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The Franco-Americans: Occupational Profiles

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Franco-Americans are Americans of French-Canadian or Acadian descent. Typically, they live in New England, although traditionally they have been found also in New York, Michigan, Illinois, Missouri, Louisiana, and today we find substantial numbers in Florida, California, and Texas. This analysis restricts itself to the Franco-Americans of New England. It is these nine hundred thousand persons which is the population of this paper.

The primary source of data for this paper is the 1970 census which asked a sample of the total population "What language was spoken in this person's home when he was a child?" It is a language background question and whatever its defects as an indicator of language ability, in 1970 it is still a good delineator of the size and distribution of the Franco-American group in which ancestral language maintenance had been high until well into the second quarter of this century. Like many social science indicators, the French mother tongue category may be a distorted mirror of the reality we want to study, but it is currently the best mirror we have. The Public Use Samples of Basic Records From the 1970 Census on tape¹ made it possible to create tables not found in the census itself. With the use of the SPSS subprogram Cross-tabs,² I have created social and economic profiles for the population of each of the New England states and Louisiana by French and English mother tongue. It is the occupational data from those cross-tabs which I will now describe, compare and attempt to explain.

The occupational description of the French males in the New England states (Table 1) in 1970 can best be summarized by their proportions in blue-collar occupations in Vermont and Connecticut, forty-five to sixty-seven percent. Let us compare the French males in the two southern-most states, industrialized Connecticut and Rhode Island. Both states have approximately the same proportion of French males in white-collar and blue-collar occupations, the major difference is that Connecticut has a greater proportion in skilled occupations (thirty-five percent) as compared to Rhode Island (twenty-seven percent).

For the females we find a variation in white-collar occupations of from thirty-six percent in New Hampshire to forty-eight percent in Vermont. These are neighboring states. The variations in blue-collar work are even more marked, one-fifth in Vermont to over two-fifths in New Hampshire and Rhode Island. For the women as with the men, the occupational patterns in Vermont are dissimilar to that of the other New England states.

If we compare the French women in the two southern industrialized states, Rhode Island and Connecticut, contrary to the male experience, we still find substantial differences. Connecticut has a third of its French women in blue-collar occupations whereas Rhode Island has nearly one-half. In fact, excluding Vermont, the most striking feature of the distribution of occupations among French women is the high proportion in semi-skilled blue-collar occupations, ranging from thirty per-

TABLE 1
Occupational Distribution of French Mother Tongue Persons By Sex,
New England States, 1970
(by percent)

	Male											
	Maine		New Hampshire		Vermont		Massachusetts		Connecticut		Rhode Island	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
WHITE COLLAR	24.8		26.6		30.0		26.4		26.2		25.8	
Upper ¹		14.3		15.4		18.0		16.4		15.1		14.4
Lower ²		10.5		11.2		12.0		10.0		11.1		11.4
BLUE COLLAR	62.2		62.7		44.8		63.5		66.5		63.9	
Skilled ³		27.9		27.0		16.2		30.2		35.1		27.0
Semi-Skilled ⁴		27.0		27.5		19.8		26.4		26.9		29.1
Unskilled ⁵		7.3		8.2		7.8		6.9		4.5		7.8
FARMING	2.7		.7		12.6		0.6		0.4		---	
Own. & Man.		0.9		0.5		7.8		0.3		---		---
Laborers		1.8		0.2		4.8		0.3		0.4		---
SERVICE	10.3		10.1		13.8		9.3		6.8		10.2	
Service ⁶		10.3		10.1		13.8		9.3		6.6		10.2
Private HH		---		---		---		---		0.2		---
(N)	(455)		(404)		(167)		(708)		(558)		(333)	
	Female											
WHITE COLLAR	40.1		35.5		48.3		43.1		49.4		37.5	
Upper		10.4		8.1		11.8		12.2		12.2		8.2
Lower		29.7		27.4		36.5		30.9		37.2		29.3
BLUE COLLAR	34.7		41.9		20.3		37.9		33.4		49.3	
Skilled		3.6		1.3		2.5		2.9		1.6		2.4
Semi-skilled		29.9		39.1		17.8		34.0		29.5		44.9
Unskilled		1.2		1.5		---		1.0		2.3		2.0
FARMING	1.9		0.3		---		0.2		0.4		0.3	
SERVICE	22.7		22.6		31.3		28.6		16.2		12.9	
Service		18.1		20.3		22.9		16.7		15.1		12.9
Private HH		4.6		2.3		8.5		1.9		1.1		---
(N)	(415)		(399)		(118)		(586)		(444)		(294)	

