

EXPLAINING ETHNICITY *

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Öz

Bu çalışma etnisite ile ilgili teorik yaklaşımları açıklama ve eleştirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. İlk önce etnisitenin ırk kavramından neden farklı olması gerektiği üzerinde durulmaktadır. Sonra da etnik kimliklerin önemine dikkat çekilmekte ve son olarak etnisite ile ilgili iki önemli teorik yaklaşım (Kanbağı ve Araçsal yaklaşımlar) ele alınıp incelenmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler

*Etnisite, Etnik kimlik, Irk
Etnisiteyi Açıklamak*

Abstract

This paper aims to explain and criticise theoretical approaches to ethnicity. In this paper, firstly differences between race and ethnicity was dealt with then the importance of ethnic identity is discussed. Lastly, two main approaches to ethnicity (Primordial and Instrumental) were examined.

Keywords

Ethnicity, Ethnic identity, Race

Introduction

Ethnicity, although it is relatively a new term has been an important factor affecting relationships of different groups sharing the same environment. As a result of wars and migrations, many of the countries of today's world have more or less this problem. In the literature ethnicity is generally seen as an identity maker. How an individual gets the identity of a group, therefore, becomes an important matter as this process is required for an effective society.

In this paper, firstly the differences between race and ethnicity were dealt with then important theoretical approaches to ethnicity were criticised.

Race and Ethnicity: Which one?

There is a great body of research on ethnicity in the literature though it is a relatively new term - first appeared in the English language in the 1950s and was first recorded in the Oxford Dictionary in 1953 (Hutchinson and Smith, 1996:3). The term ethnicity was actually meant to be a replacement for 'race' following the failure of biological research to prove that human populations can be distinguished according to the 'supposed' races. (Jahoda, 1984:37; Thompson and Priestley, 1996) Despite the intention to replace 'race' with 'ethnicity', however, it can still be seen that the term 'race' is still used by a number of scholars as a stand-alone term or in combination with ethnicity. The main reason for this, as can be argued, is the cultural existence of the notion 'race'. The term 'race' is mainly dependent on colour and physical differences to distinguish black and Asian people from white people and it finds its root in slavery and colonial times (See Banton, 1972) - though there exist different suggestions for the emergence of racism (Smaje, 2000:9). For example, Park (1967a) in his article "Racial Assimilation in Secondary Groups" stated that racial assimilation could only be feasible among the same colour people from different cultures. It

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is the physical differences, in particular colour differences, to him that make assimilation of a group with a different skin colour impossible. He gives the Japanese and Blacks as an example of this and further comments,

If they were given an opportunity the Japanese are quite as capable as the Italians, the Armenians, or Slavs of acquiring our culture, and sharing our national ideals. The trouble is not with the Japanese mind but with the Japanese skin. The Jap is not the right colour. (Ibid:119)

In another article, *The Bases of Race Prejudice*, Park (1967b) actually defends racial prejudices. He says, "A man without prejudices is a man without conviction, and ultimately without character" (Ibid:169). According to him, therefore, "the public (also) thinks in stereotypes. There is, in fact, no other way in which the public can think" (Ibid:172). He continues,

Every effort of the Negro ... to move, to rise and improve his status, rather than his condition, has invariably met with opposition, aroused prejudice and stimulated racial animosities. Race prejudice, so conceived is merely an elementary expression of conservatism. (Ibid:172)

As understood from Park's explanations, race is only attributed to the social significance accorded to physical (colour) differences. However, Glazer (1983:234) precisely argues that although Swedes are physically somewhat different from Frenchmen or Italians, the term 'race' is not used to describe the difference. However, the fact remains that differences found in skin colour, facial appearance etc of different groups in a host society still play important roles in the matter of racial prejudice. Park is right when he says that assimilation of a different group with a different skin colour no matter how keen they are is impossible as the public continues (to him, will continue) to use skin colour as an indication of social difference.

However, it should be said that even when there are no colour differences among different groups in a host society, historical evidence has shown that there are problems in complete assimilation.

Ethnic Identity and Theoretical Approaches

The question "Who am I?" plays a crucial part for an individual to define him/herself. As a result of living in a society, individuals must develop a sense of identity in order to feel themselves a part of that society. As Pike (1969:178) points out,

The individual, if he is to function effectively in society and develop his potential, requires a sense of identity ... Widely accepted historical interpretations, or agreement by the majority of a people as to who their heroes and who their villains have been, which events have been triumphs and which ones tragedies, can provide an indispensable glue for holding together disparate geographic and ethnic groups within a country.

