

# **Introduction: Ethnicity as a political resource viewed by scholars from different academic disciplines**

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Ethnicity as a political resource is a seminal subject in numerous disciplines, such as social and cultural anthropology, history, political science, sociology, psychology, cognitive science, and biology. Studies on ethnic formation, indigeneity, autochthony, nationalism, social movements, and transnational mobility often approach these topics from a particular disciplinary point of view. While most researchers agree on the significance of research on ethnic identities and their use as socio-political resources, the various disciplinary approaches to conceptualizing and understanding these phenomena have not yet been discussed within an interdisciplinary framework. In this section, different authors attempt to pinpoint crucial similarities and differences: Are we all talking about the same things when we use specific terms? What are the underlying paradigms behind the concept of ethnicity and related notions in different disciplines? Furthermore, the authors highlight the distinct methodological approaches used in specific fields and discuss how we can most effectively conceptualize and compare various scales and scopes of research. The aim of this section is to start a cross-disciplinary dialogue, to identify gaps, to compare results, and to plan future orientations.

In the following, I will address the major divergences and convergences in the study of ethnicity, and highlight debates and differences in terms of methodologies, concepts and discourses related to the study of ethnicity, to provide a condensed overview of the relevant debates and to point out central complexities and challenges.

## MAIN DIVERGENCES AND CONVERGENCES IN THE STUDY OF ETHNICITY

The literature on ethnicity is quite fragmented and compartmentalized. On the one hand, there is some separation between ethnicity, race, and nationhood, i.e. they are sometimes seen as separate fields of study, and not all research perspectives handle them together. On the other hand, the literature is also fragmented along disciplinary lines. There is relatively little cross-fertilization between work in sociology, anthropology, political science, and history, and still less between these and other disciplines such as archaeology, linguistics, economics, and the humanities. Finally, the literature is fragmented along regional lines, too: comparative work is scarce, and there is often little awareness of cross-regional variation in understandings and configurations of ethnicity (Hale 2004: 458; Brubaker 2009: 22). The fact of this three-dimensional fragmentation is a good reason to scrutinize the different approaches to the topic of ethnicity within the various fields.

Anthropological consideration of ethnicity has its origins in the research of the first generation of urban anthropologists working in Africa. Seminal work such as J. Clyde Mitchell's (1957) study of the Kalela Dance in Rhodesia (now Zambia) and Epstein's (1958) monograph, *Politics in Urban African Community* challenged the assumption that detribalization was the inevitable outcome of the movement of rural dwellers to cities. Much of this early work wrestled with the conceptual differences between 'tribe' and 'ethnic group' and resulted in the delineation of three distinct theoretical approaches to the study of ethnicity. The *primordialist approach*, which prevailed until the 1960s, argues that ethnic identity is the result of deep-rooted attachments to group and culture. The *instrumentalist approach* focuses on ethnicity as a political strategy that is pursued for pragmatic interests. And the *situational approach*, emerging from the theoretical work of Barth (1969), emphasizes the fluidity and contingency of ethnic identity which is constructed in specific historical and social contexts (Banks 1996). The latter approach remains the dominant paradigm in anthropological theory to this day (cp. more on this in Antweiler's chapter in this section).

Political science approaches the topic of ethnicity from both an empirical and a normative perspective. As for the former, constructivist assumptions dominate studies of ethnogenesis and changing configurations of ethnic identities, whereas primordialist assumptions dominate theories that are concerned with the effects of ethnic identity on some political or economic outcome (Chandra 2012). As for the latter, the central question is one of determining the sociopolitical implications of ethnic movements for the liberal state. Classical liberals such as

Rawls (1971), Dworkin (1977), and Kymlicka (1996) emphasize the rights enjoyed by ethnic minority groups in contrast to social majorities, and they argue that society must, first and foremost, accommodate and safeguard the plurality of ethnic identities. Communitarian thinkers like Sandel (1982), MacIntyre (2007), and Taylor (1994), on the other hand, argue that the concerns of the social majority may, under certain circumstances, trump the interests of minorities, and they hold that the function of the state is not primarily one of protecting social pluralism, but rather one of promoting the collective interests of society as a whole. In general, however, it should be noted that normative political theory often simply assumes the nature of ethnicity and nationalism as given, with less emphasis placed on the constructedness of social groups and more on the social and political consequences of group claims. In contrast, constructivist social theory accounts tend to reject any solitary notion of groups, emphasize the complex and cross-cutting identities at play in the postmodern world, and articulate the consequences of a more fluid (and contested) politics of identity and representation (May et al. 2004: 5–8). These debates, which also link in with anthropological discussions of culture and ethnicity, thus highlight the complex, and at times constructed and contradictory interconnections between identity claims, their political mobilization, and their social and political consequences. Along with related discussions in cultural studies, feminist studies, and some strands of political philosophy, these debates also explore issues to do with postmodernity, postcoloniality and globalization, and their influence upon articulations of ethnicity, racisms, gender identities, and other forms of social and cultural identity and politics in the postmodern world (cp. Said 1978; Benhabib 1992; Hall 2000). A detailed treatise on the notion of ethnicity in history is featured in Section C of this volume. In this chapter, Takezawa concerns herself with the notion of race from a historical perspective, especially with how race became a globalized concept in the course of colonialization.