- 1 Professional, technical, Managerial and administrative
- 2 Sales and clerical
- 3 Craftsmen
- 4 Operatives, manufacturing and transportation
- 5 Laborers
- 6 Excluding private household workers

SOURCE: Madeleine Giguère
University of Southern Maine

cent up to forty-five percent in Rhode Island. On the other hand, the males in each state except Vermont have from sixty-two to sixty-seven percent engaged in blue-collar work, a substantial proportion of which is in skilled blue-collar work. Seemingly there is a distinctive blue-collar Franco-American occupational pattern, more skilled for males than for females--always excluding Vermont, of course.

If we compare the occupational distribution of French and English mother tongue persons (Table 2) we find that French males have consistently smaller proportions in white-collar occupations than their English counterparts in each state. The difference is particularly noticeable in Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island. Alternatively these three southern-most states have a substantially greater proportion of the French male work-force in blue-collar occupations than of the English. Among the women the pattern is the same, substantial under-representation of the French in white-collar occupations in Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island, plus New Hampshire. Also, the under-representation of women in white-collar jobs is especially noticeable in Massachusetts, due to their low participation in sales and clerical work.

Can we hypothesize then, that ethnicity explains the occupational patterns in New England? To test this, we measured the extent of association between mother tongue and occupations (Table 2). It is to be noted that what is compared here is

Table 2
Major Occupation Groups By French and English Mother Tongue By Sex:
New England States, 1970

Occupation Group	Maine		New Hampshire		Vermont		Massachusetts		Connecticut		Rhode Island	
	Fr.	Eng.	Fr.	Eng.	Fr.	Eng.	Fr.	Eng.	Fr.	Eng.	Fr.	Eng.
	Male											
WHITE COLLAR ¹	25	32	27	37	30	36	26	44	26	47	26	42
Clerical & Sales	11	11	11	12	12	12	10	18	11	16	11	16
BLUE COLLAR ²	62	54	63	56	44	46	64	43	67	43	64	45
Semi-skilled	27	22	28	19	20	16	26	17	27	16	29	19
SERVICE WORKERS ³	10	8	10	10	14	10	9	12	7	9	10	12
FARM WORKERS ⁴	3	6	1	2	13	9	1	1	--	1	--	1
(N)	(455)	(2230)	(404)	(1557)	(167)	(1223)	(708)	(5635)	(558)	(5546)	(333)	(1454)
Cramer's V	13		13		13		16		16		16	
P	0.0		0.001		0.02		0.0		0.0		0.0	
	Female											
WHITE COLLAR ¹	40	48	36	55	48	56	43	67	49	69	38	67
Clerical & Sales	30	32	27	38	37	37	31	48	37	47	29	42
BLUE COLLAR ²	35	26	42	22	20	15	38	15	33	15	49	24
Semi-skilled	30	22	39	20	18	12	34	13	30	13	45	20
SERVICE WORKERS ³	24	23	23	20	31	27	19	18	16	15	13	17
FARM WORKERS ⁴	2	3	--	0.7	--	1	--	--	--	1	--	--
(N)	(415)	(1950)	(399)	(1342)	(118)	(882)	(586)	(5056)	(444)	(4887)	(294)	(1410)
Cramer's V	11		21		12		16		16		24	
P	001		0.0		0.23		0.0		0.0		0.0	

1 Professional, technical, managers, administrators, sales, clerical, etc.

2 Craftsmen and foremen, operatives, non-farm laborers

3 Service including private household workers

4 Farmers and farm managers, and farm laborers

SOURCE: Madeleine Giguère
University of Southern Maine

the occupational distribution of French mother tongue persons and the majority of persons in each state who answered "English only" to the question "What language other than English was spoken in this person's home when he was a child?" The measure of association was Cramer's V which varies from zero to plus or minus one. The degree of association between French and English mother tongue and occupation varies from .11 to .24. The results can only be characterized as indicating a low degree of association between mother tongue and occupation.³ The highest degree of association, as found among the women of New Hampshire and Rhode Island, is still in the low range (Cramer's V = .24 and .21).

Explanations of ethnic attitudes and behavior in the United States are many.⁴ To illustrate; there are explanations in terms of achievement orientation;⁵ of immigrant culture;⁶ emphases on the context of the social structure of the ethnic experience in the United States;⁷ and a combination of cultural and structural characteristics of both the ethnic group and the receiving society.⁸ Cross-cutting these are the assimilationist⁹ and the pluralist schools.¹⁰ How do Franco-Americans fit into this theoretical spectrum? The following discussion should be taken as a first or tentative explanation.

