

## RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

### MIS-SPECIFICATION OF SERVANT OCCUPATIONS IN THE 1851 CENSUS: A PROBLEM REVISITED

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The recent re-publication of 25 papers from *Local Population Studies*, concerned with various aspects of the study of local communities in the Victorian census books, will hopefully encourage renewed interest in comparing similar behaviour in different parts of the country by use of the census enumerators' books.<sup>1</sup> It should also remind us of the importance of understanding the procedures through which the personal and family situations of individuals were transformed into the statistics of the published volumes, mediated as these were by the responses of individual householders, and by the activities of the enumerators, registrars, superintendent registrars, and the central Census Office staff. This short paper will hopefully act as a stimulus to further research on both these fronts.

In a paper originally published in *LPS* in 1982, and included in a slightly updated form in the recent volume, Higgs drew attention to the problem faced, both by the census authorities and by those using the CEBs today, when men and women were listed with domestic service occupational titles in the column headed 'Rank, Profession or Occupation' but as something other than 'servant' in the column 'Relation to Head of Family'.<sup>2</sup> In Higgs's one in four sample from the CEBs for Rochdale in 1851, he found that 40 per cent of females aged twenty and over with 'servant' occupational titles did not have 'service' relationships to the head of their household. The inconsistency was especially frequent among what he calls 'General servants' (27 per cent of whom were not recorded with a 'servant' relationship), 'Housemaids' (half were inconsistent) and, above all, among 'Housekeepers', where 85 per cent had a non-servant relationship, more than a third being reported as heads of households and more than another fifth being the wives of heads. In some ways even more disturbing was Higgs's suggestion that the published census figures for Rochdale for 1851 appeared to have included all these 'familial housekeepers' as domestic servants, thus markedly over-reporting the numbers in service in the town. The same problem of housekeeper recording recurred in the CEBs for 1861 and 1871, but at these censuses the procedures in the Census Office seemed to have changed, implying that in some way the checkers were rectifying what Higgs neatly calls this 'mis-specification of servant occupations'.

#### **An England and Wales perspective**

How typical was Rochdale? And are there any further clues in the 1851 returns that may point to how this problem may have been handled in 1861 and thereafter? This paper seeks to throw some light on this issue, using data for

England and Wales from the National Sample from the 1851 Census of Great Britain.<sup>3</sup> The National Sample comprises the total population of two per cent of all 'settlements' with populations of less than 2,000 (the 'rural' sample), and every fiftieth enumeration book from the remainder of the country (the 'non-rural' sample). The complete data set contains more than 400,000 people, but the subset used here consists of three separate 2.5 per cent systematic subsamples from the rural sample and six separate 2.5 per cent subsamples from the non-rural sample; where national estimates of percentages are provided, the rural sample has been double-weighted, but the numbers of cases shown in the tables are the unweighted figures. The analysis is confined to female servants in 'domestic service' occupations, thus excluding such groups as dairymaids, farm servants, laundresses and nurses. Removing those servants who were in institutions, or whose occupational title included supplementary information such as 'Pauper', 'Formerly', or 'Out of place', left the 2,114 girls and women whose occupation titles are summarised in the first column of Table 1.

The main body of Table 1 shows how these 2,114 'servants' were described in the relationship column of the CEBs. In all, the population equivalent of 72.5 per cent were designated as 'servants' of some kind, and another 6.1 per cent had either no entry or were recorded, potentially quite 'correctly', as lodgers or visitors. As in Higgs's work, there were considerable differences in relationships between the different categories of 'servant', but there were two groups that were especially likely not to have a 'servant' designation. One was the substantial number of persons who were given simply the designation 'Domestic' or 'Dom'. Only a maximum of 12.5 per cent of this group appear to have had anything approaching a 'purely open market' relationship to their head of household, and it seems very likely that this designation was in general used simply to describe a person primarily responsible for housework activity—and that the census checkers tabulated it as such. The other group where non-servant relationships were in a majority is 'Housekeepers', though the figure is somewhat below that recorded by Higgs in Rochdale. When these two groups are set aside, 81 per cent of the population with service occupational titles had relationships to the household head as 'servants', the major remaining exceptions being the considerable numbers of daughters who are recorded as 'Servant', 'General servant' or 'Domestic servant'.

