

Race, racism and ethnicity essay sample



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Ethnic identity is the basis for understanding the dynamics of contemporary political transformation, but not a lot of study has been done to figure how to evaluate ethnic identity and even less debate on the assumptions of these measurements for understanding ethnic conflict.

Ethnic identity is used as an illustrative variable in the experiential analysis of political behaviour and attitudes, but its characteristics are hardly ever researched. The effortless method of putting people into an ethnic classes (e.g., Hispanic, African American, Russian), frequently through their own self-identification, appears so evident and appropriate that researchers often follow this method and few reveal upon its insinuation. Yet ethnic categorization by classes believes that ethnic identity is highly relevant to group members, and it overlooks slight shade of ethnic identity. It gives us no sense of degree to which recognition may be salient or of no consequence to group members, and it makes it difficult to describe within-group differences and heterogeneity.

The contact of ethnic individuality on manners depends, in a complex way, upon the significance of ethnic individuality. If ethnic identity is of no importance for the groups within a region, and there are no other diversities between the groups, then there should be no inter-group or within-group diversities in behaviours. The 'standard' attitude for each group should be the similar, and there should be no relationship between different stages of ethnic identity and attitudes within the groups.

The literature on "ethnicity" and "ethnic conflict" still fails to produce either explanatory accuracy or usable empirical referents for the study of either

phenomenon. This article offers a critique of the key literature on these subjects and a propositional inventory summarizing points of scholarly agreement, a discussion of the empirical problems that face scholars in this field, and, finally, a general model for the analysis of particular, ethnic conflicts, including consideration of the correlative tangents of resolution intervention.

The Salience of Definitions

“ Ethnic identity provides an individual with a sense of historical continuity to life, a continuity based on preconscious of traditionally held patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving that is the cornerstone of a sense of belonging” (Arce, 1982, pp. 137-138). Moreover, ethnic identity is a complex and multidimensional construct that can encompass such factors as ethnic identity formation, ethnic identification, language, self-esteem, degree of ethnic consciousness, and the ethnic unconscious, among others.

Many researches have been made relating to the identity formation of Chicano, Mexican American, and Latino youth. Bernal, Knight, Organista, Garza, and Maez (1987) reported on the conceptualisation and measurement of *ethnic identity* in Mexican American preschool children. In their study, the children responded to an *ethnic identity* questionnaire that covered items such as ethnic label, ethnic grouping, ethnic self-identification, their own ethnic behaviours, and those of the group. Bernal et al. (1987) found that the children’s self-descriptions about ethnic identity were concrete and global and consistent with the developmental level for their ages, that ethnic

identity was emerging in some of the children but not in others, and that most of the children had limited or no ethnic knowledge.

Long before the early 1990s, when ethnicity and ethnic conflict resurfaced to become “hot” topics of political comment and analysis, the origins, component elements, and consequences of group identity were debated by scholars trying to explain phenomena clearly related to communal behaviour, phenomena that today would be labelled “ethnic,” be these varieties of peaceful or violent interaction, shared socio-cultural orientations, or group structures, rules, and norms. Sociologists and political scientists studying the American scene acted as if they both knew and understood what “ethnicity” was all about; those looking at it in other or broader settings were not so sure. In the introduction to his anthology on Ethnicity in Modern Africa, Brian du Toit examined the extent of meanings assigned to the term “ethnic” and its application as “ethnic group,” and found five general definitional sets:

Initially, the term was compared to race. “This is present in its early application by Huxley and Haddon [1939] as well as in point six of the statement by United Nations experts on race” [E. Beaglehole et al. 1950]. “The term is also used to refer to precise chief races, as was done in point seven of the United Nations declaration. The third reference is to a socio-cultural assemblage such as the French, either in France or in another region. But some writers have narrowed this down and set as prerequisite that ethnic really refers to a subgroup living as aliens in a foreign country. The fifth meaning uses cultural group when a group of people contrast themselves or are distinguished by others, on the primary basis of sharing

certain cultural criteria such as religion, language, beliefs and values, or history. Such an ethnic group may have regional contiguity and may include “ racial characteristics,” though neither of these is required”. (du Toit 1978, 4)

In terms of people’s identification *conflicts* with their own *ethnic* group representatives, or those with another *ethnic* group, the possible outcomes are varied and depend on the socio-historical contexts of the *ethnic* groups in question. If identification *conflicts* with one’s own *ethnic* group are salient, then the predominant process will tend towards the reappraisal of one’s own ethnicity in which elements of contra-identification with it are reduced, that is, towards a redefinition of *ethnic identity* in which ideas of one’s own ethnicity are updated in a positive manner to suit contemporary circumstances.

