

Education Policy Analysis Archives

Volume 7 Number 21

July 8, 1999

ISSN 1068-2341

A peer-reviewed scholarly electronic journal
Editor: Gene V Glass, College of Education
Arizona State University

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Facing the Consequences: Identifying the Limitations of How We Categorize People in Research and Policy

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Abstract

Social policy researchers and policy rules and regulation writers have not taken advantage of advances in assessing ways in which social representations of ideas about people can convey alternative explanations of social life. During the past decade a growing number of scholars have considered how representational practices and the representations that are outcomes of such practices have value. Neglecting to consider representational practices has consequences including failure to mobilize and sustain alternative ideologies that reject narrow perspectives on families and communities. As evidenced by recent OMB rulings on census categories, the dominant sense of meaning of population—and hence family and community—is quite similar to the 17th century sense of people as objects of a particular category in a place from which samples can be taken for statistical measurement. However, the contrastive analysis presented in this paper points out how sustained attention to consequences of use of sets of information categories collected to enumerate population to inform social policy can still materialize. In the wake of federal welfare reform, policy makers are particularly interested in

questions of benefit relative to social service delivery and community revitalization. The presentation includes lessons learned from several dozen family, youth, school and community research projects.

Introduction

During the past few years, the population categories of race, ethnicity, gender, have been scrutinized by legal and political institutions, as well as social science disciplines and associations (e.g. Begley, 1995; Hollins, King & Hayman, 1994; Hill & Greenhaugh, 1997; Hughey, 1998; Hutchinson & Smith, 1996; Schlosberg 1998). Acting on recommendations presented by Members of the Presidential Advisory Board on Race known as the President's Council for One America, the fiscal 2000 budget included a proposal to create new types of social science population data that will provide ways to measure racial bias in everyday life and educate the public about population categories such as racial and ethnic groups (Ross, 1999; Watson, 1998). At the same time, Federal Courts are reexamining the nature and legitimacy of principles of public justification of decades old consent degrees that lead to dividing public school populations into different groups (Siskind, 1994). In academic arenas, the goal of formulating a knowledge base for teaching about diverse populations has been judged inadequate on several counts. "A major element in the confusion and conflict surrounding the field of 'ethnic phenomena' has been the failure to find any measure of agreement about what the central concepts of ethnicity signify or how they should be used" (Hutchinson & Smith, 1996, p. 15). Assessment of the analytical contributions of idioms of population such as pluralism and multiculturalism has also been negative. One set of negative judgments is that continued concern with technical matters of demography fail to advance understandings of renewed ethnic polarizations and the conditions in which numerous ethnic, religious or cultural groups coexist within a society, (e.g. Greenhalgh, 1995, Higham, 1998; McNicoll, 1994, Schlosberg, 1998, Webster, 1997).

Representatives of multiple social science disciplines argue the need for policy scientists to remake population analysis by incorporating historical contingency and societal specificity in narrative modes of explanation. Schlosberg (1998) argues that such approaches provide "an acknowledgment of multiplicity—an openness to ambiguity and the differences its spawns" (p. 603). Restating McNicoll's (1992) plea for a demography for a more turbulent world, Greenhalgh (1995) calls for policy researchers to direct audiences' attention to studies that attempt multilevel analysis to provide explanations that embrace "not only the social and economic, but also the political and cultural aspects of demographic change" (p. 49). Greenhalgh (1995) raises the question, How can the agenda of studying population as a phenomena of interest across social science disciplines be contextualized in the social and economic terms of demography and in political and cultural terms as well?

Overview

In this article, we provide examples of current work in social science disciplines which addresses the policy research argument that understanding the impact of changes in human numbers on social and cultural life requires moving beyond current standards of empirical categories. For example, the United Nations suggests enumeration of the structure of the world's populations and their patterns of change involves collecting information on at least 4 sets of empirical facts: (1) Demographic, including sex, age, marital status, birthplace, place of usual residence, relationship to head of household, number of children; (2) Economic or type of activity, occupation; (3) Social and

Political, including language, ethnic or religious affiliation; (4) Educational including literacy or level of education, school attendance (cf. "census" Encyclopedia Britannica Online, 1999).

The meaning of these sets of words and ideas about people are taken for granted and used as a referent in social policy, courts and other legal institutions to link the individual with society. Yet, few researchers make clear how their categorization and measurement of individuals along social identity and ethnic lines is linked to a conceptual foundation or theoretical base. "While conceptually researchers are pointing to the dynamics and fluid nature of ethnicity, empirically they are measuring ethnicity [and social identity] as a static entity" (Leets, Giles & Clement, 1996, p. 11).

