

THE USE OF ETHNIC CATEGORIES IN SOCIOLOGY: A COORDINATED PRESENTATION OF POSITIONS

[Georges Felouzis](#)

Éditions Technip & Ophrys | « [Revue française de sociologie](#) »

2010/5 Vol. 51 | pages 145 à 150

ISSN 0035-2969

ISBN 9782708012790

Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

<https://www.cairn.info/revue-francaise-de-sociologie-1-2010-5-page-145.htm>

Distribution électronique Cairn.info pour Éditions Technip & Ophrys.

© Éditions Technip & Ophrys. Tous droits réservés pour tous pays.

La reproduction ou représentation de cet article, notamment par photocopie, n'est autorisée que dans les limites des conditions générales d'utilisation du site ou, le cas échéant, des conditions générales de la licence souscrite par votre établissement. Toute autre reproduction ou représentation, en tout ou partie, sous quelque forme et de quelque manière que ce soit, est interdite sauf accord préalable et écrit de l'éditeur, en dehors des cas prévus par la législation en vigueur en France. Il est précisé que son stockage dans une base de données est également interdit.

The Use of Ethnic Categories in Sociology: A Coordinated Presentation of Positions

Edited by Georges FELOUZIS

ABSTRACT

Ethnic categories have only come to be used gradually in sociology in France, and debate on the issue has been quite heated, primarily because such categories are extremely remote from French intellectual tradition. However, they have gained scientific legitimacy by their clear sociological relevance, though the matter of how to define and develop them empirically remains uncertain and complex. In his overview of the debate, Georges Felouzis probes the role of ethnic categories in French sociology from both theoretical and empirical standpoints. Dominique Schnapper takes up what is at issue and at stake for democracy and society in the use of ethnic categories, and Patrick Simon reflects on possible ways of describing and accounting for “ethnic” social relations in French society.

George FELOUZIS

Ethnic Categories in Sociology: Material for a Debate

The issue of using ethnic categories in French sociology has now taken the form of a debate on statistical categories and whether or not they can be used to measure something on the order of individuals’ origins. This question has emerged only gradually, as it is quite remote from the intellectual tradition in French sociology (Schnapper, 1998). However, as is shown by the 2006 conference on “ethnic statistics” organized by the Centre d’Analyse Stratégique, and by the consultations on this question conducted by the CNIL [Commission Nationale de l’Informatique et des Libertés] in 2007, the question is no longer *whether* individuals’ “ethnic” origin constitutes a legitimate

* Georges Felouzis is a senior professor at the University of Geneva.

category for studying variations in practices and representations but *how* to categorize such origins and measure their effects on large populations and samples (Héran, 2002; Simon and Clément, 2006b).

This is a relatively new situation in France. The clear sociological relevance of “ethnic” categories has won them some scientific legitimacy, but empirically producing those categories and, I would add, naming them remains an uncertain, complex matter. The issue can be circumscribed and defined as three problems. The first is vocabulary: how to designate the categories themselves, which some in France call “ethnic”, others “indicative of origin” and still others “indicative of cultural origin”? The second is the link between types of categories –scientific or lay– and the matter of empirically constructing these “ideas” into statistical categories capable of apprehending variations and inequalities and revealing discriminatory practices. The third is the problem of comparing research results on “how individuals’ ethnic characteristics weigh upon their individual and social futures” over time and space.

How should “ethnic” categories be named?

This problem is raised by Alain Blum in an article in *Population* (Blum, 1998). In fact, there is nothing ethnic about the categories in question, in the sense that they do not reflect membership in culturally homogenous groups. François Héran (2002) is right on this point: The terms “ethnicity” and “ethnic” should be understood to refer not to “a group that has no state status but rather to a group that has a series of traits or significant properties”. Sociologists use these terms quite differently. In emphasizing the intellectual, subjective dimension of self-attributed ethnicity and in examining processes of ascribing identity that are linked to “dominant” groups’ ways of seeing (Barth, 1995; Poutignat and Streiff-Fenart, 1995), sociologists are concerned with a *social* idea of the ethnic group. In fact, we are living in a kind of semantic ambiguity that does not really clarify the debate. We can add that designating “ethnic” groups in a framework as official as public statistics amounts less to a “constative utterance” than a “performative” one, to use Austin’s terms ([1962] 1970); *i.e.*, an utterance that itself creates a social reality. This point cannot be ignored, though daily discrimination practices are likely to be much more “performative” than public statistics or research questions to individuals about their ethnic origin. Here the scientific debate cannot be dissociated from the social debate on racism and the violence that racism constitutes for individuals subjected to it. This double-bind situation gives a clear idea of the nature of the debate on ethnic categories and their use in France.