### **A regional and local view**

The problem identified by Higgs for Rochdale thus also appears in 1851 at the national level, but it occurs at a markedly lower frequency. Moreover, when its occurrence is examined at a regional level, a clear pattern seems to emerge. In the National Sample, Census Division VIII (Lancashire and Cheshire) had 14 per cent of the population in 1851, but it had 28 per cent of the female 'servants' who were identified in the relationship column as heads of households or as kin of the head, and 48 per cent of all 'Housekeepers' in such a situation, these being concentrated particularly in the Lancashire textile manufacturing towns. Division IX (Yorkshire) had 10 per cent of the 1851 population, but 13 per cent of servants listed as heads or with a kin relationship to the head. It had only 5 per cent of 'Housekeepers' in this position, but it contained 55 per cent of all heads or kin of

**Table 1 Relationship to Head of Household of female servants**

Occupational title	No entry	Head or wife	Daughter	Other kin	Lodger or visitor	Servant wife	All	Unadjusted no.
Servant or general servant	4.4	0.8	17.6	5.5	5.0	66.7	100.0	519
Domestic servant	5.4	0.0	10.7	0.0	3.6	80.4	100.0	54
House servant	1.6	0.6	5.3	2.9	1.2	88.4	100.0	819
Maid (excluding lady's or nurse)	6.9	1.9	5.6	2.3	2.8	80.6	100.0	185
Lady's maid or companion	0.0	4.8	2.4	4.8	11.9	76.2	100.0	38
Nursemaid	3.7	0.0	9.3	3.7	5.6	77.8	100.0	43
Cook	2.8	4.2	0.0	1.4	1.4	90.3	100.0	128
Housekeeper or Asst. Housekeeper	5.0	34.2	10.2	21.7	2.2	26.7	100.0	272
'Domestic'	0.0	50.0	23.2	8.9	5.4	12.5	100.0	56
<i>All except HK and 'Dom'</i>	<i>3.1</i>	<i>1.1</i>	<i>8.6</i>	<i>3.4</i>	<i>2.8</i>	<i>81.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>1786</i>
All	3.3	6.4	9.1	5.9	2.8	72.5	100.0	2114

heads who were described simply as 'Domestic' (though, unlike in Lancashire where 'Housekeepers' were widely distributed through the sample EDs, a substantial majority of the Yorkshire occurrences of 'Domestic' were clustered in just two enumeration books—and this may therefore reflect either the practice of particular enumerators or a very localised use of the term).

It would thus seem that, while it was quite a common practice nationally for women to be listed with a servant title in the occupation column but as kin in the relationship column, the misleading appearance of the description 'Housekeeper' may have been disproportionately common in the Lancashire textile towns. There are clearly, as Higgs points out, several plausible reasons why some of those engaged in service occupations should be listed as relatives of the head: many were in the households where the head was a farmer, an innkeeper or engaged in some other kind of business where servants would need to be employed. In these cases, relatives might quite reasonably be doing jobs in the family business and were thus quite correctly returned as engaged in service occupations. A particular extension of this kind of case may be the significant number of girls in all-female households where the head was described as 'laundress' or 'charwoman'; presumably in these cases the girls helped the head with her work. In other cases, some of the grand-daughters, cousins and nieces, for example,

were probably taken on preferentially as servants in direct substitution for a non-relative (perhaps because they were orphans or their families had fallen on hard times, or just as a favour), and these women would have worked and perhaps been treated in ways little different from a non-relative in a similar role.<sup>4</sup> Some others would have been living-out servants, going daily to their employer, or perhaps employed only during the week. And some would have been 'ordinary' domestic servants, normally resident with their employers, but visiting their parents' home for census night or for a few days.<sup>6</sup> In this connection it is significant that the 1851 census was held on Mothering Sunday when, in certain parts of the country, it was conventional to give servants leave to pay a visit to their parents.