The common tendency has been to use measurement categories such as suggested by the United Nations to project that the world will include 6 billion people in the 21st century. Such projections are predicated without examination of just what it is about standards categories of human numbers that will impact social life (Kertzer, 1995). Consequently, policy researchers point to a need for exploring how different categories of people are linked to different communicative practices (Wallat & Piazza, 1991; 1997). One argument is that a focus on "plurality of meanings" and "variable functions of communication" could bring attention to both internal and external influences on the "construction of the subjectivity that group membership and citizenship built upon" (Schlosberg, 1998, p.160). Practices of communication as a key issue in policy research are proposed as a strategy to: (a) affirm the theoretical richness of available notions of pluralism such as "the irreducible plurality of the social realm" (cf. Schlosberg, 1998, p. 586), and (b) provide "an acknowledgment of multiplicity - an openness to ambiguity and the differences it spawns" (cf. Schlosberg, 1998, p. 603).

Reconsidering the need within social science to expand its discursive practices to address the consequences of the projected 21st century number of 6 billion people on economy, government and society is also a current focus of the American Anthropological Association (Hill & Greenhalgh, 1998). Marking 1998 as the bicentennial of the publication of "Essay on the Principle of Population as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society," association members have reminded social scientists that the empirical observations on the realities of poverty reported by Thomas Malthus in 1798 have defied attempts to identify factors that increase the likelihood that institutional adaptation will occur fast enough to deal with current and prospective populations (Bean, 1990, p. 27).

The American Anthropology Association Annual Program Meeting Chair Susan Greenhalgh suggested that population questions, including, Who is counting whom? Why is counting taking place? and, How are the variables constructed?, can be reformulated and addressed as areas of inquiry. Examples of such areas for examination include: (a) Population categories as pattern, that is behavior conceptualized as social organization and culture change, (b) Population categories as discourse, that is how notions of discourse shape construction of discursive categories, (c) Population categories as politics, that is attention to the negotiations and contestations surrounding population as an issue or problem.

Commentaries by members of the association on the proposed questions provide further suggestions on how they might be developed as a framework for analysis of social science literature. Charles Briggs (1998), for example, suggests focusing on the extent to which public discourse terms can be taken in a marked sense, as issues of standard population measurement versus representations of populations as contested categories of cultural, political and economic power. Such contrastive analysis could provide examples of the extensive variety of ways of seeing and interpreting the study of

humankind.

The work reported in this article is organized to address these questions, areas of inquiry, and framework for analysis. For our purpose a contrast between population as a marked term and representations of population is as follows: the marked sense of population is what can be learned about a social - political construct enacted in legislation as social control indicators that are countable, manageable and amenable to manipulation in policy prescription; representations in observational studies include what has been learned from accounts of the consequences of social control statistics of populations such as ethnicity on understanding individuals' development of social identity. We propose that policy analysis can take advantage of how advances in assessing social representations of people convey alternative explanations of social life. We point to examples of recent ethnographies that illustrate consequences of use of prevailing categories of the substance of people embedded in social policy. In the wake of federal welfare reform, policy makers are particularly interested in questions of benefit relative to family and community revitalization and possible misdirection of funding contingencies. For example, The *Congressional Record* provides hundreds of references for the terms "youth" and "community services" in policy debates and appropriation hearings (<http://thomas.loc.gov>). Our presentation includes findings from studies of youth organization projects supported through such policy initiatives. Overall the findings from studies of youth organization and dominant health and education institutions suggest that the formulation of appropriation rules and regulations for American family adolescents members may be misdirected by standard categories of people. Ethnographers of schools and communities illustrate how young people represented in policy as populations at risk are resisting pejorative values embedded in such appropriation categories. Rather they portray their styles of social and individual identity in ways that leave ethnic and racial population categories behind (e.g. Davidson, 1995, Heath & McLaughlin, 1993, McCarthy, 1997, Miron, 1996, Munoz, 1998). Thus a more anthropologically oriented position, including avoiding a priori assumptions about social identity or community affiliation, is indicated.

What Do We Mean by Population Categories? Who Is Counting Whom? Why Is Counting Taking Place? How Are the Variables Constructed?

