120005
Chinese	45760	334540	278895
Korean	3425	28255	17000
Japanese	2285	16755	21780
Southeast Asian	37290	46240	20305
Filipino	14270	98790	40530
Arab/West Asian	73670	71840	18000
Latin American	46370	61320	13660
Visible Minority, n.i.e.	3330	45115	6675

* White, British = British+Irish+Scottish+English

**White, French = French+Quebecois

Spatial segregation is measured through the city-wide index of dissimilarity (D), an index commonly used to measure residential separation resulting from processes of racialization (Kaplan and Holloway 1998). D is computed as follows:

$$D_{xy} = .5 * \sum |(x_i/X) - (y_i/Y)|$$

Where: x_i = the number of visible minorities in tract I; X = the total number of minorities in the CMA; y_i = the number of the reference group y in tract i; Y = the total number of reference group y in the CMA.

The index of dissimilarity assesses the residential distribution of a group relative to the distribution of the French, British and Canadian categories.³ To assess the robustness of the indices, separate indices were computed with different reference groups. The first set of indices is based on the French population as reference group in Montréal, and the British population in Toronto and Vancouver. Two other sets of indices were computed on the basis of pooled French and British populations and residents who identified themselves as “Canadian” in the census.⁴

Results and Interpretation

Results

Table 2 displays the dissimilarity indices for Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver. The comparison between reference groups indicates that the results are robust for all three groups selected to represent the unmarked non-visible minority population. Generally, D values of less than .3 indicate a low degree of segregation; values between .3 and .6 suggest a moderate degree of segregation; and values above .6 express a high degree of residential segregation between groups.

³ An issue is that D is sensitive to group size. If population sizes are very small relative to the number of census tracts, then the D value tends to exaggerate the degree of segregation (Kaplan and Holloway 1998). If group sizes are large, however, I am able to make comparisons between D values for different groups.

⁴ The category “Canadian” is controversial. Especially in Montréal it was used as a political option to circumvent ethnic self-classification, and, by some, to assert national identity. However, since the visible minority category is also a political construct (see above), the Canadian category provides an interesting comparison to the French and British reference groups.

Table 2: Dissimilarity Indices, 1996

Reference Group	Montréal			Toronto			Vancouver		
	French	French & British	Canadian	British	French & British	Canadian	British	French & British	Canadian
Total Visible Minority	.455	.450	.458	.391	.390	.384	.377	.376	.381
Black	.561	.546	.586	.499	.494	.483	.379	.371	.391
South Asian	.736	.710	.767	.533	.530	.519	.542	.540	.514
Chinese	.635	.612	.678	.599	.595	.602	.543	.542	.574
Korean	.832	.815	.865	.576	.573	.597	.449	.447	.476
Japanese	.859	.840	.877	.447	.444	.481	.359	.358	.422
Southeast Asian	.602	.597	.630	.628	.624	.617	.613	.608	.594
Filipino	.815	.791	.837	.505	.502	.504	.443	.438	.441
Arab/West Asian	.628	.607	.671	.525	.520	.537	.424	.421	.480
Latin American	.572	.566	.607	.562	.557	.560	.452	.443	.457
Visible Minority, n.i.e.	.820	.802	.825	.538	.535	.520	.568	.563	.537

Table 3: Dissimilarity Indices for Blacks, 1996

Reference Group	n	Montréal			n	Toronto			n	Vancouver		
		French	French & British	Canadian		British	French & British	Canadian		British	French & British	Canadian
Black	121995	.561	.546	.586	274425	.499	.494	.483	16255	.379	.371	.391
African	18510	.671	.654	.701	66680	.605	.602	.599	5955	.530	.524	.551
Caribbean	82440	.592	.580	.608	166235	.514	.510	.492	3880	.496	.489	.490

In all three cities, visible minorities as a whole experience a moderate degree of segregation. In almost all instances, the degree of segregation is lower for the combined visible minority category than for the individual groups, which comprise this category. This statistical effect is no surprise and reflects the smaller sizes of the disaggregated ethnic groups. However, the drop in D value is not uniform for all subgroups. While the D values for the small Korean and Japanese groups in Montréal are almost twice as large as the overall index for visible minorities in this city, another small group, Japanese in Vancouver, has even lower levels of segregation than visible minorities as a whole.