Cognitive scientists address the social and mental processes that sustain the interpretation of the social world in ethnic terms. Drawing on experimental findings regarding a general disposition toward essentialist modes of thinking (Medin/Ortony 1989, Gelman/Wellman 1991, Rothbart/Taylor 1992), Hirschfeld (1996) and Gil-White (2001) posit a deep-seated cognitive disposition toward perceiving human beings as members of ‘natural kinds’ with inherited and immutable ‘essences’. Experiments with three- and four-year-olds show that humans have a dedicated cognitive device for partitioning the social world into ‘intrinsic kinds’ based on ‘shared essences’. (Hirschfeld 1996) This provides the cognitive foundations for what Hirschfeld calls “folk sociology” (ibid: 20), which he characterizes as the “commonsense [...] social ontology that picks out

the ‘natural’ kinds of people that exist in the world” (ibid: 20). Hirschfeld emphasizes the worldwide presence of a deep classificatory logic underlying what are on the surface strikingly different systems of racial, ethnic, and national classification. Kurzban et al. (2001) argue, however, that this kind of classificatory encoding is only a contingent byproduct of more fundamental cognitive processes evolved to detect coalitional affiliations and alliances. If ethnic categories are “easy to think” (Hirschfeld 1996: 10), this does not mean that they are universally active or salient. Cognitive perspectives suggest that one way to study the varying salience of ethnicity is to study not only the content of ethnic representations but also the distribution of such representations within a population, their accessibility, their relative salience once activated, and the relative ease with which they ‘slot’ into or ‘interlock’ with other key cultural representations (Sperber 1985; DiMaggio 1997). What cognitive perspectives suggest, in short, is that ethnicities are one way of making sense of the world that is grounded in more fundamental cognitive facts; they are ways of understanding and identifying oneself, interpreting one’s problems and predicaments, and identifying one’s interests.

## **METHODOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES AND DEBATES IN THE RESEARCH ON ETHNICITY**

The issue of methodology with respect to the topic of ethnicity can be illustrated on the basis of two significant dichotomies: the quantitative vs. qualitative dichotomy (including the dichotomy of large-scale studies vs. case studies), and the etic vs. emic dichotomy (cp. also introduction to Section C). Furthermore, there is considerable debate about the question of whether research on ethnicity should be based on comparative studies, or whether this endeavor is an implausible or even impossible one.

Qualitative and quantitative methods are still widely considered in the research methods literature to belong to two distinct research traditions (Creswell 2003: 18). Qualitative research commonly consists in the collection and analysis of material that seeks to uncover meaning and to promote the understanding of the experiences of the research subjects. By contrast, quantitative research is about the collection and analysis of numerical data – the social facts. Each of the two research processes is associated with specific research techniques: Qualitative research methods include, for example, ethnographic case studies, interviews, and observation. Quantitative methods, on the other hand, comprise questionnaires, surveys, and statistics, as well as

computer-assisted analytical techniques. This dichotomy is rooted in the basic assumption that both types of method are connected to different, and potentially incompatible epistemological positions, i.e. different conceptions of what knowledge is, what science is, and of how we come to know things. From an epistemological point of view, qualitative research is often thought to value subjective and personal meanings, while quantitative research is construed in terms of testing theories and making predictions in an objective and value-free way. It implies a clear separation of the researcher from the research process and its objects, including people. This dichotomy can be summarized in the following table.