During the past several decades scholars from a number of disciplines have focused on the practices used across the human sciences to shape and create objects of knowledge such as population. Researchers trace the historical development of ideologies as particular ways of "seeing" and interpreting collective identity to the 17th century (e.g., Popkewitz, 1991, Laosa, 1984). Popkewitz highlights tensions which have accompanied the intersection of knowledge, power and historically situated practices in the following way:

Beginning in the 17th century, there was a shift from a classical view in which [a] word was representative of the object [observed] to a world in which people [were attributed with the capacity to] reflect and be self-conscious about their historical conditions. A view of change occurred that tied progress to reason...and systematic human intervention to social institutions. The new sets of relations between knowledge and social practice inhered in a variety of social relations. Accompanying the emergent [ideology indexed as the] Enlightenment was the creation of the nation -

state, where, for the first time, people were assigned a collective identity that was both anonymous and concrete. Abstract concepts of...constitutional, democratic rules produced new sets of boundaries, expectations, and possibilities of the general notion of citizen. At the same time, people could be considered in specific and detailed ways as populations that could be characterized into subgroups distinct from any sense of the whole. The concept of population made possible new technologies of control, since there was greater possibility for the supervision, observation, and administration of the individual. (p. 32).... *People* came to be defined as populations that could be ordered through the political arithmetic of the state, which the French called *statistique*. State administrators spoke of social welfare in terms of biological issues such as reproduction, disease, and education (individual development, growth, and evolution). Human needs were seen as instrumental and empirical in relation to the functioning of the state. (p. 38)

Laosa (1984) cited policies established over the past 400 years in which children, youth and families were defined by a variety of ancestry ties, codified as people in treaties and laws, and denied opportunities to deal with their social and economic subordination (cf. p. 7). As evidenced by recent OMB rulings on census categories, the dominant sense of meaning of population—and hence family and community—is quite similar to the 17th century sociologists' sense of "population" as objects of a particular category in a place from which samples can be taken for statistical measurement. In contrast to the 100 plus possible social identity representations identified in the 1980 *Harvard Encyclopedia of American ethnic groups* (Thernstrom, 1980) and the 1998 *Atlas of American Diversity* (Shinagawa & Jang, 1998), the year 2000 census information will delimit the meaning of population to five minimum categories for data on race and two categories for data on ethnicity (i.e., American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White, Hispanic or Latino).

In 1995, Ruth McKay prophesied delimitation of social identity would continue to occur as standards for the classification of federal data on population because of conceptual and affect problems that occurred in interviews that were conducted to try new versions of race and ethnicity questions. "Many respondents were uncomfortable answering any question about race, because they feared the questionnaire was really about racism, and...a covert attempt to learn if they were really racist" (McKay & del la Puente, 1995, p. 4). Interview questions were based upon a technical frame of reference for collection of data needed to monitor policy prescriptions rather than local knowledge (cf. Pike, 1954). Questions asked included, "Please tell me what you think is the most important characteristic that defines race [and] Do you think there is any difference between race, ethnicity, and ancestry?.... Several respondents thought the [interviewer] was asking about the ethical character of races. One [person] thought the word 'characteristic' meant that we were asking about [their]character" (McKay & del la Puente, 1995, p.4). Hence, by law and policy U.S. population means the marked standards designed by the Office of Management and Budget for collecting data on the race and ethnicity of broad population groups in this country, "and are not anthropologically or scientifically based" (Office of Management and Budget, 1997).

Examination of Congressional bills during 1997-1998 (<http://thomas.loc.gov>) also suggests that population issues will continue to be legislatively framed as population management, family planning, and ancestry and social - economic identity.

We question whether the consequence of continued use of a technical base for policy evaluation continues use of stereotypes. To counter myths or broad social meanings that shape experience and evaluation of attributes requires finding ways to "pay attention to the particulars, the specifics, the concrete reality, with all its blemishes and contradictions" (Lye, 1997, p. 2)

Under these circumstances, attempting to counter prevailing population ideology by further engaging in examining "practices of decoding and re-encoding, of translation and interlocution, and of rhetorical deconstruction" (Brown, 1995, p. 13) may seem foolhardy. Yet, Charles Goodwin (1994) argues that the phenomena of legal argumentation surrounding social policies be subjected to further attention as objects of knowledge that members of the profession can contest. In his article, "Professional Vision," Goodwin illustrates how the activities of coding, highlighting, and producing and articulating ways of seeing and interpreting, can be applied to the politics of representation. He believes this may occur as the following three questions are reformulated in a new era of studies on discursive practices used across social science: (a) What are the conditions in which modes of representations are accepted in social science and humanities as objective, valid, or legitimate? (b) How are accounts of social norms made adequate to their respective purposes and audiences through discursive and political practices? (c) How can sustaining interest in rhetorical analysis of genres or texts be directed towards attention to claims, proofs, and propositions as well as to the communicative contexts in which "members of a profession hold each other accountable and context the constitution and perception of the objects that define their professional competence" (p. 606).

