The point of the following discussions of what we have called quasi-facts is not to suggest that such measurements are of doubtful value. It is rather to indicate that much of what we need to learn about our society forces us to deal with phenomena that are subjective in part, if not in whole; and that the solution of simply ignoring the subjective realm is not a feasible one.

4

The Subjectivity of Ethnicity

Tom W. Smith

Basic background variables are commonly seen as concrete and objective factors. In fact they often have a large subjective component. Ethnicity is a prime example. First there is the difficult problem of defining what ethnicity is. It is most frequently seen as some form of a cultural heritage or identification that is defined by some combination of nationality, language, religion, and race (Isajiw, 1974). We will not even try to disentangle how one plucks "ethnicity" out of these and related factors. Are Jews from Poland Jews, Poles, Polish Jews, or Jewish Poles? If we look at Catholic and Protestant Germans, do we see two ethnic groups or one ethnic group broken down by religion? Are West Indian blacks in the United States blacks, West Indians, some combination, or Africans? Are Creoles and Amerindians of Mexico both Mexican, both Hispanic, or separate? Are people from Sicily Sicilians or Italians? Certainly we could promulgate a complex set of standards to objectively resolve these and a long string of related ambiguities, but while perhaps objective in the sense of being susceptible to consistent repetitive application by different enumerators, such standards would be based on arbitrary classifications that undermine a full sense of objectiveness.

This chapter concentrates on the narrower problem of nationality.[1] Most social scientists give more weight or emphasis to this factor in their conceptualization and/or classifications, and people usually express their ethnicity in what might be considered nationality groups. If we count nationality

groups within multinational states as nationalities (for example, Serbs and Croatians), then almost all respondents respond to even vague terms such as "origin," "ancestry," or "descent" in terms of nationality. (The major exceptions are blacks, who will either respond in terms of their race or with a general reference to Africa.)

Attempts to determine nationality use three basic approaches: (1) the natal, (2) the behavioral, and (3) the subjective.[2] The natal approach identifies a respondent's nationality by determining a person's place of birth, the places of birth of his or her parents, grandparents, and so forth. The behavioral approach determines a respondent's nationality according to some practice, affiliation, or membership such as language spoken or voluntary group membership. The subjective approach simply asks respondents what nationality they consider themselves to be or where their ancestors came from.

The natal approach to ethnicity is typified by the traditional item used by the Bureau of the Census. It asks the places of birth of the respondent and his or her mother and father:

13a. WHERE WAS THIS PERSON BORN? If born in hospital, give State or country where mother lived. If born outside U.S., see instruction sheet: distinguish Northern Ireland from Ireland (Eire).

___This State
OR _____
(Name of State or foreign country; or Puerto Rico, Guam, etc.)

14. WHAT COUNTRY WAS HIS FATHER BORN IN?
___United States
OR _____
(Name of State or foreign country; or Puerto Rico, Guam, etc.)

15. WHAT COUNTRY WAS HIS MOTHER BORN IN?
___United States
OR _____
(Name of State or foreign country; or Puerto Rico, Guam, etc.)

A variant of this approach, used by the Michigan Election Studies, asks parallel information about the respondent and his or her parents, but then inquires about the general ancestral origins of respondents who are third (or later) generation:

1. Where were you born? (IF UNITED STATES) Which state?
2. Were both your parents born in this country?

—If response to Q. 2 was "no":
2A. Which country was your father born in?
2B. Which country was your mother born in?

—If response to Q. 2 was "yes" or "don't know":
2C. Do you remember which country your family came from originally on your father's side?
2D. Do you remember which country your family came from originally on your mother's side?

This begins to shift from being an objective measure to a subjective or self-identification measure. Inquiring about "which country your family came from" does not measure the national origins of the respondent's ancestors as a whole, but rather elicits a single origin from among potentially several different ancestral lines. A strict (although obviously impractical) natal approach would inquire about the place of birth of all ancestors until all lines were traced back to a country of origin.

