

## **Defining Ethnicity: Why It Matters**

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Ethnicity matters because globally and historically it is a primary source of individual and collective identity, of individual and collective action, of racism and oppression, but also of resistance and solidarity. It thus constitutes one of the foremost principles of social organization in societies throughout the world. This essay discusses how ethnicity, based on cultural attributes, differentiates ethnic groups from one another and from racial groups or races, which are marked by phenotypic or physical traits. Ethnicity hence can be contrasted with race, which is another dominant organizing principle in societies worldwide, and so is indigeneity, which demarcates indigenous peoples from ethnic and racial groups. The discussion also reviews how the concept of ethnicity emerged as a major issue of sociological interest beginning in the 1970s as a result of social and cultural processes and theoretical developments in the social sciences. Topics related to ethnicity that are discussed include ethnic group, ethnic identity construction, ethnic boundary making, and ethnic cleansing.

### **Ethnicity: Ethnic Group and Organizing Principle**

Ethnicity is perhaps best understood in contrast to the closely related concept of race.<sup>1</sup> Ethnicity is based on culture, including language, religion, values, traditions, beliefs and symbols.<sup>2</sup> Such cultural attributes distinguish ethnic groups in a common society from one another, although they are not necessarily exclusively or uniformly distributed among group members. Some cultural features, such as language, might be shared among ethnic groups in a society; ethnic groups hence are not necessarily marked by distinct cultures.

Over time, cultural differences among ethnic groups in a given society may diminish due to acculturation and loss of traditional culture. As a result, in addition to culture, ancestry or descent is a defining characteristic that differentiates ethnic groups from one another. From this perspective, the members of an ethnic group can all trace ancestry or origins from the same homeland or country. Most Italian Americans do not speak Italian and no longer follow other aspects of the Italian culture practiced by their immigrant ancestors, except for the Catholic religion and food preferences. However, they do know that those relatives emigrated from Italy, and that is a primary reason why they consider themselves Italian American and not only because of a shared culture with others.

In contrast to ethnicity, race is based on phenotype, most commonly skin color but also hair color and texture, facial features, physique, or a combination of those characteristics. Such phenotypic or physical differences distinguish racial groups or races in the same society from each other.<sup>3</sup> Which features are used to differentiate races from one another and the racial categories themselves in a society are determined by their members and thus vary in different societies. Phenotypic traits, such as skin color, have no inherent meaning and significance but are given them by societal members, which is how they come to define racial categories. Races are not based on innate biological differences among human groups and hence are not biologically determined but are socially defined and constructed.

In addition, the physical characteristics that differentiate races are readily visible on the human body in ways that the cultural attributes which primarily distinguish ethnic groups are not. Cultural symbols, for example, are not naturally part of the body like skin color is, although they can be added, such as tattoos or hair styles. Ethnic groups are not marked by the corporeality and ocularity that are dominant properties of races.<sup>4</sup>

While ethnicity demarcates ethnic groups from one another, these groups can belong to the same racial category in a society. Ethnic groups, such as Chinese American, Filipino American and Asian Indian, are part of the Asian American racial category, while White ethnic groups, including Irish American, Italian American and Jewish American, belong to the White racial category. While not all ethnic groups may be part of a larger race, viewing an ethnic group as encompassed within a racial category is a way to maintain the conceptual difference between ethnic groups and racial groups.

Whether the constituent groups in a society are ethnic or racial groups is based on their social construction. It is widely accepted by race scholars that race is socially constructed, rather than biologically determined,<sup>5</sup> but ethnicity also is socially constructed. The social construction of ethnicity means that the members of a society consider certain cultural features that differentiate them are more socially significant than their phenotypic characteristics.<sup>6</sup> They thus view themselves as belonging to different ethnic groups rather than races. In societies in which people regard phenotypic traits as more salient to demarcate them, they consider themselves as divided into different races.

Insofar as ethnicity is socially constructed, an ethnic group can be categorized differently in different societies. In the United Kingdom, Chinese are not regarded as belonging to the Asian racial category, which is limited to those who can trace ancestry to South Asia, including Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Sri Lankans. In contrast, in the United States, Chinese Americans as an ethnic group are viewed as part of the Asian American racial category together with the latter South Asian and other Southeast Asian and East Asian groups.