Thus, some young people may thereby develop a contemporary “ progressive” version of their *ethnic identity* in contrast to others, whose *ethnic* identification *conflicts* lie elsewhere, who strive to consolidate an “ orthodox” version. If, as may be the case for those with the “ orthodox” propensity, identification *conflicts* with another *ethnic* group are the more salient, attention will be more likely directed towards reappraisals of self and others providing for decreasing empathetic identification with the other group, that is, greater dissociation from it through the exaggeration of differences between self and other, in which negative qualities of moral turpitude and evil power are attributed strongly to generalised members of the other group (for example, to Americans and British by Islamic fundamentalists in some Arab States).

The fundamental reason why one's own ethnicity is implicated in these kinds of processes is that, as we have seen, own *ethnic* group identifications have primacy during primary socialisation, only after which identifications with alternative role models during secondary socialisation within the wider social context may be made. It is also apparent that, under certain circumstances, there will be some individuals, likely to be a small minority, whose attempted resolutions of identification *conflict* with their own ethnicity lead them to cross-identify with an alternative ethnicity (for example, a black youth in Britain cross-identifying with whites and rejecting his own skin colour).

The units of identity are not themselves timeless, but evolve in social praxis. (Young 1994)

Young's contribution, aside from his recognition of the complexities attending the operation of ethnic identity, lies in his identification of the three main, and interactive, nexuses of relevant ethnic expression: in the sphere of collective "primordial cultural meanings" (Smith 1986; 1993), in its uses in the politics of resource allocation, and in the socio-political construction—the making-of collective meaning and identities. David Horowitz adds yet another useful set of theoretic clarifications: unravelling the confusion over the relationship between class and ethnicity, he argues "...a simple distinction between ranked and unranked ethnic groups ... [resting] upon the coincidence or noncoincidence of social class with ethnic origins. Where the two groups coincide, it is possible to speak of ranked ethnic groups; where the groups are cross-class, it is likely to talk about unranked ethnic groups. If ethnic groups are ordered in a hierarchy, with one

main and another secondary, ethnic variance moves in one way, but if groups are parallel, neither secondary to the other, conflict takes a different course". (Horowitz 1985, 21-22)

The point, of course, is that ethnic conflict between (or among) ranked groups will involve issues such as status differentials, inequities in resource allocation, caste relations, and distinctions based on race; whereas in unranked systems conflict may involve such matters as territorial disputes, boundary maintenance, competition for resources, and attempts to convert an unranked system into a ranked one (Horowitz 1985, 22-54).⁶ Again, however, Horowitz offers few clues on how these distinctions can be measured.

The parameters of ethnic identity are easily visible when group members display the ostensible referents that mark them as such. In such cases there is little difficulty in taking their assertion at face value, though where there is ongoing conflict and ethnic identity should be its clearest, consequent perceptual distortions (such as "mirror-image" phenomena) can affect empirical observation. It is also the fact that crisis situations or situations of violent conflict sometimes prompt changes in individual and group ethnic identity, as in the former Yugoslavia and elements of the old Soviet Union. Here, one approaches ethnic identity with more than the usual scientific caution. Moreover, empirical problems can also arise where ethnic identity is masked or concealed, or where group members are themselves ambiguous about their identity, or where ethnicity makes little or no difference in the ordinary run of social interactions. One would expect the latter situation to prevail in monoethnic societies, but the fact that almost everyone belongs to

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the same ethnic group is no guarantee of social peace, as the case of Somalia—where intra-ethnic (here, clan) warfare ravaged the country—vividly illustrates (Lewis 1994). The ethnic components of conflict may be even more difficult to disengage where, as in Rwanda and Burundi elements of both inter- and intra-ethnic identity are involved.

Generally accepted norms of tolerance can make ethnic conflict less likely, as will situations of ethnic pluralism where no group or groups have achieved dominance over the others. Also, Rabushka (1974) has argued that race and ethnicity become largely irrelevant in the operation of a free market. Where or when ethnicity is either dormant, or submerged, or in transition, the absence or relative absence of ostensible “ethnic” behaviour can easily lead to false or flawed analysis.

Ethnic identity is far from being an immutable independent variable; it may itself be influenced by the process of ethnic mobilisation (rather than simply constituting a contributory force for this).