This shift from the objectivity of place of birth to the subjectivity of self-identification proceeds one step further in a standard Michigan Election Study question which asks: "In addition to being an American, what do you consider your *main* ethnic or nationality group?" This question emphasizes one's "main" background but does not make clear how this concept is to be operationalized. Furthermore, the question moves away from the place-of-birth definition by referring to "ethnic or nationality group" rather than to country of origin in a geopolitical sense. Similar in kind is the Current Population Survey (CPS) item asking: "What is _____'s origin or descent?" The CPS establishes no criteria and uses the somewhat less specific terms "origin" and "descent." Likewise, the 1980 Census asked: "What is this person's ancestry? IF UNCERTAIN ABOUT HOW TO REPORT ANCESTRY: SEE INSTRUCTION GUIDE. (For example, Afro-Amer., English, French, German, Honduran, Hungarian, Irish, Italian, Jamaican, Korean, Lebanese, Mexican, Nigerian, Polish, Ukrainian, Venezuelan, etc.)" The question uses the very vague term "ancestry" (although from its examples it makes clear that it is referring to nationality) and offers no criteria for determining ancestry. The instructions make the nationality reference explicit, stating, "Ancestry (or origin or descent) may be viewed as the nationality group, the lineage, or the country in which a person or person's parents or ancestors were born before their arrival in the United States." The instructions also set a general standard for handling multiple nationalities: "Persons who are of more than one origin and who cannot identify with a single group should print their multiple ancestry (for example, German-Irish)." The instructions also make explicit the subjective component in the question by telling the informant to "Print the ancestry group

with which the person *identifies.*" In sum, by failing to collect detailed information on nativity and asking people to select an ancestry on the basis of identification, the 1980 Census has established a largely subjective measure of ethnicity.

Even more explicitly subjective is the General Social Survey (GSS) (Davis, Smith, and Stephenson, 1980) question that asks: "From what countries or part of the world did your ancestors come? IF MORE THAN ONE COUNTRY IS NAMED: Which of these countries do you feel closer to?" Not only is no criterion specified by which to choose between origins in the initial question, but in the followup question, people giving multiple origins are told to use a subjective standard—feeling closer to—rather than to choose a particular lineage or their most frequent origin.

Clearly the line between the natal and subjective approaches is often a fine one. In general one passes from the natal approach when one moves from asking information about the place of birth of specific persons (the respondent and his or her ancestors) to nonspecific information about one's background, descent, ethnicity, nationality, or origin.

More clearly separated from the natal or subjective approaches is the behavioral approach, which classifies a person according to some practice or affiliation such as language spoken or membership in certain voluntary associations. An example of the language approach comes from the 1970 Census, which inquires: "What language, other than English, was spoken in this person's home when he was a child?"[3] The affiliation approach is commonly used when a list sample is employed to select respondents. Under this method, membership in the association that the list represents becomes the definition of nationality. This might include congregations, mutual benefit societies, or other groups (for examples, see Vrga, 1971; Masuda, Matsumoto, and Meridith, 1970; Barton, 1975). Also included in this approach are lists based on such documents as baptismal and marriage registers (which frequently include persons who are not actually members of such congregations). Another hypothetical example would be a survey that asked a series of ethnic-orientation questions (such as foods eaten, music preferred, and so forth) and then assigned ethnicity according to the responses.

Each of these approaches has particular strengths and weaknesses. We can broadly evaluate them by considering how each handles three major problems in measuring ethnicity: (1) nonidentification, (2) multiple identification, and (3) misidentification. Ideally, an ethnic measure would maximize the number of identifications, simplify the handling of multiple nationalities, and minimize erroneous identifications. No approach (nor any combination) can avoid or solve these problems completely, since nonidentification and multiple identification are intrinsic to the subject, and misidentification results from the general and basic problem of measurement

error aggravated by the complexity of categorizations and situations. The approaches do vary, however, in how well they deal with each of these problems.

