

Briefs on Methodological, Ethical and Epistemological Issues

No.10

Institutional and Sociological Approaches to the Aggregation of Detailed Immigrant Data: A Missing Link?

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Abstract

One of the dilemmas facing multi-ethnic societies is how to recognize ethnic diversity while avoiding the risk of reifying ethnic identities, i.e. conceiving ethnic groups as homogeneous and static entities. Ethnic categorization is an essential and necessary tool for developing adequate policies to address unequal opportunities and discrimination. At the same time, ethnic categorization is an inherently problematic procedure, in official statistics but also in ethnic and migration studies. In fact, ethnic categorization may involuntarily contribute to the reinforcement of stereotypes and negative attitudes towards immigrant groups and, by and large, to the ‘racialization’ of society.

The aim of this issue brief is two-fold: (1) to present and compare how the issues of ethnic categorization are dealt with by researchers of selected EU countries and (2) to highlight how cross-country differences in ethnic categorization and pan-ethnic classification practices are also related to different population-counting traditions.

Introduction: From detailed immigrant groups to aggregate immigrant categories

European migration scholars have long recognized the importance of cross-country comparisons in understanding similarities and differences in immigrant integration patterns and processes. Yet, such comparisons—and in particular those based on quantitative data—are often made difficult by cross-country differences in the definition of the immigrant populations under study.

Definitional differences are partly explained by European countries' markedly distinct histories as immigrant destinations. All European countries experienced changes in their ethnic landscapes due to immigration, but the scale, composition, and timing of migration flows differed across countries (e.g. Geddes and Scholten 2016). Accordingly, migration scholars of different countries tend to concentrate their attention on groups with different backgrounds and characteristics.

A related but less discussed issue involves the incommensurability of categories used to identify immigrant groups in different national contexts (Simon et al. 2015). This problem stems primarily from comparative migration studies' reliance on national official statistics. European countries' national statistical offices employ a variety of approaches for describing and measuring immigrant-related diversity in the population (Jacobs et al., 2009; Kraler et al. 2011). An approximate distinction can be drawn between an approach defining immigrant groups in relation to the country of origin (and/or citizenship status), an approach conflating ethnic diversity with linguistic/cultural diversity, an ancestry-related approach focusing on the offspring of first-generation immigrant parents, and an approach considering individuals' self-declared racial identity (Escafré-Dublet & Simon 2011). This variety of approaches used in the production of official statistics originates in the historical processes of population differentiation due to nation-building, colonial legacies, and more recent migration flows. Different approaches to categorization of immigrant groups are also related to differing conceptions of national identity and related visions about the relationships between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' to the national community.

The problem related to the incommensurability of official statistics is to a certain extent compounded by the frequent practice of merging detailed immigrant groups into broader, aggregate immigrant categories that encompass a wide range of detailed immigrant groups—e.g. 'non-western' or 'non-European' immigrants, or other geographic subgroups identified by the region of origin. Typically, practical considerations underlie the decision to resort to these broader categories in comparative migration studies. This is done for reasons of clarity and parsimony, because the use of fewer aggregate immigrant categories yields easier-to-interpret descriptions of integration patterns and processes than would be provided by a large number of fine-grained immigrant groups—e.g. by allowing the presentation of research findings in smaller and more readable tables with few categories. Survey researchers resort to aggregate immigrant



categories because they tend to focus on larger immigrant groups, while smaller groups are usually lumped together into broader categories. There might also be data protection reasons to not disclose detailed information on immigrants' countries of origin, e.g. in residential segregation studies at the very local level. In many countries official statistics use aggregate immigrant categories, but often the choice to aggregate detailed groups into broader categories is made directly by researchers, e.g. in order to create sufficiently large groups that are better suited for statistical analyses. Typically, institutional and research-related practices of aggregation coexist in the same national contexts.

Against this background, the aim of this issue brief is two-fold. The next section describes briefly the approaches for aggregating detailed immigrant groups that are employed by the statistical offices of some European countries. The review shows that, despite the differences in the criteria for aggregation, in all countries the officially sanctioned categories seem to be too broad and imprecise for research purposes. The following section discusses how the issue of aggregating detailed immigrant data is to a certain extent related to the sociological concept of pan-ethnicity, which refers to forms of identification transcending different national-origin groups (Okamoto & Mora 2014). The issue brief concludes by emphasizing the need for a more active involvement of migration scholars in the definition of theoretically and empirically justified criteria for the aggregation of detailed immigrant data.