Should we name, and thereby risk strengthening a racist or at any rate *racialized* vision of society, or should we abstain from naming, thereby leaving discrimination in shadow (or half-light) when that discrimination has

an immense power to structure the lives and futures of individual members of visible minorities?

In their response to this question, Richard Alba and Nancy Denton (2008) consider two centuries of American experience of these issues.⁽¹⁾ It was no simple matter to begin collecting racial and ethnic information in the United States, and it is no simple matter now. Problems include relevance of the categories used, the varying, limited reliability of responses, and problems of multi-origin due to consecutive mixed marriages. The question Alba and Denton ask is whether, in the end, collecting racial data –and using them in the social sciences– has benefited American society by limiting the effects of racism and discrimination. The authors maintain that the “great task” of racial and ethnic statistics –*i.e.*, accounting for inequalities in American society– has indeed been accomplished. This has gone together with a number of sociological advances, such as disentangling the respective impacts of race and social class on segregation (a question that French sociology cannot answer today). It has also brought to light the limits of the “performative” nature of racial statistics, through the empirical example of “white ethnics”, *i.e.*, descendents of southern and eastern Europeans, who are now fully assimilated. Clearly, racial and ethnic statistics “does not inevitably produce a strengthening of ethnic discourses and identities” (p. 147).

From reasoning to empirical data: how to construct ethnic categories?

It would be wrong to claim that “ethnic” categories constitute an arbitrary carving up of social reality. In this connection, it is useful to cite the gradual construction of socio-occupational categories in France. That process was informed by a representation of French society that gradually imposed itself as a legitimate representation (Desrosières and Thévenot, [1988] 2000). What of ethnic categories? First and foremost, they are categories of perception that individuals use in daily life to conceive of their social environment. Cultural, “migratory” and/or ethnic origin constitutes a relevant criterion for categorizing, identifying and designating individuals, a criterion that can no longer be considered unimportant. In the area of schooling, the way particular schools and curriculum groups are perceived is strongly affected by the ethnic dimension. Underprivileged outer-city neighborhoods in France, together with districts in major French cities, are identified, categorized, and ranked by proportion of immigrant or immigrant-descendant residents. Whether a job applicant gets called for an interview depends on ethnic markers such as last name and first name, skin color and accent. Other examples could be presented to show how ethnic categories partake of daily modes of perceiving

(1) The original French version (2008) of this presentation and debate included a contribution by Richard Alba and Nancy Denton entitled “Les données raciales et ethniques aux États-Unis: entre connaissance scientifique et

politique des identités” that should be of particular interest to French readers. The substance of their contribution is available in English in Alba (1990; 1995), and Massey and Denton (1993).

social reality. This gives those categories a kind of active power to define individuals and their social “destinies”, to “assign” them to a group or “ethnicity”. These perceptions, whether based on skin color or religion, create “bright boundaries” (Alba, 2005) that are hard to cross for people with the visible characteristics of a given minority, even if they are French citizens.

But ethnic categories are not just categories used by laypersons. They became legitimate when sociologists took up the question of French society’s ability to integrate people (Schnapper, 1998). Sociologists who are reasoning about and observing the social world are now willing to take individuals’ ethnic origin into account as a variable that is relevant in understanding social phenomena as diverse as convictions for offenses against police officers (Jobard and Névanen, 2007, 2009), the nature of scholastic itineraries (Payet, 1995; Vallet and Caille, 1996; Perroton, 2000), occupational integration (Richard, 2000; Silberman and Fournier, 2006, 2008), urban segregation (Lagrange, 2006) and segregation in school (Felouzis, 2003, 2005). In this sense, “ethnic” categories are already part of French sociological thinking about what principles govern variation in social practices, representations, and behavior. And sociologists’ use of these categories no longer seems as scandalous as it did little more than a decade ago. Each researcher or research team constructs indicators that are indirectly indicative of individuals’ ethnic membership or origin (parents’ place[s] of birth, first name, or any other means), and doing so now appears legitimate in that it shows the sociological relevance of such constructions. In the mid-1990s, the mere fact of measuring the contribution of successive immigration waves to the size of the French population sparked a fierce controversy (Le Bras, 1997; Tribalat, 1997). The evolution of society and mores, representations of French society, and the significant change that has occurred in the social sciences and the intellectual debate seem to have made it possible to consider research objects legitimate that used to be unthinkable in the French context.