A basic drawback of the two relatively objective approaches (natal and behavioral) is that they lead to a much higher rate of nonidentification than the subjective approach. Responses to the 1970 Census nativity question, for example, showed that only 4.7 percent of the population were immigrants, and 11.8 percent were native-born of foreign-born or mixed parentage. That leaves without any indication of ethnicity the 83.5 percent who were native-born of native-born parents. In theory one could extend the nativity question back until each ancestral line was traced to foreign shores, but this is impossible since the number of ancestors increases geometrically across generations, while knowledge declines in a similarly precipitous fashion. Approximately 56 percent of the adult population report that all four of their grandparents were native-born. For this large segment of the population, the place of birth of at least eight great-grandparents (and many more ancestors if all eight were not foreign-born) would have to be known in order to have complete information. This is well beyond the knowledge of most people.[4] Without complete information, identification could be made only by assuming that the missing data agreed with the available data or via some other imputation procedure.

The behavioral approach suffers even more seriously from nonidentification. The 1970 Census found that only 12 percent of the population did not report English as their native language, and the General Social Surveys find that only 3 percent of adults report membership in a "nationality group." Again, in theory one could extend this approach across generations, but the results would probably be even less fruitful than in the case of nativity.

Only the subjective approach succeeds in classifying a substantial majority of people. The GSS question elicited some ethnic identification from 86 percent of the population (during the period 1972–80), while in the 1976 Michigan Election Study, 89 percent of the white population mentioned an ethnicity. In sum, nonidentification is a general problem, and there remains a significant share of the population (10 to 15 percent) with no meaningful ethnic identification. The subjective questions do, however, minimize the problem by asking for a simple, summary identification, while the more objective approaches, by necessitating more voluminous and exact information than typical respondents possess, are able to come up with complete nativity data for only a minority of the population.

The performance of the strictly natal approach can be enhanced considerably, however, if it is modified to ask about the general ancestral origins of people of the third (or perhaps fourth) generation, as in the Michigan Election Study example cited above. In the 1972 Michigan Election Study, for instance, 62 percent of the third-generation white Americans were able to

give both maternal and paternal ancestral origins, and 18 percent more were able to specify the origin of one lineage. This modification of the natal approach greatly reduces the problem of nonidentification, but only by abandoning a strictly natal approach for a hybrid of the natal and subjective.

Nonidentification can also be minimized by the use of a combination of approaches. While a simple subjective question identifies a high proportion of all possible identifiers (see Smith [1980] on the reason for nonidentification), a natal approach or hybrid approach can identify the national origins of an additional segment of the population. In the 1972–74 Michigan Election Studies, for example, the additional information from the hybrid approach reduced the portion of whites unidentified on the subjective question from 28 percent to 12 percent.

In sum, nonidentification is an intrinsic problem. Even given the best possible combination of approaches, 10 to 15 percent of Americans have no ethnic identification and no information on their national origins. The nonresponse problem can be minimized by combining a subjective question with a natal or hybrid natal-subjective item. As a single item the subjective approach is most useful; strictly natal and behavioral approaches identify a smaller proportion of people.

The second major problem in ethnic identification is just the opposite of nonidentification (that is, overidentification or multiple-identification). On the 1972–80 General Social Surveys, 35 percent of respondents named two or more countries when asked about their national origins. In addition, the 1980 GSS found that among those who named one ethnicity, 24 percent mentioned two or more nationalities for their parents. For these people the task is to try to sort out a main ethnicity or to otherwise handle the multiple identification. The natal approach generates a large and rich array of identifications, but contains no device to distill the data or select a main identification. Several solutions are available for handling multiple ethnicities on nativity questions:

