

## On [not] doing integration via registration forms: Everyday category-making practices

Dvora Yanow  
Visiting Professor  
Department of Political Science  
Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences  
University of Amsterdam  
[d.yanow@uva.nl](mailto:d.yanow@uva.nl) [corresponding author]

Marleen van der Haar  
Lecturer and Postdoctoral Researcher  
Department of Political Science  
Faculty of Management Studies  
Radboud University Nijmegen  
[m.vanderhaar@fm.ru.nl](mailto:m.vanderhaar@fm.ru.nl)

Karlijn Völke  
Independent researcher  
[karlijnvolve@gmail.com](mailto:karlijnvolve@gmail.com)

### Abstract

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, enumerating the characteristics of its population according to various criteria and categories became one mark of the modern state. Today, various state-mandated practices are in use for counting a range of demographic traits and reporting on those findings. "Statistics" and "state," after all, share the same linguistic root and have been intertwined since that science's beginnings. Many states achieve such tabulation through a regular population census and/or statistical reports from other data sources. From one perspective, it is easy to think that such enumerations capture existing population traits exactly and precisely; the widespread respect accorded statistics as a science supports this. Over the last period of time, however, scholars analyzing the production of such demographic categories have argued for their ontological status as socially constructed concepts and ideas, rather than as objective mirrors of naturally-occurring phenomena. Still, it is not always easy to see these social construction processes as they unfold.

This paper seeks to capture such reality construction processes in a particular moment of time with respect to the creation of "race-ethnic" concepts and identities in The Netherlands, as these concepts – including their manifestation in *allochtoon* and *autochtoon* – are being created and used in specific practices of everyday (or quasi-everyday) life. Our data are the definitions-in-practice of "ethnicity" through categories in the commonplace forms used to register for various services, in various settings: signing a child up for school, requesting medical care, seeking employment, reporting a crime, and so on.

Carried out within a policy context (*Wet bescherming persoonsgegevens*) that seeks to protect individuals' privacy, including through regulating the collection of certain kinds of data, particularly those pertaining to "race," these registration

forms operationalize "ethnicity" and ascribe "ethnic" identity to individuals on the basis of one key characteristic: their or their parents' place of birth. Our analysis shows that this enterprise of registering "ethnic" origins is not as straightforward as it might seem, raising such questions as, What do Statistics Netherlands and other organizations actually convey through the reports derived from these data, and does the prohibition on using "race" really hold? What might appear to some as a neutrally scientific process of data collection and analysis is, instead, shown to be a political process in which some people get to define a set of identities for others and, through seemingly innocuous registration processes, impose these on them. Through such boundary-marking, integration policies are subverted, rather than supported.