Current sociological practice: confirming and comparing results

The picture becomes more complicated when we consider the *social* effects of this sociological activity. Scientific publications (in the disciplines of sociology, demography and economics) are having considerable social impact. Relations between sociological and statistical production, on the one hand, the social world on the other, may be described as complex interaction. Part of the present debate focuses on just this point, with some arguing in favor of closely measuring the effect of discriminatory and/or racist practices that undermine the very foundations of our society; others recalling that it is no innocuous move to define individuals and groups by way of “origin” or “ethno-racial” categories. Inevitably, the debate has overflowed the academic world and now encompasses the issue of the performative properties of scientific statements and constructions. And it has become multiform, concerned as much with how to construct the most relevant indicators and instruments for

apprehending and measuring inequalities linked to skin color or real or supposed “migratory” origin as with the way categories are named and groups designated (ethnic, ethno-racial, cultural, “indicative of origin”, etc.). It also bears on what questions sociologists and statisticians can and cannot ask. One example among many is urban segregation, which is both social and ethnic. Can population censuses produce detailed, exhaustive measurements that will allow for showing the relative weight of each of these dimensions, how they fit together, and their respective effects on access to employment, family structure, poverty, etc.? This question –classic and widely debated in American sociology– has as yet hardly been explored in France in statistical terms. Is this for lack of interest? Lack of reliable data on extremely small urban units? Irrelevance of such studies to the principles governing French society? Schooling offers another example. Ethnic segregation in French middle schools, which I measured by taking into account origins as reflected by pupils’ first names (Felouzis, 2003, 2005), seems to require complementary studies that would describe how widespread the observed phenomena are and the principles of variation across diverse urban and regional contexts. Is what we observe in a region that does not have a tradition of immigration the same as in regions that do? In other words, one limitation of current research studies of ethnicity-based segregation and discrimination is that it is extremely hard to reproduce and compare the results they produce. *Ad hoc* constructions do enable sociologists to circumvent the difficulties caused by lack of direct information, but they considerably restrict our ability to compare over time and across space. The issue of the need for standardized constructed statistical categories, accessible to researchers so that research can produce new results and study variations by diversified social, economic, and demographic contexts, becomes all the more acute.

The sociologists invited to present their positions offer differing views on these complex questions. The idea was not so much to produce a “balance sheet” of points dividing the discipline as to understand what we are doing now, how we are doing it and what this is moving us towards.⁽²⁾ As will be seen, the lens here is very wide. It allows each sociologist to speak on the basis of his or her own studies and concerns.

Dominique Schnapper’s analysis is centered on the political and scientific issues of the debate.⁽³⁾ Using ethnic categories in statistics is far more than a technical matter. It also and perhaps primarily involves political and social matters. Statistical constructions have “effects” on identity and run the risk of emphasizing or highlighting what are in fact blurred, shifting boundaries between groups who cannot even be said with certainty to exist. This means that those constructions run the risk of grossly simplifying a complex social reality. However, we cannot ignore the “democratic aspirations” of those who, in their fight against racism and discrimination, are calling for greater

(2) See bibliography (a joint one for all contributors to the debate).

(3) Dominique Schnapper is a senior

professor at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris.

equality. The question then becomes “how to limit the perverse effects” of such statistics.

Patrick Simon’s reasoning focuses on the need to construct statistical tools that will account for ethnic and “racial” social relations, relations that have been too long ignored in French society.⁽⁴⁾ Indeed, the role of the social sciences is to produce knowledge about inequalities, even when doing so implies subverting the image the society may have of itself. But the real question is how to construct those statistics. In addition to current solutions, which reconstruct individuals’ ethnic origins on the basis either of last name or first name, the method of self-identification seems “more respectful of freedom of choice”, though that method is highly sensitive to how questions are worded and even more so to the collective frameworks operative at a given time.

Georges FELOUZIS

*Université de Genève
Groupe Genevois d'Analyse des Politiques Éducatives (GGAPE)
Faculté de Psychologie et des Sciences de l'Éducation
40, boulevard du Pont-d'Arve
CH-1211 Genève – Switzerland*

Georges.Felouzis@unige.ch

Translation: Amy Jacobs

Previously published: RFS, 2008, 49-1

(4) Patrick Simon is a researcher at the Institut National d'Études Démographiques (INED).