1. Each combination could be treated as a separate group. Thus English and German as well as English-German would be groups. This would soon lead to so many combinations with minuscule numbers that most would have to be collapsed into a residual of other combinations.
2. A simple trichotomy of all-English, some English, and no English could be established, but this would obviously hamper interethnic comparisons.
3. A set of rules to choose a primary ethnicity could be devised. If, for example, a person reports one Danish and three Swedish grandparents, then it might be reasonable to code Swedish as the primary nationality. Unfortunately the difference is often less clear—such as choosing between parents with different nationalities (for example, one Irish and one Swiss) or between grandparents

with multiple ethnicities (for example, one Irish, one Irish-English, one Polish, and one Lithuanian). In the 1980 GSS, of those giving nationalities for both parents, 43.2 percent had parents with a single, common nationality; 8.7 percent had different mixtures of nationalities but one shared nationality; and 48.1 percent had different nationalities for their parents. Under these common circumstances the assigning of a primary nationality would be impossible or arbitrary.

The behavioral approach does not typically have much of a problem with overidentification (since it suffers so severely from nonidentification), but if it was extended across generations, it would have the same problem as the nativity question does. The subjective alternative either minimizes the problem of multiple identification by asking for a simple summary nationality, as the Michigan Election Study question does, or by asking people to choose between nationalities on some subjective ground. The GSS, for example, asks people giving two or more nationalities: "Which one of these countries do you feel closer to?" The 1980 Census instructions ask for the ancestry a person "identifies" with. These kinds of followups can greatly simplify the problem of ethnic identification. On the 1972–80 General Social Surveys, for example, 68.5 percent of those naming more than one nationality were able to name a primary ethnicity.

It can be fairly argued that complexity and detail are desirable attributes of an ethnic measure and that they should not be compressed away in analysis. Condensation, however, is often a practical necessity and may even be more meaningful than detailed information on the birthplaces of several generations of one's ancestors. Given that some simplification may be useful, the question becomes whether a genetic approach, such as nativity, or a subjective choice is more useful. Compare, for example, the approaches used in the Census and the GSS. In the 1970 Census, father's country of origin is used to determine a person's nationality when the parents have different nationalities. On the 1980 GSS we were able to compare the nationalities of parents with the summary nationality of the respondent. The standard GSS ethnicity question asked: "From what countries or part of the world did your ancestors come? IF MORE THAN ONE COUNTRY IS NAMED: which of these countries do you feel closer to?" As part of a supplement to the 1980 survey, respondents were asked the country of birth of their parents. For parents born in the United States respondents were asked: "What countries or parts of the world did your (mother's/father's) ancestors come from?" Up to two responses were coded for each parent.[5] We compared the summary nationality data from the standard GSS question with the parental nationality data. We looked at instances in which (1) different ethnicities were reported for the parents, (2) two different eth-

nicities were reported for the same parent, and (3) interparental and intraparental combinations of differences occurred. We found that among the cases where one or more different nationalities were reported for the parents, 20.4 percent had no ethnic identifications, 5.9 percent chose an identification different from that of either parent,[6] 14.5 percent selected an ethnicity shared by their parents, 26.4 percent chose their mother's ethnicity, and 35.8 percent chose their father's ethnicity. Among those who chose only between their parents, 58 percent selected the paternal line while 42 percent chose the maternal. This evidence indicates that the census had some basis for favoring paternal lineage over maternal, but in more than 40 percent of the cases it results in the assignment of an ethnic identity with which a respondent does not actually identify.

Depending on the research purpose, a person may wish to use various methods for handling multiple identities. In a study of Italian assimilation, for example, it might be desirable to include initially all people with any Italian lineage whether or not they identify themselves as Italian. Similarly, studies of father-son mobility have focused on paternal origins (Featherman and Hauser, 1978:523-528). An investigation of the pattern of ethnic identification might compare various nativity combinations with subjective identification. If the researcher is looking for a main identification, then subjective identification is probably more reasonable than is reliance on some type of genetic weighting or arbitrary assignment.