Table 1: *The Traditional Dichotomy between Quantitative and Qualitative Methodologies*

| Quantitative Methods   | Qualitative Methods   |
|--|---|
| Search for general laws of behavior, empirical regularities, with a view to making theoretical generalizations                       | Search for meanings in specific social/cultural contexts, with only limited possibilities for theoretical generalization  |
| adoption of the natural science paradigm (where objectivity is valued)   | Rejection of the natural science paradigm (subjectivity is valued)  |
| Attempt to create or to simulate experimental situations   | Attempt to observe reality in natural settings  |
| Explanation = prediction of events, behavior, attitudes (“statistical causality”)  | Explanation = understanding, interpreting reasons for observable behavior; sense given to actions (“historical causality”)  |
| Use of large-scale study samples and random sampling   | Use of small-scale sample groups; case studies; purposive sampling  |
| Analysis of data based on deduction  | Analysis of data based on induction or grounded theory  |
| Use of survey instruments with predetermined response categories based on predetermined theoretical frameworks (e.g. questionnaires) | Use of open-ended research instruments (semi-structured interviews, life histories, focus groups, observation, etc.) from which theoretical categories (may) emerge |
| Numbers (measurement)  | Words (“thick description”)   |

Source: Damaris 2001: 3.

This strict dichotomy is undercut by an approach that is commonly labeled the mixed-methods approach. It can be defined as the combination of quantitative

and qualitative research methods and approaches based on pragmatic knowledge claims (Bryman 1984; Johnson/Onwuegbuzie 2004). Mixed-methods research is a complementary, inclusive, and expansive form of research rather than a restrictive form of research (Johnson/Onwuegbuzie 2004). Among the strategies used in mixed-methods research are sequential, concurrent, and transformative procedures (Creswell 2003). Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) claim that the problems associated with a single-method study can be reduced by the mixed use of quantitative and qualitative methods in a single study, since the strengths of both methodologies can be incorporated within the same research. Mixed-methods approaches are becoming ever more popular in interdisciplinary projects on ethnicity, as well as in the social sciences and humanities (cp. Brubaker 2009, Wimmer 2013, and Holst in this chapter) It should be noted, however, that the mixed-methods approach has garnered its fair share of criticism: due to their different epistemological foundations both approaches are much more difficult to reconcile than is admitted by proponents of such integrative accounts (Creswell 2003).

The distinction between the emic and etic approaches was initially proposed by Pike (1954) and adapted to develop typologies for cross-cultural comparison derived from field data (Sanday 1979). Etic and emic researchers proceed from divergent assumptions about culture based on their own constructs. Etic researchers tend to segregate common components of culture and test hypotheses. They attempt to identify universal aspects of human behavior and universal processes that transcend cultural differences or to produce new theories that can be utilized across cultures (Fukuyama 1990). In other words, this approach assumes that all cultures can be compared in terms of generalizable phenomena. In contrast, the emic approach attempts to identify culture-specific aspects of concepts and behavior, which cannot be comparable across all cultures. The endeavor of cultural anthropologists who seek to understand culture from the native's point of view (Malinowski 1922) is the main foundation of the emic approach. In the field of cross-cultural research, the emic approach involves examining one culture at a time to evaluate how insiders or participants interpret a phenomenon. The criteria for evaluating behaviors relate to the insiders, and the structure is discovered by the researchers. Despite these differences, Morris et al. (1999) argue that the etic and emic approaches are complementary and that researchers ought to use both perspectives in order to remain objective without sacrificing a deeper understanding from the insider's perspective.

At the core of both dichotomies – that is, quantitative vs. qualitative, etic vs. emic – is the question of whether ethnic groups or ethnic phenomena are, ultimately, comparable. Is it possible to develop a set of concepts, terms and

categories that are relevant across different cultures, countries, and even continents? This is a contentious issue. While some researchers advocate working towards standardized instruments and categories for use across diverse settings (Aspinall 2007), others argue that processes of ethnogenesis are so historically and geographically specific that such harmonization is impossible (Favell 2001). This tension relates to the fundamental epistemological question of how research should steer a course between identifying the similarities across, and the differences between, the settings under investigation (Livingston 2003). Here, proponents of both qualitative and emic approaches tend to favor the assumption of incomparability, while proponents of the quantitative and etic approaches opt for comparability.

A major objection against international comparative designs is that they too easily assume an essentialist conceptualization of ethnicity. Echoing objections against the primordialist approach, it is suggested that cross-cultural large-scale studies treat ethnic group identities as natural and fixed and seek explanations largely in genetic or cultural factors (Ellison 2005). Understandings of ethnic identity that emphasize its contingent, contested and fluid nature may sit uneasily with cross-national comparative research. At best, it is argued, studies that seek to compare the experiences and outcomes of migrant/minority groups across national settings offer little in the way of analytical purchase; and at worst, they privilege genetic or culturalist accounts (since they might implicitly assume an ethnic ‘essence’ that is independent of time or place). However, recent work has argued that comparative research can be useful precisely because there is a need to take social context seriously, and because it allows an exploration of how the significance of ethnic identities varies over time and place (for an extensive discussion on comparative methodologies with an emphasis on comparison within emic approaches, cp. Schwarz in this section).