However, in the textile districts of Lancashire and Cheshire, and perhaps also in the West Riding of Yorkshire, in a situation where large numbers of married women were in factory or domestic manufacturing employment, there may well have been a very different origin to the listing of so many widowed heads of household, wives, daughters and sisters as employed in 'service' occupations. Examination of all the 69 Lancashire and Cheshire enumeration books in the National Sample gives a clear impression that many enumerators quite explicitly recorded 'housework', 'housekeeper', 'domestic duties', or 'at home' against wives, children and other relatives of textile workers who might otherwise have been employed in textile work. In doing so, enumerators (and perhaps—but by no means certainly—heads of household who completed schedules) may well have quite explicitly been identifying those particular women and girls who were playing a key role in the household economy by undertaking the task of the domestic minder of a house where all other members were in remunerated employment.

### **Census Office tabulation**

This in turn links to the other important question raised by Higgs: how did the census office officials deal with such cases? In Rochdale, where these domestic minders were listed by the enumerator as 'housekeepers', Higgs suggests that almost all were included under that domestic service heading in the tabulations that became in due course the published census statistics. But this was clearly not always the case. Examination of photocopied pages from any CEB clearly shows marks made by the census office checkers, and sometimes also shows corrections made by the registrars before the books were forwarded to London. Most of the checkers' marks are simply ticks made against entries to assist in tabulation (for example, there are usually ticks against all female ages and against all birthplaces, which are outside the county of residence). But some marks are rather different, showing how checkers interpreted particular entries—for example, where they underlined the occupation that they had selected for tabulation when a multiple occupation (for example 'farmer and weaver') was returned. Sometimes, additionally, checkers crossed through whole entries or write annotations against them—and it is this practice that provides some clue as to how they handled servants who were also kin. Unfortunately, working from photocopies it is not always easy to be sure when a checker has made a mark or

just what he has written. Nevertheless, in many cases the markings are unambiguous.

In order to explore the consequence of the checkers' work, each of the 467 'servants who were also kin' in the dataset used for Table 1 were looked for in the photocopies from which the National Sample was punched. 465 were located. Of these, 132 occupational entries had unambiguously either been crossed through or had been annotated by a registrar or by a checker in a way which clearly showed that the person had not been allocated to a domestic service occupation. In at least another 15 cases (and probably a number more) there was a reasonable presumption that this had happened, but these were not included in the analysis that follows.

Table 2 shows the effect of removing from the analysis the cases where either a registrar or a checker had unambiguously excluded the entry from the 'servant' occupational category. 78 per cent of the population listed as 'servants' in the occupation column are now classified as servants in the relationship column. This figure rises to 84 per cent if housekeepers and entries saying simply 'domestic' are ignored. By far the largest exclusions are from the category of 'Housekeeper', where at least 22 per cent were removed before tabulation (though even so this still leaves only 34 per cent of all 'housekeepers' with a servant relationship to the head).

However, examination of the regional distribution of the deletions hints at a surprising finding, but one which may provide a clue to the question raised by Higgs when he points out that while the term 'housekeeper' continued to be used in the 1861 and 1871 CEBs for Rochdale to describe the person responsible for housework, in the published tabulations for these censuses most of these individuals must have been excluded. In the 1851 CEBs in the National Sample, deletions of this group of women seem to vary considerably across different parts of England, presumably mainly reflecting some mixture of random sampling error, varying checker practice, and genuine differences in the situations in which 'housekeepers' found themselves. But, in the subsample used here, in the six Welsh books in which such 'housekeepers' appear, all 16 cases are deleted. And it is not just 'housekeepers' that were treated in this way. Of the 34 cases (spread across more than a dozen sample CEBs) where the holder of any 'servant' occupation is recorded as head of household or as having a kinship relation to the head, 25 were unambiguously deleted and three more probably were. This is a far higher rate than the England and Wales figures shown in Table 2, or than is found in any other Division in the sample data. The deleted cases include a number that arguably would have been appropriately classified as servants, for example two daughters of a victualler where the daughters almost certainly did serve the customers.