Although there is, to some extent, a general view that sociology has little to say about personality and individual identity because personality is something fixed and innate and therefore the subject should be left to psychology

(Abbot, 1998:14), it should not be forgotten that there are strong relationships between identity and social structure (class, ethnicity and gender). Sociology, in this context, mainly focuses on the reflection of group identity on individuals. It should be pointed out that ethnically different group's members, when defining themselves, use the name of their group even if they belong to a larger structure such as being citizens of a country.

Today, we still observe the fact that ethnic identities, powered from their historical roots (heroes and struggles with other groups), are still kept alive and still valuable to their members.

Ethnicity is a subject not only for sociology, but for anthropology and psychology. Perhaps this makes a sufficient definition of ethnicity almost impossible. When we look at the literature, we can note that almost all the writers address the difficulty of giving a universal definition.

According to Max Weber, an ethnic group is a human collectivity based on an assumption of common origin, real or imaginary. (quoted by Greeley, 1971:40)

As Oommen (1994:34) says, *Ethnie* is a French word referring to a people who share a common culture and life-style but who do not occupy the ancestral territory that is a homeland. According to him, an ethnic group can be described in terms of a multiplicity of attributes such as religion, sect, caste, region, language, descent, race, colour, culture, and so on. These attributes, singly or in different combinations, are used to define ethnic groups and ethnicity. (p.34)

M.G. Smith defines an ethnic unit as "a population whose members believe that in some sense they share common descent, and a common cultural heritage or tradition, and who are so regarded by others". (cited in Mason, 1995:12)

A.D Smith proposes six main features to define an ethnic group:

1. a common proper name, to identify and express the 'essence' of the community;
2. a myth of common ancestry, a myth rather than a fact, a myth that includes the idea of a common origin in time and place and that gives an ethnic sense of fictive kinship ...
3. shared historical memories, or better, shared memories of a common past or pasts, including heroes, events, and commemoration;
4. one or more elements of common culture, which need not be specified but normally include religion, customs, or 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;
6. a sense of solidarity on the part of at least some sections of the *ethnie's* population. (quoted by Hutchinson and Smith, 1996:7)

Finally, a very detailed list of features of an ethnic group comes from *The Harvard Encyclopaedia of American Ethnic Groups*, which records information on 101 ethnic groups. According to this encyclopaedia, ethnicity can

be defined as a collective characterized by some combination of the following 14 features:

- 1- common geographical origin
- 2- migratory status
- 3- race
- 4- language or dialect
- 5- religious faith
- 6- ties that transcend kinship, neighbourhood, and community boundaries
- 7- shared traditions, values and symbols
- 8- literature, folklore and music
- 9- food preferences
- 10- settlement and employment patterns
- 11- special interest in regard to politics in the homeland and the United States
- 12- institutions that specifically secure and maintain the group
- 13- an internal sense of distinctiveness
- 14- an external perception of distinctiveness (quoted by Leets, et al, 1994)

So far we have given a number of definitions of ethnicity. It can be noted that the very common feature in these definitions is the “shared elements by a group –common culture, language, religion, and so on). As can be noted, from the definitions, these different features can singly or in combination construct an ethnic group.

Having said this, we should also question the importance of ethnicity. Why is it seen as an important aspect of social life? The answer actually lies in ‘being different’. As Smaje (1995:13) precisely puts it, being ethnic requires to be different from other groups. Therefore, it is very important to stress that ethnicity only has its meaning when two or more different groups are interacting (cited by Watson, 1977:9).

Two Main Approaches to Ethnicity

As we noted earlier, ethnicity is an interdisciplinary subject and that theorization of the concept can find its roots in anthropological, ethnological, psychological and sociological discourse.

There appear to be two main perspectives in the area of ethnicity. These are, Primordial perspective and Situational approach.

Primordial Perspective

The beginning of this approach to ethnicity starts with Edward Shils’ well-known article “Primordial, Personal, Sacred and Civil Ties”. In an effort to explain the relationships between theory and research by giving an autobiography of his experience, he talks about ‘primordial attachments’ (Shils, 1957). Through his research on primary groups among soldiers in the American and German armies, he notices the solidarity within the primary groups. However, as he says, he only reaches the conclusion about primordial attachments after a piece of research on family and kinship with Michael Young

in 1952. He then realised the importance of primordial attachments. As he puts it:

As one thought about the strengths and tensions in family attachments, it became apparent that the attachment was not merely to the other family member as a person, but as a possessor of certain especially 'significant relational' qualities which could only be described as primordial. The attachment to another member of one's kinship group is not just a function of interaction ... It is because a certain ineffable significance is attributed to the tie of blood (p. 142)

Clifford Geertz (1996:43-45) went a step further in elaborating this approach by including not only primary kinship groups but also

- 1- Assumed blood ties,
- 2- Race,
- 3- Language,
- 4- Region,
- 5- Religion and
- 6- Custom.