Taking group sizes into account, there remains a strong variability of segregation levels between subgroups. Blacks in Montréal, for instance, have D values of .548-.586, but the also sizeable South Asian group has values of .710-.767. In Toronto, the smallest group, Japanese, has the lowest indices of .444-.481, while Southeast Asians with almost 20 times the group size of the Japanese have higher values of .617-.628. Similarly, in Vancouver, Japanese have D values of .358-.422 and Southeast Asians of .594-.613, although both groups are roughly the same size.

There is also considerable variability between the three cities. Visible minorities are most segregated in Montréal and least in Vancouver. Overall the values for subgroups are also higher in Montréal than in the other two cities. But inter-city differences become most dramatic when individual subgroups are compared between cities. Japanese, for instance, are the most segregated group in Montréal and the least segregated group in Toronto and Vancouver (although they are among the smaller groups in all three cities).

Interpretation

The results of Table 2 can be interpreted in light of the three hypotheses established earlier. The first hypothesis stated that cultural subgroups are better units for measuring segregation than the aggregate visible minority category. This hypothesis is generally supported: levels of segregation vary widely between subgroups, even when group sizes are accounted for. The aggregate visible minority category presents a singular statistext, which does not capture the variability between subgroups. Being represented as a visible minority distorts the residential experience among members of any of the subgroups.

However, the subcategories are statistical texts themselves. “Black,” for instance, does not represent a coherent cultural group but can refer, for instance, to Ethiopians (consisting of Tigrayans, Eritrians, Oromo and other groups), Jamaicans or African Americans (Kobayashi 1993). Other categories, such as South Asian, Chinese, Southeast Asian, Arab/West Asian, and Latin American, are equally ambiguous. As an experiment, I computed the dissimilarity indices for people of African and Caribbean origin (Table 3). Many Blacks in Canada come from these two destinations. As expected due to smaller group size, the dissimilarity indices for both African and Caribbean categories are higher than that for the overarching Black category (despite the possibility that non-Blacks of African and Caribbean origins would reduce the magnitude of the dissimilarity index). However, I also computed the dissimilarity indices *between* Africans and Caribbeans (not shown in Table 3), and received values of .505 for Montréal, .341 for Toronto and .541 for Vancouver. The two groups, although both classified Black, are almost as segregated from each other as from the French, British or Canadian groups.¹ Thus, more finely grained measures of cultural identity tend to have greater explanatory power regarding residential segregation than the binary statistical texts of visible minority.

Nevertheless, there is a categorical trend of segregation, which applies for visible minorities in general. All visible minorities combined are moderately segregated from the French, British or Canadian reference groups. To examine how robust this finding of general racial segregation is, I also computed dissimilarity indices for all visible minorities and all non-visible minorities as a combined reference group. The results revealed D values of .475 for Montréal, .437 for Toronto and .404 for Vancouver. Thus, visible minorities remain moderately segregated from non-visible minorities. Apparently, the visible minority category does capture a wider process of racial segregation, which supports hypothesis two.

¹ I would expect similar differences within the Chinese group. For instance, Chinese immigration to Vancouver in 1996 consisted of 12,269 people from Hong Kong, 9,238 people from Taiwan and 4,028 people from the People’s Republic (Citizenship and Immigration, 1999). In a recent debate on the illegal arrival of Chinese refugee claimants, Vancouver’s established Chinese community of mainly Hong Kong and Taiwanese business-class immigrants openly distanced itself from the mainland Chinese “queue-jumpers” from the Fujian province (Ian Mulgrew. ‘Why all this anger and venom about fewer than 450 immigrants?’ *Vancouver Sun* 2 September, 1999). Both groups differ in socio-economic status, circumstances of immigration and region of origin; they do not share ethnic solidarity and probably would not seek residential proximity (see Hiebert 1999).