Finally, there is the problem of misidentification. Some misidentification is inevitable, given the vagaries of memory, misunderstandings, errors of transference, and so forth. In the natal approach the special type of misidentification that occurs involves disparities between place of birth and nationality. A strict geopolitical reporting will lose all "stateless" nationalities, such as Serbian, Kurdish, Walloon, French Canadian, Armenian, or Lithuanian. Such reporting will also be influenced by the shift of boundaries and the creation and destruction of states. Polish nativity prior to World War I is only discernible in the U.S. censuses by subtracting from the Russians, Germans, and Austro-Hungarians those with Polish as a mother tongue. Likewise, accidents of place of birth, such as birthplaces of children of military personnel or of those in the diplomatic corps, will confound the situation. Behavioral identifications such as mother tongue do not create as many problems as does geopolitical reporting, although it is impossible to distinguish between nationalities speaking the same language (for example, Irish, English, and Scottish; or German and Austrian). On the other hand, identification by mother tongue can separate out such groups as French Canadians, the Flemings and the Walloons, or the Serbians and the Croatians. The subjective approach can avoid the stateless nationality and boundary problem as long as it does not rigidly structure itself in terms of

geopolitical entities, but uses nationality groups as units instead. Likewise, accidents of place of birth will typically not confound the data, since the respondent will screen out such false evidence and report national identity instead. On the other hand, since the self-identification approach elicits an ethnicity from many more people than does the natal or behavioral approach, it includes many people with weak and nominal identification. As a result, it probably receives a higher proportion of labile responses than do the natal or behavioral approaches.

Thus, subjective identifications are likely to have lower test-retest reliability than the more objective measures. In addition, reliability would also tend to be lower since a person with multiple nationalities might switch his or her subjective identification depending on personal factors and social pressures (National Research Council, 1978).[7] Also, the subjective approach can lead to certain questionable or inappropriate classifications (similar to the birthplace of children of diplomats) such as the black Irishman who calls himself Spanish, or a person adopting a spouse's nationality.[8] In brief, by relying on the nation/state of birth, the natal approach will probably create more erroneous identifications than most behavioral approaches (for example, language) or the subjective approach, either of which would reduce mistakes due to geopolitical peculiarities and circumstances of birth. The subjective approach, however, may have lower test-retest reliability because it encompasses more weak identifiers.

The previous discussion shows that a strictly objective approach to the measurement of ethnicity and nationality is difficult because (1) many people lack sufficient information to supply complete data on ancestral national origins, (2) multiple nationalities create difficult problems for objective methods, (3) objective ways of handling multiple nationalities probably produce classifications that are less personally and sociologically meaningful than those of a subjective approach, and (4) emphasizing the country or place of birth distorts classifications because of multinational states, changed boundaries, national minorities, and other "accidents" of birth and geography. In sum, a solely objective approach to ethnicity or nationality would produce less information, take more effort, and result in less relevant data than an approach that incorporates a subjective element.

The limitations of the strictly natal approach are tacitly recognized by the fact that the standard ethnicity questions used by the government and academia (see page 119) all either implicitly or explicitly incorporate a subjective element (Lowry, 1980). The preferred approach will depend on the precise research objective, but generally a combination of all three methods would be desirable. Nativity questions provide important information on immigrant generations and heterogeneous lineage. A behavioral question such as that of language can clarify various ambiguous identities and pro-

vide evidence of the strength of the identification. A subjective approach will minimize nonidentification, handle multiple identifications in a simple and relevant fashion, and reduce some types of misidentifications. When used together, each method can both buttress data obtained by the others and add valuable additional information that is missed by them. In addition, by using all three methods along with other items on strength of identity, importance of identity, and behavioral consequences, we would be able to study the meaning, sources, and consequences of ethnicity.

In summary, the measurement of ethnicity and the narrower element of nationality involves a strong subjective aspect. This is apparent in most governmental and scholarly approaches. We have further found that if one is forced to rely on a quick and simple approach, a well-crafted subjective question is the best single indicator for most purposes. Even the preferred method—combining the behavioral, natal, and subjective approaches—depends in large part on a subjective element.

