DEFINING ETHNICITY

Timothy Baumann

Timothy Baumann is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Missouri, St. Louis.

What is ethnicity? Ethnicity has been best defined within cultural anthropology, but it has been a debated topic and there is no single definition or theory of how ethnic groups are formed. According to John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith (1996:4–5), the term "ethnicity" is relatively new, first appearing in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1953, but its English origins are connected to the term "ethnic," which has been in use since the Middle Ages. The true origins of "ethnic" have been traced back to Greece and the term *ethnos,* which was used in reference to band, tribe, race, a people, or a swarm.

In more recent colonial and immigrant history, the term "ethnic" falls under the dichotomy of "Us" and "Them." The "Us," the majority, are viewed as non-ethnics and the "Them," new immigrants or minorities, as ethnic. Variations of the term have developed, including ethnic identity, ethnic origin, ethnocentrism, and ethnicism (Hutchinson and Smith 1996:4–5). Ethnic identity or origin refers to an individual's ancestral heritage. Ethnocentrism is a belief that your cultural community or ancestry is superior to all others, resulting in dislike or hatred of any material, behavioral, or physical characteristics different than your own. Ethnicism is defined as a "movement of protest and resistance on behalf of [ethnics] against oppressive and exploitative outsiders" (Hutchinson and Smith 1996:5).

Overall, an ethnic group or ethnicity has been defined in numerous ways. Hutchinson and Smith's (1996:6–7) definition of an ethnic group, or *ethnie,* consists of six main features that include:

1. a common *proper name,* to identify and express the "essence" of the community;
2. a myth of *common ancestry* that includes the idea of common origin in time and place and that gives an ethnie a sense of fictive kinship;
3. shared *historical memories,* or better, shared memories of a common past or pasts, including heroes, events, and their commemoration;
4. one or more *elements of common culture,* which need not be specified but normally include religion, customs, and language;
5. a *link* with a *homeland,* not necessarily its physical occupation by the ethnie, only its symbolic attachment to the

ancestral land, as with diaspora peoples; and
6. a *sense of solidarity* on the part of at least some sections of the ethnie's population

In a broader context, Gerald Berreman (1972, 1981) defines ethnicity as one level of social stratification or social inequality that also includes race, class, kinship, age, estate, caste, and gender. Berreman provides clear distinctions between ethnicity and race or class. Ethnicity is linked in a dichotic relationship with race. It is differentiated from race in that racial stratification is associated with birth-ascribed status based on physical and cultural characteristics defined by outside groups. Ethnicity is also ascribed at birth, but the ethnic group normally defines its cultural characteristics itself. Thus, racial categorizations, which are defined by the outsider, are normally laced with inaccuracies and stereotypes, while ethnic classification is normally more accurate of a cultural group because it is defined by the group itself. Yet, ethnic classifications can also be defined and used by outside groups to stereotype an ethnic community in ways that are often oversimplified and that view ethnicity as a static cultural process. Ethnicity is differentiated from class in that "social class membership and ranking . . . is based on attributes regarded as *extrinsic* to the people who comprise the class. . . . such as amount of income, occupation, education, consumption patterns, and 'life-style'" (Berreman 1981:15). Thus, an individual's class is not predetermined at birth; an individual's accomplishments during his or her life can help an individual to rise or fall in social status within the community.

Primordial and Instrumental Theories of Ethnicity

The work of Sian Jones (1997) contains one of the better summaries of anthropological theories concerning ethnicity and its application to archaeology. Overall, Jones (1997:xiii) outlines three major terms related to "ethnic": ethnicity, ethnic identity, and ethnic group. Ethnicity is defined as "all those social and psychological phenomena associated with a culturally constructed group identity." Ethnic identity is defined as "that aspect of a person's self-conceptualization which results from identification with a broader group in opposition to others on the basis of perceived cultural differentiation and/or common descent." An ethnic group is classified as "any group of people who set themselves apart and/or are set apart by others with

whom they interact or co-exist on the basis of their perceptions of cultural differentiation and/or common ancestry."

Within her work, Jones (1997) summarizes and critiques the two major theoretical paradigms of ethnicity—"primordialists" and "instrumentals"—and suggests an alternative approach that combines portions of both in "practice theory." Primordialists believe that ethnicity is a natural phenomenon with its foundations in family and kinship ties (Geertz 1963; Shils 1957); ethnicity emerges out of nepotism and reproductive fitness, narrowing down the social concept into biological terms. A model by Isaacs (1974), for example, developed "a concept of primordial ties as a means of explaining the power and persistence of ethnic identity which he called 'basic group identity'" (Jones 1997:65–66). Isaacs's basic group identity was linked to ethnic identity, which was argued to be assigned at birth and more fundamental and natural than other social links. An added component of Isaacs's model is a psychological theory that addresses conflict between intertribal or ethnic groups. This latter concept is often tied to nationalist movements in modern societies.

A major critique of the primordialist's origins of ethnicity has been that it represents a very static and naturalistic viewpoint. It does not take into account culture process and other social factors that manipulate or formulate ethnic communities. Jones (1998:68–72) summarizes four major critiques of primordialist theory:

1. Primordial approaches are either too general or too obscure to possess a great deal of explanatory power; "the intangible aspects of the primordial approach constitute at best *ex post facto* argument. In searching for the givens of social existence, the primordial approach explains everything and nothing."
2. Primordial approaches suggest that ethnic identity is a determining and immutable dimension of an individual's self-identity because the primordial attachments that underlie ethnicity are involuntary and coercive. However, such an approach cannot explain the fluid nature of ethnic boundaries, the situational quality of ethnic identity at the level of individual, nor the fact that the importance of ethnicity itself varies significantly in different social contexts and between different individuals.
3. Primordial explanations suggest that ethnic groups are formulated in a social and political vacuum.
4. Primordialist approaches also fail to consider the historically situated and culturally constructed nature of the very concepts that are central to their argument, most notably "ethnic group" and "nation."

In contrast, instrumentalists believe that "ethnicity is socially constructed and people have the ability to cut and mix from a variety of ethnic heritages and cultures to form their own individual or group identities" (Hutchinson and Smith 1996:9). Instrumentalist theory has been characterized as concerned "with the role of ethnicity in the mediation of social relations and the negotiation of access to resources, primarily economic and political resources" (Jones 1997:72). Jones (1974:75) argues that instrumentalists fall into two categories: "those who focus on the socio-structural and cultural dimensions of ethnicity and adopt a more objectivist approach; and those who focus on the interpersonal and behavioral aspects of ethnicity and take a more subjectivist stance."

The origins of the instrumentalist movement has been tied to the work of Fredrik Barth (1969) and Abner Cohen (1974). Barth viewed ethnic identity as an "individualistic strategy" in which individuals move from one identity to another to "advance their personal economic and political interests, or to minimize their losses" (Jones 1997:74). Following Barth, ethnic identity forms through boundary maintenance and interaction between individuals. Depending on each social interaction, a person's ethnic identity can be perceived or presented in various ways. Overall, interaction between individuals does not lead to an assimilation or homogenization of culture. Instead, cultural diversity and ethnic identity are still maintained, but in a nonstatic form. Cultural traits and even individuals can cross over ethnic boundaries, which in turn can transform an ethnic group over time.

In contrast to Barth, Cohen (1974) "placed [a] greater emphasis on the ethnic group as a *collectively* organized strategy for the protection of economic and political interests" (Jones 1997:74). Ethnic groups share common interests, and in pursuit of these interests they develop "basic organizational functions: distinctiveness or boundaries; communication; authority structure; decision making procedure; ideology; and socialization" (Cohen 1974:xvi–xvii). Overall, Jones (1997:74) suggests that both Barth and Cohen "focus on the organizational features of ethnicity, and ethnicity is regarded as constituting the shared beliefs and practices that provide a group with the boundary maintenance and organizational dimensions necessary to maintain, and compete for, socioeconomic resources."

Jones (1997:76–79) outlines five major critiques of instrumentalist theory:

1. Many instrumentalist approaches fall into a reductionist mode of explanation whereby ethnicity is defined in terms of the observed regularities of ethnic behavior in a particular situation.
2. The reduction of ethnicity to economic and political relationships frequently results in the neglect of the cultural dimensions of ethnicity. This neglect is a consequence of

the idea that ethnic categories provide an "empty vessel" into which various aspects of culture may be poured.

3. The reductionist model of analysis in many instrumentalist studies also results in the neglect of psychological dimensions of ethnicity. Research has suggested that cultural ascriptions of ethnic identity may comprise an important aspect of an individual's sense of self, creating conflict for people whose social relations and cultural practices become removed from their sense of identity.

4. The assumption in many instrumentalist approaches that human behavior is essentially rational and directed toward maximizing self-interest results in an oversimplification of the perception of interests by culturally situated agents, and disregards the dynamics of power in both intragroup and intergroup relations.

5. As a result of the tendencies to define ethnicity as a politicized or mobilized group identity, and to neglect the cultural and psychological dimensions of ethnicity, it is difficult to distinguish ethnic groups from other collective-interest groups (e.g., race, class).

Practice Theory and Ethnicity

Based on the critiques of primordialist and instrumentalist theories of ethnicity, Jones (1997:87–92) argues that a new theory is needed to bridge the gap between ethnicity and culture. Jones (1997:90) states that "ethnicity is not a passive reflection of similarities and differences in the cultural practices and structural conditions in which people are socialized . . . nor is ethnicity . . . produced entirely in the process of social interaction, whereby epiphenomenal cultural symbols are consciously manipulated in the pursuit of economic and political interests." Instead, Jones argues that ethnicity is formed by conscious and subliminal recognition of the collective and individual forms of human agency.

Jones (1997:88) suggests that a true understanding of ethnicity can be viewed through "practice theory," which attempts to address "the relationship between objective conditions and subjective perceptions." Jones's definition of practice theory is grounded in Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice in which he developed the concept of *habitus*. Following Bourdieu (1977:79–93), Jones (1997:88) states that "the *habitus* is made up of durable dispositions towards certain perceptions and practices (such as those relating to sexual division of labour, morality, tastes, and so on), which become part of an individual's sense of self at an early age, and which can be transposed from one context to another." Under practice theory, ethnicity is not a static reflection of culture, nor is it produced entirely by social interaction and boundary maintenance. Instead, "the intersubjective construction of ethnic identity is grounded in the shared subliminal dispositions of the *habitus*, which shape, and are shaped by, objective commonalties of practice . . .

shared *habitus* engenders feelings of identification among people similarly endowed" (Jones 1997:90). The *habitus* is multidimensional and can vary in different social situations. Ethnicity is viewed as being in a constant state of change and reproduction within these different social contexts. Individuals are viewed as "social agents act[ing] strategically in the pursuit of interests." Collectively, ethnicity is viewed as a "shared dispositions of *habitus*."

Concluding Thoughts

Overall, the underlying truth of ethnicity is that it is a product of self and group identity that is formed in extrinsic/intrinsic contexts and social interaction. Ethnicity is not the same as nor equal to culture. Ethnicity is in part the symbolic representations of an individual or a group that are produced, reproduced, and transformed over time. The question is, as archaeologists, can we identify these symbolic patterns in material culture? This thematic issue provides some archaeological examples and overviews that highlight the possibilities and limitations of the archaeological record. 回

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