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Abstract

The purpose of our paper is a concise review of the various approaches to the concept of ethnic community, starting from the classical ones and ending with the postmodern ones. Emphasis is laid on the constructivist and constructionist approaches, and our conclusions point out that an individual's belonging to an ethnic group is an ever-changing social construct.

Keywords:

ethnic community, ethnic group, constructivist approach, constructionist approach, identity;

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Introduction

Ethnic community generally means the members of a group asserting their distinct identity attributable to the consciousness of a common history or origin. This factor of consciousness is grounded on relatively objective criteria, such as language, religion, institutions or common cultural traits. Therefore, ethnicity as a factor of consciousness may be defined by the meaning given by each individual to the criteria enumerated above. In other words, they acquire their meaning of ethnic traits only to the extent they are activates and integrated in the consciousness of an ethnic identity. This proves the constructivist/constructionist nature of one's belonging to a particular ethnic group, a topic that we will tackle in this paper.

From Classic to Postmodern

The definition of ethnic communities requires the identification of its key components and of its dominant characteristics. In the classical approach, the notion of "ethnic community" is closely connected to the concept of ethnos, often related to the concept of race (Lieberson, 1961), whereas ethnos is correlated with the notion of ethnic group, which is defined in terms of cultural differences (Van den Berghe, 1967), social borders (Barth, 1969) or subjective belief in a group's common descent (Weber, [1922] 1968).

When referring to the origins of the term "ethnos", Bauman (2004) argues that it comes from the Greek "ethnos", and it is used to refer to gang, tribe, race, people. In the more recent immigrants' and colonists' history, the term "ethnic" comes under the "we" and "they" dichotomy (Stephan, 1985; Williams, 1977), where "we" is the majority seen as non-ethnic, and "they" includes immigrants or minorities (or ethnic individuals).

The term "ethnic group" is defined in many ways. It is accounted for in terms of cultural traits or it is analyzed in terms specific to socio-psychology (Rosen, 1959). Barth (1969) suggests a definition that he pretends it is exhaustive, according to which an ethnic group is a population characterized by four clear-cut criteria: a wide biological self-perpetuation; the existence of fundamental cultural values which achieve an undeniable unity of cultural forms; the creation of a communication and interaction environment; its members identify themselves as

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belonging to it and are identified by others as a distinct category from other categories of the same social order.

Thus, one may notice many meanings attached to ethnic group and implicitly to ethnic community, depending on the emphasis laid by various authors who analyze particular parts of ethnos or ethnicity. There is a wide range of definitions and possible interpretations of ethnicity, which is mainly viewed as a way to preserve a particular cultural inheritance, which provides a more intimate connection with broad impersonal societies (Bruhn, 2005). Research on ethnicity also reflects the manner in which individuals and groups coming from different cultural backgrounds interact or not among them (Huijts, Kraaykamp, Scheepers, 2014) and the manner in which ethnic groups are integrated in society, in the form of spatial (Massey, 1985) or emotional (Ho, Kissoon, 2012) assimilation.

According to Hutchinson and Smith (1996), an ethnic group has six main characteristics: a common distinctive name which identifies and expresses the "essence" of the community; a myth of a common ancestor which includes the idea of a common origin in time and space and which provides the ethnos with a sense of fictitious kinship; shared historical memories, more precisely shared memories about a common past, including heroes, events and their commemoration; one or more elements of common culture, which normally include religion, customs and language; a connection with a homeland, but not necessarily the actual country where the ethnos lives, but a symbolic attachment to their fatherland; a feeling of solidarity, at least from a part of the ethnos population.