He says,

By a primordial attachment is meant one that stems from the 'givens' of social existence: immediate contiguity and kin connection mainly, but beyond them the givenness that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, or even a dialect of a language, and following particular social practices. These congruities of blood, speech, custom, and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, and at times overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves. One is bound to one's kinsman, one's neighbor, one's fellow believer, ipso facto; as the result not merely of personal affection, practical necessity, common interest, or incurred obligation, but at least in great part by virtue of some unaccountable absolute import attributed to the very tie itself. The general strength of such primordial bonds, and the types of them that are important, differ from person to person, from society to society, and from time to time. But for virtually every person, in every society, at almost all times, some attachments seem to flow more from a sense of natural affinity than from social interaction. (Geertz, 1993:259-260)

As seen from the quotation, it is obvious that this approach sees ethnicity as the 'given' of social existence; that is to say, ethnic membership is acquired at birth and therefore, it should be treated as a permanent and fundamental facet of social life.

Talcott Parsons also falls into this approach when he states,

For the typical individual both his residence within the territory and his sharing of the common culture have been conceived as given by birth, that is, he has acquired the ethnic identification of his parents. (1975:53)

Another scholar in this approach is Harold R. Isaacs. According to him,

Basic group identity is derived from belonging to what is generally called an ethnic group. It is composed of what have been

called “primordial affinities and attachments”. It is the identity made up of what a person is born with or acquires at birth (1975:30)

However, Isaacs is also aware of the distinctions between cultural and physical differences. He concludes,

An individual can change his name, ignore or conceal his origins, disregard or rewrite his history, adopt a different nationality, learn a new language, abandon his family’s religion or convert to a new one, embrace new mores, ethics, philosophies, take on a new style of life. But there is not much he can do to change his body. (p. 36-37)

Donald L. Horowitz’s view of ethnicity also echoes Isaacs’ understanding of ethnicity. He agrees with him and the others that ethnic identity is generally acquired at birth. However, he is also well aware of the fact that there are possibilities for changing individual identity by means of linguistic and religious conversion. (Horowitz, 1975:113-114). In addition to this, he goes one step further and become closer to the situational approach. As he puts it, “An African student in France will identify himself in one way; at home, in another” (p.118). Therefore, we can say that Horowitz is actually in between these two approaches to ethnicity.

As we will see in the following approach, some of the objections made by instrumentalists or situationalists, as it is seen here, have already emerged in this approach with the idea of the possibility of changing identities or switching identities in different situations. However, the main argument continues, that is, ethnicity is acquired at birth.

In brief, the main assumption of this approach is that ethnicity is made up of primordial attachments such as the ties of blood, religion, language, region, race, and so on. Therefore, one acquires ethnic identity at birth. According to this approach, one is born into the religion, language, race, etc. In other words, when a person is born, the primordial attachments are already there – in the family, or community – waiting for him/her. What is more, this approach sees ethnic identities as permanent and fundamental facets of human identity (Kucukcan, 1999:38) although the later writers of this approach have noticed the possibility of changing identities.

Situational or Instrumentalist Approach

As Gil-White (1999) notes, reactions against primordial view started with Edmund Leach’s *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954), followed later by Moerman’s work among the Lue in Thailand (1965, 1968). As he puts it, these studies argued that ethnic identities did not map neatly to the distribution of artifactual or ideational culture – towards a more subjective focus that relied heavily on the labelling process of ethnic actors themselves. This view climaxed in 1969 with the publication of Fredrik Barth’s famous introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. His argument was that since the qualifications for a social identity are the conditions for being referred to by the linguistic expression that names the identity, then the ascriptions made by ethnic actors themselves are the only guides to the limits of the group. For the features that are taken into account by ethnics are not the sum of objective cultural differences, but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant. (quoted by Gil-White, 1999)

Leach (cited in Gil-White, 1999), had reported that people in the Burma Kachin Hills area sometimes switched identity. Barth (1996) also documented a similar behaviour in Swat, Pakistan. In the communities Barth studied, some individuals born into the Pathan ethnic group were, later in life, labelling themselves 'Baluch' as circumstances made this advantageous. With this argument, the circumstantialist – instrumentalist – school was born.