However, hypothesis two cannot be blindly accepted. While a general process of racialization may affect “different looking” people to a degree, there is no common visible minority experience. If this was the case, then I would expect that visible minority subgroups are evenly distributed *among each other*; i.e. if visible distinction from the European-origin population is the main source of segregation, then differences *between* the visible minority groups should have less influence on segregation. To investigate this issue, I computed the dissimilarity indices for each visible minority subgroup in reference to the other subgroups. Tables 4, 5 and 6 display the results for Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver. All dissimilarity indices in all three cities are larger than .3, implying at least moderate degrees of segregation between visible minority subgroups. In Montréal, segregation between some subgroups is extreme with indices above .8, although these high values tend to involve small groups. Clearly, there is no common residential experience for visible minorities. This finding confirms existing research indicating that ethnic segregation also derives from historical contingencies, housing market factors and group preferences (Hiebert 1999, Ray 1998). Nevertheless, the subgroups are generally less segregated relative to the other visible minority groups combined (Total Visible Minority), than relative to the French, British, or Canadian population (i.e. the indices in the first column of Table 4, 5 and 6 are generally lower than the corresponding indices in Table 2). Thus, one communality among visible minority subgroups is that they are even more segregated from British, French and Canadian groups than from other visible minorities.

Table 4: Dissimilarity Indices Between Groups, Montréal, 1996

Reference Group	Total Visible Minority*	Black	South Asian	Chinese	Korean	Japanese	Southeast Asian	Filipino	Arab/West Asian	Latin American	Visible Minority, n.i.e.
Total Visible Minority	.000										
Black	.386	.000									
South Asian	.381	.544	.000								
Chinese	.439	.549	.512	.000							
Korean	.775	.828	.798	.755	.000						
Japanese	.776	.825	.745	.730	.707	.000					
Southeast Asian	.383	.487	.527	.534	.841	.838	.000				
Filipino	.603	.683	.569	.652	.791	.799	.686	.000			
Arab/West Asian	.345	.509	.529	.516	.766	.737	.574	.690	.000		
Latin American	.351	.394	.582	.558	.855	.857	.459	.758	.547	.000	
Visible Minority, n.i.e.	.674	.697	.608	.697	.810	.792	.770	.751	.735	.757	.000

* Total Visible Minority minus subgroup.

Table 5: Dissimilarity Indices Between Groups, Toronto, 1996

Reference Group	Total Visible Minority*	Black	South Asian	Chinese	Korean	Japanese	Southeast Asian	Filipino	Arab/West Asian	Latin American	Visible Minority, n.i.e.
Total Visible Minority	.000										
Black	.298	.000									
South Asian	.234	.303	.000								
Chinese	.499	.555	.527	.000							
Korean	.486	.566	.560	.588	.000						
Japanese	.499	.570	.580	.553	.571	.000					
Southeast Asian	.484	.495	.563	.650	.669	.667	.000				
Filipino	.328	.396	.369	.541	.521	.545	.574	.000			
Arab/West Asian	.351	.439	.442	.499	.484	.544	.606	.460	.000		
Latin American	.415	.384	.489	.648	.592	.617	.443	.505	.521	.000	
Visible Minority, n.i.e.	.342	.313	.322	.591	.601	.615	.522	.436	.507	.463	.000

* Total Visible Minority minus subgroup.

Table 6: Dissimilarity Indices Between Groups, Vancouver, 1996

Reference Group	Total Visible Minority*	Black	South Asian	Chinese	Korean	Japanese	Southeast Asian	Filipino	Arab/West Asian	Latin American	Visible Minority, n.i.e.
Total Visible Minority	.000										
Black	.392	.000									
South Asian	.389	.518	.000								
Chinese	.406	.512	.559	.000							
Korean	.480	.462	.623	.523	.000						
Japanese	.366	.423	.584	.411	.455	.000					
Southeast Asian	.419	.538	.543	.475	.684	.617	.000				
Filipino	.250	.371	.430	.381	.542	.437	.395	.000			
Arab/West Asian	.473	.435	.624	.569	.463	.454	.679	.505	.000		
Latin American	.346	.359	.523	.439	.535	.468	.456	.365	.510	.000	
Visible Minority, n.i.e.	.431	.541	.414	.543	.625	.572	.539	.450	.633	.475	.000

* Total Visible Minority minus subgroup.