Smith (1981) defines ethnos or ethnic community as a social group the members of which share a sense of common origin, profess to a common and distinctive destiny and history, possess one or more distinctive characteristics and feel a sense of collective uniqueness and solidarity. In order to create a sense of community, the group members need to establish connections, which the author sees as "vital", since their feeling of belonging to that social group is built around them. History distinctiveness, one or more cultural dimensions (religion, language, skin color, customs), and the cultural relations created against the background of these cultural similarities are important characteristics for ethnic community identification. According to the author, the nature and intensity of these cultural dimensions and the sense of group origin

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and history vary considerably among ethnic groups depending on which of these characteristics the emphasis is laid. Therefore, when defining ethnic community, the cultural dimensions may not be as important as the sense of the group's common origins and history. The sense of a common history is the core of the group's identity and also of its uniqueness. Common history often reflects reality only partially, being invented, "rediscovered" by the members of that group, yet its real historical grounds and the sense of their common origins and history, with all the distortions and rites, give life to a community. Also, in order for a community to exist, it has to have a set of feelings shared by its members, a rather wide sense of belonging and acknowledgement of otherness, both from its members and the outsiders.

MacQueen, McLellan, Metzger et al. (2001) define ethnos or ethnic community by its social connections, by the sense of spatial location and by the sharing of common values among its members. Therefore, ethnic community is a group of people with various characteristics who are connected by social ties, who share common points of view and who get involved in common actions, in distinct locations or geographic organizations. The sense of place is one of the characteristics of a community, meaning something that may be localized and described, which gives a feeling of location or borders. Finally, another defining characteristic is the sharing of common interests and points of view as a sign of belonging to that community. This definition of ethnic community is the generalizing conclusion of a research conducted on 118 subjects with different social and ethnic backgrounds.

When analyzing the manner in which ethnic communities influence the society they are part of, Korgen (2008) sees ethnic community as a collective player, one that has its own life. Therefore, ethnic community is capable of collective and concerted actions designed to attain specific goals and objectives. The author identifies and stresses four constituents of the definition of ethnic community, which, in her opinion, seem to make up the most comprehensive definition of ethnic community. Thus, she refers to: the group of people defined as members of that ethnic community or who share a common ethnic identity (revealed by Gordon in 1964); political organizations and agencies supporting the cause of that ethnic group and facilitating its access to various services, etc.; an interrupted consciousness and a deliberate effort to ensure community survival by activities that create and celebrate a

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common heritage, all of which are actively aimed at by institutions like family, schools and churches (or mosques); spatial and/or social borders and phenomena distinguishing that ethnic community from the society as a whole, for instance physical demarcations like streets or neighborhoods, but also social markers including membership of and/or involvement in organizations and institutions of that ethnic community.

As concerns spatial location, the concept of "ethnic community" does not refer solely to a concrete and specific community, which is spatially located, but also to a wide community, which can be found in more than just some specific neighborhoods or places in a city or in another area and which is not limited to one particular geographical area. Relying on Barth's theory of 1969, the author underlines the importance of borders in delimiting an ethnic community. Thus, borders have a double meaning. By delimiting an ethnic community from society as a whole, they mainly define what is to be found inside and outside that ethnic community. Secondly, borders are also important in terms of understanding variations among ethnic communities, differences manifested in the effects of ethnic communities on society as a whole. Especially the permeability of these borders varies considerably among ethnic communities. Some communities are strongly delimited, thus being impermeable, meaning they are separated and isolated from outside influences. This may either be the deliberate choice of the ethnic community in question, or the result of actions taken by powerful institutions of the society, i.e. public institutions. By contrast, other ethnic communities seem very permeable and, hence, much more prone to influences from outside society.

Constructivist approaches see ethnic community as a construct, where people are collective agents who are able to construct and reconstruct, to act strategically for the purpose of achieving their common goals. According to Karner (2007), the constructivist approaches of a community may be traced back to the early work of Fredrik Barth who started by defining ethnicity as a form of organization based on the development and reproduction of group borders. Barth argued, in 1969, that ethnic groups were categories of judgments made by outsiders and of identifications made by the actors themselves. Thus, he drew attention to an important (and later much discussed) fact, namely that both often powerful outsiders and the group members themselves are involved in border and, hence, community defining.

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From this point of view, the defining of borders, the member judgments and identifications with a particular community are regarded as social processes in progress and not as an unavoidable consequence of a "natural" preexisting actuality.