In contrast to the primordial approach, instrumentalists argue that ethnicity is defined by social, not genetic forces. Barth (1996:75-76) criticises the primordial definition of ethnicity. He argues that this definition allows the assumption that boundary maintenance is unproblematic and racial and cultural difference, social separation and language barriers are spontaneous. As Kucukcan (1999:42) puts it, Barth thinks that ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves, and thus have the characteristic of organizing interaction between people. Barth further argues that ethnic boundary – he says it is of course social- defines the group, not the cultural stuff it encloses (p. 79).

According to Barth (1996:77),

The same group of people, with unchanged values and ideas, would surely pursue different patterns of life and institutionalise different forms of behaviour when faced with different opportunities offered in different environments.

According to this approach, ethnic groups are made, not born. Ethnicity is a general social status like class, age and gender which can be used to organise interaction (Barth, 1996:81).

Following Barth, Stokes (1994:6) claims that ethnicities need to be understood in terms of construction, maintenance and negotiation of boundaries. Like Barth, he also claims that ethnic boundaries define and maintain social identities that can only exist in a context of opposition and relativities (p. 6).

Ratcliffe (1994:6) points out that although primordial ties are a key element of ethnic consciousness, these are not fixed in a deterministic sense.

According to Okamura,

the structural aspect of situational ethnicity denotes the restraints enjoined upon parties within social situations as a result of the setting of social action, which in this case is provided by the overall structure of ethnic group relations in a given society. The setting also includes the relative political and socio-economic statuses of these groups, the distribution of occupation, education, income, wealth and other social and material resources among them, their numerical proportions, and the immediate prospects for change in any of these areas. The structural dimension of ethnicity denotes the significance of ethnicity as an organising principle of social relations. (cited in Kucukcan, 1999:43)

In brief, according to this approach, as Mason (1995:13) puts it, "Ethnicity is situational. The implication is that people have different ethnic identities in different situations. Their salience is affected by such factors as the distribution of desired resources and the objectives of the people concerned."

As Smaje puts it,

... a Punjabi Sikh living in Britain may in some circumstances constitute themselves as 'black' to identify their experience of racism, at other times as 'Asian' to distinguish themselves from people of other geographic origins, and at other times as 'Sikh' to identify their particular set of beliefs and practices and to emphasise politically their distance from an 'Indian' identity. (1995:17)

It is argued that primordialism is a bankrupt concept as it refers to permanent and unchangeable ties gained at birth (Eller and Coughlan, 1996:50). However, this judgement draws objections.

As Leets at al (1994) puts it,

Taken together, both the primordial and the instrumentalist approaches resulted in a productive and powerful definition. If a thorough analysis of ethnicity is desired, it appears reasonable that both must be considered.

In brief, we can say that primordial approach mainly focuses on gained identities at birth and stability of these identities. However, instrumentalists don't agree these by bringing out arguments to defend the available possibilities of gaining ethnic identities and switching them later by way of socialisation and importance of different situations so that if one finds that a situation makes him better than others he would not mind to identify himself with a different identity.

Conclusion: Criticising Both Approaches

Despite all these theoretical explanations, one thing should be made clear here. In both approaches, one may feel that something is missing. It is plausible to point out the differences for ethnic groups. However, in the literature there seems to be a tendency to see ethnic groups living in peace with each other. As can be seen from the understandings of both approaches, they do not touch upon any conflict between ethnic groups apart from instrumentalists' statement of competition between ethnic groups. Therefore, if we put them together to analyse ethnic groups without giving any attention to conflicts, it may lead to a real failure. As Stokes (1994:7) puts it, ethnicities can never be understood outside the power relations and they are actually not the harmless and colourful 'folklore' of societies as these approaches tend to see. It should be said that the differences of an ethnic group are not always easily recognised nor is it an automatic process. History has shown (still does) us the violence between ethnic groups since the dominant groups are not always keen on seeing them a part of harmony.

Another point I would like to touch on is the fact that the instrumentalist school thinks that if circumstances require, then ethnic group members can switch their identity to another one to make the most of the new situation. It is plausible to say that human beings are rational and try to maximise their profits in a competition. However, one should keep in mind that this approach actually ignores the solidarity in an ethnic group. It is true to say that we can still observe self-sacrifices of members of an ethnic group.

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