The major reasons for the overall low levels of association of mother tongue and occupation are structural. The economic conditions in the Saint Lawrence homeland which led to the great emigration of the Quebecois to the United States in the

latter part of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.¹¹ The French came to New England because of the demand for their labor.¹² They had many of the qualities of ideal "hands," docility, quick to learn, deft, and contented with low wages.¹³ James Allen shows that in 1908 textile employment explained eight-four percent of the residential distribution of the French in Maine.¹⁴ Their high job mobility in the U.S.¹⁵ probably contributed to the demand for their labor.

The key to getting out of the mills was English language ability as well as education. State child labor and compulsory education laws contributed to raising the education level and English language levels of the young "French-Canadian." The English-speaking environment was of great importance in the learning of English. The use of the public schools by the French immigrants has been little studied, but they were there and an unknown portion of the French did attend. From the beginning of the French parochial school system in the 1880's, English was taught as a second language.¹⁶ Later, the parochial schools would teach a half day of English, today the instructional language of the remaining Franco-American schools is English. Contrary to the popular image, schools were important to the Franco-Americans--almost as important as the Church. With the coming of radio in the twenties, standard American speech could be heard every day. But the impact of radio on immigrant speech has been little studied.

One can argue that the changes in language ability and quality of education of the Franco's are cultural changes, by labelling the phenomena structural, I wish to put emphasis on the impact of the social context in which Franco-Americans lived. In fact, the great engine of change for the Franco's was World War II. Men were drafted out of their Franco-American community into the armed services; others, both men and women, volunteered. Others were attracted to other communities by employment opportunities in defense industries. Many of these never returned to their Franco-American communities; but many who did had acquired new skill in English and new occupational skills, both technical and managerial, which would give them a larger range of employment opportunities than their parents had had. Some made use of the G.I. Bill to go to college and graduate school. Others, who did not return with much in the way of improved skills, returned with new aspirations for their children. They said, "My children won't be laughed at for their accent" and they taught the children little French. Others had acquired educational aspirations for their children so that by 1970 young Franco's had substantially more education than their elders¹⁷ and had achieved "rough parity" with the rest of the American population.¹⁸ In the wake of World War II the assimilation of the French into the occupational structures of their respective states become a fact. Yet, there is still an over-representation of the French in blue-collar occupations. A number of students of American ethnic groups have pointed out

that the initial employment of a group seems to mark its future occupational patterns.¹⁹ For Franco's this was factory work.²⁰

There also may be a factor of blocked mobility in that the French are not recruited for managerial positions. This is very clearly seen in the diocesan clergy where with few exceptions, Franco-Americans are not recruited to the hierarchy. That this is not a function of inherent capacity is seen in the fact that numerous religious orders have found leadership and managerial talent among the Franco-Americans. Has the same occurred in other bureaucratic structures, both private and public? Has this been also the case with regard to lower-level white-collar occupations? The substantial under-representation of French women in lower-level white-collar occupations in Massachusetts is suggestive (Table 2).

Family and home may play a greater role in Franco-American life than career aspirations. One works to support a family and a life style and not for occupational prestige. The egalitarianism²¹ bred in the "rang" and the effect of the devaluation of the individual success preached from the pulpits of Quebec²² may still be seen in the attitudes of many Franco's.

The specialization of working French women in operative work in Rhode Island and New Hampshire is to a large extent a product of the structural and cultural factors just mentioned. But in addition, it may be that these women were trapped by their limited English language ability--the high concentration

of the French in Rhode Island and New Hampshire and their well developed institutions may have made it possible to live out their lives in French and not learn much English with the consequence that many are constrained to work at semi-skilled occupations.

To sum up our tentative explanations: structural factors explain the low level of association of French mother tongue and occupation; social and economic conditions in Quebec and New England; social structures of the Franco-Americans as a group. With regard to the over-representation of Franco's in blue-collar occupations in general and semi-skilled occupations of the women in some states, historical experience, family values, blocked mobility and limited English language ability must be considered among the major independent variables. Thus both structural and cultural factors can be considered of importance and despite some survivals of an earlier occupational specialization or pluralism, overall these data support an assimilation thesis with regard to the occupational profiles of Franco-Americans.

Footnotes

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