Institutional approaches to the aggregation of detailed immigrant data in some European countries

One of the dilemmas facing European multi-ethnic societies is how to recognize ethnic and cultural diversity while avoiding the risk of reifying ethnic identities, i.e. conceiving ethnic groups as homogeneous and static entities. Arguably, statistical categories identifying migrants, their descendants or members of ethnic groups are essential and necessary tools for better understanding inequality and discrimination on the basis of migrant and/or ethnic origin (Escafré-Dublet and Simon, 2011). At the same time, such categories are inherently problematic because they may unwittingly contribute to discrimination, rather than counteracting it—notably by reifying ethnic and similar categories as inherently meaningful and explanatory categories, and by reinforcing stereotypes and negative attitudes towards certain groups.

An awareness of this dilemma seemingly underpins the choice of the national statistical offices of many European countries to use simplified, dichotomous distinctions in national statistics, e.g. between (varying definitions of) 'foreign-born' and 'natives', or between 'citizens' and 'foreigners'. Yet, these officially sanctioned categories are often perceived as too broad and crude by migration scholars. In fact, these categories encompass groups that are different from each other in terms of migration histories and motives, legal statuses, lengths of residence and contexts of reception in host countries. Sometimes, officially sanctioned categories lose their original meaning in political and academic debates and become labels



denoting specific, and narrower, immigrant groups that are perceived to be more disadvantaged and/or vulnerable to discrimination in host societies.

For example, the Netherlands statistical office collects register-data on immigrants' country of birth along with data on parents' country of birth, and a binary taxonomy is often used in official statistics to distinguish between 'autochthones' (i.e. the natives) and 'allochthones' (i.e. the foreign-born and their second-generation offspring). However, the term 'allochthones' has gradually undergone a shift in meaning in academic and policy debates and came to be used selectively to pinpoint specific (non-Western) immigrant groups of Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese or Antillean origin, rather than to refer to the whole immigrant population (Jacobs et al. 2009, p. 79).

The German statistical office collects less detailed migration-related data than its Dutch counterpart and immigrants are distinguished only on the basis of their nationality and country of birth. In official statistics, immigrants are also referred to as 'persons with a migration background'—an officially sanctioned category that serves the same functions as the Dutch 'allochthones' and has likewise been introduced by the national statistical office¹. Also in Germany, this category is sometimes used in a more narrow sense to refer only to the 'less integrated' immigrant groups and, for this reason, it is perceived to have negative connotations (Elrick & Schwartzman 2015).

Like the Netherlands, Sweden collects detailed register-data on country of birth, parents' country of birth and citizenship. Despite the availability of these detailed data, official statistics usually focus on two broadly defined population subgroups, i.e. the individuals with a 'Swedish background' and those with a 'foreign background'. Although the 'foreign background' category officially refers to the whole immigrant population, it is more often used in daily language to refer to non-Western immigrants and their descendants, and particularly to those with a refugee background. The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare has recently proposed an alternative classification dividing the immigrant population into an 'invisible minority' and a 'visible minority'—the latter comprising more disadvantaged immigrant groups. When this distinction was introduced in 2006 (National Board of Health and Welfare 2006), the 'visible minority' group comprised immigrants from the Global South (Africa, Asia except ex-USSR, and Latin America), but also immigrants from Southern EU countries (Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain), and from some Eastern European countries (Albania, Bulgaria, and ex-Yugoslavia). A follow-up revision of this scheme removed Southern EU immigrants from the visible minorities and added Romanians and Moldavians to this group (National Board of Health and Welfare 2010), but the category continue to be employed inconsistently in academic and policy debates.



Aggregate immigrant categories can be also found in countries that are more politically reluctant to collect ethnic statistics on the population as, for example, France. The French debate (or lack thereof) on ethnic statistics is influenced by republican assimilationist model of immigrant integration, which assumes that immigrants are expected to discard their culture and values of origin and to adopt those of the host country. Hence, French official statistics use broad categories—‘French’, ‘French by acquisition’, and ‘foreigners’—that indicate different levels of assimilation and are thus “geared to the study and monitoring of the assimilation of foreigners” (Simon et al. 2015, p. 6).

The UK case differs substantially from other European countries because migration-related data are collected on the basis of a self-identification system that is used in the decennial census but also in social surveys. Respondents are invited to select the group to which they consider to belong from a standard list of racial categories. Racial self-identification is complemented by information on the country of birth, but no official information is collected on citizenship. Self-declared racial identities encompass different country-of-origin groups and, therefore, are the British equivalent of the officially sanctioned aggregate immigrant categories used in other European countries.