Besides distinguishing ethnic groups based on culture, ethnicity is also a principle of social organization that structures relations, generally unequally, among ethnic groups in a society. As such an organizing principle, ethnicity regulates differential access among ethnic groups to socially valued resources, including wealth, income, home ownership, education, employment, and political power. The result is an ethnically stratified or unequal society with ethnic groups holding varying socioeconomic, political and other social status. Race operates similarly as an organizing principle of social relations that structures racial inequality in a society. Determining whether ethnicity or race (or class) is the dominant organizing principle in a society is based on which of them provides the most compelling analysis of the structure and nature of its social relations, especially those marked by inequality.

The notion that ethnic groups constitute real, substantial entities has been criticized as a prime example of “groupism”—the tendency to treat categories of people as if they are internally homogeneous, externally bounded groups, and unitary collective actors with common purposes.<sup>7</sup> In terms of ethnicity and race, groupism means to assume that ethnic and racial groups are basic constituents of society to which interests and agency can be allocated, thus

leading to their reification. Alternatively, sociologist Rogers Brubaker argues that “ethnicity works not only...in and through bounded groups, but in and through categories, schemas, common-sense knowledge, symbols, elite and vernacular discourse, institutional forms, organizational routines, public ceremonies, and private interests.”<sup>8</sup> These diverse cultural and social manifestations of ethnicity are not surprising if it is understood as a major principle of social organization and hence can be expected to be variously expressed throughout social life. As such, rather than working primarily in and through ethnic groups, ethnicity operates in society at large by structuring relations among different groups, thus resulting in its multiple manifestations.

A concept related to ethnicity and race is indigeneity, which is based on native origins in a society. Such aboriginal origins differentiate indigenous groups or peoples, also referred to as “first nations,” from both ethnic and racial groups, which immigrated and settled in a society. Indigenous peoples throughout the world are distinguished by their special relationship to their native land, which often is expressed in kinship terms—our land is our ancestor who took care of us, so we must take care of it. Hence, like ethnic groups, cultural traditions, beliefs and values differentiate indigenous peoples but, unlike the former groups, native peoples can claim ancestral land rights in a society, which ethnic groups, as immigrants or settlers, cannot. Also, like ethnic groups, indigenous peoples have lost or have had much of their traditional culture taken from them, so they also emphasize ancestry or descent as the basis for claims to membership in a nation or tribe. Many indigenous peoples have formal rules based on ancestry to determine who rightfully belongs to their group, such as a certain minimum native ancestry or blood quantum.

Like ethnicity and race, indigeneity also can be viewed as a principle of social organization that structures relations between indigenous peoples and non-indigenous (or settler) groups in a society. But given the usually relatively small population with limited political power of native peoples in a society, indigeneity as an organizing principle is generally of secondary significance compared to ethnicity or race. Unlike ethnic and racial groups, indigenous peoples often seek sovereignty or self-determination as their political objective. Sovereignty does not necessarily equate with independence because not all native peoples seek to have their own independent nation-state, given the political obstacles and military opposition against such. But sovereignty does refer to a political and legal status in which indigenous peoples have the power to determine their own affairs themselves, particularly over the ancestral lands they claim as theirs. More than 500 Native American groups, or so-called “tribes,” are officially recognized by the U.S. government. Such recognition means they have legal rights to control their own affairs, including ownership of the lands they occupy, electing their own leaders, and determining official membership in their group. Rather than independence, this form of sovereignty is referred to as “nation within a nation”—a tribal nation within the U.S.

Rather than working in isolation from each other, ethnicity, race and indigeneity intersect or converge with two other leading principles of social organization that also structure inequality in society—class and gender. While gender is an organizing principle found in all societies, class is the foremost such principle in societies that are relatively ethnically or racially homogeneous, such as contemporary Japan and Korea and most western European nations prior to the 1970s with the advent of global labor migration.

Intersection theory was introduced by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw, who asserts that, “Intersectionality is a metaphor [framework] for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality and disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking,”<sup>9</sup> which tend to emphasize a single organizing principle. Thus, the power of ethnicity, race or indigeneity to enforce inequality and discrimination in society is enhanced when those structural principles are understood to intersect or to reinforce class or gender as comparable organizing principles of social relations. While Asian American women are disadvantaged by race as a structural principle, its intersection with gender further subjugates them to a greater extent than Asian American men.