## RELATED CONCEPTS AND DISCOURSES

To understand many of the discussions and debates within the contributions of this volume, it is vital to distinguish and briefly present some of the basic concepts closely related to ethnicity.

There are different approaches in contemporary literature towards the conceptualization of phenomena related to the overall topic of ethnicity. The first approach seeks to establish universal etic parameters to delineate ethnic groups. However, many theorists acknowledge the difficulties involved in providing a universal definition of ethnicity that fits all different groups in various settings

and historical contexts (for a constructivist critique, cp. Holst in this section). Consequently, other approaches – which will be addressed in the following – focus on the particular relations of individuals and/or groups to political, legal, and geographic as well as social and emotional contexts.

The second approach takes into account criteria such as emotional attachments and sentiments of belonging, and emphasizes the fluidity and flexibility of ethnic identities (for a case study on multiple ethnic identities in Namibia, cp. Widlok, this section). In this context, notable core concepts are ethnic identity and belonging. Much of the research on ethnic identity has been based on the study of group identity by social psychologists (e.g. Tajfel/Turner 1986). From this perspective, ethnic identity is an aspect of social identity, defined by Tajfel as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from [his] knowledge of [his] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (1981: 255). Recently, the use of identity as a term in ethnicity studies has been increasingly criticized. Critics state that the term is a slippery and overburdened concept (Brubaker 2009) but also that it says too little (Anthias 2002). In the critics’ view, the term tends to suggest mutually exclusive identities, and that identity is a possessive property of individuals. As an alternative concept, the notion of belonging is favored by many. Pfaff-Czarnecka highlights its advantage, as “identity is a categorical concept while belonging combines categorisation with social relating” (2013: 6). ‘Belonging’, as an analytical term, can enable us to ask questions about *what* a person belongs to, rather than, as with identity, *who* an individual *is*, or *who* and *what* they *identify with* (which are in fact two different questions). Certainly, the use of identification maybe entailed in the notion of belonging as well as in the notion of identity. But more than identification, belonging actually not only entails issues about attributions and claims (as does identity), but also allows us to address more clearly questions about the actual spaces and places where people are accepted as members or feel accepted, as well as broader questions about social inclusion and forms of violence and subordination entailed in processes of boundary-making (Anthias 2013).

The third approach focuses on relationships with political and legal institutions such as states. Here, the main concepts are nationality and citizenship, which are analytically separate. McCrone and Kiely define the difference as follows: “nationality and citizenship actually belong to different spheres of meaning and activity. The former is in essence a cultural concept which binds people on the basis of shared identity – in Benedict Anderson’s apt phrase as an ‘imagined community’ – while citizenship is a political concept deriving from people’s relationship to the state. In other words, nation-ness and

state-ness need not be, and increasingly are not, aligned” (2000: 25). However, despite the fact that we can clearly distinguish the two concepts, there are also theoretical grounds for expecting the obvious confusion of sense of self as a citizen and sense of national identity that is expressed in many historical and biographical accounts. Furthermore, both concepts are, historically speaking, closely intertwined since they not only emerged simultaneously in Enlightenment political discourse, but were also conceived as two sides of the same coin: a socio-political community of equal citizens unified by a shared nationhood (cp. Gellner 1995). However, as we will see in the next approach, the link between citizenship and nationality is not as close as one might think – as becomes clear for example when former immigrants become naturalized citizens without being considered part of the nation by their fellow citizens.

