

Chapter 64

Analytical and Methodological Considerations for the Use of Social Categories in Identity Research

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the limitations of measuring identities as based on pre-selected categories, such as 'immigrant' or 'Third Culture Kid', within which the individuals are placed according to particular criteria. Simplified, etic categories fail to mirror the complex identifications of the contemporary individual and strengthen essentialism related to ethnicities, cultures and religions. This paper discusses the problematic related to categorization at both analytical and methodological levels. The need for critical reflection on the use of social categories to portray identities is highlighted in general. The adequacy of surveys to measure and examine identities is questioned in particular. This paper illustrates the need to approach identities from emic-etic perspectives and multiple angles in order to grasp a more multilayered view into the complex nature of identity.

INTRODUCTION

The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story. (Adichie, 2009)

Social categories have a long history within social sciences (Wiley & Revenson, 2012). Human beings think through categories, and as long as humans have existed, different categories have existed. People use categories like black, white, French, Christian, gay, or Hispano - in order to comprehend the social

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environment around them and to position themselves within the complex network of social settings in everyday life. This positioning is a two-dimensional process, which happens both by self-categorization, continuous re-categorization and by external labeling. Deaux (2012) talks about ‘actor’ and ‘observer’ categories respectively. However, although an individual may voluntarily identify with the social category s/he is placed in externally, for example being a ‘Muslim’, it is problematic to think that there is an isomorphism between the ‘actor’ and ‘observer’ categories. It is of essence to understand that despite the same category name, different processes, understandings and power structures are involved (Deaux, 2012).

In order to make this distinction clearer, this paper proposes going back to the concepts of ‘etic’ and ‘emic’ coined by linguistic anthropologist Kenneth Pike (1954), with *etic* referring to objective or ‘observer’ accounts, and *emic* referring to subjective or ‘actor’ accounts. Participant-generated, *emic* research aims to understand original phenomenon in its own context and to generate descriptions with criteria chosen from within the system (Berry, 1989, p. 722). Identity categories are often operated within researcher-generated, *etic* research. In this context, categories are typically used to produce an overall view of how typical particular identifications are among a large number of people in a particular society or across countries, or to explore differences between social categories, like ethnic groups, in outcomes such as health (Pearson & Geronimo, 2011) or educational inequality (Stevens, 2007), for example.

However, social categories are mere social constructs embedded in specific times and contexts (Wiley & Revenson, 2012). As societies are undergoing rapid demographic changes and the ‘mixedness’ of individuals is increasing, it is timely to reevaluate the use of social categories in public discourses in general and in research in particular. First of all, what is the gain of operating with these categories while at the same time their boundaries become more and more blurred in societies (De Vidas & Hoffmann, 2012)? When mobility and dislocation are consistent features of everyday life for more and more people (today, more than 230 million people live outside their birth country; UN 2013), who can be categorized, for example, as ‘immigrant’ and across how many generations does this category apply? Second, research operating with pre-determined social categories may only reflect the researcher’s often outsider, *etic* understanding of the phenomena in question. It is rooted in subjectively construed presuppositions and stereotypes about the characteristics of each group, which consequently become framed in the categories (Prentice & Miller, 2007). This leads us to the question of whose ‘truth’ is being measured with social categories and what kind of knowledge they can produce? Can one really examine and understand people’s multiple identifications through the use of clear-cut, generalizing social categories in research?

In this regard, this article critically reviews, through examples from previous identity studies, the inclination and possible problematic of many traditional research designs to present and measure identity based on pre-selected categories, such as a particular ethnic or religious identity, within which the individuals are positioned by someone who has the authority and power to do this — typically the researcher. As identities that for long defined the social and cultural world of modern societies (i.e. ethnicity, race, class, nationality etc.) have been weakening (Bauman, 1996) and the understanding of identity has shifted during the past few decades, the research methods and tools to examine it need to be re-thought accordingly. This paper discusses the use of social categories at two different levels. First, at *analytical level* considering the compatibility of social categories with the post-modern conceptions of identity, the power differentials and political agendas involved, and the consequences of the use of social categories at individual and societal levels. Second, at *methodological level* considering the problems embedded in research designs, measures and terminology used to create social categories to describe individual

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