### **The Emergence of the Ethnicity Paradigm**

Ethnicity became a major theoretical and empirical issue for the social sciences in the 1970s, as a result of ethnic and racial minority movements in the U.S. that began in the late 1960s. These organized campaigns by people of color and the retention of their ethnic identity by some White ethnic groups represented critical challenges to assimilation theory, which had been the dominant approach to ethnicity from the 1920s till then. The first of these minority movements was Black Power in 1966, which advocated for Black self-determination and control of their local communities, including in housing, schools and employment, rather than integration or desegregation as sought by the civil rights movement. Toward attaining those objectives, the Black Power movement created a new racial identity as Black, which replaced Negro or colored, that emphasized pride in claiming and asserting that new identity rather than the acquiescence associated with the previous terms.<sup>10</sup>

Black Power was shortly followed by the Chicano movement, which similarly sought Brown Power for people of Mexican ancestry in the U.S. and rejected Mexican American identity as assimilationist. The Asian American movement emerged at about the same time at colleges and communities on the West coast of the U.S. and consisted of a coalition among Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans and Filipino Americans, the largest Asian ethnic groups in America at that time. Following the lead of Blacks and Chicanos, they constructed and expressed a new identity for themselves, which replaced Oriental because of its connotations of docility and submissiveness. The Black Power, Chicano and Asian American movements demanded and shortly were granted the establishment of ethnic studies programs at universities starting in 1970 in order to offer courses and degrees on the historical experiences and political and economic status of those people of color in the U.S. Clearly, Blacks, Chicanos, Asian Americans, and other ethnic and racial minorities had not assimilated into American society, so new theoretical approaches were needed to explain what was happening.

Ethnicity hence developed as a focus of sociological concern in the 1970s. Arguably the principal work that contributed to this heightened interest was *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, edited by social anthropologist Fredrik Barth in 1969. Although he did not use the term “ethnicity” in his two chapters in his book, in a later article, “Enduring and Emerging Issues in the Analysis of Ethnicity,” which was written to assess the influence of his book twenty-five years after its publication, Barth asserted that “ethnicity is the social organization of culture difference.”<sup>11</sup> He thus emphasized the close connection between ethnicity and culture and that ethnicity is a principle of social organization. Another

major contribution of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* followed from Barth's insistence in his introductory chapter on "what the actors themselves regard as significant."<sup>12</sup> This perspective can be appreciated as contributing to the consensus in the social sciences of the social construction of ethnicity and race.<sup>13</sup>

Prior to publication of Barth's book, ethnicity was not a commonly used concept in the social sciences, as is evident in its non-inclusion as an entry in the *Dictionary of Sociology* published in 1968. At that time, race was invoked much more frequently, including in reference to groups, such as the "Jewish race," that are currently viewed as ethnic groups. In the United Kingdom, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* very likely contributed to the convening of the 1971 annual conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the Commonwealth (ASA) on the theme of "Urban Ethnicity." Three years later, several of the conference papers were published in an ASA monograph with the same title.<sup>14</sup> In social anthropology, Barth and the other contributors to his book have been credited with initiating the "paradigm of ethnicity" by shifting discussion from "tribes" to ethnic groups and by researching and representing them as constituent groups interacting within a common society rather than in ethnographic isolation.<sup>15</sup>

In the U.S., increased scholarly interest in ethnicity was heralded by the publication of *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience* in 1975, edited by the eminent sociologists Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who acknowledged they had benefited from Barth's book. In their introductory chapter, they posited that "something new [is] afoot in the world. ... The new word is 'ethnicity,' and the new usage is the steady expansion of the term 'ethnic group' from minority and marginal subgroups at the margins of society to major elements of a society."<sup>16</sup> In the same decade, sociologist Herbert Gans introduced the concept of symbolic ethnicity to explain how White ethnic groups in the U.S., such as Irish Americans, Jewish Americans and Italian Americans, maintained their distinct ethnic identities over the generations, despite their assimilation into a White racial identity.<sup>17</sup> Gans argued that, instead of a wide range of cultural activities, those groups have retained a limited number of traditional practices, which are sufficient to sustain their ethnic identity over time. These cultural traditions or symbols especially include the celebration of major annual holidays, such as St. Patrick's Day by Irish Americans and Rosh Hashana by Jewish Americans, which are observed with special foods consumed particularly on that holiday and with family members. For such White ethnic groups, ethnic identity was more about feeling—Irish, Jewish or Armenian—than being.<sup>18</sup>

By the 1980s, ethnicity-centered studies of such White and other ethnic groups had resulted in the "ethnicity paradigm of race," in which ethnicity subsumes race as the leading principle of social organization in the U.S.<sup>19</sup> According to this perspective, race was declining in significance as an organizing principle in structuring social processes, such as the distribution of wealth, employment, education and legal justice.<sup>20</sup> Under the theoretical and ideological influence of the ethnicity paradigm, the argument was advanced by neoconservative scholars and political commentators that America had transcended race and become a post-racial, if not colorblind, nation by the 1990s, which certainly was not the case.<sup>21</sup>

The ethnicity paradigm of race has been strongly challenged by race theorists, including Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Joe Feagin, Michael Omi, and Howard Winant, who contend that race as an organizing principle is, in fact, increasing in significance. A clear indication of the expanding

salience of race is the rightward shift in racial politics in America that already had emerged in the late 1960s in opposition to the political gains of the civil rights and Black Power movements. The concept that captures this proliferating significance of race is racialization—the extension of racial meaning to previously racially unclassified relations, practices or groups, which come to be viewed in racial terms as a result.<sup>22</sup> After the 9-11 attacks, Arab Americans, who previously were stereotyped as small business operators, became racialized as terrorists engaged in a global conspiracy to topple the U.S.

As might be inferred from the above discussion, one of the salient challenges in ethnic and racial studies is to maintain the analytical distinction between ethnicity and race, given their regular conflation in daily life, such as by the news media, the general public and even some scholars. The authors of a highly used textbook on race and ethnicity contend that some races, including African Americans, can be considered ethnic groups at the same time, thus blurring the fundamental difference between the two concepts.<sup>23</sup> As explained above, ethnicity and race refer to very different cultural and social phenomena and have diverse manifestations and consequences in society, which is the primary reason for maintaining the analytical distinction between them. Of particular concern is which of them as an organizing principle provides a more cogent analysis of the nature and structure of social relations in a given society. That is an empirical question which cannot be determined on an *a priori* basis by applying one or the other principle and assuming that it is the most appropriate for explaining what is going on in that society according to ethnicity or race.

### **Ethnic Identity: Constructed or Assigned**

Ethnic identity can be understood as a collective sense of belonging to such a group, although it can also be discussed from the perspective of individuals. Identity is among the most enduring attributes of an ethnic group, despite acculturation into the dominant culture of a society and loss of its traditional culture. Ethnic identities, like all social identities, are subject to change in their meaning, significance and expression since they are not permanent or natural but are created or constructed by an ethnic group. Ethnic identity construction refers to the process by which a group employs aspects of its culture, history or social status to create and assert a new categorical identity for itself and its members in order to advance their political, economic, cultural or other interests. Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall emphasizes that collective identity is “constructed historically, culturally, politically—and the concept which refers to this is ‘ethnicity.’”<sup>24</sup> The collective interests or concerns of an ethnic group include political power, socioeconomic mobility, employment, higher education, legal justice, and language rights. Identity construction is a means to mobilize support and resources and organize group members to attain those objectives by raising their consciousness of their shared historical experiences and contemporary status and of the social and cultural ties that bind them together and separate them from others.

As noted above, in the late 1960s, Mexican Americans constructed and advanced Chicano identity to bring together people of Mexican ancestry in their movement for greater political and economic power for themselves. To be Chicano meant to have pride in their ethnic identity and cultural heritage, especially the Spanish language, while they repudiated the term “Mexican American” as indicating a desire to assimilate into society. Over time and under

changing political and economic circumstances, Mexican American came once again to be invoked more commonly to emphasize that they are American and have the legal right to live and work in the U.S. Its assertion is intended to challenge the stereotyped perception and representation that many of them are undocumented immigrants in the country. Similar objectives to proclaim their American identity and history in the context of racialized stereotypes of them as foreigners are evident in the constructed identities by other ethnic and racial minorities, such as Filipino American, Asian American, and Arab American. The latter racial identity has been asserted especially since the 9-11 attacks by Al-Qaeda to counter the widespread stereotype of Arab Americans and Muslim Americans as violent terrorists threatening the lives of the American people. Racist stereotyping, systemic racism, and other aspects of the political and economic circumstances in which ethnic and racial minorities are situated may restrict their ability to have their constructed identities accepted by the dominant society.

In contrast to ethnic identities, the identities advanced by indigenous peoples generally do not emphasize that they are citizens of the nations in which they reside and may use a name from their own language to affirm that they have not assimilated into the dominant culture and society. In Hawai‘i, Native Hawaiians refer to themselves as Kanaka Maoli—the real or true people—to proclaim that they are the indigenous people of Hawai‘i, whose kingdom was overthrown and annexed by the U.S. in the 1890s. As the native people, they also are declaring that for them indigeneity constitutes the fundamental difference between themselves and everyone else, who are historical and contemporary settlers in their homeland of Hawai‘i. From the perspective of indigeneity, Native Hawaiians are a colonized people in their ancestral nation and not an ethnic or racial group in America’s fiftieth state like the other groups are.<sup>25</sup>

Besides being asserted, ethnic and racial identities are also assigned by government agencies through the ethnic and racial categories they employ. In 2024, for the first time in twenty-seven years, the federal government, through the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), changed how it classifies people in the U.S. by ethnicity and race.<sup>26</sup> OMB, which provides official definitions of ethnic and racial categories and oversees the U.S. Census Bureau, announced the creation of a new Middle Eastern or North African (MENA) racial category.<sup>27</sup> As a result, people who can trace ancestry to countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, Israel and Iran, who had previously been classified by the U.S. government as White, can identify themselves in the new grouping. Based on the 2020 census, an estimated 3.5 million U.S. residents can be considered Middle Eastern or North African.<sup>28</sup>

Including the new MENA racial category, seven broad racial and ethnic categories are officially recognized by the U.S. government: African American or Black, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, White, and Hispanic or Latino. Previously, the U.S. Census Bureau considered the first five groups as racial categories, while Hispanic or Latino was regarded as an ethnic category that encompasses various racial categories, such as White, Black, and Asian. Many race and ethnicity scholars disagreed with that classification scheme because they view Hispanic/Latino a racial category, which comprises ethnic categories, such as Mexican, Puerto Rican and Salvadoran. Another problem is that American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native

Hawaiians maintain that they are indigenous peoples in the U.S. and not ethnic or racial groups like the others are.

The above issues highlight the critical difference between constructed and assigned ethnic and racial identities. While constructed identities are created and asserted by an ethnic or racial group, assigned identities can be conceived and designated to such a group by government agencies. The latter, such as OMB, have the formal authority that results in official acceptance and dissemination of their ethnic and racial categories and their definitions of them. The new MENA racial category illustrates these issues. For more than three decades, the Arab American community appealed to Congress for a separate racial category for themselves to be included in the U.S. census. They wanted to be officially recognized and to have demographic and socioeconomic information about them gathered and published in government reports. However, the 9-11 attacks considerably lessened that desire because Arab Americans did not want to bring increased government scrutiny upon themselves, including their population and where they resided, so the campaign to have their own racial category was dropped.

Rather than Arab American, which emphasizes their American identity and status, Middle Eastern or North African is a broader racial category assigned by the U.S. government. It combines people from two large geographical regions, similar to what the American Indian or Alaska Native category does, and is not a constructed identity asserted by Arab Americans because it includes people of Iranian and Israeli descent. Thus, unlike Arab American, there is no MENA community or identity because it is a racial category devised and designated by the federal government.

Another major change introduced in 2024 by OMB concerning the decennial U.S. census is that starting in 2030 people filling out the census form will be asked, “What is your race and/or ethnicity?”<sup>29</sup> Previously, two separate related questions were on the form—“Is this person Hispanic or Latino?” which was followed by, “What is this person’s race?” The five racial categories were listed below from which the respondent could select one or more and could also indicate their ethnicity. According to the Census Bureau, studies indicate that a considerable percentage of Hispanics are uncertain how to answer the question on race when it is asked separately because they understand race and ethnicity to be similar and frequently select “some other race” or do not respond to the question.<sup>30</sup> However, asking “What is your race and/or ethnicity?” conflates race and ethnicity and implies to respondents and others in society that they mean the same thing, further adding to the confusion and misunderstanding about those two concepts.

Some of the other racial categories used in the U.S. census are also problematic. If the term “African American” is employed, so should Asian American, instead of Asian, as leaders of the Asian American community have advocated for decades since they created and claimed that identity for themselves in the late 1960s. The category “Hispanic or Latino” is also questionable because it combines terms with opposed meanings. Hispanic includes persons who consider themselves Spanish, which Latino as a political identity does not because the Spanish were the colonizers of Latino people.

It needs to be noted that African American, Black, Latino, and Native Hawaiian are terms initially constructed and asserted as categorical identities by those respective communities. The U.S. government officially adopted them after they had been widely employed by those groups for many years. Those categories sometimes replaced pejorative terms, such as Negro or Oriental, previously used in government publications, including census reports. Ethnic groups continue to construct new identities for themselves, such as Filipinx by some Filipino Americans, primarily academics and college students. Filipinx expresses gender neutrality and inclusiveness in contrast to Filipino, Filipina and Filipino/a, which also are used in their community. The term “Filipinx” follows from the practice starting in the early 2000s among Latinos of referring to themselves as Latinx, which similarly succeeded Latino, Latina and Latino/a. More recently, “Latine” has emerged as another racial identity among some Latinos.

### **Ethnic Boundary Crossing and Making**

One of the most cited arguments made by Barth in his Introduction in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* is his contention that “the critical focus of investigation...becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses.”<sup>31</sup> Consequently, a commonly made assertion about Barth’s approach to ethnic groups was that he had definitively detached culture from ethnicity, with which he did not agree. Insofar as “cultural stuff” includes the diacritica that define group membership and identity, such as language, religion, symbols and values, they also can be understood as constituting the boundary separating ethnic groups and not just defining them. Moreover, Barth later remarked that “the issue of cultural content versus boundary, as it was formulated, unintentionally served to mislead” and that “central and culturally valued institutions and activities in an ethnic group may be deeply involved in its boundary maintenance.”<sup>32</sup> He thus affirmed the conceptual difference between ethnic groups and races, which are not primarily dependent on culture for their definition and maintaining their boundaries.

In his assessment of *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Barth states that the book was especially concerned with “persons who *change* their ethnic identity.”<sup>33</sup> Given that ethnic identity and, more generally, ethnic groups are associated with cultural features, it can be changed during a person’s lifetime through acculturation into another culture. In contrast, racial identity change is much more difficult to accomplish because phenotypic traits, such as skin color, are not easily altered, at least permanently. Especially for individuals, ethnic boundaries hence are easier to cross than racial boundaries because the corporeality and visibility of the racial body are highly distinctive attributes of races in contrast to their cultural characteristics.

Besides crossing by individuals, ethnic boundaries can be created or changed by ethnic groups. In *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks*, sociologist Andreas Wimmer maintains that Barth was mainly concerned with the “reproduction of ethnic boundaries: to explain why they remained stable although individuals ‘crossed the boundary.’”<sup>34</sup> As an alternative, he argues for the “need to dynamize this analysis: to show how such boundaries emerge in the first place and what the logic of their subsequent transformation might be.” Toward this end, Wimmer identifies five primary strategies of boundary creation that can accommodate cases from premodern to modern history and on every continent except for

Antarctica. The strategies include: “expansion”—redrawing a boundary by expanding the people included in one’s ethnic category; “contraction”—limiting the expanse of those included in one’s ethnic category or creating a boundary within an existing category; “transvaluation”—modifying boundaries by contesting the hierarchical ranking of ethnic categories; “positional moves”—changing one’s position from a lower to a higher-status ethnic category without changing the overall ethnic boundary hierarchy; and “boundary blurring”—emphasizing non-ethnic identities, such as those based on class, religion or locale.

All of the above strategies of ethnic boundary making also can apply to racial boundary formation with the possible exception of positional moves because of the considerable difficulty in changing one’s membership in a racial category. However, this issue is not problematic for Wimmer because he does not consider that ethnicity and race differ analytically, and “‘race’ is treated as a subtype of ethnicity” by him.<sup>35</sup> Instead of races, he contends, “If phenotypical features or genealogical descent indicate group membership, we speak of ethnosomatic groups.” In partial support of his argument foregrounding ethnicity over race, Wimmer asserts that “treating race as fundamentally different from ethnicity overlooks the fact that one and the same group might be treated as a race at one point in history and as another type of ethnic category at another.” That is certainly the case with groups such as Jews and Irish in the U.S., who were initially racialized as belonging to a separate race from Whites but, as a result of acculturation and assimilation, became accepted as White ethnic groups over time. That historical process also follows from the social construction of both race and ethnicity in different historical periods and has hardly been overlooked, as Wimmer claims.<sup>36</sup>

## **Ethnic Cleansing**

While collective attacks against racial minorities have occurred and continue to occur, ethnic cleansing refers to extreme violence against an ethnic or religious minority. It consists of the forced removal or displacement of such a minority from a particular territory so that it can be occupied.<sup>37</sup> In contrast, genocide refers to the annihilation of a people and hence can be considered a means of ethnic cleansing. Other ethnic cleansing strategies include killing, rape and torture of civilians, and destruction of houses, businesses and infrastructure to coerce people to flee their home territory. Ethnic cleansing is sometimes a policy implemented by a nation-state to expand its power over a geographical area that it controls or would like to control. The term began to be widely used in the early 1990s following the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia to describe the systematic violence perpetrated against Bosnian Muslims by Serb paramilitary forces, which resulted in the forced displacement of more than one million people and the killing of tens of thousands.

Numerous cases of ethnic cleansing worldwide can be cited going back centuries. In the U.S., a notable example is the removal by the federal government in the 1830s of Native American peoples from their traditional homelands in the southeastern U.S. so that white farmers and miners could take over their lands. Following passage of the Indian Removal Act by Congress in 1830, 60,000 Native Americans, including Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Muscogee and Seminole, were forced to walk to a federally designated “Indian Territory” several hundred miles away in Oklahoma.<sup>38</sup>

More recent salient examples of ethnic cleansing include the imprisonment in “re-education” camps by China of more than one million Muslims, most of them Uyghurs, in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in the largest detention of religious minorities since the Holocaust. In recent decades, China has directed the mass migration of the politically and culturally dominant Han Chinese into the oil and natural gas rich XUAR where twelve million Uyghurs reside but have become a declining minority of the population.<sup>39</sup>

The initiative by Israel to seize control of Gaza from Palestinians is the most recent significant outbreak of ethnic cleansing. By aerial bombardments, ground invasions, forced displacements, and other military actions, Israel has compelled 80 percent of the 2.2 million Palestinians in Gaza to flee their homes and killed more than 50,000 of them, most of them women and children, as of April 2025.

The argument has been advanced that ethnic conflict should not be viewed primarily as conflict between ethnic groups but can be better understood as “ethnicized or ethnically framed conflict.”<sup>40</sup> Comparable to the concept of racialization, ethnicization is the extension of ethnic meaning to previously non-ethnically classified groups, relations and practices, such as conflict. Brubaker contends that his approach is intended to avoid uncritically adopting “categories of ethnopolitical practice as our categories of social analysis” so that a more incisive understanding of the causes of such conflict can be attained. He admonishes that by invoking groups, “ethnopolitical entrepreneurs,” such as political, military and organization leaders, seek to “call them into being” because they wish to motivate and mobilize their followers, and they thereby reify groups.<sup>41</sup>

Consistent with his opposition to groupism, Brubaker adds that while reification of ethnic groups is basic to the “practice of politicized ethnicity,” scholars need not contribute further to reifying groups in their analyses. Besides analyzing conflicts, ethnic or other, some scholars also seek ways to resolve them and, from this viewpoint, it is much less significant whether the conflicting parties are groups or categories.

## **Conclusion: Why Ethnicity Matters**

Ethnicity matters because, above all, it does not have the same meaning and political, economic and other impacts that race does. As an organizing principle of social relations, ethnicity operates quite differently from race in enforcing inequality, injustice, racism and discrimination in society—first of all, among ethnic groups and not races. Insofar as ethnicity differs from race, it also means that ethnic groups, ethnic identities, and ethnic boundaries differ from racial groups, racial identities, and racial boundaries, respectively. Insisting upon these distinctions is not just an academic exercise limited only to those who write scholarly books and journal articles and give learned lectures to one another. They find their way to policy makers, anti-racism activists, and community organizers who employ and disseminate these concepts in their advocacy work on behalf of ethnic and racial minorities.

From another perspective focused on alleviating ethnicity or race-based societal problems, such as conflict or inequality, deciding on which principle underlies or accounts for those issues is necessary to develop the appropriate policies and strategies to resolve them.

Presuming that race is the dominant organizing principle in a society in which its members view themselves as belonging primarily to different ethnic groups creates obstacles to mitigating hardships based on, for example, cultural differences such as language. Government programs and services, such as in health care, education, employment, and social services, are less effective and responsive if they are targeted at large racial categories that comprise ethnic groups, which differ considerably in their cultural background and socioeconomic and political status. Broad racial categories, such as Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, are created by the U.S. government for bureaucratic convenience and not principally to address the widely varying problems and concerns of their diverse constituent ethnic and indigenous minorities. Ethnicity matters because it provides a direct means to focus on ethnic, and not racial, matters.

## Endnotes

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This paper was solicited and, following peer review, accepted for publication in 2024 by AM Research Skills, based in London, in an edited volume on *Ethnic and Indigenous Studies*. However, AM Research Skills decided in 2025 not to publish the volume.

