<hw>Concepts of Ethnicity

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<ab>An ethnicity is a collective that has a shared common name, a shared myth of common descent, shared historical memories, one or more differentiating elements of common culture, an association with a specific “homeland,” and a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population. A subjective sense of being a group—that is, subjective identification with the group by its members—is essential. These necessary and sufficient markers of ethnicity might be developed to varying degrees of strength for different groups, but they will all be present to some degree. Ethnicity is a construct rather than a primordial phenomenon. Nonetheless, ethnicity is *subjectively experienced* as an objective reality by those who subscribe to an ethnic category.

<pf>Multiple and contradictory definitions of ethnicity have been offered by a range of scholars from different academic disciplines. The term “ethnic” is derived from the Greek word ἔθνος (*ethnos*). A good working definition is that a collective shares common ethnicity (ie it is an *ethnie*) if the group has a common name, a shared myth of common descent, shared historical memories, one or more differentiating elements of common culture, an association with a specific “homeland,” and a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population. These attributes of ethnic communities were offered by Hutchinson and Smith (1996), and they are accepted here as both necessary and sufficient conditions of ethnicity, although other influential definitions exist (eg Brass 1991; Horowitz 1985). An ethnic group, then, is a subjectively-subscribed-to cultural collective that emphasizes the role of myths of descent and historical memories (also regarding a regionally specific homeland) and that is characterized by one or more cultural differences such as religion, customs, language, or institutions (Smith 1991).

The ethnic markers listed above might be more or less strongly developed for certain ethnic groups, but all ethnic groups will manifest each attribute to some degree (Smith 1988). Other definitions are more circumscribed, and for example recommend limiting the definition of the ethnic group to a sense of group uniqueness. However, this is not a sufficient condition for the emergence of *ethnie*, as it does not differentiate ethnic groups from other types of group to a satisfactory degree (eg regional groups, or even interest groups such as tennis clubs). The content of the shared culture might differ between ethnic groups (eg religion for Jews, language for Germans) and the varying importance can help to explain the different trajectories of ethnic communities (Smith 1981).

More fundamental than the question of necessary and sufficient markers is the question of to what extent ethnicity is primordial or constructed. Primordialism holds that ethnicity is rooted in objective reality and that it is externally given. Humanity is understood as being divided into primordially existing ethnic groups bound together by kinship and biological heritage. Constructivism sees ethnic groups as products of human social interaction and construction, as malleable and nonexistent outside subjective perception. Constructivists view national and ethnic identities as the product of historical and subjective forces rather than as a biological necessity. One variety of this is the instrumentalist approach (Hechter 1999), which treats ethnicity as a resource for interest groups for achieving political goals. Primordialist views do not hold much currency in the academic discourse anymore; it is now commonly accepted that ethnicity is subject to human agency, perception, and construction. Ethnic categories are not independent from their social representations; they do not objectively exist. Ethnic markers cannot be objectively derived from reality, and it is only when they are endowed with significance that they become psychologically and behaviourally relevant (Smith 1991).

However, scholars differ in their views of how much the construction of ethnicity is constrained by contextual factors. Accepting a radical constructivist view of ethnicity implies that any amount of perceived group distinctiveness is enough to build an ethnic group on but that no amount is enough to ensure that an ethnic group is built on it. It also implies that ethnic identity is not universal and not an essential quality inherent to the human condition. However, other views have highlighted that, although the term “ethnicity” is recent, the sense of kinship, group solidarity, and common culture to which it refers is as old as the historical record, that ethnic groups have played an important role in all societies, in every period, and on every continent (Hutchinson and Smith 1996). More moderate constructivist accounts seem, on balance, more convincing. They suggest that the construction of ethnicity is limited by existing constructions, physiognomies, history, and political geography. According to this view, people are limited in their ethnic self-definition by, but not prisoners of, constraining contextual factors.

Acknowledging the constructed nature of ethnicity on an analytical level brings the danger of failing to acknowledge the often tremendous subjective importance that people place on their ethnic group belongings. Although ethnicity is ultimately a construct rather than an objective reality, it is *experienced* as an objective reality—that is, it is part of people’s psychological reality. Primordial notions of ethnicity are prevalent in the popular discourse and in lay conceptions of ethnicity. Here, features of ethnic groups are often taken to demarcate an objective difference, and ancestry is seen to link successive generations of its members. The concern of academic psychology should be to study people’s experiences and perceptions, not to negate them. This is especially important when studying ethnic-minority groups, for whom an emphasis on ethnic difference is often an attempt to protect themselves and their interests from a more powerful majority group.

An important advantage of the necessary and sufficient markers of ethnicity proposed above can now be highlighted. The approach is consistent with a constructivist account of ethnicity in that it emphasises subjectivity over objectivity. What is important is not objective common ancestry but the *myth* of and subjective belief in it (Smith 1981). Moreover, the definition highlights psychological self-identification: the fact that ethnic group members need to subjectively subscribe to the collective, as a *conditio sine qua non*. A subjective sense of being a group is essential, and an ethnic group does not exist if group members are oblivious to their group membership or if they do not imbue that community with subjectively perceived relevance and importance. The significance of subjective perception and of people’s psychologies is often ignored in definitions of ethnicity offered within other social-scientific perspectives. However, it is often overlooked even within quantitative psychology itself (Zagefka 2009).

There is considerable conceptual overlap between the concepts of ethnicity, race, and nation (national identity), both in lay conceptions and scholarly work. As for the overlap between ethnicity and race, interestingly the Encyclopedia Britannica (2002) defines an “ethnic group” as a people having common ties of *race* (my emphasis), language, nationality, or culture. Weber introduced ethnicity as a social construct. Despite Weber’s (2001) attempt to delineate ethnicity from race by clarifying that the former, unlike the latter, does not imply that sociocultural and behavioral differences between peoples stemmed from inherited biological traits derived from common descent, the tendency to equate the two concepts is still widespread. As for the overlap between ethnicity and nation, the Oxford Dictionaries define ethnicity as the fact or state of belonging to a social group that has a common *national* (my emphasis) or cultural tradition. For sure, every nationalism has civic and ethnic elements. This is imminently clear when considering Smith’s (1991) definition of national identity. Despite their overlap, the two concepts are not identical.

Two last issues are worth highlighting. First, ethnic community and identity are often associated with conflict (Hutchinson and Smith 1996). Second, some scholars have defined “ethnic group” as a group that exists as a subgroup of a larger society, thereby implying that majority groups do not, in fact, have ethnicity. Both positions are problematic. There is no necessary process connecting ethnicity and conflict, and interethnic relations can often be peaceful and cooperative. Further, labelling the minority as ethnic implies that perceptions, actions, and customs of members of that group are mediated through an ethnic lens and that the perspective of majority members is subjective and not tainted. Labelling the minority as “ethnic” can therefore be a tool for minority suppression. In fact, the vast majority of people define themselves in terms of ethnic ties. This does not, however, necessarily condemn them to being in a state of perpetual interethnic conflict.

<x>SEE ALSO: Ethnicity; Nationalism; Weber and Nations

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