Notes

1. Schemes that use multiple variables to construct ethnic categories still collect the constituent parts as separate variables, so one is dealing with what usually are clearly distinguished components.

2. In addition to these, there are several other methods of identifying national origins, such as by surname or by physical characteristics. Neither these nor other techniques are generally reliable or commonly employed.

For example, the Current Population Survey (CPS) found that "among all persons with a Spanish surname in the United States in March 1971, only about two-thirds reported that they were of Spanish origin . . . among all persons in the United States who reported they were of Spanish origin, about two-thirds had a Spanish surname and one-third did not" (Bureau of the Census, 1975:2). On the difficulty of using surnames for classification in general, see American Council of Learned Societies (1932).

3. For problems with this item, see Bureau of the Census (1974).

4. Both because of mortality and associational patterns (that is, with each prior generation the ancestor is less likely to be alive during the respondent's lifetime, and, if alive, is likely to have less contact with the respondent), knowledge about ancestors quickly diminishes with each intervening generation. A National Opinion Research Center mobility study (Davis and Smith, 1980) found, for example, that while 98 percent of respondents knew their father's occupation, only 76 percent knew the occupation of their paternal grandfather. Knowledge about paternal great-grandfathers could be expected to decline as sharply. Schneider and Cottrell (1975:65-66) found that while 55 percent of their white, middle-class Chicago sample could give the first or last names of all four grandparents, only 14 percent could identify half

(four) of their great-grandparents. Among respondents with at least one native-born parent, paternal and/or maternal origin was unknown for 24 percent. Among the 76 percent with both a known maternal and paternal origin, few could probably successfully track all ancestral lines as a strict natal approach would require (see also Davis and Smith, 1980).

5. Only 20 percent of those with one nationality gave a second nationality, so the restriction to code only two nationalities per parent probably lost little information.

6. We looked at these odd cases in which a respondent reported an ethnicity different from that of either parent. Around a quarter were instances in which people expressed an ethnicity in different ways, such as Mexico versus Spain or England versus Canada. The other combinations are not readily explainable. They probably result from such factors as mixing references to natural and adopted parents, contradictions between place of birth and nationality, and coding or processing errors.

7. In 1973 and 1974, subsamples of the GSS were reinterviewed about 1 month later; 82 percent either selected an ethnicity or chose no identity both times. Among the consistent identifiers, 89 percent selected the same nationality. This gives 74 percent as consistently defining their ethnicity (or lack of same). This percentage tends to be lower than that for other demographics: 97 percent were consistent on region of residence at age 16, 92 percent on religious preference, 85 percent on father's education, 70 percent on community type at age 16, and 69 percent on number of siblings. The consistency was higher when collapsed ethnic groups were used. For example, using English versus non-English, 79 percent were consistent.

8. We assume that distortion from conscious attempts at racial/ethnic passing would be similar across approaches. A person wishing to be identified with a more prestigious nationality would presumably alter natal as well as subjective responses.

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5

Measuring Employment and Unemployment

Barbara A. Bailar and Naomi D. Rothwell

Whether a person is employed, unemployed, or out of the labor force may seem at first a factual item, and one that can easily be verified. There are people, however, for whom labor force status is an attitude that cannot be verified from records. Whether or not a person will be reported in statistical tabulations as employed, unemployed, or out of the labor force may depend on various factors such as the weather or the interviewer's skill; who responds for the person; the respondent's interest, mood, or perceptions about the purposes and uses of the interview; the time of day; who else is present; other things that happened that day; and the questions asked. The effects on labor force classification of some of these variables will be illustrated here after some facts about the Current Population Survey are described.

The Bureau of the Census conducts the Current Population Survey (CPS) monthly to estimate employment and unemployment. The survey, begun in 1940, has undergone a number of conceptual changes, which are described in the chapter on historical development of the 1979 report of the National Commission on Employment and Unemployment Statistics (1979: