# Ethnicity from an anthropological perspective

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Among the main questions discussed in relation to ethnicity, viewed from an interdisciplinary angle, are the following: Is ethnicity a specific *cultural* form of identity, or merely a variant of collective identity? Is ethnicity a phenomenon of all human societies, or primarily a trait of small-scale societies? Is ethnicity of less importance in *functionally* differentiated modern societies? How much relevance should be given to ethnicity in an emerging cosmopolitan or plural world society? Should there be rights based explicitly on *collectives* and *ethnic* identities?

## COLLECTIVE AND PERSONAL IDENTITY IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

Whereas the term 'identity' was already popular in the early 20th century, 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic identity' have only become buzzwords since the 1960s (Glazer/Moynihan 1963; Niethammer 2000; Wikan 2002). Since the 1980s, the notion of collective identity has become a globally common 'currency' of interest politics (Baumann/Gingrich 2004; Cornell/Hartmann 2006, Schlee/Zenker 2009). Claims for economic or political participation began to be made with reference to to culture or tradition rather than by invoking e.g. poverty or basic needs. In a similar manner, when arguing for the exclusion of people from contested resources, the reference shifted from race to culture. The (explicit) allusion to corporeal features receded, but the dominant perspectives on human collectives basically remain categorical and essentialistic.

The specific global formation of collective identity today progresses approximately thus: (a) personal subjectivity is to a certain extent experienced

via collective identity; (b) reference to collective identity is the principal means by which to fight for rights, resources and/or recognition; and (c) ethnicized versions of collective identity are appropriated in postcolonial contexts, especially by leaders of ethno-nationalist governments and representatives of indigenous minorities (e.g. Breidenbach/Nyiri 2009; Radtke 2011).

Identity, whether personal or collective, is about staying (partially) the same in the context of others. Thus, identity is always related to difference and demarcation. In both personal as well as collective identity dynamics, both inclusion and exclusion, and often also discrimination, are principally implied. Ethnicity is an aspect or variant of collective identity. Concepts of collective identity were first developed mainly in sociology (cp. e.g. Krappmann 2010; Eickelpasch/Rademacher 2013; Keupp et al. 2013). Collective identity is about perceived or experienced consistency and continuity in human collectives. Human cultures can survive trans-generationally only in the form of collectives. But as a cognitive and emotive phenomenon identity is always related to individual consciousness. The question 'Who are we?' is related to the question 'Who am I?', and *vice versa* (Eriksen 1973; for overviews cp. Leary/Tangney 2012; Schwartz et al. 2012). Thus, as a research topic, collective identity should always be conceptually embedded in personal identity. The connection between both emerges from the questions 'to whom do I (factually) belong?' and 'to whom do I feel I belong?'.

Increasingly, identities, be they personal or collective, have to be negotiated. In view of the multiplicity of options, more and more 'identity work' has to be done (Keupp et al. 2013). For the individual, negotiation with oneself as well as with others includes emotional issues. A central question is the extent to which identity remains subjective and internal, or else is shown openly, thus becoming quasi-objective (Taylor 1977).

The main disciplines to which ethnicity is relevant are sociology, cultural anthropology and cultural studies, social psychology, political science, and the evolutionary sciences[1]. The main disciplinary divergences I see are between cultural anthropology and (a) sociology, (b) cultural studies and (c) evolutionary sciences. This paper is focused on ethnicity as it is approached and discussed in cultural anthropology (social anthropology, anthropologie culturale) today.[2] On the one hand, cultural anthropology is the discipline most often consulted if ethnicity is scientifically reflected. On the other hand, many anthropologists are

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1  Sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, evolutionary ecology and paleo-anthropology.

2  On the history of the concept, which I cannot cover here, cp. e.g. Heinz 1993, and core texts in Hutchinson/Smith 1996.

among the most serious critics of the concept, especially as it is used in the wider public sphere, e.g. by the media as well as by representatives of ethnic groups.

## THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ETHNICITY

The core of ethnicity is the consciousness and feeling of individuals that they are members of a 'We'-group, and their behavioral actions in light of this feeling. Ethnicity is a socially grown collective identity, which assumes a common history and origin as well as shared traditions, and claims to define a culture as different from (all) others. The main anchors and motivating forces for this identity seem to be those of a common language and/or religion (Smith 2003).

Anthropology offers several explanations of the meaning and function of ethnicity. In the following, I want to highlight the primodialist and the constructivist approaches.

The primordialist anthropological approach stresses the continuity of ethnicities: it explains ethnicity with reference to a factual shared history and common origin of the respective collective as an ethnic group (e.g. Naroll 1964).

Others criticize these assumptions and argue that ethnicity is always dynamic and historically specific. Here, ethnicity is conceptualized in a functional or utilitarian way. Ethnicity is interpreted as a result of human interests, political manipulation, and maneuvering by individual or collective actors.[3] It is assumed that ethnicity usually has some individual benefit or social function. Human actors use cultural differences and boundaries between collectives as a resource to achieve specific aims versus competing actors. These aims are not always political, but are often economic (Comaroff/Comaroff 2009). Leaders of human collectives such as ethnic groups use references to ethnicity to achieve conformity among members and to motivate for solidaric action. The collective appears as an ethnic group. In this process, specific current values, norms, and practices are selectively stressed, and specific traditions or aspects of the group's factual history are selected from the historic consciousness or collective memory. Often such alleged 'historic' traits or traditions are in fact created (cp. e.g. Bernard Lewis 1987 on 'invented history').

The constructivist anthropological approach assumes that ethnicity is about boundaries. The principal source of this approach is the classic work of Fredrick

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3    It is also called 'situationalism', as differences due to social situations are invoked; and 'instrumentalism' due to an assumed strategic using of identity.

Barth (1988 [1969]).[4] Barth and his followers focus on cognitive and symbolic boundaries between collectives, rather than on actual cultural traits or differences. Thus, anthropologists studying ethnicity are more focused on boundary-making, i.e. processes of categorization and the construction of boundaries. The boundary ('We/They') is more relevant than the specifics defining the collective's way of life, such as norms, values, religion, or practices ('cultural stuff'). In contrast to the assumptions of primordialists, the shared way of life among the members of a collective is *not* seen as the basis of cultural boundaries, but as an effect of them. This implies that boundaries are dynamic and that membership may be fluid. Despite the functional importance of cultural boundaries, members of respective collectives can move to another collective.

A further implication refers to the relation between inter-cultural contacts and cultural similarities. The contact and exchange between members of different collectives does not automatically lead to a cultural convergence (i.e. assimilation). Because of the positive functionality of boundaries, contact often results in differences being stressed (Bateson 1985). Typically, groups which interact (e.g. through trade or partner exchange) converge in their ways of life but diverge in their internally shared conceptions of what 'We' and 'They' are (dissimilation). The respective boundary is usually conceptualized as a sharp, dividing, and unambiguous line. Most often, this contrast-intensifying perspective is associated with a worldview centered on the own collective and portraying it in a positive light. The concept might be called a concentric dualism. The high esteem in which the own group is held is combined with an explicitly negative attitude towards other collectives ('Us/Them'), most often neighboring groups. The own group, even if it is a large collective of thousands of people, is perceived as a kinship unit. This ethnocentrism takes the form of a syndrome, as it not only consists of concepts, but also includes feelings, attitudes, and practices.

## HOW TO RECOGNIZE ETHNICITIES EMPIRICALLY?

Ethnicity is not confined to cognition, emotion, or consciousness and related behaviors, but also includes all the other material and behavioral aspects of collectives. How do anthropologists recognize ethnicity, when observing in the field, transcribing interviews, analyzing survey data, or looking at written or

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4   The idea has forerunners in the work of the Manchester School in Central Africa and Edmund Leach's early work on the Kachin in Burma (1954).

other archival records? Identity is first and foremost an individual issue. Thus, to recognize ethnicity, we must link collective identity with individuals and their actions, because cultures do not talk (cp. Radtke 2011)! We need to combine an emic approach using 'naturalistic' data, such as e.g. linguistic and cognitive information, with an etic approach using experimental and laboratory data as well as documentary studies. This combined approach is required because of the basic characteristics of identity. Like individual identity, ethnicity is primarily a cognitive-*cum*-emotional and behavioral phenomenon. To recognize psychic aspects empirically we should seek words and idioms indicating emic sentiments and concepts (e.g. ethnonyms, 'Our land', 'We/They'; 'Us/Them'). To discern behavioral effects we should document e.g. marriage preferences, preferred trade partners, and ethnic work specialization. To find out about the institutional ramifications of ethnicity we should look for state-generated statistics, censuses, and other measures of statal ethnicism. Material traces may be found e.g. in building arrangements, symbols, and patterns of ethnic residential segregation.

## POST-BARTHIAN APPROACHES

Recent approaches build on Barth's classic insights (1998 [1969]), his earlier and later empirical studies and refinements (1959; 1966; 1983; 1994; 2002), and critiques of these (Gronhaug et al. 1991; Vermeulen/Govers 1994; Pascht et al. 1999; Bailey 2001; Poutignat/Streiff-Fenart 2008; Guibernau/Rex 2010). Recent works are critical of the focus on boundaries and on ethnic groups as units (Banks 1996; Sökefeld 1999; 2007; Fenton 2010; Jenkins 2014). One post-Barthian shift in anthropological ethnicity research refers to the traits used in the process of othering by the actors. The criteria for differentiation from others often do not derive from members of these groups but are attributed to them by other people or other collectives. These other groups – e.g. colonial powers or the national state – provide terms, criteria, and categories for and about collective groups (e.g. through censuses) (Eriksen 2010). In this vein, there is a sharpened focus in research on religion, power, and economy as factors forming ethnicities, and on systems of ethnic stratification as well as economic segmentation and specialization according to ethnicity.

Another shift is a renewed reflection on the concepts of ethnic groups. Today we can empirically show that in large societal systems there may be ethnicized categories without ethnic groups (Brubaker 2004). This is especially the case in complex, culturally diverse or pluralistic societies. Consequently, ethnic groups cannot be conceptualized as quasi-natural units of social life. This implies that if

we find ethnic groups empirically, their existence as social and acting units has to be *explained* instead of simply being assumed.

## BEYOND CULTURE PROPER: MAIN DISCIPLINARY DIVERGENCES

The constructivist approach to ethnicity is the dominant one, and has its merits (Wimmer 2010). Boundaries are accepted as a major aspect of ethnicity (Orywal 1986; Wallmann 1986; Orywal/Hackstein 1993). A central contested point, however, is the existence and relevance of *cultural difference*. A broad consensus since Fredrik Barth´s work is the idea that boundaries are more relevant and more persistent than differences within the 'cultural stuff'. One divergence among scientists pertains to the importance of these ethnic boundaries. Whereas cultural studies tend to speak of 'cultural landscapes', cultural anthropology, along with biological anthropology and political science, tends to stress the existence and permanent importance of cultural boundaries. Permanent importance is not to be equated with stability. Most cultural anthropologists and evolutionary scientists tend to regard ethnic groups as a universal phenomenon in human societies, and both stress the functional usefulness of boundaries. But whereas cultural anthropology stresses their constructed, instrumental and changing character, evolutionary scientists point to *primordial* continuities, and to the fact that these cultural constructions are *constrained* in several ways.

In terms of offering explanations, there are also problems for any constructivist approach. Constructivist theories of ethnicity fail to explain (a) the universality of ethnicity and ethnocentrism (Berreby 2005), (b) the fact that ethnicity is experienced and perceived by most persons as being primordial (Van den Berghe 1987), and (c) the fact that kinship is the most effective idiom in ethnic groups as well as in nationalism (Anderson 1996; Smith 2003; Malešević 2013). Why are ethnic sentiments far easier to generate with the imagination of 'family' than with references to collectives at higher levels of scale? To explain such observations we need to incorporate theories from anthropology and cultural studies and their insights into human nature. Humans have certain cognitive, emotive and behavioral inclinations, which were formed during the evolution of humanity. Humans spent most of their evolutionary history within small-scale collectives. Small groups functioned as their "cultural survival vehicles" (Pagel 2012). Thus, kin-selection, and other theories and insights from fields such as evolutionary anthropology, evolutionary ecology, human sociobiology,

and evolutionary psychology, are relevant. This point seems to be accepted by only a minority of social scientists and anthropologists (e.g. Meyer 2010; Fox 2011; Antweiler 2012b).

Another dispute is located within the social sciences. The divergence is between anthropologists studying smaller social units on the one hand, and other social scientists, especially sociologists, focused on large-scale modern national societies. Cultural anthropologists tend to view ethnicity as an aspect of the general identity of human collectives at different scales (from 180 members of a village in New Guinea to about 1.2 billion Han-Chinese). Sociologists consider ethnicity as a notion common to 'traditional' societies; one which is not suited to modern – that is, functionally specialized – mass societies. Whereas cultural anthropologists tend to call for special rights for migrants or ethnic minority groups or indigenous peoples, sociologists stress the general rights of individual citizens of states, or what could be called 'cosmopolitan human rights'.

Laymen, the mass media, and especially leaders and advocates of ethnic groups often tend to use an essentialistic concept of ethnicity (similar to that of old-fashioned anthropology) as a cultural weapon. The perception is one of clearly bounded ethnic communities with a collectively shared We-consciousness. An especially severe problem emerges from the public use – in the media and often also by representatives of the collectives themselves – is that ethnicity is increasingly simply equated with culture as a way of life. This perspective assumes that ethnic groups are natural quasi-units and portrays ethnicities as congruent with ethnic groups.

## HOW TO EXPLAIN ETHNICITY AND GAPS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE EXPLANATIONS?

We should seek explanations at several levels; both more specifically and more generally. To explain more specific and constructive aspects of ethnicity, we have to look at strategies, tactics, and interests, and the realities of the specific socio-cultural setting. In the context of construction, we should also not forget emotional factors. For the more primordial and universal aspects of ethnicity (e.g. categorical thinking, in-/exclusionary behavior, emotive forces) we also have to include our evolutionary past and compare our psychic and behavioral tendencies with those of other primates. For example, ordering and categorizing things and social partners is not specifically human, but naming categories and discussing relations among them is (cp. examples in Schlee/Zenker 2009).

These different, and not necessarily competing, levels of explanation can be illustrated with arguments about the *functionality of boundaries*. Anthropological and sociological variants of functionalism explain ethnic boundaries by their utility for political and economic co-ordination and fostering social coherence in human collectives vs. other collectives. Evolutionary accounts (Pagel 2012; Tomasello 2014) argue for a deeper functionality related to natural selection. The specific quality of ethnicity is due to one human specifity: the faculty to *intentionally* cooperate with groups of relatives *and even with non-relatives*. Group formation and the erection of social boundaries allow groups to combine kin altruism and reciprocal altruism with a further form of altruism only found among humans. This is altruism towards people with similar interests, but who are not relatives. Such an altruism includes even people not personally known but who are nevertheless *trusted* by virtue of their being members of one's 'We'-group with its instituted rules and norms of cooperation. Cooperation and group formation are related to both individual interests and anticipated group size. Decision-making and utilitarian considerations are also relevant to the notion of identity, and thus rational choice theory approaches (sidelined by most anthropologists) should be revisited (Banton 2014).

