

How should the diverse origins of people living in France be described? An exploratory survey of employees' and students' perceptions

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Should we abandon the French republican principle of non-differentiation and establish permanent statistics on the origins of the French population in order to combat discrimination? If so, what criteria should be taken into account? Reported origin, origin of parents and grandparents, or ethnic origin? And how should individual privacy be protected? Patrick Simon and Martin Clément have assessed the consistency of different methods used to record origins in various administrations and companies, while measuring the respondents' reactions to the questions asked.

Be they of French or foreign nationality, many people living in France are subject to racial discrimination. INSEE, INED and CEREQ (1) have shown, for example, that for a comparable level of education and social status, the descendants of North African immigrants are less likely to find a job than young people of Portuguese or French origin. But the parents' country of birth is only one way of defining people exposed to discrimination. Visible traits such as skin colour are also a component of racial prejudice. Witness, for example, the difficulties faced by French citizens of the Caribbean looking for a place to live in mainland France.

To combat inequality of treatment linked to ethnic or racial origin, inequality must be measured and origins identified. A judicious statistic might reuse, for completely opposite ends, the same criteria that form the very basis of discrimination. But a reappropriation of this kind prompts many questions [1] [2]. What variables should be used in sample surveys conducted by researchers or public statistical bodies? What about the administrative data files kept by public authorities and employers? Several official reports have pinpointed the inadequacies of the French statistical system in this area, as have a number of business corporations, signatories of a "diversity charter" [3,4]. The French data

protection agency (CNIL) has recognized the legitimacy of the ends pursued, but has invited employers to "refrain from collecting data relating to actual or assumed racial or ethnic origin" in view of the "absence of a nationally accepted definition of 'ethno-racial' categories" (recommendation of 5/5/2005).

To contribute to the debate on this highly sensitive issue, INED ran an experimental survey called "*Mesure de la diversité*" (measuring diversity) to test different methods for reporting national or ethnic origins and to record the respondents' reactions (see box 1).

◆ Three approaches to origins: information on ascendants, reported origin, "ethno-racial" identity

Three methods were tested: collecting data on ascendants (respondents' country of birth and nationality, that of their parents and grandparents), asking respondents to choose their origin from a predefined list (with two variants: a list of regions of the world and a list of nationalities) and lastly, and asking them to choose their "ethno-racial" affiliation from a list based on the British census and adapted to the situation in France.

Though the survey was by no means representative of France as a whole, the respondents' answers reveal the extent of mixing that can occur over three generations. For half of the respondents born in France, at least one in six of their parents or grandparents were

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(1) See the list of acronyms page 4.

born abroad, and for one-third, the proportion was at least one in three. Logically, the proportion is highest (91%) for immigrants. These factual data were compared with reported origins using a list of regions of the world. Not all individuals with multiple origins – both French and foreign – claim an affiliation with their foreign ascendants. For the two main origins represented – North Africa and southern Europe – 85% and 75% respectively of respondents who reported having ascendants born in these regions describe themselves as being from these regions too, in part at least. The others, i.e. 15% and 25%, prefer to see themselves as entirely French, thereby expressing their attachment to the national identity.

The transition from a description of one's origins to that of one's "ethno-racial" identity is a delicate one. The ethno-racial stereotypes such as "White", "Black", "Arab or Berber" or "Asian" commonly used in Anglo-

Box 1

The "measuring diversity" survey

Funded by FASILD and commissioned by the French Ministry for Equal Opportunities, the "measuring diversity" survey was conducted between November 2005 and March 2006 in seven companies (Axa, SNCF, Eau de Paris, L'Oréal, Adecco, Ranstad, ED), three universities (Villetaneuse, Evry and Paris VIII) one teachers' training college in the Paris region and one local government body (Conseil Régional d'Île de France). The questionnaire was filled in by 1,327 employees and students who are not representative of the entities where they work or study, or of France as a whole. Efforts were made however to choose survey sites where a wide range of hierarchical levels and origins were represented among respondents.

Four discussion groups (50 employees) were organized to record employees' interpretations of the notion of diversity and to test their reaction to the questionnaire.