**Table 2 Relationship to Head of Household of female servants, after omission of cases excluded by checkers**

Occupational title	No entry	Head or wife	Daughter	Other kin	Lodger or visitor	Servant	All	Unadjusted n.	Per cent cut before tabulation
Servant or general servant	4.7	0.9	12.2	4.5	5.4	72.2	100.0	485	7.7
Domestic servant	5.4	0.0	10.7	0.0	3.6	80.4	100.0	54	0.0
House servant	1.7	0.3	3.3	2.7	1.2	90.9	100.0	798	2.7
Maid (ex lady's or nurse)	7.1	1.9	3.3	2.4	2.8	82.5	100.0	181	2.3
Lady's maid or companion	0.0	4.8	2.4	4.8	11.9	76.2	100.0	38	0.0
Nursemaid	3.9	0.0	5.9	2.0	5.9	82.4	100.0	40	5.6
Cook	2.8	3.5	0.0	1.4	1.4	90.9	100.0	127	0.7
Housekeeper or Asst HK	6.0	32.0	5.6	20.4	1.6	34.4	100.0	210	22.4
'Domestic'	0.0	55.1	18.4	6.1	6.1	14.3	100.0	49	12.5
<i>All except HK and 'Dom'</i>	3.2	0.9	5.7	3.0	2.9	84.2	100.0	1723	3.9
All	3.5	5.3	5.9	4.9	2.8	77.5	100.0	1982	6.0

One distinct possibility that this raises is that occupational analysis of the Welsh books was undertaken rather late (or even last) in the sequence of tabulation and that at about this time the problem of servants who were also relatives was confronted in the Census Office and new instructions were issued. This then led to many more such cases not being included in the occupational tabulation.<sup>5</sup> This lesson was then kept in mind in the planning of the census for 1861 and thereafter. Indeed, what is more generally striking about the Welsh CEBs in the National Sample is a markedly higher level of all kinds of explicit annotation not in the enumerators' hand. So the treatment of servants may not be the only area affected by a new and more rigorous approach.

## Conclusion

This paper raises several issues which might be developed in future work. First, it reminds us on the one hand of the dangers of national averages and on the other of the need to be aware of local and regional diversity in generalising from data from the CEBs for one place. Secondly, it invites further investigation of the circumstances under which relatives of the head may sometimes be returned in

the occupation column of the CEBs, and, in particular, it suggests that, in areas where married women were commonly in paid employment, household heads and/or enumerators may have been especially likely to identify one or more women in a household as the person engaged in domestic duties in ways which can confuse the unwary but may in fact provide interesting insight into a largely unknown aspect of the workings of the household economy.<sup>7</sup> Thirdly, the findings suggest that there may be some interesting further work to be done in studying on a comparative basis an almost unexamined topic: the work of the census office checkers at the nineteenth century censuses.

#### NOTES

1. D. Mills and K. Schürer eds, *Local Communities in the Victorian Census Enumerators' Books*, (Oxford, 1996).
2. E. Higgs, 'The tabulation of occupations in the nineteenth-century census, with special reference to domestic servants' in *Local Communities*, 27–35 (original in *Local Population Studies*, 28 (1982), 58–66).
3. The complete National Sample machine-readable dataset and associated documentation is held by the ESRC Data Archive at the University of Essex. A microfiche transcript was published by Chadwyck-Healey in 1987. For a brief account see M. Anderson, 'Households, families and individuals: some preliminary results from the National Sample from the 1851 Census of Great Britain.', *Continuity and Change*, 3 (1988), 421–38.
4. Indeed, as D. Cooper and M. Donald have pointed out ('Households and "hidden" kin in early nineteenth-century England: four case studies in suburban Exeter, 1821–1861', *Continuity and Change*, 10 (1995), 257–78), there were probably significant numbers of servants who had some kinship relationship to some other member of their households but were reported as servants in both the occupation and the relationship columns of the census. The great majority of these were probably unambiguously providing domestic services, even if their recruitment, as with so many other servants at the same date, was the result of a personal connection rather than open market activity.
5. See also E. Higgs, 'Women, occupations and work in the nineteenth century censuses', *History Workshop Journal*, 23 (1987), 59–80; E. Higgs, 'Domestic service and household production' in A. V. John ed., *Unequal opportunities: women's employment in England 1800–1918*, (Oxford, 1986), 124–50.
6. Examination of the published tables shows that 'housekeepers' form a very low proportion of all servants in Wales, at 7.4 per cent compared with an England and Wales average of 10.9 per cent and a Lancashire and Cheshire figure of 15.6 per cent. But the lowest figure is for London (5.2 per cent), and the highest (21.2 per cent) is for East Anglia, for reasons which remain unclear and may merit further research; the East Midlands have the second highest rate of recording.
7. I understand from a discussion with Bob Morris that a similar phenomenon can be observed in at least one textile village in Fife.