The sociological debate on pan-ethnicity

The aggregate immigrant categories used in European migration studies present some analogies with the sociological concept of pan-ethnicity. Pan-ethnicity can be defined as the expansion of identity boundaries among ethnic subgroups that had previously distinct identities and it is associated to the development of new forms of collective solidarity (Lopez & Espiritu 1990; Okamoto 2003; Okamoto & Mora 2014). Pan-ethnicity can also function as a ‘second’ identity that coexists, sometimes problematically and even uncomfortably, with more narrowly defined ‘primary’ ethnic identities (e.g. with national identities). Much of existing literature relates to the US context and focuses on the link between the racial categories used in the US census categories and self-identification processes at the group and individual level. This debate has been somewhat overlooked in European migration studies.

A stream of research analysed whether US census categories have bottom-up support from immigrant groups. For example, Alba & Islam (2009) explained the decline of individuals who self-identified as Mexican Americans across the 1980-2000 US decennial censuses as a consequence of the emergence and consolidation of a ‘Latino/Hispanic’ pan-ethnicity. In fact, in two decades, a growing number of respondents to the US Census ethnic origin question ceased to self-identify as Mexican Americans and began to label themselves as Hispanics/Latinos. The link between officially sanctioned aggregate immigrant categories and self-identification processes at the individual and group level has been seldom considered in European migration studies. A recent exception is a study focusing on the gradual recognition of Finnish-



speaking Finns as ‘Northern Europeans’ in the 1950s, when they gained the same naturalization privileges as other Scandinavian citizens in Sweden (Wickström 2017).

Another issue that arises in the pan-ethnicity literature is whether and to what degree pan-ethnic identities influence individual social behaviour. Some studies analysed to what extent proximity between ethnic groups facilitates identity boundary crossing in friendship ties and networks. For example, Kao & Joyner (2006) analysed the friendship networks of (pan-ethnically defined) Hispanic and Asian adolescents in US schools and found evidence of preferences for friends of the same pan-ethnic groups. However, they also found inter- and intra-group variation in the degree of pan-ethnic homophily. Asians were found to be on average more pan-ethnically oriented than Hispanics. At the same time, within each pan-ethnic group, some ethnonational groups were more likely to form friendships with co-pan-ethnics than with members of other groups (e.g., Vietnamese among the Asians, Mexican and Puerto Ricans within the Hispanics). In contrast to US studies, studies of immigrant children in European schools have usually focused on the shares of nationally defined co-ethnics in their friendship networks (e.g., Smith et al. 2015; Smith et al. 2016). European studies have thus paid less attention to whether officially sanctioned aggregate collective categories play a role in affecting immigrant children’s friendship preferences.

A third and less developed stream of research examined the patterns of segregation of narrowly defined national-origin groups that are usually lumped together in the same US census racial/pan-ethnic categories. For example, a study by Kim & White (2010) showed that pan-ethnic aggregation provides a very approximate representation of residential segregation patterns in US metropolitan areas and therefore conceals the existing variation between more narrowly defined country-of-origin groups. Aggregate immigrant categories are widely used in European studies of residential segregation, which typically compare the residential segregation patterns of broadly-defined immigrants and ethnic minorities with those of natives (Mateos 2015). At the same time, little attention is paid to existing differences in residential segregation patterns of immigrant groups that are ascribed to the same, broader aggregate immigrant categories.

In general, in many European countries, there seems to be no consensus regarding the number of categories needed to account for major ethnic divisions in the population. Yet, aggregate immigrant categories used by the national statistical offices tend to enjoy a high degree of institutional legitimacy and, therefore, they are often used uncritically in public and academic debates. These categories lend themselves as useful and parsimonious tools for analysing immigrant integration patterns and processes, but more research is perhaps needed to verify whether they provide a too crude and simplified representation of immigration-driven super-diversity.



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Suggested citation:

Scarpa, S. (2019) “Researching across differences: Unsettling methodological discussions from a minority’s perspectives” in Briefs on Methodological, Ethical and Epistemological Issues, No. 10, www.migrationresearch.com

ⁱ While the “migration background” category has been a particularly prominent in Germany, it is been also used in other countries and it has had a longstanding definition at the international level, e.g. the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) recommended its use for the 2020 census round.