The first part of the questionnaire records standard information (sex, age, educational level, length of tenure, social status and background), plus three methods for recording respondents' origins. The first asks for the nationality and country of birth of ascendants (parents and grandparents). The second asks the following direct question: "You would say that you are from..." and gives two lists, one based on the regions of the world (African, West Indian or Caribbean, Asian, North African, European, French) and the other on countries (French, Algerian, Portuguese, Senegalese, Turkish, etc.). The third classification mixes categories qualified as "ethno-racial" (as does the American Census Bureau): "Would you say that you are... White, Black, Arab or Berber, Asian, from the Indian sub-continent?". Multiple answers were possible for the second and third methods. Respondents were then invited to give their opinion of these three types of classification, in general terms to begin with ("Do you feel any unease..." on a scale of 1 to 5), then depending on the context of use (employer's files, administrative files, scientific surveys, census). They were then asked about the conditions that would need to be satisfied if such methods were to be used by employers. Lastly, to shed light on their attitudes and positions, they were asked for their opinions about diversity in the workplace and the fight against discrimination in France.

Saxon statistics are reserved for private usage only in France. Their use is highly ambivalent, either perceived as a form of pejorative labelling, or as an assertion of identity. When asked to place themselves in these "ethno-racial" categories, generally perceived as contrary to the French republican principle of non-differentiation, 94% of respondents agreed to do so. Though they were able to choose more than one category, 91% only chose one. The remaining 9% of "mixed race" were not a random group: only 10% of those who chose "White" also selected another category, compared with a quarter of those who chose "Black" and half of those who opted for "Arab or Berber", most often in combination with "White". Given that ascendants may have multiple origins, the choice of origin does not necessarily coincide with the country of birth or the ascendants' nationalities. The "ethno-racial" category can be deduced from the geographical origin however. In 95% of cases, the reported origin is African or Caribbean for persons who report themselves to be exclusively "Black" and North African or African for those who class themselves as "Arab or Berber". Conversely, if the reported category is "mixed race" (combining "White", "Black", or "Arab or Berber"), the reported origins are more diverse.

Does self-defined identity (auto-identification) encompass an individual's identity as he/she imagines it to be perceived by others (hetero-identification)? A survey question on this point revealed considerable congruence between the two. Significant discrepancies exist however: 3% of persons defining themselves as "White" think that they are perceived as "Arab or Berber", 9% of persons who say they are "Black" think they are seen as mixed race "Black-White", while 18% of the "Arab or Berber" category imagine that they are classed by others in the "Black" or "White" categories. The differences are largest among persons claiming to be of "mixed race" who imagine that others see them as "White", "Black" or "Arab or Berber".

◆ Do grandparents' origins really weigh in the balance?

The survey sheds light on another key question. What can be gained from adding information on grandparents when we already know the parents' country of birth or nationality? We found that it increases the number of persons with southern European origins by 43%, though the number of those with ties to North Africa rises by only 7%, and those with ties to sub-Saharan Africa or the French overseas départements by just 12%. In short, data on two generations is sufficient to correctly determine the origins of groups exposed to discrimination, though this congruence no longer applies for the descendants of earlier migrants.

There are large discrepancies between origins over two generations and self-reported origin. Only 55% of persons who chose an African origin were born in Africa or had at least one African-born parent. The proportion was 60% for persons reporting a Caribbean

origin and 89% for those claiming North African origin. These variations illustrate the subjective nature of choices of origin and the ambivalence of the geographical references used in the list of choices offered.

The links between origin over two generations and the choice of an "ethno-racial" category reveal the strong homogeneity of European and French origins, classed in the "White" category in 95% of cases. While 18% of French people with origins in the overseas *départements* over two generations place themselves in the "mixed race" category, those from sub-Saharan Africa mainly see themselves as "Black". North Africans opt for a much broader range of classifications, with 39% choosing "mixed race", 47% "Arab or Berber" and almost 13% seeing themselves as exclusively "White".

◆ **A sense of unease with the ethno-racial approach**

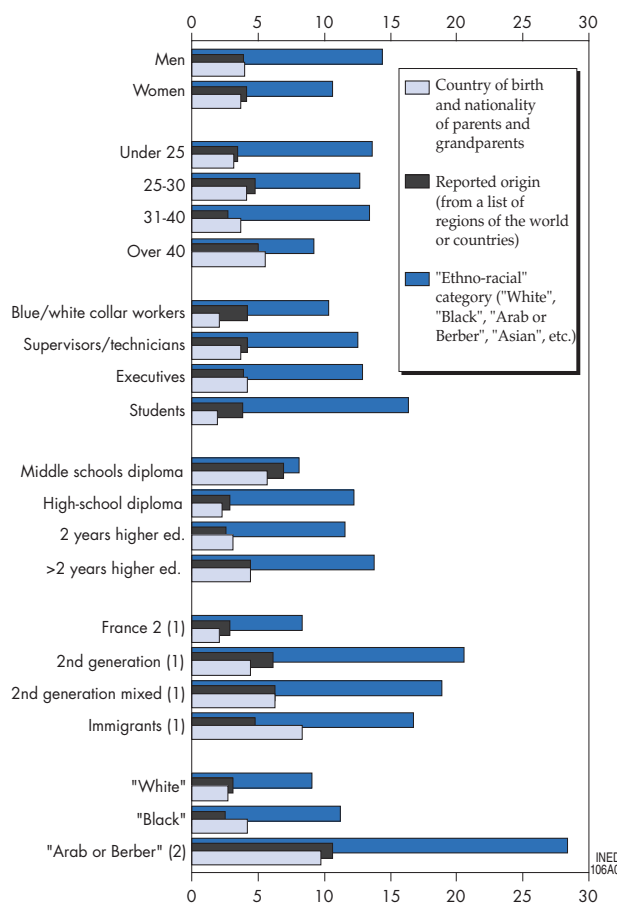
How do respondents react to the three different identification methods proposed? The questionnaire began by asking respondents to give their overall opinion. Classification by ascendants' origin or geographical origin was well accepted, with 96% of respondents readily agreeing to answer the question. However, 12% noted that they felt a certain sense of unease or a strong sense of unease (grades 4 and 5 on the proposed scale) about placing themselves in an "ethno-racial" category.

The positions adopted vary little with the standard socio-demographic markers such as sex and age, level of education or social status (Figure). They depend above all on the individuals' proximity to the stigmatized categories. Immigrants and their direct descendants are twice as reticent as the average when faced with the question of "ethno-racial" categories. Reticence is also stronger among persons who classify themselves as "Arab or Berber". Though "Whites" are more willing to label themselves in this way, the same is true for "Blacks", thus refuting the idea that the minorities most exposed to discrimination are the most wary of racial stereotyping. When asked about their parents and grandparents, the respondents who most frequently rejected the "ethno-racial" labels were those of North African origin, though they were nevertheless a minority. Reticence was expressed most commonly among students and "second-generation" employees.

◆ **Personnel files much more sensitive than the census**

Respondents were then asked to say how they felt about the use of identification methods in real-life situations (by employers, administrations, in scientific surveys, in the census), and these questions prompted much more varied reactions. Respondents were particularly hostile to the inclusion of data on ethnic identity in personnel and administrative files. One-fifth were opposed to the recording of information on their own or their ascendants' origin and one-third to the

Figure – Proportion of respondents who are ill at ease or very ill at ease with the three methods of recording origins, by personal characteristics



(1) "France 2": person born in France with both parents born in France; "2nd generation": born in France with two immigrant parents; "2nd generation mixed": born in France with one immigrant parent and one French-born parent.

(2) The "Asian" and "Indian sub-continent" categories are too small to be shown here

Source: "Measuring diversity" survey, INED, Nov. 2005 – March 2006. Nationally non-representative sample of employees and students

recording of "ethno-racial" categories. Opposition was most frequent among persons placing themselves in the "Arab or Berber" category (52%).

The negative response to inclusion of data in employers' files is tempered by the possibility of defining guarantees regarding the use of information collected or the involvement of an independent body. When presented with this option, the proportion of respondents rejecting the use of "ethno-racial" categories in this type of file falls from one third to a quarter (27%). The differences between the groups remain unchanged, with 37% of "Arabs or Berbers" (versus 52%), remaining hostile notwithstanding the guarantees provided, compared with 21% of "Blacks" and 25% of "Whites". This relatively high refusal rate would make the adoption of such a system very difficult at the present time.