Second, ethnic conflicts are not always simply about symbolic matters (indeed, perhaps they are never confined to these). Competition over resources and economic arguments frequently underlies political arguments in favour of territorial restructuring, and in some cases such considerations outweigh ethnic ones. The process of disintegration of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union was similarly assisted by sharply diverging ideological preferences between the centre and the peripheries, with Communists lingering in power at the centre while pro-capitalist forces took control in certain republics.

The struggle of Russia for independence of the Soviet Union similarly makes little sense if viewed as an ethnic conflict between an entrapped nationality and the centre; ideological conflict and a struggle for power within the political elite go further in explaining what was on the surface an essentially counter-intuitive process. By ‘counter-intuitive’ here is meant failure to conform to the logic of ethnoterritorial power: dominant ethnic groups typically seek to maximize their territorial control (for example, it is unlikely that England will try to secede from the United Kingdom). On the other hand, Conversi argues that the Serbian role in the break-up of Yugoslavia was calculated, and one can indeed see advantages from the Serbs’ perspective: a territory with which they had identified since 1918 might have disintegrated and they might have lost more of its territory than they had expected, but they are now a decisive majority rather than being simply a large minority. The Flemish relationship with Belgium also raises interesting questions: though constituting a majority of the population, Dutch speakers had historically been characterised by relatively low social status and political marginalisation, and their political resurgence in recent decades was associated with the goal of autonomy in relation to Belgium rather than with the object of capturing the institutions of the state.

There is nothing in this world as the ultimate ethnic identity, though all subscribing to an ethnicity will identify in common with at least some ethnically symbolic prototypes within the culture. There are generally variations in the manifestations of a “core” ethnic identity, such as the Sunni and Shiite variants of Islam, the Ashkenazic and Sephardic variants of Judaism, the “progressive” and “orthodox” variants of Muslim British

identify, and so on. Within such variants there will be further variations in accordance with gender, class, caste and occupation, so that, while certain symbolic core dimensions of ethnic identity will feature within an ethnicity, there will be disagreement and argument over other aspects of ethnic value and belief systems. To an extent, to be ascertained empirically, there will be alternative social representations of an ethnicity, accompanied by attenuations in indigenous psychologies, in which ethnic identities are being continually reconstructed and redefined in complex ethnic political negotiations, which take place both within the boundaries of an ethnic group and in relation to other ethnic groups.

Those people, who habitually inhabit the social worlds of different ethnic groups, who have formed partial identifications with another ethnicity and are bilingual in the languages of their ancestry and the other ethnicity, manifest their ethnic identity differently in the two languages. In Gujarati-English speaking Hindu and Muslim young people in Britain, this bilingual attenuation in expression of ethnicity differs, however, according to whether they are orientated predominantly towards an ancestral orthodoxy or towards Britain. Those who remain monolingual in a minority ethnic language deny themselves communicative interaction with others of different ethnicities. Thus, language usage also has an important bearing on the variations of ethnic identity that are manifested. While there may be, in practice, no genuinely definitive ethnic identity, there will be those people who are regarded as the repository of the “ true ethnicity”, who epitomise the prototypical characteristics of the symbolic elders of the ethnic group as

viewed from current time, that is, who in political terms effectively espouse and rework ethnic folklore for contemporary consumption.

Another set of analytical problems arise when class becomes the basis of analysis. How do we know that what we label as ethnic conflict is not class conflict, or vice-versa? 1) If the analysis assumes that class is the basis of all social conflict, then a priori ethnicity cannot play any determining role, and can only operate as a contributory element, if at all. 2) However, if the analysis of a particular conflict identifies class as the basis of that conflict, the door remains open for empirical verification of that assertion. Part of the problem, of course, is that 3) class, as an analytical variable, can be defined according to synthetic criteria (occupation, “eliteness,” income, life-style, etc.) and self-ascription (self-identification), or employed as an operative theoretic premise (in Marxian analysis, ownership of the means of production). If so, then only the second definitional mode gives ethnicity much purchase as a variable; the other two seem to minimize, if not preclude, it in the first place. The problem becomes less difficult if the question is asked first of ethnic conflict: here, class can be given its empirical due if it can be reasonably demonstrated that it does play a role in a given conflict. It is one thing, however, to use class as the key variable in an argument, but another (and more helpful) to use it as a descriptor, as does Gurr (1993, 18) when he specifies what he calls “ethnoclasses” as a category of politically active communal groups: “Ethnically or culturally distinct [minority] peoples, usually descended from slaves or immigrants, with special economic roles, usually of low status.”

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