## ARE THERE ALTERNATIVE TERMS OR CONCEPTS?

We should look for alternatives not only to the term 'ethnicity', but also to 'ethnic group'. In this line of thought we could revisit the concept of *ethnos* in classical Soviet anthropology. *Ethnos* combines the assumption of an objectively existing ethnic group with biotic continuity (though not necessarily closed) with the subjective dimension of identity (Bromlej 1974; cp. Tishkov 1992 for a critical assessment). The main alternative terms for ethnicity are 'ethnic identity', 'cultural identity', and 'collective identity' (if they are not used as a mere synonym for ethnicity). Despite different uses and definitions, ethnic identity' mostly refers to the individual, experiential dimension of 'ethnicity; 'cultural identity' stresses the locally and historically grown specifics of identity, and 'collective identity' covers the idea that this identity does not pertain only to ethnic collectives, but is a general phenomenon, also found among other types of collectives (e.g. nations).

One conceptual alternative might be to focus on an integral element of ethnicity: dualistic thinking; with psychology being the main relevant discipline. The argument would be that such binary thinking is a general necessity for reducing complexity and that it translates to thinking about collective relations.

A second alternative to ethnicity might be found in the new concept of transdifferenc*e*, as developed in literature studies. The idea is that conceptual boundaries may be subdued at times and in specific social contexts, but will crop up again at other times and in other situations (cp. Antweiler 2008; Kalscheuer/Allolio-Näcke 2008). For example, religious differences might be subdued via inter-religious dialogue but crop up again if competition for a resource emerges between followers of the respective beliefs.

A third alternative would be to think more in terms of belonging instead of ethnicity (cp. Geddes/Favell 1999; Yuval-Davis 2011: 1–45, Pfaff-Czarnecka 2012: 19–46). This would place more stress on the possibility of multiple memberships (Mecheril 2003). More than with 'ethnicity', the emphasis would be on emotional familiarity and symbolic relatedness to people, places and social spaces. The last point would also be inline with the current reexamination of issues of spatial acquaintedness, nostalgia, and longing, and thus also with the problematic notion of *heimat*. A last option is to see ethnicity in modern complex societies as being of reduced importance relative to functional specialization, a specialization in work, and a differentiation of socio-cultural milieus and tendency toward pluralistic individualization. Viewed historically, these would be conceptualized as partial successors of ethnicity in large-scale societies. Sociology is the most relevant discipline here (Eickelpasch/ Rademacher 2013; Keupp et al. 2013).

The big open questions in ethnicity research do not only revolve around ethnicity as such but also pertain to the very nature of human collectives. The interconnected world of today has made flexible identities and multiple group memberships almost normal. Nowadays 'only' half of humankind lives in cities. But seen structurally, almost all humans socially and psychically exist in an urban world. They live densely packed in built environments. On a normal day they meet more people not personally known to them than a prehistoric person would meet during an entire lifetime. Strangeness itself becomes globalized, and thus an everyday cosmopolitanism becomes imperative (Calhoun 2003; Antweiler 2012a; Rumford 2013). The question is whether *spatially focused* and *ethnically* oriented collectives continue to have a place in *functionally* differentiated societies, despite the mobility of collectives and the general interconnectedness characteristic of an emerging world society. The general forms as well as the variants of human collectivity are an under-studied topic in the social sciences. There are several levels of sub-national as well as supra-national collectives. What are the principal differences between 'ethnic' collectives – such as ethnic groups, indigenous peoples, and ethnic nations – and other collectives, such as corporate cultures, subcultures, and political cultures?

It is a pity that the social sciences so often talk about collective identities without having a clear concept of collectives (cp. Hansen 2009 for a refined attempt).

I conclude:

- Ethnicity should not be conflated with endurance, stability or sustainability, and with the contents of current ways of life or traditions in human collectives.
- Ethnicity was and is used as a political resource, but the concept itself should not be reduced to this instrumental aspect.
- As a concept used strategically by members of collectives, ethnicity is a part of social reality of complex societies, and should be studied as such. Despite sympathies for ethnic groups, migrant minorities, and indigenous peoples, anthropologists and other scientists should not fall prey to the concepts used by their political leaders or representatives.

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