The fourth approach concentrates on the geographical linkage of groups. The most relevant concepts are autochthony and indigeneity. Both terms go back to classical Greek history and have similar etymological meanings. Autochthony refers to self and soil. ‘Indigenous’ literally means ‘born inside’, with the connotation in classical Greek of being ‘born inside the house’. Thus, both notions inspire similar discourses: on the one hand, the need to safeguard ‘ancestral lands’ against ‘strangers’ who ‘soil’ this patrimony; on the other hand, the right of first-comers to special protection against later immigrants (Ceuppens/Geschiere 2005). Nonetheless, both terms have followed separate trajectories, with different repercussions for issues of belonging today. Over the past decades, the notion of indigenous peoples has acquired a new lease of life with truly global dimensions, especially since the founding of the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations (1982), representing groups from all six continents (Hodgson 2002). Around the same time, autochthony became a key notion in debates on multiculturalism and immigration in several parts of Europe. The spread of the notion into Western contexts is of particular interest. Most Westerners think of indigenous peoples as ‘others’ who live in far-flung regions and whose cultures can only survive if they receive special protection, but the epithet autochthon is claimed by important groups in the West itself. This term thus highlights the prominence that the obsession with belonging and the exclusion of strangers have assumed in day-to-day politics worldwide, in the North as much as in the South (Geschiere 2009; Pelican 2009). Concepts like indigeneity and autochthony approach the realm of ethnicity through the political, legal, and public discourses on nationality, citizenship, and belonging (cp. Feyissa/Zelege, Section B, for more on the concept of indigeneity).

Of course, the various approaches and views that I have outlined are often combined and can complement each other. It must also be noted that

intersectional categories like class, gender, and power, which have not been discussed here in greater detail, are important analytical instruments, too (cp. for example O'Toole in this volume).

In the following, five authors will delineate their approaches to the issue of ethnicity and related questions from the perspectives of anthropology, political science, and cognitive science.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

*Christoph Antweiler* is a cultural anthropologist with a background in cognitive and evolutionary theory. In his contribution, he undertakes the challenging project of defining the key concepts used in interdisciplinary discourses on ethnicity. Starting from an anthropological perspective, he gives both a historic and a systematic account of the meanings and usage of terms such 'identity', 'collective identity', 'ethnicity', 'collective group', and 'ethnic group'. Finally, he addresses the question of whether there are plausible alternatives to be found to the established terminology, and he points out two promising approaches in psychology and sociology.

*Frederik Holst* has a multidisciplinary background in communication studies, political science, and South East Asian studies. In his contribution, he focuses on the conceptual use of ethnicity and race and considers alternative notions. He proposes a shift from studies on ethnicity to research on ethnicization. He proposes a processual approach: (1) Many conflict issues should not be framed along the lines of identity group categories, but would be better examined along the lines of more complex categories such as class, gender, or state power. (2) He proposes the concept of 'ethnicized' groups instead of 'ethnic' groups. Ethnicization does not reinforce static notions of group identity and belonging, but helps to disentangle the manifold ways in which race and ethnicity have become rooted in various societies. Speaking of ethnicized rather than ethnic groups underlines a fundamentally different approach when describing identity-group formation processes. Instead of ascribing features to homogenous groups, ethnicization emphasizes the constructedness, the politics involved in, and the processes that lead to group formations.

*Tobias Schwarz's* background is in cultural studies. He deals with an important methodological question – how can we compare research findings on ethnicity? In his contribution, he draws on research on naturalization from political and anthropological scientists to juxtapose large-scale quantitative studies and (mostly) qualitative single-case studies. Using the classification of

‘nomothetic’ and ‘idiographic’ as a way to pinpoint the major differences in comparative research by political scientists and anthropologists, he highlights how deductive comparative research that tries to generate universal terminology out of specific emic vocabulary can lead to essentialization, but he also highlights how an inductive comparative perspective can help to find new insights and an overall more detailed understanding of the subject matter.

*Yasuko Takezawa* is an expert on Asian-American studies whose main research interests are nationalism, the politics of history, and national identity. In her contribution, she argues that the concept of race is an indispensable analytical resource for understanding social phenomena of oppression, marginalization, and resistance against socio-political hegemony. She distinguishes between three aspects of the various phenomena constituting the idea of race: ‘race’ in the lower-case sense, ‘Race’ in the upper-case sense, and ‘race as resistance’. While ‘race’ in the lower-case sense refers to differences observed in particular societies understood as inherited over generations, ‘Race’ in the upper-case sense uncovers cases where race is used as a pseudo-biological construct. Finally, ‘race as resistance’ indicates a discursive strategy to expose existing racial discrimination.

*Thomas Widlok* is a cultural anthropologist with a strong focus on linguistics. In his contribution, he analyses emic individual attributions of ethnic identity. He advances the thesis that ethnicity has to be understood first and foremost as a way of referencing ethnic status. In this context, he holds that ethnic referencing is deictic in nature; that is, that the meaning of ethnic terms is dependent on how they are used in different circumstances. The main advantages of importing the notion of deixis to ethnicity studies are, among others, a better understanding of how, when, and why persons switch between ethnic and alternative modes of referencing; and the establishment of a single framework within which universal and culturally relative aspects of ethnic reference can be analyzed.

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