The third hypothesis, stating that patterns of residential segregation among visible minorities differ between cities, is also supported. Visible minorities are more segregated from the French, British and Canadian groups in Montréal than in Toronto or Vancouver. The indices for Blacks provide an example in which city-particular constructions of race are a plausible explanation for different levels of segregation. Arguably the most “visibly distinct” group, Blacks are expected to experience high levels of housing market exclusion throughout Canada. Accordingly, the dissimilarity indices for Blacks in Montréal are above .5, and in Toronto they are somewhat lower as expected due to larger group size. In Vancouver, however, where Blacks are a relatively small group, the dissimilarity indices are unexpectedly small. Apparently, being Black has a different housing market effect in Vancouver than in the other two cities. The problematic nature of a Canadian-wide racialization scheme is also evident in the case of Japanese. Although Japanese are among the smallest groups in all three cities, they are the most segregated group in Montréal, but one of the least segregated in Vancouver (Table 2). Between visible minority subgroups notable differences also emerge between cities. The dissimilarity index between Filipinos and Latin Americans, for instance, is .758 in Montréal, .505 in Toronto and only .365 in Vancouver (Tables 4, 5 and 6). The universal visible minority classification scheme has only limited explanatory power regarding residential segregation in different urban contexts across Canada.

Discussion

There are three points of discussion emerging from this research. First, the visible minority variable in the 1996 Canadian census is a reductionist representation of social groups. Ornstein (2000) has already illustrated some limitations of the ethnic and visible minority variables in the Canadian census. My aim was to demonstrate the particular limitation of the visible minority category as a meaningful measure for residential segregation. An issue is that ethnic groups differ vastly in respect to language use, occupational characteristics, socio-economic status and period of immigration, all of which are related to residential segregation (Hiebert 1999, Ley 1999, Ray 1998). Aggregating some groups under the umbrella of visible minority glosses over these differences. Even subcategories, such as Black, consist of smaller groups, such as African and Caribbean, which do not share the same residential space.

Detailed ethnic categories, although problematic themselves, are more suitable for urban analysis than the broader visible minority classification.

Second, the visible minority category and its subcategories are statistical texts reflecting cultural and ideological processes of racial representation. But because similar processes of racialization may also shape urban residential patterns, the visible minority category retains some analytical value. The analysis above revealed that visible minority subgroups are generally more segregated from British, French and Canadian groups than from each other, and that visible minorities are generally segregated from non-visible minorities. This finding suggests that processes of racialization are operating in the housing market. A remaining question, however, is whether the visible minority category can *objectively* measure racial discrimination in the housing market. The visible minority category was initially created in response to racial discrimination but now participates in the discourse of race. It re-enforces the idea that social boundaries around biological attributes of skin colour are ontological facts and thereby fuels processes of racialization. Quantitative analysis, however, does not take into account the nature and feedback loops of racial discourse.

Third, a spatially fixed conception of visible minority, as applied in the census, cannot capture the place-contingent nature of racial representation and segregation. Blacks and Japanese, for instance, experience different degrees of segregation in Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver. One interpretation is that the meaning of being Black or Japanese differs between the contexts of the three cities. But universal visible minority and ethnic categories imply uniform meanings across Canada. These categories are not suited for teasing out place-contingent meanings of ethnicity and race. In addition, other factors, such as the local availability of rental housing, the location of support facilities, or timing of settlement, influence the differences in segregation between the cities. Unfortunately, the data and method of analysis used in this paper do not account for these factors.

Despite these limitations, the visible minority category can be of value. For one, the reinforcement of racial identities and their adoption into the census can be an important political tactic for counteracting racial discrimination in the housing market (or in the workplace, as intended by the Employment Equity Act). In addition, this form of strategic essentialism is politically more effective if racial and ethnic identities are negotiated on the

national rather than the local level, even though it may result in the creation of nation-wide statistics. Social scientists and policy makers, however, must recognise that seemingly fixed racial and ethnic identities are indeed political constructs. I am not suggesting that existing research using visible minority categories is invalid. Rather, I want to urge caution against blindly accepting visible minority categories as ontological facts. Thus, the core conclusion from this paper is that the visible minority category and its subcategories can be effective tools for political advocacy, but explanatory urban analysis must acknowledge the limitations of this classification scheme.

A future research agenda might focus on the relationship between the discursive production of racial and ethnic categories used in the census and the social and spatial structuring of cities. In addition, further comparative research is needed to examine city-particular constructions of racial and ethnic identity in Canada.

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