Richard Brown (1995) has also produced a collection of arguments by anthropologists and sociologists to persuade others to make problematic the construction and presentation of representations by focusing on the how of representation—of objectivity, of native view, of group, of culture—and so forth (p.13). The unifying perspective presented by Brown, is that an emphasis on deconstruction and rhetorical analysis may counter current pessimism and suspicion flagged in both academic and public discourses on the limits of social science (cf. Wallat & Piazza, 1999).

According to John Van Maanen (1995), however, the consequences of the introspection of written representations of culture produced by specific ethnographers since the 1960s, as well as the spread of methodological self-consciousness across the "cultural representation business" remains to be seen. What is needed is examples of how this turn towards displaying problems that social science representations face, and cracking open representational practices alters—if at all—traditional practices in educational, community, and legal arenas (cf. Van Maanen, 1995).

The following section provides a compilation of such examples.

Focus on the Extent to Which the Term Should Be Taken in its Marked Sense, As Issues of Population versus the Representations of Populations

The value of Charles Briggs' advice to develop critiques of the concept population as a contrastive analysis of marked sense of the term in legal documents such as government standards for the classification of federal data on race and ethnicity, versus representations of populations that may demystify such standards through drawing attention to particulars of family and community experiences, is beginning to emerge in studies of school populations. For example, contrastive analysis is possible due to the availability of primary sources for reviewing school population issues as they are marked

in reports developed by The National Center for Educational Statistics (<http://nces.ed.gov>) through funding appropriated to this agency and a growing number of published collections of life experience narratives.

Recent ethnographies of African American and Asian American students and their teachers, families, and communities (e.g., Fordham, 1996; Lee, 1996), "pay attention to the particulars, the specifics, the concrete reality, with all its blemishes and contradictions" (Lye, 1997, p. 2). Analysis of the contributions of such studies is the researchers' ability to point out that a major consequence of population categories in educational domains is that "Whiteness remains the dominant racial ideology, not by promoting Whiteness as superior, but by promoting Whiteness as normative" (Spina & Tai, 1998, p. 36). For example, the population category "at risk youth" continues to be a term synonymous with Black, and Latino youth while Asian American students are represented as "academic superstars." The power of the dominant normative stance "does not stop at simply defining Others.... It supports the assumption that White youth are not all 'at risk' nor are they all 'academic superstars.'" This position grants White youth the privilege to determine their own academic destiny" (p. 36).

Reviewers of such ethnographies of students, teachers, families and communities (e.g. Sleeter, 1992) provide a means of publicly contesting limited knowledge of concrete realities of and continued use of "prefabricated panethnicity" (Spina & Tai, 1998, p. 40) such as White, Black, Hispanic and Latino in public discourse. Educational researchers are beginning to recognize that more can be learned about "how power lies not in the making of generalizations, but in making generalizations stick" (Spina & Tai, 1998, p. 36). As Greg Urban stated in his response to the year long *Anthropology Newsletter* discussion on the known and unknown in social science, the question should not be: What is the relationship between the culture being represented in an ethnography and the world. "Rather, because culture is both in the world and about the world, the question [we should be asking participants in our studies to help us explore is] What is the relationship between culture that is out there and culture that is a representation of what [you believe] is out there?" (Urban, 1997, p. 1). Compilations of stories of youth, families and communities, representing individuals' attempts to define their personal and social identity provide new images of the concept of power through considering how persons receive, resist, contest, or transform dominant representations.

Facing the Consequences of Traditional Research on Youth Development

The General Accounting Office (GAO) has identified 131 programs administered by 16 different federal departments and other agencies that direct four billion dollars a year at communities represented as disadvantaged to support the creation of empowerment zones, comprehensive community services delivered through schools, gang prevention efforts, and programs that serve runaway or delinquent youth (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1996). A study panel that produced the 1996 National Research Council (NRC) report "Youth Development and Neighborhood Influence: Challenges and Opportunities" (Chalk & Phillips, 1996) considered the long term gains and consequences of such federal support and concluded that investments in social strategies and community resources to promote youth development require "more attention to the types of social resources that youth seek out and create, as well as consideration of the ways in which youth gain information and control over their environment" (p.25).