Just like social constructionism, the constructivist approach argues that everything that we know about the world is the result of a construction process. The constructivist approach keeps the subject (community member) and object (community) duality, since the construction process occurs in an individual's mind by a socialization process, in which the individual remains an outside observer who takes in knowledge about the world as an outside reality. To that effect, the mind is a mirror or reality, and individual habitus is a social construction, which is specific to the individual. This habitus is a "map of reality" drawn by an individual in his/her social interactions with the other community members and not with reality itself. This appropriation process occurs in an individual's mind by contact with the social structures that the individual belongs to and it is influenced by that individual's social relations (Gergen, 1999).

In the same vein, ethnic habitus (Bourdieu, 1980) may be used as an analytical instrument to explore the manner in which the members of a social group come to acquire, as a result of their socialization, a set of inbuilt inclinations or ways of perceiving or living in the world. These inclinations mainly operate on a subconscious level and they may include, as far as ethnicity is concerned, various elements such as stands on languages, clothing, diet and regular practices. Bourdieu's key argument is that habitus is "modeled by", and at the same time "models" the objective cultural and social conditions that surround it. Habitus reflects systems of sustainable, transposable and structured inclinations, prone to operate as structuring structures, i.e. practice generating and organizing principles.

As a product of history, habitus generates individual and collective practices, thus leading to a present behavior, provided the current situation is identical or similar to the one when the perception, thinking and action patterns were shaped and appropriated. If the current situation is different from the context of its creation, habitus causes innovating behaviors.

The constructionist approach argues that one never truly knows what is universally true or false, what is good and what is bad, right or

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wrong. Instead, one only knows stories about truth, false, good, bad, right or wrong and abandons the idea of constructivism according to which an individual's mind mirrors reality. Constructionism focuses on relations and supports an individual's role in constructing significant realities. The "map is the territory" seems to be the essence of the constructionist approach, as the map is considered an interpretation of reality which is constantly constructed in interaction with the other community members (Maas et al, 2001). Thus, maps are constantly being constructed and reconstructed by interaction with other individual maps, by a process of incessant negotiation. Reality itself is the result of these negotiations and interactions, and individuals are able to draw many different maps of reality. The purpose of social constructionism is not to construct a perfect map of reality, but to capture the processes by which these maps are constructed and individuals negotiate by adjusting their individual maps, since this construction process is the most important, and attention should be focused on the various ways in which the world may be constructed (Gergen, 1994). Dynamic maps are constantly constructed and reconstructed, as they have several social drives filtered by the individual: interest, goals and means, values, customs and knowledge.

According to social constructionism, language, communication and speech play the most important role in the interactive process by which we understand the world and ourselves. Language and communication are coordination processes of the social actors that construct social realities. An emphasis is laid on the social, cultural and historical background of our appropriations and constructs and on maintaining an open mind about other possible constructed realities (Van der Haar, 2002).

Conclusions

According to the classical definition, ethnic community is a fact of life, which has objective characteristics: sharing the same language; living on the same land, where the members of an ethnic group are all connected to the same fundamental historical-cultural landmarks; origins (local mythology of their descendents); common tradition, customs, shared values and standards inherited across generations through socialization; a collective self consciousness.

All the delimitations identified above contain congruent elements that may be included in a comprehensive definition of ethnic community. The notion of ethnic community refers not only to the idea of locality and particular or social kinship networks. It also has many subjective meanings that people attach to the place itself, to the social relations that they are part of and to the social group that they relate to. In terms of such meanings, ethnic community may be recognized and people belonging to it may recognize one another as belonging to it. Identifications with a particular ethnic community may be regarded as social processes in progress.

In time, ethnic community has come to be considered a construct, a reality that is constantly constructed and reconstructed by and individual and/or collective consciousness.

To that end, defining the inclusion in a particular ethnic community has the advantage of perceiving identity in a dynamic way, as a process in which periodic reconfigurations occur and in which the role of interactions with individuals in the immediate environment, with groups and frames of reference, real or symbolic, with a horizon of standards and values relied on when giving new meanings to events and when an existential journey retroactively acquires a particular meaning, is decisive and visible.

Acknowledgements

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Biodata

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