However, the idea of asking such questions in scientific surveys or in the census is widely approved, for all categories of respondents. Even the "ethno-racial" classification is accepted unreservedly by 72%

of respondents for scientific surveys and by 68% for the census. Variations by socio-demographic characteristics or by "ethno-racial" category remain small, indicating an overall consensus.

These results must be interpreted in the light of the current French context, where references to origin are too often used to stigmatize the populations concerned. Overall, the people interviewed for this experiment were consistent in their response. They are receptive to the idea of establishing "statistics of origins" while remaining reasonably cautious. They make a clear distinction between data that serves knowledge (surveys and census) and data used by employers or administrations. Many fear that data on individual origins in administrative files might be used abusively for discriminatory

Box 2

INED and the debate on "diversity" statistics

What statistical tools are available in France for fighting ethnic or racial discrimination? Two cases need to be considered: that of research data, and that of administrative data.

The national statistics office and research statisticians conduct sample surveys to improve overall knowledge, though the data collected remains strictly anonymous. These surveys have no impact on the respondents' individual destinies. The questionnaires may explore origins (parents' country of birth for example) or collect sensitive data (such as religious affiliation or physical appearance), provided that the questions asked are relevant to the survey's declared objective and that the respondents give their prior consent. The French data protection agency grants considerable freedom to statisticians and researchers in this domain.

This is certainly not the case for administrative files affecting individuals' lives, whose contents are permanent, exhaustive and nominative (files on personnel, students, tenants, etc.). French legislation rules out the inclusion of data on origin or physical appearance in such files. This approach is radically different from the methods adopted in Anglo-Saxon countries, where employers are legally obliged to collect such data with the aim of fighting discrimination.

Though it is perfectly legitimate for INED researchers to produce anonymous research files to study the effects of origins on life trajectories, they have absolutely no reason to produce permanent statistics on "diversity" for use in the administrative files of employers and administrations. On this point, the opinions of researchers are necessarily diverse. All are entitled to express their personal opinions publicly, while indicating their affiliation with INED (which obeys the same rules as the large research establishments). But what is the position of INED as an institution? Unlike CNIL or HALDE [5], INED cannot take sides in the public debate, though its duty is to nurture this debate by provide data that is as objective as possible, and whose scope must be clearly specified. Such data may be produced on the initiative of INED researchers or at the request of official government bodies. For the exploratory survey described here, INED submitted a proposal to the signatories of the "diversity charter" via an official body, the FASILD.

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purposes. They are not convinced by the guarantees provided and cannot really see what purpose is served.

Clearly, this exploratory survey needs to be taken further. The next stage would be to conduct a representative survey on a national scale, with a more detailed questionnaire on the experience of discrimination and more representative of the diversity of situations. It would provide all players – employers, administration, government authorities, associations and trade unions – with the information they need to ensure that improved statistics tools on origins serve to combat discrimination more effectively rather than exacerbate the problem.

List of acronyms

CEREQ: Centre d'études et de recherches sur les qualifications (training policy research centre),

CNIL: Commission nationale de l'informatique et des libertés (French data protection agency),

FASILD: Fonds d'action et de soutien pour l'intégration et la lutte contre les discriminations (action and support fund to promote integration and combat discrimination),

HALDE: Haute autorité de lutte contre les discriminations et pour l'égalité (government authority for fighting discrimination and promoting equality),

INSEE: Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques (National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies).

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ABSTRACT

In a country with a long history of population mixing, defining criteria for identifying origins that are both objective and acceptable to everyone is a difficult task. Though respondents do not oppose the principle of reporting family and individual geographical origins, many are ill at ease with the notion of "ethno-racial" classification.

The survey also shows that respondents' reported origin reflects a choice rather than an accurate description of ascendants' countries of birth and nationalities. There is a close correspondence however between reported origin and ethno-racial category. Moreover, while in favour of collecting statistics on origins for scientific purposes, the respondents are wary of their inclusion in the personnel files of employers' or administrations.