The study panel also noted that such efforts require shifting from a prior problem

categories such as delinquency and dropping out of school to social setting perspectives and approaches that may stimulate "interest in recognizing how adolescents themselves perceive role models of successful adult behavior, how they protect themselves during periods of danger or uncertainty, and how they seek out individuals or groups that constitute community assets capable of helping" (Chalk & Phillips, 1996, p. 7).

The NRC report noted the contribution of private foundations to research and development efforts along these lines as well as pointing out that ethnographic research has alerted social science to new possibilities for research on family and community research and policy. Their Study Panel noted that research efforts that rely on demographic and census data to assess change and development within neighborhoods and examine pathways by which ethnicity and racial heritage messages affect youth development, "have revealed many uncertainties in understanding how teenagers negotiate critical transitions...the formation of self identity, and the selection of life options" (p.3). Examples of private foundations projects were noted as examples of ways of dealing with issues in the concept of population, with formulating new policies on children, youth and families, and with crafting new lines of research inquiry highlighting the need to integrate children, youth and family development literature with research on community development and organizations. Efforts mentioned include the Casey Foundation's nationwide *Kids Count* project to identify model programs and policies (<http://www.aecf.org>), the Ford Foundation's Community Revitalization programs (<http://www.fordfoundation.org>), the Carnegie Foundation on Adolescent Development (<http://www.carnegie.org>), and foundation sponsored research grants programs.

One such foundation's research grants program provides an excellent example of the questions, areas of inquiry, and framework for analysis described in the introduction section of this paper. The Spencer Foundation (<http://www.spencer.org>) supported a five-year study of 60 different organizations described by local city officials as located in " 'the projects,' 'the barrio,' or, alternately 'communities suffering from poverty, crime, [and] severe ethnic tensions'" (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993, p. 5).

The project called "Language, socialization, and neighborhood based organizations," included exploring how members of neighborhood based organizations in the 1990s perceive their social settings, as well as tracing 20th century family and youth policy notions (James, 1993). Fundamental differences among the crafters of youth policy and the youth from 60 different organizations who participated in this study ranged from perspectives on the role of ethnicity to types of processes and structures that set up contingent attributes of valuable life experiences. Youth avoid programs defined in terms of population policy labels and people as object statistics categories such as reduction in crime, lowered rates of school dropouts. Youth do not elect to participate in programs that label them as deviant, 'at risk,' or in some way deficient or negative. " 'What works' for inner city youth conforms to the contexts in which an activity is embedded and to the subjective realities of the youth it intends to advance, not to distant bureaucratic directives" (p. 227).

Summary

The formulation of population categories to aid in understanding the nature of people and the properties of sociocultural systems hold consequences for social science and public policy. Following scientific conventions, the many things that can be said or predicated of objects of inquiry can be subject to criticism of method and substance. Correspondingly, difficult questions have been raised for centuries about procedures for observing events, processes or phenomena glossed as the study of human nature.

However, changes in the world we have lived in during the past few decades have brought a host of new, more concrete issues into the social science intellectual agenda (Greenhaugh, 1995). Concepts, categories and representations of people are being scrutinized in terms of how events, processes or phenomena are ordered and denoted.

Major consequences of the realities of funding formulas based upon statistical meanings of people that began taking hold in the 17th century are being uncovered as organizations attempt to serve youth and families. The challenge to explicate and use local knowledge in contrast to relying on a prior categories of people in the design and delivery of services is being formulated in reports of personal life experiences of health, education and social service providers and the children, youth and families who constitute the pluralistic community of these dominant social institutions. Such life experience stories explicate patterns of exclusion, as well as elicitation methods for overcoming patterns of silence about exclusion (e.g., Davidson, 1996, McCarthy, 1997, Miron, 1996, Munoz, 1995, Olsen, 1997, Pang & Cheng, 1998, Spindler & Spindler, 1994; Wallat & Steele, 1997).

As Kenneth Pike (1954) pointed out nearly a half century ago when he introduced the concepts of emic and etic knowledge, the foundation for documenting the structure of local knowledge including how individuals receive or resist dominant representations such as ethnic identity stands in sharp contrast to continuing to document categories of people marked by statisticians as a means of collecting technical descriptions of objects.

Note

Portions of this paper were presented at the American Anthropology Association Annual Meeting, December 1998, Philadelphia.

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