<sup>1</sup> Ethnicity is also often contrasted with nationalism. In “Nationalism and Ethnicity,” Calhoun contends, “A crucial difference between ethnicities [ethnic groups] and nations is that the latter are envisioned as intrinsically political communities, as sources of sovereignty, while this is not central to the definition of ethnicities.” Unlike ethnic groups, nations also are associated with a historical land base.

<sup>2</sup> Omi and Winant (2014), *Racial Formation in the United States*, 21. Another notion of ethnicity is that it represents a combination of culture and identity. Polish American ethnicity hence consists of Polish American culture and identity.

<sup>3</sup> Omi and Winant (2014), *Racial Formation in the United States*, 111.

<sup>4</sup> Omi and Winant (2014), *Racial Formation in the United States*, 246.

<sup>5</sup> Bonilla-Silva, “Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation,” 472.

<sup>6</sup> Okamura, “Race and/or Ethnicity in Hawai‘i: What’s the Difference and What Difference Does it Make?” 16.

<sup>7</sup> Brubaker, “Ethnicity, Race and Nationalism,” 29.

<sup>8</sup> Brubaker, “Ethnicity, Race and Nationalism,” 30.

<sup>9</sup> Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.”

<sup>10</sup> Black previously was a demeaning term among African Americans but was given a positive meaning through the Black Power movement.

<sup>11</sup> Barth, “Enduring and Emerging Issues in the Analysis of Ethnicity,” 13.

<sup>12</sup> Barth, “Introduction,” 14.

<sup>13</sup> In “Enduring and Emerging Issues in the Analysis of Ethnicity,” Barth (13) acknowledged that he had previously argued “for what would now be recognized as a constructionist view.” He modestly added, “If it is true as many have said, that *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* revolutionized the debate on the subject,” it would be in this regard that ethnicity and race are socially constructed.

<sup>14</sup> Cohen, *Urban Ethnicity*.

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- <sup>15</sup> Jenkins, “Social Anthropological Models of Inter-ethnic Relations,” 173-174.
- <sup>16</sup> Glazer and Moynihan, “Introduction,” 5.
- <sup>17</sup> Gans, “Symbolic Ethnicity.”
- <sup>18</sup> Bakalian, *Armenian-Americans: From Being to Feeling Armenian*.
- <sup>19</sup> Omi and Winant (2014), *Racial Formation in the United States*, 39.
- <sup>20</sup> Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*.
- <sup>21</sup> Okamura, “Barack Obama as the Post-Racial Candidate for a Post-Racial America: Perspectives from Asian America and Hawai‘i,” 134.
- <sup>22</sup> Omi and Winant (1986), *Racial Formation in the United States*, 64.
- <sup>23</sup> Cornell and Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World*, 15.
- <sup>24</sup> Hall, “New Ethnicities,” 257.
- <sup>25</sup> In a highly incisive article on “Theorizing Race in Hawai‘i,” sociologist Jennifer Darrah-Okike emphasizes the significance of indigeneity for studies of race and ethnicity.
- <sup>26</sup> In 1997, OMB announced that respondents to the 2000 U.S. census would be allowed to indicate that they belonged to more than one racial category, whereas previously multiracial individuals had to select only one such category. This decision meant that sixty-three racial categories, including multiracial combinations, were officially created and recognized by the U.S. government.
- <sup>27</sup> Grimm, “What does MENA mean? The U.S. Census’ new category.”
- <sup>28</sup> Grimm, “What does MENA mean?”
- <sup>29</sup> Grimm, “What does MENA mean?”
- <sup>30</sup> Grimm, “What does MENA mean?”
- <sup>31</sup> Barth, “Introduction,” 15, emphasis in original.
- <sup>32</sup> Barth, “Enduring and Emerging Issues in the Analysis of Ethnicity,” 17-18.
- <sup>33</sup> Barth, “Enduring and Emerging Issues in the Analysis of Ethnicity,” 11, emphasis in original.
- <sup>34</sup> Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks*, 4.
- <sup>35</sup> Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks*, 7-8.

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<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* and Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*.

<sup>37</sup> Lieberman, "'Ethnic' Cleansing versus Genocide," 42.

<sup>38</sup> Davis, "An Administrative Trail of Tears: Indian Removal."

<sup>39</sup> "Who are the Uyghurs and why is China being accused of genocide?"

<sup>40</sup> Brubaker, "Ethnicity without Groups," 166.

<sup>41</sup> Brubaker, "Ethnicity without Groups," 166-167.

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