

Tri-Chandra Multiple Campus
Tribhuvan University



Term Paper
On
Identity, Inequality and Intersectionality
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Why ethnicity is socially constructed

Ethnicity

Ethnicity is fundamentally associated with a group's shared identity of culture, religion, language, nationality, common ancestry, and more. It is the embodiment of a shared cultural history that created similar worldviews, values, and ideals. For many peoples around the world, their ethnicity gives their daily lives meaning and purpose. Individuals accept their ethnic identity based on their membership with the collective group and participation in the traditions of that group, the most central characteristics of which seem to be shared language and religion.

Ethnicity refers to the identification of a group based on a perceived cultural distinctiveness that makes the group into a “people”. This distinctiveness is believed to be expressed in language, music, values, art, style, literature, family life, religion, ritual, food etc. In another word a unique set of cultural characteristics perceived as expressing themselves in commonly unique ways across the socio-cultural life of a population is known as ethnicity. As we define it, ethnicity comprises two dimensions; the attributional dimension describes the unique sociocultural characteristics (e.g., culture, diet) of groups while the relational dimension captures characteristics of the relationship between an ethnically defined group and the society in which it is situated. This two-dimensional definition contrasts with most social science definitions of ethnicity, which only describe what we refer to as the attributional dimension. They emphasize sociocultural characteristics as the basis for defining groups as ethnically distinct from one another and for establishing personal ethnic identity. The following standard definition of ethnicity reflects what we define as the attributional dimension: “a shared culture and way of life, especially as reflected in language, folkways, religious and other institutional forms, material culture such as clothing and food, and cultural products such as music, literature, and art.” (Johnson 2009).

Approaches to Understanding Ethnicity

Different approaches have been used by different social scientists to attempt to understand the nature of ethnicity as a factor in human life and society. Examples of such approaches include primordialism, perennialism, constructivism, modernism, and instrumentalism.

- Primordialism holds that ethnicity has existed at all times of human history and that modern ethnic groups have historical roots far into the past. According to this framework, the idea of ethnicity is closely linked to the idea of nations and is rooted in the pre-Weber understanding of humanity as being divided into primordially existing groups rooted by kinship and biological heritage.
- Perennialism holds that ethnicity is ever changing and that while the concept of ethnicity has existed at all times, ethnic groups are generally short lived before the ethnic boundaries realign in new patterns.
- Constructivism sees both primordialism and perennialism views as basically flawed and holds that ethnic groups are only products of human social interaction, maintained only in so far as they are maintained as valid social constructs in societies.
- Modernism
- Instrumentalism

Ethnicity is best understood as a dynamic, constantly evolving property of both individual identity and group organization. The construction of ethnic identity and culture is the result of both structure and agency- a dialectic played out by ethnic identity groups and the larger society. Ethnicity is the product of actions undertaken by ethnic groups as they shape and reshape their self- definition and culture; however, ethnicity is also constructed by external social, economic, political processes and actors as they shape and reshape ethnic categories and definitions. According to the perspective of constructivism, we come to an understanding of certain ideas in our society because we made them exist. Ethnicity is an example of socially constructed ideas in our society. Sociologist Max Weber asserted that ethnic groups were *kunstlich* (artificial, i.e. a social construct) for three reasons. Firstly, they were based on a subjective belief in shared community. Secondly, this belief in shared community did not create the group; rather, the group created the belief. Thirdly, group formation resulted from the drive to monopolize power and status. According to Berger and Luckman, social construction is a process that involves 2 steps:

1. People categorize experience and then act on the basis of those classifications
2. They eventually forget the social origins of the categories and come to see them as natural and unchangeable. Ethnicity is social constructions. Ethnicity is categorized that is not “natural” but is created within society.

Identity and culture are two of the basic building blocks of ethnicity. Through the construction of identity and culture, individuals and groups attempt to address the problematics of ethnic boundaries and meaning. Ethnicity is best understood as a dynamic, constantly evolving property of both individual identity and groups organization. The construction of ethnic identity and culture is the result of both structure and agency – dialectic played out by ethnic identity and culture is the result of the structure and agency- a dialectic played out by ethnic groups and the larger society. Ethnicity is the product of actions undertaken by ethnic groups as they shape and reshape their self- definition and culture; however, ethnicity is also constructed by external social, economic, and political processes and actors as they shape and reshape ethnic categories and definitions.

In 1978, Anthropologist Ronald Cohen claimed that the identification of “ethnic groups” in the usage of social scientists often reflected inaccurate labels more than indigenous realities: “The named ethnic identities we accept, often unthinkingly, as basic givens in the literature are often arbitrarily, or even worse inaccurately, imposed.”

In this way, he pointed to the fact that identification of an ethnic group by outsiders, eg- anthropologist, may not coincide with the self- identification of the members of that group. Cohen also suggested that claims concerning “ethnic” identity (like earlier claims concerning “tribal” identity) are often colonialist practices and effects of the relations between colonized peoples and nation-states.

Conclusion

The socio- cultural and behavioral differences between peoples of different ethnicities do not necessarily stem from inherited traits and tendencies derived from common descent; rather, the identification of an ethnic group is often socially and politically motivated.